

# Religious education

## A conversation with Nikki McGee

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Previously she taught in Dorset and was head of department. Prior to that, she taught in Blackpool, London and Wakefield in a variety of schools. She is a 'lefty trad' and tries to give the young people in her class the kind of education she would want for her own children – rich in knowledge and calm in atmosphere.

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### **What does success in RE look like at the end of Year 9?**

You would want students to have a sound understanding of the drivers of the Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths, to understand the roots of the Dharmic faith, and then how over time history has corrupted and twisted and blurred the boundaries between those faiths. You would want them to have real insights into lots of the discussions that are going on today about why even the language that we use about those Dharmic faiths is complicated and controversial. You would also like them to have a good grounding in the Abrahamic faiths, and to know that the faiths of Islam, Judaism and Christianity share these roots, and then, where those boundaries cross, what the conflicts are about. RE students would know by the end of Year

9 why Jerusalem is as important as it is, why these conflicts are happening and why the situation in Jerusalem is incredibly complicated.

You would like most of them, for whom it is appropriate, to know that they are consequently viewing every other religious worldview through the eyes of Abrahamic faiths and why that is complicated. You would want them to understand that Britain and Western Europe are becoming increasingly secular and to have informed, intelligent, tolerant conversations about why that is. But you would also like them to understand that when you look at the world, religion isn't going away. In fact, religion is becoming increasingly polarised, where you have the big giants of Christianity and Islam growing, and other faiths possibly receding or changing in character. You would like them to understand that religion might not seem that relevant in an increasingly secular country like the UK, but on the world stage it is incredibly powerful, for both good and bad. So they need to understand that, and a smart way to do so is through the eyes of Abrahamic and Dharmic faiths. Ultimately, a good RE curriculum, taught well, will equip a student to be an effective citizen of the world.

### **How do you start to build that up from Year 7? How do you build a key stage 3 key curriculum from the moment they arrive?**

You would hope that they have covered quite a lot at key stages 1 and 2, and in an ideal world, it would feel like a continuation when they get to key stage 3. Anyone line managing RE needs to know that RE is going through a metamorphosis, and there is much discussion about worldviews. So what you want students to have an understanding of first of all is 'What is their worldview, and how does that shape how they see the worldviews of others?' And that is not a touchy-feely 1990s RE 'learning from religion' exercise; it is about pupils developing some sophistication of thought, where they can recognise the lens through which they see the world. Indeed, the idea that we all see the world through a unique lens – and that that lens affects how we see other people's lenses and worldviews – is a crucial threshold concept.

In Year 7, RE is essentially story driven. If you begin with the Abrahamic faiths, start with the Exodus narrative, or the story of Abraham, it is important to preface everything by asking questions such as: 'What am I bringing to the story? Am I bringing an innate suspicion of anything

religious, or a view that it's really stupid? Am I bringing a sense of respect for my own faith background? Am I bringing feminist thoughts, wondering where all the women are? Am I bringing some kind of British pride (as nationalism is often a big part of religion)?' That enables students to read these stories with a real sense of complexity, so that you are building on what has happened at key stages 1 and 2. At the end of the story, the next question is, 'Has my lens been changed by reading and thinking about that story?' Hopefully, all the way through their RE curriculum journey, they will be constantly tweaking that lens and their picture of the world will become even sharper. What's influencing the way that I see the world? When I learn something new, what am I taking away that is going to influence the next thing that I learn about?

When you understand religion, you see the world in full technicolour. All works of art and literature – paintings, films, poems, books – trace their origins to religious stories. Modern psychologists would say this that is why religion has survived, because humans love stories. Humans are drawn to, and remember, narratives. So all your Marvel films – they are just religion with special effects. But if you do not understand religion, you do not really get the technicolour that goes with those special effects.

Developing that lens explicitly is important. The religion and society think tank Theos have produced a beautiful animation<sup>1</sup> that is aimed at helping people to understand the term 'worldview'. Dawn Cox has developed the idea of using a lens through which students can read texts and understand beliefs and practices. Once you have made the students aware of the concept of the lens, their first task is to design their lens, illustrate it to reflect their worldview. They then write an explanation of it which they keep in their books through Years 7, 8 and 9, so at the end of each year, they can look at their lens and see how it has changed. They prepare a new version of their lens for the beginning of the next year. They can see how they are growing and developing as a person. Each time you look at a belief or a practice or a story, they look back at their lens, and they're going to say, 'Well I am viewing this from my perspective: a white kid from Norwich, whose mum is a Christian, whose dad is an atheist, and who is really into animal rights.

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1 [www.bit.ly/3ijTUKc](http://www.bit.ly/3ijTUKc)

This is my lens.' Once they understand their own lens, they also then start to appreciate the lenses of others. It is helpful if a student sits next to someone in the class that they really like, and their lens is completely different; or perhaps they have quite similar views, but they work out that those views are shaped by quite different things. It is important that you expose the students to really rich examples of lenses or voices; for example, when you look at the Exodus accounts, you might talk about how black theologians would read the Exodus story and perhaps have a different interpretation from somebody else. So if you expose children from key stage 1, 2 and up to rich voices where it is easy to identify their standpoint – maybe a feminist theologian, or someone who is not religious, or perhaps someone who has a background of being a refugee – and you can see their lens at work, it helps students understand how texts and beliefs are created, and also how they are interpreted.

Andy Tharby at the Durrington Research School says the text should be the beating heart of the lesson. He is talking about English, but it applies to any subject. Let the text speak for itself. In RE, we study religious texts, but it is important that you do not turn RE into just theology. There is a real danger there that the students never meet anybody who is religious and alive. If you stop studying Islam just after the death of Muhammad, students never learn about Muslims after the 6th century, do not learn about any Muslim women, and do not learn about any white Muslims. So, as well as Bible texts and sacred texts, in just about every unit you need a couple of texts that will drive your schemes of work. In Year 9, for example, you could have a unit where they look at the Abrahamic faith using the book *A Little History of Religion* by Richard Holloway, which is challenging but, at a stretch, not out of the reach of key stage 3 students. The book traces key thinkers across the faiths and events in history that have prompted a change in world religions. It is a great book to use at the end of key stage 3 because it makes so many links. For example, there is a chapter on Guru Nanak, and Holloway compares Guru Nanak with Martin Luther. Nanak and Martin Luther were in the world at the same time, within a few years of each other, and their message was very similar: they were both stripping away all the frivolities of religion; they were both removing the need for priests and saying you can talk to God for yourself. They are also talking about service and simplicity. And Richard Holloway's style of writing is just quite beautiful.

You need a unit looking at why religion exists, because it is important in RE that students do not just study religions but they study religion. You can use a text by Pascal Boyer, who looks at classical anthropological arguments for why religion exists. Boyer looks at functionalist arguments that try to explain why humans are drawn to religion. He claims firstly that religion attracts us because it is a story and we like stories as humans; and secondly that we have templates of what the world should be like, and that religions contradict these templates. So, a good example is the Virgin Mary, who is like all other mothers in that she cares for her son etc., but she is a virgin: a very specific important violation. Our brains remember these narratives because they violate our templates. They become sticky because they are surprising. Boyer's text is a scholarly piece of work and it also helps students to appreciate a different way of studying religion because they are using a mixture of psychology and anthropology. We also include research reports for our students to read.

It is important when you are studying religions that you use books from the culture that you are studying. Within the Dharmic phase, there are lots of clever, scholarly books written by white people who do not belong to the Dharmic faith, who have never been to India. Instead, you might use *The Truth About Us* by Sanjoy Chakravorty. He considers how the British Empire has shaped the way we view the Dharmic faiths. It is a clever book: it draws from geography; it draws from the social sciences; it draws from religious studies. Chakravorty argues that what we call 'Hinduism' today is basically an invention of the 18th and 19th centuries. He uses plenty of examples that students can access and understand. This means that students are inspired, and they are having the kind of conversations that are happening in university departments with carefully chosen extracts from challenging texts. All students deserve the right to have that, regardless of what kind of school they come from. You need to respect both the integrity of the material and the intelligence of your pupils. So much of what you might have drawn on actually is not from the authentic voices of the people within those traditions. If you return to that first lesson where students look at their lens, then they understand that whether the author of a text was an anthropologist in the 19th century or a general in the British Army in India, those authors were looking at religion that they encountered in India and assuming that it must be like Christianity. So it must have a single text, it must have ten rules that

everybody follows, and so on. That's what happens when you look at one person's religion through your own fixed lens. If your students look at anthropologists in Year 9, you can help them see that the way we see religion is often a creation of those anthropologists that they study from the 18th or 19th centuries, who tended to see religion as a collection of beliefs. In Europe, it often is, but go elsewhere in the world and religion is much more practice based, and is about ways of living. There is an argument that you should not use the term Dharmic 'faiths'; rather, you should say Dharmic 'ways of living', because it is about what you do, not about what you believe.

The Ofsted research review of the RE curriculum published in 2021<sup>2</sup> points out that the discrete teaching of the different religions might be mistaken because children do not get any sense of the interconnectedness of all this material. You need to build the big picture of what it means to belong to a faith community and understand a faith community, but also explain that there are worldviews that are different aspects of which might creep into formal religions as well. You need to establish enough content over the years to give your pupils these insights; it's about choosing this powerful material which opens up where you want to take the pupils. RE teachers want to cover the 'big six' – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism – because religion is deeply personal, and the idea that there might be someone in an RE classroom who is of a religious background that never gets mentioned is untenable for RE teachers. That said, you are always going to leave someone out; even if you cover the big six, you know there are other religions beyond that, other worldviews beyond that, which could claim a right to be in your curriculum as well. And then you have got to include humanism and other non-religious worldviews. You cannot do it. Most RE departments just have an hour a week. Your diversity comes from the tools that you use to study. So you might not cover all six; but it is realistic, if you have an hour a week and you have three terms, to say you are going to study religion using the tools of philosophy, social sciences and theology. That way, students are getting a rich diet, but it is richness of a different type, and it is richness that is achievable. And at a classroom level, you can then perhaps add in some

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2 [www.bit.ly/3fvaoxo](http://www.bit.ly/3fvaoxo)

diversity. If you try to cover everything, you are going to fail. Trying to cover all six in an hour a week is going to end up being superficial. It is going to end up with misconceptions, which is raised as a concern in the Ofsted Research Review, where departments are racing through things very quickly. A curriculum that teaches the religions thematically, but in the sense of Abrahamic and Dharmic, creates the richest conversations, because the students can see the links.

### **The Norfolk Locally Agreed Syllabus**

Disciplinary knowledge in RE is something departments pay a lot of attention to. When you teach RE, you have a locally agreed syllabus that you should follow. The Norfolk-agreed syllabus is themed by disciplines, and so it talks about studying religion, with the tools of philosophy, theology and social sciences. We also add in the tool of history. Each of those disciplines will have their own ways of getting to the core subject truths, and they will have their own ways of questioning. In RE, the disciplinary and the substantive overlap somewhat; when we design assessments, we will sometimes give our students a question and we will ask, 'Which discipline would ask this question? Does this read like a philosophy question, a social sciences question or a theology question?' When we design our assessments, we will design questions that will be from either theology, philosophy or the social sciences. So a theology question is often about interpreting text or interpreting a belief and maybe relating to it today. A philosophy question is going to ask whether this is convincing, does it make sense, is it coherent? A social sciences-type question is going to ask what this looks like today, how does this shape the way that humans behave? By the time our students leave Year 9, they have got an understanding of how those disciplines – theology, philosophy, history or social sciences – will help answer that question. I would like to have my students doing the kinds of things that psychologists do. So we are not just going to learn what Pascal Boyer thinks about religion; like him, we are going to take some data and we are going to learn how to interpret it. At the start of Year 7, we might even create some data of our own and answer certain questions, such as, 'Is this data reliable? How could I make it more reliable? What are the flaws in this data?'

## How can the SLT line manager support RE?

Any SLT line manager should read the executive summary of the Ofsted research review. The whole thing is about 100 pages long, but the summary is about 10, and that will tap you into the latest debate about worldviews, and how studying world religions is perhaps not where we are today because the boundaries of religion are much more blurred than that. Then there is the *Reforming RE*<sup>3</sup> blog, where you have people at the cutting edge of RE writing readable blog posts. You could also read the *Reforming RE*<sup>4</sup> book, which is one you can dip in and out of, and then *Making Every RE Lesson Count*; at the end of each chapter of the latter are sharp summaries and questions. They could form the centre of your discussion with your senior leader. They should also be aware of the locally agreed syllabus.

Once they have done their reading, they should ask questions like 'How are you interpreting "worldviews"?', because that is one of those terms that everybody has got their own meaning for. By having that discussion with the subject leader, they will know what they are looking for when they are going into lessons or having conversations with colleagues and students. They will want to know from the subject leader what disciplines are being used in RE, because RE is one of those interdisciplinary subjects where curricular debate can be never-ending. They should ask about workload, because RE departments are often at the rough end of the decisions made by people at the top who have not taught a subject on a full timetable that is allocated only one hour a week, so teachers have lots of classes and teach just ridiculous numbers of students. Also useful are workload questions like, 'There's a data drop then in the calendar; does that really work for RE? How many lessons was it from the previous data drop?' Because if you are in one of those schools where they hand in data every half term, there could have been three lessons of content between the data drops. Other questions might be, 'How are those non-specialists you have delivering your subject getting on? What can we do so that you can have some time with your non-specialist teachers?' Because they are trying to teach a deeply challenging curriculum, there needs to be a time when teachers who are teaching other subjects do not go to their department meeting and work on RE instead.

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3 [www.reformingre.wordpress.com](http://www.reformingre.wordpress.com)

4 [www.bit.ly/2VKHimY](http://www.bit.ly/2VKHimY)



Another question they should ask is, 'What are you reading?' Because everything that you do as a leader of RE comes from what you read. One thing that is clear in the Ofsted research review on religious education<sup>5</sup> is that heads of department should be encouraged to read widely. So, 'What are you reading?' and 'Do you have time to read?' are important questions because if your head of RE or any subject does not have time to read, they are not nourishing their scholarly soul, and, crucially, they are probably not driving the curriculum forward, because it is a subject that is dynamic and changing, and we need to be reading.

### **Religious education: background**

It is helpful for subject leaders and coordinators to discuss and agree with colleagues the reason why their subject, in this case religious education, is important for the pupils in their school. One way of doing this is to draw on a quote, in this case from a pupil: 'In the same way that an iceberg has layers which are below the surface, religious education provides opportunities for pupils to explore the depths of faith traditions and worldviews.' This kind of prompt allows us to formulate our way of stating the importance of the subject. We might agree or disagree with such a statement and in doing so come to a form of words which expresses our view of the importance of this subject, in this school. This moves us away from the territory of 'We teach this subject because of the SATs or GCSEs.'

While the external tests and exams are important, they are not the totality of the subject.

The 'material' of religious education stands separate as an object for study and critique, and as such the personal beliefs of the teacher and pupils are irrelevant. It is every pupil's entitlement to have access to the key concepts underpinning religions and beliefs, whether they are of that tradition or not. All state schools must teach religious education<sup>6</sup> to pupils at every key stage. Local councils are responsible for deciding the RE syllabus, but faith schools and academies can set their own.

Religious education is important because like every other subject, it provides a particular set of materials through which pupils come to understand important things about the world and themselves. It is the

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5 [www.bit.ly/3IUEGOe](http://www.bit.ly/3IUEGOe)

6 [www.bit.ly/2Wrt60h](http://www.bit.ly/2Wrt60h)

study of religion and beliefs and it stands in the curriculum as a set of ideas and practices which have shaped and continue to shape our world. The business of religious education is an exploration of the influence of religions and beliefs on individuals, culture, behaviour and national life.

As in any other curriculum areas there are concepts and ideas underpinning the subject. The word 'religion' has its roots in the Latin for 'to bind', and it is the sacred texts, practices, literature, stories, art and practices that bind communities within a tradition together. The subject includes theology, namely the discussion of the divine, philosophy and the human or social sciences,<sup>7</sup> and it is through working with these lenses that the subject secures its rigour.

Good quality provision occurs when teachers keep as close as possible to the fundamental 'material' of the subject. In RE, this includes the following:

- The Bible and sacred texts – these should be the beating heart of religious education. Texts have a primacy in that they have stood the test of time over centuries, they contain the accumulated wisdom of traditions and they have a life beyond any individual. They usually point to the ultimate, whether God in Christian tradition, Yahweh in Judaism or Allah in Islam. The texts can provide the lens through which to engage with the theological. Theology, understood here as conversations about foundational beliefs within religions, is a study of religions and beliefs that will include some approach to the concept of 'God' or 'ultimate reality'. Georgiou and Wright explain: 'Theology involves investigating key texts and traditions within different religions and belief systems, exploring the ways they have become authoritative for believers and the ways they have been challenged, interpreted and disregarded over time.'<sup>7</sup> JW: Add superscript number to match the one after 'or social sciences' above.
- Stories from faith traditions – the hadith in Islam, the lives of the saints in the Christian tradition, the wisdom of the Midrash in Judaism, the Ramayana – are all fertile sources providing insights into religious beliefs.

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7 [www.bit.ly/3ijx45w](http://www.bit.ly/3ijx45w)

## Religious education

- Artefacts as ways of understanding belief and practice. Material based on strong sociohistorical grounds – namely that which has emerged from the past, stands up to the critique of time and resonates with society today – is both static and malleable in that it can be interpreted through the lens of different individuals and their communities.
- Visits and visitors providing the unique insights of lived religion and belief
- Art and sacred music as ways of understanding and expressing religion

It is important that teachers appreciate the difference between the external aspects of religions and the lived experiences of individuals. Furthermore, they need to know that traditions differ, and scholars often take opposing views. REonline<sup>8</sup> provides useful summaries of these supplemented by wider scholarship and research.

### **Professional communities**

Subject associations are important because at the heart of their work is curriculum thinking, development and resources. The subject association for religious education is the National Association of Teachers of RE.<sup>9</sup> It should be the case that any member of staff with responsibility for a subject should be a member of the relevant subject association, and this should be paid for by the school.

Twitter subject communities are important for the development of subject knowledge, because it is here that there are lively debates about what to teach, how to teach and the kinds of resources that are helpful. For religious education, it is worth following NATRE on Twitter and the hashtags #rechatuk #TeamRE #REteacher

### **LINKS**

REonline – [www.reonline.org.uk](http://www.reonline.org.uk)

CStG – [www.cstg.org.uk](http://www.cstg.org.uk)

NATRE – [www.natre.org.uk](http://www.natre.org.uk)

RE Council – [www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk](http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk)

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<sup>8</sup> [www.reonline.org.uk](http://www.reonline.org.uk)

<sup>9</sup> [www.natre.org.uk](http://www.natre.org.uk)

## An overview of the Inspiration Trust's key stage 3 RE curriculum

	Year 7 – Origins	Year 8 – Foundations	Year 9 – Variety
Autumn	<p>Disciplinary Focus Philosophy</p> <p><b>What is the love of wisdom?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Socrates, Plato and Aristotle</i></li> <li>• <i>Cave Analogy</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus Philosophy and Theology</p> <p><b>Is the concept of God coherent?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Paley Design Argument and Mill criticisms</i></li> <li>• <i>Aquinas First Cause and criticisms</i></li> <li>• <i>C.S Lewis Moral and A Ahmed's criticisms</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus Philosophy</p> <p><b>How do humans make moral decisions?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Aristotle – Virtue Ethics</i></li> <li>• <i>Bentham – Utilitarianism</i></li> <li>• <i>Fletcher Situation Ethics</i></li> </ul>
Spring	<p>Disciplinary Focus Theology</p> <p><b>What do Abrahamic faith stories reveal about God?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Abraham – Covenant and Sacrifice</i></li> <li>• <i>Moses – Exodus</i></li> <li>• <i>Jesus – Birth, Death and Resurrection</i></li> <li>• <i>Muhammad – Sira and Qur'an</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus Human Sciences and History</p> <p><b>To what extent do religions reflect or react to society?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Sikhi and Hindu Dharma</i></li> <li>• <i>Marx and Durkheim</i></li> <li>• <i>Rama and Sita</i></li> <li>• <i>Story of Malik Bago and Lalo</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus Human Sciences</p> <p><b>What is religion?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Abrahamic and Dharmic</i></li> <li>• <i>Functionalist – Durkheim, Berger &amp; Tylor</i></li> <li>• <i>P Boyer – Religion Explained</i></li> <li>• <i>P Singer: Marx, A Very Short Intro</i></li> <li>• <i>A Storr: Freud, A Very Short Intro</i></li> </ul>
Summer	<p>Disciplinary Focus Human Sciences and Theology</p> <p><b>How do creation narratives shape what it means to be human?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Genesis Creation Accounts</i></li> <li>• <i>Abrahamic faiths</i></li> <li>• <i>Peter Berger</i></li> <li>• <i>Big Bang/ Evolution/Out of Africa</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus History and Theology</p> <p><b>Why is Christianity the way it is?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>J Hill: History of Christian Thought</i></li> <li>• <i>C K Barrett: Paul. An Introduction</i></li> <li>• <i>Arian Controversy &amp; Nicene Creed</i></li> <li>• <i>St Paul and Martin Luther</i></li> </ul>	<p>Disciplinary Focus History and Theology</p> <p><b>Why are religions so diverse?</b></p> <p>Texts, Scholars and Traditions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Abrahamic and Dharmic (Choice)</i></li> <li>• <i>A Little History of Religion by R Holloway</i></li> <li>• <i>J Lipner: Hindus: Their Religious Practices &amp; Beliefs</i></li> <li>• <i>K Douglas: The Black Christ</i></li> <li>• <i>C Woodall: Minor Prophets in a Major Key</i></li> </ul>

**Three documents for your senior leader line manager to read about RE**

1. Making Every RE Lesson Count by Louise Hutton and Dawn Cox
2. Reforming Religious Education: Power and Knowledge in a Worldviews Curriculum by Mark Chater
3. The RE Chapter in Curriculum: Theory, Culture and the Subject Specialisms by Ruth Ashbee

**Five questions for your senior leader line manager to ask you about RE**

1. What are you reading?
2. Does our feedback and assessment policy work for RE?
3. What do you understand by the term 'worldview'? How is that being translated into the classroom?
4. How can I help you support your teachers with other specialisms?
5. Which tools or disciplines are your students using to study religion?

