

Religion and belief

John Hall outlines reasons why it's time to rethink religious education

YOUNG PEOPLE FACE many challenges, including learning to navigate the world of religion and belief.

Every day they are exposed to the main traditions of faith and belief as well as a wide variety of worldviews through the media, online, and in daily social interactions. Often surrounded by controversy and misinformation, they have to understand complex issues and make their own decisions.

Religious education (RE) has always addressed this academically challenging task and has been the school subject that has most equipped young people for such understanding. An integral part of the British education system since 1870 and statutory since 1944, RE in England has continuously evolved.

Taught well, RE can prepare young people for a globalised world with a growing diversity of beliefs and practices. But it has to respond continually and creatively to the changing context of society, the world around us, and the shifting educational landscape.

Time to reinvigorate RE

The Commission on Religious Education has spent the past two years listening to evidence from over 700 concerned parties, including pupils, teachers, lecturers, advisers, parents and faith and belief communities. It received over 3,000 submissions, including encouraging reports of the excellent work happening day by day in many classrooms.

Alongside the growing diversity of religions and beliefs that pupils encounter, the variable quality of RE has led to a postcode lottery. Furthermore, it has become clear that the legal arrangements around RE are no longer working. More schools are becoming

academies and wider changes to the education system, such as the introduction of the EBacc performance measure, mean schools are focusing on a narrower set of subjects. This has led to a quarter of schools in England failing to fulfil their legal duty to provide RE.

After listening carefully to the evidence, the commission has concluded that RE needs rejuvenating. It is proposing a new three-part national plan to ensure that learning in this area remains academically rigorous and a knowledge-rich preparation for life in a world of great religion and belief diversity.

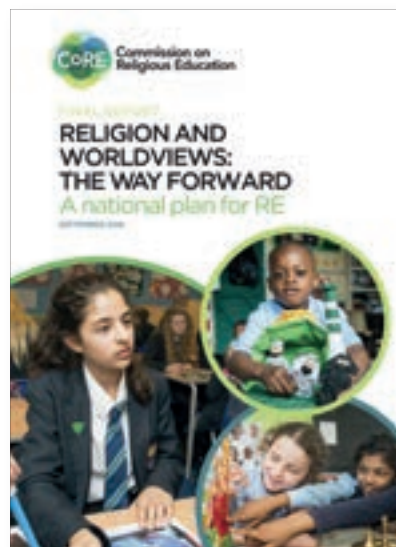
New vision

First, a new vision for RE is needed. The subject should explore the important role that religious and non-religious worldviews play in all human life. This is an essential area of study if pupils are to be well prepared for life in a world where controversy over such matters is pervasive, and where many people lack the knowledge to make informed decisions.

It is a subject for all pupils, whatever their family background and personal beliefs and practices. To reflect this new

A CALL TO GOVERNMENT

Secretaries of state for education have repeated their ongoing support for RE, and the government frequently emphasises its statutory role on the curriculum, often in response to schools and academies failing to meet their legal duties. The study of Religion and Worldviews has an important contribution to make to future generations' understanding and enjoyment of life. The time is ripe for change.



“RE can prepare young people for a globalised world”

emphasis, the commission proposes that the subject should be renamed Religion and Worldviews.

Second, all pupils should have access to high-quality teaching. The commission proposes that a statutory national entitlement should apply to all schools and that this should be subject to inspection, with schools required to publish details of how they provide this entitlement. The entitlement encapsulates a common vision within which schools will be able to develop their own approach appropriate to their character. National programmes of study should be developed.

Finally, there should be significant investment in ensuring two essential supports for this new way forward. A sustained programme of investment in teacher education and development is essential. Local communities have also played a significant role in supporting RE in the past. The commission proposes that the structures that made this possible should be re-envisioned to enable this important contribution to continue. ●

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