

Religious Education

The National Secular Society advocates comprehensive reform of religious education. We would like to see education *about* religion absorbed into a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils that covers a variety of religious, non-religious and secular philosophies and worldviews.

A new approach: philosophy and ethics

Paradoxically, Britain is one of the most religiously diverse and least religious countries in the world. It is therefore especially important that young people learn about the beliefs and perspectives of those whose beliefs and values differ from their own.

It is also appropriate for part of the school curriculum to be set aside, as it currently is, for the consideration of moral and ethical issues but for more emphasis to be given to provide space for young people to reflect on philosophical questions and develop their thought processes.

We believe a new programme of study under the heading of philosophy and ethics, along with strengthened provision of citizenship education is the most appropriate and inclusive means of achieving this. The reformed subject would include objective education about religious belief, but not to the detriment of other important philosophical and ethical perspectives.

Historical background of Religious Education

Religious education (RE), which replaced religious instruction (RI), evolved out of religious schooling and has been part of the school curriculum since the Elementary Education Act 1870, which established elementary education of all children aged 5–13. The Education Act 1944¹ (often called “the Butler Act” after the Secretary of State responsible for it) established religious instruction as a compulsory subject in order to “lay the basis for a morally stable society rooted in its common Christian heritage”.²

¹ Education Act 1944 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/7-8/31/part/II/crossheading/religious-education-in-county-and-voluntary-schools/enacted>

² Chadwick, P. (1997) *Shifting Alliances: Church and State in English Education*. Continuum.

Religious education still enjoys special protected status on the school curriculum as a compulsory subject. The historic relationship between the Church of England and the state continues to have a profound influence over our education system – and successive legislation has reinforced the privileged status of Christianity in religious education, often reinforced by the activities of those on the bishop’s bench in the House of Lords.

Current legislative position

RE is a statutory part of the basic curriculum³ and all maintained schools by law and academies and free schools, by virtue of their funding agreement, must provide RE for all children attending school.

Parents have the right to withdraw their child from all or any part of RE.⁴ This includes parents whose children attend a faith school. If pupils are withdrawn from RE, schools have a duty to supervise them, though not to provide additional or alternative teaching.

RE is the only statutory subject that is not part of the National Curriculum.

Community schools and Voluntary Controlled faith schools⁵ follow a locally agreed syllabus drawn up by local committees (known as Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, or SACRE) comprising of teachers, local churches, faith groups and the local authority.⁶ SACREs are not required to include any specifically non-religious representatives, and any there are (usually humanists), are the only representatives denied the power to vote.

In Voluntary Aided faith schools (technically called schools “of a religious character”) the syllabus is decided upon by the governing body – and may be of denominational character. This means that a significant number of state-funded ‘faith’ schools are permitted to teach RE from a selective, exclusive or confessional viewpoint, more analogous to religious instruction than education.

The funding agreement for an academy without a religious designation states that it must arrange for RE to be given to all pupils in accordance with the requirements for agreed syllabuses. The same applies for converter academies where the predecessor school was Voluntary Controlled (VC) or foundation school.

Unless the predecessor school was a VC or foundation school, the model funding agreement for academies with a religious designation specify that it must provide RE in accordance with the tenets of the particular faith specified in the designation, and is permitted to be confessional. In addition, they are encouraged, but not required, to

³ Mandated by statute in the [School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Section 69](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/section/69) (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/section/69>)

⁴ Section 71 (1a) School Standards and Framework Act 1998
<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/31/part/II/chapter/VI/crossheading/exceptions-and-special-arrangements-etc>

⁵ Different types of school: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/types-of-school.html>

⁶ Further information about SACREs is available here: <http://www.secularism.org.uk/sacres.html>

provide RE that is in line with a locally agreed syllabus and teach about other faiths and philosophical perspectives.

Religious Education: What's the problem?

Bias

We regard it as unjustifiable that VA schools and most religiously designated academies, all publicly funded, are still permitted by law to teach RE solely from their own exclusive viewpoint, and in a confessional way. Such a situation not only undermines the integrity of a state education system, it also undermines young people's religious freedom. It is worth noting that not all pupils at such schools are admitted on religious grounds in accordance with their parents' stated religion. Some choose a school because of its proximity — often the Church of England school is the only one in the area. In other areas, a shortage of school places means many parents have no option other than to send their children to a faith school.

Even in non-religious schools, religious groups and representatives enjoy privileged input into what is taught in RE. As a result, the subject too often morphs into religious instruction, or acts as a conduit for promoting religious belief.

Responding to criticism from church leaders that RE was being sidelined in schools, Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, said in July 2013, that he wanted to work with 'faith groups' to improve RE teaching.⁷ His comments typify the general approach to RE that allows the interests of faith groups to dominate the subject content.

We argue that in a religiously plural democracy it is inappropriate for any belief system to be privileged in state schools. The law however, privileges Christianity by stipulating that the religious education agreed syllabus must reflect that the religious traditions in Great Britain are, in the main, Christian while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principle religions represented in Great Britain.⁸

This legal position reflects the desire of the Church of England, which believes that religious education teaching in England should have a "central focus on Christianity".⁹ The Church recognises that with church attendance in decline, schools provide the only real opportunity to reach children with its message.¹⁰

The subjective teaching of RE leaves many parents who contact the NSS in the uncomfortable position of having to either compromise their values, or withdraw their children from the subject. Given that schools have no obligation to do any more than supervise withdrawn pupils, many parents wishing withdrawal find it an unattractive option. Concerns about separating their children from classmates — which can lead

⁷ Gove says school RE has 'suffered' BBC 4 July 2013 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-23191048>

⁸ Section 375(3) of the Education Act 1996 <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1996/56/section/375>

⁹ <http://www.churchofengland.org/education/latest-education-news.aspx>

¹⁰ When explaining the rationale for why the Church of England should be promoting RE, the Church of England's RE spokesman, Dr John Gray wrote in the Church Times, "For most children and teenagers, their main experience of and knowledge about Christianity is gained through RE lessons in schools, rather than through the churches."

to difficulties for children identified by their peers as being 'different' — also makes withdrawal an unsatisfactory solution.

The nature in which religious education is taught in schools often appears to be heavily influenced by the head teachers and teachers involved in delivering the subject. The Association of Christian Teachers (ACT) seeks to “inspire all Christians in education confidently to live out their faith day by day, positively influencing the culture, values and spiritual environment of their place of work and, ultimately, transforming the nation for the Kingdom of God.”

ACT advises its members to scrupulously avoid evangelising in the classroom. However, it is notable that many parents contacting the NSS with specific concerns cite the personal faith of the RE teacher, or head teacher, as being a key factor in their concerns over the way RE is taught at a particular school.

There need be no conflict between personal faith and professionalism of teachers, but a subject called 'religious education' does provide an opportunity for those that do wish to proselytize in the classroom to do so.

It would be unthinkable unprofessional for teachers to abuse their positions to espouse party political bias, and it should be similarly unacceptable in publicly funded schools for teachers to evangelise any religion or, indeed, non-belief.

Policy makers may not wish to move away from the subject of religious education for political and cultural reasons, or for fear of the condemnation of religious leaders protecting their self-interest, but until they do, young people will continue to be denied the impartial, objective, relevant and academically rigorous education they should be entitled to.

Classroom evangelism

The lack of impartiality in the teaching of RE is compounded by the significant number of evangelistic Christian groups involved with the provision of religious education. We are concerned that the presence of such groups fundamentally undermines the objectivity and educational integrity of religious education.

By packaging proselytization as education, well-funded and well-organised evangelical groups are fulfilling their missionary objectives to 'bring children to Jesus' by providing schools with manipulative teaching resources and preaching to pupils during schools visits.

With religious education regarded as low priority for many schools and specialist RE teachers being in short supply, evangelical groups are exploiting this situation by increasingly approaching schools with offers to contribute to and/or deliver work related to religious education.

We are concerned that a significant number of schools are naïvely welcoming offers of help from evangelical groups and using them as a substitute for objective teacher-led education about religion.

A list detailing some of the RE provision being carried out by evangelical groups in UK schools is available on the NSS website.¹¹

Unclear purpose

The partial and evangelist nature of some RE teaching is facilitated by a degree of ambiguity about the specific aims and purpose of religious education. A three year investigation into the practices and outcomes of RE found:

"One consequence of maintaining some of the structural features of religious education created in the nineteenth century into the twenty first century has been that policy makers are unclear about the specifically educational purposes of religious education."¹²

The Department for Education non-statutory guidance for RE has a very broad understanding of the purposes of RE, which includes ethical and philosophical questions:

"Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong, and what it means to be human."

For the Church of England, which regards education as central to its mission, the purpose of religious education is very clear. According to its Church School of the Future Review in 2012¹³: "High-quality religious education and collective worship should continue to make major contributions to the Church school's Christian ethos, to allow pupils to engage seriously with and develop an understanding of the person and teachings of Jesus Christ." One of the ideal outcomes identified for pupils at the end of their education in church schools is that they are able to "think theologically". The report highlights the fact that schools enable "more direct engagement with children and their families than any other contact including Sunday worship." Similarly, in Catholic schools the objective is "deepening and enhancing [pupils'] personal faith; [and] for some it will be evangelisation".¹⁴

Other religious and belief groups similarly regard religious education as 'advertising space' in schools.

Poor provision

Provision of RE in primary and secondary schools is not only vague in its mandate but, according to broad consensus, is poor.

¹¹ List of evangelical groups active in schools <http://www.secularism.org.uk/evangelism-in-schools.html>

¹² Conroy, J et al. (2011) Does Religious Education Work?" <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/does-religious-education-work-by-prof-c-conroy.pdf>

¹³ [http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1418393/the%20church%20school%20of%20the%20future%20review%20-%20march%202012\[1\].pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/1418393/the%20church%20school%20of%20the%20future%20review%20-%20march%202012[1].pdf)

¹⁴ Statement on Religious Education in Catholic Schools - issued by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

http://www.rcdow.org.uk/education/default.asp?library_ref=8&content_ref=827

For too long RE has been allowed to carry on with no clear educational purpose – and as a result, many schools regard RE as a low priority. A survey in 2013 revealed former pupils regard RE as the least useful subject on the curriculum.¹⁵

A report in 2013 by the All Party Parliamentary Group on religious education (APPG) found that RE lessons are frequently taught by teachers with no qualifications in the subject.¹⁶

Ofsted, the Office for Standards in Education, has criticised the quality of RE provision at both primary and secondary levels – saying many teachers are unsure of what they are trying to achieve in the subject. Ofsted say there is an urgent need to review whether the current statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum are effective.¹⁷

The current poor provision of RE is depriving pupils of a potentially engaging and academically rigorous field of study. The most enthusiastic advocates for strengthening the provision of RE in schools are religion and belief groups. Given the extent to which they seek to influence the syllabus, their lobbying should be treated with a degree of scepticism.

Fails to foster community cohesion

One common justification for the inclusion of religious education on the school curriculum is its contribution to community cohesion and mutual understanding.

In a diverse society there is a clear need for pupils to learn mutual respect and tolerance. We believe cohesion is best served by children and young people recognising shared values and what they hold in common.

Many faith schools being permitted to select pupils on the basis of faith and to teach religious education from a confessional viewpoint also fundamentally undermines the claim that RE is an appropriate vehicle for good community cohesion.

A key aspect of citizenship education is to teach about “diverse national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding”.

We believe citizenship education is a far more useful vehicle for promoting community cohesion than religious education.

In addition to citizenship education, a new subject of philosophy and ethics to replace religious education would provide an inclusive and neutral environment for pupils to better understand and explore the views and opinions of people whose beliefs and values differ from their own.

¹⁵ Survey by Opinium Research asked more than 1,800 adults who attended UK secondary schools which subject they thought was the least beneficial to their education. Just over one in five (21%) said religious education. <http://news.opinium.co.uk/sites/news.opinium.co.uk/files/OP3507%20-%20Opinium%20PR%20-%20Education%20-%20SET%20FOUR%20-%20Tables.pdf>

¹⁶ RE: The Truth Unmasked http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/media/file/APPG_RE_-_The_Truth_Unmasked.pdf

¹⁷ Ofsted (2010) Transforming Religious Education. <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/resources/transforming-religious-education>

Conflation of religion with ethics and environmentalism

Another common justification for the necessity of RE as part of the school curriculum is that it is an appropriate forum through which to teach students about morality.

However, presenting moral issues to young people in the context of 'religious education' inevitably leads to morality being perceived as uniquely associated with religion, which is deeply erroneous and leaves pupils with a skewed and very poor understanding of ethics and how normative discourse has developed and been framed throughout previous centuries.

We regard it as very problematic that the exploration of ethics and fundamental life questions is undertaken in an almost exclusively religious context, which sidelines a host of other philosophical approaches. Accordingly, we think it would be more appropriate to teach morality outside of a 'religious education' context, in a way that acknowledges the moral values arising in religious traditions but also in a way that gives equal prominence to the long history of secular ethics.

It is also important to note that believers in any one religion are not a homogenous group. The views of religious believers on moral and ethical issues are often at variance with those of the religious doctrines they purport to follow, and particularly the often deeply conservative doctrines espoused by religious leaders.

For example, the majority of British Catholics disagree with their Church's stance on key controversial issues such as contraception, abortion, homosexuality and celibacy.¹⁸ Likewise, three in five people of faith supported government plans to extend civil marriage to same-sex couples, despite a vitriolic campaign against the proposal by the Church of England and other faith leaders.¹⁹

Equally, there is no one non-religious culture; non-believers are as diverse as believers. The point is 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.

There is also a growing tendency to cover environmental issues as part of religious education. The Religious Education Council (REC) claims that "concern for nature is essential to religion and that religious awareness has a vital contribution to make to respect for nature".²⁰ An RE resource promoted by the REC to explore the theme of caring for the environment is supplied by an evangelical organisation and written from an exclusively Christian point of view.²¹ Environmental issues should primarily be covered in geography lessons, but where the ethical aspects are explored, it is inappropriate for environmentalism to be presented as a specifically religious concern.

¹⁸ YouGov / ITV Survey Results (2010) <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/british-catholics-disagree-with-church-pov.pdf>

¹⁹ YouGov for Stonewall revealed that three in five people of faith supported government plans to extend civil marriage to same-sex couples
http://cdn.yougov.com/cumulus_uploads/document/fi1b20gjes/12%200612%20Stonewall%20attitude%20tables%20rebased%20-%20for%20website%20v2.pdf

²⁰ REEP: The Religious Education and Environment Programme
<http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/members/rec-members/reep-the-religious-education-and-environment-programme>

²¹ Wow! Our Amazing Planet <http://www.barnabasinschools.org.uk/9780857462497/>

A-contextual ring fencing of religious ideas

A further reason sometimes given for including religious education on the school curriculum is that religion, Christianity in particular, represents a significant cultural heritage in the UK, which deeply informs our visual arts, history, and literature, and as such, pupils need to study RE in order for them to understand these other subjects.

We argue that the study of religion 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. This approach would not only enrich students' understanding of a number of subjects outside RE, but it would leave the subject of RE 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.

The concept of 'religious education' has served to ring fence religious ideas for special treatment in schools, presenting them in an a-contextual manner. However, we argue that those ideas can be covered in other subjects. Those pertaining to the descriptive elements of religious doctrine can be covered in subjects such as art, history and English literature where they would enrich students' understanding of both the arts and religious doctrine in a more direct and context-oriented way. Those ideas pertaining to the normative, theological and value-based elements of religious belief can 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.

Undue emphasis on religion

Not only does the provision of religious education ring fence religious ideas for special treatment, it also attaches a disproportionate significance to the importance of religion in people's lives.

In the 2011 census around a quarter of the population in England and Wales reported that they have no religion²². Other research suggests that two thirds of 12–19 year olds do not regard themselves as belonging to any religion.²³ It is important that the values and beliefs of the adherents of 'major faiths' are not given greater importance in schools than those of non-religious citizens.

The Pew Global Attitudes Project revealed stark global regional divides over the personal importance of religion, but in the UK, just 33% of people say religion plays a very important role in their lives.²⁴ According to a similar Gallup WorldView poll, 73% of British citizens say religion is not important in their daily lives.²⁵

In a poll for the BBC's Religion & Ethics Department young people placed religion near the bottom of their list of moral priorities. Only 4% said having a religious faith or belief was important for them.

²² ONS Religion in England and Wales 2011 <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/rpt-religion.html>

²³ Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds <http://www.secularism.org.uk/uploads/young-people-in-britain-ncsr-research.pdf>

²⁴ <http://www.pewglobal.org/2002/12/19/among-wealthy-nations/>

²⁵ GALLUP WorldView - data accessed on 17 January 2009

http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/Importance_of_religion_by_country

On a global scale religion is clearly an important political and ideological phenomenon. It is therefore appropriate to include objective education *about* religion in the school curriculum in a way that does not seek to inculcate.

The place of religion in schools

It is important for young people to understand the significance of religion in society, and the importance of faith to many people.

However, we believe the in-depth teaching of a specific faith should be a parental responsibility, for those that want it, and not the role of state education. It is no more the role of the state to instil religious beliefs as it is the state's role to question the validity of religious beliefs, or, similarly, political beliefs.

We would therefore like to see religious education replaced with a new programme of study that allows pupils to take a more objective and religiously neutral approach to the consideration of moral and ethical issues.

Such a subject would still include basic knowledge about a variety of religions and beliefs, their broad ethical standpoints and their philosophical and/or theological underpinning.

Importantly, religion and belief groups should have no privileged input into the syllabus. As with other subjects, the syllabus should be nationally determined by independent educationalists without an agenda motivated by a specific religion or belief.

Key recommendations

- In any publicly-funded school, including VA schools and academies with a religious designation, the law should be amended to: (a) require teaching *about* other major faiths and non-religious philosophies, and (b) outlaw confessional teaching of RE.
- RE should be replaced with a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils. The newly devised study of ethics and philosophy should cover a variety of religious, non-religious and secular worldviews.
- The construction and content of the new programme of study to replace RE should be determined by the same process as other National Curriculum subjects (by an advisory Committee supported by an expert panel of senior educationalists and academics.)
- Teachers, subject communities, academics, employers, higher education institutions and other interested parties should be consulted, but should not have undue influence on how education about religion is delivered.
- Accompanying guidance related to any subject covering religion and belief should make clear that schools must not offer opportunities to groups seeking to evangelise in schools. When external groups are invited to assist with educational provision, the parameters of what is acceptable should be made clear by the school in advance and agreed, a teacher should be present to

ensure the parameters are not violated, and parents should be notified sufficiently far in advance of lessons where such groups are being invited to be able to withdraw their child.

Get involved

If you agree that education about religion should be absorbed into a new National Curriculum subject for all pupils that covers a variety of religious, non-religious and secular philosophies and worldviews, please tell your MP.

Using the arguments in this briefing, please [contact your MP](#) to seek his or her support, at least in principle, for the establishment of a new subject of philosophy and ethics to replace religious education.

Please make the National Secular Society aware of any feedback you receive.