

The Importance of Religious Studies



Cecilia Bidie is Head of Theology, Philosophy and Religion at Wetherby Prep School.

Religious Studies comes in many forms and has myriad different names but no matter its guise, it remains one of the most important subjects on the curriculum. In these lessons, children learn the tools they need to go confidently into the world able to respectfully interact with almost anyone they meet. Not only this, but R.S. offers a pathway to numerous degree and career options, providing a skill-set that would serve one well in almost every professional sector. However, aside from academics it is also vitally important for children's personal development, social awareness and understanding, as well as their empathy, that they have a solid grasp of the world religions.

In order for children to value R.S. enough to inspire them to take the subject all the way to A-Level and beyond, it needs to be taught in an inspirational way. However, because it can often not be considered as important a subject as its Humanities

counterparts, fewer children take R.S. to eighteen than, for example, English Literature or History, one consequence of which being that we end up with a shortage of specialist R.S. teachers, and the cycle starts again. More often than not, even at prep schools which employ subject-specific teachers, R.S. is taught by non-subject specialists and there can be problems with schools offering the appropriate training to enable these teachers to feel confident delivering their school's R.S. curriculum.

R.S. is such an enjoyable subject to teach and children love to share their own knowledge and experience of their faith with the class. I am fortunate to work in a very diverse school and have taught classes containing pupils from each of the world religions. Seeing the joy it brings children to share their stories with peers is one of my favourite parts of the job; it brings the subject to life. Our children are so fortunate to have the opportunity to learn this subject at school as we are in the minority, internationally, in having

compulsory R.S. lessons on the curriculum. It is certainly a subject worthy of investment in the training and resources that will enable it to be taught in the way it deserves.

That being said, one of the most effective ways to teach any subject is to approach it from a cross-curricular angle, and that goes for R.S. as much as any other. The subject feeds seamlessly into the rest of the curriculum and there are innumerable ways in which it lends itself to cross-curricular learning. Why were the Tudors endlessly swapping the country's official religion back and forth? Why did the Nazis ban the music of such influential composers as George Gershwin and Irving Berlin? Why is Islamic art often typified by geometric patterns? Why did the publication of his book force Salman Rushdie to live for years in hiding and, later, be brutally attacked for what he wrote? What inspired the Beatles' spirituality?

Admittedly, a prep-aged pupil might struggle to wrap their heads around

some of these questions, but they are examples of how R.S. weaves into History, Music, Art, Maths, PSHE and so on. Their education should give children the foundations to enable them to delve into these often quite serious questions when they reach the right age. Indeed, R.S. at 13+ scholarship-level regularly sees senior schools question children about abortion rights, IVF and euthanasia laws. These topics are robust, to say the least, and so it is essential that they are taught with sensitivity and care. Putting such topics in the perspective of the broader curriculum can often help to frame them and make them slightly more coherent.

In addition to this, in my experience, parents love R.S. and I have wonderful conversations at Parents' Evenings about how envious they are of their children having access to the subject. Often I am told that they never had the chance to study R.S. (or Theology, or Philosophy) at school, but that they wish they could have. This lends greater weight to the subject and means that parents are eager to know how they can support their children's R.S. learning at home. To this, I always encourage reading the news and staying up-to-date with current affairs, discussing with their children the things they have read and appraising the issues from different viewpoints (evaluation is, after all, a key assessment objective from Common Entrance through to A-Level).

Professor John R. Hinnells describes the importance of R.S. in the Handbook of Living Religions: 'Whatever any individual's personal religious beliefs may be, or even if there is some antagonism towards religion, it is difficult for anyone to deny that religions have had considerable impact on societies on all continents.' The UK is one of Western Europe's most diverse countries and religion has indelibly shaped its history, and continues to influence the way we develop. For children to have a true understanding of their country,

its society and people, discussion of religion is crucial.

Furthermore, people are happier than ever to talk about religion, contrary to the popular belief that society is becoming increasingly apathetic towards it. Data from the 2021 Census showed that, although the religion question is voluntary, the number of people answering it increased by around four million.

Admittedly, the second most common response to the question, behind Christianity, was "No religion," but this does not mean that people are indifferent to religion. If they were indifferent, they would have skipped the question altogether. The census also showed that more people than ever responded describing themselves as "Agnostic" or "Atheist". Does all this mean that we should therefore radically change R.S.? Of course not, we should interpret this data. It could mean that people are no less spiritual, but are perhaps less inclined to commit to an institutional form of religion. As such, an academic exploration of spiritual traditions must remain a critical part of education. It is not true that the data proves that religion is irrelevant and should be replaced with something called a 'worldviews' approach, which places academic R.S. at risk of being radically watered down to a sharing of opinions. 'Worldviews' is so ill-defined that it is best avoided altogether. We should be constantly striving to provide our children with every possible opportunity to achieve and succeed – to develop interests, have questions and swap experiences – so academic rigour and inspirational teaching are as important in Religious Studies as in any curriculum subject. As mentioned, religion has indelibly shaped our country's history and remains at the centre of our values and ethos. If such a large number of people today are describing themselves as belonging to no religion, it is vital that we are teaching R.S. well.

Studying religion helps children to understand both themselves and the world around them. Having a thorough knowledge of what makes people different, but what connects them too, moves us past tolerance and into acceptance. If children are brought up to learn acceptance, the positive effects will be far-reaching.