

Panel: What does '21st Century RE for All' mean?

We are grateful to the panel speakers from our [conference on religion and belief education](#) on 14 April 2018 agreeing to share the notes for their presentations. These may differ slightly from the final speeches given on the day, which are available on our YouTube channel ([playlist link](#)).

Martha Shaw

I'm here as a semi-outsider to RE (I have previously taught it – but my main subject is Sociology) In 2010/15 I carried out (with Adam Dinham at Goldsmiths), a research project, RE for Real, which explored stakeholders views on and aspirations for the purpose, content and structure of learning about religion and belief in schools. I welcome the opportunity to talk here today on 21st century RE – a key driver for our research was the fact that we have a mid-20th century settlement for an early 21st century reality.

I would like to use this time to outline what I think are the key recommendations for the future of RE that came from that project and my views on how they can be best developed.

The project: looked at the range of ways in which teachers, students, parents and employers think religion and belief should be taught and learnt.

Its intention was to put findings from schools, families and workplaces, into dialogue with those who can construct the future of learning.

19 participating secondary schools - 4 in London, 2 in the South West, 3 in the South East, 3 in the East, 2 in the East Midlands, 1 in the West Midlands, and 3 in the North West and 1 in the North East.

Semi-structured interviews & focus groups

331 people – 10 employers, 34 parents, 190 students and 97 teachers.

5 Community schools & 14 Academies (6 C-of-E, 1 ecumenical, 7 with no religious character)

I will not go into the findings here – they are available in the report:

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/documents-by-section/departments/research-centres-and-units/research-units/faiths-and-civil-society/REforREal-web-b.pdf>

The report made some key recommendations for the future of RE in schools – based on premise that the current system and legislation is outdated – ill-fitting to 21st century society – in terms of structures & content.

- A National **Framework panel** should be mandated to make recommendations about i) the purpose, ii) content and iii) the structures of teaching and learning.
- **There should be a National framework** (for all schools) – including independent & faith schools.

We have since seen the establishment of the REC Commission for RE – which is doing a great job at broadening this process – although I think perhaps a wider process is necessary (more in a moment) in their development of national entitlement.

I think it is important that this an entitlement - outlining learning goals and suggested content - not a curriculum – there needs to be a balance between maintaining national coherence, ensuring consistency of quality and school level flexibility.

We recommended that a panel should also consider and make recommendations about the relationship **between learning inside RE, outside in other subjects**, and in the wider life of schools, especially in relation to the Act of Worship, and the right to withdraw.

There is a need for a change in legislation to support this – but also a need for **review of the competing aims and purposes within the wider context of learning about religion and belief**.

It is widely recognised that RE cannot deliver all of the various aims ascribed to it, so more thought needs to be put into which of those are specific to RE and which are better suited to other subject areas or whole school concerns.

Consideration should be given to clearly demarcating the boundary between academic study of the real religious landscape, and other religion and belief learning associated with citizenship and SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) particularly relevant to secondary– Key stage 4 – at primary more holistic approach.

This is why I think a review needs to be broad– to look at learning about religion and belief in general terms - particularly need to consider overlapping and discrete aims of RE & Citizenship & SMSC.

Religion and belief hugely relevant part of Citizenship education –the two had a complicated relationship – maximal notions of citizenship such as those found in intercultural education recognise the importance of this relationship and of knowledge & understanding about religion and belief as a key dimension of global citizenship.

In 2008 Council of Europe made recommendations to member states on the religion & belief dimension of intercultural education – since translated into a road map in Jackson's *Signposts*. Yet, not sufficiently reflected in current Citizenship guidance. Hugely important aspect of learning about religion & belief and key driver for such learning in schools but often left to RE – maybe that's fine and a good place for some of it - RE teachers best qualified to facilitate the kind of learning envisioned in such an approach –but it needs thorough consideration – by the RE community & by those with influence over Citizenship in schools. Citizenship needs review too.

Another area of overlap that I think needs more thought is that of personal **development**. This tension between the intrinsic and instrumental aims of RE is expressed in the duality of implicit and explicit learning objectives – learning about and learning from. This tension was expressed in the RE for Real research – explicitly amongst some teachers but implicitly in range of responses from across the sample.

I **do think** the main aim of RE should be the **academic study of religion and belief** (drawing on a range of disciplines, sociology, history, theology for example).

Such a focus would promote the status of RE as an academic subject – it makes assessment easier – makes it easier to identify progression. But I think we need to exercise caution - and not rush to adopt a narrow, knowledge focused justification. We work in a knowledge focused curriculum – but

we need to be careful about rushing to fit an accountability focused framework and excluding other key dimensions of learning.

In Castelli & Chater's recent book, *We Need to Talk about RE*, Peter Schreiner argues that the knowledge economy and its focus on commodification leaves little place for RE, suggesting its *raison d'être* lies in pupils' personal development. He argues that "a new, more energetic position for RE to some extent depends on a new, more human-centred vision for education" (Schreiner, 2018, p50). I do think we need this more human centred education and RE can be part of it – but I don't think that personal development and identity formation are or should be the main purpose of RE.¹

However, I think the personal development element needs careful handling **2 key reasons** –

Firstly, whilst our research showed that the RE space has been occupied with whole school concerns such as moral and spiritual development and that was seen as problematic, our research also showed, that if it wasn't for RE, some of this wouldn't happen. Our respondents told us that RE is currently the only space in many schools where pupils feel they can discuss their opinions on things that matter to them. Whilst I do not think RE should be the main space for this – a future model needs to be **think about where this goes** (Goes back to the idea of a broader review of RE and related subject/curriculum areas. i.e PSHE needs a re-think too).

Second reason for caution in side-lining personal development relates to my understanding of **religious literacy** - understanding of religion and belief and positive engagement with religion and belief diversity demands a level of personal reflection.

This is promoted in constructivist approaches and most explicitly in Jackson's Interpretive approach. I think that positive understanding of and engagement with religion and belief diversity demands a hermeneutic approach in which pupils question their own assumptions around religion and non-religion, religions and worldviews.

So whilst I agree that there is a need for clear expression of the knowledge basis for RE – this should not be too narrow.

Before I finish I want to say something about **content** – **and this is another key dimension of religious literacy**.

The RE for Real research recommended that content should reflect **the real religious landscape**, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief. I welcome the focus in *Big Ideas* on 'continuity, diversity & change'

As the sociological study of religion and belief continues to show - the real religion and belief landscape is dynamic – it's changing and RE needs to reflect that. It also needs to reflect the broad trends – that there is more believing without belonging, and different ways of non-believing. It is a context that is Christian, plural and secular all at the same time.

Our recommendation is that content should always include:

¹ Schreiner, P, (2018) A European Perspective – How Educational Reforms Influence the Place & Image of RE, in Castelli, M & Chater, M eds. (2018) *We Need to Talk about Religious Education – Manifestos for the future of RE*, London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp 37 – 51.

- The study of a broad range of religions, beliefs and non-religion
- Exploration of religion, belief and non-belief as a category
- Exploration of the changing religion and belief landscape and its impacts on contemporary society
- A focus on contemporary issues and the role of religion and belief in current affairs and controversies - how religion, history & culture relate to one another.
- A focus on the relevance of religion and belief for workplaces and working life
- Exploration of religion and belief as lived identity as well as tradition.

The **category or concept of religion and belief is a good place to start.**

A focus on which religions/worldviews to include can lead to incoherent snippets of various worldviews, relating neither to each other, nor to pupils own experience.

A focus on category allows the exploration of the nature of religion and belief for the individual, communities, and wider society. – it is the thread that pulls the other strands together – and in considering religion and belief as categories – students necessarily have to critique, not only the content, but their response to it.

I understand religious literacy as being about a)category b) disposition c) knowledge and d) skills.

Rel Lit: “It matters not that this or that religious tradition has been covered, but that the pupil is prepared for a possible eventual encounter with an adherent. Armed with the **right attitude, the skill to question and some vantage point to make sense of the answers**, such a pupil will be set up to cope with religion in the 21st century” (Lawton, C, 2017, p34)

If RE to do this well – it needs more space on the curriculum – but maybe some of this could be equally well done elsewhere. For example, would more dedicated space outside RE for citizenship, cohesion, and personal development (SMSC) make more room for diversity of religion and belief within RE?

Keith Sharpe

1. I am Keith Sharpe. Retired teacher, teacher trainer and professor of education. I chair the Secular Education Forum of the NSS. In my career much of my research interest was focussed on France, which as is well known is a country long committed to a fully secular education system. France and England provide very interesting contrasting case studies of the role of religion in schooling. In France they try to find ways to keep religion out of schools; in England we try to find ways to keep religion in schools.

2. I am old enough to remember a time in this country when we did not speak of religious education. In the schools I went to we had Religious Instruction, or Religious Knowledge, or Scripture. And there was no doubt that the principal purpose of the subject was to inculcate Christian dogma.

3. The justification for this was that England was a Christian country and children should therefore be taught the fundamentals of Christian doctrine, whether in a church school or a state school. This simply reflected widespread conviction. All children were automatically assumed to have a Christian identity. The Christian religion pervaded the whole of school life. In history I was told that God caused storms to occur to blow the ships of the Spanish Armada off course and so protect protestant

England. The legal framework for this approach had been established towards the end of the Second World War.

4. The 1944 Education Act - a clear statement of the raison d'etre of the subject.

- * religious instruction was the only named compulsory subject in every county and voluntary school.
- * SACREs to ensure that the doctrinal content '*reflected local circumstances*' - i.e. the relative strength of different denominations - with a brief to advise local authorities on their responsibility
- * ASC *religious instruction shall be given in accordance with an agreed syllabus*' - determined by An Agreed Syllabus Conference which the LA had to convene.
- * religious schools control their own RE

This settlement has endured to the present day despite subsequent major educational reform.

5. The 1988 Education Act - in the postwar period the subject's rationale distintegrated

- * introduced a national curriculum for other subjects but left the 1944 religious settlement in place.
- * subject now to be called religious education - teach about religions not induction
- * nevertheless ASCs must '*reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian*'
- * parental right of withdrawal continues - this would have been difficult if RE were a national curriculum subject e.g. no withdrawal from maths

6. Legacy of problems from 1988 onwards:

- * local determination is a postcode lottery - imagine decimals in Doncaster but not in Dunstable
- * multicultural society - non-Christian religions represented on SACREs
- * the subject has no clear raison d'etre - no longer inculcation of dogma - loss of rationale
- * religion is a personal choice, not an ascribed identity
- * rise of the nones - growth of no faith

7. Height of absurdity: Vale of Glamorgan Council vs BHA in High Court in Cardiff - Paul Smiley, Chair of National Association of SACREs said last year:

'membership of SACREs should reflect broadly the proportionate strength of the denomination or religion in the area...then...in deciding whether to appoint a humanist representative an authority must satisfy itself that humanism is an 'other religion', that is part of the make-up of the principal religious traditions in the area, and that humanist representation would reflect the strength of humanism in the area'.

There are good reasons to teach children in Glamorgan about humanism. It is ridiculous to say this should only be done if there are enough humanists living there.

8. It is vital to end arbitrary local determination, end the postcode lottery and establish a national entitlement to an RE curriculum for the twenty-first century.

9. NSS eight recommendations - part of overall NSS campaign - schools should not be organised around religious identities or used to promote religious world views or engage in proselytization

We do not want different truths being taught to children, either because they are in religious schools or because of the arbitrariness of SACREs. We believe in inclusivity for all children.

- * national determination of an RE curriculum for all children as future citizens
- * broad, balanced and objective
- * cover both religious and non-religious worldviews
- * no intention to inculcate dogma, no confessional element
- * subject to inspection by OFSTED - including in schools with a religious character
- * no parental right of withdrawal
- * content decided by same structures and processes as other subjects
- * no undue influence or veto from other interested parties

10. The reform of RE is urgent. Current parlous state, some good practice but

* OFSTED 2013 report 'Religious Education: Realising the Potential'

1. low standards
2. weak teaching and assessment
3. teachers having little understanding of the subject
4. confusion about the purpose of RE
5. weak leadership and management

Teaching was less than good in 60% of primaries and 50% of secondaries

OFSTED specifically draw attention to the problems of local determination.

11. Signs of hope

* Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) set up by RE Council of Eng & Wales) Interim Report 2017

'RE faces a perilous future without strategic urgent intervention'

'low standards predominate across too many schools, including schools with and without a religious character'

They suggest a national entitlement:

'pupils should understand the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews and ways of life that exist locally, nationally and globally.' The idea of religious literacy (disputed term) that children need to know about other religions - 'worldview literacy' might be a better term. It is about *'developing tolerance, sensitivity and empathy for the diversity of humanity e.g.*

'understand how individuals, groups and communities communicate their beliefs, experiences, values and identities through verbal and non-verbal means (e.g. prose, story, poetry, art, music, dance, ritual, architecture.)

* National Association of Teachers of Religious Education during the 2017 General Election expressed strong support for the recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education.

* A New Settlement - Religion and Belief in School 2015 Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead also argue for an agreed national syllabus and propose a National Standing Advisory Council on RE.

* RE for Real 2015 by researchers at Goldsmiths College 'policy muddle' on RE - propose a statutory National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning applicable to all schools. 86% of the teachers interviewed thought RE should be a national curriculum subject.

12. The importance of education

There is no evolutionary difference between us in the twenty-first century and humans in the first century. Our bodies are the same as theirs. We are the same as them physiologically and neurologically. Yet our lives are incomparably different and vastly better. The difference is purely that we have better knowledge and better education. They were ignorant, lacked reliable knowledge and had little understanding of how the world works. The dogmas of witchcraft and demon possession were very poor explanations of illness. The germ theory of disease is infinitely more effective. We need to educate children to understand the importance of openness and freedom in society so that there is an open market place of ideas in which none are privileged and all are open to critical analysis in order that progress can be made. Children need to understand the importance of free speech, thought and expression. And they need to learn methodologies for distinguishing good ideas from bad ideas. Good quality RE, whatever we call it, can make a valuable contribution to developing just this vital critical facility.

Conclusion

Now 30 years since the first national curriculum entitlement it is timely to establish a national entitlement to RE.

The NSS is pushing at an open door. Time to end the anachronistic, unfair and arbitrary system of local determination and provide proper good quality education about religious and non-religious worldviews for every child in all schools.

Kate Christopher (notes on roundtable discussions)

Confessionalism: We haven't yet got beyond this. We do not look at religion in multiple dimensions. We let RE have a value because we use it as **moral education**. But this could just its own subject. RE could then be one of the intellectual humanities, involving theological and historical etc analysis. It could look at interpretations of the 'holy texts' and learn about interpretation as well as what the texts say.

Religious Literacy issues: RL can be defined as knowing about religion and belief without accepting it. It should be factual learning, not straying into the confessional.

(1) *Religious literacy* needs to include political literacy, eg how religions have been used to perpetuate patriarchal norms. (2) *Definitions* – What does the term mean in practical use? Need to define what it involves in practice, some definition of terms, some analysis, some linguistics, some philosophy etc. (3) *School curriculum* - RL requires thinking about the actual contribution of RE/RL in

the curriculum, how much time, status in relation to other subjects, how many religions² can actually be taught? (4) What is RE *for*, eg is its purpose educational (factual) or social? Should any one subject bear this responsibility? If so, how can we manage the complexity of people's different 'world views'. Does it risk straying into relativism and acceptance of illiberal³ practices (eg circumcision, FGM)? Can a simplistic RE/RL curriculum ever lead to true religious literacy?

The school curriculum: Education about Belief could fit within Sociology. Theology could be part of a wider Humanities offer, eg with RE/RL and History teachers planning and teaching the Reformation together. However, engaging with the subject matter of RE/RL needs time, space and effort⁴. If we keep RE/RL to the current level of 1 hour per week⁵, we may have to abandon some depth for breadth (Q3 Option 1). Alternatively, RE/RL can become 'Worldview Studies' working in association with the wider Humanities (Q3 Option 2)⁶.

Professor A C Grayling: Religion is taken out of the larger context. We should teach 'history of ideas', extending even before the 'classical' period, as part of a 'grand narrative' to make sense of our society. Where and how did ideas arise? Humans have an instinct to ascribe agency to natural phenomena, to which add dreams and drugs. Religion does evil as well as good. From 380-580 Christian iconoclasm and persecution of 'pagans' made it "the ISIS of its day". RE should include how religion was imposed. Augustine used apologetics to paper over inconsistencies of Christianity. Later this was replaced by legalism backed by the Inquisition. Thales (6C BCE) tried to use powers of observation and reason. Compare Hesiod and myths that came later! The key to the Reformation is that in the northern European countries the church was not powerful enough to stop it⁷. It led to an explosion of interest in religion, but this later settled down into rational enquiry. Francis Bacon (15-16C) has been called father of scientific method. Apologetics return in 18C, eg the watchmaker analogy. So religious instruction (as was then) was an attempt to keep religion alive, starting with children⁸. Why has humanism, which has been around for 300 years (Hume, Locke etc), been so slow to gain acceptance⁹? The 30-years war and the wars of religion in France were as bad as that in Syria. Why not subject religion to scrutiny and analysis in schools, as part of a wider study of ideas?

Audience question: How can history of ideas relate to citizenship and other sociological practice?

Answer: get more people involved!

Audience question (KC): The Jews developed *Pardes* (exegesis) a way of reading texts at different levels (superficial, allegorical, semiotic, mystical). Are we being too culturally analytical, and are

² Information: Ten religions cover 99% of 'cultural adherents' (not necessarily personal adherents), with Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism representing over 87%. Judaism represents a quarter of 1% but its influence on the other 'Abrahamic' religions means it should be included.

³ Comment: 'Illiberal' may need definition, preferably in non-relativist terms, and if necessary in terms of a set of constitutional equitable and moral values. This is a topic of current research and some empirical findings.

⁴ Comment: So not just a matter of repeating what is written in the Bible or Qur'an.

⁵ Comment: according to the National Curriculum Framework, RE should feature in all 12 years of education (average 39 weeks per year), implying a total of 468 hours equivalent to nearly a four-week intensive course (23h per day).

⁶ Assessment: In a rough round-up of opinions on Q3 from the tables (6 giving opinions), 83% favour Option 2, 16% Option 1 (some having moved from 1 to 2 during discussion).

⁷ Comment: Not forgetting the printing press.

⁸ Comment: Can one infer that only children and activists really 'believe' in the sense of acknowledge truth as opposed to just formal commitment?

⁹ Comment: The problem with humanism may be that, as with any movement that denies hierarchy or the will to power, it is not clear who benefits, so it does not attract powerful adherents.

there other ways? *Answer:* scholars are still working on the original texts but without having them in having access to the original language, interpretations is necessarily 'second hand'.

Audience question: Isn't it too ambitious to expect everyone to think like an Oxford professor?

Answer: Religion is no different from any other branch of history. [Points to simple connections:] Christianity rejected polygyny "because St Paul was gay". Why "Patri ET fili' not just Father?

Re worship: Relates story about someone who inked out references to God in a collect "because no gentleman likes to be praised to his face."

Alan Brine

I am a member of the Commission on RE – reporting later this year - but here I am speaking in a personal capacity

Informed by the fascinating process of collecting evidence, listening and reflecting and my wider experience of RE. 50 years exactly since Ninian Smart persuaded me to take RS at university.

Much going on that is exciting – new thinking especially around purpose and content of RE - Big Ideas - We need to Talk about RE - 20/20 Conference.

BUT word that most comes to mind for the future of RE for ALL is complicated

Current debates around the nature and purpose of RE are quite troubled and affected by the various vested interest groups that populate the world of RE.

Most significant, I believe, is the impact the dual system (the faith/non-faith sectors) has on these debates. Can we escape from recognising that behind the discussions are issues of politics and economics? In the world of RE, who has the power and influence; who controls the money?

Interesting paradox that many argue for the important of reducing the impact of faith interest groups on RE just r the time when the politics and economics of RE are moving in the opposite direction because of inequities across the dual system.

Explain by reference to two narratives currently used to interpret where we are:

Narrative 1 – the enthusiasts' narrative (popular with RE teachers).

RE is wonderful but there is not enough of it – espc the 30% of non-faith academies who apparently do not make appropriate provision. It misunderstood and has been badly treated by Govt policy on training bursaries, Ebacc etc etc. Picture suggests RE is v healthy in the faith sector but troubled in the non-faith sector. Three things needed:

- Promotion of better public understanding of this wonderful subject – including HTs
- Better monitoring of statutory requirements and holding non-faith schools to account when they fall short including use of legal challenges
- Changes in Govt policies that are damaging RE – bursary, EBacc, SACREs

Narrative 2 – the darker narrative

Recognise the low public status of RE (only 41% thought RE was important C/f 60% Cit, 83% Geog; 84% Hist) and consider why the subject has low status.

Recognise that there are major problems within the RE world which are contributing to our problems – all is not well.

Especially focus on ONE issue – there are others. **The problem of inequity of capacity, resource, support and influence across the dual system poses a major and increasing threat/a clear and present danger to the future credibility and integrity of RE.**

Traditional checks and balances between the faith and non-faith school sectors in relation to RE have been undermined by the collapse of LA support and the academisation process. Arguably, the issue is compounded by the increasing emphasis being placed recently on the policy of more active promotion of faith-based models of RE within the faith school sector.

As examples of the inequity we can point to:

- Most significantly. the inequity of access to, and influence on, policy makers between the faith and non-faith sectors
- Significant inequity in the arrangements for inspection, monitoring and support for RE with the impression given that the subject has a higher status in the faith sector.
- Investment for resource development and CPD (linked to religious Trusts) focusing heavily on the particular priorities of schools with a religious character rather than wider 'whole RE' needs
- Increasing influence of faith school personnel and resource providers in the development of locally agreed syllabuses
- Dominance of the faith sector in the way RE is being interpreted (including the shaping of examination provision) with the increased emphasis on narrow theological themes threatening the subject's broader scope and appeal with mantra of fewer religions in more depth. RE losing contact with the public perception of its fundamental purpose. Perhaps the biggest problem.
- Linda Woodhead – “CofE strategy is now for their schools to more intensively used for promoting the faith – and indeed a particularly evangelical version of it”. Very high % of XTY in faith schools (80+ in RC, 66%-75% in CofE)
- Growing tendency to produce resources which apply different approaches to the teaching of Christianity by contrast with non-Christian faiths and beliefs - increasing the sense of 'othering'.

What we seem to be seeing is a pattern which has a biblical parallel "To those that have, more shall be given". No way to run a subject and threatens to undermine the credibility and integrity of RE.

The way ahead

In the drive towards developing a national curriculum for RE for all have we exposed divisions and difference across the dual system?

Danger that a national entitlement will be constructed to keep the powerful faith lobbies on board rather than securing the radical changes needed.

Rather than seek agreement across the divided dual system should we move to a clear separation allowing for a more radical reconfiguration of RE in the non-faith sector?

Radical re-configuration – key elements (beyond the more obvious structural changes around a national curriculum):

- Take the subject out of hands of religious interest groups and the faith school community
- Re-affirm the secular nature of the curriculum within which study of religion and belief fits
- Recognise ‘bed-blocking’ problem – blocking study of philosophy, ethics and social studies
- De-construct the subject – phil and ethics, inter-cultural studies, the use of human sciences to investigate the lived reality of religion and belief. THEN look at those elements alongside the cognate subjects – philosophy, history, citizenship, social studies and cultural studies. THEN reconstruct the way the curriculum space is used.

English, Maths, Computing and Science are the most important school subjects, according to the public

How important do you think it is to teach each of the following subjects at secondary school? %

