

# **SHARING RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

**A brief introduction  
to the possibility of an inclusive approach  
to R.E. in Northern Ireland**

*Norman Richardson*



*Research Resources for RE*



Research Resources for Religious Education  
Occasional Paper No. 2

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## **A brief introduction to the possibility of an inclusive approach to R.E. in Northern Ireland**

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*“All schools should ensure through their policies, structures and curriculae, that pupils are consciously prepared for life in a diverse and inter-cultural society and world.”*

*A Shared Future*

– Policy & Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland, 2005

*“Time and again in recent years we have been reminded that religion is not what the European Enlightenment thought it would become: mute, marginal and mild. It is fire – and like fire, it warms but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame.”*

*“Education is the single greatest key to human dignity.”*

**Jonathan Sacks**, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth  
from *The Dignity of Difference*, 2002

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## Research Resources for Religious Education Occasional Paper No. 2

Research Resources for Religious Education is part of the Religious Studies subject area in Stranmillis University College. Its aims are to:

- support teachers in the delivery of Religious Education in Primary and Post-Primary schools
- stimulate discussion and debate around key issues in relation to Religious Education
- increase awareness of issues of diversity, spirituality and values in the curriculum
- disseminate creative research and writing on Religious Education

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## **Introduction to the Original Edition**

My fundamental belief in writing this short paper is that inclusive religious education should be an important element of school education in a democratic society. Some people may regard pluralism and diversity in society as uncomfortable and even threatening, particularly in relation to religious belief and practice, but I believe that they provide exciting opportunities for developing positive awareness, deepened understanding and improved relationships. This is especially important in a society like Northern Ireland which is perceived to be divided along religious-cultural lines, and in such a context the role of the teacher of Religious Education becomes very important. In my view nowhere is this more significantly tested out at the present time than in Northern Ireland's integrated schools, but it is no less crucial an issue in all other kinds of schools.

This document has grown out of an in-service seminar organised by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) for R.E. teachers from the integrated schools, both primary and secondary, in November 2002. I am grateful to NICIE staff and their R.E. Focus Group for the opportunity of sharing and discussing these ideas. However, the views expressed are my own and do not necessarily represent those of NICIE or its members.

Thanks are also due to my colleague, James Nelson, for his helpful observations and suggestions.

Norman Richardson, March 2004

## **A Note on the Revised Edition**

This revised version has been prepared in order to bring the document up-to-date with a number of recent developments and changes, most notably the acceptance by Government in November 2006 of the controversial proposals by the Churches for a Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education, to begin to come into effect from September 2007. Despite significant opposition from some quarters, the Revised Syllabus perpetuates the exclusivity of what the Churches' Working Group described as "the essential Christian character of Religious Education". A critique of the Syllabus, as issued at the time of this government decision, is included as Appendix 4 of this booklet.

Norman Richardson, June 2007

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## Some Concerns about Religious Education

*“Religious Education may easily become part of the process of initiation into the tribalism of Northern Ireland.”*

John Greer & Eugene McElhinney: *Irish Christianity: A Guide for Teachers*, 1985

*“The group accepted that religion was one of the darkest regions in education. The curriculum certainly needed to be developed in that area.”*

Maurna Crozier (ed) Report from Education seminar group,  
in *Cultural Traditions in Northern Ireland – Varieties of Irishness*, 1989

Religious Education in schools is a contentious area. Some people dispute its right to a place in publicly-funded schools because it is perceived to be about promoting a particular religious viewpoint. At the other end of the spectrum, some people unashamedly argue for R.E. as a confessional subject, claiming support from an apparent majority of parents and even from Human Rights documents\*. Others argue for Religious Education from an open, inclusive and non-confessional position, suggesting that it merits consideration as an important aspect of human experience and as an antidote to any attempts at religious indoctrination, which is a view that can also be supported by recourse to the views of parents and, indeed, Human Rights documents. It will quickly be evident that the view taken by the present writer comes closest to this last position.

### Public perceptions of Religious Education

Before discussing in detail the possibilities of an inclusive approach to Religious Education, it may be helpful to outline some of the issues in the discussion about the place of religious education in a plural society. One of the greatest difficulties in this discussion lies in the persistent perception that religious education is about promoting a particular religious view of life, whether this be a specific denominational position as in the case of church schools or a non-denominational position, as in the case of the controlled schools in Northern Ireland. It does not seem to have occurred to many people that R.E. can be taught in a more open way, and so a confessional purpose for R.E. is simply assumed as the norm. This presumption that schools (and therefore the religion that is taught in them) have an inevitable religious/denominational bias is confirmed in many people’s minds by the fact that Catholic schools in Northern Ireland receive 100% government funding, and by the existence of significant funding for other voluntary denominationally-managed schools. The impression is further compounded by the continuation of conscience clauses which permit parents to request the withdrawal of their children from R.E. classes, the right on the part of teachers to request not to teach R.E. and the fact that in most schools R.E. is only inspected by the clergy rather than the regular schools inspectors from the Education and Training Inspectorate. If Religious

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\* Some Human Rights statements affirm the right of children to be educated in the religion of their parents – as for instance in Article 5 of the 1981 *UN Declaration on the Elimination of all forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion or Belief*. Such statements, however, surely need to be balanced against other Human Rights principles which emphasise the importance of children valuing not just their own but other cultures also, and of developing tolerance and respect for all human beings (as in the Final Document of the *UN International Consultative Conference on School Education in Religion with Freedom of Religion and Belief* (2001)).

Education really is open and free from pressure, and if it is as fully educational as any other subject in the curriculum, so the argument goes, why is there a need to ‘protect’ it with these conscience clauses and to deny teachers the right of inspection from within their own profession?

### **The role of the Christian Churches**

In many countries in Europe Religious Education has traditionally been defined and managed by the Churches or other religious groups. Some states have moved away from this position to a more inclusive approach, but elsewhere (or in the case of some religious hierarchies) a strong claim is made for the continued control of R.E. as a confessional subject. This has sometimes been done with a spirit of openness and generosity towards minority faith communities, but all too often it has been in a mood of defensiveness whereby past privileges have been selfishly and exclusively guarded.

The significant role of the four largest Christian denominations in Northern Ireland in devising a Core Syllabus for Religious Education (without any involvement of members of other faith communities) further serves to convince many people that R.E. is indeed a confessional subject. All other subjects are developed and reviewed by government appointed public working parties, whereas R.E. sits outside this arrangement (because although all grant-aided schools are legally required to provide R.E., it is not one of the “compulsory contributory subjects” of the Northern Ireland Curriculum\*). Furthermore, the churches’ syllabus that has been in place since 1993 is exclusively Christian, and despite the inclusion in the Revised Core Syllabus (from September 2007) of some limited teaching of other religions at Key Stage 3 only, the rationale, content and ethos of the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for R.E. remain unambiguously Christian, based on a potentially sectarian argument that Northern Ireland “is still a Christian country”. Even at GCSE level pupils in Northern Ireland do not have an opportunity of studying other world faiths, and the remaining option to study them at A level is taken up, unsurprisingly, only by a few. Surely these very narrow confines around R.E. in Northern Ireland only confirm many people’s worst fears about the nature of the subject.

### **Evaluating Outcomes and Experiences of R.E.**

In my work with student teachers, including those specialising in Religious Studies, I find myself in a position to evaluate how some young adults have experienced their fourteen years of school-based Religious Education. Some have clearly valued their experience, but many are critical of it, and both kinds of experiences seem to have motivated those who wish to become teachers of R.E. themselves. Specialists aside, there is a good deal of cynicism and not a little indifference to the subject, and these negatives are sometimes confirmed by what students experience in their school placements.

Some of the “outcomes of R.E.” which I encounter, within and outside the teaching profession, give me particular cause for concern. Chief among these is the lack of awareness of religious diversity, both in relation to Christianity and other religions, and the unwillingness of many people to discuss it, especially in what they perceive as “mixed” company. Despite years of classroom R.E. the majority of students readily acknowledge their

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\* These “compulsory contributory subjects” are listed in Schedule 2 of the 1989 Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order.

relatively sheltered experience and a lack of awareness of religious traditions other than their own; all but a few have never studied any religion other than Christianity. In some young adults this expresses itself in defensiveness and occasionally even a self-assured arrogance, leading to a readiness to dismiss other people's faiths. A recent piece of research (Richardson, 2003a), however, indicated that many student teachers from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds are very open to increasing their experience of religious diversity, albeit with an awareness of how they are thwarted by lack of opportunity.

Another "outcome" which causes concern is the far too common myth that any discussion of religious issues, especially in the presence of people from a different religious tradition, is likely to cause offence. This appears to deflect many teachers from consideration of differing beliefs for fear of provoking religious conflict in the classroom or of upsetting parents or members of the clergy. If such openness about religion has never been part of a teacher's own experience, as a pupil or as a student or in their personal activities, this reluctance to discuss religious issues on an equal basis is likely, quite understandably, to be reinforced.

### **R.E. and religious minorities**

If the narrowness of the curriculum disadvantages children and young people from Catholic or Protestant backgrounds by limiting their awareness of diversity, it also creates problems for families from minority faith communities. Research (Richardson, 2003b) was carried out with parents from minority faiths who had children at school in Northern Ireland, including members of the Muslim, Hindu, Bahá'í, Jewish, Buddhist and Sikh communities, plus a few parents claiming to have no religion. Only a small number of these parents indicated that RE in their child's school ever included consideration of their own religion, or indeed of any religion other than Christianity. Most of those who indicated that there was some broader teaching indicated that it was "very little", or used the word "occasionally". When asked about the extent to which they were satisfied with the RE provided by their child's school, two-thirds indicated that they were "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied", and about half of the remainder indicated that they were "unsure". One Hindu parent indicated amazement that Northern Ireland was "so far behind" compared with his or her own experience of Religious Education 30 years ago in England. A very large majority agreed or agreed strongly that they would like more consideration of their own religious faith in school RE classes, and an even larger majority wanted their children to learn about a range of different religions in RE. The parents were strongly in favour of the provision of better information and training for teachers in relation to minority faith concerns, and particularly in relation to how to deal with prejudice and racism. The great majority of them supported the provision of religious education, but suggested that it must be a changed, fair and balanced provision if they are to feel heard and respected.

### **Teachers' Reluctance**

Other anxieties are sometimes articulated by teachers which amount to a reluctance to deviate from traditional approaches to R.E. or to get involved with issues of religious diversity. A fear of relativism or syncretism is often expressed as the reason for not dealing with issues of diverse religious experience. Some teachers take refuge in a cocoon of reinforced ignorance, arguing that their own lack of knowledge is reason enough not to explore diversity. Others suggest that only a believer in a particular tradition or religion has the capacity and right to

teach that religion, or that teaching by someone outside a particular faith tradition would inevitably be superficial. It is clear that there is a long way to go in the process of developing teachers' capacity and confidence to deal with a breadth of religious issues in schools, and this has significant implications for teacher education at all levels.

### **Religious Education for Openness**

Despite all the difficulties and disadvantages indicated above it is possible to take a positive view of the educational potential of R.E. Educators who are prepared to work through these difficulties agree that Religious Education is a subject with great possibilities, not least in challenging ignorance with increased understanding. Far from being an agent of closing minds, soundly-taught educational R.E. is an opener of minds and a challenger of prejudice – a process that the writer David Hay has described as *de-indoctrination*:

“Religious educators are sometimes accused of attempting to indoctrinate their pupils. But when religious education is correctly understood, it becomes clear that it is the reverse of indoctrination. What it does is to demonstrate that there is more than one perspective on reality. It enlarges, rather than diminishes, freedom.” (Hay, 1990, p.15)

The best way to counter prejudice and indoctrination, one might argue, is through those very aspects of education where there might appear to be the greatest danger of them occurring. To *avoid* teaching such a controversial subject is to give credence to the argument that it is not possible to do so in an open and fair manner. In other words, if we want to counter religious exclusivism and open people's minds to unfamiliar ideas and situations, well-taught R.E. is crucial, especially in situations where there is a “given” diversity – such as in the classrooms of integrated or other shared schools, or, indeed, in a growing number of controlled and maintained schools around an increasingly plural Northern Ireland.

## Religious Education – Reflections and Challenges

Competence Statement No.8: *Teachers will have developed a knowledge and understanding of the need to take account of the significant features of pupils' cultures, languages and faiths and to address the implications for learning arising from these.*

General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland, 2007

My purpose in this section is to reflect on what I believe to be the most appropriate purposes of, and approaches to, Religious Education in a society like Northern Ireland – traditionally divided and increasingly diverse. What are the key elements that must be included, and how can the curriculum be appropriately balanced in a way that meets the needs of children from diverse backgrounds? In particular how can this be done in an integrated/integrating (or otherwise genuinely mixed) school, and what structures and support will best facilitate the process? Is there, indeed, a case for an R.E. Syllabus that is specifically designed for Integrated Schools (and that could perhaps be used by others who wish to take a more inclusive approach)?

### **Differences Matter!**

A view is sometimes articulated by those who wish to take a moderate position in relation to religious diversity that “differences don’t matter” because “we’re all the same really”! While such a view may sometimes stem from a genuine recognition of the large areas of commonality between, for example, Catholic and Protestant Christians, it can be dangerous and counter-productive because it tends to play down the real and significant differences between people from different religious and cultural backgrounds for the sake of a too-easy unity. This position, which at an extreme becomes dishonest, should surely also be regarded as an undesirable outcome of Religious Education, particularly if it occurs in a setting where there are real opportunities to explore diversity first-hand. (For a fuller discussion of attitudes to religion in Northern Ireland see Richardson, 1998: *Preface* and pp 1-19.)

The reality is that there are real and significant differences, within and between religions. Religions make truth claims which often conflict with other truth claims, and we do no justice to religious understanding and dialogue if we try to diminish them or to play them down. Recent writers on Religious Education have given considerable emphasis to this point.

### **Constraints and Options in R.E.**

A survey of R.E. in 20 integrated primary schools carried out by members of the NICIE R.E. Focus Group (NICIE 2002) made it clear that most teachers in the survey seemed wary of straying from what they perceived to be the “norms” of Religious Education as they have known them – that is, adopting the generally Biblical approach of the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus (and its interpretations through the various Education and Library Board schemes) plus the provision of sacramental teaching for Catholic pupils. The survey results indicated very few attempts to deal with the issues of religious diversity at any level. Constraints seemed to stem from lack of time, lack of awareness or training in diversity issues and, perhaps understandably, a preoccupation on the part of many integrated primary schools with the issue of provision for Catholic pupils in relation to the sacraments. It does not seem unreasonable to presume (on the basis of considerable observation and anecdotal evidence)

that these views probably reflect those of most primary school teachers in most types of schools.

There is no doubt that some parents, in choosing to send their children to integrated schools, have hoped to get away altogether from religion in schools, and have been surprised by the significant provision made for religion in most of the schools in the sector. The removal of any religious teaching from schools, as in the case of France, the United States or in many countries of the former Soviet bloc, often seems an attractive or even highly desirable option especially to parents and teachers with a humanist or other non-religious world view. I have already argued, however, that there is a positive case for including R.E. in the school curriculum in all kinds of schools, despite my many frustrations with the way in which it is presently officially framed and publicly perceived. A “secular escape” from religion in schools does not do justice to the reality that children need to have an understanding of their encounters with the phenomenon of religion – its various expressions, its language, its thought, its concerns, its impact on human feelings – if they are to have a rounded and balanced view of the contemporary world. The ways in which religion is currently taught in schools may well require considerable review, but its place and significance within a soundly educational framework should not be in doubt.

Despite these difficulties and obstacles to progress I believe that Religious Education has a very important role to play in the development of shared education in Northern Ireland. In order to take a more positive direction, however, it will be necessary to move away from the traditional perception of Religious Education as the promotion or nurturing of religious belief. The genuinely educational alternative approach is about promoting religious awareness and understanding in an inclusive manner, appropriate to a culturally and religiously plural society. Good quality open R.E. can challenge attitudes and stereotypes and make people think; in promoting dialogue it offers an alternative to opposing authoritarian monologues; in building relationships it can run counter to prejudice, suspicion and fear.

The challenge of Religious Education in schools in a divided and diverse society is not to find ways of avoiding it so as to prevent it from becoming a nasty and divisive issue in the classroom, but rather of finding ways of making R.E. work positively for understanding and improved relationships. If this means subverting the existing church-dominated system of Religious Education, then so be it. (Integrated schools should not find this too difficult a challenge, as their very existence is subversive of traditional church control in education, historically and in the present.)

In a review of Religious Education in the Province’s schools the Northern Ireland Education and Training Inspectorate commented favourably on the importance of a broadly-based approach to R.E.:

“A study of the various Christian denominations and other, world, religions within Northern Ireland, at a level appropriate to the age and ability of the pupils, acknowledges the increasingly pluralistic nature of modern society ... Furthermore [it] can deepen and broaden the pupils’ understanding of their own faith, can make a valuable contribution to developing tolerance and can support the aims of the educational themes of Education for Mutual Understanding and Cultural Heritage.” (ETI, 2000, p.1)

Some time ago a senior member of staff in an educational institution which has traditionally catered primarily for people from a protestant community background noted that an incoming Religious Studies student was from a Catholic background, and commented: “We’ll have to be extremely careful what we say!” The response he received from a colleague was probably quite unexpected from his point of view: “Not at all! It’s a wonderful opportunity!” Religious diversity in the classroom can and should be an open door leading to greater awareness and empathetic understanding.

## Inclusive Religious Education

*“The organisation of the curriculum for R.E. can be considered good when ... all pupils, regardless of gender, ability or religious belief, experience a programme which is sensitive to the diversity of religious and cultural experience within the school and wider community.”*

Northern Ireland Education & Training Inspectorate, 2000

Open and inclusive approaches to R.E. are highly desirable in any society that wishes to move from religiously-related conflict towards mutual understanding and respect and they are surely crucial and unavoidable in any school (whatever “sector” it belongs to) that wishes to be regarded as a shared school. Such an approach has to be built up, and there are some crucial building-blocks in the process. The most important of these are:

*an open ethos;*  
*an open educational rationale; and*  
*a balanced R.E. curriculum.*

### ***An Open Ethos***

In schools where there is a genuine diversity of religious backgrounds and commitments (including children from families where there is no religious involvement) Religious Education has tremendous potential as one of the key formative subjects which can be used to develop new ways of learning to value and respect difference. This is a counter-statement to the “traditional” playing-it-safe view that “we don’t speak about differences here”! It is a statement that real open sharing is desirable and possible. (I am reminded of the poster that I used to have in my classroom, of a old sailing ship with the slogan *A ship in a harbour is safe – but that is not what ships are for!*)

If such sharing is to happen, however, we have to create a safe and secure space for all members of the school – teachers, children, parents and ancillary staff – to support each other in this openness. This is a task which goes beyond just the subject of R.E.; it is dependent upon a positive whole-school ethos, within which the acknowledgement of, and respect for, diversity is a central precept. Adults within such an environment have a particularly important role in modelling this open and positive approach to religious and cultural diversity. Some teachers in integrated schools have sometimes expressed their genuine concern that if they start to talk openly about sensitive issues they will spoil the good relationships that have been built up between colleagues from different backgrounds. This is understandable, but it is an anxiety which has to be recognised and then worked through if real progress is to be made. Such concerns require careful leadership, and head teachers must make adequate time for them to be addressed in staff development programmes. Some school staffs have spent time together on residential in order to work at such issues.

### ***An Open Educational Rationale for R.E.***

An approach to Religious Education appropriate to this context of open appreciation for diversity needs to have clearly *educational* aims. Aims which are only specific to committed members of one religious community (whether this is defined as Catholic, Protestant or just simply Christian or any other faith) are fundamentally confessional and inappropriate to the broad educational needs of children from a diversity of backgrounds. (The possible place for

confessional teaching in schools – such as teaching on the sacraments for Catholic children – is discussed below.)

Such a set of overall aims for Religious Education might look something like the following:

***Religious Education seeks, over time,  
to help children and young people:***

- to explore and understand religion in its various expressions;
- to develop an awareness of the language and practice of various religions;
- to explore religious and ethical issues with awareness and understanding;
- to understand how religion can be a powerful influence, positively or negatively, on people's lives, individually and in communities;
- to value and respect religious diversity and to learn how to live with it in a shared society;
- to develop emotional awareness and maturity when discussing and reflecting on religious matters;
- to develop a sensitive awareness of various approaches to spirituality;
- to develop a basis for their own open-ended religious and ethical choices;
- to engage in responsible religious dialogue which involves the right to a voice and the responsibility to listen.

Any set of educational aims will have to be adapted to the age and developmental level of the children, of course.

The broadly-based aims proposed above might be used to provide a stimulus for discussion among teachers as to what is appropriate in their particular school. A statement of purposes for R.E. should ideally be agreed and owned by those who will teach it. This will be particularly important where teachers are used to a more confessional or denominational approach to R.E., or where a mono-faith approach has traditionally been assumed.

***A Balanced R.E. Curriculum – Case Studies***

A significant weakness of traditional Christian catechetical religious education programmes is that they have provided only what I would term *Christian Education*, rather than Religious Education in the fullest sense. Indeed, this has often led other religious communities to call for specific instruction in their own faith as an option for pupils from their communities. This all too easily becomes a divisive, disruptive and even sectarian influence. Something more balanced and comprehensive is required if we are to achieve the aims proposed above.

Religious Education in some countries, however, has crossed over from the traditionally confessional approach to a much more balanced and inclusive position and a glance at these may serve as useful models for those societies which are still in the process of reflection and change. In this regard the syllabuses and structures in England, Norway and Scotland are worth particular examination.

Religious Education in **England** was traditionally focused on the Bible and Christianity until the 1960s, but has undergone many changes since then, significantly in response to the increasingly plural and multi-religious nature of British society. Multi-faith approaches to teaching religion have been prominent since the mid-1970s and under the present arrangements Religious Education is planned co-operatively by a body in each educational administrative area known as the *Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education* (SACRE) in which there is significant partnership between representatives of the different faith communities. Non-statutory advice and guidelines are produced by government, including the production in the 1990s of Model Syllabuses which emphasised the importance in R.E. of “learning *about* religion” and “learning *from* religion”. A non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education (QCA, 2004) has recently been developed, emphasising the importance in R.E. of learning from “different religions, beliefs, values and traditions while exploring their own beliefs and questions of meaning”, and it challenges pupils “to reflect on, consider, analyse, interpret and evaluate issues of truth, belief, faith and ethics”. The introduction to the framework also states that R.E. should encourage pupils “to develop their sense of identity and belonging” and to “flourish individually within their communities and as citizens in a pluralistic society and global community”.

In **Norway** the previous traditional Christian syllabus has been replaced since 1997 by a subject known as *KRL* (the Norwegian abbreviation for “Christianity, Religion, Life Stances”). This is non-confessional and multi-faith although there is quantitatively more material (nominally 55% of the syllabus) on Christianity for historical and contextual reasons relating to Norway’s dominant Lutheran heritage. Its stated purpose is to provide tolerance and understanding between religious communities by providing knowledge about different traditions and facilitating dialogue in relation to faith and values in multi-religious societies. Other non-religious life stances are also included in the overall syllabus along with Christianity and world religions “as living sources of faith, morality and views of life”. The subject is compulsory, which has led to some controversy although in general most people seem to have welcomed the new approach.

The subject “Religious and Moral Education” in **Scotland** (1992) is based on three “broad attainment outcomes”: Christianity, Other World Religions and Personal Search. As in the case of Norway and England, the Scottish approach emphasises the importance of the development of the whole person in terms of self-awareness and awareness of others and the development of respect in the context of a plural society.

Developments in Religious Education in post-Apartheid **South Africa** also provide an interesting point of comparison for those considering options in Northern Ireland. During the Apartheid years the “single faith approach” to teaching religion in schools (Christian National Education) had been based on the simplistic assumption that South Africa was a Christian country. The initial post-Apartheid alternative was to initiate a “multiple-single tradition” approach with R.E. being taken separately according to the faith community to which children belonged, but there were many concerns expressed that this would simply create a form of

religious apartheid, accompanied by mutual ignorance and mistrust. Eventually an inter-cultural “multiple-tradition” was promoted, leading to the present *Religion Education* programme which, in the words of the South African Department of Education:

“contributes to the wider framework of education by developing in every learner the knowledge, values attitudes and skills necessary for diverse religions to co-exist in a multi-religious society” (quoted in Chidester, 2003).

### **Curriculum and Balance in Northern Ireland**

Changes to the RE curriculum in other countries offer various pointers for the future of the subject in Northern Ireland. In all types of schools, including those most committed to a “faith formation” approach, there are challenges around the issues of diversity and inclusion in teaching R.E. that must be faced. Nevertheless it seems that in many schools in Northern Ireland little thought has been given to this, despite some notable exceptions. In many areas the view that “it’s not an issue here” can still be heard, although this is a hollow argument in the light of the significant exposure that children and young people have to religious, ethnic and cultural diversity through television, the internet and other media, whether or not they are sharing a classroom with children from diverse backgrounds.

This issue is perhaps particularly significant for teachers and pupils in Northern Ireland’s integrated schools, with their *raison d’être* of shared education and their anti-sectarian principles. Despite some consideration having been given to the issue by various schools or groups of teachers over the years the evidence suggests that there is no agreed approach to a balanced curriculum for Religious Education specifically for integrated schools. Some have suggested that such a development would be highly desirable, but at the present time this seems some way off. Integrated schools have often used the R.E. programmes developed for Catholic schools (*Alive-O* in primary schools, and the new post-primary programme, *Fully Alive*), and there is certainly some very good and broadly-based material in these programmes which could be used much more widely than in the Catholic sector alone. Some parts of these programmes are very catechetical and confessional, however, and are therefore unsuitable for use as the total R.E. programme for the widest range of pupils.

All publicly-funded schools in Northern Ireland are technically legally bound to follow the Churches’ Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for R.E. (in its Revised form from September 2007), although they may if they wish teach additional material “beyond the core”. (The reality for many teachers, however, is that they feel that there is too much already in the syllabus and that any suggestion of teaching additional material is out of the question.) This Core Syllabus, the content of which has been controlled and agreed by four Christian denominations, is inevitably very confessional, despite being presented in a non-denominational manner. Its assumptions are exclusively Christian and very narrowly conceived, and there is very little in it to encourage knowledge of and respect for diversity, despite some of the high ideals on which it claims to be based. Although it includes material which should quite reasonably form part of any R.E. programme its greatest weakness is in its incompleteness and consequent narrowness.

This Churches’ Core Syllabus (in its original and revised forms) has been given the go-ahead by government despite considerable opposition from groups concerned with equality issues, inter-religious relations, human rights, community relations, etc.. Many people have argued

that it runs counter to the requirements of equality legislation (most notably Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Acts of 1998) and to the spirit of the government's policy statements in "A Shared Future" (2005). In all conscience I would have to advise schools against following the Core Syllabus unless they are prepared to supplement it with a great deal of much more broadly-based material – and many schools will find this difficult to do, not least because of limited time and limited resources. In fact, both the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus and the Catholic programmes provide only what I would term *Christian Education*, and do not constitute Religious Education in the fullest sense. (I have come to believe that R.E. teachers committed to the principles of diversity and inclusion in religious education must continue to protest in the strongest possible terms against the legal imposition of this Core Syllabus, which does genuine Religious Education a great disservice).

Something more balanced and comprehensive is required if we are to achieve the aims proposed above.

## A Model for Inclusive Religious Education

Given the constraints of the imposition of the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus, what are the options for those who wish to teach Religious Education in an educational, balanced and inclusive manner that is suitable for *all* pupils whatever their cultural/religious background?

It is possible that in the not-too-distant future a suitable R.E. Syllabus could emerge from the integrated schools movement that could be used much more widely by other schools wishing to develop their ethos of respect for diversity. In the meantime it will be important to offer options and alternative models for teaching R.E. in any school type, based on experience and effective practice elsewhere.

In order to give some idea of what such a syllabus might look like, the diagram on page 17 proposes a shape and indicates some of the key areas that might be included. It was developed from earlier models which took shape over many years in the present author's classrooms and, later, in curriculum development work. In its present form it was devised especially for a seminar in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 2001 in which the question was raised: *how can we teach religion positively and constructively in a religiously divided society?* It was further developed during and following a workshop held under the auspices of the Department of Education in the Republic of Georgia in 2004 which was also exploring these issues in relation to their own changing situation.

Through its three strands, this model recognises the religious traditions and communities present in a particular country or region, and gives due weight to the more prominent traditions while recognising the wider need for awareness of religion as a local and global phenomenon. It raises three key questions:

- *What do people believe?*
- *How do people practise what they believe?*
- *How do beliefs affect daily life and behaviour?*

These questions should be explored in an inclusive manner in order to develop understanding, sensitivity and critical openness, with an appropriate balance between systematic teaching and thematic approaches. The different strands should not just be about content or “knowing things”, but should also provide a basis for reflection and emotional development while remaining open-ended and inclusive. This has often been expressed in terms of the balance between “learning *about* religion” and “learning *from* religion”, and such a model has been employed effectively in other parts of the UK and Europe.

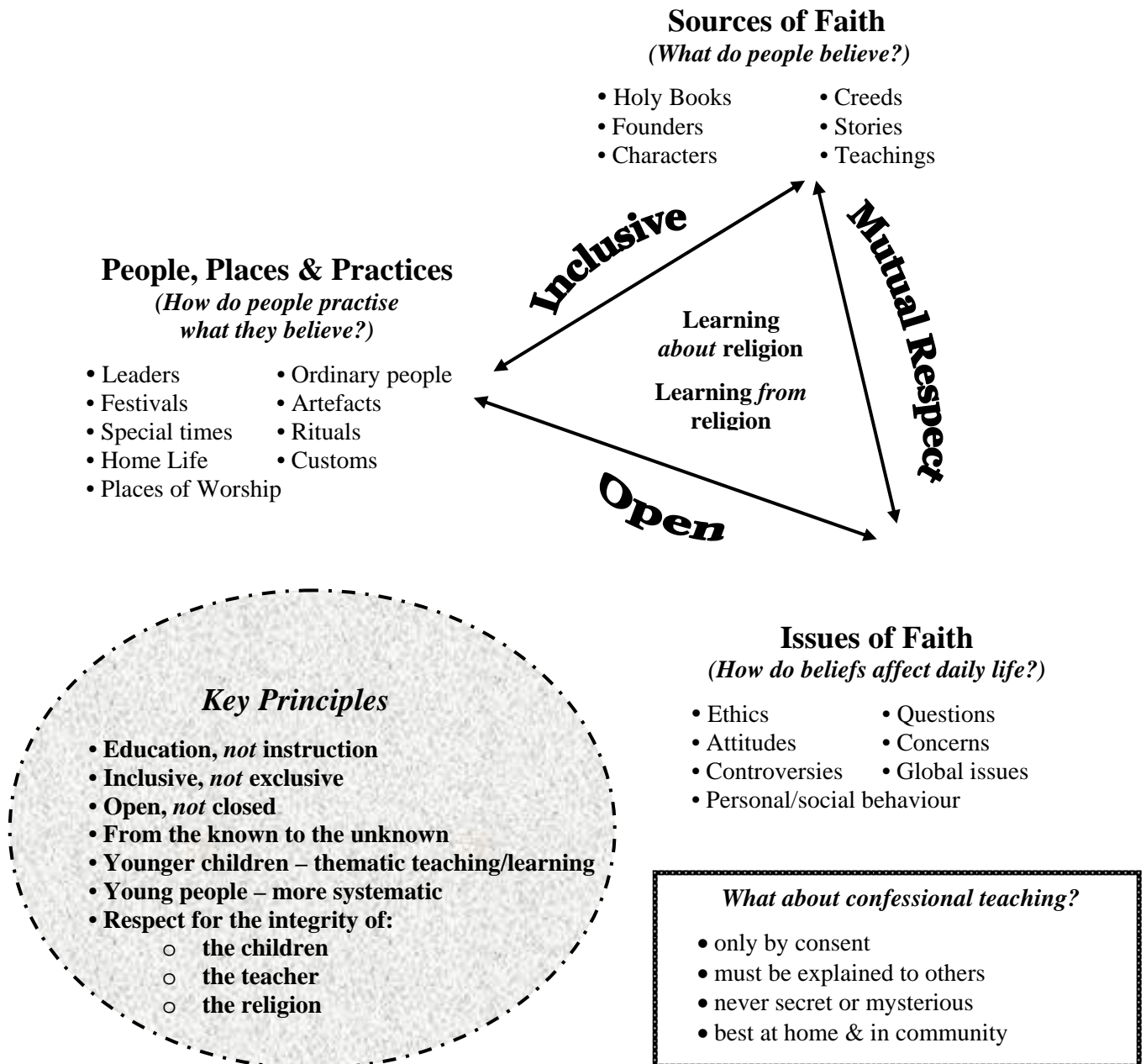
Perhaps the greatest value of this model is that it is a template which can be adapted and developed according to identified needs in a particular school or group of schools. It proposes a soundly educational alternative to the confessional and often confused approach evident in too many schools. It offers a basis for enabling shared schools (or schools that wish to extend their capacity as shared spaces) to explore religious issues openly and fairly while encouraging mutual respect. The set of guidelines on pages 22-23 (**Appendix 1**) offers some key principles on which such an approach to teaching R.E. might be based.

Figure 1

**TEACHING RELIGION EDUCATIONALLY & INCLUSIVELY**  
**A Balanced Model for Plural Societies**  
*Norman Richardson*

*In this balanced model it is assumed throughout that the syllabus will include*

- *the religious tradition(s)/faith(s) which are familiar in a particular society*
- *other traditions/faiths/life-stances, including those which do not have a local presence.*



Model developed for a Workshop on *Teaching Religion in a Conflictual Society*, for the annual conference of the European Network for Conflict Resolution in Education (ENCORE), Bosnia, August 2001.

## Uncomfortable Issues

Any proposals for the broadening out of Religious Education are likely to raise issues and concerns in relation to the traditional expectations about R.E. in Northern Ireland. These relate especially to the place of confessional teaching in schools and the legal provision for withdrawal from R.E. classes.

### *1. Confessional Teaching*

The traditional assumption that publicly funded schools should provide religious teaching and faith nurture/formation for children from a specific religious community is increasingly hard to sustain in the context of a plural global society. Such an approach fails to prepare children for the realities of life in a very diverse world and at its worst it leads to the rigid separation of children into different confessional camps during a very formative period in their lives. One would like to think that schools in Northern Ireland committed to a “faith formation” approach – Catholic maintained schools and a small number of independent Protestant schools – would be making a special effort to ensure that separate religious teaching is offset by the inclusion of a broadly-based religious curriculum and opportunities for significant inter-school cross-community contact, but with a few exceptions this appears to be wishful thinking.

In the view of the present writer, confessional teaching is a role for the Churches or other faith communities, not for the publicly funded school. In the UK and Ireland many Christian denominations and local parishes or congregations have done a relatively poor job in their church-based Christian Education programmes, whether for children or adults, because it has been assumed that this is taking place in schools. It is surely time for the various churches to get their act together for this task *within* their own communities – and even ideally in co-operation with each other – rather than to continue to place unrealistic expectations on the state-funded schools. This would release R.E. in schools from these inappropriate confessional pressures and free them up to develop a truly educational approach to teaching religion.

Nevertheless, this is not a position which can be reached quickly and thus for the present those schools that are seeking to provide for children from a diversity of faith backgrounds will probably have to make some provision for an element of confessional teaching. In Northern Ireland the most obvious expression of this is in relation to the preparation in primary schools of Catholic children for the sacraments of first confession, first communion and confirmation.

Integrated schools have put considerable energy into reassuring Catholic parents that they can do this just as well as the Catholic schools, which is understandable. The situation does raise issues about how to ensure that religious education remains as inclusive as possible, however. The ‘necessity’ of dividing classes in order to provide confessional teaching about the sacraments, or of separating mixed classes only for religious education, could be seen to undermine the very central principle of shared education. There is also the very practical issue of what to do for the other children while the Catholics are thus engaged. Attempts to provide parallel programmes for “non-Catholic” children (as for instance in NICIE’s “Delving Deeper” programme for Protestant children) have proved difficult and

elusive, and it is surely unwise to imply that the only alternative to a specifically Catholic form of R.E. is one that is specifically Protestant. Under these circumstances it will be most important to ensure that all children do as much as possible of their Religious Education *together* and that the content of Religious Education is not assumed to begin and end with that which is denominationally specific to Catholic and Protestant forms of Christianity. Under no circumstances should the catechetical teaching appear secretive or mysterious to the other children, and every effort should be made to explain what is being done. Those integrated schools that make the first communion or confirmation a shared celebration for all pupils, of all faiths and none, have spoken warmly of the value of such sharing.

This fundamental point was very clearly expressed in the Anti-Bias Curriculum booklet produced by the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education:

“The basic principle with regard to religion is that children should only learn apart that which it would be unreasonable to ask them to learn together. With this in mind, participation in religious events should, wherever possible, be inclusive rather than exclusive.” (NICIE, 1998)

## ***2. Withdrawing Children from R.E.***

A further contentious issue relates to the legal right of withdrawal from R.E. – a privilege which goes back well over a century and which is not enjoyed in relation to any other subject.

Parents have a legal right to request withdrawal of their children from R.E. classes, and schools have an obligation to provide appropriate alternative work. Similarly, teachers may also request not to teach Religious Education on grounds of conscience. Recent research with parents from minority faith communities (Richardson, 2003b) indicated that some families from such groups, but by no means all, do make a request for withdrawal. Some families reported that schools did not tell them about their rights in this regard and some indicated that pressure had been put on them not to withdraw. In practice relatively few parents (and even fewer teachers) avail of this possibility, but if it is requested schools must respect the request and are legally obliged to facilitate it.

Difficulties in providing practical, properly supervised alternative arrangements have often made a nonsense of the right of withdrawal. There are many accounts of children sitting at the back of a class “reading a book” but obviously listening to what is going on and often wanting to take part. In other schools the option of “sitting outside the principal’s office” provides an uncomfortable ambiguity about a child’s absence from class. Some children undoubtedly feel very unhappy about being singled out in this way, especially if teachers are less than sensitive to the needs and feelings of children who withdraw from R.E..

The greatest difficulty, however, is an ethical one. The right to withdraw strongly implies that R.E. is being taught confessionally from a faith position, and this makes it harder to persuade parents from a diversity of backgrounds that R.E. is open, inclusive and genuinely educational.

Schools wishing to be as inclusive as possible in their R.E. teaching need to build the trust of parents, especially those from minority faith communities. Parents *can* be encouraged to participate and not to withdraw, but this will require careful explanation, patience, individual negotiation and perhaps most of all sensitive but clear leadership. Schools wishing to teach R.E. in an educational and inclusive manner will surely wish to pursue such an approach, while yet respecting the wishes of parents who may still remain unsure or in need of greater confidence.

## Concluding Thoughts: Teachers Moving Forward

Religious Education has great potential as a vehicle for helping children and young people to develop awareness of and respect for religious diversity and to find creative and enriching ways of encounter with people who are from differing religious backgrounds. The role of the teacher is crucial in this process, and the teacher should be a model of such an approach. In their book *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society*, Hobson and Edwards raise the question of the place of the teacher in this process:

“What are the desirable attitudes for a teacher of religious studies? ... Perhaps the most essential attitude would be one of openness to new perspectives and an ongoing interest in the search for truth (rather than a conviction that one already has all the answers). At the same time, a desire to assist others in the same search and to share one’s doubts and questions would be highly desirable.” (Hobson & Edwards, 1999, pp.170-1)

The creative teacher of religious diversity, with children of whatever age group, will be an encourager of pupil enquiry, of curiosity and exploration. In such a teacher’s classes pupils will be motivated to articulate ideas and feelings and to be able to reflect on their own and others’ experiences. Adequate time will be made for interactive discussion, based on an expanding knowledge and understanding. First-hand experience will be emphasised through the provision of opportunities to visit a range of relevant places and to receive visitors or engage in various kinds of encounters with people from different religious and cultural communities. Local and global perspectives on religion and other life stances will be developed, with an awareness of both similarities and differences. Within such an ethos some aspects of religion will be explored in a broadly thematic manner, especially with younger children, while other aspects will be explored more systematically, especially with older pupils.

This approach to Religious Education already exists in some schools, though in too many others it is stultified because of the constraints, anxieties or hesitations indicated in the first part of this paper. Those who are convinced of the value of the open and genuinely educational study of religion in schools have the task of persuading their colleagues to shed the negative perceptions and engage with an altogether different way of doing R.E..

It may be that those schools which have already made a commitment to shared schooling will wish to develop a syllabus for R.E. which reflects this approach, supported by appropriate training structures. Such a syllabus may yet become a model for other schools which are looking for alternatives to narrow, Church-dominated programmes as represented by the current Northern Ireland Core Syllabus. Whether such a syllabus eventually emerges from the formal integrated sector or from elsewhere, the modelling of such an approach will surely do a great service to Religious Education in all kinds of schools. The challenge will be to show that such an approach can be effectively implemented and that it can enrich our understanding, educationally, culturally and within and between our divided and diverse communities.

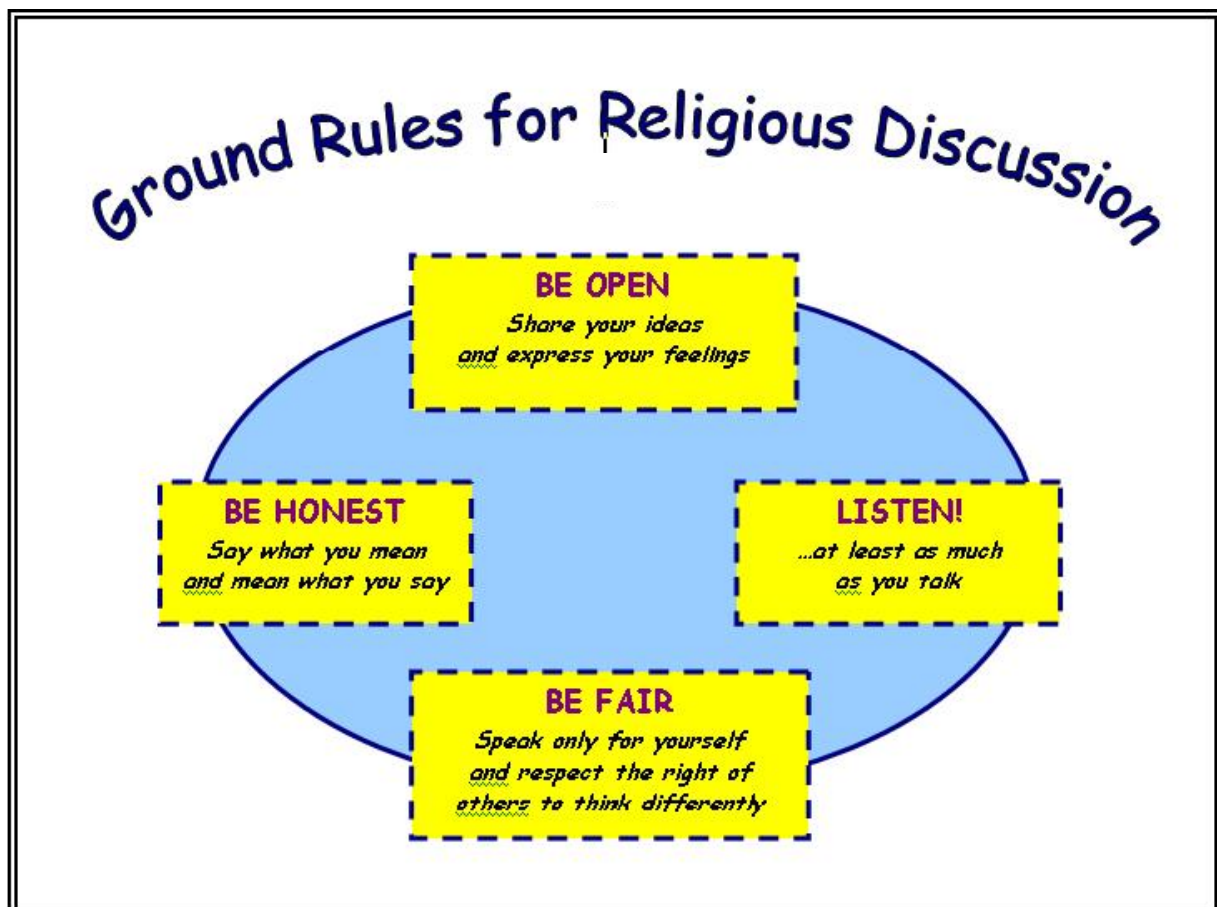
Appendix 1  
**Teaching Religious Education Inclusively**  
*Suggestions and Guidelines for Teachers*

The premise of these guidelines is to propose that it is possible for teachers of all religious backgrounds and of none, specialists and non-specialists, to teach R.E. with a clear conscience, both personally and professionally, and to offer some suggestions which may help. *The basic principle is to find an approach which respects the background of the pupil, the integrity of the teacher and the nature of the subject matter* (i.e. the religion or religions being studied). Most of these principles can apply in situations where the teacher is teaching children who all come from the same religious-cultural-ethnic background as well as situations where there are children from a range of backgrounds together in the same classroom.

- Be true to your own beliefs and insights. Like any other subject R.E. fundamentally requires you to be first and foremost a good, professional teacher. It should not require you to sacrifice any personal beliefs or principles or to attempt to pretend that you are something which you are not.
- Don't be tempted to hand over the teaching of R.E. just to those with strong religious views. An *educational* approach to R.E. requires that children experience a breadth of views and approaches. No-one has a monopoly of religious understanding.
- Where possible R.E. should include material on the religion which is most familiar to the children being taught and also on other, less familiar religious beliefs and practices. The expansion of pupils' horizons is very important, especially where there has been religious division and conflict. If R.E. only reinforces already-held beliefs then it is not truly educational.
- R.E. requires an approach which is sensitive to the various religious (or non-religious) viewpoints which may be represented by the children, their parents and the school community in general, but don't be over-cautious to the extent of failing to be adventurous. Keep parents well informed and even involve them if possible.
- Use inclusive language which emphasises your professional educational approach. For example, rather than phrases which imply that there is only one way of "correct" belief, use expressions such as  

*"Some people think that ..... while others think ....."*  
or *"Christians/Jews/Muslims, etc. believe...."*  
or even (occasionally) *"I believe ... but ... "*
- R.E. can be an ideal opportunity for encouraging the development of respect for differences and for building mutual understanding, especially in a society with a history of religious division. Don't just leave this to chance!
- R.E. is about helping children to explore their feelings and to develop personal attitudes and values. This requires a spirit of openness to the children's own ideas and goes beyond just giving them facts and information.

- R.E. involves knowledge and understanding, but it also relates to the human quest for meaning in life. Teachers can also enter into that quest and explore it with the children, whose insights can often be enlightening! (Children need to know that adults are still learning, thinking, growing, exploring....!)
- Make full use of the range of religious (or religious-related) festivals which punctuate the year. They provide lots of material for a broadly-based, multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural approach to R.E. and provide a natural starting point for the exploration of religious practices, beliefs and issues.
- Confidence-building classroom strategies, such as *Circle Time*, which is based around emotional development, promoting trust and respect and the sharing of ideas in an open and democratic manner, can be an excellent way of dealing with the feelings, values and morality aspects of R.E..
- Discuss and develop principles and ground rules for discussion, especially for topics and issues which may involve sensitivities and deeply held beliefs. (See the example below.)
- R.E. can be taught in a broadly cross-curricular way, using approaches relating to a wide range of other skills and subjects - story (reading and writing); discussion; listening skills; drama; art; music; geography; history; science..... and much else. Make the most of your own skills and interests in the way you develop topics and themes.



## Appendix 2

### Initiating a Staff Development Process for the Renewal of Religious Education

Schools wishing to develop their Religious Education along the lines suggested here will need to engage all staff in discussion and consideration of an appropriate curriculum and practical arrangements. For such an approach to work it will require professional ownership by teachers and a supportive ethos of respect for diversity. Time for staff development is therefore crucial.

A staff development day (or half-day) on this theme might have the following structure:

- ❖ In advance – an opportunity to read this document or a similar statement about diversity in Religious Education
- ❖ Guided reflection and discussion on personal professional experiences of R.E. (See suggested reflection points below, under *Discussion 1*.)
- ❖ Feedback
- ❖ Input drawing on curriculum audits, inspection reports or other experiences (possibly involving a guest speaker)
- ❖ Discussion towards proposing aims and ways of implementing a more inclusive approach to R.E. (See suggested discussion questions below – *Discussion 2*.)
- ❖ Feedback and agreement on practical steps that could be taken over the next months and into the next academic year.

#### **Discussion 1: Guided reflection on experiences of teaching R.E.**

(If the situation is purely one of personal study, then the reader may wish to take some moments to write down his or her own reflections on the following questions.)

- *Share one thing you have really enjoyed/appreciated about teaching R.E. and one thing which has frustrated or irritated you.  
If this teaching was taking place in an integrated or other shared setting, indicate the extent to which this was a factor in your feelings about R.E..*
- *What benefits from R.E. would you expect or hope that children & young people would gain in an integrated school (or similar shared environment) which they might not so easily gain from other kinds of schools/settings?*
- *How openly can you discuss Religious diversity with:*
  - a) *your pupils?*
  - b) *your colleagues?*

## **Discussion 2: Present practice and ways forward**

Consider how R.E. is developed and organised in the school at present (based on results of surveys, audits, inspection reports where available, personal experience, etc.).

- Share experiences and highlight good practice.

### ***Questions for all schools:***

- Who teaches R.E.? When is R.E. taught?
- What is working well? What is not working so well?
- What are our aims / purposes / intended outcomes in relation to R.E.?
- How strong is our personal and collective knowledge base about religious diversity – within Christianity and in relation to world faiths?
- How effectively do we respond to the sharper edges of religious diversity in schools, especially in relation to sectarianism and racism?
- What do we need to do to improve practice – personally and as a staff team?

### ***Questions specially for Integrated (or otherwise mixed) Schools:***

- What should be the distinctive contributions of the integrated classroom to R.E.?
- If in an integrated school, when and how do children prepare for the sacraments? (What are other children doing during this time?)
- Should there be a distinctive Integrated R.E. Syllabus?

### Appendix 3

## The Revised Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland: Questions and Alternatives

*The two short papers that follow were written immediately after the announcement by the Minister of Education, Maria Eagle, in November 2006 that the government was accepting the proposals of the Churches Working Group for the Revision of the Core Syllabus. These documents challenge the government's decision on the grounds of equality and educational principles. They were sent to a number of interested parties within and beyond Northern Ireland to encourage them to take the issue up with the government. (A few minor changes have been made to the original text in order to accommodate the change of context.)*

### 1. Questions About Religious Education In Northern Ireland

According to a Department of Education News Release dated 15<sup>th</sup> November 2006 (see website address below), Maria Eagle, the current Education Minister for Northern Ireland, has formally accepted the Churches' Proposals for the revision of their Core Syllabus for Religious Education. In doing so she has stated that **"it will help to better prepare [sic] our young people to deal with the challenges of life and work in today's global society"**. This quite incredible statement has been made in relation to a Syllabus which was devised by the four largest Christian denominations without any attempt to include or consult with other faith communities and which explicitly excludes teaching about other faiths except minimally at Key Stage 3. Even this very limited section on world religions was produced by nominees of the Churches without any reference to members of minority faith communities. (*Relevant documentation is indicated below.*)

In its approach and content the Churches' Core Syllabus is little changed from the original version formally approved and published in 1993. The many criticisms that were made then very largely still apply and virtually the only concession, apparently grudgingly made, has been the proposal for a limited inclusion of world faiths only at Key Stage 3. The Syllabus is expressed mainly in terms of a listing of content and indicates little or no awareness of the extensive literature on contemporary approaches to teaching religion in a plural society. In their introductory rationale for a Revised Core Syllabus, published in 2003, the Churches Working Group stated that even at Key Stage 3 the study of other faiths "will require only a modest amount of teaching time in each year of key stage 3" (p.11). Primary children are simply offered what amounts largely to a biblical studies programme, often couched in confessional Christian language. No attempt has been made to restore the study of faiths other than Christianity at Key Stage 4 / GCSE level.\* The Churches have unashamedly expressed their support for "maintaining the essential Christian character of Religious Education for all grant-aided schools in Northern Ireland" (p.4).

The Churches, supported by the Department of Education, have always argued that the Core Syllabus "is only a core" and that schools are free to include other material, but it is very clear that throughout the period of the first Core Syllabus very few schools have been willing to attempt other topics, often arguing that there is not enough time even to cover the statutory syllabus.

I would like to pose the following questions to those who have accepted the Churches' position on this Syllabus, and would welcome the support of others in directing these questions to the Government, the Department of Education and, indeed, to the Churches themselves.

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\* Since November 2006 there have been some indications by CCEA that they will consider the possibility of extending the study of world faiths into Key Stage 4 and GCSE Religious Studies. At the time of writing (July 2007) this is not confirmed.

- In a plural society – and one which makes considerable play of the concept of “A Shared Future” and the significance of Section 75 equality legislation – how can it be fair and acceptable to hand over the responsibility for the preparation of a Syllabus for Religious Education to representatives of one religious tradition (the Christian Churches) while excluding the involvement of other faith communities?
- Why is it still thought necessary to retain legislation – on statute since the 1947 Education Act – which states that Religious Education should be “education based upon the Holy Scriptures according to some authoritative version or versions thereof” (Article 21[2] of the Education & Libraries [Northern Ireland] Order 1986)? How can such a clause be perceived in any way to be appropriate in a society which includes people of many different faith communities and those who belong to no religion? (It could be argued from this clause that even “a modest amount” of teaching about “other” world religions is actually illegal!)
- Does it not seem contradictory to recognise and promote the importance of primary school children exploring cultural and religious diversity through the new learning area of Personal Development & Mutual Understanding (PDMU Strand 2: Mutual Understanding in the Local and Wider Community), while officially supporting the Churches’ view that such learning is inappropriate in primary Religious Education?
- How can the Department of Education reconcile the Churches’ position on Christian-only Religious Education for primary school children with the well-known research by Paul Connolly and others demonstrating that children as young as 3 years have a capacity to develop prejudiced attitudes in terms of racism and sectarianism?
- How can the Department of Education justify continuing to deny the study of faiths other than Christianity to students at GCSE level (and of offering only very limited opportunities at A level)?
- How can government continue to support exclusive and partisan approaches to religious education in schools at a time when Northern Ireland is experiencing the growing presence of people from culturally and religiously diverse backgrounds? Does the government acknowledge any possible connection between a narrow, exclusive and biased syllabus and the disturbing growth in racist behaviour – such that Northern Ireland has been described as “the racist capital of Europe”?
- How can the UK Government justify their support of a broadly-based, multi-faith and intercultural approach to Religious Education in England, Wales and Scotland while denying it to Northern Ireland?
- How can the Department justify describing this syllabus as “Religious Education” when it is clearly and overtly designed solely by four Christian denominations to be “*Christian Education*” (and could be described perhaps even more accurately as “*Christian instruction*”)?
- How can the retention in law of conscience clauses permitting parents to withdraw children from RE classes (and permitting teachers the right not to teach the subject) be reconciled with the concept of open-ended and fairly taught Religious *Education*?
- How can we possibly hope to “*prepare our young people to deal with the challenges of life and work in today’s global society*” (Maria Eagle, November 2006) if we continue to offer them a limited and inward-looking approach to religious awareness and understanding designed by Churches that are clearly concerned to protect their own interests and power-base?

## **2. Religious Education - towards an Inclusive Approach in Northern Ireland**

Are there any possible alternatives to the Churches’ Core Syllabus for R.E.? Would it be better to exclude religious teaching altogether from publicly funded schools, as some people argue, or is there a place for teaching religion in a way that is genuinely *educational*?

It may be perceived that those who object to the nature and content of the Churches' Core Syllabus for Religious Education in Northern Ireland are entirely negative in their outlook, but this is certainly not the case. There are very different ways of teaching religious themes and topics, well-tried in other countries, which do not focus exclusively on one religious tradition and which do not make assumptions about the religious commitment or otherwise of either learners or teachers. Some teachers in Northern Ireland have already done their best to teach R.E. in this way, despite the constraints of the Core Syllabus. In this brief document I want to offer some key principles that might help give shape to a positive alternative approach to R.E. in a religiously and culturally plural society.

1. A fair and inclusive syllabus for Religious Education in publicly funded schools should be designed by representatives of various religious traditions, including the Christian Churches, and of other interest groups (for example, professional Religious Education bodies; Humanists; teaching unions). The Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order of 1989 requires a Core Syllabus for Religious Education to be produced by "persons having an interest in the teaching of Religious Education in grant-aided schools". Government has continuously interpreted this as applying only to the four largest Christian denominations, but such "interest in R.E." is clearly shared by others, including members of other faith communities.
2. An educational approach to the teaching of religion in schools could find a useful basis in internationally agreed human rights principles. The following statement, for example, offers a possible starting point for a rationale that could be widely acceptable in the publicly funded schools sector:

**"... the education of the child shall be directed to ... the development of respect for ... his or her own cultural identity, language and values ... and for civilisations different from his or her own; ... in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin ..."**

Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

(Other relevant human rights statements can be found in: Article 5 of the *U.N. Declaration on the Elimination of all forms of Intolerance and Discrimination based on Religion & Belief* [1981]; Paragraph 59 of the *Programme of Action from the United Nations World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance* [2001]; and in particular paragraphs 1, 4 & 7b of the *Final Document of the UN International Consultative Conference on School Education in Religion with Freedom of Religion and Belief* [2001].)

3. An inclusive approach to Religious Education would seek to develop a balanced content, taking account of the religious traditions of the majority (Christian) but also of other traditions, particularly, though not exclusively, those with a local presence. Such an approach is suitable for **all age groups** (not just at Key Stage 3) and there are excellent resources available, nationally and locally, that can support such work at all stages of education.
4. Religious awareness and understanding can effectively be built on a developing knowledge of religious beliefs and practices, supported by a sensitive but open-ended exploration of questions of meaning and various religious and non-religious responses to them. In primary schools a thematic approach may be particularly helpful in the process of religious learning; in post-primary schools a more systematic approach is often appropriate.
5. Religious learning must engage children both intellectually and affectively. Religious understanding is not just about building up knowledge, but also relates to emotional development and attitudinal development. It is sometimes suggested that the discussion of religious concepts and religious diversity is too difficult and confusing for young children. Yet the work of movements such as *Philosophy for Children* (Matthew Lipman and others) has demonstrated the capacity of children to discuss such issues so long as they are presented in a manner appropriate to children's age and aptitude.

6. Encouragement should be given to pupils to explore religious diversity, within as well as between religious traditions, according to age and ability. This should include the consideration of divergent truth claims and support for the development of skills in approaching controversial issues.
7. An inclusive Religious Education syllabus should have a particular focus on promoting inter-religious awareness and mutual understanding, in relation to Christianity and to other faiths and alternative life stances. Such understanding can only truly come about on the basis of open discussion of genuine differences. A Religious Education that did no more than reinforce stereotypes, even if only by the exclusion of alternative beliefs and practices, would be a very dangerous thing. R.E. teachers need specific awareness of religious diversity and keen skills in inter-religious encounter and dialogue.
8. Church schools and other faith-based schools in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, regard their role as one of “faith formation”, although the great majority of such schools in Northern Ireland (mostly in the Catholic sector) are fully publicly funded. Whatever one’s views about the rightness or wrongness of separate school systems based on religious denomination, surely the inclusive principles outlined above should be applicable to *all* school pupils, whatever their personal religious background or school type. In fact, they are perhaps *particularly crucial* in relation to those children who attend schools where all or almost all are from the same cultural/religious background and where there is therefore some isolation from cultural diversity.
9. Inclusive Religious Education should not be an option, any more than any other subject should be. It is sometimes suggested that people who do not like the particular Religious Education Syllabus can withdraw their children from class, and indeed there is a legal right so to do. Yet if we wish to develop inclusive schools and curriculae, open to people of all faiths and those of no religion, withdrawal is an extremely un-educational option. This, however, has implications for the content and ethos of any syllabus; it is hard to see how a Churches-produced syllabus that is couched in confessional Christian language and sees itself as “essentially Christian” could ever achieve such inclusivity.

The above principles only offer a flavour of what is possible in terms of a positive, inclusive, thoroughly educational approach to Religious Education. It can be done, and members of the Churches need not feel threatened by it, but it will require a change of approach and a willingness to share responsibility, rather than to dominate!

**Footnote on Documentation:**

Maria Eagle’s statement is available on the Department of Education website, as is the now approved Churches’ Revised Core Syllabus (which is due to be implemented progressively from September 2007): [http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/80-curriculumandassessment\\_pg/80-curriculum\\_and\\_assessment-religiouseducationcoresyllabus\\_pg.htm](http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/80-curriculumandassessment_pg/80-curriculum_and_assessment-religiouseducationcoresyllabus_pg.htm).

The Churches’ Working Party introduction and rationale is not available on the website, but copies can be provided on request from the present writer. The results of the EQIA on the Core Syllabus proposals (which has concluded that the proposals are appropriate and “suited to the religious background of the vast majority of NI pupils”) are also available on the Department of Education’s website.

**Norman Richardson: November 2006**

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- QCA (2004) *Non-Statutory National Framework for Religious Education*, London: Qualifications & Skills Authority and Department for Education & Skills
- Richardson, N. (ed) (1998) *A Tapestry of Beliefs: Christian Traditions in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Blackstaff Press
- Richardson, N. (2003a) *Religious Diversity in Northern Ireland: Questions and Challenges for Educators* (paper given at the Educational Studies Association Ireland conference: St Mary's University College, Belfast, April 2003) \*
- Richardson, N. (2003b) *Curricular, Faith and Pastoral Issues for Minority Faith Children in Northern Ireland Schools: The Views of Their Parents* (paper given at the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum Conference on Diversity, World Faiths and Education, November 2003) \*

### **Other Relevant Books:**

- Jackson, R. (2004) *Rethinking Religious Education and Plurality*, London: RoutledgeFalmer \*
- Jackson, R. & McKenna, U. eds., (2005) *Intercultural Education and Religious Plurality*, Oslo: the Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion & Belief
- Palmer, M. (1991) *What Should We Teach? Christians and Education in a Pluralist World*, Geneva, Risk Books - WCC Publications \*
- Rivett, R & Blaylock, L (2003) *A Teacher's Handbook of Religious Education: 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*, Birmingham: R.E. Today Services / Christian Education Publications

### **For other useful sources of information and ideas:**

**British Journal of Religious Education** (Editor: Prof. Robert Jackson, University of Warwick) - published 3 times per year by Routledge Journals, Taylor & Francis Group Ltd, 4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxfordshire OX14 4RN, UK

**R.E. Today Services:** provides ecumenical and inter-faith resources to support inclusive and fully professional approaches to Religious Education in the UK. Among their many excellent resources see in particular the *Developing Primary R.E.* and *Developing Secondary R.E.* series. See the website and catalogue for full details: [www.retoday.org.uk](http://www.retoday.org.uk)

**The Oslo Coalition on Freedom of Religion or Belief:** an international network of representatives from faith communities, NGOs, international organizations and the academia, with the aim of promoting freedom of religion or belief and strengthening interfaith co-operation worldwide. Of particular relevance is its project on **Teaching for Tolerance and Freedom of Religion or Belief**. Many articles and links are available on the website: [www.oslocoalition.org/html/project\\_school\\_education/](http://www.oslocoalition.org/html/project_school_education/)