

# Ten characteristics of RE

**Brian Gates**

Like many other publications produced during 2011's Celebrating RE Month, the pamphlet used at the official launch of the month at the Houses of Parliament on Tuesday 1 March was impressive. It included a short section entitled 'Ten Characteristics of RE' which had been penned by Brian Gates, Chair of the RE Council of England and Wales. Here, he explains how he came to formulate the characteristics in the way that he did.

## So what do you do?

Like other teachers over many years, I've frequently been faced with negative reactions to my mentioning religion or RE when I've responded to the question 'so what do you do?' Disinterest or disdain have been common: more occasionally there's been overt hostility and sometimes a sympathetic grimace which says 'O you poor thing', only in rather stronger terms!

My favourite alternatives are 'long-distance lorry driver', 'window cleaner' or 'world views analyst'. Each has the advantage of a tangible starting point in an indispensable activity and from which an enticing link can be made to classroom RE. (Well, they've worked for me.)

## Positive characteristics of RE

Positive characteristics of RE are actually not difficult to find. In specifying some, I've avoided standard curriculum vocabulary. Nor have I appealed to second-order priorities, such as 'social cohesion', since they are the standard fare of good teaching generally. Instead, I've homed in on ingredients which are intrinsic to religious experience globally in all its diversity, and therefore of special priority for RE. (If the choice of images is in any doubt, check the relevant entries in Mircea Eliade's 16-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion*.) In remarking that they figure commonly in religious language, I am not intending to convey a covert message that individual religions are all equally true. Rather, it is a pointer to the fact that picture language is used universally to express religious convictions. Accordingly, such images deserve to be adroitly deployed in opening up the basic stuff of RE.

## Negative characteristics of RE

The negative characteristics from which RE must distance itself are easily found in the stereotypes that are all too often associated with it. They may have some basis in an experience of yesterday.

More often they thrive in media misrepresentation, fed by prejudice. They need urgently to be unmasked. They are false distortions and, where there is any remaining corroboration of them, school managers and governors are failing their pupils. Counter-characteristics which are proper to good RE are readily to hand.

## The list of characteristics

### RE is like . . .

**a tree:** it reaches upwards for our highest hopes, downwards for our roots, and spreads sideways towards others.

**the sun:** it is a source of illumination and warmth, and a reminder of our dependency for life.

**a river:** it has its particular direction and flow from individual starting points and it connects with bigger and more universal currents.

**a mountain:** it gives opportunity for challenging climbs and through it better perspectives on the world.

**an oasis:** a place for refreshment and inspiration.

### RE isn't . . .

**speed-dating:** instead of a brief encounter, it affords longer-term familiarisation.

**boringly monochrome:** but full of colour and imagination.

**an easy option:** but a hard think for heart and mind.

**a pre-packed and uniform product:** instead its ingredients are diverse – they require personal reworking for stability and delight.

**peripheral to good education:** but the discipline of its deepest core.

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