

Two cheers for the new National Framework for RE

In 2004 the first ever National Framework for Religious Education in England was published, and the good news was that Humanism was recommended for study by all pupils. The then BHA Education Officer Marilyn Mason welcomed this progress and described how it had come about in the article below, an abridged version of which appeared in New Humanist, September/October 2004. This document has been updated with new hyperlinks in June 2009.

Where did we start from?

For decades before the National Curriculum RE was the only compulsory subject in schools, but it never became part of the National Curriculum. It was overseen by national bodies such as the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and there are some fairly minimal legal requirements, but its actual content is largely locally determined – with the result that there are currently 151 slightly different RE syllabuses in England. The new Framework won't change that arrangement, but it is the strongest national guidance that has been issued to date, and it will be highly influential.

For humanists the Framework, which will recommend Humanism for study for all pupils, represents a big stride forward, part of a long process of critical but constructive engagement with RE, locally on Standing Advisory Councils for RE (SACREs) and nationally through the British Humanist Association (BHA). Humanists sometimes wonder why we bother – why don't we just lobby for the abolition of RE and the teaching of religion in, say, History lessons? There are good reasons. Some are pragmatic (RE is firmly embedded in schools and is not likely to go away), and some are educational and philosophical. Religions aren't history – they exist today and exert a powerful influence on individuals and society; there are beliefs, questions and ideas in RE which pupils should encounter; when a good syllabus is taught by a good teacher, it can be an exciting and challenging subject, one that young humanists often find quite interesting, their usual complaint being that it's almost entirely about other people's beliefs, rarely their own; equally, children from religious backgrounds rarely get the opportunity to learn about the non-religious ethics and beliefs of a sizeable section of the UK population. That is what the BHA and humanists on SACREs want to change.

Humanists have long sought "objective, fair and balanced" RE which included Humanism, treating the humanist world view as respectfully as the religious ones – and which reflected this in a more inclusive subject title. (Click [here](#) and [here](#) for our ideas on RE.) Sometimes we have had to be more critical than constructive, and there has been much to criticise, but anyone observing RE over the past decades would have seen real improvements, though they have been patchy because of the local autonomy of SACREs and some are owed more to the increasing pluralism of society and changing fashions in education than to the activities of humanists. Sometimes progress has been hindered by unhelpful advice from the centre, such as the infamous Circular 1/94, and there remain widespread misconceptions about RE's contents and purposes; nevertheless it is now generally the study of world religions, with a range of perspectives on the "big questions", sometimes including a humanist one and almost always, for example, when discussing the existence of God, the atheist arguments. It is very very different from the Scripture or Religious Knowledge that some readers will remember, and it is widely understood within the RE world (though not always outside it) that RE is not about instilling religious faith.

How did we get to a National Framework?

The idea for a National Framework first emerged from Anglican organisations, with the BHA acknowledged as a stakeholder in RE and involved, from the 2000 seminar hosted by the St Gabriel's Programme where the idea was first mooted to the final discussions of the national working party on the Framework several years later.

A National Framework was a risky and not wholly popular strategy. Would it be really based on good practice or would it echo the dreary content-laden national model syllabuses of a decade ago? Could it risk a "trendy" thematic approach, or were we stuck with studying religions (and maybe even beliefs) in their own little vacuum packs? Was the fact that the idea first came from the C of E an ominous portent of more compulsory Christianity? Was this a plot to centralise RE and dictate its content, even its pedagogy, as has happened to other school subjects, making it more difficult for progressive SACREs to create good syllabuses? Doubts, but also hopes, were vigorously expressed in the RE community. Eventually, late in 2003, after long periods when nothing much seemed to be happening, work began.

The slow start was partly because tampering with RE is politically risky too: Education Ministers rarely want to stir the passions and rivalries that lurk just under the civilised surface of RE, and the current ascendancy of Christian Socialism and Downing Street support for religious and creationist schools seemed an unlikely setting for real progress in RE. But in Charles Clarke we have a Secretary of State who, like the British Humanist Association, is not religious but is interested in improving RE. Clarke proceeded cautiously and diplomatically, determined to establish consensus amongst the stakeholders.

Partly because we met him, and partly through BHA membership of the RE Council, I was invited onto the Framework steering group of faith representatives, professionals, and DfES and QCA officials. Though somewhat isolated in this working party of 20 -30 people (meetings would routinely end with thanks to "faith representatives – and Marilyn"), I met little resistance to the idea that Humanism should be included, indeed there much support for the idea. This was, I think, because the faith representatives were mostly, like me, educators too. RE suffers from low status and standards, a shortage of specialist teachers and a lack of public understanding – everyone involved knew that a return to Scripture would do nothing to solve these problems, or wider post-September 11th anxieties about mutual understanding and "social cohesion".

Media over-reaction this February, when the Institute for Public Policy Research suggested that atheism and Humanism should be included in RE (see "RE – Could do Better" for the BHA contribution to this debate), also proved unexpectedly helpful. Commentators such as Anne Widdecombe in *The Telegraph* complained that teaching about atheism in RE would be "a betrayal of our children" and the Conservative Christian Fellowship whinged unnecessarily that "it would be wrong to jettison Christianity", while RE professionals didn't know whether to be pleased or horrified at this unaccustomed intrusion into their private space. Better informed voices greeted the proposals calmly – this was merely a report, after all, a contribution to the debate, not the first step in abolishing religion from RE and turning all our children into atheists. When the public consultation on the draft Framework began in April, the fact that Humanism was still there passed almost unnoticed, except by *The Telegraph*, which claimed in a rather eccentric headline that "Humanism becomes one of the new gods of RE". Journalists who phoned me for information only wanted to know if *atheism* was in the Framework; when told that it was not, explicitly, but that Humanism was, they seemed to think that rather dull, and I suppose it was – to journalists and headline writers. This media indifference helped to make the inclusion uncontroversial, useful given DfES wariness.

Working on the Framework

Humanism was in the Framework from the earliest drafts, but its position and status varied, and the language of the document was never consistently inclusive. My task at and between meetings was ensure that it was securely there, more than just an optional study or one contingent on the beliefs of pupils, and that the language of the "areas of study" and attainment targets reflected this. There was little disagreement at meetings, though the size of the working party meant that much discussion went on in sub-groups and some lobbying between meetings – and one could never be sure what the other members were proposing. I commented on drafts during and between meetings – and so, I expect, did everyone else. One difficulty was the confidential nature of the work: understandably, the drafters didn't want very early and incomplete work-in-progress circulating and being torn apart by faith groups or the *Daily Mail*, but confidentiality made it impossible for participants to consult or inform their constituencies as work progressed. Before work on the Framework began I had asked members of the BHA education forums what they would like to see in it – a request that elicited hugely detailed wish lists that were never going to make it into such a general document and so probably just created unrealisable expectations.

Between meetings there were extensive redrafts, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. The draft that went out for consultation in April was a disappointment, and the one that appeared after the consultation, in early July, even worse, with Humanism featuring as something that "consideration could be given to including", which appeared to mean that even considering it was optional. This was in spite of the active participation of humanists in the consultation and some excellent constructive responses from humanist groups and individuals. Despite a general willingness to include the non-religious, the ability to see how or to recognise exclusive language was often lacking – as these drafts demonstrated. And a small group of conservative Christian academics who claimed that the advice in Framework would be illegal and hinted at legal action seemed to be worrying the DfES and pushing the project backwards. But two can play at this game, and the BHA also hinted, quite strongly, at legal action based on the Human Rights Act.

The final meeting of the working group in July was eager to revise the Framework yet again and to establish consensus. The version agreed then by all the faith groups around the table contained much to please humanists, though the subject title and the irritating references to "Learning from religion" remained unchanged.

What's in the Framework?

The full document is [here on the QCA website](#) and there is [a BHA analysis of it here](#).

The approach of the Framework is broad and thematic, largely concerned with "the big questions"; it is not detailed and nor is it particularly prescriptive – a *Framework* was bound to be like this. Much of the content is left for local syllabus makers, advisers and teachers to interpret and fill out, and it remains to

be seen how this is done, but there is much in it to encourage good practice and which humanists, and others who want RE to be relevant to all pupils, can build on.

"Secular world views" are included "where appropriate" in the Breadth of Study sections from Key Stage 1 onwards, and an introductory statement *About Religious Education in the Curriculum* reads (on p12):

"Many pupils come from religious backgrounds but others have no attachment to religious beliefs and practices. Therefore, to ensure that all pupils' voices are heard and that the religious education curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there should be opportunities for all pupils to study ... secular philosophies such as humanism."

Humanists will welcome this recognition of a world view that will be personally meaningful to many pupils and interesting and relevant even to those who do not share humanist beliefs. The Framework acknowledges that a wide range of ideas about religion and morality co-exist in our society and should be encountered in RE; there is much in it that should encourage more inclusive teaching and a better understanding of today's world. There are many references to "religions and beliefs" which will enable the inclusion of humanist beliefs and perspectives. The guidance also hints at a less rosy (post-September 11th ?) view of religion that we are used to; it recognises, for example, that "some forms of belief are not inclusive" (p13), that people can have "various perceptions" about the roles of religion in the world (p30), that there can be "tensions" within and between religions and beliefs (p28).

What next?

During consultations, the most enthusiastic group were teachers, most of whom (98% according to the QCA report on the consultation) would like to see the Framework becoming statutory; the least keen (predictably perhaps) were those who control RE locally: RE advisers and SACREs. It will be liked by some humanists and not by others: some will worry that it may only be taught "when appropriate", though a good case can be made for it being "appropriate" to many places in a typical RE syllabus. I believe that the Framework offers an opportunity for RE to throw out the last vestiges of confessionalism and bias and to turn RE into a genuinely inclusive and intellectually credible subject.

For the time being, RE syllabuses will remain in the hands of those very variable local bodies, the SACREs. It is conceivable that they will ignore the Framework, but I hope not and I think that it will be influential in many ways. Firstly, it is bound to be one factor in local discussions as RE syllabuses are reviewed over the next five years – and it ought, as a document agreed by many different RE and faith organisations, to carry some weight. New local syllabuses have to be submitted to the QCA, and it seems likely that the QCA will look for some conformity to the Framework it has worked so hard to construct over the last year. As the most recent national statement on RE, it is bound to influence publishers, and those looking to refresh their lists may well focus on new entrants such as Humanism – and where there are text books and resources, teachers will follow. It is also likely to influence RE teacher training, which even in the smallest institutions now often has to cover half a dozen RE syllabuses in the surrounding LEAs – it will be useful for colleges to have an overview describing what is common and good practice in RE. In LEAs where there are poor or limited syllabuses, it might inspire the more dynamic RE departments to do more than just the minimum required topics and religions.

There should be some immediate changes to DfES guidance. Circular 1/94 now badly needs to be replaced with more up-to-date advice on RE. I hope, also, that more positive guidance on the position of humanists on SACREs will emerge from the DfES, and more welcoming attitudes from the many SACREs that still do not include humanist representation (see [here](#) for BHA policy on SACREs). Later, there may well be some rethinking of collective worship in schools (see [here](#) for BHA policy on this).

Though it was definitely worthwhile and encouraging to be part of the process, it remains to be seen how effectively the Framework will be disseminated and encouraged, and whether this will be, as Charles Clarke has intimated, the first stage towards a National Syllabus for RE (see [here](#) for BHA comment). A National Syllabus would mean that every child in ordinary state schools would receive a broadly similar Religious Education, but this would require the will to legislate and take on the religious conservatives. Even then, faith-based schools and the quasi-independent "academies" could continue to do their own thing, and there remains some work to do before all state-educated pupils get the broad and balanced RE that is surely their entitlement. I hope that eventually they do – it is important for all children, whatever the type of school they attend or their family's religious affiliation, to understand the range of beliefs they will encounter in contemporary society and learn to live with different beliefs – including Humanism. Of course, there will be more discussions and consultations before that happens, and it will be a slow process with an uncertain outcome. Much will depend on a continuing informed and benevolent interest from the DfES, by no means a given. But if it happens, perhaps by then the media will have realised what has long been understood in RE – that it is not about promoting religious faith and that there is nothing very controversial about including world views such as Humanism.

I've been cautiously optimistic throughout the process and remain so. I think that humanists and others who care about RE should welcome the new Framework with a resounding two cheers. I'm saving the third cheer for when it's successfully implemented.