



What is Religious Education for?
Getting the National Framework Right

Event Report

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Introduction

On 20th January 2004, the Institute for Public Policy Research, with the support of the British Humanist Association, held an afternoon seminar entitled *What is RE for? Getting the National Framework Right*. As the Government and Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) consider the formulation of the first ever National Framework for RE, this roundtable discussion aimed to provide a space to explore some of the pertinent issues and feed into the debate. Ben Rogers, Senior Research Fellow at ippr, chaired the event. Attendees included a range of policy makers, practitioners and academics providing the opportunity for a wide array of contributions. (For a full list of participants, see appendix I).

The context

As part of the "basic curriculum" RE is compulsory in state schools for all pupils whose parents do not withdraw them, as is their right. Yet, uniquely for a compulsory subject, RE has always remained outside the remit of the National Curriculum leaving syllabuses and standards to be determined locally by Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs) and Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs).

After a feasibility study by the QCA in 2003, the Government opted to create a non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education. Whilst this means RE will remain outside the National Curriculum, the Framework will provide ASCs with the opportunity to choose to adopt extensive, common non-statutory guidance. Yet the fact that schools will not be obliged to work within the Framework makes it all the more important that the Framework should be well thought out with wide appeal.

QCA are currently preparing a draft document for presentation to the Secretary of State at the end of the Spring Term, 2004. They state the aims of the Framework as:

- supporting the Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education, ensuring that they meet the needs of pupils
- facilitating the development of more national support materials for RE
- increasing public understanding by providing a definitive description of what is covered in RE (QCA, 2004)

The Framework will be published after a wide consultation in the Summer Term including young people, faith communities, non-faith groups, teachers and others.

Key Seminar Questions

- What is RE for?
- What might a progressive, liberal National Framework look like?
- What benefits can a Framework bring and what are the concerns?
- How can we develop a Framework that both enhances the RE experience and gains wide support and take-up?
- What can we learn from Religious and Moral Education in Scotland?
- How should the Framework deal with issues such as:
 - Creating space and equipping pupils for personal search and critical religious thinking
 - The balance between small and large religions, atheism and non-religious belief sets
 - Topic approach, i.e. thematic Vs religion
 - Links with the curriculum – especially Citizenship, PSHE, History, Science

Presentations

I. Michael Hand, Institute of Education

Michael Hand presented ideas first set out in a chapter he contributed to John White's 2003 book *Rethinking the School Curriculum: Values, Aims and Purposes* (available at www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk).

Presentation slides:

1.

What is RE for?

or

Why should RE continue to have a place on the compulsory school curriculum?

2.

Compulsory RE

RE is a compulsory curriculum subject in state schools in England and Wales.

The SCAA model syllabuses recommend the following level of provision:

- 36 hours per year at KS1
- 45 hours per year at KS2 and KS3
- 40 hours per year at KS4

There are two standard justifications for compulsory RE:

1. **a social justification**, to the effect that the study of religion equips pupils for life in a multicultural society
 2. **a moral justification**, to the effect that the study of religion is morally educative
-

3.

The social justification

An understanding of religious individuals and communities better equips pupils for life in a multicultural society. Whether or not pupils hold religious beliefs themselves, they will live and work among people who do, and they will be better able to communicate and negotiate with such people if they understand their beliefs and values.

AT1: Learning about religions articulates the objective of equipping pupils with an understanding of religious individuals and communities. It requires that pupils should come to have knowledge and understanding of religious beliefs, teachings, practices and lifestyles.

4.

Objections to the social justification

1. Religion in contemporary Britain is a far less significant social phenomenon than it once was:

- in 1980, only 19% of the adult population belonged to a church, mosque, synagogue or temple
- by 1990 the figure had fallen to 17.5%
- in 1999 only 7% of British people were attending a weekly religious service

Britain is now a country in which the great majority of people neither belong to religious institutions nor engage in religious activities.

2. There are many more kinds of difference between people than differences of religion. If there is a social case for compulsory RE, there would seem to be an equally strong social case for compulsory gender studies, cultural studies, ethnology and psychology.

There is indeed a social case for equipping pupils with a basic knowledge of the major world religions, but this could readily be incorporated into a general programme of civic education.

The statutory programme of study for citizenship in secondary schools requires that:

... pupils should be taught about the diversity of national, regional, religious and ethnic identities in the United Kingdom and the need for mutual respect and understanding.

5.

The moral justification

Religions are repositories of moral wisdom upon which pupils may be encouraged to draw. By reflecting on the moral teachings propagated by religious communities, or the exemplary lives of characters in religious narratives, pupils can acquire the inclination and ability to make sound moral judgments.

AT2: *Learning from religion* expresses the aim of promoting moral development. It requires that pupils, through their engagement with religious traditions, should ask and respond to questions of identity, purpose, values and commitments.

6.

Objection to the moral justification

When, from 1944 to the late 1960s, RE openly sought to induct pupils into the Christian faith, it made good sense to justify the subject in terms of its contribution to moral development.

At present, however, the aim of nurturing faith is explicitly eschewed in policy documents and Agreed Syllabuses for RE. The means by which RE is supposed to promote pupils' moral development is not Christian nurture, but the academic study of world religions. Pupils are not expected to adopt religious beliefs, but they are expected to draw guidance from moral teachings based on those beliefs. This expectation is incoherent.

One only has reason to submit to the moral teachings of a religion if one holds that religion to be true. *If* one believes that there is a divine being whose moral judgements are significantly more reliable than ours, and who issues injunctions through the texts and institutions of a religious tradition, *then* it is reasonable to abide by those injunctions. But in the absence of such a belief, there is no reason at all to regard religious texts or institutions as morally authoritative. On the contrary, one has good reason to regard their moral teachings with suspicion, since they are predicated on beliefs one does not share.

7.

The possibility-of-truth case for compulsory RE

Pupils should be given opportunities to consider religious propositions, and be equipped to make informed, rational judgements on their truth or falsity, on the grounds that some of those propositions *may in fact be true*.

Religions make claims about the world with far-reaching implications for the way life should be lived; if there is a genuine possibility that some of those claims are true, pupils have a right to be made aware of them and provided with the wherewithal to evaluate them.

The argument has three premises:

1. At least some religious propositions are plausible.
 2. Religious judgements *matter*, in the sense of making some practical difference to people's lives.
 3. Making religious judgements rationally requires a facility with distinctive kinds of evidence and argument
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8.

Implications for RE syllabuses

If RE were to be justified in these terms, syllabuses would need to look rather different from the way they do now:

- The focus would be on learning how to make informed, rational judgements on the truth or falsity of religious propositions.
 - The emphasis would shift from *empathising* to *evaluating*, from trying to imagine what it is like to hold certain beliefs to asking what grounds there are for doing so.
 - There would be much less attention to the differences between particular religions and much more to the differences between religion and irreligion.
 - Pupils would be actively encouraged to question the religious beliefs they bring with them into the classroom, not so that they are better able to defend or rationalise them, but so that they are genuinely free to adopt whatever position on religious matters they judge to be best supported by the evidence.
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II Marilyn Mason, Education Officer, British Humanist Association

Marilyn Mason presented a British Humanist Association perspective as set out in a paper written especially for presentation at the seminar entitled *Religious Education – could do better?* (See www.ippr.org/education for full paper).

Presentation:

Can RE achieve the things it's for?

Yes it can – these are not impossible dreams – but I don't think it necessarily does. It certainly doesn't do so in every LEA and in every classroom and for every pupil. My criticisms are not of aims and claims like those above, but of the disappointing and fact-laden content of so much RE. For despite (or perhaps because of) the mass of facts they encounter, all pupils do not have the opportunities they should, because they will probably not experience a true or complete reflection of the contemporary religious landscape or be introduced to the full range of worldviews they are likely to meet as adults. Nor will they necessarily meet their own beliefs or ones they might find of personal interest or value in RE, or learn about "principles for distinguishing between right and wrong" that they can personally accept or identify with. Michael Hand is quite right when he suggests that teaching moral values through religion will have little real relevance for many pupils and may even be counter-productive¹, though I think this could be overcome by broadening out the content of RE. Of course it is interesting and worthwhile to learn about other people's beliefs, but many pupils must wonder why their beliefs are not included in these cosy, mutually respectful, discussions, and a syllabus in which many never encounter their own beliefs is sadly deficient. Some worldviews are marginalized or criticised by omission, and some may even be treated with scant respect or belittled by the usual assumptions and language of RE and its habit of ascribing everything that is beautiful, good and true to six world religions.

RE's contribution to mutual understanding and respect and social cohesion can only be very partial as long as many (sometimes most) pupils find their own beliefs and values absent. The non-religious are a significant element in Britain today, as are new religious movements, cults, the Bahá'í faith, paganism, deep green environmentalism, and many other life-affecting philosophies. RE is not yet relevant and meaningful to all, and if it is to achieve its aims, it must re-think its usual content – no easy matter when we are talking about 151 local syllabuses. So

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How can the new National Framework for RE help?

My fear is that the National Framework could simply become the 152nd syllabus, yet another one to be adapted or plundered or, worse, ignored. And I doubt that a National Framework, however good, could justify RE's peculiar and anomalous place in the school curriculum: Why should it be compulsory right up to the end of school, though not in colleges? Is there enough interesting and relevant content to justify this? Is it really so much more important than literacy, numeracy, or critical thinking? It would be good to see a really dynamic and exciting RE competing on equal terms with the other humanities subjects for students after KS3, though that is beyond the scope of a mere Framework.

But let's be optimistic and assume that a good National Framework would be so attractive that it would be widely adopted and so would influence and improve RE generally, even in faith-based schools. Pupils in faith-based schools are also entitled to broad and balanced RE and an understanding of the plural society they will move into, and this could perhaps be achieved by recommending the Framework as a core, on top of which faith-based schools could also teach about their own faiths.

Much of what follows does happen in the best local syllabuses and classrooms – and one thing a National Framework could do is to spread good practice and reduce the patchiness of RE provision. So here follow some suggestions as to what it could do, and how – mainly, perhaps, by doing it itself.

¹ Michael Hand "Religious Education", in John White (ed) *Rethinking the School Curriculum: Values Aims and Purposes*, (Routledge Falmer, 2003)

I hope that the National Framework could begin to address the relativism too often seen in RE, where talk of “different truths” or “subjective truth” seems to have become the accepted way of demonstrating tolerance and mutual respect. The Framework could encourage the use of terminology such as “truth claims” and “beliefs” which make more sense, and it could remind teachers of Ninian Smart’s more accurate way of describing religious beliefs: “What people believe is an important aspect of reality whether or not what they believe is true.”² And surely the Framework could promote the immense value and beauty of story and myth and poetry and symbol, without claiming that they are “a different kind of truth”, which is both relativistic and confusing.

It could set standards of inclusive language, which would include replacing the title of AT2, “Learning from Religion”, which non-religious people like me tend to find patronising. It is misleading, too, because it does not do justice to the skills and attitudes which appear under it. There must be clearer ways of describing AT2, if it is in fact necessary or useful to have separate attainment targets for knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. Generally, the Framework could advise language and tasks that include all pupils and do not imply that the religions being studied have a monopoly on ideals, values, social action, ceremonies et al. The BHA has long campaigned for a change in the title of the subject itself to something more obviously inclusive³.

It could improve the involvement and attainment of boys, by encouraging tougher debate and argument, and by emphasising the contribution to human welfare and spirituality of science and technology, as well as the more “touchy-feely” arts. (Science too often appears in RE simply as an enterprise to be criticised.)

The Framework should make clear that its proposals and the legal requirements are a minimum which does not preclude ASCs and schools and individuals from doing far more. The Framework should leave space for the “personal search” element of RE in individual projects and research, and for the local – there are undoubtedly local resources and local factors that a Framework should be flexible enough to allow for, but RE shouldn’t be too parochial or continue to insist on local differences and needs that do not really exist.

It could suggest ways of equipping students with the means of finding out about religions and beliefs, and evaluating their sources of information. Looking critically at the media, including the internet, should be part of every pupil’s education, and offers huge opportunities for learning how to learn and research, for analysis and comparison, and for critical judgement.

It could enhance the contribution of RE to thinking skills by suggesting ways of analysing, evaluating and criticising beliefs and philosophies. Humanists accept that Humanism where it appears in RE will be subjected to scrutiny, evaluation and criticism, and merely seek balance, pointing out that at the moment some beliefs seem to be “more equal than others” when criticism is on the agenda. Some students may take criticisms personally, and the diplomatic and pedagogical skills of teachers will be tested, but I think that beliefs which want to be taken seriously and studied in depth must submit to this. Beliefs that do not permit analysis and argument and criticism should perhaps content themselves with being studied at a fairly superficial descriptive level. The occasional study of a dead religion would permit more robust criticism than is usual in RE.

It could recommend the study of religion, not just religions, and of what belief systems have in common, as well as what distinguishes them. How is it, for example, that people of many different faiths and none, with apparently very different foundations for their moral views, can come to similar conclusions about so many values and issues? Why is it, for example, that on

² Ninian Smart *Worldviews* (Prentice Hall, 1995)

³ Belief Education is the BHA preference, though Religious and Moral Education or Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies, as in Scotland, would do nicely. The legislation on RE uses the lower case “religious education” as if it is a generic term rather than the subject’s designated title, and Scottish education has moved without difficulty from “religious instruction” to RME and RMPS.

some scales and by some criteria Humanism and Christianity are very alike, yet on others they are poles apart?

It could recommend a thematic approach, focussing mainly on the “big questions” and the rigorous evaluation of religious and philosophical concepts and ideas and bringing out the similarities and differences between belief systems. Inevitably some themes and concepts would focus on those religions / beliefs that have much to say on them; others would range much more widely and include relevant beliefs such as Humanism and minority religions. (Giving every belief equal space is not important and shouldn’t be an issue. “Size doesn’t matter” and the Framework should – somehow – try to discourage competitive jockeying for space and content.) Humanism is different from religions in many respects and does not correspond with all the RE categories, but when it does, it offers something useful and complementary and it should be there – the Framework could encourage that.

It could suggest particular topics or themes at each Key Stage to ensure continuity and progress even when moving between LEAs, and to facilitate links with National Curriculum subjects such as Science, History, and Geography, and PSHE and Citizenship. It would not, for example, be difficult to make links between teaching about wedding and baby ceremonies in RE and what is being taught in SRE and PSHE. There must be concepts and topics suited to different stages of development, which do not vary from LEA to LEA, and some agreement on these would enable publishers to develop better targeted materials.

There are, for example, things that a humanist would want taught at suitable times, depending on how they fitted the rest of the curriculum:

- From KS1 onwards, we would like children to learn that there are people who do not believe in God, the afterlife or the power of prayer, or that the Universe was created, who believe that good lives and behaviour can be based on reason and experience – and why they hold these beliefs. (Some pupils will recognise their own families in this.) It is misleading to teach or imply, as RE often does now, that everyone belongs to one of six religions, and no subject should be in the business of misleading children.
- Activities which promote empathy and reasonable discussion of ideas (for example, the Philosophy for Children approach) should be encouraged from KS1.
- We would like children, when they learn about sex and relationships, babies, and death, whether in PSHE or RE, to learn that there are non-religious ways of marking these key life experiences, as well as the religious ones.
- We would like, at KS2 and KS3, some humanist history and some humanist figures – enough to provide a context for Humanism today.
- We would like to see KS3 RE stretching every student by presenting the really stimulating and popular⁴ philosophical and ethical topics: Why do I exist? What is religion? Where do values come from? What happens when people die? How do I know things? What is the good life? – with a broad range of perspectives on these, including humanist ones.
- We would like to see a core content at KS4, common to both non-examination and GCSE courses, that developed these questions as well as looking at a range of contemporary moral issues, again from a broad range of perspectives, including humanist ones.
- At sixth form level, for non-specialists, we would like to see discussion of big contemporary or topical themes, drawing on a wide range of visiting speakers, including humanists. Particularly when these are new topics, they can be hugely stimulating and make a real contribution to students’ explorations and evaluations of their own beliefs and values and those of others.

This would not entail a huge commitment to more content in RE, something that I know would be resisted. There is more to Humanism, of course, but if students were familiar with the word and some of the concepts, they could find out more if and when they wanted to (perhaps as a

⁴ See, for example, the 2003 figures for AS and AL choices: Philosophy and Ethics: AS – 26,138; AL – 13,157; All Christian papers: AS – 6,308; AL – 3,609; World Religions: AS – 4,398; AL – 1,857

“fun” activity in the sixth term of the proposed new school year, if that happens, or as adults). In fact, there is a lot of factual information in most RE of little relevance or interest to those outside the faith being studied⁵ (outsiders are, for a lot of the time, a majority) which could be pruned or left to personal research, and a lot of repetition that could give way to more interesting and diverse material.⁶

In conclusion

The National Framework, if it were accessible to all teachers, potential teachers, parents, governors and politicians, could promote not just high quality and stimulating RE but a better understanding of RE, which is still widely misunderstood outside the RE world. It could, for example, make clear to all involved in RE, and to parents who worry about such things, that to study a belief is not to become a believer in it. It is helpful to this end that the Framework is to be modelled on National Curriculum documents, and this should also make the Framework more user-friendly for the many non-specialists who have to teach RE.

And it could, if it were accessible to our neighbours in Europe who struggle with the same educational, social and ethical problems, lead the way to a religious and philosophical education fit for 21st century Europe. You may be aware that the other side of the Channel, the minister of education, Jack Lang, commissioned a report from Régis Debray⁷ on the teaching of “religious fact” in the secular school, because of post-September 11th anxieties about mutual incomprehension between different groups in French society. While staunchly defending French secularism, which he sees as fostering equality between believers, atheists and agnostics, he supports rather more teaching about present day religion (in Philosophy and History lessons) than has hitherto been the case in French schools, because he differentiates between “teaching about religion” and “religious teaching”, as most of us have learnt to do. Towards the end of his report, Debray surveys European RE (omitting Britain completely) and finding it wanting, indeed often in crisis, speculates that France, this latecomer to RE, could find itself leading Europe! I think even our current imperfect and fragmented RE could teach the French a thing or two, but a good National Framework could provide a model for Europe as well as for us.

III HMEI John Brown, Scottish Executive

Religious and Moral Education: The Scottish Experience

John Brown, an experienced Religious and Moral Education teacher in Scotland and current HMIE National Specialist for Religious and Moral Education presented the Scottish experience.

Summary of Presentation:

In a sense Scotland has always had a National Framework since the National Church was the originator of the school system. In 1872 Religious Instruction was enshrined in law – the only subject in the Scottish curriculum to be so.

In 1972 the Millar Report was published – this proved to be a seminal document. It was a reaction to increasing numbers of non-Presbyterian and non-religious pupils. This was followed in 1981 by an inspection of RME.

⁵ I agree with Michael Hand's contention, in “Religious Education” in John White (ed) *Rethinking the School Curriculum: Values Aims and Purposes*, (Routledge Falmer, 2003), that “11 years of compulsory education is far in excess of what preparation for social diversity requires” – the amount we need to know about each other's beliefs is not nearly as much as RE syllabuses commonly assume.

⁶ Humanism has been included in the Scottish RME syllabus and some local RE syllabuses with no apparent problems or ill effects, and some local syllabuses have been admirably open to a wide range of beliefs.

⁷ *L'enseignement du fait religieux dans l'école laïque*, (Éditions Odile Jacob, Paris, 2002)

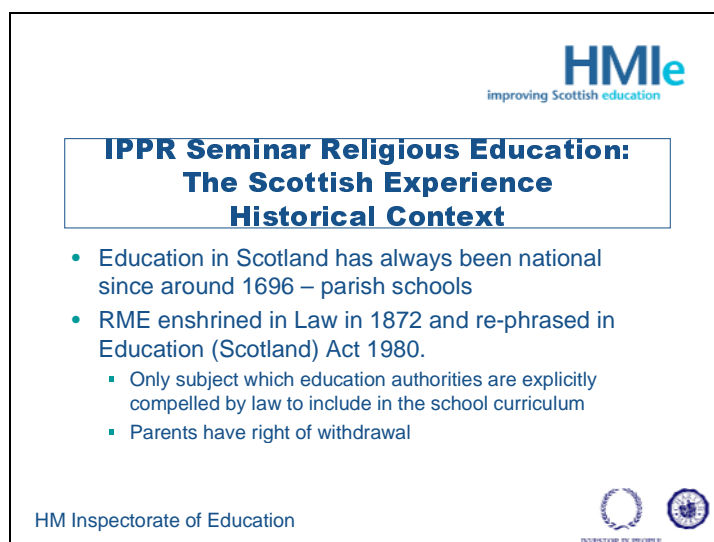
The Millar Report set out that RE should no longer be aimed at producing assent in the Christian faith. Instead it should aim to develop a child's awareness of self and others, an insight into situations which pose moral and religious questions, and a capacity to respond to these situations in a balanced and understanding way. The Scottish Education system has tried to push these aims under the idea of 'personal search'. This should allow young people to have the opportunity to look at the big questions in life.

The aims set out in the Millar Report created havoc in Scotland for a short space of time. However, the fact that Scotland is a small country meant they were able to consult people on the development of RME. They spoke to a variety of people involved in RME at every stage of change.

Nine years after Millar, national inspection started. This highlighted the need for national guidelines (though a National Curriculum was resisted across all subjects). In 1990 the preparation of the National Guidelines for the 5-14 curriculum began. The first attempt laid out the syllabus, attainment targets, and advice on the programme of study but Catholic schools were not happy with the document. Finally in 1992 the Guidelines were produced but now Christianity, World Religions and Personal Search were included. There was a big shift towards critically analysing the child's own faith commitment but there is still not as much emphasis on a personal search as some would have liked and this is currently being worked on.

The question of the examination system is always interesting. For the A-Level equivalent of RME the title was changed to 'Religious, Moral & Philosophical Studies'. Exam questions can be answered from a non-religious perspective but pupils are expected to include some religious content.

PowerPoint Presentation:





The slide features the HMIE logo at the top right, which includes the text 'HMIE' and 'improving Scottish education'. The main title is enclosed in a blue-bordered box. Below the title is a bulleted list of points. At the bottom left, it says 'HM Inspectorate of Education', and at the bottom right, there are two circular logos, one of which is the HMIE logo.

HMIE
improving Scottish education

**IPPR Seminar Religious Education:
The Scottish Experience
Historical Context**

- Education in Scotland has always been national since around 1696 – parish schools
- RME enshrined in Law in 1872 and re-phrased in Education (Scotland) Act 1980.
 - Only subject which education authorities are explicitly compelled by law to include in the school curriculum
 - Parents have right of withdrawal

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education:
The Scottish Experience
National Guidelines**

- Prior to 1972 in most schools Presbyterian instruction except in denominational schools (Catholic schools which were transferred to the state 1918)
- 1972 Millar report – watershed document which still influences the RME curriculum
- Inspection of RME 1981
- Circular 6/91 Specified the amount of time for RME and the frequency of Religious observance (the latter is being reviewed)

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education:
The Scottish Experience
Millar report**

- ‘Religious Education is no longer aimed at producing assent to any particular set of propositions or commitment to one particular faith: it aims to develop a child’s awareness of himself and others, his insight into situations which pose moral and religious questions and his capacity to respond to these situations in a balanced and understanding way.’

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education:
The Scottish Experience
Millar report**

- **Aims of RE**
 - To identify with pupils the area of religion in human experience
 - To enable pupils to explore questions about the nature and meaning of existence and the answers that religions offer
 - To help pupils understand the nature and importance of commitment whether within a religious or secular context and to appreciate what it means to be committed to a particular way of life
 - To encourage in pupils an awareness of the wider social and cultural impact of religions.

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education: The
Scottish Experience
National Guidelines**

- 1990-1992 Preparation of Guidelines: national working parties
- 1992 National Guidelines produced for 5-14 Curriculum
 - 'Religious education is concerned with the development of understanding of religion as a significant area of human experience. It is also an aspect of personal growth enabling the individual to explore questions concerning the meaning of life and the value of the individual interpreted in relation to which is beyond man'
 - Moral education is the process whereby a person develops responsible attitudes towards others and skills of moral judgement about what is considered right and wrong.

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education: The
Scottish Experience
National Guidelines**

- Aims of Religious and Moral Education
 - Develop and understanding of Christianity and other world religions and to recognise religion as an important expression of human experience
 - Appreciate moral values such as honesty, liberty, justice, fairness and concern for others
 - Investigate and understand the questions and answers that religions can offer about the nature and meaning of life
 - Develop their own beliefs, attitudes, moral values and practices through a process of personal search, discovery and critical evaluation.

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education: The
Scottish Experience
Certification**

- National examination system: Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA)
 - Standard Grade in Religious Studies (at age 15/16) but pupils chose to take examination. 3 levels: Credit, General, Foundation.
 - Higher Grade: Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies
 - Advance Higher Grade

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education: The
Scottish Experience
Certification**

- Philosophy Higher and Advanced Higher
 - Not connected to RMPS but normally taught by RE teachers.

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**IPPR Seminar Religious Education: The
Scottish Experience
Present**

- Emphasis on personal search
 - A process by which pupils can discover and develop their own beliefs, values and spiritual lives. It involves them in reflecting on ideas and making up their own minds
 - They have to understand and appreciate religious and other beliefs which are not religious as contributions to the development of their own beliefs and values. However, they have to engage in a dialogue with the questions religions and others pose and the answers they propose to the major questions of human existence; ie critical evaluation.

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Points from the discussion

The points expressed here are the views of individuals and do not necessarily always reflect consensus across the group. However, they have been grouped together so as to highlight some of the main lines of argument emanating from the discussion.

In response to Michael Hand's paper

- The argument for compulsory RE on the grounds that young people should be equipped to make informed, rational judgements on the truth or falsity of religious propositions is strong if an incomplete account of the reasons for compulsory RE.
- There is more complexity in the social and moral relationship with religious education than portrayed. RE is evolving and the critical realism framework put forward is only one interpretation.
- The paper contends it is incoherent that currently pupils are not asked to adopt religious beliefs, but they are expected to draw guidance from moral teachings based on those beliefs. Yet this does not reflect what really goes on in schools. Pupils are currently being asked to *engage with* moral arguments – not necessarily adopt them. It is not a process of taking moral guidance but sparking off pupils' own personal engagement. Engaging is a dialectic. Encouraging this dialogue in RE helps enable pupils in their own personal searches.
- Michael Hand attempts to deconstruct the social case for compulsory RE by arguing that membership of religious organisations and attendance at services in steady decline and religion in contemporary Britain is a far less significant social phenomenon than it once was. Yet declining church attendance is not an indication of declining religion and does not mean that it is not useful to study religious view and difference. Hand further argues that other issues of difference could be more usefully addressed. However, this ignores that other issues of difference, such as race and gender, are already addressed in RE.

Thinking about the National Framework:

Points from the QCA

- RE does have successes at the moment. At Key Stage Four 360,000 pupils have gained accreditation in the subject.
- The Framework will be non-statutory
- QCA want to include what children want at the heart of the new Framework and are currently consulting children and young people through focus groups.
- It is vital that every child feels that its view is valued in this subject. Children must feel that different faiths are respected.
- There must be a balance between content and skills – RE is not going to be solely content driven (though this is not because content is not important).
- The nature of the summer 2004 term consultation will be extensive and includes young people, faith communities, non-faith groups, teachers and more.
- The National Framework will not advise on teaching methodology (nor pedagogy) as this would be out of sync with other the National Curriculum Framework.
- The Framework must maintain a balance between the local and national in RE. It should not reduce the role of the SACREs and may strengthen them.

The Framework raises concerns about a potential rigidity

- Some RE teachers are already recognising a wide spectrum of interpretations in their practice. A National Framework will fix the subject at one point in time.
- Marilyn Mason draws attention to the fact that there are currently 151 RE syllabi in operation in England. Yet each local authority does have the option of adopting the syllabus of another local authority. Instead most choose to go through the process of drawing up their own syllabus because they see value in it. This allows teachers to be involved in and debate what is taught and how. This helps raise the standard overall.

The Framework should promote the unique qualities of well taught RE

- RE uniquely gives children the opportunity to start probing and looking at the big questions. This is not possible anywhere else in the curriculum (unless you start teaching philosophy).

- RE gives teachers the opportunity to question and challenge thinking and young people the chance to develop the will to resist missionary persuasion. You must try and give children the opportunity to resist propaganda.
- The questions raised by RE are unique and special (such as life and death) and are not dealt with anywhere else in the curriculum in the same way.
- In the present social political climate RE is particularly important. Post 9/11 there is a great deal of misunderstanding and Islamophobia. In one survey in the US for example, where 400 children were interviewed 'What is a Muslim?' – 75% mentioned terrorism in their answer.
- Whilst RE covers some of the same topics as other subjects it brings a unique line of inquiry. Citizenship lessons for example may cover the integration of different religious groups but the aim of citizenship lessons is different. It is also different to the way children study events that are related to religion such as the holocaust or reformation in history.
- Some of the questions raised in RE will be raised all over the curriculum (for example in science). Religious Studies provides a space to develop and look at the answers properly. It is not a case of 'this is what the Jewish God said...' but discussing how the answers have been arrived at through a long process of reasoning, thinking and reflecting. RE can make understandings richer by thinking about answers in religious ways, anthropological ways, and sociological ways. It can bring all subjects together.
- RE can have the potential to allow some children to excel more than in other subjects they learn.
- We should not forget the important contribution of RE to Social Cohesion though this is a second order aim.

The Framework should reflect the needs of a multi-faith and largely non-faith society

- Most of us would want children to see a variety of world views.
- There is currently no uniform consensus on how RE should develop. The only way to move toward a broad-based single subject is if everyone agrees not to claim a monopoly. People must understand that no individual group can set the agenda. We need a coalition between those who want to see religious content and those who do not. Without some consensus there will be no change.
- We are debating the model for RE set out in 1994 (SCAA model syllabuses). In 1994 this was an opportunity missed. The discussion should not just be about broadening out which faiths are learnt about. We need to broaden out the concept of religion.
- The question of who writes the syllabus is crucial. Is a large input from religious groups (or insiders) the best way or should it be the citizenry as a whole who input?
- The problems associated with studying religions do to some extent apply to philosophy – whose philosophy do you study?

The Framework is an opportunity to re-think the balance between the 'religious' and the philosophical and moral

- The personal search is clearly important but why should it be located in 'RE'? Complexity alone is not a justification. A greater distinction should be drawn between questions and answers. The important questions are not all religious although they might have religious answers. 'Is there a God?' for example is more about the nature of the universe.
- In terms of content, you clearly need some 'stuff' to work with but this need not be exclusively based on established religious traditions. Adopting this notion is dismissive of other philosophies that are not religious.
- Independent schools now seem to be moving more toward the Scottish model. In one school pupils were turned off 'RE', seeing it as 'naïf'. Now the school plays on the philosophical/ethical with religious dimension and has changed the name to 'Philosophy and Ethics'. The numbers choosing to study the subject at GCSE/A-level have shot up. Parents and young people see it as philosophy although the content is still RE. Now, RE is the second most popular subject behind English despite traditionally being perceived as a minority subject. The school believes it has worked out what children *want* to study.

A change of the subject name should be considered

- The semantics are interesting. Given this is a compulsory subject, the Framework should consider using the term 'spiritual' in the name. The term 'religious' may exclude many given the high proportion of atheism.
- The crucial question is: Can we manage to change the name? The alternative options should all be considered though using the term 'beliefs' alone would be too simplistic.
- The discussion so far has highlighted the need to rename the subject. There is a need to change the name of Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) too if we are to ensure they are open to all. Currently members try to be unselfish but how can they be expected to represent a wide variety of interests when they are committed to particular religious belief sets?
- A new name has been possible in Scotland without changing the legislation.

The Framework is also an opportunity to re-think the type of content and amount of content

- World religions provide a lot of philosophical material for discussion. You need to start allowing young people to start making connections. The 'personal search' approach currently being developed in Scotland aims to allow children and young people to have a springboard to think about themselves, meanings and values. It is not possible to do this in a vacuum.
- As argued in Marilyn Mason's paper – there is a need to cut the content. One of the biggest problems is overload. This allows teachers to get away with not engaging their students properly.
- It should be a multi-disciplinary subject.
- We must unpack the content a bit more – this is not just a question of whether the syllabus is skills or content driven. We need to clearly differentiate between the balance of factual knowledge and conceptual knowledge.
- How much can the Framework specify about content? Defining the key content is really difficult. What are the key concepts in RE? It jumps from one area to another.
- It would be good to see the Framework creating space for real discussions on the existence of God.

The Framework is an opportunity to re-think how the subject is taught

- The name is clearly very important but the real difference is how things happen in the classroom. Lessons should be more pupil-led with teachers facilitating. Children enjoy the interaction.
- All three papers advocate a curriculum for RE largely centred on developing thinking skills and dispositions. This should be at the fore when designing a new framework.
- We should take inclusion as a guiding principle – the best RE will include all beliefs. This would mean dealing with the big questions and making criticism and evaluation central to the framework.
- There needs to be a lasting pedagogy. It is conventional to think of as pedagogy as something quite separate because the guidelines are about subject content. It is impossible to separate the two. There are some very exciting and innovative examples such as Julia Hipgrave's work in Leicester on classroom dialogue... and Kevin O'Grady's work on motivation and the reflexive process.
- The alternatives are teaching by religion and teaching by theme. It is important that the themes selected are relevant. Why should studying 5 different religious festivals motivate a child? Instead the themes chosen should be much more philosophical. The following themes have previously been successful in engaging pupils in learning in one school: power, space, time, right and wrong, communication and relationships.
- We should explore options for a skill driven curriculum in RE. This could for example teach quality of argument and enduring thought quality. It might be possible to spend a term a year working on a particular skill.
- How can we achieve a Framework which is a balance between being skills-led and content-led?
- We should draw from the citizenship curriculum model which is skills heavy.

There is currently a lack of clarity about the legislative restrictions on the new Framework will have to work to

- A key question is whether to stand back and accept the definitions and limitations of the 1988 Education Reform Act. Alternatively what do we want to see in the future?
- It might be more difficult for us to move away from what the legislation stipulates than it has been in Scotland. Changing the name of the subject may not be possible here.
- Those writing the Guidelines are stuck with the Act.
- We must work within the parameters of what is achievable in the real world. To build a successful Framework we must consider what have we already got and what can we do. Could the new Framework potentially allow us to develop new teaching methods bearing in mind that the legislation is not changing? What is 'proper' RE in terms of legislation?
- Does the legislation about RE restrict us from adopting a skill driven curriculum? It is fairly minimalist. Does it prevent any teacher from adopting these styles?
- The legislation is not extensive on the nature of the syllabus or the content though it does provide some constraints (as does the National Curriculum).

The Framework should be transformational but grounded in the current skills and abilities of teachers

- The Framework should aim to alter the existing GCSE syllabuses. It should have areas looking at skills.
- It would be very disappointing if the guidelines mirror the status quo.
- We must ask how the Framework can provide some continuity so teachers are able to teach it without any re-training?
- There is an issue of the teachers' existing knowledge. We must guard against excluding certain religions that RE teachers may not know much about non-Western philosophies and theologies. This may mean more teacher training.
- Should the national framework be constrained by what exists? The answer is no – people adapt and RE teachers can adapt. In the last a decade a lot has changed and RE teachers have moved forward.

The need to engage pupils

- The Framework should promote teaching that engages young people in something which is abstractly relevant to them first. It is hard to capture their attention with concepts that appear alien.
- Increased emphasis on philosophy and ethics has improved take-up and levels of engagement in one school. At GCSE level, 85% now achieve an A* in RE in this school.

The need to consider wider shifts in education

- The National Framework must respond to change. We may be working within a Baccalaureate style system soon anyway.
- Mike Tomlinson's review of the 14-19 curriculum is looking for a core element of philosophical enquiry. They are missing this element.

Concluding Comments:

Though Britain has become a much less religious society than it once was, religion is still an extremely important force in our lives - if nothing else, as a source of social tension at home and violent conflict abroad. Moreover, young people are increasingly reflective and interested in exploring ethical questions. Learning about belief systems and traditions, and developing the skills to critically evaluate philosophies and theologies, is crucial for enabling each young person to come to their own conclusions. Or, as the Scottish National Guidelines put it, to “develop their own beliefs, attitudes, moral values and practices through a process of personal search, discovery and critical evaluation”. All of these points mean that there are good arguments for retaining something like religious education as a compulsory subject.

Further, as the Government begin to adopt a less prescriptive 14-19 curriculum and recognise the value in allowing local actors to be involved in shaping local learning, RE could in a sense be seen as the vanguard. The influential role of local SACREs has meant that there is a long-standing tradition of embracing a diversity of provision in RE. As emphasised in our discussion, the new Framework has got to work with this diversity and not challenge it. It is pleasing to see the QCA’s clearly stated commitment to the continued role of SACREs and to consulting as widely as possible in the process of writing the Framework. Input from the full range of faith groups, parents and above all children is crucial to enrich the Framework and avoid running the risk of low buy in from stakeholders.

However, the Framework also provides an opportunity to bring some coherence and transparency to what has, perhaps inevitably, been patchy provision. Drawing from the 20th January seminar, and building on previous ippr work on citizenship, we would argue that for a National Framework to be progressive, popular and sustainable the Government and the QCA should consider the following points:

1. RE should not focus narrowly on religions but should a) widen its scope to include non-religious belief systems including atheism, agnosticism and humanism b) encourage the study of free standing philosophical and ethical problems.
2. The heading ‘Religious Education’ should be dropped in favour of something like ‘Religious, philosophical and moral education’ as it has been in Scotland.
3. Religious education should learn from the Citizenship curriculum and develop a less content heavy approach that creates more room for skills led learning.
4. RE should aim to instil norms of reflective thought and reasonable discussion - so complimenting values and dispositions cultivated in citizenship curriculum.

Appendix

I. Attendees to ippr seminar *What is Religious Education for? Getting the National Framework Right*, Tuesday 20th January 2004, ippr

Mohammed	Aziz	British Muslim Research Centre
Tony	Breslin	Citizenship Foundation
John	Brown	HMI - Scotland
Cynthia	Davies	DfES
Judith	Fox	Islington SACRE
Michael	Hand	Institute of Education
Ted	Huddleston	Citizenship Foundation
Robert	Jackson	University of Warwick
John	Keast	DfES
Graham	Langtree	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA)
Marilyn	Mason	British Humanist Association (BHA)
Will	Ord	Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)
Brian	Pearce	Interfaith Network for the UK
Lesley	Prior	RE Adviser for Hounslow
Jodie	Reed	ippr
Peter	Robinson	ippr
Ben	Rogers	ippr
David	Rose	Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education
Ian	Stannard	Independent School Religious Studies Association
Susan	Steed	ippr
Beth	Stockley	RE Adviser for Brent
John	White	Institute of Education

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