**Landscapes, Real and Imagined: ‘*REforREal’***

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This chapter is based on research undertaken in 2014-15 called REforREal. Wordplay aside, the name makes a serious point – that RE and the real religion and belief landscape have been somewhat at odds, and that this is largely because RE has got stuck in a policy framework which is hopelessly muddled and outdated. The need for an urgent conversation about this is outlined elsewhere (see Brine, above) but the muddle can be characterised as a 20th century settlement for a 21st century reality. This is set against a growing vigour of debates about religion and belief across a range of academic disciplines, public settings and sectors (see Baker and Dinham 2018). It is largely driven by new laws against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and by anxieties about migration and extremism. The question of what to do about religion and belief in general collides with the issue of how best to educate in this context. Is the current RE landscape up to the challenge? How might it be re-imagined, and what might the alternatives look like? REforREal was deliberately designed to join and invigorate a national and international conversation about this, and to point towards the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief – not only in RE itself, but elsewhere in the life and curricula of schools.

**The Real Religion and Belief Landscape**

RE struggles to meet contemporary debates about religion and beliefs. We use the phrase ‘religion and belief’ in this chapter to align with the terminology employed in the REforREal research, which was reflective of usage at the time, with ‘religion *or* belief’ a relatively new protected characteristic under the 2010 Equality Act. The phrase is used to indicate the full landscape of religious and non-religious worldviews - Our concern is around how conteporary debates indicate a gap between how this landscape has come to be thought about, and a real landscape which is quite different. This suggests that RE has an opportunity to engage anew. True, a century or so of secular assumptions has resulted in the West talking not very much and not very well about religion and belief. But at precisely the time we’ve mostly been looking away, the religion and belief landscape has changed enormously. Yet the ability to talk well about it has largely been lost. This has been described as a crisis of religious literacy (Dinham and Francis 2015).

In the 2011 Census for England and Wales, the headlines are as follows: Christianity remains the largest religion with 33.2 million people but is down from 71.7 per cent in 2001 to 59.3 per cent; Muslims are the next biggest religious group with 2.7 million people (4.8 per cent of the population). This is the group with the largest increase in the last decade (from 3.0 per cent to 4.8 per cent). The proportion of the population who reported they have no religion has now reached a quarter in the UK - 14.1 million people. This represents an increase from 14.8 per cent to 25.1 per cent. Other sources put this figure at 50%, rising to 64% among 18-24 year olds (BSA 2015).

Likewise, in England and Wales, while church attendance is estimated to have fallen to 4.7 per cent of the population (BRIN 2015), the breakdown of attenders has also changed – less than one third are now Anglican, less than one third Catholic, and over a third  (44%) charismatic and independent (Brierley, 2006, cited in Woodhead, 2012a, p6). As Woodhead observes, this represents a massive internal realignment within Christianity alone, which is hardly ever commented upon (Woodhead, 2012b). *What* we believe has also changed. Belief in ‘a personal God’ roughly halved between 1961 and 2000 – from 57 per cent of the population to 26 per cent. But over exactly the same period, belief in a ‘spirit or life force’ doubled – from 22 per cent in 1961 to 44 per cent in 2000 (Woodhead, 2012b). More recently, a report by the think tank Theos claims that that a majority of people (59%) believe in a “spiritual being” (ComRes, 2013). Others have non-religious beliefs that are deeply important to them, such as humanism, secularism and environmentalism.

It is really important to grasp this because there is a *real* religion and belief landscape and one imagined by the policy makers, and there is a growing gap between them. This is part of the muddle. Young people need to develop an understanding of the diverse religion and belief landscape to avoid the kind of misunderstadnings and knee-jerk reactions that hinder positive engagement in it. What part can RE play in addressing this?

**REforREal – Purpose, Content, Structure of RE**

REforREal sought to address this question, undertaking interviews and focus groups with 331 participants – teachers, pupils, parents and employers - in 19 schools around England with questions revolving around three key areas: understandings of the purposes of RE; aspirations regarding content; and thoughts about the structures of teaching and learning of religion and belief. Students, teachers and parents alike thought RE was important. They wanted young people to learn about religions and beliefs, and recognised that they are important parts of many people’s identities and lives. But they wanted to learn about a broader canvas of experiences and outlooks, to include Christianity and the world religions but also non-traditional forms, like paganism and wicca, and non-religious beliefs like humanism and secularism. They also wanted a focus on how religion and belief are lived, as fluid experience rather than fixed identity, and how they are internally differentiated rather than homogenous, as well as to focus on real-world dilemmas and controversies, such as ‘gaycake’ and the banning of minarets and hijabs.

**Content: What should be included in teaching and learning about religion and belief?**

Students in the study widely recognised the relevance and importance of religion and belief in the world and felt this makes it something they need to know about.

*"I'd say as Britain is becoming more multi faith and multicultural, it’s important to learn about it because it’s becoming more and more relevant... I think it’s important so you can understand what other people believe in life.*" (Student)

For many, RE was seen as essential in preparing students to engage with this diversity, particularly in more rural areas where such encounter is not part of their daily lives:

"*You're going to meet all kinds of people, you don't know what the future holds, and it’s important that you have at least awareness and consideration for everything that you might come across.*" (Student)

“*I think the purpose of RE should be to bring to the attention of students other ways of living life that they may not come into contact with. The fact that we are a very rural school here, we don’t have many people of other religions, so it’s good for them to try and get a bit better understanding*.” (Parent)

For teachers a key concern was how to balance engagement with both breadth and depth. This is largely a response to time constraints, though there was broad agreement that the focus on one or two traditions at GCSE is too narrow. This points to a key dilemma for reform of RE – how much can be done, and when? There was general recognition of huge diversity within, let alone between, religions and teachers think that RE should have more time so as to embrace these complexities.

“*I’d learn the different sects and denominations but you can’t spend much time talking about differences between individuals because there’s not enough time.*” (Teacher)

*”I think it is important that they do obviously understand the ones that a majority of the people in the world follow but there are also other belief systems out there as well that they should be learning about.”* (Teacher)

As well as diversity of traditions, participants felt it important to explore diversity within traditions and diversity at the individual level in terms of interpretation.

“It’s such a broad thing, so to say …. Christians believe that…having women Bishops is wrong ... is a really difﬁcult thing to say ... there could be some people who are Christian who completely don’t think that”. (Pupil)

“It’s important for pupils to know that there are lots of people that would tick a religious box but not practise it, and that that doesn’t make their religion any less valid than those following it more closely ... There are spectrums everywhere.” (Teacher)

“It’s not something you can just learn as a block. It’s individual what you believe.” (Pupil)

To add to the time pressure, all groups showed an interest in learning about informal, non-traditional religion and belief as well as the traditions. That curricula are often restricted to two, let alone the ‘big six’ was evident in particpants’ appetite for the study of other, non-traditional worldviews that do not easily fit into the current RE framework.

“*Obviously you can’t look at them all but I think it is important to look at how people have beliefs but they may not be within a formal religion*.” (Parent)

“It’s like a mind map of religion because within that you’ve got religions that aren’t necessarily religious but are spiritual.” (Teacher)

Some questioned the reductionist way in which religions have been represented in RE, suggesting the need to explore the category of religion:

*“I’d want them to think more broadly about what we class as religion too. There are people that dance round Stonehenge naked because the sun’s up. Does that fall under the remit? Definitely it does of spirituality.”* (Teacher)

Likewise, all groups agreed that non-religion and non-religious beliefs should be studied, with humanism and atheism most referred to.

“*I would hope that RE would include units on atheism and agnosticism, not just as footnotes but as important sets of beliefs in themselves.” (Teacher)*

*“I think that’s important, because I think if you don’t counterbalance the information, the message you’re sending is you have to have a specific religious belief and you can’t have anything else – you either believe or you don’t”. (Teacher)*

“*They don’t like to say that they are a religion but they are a set of beliefs and so they should be learnt in the same way*.” (Student)

At the same time, all groups emphasised the importance of learning about ‘lived’ religion too. Within this, teachers observed an over-simplification in the GCSE which sets religion and belief up as unchanging blocks of tradition, rather than fluid identities:

*“You’re not going to meet a Christian and start talking about how Jesus was born, or Adam and Eve, which is something we cover a lot in RE…you should learn more about what people do in everyday lives.”(Student)*

“*It’s warped by GCSE. Boxed religion. Everything is categorised, everything is this or that, nothing is nuanced or honest*.” (Teacher)

This naturally leads to an emphasis among all groups that RE should also address the contemporary, including controversies and dilemmas. Students particularly prioritise the contemporary over the historical and are especially keen to study real-world controversies. Amongst students, RE is seen as a key space for exploring real world contemporary issues.

*"I think it’s interesting when we look at the big disasters and the terrorists... then we look at why they did it, from their religion, what were their reasons, what we've done to them... I find that more interesting.*" (Student)

*"I don't think you can just learn the good stuff in RE, you've got to look at the downsides, I've never learned about that.*" (Student)

Amongst teachers there was also consensus that students should study controversies, giving examples such as extremism and same-sex relationships.

“ *Just because something’s uncomfortable doesn’t mean you shouldn’t teach it …it’s [Charlie Hebdo] really relevant. That will have far more impact on their lives than what Christians think about divorce.*” (Teacher)

“*You’re not really doing RE unless you lift up the rug. If we teach them Christians are all kind people, then they’ll get to history and hear about the crusades or slavery and go, ‘what?’” (Teacher)*

Parents also emphasised the need for students to explore and understand controversy:

“*Why some groups choose a path of violence. They need to know where that stems from*.” (Parent)

“*They need to know about Jihadi John, and that sort of thing*.” (Parent)

These responses suggest the need to challenge existing orthodoxies and that reformed RE should reflect the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief. This would mean finding room for: the study of a broad range of religions, beliefs and non-religion; exploration of religion, belief and non-belief as a category; exploration of the changing religion and belief landscape and its impacts on contemporary society; a focus on contemporary issues and the role of religion and belief in current affairs and controversies; a focus on the relevance of religion and belief for workplaces and working life; and an exploration of religion and belief as lived identity as well as tradition.

**Purpose: What should religion and belief learning be for?**

Whether in inner city or more rural schools, participants were concerned about engagement with diversity. Within this, students were concerned about not offending others. They felt RE should help them to manage difference positively and avoid offence.

*"It’s for our future as well, because if you're not used to being around them sort of people now... when you're older and working and you come across one of them, you know what to say and what not to say... so you don't accidentally say something they could be offended by.” (Student)*

In half the schools in the study, RE was seen explicitly as contributing to a more cohesive society in the future:

*“When you’re young, if you’re taught to respect each other, and taught about Muslims and things like that, if you’re taught to work together, when you’re older, that generation will work better together than, say, our generation now, because we haven’t been taught it straight away. But now we’re being taught it, we’re all sort of learning how to respect each other.” (Student)*

"*If people are educated about different religions it’s going to help people get along better because they can understand what people believe and why they believe it.*" (Student)

Students also had a developed sense of how religion and belief may manifest itself in the workplace and see RE as key to preparing them for this:

*“The role of religion in the workplace and how far you can go in expressing your beliefs in terms of the law.”* (Student)

***“****Understanding why, if you’re an employer, why different people might have to do things slightly different to others, so when they have to take more time off for religious reasons, why they work a certain amount of hours, why they have to work differently, speak to people differently. And some Muslims have to pray a certain amount of times and people need to understand that.” (Student)*

But there was also a perceived colonisation of the RE space, particularly where RE is combined with PSHE, Citizenship or Careers education. Some students enjoy this approach, and most recognize that these themes are important somewhere, but the majority want RE as a separate lesson.

*“We’re supposed to be doing RE and then we’re doing global warming.” (Student)*

*“Quite often we're not really looking at religion. It’s just different opinions."* (Student)

“*You couldn’t learn the core things about belief and worship anywhere else. In other lessons you might see the social side, but the core is RE.*” (Student)

"*RE lessons are a lot more focused....* " (Student)

"*You might cover it briefly in other subjects, like in History when you cover other religions but then you move onto something else... you need RE to focus on the religion.*" (Sudent)

In terms of purposes, we found a divide between the views of specialist and non-specialist RE teachers. Specialists emphasised the intrinsic value of religion and belief learning.

*“The academic study of religion as a phenomenon in the world.*” (Teacher)

“*Educating young people about the concept of there being a higher deity, which affects the way people organise themselves in terms of established religions*.” (Teacher)

*“It’s more to do with education for education’s sake. It should be exciting to go out and engage with difference.”* (Teacher)

Non-specialist teachers emphasised its role in cohesion, particularly in less diverse areas, although this is sometimes seen as a by-product, not a central aim.

*“Particularly here because it’s not a very diverse community and some of our students may go on to university or they might go to cities to work and not be prepared for anyone that’s different.” (Teacher)*

*“Ultimately it’s not about someone who can answer the pub question on Hinduism; it’s about someone who can go out there and relate to someone of the Hindu faith.”* (Teacher)

*“It is important for students to understand why they are there and why they have their practices and beliefs, so they can respect it when they go out into the real world.” (Teacher)*

*“If you develop religious literacy, in a way you are developing cohesion because people have the right understanding. It’s far more important going to a lesson with a purpose that they have the correct information than that they’re going to be cohesive. But certainly it is something I am aiming for.” (Teacher)*

Specialist RE teachers were rather troubled by a lack of shared aims and purposes for RE, and many felt that there simply isn’t time to do all that is asked of RE:

*“Make it an academic subject, be honest about it. If it’s about holistic development, be honest about it. But it can’t be both. Not in an hour a week.” (Teacher)*

*“It’s almost like two different subjects within RS. It’s like philosophy and ethics vs. RE.” (Teacher)*

“*It’s very confused. One of the issues in RE generally is it isn’t a thing. It’s a strange collective of subjects, which, depending what your own background is, you come at from your own way… I think the present government struggle with wanting it to be about knowledge but also thinking that through it they can achieve other aims. Community relations or…whatever.” (Teacher)*

“*So whereas it’s more academic here and it might be more personal development elsewhere*.” (Teacher)

“*It does feel like you are being pulled in lots of different directions.*” (Teacher)

But there was broad consensus that learning about religion and belief should play a role in developing students’ spirituality - the development of a non-materialistic, spiritual side to life including: a sense of identity, self-worth, personal insight, development of a pupil’s soul or personality or character. Although the RE classroom is considered an explicit space for this, there is significant insistence that this should not be the responsibility solely of RE.

*“They need to work out what their own beliefs are.” (Teacher)*

*“It’s one of the few subjects you can delve, beyond academia…how [young people] think and how they feel and allow them also to have a spiritual response. That doesn’t have to be an around the world faith, but to have a response that comes from deep within, as opposed to asking them what they think about Henry VIII or deforestation, anything like that.” (Teacher)*

“*I’d say that’s the purpose of all education actually. But not particularly religious education. I don’t think it has any special claim*.” (Teacher)

**Structures: On what basis and when should religion and belief learning take place?**

Almost all the teachers in the study thought that RE should be in something like a national curriculum, (with recognition that not all schools are subject to the existing national curriculum). Of 90 teachers who expressed an opinion, 86% said it should be included.

“*I think that like the rest of the national curriculum these are essential bits of knowledge and skills that equip someone to live in our modern world*.” (Teacher)

“*It’s very diverse, the youngsters’ experiences can be very different from class to class, or from school to school. Therefore if there was a National Curriculum and there was a requirement for these skills to be covered and these topic areas to be covered, at least you would know that youngsters have that basic knowledge going through to 16-18. At the moment it is too diverse and too unpredictable.*”(Teacher)

Of those teachers who expressed an opinion, 99% favoured compulsory ‘religious education’ (of whom 11% specified to age 14, 34% to age 16 and another 38% to age 18). Only one teacher thought ‘religious education’ should not be compulsory. There is also support for retaining an optional Religious Studies GCSE.

“*The level of importance that it has around the planet means we should keep it.” (Teacher)*

*“Yes, all the way through, because I think if it’s not taught, I don’t think it’s something students would otherwise think about or consider.” (Teacher)*

*“Yes, to 16 and it’s at the education of the moral, ethical and cultural issues, because if they go out into that big wide world and they don’t understand, there are going to be issues and conflicts.(Teacher)*

*“Yes all the way through because some of the things you discuss require a level of maturity that you can only discuss later. The fact gathering is done in lower school, but the application takes time.”(Teacher)*

*“I think everyone should do something that is core and then people get to choose their additional.”(Teacher)*

There is also some evidence of a distinction being drawn between‘vocational’ and ‘academic’ strands in the study of religion and belief, with an emphasis on vocational elements for everybody and academic elements within the GCSE.

*“…something that was really tailored for preparation in the workplace of multi-faith people something like that then that kind of a key skills unit that could be really helpful. What are the rights of people with religion? How do you need to act towards these people? What it’s not okay for you to say or do in the workplace*.” (Teacher)

While most teachers thought that there should be a distinct specific space for learning about religion and belief, many also favour teaching religion and belief themes in a distributed way in other subjects too, especially Citizenship, PSHE and History.

“*We’re supposed to be preparing them for life and that means encountering these things so I definitely think it should be in a classroom dedicated to it. But it’s useful to have it in those other areas so they can see how it applies and why we learn it.*” (Teacher)

“*The ethical and moral side of it should be fostered across the curriculum and then leave the actual teaching about [religion and belief] to RE.*” (Teacher)

“*RE as a standalone subject is something that is quite powerful, I think it sends out a powerful message as well to the students. So it’s not RE and PSHE, it’s not RE as part of humanities or citizenship, it’s RE as a credible subject*.” (Teacher)

There is also broad agreement that RE should be taught by subject specialists wherever possible. This study found significant anxiety amongst non-specialists who sometimes feel ill-prepared for the discussion students want them to engage in.

“*In order to understand religion properly you need to have specialist teachers.*” (Teacher)

“*I think we shy away from it because we don’t want to get it wrong. I get that*.” (Teacher)

**Conclusions**

These findings imply the need for wholesale reconsideration of the context in which religion and belief learning takes place in schools in order to clarify the muddles, especially in the relationship between learning inside RE, outside in other subjects, and in the wider life of schools. There are likely to be particularly challenging implications for the amount of time that might be needed – and found – to do religion and belief justice. Based on these research findings, wherever religion and belief learning occurs content should reflect the breadth of the real religious landscape and focus not solely, or even primarily, on traditions. Nor should it over-emphasise instrumental concerns about cohesion and citizenship. Rather, religion and belief learning should be concerned with preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life, in and outside of schools, whatever the challenge or opportunity at hand. It seems especially important to model the distinctions within and between religions and beliefs/religious and non-religious worldviews??, and to be clear about their differences and overlaps with other school concerns around ethics, morals, values, and spirituality. Clarity of purpose, content and structure seem essential to the goal of socialising young people to do likewise. Once achieving clarity on these points, the challenge for schools will lie in finding the time to prioritise and fit it all in.

***4130 words***

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