

Religious studies: Reformed GCSE and A level subject content consultation

1. This submission is made by the National Secular Society (NSS). The NSS is a not-for-profit non-governmental organisation founded in 1866, funded by its members and by donations. We work towards a society in which all citizens, regardless of religious belief, or lack of religious belief, can live together fairly and cohesively. We campaign for a secular democracy with a separation of religion and state, where everyone's Human Rights are respected equally.

Introduction

2. It is important to make clear from the outset that whilst we think students should engage academically with religion and other life stances, we do not support the continuation of religious studies in its present form.
3. We believe students and wider society would be better served by religious studies being replaced with a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils that covers a broader spectrum of human ideas and thought. This would encompass both religious and non-religious worldviews.
4. In our view, the concept of 'religious education' has allowed religious ideas to be ring-fenced for privileged treatment in schools, often presenting them in an acontextual, and often implicitly in a confessional, manner. We believe the study of religion, particularly Christianity, for its impact on our arts and history should be undertaken where and when relevant in subjects such as English literature, History, and the visual arts.
5. This approach would not only enrich students' understanding of a number of subjects outside RE, but it would leave the subject of Religious Education free to be suitably reformed so as to provide students with a comprehensive and

reflective framework through which to analyse and discuss a wide range of normative theories and ethical codes.

6. We believe aspects pertaining to the normative, theological and value-based elements of religious belief should be covered in the context of a reformed subject that looks at these elements in a much wider and more inclusive framework of philosophy and ethics.
7. Reforming the subject in this way would still offer students the opportunity to study the relationship between religious beliefs and practices and ethical and philosophical concepts. The reformed subject we propose would also include the study of the doctrines and practices of the world's religions, and would seek to improve religious literacy by providing students with a core knowledge and understanding of religious ideas and language and their social and cultural impact. However, this would be undertaken within a much wider context to encompass other important philosophical and ethical perspectives and a much broader history of human ideas about life.
8. We believe such an approach would better develop pupils' ability to engage critically and sensitively with religions and belief issues, and the complexities of modern life. At the same time, it would provide them with a rich intercultural education that would give them an understanding of the beliefs and perspectives of those whose beliefs and values differ from their own.
9. We recognise that policy makers may not wish to move away from the subject of religious education for political and cultural reasons, but until the subject is suitably reformed, young people will continue to be denied the rounded, objective, relevant and academically rigorous education they should be entitled to.

Is the revised GCSE content in religious studies appropriate?

10. In terms of the proposals set out in the consultation, we do not share the Department for Education's view that the reforms will enable all students to receive "well-rounded education" and equip them with a "thorough grounding in religion, religions and belief."
11. We acknowledge that, for the first time, the content sets the expectation that all students will study two religions. Whilst this is clearly preferable to students being able to study just one religion, it still falls far short of what is required to provide students with what could be considered a "well-rounded education".
12. Under the proposals, schools, including faith schools, will still be able to offer GCSE and A Level options dominated by a single religious tradition (75% at GCSE and 100% at A Level). In our view this will deliver little meaningful change or progress

in terms of providing a rounded education or challenging the extent to which some schools may be failing to prepare students for life in modern Britain.

13. As the DfE has itself acknowledged, the new GCSE will not affect the emphasis faith schools put on their individual teachings. We do not regard it as educationally appropriate that pupils spend 75% of their time studying one religious belief system.
14. We also question the thinking behind schools having the freedom to decide which two religions are most appropriate for their students to study. In a secular society, the State's role should be to ensure pupils receive religion and belief teaching from a neutral, academic perspective. The Department should not facilitate schools' wishes to use the curriculum in ways that directly promote a particular religious tradition. This again highlights the problematic nature of a curriculum that compels students to spend three quarters of their time on the in-depth study of just one religion.
15. Rather than studying one religion in depth, we think it would be preferable if the purpose of the subject content was to allow pupils to develop a broad understanding of a variety of religions, beliefs and perspectives their broad ethical standpoints and their philosophical and/or theological underpinning.
16. Whilst the GCSE RS content is structured in such a way to ensure all students study two religions at key stage 4, we note that there are no plans to change the law that allows schools of a religious character to determine their own syllabus and teach RE from a selective, exclusive or confessional viewpoint. Any serious reform of the way religion is taught in schools must include the amendment of this law.
17. From a secularist perspective, we regard it as deeply problematic that any subject in publicly funded schools covering religion and belief can be in any way confessional. Doing so means, whether stated explicitly or not, the state is taking on a proselytising role, something we reject as an illegitimate one. Religion and belief education in such schools should, we contend, be the academic study of beliefs, not the encouragement of students to identify with a particular religious position, or indeed a belief position.

The exclusion on non-religious perspectives

18. We very much regret that the proposed subject content contains no systematic study of secular ethics or non-religious worldviews.
19. In a Ministerial Statement upon publishing the draft subject content, the Minister of State for School Reform, Nick Gibb, claimed that "as well as studying key

scripture and religious texts, students will have the opportunity to learn about critiques of religion (external and internal) and other nonreligious beliefs through the study of philosophy and ethics.”¹

20. Whilst there is limited opportunity to study non-religious views within the thematic studies, this remains optional with no requirement to do so.
21. As previously noted, we advocate a broadening of the subject content rather than it being limited and restricted to two religions. However, if this approach is adopted, we strongly recommend that an additional element be introduced to include the systematic study of non-religious worldviews and secular ethics as a comparative framework.
22. In our view, the inclusion of a systematic study of non-religious world views, philosophy and secular ethics in the new GCSE syllabuses is essential to enable pupils to adopt an enquiring, critical and reflective approach to the study of beliefs. Secular and philosophical critiques can deepen our understanding of religious view points and are part of, not separate from, religious literacy.
23. The religion and belief landscape in the United Kingdom has changed dramatically since the Education Act of 1944 first established religious instruction as a compulsory subject. One of the most notable changes is the growth in the number of people who do not identify with any religious belief². As a direct result, there has been a necessary and ongoing readjustment of the role of religion in society.
24. A key objective of any religion and belief education should be to equip young people with the knowledge and skills to engage effectively with religion and belief diversity, in schools, in their communities, in future workplaces and in wider social contexts. By failing to include the study of non-religious perspectives, and indeed understand that for many UK citizens, religion is not an important in their daily lives³, the proposed subject content fails to ensure this objective can be realised.
25. It should be noted that a majority of pupils come from non-religious backgrounds. The inclusion of non-religious world views and secular ethics will

¹ <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons-vote-office/November%202014/7th%20November/6.Education-GCSE-A-Level.pdf>

² 50.6% of the population now claim to have no religion Source: [BSA 31](#), In the 2011 census 25% ticked 'no religion' (England and Wales).

³ 73% say religion is not important in their daily life in the UK. Source: [Gallup](#). In addition, 81% of people agree with the statement: "Religious practice is a private matter and should be separated from the political and economic life of my country". 6% disagreed. Source: [YouGov-Cambridge Poll](#)

both help such pupils develop their own perspectives and, at the same time, explain them to pupils coming from a more religious backgrounds.

26. There is a real danger that the draft subject content will turn the clock back on the limited progress that has been made regarding the way religion is taught in schools. The growth in the number of pupils taking Religious Studies since 2000 has largely been the result of the focused courses schools have offered in "Philosophy and Ethics".
27. Many schools, including, Goffs School in Hertfordshire, for example, have taken the step of revising the subject content and rebranding religious studies as "Philosophy and Ethics" in order to successfully boost student numbers and engagement.⁴
28. This indicates that young people are interested in engaging with religious, philosophical and ethical ideas. The Government's proposals to coerce students into deep theological study of a particular religion would deny them to study religion and belief in ways many young people find engaging.
29. In our view, the proposal to restrict the subject content to two religions, with philosophy and ethics relegated, would make the GCSE less educationally valid, less relevant and less appealing to both pupils and teachers alike. We believe this would inflict long-term damage on an already contested and much maligned subject area.
30. Whilst it is important to note that believers in any one religion are not a homogenous group, equally, there is no one non-religious culture; non-believers are as diverse as believers.
31. We do not therefore support calls for non-religious worldviews and secular ethics to be subsumed solely under the label of Humanism. Neither do we believe it appropriate to seek to force Humanism into the mould of a religion by including the study of Humanist "practices", texts, sources of "authority" etc.
32. The point should be to offer a wide range of ethical perspectives, for example, consequentialist ethics, virtue ethics, or deontological (duty-based) ethics that students can learn about and question. The subject content should allow students to explore the 'big questions' through a host of secular philosophical approaches including pre-Christian philosophy and the history of) unbelief encompassing atheism, agnosticism, free thought, humanism, rationalism and scepticism, for example.

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/teacher-network/teacher-blog/2013/jul/08/teaching-rebrand-subject-philosophy-ethics-religious-education>

33. Consistent with our view that religious groups and representatives should not have undue influence over what is taught in schools, any subject covering secular ethics and philosophical approaches should be determined by an independent advisory Committee supported by an expert panel of senior educationalists and academics of the relevant fields.

Religious education: the ongoing and problematic issue of religious bias

34. We are concerned that in drafting the subject content, too much emphasis was placed on conciliating religious organisations, rather than honestly assessing how the educational needs of young people growing up in 21st century Britain are best met.

35. This is evident in the DfE's press release to launch the consultation: "New academically rigorous RS GCSE backed by faith groups".⁵

36. The press release listed endorsements of the new subject content from a host of religious organisations. Given their involvement in drafting the subject content, their support is unsurprising.

37. Religious education evolved out of religious schooling and it is clear that the historic relationship between the Church of England and the state continues to have a profound influence over the way in which religion and belief are approached in schools. Many of the structural features of religious education, such as local determination, created in the nineteenth century, are still present to this day and the subject is clearly regarded by religion and belief communities as an opportunity to reinforce and enhance their own influence throughout the education system. The privilege once solely enjoyed by the Church of England is increasingly being shared by other religions and belief groups, but in our view this is not an appropriate way for state education to be conducted.

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⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-academically-rigorous-rs-gcse-backed-by-faith-groups>