

Three, Four or Six ...?

Summary

The paper sets out to explain the reason for the wording and reference to 3 religions in the collective statement of principles. For the secondary phase, it would allow children to focus on the religious tradition from which they come, meet the requirements of law, and give teachers flexibility. It is also religiously more sensitive. In many respects the focus on numbers is a digression from the purpose of RE which should be the real determinant of what is taught.

Introduction

The final paragraph of the collective statement of principles has generated some concern and a word of explanation appears to be required to justify the existing wording. The considerations are essentially of an educational, religious and legal nature.

Educational Considerations

The context of the specification is the study of religions '*identifiably and systematically*'. The conciseness and brevity of the statement does not make explicit the educational thinking that underpins this phrasing. It assumes a fundamental difference between the phases of primary and secondary education. Primary education is expected to be more holistic, addressing the whole child, the curriculum being more expressive and kinetic, and as far as RE is concerned clearly focussed on the moral and spiritual life supported by a range of religious traditions, emphasising the extensive moral and spiritual consensus that exists between religious traditions. In this context the desire to show the catholicity [or universality] of basic values would encourage teachers to look as widely as possible. It is in secondary education where the distinctive features of religions become more telling, where the study becomes more 'cerebral and literate' and the significance of differences between the religions more intensively evaluated. Any systematic study of this nature requires a degree of specialisation. The main question is how much specialisation should there be? Will that specialisation help to deepen the pupils' appreciation of the religious life and will

it support educational strategies of valuing the dignity of the other and of promoting the well being of society? The possibility of topic work to achieve these ends with reference to more religions in secondary school is not ruled out.

It is at this point that it is important to liberate teachers from a regime of over prescription and to rely on their *professional* judgement and expertise, referring to the needs and abilities of pupils, the wishes of parents and the school context. The current '95 syllabus recommends the use of 'material from at least **three** traditions, one of which must be Christianity'. This phraseology, like the statement of collective principles, is open-textured and allows the teacher to exercise his or her judgement; the recommendations of the non-statutory framework are much more prescriptive and will tie the teacher down to do things he or she may not believe to be desirable in his or her situation and to work in areas in which they have no great expertise. The Framework recommendations are idealistic, where preferably everyone learns and knows about everything, and it is difficult to quarrel with this ambition. However, in a finite world, with limitations of time, limitations on human knowledge and on the capacity of pupils to absorb and properly synthesise and appropriate information, it is for the teachers' professional judgement to determine the breadth and depth that may be both desirable and realisable given the background of the pupils in the class.

Good reasons, based on some perceived failure in the current delivery of RE, are needed to change the *status quo*. The reasons for becoming more prescriptive than the current syllabus happens to be at present and to follow the Framework on this particular point are not at all obvious. I do not believe the evidence exists, demonstrating the value of greater plurality at the expense of closer attention to fewer, which would encourage one to compel teachers to broaden their curriculum still further; on the contrary, the range of religious traditions teachers are expected to cover by convention has seriously undermined any deep knowledge of any *one* of them. Shallow knowledge of many traditions can do more harm than a deeper knowledge of fewer.

It is on these *educational grounds* that the open texture of the collective statement of principles is to be preferred to that set out in the non-statutory national framework.

Religious Considerations

The reference to '*six principal*' religions and 'others' is distinctly unhelpful in a city that boasts the presence of a great number of faiths. It suggests that some traditions are in the premier league and others in a lower league. Every tradition shares something with the others but also has something distinctive to offer. This should be conceived qualitatively rather than purely quantitatively – whether the latter is worked out demographically on a City basis, national or worldwide basis. Every person's religion is the principal religion to him or her. It undermines every notion of inclusion to say to some, "you are not 'principal' but belong to the category of 'other'". The law does refer to 'principal' religious traditions but wisely neither names them nor enumerates them; it simply recognises that there are traditions other than Christianity that are important to people in Great Britain and which might be purposefully and valuably used in schooling.

Religious faith permeates the whole of life and culture; it informs whole civilisations. To demonstrate this multi-dimensional nature of religious faith will take time in the classroom. In addition, religious faith is primarily about inwardness and, as such, this should be the main focal point. The more the discussion is on the plurality of faiths, the more likely the teaching will focus on externals. An expectation must be created that different traditions have something distinctive and valuable to contribute to human spiritual life. This interest should dominate rather than whether pupils study religions identifiably and systematically in sufficient numbers. Reference to *any* number is actually unhelpful and if reference is made to 3 it is wholly symbolic of the need to look outward and beyond the horizons of one's own familiar world. What is needed is a strategy to combat sectarianism in which minds are closed to the contributions of others. To achieve this a deeper study of a religion of, e.g. Islam, must search for those resources in that tradition, which encourage the pupil to value the contribution of other faiths and to critique those aspects within the tradition which appear to diminish the other.

Tolerance and openness towards others are much more likely to come from a confident identity capable of reaching out to others rather than from a threatened identity for whom the existence of others simply serves to highlight their own

vulnerability and insecurity. It is a liberal educational (but unproven) assumption that knowledge alone helps to subvert prejudice and hatred of the other. It is belied by human history. The Nazi's were not ignorant of Judaism and Jewish history. The internecine slaughter in Rwanda was not caused by ignorance of the other. The Hutus and Tutsis lived in close proximity and had often intermarried. The facile teaching of as many traditions as possible does not achieve the purported benefits claimed for it. This is, of course, not a recommendation that ignorance is to be preferred but an invitation to consider how the goals of tolerance and openness in society are best achieved.

The goal of religious depth is not achieved simply by multiplying the number of religions studied. In history many profound and deep people, prophets, gurus, thinkers of all kinds knew only one tradition, or at best two or three. If globalisation offers more, we should look to the *qualitative* contribution traditions other than one's own can make. But this goal truly requires a depth of study and the associated allocation of curricular time; superficial surveys will not do this.

It is on these *religious grounds* that permission for more detailed and purposeful study at secondary level is deemed desirable and to that end the open texture of the collective statement of principles is to be preferred to that of the framework

Legal Considerations

The law speaks of the curriculum being 'broad and balanced'. This refers to the school curriculum as a whole, not to any one element of the curriculum. Religious education above all must balance the apparently secular curriculum with the character and perceptions of religious life. It cannot be content with presenting a secular view of religious life if it is to contribute breadth and balance. Religious education as an identifiable element of the total curriculum must, above all, be purposeful, religious and spiritual.

The European Convention of Human Rights offered parents the right to have their children schooled in their own religion or philosophy of life. One needs to ask how this can be done, given other demands. If the law privileges Christianity for

demographic, historic and cultural reasons in the syllabus so that it is '*in the main Christian*', how does one satisfy the right of *non*-Christians to an education of their children in their faith? If one privileges the faith of the family background of the child then one must prescribe the means by which this is to be done. This can hardly be achieved for non-Christians without a significant chunk of curricular time. How can the rights of a Bahai' child be recognised if one first prescribes that the so-called 'principal' religions must be studied first?

Knowledge of one's own tradition must be balanced by knowledge of the valued contribution of others. For the sake of Christians and non-Christians alike the recognition of other traditions treated at a serious level would suggest at least a third faith. To increase the minimum prescribed number still further without good reason, [e.g. to insure proper inclusion in the classroom] could begin to undermine the 'in the main' clause or the education of non-Christian children in their faith. For example, the Framework mentions 6 (principal) + 3 (other) + 2 secular ideologies for a total of 11. Given 45 hours of curricular time in any year and 11 different identifiable religious and non-religious ideologies, they would get 4 hours each, a recipe for trivialisation. If, as some others have maintained in the past, 'in the main' means at least 50% of curricular time should be assigned to Christianity, the time allocated to non-Christian faiths would be two hours per year. This highlights still further the practical constraints on what one can do. In this area of *identifiable and systematic* study the real task is to develop in pupils attitudes of openness towards others, not to insure every religious tradition gets a mention. The second is not to be confused with the first.

The reference in the '88 Act to the development 'of pupils' and 'of society' should focus attention much more on what is to be achieved *by* the study of religions than on the range of religions covered. Without this focus the attention on the prescription of the numbers of traditions becomes a diversion. What one purposefully selects from a set of traditions will be far more important than the fact that religions are studied.

When it comes to the plurality of faith the law defines the purpose of study not the numbers.

Conclusion

The wording on the numbers of religions in the statement of principles is purposefully open and flexible. This is designed to give teachers maximum professional freedom to realise the *purpose* of Religious Education. RE should give students access to the depth of religious life together with the cultivation of agreed moral values and cultural creativity. In addition, the selection of material from within a tradition and from a range of traditions should have social solidarity and social cohesion in view. With a genuine clarity of purpose the number of traditions becomes well nigh irrelevant except on some assumption about what an indeterminate encounter with a restricted or increasing numbers of religions actually achieves. Instinct at this point may not be a very reliable guide.

Marius Felderhof,
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P.S. To avoid the trap of the numbers game and to meet the objections of the Hindu community, where the collective statement reads:

For this aspect of the syllabus the study of three religions (one of which will be Christianity) will be more appropriate than of six (whilst reference to more than three may well be required by subject matter and audience).

could be replaced by:

For this aspect of the curriculum, any child should be able to study the tradition from which he or she comes, Christianity, and the minimum of one other tradition selected to help realise the goals of RE.