

Religious education

A conversation with Adam Smith

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Many people don't realise that RE is not on the national curriculum apart from a stipulation that schools must teach religious education as part of a broad and balanced curriculum. That leads to the question, where do you get your RE curriculum from? The answer is confusing. For most maintained schools, you need to follow your locally agreed syllabus unless you work in a faith school. The locally agreed syllabus is produced by a SACRE, the standing advisory council for religious education. This is a group of teaching professionals, religious representatives and non-religious people who come together under a local authority to produce a syllabus for the local area. This leads to a rather strange situation we have in London where in Southwark we teach a different syllabus from neighbouring boroughs, with Lambeth on one side, Lewisham on the other, Croydon south and Westminster and Camden to the north. It's important to emphasise that academies must follow or create a curriculum of equivalent breadth and depth to locally agreed syllabuses. And then church schools or faith schools have their own syllabuses. It is a confused picture.

I think a lot about what I want pupils to know, understand and be able to do by the end of Year 6. It's interesting to divide religious education knowledge into substantive and disciplinary elements. You want pupils to know what the Trinity is, to be familiar with the Lord's Prayer or the Five Pillars of Islam or the festivals of Judaism. There are just things that are classic, bog-standard RE, the same in 1945 as today, the real meat and potatoes of substantive knowledge. There's also a whole other world of substantive knowledge that comes when you start to look at RE through disciplinary lenses. For example, there is the sociological lens through which to view things. I think it's very important that our pupils have an understanding of religion in London and of the communities in London, of the festivals and the way that religion paints itself on the city, the way that religion is there historically. Layer upon layer of religion in their community, there are synagogues and mosques and gurdwaras, and churches and temples and cathedrals all within spitting distance of our school. To be honest, the UK is such a beautifully rich country that there are places of worship near almost every school. I used to work in rural Cambridgeshire, and we looked at the local area there.

That's the substantive side of things, there's a lot. I could think of a list, almost a vocab-based list of what I want from pupils, in terms of disciplinary, that's crucial at the end of Year 6. We are preparing our pupils for secondary school. However, with all the substantive knowledge in the world, if they don't understand how to interrogate, how to have fun with, how to enjoy the subject, how to write in the subject, how to talk in the subject and discuss in the subject and debate in the subject, then I think we've failed them.

My dream is that a Year 6 pupil can walk into the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery or walk into the various rooms in the British Museum that have religious artefacts in them and have a framework through which to interpret new stories that they come across, new symbols, new images, new narratives that they see. I'd love to go on a trip with Year 6 and see how they are able to interpret the different images because they will have gained a language of art history and visual art, through some of the schemes that we teach. I would also love them to be able to walk into a church, or walk into a text, as it were, the hermeneutics side of things, walk into the interpretation of a text and have the same experience.

There's a unit for Year 4 where the inquiry question is, 'What does Jesus teach Christians about poverty?' It starts with looking at charity and at the New Testament. It starts with looking at Christian attitudes towards helping others and why that's important. Again, that's very much meat and potatoes RE. Then it turns that question of poverty on its head slightly because then we look at monasticism and we say, 'Why do some Christians choose to live in poverty and make a promise not to have any personal property? What is the relationship between that and their faith?' I lived in a monastic community for three months. I've long been fascinated and attached to Anglican monasticism. It's a personal interest of mine. I've brought it in and I believe there's a justification and a place for it in the curriculum. You can pick that up again with Ramadan and you can say, 'Why would a Muslim choose not to eat during the daylight hours of August?' RE is an interesting subject to talk about with primary school children; why do people make these counter-intuitive choices, influenced by their faith? Why do we have people who choose to live in poverty and give up personal property? Why do some people choose to fast? Why do we have people who devote their lives to looking after a Hindu temple? These are fascinating, anti-societal impulses. That asceticism that you see in Buddhism, that monasticism, it's just so interesting to talk about with pupils because their lives are often – not that it's their fault – overly materialistic.

If pupils can have more than a surface level discussion such as, 'Yes, that is hard,' if they can understand the motivations, even if they don't agree with them. They don't have to want that for themselves, but more than just observing it as a phenomenon, if they can interrogate it and if they can find interest and questions there, that is the heart of RE for me. Why are they doing that? How does that interact with the daily practice of faith and how does that link back to texts and how does it link back to tradition and the past?

I think we need our pupils to understand the culture and society in which they live. RE provides the religious element of that understanding of the world. That's what we call it in Early Years. That is fundamentally important about RE. There's some commentary that says that it's irrelevant now, that religion is a declining force. That might be true to some extent in the West. However, globally, religion is growing, and the number of religious believers is growing. If we want our pupils to exist in

a global world, they need to understand the billions of people who are professed members of the faiths that we study.

We study what are called the big six: Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. They account for most religious believers in the world. This is also important because of the deep mark that religion, particularly Christianity in the UK, has made on our culture. Art, history, architecture, politics are imbued with religious language and with religious ideas. When I moved to primary from secondary, I usually describe it as a Damascene conversion, seeing the light. If you don't know the story of the road to Damascus, that's a reference you won't understand. That's one tiny example that if we don't teach RE, we leave our pupils a lot poorer for it.

If we don't teach this, we leave our pupils without references to Krishna, to Guru Nanak, to Buddha, to Jesus, to Muhammed, to the Qur'an, to the sacred texts and stories that are everywhere. Every literary archetype originates with a sacred or religious text. The earliest texts that were ever written were mythological, they were religious. Finally, it is self-evidently interesting. I'm sorry, but it just is! It's fascinating to look at how people's belief influences their actions. It's fascinating to look at how religious art and religious buildings reflect belief. It's fascinating to build a rich schema connecting art, scripture, belief, practice, community. I know that this is a series of conversations with different subjects, but I will go to bat for RE and say it's just the most interesting subject to teach at primary. I think that with good planning all three of those strands can come through, that will have an influence on a Year 6 pupil, but also hopefully an influence on a 36-year-old in 20 years' time living in the world. Living in London, living in Leeds, living in Kirklees, whatever it is, interacting with society, culture, literature, everything really is influenced by religion.

One of the differences with primary is you rely more heavily on the materials that you're presented with as a non-specialist teacher. That's why I think it's important to have a high-quality curriculum, high-quality planning, where it is clearly thought out what a teacher is going to do in a lesson, how they're going to be supported with subject knowledge, how we've chosen the best of our subject to present to pupils.

That way there's less emphasis on that one teacher. There's less emphasis on their personal view or their personal relationship with

religion. If we just said to teachers, 'I'd like you to plan a six-week unit on Jesus,' that's going to result in conflict. That's going to result in some teachers presenting a six-week unit on how Jesus was this incredible figure who was messianic and has come to save the human race, Christian belief. Some people will be producing a six-week unit on did Jesus really exist and if he did exist, what evidence is there that he was crucified and born again? We cut the difference and present something that is hopefully a little bit more scholarly and academic.

I leave some open-endedness in my planning. I leave a little bit less on the plate, in terms of discussion questions. I feel those can take more time and they can be guided by teachers in my school who I know are expert at questioning, experts at working a room, experts at answering and asking questions. We assess RE but we do it in a free-form way. We assess through a piece of extended writing where pupils have freedom to choose their topic sentences and their topic points.

In the right hands, it's brilliant and in the wrong hands, it can be RE in 20 minutes instead of an hour. I really get upset when I walk into a classroom, and I see RE as last thing on a Friday. That's the squeeze spot. I think part of the role of an RE co-ordinator is to be an advocate for the subject, to create booklets and to ensure you're talking to teachers about the scheme.

When planning the RE curriculum for Year 1, I had to appreciate that children don't have certain subject concepts and categories that we take for granted as adults, and that we certainly take for granted by KS3: belief, prayer, God, supernatural. The difference between a God that has been believed in for 2000, 3000-plus years and Iron Man is an important concept for Year 1 children to understand. Similarly, the difference between Jesus and fictional characters in stories. Basically, religion inhabits the grey area between fact and fiction. We explicitly teach that belief is having something that exists in your head that you don't necessarily have tangible proof for. We say some people use this analogy of the wind, that's clunky, but it starts to get younger pupils to understand this third category that RE exists in.

Teaching children what God is, teaching children what prayer is, is crucial. That's not to say you sit down with pupils in Year 1 and say, 'Today we're going to learn the word God, and this is the definition for it.' Pupils learn it through stories and through meeting experiences of

believers and learning about their lives. They learn it through stories of Jesus, the stories of Krishna, the stories of Buddha. And they also learn it through the stories of religious believers and their actions. So it's never too young to start teaching about these inspirational figures and how their faith influenced them.

It's also worth noting that our school has a very rich cultural calendar. However, this is not RE. We celebrate Diwali, we celebrate Eid, we celebrate Christmas, we celebrate Easter. We have a Nativity; we have a big Eid celebration in our playground. That's not RE. It's not collective worship either. It's just a part of our SMSC. It's part of how we involve our community, but that is a big chunk of our Early Years interaction with religion.

It's KS1 and then onwards where I want to have a bit more of a categorised view of what religion is. In early years, they are exposed to RE through our 'Understanding the World' module, through our cultural calendar and through our community. They meet people at school from different faiths, their peers, teachers, teaching assistants and parents.

In terms of content coverage, we need to consider doing fewer things in greater depth. A common complaint from RE teachers and co-ordinators is there's just not enough time. However, I am not sure if that's true. I don't believe that mantra of 'we don't have enough time'. In primary we have Early Years, Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, Year 4, Year 5, Year 6, seven years of RE. That's amazing. I couldn't believe when I sat down to plan our curriculum just how much work was ahead of me, but also how much space I had to do incredible things. So we do the basics. We do six world religions. We focus particularly on Islam and Christianity. In KS1, those categories, those stories are almost exclusively Islam and Christianity. They still get exposure to other religions through our cultural programme, but we focus on just Islam and Christianity in KS1. In KS2, they spend a term studying one of the four other world religions.

In Year 3, pupils learn about Judaism, Sikhism in Year 4, Hinduism in Year 5, and Buddhism in Year 6. The other two terms we teach thematic approaches to religion within a singular religion. So, Christianity and poverty, Christianity and war, Christianity and visual art, Islam and climate change, Islam and visual art, Islam and the community in London. I have found time for almost everything that I want to be included. There are some things we don't teach such as non-religious world views, and we don't do anything on religions outside the big six.

Religious education

The themes of poverty, sacrifice, redemption, prayer, practice, of sin. We revisit these themes in the Islam and Christianity modules. This means that pupils get to the point of fluency in those terms and ideas by Year 6.

We achieve breadth in the other units. Pupils learn about the festivals of Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, as well as Islam and Christianity. They learn about some of the stories, practices, buildings, and symbols. We also include believers' lives and learn how their belief influences their lives.

It is important to have breadth and depth. RE is like a gas. It expands to fill the space you've got. If you give RE a tiny container then, fair enough, you'll find something to do with it but ultimately if you give RE an entire room, those molecules will expand until it fills the room. That can be dangerous because you can go down a bit of a tick list route with it. It is helpful to have themes that are revisited across the years. It's important to return, because children grow up. Teaching a Year 1 child is nothing like teaching a Year 5 child. The conversations you can have in Year 2 are not like the conversations you can have in Year 4 or Year 6.

It's important to remember that our schools are hyper-local. Our curriculum includes the local mosque and Southwark Cathedral and the church, Saint George the Martyr, opposite Borough tube station. That's our hyper-local context and it's important to include these. I think the fact that most of our pupils are Christian and Muslim does justify a focus on these religions in the curriculum.

It doesn't mean that if your school isn't diverse, your curriculum shouldn't be diverse. I taught in rural Cambridgeshire, and it was not a diverse community. We prided ourselves on having a diverse curriculum, because pupils are not going to get the same contact or influences in their local community. They need to have it through their RE. So, yes, context is important but only to further diversity and never to reduce diversity in the curriculum.

I think there's a high barrier to entry to a lot of the discussion and debate about RE. Please don't let that put you off. Please come and join our conversations. Please ask if you don't know. Please read up on some of the debates. You don't have to take a position on them, but they're important – topics such as world views, such as learning from and learning about religion. I'd love to have more primary conversations.

I think just come and bring yourself to it. Bring your curriculum to it and learn from it. Be part of it and please don't be put off. I love talking RE so much. I love talking primary RE, so I always want to hear from primary teachers who maybe just want a little bit of help accessing the community and some of the discussions that we're having.

The kind of discussion I would like to have with my line manager is probably quite similar to the conversation we're having. If I had this conversation with my line manager, it would be lovely. I think a question has to be around assessment, which is a hard topic in RE. How are we going to assess these pupils? Is it going to be written? Is it going to be oral? I'd also like to talk about the shape of the curriculum. We talk about how the spiral curriculum is still very much alive and well in primary RE. I'd love to talk through the curriculum with a line manager. It is always such a useful, productive process to draw out threads so you end up with a flip chart paper that just looks beautiful and wonderful and suddenly you can see things a lot more clearly. I think I'd like to be challenged more, as well.

Religious education: background

It is helpful for subject leaders and co-ordinators 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: 'RE is like an iceberg. As you unpack ideas, you come to understand deeper meaning.' 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, 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 to

pupils at every key stage.¹ 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 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 'to bind', and it is the sacred texts, 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 (Georgiou and Wright, 2018²) and it is through working with these lenses, the subject secures its rigour.

The characteristics of good-quality provision are when teachers keep as close as possible to the fundamental 'stuff' of the subject. In RE, these include 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, contain the accumulated wisdom of traditions, and 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 is understood here as – conversations about foundation beliefs within religions, that a study of religions and beliefs will include some approach to the concept of 'God' or 'ultimate reality'. Georgiou and Wright 'Theology involves investigating key texts

1 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4/the-national-curriculum-in-england-framework-for-key-stages-1-to-4>

2 Georgiou, G. and Wright, K. (2020) 'Disciplinarity, religion and worldviews: making the case for theology, philosophy and human/social sciences', in Mark Chater (ed.) *Reforming RE*, Woodbridge: John Catt, pp. 149–164.

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' (op cit).³

- Stories from faith traditions – the hadith in Islam, the lives of the saints in the Christian tradition, the wisdom of the Midrash in Judaism and the Ramayana are all fertile sources providing insights into religious beliefs.
- Artefacts as ways of understanding belief and practice. Material based on strong 'socio-historical' grounds – namely that which has emerged from the past, stands up to the critique of time and resonates with society today. It 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. RE:online 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. 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.

3 Ibid.

Religious education

For religious education, it is worth following NATRE @NATREupdate on Twitter and the hashtags #rechatuk #TeamRE #REteacher.

Links

RE:online – <https://www.reonline.org.uk>

CStG – <https://www.cstg.org.uk>

NATRE – <https://www.natre.org.uk>

RE Council – <https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk>

Making Every RE Lesson Count – <https://amzn.to/3DIAQ7t>