

**RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN ENGLAND – A CRITICAL TIME
A PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE BY JOHN KEAST**

A critical situation for RE in 2011

1. Since the mid 1990s provision and quality in RE has improved, though patchily across the country, as evidenced by the growth in entries for Religious Studies at GCSE and AS/A Level. Last year's Ofsted report *Transforming Religious Education* (Ofsted 2010) confirmed the pattern of good practice but identified issues concerning the current statutory arrangements for RE, what constitutes learning and progress, and the inadequacy of professional development in RE. Neither the last nor current government has responded to this report. Although there were worrying signs for RE before the coalition government including the negative impact on RE of the new secondary curriculum in some schools and the lack of a systematic monitoring of statutory compliance by Ofsted, the situation at the beginning of 2011 is now the most critical for RE since 1988 or even before that.
2. There are **contextual threats** to the flourishing of RE.
 - 2.1. The continuing drive towards academies and free schools will create a virtually 'independent' system of education everywhere, where governors and head teachers are promised much more autonomy. This has the potential to lead to much greater flexibility and diversity in the curriculum and the undermining of the notion of statutory entitlement. How RE will fare in such a situation is far from clear or reassuring.
 - 2.2. The QCDA is to go; there is now no national adviser for RE curriculum, assessment and qualifications in RE.
 - 2.3. SACREs are likely to become increasingly redundant and impotent, and schools in their areas will increasingly be detached from the locally agreed syllabus. Schools designated with a religious character, academies and free schools will not have to teach RE in accordance with it.
 - 2.4. Changes to Initial Teacher Training signalled in the White Paper mean that the provision and quality of training of specialist RE teachers will suffer, and there is already insufficient effective CPD for RE teachers.
3. There are **legal threats** to the flourishing of RE.
 - 3.1. The government is committed to relaxing statutory curriculum requirements. Ofsted's inspection framework is likely to have limited focus on monitoring the statutory requirements of the curriculum. The statutory

provision of RE is likely to become weaker or even cease, as has happened in the past.

3.2. The Academies Act 2010 removed from Academies and free schools the statutory requirement, in force since 1870, for all maintained schools to provide RE in the curriculum and a daily act of collective worship for all pupils. Whilst the model funding agreements for such schools does require such provision the funding agreements can be changed by government policy. The funding agreement does not require a school to use a locally agreed syllabus.

4. There are curriculum threats to the flourishing of RE.

4.1. The curriculum review refers to the development of a new National Curriculum which will contain “a core of essential knowledge in key subject disciplines”. RE is not included in the review (despite the Secretary of State saying in Parliament in July that it would) implying that RE is outside of any national concept of essential knowledge or key subject discipline. There is reference to RE as one of the important components of a broad and balanced school curriculum but the review document does not include any affirmation of the value of RE within the curriculum, nor to the current aim of the curriculum including the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and society. How agreed syllabuses may contribute to the overall aims and purposes for the school curriculum will become harder to realise.

4.2. The announcement of the curriculum review makes clear that the government does not intend to make any changes to the statutory basis for RE, thus making it clear that the government believes the current statutory basis for RE is sufficient for its proper provision and high standards. This policy is a repeat of the mistake made in the 1987 Education Reform Bill, ignores the lessons of the development of the RE curriculum in the 1990s by John Patten,; and ignores the repeated warnings from Ofsted about the ineffectiveness of the current statutory basis for RE Furthermore, it fails to take account of the fact that schools may well ignore the statutory basis for RE. A daily act of Collective Worship by all pupils has been statutory since 1944 but over 80% of secondary schools fail to meet this requirement with complete impunity.

5. There are qualifications threats to RE.

5.1. The announcement that full course GCSE RS did not count towards the English Baccalaureate in 2010 and the retrospective application of the EB to

the 2010 school results has provoked a high level of protest from head teachers, faith communities and RE professional associations. A rationale for not including RS as a humanities subject is completely absent, and the commitment of all kinds of schools to the provision of Full course GCSE RS for their pupils has been totally undervalued and ignored. Evidence is accruing on an alarming scale of schools dismantling their key stage curriculum arrangements and removing the opportunity for young people to study GCSE RS. RE Departments could be radically reduced on grounds citing the English Baccalaureate. The review of qualifications now taking place makes the future of short course GCSEs very uncertain. If they are abolished over a quarter of million students will no longer gain that qualification in RE. How the review of qualifications will affect AS/A Level RS are not clear.

5.2. All these developments threaten the status of RE at a time when schools will have more freedom not to provide accredited courses in RE at all. They seriously risk the credibility and quality of RE as an academic subject throughout secondary schooling, and are likely to undo the gains in RE qualifications over 20 years.

6. **In short, whilst almost certainly not intentional, government changes to education are having a major regressive impact on RE as an unrealised consequence. The Government has not recognised the contradiction at the heart of its approach to RE: affirming the statutory position of RE and importance of local determination while dismantling the very structures which underpin this affirmation. RE faces massive marginalisation and decline in English schools from 2011 onwards.**

What should the “RE community” do?

7. Most of the government changes described above are high priority policies for the coalition government and are therefore unlikely to be changed. The “RE community” therefore must prepare to live with most of them, and turn them into opportunities. The potential for working together which is clearly emerging from the varied responses to this critical time is very helpful and encouraging, and should continue, with the following actions.
- 7.1. Those who have the interests and wellbeing of good quality RE for all pupils not withdrawn by their parents should come even closer together, and, through the RE Council and its strategic plan, establish a more effective broad subject community, seeking major funding from appropriate sources to empower faith communities, RE organisations, RE teachers and friends of RE to safeguard and improve provision and quality in England. In particular, the chairs of organisations that represent SACREs, RE teachers and advisers

should work more closely together within the structure of the RE Council. Working with its member bodies the RE Council should continue to make representations to government, welcoming the reaffirmation of local determination and the National Curriculum review, and seek ways to work with the Department for Education, flagging up the hope that RE might re-enter the review at Stage 2.

- 7.2. LAs and SACREs need to consider how to streamline their working practices, build relationships with the diversity of schools within their area, seek new sources of subject advice, be ready to offer guidance to schools to support them through a period of change, and be ready to review their AS as the pattern of the new NC emerges (to ensure the language and approach in RE is aligned with it). The work and capacity of the National Association of SACREs should be enhanced so that NASACRE can take on a greater support role for SACREs in doing this.
- 7.3. The slimming and radical discontinuity of the new National Curriculum with the old mean that the links between RE and other curriculum/educational initiatives need to be rethought in the medium term. A new source of consensus for the RE curriculum needs to be found; this would need to cover not only the content of agreed syllabuses, but the overall aim of the subject and its contribution to the curriculum, and the definition of attainment and progression. The crucial period for developing a consensus on how to align RE with the rest of the curriculum may well be Spring 2012 - Spring 13. One strategy for the RE Council to consider in the coming year, therefore, is the establishment of a parallel RE group alongside the NC development work, preferably with some Department for Education funding, to revise the 2004 non-statutory Framework and re-align it with the new curriculum, to secure consistency with other subjects and support local SACREs.
- 7.4. The campaign to get full course GCSE RS included as a humanity in the EB for 2011 needs to be continued as a matter of urgency, preferably without hostility to Geography and History. There must be room for all three subjects in the EB.
- 7.5. New ways to cater for the curriculum and assessment of pupils who do not choose RS in the EB need to be found, but without “doubling up” on RE for those who do choose it, to prevent allegations of RE having a privileged position. In this complex process, how RE might cope without a short course GCSE may need to be faced. The implications for AS/A level in the longer term will also have to be faced.

John Keast, 25 January 2011