



# Synoptic vision: some research priorities for RE

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## Abstract

Religious Education (RE) is more than a single curriculum subject and research should give more attention to that fact. Drawing on a lifetime’s engagement with RE, this article identifies ten topics that deserve urgent pursuit if the interests of children and young people are to be more effectively understood and addressed. They begin with a cluster on the nature and extent of RE provision within both schools and colleges and in teacher education. These are followed by ones stretching horizons for understanding religious dimensions of moral and social development. They culminate in a proposal for a radical initiative to transform the collective life of schools with a calendared celebration of plurality. Though focussed primarily on the UK context and that of England in particular, they invite extrapolation elsewhere.

**Keywords** Teacher education · Religion · Conscience · Worship

The last five to ten years has seen some very stimulating exploration of the definition and scope of Religious Education (RE) and Worldviews—Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead’s successive Reports, the RE Council’s *Commission on RE*, Adam Dinham’s *Religion and Belief Literacy*, and now the splendidly innovatory Ofsted Research review on RE by subject lead inspector Richard Kueh. All this appears largely to have been done with minimal consultation with advocates and agencies for other curriculum areas or attention to reports being produced from within them.

For anyone concerned with Religion and indeed Ethics in education, ‘siloining’ of subjects is not only falsely constricting, it is also a threat to the interdependence of the knowledge curriculum. Reconfiguration of any one curriculum aspect, focus, or subject is likely to have impact on others. A shared understanding of the ‘architecture of knowledge’ is a wiser route for coherent learning and teaching education than a singular mindset. Philip Phenix’s *Realms of Meaning* is a classic analysis in this regard, ranging from Symbolics, Empirics, Esthetics, Synnoetics, Ethics to Synoptics. The last of these includes History, Philosophy and Religion; they extend to and fro across and into all the others. ‘Religion’ has to do with the deepest, most comprehensive and ultimate of all realms of meaning. It ramifies within and across the entire curriculum.

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My listing of indicative topics for researching RE has this in mind. They would each redound to the eventual advantage of all children and young people in our schools, academies and colleges. There are ten. They are focussed in areas I've been most directly engaged with. It may well be that some of them are already being well pursued without my knowing, since my last foray into comprehensive, systematic checking of what is current in empirical research was as long ago as 2014 (Gates & Jackson, pp. 89–92). The ten are set out under three headings: Provision, Horizon stretching, and Centre Point.

## 1 Provision

This first cluster has special priority for me because it represents a deliberate shift which I made in the 1970s in deploying of such research energies which I had on top of teaching and admin commitments. I had become acutely aware of the peril in which RE was finding itself in respect of quantity and quality of provision and the underfunding of specialist staffing and resources. In the foundation meetings of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV) in 1978 and 1980, I maintained my doctoral research focus on religious and moral development of children and young people, but ducked from active membership thereafter till 2008.<sup>1</sup> Instead, I resolved to focus primarily on data gathering and analysis relating to RE provision—staffing, time allocation, exam options—along with joining in efforts from within the RE Council of England & Wales (REC) to promote it with government agencies and the full range of relevant faith communities including Humanists. The shift was evidenced first in my *RE Directory for England and Wales* (1982) followed by annual updates analysing DES statistical bulletins, with an interim collation in 1993: *Time for Religious Education and Teachers to Match*, and continuing throughout my time as REC chair. It also fed my determination to develop internet-based resource supports—RE-XS, PHILTAR, YBGUD, [www.moralcapital.info](http://www.moralcapital.info) and most recently [www.armisticenow.net](http://www.armisticenow.net).

My fear is that we are now undergoing a repeat threat and that the capacity for resurgence is diminishing as full-time academic and professional strength is being significantly dismantled—an unwittingly tragic result of government education policy with regard to the school curriculum, teacher education, and both university and local authority funding.

Here are my five on Provision:

### 1.1 The nature and extent of specialist staffing in RE throughout university and alternative provision of initial and continuing teacher education and training

Given the expectations for Religious Education/Religion and Worldview Education (RE/RWE) as variously identified, eg. by the several reports and reviews already mentioned, plus the expectations of Agreed Syllabuses and in documentation for schools of a religious character, it is reasonable to suppose that all providers of relevant academic and

<sup>1</sup> This distribution of interests is reflected in *Transforming Religious Education* (2007).

professional education and training will be qualified specialists in the subject. With specific reference to RE, what is the evidence in regard to their relevant qualifications, allocated teaching and research time, relative organisational seniority, and formal employment status<sup>2</sup>?

## **1.2 Provision made in universities and ITT/ITE programmes for inter-disciplinary engagement on the part of all involved academic staff**

During my eight years of responsibility for Post Graduate Certificate in Education/Religious Education (PGCE RE) at Goldsmiths (and followed subsequently at St Martin's), we introduced a requirement that *every* student subject specialist should in turn give an exposition on the distinctive educational worth of their subject to students from *all* the other subjects. Fellow tutors as well as students, across the different subject departments, came to value this as an ingredient which had usually been missing from subject degree programmes as well as previous PGCE experience. It would be revealing to investigate what opportunities and obligations there are for university Initial teacher training/Initial teacher education (ITT/ITE) tutors to engage in inter-disciplinary teaching and learning and what their attitude towards the value of such is.

## **1.3 Nature and extent of 16–19 non-examination RE provision, especially in Further Education (FE)**

Research has frequently been carried out on the nature and extent of Religious Studies (RS) exam and general RE provision for full-time 16–19 aged students in schools/academies/sixth form colleges. Those investigations apply to no more than half of that age range. For the other half who do not leave public education until they are 18/19, any investigation tends only to consider exam provision. The nature and extent of any RE/RWE provision in FE deserves scrutiny as a properly intrinsic component of that continuing format of community education and learning. FE along with apprenticeship and vocational training has been notoriously underfunded in the educational economy, so it will be no great surprise if research on existing RE/RWE provision in FE reveals neglect. Research is needed both to document the lack in RE provision and to develop a strategy for its redevelopment.

## **1.4 Head teacher education relating to all aspects of RE**

Given that head teachers/principals 'carry the can' for all aspects of RE provision, it would be informative to learn what attention is/was given to their understanding of RE in their own appointment procedure and in any subsequent management education and training. It would be important that any survey is inclusive of all types of primary and secondary schools/academies/ colleges. It might usefully also include an approach to discover what is asked by appointing panels of Local Authority, Diocesan and other bodies.

<sup>2</sup> The thinness of qualifications in RE in English teacher education by comparison with Germany is remarked by Bernd Schroeder (2016).

## 1.5 Respective RE and moral education (ME) stances and strategies of successive prime ministers, secretaries of state, ministers + special advisers for education over last 25 years

Inner workings of governments on most aspects of their operation are vital but difficult to gain access to, except through candid diaries and biographies. Personal experience, however, tells me that persistent digging would be revealing. For instance, behind the decision by Secretary of State (SoS) Charles Clarke to authorise the development of the non-statutory *National Framework for RE* was a nudge on him from Tony Blair, prompted by a personal communication from the REC chair conveyed to him by the then Minister of Faith. Rather different was the decision by Michael Gove, as soon as appointed SoS, to terminate the well-grounded *REsilience* Project designed to support teachers in addressing contentious issues in the classroom, including violent extremism. It was popular in schools, and across faith communities in both England and Wales. He himself had written *Celsius 7/7* (2006) regarding Islam. Is it relevant that Dominic Cummings is acknowledged therein and was also already a Specialist Adviser in 2010? Anyway, the partnership advisory status which the REC had with government – reflected in the 2010 production of *Guidance on RE in English Schools*—also ceased overnight.

## 2 Horizon stretching

The second cluster of my suggestions of priority research topics is four in number. The title of my PhD thesis was *Religion in the developing world of children and young people* (Lancaster University 1975). It was principally an opportunity for me to engage with boys and girls between the ages of 6 and 16 from two different parts of the country, in equal numbers and of each age. Initially, over 1000 completed the same hour-long written exercise. I then individually interviewed a subset of these for an hour each (same questions and activities across the ages), selected according to their respective backgrounds – 82 Church of England, 81 no-attachment, 38 Free Church, 40 Roman Catholic, 41 Jewish, 38 Sikh, and 17 Muslim. Empathically, it stretched my understanding of those backgrounds, any age-related sequencing in children's thinking, and the correlation of artistic, moral, physical, political, and scientific usage with religious language. It anchored me then and since, and it's reflected in these four suggestions.

### 2.1 Revisiting of longitudinal study of any developmental sequencing involved in 'pupils' understandings of 'key concepts' and symbolic language in religion

There's no doubting general recognition of the need for teacher sensitivity regarding what is 'age appropriate' for pupils. Nor, either, for the need to be wary of procrustean assumptions about stage sequences of their developmental capacities for understanding. That said, both small and large-scale comparative investigation of cross curricular understanding of 'key concepts' (eg. 'thunder and lightning' in science, 'homeland' in geography, 'Member of Parliament' in Personal and Social Education (PSE), 'prayer' in RE<sup>3</sup>) would be revealing. Even more revealing and important would be a monitoring of the development of

<sup>3</sup> These were terms I used in my PhD, but others would be equally relevant.

‘symbolic sense’ in relation to artistic expression (painting, music, dance) and religious language (verbal, visual, and ritual). It is my impression that attention to the potential relevance of ‘psychogenetic’ factors for curriculum specification is now underplayed. I hope I’m wrong.

## 2.2 Insights from psychology on sense of ought and ‘consciencing’

It is somewhat ironic that a term which is universal in the language of human rights, immediately recognisable as pointing to personal integrity, common in political discourse and a primary ingredient in some religious traditions has become unusual in respect of public specifications regarding education: conscience. Although there will rightly be suspicion of the highly variable ‘superego’, that does not justify deliberate inattention to it along with the development of moral sense and moral agency, nor their constriction to the solely utilitarian. Research which combines attention to relevant insights from the social sciences with a curriculum development initiative would be invaluable as a research priority. Recent research evidence of children as young as 18 months shown as behaving with a sense of fairness warrants extrapolation.

## 2.3 Interface of RE with ME

This topic shifts from the more psychological to the more philosophical. The relation between RE and ME has been ambivalent, even contentious, in both directions. ‘RE must avoid instrumentalist justifications.’ ‘Religions are multi-dimensional; ethics are a very variable aspect.’ ‘Ethics are autonomous and linking with religion is a distraction.’ ‘ME is what’s needed in schools, not RE.’ In discussions of name-change, I have favoured Scotland’s ‘*Religious and Moral Education*’ (RME), but I recognise the fearful connotation of moralism. It would be hypocritical of me to reject *Religion and Worldviews* since for many decades I’ve used the term in apologetics for RE. That said, clarification is needed of whether, or if not why not, political views and ideologies come into play. Neo-liberal/capitalist and Marxist, *Extinction Rebellion* and *Deep Adaptation* all potentially qualify. But crowd booings and barbs from senior politicians at footballers taking the knee over *Black Lives Matter* are a ready reminder of the explosive reaction to Marxism in the Birmingham 1975 *RE Agreed Syllabus and Handbook*.<sup>4</sup> I would rather argue that the conjunction of ‘Religion and Ethics’ is a creative avenue for delineating the condition of mutual interrogation which properly exists between their respective autonomies. Both are intrinsic aspects of the conjoint human experience of believing and valuing (Gates, 2011).

## 2.4 Inter faith ‘theologies’ of education (including non-theistic)

In my own PhD research, one of the questions I asked boys and girls to consider was whether all religions are equally true and equally false, and how we might be able to tell. It is now even more obvious that our national context is one of competing claims to truth. Our public institutions acknowledge that. We are a constitutional monarchy, with citizens

<sup>4</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/1975-03-26/debates/329cc586-8fe7-42c4-ae2f-84adc5d10746/ReligiousEducationAndCommunism>.

of different degrees of aversion and approval of that fact. Christianity is politically affirmed in the form of the nationally established Church of England, whilst admitting not only Christian diversities but also those of other faiths. Monarch and Church have both affirmed that their role is to serve and not control in a context which is secular and multi-faith as well as Christian. Sooner or later we may vote for change in either or both regards; for the moment they remain.

The national RE tradition has always recognised a degree of religious plurality – why else the talk of ‘Agreed Syllabuses’? Remarkably, the 2004 *Non-statutory National Framework for RE* was formally approved not only by academic and professional associations, but also by the leaders of faith communities. And it was judged as permissibly relevant for both community and ‘denominational’ schools. This was declaration of a promise that the once Dual System of partnership of Church and State in public education had become a Plural System of partnership of Faith Communities and State (Gates, 2005).

Research to help take this forward would examine the respective ‘theologies’ of education’ of each of the faith traditions represented nationally, along with the rationale for their approach to and engagement in inter faith dialogue. This is relevant for *Standing Advisory Councils on RE* (SACREs) and *National Association of SACREs* (NASACRE) as much as for *Inter Faith Network for the UK* (IFNET) and its local and regional associations. It’s also relevant for all schools of a religious character – whatever their denomination. Without this, it is too easy for discussion and development to be done on separate tracks. An understanding of these different views would be invaluable for RE/RWE teachers. How else are they able to answer general questions from pupils about the relations between one religious tradition and another, or more specifically about a flare up such as the current one between Jews and Muslims which has led to the interruption of all of the previously thriving joint projects in England between the two faith streams.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Centre point

#### 3.1 School assemblies and collective worship

This last suggestion is one which I am myself pursuing. In recent years evidence of social disparity and division has been mounting – poverty and wealth gap, arguments over Brexit, attitudes towards refugees and trafficking, prison conditions, the mixed blessing of mobile phone connecting and yet disconnecting and dividing. Nearly ten years ago, I had been overjoyed by the Olympic Games Opening Ceremony with its celebration of the National Health Service (NHS), now amidst Covid I was moved by the weekly clapping for the NHS – a collective performative ritual. It re-awakened a long-held view that, in a Durkheimian sense, school assemblies are a form of religious ritual even without the legal terminology of Collective Worship (CW).

More specifically, I realised how much I was and am regretting that a truth, which was evident to politicians, religious leaders and educationalists during World War 2, that there is a communal dimension to RE is being overlooked at a time of comparable threat: global pandemic and environmental crisis. Making effective preparation for a post-war future

<sup>5</sup> A fact drawn to my attention by Clive Lawton, an initiator of *Limmud* and chair of the Shap Working Party throughout its later years.

required the highlighting of the need for priority attention to beliefs and values. This was why RE was given exceptional status and defined in the 1944 Education Act (and again in the 1988 ERA) as both the teaching part - Religious Instruction (RI) and the assembling part (CW). Now the notion of the latter's integral part in RE is largely denied, except in schools and academies with a religious foundation. Especially in secondary settings its provision is patchy and perfunctory, with Ofsted ceasing to inspect it.<sup>6</sup> Major reports on RE bracket it. And a Humanists UK sponsored Bill to abolish it has recently had its first reading in the House of Lords.<sup>7</sup> What a wasted opportunity for whole-school enrichment from RE/RWE!

Primary legislation is actually permissive: 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.<sup>8</sup> What's been missing is any nationally funded curriculum research and development initiatives to demonstrate the scope of what could and should be done in all schools and academies in an educationally appropriate way. Of course, worship services of the kind held by faith communities in celebration of their singular beliefs are inappropriate. For many young people, such liturgies lack resonance. CW is not that. Rather it has to do with shared open exploration, affirmation and celebration of what matters, what's of most worth, in the collective hearts and minds of teachers and pupils, including those expressed in living religious traditions.

Having talked this through with lead officers of the REC, NASACRE and IFNET, I resolved to work in an explorative way over the next two years before looking towards any realistic form of nationally co-ordinated roll out.

Preparation began with a look at some key terms whose interpretations can get in the way of sensible thinking on this front—nation/patriotism, faith, religion, humanism and worship. There is a timeline and literature survey (including my own input on this since 1972). Next four shaping ingredients for CW and 'depth charging' are identified. These are:

### 3.1.1 Special moments

These are common in individual and family life, that of communities and nations, and in religious traditions: Hellos and goodbyes, Gratitude and thankfulness, Regret and sorrying, Wonder and wowing, and Hoping and seeking.

### 3.1.2 Belonging and boundaries

Building and extending a sense of relational context is fundamental to who we individually are. These feed into explorations of future roles in life.

### 3.1.3 Subject celebration

Arousing curiosity, discovering the delights of learning and knowing are at the heart of education. Each curriculum subject has its own potential in this regard, as does the focus of

<sup>6</sup> For details on this background, see Manifesto section of [www.communityclapping.net](http://www.communityclapping.net).

<sup>7</sup> <https://hansard.parliament.uk/lords/2021-05-27/debates/F1E0AFE5-681C-4851-881A-DA1C5D5CEA8D/Debate>.

<sup>8</sup> Education Reform Act. (1988). Section 7(1). Neither *Circular 1/89* nor the more contentious 'corrective' *Circular 1/94* has changed the force of the Act.

a teacher's own enthusiasm. Why not give time together to appreciate and ponder on all the realms of meaning and knowing across the whole curriculum?

### 3.1.4 Living faith streams

It is a strength of the UK to be Christian, Secular and Multi Faith. Given their current insights and impact, even more than their past determinations, faith streams including secular humanism warrant celebratory attention in the collective life of every school.

Finally, shaped by all these inspirational ingredients, an annual calendrical sequence is outlined, based on three terms of 12 weeks, and twice weekly instead of the full legal requirement of daily CW.

Taking into account the available national census data on religious demography, the times allocated to specific faith streams is as follows

Christian 6	Jewish 3	Muslim 3	Hindu 3.
Sikh 3	Buddhist 3	Humanist 3	Baha'i 1
Jain 1	Pagan 1	Rastafarian 1	Zoroastrian 1
Inter Faith Week 1			

The novelty of this entire approach is that it is affirmative of Christian breadth rather than narrowness. It gives public acknowledgement of religious diversity as characteristic of the UK. And it also exemplifies worship as on a par with regular human 'giving worth to'. Moreover, it remains open for 'denominational schools' to provide supplementary perspectives.

As a test of practicability and a resource for further refinement, the next step is to take this forward in co-operation with a local SACRE working with a small group of teachers and schools.

Very significantly, it raises the profile of RE as Synoptic Vision in education and its central claim on staffing resources.

All this is fully documented on the project website [www.communityclapping.net](http://www.communityclapping.net), which invites continuing comment.

## 3.2 A concluding rider: the matter of national constitutions and religious demographics

Given the complexities of human civilisation, it is inevitable that there are tensions between what might best be theoretically and normatively desirable regarding RE/RME/RWE provision throughout the world and the form which that can realistically be put in place in any one nation. Internationally, legal affirmation of the freedom of religion and the importance of conscience are commonplace, but how this is translated in particular national systems of public education is both variable and surprising.<sup>9</sup>

The novelty of the UK is that its demographic and constitutional context has increasingly been interpreted and acknowledged as Secular and Multi Faith as well as Christian, and, within each of the now devolved educational systems of England, Northern Ireland,

<sup>9</sup> For comparative scrutiny of the English provision by scholars from Australia, Canada, Continental Europe, Israel, Malaysia, Russia, South Africa, Turkey and USA, see Gates (2016).



Scotland and Wales, there is opportunity to rework constitutional givens for RE creatively to demonstrate and celebrate what that plurality might best mean. In turn, there is hope that children and young people can safely explore and enrich their own sense of personal identity and meaning within national educational frameworks, which are genuinely open to the world. However, the realisation of that hope very much depends upon the deepening of the personal and professional education of all teachers and not only RE specialists. They need to be prepared for a triple hermeneutical challenge: sensitive mediation between the starting points of individual children and young people, the wider British and global contexts, and living religious traditions (and not only the theistic ones). In this enablement lies the most vital focus for RE research.

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