

APPG on RE inquiry into the contribution of religious education to good community relations: comments from British Humanist Association



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About us

The British Humanist Association is the national charity working on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical and fulfilling lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, support and represent the non-religious, and promote a secular state and equal treatment in law and policy of everyone, regardless of religion or belief. Founded in 1896, we have around 30,000 members and supporters, and over 70 local and special interest affiliates.

The BHA has a long history of work in education, children's rights and equality, with expertise in the 'religion or belief' strand. We have been involved in policy development around RE for over 60 years. We also provide materials and advice to parents, governors, students, teachers and academics, for example through <http://www.humanismforschools.org.uk/> and our school volunteers programme. We have made detailed responses to all recent reviews of the school curriculum, and submit memoranda of evidence to parliamentary select committees on a range of education issues.

Summary

We have focused our comments on three separate areas:

- Our main topic is the need to include non-religious beliefs in RE, and why it is harmful for RE and its contribution to cohesion for this to not occur.
- We also discuss the need for RE to cover controversial topics that may sometimes be avoided – where perhaps the most can be done to dispel misconceptions.
- Finally, we discuss the need to avoid pigeonholing people based on their stated religion or belief – RE must reflect the fact that every individual is unique and will hold their own beliefs. These will not always match those of their religion's hierarchy.

On the need to include non-religious beliefs

Improving community relations means fostering understanding between those who hold certain beliefs and those who do not, and eliminating discrimination between these different groups. It is therefore vital that such efforts do not exclude any of the major stakeholders from the conversation.

Surveys consistently suggest that those with no religion are the biggest or second biggest religion or belief grouping:

- The 2003 Citizenship Survey found that 46% of 11-15 year olds do not have a religion, while 44% were Christian.¹
- A 2004 Department for Education report found that 65% of 12-19 year olds are not religious.²

¹ Christine Farmer, '2003 Home Office Citizenship Survey: Top-level findings from the Children's and Young People's Survey' (Home Office and Department for Education and Skills, 2005), p. 37: <http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/452490.pdf>

- The 2010 *British Social Attitudes Survey* recorded 65% of 18-24 year olds as not belonging to any religion.³
- In England and Wales, half of 0-19 year olds are listed as 'Christian', falling to 45% of those aged 20-29. 31% of 0-19 year olds are listed as 'No religion', rising to 37% of those aged 20-29. A further 8% of those aged 0-19 and 7% of those aged 20-29 did not respond to the question.⁴ Academics have suggested that the difference is because parents often fill in the Census form for their children, so the religiosity of young people is artificially inflated by the fact that their parents' generation is more religious.⁵

For RE to have a significant impact in improving community relations, it is vital that it remains relevant. This means ensuring that the subject makes those who are not religious feel included; but also that it educates others about their beliefs, which can often be the subject of ridicule and stereotyping from some areas of society. Atheists and agnostics are described by some as immoral, attacked as 'militant' or referred to as 'aggressive'. There is a widespread perception in some quarters that it is not possible to lead a happy, moral life without religion; RE needs to teach every young person that this is not true.

The Three Faiths Forum tells us that in their experience, schools will more often ask for a humanist on the panel than any other belief group. Humanists are typically asked questions ranging from beliefs about God and life after death to what humanist marriages and funerals are like and what non-religious people do at Christmas.

Taken together there is a clear need for education about non-religious beliefs. In fact, all the usual contemporary justifications for the subject of religious education in the school curriculum – its contribution to social cohesion and mutual understanding, its presentation of a range of answers to questions of meaning and purpose, its role in educating about the history and present culture of humanity, and its role in the search for personal identity and values – can only be served by including humanist perspectives and non-religious students.

Increasingly, religious education as set by locally agreed syllabuses does include the study of non-religious worldviews such as Humanism. The last major survey of the extent of this was in 2007. 62 of 80 syllabuses surveyed were found to refer to teaching non-religious worldviews – although the extent of this inclusion varied.⁶ Since then the proportion of syllabuses that are inclusive of Humanism and depth of their inclusiveness has continued to increase. This progress is in parallel to increasing inclusion in successive Government documents on RE, with the RE subject framework, produced by the RE Council for England and Wales, putting teaching about non-religious worldviews

² Alison Park, Miranda Phillips and Mark Johnson, 'Young People in Britain: The Attitudes and Experiences of 12 to 19 Year Olds' (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), pp. 10-11:

<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/eOrderingDownload/RR564.pdf.pdf>

³ 28th British Social Attitudes Survey – see page 195: http://ir2.flife.de/data/natcen-social-research/igb_html/index.php?bericht_id=1000001&index=&lang=ENG

⁴ 'Statistical bulletin: Detailed Characteristics for England and Wales, March 2011', Office of National Statistics, 16 May 2013: <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/detailed-characteristics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/stb---detailed-characteristics-for-england-and-wales--march-2011.html#tab-Religion->

⁵ David Voas, 'Religious Census 2011 – What happened to the Christians? (Part II)', British Religion in Numbers, 18 May 2013: <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2013/religious-census-2011-what-happened-to-the-christians-part-ii/>

⁶ Dr Jacqueline Watson, 'Humanism in Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education: A Report to the British Humanist Association', University of East Anglia, 2007: <http://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Watson-Syllabus-Report.pdf>

on an equal footing to teaching about religions. We are delighted by this trend, and will be working hard to ensure that this is reflected in locally agreed syllabuses and beyond.

One area that is more problematic is 'faith' schools' RE syllabuses. We are not aware of any dioceses recommending the teaching of non-religious worldviews (although many in Church leadership roles, such as the Bishop of Oxford, are supportive). In some ways, the inclusion of Humanism in 'faith' schools' RE curriculums is even more important than it is in other schools: those students who have no religion are more likely to feel isolated and excluded, while those who share the religion of the school are less likely to meet anybody who is not religious and so more likely to hold misconceptions about them.⁷

Controversial topics

The subject of religion and belief is often a controversial one: the subject of frequent media debate and discourse, as well as being at the centre of reprehensible incidents such as the murder of Lee Rigby. Bad RE will be detached from all of this, instead just focussing on more conventional narratives. Good RE must not be afraid to address these issues and it is vital that teachers are adequately trained to do so. The study of such topics not only keeps RE engaging, but perhaps does more than anything else to dispel discriminatory attitudes that young people may have.

Pigeonholing people into communities

Finally, in RE it is hugely important not to pigeonhole people into certain communities, based on their faith or beliefs. Good RE will reflect the fact that everyone is an individual holding their own beliefs, and these beliefs are diverse – typically differing from the orthodoxy in some way or another. For example, while the Catholic Church opposes abortion, most Catholics in this country support it being legal to some degree – only 7% of the public as a whole supports a complete ban.⁸ Conversely, while most humanists and the BHA are pro-choice, certainly this is not the case for everyone who is not religious. Deference to the hierarchical view is another problem with faith-based RE.

Seeing people as parts of communities instead of as individuals is also harmful in terms of establishing an 'us vs them' mentality. Professor Ted Cantle CBE, founder of the Institute of Community Cohesion, has abandoned the concept of 'multiculturalism' in favour of 'interculturalism' – focusing on the individual instead of on separate groups.⁹

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⁷ We would further argue that faith-based RE, and indeed single-faith schools more generally, are bad for community cohesion. The academic literature is clear that mixed schools are good for cohesion, reducing discrimination and improving well-being. See, for example, the evidence cited by the Fair Admissions Campaign at <http://fairadmissions.org.uk/ethnically-mixed-schools-help-pupils-overcome-discrimination-2/>. However, we appreciate that such points are beyond the scope of this review.

⁸ Ben Quinn, 'Anti-abortion feelings declining – poll', *The Guardian*, 12 February 2013:

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/12/anti-abortion-feelings-declining>

⁹ <http://tedcantle.co.uk/resources-and-publications/about-interculturalism/>