

**BHA submission to the Commission on Religious Education**  
*10 February 2017*



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**3. Are you answering on behalf of an organisation or an individual?**

On behalf of an organisation

**4. Which organisation are you answering on behalf of?**

British Humanist Association

**5. Can we publish your organisation's name as part of a list of respondents in the interim and/or final report of the Commission?**

Yes

**6. Can we publish extracts from your response in the interim and/or final report of the Commission? Any extracts published would remain anonymous?**

Yes

**7. Can we publish your name as part of a list of respondents in the interim and/or final report of the Commission?**

Yes

**8. Can we publish extract from your response in the interim and/or final report of the Commission? Any extracts published would remain anonymous.**

Yes

**9. What do you consider to be the main aims and purpose of RE?**

Though there is natural diversity of opinion on this question among humanists, most would agree with the summary provided by Jeaneane Fowler, formerly Head of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of Wales, Newport, who states that education 'should foster creativity, independent thought, the ability to analyse material carefully and thoughtfully, and the ability to argue rationally'. More pertinent to our view of RE, however, is the idea that education should be involved with 'the encouragement of rational and critical thought and not blind obedience... developing individual freedom in tandem with moral responsibility' through a process that entails 'asking questions about the nature and purpose of things, asking questions about needs, about the self, society, where we are going in life and what kind of individual pathway is right in life, making

moral decisions, thinking about responsibilities, about relationships, and about individual, societal and global needs'.<sup>1</sup> The implications of this for our view on RE are clear.

We believe that RE should provide pupils in all types of school the opportunity to consider philosophical and fundamental questions, and that in an open society we should learn about each other's beliefs, including humanist ones. We want a subject on the curriculum which helps young people to form and explore their own beliefs and develop an understanding of beliefs and values different from their own; contributes to social cohesion and mutual understanding; enriches pupils' knowledge of the religious and humanist heritage of humanity and so supports other subjects such as History, English Literature, Art, Music, and Geography; and allows pupils to engage with serious ethical and philosophical questions in a way that develops important skills of critical thinking, reasoning and inquiry. As such, RE should be inclusive, pluralistic, objective, fair, balanced, and relevant to all pupils, in all types of school, allowing them to explore a variety of religions and non-religious worldviews.

Crucially, therefore, RE cannot be a subject in which children are encouraged or instructed to view any particular set of religious or non-religious beliefs as distinctly 'true', or more worthy, or more deserving of attention and study than any other. If 'individual freedom' and 'critical thought' are to be championed over 'blind obedience' in education, there is no room for confessional religious education or instruction. Young people must be allowed and encouraged to think freely and for themselves.

On the other hand, while the academic side of RE is important, RE cannot simply be an academic subject, involved only in informing children about the practices, beliefs, and values of different religions and worldviews. RE has always represented a key means by which schools ensure the spiritual, moral, social, and cultural development (SMSC) of their pupils and if it is to fulfil this role, as it should, it must go beyond mere intellectual inquiry. The humanist view on this particular aspect of RE is best articulated by the moral educator, former BHA President and REC Board member James Hemming who says, of what he calls moral education, that 'What we have to do is to promote not only knowledge of moral values but the will and the capacity to live morally, founded on a personal moral insight... Moral education is not an intellectual content only or even primarily, but a carefully planned combination of formative experience and valid information, each aspect being matched to the maturation of the child, so that moral insight and understanding gradually deepen and extend as the child grows.'<sup>2</sup> This moral education effectively describes the process through which pupils' SMSC development can be promoted, so it follows that if RE is central to schools' SMSC responsibilities, moral education must in turn be central to RE. Indeed, our view is that allowing and encouraging pupils to consider and come to their own conclusions about important questions of meaning, purpose, and morality is perhaps the most important purpose that RE should fulfil.

By way of a broad summary, therefore, we believe that RE should:

- Enable young people to understand the views and opinions of those whose beliefs and values are different to their own
- Develop a capacity for critical reasoning and balanced enquiry, preparing young people to engage respectfully with those whose views differ from their own
- Help young people to develop informed personal responses to life's big philosophical and ethical questions

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<sup>1</sup> Jeananne Fowler, *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices*, 1999: [http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/philosophy/fowler\(humanism\).htm](http://www.sussex-academic.com/sa/titles/philosophy/fowler(humanism).htm)

<sup>2</sup> J Hemming, *Moral education* in A J Ayer (ed) *The Humanist Outlook* 1968: <https://philpapers.org/rec/AYETHO>

- Support children’s understanding of the cultural heritage of humanity, in conjunction with other subjects such as History, English Literature, Art, Music, and Geography.

## 10. What should be included in the scope and content of RE?

We have set out above that we think RE should involve the study of a wide range of religions and beliefs, and why, and that the content of RE should be critical, objective, and pluralistic. It is worth setting out in more detail what these terms mean, however, and for this the ruling of the High Court in *(R) Fox vs Secretary of State for Education* (concerning the place of non-religious worldviews such as Humanism in Religious Education) is helpful. (Whatever the Commission’s own preferences, it must acknowledge that it must work within the framework of these terms as they are defined in case law.)

Taking objectivity first, the term is explained well by the High Court, which says that, outside of a minority of religiously designated schools, ‘[the state] is not entitled to discriminate between religions and beliefs on a qualitative basis; its duties must be performed from a standpoint of neutrality and impartiality as regards the quality and validity of parents’ convictions.’ Clearly, any syllabus which seeks to promote the validity of one religion or belief over all others, or indeed of religion in-the-round over non-religious belief, does not meet the standard of objectivity required. Students will, of course, come to form their own opinions as to the quality and validity of different beliefs, but objective RE encourages this process of enquiry without seeking to influence its outcome.

Note that we say here ‘without *seeking* to influence’. We recognise, of course, that neutrality, impartiality, and objectivity are terms denoting an ideal that is difficult to achieve, and may even be impossible to achieve. However, that is not to say that these things should not be sought after to the best ability both of those setting the syllabus and those delivering it, and without the need to abandon any common and widely held values. Abandoning any attempt to achieve these things simply because one can never be completely successful in doing so is clearly not the correct approach. The more neutral, impartial, and objective the RE, the better (and indeed more lawful) the RE.

Second, the term ‘critical’ speaks principally to the way in which enquiry should be conducted, involving balanced assessment of information, evidence, and experience by individual students, the forming of conclusions on the basis of that assessment, and ongoing consideration of and amendment to those conclusions as further assessment is made. We believe, too, that critical enquiry suggests the inclusion of certain types of content, without which it cannot be properly carried out. Firstly, the critical character of RE should be supported by some teaching on philosophy. At its most basic level, philosophy is the study of alternative perspectives, and as such it allows students to develop important skills in examining and comparing various positions on a range of issues, and crucially the justifications for those positions too. A student’s ability to engage with the subject of RE is therefore significantly strengthened when philosophy is included. Following on from this, if RE is to be critical it must see belief for what it is in the real world: the divergent opinions of rank and file members of religions and beliefs must be explored, not merely the opinions of the hierarchy; the history and development of religions and beliefs must be studied, so as to provide context to their present form and insight as to their future form; and religious education delivered in the classroom must be mindful of the religious ‘education’ delivered through the media, so that students have the information they need to assess different portrayals of religion and belief. Too often RE falls short of this critical standard, and children’s experience of the subject suffers for it.

Finally, with regard to pluralism, the Court is clear in identifying ‘a positive duty on the part of the state to ensure respect for parents’ convictions, which includes ensuring a fair balance between

majority and minority rights and interests'. More specifically, it found that 'a fair balance allows the state to accord appropriate weight to majority views, but does not permit it to treat the views of minorities in a way that is significantly different at the qualitative level'. In other words, it is through both acknowledging the place of a wide range of beliefs in the curriculum, whether they be majority or minority beliefs, and acknowledging the need to treat those beliefs with equal respect, that pluralism is achieved.

The need for RE to be critical, objective, and pluralistic therefore demands the inclusion of a wide range of religions and beliefs. This certainly should include the six major world religions, and Humanism as the most prominent non-religious worldview (more on that below), and where possible it should also include other religions and beliefs. As the High Court made clear the state has 'considerable latitude' in deciding exactly how to meet its responsibilities for pluralistic RE, 'having regard among other things to available resources, local conditions and, in particular, the preponderance in its society of particular religious views.'

Given this emphasis on inclusion, the balance between a systematic approach to RE and a thematic approach is important to consider. Broadly speaking, a systematic approach involves the study of religions and beliefs individually and separately (e.g. units are organised to be on one religion/belief each), while a thematic approach involves the study of phenomena (values, practices, symbology, etc.) that arise in different religions and beliefs in a comparative and simultaneous way. Whilst the two approaches should not necessarily be seen as mutually exclusive in RE, we believe there are advantages to a more thematic and values-led approach.

For instance, *inclusive* RE is often best served by a thematic approach because it enables the introduction of content on religions and beliefs that have a small number of adherents or that may not have any real prominence in the culture or traditions of our society, without the need to set aside disproportionate curriculum time to those religions and beliefs. In this way, a thematic syllabus can better ensure both breadth and depth of study, without having to significantly sacrifice one for the other. *Critical enquiry* in RE is often best served when students can consider the different perspectives of different religions and beliefs on various issues alongside each other, rather than in silos. And RE that *promotes mutual understanding and respect* is often best served by the propensity of the thematic approach for emphasising shared values whilst also introducing controversy with appropriate balance. In sum, it is our view that a more thematic approach allows for the purposes of RE to be met more effectively than does a systematic approach.

We now turn to our comments on the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, specifically Humanism in RE.

### **On the inclusion of Humanism in RE**

First and foremost, all the aims and purposes for RE set out above entail the inclusion of non-religious beliefs and humanist perspectives just as much as they entail the inclusion of religions. The subject's 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.

It follows from this that RE must remain relevant to students and to our population, something that it is not necessarily doing at present. A 2013 survey, for instance, found that more people consider

RE to have been the 'least beneficial subject' than any other.<sup>3</sup> Surveys consistently show that a high proportion of young people are not religious; for example, the 2011 Census found 31% of 0-19 year olds having no religion, with a further 8% not stated; the 2003 *Citizenship Survey* found 46% of 11-15 year olds not having a religion (44% were Christian);<sup>4</sup> while a 2004 Department for Education report found 65% of 12-19 year olds are not religious;<sup>5</sup> and the most recent (2014) *British Social Attitudes Survey* records 70% of 18-24 year olds as not belonging to any religion.<sup>6</sup>

On Humanism specifically, an internal opinion poll commissioned by the BHA in 2014, carried out by YouGov, found that 46% of British adults say they do not belong to any religion, and 6% identify 'humanist' as the word that best describes them (the other options presented to the remaining 40% being atheist, agnostic, spiritual, naturalist, none of these, and don't know). Some of those who chose other options would likely also subscribe to the label 'humanist', but even setting that aside, the results suggest that around 6% of British adults primarily identify as a humanist.

With that said, Humanism is different from the major religions in being a descriptive label for a set of beliefs that have existed throughout history and across the world. Often when people come to self-identify as a humanist they say they have 'discovered' a term that has long applied to them. This doesn't happen with religions but is more akin to sexual orientation, for example. To try to get closer to understanding this phenomenon, a 2016 BHA-commissioned YouGov poll asked British adults a series of questions about their beliefs about religion, ethics, morality, and reason. The results found that 22% of the population has a non-religious outlook on life that matches the humanist one, and 17% would self-define as humanist when this fact was pointed out to them. Whatever figures one uses - 46%, 22%, 17%, or 6% - non-religious people certainly outnumber all minority religious people put together and there are more adults who are humanists than there are Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews, or Buddhists.

For RE to remain relevant as a subject, it is vital that it is as relevant to the non-religious as it is to their religious peers. This is not to say that the subject should be purely dictated by the demands of students or the makeup of the classroom. Rather, 'relevance' means that students should be able to understand why they are learning something and appreciate why it is important for them to do so. It is doubtful that students would be minded to ascribe importance to a subject that included a range of different beliefs but not their own.

This need for relevance is captured in the Religious Education Council's 1991 report *RE, Attainment and National Curriculum*, in which the standard case for Humanism in RE is set out:

- *RE should be open to all pupils regardless of their beliefs.*
- *If RE is 'open' it is necessary for pupils to learn that there are many who do not believe or practise a theistic or religious world-view. Indeed if pupils did not learn this, it could be said they were victims of indoctrination.*

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<sup>3</sup> 'School Days: the best days of your life?', Opinium, 2013: <http://opinium.co.uk/school-days-the-best-days-of-your-life/>

<sup>4</sup> 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://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20120919132719/http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/communities/pdf/452490.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> 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>

<sup>6</sup> From the British Social Attitudes Information System, with cross-tabs by age: [http://www.britsocat.com/BodyTwoCol\\_rpt.aspx?control=CCESDMarginals&MapID=RELIGION&SeriesID=12](http://www.britsocat.com/BodyTwoCol_rpt.aspx?control=CCESDMarginals&MapID=RELIGION&SeriesID=12)

- *Humanism and other non-theistic beliefs have their own views about religion and these ought to be part of a pupil's RE.*
- *Humanist thinking has influenced the RE and PSE curriculum, particularly in the exploration of the term 'spiritual'.*
- *Many pupils come from non-religious backgrounds and probably share some of the views humanists express.*

Today, the RE Council's vision is that 'Every young person experiences a personally inspiring and academically rigorous education in religious and non-religious worldviews',<sup>7</sup> as is reflected in its 2013 Curriculum Framework for Religious Education which places religions and non-religious worldviews such as Humanism on an equal footing. So too do an increasing number of locally agreed syllabuses,<sup>8</sup> and the majority of those that don't grant equal respect to Humanism now include it at least some extent.

Quite apart from the number of people who are non-religious in our society, reflecting the impact of the non-religious on our society is also important if RE is to achieve relevance (and to impart knowledge on the religious and non-religious heritage of humanity, as we mention above). As David Voas, quantitative sociologist of religion and Professor of Social Science at the UCL Institute of Education, writes:

'Religious scepticism is also an important and longstanding part of British culture and tradition. The beliefs and worldviews that are characteristic of this country can only be understood with reference to non-believers such as Aphra Behn in the 17th century, David Hume, Mary Wollstonecraft and Thomas Paine in the 18th, Percy Shelley, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, George Eliot, Charles Darwin, T. H. Huxley, Charles Bradlaugh and Thomas Hardy in the 19th, Bertrand Russell and E. M. Forster in the early 20th, or the majority of leading philosophers and public intellectuals in the post-war period.... It is impossible to understand the changing role of religion in society without grasping the significance of the age of enlightenment, movements such as rationalism and freethought, and belief systems based on atheism or Humanism. The erosion of religious privilege and the spread of equality over the past two centuries is bound up with the rise of secularism. One cannot make sense of religion without some study of the alternatives.'<sup>9</sup>

Given both the number of its proponents and the weight of its contribution, Humanism demands inclusion in RE on the basis of any measure of current or historic significance. Only a crude attempt to divide religion and non-religion (and give priority to the former) can deny this.

### **Support for the inclusion of Humanism**

In addition to the REC, support for the inclusion of Humanism in RE has been expressed by a large number of individuals and organisations.

When the subject content for Religious Studies GCSE was being revised in 2014/2015, some 113 leading philosophers, RE academics, consultants, advisors and teachers, and children's authors wrote an open letter to the Department for Education calling for non-religious worldviews like

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<sup>7</sup> *Aims, Vision and Values*, Religious Education Council for England and Wales:

<http://religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/about/how-the-rec-works/aims-vision-and-values>

<sup>8</sup> 'New RE syllabuses put Humanism on equal footing to major religions', BHA, December 2014:

<https://humanism.org.uk/2014/12/12/new-re-syllabuses-put-humanism-equal-footing-major-religions/>

<sup>9</sup> *Witness statement of David Voas, (R) Fox vs Secretary of State for Education, 2015:*

<https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/BHA-WS-Voas-0016.pdf>

Humanism to be included in the GCSE alongside religions.<sup>10</sup> In February 2015 the former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams joined 28 religious leaders in writing an open letter to the Government to the same effect.<sup>11</sup> Almost 90% of respondents to a Department for Education consultation on the GCSE also supported its inclusion, and the National Association of Teachers of RE have long supported Humanism's place in the subject.

It should also be noted that the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in the curriculum alongside religious beliefs reflects consistent recommendations in international agreements such as the ODIHR-OSCE's *Toledo Guiding Principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (2007),<sup>12</sup> the *Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination* (2001),<sup>13</sup> and the Council of Europe's *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education* (2008).<sup>14</sup> Such inclusion was specifically recommended by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief in a recent report on the UK.<sup>15</sup>

### **On why Humanism in particular as the non-religious worldview included in RE**

When discussing the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in RE, we are often asked the question of why Humanism should be included in particular. There are two main reasons for this.

The first is that it is the only non-religious worldview that is sufficiently well-articulated and the subject of a sufficient body of writing suitable for use in schools (see our response to question 16 for further detail on this).

The second is that it is the (explicit or implicit) worldview of the great majority of non-religious people in England. Not every person who meets the definition of a humanist would refer to themselves as such and some will even be unfamiliar with the term. This reflects the fact that non-religious people are not compelled by their beliefs to engage in any sort of formal practice or observance, join any organisation or even identify with any particular creed at all. The difference between religions and non-religious worldviews on this score should not mask the fact that the humanist outlook on life is widespread in Britain today, much more so than all the minority religions combined.

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<sup>10</sup> *Open letter to Minister of State for School Reform Nick Gibb MP supporting Humanism in Religious Studies*, BHA, 2015: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Open-letter-to-Minister-of-State-for-School-Reform-Nick-Gibb-MP-supporting-Humanism-in-Religious-Studies.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Rt Rev and Rt Hon Dr Rowan Williams et al, *Open letter to Minister of State for School Reform Nick Gibb MP supporting Humanism in Religious Studies*, BHA, 2015: <https://humanism.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Religious-leaders-letter-on-Humanism-in-RS.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> *Toledo Guiding Principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools*, ODIHR-OSCE, 2007: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>

<sup>13</sup> *Final Document of the International Consultative Conference on School Education in Relation to Freedom of Religion or Belief, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination*, 2001: [http://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/human\\_rights\\_education\\_in\\_asian\\_schools/section2/2002/03/final-document-of-the-international-consultative-conference-on-school-education-in-relation-to-freed.html](http://www.hurights.or.jp/archives/human_rights_education_in_asian_schools/section2/2002/03/final-document-of-the-international-consultative-conference-on-school-education-in-relation-to-freed.html)

<sup>14</sup> *Recommendation of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the dimension of religions and non-religious convictions within intercultural education*, Council of Europe, 2008: <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1386911&Site=CM>

<sup>15</sup> A/HRC/7/10/Add.3 *Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief, Asma Jahangir into the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (June 2007)*, United Nations Human Rights Council, (amongst others) paragraph 69, 7 February 2008: <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/Visits.aspx>

Atheism and agnosticism are not worldviews but positions merely on the existence of god. They are not equivalent to 'religions' but to 'theism'. Besides, humanists are by definition atheists or agnostics and so both terms would be discussed as part of the systematic study of Humanism.

Secularism is not a worldview but a political position, equivalent to (for example) feminism.

Non-theistic religions such as some versions of Buddhism are religions and we would advocate strongly for the inclusion of such religions *alongside* other religions and Humanism.

'Beliefs' such as nihilism, Confucianism and (the philosophical aspects of) Marxism do qualify as worldviews but (like many reputable but minor religions) are not widespread enough to merit inclusion over Humanism (or perhaps at all).

Philosophical convictions on a narrow range of issues, such as vegetarianism, are 'beliefs' but not worldviews. They might meet the definition of a 'belief' under equality and human rights legislation but they would not merit inclusion in RE as they are not moral and ethical frameworks that seek to answer the major questions of meaning and purpose.

An argument could be made in terms of numbers for inclusion of the beliefs of individuals who are 'spiritual but not religious', who believe in some higher power or life force but in a non-defined way, or perhaps who believe in life after death – all of which are common beliefs. But (unlike Humanism) such beliefs are rarely or never articulated in a way susceptible to study, except by sociologists of belief, and in any case exactly the same arguments could be made in favour of including the equally widespread – and sometimes indistinguishable – beliefs of vaguely religious individuals who are not particularly aligned to any one of the six principal religions, or who are aligned but whose beliefs fall well away from those of the established hierarchy.

We are not making a commentary on the legitimacy of studying any of the different religions, worldviews or other approaches we have referred to – young people are often very interested in smaller religions, alternative worldviews and cults, all of which can be prominent in media discourse, and good RE should engage with any questions they have about these different belief systems. All we have done is set out why Humanism should be included in particular.

## **11. What changes (if any) should there be to the current legal framework for RE?**

See our answers to the questions below.

## **12. Should there be a common baseline entitlement for RE which applies to all types of school?**

Yes.

Schools with a religious character are free to teach confessional religious education in a way that promotes the veracity of one set of beliefs over another. As we have set out above, this is an approach that we are fundamentally opposed to. Our view of RE and education more generally centres around balance, inclusivity, and encouraging children to think for themselves, and insofar as a common baseline entitlement would require schools to meet these standards, we strongly agree that it should apply to both schools with a religious character and those without. A child's access to accurate and impartial information about religious and non-religious beliefs and philosophical and moral issues should not be determined by the type of school they have had chosen for them or to which they have been allocated.



We recognise, of course, that there may be schools with a religious character that already provide RE in a balanced and inclusive way, and choose not to avail themselves of the freedom to teach confessional RE. That is obviously something we welcome, but as long as the law allows all religious schools to teach confessional RE, a great number will clearly continue to do so. It is therefore not sufficient merely to encourage religious schools to ensure that their RE is objective and pluralistic. Rather, the exemptions in equalities legislation that allow them to circumvent this requirement must be removed.

Setting religious schools aside, we also believe that any common entitlement should apply to all types of state-funded schools, whether they be local authority maintained schools, or academies or free schools. Again, a common entitlement ceases to be common if a child's access to it is subject to the school they attend. We discuss the fragmentation of the school system and its implications for RE in more detail below.

### **Survey of current agreed syllabuses**

In 2016, the BHA commenced a survey of locally agreed syllabus to assess, among other things, the coverage of different religions and beliefs at each key stage, the extent to which the study of different religions and beliefs is compulsory or optional, whether syllabuses set out their own content at KS4 or simply direct schools to follow the Religious Studies GCSE course, etc. If the Commission would find it helpful, we would be happy to complete and submit this survey.

### **13. How should the development of RE standards, curricula, or syllabuses be best organised?**

We strongly believe that there should be a nationally set RE syllabus and that it should be a statutory part of the national curriculum, whilst also applying to academies and free schools (including schools with a religious character).

The current system by which RE syllabuses are set locally by agreed syllabus conferences (ASCs) and managed by 151 different standing advisory councils on RE (SACREs) in England and 22 SACREs in Wales has a number of significant flaws.

Firstly, and most obviously, the system is an unnecessarily fragmented one. Our country is more diverse than it ever has been before and the people in it more mobile. Indeed, a 2015 report published by Centre for Cities found that just 32% of people aged 35-54 still lived where they grew up.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, even children in the most homogenous or insular communities are likely to find themselves having to co-exist with colleagues and neighbours from a range of different religious and non-religious backgrounds. If RE is to prepare children and young people for life in modern Britain it must allow some flexibility to schools and teachers, yes, but it must be national in scope.

The fragmentation of RE is problematic in more ways than this, however. We explain above that we do not believe the nature of the RE experienced by children should be subject to the type of school they attend, and equally we do not see why it should also be subject to the local authority area in which they go to school. The quality of syllabuses varies considerably from local authority to local authority, and so too does the content. Furthermore, syllabuses lay out programmes of study that are intended to provide for the entirety of a child's time at school. As such, different types of content tend to be balanced *across* key stages rather than *within* them. If a child was to go from

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<sup>16</sup> Elli Thomas, Ilona Serwicka & Paul Swinney, *Urban demographics, why people live where they do*, Centre for Cities, November 2015: <http://www.centreforcities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/15-11-02-Urban-Demographics.pdf>

primary to secondary and in doing so move from one local authority to another, that balance would clearly be lost. More likely now, in England at least, is that in transitioning from primary to secondary a child would move from a school that is required to follow the local syllabus to one that is not. Given that around 70% of secondary schools are now academies this may even be the norm. The degree to which such a change would impact on a child's learning would naturally vary from case to case, but it nonetheless seems to be a problem that would be better avoided.

Academisation has also resulted in the system of local syllabuses no longer representing an efficient or practical use of resources. The number of schools that are not required to follow a local syllabus has grown enormously in recent years and now around 20% of primary schools and 70% of secondary schools are academies, equivalent to about a quarter of all state-funded schools. Indeed, many local authorities do not have any maintained secondary schools left within their borders at all. One has to question the benefit of allocating time and resources, neither of which are in abundance at local authorities, to bodies that have so small a remit and achieve such little practical impact. Indeed, this appears to be a question that local authorities have been asking themselves, as is reflected in the lack of resources that tend to be made available to SACREs and ASCs. Many SACREs/ASCs have therefore resorted to simply re-approving their existing syllabus every five years so as to meet their statutory obligations or, only marginally better, to make minor and low-cost updates to it every five years. This is clearly not conducive to comprehensive, high-quality, and relevant RE.

Neither, do we think, is the composition of SACREs and ASCs, which are not set up to ensure the expertise required to draft high-quality syllabuses. None of the four groups that form SACREs and ASCs are dedicated to syllabus drafting specialists. Such specialists, it seems to us, are the people whose involvement in a SACRE or ASC is most important, and yet they are not formally represented. Further, whilst we recognise the importance of having religion and belief experts input into the drafting of syllabuses so as to ensure that content is accurate, we do not believe that the same people are best placed to oversee the design of the curriculum. This too often leads to the representatives of religions and beliefs jostling for airtime rather than focusing on what is best for the learner. It can also lead to content that presents an idealised version of the particular religions and worldviews, with insufficient attention paid to the differences within them, the history of how those denominations came to be, and the divergence of the values and moral positions of the rank and file vis a vis the hierarchy. It is even the case that some local syllabuses seek to emphasise having a religious faith as a virtue, a message that is clearly not within the remit of the subject to promote. Birmingham's 2007 syllabus is perhaps the most ready example of this, entitled as it is 'Faith makes a difference'.

What is perhaps more concerning from our perspective, however, is the degree to which a number of SACREs and ASCs have been hostile to the involvement of humanists and the place of Humanism in RE. Correspondence shared with the BHA has revealed, for instance that one SACRE in Wales recently refused a humanist representative's application for membership by explaining that 'members were concerned that a non-religious body represented on SACRE could weaken the religious basis of the Group'. And another in England has stated that 'non-religious worldviews are not religions. As such they are taught in every other subject in school, particularly Science.'

In *(R) Fox vs Secretary of State for Education*, the High Court was clear that 'the state must accord equal respect to different religious convictions, and to non-religious beliefs; it is not entitled to discriminate between religions and beliefs on a qualitative basis'.<sup>17</sup> Not including non-religious beliefs in a syllabus, or refusing to admit non-religious representatives to a SACRE, purely on the

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<sup>17</sup> *(R) Fox vs Secretary of State for Education*, 25 November 2015: <https://www.judiciary.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/r-fox-v-ssfe.pdf>

basis of them being non-religious, is unlawful and yet it is all too common throughout England and Wales. By way of another example, the High Court also stated that - in response to the Government's assertion that Humanism didn't have to be included at Key Stage 4 specifically, as long as it was included elsewhere in the syllabus - 'it is obvious that GCSE is a vitally important stage in the development of a young person's character and understanding of the world. I do not consider it could be said that a complete or almost total failure to provide information about non-religious beliefs at this stage could be made up for by instruction given at earlier stages.'<sup>18</sup> Despite this, a survey conducted by the BHA last year found more than 100 locally agreed syllabuses that allowed or directed schools to use the Religious Studies GCSE as the entirety of their Key Stage 4 provision - something which in most cases would be unlawful.

A system in which no one involved in the drafting of syllabuses is required to possess legal expertise, and in which those that are involved may well have a vested interest in flouting the law, is not a suitable one.

All of the problems with the current system which we have outlined above can be addressed by having an RE syllabus that applies to all schools and is agreed and regularly reviewed at a national level by experts, with the input of religion and belief representatives. This would ensure that quality is maintained more consistently across schools and that there is continuity for children who move schools, both at standard and non-standard transition points. We would be willing to see SACREs continue as a channel for consultation between teachers and local religion and belief communities, provided that humanists are included equally with religious representatives on these bodies, but ASCs should be abolished.

#### **14. Are there changes to primary and secondary teacher education that could improve the delivery of high quality RE?**

The development of subject knowledge plays an increasingly reduced role in teachers' Initial Teacher Training (ITT). This is particularly noticeable in training for primary teachers, with often almost no time available to develop an understanding of the necessary content for RE. To ensure the delivery of high quality RE, this time dedicated to the development of essential subject knowledge needs to increase, and it needs to include Humanism.

There currently exists a significant deficit in RE teachers' subject knowledge about Humanism. This is exacerbated by the existence of many non-specialists delivering RE in the classroom, in both primary and secondary schools. Many ITT programmes for RE teachers include almost no opportunity to develop subject knowledge about Humanism. This opportunity must be guaranteed to all trainee teachers. An equivalent amount of time should be dedicated to this as is provided for each of the principal religions.

Given the limits on available time for subject knowledge development during ITT and the number of non-specialist teachers teaching the subject, appropriate continuing professional development (CPD) for RE teachers within schools is essential in order to guarantee that teachers are capable of and feel confident to deliver high quality RE.

#### **15. What factors lead to high quality learning and teaching in RE, and what are the main obstacles to this?**

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

Pedagogy should be evidence-led and based on the best available research. We believe that the Commission should therefore be guided by those with relevant expertise. We are, however, aware of the challenges researchers face in making conclusions about best practice in teaching and learning in subjects where there is a core component of the personal development of the student, not just the dissemination of knowledge. High quality teaching and learning can therefore not escape questions of values, purposes, and aims, our thoughts on which are detailed above.

The most important factor behind enabling high quality learning and teaching in RE is to ensure every student has a qualified, motivated, and well-supported teacher with a confident grasp of the subject knowledge required to teach the subject. As stated above this requires that all teachers receive appropriate initial teacher training and continuing professional development to ensure they have both the knowledge and skills necessary to guarantee that successful learning takes place in the classroom. Such guarantees are currently under threat due to the high number of non-specialist teachers teaching RE, and more specifically weaknesses in subject knowledge about Humanism present amongst many in the RE teaching community.

To ensure high quality learning, RE must be objective, inclusive, balanced, pluralistic, and relevant. Teachers must ensure that they avoid making assumptions about the beliefs of their students, in particular the assumption that they share their own beliefs, the beliefs of their parents, or those beliefs represented by the nature and ethos of the school. Teachers must acknowledge the potential influence they have on the beliefs and values of their students and, although one can claim complete neutrality represents an impossible goal in practice, that should not prevent it from being the aspirational and desired position from which the subject is delivered. High quality teaching about beliefs and values must also allow the opportunity for reflection, evaluation, and criticism. Time must be made for this in order to ensure both the development of students' depth of understanding of the concepts learned in RE, and the development of their own capacities for critical thinking.

The availability of high-quality resources is essential to guarantee quality teaching and learning. Many existing resources present overly-simplified or sugar-coated pictures of religions and beliefs. More specifically resources about Humanism often present a muddled and inaccurate picture of the reality of many humanist beliefs and values. As RE becomes more appropriately inclusive of Humanism, more needs to be done to ensure that those providing education resources have an adequate subject knowledge to ensure they are not perpetuating misconceptions.

In many schools insufficient time is made available to deliver appropriate Religious Education, particularly as in many schools, the RE lesson often becomes the space provided for teachers to cover citizenship, PSHE, and wider aspects of SMSC development. We believe that one of the most important goals of education is to create human beings capable of finding their own ways of living flourishing and fulfilling lives, not merely to raise their economic utility. Although academic knowledge and employability can contribute to young people's wellbeing, it is far from the only ingredient. If RE represents the space to ensure this personal development of students in a way that adheres to the aims and purposes of the subject stated above, then more time needs to be made available for it within the school timetable.

**16. Which books, reports, research, or resources (if any) would you particularly like to draw to the attention of the Commission? Please give full references/weblinks**

[understandinghumanism.org.uk](http://understandinghumanism.org.uk) is the British Humanist Association's website of education resources. Designed by teachers for teachers, the website features comprehensive, flexible, and free resources for primary and secondary schools. One can find lesson plans, presentations, classroom activities, videos, and humanist perspectives on a wide variety of topics, themes, and discussions.

The resources have been designed to enable students to get to grips with how many non-religious people approach life's fundamental questions and provide opportunities for them to explore such questions for themselves. There are also planning guidelines, designed to support teachers and schools to create schemes of work on Humanism or to include humanist beliefs and values into more thematic schemes of work. Schools can also find information on CPD opportunities, as well as guidance on how to book a visit from a **free**, local humanist [school speaker](#).

[What is Humanism? How can I live without a god? And other big questions for kids](#) by Michael Rosen and Annemarie Young provides a great introduction to Humanism for children aged between 9 and 14.

Books to support teachers' subject knowledge about Humanism:

- [What is Humanism?](#) by the Humanist Philosophers Group
- [On Humanism](#) (Routledge) by Richard Norman
- [Humanism: A Very Short Introduction](#) (Oxford University Press) by Stephen Law
- [Humanism: A Beginner's Guide](#) (OneWorld) by Peter Cave
- [The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism](#) (Wiley Blackwell) edited by Andrew Copson and A. C. Grayling
- [Humanist Anthology](#) (Rationalist Press Association) edited by Margaret Knight

The British Humanist Association has a wealth of further information about Humanism on its [website](#). Teachers can also download the BHA's free [Short Course on Humanism eBook](#).

## **17. Please use this box for any further comments you wish to make.**

### **Subject name**

As we have set out above, we believe that Religious Education should be as inclusive as possible, not just of all religions, but of humanism too. We have also stated that, whilst we do not wish to see the various religions and non-religious worldviews examined with any less rigour, we would like a subject that is more thematic and values-led, focusing on the study of important moral and ethical issues, different perspectives on those issues, and encouraging children to grapple with them.

Given this, it has long been our view that Religious Education should be renamed to more accurately reflect both the nature of the subject we want to see and its inclusive nature. Other names for the subject do exist, of course. In Scotland, 'Religious and Moral Education' is taught. This is not, in our view, the best solution, both because it fails to address the exclusion of non-religious worldviews, and because it might imply that moral questions are exclusively within the realm of religion, which is clearly not the case and presumably not the intention. In Wales, it has been proposed that RE be reformed into 'Religion, Philosophy, and Ethics', which (assuming this does not entail any downgrading of teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews) is better but still does not fully respond to these issues.

Our preference would therefore be for a subject called 'Beliefs and Values', or 'Religions and Worldviews', as we believe these to be the most accurate and inclusive options.

## **English Baccalaureate**

Given the impact that the English Baccalaureate (Ebacc) has had on the curriculum and on Religious Studies specifically, we believe it is worth the Commission's consideration. Our view is that good quality education about religious and non-religious worldviews is an important part of education in the Humanities more generally. By this token, we believe that RE has a natural place in the Ebacc. Indeed, its omission is to the detriment not only of the Ebacc itself, but also to pupils' wider learning, as schools inevitably shift focus away from the subject. Assuming the reforms we have recommended elsewhere in this response are introduced - though not until that process of review is complete, and RE is guaranteed to be inclusive, critical, and pluralistic - RE should clearly be a part of the Ebacc.

## **Right of withdrawal**

We have set out above why we think RE is an incredibly important subject for all children and young people to study and to benefit from. If RE was genuinely educational (rather than confessional) and was delivered by schools in an inclusive, impartial, and balanced way, therefore, we do not see that there would be any more need for parents to have the right to withdraw their children from it than there would be for subjects like History, Science, or Maths.

However, it is still the case that religious schools are legally entitled to teach, if they wish, an entirely biased syllabus which favours one religion over all other worldviews. It is also true, as we have outlined above, that many syllabuses around the country are not as inclusive or impartial as they ought to be. As long as this situation endures, the right of withdrawal will continue to be important, not least for the many parents who have no choice but to send their children to a religious school, even if it does not cohere with their own beliefs. (It is also not clear that entirely removing the right of withdrawal would be permissible on human rights grounds, whatever the nature of the RE.)

Furthermore, we do not believe it is right that only parents have the right to opt out their children from RE, while children themselves enjoy no such right. This limits the rights of children to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion, as is enshrined in Article 9 of the ECHR, and fails to reflect ECHR case law on Gillick competence, which establishes that once a child obtains sufficient understanding and intelligence to be mature enough to make up their own mind on the matter, a child's right to make their own decisions overrides their parents' rights over them. The lack of any opt out for children is also out-of-step with the fact that young people are able to withdraw themselves from collective worship at age 16. We therefore believe that a similar right of withdrawal should exist in relation to RE, though the age at which this right can be exercised should certainly be lower than 16, if indeed it should have a firm age attached to it at all.