Diversifying the Religious Studies curriculum: Considering Britain’s increasingly secular society

***Introduction***

We chose to centre our Extended Project Qualification on the diversification of the Religious Studies curriculum. We will be evaluating the AQA GCSE syllabus, in light of the recent shift towards secularism in Britain. As someone from a religious background, I have found this topic to be relevant to my own beliefs and previous experiences, such as attending a faith school. After transitioning to Putney High, I feel that I have benefited greatly from encountering a wider range of views and I hope to benefit similarly from researching the curriculum’s approach to religion. On the other hand, my partner grew up in an atheist household. Therefore, Bella has provided an alternative perspective, whilst simultaneously sharing my interest in the subject and its more philosophical aspects. Although we both take Religious Studies GCSE, neither of us currently intend to pursue it at A level. Consequently, the EPQ was an ideal opportunity to continue to develop our learning of the subject, through exploring RS in the context of diversifying the curriculum.

Historically, religion has evolved over time to best represent the beliefs held by the collective. This means that it is undeniably intertwined with the formation of society’s morals, with much of Western morality being inherited from Abrahamic teachings. Religion’s prominent influence in Britain can be traced back to the presence of paganism in Anglo-Saxon times. After the Roman invasion of Britain, Constantine, the first Roman Emperor to adopt Christian beliefs, went on to found the longest lasting medieval power, the Byzantine Empire. This rendered political power intrinsic to religion and lead to Catholic evangelism being utilised as a justification for continued expansion. Theologian, Stanley Hauerwas, even championed Constantine’s rule as the beginning of religion’s close association with patriotism. As a result of Roman rule, Britain was predominantly Catholic until the Protestant reformation in 1534, when Henry VIII instated himself as head of the Church. Although in the past, religions have tended to evolve alongside society as it progresses, Christianity has remained Britain’s official religion for nearly 500 years. This is despite Britain undergoing numerous unprecedented changes, such as the industrial revolution. Many more traditional belief systems have, through no fault of their own, not evolved alongside more recent shifts in ideology. This disparity prompts us to consider the duty of the government to ensure that public services, such as the education system, cater to Britain’s increasingly diverse religious demographic.

In the modern day, a new era of consumerism, technology and scientific understanding, ‘has marginalised’ religion (1). For some, the significance of traditions established by religious institutions has become merely symbolic or obligatory, with many of those partaking in holy sacraments rarely viewing the occasion as synonymous with making a lifelong commitment to God. This has been evidenced by the majority of couples preferring to be wed in the eyes of the law, with fewer than a quarter of all marriages being religious ceremonies (2016). This paves the way for liberalist sources, to consider ‘secularity’ as the default, as religion is “a matter of personal belief,” “that is valid so long as it does not impinge upon the life and choices of others.”(2) Arguably, recent data displays that this description is not dissimilar from how British society functions, however this is not reflected in the religious studies curriculum.

**Religious Identity Survey**

Christianity has declined, whilst those with no religion has increased, despite British culture and tradition.

Unfortunately, this discord has impacted the proficiency of the current curriculum, which perpetrates a skewed approach to Britain’s pluralistic society. This leaves the younger generation with a lack of relevant knowledge, and potentially discourages individuals from pursuing RS at a higher level. Due to the aforementioned reasons, the curriculum has been heavily disputed by politicians and religious leaders alike. The chief executive of the British Humanist Association has demonstrated a desire for a reform of the curriculum, emphasising the “importance of a religious education curriculum that is inclusive, balanced, and pluralistic.”

This discord in views has prompted us to consider diversifying the curriculum. The proposed changes would entail the inclusion of non-religious outlooks, to reflect the changes within British society. Secondly, they would prioritise increasing students’ breadth of knowledge to encompass a range of beliefs, as opposed to highly specific and specialised teaching on only two religions. Prior to reaching a conclusion, our project will asses these changes through a variety of lenses, namely: Education Standards, Secularism, Faith schools and Feasibility.

***Education Standards***

Previous to inspecting the necessity for change, it is crucial to examine the status quo and the current legislation, in respect to education standards. At present, schools are given the opportunity to select modules deriving from the six main world religions: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and Buddhism. On the other hand, a recent review by Ofsted stated that pupils should be taught about ‘the place of religion and non-religion in the world.’ Indicating that academic authorities recognise the necessity for change, in order for the curriculum to better comply with Government education standards. According to the Government, the education system exists to satisfy three fundamental purposes: ‘empowering young people to succeed in the economy, participate in culture, and leave school prepared for adult life.’ (8) Arguably, the rise of “no religion” as a self-designation” (4), renders RS to be lacking in regard to the latter principle. Recent evidence “largely attributed” this “to generational differences, with younger generations being more likely to partake in the “growing culture of non-religion”(5). Consequently, a wider understanding of secularism and other beliefs would be particularly relevant to helping students ‘prepare for adult life’. (8) Unfortunately, this breadth of topics is not offered under the current curriculum, despite Government having a responsibility to not deviate from these basic principles. In regard to the role of education in enabling individuals to “participate in culture” a reformed curriculum would encourage diversity within British culture and foster “mutual understanding, between people of all religions and none.” (3) Overall, the diversification of religious education would enable the government to fulfil its duty in maintaining education standards.

***Secularism***

Above, I established how continued relevance to the ever-changing British population is paramount to complying with education standards. Considering this legislation, we are prompted to explore the propensity for evolution within the RS curriculum. The rapidly developing society of the 21st century has heralded in an age of large-scale development and indirectly birthed a “revolution in belief”(4). In Britain this has manifested itself in a shift toward secularism, a term which I employ to encompass any beliefs that do not ascribe to a particular religion, such as; humanism, atheism, or simply the existence in an undefined ‘higher being’. The growth and longevity of secularist ideology has been evidenced by several sources, which I will go onto examine, before considering the resulting impact on religious education.

Despite little legislative acknowledgement, this shift has persisted for a notable period of time, with an ICM poll dating back to 2006, “revealing [revealed] that the majority of adults in Britain describe themselves as non-religious.” (4) In conjunction with this, religion has born witness to a decrease in commitment from those who still ascribe to it, with ‘58% of those who identify as religious worshipping never, or practically never’ (6), as of 2012. Previous to which, academics were already reflecting on the changes and boldly asking educators to “raise their eyes, if not to heaven, at least to a more global picture of what education should be about.” Since then, although statistics prove the marked decline in religion undeniable, many aspects of society have yet to acknowledge the “growing loss of faith”(4) in Britain.

Researcher has partly attributed modern society’s “rejection of organised religion” (5) to scientific discoveries, which now provide answers for complex issues, which may have previously only been satisfied through religion. Additionally, the popularity of democracy and liberalism has increased, weakening the once autocratic power of the Church. For example, the Monarch’s reduced authority means that they now primarily serves as a figurehead, symbolic of British patriotism and culture. This has enabled the governance of Britain to gain autonomy from the Church and lessened religion’s political influence. Since there is no foreseeable end to technological advancement and with democracy being firmly intrenched in the British conscious, the growth of secularism shows no sign of slowing. In fact, a BSA report reveals that “non-religious parents” are statistically more successful in “transmitting their” belief system “to their children,” in comparison to religious parents. Therefore demonstrating the likelihood that post-Christian Britain is a reality that will remain for years to come, and therefore must be accommodated.

This drastic shift has naturally raised concerns regarding the impact of secularism on society, such as; the potential endangerment of national consciences, often undeniably founded in religion. However, an “increased focus on morality and philosophy,”(5) in RS, would educate future generations on how to maintain morality outside a “religious framework”(4), and simultaneously quash this uncertainty. Furthermore, acknowledging the existence of a “new cultural majority” (5) would ensure that Religious Studies remains a relevant forum for education. Currently, children are only provided with the opportunity to learn about traditional religions. This disproportionate exclusion of non-religious beliefs now impacts a greater proportion of individuals than ever before. An oversight, which leaves many with a lack of awareness of what the wider populous believe in. This demonstrates the subjective nature of religious education: as it is entire dependent on the beliefs of the demographic it caters to. In order to remain pertinent to contemporary society, and education standards; religious studies must progress alongside modern belief systems. In this case, this would be achieved by introducing a wider range of beliefs and ethical systems to the current syllabus. This approach will comprises of various ontological perspectives and therefore encourage the development critical thinking, in regard to both theistic and atheist beliefs .

***Faith schools***

In order to reap maximum benefits from the diversification of RS, we are evaluating the suitability of such changes on a national scale. As a result, it is crucial to explore the impacts of augmenting the curriculum in all schools, irrespective of their nature. This brings us to the highly contested question of Faith Schools: would implementing an different curriculum in Faith schools better serve the interests of contemporary Britain? This segment of my essay will be devoted to examining whether the current system exists at the detriment of religious education. This will lead me on to the logistics of the hypothetical curriculum changes, through which we aim to eradicate the legal and moral consequences that arise from the present mandate.

In Britain, Faith schools, also known as denominational schools, are affiliated with religious sources of authority through; funding, admissions, employment and the RS curriculum. Whilst the funding provided is additional to that bestowed upon state schools by the government, faith schools have complete jurisdiction over their admissions and employment process. This enables their criteria to orientate around a desire to primarily cater for religious individuals, who partake in the religion fundamental to the school’s ethos. These schools are legally referred to as possessing “ religious character,’ however the state remains liable for funding and dictates the majority of its curriculum. This means that the current system ensures that all faith schools are obliged to follow the national curriculum, apart from religious studies, over which they have almost complete autonomy. However, GCSE requirements do state that “25% of the study should” (10) be dedicated to a second religion. In theory, this ensures that faith schools consign an adequate segment of time to alternative faiths. On the other hand, due to faiths schools often devoting extra time to the study of their faith, the representation given to other religions, may not be proportional to that of RS as a whole. For example, whilst the time spent by Catholic schools meets the requirements, only 10% of curriculum time is actually allocated to the study of other faiths.

The resulting disparity could lead to students becoming overwhelmed and neglecting the portion of time reserved for the study academic knowledge, vital to their GCSE. This potentially compromises the quality of education received on any faiths that are not implicit to the school’s ethos. Secondly, the inaccurate portrayal of a primarily secularist society, denies students the opportunity to develop a multifaceted outlook. It is conceivable that this would be in breach of the aforementioned education standards, if viewed as a failure to impart the knowledge required to navigate modern society. Many faith Schools understandably often choose to favour instilling spiritual belief and concepts, in adherence with the source of their funding. In theory, such inherently subjective concepts “can be prone to quite heavy-handed indoctrination,” (11) when expressed “extremely dogmatically.” (11) A critical review of Religious Education in Europe theorised that “the (Christian) notion of religion” has become “a frame of  reference  for  almost  all  education  about  religion,” is often represented as if it construed not a particular religious view of religion, but a kind of universal perspective on religion.” (12) However, objectivity cannot be unequivocally guaranteed by the curriculum itself, but rather by the manner through which it is taught, making it the responsibility of teachers to remain impartial. Upon consulting my own RS teacher, he stated that “even those who espouse a non-religious perspective build upon various presuppositions,”(11) confirming the inevitability of all individuals possessing an intrinsic bias. Nevertheless, diversifying the curriculum could act to minimise the influence of those predisposed to a certain viewpoint, in faith schools and non-faith schools alike.

In faith schools, establishing a more multilateral approach should arguably entail a clearer division between that which is spiritual, and that which is applicable to state assessments. We propose to achieve this by enabling faith schools to devote the extra time, currently invested in RS, to the additional study of their chosen religion. The religion present in the school’s ethos would be taught as a separate lesson, similar to PSHE, prompting that religion to be removed from academic studies. The result would isolate the sacred practise of faith, from the factual and objective learning that is outlined within the RS GCSE. Under the proposed legislation, teachers would be able to administrate an unbiased perspective on the required curriculum. Whilst simultaneously providing an entirely separate opportunity for spiritual learning, surrounding topics such as; the practise of faith, deepening relationships and practising specific teachings. Thus, students can opt to avail of their school’s religious nature without jeprodisring their academic pursuits.This would create a more inclusive community and assure adherence to education standards within all schools.

***Feasibility***

There are many aspects of RS that would be enriched by altering the curriculum, however we must first assess if diversifying the curriculum is a feasible and realistic ambition. Since I am ill-placed to embark upon my own campaign and lack the necessary resources, I am unable to evaluate this through trial and error. Instead, I intend to avail of the efforts of an organisation, likeminded in their desire for a more diverse curriculum, to provide an insight on the viability of such changes.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has spent years advocating for changes to be implemented, yet with little tangible impact. This is primarily due to the practical challenges of enacting legislation within an complex organisation, like the Department for Education (DfE), intrenched in external vested interests.

The very existence of the BHA’s campaign prompts us to consider adapting the GCSE curriculum. With the BHA managing to garner support from powerful figures, including “twenty-eight religious leaders” who wrote to the Schools Minister regarding “the systematic study of Humanism” (9). On the other hand, they are yet to enact “a complete rethinking of RE.”(9) One of the foremost objections raised against this proposition, is that a wider range of content would “detracting from an in-depth treatment of religion,” since no subject can be afforded unlimited time to cover the necessary content. However, many people would view secularist beliefs as a necessary component of a well-rounded and “in-depth treatment of religion.” Alongside this, a variety of further resources would be available for students who wish to actively seek out more specific knowledge; through faith-school-specific lessons, Sunday schools, camps, courses and higher education. Overall, whilst this multifaceted debate is undoubtedly contentious, it is dynamic and, most crucially, ongoing.

Although the BHA’s considerable efforts give us reason to believe that a solution is attainable, the specific logistics of their objective differ from our own. This brings me to the second factor in determining the feasiblity of this process: the exact reforms that I would propose when diversifying the RS curriculum in Britain. In the case of faith schools, I have already outlined how alterations would be tailored to their unique needs. For non-faith schools the amended syllabus would entail a compulsory unit on secularist beliefs, centring on options such as; humanism, atheism, agnosticism etc. Furthermore, the required number of religions studied at GCSE level would be upped to three (not including the study of secularism), an approach also used in the GCSE level History curriculum. This enables students to experience studying a wider range of content, albeit in less intricate detail.

***Conclusion***

I now will briefly summarise and re-state the criteria, through which I have evaluated diversifying the RS curriculum, before reaching a conclusion on the viability of our proposal. Having considered education standards, we can conclude that the government attributes much of the curriculum’s pertinence to how relevant it is to “culture” and “adult life.” Both of which concepts, are dependent on the ever-evolving culture and lives of the British public. In view of this, I examined the evidence, testifying to the decline in religious belief, and the resulting increase in secularist belief. A marked change, which the current system fails to realise, with each of the individual “five non-Christian GCSE religions” currently “being given priority over all non-religious beliefs,” despite them together accounting for only 8% of the population.”

However, we still wish to ensure that those who espouse religious beliefs do not feel excluded from the curriculum. Therefore, we decided to examine how we could tailor our changes to also benefit the RS curriculum in faith schools. Often, faith schools provide an incredibly beneficial and safe environment, for those who wish to explore the more spiritual aspects of RS. Whilst we intend to implement expansion of the syllabus nationally, a new separate lesson would also be introduced in faith schools. This would enable religions o continue to fulfil its role in providing children with a faith based education. Lastly, in studying previous attempts to alter the curriculum I was able to evaluate the many challenges facing our proposition. Whilst I found that passing legislation is, by its very nature, a lengthy and complex process, I also believe that I have proved change to be warranted.

The limited curriculum doesn’t only act to restrict the quality of teaching being received by those studying RS, it also dissuades others from taking the subject. The exclusion of such a large proportion of the population contradicts education standards by hindering students’ ability to “participate in culture” and adequately “prepare for adult life” in the field of Religious Studies, and beyond. Ultimately, I implore you to consider Britain’s increasingly secular society, and to reflect this in a diversified RS curriculum.

***Reference section***

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**(2)** Ben Rich, “Secularity and Region in England Today”, Commission on Religion and belief 20 December 2018

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**(4)** Michael Reiss and John White, “Atheism needs to be studied in schools” , The Independent, 16 July 2009

# **(5)** Opinion piece, “The Guardian view on 'post-Christian' Britain: a spiritual enigma”

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# **(6)** Clive D. Field, “British Social Attitudes Survey”, British Religion in Numbers, September 12 2012

# **(7)** Ofsted, “Ofsted publishes research review on religious education”, on Gov.uk, 12 May 2021

**(8)** Schools Minister Nick Gibb, “The purpose of Education”, on Gov.uk, 9 July 2015

**(9)** David Pollock, “Objective, critical and pluralistic? Religious Education in non-faith schools” in Law & Religion UK, 17 June 2016

**(10)** Education Standards, “Religious Education in Catholic schools”, catholic education standards agency of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales

**(11)** Mr Virgo, “Interview with Mr Virgo”, 6 July 2022

**(12)** Dr Wanda Alberts, “Religious Education as Small ‘i’ Indoctrination: How European Countries Struggle with a Secular Approach to Religion in Schools (only referencing the introduction, pg. 53)”, Faculty of Philosophy, Leibniz Universität Hannover, 20 December 2019

***Project Review***

Personally, although I found the project stressful, I have enjoyed the process and I am proud of what we have produced. I feel enthusiastic at the idea of pursuing an EPQ at A level, and I aspire to do so next year. Therefore, in my evaluation, I will consider the problems with our project and process, which I hope to learn from and improve upon in the future.

In hindsight, I think that organising our project’s sources to ensure we had an even balance of opinions would be beneficial to the overall unbiased deliverance of our points. I worry that, whilst I am happy with the standard of work that I have produced, I should have taken a more impartial tone when examining data. I think that having a range of opinions from our sources would have aided in the deliverance of a less one-sided argument.

In order to improve the process, I think I would have found establishing a strict set of specific deadlines very helpful, as though I didn’t fall behind at any stage, I often did more than necessary in some stages of the process, instead of spreading it out. I also believe that this would have benefited my ability to work as a team with my partner, as we both took differing approaches to deadlines. Upon reflection, I think that I may have been too forceful and insistent in regard to timings, as I found it hard to find balance with the ongoing nature of the project.

Despite missing a significant amount of school last year, I found that most aspects of my EPQ were still relatively accessible. I think this taught me to take a more independent approach to my learning, which I hope will benefit me in the long run. I found researching quite hard, as I couldn’t visualise the reasoning I wanted to discuss yet, however I particularly enjoyed writing everything up in the final essay.