

# RE for REal



THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT RELIGION AND BELIEF

Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw

**RE**forREal



CULHAM ST GABRIEL'S  
EXCELLENCE IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

**Goldsmiths**  
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

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# RE FOR REAL: THE FUTURE OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT RELIGION AND BELIEF

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 A statutory National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should be developed, and be applicable to all schools, balancing shared national approaches with school level determination.
- 2 Since SACREs currently play a leading part in religion and belief learning, there is an urgent need for review of their role, and the role of others, such as professional bodies, local education authorities, schools themselves, and other experts, in the forming of learning. This should inform and result in the appointment of a national panel to develop the framework.
- 3 The National Framework panel should be mandated to consider and make recommendations about i) the purpose, ii) content and iii) the structures of teaching and learning, It should also consider and make recommendations about the relationship between learning inside RE, outside in other subjects, and in the wider life of schools, especially in relation to the Act of Worship, and the right to withdraw.
- 4 Religion and belief learning should be a compulsory part of the curriculum to age 16, and consideration should be given to what, if anything, happens in post-16 learning. The panel should consider the related question of appropriate progression pathways and connections between education in primary, secondary, FE, HE and in to CPD.
- 5 Content should reflect the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief.
- 6 The process of producing a National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should determine the mix, content and location of religion and belief learning specific to RE, and that which takes place in a distributed way in learning outside of RE.
- 7 GCSE Religious Studies should remain as an optional subject for schools, and consideration should be given to clearly demarcating the boundary between academic study of the real religious landscape, and other religion and belief learning associated with citizenship and SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) outside of the GCSE.
- 8 There should be continued investment in Initial Teacher Training for subject-specialist RE teachers.
- 9 There should be increased investment in continuing professional development for non-specialist teachers of religion and belief.
- 10 The process of producing a National Framework should include a review and decision on the name or names of religion and belief learning in schools.

*RE for REal* is a project within the Religious Literacy Programme in the Faiths and Civil Society Unit at Goldsmiths, University of London.

With funding from Culham St Gabriel's Trust, an educational charity committed to excellence in RE, *RE for REal* examines future directions for teaching and learning in schools about religion and belief.<sup>1</sup> Its title puns on the RE name, to suggest that future teaching and learning needs to reflect the real religious landscape as it looks today. The visual pun on REal is also intended as an abbreviation of 'RE alternative', to capture the possibility that RE as a subject could be rethought, as well as its relationship to possible alternative spaces for teaching and learning about religion and belief outside the RE space.

## WHAT PROMPTS THE PROJECT?

An urgent conversation is underway within the RE community in the UK about the future of RE in schools, following growing criticisms of the policy muddle which frames it. There is an impetus to clarify the muddle.

Religious Education must be provided for all registered students in maintained schools, including those in reception classes and sixth forms (though not in further education colleges). Under the 1944 Education Act, Religious Instruction became compulsory in schools, but when the national curriculum was introduced in 1988, it was not included, and has never been since. The 1944 Act made it mandatory for fully funded state schools to have an 'Agreed Syllabus' for Religious Instruction, developed within each Local Educational Authority by a Syllabus Conference, consisting of representatives of the Church of England and other Christian denominations. During the period up until 1988, most teaching was based on a scriptural approach. The 1988 Education Reform Act maintained the model of local determination of RE, and left it out of the newly introduced National Curriculum. At the same time, the Act saw a shift in the stated purpose of RE from 'teaching religion' to 'teaching about religion', and indoctrinatory teaching was prohibited. With this came a broadening of the content and structures of the study

of religion and belief in schools. 'Religious Education' replaced 'Religious Instruction' and multi-faith Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) became mandatory. Agreed Syllabuses are now required to "reflect the fact that religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain" (UK Parliament 1988, Section.8.3).

In 1994 the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority published non-statutory model syllabuses, which included six 'main' religions and used the two attainment targets of 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion. These were widely adopted in Agreed Syllabuses. In 2004 the successor Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) introduced a non-statutory national framework to support those responsible for syllabus development locally. The aim was to clarify the required standards in RE (QCA, 2004). The range of religions to be studied was further widened and it was recommended that students also have the opportunity to study 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (ibid).

The introduction of academies in 2000, and the subsequent expansion of the academies programme in 2010 led to a situation in which an increasing number of schools are not required to follow Locally Agreed Syllabuses. Free schools are also outside the requirements. The increase in free schools and academies has led to more schools 'with a religious character' within the state system. The impact on RE has been an increased diversity of approaches within state-funded schools.

The decision to exclude RE from the new English Baccalaureate Certificate (EBacc) is widely acknowledged as having led to a reduction in teaching time devoted to RE. Many schools have taken to delivering RE through tutor time, or occasional 'RE days' rather than as a discrete regular subject on the timetable.

Funding for trainee teachers in RE was cut in 2010, with the effect of increasing the proportion of non-specialist RE teachers. Although reinstated in 2014, bursaries are smaller than for other

<sup>1</sup> The phrase 'religion and belief' is used as shorthand for religious and non-religious world views. The phrase 'religion and belief learning' is used as shorthand for learning about the diversity of religious and non-religious world views.

humanities subjects. At the same time, RE was not included in the government's review of the National Curriculum carried out in 2013. The RE Council of England and Wales has since undertaken its own parallel review in order to seek to participate in that conversation, though without public funding to do so (REC, 2013). A former Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, has said that RE has been an 'unintended casualty' of reforms (REC, 2013).

All that said, in schools, RE is a popular and growing subject choice, demonstrated in increased uptake at GCSE and A-level (NATRE, 2015). Nevertheless it is often questioned in terms of status and academic seriousness.

In short, the education policy framework is highly muddled. Growing freedoms from local authority control under the Free Schools and Academies programmes make clarity all the more pressing. Yet the way forward is far from clear. This is set against the growing vigour of debates about religion and belief across a range of public settings and sectors, largely driven by new laws against discrimination on the grounds of religion or belief, and by anxieties about extremism. The question of what to do about religion and belief in general collides with the issue of how best to educate in this area. Is the current RE landscape up to the challenge? How might it be re-imagined, and what might the alternatives look like?

## THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT RELIGION AND BELIEF

There is a failure to clarify the relationship between general aims of schooling, to which RE makes a contribution, and particular aims specific to Religious Studies (Expert Panel, REC, 2013). There is also a lack of consensus over the balance between 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion: between the 'intrinsic' and 'instrumental' aims of the subject (Jackson, forthcoming).

This results in concern that social, moral and ethical issues have become over emphasised at the expense of learning about religion and belief itself (see Ofsted, 2013).

Another concern is that RE in England has increasingly been colonised by themes such as citizenship and cohesion, which overlap with, but are not in themselves, religion or belief (see Gearon, 2010; 2013). What these approaches imply is that religion and belief learning is intended to perform a primarily social task – to form citizens who can connect across difference. This emerges in a context increasingly driven by anxiety about extremism, and the challenge of responding to growing diversity as Europe and the West continue to globalize.

These are all important concerns, and there is widespread consensus that they should certainly be addressed somewhere, somehow. But this project takes a step back to ask, why in the RE space? How far has this been thought through by teachers, parents, students, and employers? It appears to be taken as given that at least part of RE is the development of skills, attitudes and understanding which equip young people to engage positively with ideas and concepts different from their own. This risks colluding with an idea of religion as the opposite – as primarily a threat to cohesion about which something must be done. It also assumes that simply knowing more about others makes us like them more.

From the Religious Literacy perspective, RE can be explored in a different way: not as about cohesion and citizenship, but concerned with preparing students for the practical task of engagement with the rich variety of religion and belief encounters in everyday, ordinary life. This distinguishes between learning for a politically determined purpose (making cohesion) and learning for a task (encountering variety well). It asks how to educate young people about religion and belief alongside the other school subjects in ordinary, un-anxious ways, enabling them to enter adulthood understanding their lives, at home and at work: recognising the chain of memory in which they stand – most of whose links were forged in the religious mode; and the comings and goings of religion in time and place across the world. Every subject has its quiet normativities, as recent reform of the teaching of history in England reveals (to make it more chronological and more 'British'). But perhaps we should question whether RE bears too much of an instrumental responsibility and whether that responsibility should be concentrated in the RE slot, where it risks filling up the already limited and contested space.



## THE REAL RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

At the same time, contemporary debates about religion and belief are vigorous and pervasive, indicating a gap between how religion and belief have come to be thought about, and a real religious 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 religious 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.

Likewise, in England and Wales, while church attendance has fallen to 6.3 per cent of the population on any given Sunday (Christian Research): 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 commented by Woodhead, that 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). 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 majority, and there is a growing gap between them. This is part of the muddle, which impedes good responses. What part can RE play in correcting this?

If understanding about religion and belief is as necessary and important as the Religious Literacy critique suggests, teaching and learning are in need of being re-imagined. Cutting edge research in the sociology of religion suggests that it will be strongest when it moves away from teaching the world religions as though 'they' are problematic, 'out there', exotic or other, or as historical traditions, either in the past or stuck there. Research indicates that religion is contemporary, pervasive and real. It is lived. It is fluid identity, as well as solid tradition, and it is contested internally in each individual's daily experience. How can we equip people to get to grips with the religion and belief, which turns out to be all around after all? In schools, what sort of teaching and learning about religion and belief can help?

## PROJECT APPROACH

The classic model of academic research has been experimental and detached: take a question, explore it as neutrally and objectively as possible, and report the findings as an independent observer. At least sixty years of debates about qualitative research have established alternative approaches which accept that knowledge can be subjective and constructed as well as objective: the knowledge that counts is not only that which can be observed, (as in much medical and scientific research). Understanding meanings can be as valuable as identifying 'facts'. This project stands in that tradition. It also stretches it, to take up a still newer emphasis in social research, on impact and engagement: what difference does it make? How can we engage policy-makers and practitioners to maximize the impacts?

The project takes place with these considerations very consciously in mind. It is deliberately designed to join and invigorate a national and international conversation about the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief – not only in RE itself, but elsewhere in the life and curricula of schools

too. The aim is to address a lack of clarity about how and where learning about religion and belief should take place, what it should consist of, and what it should be for.

So *RE for REal* is research with change in mind. It actively seeks to identify the range of ways in which teachers, students, parents and employers think religion and belief should be taught and learnt. What are the points of connection between these four key interest groups? What are the points of disconnection? Having understood that, the project is also designed to engage with those able to influence the future of teaching and learning in this area. It is intended to put findings from schools, families and workplaces, into dialogue with those who can construct the future of learning.

An "Influencers' Group" of key stakeholders in learning about religion and belief from policy, practice and academia has been regularly convened alongside the research process, to hear and comment on findings as the project has unfolded. (For a list of participating influencers, see Appendix A). Likewise, a policy seminar has been incorporated to bring together key bodies to discuss the directions in which the findings might point.

Parallel conversations about the place of teaching and learning about religion and belief have also been emerging in Europe, where inter-cultural education has frequently been promoted in this space, though it has not always taken root. Likewise in Canada, there is a focus on education for diversity and Australia has been preoccupied with managing its Christian character in a global region which is primarily Muslim. The project has intentionally engaged with these conversations to share findings as they emerge.

The conversations here and internationally are part of a broader effort to work out how to engage and re-engage critically with the real religious landscape through teaching and learning in schools. The project has asked teachers, students, parents and employers what this should look like. What do they think should be the purposes, content and structure of teaching and learning about religion and belief?

## METHODS AND SAMPLE

The aim was to undertake case study research in 20 schools during the course of a year. We achieved a total of 19. Schools were self-selecting in response to advertisements through national RE networks, including the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC), the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) and the Association of Religious Education Inspectors, Advisors and Consultants (AREIAC). Following significant interest from several Church of England Diocesan educational bodies, the project was also advertised through these.

As far as possible, schools were selected to represent a geographical spread and a mix of rural and urban. Of the 19 participating schools, 4 are in London, 2 in the South West, 3 in the South East, 3 in the East, 2 in the East Midlands, 1 in the West Midlands, and 3 in the North West and 1 in the North East. The only English region we were unable to secure a participating school in was Yorkshire and the Humber. 5 are Community schools and the remaining 14 have Academy status. Of the Academies, 6 are C-of-E, 1 is ecumenical, and 7 are schools with no religious character. Free schools were excluded in order to ensure a manageable range of variables in what is a highly complex schools system.

Each school was asked to select 5 teachers (n=100) and 5 parents (n=100) to be interviewed for up to 45 minutes each, in person or by phone, and to select 10 students from Year 10 to take part in (with their parents' permission) a 1-hour focus group (n=200). We achieved a total of 331 participants and carried out the interviews and focus groups over 1 or 2 days at the convenience of participating schools.

In the teachers' group we included at least one from each of: the leadership team (pastoral and curriculum leads); Head of RE; Heads of Year; and other relevant subject leaders (History, Citizenship, PSHE), as deemed appropriate by the school.

In the parent sample, we asked each school either to invite parents to take part or to select parents and provide the research team with contact details, so that we could arrange a time directly. This resulted in 34 parents across 19 schools.

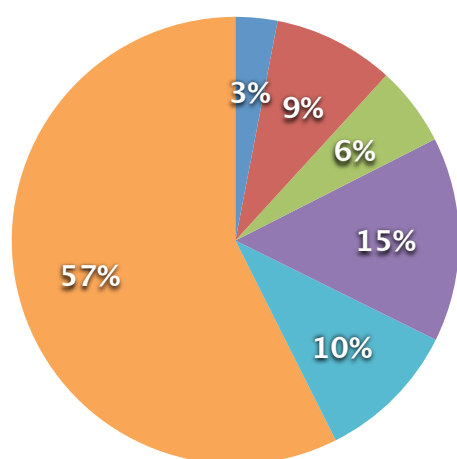
Ten employers were interviewed, who were self-selecting from a list of 17 potential participants, all of whom received an email and up to three follow-up attempts to include them in the study. This was a purposive sample, intended to reflect a range of organisations within the public and private sectors. In each organization, the participating member was working at Director level, or with a responsibility for employing staff. (For a summary of participating employers, see Appendix B).

The research questions were asked either in semi-structured interviews (parents, teachers, employers) or in focus groups (students). They revolved around three key areas:

- 1 Understandings of the purposes of RE
- 2 Aspirations regarding content
- 3 Thoughts about the structures of teaching and learning of religion and belief.

The full interview/focus group schedule can be seen at Appendix C.

Total respondents 331.



- Employers (10)
- Teachers – RE Specialists (29)
- Teachers – Senior Leadership (19)
- Teachers – Others (49)
- Parents (34)
- Students (190)

Four short films have been made presenting leading figures discussing the future of teaching and learning about religion and belief. These are included by way of stimulating discussion inside and outside the study itself and are posted online (<http://www.gold.ac.uk/faithsunit/reforreal>). They feature Joyce Miller, Former Chair Elect of the RE Council; Professor Grace Davie, Sociologist of Religion; Mark Chater, Former national adviser for RE; The Rt. Hon. Charles Clarke, Former Secretary of State for Education.

## FINDINGS

The data have been interrogated to reveal points of connection between the four groups, as well as points of difference. The goal is to identify preoccupations, and points of consensus and disagreement. This underpins an assessment of the opportunities and challenges for change.

Following full transcription of every interview and focus group, and entry on NVIVO, analysis has been undertaken using theme identification, combined with grounded theory, until 'theme saturation' was achieved. Themes were allocated codes, and each transcript was then coded accordingly. Particular analyses were undertaken in relation to gender, age, and faith tradition (or none). These are reported where a distinction was identified on any of these grounds.

While qualitative findings are always generalisable to theories, and not to populations, they are nevertheless indicative of issues, which can be tested quantitatively in statistically significant samples. It is anticipated that further research will be undertaken to test these qualitative findings in statistically significant samples, so as to establish their generalisability.

The findings are grouped according to the four key participant groups – students, teachers, parents, and employers. Each section begins with a summary of the key findings in that cohort. These are then discussed together with illustrative (anonymised) quotes from participants. A fifth section identifies key messages from the study as a whole, with a focus on points of connection and disconnection, concluding with a summary of the challenges that arise for policy and practice, and recommendations.



# 1 STUDENTS

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Students are concerned that they hear a lot of stereotypes in the media and in some of their learning. They want to know what's real.
- 2 They think that learning about religion and belief is becoming more and more relevant because they see more of it, and what they see is more diverse.
- 3 Almost all emphasise the role of learning about religion and belief in order to engage positively with diversity.
- 4 Almost all emphasise the importance of learning about religion and belief to their personal development.
- 5 Almost all want to learn about a wider range of religions and beliefs and are worried that many students learn about only one or two traditions.
- 6 Students really enjoy learning about real 'lived' religion, especially through thinking about religion and belief controversies.
- 7 Most of this cohort think RE needs to be a separate subject with subject specialist teachers.
- 8 Many think that RE lacks status.
- 9 The majority think they should study religion and belief up to Year 10, but then GCSE should be optional, not compulsory.

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING BE FOR?

Students in the study widely recognise the relevance and importance of religion and belief in the world and feel 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.”

They see RE as necessary for preparing them to engage with diversity.

“ 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.”

“ It’s because of RE that I can talk to a lot more people, because I understand them more.”

“ By debating things in class and other opinions on it means you are more accepting about other opinions and views when you go out into the world... so you don’t end up offending people and so society can function effectively.”

“ Compared to students who don’t take it you’re much more culturally aware, you come across as much more intelligent and aware, someone who’s interested in society.”

Whether in inner city or more rural schools, students are concerned about not offending others. They feel 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.”*

In half the schools in the study, RE is 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.”

“ 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.”

This cohort also have 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.”

“ 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.”

They also see RE as the single most important space for ‘spiritual development’. While a few thought RE should help them find a ‘pathway’ or ‘worldview’, most understand ‘spirituality’ in the

sense of Ofsted's definition, as part of Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) development (Ofsted, 2015,p36). They see it as a key area for exploring and forming opinions with respect to moral and ethical issues. This is highly valued amongst students and for many RE is regarded as the only space in the curriculum for this kind of personal development.

“ Exploring your own spirituality, like if you didn't have a religion and you learn about these different religions and something speaks to you, or doesn't speak to you, you form an opinion.”

“ I think RE is good just to say what you feel ... to speak your mind in a way that you can't be judged and that you can get different people's opinions and consider your own mindset... It's just an opportunity to say what we feel and understand other people's points of view, and form an opinion about the world, that I don't think you get just by going through life.”

“ You can't say whatever you want but you can express your opinion, you can safely express your view. In RE people are prepared for different responses, whereas in life they might get a shock. People have a lot more questions as well, things they might have seen on the TV, and RE is a good place to ask those questions.”

“ ... in PSHE you don't get a chance to explore who you are whereas in RE you've got the chance of looking at religious beliefs and the ways people follow to help them understand who they are and [that] can sometimes influence you to think you can explore who you are”

“ RS is the only subject you get to express your opinion.”

“ You can't learn morals...in Maths, but in RE you can.”

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING INCLUDE?

In every school students said they wanted to study a wider range of religions and beliefs. This includes a lot of interest in informal religion, and non-religion, which are widely recognized in this cohort.

“ ...we live in a country with loads of different religions and I think we should learn about each different one, so if you do come across them, you know what they're on about, and you know who they are.”

“ when we leave school it's not just like one or two religions we're going to encounter.”

“ [Learning about the informal} would help you to understand real people more.”

“ RE shouldn't be just about religions but other, broader perspectives on the world.”

“ 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.”

In every school, students also talked about learning about what religion means to individuals; how it is lived.

“ 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.”

“ It's not something you can just learn as a block. It's individual what you believe.”

They are also interested in learning about the reality of religion in society. They prioritise the contemporary over the historical and are especially keen to study real-world controversies.

Often RE is the only place students feel they can explore real world contemporary issues.

“It’s not something we can hide, because it does happen, most of the fights that are going on are about religion, you can’t ignore it because it’s an uncomfortable matter. I think we should talk about it.”

“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.”

“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.”

## WHERE SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING TAKE PLACE?

There is substantial dissatisfaction among students with GCSE Religious Studies, largely due to the lack of breadth.

“It would be better if you could explore different religions’ attitudes to one point, rather than just Christian and your own.”

“There is so much you could do in RE and then we’re like restricted by these boundaries and I don’t think we should be restricted.”

There is general consensus that GCSE Religious Studies should be optional.

“It should be an option like history or geography.”

“[In lower school] you learn enough to be respectful, you don’t need the detail and to remember it all for exams.”

“When you go into detail with different religions, you’ve actually got to be interested to do it well, otherwise you’re just going to be like ‘it’s useless, I don’t want to do it.’”

“For example PE, you can take it as a GCSE and sit an exam in it but also you have to take it to keep fit. You could have to take RE but not sit an exam in it just so that you are socially capable.”

However in some schools, students are glad it is compulsory, as they feel that RE lacks status and many would not have chosen GCSE Religious Studies otherwise, because it is not seen as 'counting'.

- “ I think it's lucky we have to take it as a GCSE, it doesn't take up one of our options because I think most people enjoy it as a subject and if it wasn't compulsory not many people would take it as a GCSE.”
- “ While I really love RE, Universities just see it as another GCSE... it's not necessarily one of the ones they are looking for ... in reality to a person, RE doesn't just count as a GCSE.”
- “ The parents' generation and above had a bad experience of the subject... a lot of people from that generation seem to disregard it a bit.”
- “ I don't think we (in years 7,8 & 9) think RE is important... it's such a big part of society but I didn't know that. I just didn't notice it. I think if we are told how important it is RE would be more enjoyable and we would understand it a lot better.”
- “ An employer, unless you're specialising in something, an employer will look at your English and your Maths. They will look at RE but ... it would be almost at the bottom of the list.”

There is 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.”
- “ Quite often we're not really looking at religion. It's just different opinions.”
- “ 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.”
- “ RE lessons are a lot more focused....”
- “ PDL does touch on it but I find it more about life rather than other peoples' lives, so I think there should be an RE lesson because other lessons don't really teach you about that stuff.”
- “ 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.”



## 2 TEACHERS

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Teachers in this study broadly assume that understanding religion and belief will result in positive attitudes to difference.
- 2 They particularly emphasise the importance of learning for cohesion in the least diverse places.
- 3 They think RE has an important task in rebalancing media stereotypes.
- 4 They are frustrated by how little time there is for RE, often resulting in teaching about only one or two traditions.
- 5 Specialist RE teachers emphasise RE as a humanities subject with an academic justification in its own right, while non-specialist RE teachers emphasise learning for cohesion and respect.
- 6 Many see RE as a key space for personal, spiritual and moral reflection in school.
- 7 There is concern about a tension in RE between academic and personal purposes.
- 8 Teachers think religion and belief learning prepares students for the workplace.
- 9 86% of teachers in the study feel that RE should be a National Curriculum subject. 72% say it should be compulsory to at least 16.
- 10 The majority of teachers in the study think teaching and learning about religion and belief should take place in a distinct RE subject (specific) and also be included as a theme in other learning areas (distributed).

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING BE FOR?

Specialist RE teachers emphasise the intrinsic value of religion and belief learning.

- “ *The academic study of religion as a phenomenon in the world.*”
- “ *Educating young people about the concept of there being a higher deity, which affects the way people organise themselves in terms of established religions.*”
- “ *It’s more to do with education for education’s sake. It should be exciting to go out and engage with difference.*”

Non-specialist teachers of RE emphasise 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.*”
- “ *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.*”
- “ *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.*”

- “ *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.*”

There is also broad consensus that learning about religion and belief should play a role in developing students’ spirituality, as defined by Ofsted – 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.*”
- “ *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 VII or deforestation, anything like that.*”
- “ *I think RE is that safe environment where they can ask questions, is it ok to use the word ‘black? Am I ok to use this word? And you say ‘No, it’s definitely not’, and you talk about why. It’s a safe environment for them to think, ‘right that’s why I’m not allowed to say that and that’s why it’s bad and there is a consequence’. I really worry that if RE is not part of the curriculum there is no other subject that would allow the kids to do that. That really does concern me.*”
- “ *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.*”

Specialist RE teachers are troubled by the lack of shared aims and purposes for RE. Some teachers 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.*”
- “ *It's almost like two different subjects within RS. It's like philosophy and ethics vs. RE.*”
- “ *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.*”
- “ *So whereas it's more academic here and it might be more personal development elsewhere.*”
- “ *It does feel like you are being pulled in lots of different directions.*”

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING INCLUDE?

The overwhelming majority of teachers in the study support the inclusion of teaching and learning about non-religion in RE. Humanism and atheism were those most referred to. There were mixed views on the inclusion of 'secularism' as this was seen by most as better suited to the Citizenship curriculum.

- “ *I would hope that RE would include units on atheism and agnosticism, not just as footnotes but as important sets of beliefs in themselves.*”
- “ *Yes. If you were doing politics you'd do the same. You'd want the main parties.*”
- “ *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.*”

They also thought students should learn about lived religion and a diversity of manifestations.

- “ *Getting beyond festival and ceremony because for many children that's all they think religion is because that's all they did in primary school.*”
- “ *...grasping that that's not always how it plays out.*”

Within this, there is broad consensus that students should study controversies 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.*”

“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?’”

“Those are the ones they learn from. Helping them to reflect on things rather than having a kneejerk reaction.”

“Students should understand there are positives and negatives to religion.”

Teachers place importance on students studying the social roles and significance of religion and belief:

“Beliefs and practices are important, but it needs to be coupled with the sociological; the changing nature of religion. Religion is clearly changing very rapidly. From a sociological point of view, is there even such a thing as Christianity anymore?”

“It’s [religion] not an underpinning ideology anymore, and I think RE could transform itself to try and develop a narrative.”

“I think it lives and breathes. It’s the same with language, it’s eternally changing, we should teach it as that.”

“We need to look at religions and their core beliefs and practices, but then examine its role in believers’ lives, their role in society, and religion’s role in shaping society.”

However, overall teachers are concerned with how to deliver depth, placing importance on learning the ‘main’ religions well. Crucially, this is largely in response to time constraints and there is broad agreement that the focus on one or two traditions at GCSE is too narrow. There is 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 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.”

“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.”

“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.”

Many feel that the GCSE over-simplifies religion and belief as unchanging blocks of tradition, and they think it needs to reflect the lived reality better:

“It can become sort of box ticking activity. So that’s what’s lost, really getting to grips with what religious attitudes towards different themes and aspects, what they actually mean and picking them apart because it becomes a kind of memory game.”

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

All see RE as a key place for learning transferable skills, for example to structure informed and respectful argument, to listen and to communicate developed responses, to develop critical thinking skills, and empathy:

“RE builds all those cognitive skills those academic skills that are going to benefit you in any job at all.”

- “ I think the number one skill is literacy. I don't just mean written, but communication skills, confidence, articulacy – key skills we routinely don't see enough of in this school. Being able to talk with a little authority, empathy, even-handedness.”
- “ RE is unique there in that empathy and understanding.”
- “ Analysing things and actual interpretation, understanding that there isn't always one way to read certain things.”
- “ I think healthy curiosity and being able to ask questions in an appropriate way and just that recognition of that diversity and we don't have time to teach them about ...every religion that they come across but at least we give them an awareness that means that when they are with diverse groups they can recognise that and recognise that they might need to be aware of how to behave and think about asking if they are unsure.”

Spiritual, moral and ethical development are also seen as important benefits, particularly in relation to self-exploration, that is not found in other lessons:

- “ Understanding about what it means to be alive.”
- “ In terms of developing a moral view on something, I think that is unique to RE.”
- “ The ability to think things through and be comfortable with yourself but also have some understanding and opinions on things.”
- “ RE forces people to look inwards and I think that is an important part of education.”

## WHERE SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING TAKE PLACE?

Almost all the teachers in the study think that RE should be in something like a National Curriculum, (with recognition that not all schools are subject to the National Curriculum). Of 90 teachers who expressed an opinion, 86% said it should be in the national curriculum, 4% said no and 10% were unsure.

- “ 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.”
- “ It's a crying shame that it's not given its standing.”
- “ 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.”
- “ If there's anything that can come from your research it's that it needs to be part of EBacc.”



Of those teachers who expressed an opinion, 99% favour 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.”

“ 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.”

“ 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.”

“ 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.”

“ I wouldn't want to see a humanities faculty that only taught about history and geography and the sociology whilst ignoring something that is so important to so many people and is so important to so many things that have happened around the world. It's not about teaching people to be religious it's about teaching people to understand religion. That's where I come from in terms of the education side of it. Therefore, there is no real strong argument to not deliver religious education in school.

“ Yes, to the end of year 11 because it's important in terms of empathy and tolerance, and because people aren't naturally going to go away and explore a faith that is different to theirs. It forces you to do it in some ways but it raises awareness. It also gives you a global viewpoint of the world, beyond your own back yard.”

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

“ All the way through but you shouldn't have to take an exam at GCSE. A choice, academic version as well as an awareness, social version.”

'Vocational' and 'academic' strands in the study of religion and belief are identified, 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.”

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

“ I think that dedicated RE time is crucial for our students to get a better understanding of the world.”

“ 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.”

“ I could not teach about Elizabeth I without discussing religion. It’s so entrenched into our world and the past, whether explicitly or implicitly, that it can’t be ignored. And if you do, you’re doing the students a disservice.”

“ 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.”

“ 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.”

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

“ In order to understand religion properly you need to have specialist teachers.”

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

“ You have that nervousness about saying it in the wrong way: Am I being racist or stereotypical or prejudiced?”

Many teachers in the study suggested changing the name of RE. They thought that RE and ‘Religious Studies’ carries baggage from a confessional era, has low status, and is off-putting to students.

“ A lot of kids are uncomfortable calling it RE.”

“ They’ve got a very negative attitude because it is named RS.”

“ Maybe it shouldn’t even be called religion.”

“ Too many connotations with how the older generation were taught it and it has too much baggage. So first I would go for a name change.”

## 3 PARENTS

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Almost all parents in the study think religion and belief learning should prepare students for religion and belief diversity.
- 2 Parents emphasise attitudes – respect and tolerance – rather than knowledge, as being the main point of learning about religion and belief.
- 3 Parents mostly talked in very general terms about RE inculcating morals and spirituality.
- 4 Parents think it is important for young people to understand the ‘world religions’, though most could not say which religions they mean.
- 5 1/3 of parents in the study did not know that RE is not in the national curriculum. 94% said it should be.
- 6 94% of parents in the study think religious education should be compulsory in schools. 70% say up to at least age 16.
- 7 Some want a name change, saying they think ‘RE’ puts young people off.
- 8 The majority think that students should learn about a wide range of religions and beliefs.
- 9 Almost all think that this should include non-religious beliefs.
- 10 Parents think there should be a focus on religion in contemporary society.

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING BE FOR?

Almost all the parents in the study said that the focus of religion and belief learning should be on knowledge and understanding of religions to prepare students for living in a diverse society. This was particularly emphasised in less diverse schools.

“When I was at school we were purely taught Christian beliefs, mostly Protestant. So there’s little I know about any other religion. But my children have been taught lots of religions. And I think that makes diversity a lot easier.”

“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.”

“That’s a massive part of our society. They have to be aware of the kind of diversity there is now.”

Parents also stress that moral and spiritual development should be a key aim of religion and belief learning. Most see the development of moral values as an intrinsic part of RE, but they want it to be exploratory, rather than dictating or determining a moral framework.

“To educate about different morals and to look at moral issues, different beliefs on moral issues and ethics in general.”

“I’m not interested in developing someone’s religious belief, I don’t want to convert them to any particular religion, but I want to enhance their spirituality, so that they know it’s okay if they want to go down that route, and to investigate that.”

“I would say that everyone needs to sort of have a knowledge of the possibilities and then make their own mind up.”

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING INCLUDE?

Parents in this study are focused on learning about the real religion young people encounter in everyday life, including diversity within traditions. They emphasise learning that engages with current affairs including controversies around religion.

“ White girls have converted for their boyfriends. So students have seen that and asked questions about it. So to me that’s modern day religion.”

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

“ Whether that is trying to describe the differences between Sunni and Shi’ism, and why that creates conflict, whether that is the difference between Christians and Muslims or the fact that Buddhists are completely different from everyone else, they don’t worship a God in way that we would. I would really hate us to lose the edge of intellectual rigour for political correctness.”

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

“ There’s a lot of ignorance around Muslims. People don’t know the difference between being a devout Muslim and blowing people up.”

Parents are broadly in agreement that the ‘main religions’ should be covered, but there is also support for including informal beliefs.

“ ...it’s the main ones that you tend to deal with and there are some out there ones really, like the Latter-day Saints and the Jehovah Witnesses and things like that.”

“ I think that nowadays people find themselves being more spiritual than religious.”

“ It would be good to cover some of the informal ones just so people understand what else is available.”

“ 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.”

In this cohort, attitudes are prioritized over knowledge and parents emphasise the development of tolerance and respect.

“ ... treating people as you’d expect to be treated. I don’t think without RE they’d have that.”

“ I feel that the more they are equipped and educated the easier it is for them to work in any setting and with any others and be more accepting of people’s differences.”

“ I suppose it’s about respecting others in the same way as all the other protected characteristics, but do they need an understanding of religion when they start? Useful I suppose, but not a must have. Only on the basis of making them more tolerant and understanding of others’ difference.”



## WHERE SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING HAPPEN?

A third of parents were not aware that RE is not part of the National Curriculum and nearly all (94 per cent) thought it should be.

94 per cent of parents think RE should be compulsory. The majority support compulsory RE to aged 16. Justification for this centered on its value in terms of personal development:

“ If they are not teaching RE how are they teaching citizenship and moral values and all that.”

“ Because if you don't carry on till 16, you're going through such a change, developing your own identity, if they're not given all the tools and information through that developmental stage, they're not able to become well-rounded individuals.”

“ It should be compulsory. It gets them talking.”

“ I know it is covering religion but it transcends into being tolerant with society. I'm interested in it and have gone out and learned about it but it wasn't taught at school and I wish it had have been.”

“ Up until 16. Because they're not old enough to know they want to learn it or not. I'd still like my son to learn stuff like that even though he's not interested.”

However, some think that the name 'Religious Education' is off-putting because of being overly associated with Christianity. Parents preferred 'Philosophy and Ethics'.

“ It's about making them enjoy it and not calling it RE anymore.”

“ But what might help that is if they stopped calling it RE. Because for such a long time it was just Christianity and so people perceive it as that.”

“ The change of name really did bump it up, it's like a marketing exercise. I think that RE is in a lot of people's mind as a term of old fashion and things like that, but I do think that whatever you call it, and philosophy and ethics is actually a very good name, it definitely should form a good wedge of education.”

## 4 EMPLOYERS

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Young people need to learn about handling religion and belief diversity in ways that prepare them for workplace diversity.
- 2 Learning about religion and belief should provide students with empathy with regard to the importance of religion in people's lives.
- 3 It should give young people a practical understanding of how religion and belief will manifest themselves in people's lives.
- 4 It should give young people an understanding of what are acceptable manifestations of religion and belief within the work place and what are not.
- 5 Students should learn about non-religious beliefs.
- 6 Most think RE should be compulsory at secondary school, though they weren't specific as to what level.

## WHAT SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING BE FOR?

This is the smallest cohort within the study, and is self-selecting from a larger list. Within the cohort there is consensus that teaching and learning about religion and belief should be a preparation for encounters with religion and belief diversity, which are inevitable in ordinary daily life.

“*In a multicultural and multi ethnic society it should be about teaching children a basic understanding of other people’s religious beliefs and the importance of what religion means to people of faith and how it will require them to act.*”

These employers assumed that learning about religion and belief will result in the development of tolerance and respect.

“*Education about religion serves a fundamental purpose – teaches tolerance and understanding.*”

“*Part of it should facilitate understanding, harmonious living, and respect for different religions to your own.*”

Employers want a pragmatic, practical engagement with religion and belief, focused on lived experiences, and manifestations of religion and belief. Learning about beliefs and practices is seen as important, but largely in relation to what they mean for individuals and how this plays out in workplaces.

“*Its important to learn the holy days and festivals and the implications for their lives. For example it’s important for non-Muslims to understand the importance of Ramadan for Muslims.*”

“*How religion and belief impact on the day to day life for individual members of a religion and for the entire country, how it impacts on overall culture, laws etc.*”

“*A very, very large number of beliefs are relevant to the workplace, e.g. if you work in education or health sector, understanding about religious beliefs in our society today is very important. The precise utility of religious knowledge will vary by occupation, activity and sector but there is no doubt that to a wide, wide range of sectors, knowledge about religion and belief is very important. And to put the contrary, not understanding about religious belief is a serious weakness.*”

“*In terms of the NHS, the way it’s going in the future, its very much more of a community based delivery, so even more important. So in the past very much place based – surgeries etc. and people came to those places. When people come to your home or your place of work, you set the rules. When you turn that around and become a more outward facing service, the way the NHS is going now and will go more in future, our staff will be delivering services within the community, within homes and different places so ... it’s important people understand the rules, rituals and beliefs of those communities they’re going in to.*”

“*...so I think that whole notion of diversity in the workplace, respect and ‘good working’ that understanding and awareness of other religious faiths in such a diverse society as we are becoming is absolutely what every employee needs to be equipped with.*”

This extends to understanding the controversies and dilemmas posed by religion and belief in everyday life:

“*To understand the controversies about religion in modern life is an important part of RE in school.*”

“What is its presence both in the local community to a particular school, in the UK as a whole and to the world more widely today and how has that changed over the last 4 or 5 decades.”

For reasons of practical encounter, employers were narrower than other cohorts in the study about the range of religions and beliefs, which should be learned.

“90%+ of the people they meet will be from the big 6 or none, that’s where the focus should be.”

Half of the sample however, thought that a wider range of formal and informal beliefs should be studied because that reflects the reality. For this reason, there was also broad consensus that non-religious worldviews should be included.

“Giving some sense of the wonder of the variety of different beliefs and religions that there are throughout the world is quite important so children understand that there isn’t a belief system that dominates but an enormous range of beliefs – including spiritual, informal religion – ‘spiritualism’ very widespread outlook on life and important part of overall description of pattern of religious belief.”

“People’s beliefs are mixed, whatever religion they may or may not have been brought up in, there are all sorts of issues, beliefs such as vegetarianism, concern for the planet, – these are all ways that people may want to manifest the importance to their lives. It’s important that people are aware ... the external impact is still the same.. because you had a set of beliefs, whether is within a formal religion or a less formal belief system, you’ll want to act in a certain way and people need to understand that your motivation is legitimate.”

## WHERE SHOULD RELIGION AND BELIEF LEARNING HAPPEN?

Most employers felt that the study of religion and belief should be a compulsory part of secondary education, although there were different views as to the age to which this should continue.

Employers favoured alternative approaches to learning about religion and belief that are more distributed, for example, combining it with PSHE and Citizenship curricula.

“Keeping it as a separate, slightly odd subject that only weird people think is interesting is not very helpful.”

“..you take the current context of the way in which religion rears its head in a whole set of different ways...that’s why we should keep RE on the curriculum and it should also be encompassed into a spirituality or good citizenship approach throughout the whole curriculum.”

“It’s more of a spectrum than a silo and the implications of religion do clearly ripple out into other subjects too.”

Many disliked the name, which they felt was discredited. One preferred model was a ‘religious awareness’ subject. Another suggested a ‘religious literacy lesson’ to run alongside a more distributed learning about religion and belief.

## KEY MESSAGES: CONNECTIONS AND DISCONNECTIONS

The table below draws out points of connection and disconnection across the sample and the challenges and/or questions these raise for policy and practice. This is intended to stimulate discussion. A set of key messages and related recommendations follows.

Points of Connection and Disconnection	Challenges and Questions for Policy and Practice
<b>Purposes of Religion and Belief Learning</b>	
There is broad consensus between students, parents, teachers and employers that young people should learn about religion and belief diversity, with the goal of managing difference and cohesion.	Should the onus for this key instrumental goal be placed on a subject that is so diverse in its delivery? Would these instrumental goals be better and more appropriately met if more distributed across other subjects in the timetable?
They broadly agree that it should also contribute to their personal development.	RE is often seen as the only space for this on the curriculum. Would a stronger PSHE curriculum be appropriate that encompassed aspects of religion and belief, and contextualized them as overlapping but distinct from ethics, morals and spirituality?
But among the adults there is a difference between men, who stress the purpose of managing diversity, and women who stress spiritual development.	Does this draw attention to the need for stated aims and purposes for the subject at school level and nationally?
There is also more emphasis placed on spiritual development by students and parents, than by teachers and employers.	Teachers and employers may be more focused on extrinsic usefulness than on intrinsic value. Is there a conflict? RE is currently the key space for both. How can they be balanced?
Younger people focus more on cohesion. Older people focus more on moral development.	The focus on cohesion emphasises the idea of religion as something that needs to be managed. The focus on morality emphasises the idea of religion as a resource for formation. How can these be balanced and clarified?
Specialist RE teachers tend to see religion and belief as worthy of study in their own right and non-specialist RE teachers tend to emphasise RE for cohesion.	Can RE be both instrumental and academic? How can teachers be better equipped for clarity about its purposes?
In this study, being a 'school with a religious character' makes no difference to what people think religion and belief learning should be for – except that students in such schools are noticeably more focused on the importance of developing tolerance and respect.	Is there anything to be learnt from schools with a religious character on inter-faith awareness and learning?



Points of Connection and Disconnection	Challenges and Questions for Policy and Practice
<b>Content of Religion and Belief Learning</b>	
<p>All, but particularly students, would like to see a wider range of religions and beliefs studied. However, teachers feel limited due to time pressures.</p>	<p>'How many' and what to teach are live areas in a context where time is so squeezed. To what extent should the range and mix be determined? Who should determine it?</p> <p>The RE time is limited and the space is full. Would more dedicated space outside RE for citizenship, cohesion, and personal development (SMSC) make more room for diversity of religion and belief within RE? *</p>
<p>All groups show an interest in learning about informal, non-traditional religion and belief as well as the traditions, although due to time pressures this is not seen as a priority over the 'main' religions. Teachers and students are also focused on teaching about internal diversity.</p>	<p>*See above</p> <p>Should curriculum planning processes consider the latest research on religion and belief and work to reflect better the real religious landscape?</p>
<p>All groups agree that non-religion and non-religious beliefs should be studied.</p>	<p>*See above</p>
<p>All groups emphasise learning about real 'lived' religion, and religion in society, especially controversies like extremism.</p>	<p>*See above</p>
<p>Students particularly emphasise learning about social and moral issues – this reflects both current curricula and their focus on personal development.</p>	<p>How can teachers balance the cross over with PSHE alongside a lack of clarity over what belongs where?</p>
<p>There is broad consensus that learning about religion and belief is beneficial in preparing students for the workplace. Students and employers are more likely to express this in practical terms of 'handling' manifestations in the workplace.</p>	<p>There is an important vocational aspect to religion and belief learning. Should this be distributed to other areas of learning, for example by integration with careers education, making more room for other things in the space remaining?</p>
<b>Structures of Religion and Belief Learning</b>	
<p>Almost everybody agrees that RE should be compulsory to at least the end of Key Stage 4.</p> <p>Many across all cohorts are in favour of an optional GCSE.</p>	<p>Should compulsion be retained? Should compulsion be lifted at KS5?</p>
<p>Almost everybody agrees that RE should be in something like a national curriculum. There is a strong call for inclusion in the EBacc.</p>	<p>All state-funded schools will soon be Academies or Free Schools and the national curriculum will be less relevant anyway. As its role diminishes, what scope is there for an alternative framework that supports all schools?</p> <p>How can a national framework be balanced with school-level determination? How would the curriculum development process be managed and who would be involved?</p> <p>This also raises the question of how standards would be assessed. Would this be Ofsted's role and/or is there scope for other bodies to play an increased role in benchmarking standards?</p>
<p>All groups agree that learning about religion and belief should be a distinct timetabled subject, taught by specialists and also be distributed in subjects across the curriculum. But non-specialist teachers are anxious about their capacity to do this well.</p>	<p>Given the lack of RE specialists, what are appropriate levels of investment in initial teacher training, and in CPD for non-specialists called upon to teach RE?</p>
<p>All groups expressed some appetite for a change of name due to a perceived status problem but this was most apparent amongst men and parents. It was also more apparent in schools without a religious character.</p>	<p>Some suggestions include; Religious Awareness, Religious Literacy, Beliefs, Ethics and Values Education.</p>

## KEY MESSAGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1 There is overwhelming support for including religion and belief learning in something like a national curriculum, but also a concern to maintain school-level local flexibility. Recognising that more and more schools are not subject to the national curriculum, we propose that **a statutory, National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should be developed and be applicable to all schools, balancing national approaches with school level determination.** It should outline the purposes of religion and belief learning, including key learning goals, alongside suggested content.
- 2 There is a crucial question about how to determine the national framework, and its relationship to school-level determination. None of the study's participants commented explicitly on this. However, **since SACREs currently play a leading part in religion and belief learning, there is an urgent need for review of their role, and the role of others, such as professional bodies and experts. This should result in the appointment of a panel to develop the national framework.** This should also consider the role of Local Education Authorities and school level determination.
- 3 **The National Framework panel should consider and make recommendations about the purpose, content and structures of teaching and learning.** In doing so it should consider the context in which religion and belief learning takes place, especially the relationship between learning inside RE, outside in other subjects, and in the wider life of schools, especially in relation to the Act of Worship, and the right to withdraw.
- 4 There is strong support for compulsory religion and belief learning to at least the end of Key Stage 4 (age 16). We recommend that **religion and belief learning be a compulsory part of the curriculum to age 16.** This raises the question of what, if any, religion and belief learning should take place after Key Stage 4, and how religion and belief learning is best progressed in each stage of education. The panel should consider the question of appropriate progression pathways more broadly, to include primary, secondary, FE, HE and in to CPD.
- 5 Based on these research findings, we recommend that the **suggested content should reflect the real religious landscape, as revealed by cutting edge theory and data in the study of contemporary religion and belief,** and always include:
  - a The study of a broad range of religions, beliefs and non-religion
  - b Exploration of religion, belief and non-belief as a category
  - c Exploration of the changing religion and belief landscape and its impacts on contemporary society
  - d A focus on contemporary issues and the role of religion and belief in current affairs and controversies
  - e A focus on the relevance of religion and belief for workplaces and working life
  - f Exploration of religion and belief as lived identity as well as tradition.

- 6 Our findings suggest two possible settings for religion and belief learning: a distinct, separately timetabled, Religion and Belief subject (specific learning); and the incorporation of aspects of religion and belief learning into other subjects, especially PSHE, Citizenship and Careers Education (distributed learning). We recommend that **the process of producing a National Framework for Religion and Belief Learning should determine the mix of specific and distributed learning, as well as the respective content and locations.** A particular task is to clarify which issues are core to the academic study of religion and belief, which elements are vocational or formational, and which overlap but are not really about religion or belief at all. This should serve as a basis for clarity about where each should be learnt.
- 7 The findings show that there is also strong support for a specific optional GCSE Religious Studies for those wishing to pursue academic specialism. We recommend that **GCSE Religious Studies should remain as an optional subject in schools and consideration should be given to clearly demarcating the boundary between academic study of the real religious landscape, and other religion and belief learning associated with SMSC (spiritual, moral, social and cultural development) outside of the GCSE.**
- 8 The combination of compulsory religion and belief learning and a subject-specific GCSE implies the need for the continuation of both specialist and non-specialist teachers of religion and belief. **We recommend continued investment in Initial Teacher Training for subject-specialist RE teachers.**
- 9 Our findings also reveal a lack of confidence among many non-specialist teachers. **We recommend an increased investment in continuing professional development for non-specialist teachers of religion and belief.**
- 10 Within the study there is widespread concern about the status and name of RE. The combination of distributed religion and belief learning, alongside a specialist optional GCSE, suggests that the name of one or both approaches should be carefully revisited to reflect the distinctions. **We recommend that the process of producing a National Framework should include a review and decision on the name or names of religion and belief learning in schools.**

# APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A INFLUENCERS' GROUP

Dr. Bob Bowie, School of Childhood & Education, Canterbury Christ Church University  
Alan Brine, Former lead RE adviser for Ofsted  
Mike Castelli, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol  
Andrew Copson, Chief Executive, British Humanist Association  
Prof. Grace Davie, Professor Emerita of Sociology, University of Exeter  
Paul Deemer, Consultant to NHS  
Steve Evans, Campaigns Manager, National Secular Society  
Rev. Nigel Genders, Chief Education Officer, Church-of-England  
Prof. David Ford, Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge  
Bruce Gill, Former Chair of the National Association of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (NASACRE)  
Tom Gilliford, Project Engagement Manager, RSA  
Prof. Robert Jackson, Research Consultant to WRERU, University of Warwick  
Dr. Abdullah Sahin, Senior Lecturer Islamic Studies & Education, Markfield Institute of Higher Education  
Dr. Jasjit Singh, Research Fellow, University of Leeds  
Bharti Tailor, Secretary-general, Hindu Forum of Britain  
Prof. Linda Woodhead, Professor in Sociology of Religion, Lancaster University

## APPENDIX B PARTICIPATING EMPLOYERS

National Health Service  
Civil Service  
Government Equalities Office  
Local Government Association  
157 Group  
AT and T  
Confederation of British Industry  
Former Director within BBC  
Senior politician

## APPENDIX C

### INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Before we begin, all responses will be anonymous and confidential.

Are you ok with this being recorded?

The interview will take no more than 30 minutes.

Age: Gender:

The first few questions are about you and your religion or belief:

- 1 What 3 words first come into your head when you think about religion?
- 2 Would you describe yourself as any of the following:  
Religious/Not religious but spiritual/Not religious or spiritual/  
other/ not sure<sup>2</sup>
- 3 Do you identify with a particular religion or worldview? If so which?
- 4 Would you say that you practise your religion?  
If yes, do you practise in any of the following ways?
  - a) Worship
  - b) Volunteering
  - c) Prayer (private)
  - d) Prayer (communal)
  - e) Other?
- 5 How important is your religion or belief to you?  
(1 = not at all, 2= not very, 3= slightly, 4=quite important and 5=very important)
- 5 Can you say in a sentence what do you think RE should be for?  
Prompts:
  - a) To bring up children in Christian/religious values
  - b) To develop moral values
  - c) To provide students with knowledge about world religions
  - d) To help develop students' own spirituality
  - e) To help students explore their own identity
  - f) To help students explore each other's identities
  - g) To help foster cohesion
  - h) To prepare students to engage with religious diversity
- 7 What do you think is the purpose of current RE?  
Prompts:
  - a) To bring up children in Christian values
  - b) To develop moral values
  - c) To provide students with knowledge about world religions
  - d) To help students explore their own identity
  - e) To help students explore each other's identities
  - f) To help foster cohesion
  - g) To prepare students to engage with religious diversity
- 8 In terms of content, what do you think students should learn about religion and belief?  
Prompts:
  - a) Beliefs
  - b) Practices
  - c) How religion is lived by individuals
  - d) History
  - e) Controversies – the places where religion bites in the contemporary world e.g. Terrorism/Arab Spring/Extremism
  - f) Sociological context – how religion operates in society –
  - g) Contemporary religious landscape
  - h) Engaging with ultimate questions and truth claims
- 9 What range of religions and/or beliefs do you think students should learn about in schools?  
Prompts:
  - a) The 6/9 major world religions
  - b) Contemporary informal religion, e.g. spiritualism
  - c) Non-religion, e.g. humanism, atheism, secularism,
  - d) Legally defined beliefs, e.g. veganism, environmentalism
- 10 Do you think learning about religion and belief can foster specific skills which other learning does not?
- 11 What sorts of knowledge about religion and belief do you think school leavers should take with them in to their workplaces?
- 12 Do you think RE should be compulsory for all students? To what age? Why?
- 13 Did you know it's not part of the NC? (NOT TO TEACHERS)
- 14 Do you think RE should be part of the national curriculum?
- 15 Is RE the best or only place to learn about religion in schools?

<sup>2</sup> Typology taken from Guest.M, Aune.K, Sharma.S, Waner.R eds (2013)

## APPENDIX D

### FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

#### Starter

- 1 Ask pupils to move around the room – true/false/not sure:  
Come back to middle after each

There follows some statements about religion and belief in the UK today. Please state if think they are true or false, or 'don't know'

- a) A quarter of the population are non-religious (25%,2011 CENSUS)  

True	False	Not Sure
------	-------	----------
- b) A quarter of the population believe in 'a personal God' (26%: Woodhead, 2012b)  

True	False	Not Sure
------	-------	----------
- c) A quarter of the population believe in a 'spirit or life force' (44%: Woodhead 2012b)  

True	False	Not Sure
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- d) All state schools have to provide religious education up to age 18 (True)  

True	False	Not Sure
------	-------	----------
- e) Parents can legally take their children out of RE lessons (True)  

True	False	Not Sure
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- 2 The following are some categories that might fit your position in relation to religion and belief. Please raise your hand to say which of the following you identify with:

Religious/Not religious but spiritual/Not religious or spiritual/other/ not sure<sup>3</sup>

- 3 Raise your hand if you identify with a particular religion/worldview. Can you say which?
- 4 On a scale of 1-5, one being not very and 5 being extremely, how important would you say your religion/worldview is to you?



<sup>3</sup> Typology taken from Guest.M, Aune.K, Sharma.S, Waner.R eds (2013)

#### Main

- 1 What 3 words first come into your head when you think about religion?
- 2 What do you think RE should be for?  
Prompts:
  - a) To bring up children in Christian/religious values
  - b) To develop moral values
  - c) To provide students with knowledge about world religions
  - d) To help students explore their own identity
  - e) To help students explore each other's identities
  - f) To help foster cohesion
  - g) To prepare students to engage with religious diversity
  - h) Anything else?
- 3 What do you think is the purpose of current RE? Does it match with your views on its purpose?
- 4 In terms of content, what do you think you should learn about religion and belief?  
Prompts:
  - a) Beliefs
  - b) Practices
  - c) How religion is lived by individuals
  - d) History
  - e) Controversies – the places where religion bites in the contemporary world e.g. Terrorism/Arab Spring/Extremism
  - f) Sociological context – how religion operates in society
  - g) Contemporary religious landscape
  - h) Engaging with ultimate questions and truth claims
- 5 Which religions or belief systems do you think you should learn about in schools?  
Prompts:
  - a) The 6/9 major world religions
  - b) Contemporary informal religion, e.g. spiritualism
  - c) Non-religion, e.g. humanism, atheism
  - d) Legally defined beliefs, e.g. veganism, environmentalism
- 6 Do you think learning about religion and belief gives you specific skills which other learning does not?
- 7 What sorts of knowledge about religion and belief do you think you'll need when you leave school and enter a job?
- 8 Do you think RE should be compulsory for all students? To what age? Why?
- 9 Is RE the best or only place to learn about religion in schools?



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