

# A conversation about balance: key principles

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This document contains an outline of our basic premise that the key to effective RE is a balance between three key disciplines. Implicit within this is a specific understanding of the underlying purpose of RE on the broader school curriculum.

Throughout this document there are questions to stimulate conversation that you may wish to use yourself or with colleagues.

## 1 Definition of Purpose

This project is defining the purpose of RE as follows:

Helping children and young people hold balanced and well-informed conversations about religion and belief.

### Conversation Point

Do you agree with this statement of purpose? How might different groups of people understand the underlying purpose of RE?

## 2 Theology

In the context of RE, we are currently defining 'theology' as:

Conversations about the key ideas or concepts in religions and belief systems which have taken place throughout human history and continue to take place today within and beyond communities of faith...conversations about foundational beliefs within religions and worldviews; examining the key ideas or concepts in religions and belief systems.

### Believing

This is about believing. It looks at where beliefs come from, how they have changed over time, how they are applied differently in different contexts and how they relate to each other.

The word ‘theology’ literally means ‘study of God’; it is inevitable that the study of religions and beliefs will include some approach to the concept of ‘God’ or ‘Ultimate Reality’. However, religions and beliefs are not limited to these concepts.

Theology (insofar as it relates to an RE curriculum) considers:

- The origins of key beliefs in a tradition; looking through the lens of theology would enable pupils to consider the sources of beliefs, such as sacred texts, tradition, reason and experience; the reliability and authority of sources may also be debated.
- The ways in which beliefs have developed over time; looking through the lens of theology would help pupils understanding how key beliefs, concepts and ideas have changed through history, or have emerged at different points in response to societal events. It acknowledges that theology takes place within, between and beyond communities of faith.
- The ways in which beliefs relate to each other; looking through the lens of theology would help pupils make connections between different beliefs, concepts and ideas both within and between religions and belief systems/worldviews.
- The ways in which they shape the way believers see the world and each other; looking through the lens of theology would enable pupils to consider how theology impacts on the way believers see the world and, as a result, how they live their lives.<sup>1</sup>

Theology involves investigating key texts and traditions within different religions and belief systems, exploring the ways in which they have been used as authoritative for believers and the ways in which they have been challenged, interpreted and disregarded over time. It considers the use of reason in assessing the key ideas of a religion or belief system (thus crossing over with philosophy in places), as well as exploring the significance of experience on the claims made by religious and non-religious people. Theology enables children and young people to grapple with questions that have been raised by religions and beliefs over the centuries. Thus, we argue that everyone can have something to say about these ideas and concepts and that all can be theologians.<sup>2</sup>

### **Conversation Point**

The term ‘theology’ is sometimes associated with the particular study of God and not all religion and belief traditions include a concept of God. It is also often assumed to be connected to a faith- motivated study of religion. To what extent are assumptions about the term ‘theology’ a barrier to teaching pupils to engage with the work of theologians and to engage in their own critical analysis of beliefs in RE?

<sup>1</sup> McGrath, A E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*. 5th ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, *Subject Benchmark Statement: Theology and Religious Studies* (Gloucester: QAA, 2014).

### 3 Philosophy

In the context of RE, we have defined 'philosophy' as:

Conversations about thinking, reasoning and making judgements: investigating the nature of knowledge, reality and morality and the way in which we reason about them.

#### **Thinking/reasoning/making judgements**

This is about thinking. It is about finding out how and whether things make sense. It deals with questions of morality and ethics. It takes seriously the nature of reality, knowledge and existence.

For many thousands of years, human beings have asked questions about meaning and existence. Around the 6th century BCE these questions began to be systematized in religious philosophies in different areas of the world. This is the starting point for the discipline of philosophy. However, curiosity on its own is not enough; we also have the capacity to reason as well as wonder. It is this process of reasoning that lies at the heart of philosophy. Philosophy is less about coming up with answers to difficult questions and more about the process of how we try to answer them. It uses dialogue, discussion and debate to refine the way in which we think about the world and our place in it.

Philosophy contains three fields of enquiry that would be applicable to a balanced framework for RE:

- **Metaphysics:** metaphysics considers the nature of the world around us; using our senses and reason to think about the world and to ask questions about it; asking epistemological questions about how we know; examining how people make sense of the world they live in; examining and analyzing definitions of things, e.g. what we might mean by happiness, hope, truth or knowledge; looking through the lens of metaphysics would help pupils consider what the object of study might tell us about the nature of existence and reality.
- **Logic:** investigating the process of reasoning that takes place when we ask questions about the world and our place in it; this branch of philosophy considers the way in which statements are put together to form conclusions; looking through the lens of logic would help pupils consider whether they are asking reasonable questions of the object of study, as well as thinking about whether the object of study is providing a well-constructed and coherent response to questions of existence, reality, truth, morality, etc.
- **Moral philosophy:** moral philosophy considers the nature of good and evil, asking questions such as, 'How do we decide what is good? What is the nature of goodness?' and, 'What is a 'good' life?'; looking through the lens of moral philosophy would help pupils explore what the object of study is telling believers about the nature of goodness, how to make decisions and how to live a 'good' life.

As a discipline, philosophy has long been associated with the study of religions and beliefs, which is evidenced in the specialised field of philosophy of religion. Indeed, RE may be the curriculum area in which many children and young people first encounter philosophical ideas and thinking. This is not to say that philosophy is limited to a study of religions and beliefs, but it is to acknowledge that is a key element of a balanced RE curriculum.

### Conversation Point

We have categorised Philosophy in the context of RE as investigating questions of meaning, knowledge, existence and morality. It focuses on developing tools of critical analysis and helps pupils understand how they and others make judgements. How helpful is this? Do you think anything is missing that is crucial to Philosophy in the context of RE?

## 4 Human/social sciences

In the context of RE, we have defined 'human/social sciences' as:

Conversations about the human dimension of religions and beliefs: enquiry into the lived and diverse reality of religions and beliefs in the world today.

### Living/practising

This is about living. It explores the diverse ways in which people practise their beliefs. It engages with the impact of beliefs on individuals, communities and societies.

Religions and beliefs are not static entities that can be objectively studied. They are living and diverse, complex, sometimes chaotic, sometimes creative and always human (Jackson, Barratt and Everington, 1994<sup>3</sup>; Dinham and Shaw, 2015<sup>4</sup>). This means that a balanced framework for RE needs be mindful of not just what a religion or belief system says it is (the 'authoritative' version, as it were), but also the multiple ways in which it is lived. It is the difference between studying 'Christianity' and 'Christians' or 'Islam' and 'Muslims'. It is for this reason that the other two fields of enquiry are crucial, because the lived realities of religions and beliefs are often rooted in theological and philosophical interpretation. To that end, we have the opportunity to explore subject matter through the lens of social/human sciences.

These disciplines include three fields of enquiry that would offer a valuable contribution to a balanced framework for RE:

- Individual identities: various human/social scientific disciplines (e.g. psychology,

<sup>3</sup> Jackson, R., Barratt, M., and Everington, J., *Bridges to Religions: teacher's resource book*. (Oxford: Heinemann, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Dinham, A., and Shaw, M., *RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* (London: Goldsmiths University Faith and Society Unit, 2015).

anthropology and sociology) consider questions of individual identity; considering subject matter through the lens of these disciplines would help pupils consider how the object of study contributes to or impacts the individual identities of a believer.

- Communal identities: various human/social scientific disciplines (e.g. politics, anthropology and sociology) consider questions of communal identity; considering subject matter through the lens of these disciplines would help pupils consider how the object of study contributes to or impacts communal identities within and beyond religions and belief systems.
- Social structures: various human/social scientific disciplines (e.g. politics, economics and sociology) consider questions about human society; considering subject matter through the lens of these disciplines would help pupils consider how the object of study contributes to or impacts upon human patterns of life.

Engaging with the methodologies of the human/social sciences will help students investigate the ways in which religions, beliefs and religious believers have shaped and continue to shape societies around the world. They can promote better understanding of the ways in which religions and beliefs influence people's understanding of power, gender, compassion, and so on. The methodology includes listening to the voices and observing the practice of members of faith and belief communities. Considering both the strengths and weaknesses of religions and beliefs in their lived reality is a crucial element of helping pupils hold the balanced and informed conversations we hope for. It also enables pupils to consider the nature of religion itself and the diverse ways in which people understand the term 'religion'.

#### **Conversation Point**

In a time-pressured curriculum, how might we find opportunities to help children and young people engage with the diverse lived reality of religions and beliefs and why is it important that we should do so?

## **5 The issue of content and methodology/process**

This piece of work has been developed as a bottom-up approach to a particular need in the classroom. We are mindful of the fact that, as yet, we have not provided a formal theoretical framework in which the work sits and, as is our usual working practice, conversations about what such a framework might look like are ongoing. This means that, to a certain degree, what we present here is subject to certain limitations. For example, it has been noted in the initial research phase that there is a tension between presenting the content of theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences as part of a balanced RE curriculum, and delivering content via the methodologies of theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences as part of a balanced RE curriculum.

Our proposed structure enables pupils to engage with both the distinctive content of theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences, but also to develop key learning processes associated with RE. We believe that it would be appropriate for some students to engage with the specific methodological approaches of the three key disciplines, such as hermeneutics (theology), epistemology (philosophy) or ethnography (human/social sciences) – these could be engaged with as both content to be studied and methodology to be carried out in the classroom. We are mindful of the fact that methodological processes and subject content are often intertwined. For example, when studying a historical event, students often engage with source texts, which is both a form of encountering content and engaging in methodological processes. We do not understand that our work should be limited to either methodological process or subject content, nor do we believe that it is as simple as applying this dichotomy to any given curriculum.

Our immediate concern is to produce practical resources to assist teachers in the classroom. As research continues, both in the classroom and in conversation with a range of partners, we expect the way in which the content/methodology relationship relates to a balanced RE curriculum to be sharpened.

We intend to produce a more detailed account of the theoretical framework that underpins these resources in due course, which will explore the relationship between the methodological processes and subject content of the three disciplines: theology, philosophy and the human/social sciences.

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