

challenging religious privilege

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Religious education in English schools: Non-statutory guidance 2009

A response from the National Secular Society

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<http://www.qcda.gov.uk/22259.aspx>

relating to draft guidance shown at:

http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/8222-DCSF-Religious_Ed_in_Eng-consultation-FINAL.pdf

and returned to info@qca.gov.uk

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Introduction

- a. The National Secular Society promotes the separation of Church and State. It campaigns both at home and in the EU against the privileged influence of religion in public affairs and education. We defend scientific rationalism, freedom of speech and Human Rights, and stand for equality for all regardless of religious conviction or non-belief.
- b. The National Secular Society has long argued for complete reform of Religious Education (RE) in Britain. The best way forward is a completely revised RE syllabus that, as part of the National Curriculum, teaches about both religious and non-religious worldviews.
- c. Religious groups and representatives should have no privileged input and any syllabus should be nationally determined by independent educationalists without a confessional religious agenda. Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) do not require any non-religious representatives and any there are the only representatives denied the power to vote. This reveals the covert objective of RE: to promote the belief systems of the individual members of the SACREs. The correct objective of RE should instead be providing pupils with a balanced academic knowledge of religious beliefs and non-religious worldviews.
- d. Even the above lies far short of the ideal, but the reforms we seek, which would broaden the subject to include philosophy, would require legislative change and are therefore beyond the scope of this consultation. Our recommendations are therefore confined directly to the guidance itself.

Comments and recommendations relating to Non-statutory guidance 2009

[Read a copy of the draft guidelines annotated with the changes we propose.](#)

These comments should be read in the light of statistics showing that young people are increasingly losing interest in religion. For example, a recent survey showed that two thirds of teenagers do not believe in God¹. Even research done by religious groups finds both a loss of interest in religion and a steep decline in attendance.²

Teaching should reflect the diversity of belief and the lack of it in young people to preparing them for their role in a diverse society. This cannot be achieved by adhering solely to traditional ideas about the role and importance of RE.

¹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstoppers/religion/5603096/Two-thirds-of-teenagers-dont-believe-in-God.html>

² <http://www.tearfund.org/webdocs/Website/News/TAM%20Final%20Version%208.5.07.pdf>

1. While the NSS welcomes the fact that the guidance generally refers to 'religion and belief', the term itself is not defined within the document. **To make clear that 'religion and belief' includes non-religious philosophies, belief should be defined as 'any religious or philosophical belief', as set out in the Equality Act 2006.** The words 'Humanist', 'atheist' and 'freethinker' appear nowhere in the main text of these guidelines. **In order to make it clear that 'religion and belief' encompasses the life-stance and attitudes of people who have consciously rejected religions, a specific guideline should be included, similar to this:**

'The phrase ' religion and belief' for the purposes of these guidelines includes not only the beliefs of the adherents of the world's religions but also of those people who have consciously rejected religions or believe that religion should be a private affair, denoted by such words as atheist, humanist, agnostic, freethinker, secularist. Care must be taken in teaching to distinguish between them.'

If necessary, the guidelines should provide definitions of these widely confused terms.

2. There are many instances throughout the guidance where 'religion' alone is referred to. **These should be replaced with 'religion and belief' to ensure consistency and clarity.**
3. In **Section 1.2.3** the guidance discusses *Religion and belief: the context for RE*. The Ofsted report of 2007 *Making sense of Religion*³ called for the RE syllabus not to ignore controversy and the social reality of religion, but the latest guidance offers no such advice. The Ofsted report recommended that "We should dispense with the notion that we should encourage pupils to think uncritically of religion as a 'good thing'. Religion is complex and its impact is ambiguous. Pupils are aware of this ambiguity and must be given the opportunity to explore the issues openly". **With the RE currently being devised by SACREs dominated by faith groups, we are concerned that without such explicit guidance it is unlikely that these recommendations will be taken up. These specific Ofsted recommendations should be incorporated into the guidance.**

We recommend the removal of the biased presentation of positive aspects of religion that ignores or glosses over the much more visible negative ones - mainly about armed conflict and terrorism. The bias also evades religious and moral questions such as attitudes to homosexuality, women's rights and start and end of life matters where religious positions are often at variance with Human Rights.

4. Still in **Section 1.2.3**, a sentence in the guidance relating to the Census reads:

³ [http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Curriculum/Religious-education/Secondary/Making-sense-of-religion/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Curriculum/Religious-education/Secondary/Making-sense-of-religion/(language)/eng-GB)

It also confirmed that religion plays a role in the identities of many British people whilst there are also many others who identify themselves as being of no religious faith.

This sentence should be replaced by the following four paragraphs, with or without the references:

‘A separate Home Office Study in 2001 showed that religion ranked only ninth in characteristics important to people's identity, although it figured very much higher in the identity of Jewish and Muslim respondents.’⁴

Another major change since 1944 is the huge and continuing reduction in Christian belief, affiliation and practice. In 1944 around 3.7 million children attended Sunday school, but in 2009 this was considerably less than half a million. According to two major studies⁵, nearly two thirds of children do not regard themselves as religious.

Normal Sunday attendance at churches in England in 1980 exceeded 10% of the population. In 2009 it was around 6% and is projected by Christian Research to drop to 1.2% in 2050.

The percentage of people claiming they belong to Christianity was 52.8% in 1996, dropping to 47.6% in 2006. This was mirrored by an increase in people not belonging to any religion (increasing from 42.6% to 45.8%) who by 2009 will outnumber those who belong to Christianity. People of other religions than Christianity rose substantially, from 3.8% to 6.0%, of whom around a half were Muslims.’

5. **Section 2.1** of the guidance states:

*The requirement above does not apply to pupils who are **under** compulsory school age, although there are many instances of good practice where RE is taught to such pupils.*

This should surely read ‘over’ and not ‘under’? If not, it is unclear to what ‘The requirement above’ relates. We are assuming this is a mistake. Please let us know if this change is opposed as it raises further serious questions if it is not accepted.

6. **Section 2.3** of the guidance states:

ASCs can decide which principal religions represented in Britain, other than Christianity, are to be included in their agreed syllabus.

⁴ <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors274.pdf> [Home Office Research Study 274 Religion in England and Wales: findings from the 2001 Home Office Citizenship Survey Table 3.1: *Which of the following things would say something important about you, if you were describing yourself?* Religion was ranked as the ninth factor out of 15 with only 20% of respondents claiming it to be a factor at all.]

⁵ The two major studies cited are <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR564.pdf> (Extract from page 10) and **4th R for the Third Millennium** (Ed LJ Francis J Astley and M Robins Publ. Lindisfarne Books (2001) **Pages 50-58** which show 58% are either agnostic or atheist.

This is not satisfactory. In the interest of fairness, **the following sentence should be inserted after the above sentence:**

‘The non-statutory framework on RE also provides for “secular philosophies” and “secular world views” to be included, which should be carefully considered in view of the high proportion of non-religious pupils or pupils from non-religious families’.

This will serve to ensure that the principle religions **and beliefs** of the 45.8%⁶ of British people who regard themselves as non-religious are covered within the syllabus.

7. Still in **Section 2.3** the guidance states:

*Agreed syllabuses in any community school and any foundation, voluntary-aided or voluntary-controlled school without a religious character **may** not require RE to be provided by means of any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of a particular religious denomination.*

In ordinary English usage, ‘may’ is likely to be read as giving an option. This should be replaced by ‘must’.

8. **Section 2.6** states:

Responsibility for RE, which has always been part of the school curriculum in England, is a shared one – between local and national bodies, and between religious and belief communities, educationalists and representatives of the LA.

There is no mention of the children in this partnership, who have their own rights in religion under UNHRC and ECHR (see point 16).

The guidance also states:

The syllabus is arrived at as a result of local teachers, members of different religions and beliefs and representatives of the LA working together on SACREs and ASCs.

In practice, the non-religious are often barred from SACREs, or if admitted, often marginalised. They currently have no voting rights and therefore no real influence or purpose other than SACRES paying lip-service to the non-religious.

9. We welcome the advice in **Section 3.1** that RE should be:

taught in an objective and pluralistic manner and not as indoctrination into a particular faith or belief.

⁶ http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Social_Trends38/Social_Trends_38.pdf

However, unless non-religious viewpoints are proportionately covered, this still allows for RE to be used to exaggerate the importance and normality of belief rather than non-belief. As the guidance infers, RE should not be Religious Instruction, either promoting a particular belief or presenting a set of values as the norm from which all other beliefs and lack of belief deviate. As we note in Section 9 below, however, RI is lawful, despite being wholly inappropriate as a public function and undesirable from the perspective of cohesion.

To ensure RE is not taught as indoctrination, the guidance should advise that discussions of beliefs should use objective language such as ‘Christians believe...’ or ‘Muslims say that...’ rather than ‘God says...’ or ‘Jesus was...’ as such language is loaded with assumptions about the existence of religious figures, historical accuracy of religious texts and moral authority.

Greater emphasis should be given to proscribing indoctrination, proselytisation and evangelisation, given it is in the interests of religious bodies who are desperate to recruit new members through proselytising in the classroom. Hypnosis or similar techniques must never be used. The validity of this concern is underlined by Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury statement that ⁷“A church school is a church” and it being official Church of England policy to “challenge those of no faith”.⁸ And it was in a Church of England diocese that we have encountered hypnosis or similar brainwashing techniques being applied unashamedly to very young children⁹.

It is not enough to simply *allow* for non-belief to be covered. Any curriculum serious about teaching pupils about the concept of religion and belief, and the part it plays in the spiritual, moral and cultural lives of people in a diverse society, must objectively examine the cultural change that has seen a major shift towards non-belief. If, as claimed, proselytisation is not the aim, then the **beliefs of the non-religious should be examined on an equal footing with Christianity and other world faiths. It is also important for pupils to learn about the historical context and content of beliefs – for example Greek/Roman, Scandinavian/Teutonic and Mesopotamian.**

10. Throughout **Section 3** there are frequent references to various religious beliefs and some mention of ‘religion and belief’. **In the deeply regrettable absence of one, we make a strong request for a specific recommendation that children should look at the way of life, moral and social attitudes of people with consciously thought-out non-religious ‘beliefs’.**

11. **Section 3.1** also states

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2004/mar/16/faithschools.schools>

⁸ The Way Ahead (CofE Archbishops’ Council 2001)

⁹ <http://www.newstatesman.com/200408020016>

[curriculum] promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and of society, and prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life.

The word 'spiritual' has such wide usage that it has become meaningless. When it is used to mean 'religious', it immediately imposes a religion on the child in question. Many non-religious people have a sense of 'spirituality' that is based, for example, on an appreciation of non-material things. The fact that the term is currently used in a much wider sense than the purely religious should be reflected in teaching.

It should be clearly taught that religion (any religion) is not the sole or true source of morality and ethics. Non-religious people have moral values that are not derived from religion (as is often claimed). Basic ethical treatment of others is pragmatically necessary for social cohesion and psychologically necessary for well-being. The necessity of obeying a set of social rules is seen in all social animals.

Many of the goals mentioned in the section 3.1 box entitled *Importance of RE* can be and should be achieved without special compulsory lessons based around religion.

12. The rest of **Section 3** exemplifies the efforts of promoters of RE to justify its place as a separate lesson. Substitute history for RE and much the same could be said – without the potential for bias that RE brings with it.
13. **Section 5 should advise SACREs and ASCs that good practice and Human Rights concerns dictate that they cater for non-religious pupils and ensure religious pupils are aware of non-religious perspectives, according them as much respect as they do other religious perspectives.**
14. **Section 5.3.2** emphasises the importance of inclusiveness and breadth across beliefs in the community stating:
If a SACRE is to be effective its membership needs to reflect the priorities for RE and for education more broadly in the twenty-first century."
Despite this, the guidance uses words such as 'may', 'may well feel' and 'desirable'. **We recommend much stronger guidance using phrases such as it being 'best practice' to invite representatives of non-belief to join SACREs.** Unfortunately, however, the law does not even make any provision for the inclusion of the non-believers so it is not appropriate to make such broader membership mandatory.

15. Accepting young people as members of SACREs is mentioned in a case study (as opposed to being members of Young SACREs, discussed elsewhere in the section): **inviting young people to join SACREs should become a substantive guideline to meet with Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child¹⁰**. This is not enough in itself to comply with the Convention, but is acceptable as a first step.
16. In **Section 8, *Information on parents' and pupils' entitlements***, **a sentence should be inserted under 8.2 Pupils to make clear that it is essential that pupils are not marked down or otherwise disadvantaged in RE for expressing non-religious views or not being religious believers. Sensitivity is needed in the conduct of lessons or setting of homework not to require pupils to implicitly accept what others regard as religious 'truths'.**
17. In **Section 9, *The right of withdrawal***. The impression is given, we believe falsely, that the legislation¹¹ renaming Religious Instruction as RE marked an end confessional teaching. The law, however, still permits this – whether or not the QCA approves of it – in Voluntary Aided schools of a religious character, and we are aware of it having been operated in an RC diocese in recent years. We believe the document should acknowledge that the law permits this in Voluntary Aided schools of a religious character but it is not considered good practice.

¹⁰ http://www.unicef.org/crc/files/Guiding_Principles.pdf

¹¹ Education Reform Act 1988