

# Religious Education is at a crossroads

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Excluding Religious Education from the Baccalaureate in England risks unravelling years of progress in developing a subject rich in reasoning and discursive skills, say experts.

The conclusion was reached by Professor James Conroy at a recent conference to mark the end of the Religion & Society Programme, a UK Research Councils' initiative which invested in the largest suite of research projects into religion in public life.

Prof Conroy noted that where Religious Education (RE) is given only a marginal place in the curriculum, teaching can be “dominated by somewhat crude comparisons, which misrepresent the ‘being-in-the-world’ nature of religious attachment”.

The study, conducted by the University of Glasgow, King's College London and Queen's University Belfast, involved in-depth observations and collaboration with teachers in 24 schools across the UK which self-identified as sites of good practice in RE.

Researchers concluded that RE offers students a positive experience, develops their discursive abilities and contributes to multicultural awareness, and is often led by highly committed and thoughtful teachers capable of navigating the complex territory of religious beliefs and attachments in contemporary society.

The researchers say the findings demonstrate that RE is at a crossroads: caught between a vision of Religious Studies as a rigorous academic

discipline, concerned with exploring questions of meaning and value in the great religious and philosophical traditions; and an older vision of RE as satisfying a range of social and moral functions tangential to the study of religion.

The researchers claim RE is often overburdened with expectations laid upon the subject by politicians, educators, religious groups and schools, making up for shortfalls in citizenship education, community cohesion, sex education, collective worship and a range of other entailments.

Professor Conroy said: “While teachers in other subjects will, of course, wish to engage with questions of meaning and value – in literature or history for example – only Religious Education makes the exploration of questions of value intrinsic to the nature of the subject itself.”

In 2010, in a letter to his predecessor, Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State of Education for [England](#) and Wales, cited RE alongside Citizenship and Personal, Social and Health Education as subjects to receive lower priority in the comprehensive spending review.

Pointing to the strengths of an academic model of RE, Dr. David Lundie, a co-investigator on the project said: The teacher points students not only to the limits of imagination, but to the limits of hope – opening possibilities for personal meaning-making on a level beyond the literal.”

While echoing the calls from faith leaders for the inclusion of RE in the English Baccalaureate, Prof Conroy and his research team also point to the continued confusion which surrounds their discourse, conflating the academic rigours of the subject with various social entailments around students’ social development, community cohesion, and the like.

Prof Conroy said: “Religiously literate young people are able to explore the ways in which religious and philosophical world views endow the

material world with value and explanation.

“As educators, the urge to reduce education to a series of functional purposes needs to be called into question. The study of [religion](#) as a social practice is the one area in the curriculum where this happens by the very nature of the subject, which lends RE a distinctive character, both in state schools and in schools of a religious character.”

Provided by University of Glasgow

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