

**Standing Advisory Council For Religious Education
(SACRE)**

Second Public Annual Lecture

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HMI for Religious Education at the
Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED)

**“Is Religious Education relevant
today?”**

Transcript of the lecture

Held on

Thursday, 22 March 2001

At

Christ Church,
91 Coombe Road,
New Malden.
6.30-7.30pm

IS RELIGIOUS EDUCATION RELEVANT TODAY?

Gillian Wood, Chair of the Kingston SACRE welcomed everyone to the second of the SACRE's annual lectures and in particular thanked Barbara Wintersgill, HMI for Religious Education at the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) for coming to Kingston to make his presentation.

Introduction

1. Is Religious Education relevant today? An interesting question and I wonder if we would ask this question of any other statutory subject of the curriculum?
2. Everyone concerned with RE from professors of RE to classroom teachers has a set of well rehearsed arguments to justify the place of RE in the curriculum; and they all have the character of an apologia. We need these arguments because people keep asking the question: "Is RE relevant?" – or simply tell us it is not.
3. I am sure that I will come up with those same well rehearsed arguments tonight – after all – I have had over 30 years practice! But I want to go further than that. I intend to:
 - 1 set out the reasons why RE is relevant today;
 - 2 compare the theoretical and real value of RE today; and
 - 3 Consider what has to be done to bring reality closer to the idea.

Religious Education's relevance

4. What do we mean by relevance? My view – relevance is to do with general usefulness to life as a whole – includes developing a personalised code by which to live – self-respect. Also, useful to forming relationships on a larger scale – knowing our place in the universe.
5. RE is frequently attacked as being irrelevant on the grounds that, it is claimed religion is only a minor interest and occupation these days – in other words, it is assumed that RE can only be relevant for the overtly religious. We reply that RE (at least in non-denominational schools) is primarily an educational matter – like History, Geography or Science – and that it is as nonsensical to suggest that RE can only be of relevance to the child of a committed Christian family as to suggest that history can only be relevant to the offspring of a museum curator.
6. We claim that RE contributes to the knowledge of the world that should be possessed by any educated person – knowledge of the world's, religions should constitute part of their general knowledge. After all – on

one famous games show, questions about the names and ownership of religious buildings and texts are regularly worth several thousands of pounds – now that really is relevant knowledge!

7. **But we do not just want to give them general knowledge** – those of us who claim that RE is relevant – notably those who write agreed syllabuses and those who teach from them – want children and young people to **understand** what religion is all about and why it has always played such a major part in many people's lives. We claim, in particular, that by learning about the teachings and practices of the world's major religions, young people come to understand some of the significant differences between the world's cultures – and more particularly between different religious and cultural groups living in this country.
8. We would go on to argue that RE makes a significant contribution to pupils' skills – and given the current prominence of thinking skills, this adds to the relevance of RE in the curriculum. Through RE pupils gain valuable experience in asking relevant questions, drawing out meanings from evidence whether literary or eg a work of art; they learn to identify with the feelings and experiences of others, to structure a critical line of argument, to apply belief to practice... and much more.

Cultural argument

9. Then there is the cultural argument. A traditional reason for teaching RE is that it teaches young people the beliefs that underpin our social mores, our art, literature, poetry, music and drama. A good illustration of that in schools is the claim on RE teachers to help out once other teachers start teaching Milton. Ideas such as the fall of Man, heaven and hell, judgement and redemption are indeed so central to high culture that it is barely possible to read even perhaps especially – detective novels without some understanding of them. (Have you noticed that Inspector Dalgleish's latest mystery is set in a theological college).

Moral argument

10. Then there is the moral argument. To be honest RE has probably survived this long for two reasons:
 - a) no sensible politician is prepared to go down in history (let alone the Daily Mail) as the government that abolished RE – or Collective Worship;
 - b) parents have always generally favoured RE – probably because they think it makes their children good – although we may just be seeing a new generation of parents who value RE because they recognise it offers their children more than this – and in doing so recognise its true relevance – I'll come to that later.

11. These arguments between them offer – collectively – the start of a strong case for RE in the curriculum. We should never forget that what is unique about RE is the **content** it teaches – pupils will not get this anywhere else in the curriculum (except odds and ends in history – often very badly taught).
12. But we now have to contend with a new argument against RE. There are those who say that now we have Citizenship in the curriculum, which also claims to teach about different religious groups in the UK, we do not need RE. [I suspect that in reality most schools will simply say that RE delivers that part of the Citizenship curriculum, but time will tell].
13. But there is one word that – unless I have not read the Citizenship order correctly – is totally absent that is the word “spiritual”. Moral yes – but not spiritual.
14. And here we turn to one of the most persuasive arguments for RE as a “relevant” subject – that the relevance of RE lies in its contribution to pupils’ **spiritual** – as well as moral welfare.

Pupils’ moral-development

15. So I would like to look for comments on how RE – at least in theory – contributes to pupils’ moral-development.
 - a) RE gives them opportunities to learn about, reflect on and evaluate contemporary issues – many related to ideas about the sanctity of life.
 - b) It helps them understand that people have different outlooks and opinions and that it is often difficult to say which of these opinions is the right one.
 - c) It helps them develop their own moral code by teaching them to defend their own position and argue against the views of others;
 - d) It teaches them right from wrong – or at least what different people consider to be right or wrong. Hopefully older pupils will have opportunities to engage in debates about moral relativism and absolutes.

Spiritual Development

16. Without going into long diversions on the nature of spiritual development, there are frequent claims that RE gives pupils the following opportunities:
- a) to consider claims to religious experiences and to think about possible explanations for them;
 - b) to reflect on religious issues arising from the study of religion and how these relate to their own beliefs and values;
 - c) to develop a readiness to explore in and engage with religious ideas and questions; and
 - d) to formulate their own responses to life's most puzzling questions (ultimate questions in the trade).
17. And that is not all. On top of all this, RE is frequently claimed to develop in pupils certain attitudes, such as:
- a) Sensitivity to people of faith;
 - b) respect for people's right to hold their beliefs and practice their religion;
 - c) ...and a whole list of others, equally worthy.
18. All these claims for the relevance and importance of RE are on a grandiose scale and can be found in most agreed syllabuses – quite right too. What makes RE relevant is not any one of these things I have mentioned – it is the whole package – and that is the important thing to remember.

What about in practice?

19. This is all very well in theory – but what really happens? Is RE really like this – does it develop spiritual and moral awareness? Does it develop skills? Does it make young people more respectful of each other's cultural backgrounds and opinions? Does it make them more open to the possibility of a religious dimension to life?
20. The answer is NO – if RE falls into either of two traps:
- 1 teaching 101 facts about religions – the names of the buildings, the sacred texts, the founders, the leaders, festivals, worship, pilgrimage etc is usually sterile, lacks depth and challenge and most likely to lead to the “why do we have to do RE?” question;

- 2 Equally, the sort of RE that focuses over much on “human experience” with little reference to religions invariably lacks rigour, direction and is generally woolly.
21. RE comes to life and makes sense to pupils – and often their parents who find themselves engaged in discussion on matters metaphysical over breakfast – when it delivers the whole package. That is why – in the words of M Grimmitt and adapted by the model syllabuses – good RE consists of learning **about** religion and learning **from** religion. One without the other is a poor diet. Learning from religion without much specific religious content is not learning from religion at all – it usually relies on a “sharing of human experience” – another bit of RE jargon. There are two problems here:
- a) this talk of “shared human experience” comes from people often from a faith background who assume that others more specifically children, share the experiences they have. The term itself is coded – what does it mean to an “outsider”? Human experience could be anything from the train being late to gazing at the sky and wondering if there is a creator.
 - b) The experience of children can be very limited – just as their ideas can be only partly formed. RE lessons which rely overmuch on a sharing of “experience” and pupils’ ideas – important as they are – tend to go round in circles; simply because there is little substance in them. In OFSTED speak – little progress is made – little learning goes on.
22. So first point – if RE is to be purposeful it must be balanced between learning and personal reflection. This takes me to my second main point of comparison between theory and practice. If RE were always as I have described, it would be educationally challenging, intrinsically interesting, enjoyable and relevant. Sadly that is not always the case – if you have been keeping abreast of OFSTED publications you will know why. First, I need to say that in our estimation about 1/3 of RE lessons overall are good: but probably more than 1/10 are unsatisfactory – there’s the rub with lots of lessons! If you have seen an unsatisfactory lesson you will know how depressing that is. Also, it is worth noting that there is more unsatisfactory teaching at KS3 than elsewhere.
23. There are a number of reasons for this – all relating back to the criteria that should make RE relevant. Above all, there is an over emphasis on teaching the externals of religions (festivals, buildings etc). OK KS2 but by secondary school even the less able have outgrown it. That is not to say that teaching knowledge at KS3 is inappropriate – the questions are: are we teaching the right knowledge? And what are we encouraging children to DO with their knowledge? The answer is too often – not enough. You only have to look through the exercise books of most KS3

pupils to see that most of their time is spent in descriptive writing, simple question and answer exercises and usually a lot of drawing.

24. The fact that in most secondary schools standards in RE are below those in History and English is something we must take seriously. In many cases, the problem could be resolved if teachers would only set appropriately challenging tasks which enabled pupils to demonstrate their best achievement. Frankly, it gives RE a bad name – as long as RE sits at the bottom of the list of subjects in terms of quality of provision, the greater the danger of its opponents saying “for goodness sake, let’s get rid of this subject – it clearly is not improving and its contribution to pupils’ education is clearly minimal.” We have got to do something about standards in RE at KS3 – not only for the image of the subject and the self-respect of teachers but in order to give pupils the full benefit of studying the subject. This means improvement cannot be seen merely as teachers’ responsibility – it is the responsibility of us all – particularly those who prescribe the content of the syllabuses. We have a good model before us – KS4. What used to be the black hole of RE is now its greatest success. The short course in particular has led to higher standards and, in particular, enhanced pupils’ interest – there are even indications that increasing numbers may be taking AS/A2. The success of the short course lies in two things – its academic demand and the intrinsic interest of the content.

What can we do to improve RE and make it more relevant?

25. We need to make sure that the content of the curriculum at KS3 differs significantly from that at KS2. All our evidence from inspections suggests that the most exciting – and relevant – RE in secondary schools focuses on teachings and beliefs. There are some obvious reasons why eg beliefs about God, or life after death, should be more relevant to teenagers than drawing and labelling the ground plan of a Mosque – or drawing pictures etc. Firstly, work on beliefs is generally more challenging, and secondly, it is more likely to connect with pupils’ own interest and experiences – hence to develop AT2. The majority of young people in this country have no direct contact with places of worship, holy books, clergy etc. But they do ask religious questions, and they do face – increasingly – moral dilemmas in their lives. Obviously, we do not want to replicate at KS3 the content of the GCSE courses. But we should be thinking in terms of laying the foundations for GCSE. The answer I believe lies in an increased attention to specifically religious and moral concepts.
26. In order to do this, we must resolve once and for all the problem of progression from KS2-3 for the last 10 years at least!. In most secondary schools I visit, because Y7 pupils have done different things at KS2 and at different depth – teachers at KS3 teach RE as though none of the pupils have studied it before. We see examples of this everywhere we

go. Only last week I took away some work: fairly ordinary pupils drew pictures of key features of a church (altar, lectern, font) labelled them and wrote about their use and purpose. We see this in Y7-9 all the time. But this was year 3. We see the pattern in the way religions are taught. If Islam is taught at KS2, pupils learn about the life of Muhammad, the five pillars, the Hajj in detail, the mosque. If Islam is taught in Y7 or 9, exactly the same topics are covered – often in little more depth. We must get a grip of progression in RE – and we must stop thinking about it as progression from one religion, or one topic, to the next, but in depth study and level of conceptual theme. I believe that having levels will help pitch work properly. We have to think about beginning KS3 on the model of 16 year olds beginning AS. Some took GCSE; some did not. But the expectations of all are the same.

27. This takes me back to concepts – last point. Teachers often worry when we suggest a more conceptual approach at KS3, because they say “the pupils have got to know the facts”. That is true, and teaching concepts does not preclude pupils learning facts. Take Hinduism, for example – notoriously badly taught. (Done Divali done Hinduism). If you were to look at the notes on progression in Model 2 – you would see that under the heading “scriptures” at KS3 is “relevance of the scriptures”. You may say – they have got to know what the scriptures are before deciding on their relevance. But we are talking about KS3 here – pupils can research for homework what the Hindu scriptures are – leaving room for a more interesting discussion on how their status compares with the Bible or Qur’an – or indeed how universal are the Hindu scriptures compared to the texts of other religions. Do not need to spend valuable lesson time teaching – drawing descriptions of altar – these are on the Internet.
28. It may sound as though I have got back to my favourite topic – standards at KS3. True. But this is intrinsically linked to relevance.
29. Easy lessons – mindless tasks – lack of challenge can have little relevance to pupils – simply because there is nothing important to think about. RE can only be relevant for most of our pupils when it **engages** them and trains them to think. We are beginning to get there– but need to move more swiftly.
30. Time could be running short.

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