

Talk at St Mary's Church Ecclesfield

"I don't like RE."

"RE is pointless."

"RE has nothing to do with me."

"Colleges don't need us to have RE."

"I don't believe in God, why do I have to do RE?"

"If I want to have sex, I will. Whenever, and whoever I want to with."

"Why do we only learn about other religions – why not learn about us?"

"Religion isn't true."

"They blow us up, so why do we have to learn about Hindus getting married?"

"There is no such thing as God. Why bother learning about it?"

"Jesus isn't real. I am a Christian though."

"My mum thinks RE is pointless. She thinks I should do more English and Maths coursework."

All comments said to me in the last few weeks. Hence the start of my defence as to why RE is important, in fact, essential for students at Ecclesfield School.

RE today is a different subject to what many of you here may remember. It has in fact been the longest established subject in the School curriculum, being a legal entitlement for all pupils since 1948. All schools, primary, secondary and tertiary have a legal requirement to offer at least one hour of RE per week - At Ecclesfield School we are happy to offer this entitlement and more to pupils, maybe not the case in all schools and colleges across the country.

Unlike other subjects it does not, yet, have a national curriculum. Instead the curriculum is locally agreed, with members of the SACRE, that is, Standing advisory Committee for Religious Education, meeting and deciding on what is the most appropriate curriculum content for the relevant area, in our case Sheffield LEA. The SACRE is made up of teachers and representatives of religious faiths from the local area. Here in Sheffield, the Locally Agreed Syllabus has recently undertaken a new revision, and is now into schools across Sheffield. Rather than give explicit learning plans, the syllabus puts a lot of control into each school. The aim is to allow schools to develop programmes relevant for their pupils, and to try and foster creativity amongst the teachers of RE in the city.

Here I have a couple of myths to dispel:

- a. RE is about making developing young Christians.
- b. RE never teaches about Christianity, only other religions.

Myth a: RE is about making developing young Christians. It is a common misunderstanding of pupils and their parents that my job as Head of RE is to produce a wave of God-fearing pupils, well versed in Biblical knowledge. This, in fact, in a non-denominational comprehensive school would be

illegal for an RE teacher to do. We as RE teachers are not allowed to put our own agendas forward as the only way of thinking.

In fact, RE is taught so that pupils have an awareness and understanding of religion, the faith, practices, history and culture in one respect, but perhaps more importantly, RE is not just 'learning about religion', but 'learning from' religion. What do you think? How would this affect you? In what ways is your life similar or different to...? Why do you say that? These are examples of common question stems utilised by experienced teachers of RE.

RE is about examining real situations, common issues, analysing different religious responses to these, and then offering a considered and well-thought out point of view. At Ecclesfield we are well on the way to developing this in the vast majority of pupils.

RE is RE. It is an academic subject with overtones of spiritual and cultural development. Yes, collective worship is a legal requirement for schools, and should broadly take a Christian basis, but this is often not the responsibility of the RE department in many schools.

Myth b: RE never teaches about Christianity, only other religions. Wrong. It is a legal requirement that we at Ecclesfield fulfil the requirements made upon us by the Locally Agreed Syllabus. This currently means that 51% of RE's curriculum time should be of Christian based content. The other 49% of the time needs to explore the other 5 'world religions' namely, Sikhism, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism and Buddhism. Some minority religions, and non-religious faith positions will also be studied by many schools – we at Ecclesfield have studied the Rastafari Tradition and Humanism in recent times. I will explain a little more about the content of what we teach at Ecclesfield later in my talk.

It must be remembered that Ecclesfield School is predominantly a white school population. And many of the pupils are not religious – and if they are Christians by baptism, often have a rather limited, perhaps even negative view of Christianity. The challenge for RE teachers is to make the content accessible and also relevant. This is my 3rd year as Head of the RE department, and in those 2 and ½ years the KS3 syllabus has continuously been modified aiming as we are to fully engage pupils in developing their own sense of self and spirituality.

I feel it is vital that we as an RE department challenge misconceptions, especially those that could develop in a more sinister fashion later in life. Sheffield **is** multi-cultural, an amazing opportunity for ideas to be challenged, for ideas to be developed and for mutual understanding to be gained.

I will use some of the pupils work to demonstrate what we do in RE at different points. To demonstrate again, the need for RE to encompass different religions I quote a pupil's recent assessment work: "It is completely different for Muslims. We speak English. They speak Arabic, and we wear different clothes. The Muslims aren't the same because we are two different kinds of people." It is clear that religion and race have been mixed up in this pupil's mind – and this despite a full unit focussed on exploring what it may be like living as a Muslim in the UK today.

I have made it one of my main goals that prejudicial and misguided opinions are challenged and not allowed to fester unimpeded. RE helps pupils to gain an empathetic understanding of people who may look different, may be different, but ultimately who share the same status as a 'Human being'. All the religions that we study with belief in a creator God, believe that God made all human beings and therefore it makes sense that RE lessons help to break down barriers and promote community cohesion.

Back to what and how we teach at Ecclesfield School. We focus on promoting 'learning'. RE lessons should not be all about taking in what the teacher tells you and regurgitating this in a factual based test. One this is superficial learning, and two, it is a really boring way to teach!! As half of the assessment criteria we have to use is based upon learning from religion we focus on promoting critical and analytical thinking skills, utilising cross-curriculum based learning skills, and most importantly promoting creative thinking. I often act as 'Devil's advocate' – offering alternative points of view, both to pupils who are 'anti-religion' and those that express their own belief in God. The challenge is to provide reasons, evidence, and examples for why you believe what you do. In recent times we as a department have tried to move this role of 'devil's advocate' back to the pupils themselves – they talk, debate and critique, whilst always maintaining that an aura of respect for each others faith positions is expected.

As Head of RE, I have tried to move the way we work in many new and exciting directions. The current year 7s began the year looking at the philosophical concept of God, examining Jewish, Hindu, Sikh and Muslim ways of expressing their beliefs. This then linked into the current term and a half long series of lessons focussed on Christianity. We explored the nativity and are now studying an RE and History unit, being developed as we speak, based upon the life of Jesus. In it we have studied historical and non-biblical evidence for the existence of Jesus. We have studied different artistic interpretations of Jesus and examined what society was like in Palestine 2000 years or so ago. We will explore the main teachings of Jesus – utilising empathetic work based upon the lost son parable, and examining parts of the Sermon on the Mount. We will look at religious experience, examining both Biblical and modern day miracles, evidence for and against these being true, before moving onto the most important part of Jesus' existence, that is Holy Week, the Crucifixion and his resurrection. Again this will be analysed by the pupils, and it will be for them to decide based upon the different evidence provided whether the resurrection was a true event.

To aid the department with this unit, and indeed other learning units, I am fortunate enough to have established links with local Christian representatives, Reverend Impey and Hammersley amongst them, Rob Elliot from St John's and also Rach Ward from the Methodist church in Chapeltown. Each has visited the school previously, and all have agreed to visit again. The pupils get chance to talk and ask their own questions, about what matters to them at the time. It works well.

Reverend Hammersley has experienced P4C (Philosophy for Children) albeit in a Sociology lesson – a way of learning that the pupils ultimately control, by responding to a stimulus and developing their own open questions to discuss in a circle and work as a class towards an answer – if this is possible. A recent P4C lesson focussed on the artists' impressions of Jesus and provoked questions such as: "Can Jesus be seen in different ways by different people at the same time?" "How did God make Mary pregnant?" "Is Jesus eternal?" "Why did people hate Jesus so much?" I follow with 2 pupils' homework (which was to write, draw or make something based upon the P4C session with pictures of Jesus as a stimulus):

Pupil 1: Who created God?

If God created everything in the world then who created God? Some people believe that God is a spirit and not a person. This means that he can exist outside normal time and space. If he can do that, then there has always been a God no one or nothing created him. It says in the Bible that in the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth so that suggests that there was no one before God. Another idea could be that God was created during the Big Bang and then He created the world. This could be because of all the energy that was released when the Big Bang happened.

Pupil 2:
If God made the world then who made God?

Everyone can have an opinion while being together. Our class discussion was based on the question; If God made the world then who made God? My Beliefs on the matter are as follows. The world was created naturally by the Big Bang. God then created the sea, grass and so on. God also created the human race by creating Adam and Eve. I drew a circle to resemble the formation we sat in during lesson. I think we did this to give everyone a chance to talk in the discussion. I think we often think of God as a circle too as he looks after everyone in and out of his life style such as people who do not believe in him.

Recently with year 9 we explored beliefs about life after death, focussing on Christianity and Hinduism. The following is a poem written by a pupil exploring Hindu ideas on reincarnation.

Who was I? What will I be?

Echoes in my thoughts,
Of a place in different times,
Places once familiar,
Haunt with recurring signs,

I am in the here and now,
And not the where or when,
But unexplained clear memories,
Remind me of who and then...

Was I forever in this form?
Or fit another mould,
Did I exist as I am now?
Or play another role...

It's possible my vessel,
That is now of human kind,
Was once so very different,
Inherited by my mind...

Was I a regal tiger?
Or some other feline king,
Maybe just a tiny ant,
Or a bird with a voice to sing...

If karma plays a part in,
Where my path leads now,
If when I move from this world,
And take my final bow...

Will I be rewarded,
For kind and virtuous ways,
They say there will be judgement,
On how I lived my days...

Will I experience rebirth,
And live a life that's sound,
For people always say,
What goes around comes around...

And below, an extract taken from another pupil's end of unit assessment called, **'Believing in life after death effects how people live their life; do you agree?'**

A Christian believes that after you die you will go to heaven, but only if this person has lead a good life will they go to heaven. If not they will go to hell, or as some Christians believe it they will go to purgatory (a waiting room to get into heaven). If the soul of the body is pure it will go to heaven, but if it isn't it will go to hell.

When you die Christians also believe that they leave three things behind; their memories, what they have done and their genes (DNA). On the last day on earth some Christians believe that this is judgement day. Judgement day is the day where everyone returns back to life for that one day and God decides whether or not they should go to heaven or hell. To make sure that Christians go to heaven with a pure soul they would go to church regularly, treat everyone the same and follow the bible. If a Christian is having a bad day and has committed sins they should always look to Jesus for guidance. Christians believe they need to earn their way into heaven because of their original sin which was given by Adam and Eve. To purify this sin they first need to be baptised and then keep their life pure and sin free. Roman Catholics believe that the more sins you commit the longer you stay in purgatory. This means that most Christians will get into heaven but have to stay in purgatory longer.

Back to what we teach:

Other key stage 3 units we will be utilising include 'CelebRE' – a unit exploring how faith is put into action, with a heavy Christian emphasis, Religion and Science – the creation v evolution debate, again exploring Christian beliefs. Why does Evil and suffering exist? Is a unit where pupils examine the phenomenon of Evil and different Christian responses, alongside other religious and non-religious points of view. These units make the pupils think – and get interested.

This is developed further in KS4 where we study topics from a Christian and Hindu based perspectives, and where the new syllabus began with the current year 10 expects nearly 50% of the marks to be awarded based upon pupils' personal opinion of the issues studied. These issues include abortion, euthanasia, life after death, media attitudes and treatment of religion, marriage, divorce, contraception, sexual relationships including homosexuality, racism, sexism, and whether there really is a God!

To finish, one of my proudest moments as an RE teacher was when I organised Ecclesfield School's inaugural Interfaith week and the amazing response we had from the pupils involved. We had 25 plus guest speakers visit during the week including a pagan, different Christians, Muslims, and Baha'i. They took part in the lessons, agreed to be interviewed by 21 year 8 Interfaith week reporters who then went on to make podcasts in their own time editing these interviews. One pupil represented Ecclesfield School (after I approached her as a creative writer) and she wrote the following poem and Interfaith pledge, a fitting way to end, I'm sure you'll agree, and a way that sums up what RE is trying to achieve at Ecclesfield:

Her Poem

Life is like the city's centre,
If we think of it as a place to enter,
There are many routes and many paths,
But they all end the same when we do the maths,
There's a hundred ways to reach the end,
It's just that we all choose a different bend,
Whether that Christianity, Islam or Paganism,
Hinduism, Buddhism or even Atheism,
The point is that we all get to the same place,
In spite of our colour, religion or race,
We're a whole different species with a world to explore,
Our life is what we make it; it could be so much more,
With media focus on the bad things in life,
All that's on our mind is cultural strife,
With stabbings and shootings and fights a plenty,
Some of us teens not even living past twenty,
Society is a mess; it's become such a shame,
Instead of making things right we find someone to blame,
Don't turn to your neighbour and feel the need to judge,
Their free will and opinion you should begrudge,
Diversity is a gift that makes us apart,
It doesn't change what's in the heart,
We could be happier if we all just moved on,
If racism, discrimination and hatred were gone.

And the pledge:

Here we go forth today,
On different paths in different ways,
But still we live and breathe as one,
A modern society we've become,
We pledge with life and love in mind,
And hope that peace we shall find,
Sharing within faiths, cultures and faces,
Between creatures, nature, human and places,
Union in Burngreave, in Sheffield, on Earth,
Continuing to death as begun at birth.