

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION 4-11

second edition



DEREK BASTIDE

Teaching Religious Education 4–11

Second edition

Teaching Religious Education 4–11 is an accessible, practical guide for primary teachers, and covers the teaching of religious education at the Foundation Stage, Key Stage 1 and Key Stage 2. This second edition has been extensively updated to take account of recent changes to religious education.

The book is divided into three sections: 'Setting the scene'; 'Planning the teaching'; and 'Background'. It maps out and considers the implications for teachers of:

- the changing aims and objectives of RE;
- the legal framework;
- the broadening understanding of the notion of religion;
- concern for spiritual development;
- emergence of citizenship as an additional component of the curriculum;
- introduction of formal guidelines to the content of RE;
- tackling important topics and contemporary issues;
- planning RE across the primary school;
- planning a unit of work;
- using different teaching approaches;
- monitoring and assessing progress;
- teaching Christianity and other world faiths – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

The book is full of practical examples and ideas for use in the classroom and also contains a helpful resources section.

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To Billy, Annabel, Sophia and Milo
who are just beginning their religious education

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At the present time any writer on religious education is indebted to the National Framework for Religious Education produced in 2004 for the Secretary of State for Education. This has perhaps the lowest status but highest influence of any document in religious education – of low status because it is advisory (and so could be ignored) but of high influence both because of its clarity and because of the overwhelming support it received in the consultation process.

Beyond all this I am also immensely appreciative of the understanding and loving support of my wife, Judith, in this as in previous similar ventures.

Setting the scene

1 Introduction

The first edition of this book, then titled *Religious Education 5–12*, was published in 1987, a year before the Education Reform Act of 1988 came into effect. In many ways this Act changed the face of education in England and Wales, perhaps especially in primary schools, by introducing so much that is now taken for granted: the National Curriculum, the key stages, the numbering of year groups from YR to Y13, SATs, OFSTED, to name but a few. As the book predated the Act none of these, not surprisingly, appeared in it.

The Act contained some valuable directions on the content of religious education, chiefly that it should ‘reflect the fact that the 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’.

This clearly laid out the framework of a subject content although it did raise many issues which needed to be solved over the succeeding years. This development is charted in Chapter 2. Although the first edition of the book came before the Act, its philosophy and approach to RE was essentially the same and this is largely because the Act did in fact enshrine in law what had already become good practice in RE over the 1970s and 1980s.

A very significant milestone in the development of RE was the publication in 2004 of a ‘National Framework for Religious Education’. Prior to its appearance in final form, the framework was subjected to widespread consultation and was overwhelmingly welcomed with enthusiasm. Like the Education Reform Act in its time, the framework reflects best practice in the subject across the country. It is at present a non-statutory document and therefore without force of law but it is intended as advice to local authorities in the five-yearly revisions of their agreed syllabus. Although a few local authorities may decline to follow its advice, it is highly likely that most will use it as a basis for their future work. The framework is therefore set to be a crucial shaper of future RE. The approach of this book is closely in line with that of the National Framework for Religious Education.

The underlying principles of the approach of this book can be summarised under six main headings.

First the book assumes that religious education in schools is different from religious nurture which is the work and privilege of the appropriate religious community. It also assumes that in voluntary aided schools pupils will be given religious education as well as religious teaching of a nurturing nature.

Second, Christianity should occupy half of the RE teaching time over each key stage and that over the years of compulsory schooling pupils should become acquainted with

the other principal religious traditions in Great Britain: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism.

Third, to avoid ‘mishmash’ and trivialisation, pupils in Key Stage 1 should study aspects of Christianity and (only) one other religion, and in Key Stage 2, Christianity and (only) two other religions. This does not exclude reference to other traditions but it does mean that the identified religions should be the focuses. How these are taught will depend upon the age and stage of the child. Which religions these should be will normally be determined by the local agreed syllabus.

Fourth, a religion should be studied as a *living activity*. It is *living* because for countless millions religions are highly important, giving values, shaping lives, providing support and offering a coherent framework of meaning. It is an *activity* because religion for most adherents is concerned with doing: celebrating festivals, engaging in worship, going on pilgrimages, initiating the young, hearing and retelling stories significant to the faith. Even the sacred books which are usually of ancient origin are studied so as to enlighten the present. Religions should not be presented as the relics of a past age.

Fifth, there should be two main focuses as attainment targets: *learning about religion* and *learning from religion*. Pupils need to have a knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the principal religious traditions, but a knowledge which transcends just facts and which incorporates both understanding and empathy, so that they learn both the ‘what’ and the ‘why’. In the end RE is not about knowing lots of facts about religions but about developing a sympathetic understanding of them. This study should be undertaken in a respectful way recognising that for large numbers of people across the world these faiths are their holy ground and should not be trampled on. This ties in closely with the concern in the National Framework that RE should be an agent for inclusivity in society. Pupils also need the opportunity to develop their own ideas and understanding about meaning and purpose in life (learning from religion). This also matches closely with the concern in the National Framework for pupils’ own spiritual development.

Sixth, RE should be seen as a normal school subject. It should have its own policy and scheme of work, it should be monitored and evaluated, it should figure in the school improvement plan and there should be assessment (see Chapter 16).

This book is written principally for teachers in primary schools and for students in training who as class teachers will teach RE along with all the other required subjects. It is not an agreed syllabus for RE nor does it try to be one. Rather it tries to meet the need that many teachers feel for a deeper understanding of the aims of religious education and for some information on and understanding of religion and religions if they are going to work successfully in RE. They also need an understanding of how to approach RE in the classroom – and this involves an interrelationship of the aims of the subject, the age, stage and development of the pupils, and the subject content. Early in the book there is a detailed consideration of the nature of religion and the aims and expectations of RE. At the end of the book there are two chapters with material at adult level, one containing brief accounts of the six principal religious traditions and the other on Christian festivals. Material at adult level appears throughout the book especially as background to particular units of work. (A look at the contents page will give a flavour of the approaches in RE explained in the book.)

A particular feature of the book is the provision of detailed teacher accounts of successful RE work done in schools as illustrations of the different approaches.

The overall hope of this book is that teachers and those in training will give thought to the teaching of RE so as to make it exciting to children, to help them to understand the

beliefs, values and practices of their neighbours with traditions other than their own, to treat these with respect and tolerance and, at the same time, to have the opportunity to nourish their inner beings.

2 Where is RE now?

The legal position

Ever since schools were founded in England, religion has had a place as a normal part of the curriculum. The first schools in the country were largely established by the churches and so religious teaching was central to the education provided. In 1870, the date when Parliament approved the plan to provide compulsory education for all, it was decided as a national policy that existing schools provided by the churches should remain and that the new schools, provided by the School Board set up in each locality, should fill the gaps in the existing voluntary provision. While it was clear that in Church of England schools, for example, the form of religious teaching should be Anglican, it was less clear what form it should take in the new Board schools which were paid for out of taxes and had no allegiance to any of the churches. An agreement was reached (called the Cowper-Temple clause) by which religious teaching should not be given 'by means of any catechism or formulary which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination'. This early principle remains with us today and from this came the long tradition of Bible/scripture teaching, the Bible being of great significance to all the Christian denominations, which dominated RE in English schools for a century.

The 1944 settlement

The 1944 Education Act, often called the Butler Act, was the next great step forward in RE – or to be more precise RI (Religious Instruction), as it was called then. This Act made the following references to religion:

- that religious *instruction* should be given in every county school;
- that each school day should begin with an act of worship;
- that in each school there should be a right of withdrawal both for teachers and for parents on behalf of their children;
- that each local authority should formulate its agreed syllabus for religious instruction (or adopt that of another LEA).

Although the 1944 Education Act did not lay down what it considered should be the aims of religious teaching or give guidelines for its content, there seemed to be an implicit assumption that the teaching should be, to use a technical term, *confessional* (that is, it

should attempt to lead pupils into a commitment to the Christian faith). Evidence for this is provided by the term *instruction* and by the right of withdrawal on the grounds of conscience for both teachers and parents on behalf of their children. For the forty-four years from 1944 to 1988, the requirements of the 1944 Education Act were in place. During that time, however, much happened which began to change the ways in which RE was both understood and taught. Of these, two movements seem to be the most significant.

Changing times

First, in the 1960s there was a considerable research focus on the way children's understanding of religious concepts developed. Of these researchers Ronald Goldman was certainly the most influential. Goldman agreed that the apparent lack of success with religious teaching in school was caused partly by much unimaginative teaching and partly by a focus upon Bible stories which were often too complex and difficult for younger children to make proper sense of. The net result was the misunderstanding by significant numbers of children of many religious concepts. Goldman's interviews with pupils from aged 5 to 15 revealed different levels of understanding occasioned by limitations of thought and experience of younger children. For example, one Bible story he discussed with children was of Moses and the Burning Bush. In the story, Moses sees a bush burning on the mountain side which burns but never burns away. God speaks to Moses from the bush and Moses, overawed by the event, is afraid to look on God. When asked why Moses was afraid to look on God, children aged 4–6 years tended to be limited in their thinking by egocentricity and monofocalism: one child responded, 'God had a beard and Moses did not like beards'! Further quotes from Goldman's collections from his interviews with children of this age include:

'God is the man in the moon. He has a round head and he has bent ears. He lives in a round house.'

'God is in the sky and you can't see him. He flies around. Sometimes he stops behind a cloud to have something to eat. He goes down to land at night to see shepherds and talk to them.'

Goldman's research indicated that children's understanding developed as their thinking and experience developed. Thinking became less egocentric and monofocal, so an 8-year-old would not be concerned about Moses and beards but would be more likely to speculate that 'it might have been because the bright light from the bush was frightening him'. This response is clearly more logical but, as Goldman noted, still limited by concrete thinking.

Goldman argued strongly for a shift away from Bible-centred RE to child-centred RE and he recommended the exploration of topics such as bread, water, families, light, sheep and shepherds which were much closer to children's own experience and would therefore be more appropriate for pupils, especially younger ones, to explore religious ideas and concepts implicit in these topics. Goldman's ideas have almost certainly brought both benefits and disadvantages to RE teaching but they had considerable impact on that period and made very many teachers – and agreed syllabus writers – think very carefully about the appropriateness of much of the content of traditional religious teaching.

The second movement was a change in the religious composition of the country. This was in part a loosening of the connections of many people with the main churches. Some of the traditional indicators of religious practice – churchgoing and baptisms, for example – were declining and it was becoming much more acceptable to admit publicly to agnosticism. At the same time other religious traditions were beginning to appear in Britain. In the 1950s and 1960s, there was large-scale immigration into the country from the Caribbean, Africa, Cyprus and the Indian sub-continent. Practically all those who came from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh practised religions other than Christianity. The result was that mosques, temples and gurdwaras began to appear in many towns and cities and many teachers found that they had in their classes children from different religious traditions.

These factors, which will be explored in more detail later in the book, led to considerable changes to the aims and content of RE in the county school and it was this approach to RE which was widespread in 1988 when the Education Reform Act was introduced.

RE in the Education Reform Act (1988)

Contrary to many reports in the media at the time of the publication of the Act, the requirements in RE were not an attempt to put the educational clock back to the period of the 1944 Act, but rather they reflect and enshrine in law the thought and practice which had developed in the intervening years. In its attempt to give coherence and balance to the overall curriculum, the Education Reform Act has given RE a firm, if slightly idiosyncratic, place in its plans. In general, the Education Reform Act continues the religious settlement of the 1944 Education Act but introduces some helpful clarifications and modifications.

The basic curriculum

The Education Reform Act introduced the notion of a basic curriculum to which all pupils are entitled. The aim of this ‘balanced and broadly based curriculum’ is to promote ‘the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society’ (Section 1:2). This provides the overall framework in which RE and the ten foundation subjects which form the National Curriculum (English, mathematics, science, technology, history, geography, music, art, physical education, and in Key Stages 3 and 4 a modern foreign language, plus Welsh in schools in Wales where Welsh is not spoken) are placed, and it is intended that they should all make their contribution to the rounded development of individuals. None of those defined aspects of development is the preserve of any given subject. It would be a mistake to think that spiritual development is the responsibility only of RE; it would be hoped that English, science, art and music and others too would have their contribution to make.

Unlike the foundation subjects of the National Curriculum, RE has no prescribed national attainment targets, programmes of study or assessment arrangements, so from this it is clear that RE has a unique place in the basic curriculum. The (then) DES Circular 3/89 expresses it:

The special status of religious education as part of the basic curriculum but not of the National Curriculum is important. It ensures that religious education has equal standing in relation to the core and the other foundation subjects within a school's curriculum, but is not subject to nationally prescribed Attainment Targets, Programmes of Study and assessment arrangements.

This means in effect that the Secretary of State has little power over religious education. In reality the RE curriculum, rather than being national, is local – the responsibility of each local education authority.

That RE is not part of the National Curriculum seems to arise for a number of reasons. First, it is no doubt partly due to the long-standing responsibility which LEAs have held for the content of RE through the agreed syllabus. Second, the existence of a conscience clause enabling parents to withdraw their children from RE would mean that some children might not be able to participate in part of the National Curriculum – and that would be odd. Third, the fact that a significant number of schools are voluntary aided and can therefore teach RE according to their trust deeds would mean that they would be ignoring the content of the National Curriculum. It is reasonable to suspect, too, that the government feared that to reach agreement on national programmes of study and attainment targets for RE could be a very controversial process and therefore one best avoided if possible! The traditional responsibility of the LEAs for RE in their boundaries was therefore a very attractive solution. While it did solve one difficulty, it did create another. An underlying principle of the National Curriculum is that children, wherever they live in the country, should have an equal educational entitlement which should not be subject to the vagaries of the LEAs or of individual schools. Because of its essentially local character, this principle could not apply to RE. This is an issue which is still being addressed.

The content of RE

Although the Education Reform Act deputed the RE curriculum to each LEA to devise in the form of an agreed syllabus it did provide a very important framework in which these syllabuses should be drawn up. This framework is contained in one sentence in the Act, which states that all new agreed syllabuses must: 'reflect the fact that the 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'. Before the implications of this sentence are examined, it is important to note that the law for the first time lays down a requirement about the content of RE – that over the period of compulsory schooling pupils should have the opportunity to study a range of religious traditions. LEAs are free to draw up their agreed syllabuses but they must fit within this framework. This would mean, for example, that an agreed syllabus which included only Christianity would not be within the law and neither would one which attempted to exclude it. This is a most definite development from the 1944 settlement and one which reflects very clearly what has been happening in the teaching of RE over the intervening years.

It is important to note that the sentence from the Act above refers to religious traditions (in the plural) and while it acknowledges that Christianity is the main one, it is still one among a number. The religious composition of Britain is therefore seen as *pluralist*. This has implications for the aims of RE in county schools. While it is never stated