Is RE important in schools today?

A report from the inaugural RE Youth Debate 2016
On Wednesday 13th July, around 70 Year 10-12 students from schools across England came to Parliament to debate some of the key issues around the teaching of Religious Education (RE).

The students dealt with some of the fundamental issues facing RE, such as whether it is an essential component of a 21st century education or whether it should be excluded from the curriculum and become the sole responsibility of the family unit.

The debate was witnessed by numerous MPs, Parliamentary researchers, policy advisers and other interested parties, and showcased the students’ engagement with the range and depth of thinking around these complex themes.

The schools

14 schools came from across the country to take part in the debate. The attending schools were:

- Amery Hill School, Hampshire
- Broughton High School, Lancashire
- Groby Community College, Leicestershire
- Humphrey Perkins School, Leicestershire
- Littlehampton Academy, West Sussex
- Mulberry School for Girls, London
- Perins School, Hampshire
- Queen Katherine School, Cumbria
- Redhill Academy, Nottinghamshire
- St Lawrence Academy, Scunthorpe
- St Wilfrid’s Church of England Academy, Lancashire
- Stroud High School for Girls, Gloucestershire
- Tring School, Hertfordshire
- Trinity Church of England High School, Manchester

7 of the schools involved are members of the Religious Education Council (REC) Young Ambassador scheme. Please find more information here: http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/young-ambassadors

Mary Glindon MP and Sara Pascoe

Mary Glindon MP and comedian Sara Pascoe joined the talented students at the debate, which was funded by Culham St Gabriel’s Trust.

Mary Glindon, MP for North Tyneside, hosted and introduced the event. She is a long-time supporter in Parliament of RE, championing the subject since her election in 2010. She is a Vice-Chair, and founding member, of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education, and has spoken on a number of occasions about the importance of an academically rigorous RE that explores in detail the religious and non-religious world views of 21st Century Britain.

The second Guest Delegate was well-known comedian, actress and writer Sara Pascoe. A Humanist, Sara is also patron of the REC and speaks frequently about the need for good quality RE for every child. Before the debate Sara said:

“The issues raised in RE lessons constantly mirror the news headlines. I loved it when I was at school, for encouraging me to think for myself, develop my opinions, and understand the world I was living in. Broad knowledge of the different religions and beliefs is never wasted, and can make us all better neighbours.”
The format

The debate was built around a moderated caucus to enable all students the opportunity to speak and for the debate’s content to be driven by the students’ own ideas. Two student chairs from Mulberry School for Girls introduced each of the three topics and chose contributions from the floor one at a time and on a strict 30 second basis.

After each topic had been discussed for ten minutes, Mary Glindon MP and Sara Pascoe were invited to sum up the discussion and pull together key themes or areas of dispute. A vote was then taken on whether the pupils agreed or disagreed with the hypothesis set for that topic.

The debate

1. If religious literacy is fundamental to challenging extremism, the Government should repeal the right to withdraw.

Religious literacy was deemed by participants to be an essential skill for everyone in our society and there were several personal stories of how RE empowered individuals to develop their own views, as well as understand and appreciate those of other communities within our wider society. Sara Pascoe and Mary Glindon MP praised the level of the debate, and Sara added that RE gave the opportunity for pupils to study a subject where there is no explicitly right answer. The question was then put to a vote, with an overwhelming consensus voting to agree with the question.

2. Schools should be secular, there is no place for RE in a modern curriculum.

One delegate clearly articulated their view that RE is not teaching pupils to be religious, just as German lessons are not teaching them to be German. There were also several contributions that delved into the very nature of what British society stands for in the 21st Century, with Marx’s view of religion used as a counter argument to those supporting the need for RE at all. Both Mary Glindon and Sara Pascoe agreed that understanding religion was essential even if society has become more secular. The question was voted down unanimously.

3. Religious Education is too important to leave just to parents.

The final question focused on the role schools and the home in providing RE, and featured many nuanced and thoughtful responses. Contributors recognised that whilst the role of parents in education is essential for children, a holistic curriculum needs to provide a fully rounded view of society. Within the school environment, RE in particular exposes students to different ways of thinking possibly not available at home, or even elsewhere in the curriculum. The subject helps them to develop their own critical thinking skills, and covers a wider range of religions than parents are likely to have knowledge of. An overwhelming majority voted for the question.
MP support

The students received a huge level of support from numerous MPs and Parliamentarians throughout the day. Many students were able to meet their local MP and talk through the issues the debate raised, while some groups were also taken on a tour through the Palace of Westminster with their local MP or staff.

The final words of the debate came from the then Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan MP, who came to visit her constituents from Humphrey Perkins School and congratulate all the pupils on an excellent debate tackling such complex issues.

Parliamentarians who came to the debate and/or met with their constituents included:

- Damian Hinds MP
- Ben Wallace MP
- Edward Argar MP
- Nicky Morgan MP
- Nick Gibb MP
- Jim Fitzpatrick MP
- Steve Brine MP
- Tim Farron MP
- Vernon Coaker MP
- Nic Dakin MP
- Kate Hollern MP
- Neil Carmichael MP
- David Gauke MP
- Lucy Powell MP

We would like to thank all the Parliamentarians who came to the debate and/or met with the participating students on the day and ask that they continue to support RE.

RE, when taught effectively and given an appropriate amount of curriculum time, can make a strong contribution to the education of all young people and improve social cohesion. We believe RE and religious literacy provides an essential foundation for young people to engage positively with their communities, understanding both the increasingly mixed cultural heritages in the UK and the lives of their neighbours in the 21st century.

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