

## An education in Religion and Worldviews



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# Introduction

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Religious Education is a statutory requirement for all school children in England. This course explores how the teaching and scholarly community is working to ensure this curriculum remains relevant for the twenty-first century. It is aimed at parents, faith and community group members and all others who might be interested in the purpose and content of Religious Education in schools.

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- better understand the reasons and purpose of the national entitlement for Religious Education in schools in England
- consider to what extent the 'Religion and Worldviews' proposal could contribute to a rigorous learning experience that promotes social cohesion and productive problem-solving for shared challenges
- understand what can be done to support the provision of good-quality Religious Education teaching in schools.

# 1 What is going on? Why is it important?



Did you know that all children in England should be receiving Religious Education (RE) as part of the educational provision in state-funded schools?

According to a recent Ofsted report, good RE teaching should be intellectually challenging and personally enriching, enabling pupils to be able to take an informed and educated position 'within a diverse multi-religious and multi-secular society' (Ofsted, 2021).

While it is a statutory requirement, RE provision can be spotty in both quality and time provided to the subject. When it is taught well, many students love it. In a recent survey of current undergraduates (Harvey, 2021a):

- 72% agreed with the statement 'I enjoyed Religious Education/Religious Studies at secondary school'

and

- 70.8% agreed with the statement 'I personally learned a lot from Religious Education at secondary school'

While some experiences are glowing:

I think these school lessons are so crucial to teaching morals and values, respect for all people and communities, and it provides us with the foundation frameworks to make life decisions.

Others are not:

[RE was] 'very unfocussed – not really exploring the roots of faith or the philosophy of major religions – instead just learning some trivia about a few religions'.

When RE is not taught by well-trained and enthusiastic teachers, pupil experiences can also be negative.

## Activity 1

Take a minute to reflect on the following questions:

- What are your memories, experiences and/or expectations of Religious Education?
- What are your worst fears?
- What might be the best-case scenario?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

We each have a uniquely personal association with the word and experience of 'religion' and how religious ideas and practices were taught to us. These two things – our personal associations with religious and non-religious beliefs and how they were taught to us can be difficult to tease out from each other. Some of these experiences might be positive, drawing our attention to a sense of meaning and purpose for our lives and how we are connected with our family, community, and the world around us. However, other experiences of religion and Religious Education might be less than positive.

One influential proposal on orienting RE to the needs of twenty-first-century pupils is known as 'Religion and Worldviews'. This proposal is gaining traction by many of the leading providers of high-quality teaching resources.

The next section of this course will explain a bit more about these proposals for ensuring that English children learn to be:

open-minded, critical participants of public discourse, who make academically informed judgements about important matters of religion and belief which shape the global landscape.

(NATRE, CoRE, RE: Today, n.d.)

How can we ensure the 'best case scenario' for Religious Education in schools is likely to be experienced?



## 2 Nobody Stands Nowhere

At the heart of the proposal for 'Religion and Worldviews' is the intention to emphasise the importance of engaging with individuals' lived experiences. It is a way of framing the subject to emphasise the importance of pupils becoming 'responsible interpreters' of information, developing both educated moral judgement as well as critical thinking skills (Cooling *et al.*, 2020).

### Activity 2

Now watch the video 'Nobody Stands Nowhere' and consider the implications of what it might mean to make this approach central to Religious Education in schools.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Nobody Stands Nowhere](#)



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

This film was designed to illustrate the importance of the idea that 'nobody stands nowhere'. Exploring in a sensitive and evidence-based way where we and others 'stand' is the fundamental reframing of Religious Education recommended by the Religion and Worldview proposal.

As Professor Trevor Cooling explains, because everyone has a worldview, the 'risk that certain views will be allowed irresponsibly to influence education is a risk for everyone – not just those with a religious affiliation – and we therefore need to ask what responsible influence looks like in education, rather than trying to exclude the influence of worldviews altogether' (Cooling *et al.*, 2020).



Attention to religious and non-religious worldviews is a rich and valuable access point for understanding the complexity of navigating moral and social choices in our complex society. As is illustrated well in the animation, 'where we stand' is fluid and changing both for individuals and organisations. Understanding how this process works in our own lives and in the social world cannot be simplified into a list of facts to be memorised. Good RE teaches us how to bring parts of our identity which are deeply personal and influential into public discussion with our community.

Our perspective – 'where we stand' – is brought into all our decisions whether they be personal, academic or professional. Religious Education is an opportunity to examine this fact head-on and learn how to negotiate 'where we stand' and 'where does truth lie?' in constructive dialogue with others who stand in different locations.

In the next activity, you are going to consider further our own values, hopes and aspirations – and the roots of these life goals. You will do this through engaging with the metaphor of an 'identity tree'.

## 2.1 Identity tree activity



You'll now use an activity called the 'identity tree' to explore how Religion and Worldviews could be an important anchor for critically understanding why these subjects need to continue to be discussed in a facilitated way in schools. This activity was developed by the Faith and Belief Forum to explore how religious and non-religious beliefs and practices continue to shape our identities today (Faith and Belief Forum, 2022).

Get out a piece of scrap paper or print out this [worksheet](#) (open the link in a new window or tab so you can easily return to the course) and start with labelling the leaves of the tree.

Here are some questions to get you started – but you may want to use the leaves to label other important parts of who you are that are not mentioned.

- Which people are important to me?
- What are the places that are important to me?
- Which beliefs, values, ideas are important to me?
- What is my personality like?
- What do I do well and enjoy doing?
- What am I studying?
- What job do I want to do?
- What gender do I identify as?
- What is my sexuality?
- What groups do I belong to?
- What are my hopes for the future?



Now consider where all these leaves originated – what are the roots of your identity? You can use the prompts below to label the roots which support your tree:

- My religion, beliefs, values come from...
- My personality comes from...
- My hobbies come from...
- My strength and skills come from...
- My appearance comes from...
- My dreams about the future come from...

There will be some aspects of your identity that you have little choice about, these may be physical attributes like your ethnic and religious heritage, genetically determined attributes, as well as early experiences. Others may assume you have certain identities that you do not experience as part of 'who you are'.

Now that you've sketched out your own personal 'identity tree' here are some questions to consider:

- What has had the most influence shaping your identity?
- Was there anything that surprised you?
- Do you think your identity would be different if you:
  - a. Were born into a different country?
  - b. Were born into a different family?
  - c. Were born into a different culture?
  - d. Lived in a different city?
  - e. Went to a different school?
  - f. Had different friends?
- Would you have labelled this tree's leaves and/or roots differently if you did this activity at a different time in your life?

This activity illustrates how our identity is shaped by our history, culture, practices and life experiences. These influence and shape our ideas about right and wrong, how a person should behave and what beliefs and behaviour are unacceptable to us. This exploration does not need to erase the importance of religious identities, community and social context. Indeed understanding the origin and roots of our own values is an important starting point in engaging with groups and organisations who are coming from different perspectives.

So what might the Religion and Worldviews proposal look like in practice?

## 3 The Religion and Worldviews proposal



When the statutory framework for providing universal, state-funded education in England and Wales was drafted in the nineteenth century, it was assumed that attention to children's moral development was an essential component of schooling. Originally, this assumption was based in a predominantly Christian context. The situation became more complex in the later twentieth century as non-Christian people who were previously subjects of the British Empire immigrated to the United Kingdom. British people also increasingly found other things to do on Sunday mornings than attend church, even as they explored different kinds of spiritual and moral groundings.

Today most people in England and Wales identify as 'non religious', but this does not mean that young people are uninterested in exploring their own values and moral framework both inside and outside the classroom (Curtis *et al.*, 2019, p. 5 and Harvey *et al.*, 2021b). In the global context, traditional religious beliefs remain vital motivating factors for making life choices. This makes it more, rather than less, important that Religion and Worldviews are a topic of explicit discussion in schools.

## 3.1 What is being proposed?

RE can provide a platform for students who come from a traditional religious background to share their experiences and communities, while it can also provide a much-needed framework for non-religious pupils to explore their moral and ethical beliefs and assumptions. The Religion and Worldviews proposal is a way to further these discussions of best practice in RE teaching and making the subject better understood and more effective.

### Proposed Religion and Worldviews national entitlement summary

Pupils are entitled to be taught, by well qualified and resourced teachers, knowledge and understanding about:

- what religion is and worldviews are, and how they are studied
- the impact of religion and worldviews on individuals, communities and societies
- the diversity of religious and non-religious worldviews in society
- the concepts, language and ways of knowing that help us organise and make sense of our knowledge and understanding of religion and worldviews; the human quest for meaning, so that they are prepared for life in a diverse world and have space to recognise, reflect on and take responsibility for the development of their own personal worldview.

(NATRE, CoRE, RE: Today, n.d.)

In this subject, pupils develop knowledge and understanding of religious and non-religious traditions, including their diversity and impact on individuals, communities and society. Pupils learn about the different ways in which people study these traditions, as well as building an awareness of and reflecting on their own personal worldview (Wright, 2022).

The way RE operates in schools is open to a lot of local variation. This allows for local school leaders to reflect the diversity of religious and non-religious traditions in the local community. It can also mean that not all students are able to experience the benefits of high-quality RE teaching for their intellectual and personal benefit.

Because it deals with the roots of our personal values and the subject of how we find meaning in our lives, good RE teaching cannot be simply replaced by what is covered in Citizenship or Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) curriculum.

## 4 An education for life and employment



The Religion and Worldviews proposal is a potential container for bringing forward discussions which can aid community cohesion, teaching productive dialogue across different beliefs and backgrounds.

There is no need for complete coherence or agreement about the terms 'religion', 'worldview' or what should be taught within Religious Education. In fact, learning to work with contested concepts, and dialogue with people's deeply held sense of identity, is one of the most important aspects of high-quality Religious Education. It also teaches skills that are in high demand in our twenty-first century economy.

### Activity 3

Do you think that RE teaches important skills that will help students get jobs and have successful lives after school? Have a look at the following video – do any of the testimonials surprise you?

Video content is not available in this format.

My future. My career. My RE.



*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

The services sector makes up 80% of the UK economy, and this is only expected to grow in the future. Good quality RE in schools can be a vital preparation for jobs in all sorts of areas including the NHS; the civil service; youth and social work, advertising,



investment and banking, law, politics, business, the creative industries, the charity sector and NGOs, publishing and journalism, and education (Robertson *et al.*, 2021).

Developing highly valued skills for employment is also true for university students who study Theology & Religious Studies (TRS) or related subjects like Religion, Philosophy & Ethics. Those with degrees in these fields are highly employable; there are a selection of testimonials from recent graduates on the [TRS\(UK\) website](#) (open the tab in a new window or tab so you can easily come back to the course).

In our rapidly changing world, skills of understanding and communicating are becoming ever more essential and valuable in the workplace. While some aspects of employment are becoming animated by artificial intelligence, the need for critical thinking and making educated and sensitive moral judgement remains with each individual. These are the skills that high quality Religious Education in schools prepares its pupils to apply outside of the classroom.

## 4.1 Ensuring high-quality RE is taught in schools



Old assumptions about content and relevance of the subject do not necessarily reflect current realities. According to a recent representative survey most people in England believe that Religious Education in schools should:

- help young people gain a better understanding of their own beliefs (69%)
- foster the mutual understanding of different beliefs among young people (71%)
- provide young people with the opportunity to learn more about other people, beliefs, worldviews and cultures (73%)
- encourage young people to openly discuss their beliefs with others (69%)
- help young people critically evaluate their own beliefs (65%)
- help young people critically evaluate the beliefs of others (65%).

A clear majority see Religious Education in schools as offering important civic and social benefits; as well as similar respondents affirming that RE should be reflecting the diversity of religious and non-religious perspectives that are part of public discourse today (Wright, 2022).

However, there are different challenges in local contexts in ensuring the national entitlement for a high-quality education in religion and worldviews can be met. There are also some shared national challenges.

After considering some of the possible barriers to ensuring every child in English state-funded schools has a quality experience of Religious Education, you will be provided with some resources to help encourage this outcome in your own context.

### Activity 4

There are quite a few challenges in ensuring that all students receive their statutory entitlement to good quality RE. Can you think of what some of these challenges might be?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

There are a number of challenges for the provision of good RE teaching in schools. Some of these include issues of 'perception' including:

- negative public perception of religion in general
- people of faith fearing their tradition will be weakened by RE teaching
- misunderstanding of RE as seeking to convert their children
- assumption that RE is a non-academic and unimportant subject
- assumption that RE does not directly contribute to future employment prospects.

Other challenges are more structural such as:

- a lack of specialist teachers and a lack of support and funding teacher training
- the time allocated to RE in the curriculum and, often, its conflation into other subjects such as PHSE, as well as some schools not teaching it at all
- the unique status of RE as a non-national curriculum subject, instead determined by Locally Agreed Syllabuses
- the exclusion of RE from the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), the subjects the government considers 'keep young people's options open for further study and future careers' (DoE, 2019).

If you want to do more to ensure that the RE provision in schools is high quality, there are simple things you can do and lots of resources to help you. Some of these are listed on the next page.

Good quality RE is not about absolute agreement or consensus, but it is about valuing dialogue and mutual respect and preparing our children to be better able to face future challenges in our diverse and interconnected world.

## 4.2 Resources

- Have you wanted to get involved with the teaching of religion in your child's school, but didn't know how to go about it?
- Are you part of a local group which demonstrates how different worldviews can work together to promote better understanding and wellbeing for all in the local community?
- Or perhaps you're a teacher or subject lead who wants to involve community groups in the teaching of Religion and Worldviews in your school, but you're unsure how to approach the conversation – or you're looking to reduce parent withdrawals.



Emerging from our research project in partnership with the [Faith and Belief Forum](#) and [Inform](#), the resource packs below are designed for three different groups, tailored to your needs. Each contains information on the Worldviews recommendation, what good religious education looks like, how you can get involved in (or bring diverse perspectives into) religious education in schools, and how you can equip yourself and get involved in the wider movement advocating for a balanced and diverse RE.

Follow the links below to access the resource packs:

[Religion and Worldviews in schools: A resource pack for teachers and subject leaders](#)

[Religion and Worldviews in schools: A resource pack for parents](#)

[Religion and Worldviews in schools: A resource pack for community groups \(religious and non-religious\)](#)

## Conclusion

Hopefully this course has given you a chance to reflect on the benefits of well-considered teaching in Religious Education. Improving understanding of Religion and Worldviews in the contemporary world benefits everyone.

When taught skilfully, the study of religion has a unique potential to create intelligent reflection on the structure of our own moral compass and how to act with integrity in a challenging, changing world. Most of the world still identifies with religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, good education in Religion and Worldviews is also an excellent preparation for engaging with diverse, multicultural publics, providing skills which are highly valued in a growing number of occupations.

Interested in taking your learning further? You might find it helpful to explore the Open University's [Religious Studies courses and qualifications](#).

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## Audio-visual

'Nobody Stands Nowhere': Film by Emily Downe, created in partnership with Culham St Gabriel's Trust and Canterbury Christ Church University. Courtesy also Theos Think Tank

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