Seventh Annual Public Lecture

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“Can Religious Education be relevant to the non-religious?”

Transcript of the lecture

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“Can Religious Education be relevant to the non-religious pupil?”

The short answer to this - one that most RE professionals would agree with - is: “Yes, of course it can.” In fact, for most of its history, most people would have said, not only that it can be, but that it is.

However, while most of my work at the British Humanist Association (BHA) was based on the belief and hope that it can be, I’m not confident that it is yet relevant, everywhere.

So there is a longer, more complex and interesting answer to the question, and this evening I want to focus on what we might mean by “relevant to non-religious pupils”, and on whether contemporary RE is in fact relevant, and ways in which it could be more relevant.

There are certainly differences of opinion about relevance. Those who framed the Education Act of 1944 which first embedded RE firmly in the curriculum as a statutory requirement for all pupils (the only one at the time) did so just because they thought it relevant to all pupils, regardless of their personal beliefs.

The RE (or more properly RI, religious instruction) they set in place was essentially Christian scripture, albeit non-denominational – the implicit rationale being that almost everyone in 1940s England was a Christian, and those that weren’t probably ought to be, or at the very least could learn a thing or two from Christianity. As R A Butler (author of the 1944 Act) put it, the hope was that children would “gain knowledge of the Christian faith” and would “seek for themselves in Christianity principles which give a purpose to life and a guide to all its problems…”

This was largely the RE that my generation had – called, in my school, Religious Knowledge. Though it was mildly interesting culturally, it was mostly dull, not very memorable, and failed to provide any kind of preparation for life in the mobile and plural society that was developing even in the late 50s and early 60s.

Even the Church of England now admits that this “predominantly biblical [RE] … did not always inspire its pupils, nor was it dramatically successful at conveying biblical knowledge”.1 Neither, of course, did it have any personal spiritual or moral relevance to non-believers like me or, presumably, to the growing numbers of children of other faiths in our schools. The best that could be said for it was that it taught me something about the stories and traditions of Christianity and revealed clearly to me what I did not believe – but this is hardly what most people mean by “relevant”.

As to what I did believe, I was on my own, and I arrived at my humanist beliefs and values by a long and independent route that owed nothing to my religious education. And that, I think, remains largely the route that most non-religious children follow to this day, despite the considerable and welcome broadening out of RE since the 60s².

Of course, because of the devolved management of RE and a diversity of views on its nature and purpose, the evolution of RE has been slow and patchy, and one can generalise only cautiously.

But the impression I gained from working at the BHA is that non-religious ethical worldviews, such as Humanism, are often marginalised or criticised by omission, or presented only critically or negatively.

Or they are more subtly belittled by the usual assumptions and language of RE, and its habit (shared in the outside world by many religious commentators) of ascribing everything that is beautiful, good and true to a handful of world religions.

The young humanists that I met often found the subject interesting; they well understood the value of learning about the world religions and what is important to other people, and they were very interested in the existential and ethical questions that are so much part of RE today. But this 12-year-old humanist’s comment is fairly typical: “I think it’s quite interesting to learn what other people believe, but Humanism is never mentioned.”
That idea is reiterated by the ten-year-old boy quoted in the 2004 non-statutory National Framework for RE:

“I do not believe in God but I still enjoy RE. I like learning about other people’s faiths.”

But if it’s only about “other people’s faiths”, if it doesn’t acknowledge and include their beliefs, then RE, for non-religious pupils, is just “a spectator sport” (as a previous chair of this SACRE once described it).

Spectator sports are all very well, but participatory sports are much better for the health. And RE should surely be both:
- a spectator sport when teaching about other people’s worldviews and traditions, which for most pupils it is doing most of the time; and
- a participatory sport when it engages with personal values and beliefs and invites pupils to consider and evaluate their own worldviews.

If that personal engagement element of RE (or “personal search” as Scottish Religious and Moral Education nicely describes it) is to be a reality for many non-religious pupils, then we do need to think a bit harder sometimes about how non-religious pupils can be provided for, included, or even inspired.

And we are talking about a sizeable group here, one worth engaging:

According to the 2001 National Census, people with no religion formed the second largest “faith group”, comprising 15% of the population. (In Kingston it’s slightly more, at 18%).

Younger people were more likely than older people not to belong to any religion. Among 16 to 34 year olds, almost a quarter (23%) said that they had no religion, compared with less than 5% of people aged 65 or over. Other surveys of young people (for example those carried out by Revd Professor Leslie Francis and Revd Dr William Kay, and one done for the DfES in 2004) find anything between 58% and 65% of young people describing themselves as atheist or agnostic. (There’s no reason to suppose that young people Kingston are very different; though it’s possible, if they reflect the 2001 Census, that non-religious pupils form an even larger group here.)

The claims and aims of RE, as the subject presents itself today, in statements and preambles up and down the country, are highly relevant to non-religious pupils, of course. I can’t find much to quarrel with in aspirations such as these, from the National Framework, on “The importance of religious education”:

| Religious education provokes challenging questions about the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, beliefs about God, the self and the nature of reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human. It develops pupils’ knowledge and understanding of Christianity, other principal religions, other religious traditions and other world views that offer answers to questions such as these. It offers opportunities for personal reflection and spiritual development. It enhances pupils’ awareness and understanding of religions and beliefs, teachings, practices and forms of expression, as well as of the influence of religion on individuals, families, communities and cultures.  
| Religious education encourages pupils to learn from different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning. It challenges pupils to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics and to communicate their responses.  
| Religious education encourages pupils to develop their sense of identity and belonging. It enables them to flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community. Religious education has an important role in preparing pupils for adult life, employment and lifelong learning. It enables pupils to develop respect for and sensitivity to others, in particular those whose faiths and beliefs are different from their own. It promotes discernment and enables pupils to combat prejudice.” |
These aims are worth reminding ourselves of occasionally, because they are certainly worthwhile and relevant to all pupils, I would think. Opportunities to learn about the beliefs of others and to reflect on their own, to consider the "big questions" thoughtfully, comprehensively and deeply, to discuss contemporary moral issues and the roots of ethics in ways that mean something to them personally, opportunities that help to "develop their own sense of identity" ought surely to be the entitlement of all pupils, including non-religious ones. So do they, in fact, have these opportunities?

The 2004 National Framework for RE made two significant steps forward for non-religious pupils, I think. One was in its inclusive introductory statement:

"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 RE curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there should be opportunities for all pupils to study ... secular philosophies such as humanism."

The second step was its approach, which is broadly conceptual, uses relatively neutral and inclusive language, and implicitly offers opportunities for inclusion of a range of beliefs, including non-religious ones, in many topics at all Key Stages.

It is not at all specific or prescriptive at a detailed level – it is intended to be a framework, for local and faith school syllabus makers to interpret and fill out, and of course it is non-statutory, which means that syllabus makers can adopt it, adapt it, or ignore it completely.

So all one can say about the current situation across the country is that the content and time devoted to "secular philosophies such as humanism" vary considerably from one RE syllabus to another – though it is hard to see quite what the justifications for this variation might be.

The range of approaches includes:

- entire units or modules on Humanism at one or more Key Stages;
- one or two optional modules for teachers to choose – or not;
- occasional mentions of humanist perspectives within specific topics or themes;
- very careful screening of language, questions and tasks to ensure that they are genuinely open and do not contain inbuilt religious (often Christian) conclusions or assumptions;
- a statement somewhere near the beginning of the syllabus that RE is for pupils of all faiths and none, but with no further guidance for teachers on relevant content or assessment strategies;
- or there may even be, as in this recent advice on RE in church schools, some hostility and insensitivity towards non-religious worldviews – or indeed worldviews that are not Christian: "... Church of England schools recognise the common search of all humanity for ultimate truth and relationship with the divine. The secular assumption that there is no reality beyond the physical world is ultimately sterile..."; pupils in Church schools are supposed to " see how the truth of Christianity is relevant today..." 6 (This is not what I, or other non-Christians presumably, mean by relevant!)

I've observed all these approaches, some of which are patently more relevant and interesting to the non-religious than others, but I think the inclusive statement, with little further advice on content is, in fact, the most common arrangement – one that I would describe as an encouraging gesture towards inclusion, but which offers too little in practical terms for either the teacher or the student.

So what can we do in practice?

I'm going to finish by offering some advice for those who influence syllabuses and those who implement them, especially, of course, teachers. I'm not going to speculate here about what an ideal RE for the non-religious pupil would be like, or what it would be called – I've done that elsewhere. But we rarely have the luxury of starting with a blank sheet of paper, or the opportunity for radical syllabus development, so I'm going to focus pragmatically on fairly minor adjustments that I think any teacher could make in the classroom, with just a bit of encouragement from their syllabus.
Please note, I am not suggesting that this should replace learning about the beliefs of others in our society and world. Neither am I suggesting that the purpose of RE should be to turn all children into atheists or humanists. I think the professionals in the audience will know perfectly well that RE doesn’t work like this, and that learning about something is not the same as becoming that something, but there does remain a great deal of suspicion and misunderstanding about the aims and purposes of RE amongst parents and the general public, misunderstandings sometimes exacerbated by the media and politicians.

So what can be done to make RE more relevant to non-religious pupils?

Good inclusive teaching entails the following, all of which are based on existing good practice, and many of which might need only a few changes of emphasis or language in existing schemes of work:

- The use of inclusive language (for example, “belief” or “life stance” or “worldview” or “philosophy” or “ethical tradition” instead of, always, “religion” or “faith”). It would involve prefacing statements about religions or gods with “some people believe…” rather than implying that they are true, or that everyone believes them.

- Tasks that exclude or make assumptions would be avoided. For example, any pupil could attempt a “reflection”, though they might be unhappy at having to write or say a prayer, or at having to answer questions as if they were a Christian or a Buddhist or a Hindu. Questions such as “What is heaven like?” or the GCSE one that asked pupils to give advice to “a close friend of your own religion” don’t relate adequately to non-religious pupils.

- RE would acknowledge clearly that not everyone belongs to one of six world religions, that religion and morality are distinct from each other, and that religious answers to existential and moral questions are not the only ones worthy of consideration or respect.

- It would look at what various worldviews, including humanist ones, have in common, as well as the differences. (A previous speaker in this lecture series, Indarjit Singh, thought that RE focuses too much on differences, and I agree with him – but I’d go further than him in the worldviews I’d include in this exploration of the common ground.)

- Inclusive RE would acknowledge that spirituality can take many forms, and that every aesthetic or joyful experience or emotion or reflection is not necessarily a religious one.

Every subject on the school curriculum is supposed to contribute towards pupils’ “spiritual development”, and RE has always taken this obligation seriously. But it has sometimes also interpreted it rather narrowly, because, for some, the concept remains an essentially religious one.

But there is another perspective on this, one that finds spirituality or “awe and wonder” in those things that inspire or express the best in humanity: our growing understanding of the universe, and its size and complexity, the richness and beauty of the natural world, human ingenuity and creativity.

It’s a difficult, rather woolly and personal area, and I’m not going to claim that the things that inspire me, that I might define as spiritual – experiences of nature or the arts perhaps – will be shared by all non-religious pupils; the cartoon on the right quite rightly, and realistically, mocks that approach. But despite the difficulties, it’s an area well worth exploring, in an open-minded and inclusive way.
And it would involve learning something about Humanism: a worldview that many atheist and agnostic pupils will find sympathetic – and also why humanists hold beliefs like the following:

### Humanism in a nutshell

*Five important humanist beliefs, focusing on morality, meaning and purpose, inspiration, knowledge and evidence:*

- Humanists believe in shared moral values, based on human nature and experience alone. They take responsibility for their own actions, and believe that we should try to live good lives and help others to do so.

- Humanists seek to make the best of this life by creating meaning and purpose for themselves and by living life to the full.

- Humanists are inspired by art and culture and the rich natural world, and motivated by the desire for happiness and good relationships with others.

- Humanists look to experience, science and reason for their understanding of how the world works.

- Humanists do not believe in things for which there is no good evidence, such as gods or an afterlife, and they do not pray or worship or practise unnecessary self-denial.

For some pupils these are mere common sense, and many will recognise their own families’ beliefs and values in accounts of Humanism.

Others may learn that atheism does not automatically entail mindless hedonism, selfishness or carelessness of others or the environment – and in this way RE can extend its contribution to mutual understanding, toleration and social cohesion.

Humanism is different from religions in many respects and doesn’t correspond with all the typical RE subject matter, but where it does, it can offer something useful and complementary and relevant to many pupils.

Humanist perspectives can provide thoughtful and serious alternative viewpoints on many typical RE themes, such as: the existence of God; miracles; prayer; creation stories; death and the afterlife; rites of passage and ceremonies; story, myth, metaphor and symbol; ethics and contemporary social and moral issues. Common ‘RE’ topics such as medical ethical issues, the environment, human rights, world poverty, are not exclusively, or even mainly, religious topics, and that should be acknowledged.

There is more to Humanism, of course, but if non-religious pupils knew the word and understood some of the concepts, they could find out more if and when they felt it to be relevant to their lives.

Accommodating and interesting them doesn’t necessarily require a huge amount of extra time or content – it’s more a shift of tone and emphasis.

To sum up, the undoubted fact that RE can be relevant to pupils of all faiths and none doesn’t mean that it always is.

If RE had stuck in its 1950s mould, I think most humanists would have given up on it by now, and the BHA would just be advising non-religious parents who weren’t happy with it to exercise their right to withdraw their children from a more or less irrelevant subject, one that at its worst would (and sometimes does) offend and upset thoughtful atheists and agnostics.
It’s because RE has taken on board so many of the fascinating questions that all thoughtful human beings ask that we remain interested and involved, with the aim of ensuring that it relates properly to non-religious pupils too.

At its very best, RE can be a wide-ranging exploration of the big questions about life and death and about values, purpose and meaning that concern us all, and it’s hard to see why the humanist contribution to these debates should be ignored.

Non-religious pupils need as much support as religious ones in formulating and articulating their own beliefs, but their questions cannot be fully or satisfactorily answered by religious answers, interesting though they may be as examples of what others believe.

I think it is important that non-religious pupils don’t leave school thinking that they are failed religious believers or "nothings", or that their beliefs are worthless, or that morality and the “big questions” are irrelevant to them.

The “big questions” are highly relevant, of course, and they don’t crop up, much, elsewhere on the current school curriculum. So it’s up to those of us involved in RE to ensure that they are not presented as issues only for the religious, so that RE is as relevant as it can be - and more than just a 'spectator sport' - for the non-religious pupil.

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Notes
I am indebted to Terence Copley’s *Teaching Religion – fifty years of religious education in England and Wales* (University of Exeter Press, 1997) for some of the historical information here.

References
2. Codified in the 1988 Education Reform Act, and successive guidance from the DfES and the QCA.
4. Revd Professor Leslie Francis & Revd Dr William Kay *Teenage Religion and Values* (Gracewing, 1995)
7. E.g., *RE – could do better*, a paper presented to an IPPR seminar on RE and the proposed National Framework (January 2004)