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

*Introduction:*

My partner and I chose to focus our Extended Project Qualification on the diversification of the Religious Studies curriculum, crucially the GCSE AQA syllabus which we currently study, to encourage the exam board to produce a curriculum that is reflective of the pluralistic and increasingly secular society British students live in. As someone who has never explicitly been guided towards any religious beliefs by my parents, the nature and origin of all theistic beliefs have always fascinated me, as has atheistic ideology. I have always benefitted from the moral guidance and avid debate that exposure to predominantly Christian teachings has provided me, however, I feel it is crucial to form a multifaceted comprehension of what religion represents through studying a range of major world religions. In synthesis with the perspective my partner, Sarah, can provide as a practicing Christian, I hope to benefit from cultivating a balanced and coherent evaluation of the Religious Studies curriculum to act as a justification for why we must encourage the study of all major world beliefs rather than just those of Abrahamic (specifically Judeo-Christian) origins, specifically beliefs that fall outside of the bracket of religion entirely: atheism and humanism.

Diversity in religious education is imperative because religion is first and foremost an ethical structure which has shaped the foundation of our morality, our welfare state, and other human rights which are considered a privilege in the defective social, economic and political environment of our world today. Therefore, we should account for the doctrinal variance that has arguably designed our collective global moral compass. Beyond this, however, in the United Kingdom, we have witnessed various theological disciplines shape our society and root themselves in our history, whether that be pre-Christian Britain which witnessed the practice of paganism by the Anglo-Saxons, the eventual Christianisation of Britain through Augustine’s mission in 597 AD, or the Reformation from Catholicism to Protestantism instigated by King Henry VIII in the 16th century which pre-ordained conflict between the two denominations for several ensuing centuries. The evolutionary nature of religion, as demonstrated by the former concise summary of Christianity in England - or the nexus of the two distinct religions Christianity and Islam being that they sprung from the same parent religion: Judaism - shows that we must continue to appreciate the propensity for ideological change in the collective beliefs of a society, even if this sunders it from religion to an extent. Consequently, we must explore secularism as it has become an increasingly accurate national identity.

I have emphasised this dichotomy because Britain is now “no longer a nation of believers and has entered a ‘post Christian era’ (1)” according to the former Archbishop of Canterbury. The innovation of modern technology, science and philosophy in the 20th century, as well as the catastrophic impacts of both World Wars, birthed a society in which an influx of people felt removed from God. Through this, a voice was given to those who felt there may be an irreligious explanation for our existence which became an increasingly accepted notion in society. Sacramental rituals previously inextricably linked to the church were slowly adopted into secular tradition, such as marriage which is now a legally recognised partnership rather than a holy covenant before God. Furthermore, the “process of liberalization of attitudes over time” means that ‘‘intolerance’ [is] progressively dying out as more illiberal older age cohorts are replaced by more liberal younger ones (2),” a process which has impacted religious beliefs too. Not only have “Christians displayed greater social liberalism over three decades (2)” due to this generational phenomenon, as demonstrated through increased tolerance on the issues of premarital sex, abortion and homosexuality, but the previously minority secular portion of society in 1983 has now grown to become the majority (58%) of Britons who “worship never or practically never. (2)”

Unfortunately, this secular society is not reflected in the current curriculum which leads students to explore a restricted, stilted version of a subject that has the propensity to encapsulate a myriad of world truths. Currently, on the AQA and Edexcel syllabi, British students only have the opportunity to cover two of the 6 main world religions, typically in synthesis with the study of a gospel or Christian philosophy. This is a highly iniquitous use of the wealth of subject material available, as it does not afford students the ability to explore other beliefs, such as atheism and humanism, as well as providing both a highly euro-centric and androcentric view of religion. The restrictions imposed by a combined study of Christianity and Judaism, for example, mean students risk becoming ignorant to the ideological divergence of widely ascribed to religions such as Islam, Sikhism; pivotal polytheistic religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism; and philosophies which life outside of the religious bracket entirely. Therefore, a reformed curriculum should be implemented in order to accommodate the influx of secularity and the variety of religions in the UK, as “the goal should be a way for the public sphere to benefit from the articulation of diverse views. (3)”

*Secularism:*

The purpose of this essay is to explore and deconstruct the status quo of religious education in this country, the epicentre of which I feel lies in the divide between theistic and atheistic beliefs. Historically, whenever education was afforded to children, it was catered to equip them with the skills needed to fulfil their role in society: whether that be dictated by their gender or social class. One unifying factor throughout this divisive education, however, was the pre-ordained theism of the nation. Everyone was expected to unequivocally believe in God and condemn those who asserted otherwise, and this indoctrination began through proselytising the nation’s youth. Due to this precedent, religious education was temporally restricted to Christianity before later diversifying to cover other significant world faiths. Since then, however, Britain has emerged from a chrysalis period of “major intellectual revolution (4)” and birthed a population which espoused secular beliefs in many areas of life; meaning the role of religion in everyday life regressed significantly as “58% of Britons worship never or practically never (2).”

Up until now, the growing “rejection of organised religion (5)” has refused to be stemmed, the impact of which means that secularism has moved from being unconventional to a cultural mindset with increasing fecundity. For example, the sovereign, who is also the ceremonial head of the Church of England, is no longer the head of state and merely acts as a figurehead with minimal political influence (beyond a veto which would likely terminate their reign due to the controversy of a monarch interfering in democratic politics), therefore reducing the involvement of religion in politics to an often-conservative position on the political spectrum. The minority position of religious voices in politics, which often become highlighted as diverse and are subsequently ostracised, is demonstrative of the secular outlook that has infused into our practice of contemporary politics, law-making and jurisprudence. The industrial and scientific revolution of the late 19th century further resolved the absence of knowledge which has long purported the existence of God, such as The Theory of Evolution by Charles Darwin and the Big Bang Theory, as they became a counter argument against the religious philosophy relating to the cosmological argument and therefore diminished the position of religion as equivocal to truth. All of these events culminated in the society in which, according to a BSA report (2), “non-religious parents” are statistically more successful in “transmitting their” atheistic beliefs “to their children”, speaking to the permanence of this post-Christian society.

Unfortunately, at no point since this development have secular beliefs been afforded the same priority in the Religious studies curriculum, despite the aim of “empowering young people” to “participate in culture” (6) being one of the three purposes of education set forth by Nick Gibb, the ex-Schools minister in 2015, as well as their indisputable influence in this nation and on the world stage in history, philosophy, science, politics and the religious public sphere. Currently, humanism is an optional topic on some non-statutory RS curricula whilst Christianity, and often the 5 other major world faiths, continue to be mandated. Whilst the option is there, humanism’s significance is not emphasised, either because its interdisciplinary importance is not widely appreciated and it is, according to Michael Reiss and John White (Institute of Education), treated as being “on par with Zoroastrianism (4)” and other lesser ascribed to beliefs, or because influential religious or political bodies fear indoctrination in ‘un-belief.’ Ultimately, atheism is continually denied any academic exploration comparable to the customary 5 major religions, whose influence I have demonstrated to be increasingly foregone. If this neglect is allowed to continue in a subject that is self-evidently subjective, students will be ill-equipped to form an awareness of the significant secular shift that has occurred and how it encompasses a large proportion of national belief. In order to maintain relevance and inclusion, the curriculum must adapt to include the wider range of beliefs and ethical systems that modern Britain ascribes to, regardless of how they may oppose one’s own beliefs. In synthesis with an “increased focus on morality and philosophy, (5)” this would demonstrate the opportunity for moral debate to occur “outside of a religious framework (5)”, not in replacement of one, therefore demonstrating how the inclusion of Secularism will not invalidate traditional religious beliefs. This change is merely to reform the previously incomprehensive Religious Studies curriculum into a subject which welcomes free thought, debate, and conjecture that will test theistic and atheistic beliefs alike.

*Faith Schools:*

The question of faith schools in Britain has long beset debates pertaining to the ethics of independently funded education, the inequalities between denominations (including criticism facing the wealth of the Catholic church) and, in relation to this essay, simply the nexus between religion and education. To clarify, faith schools are educational institutions, unique to the United Kingdom, that teach a general curriculum but which have a particular religious character or formal links with a religious or faith-based organisation, including funding. However, the monopoly of the church instead of the government over these schools means that the church can dictate what is taught in Religious Studies, and they can control their admissions process to only admit students who ascribe to a particular religious faith. This section of my essay will be dedicated to evaluating the extent to which it should be under a faith school’s jurisdiction to dictate what students should have exposure to on their Religious Studies curriculum, how this is taught, and whether this ostracises them slightly from Britain’s largely post-Christian, multicultural society to the detriment of the students and their education.

The current sphere of influence the church possesses over what the curriculum contains can mean that an objective GCSE curriculum can become a lesson on faith and spirituality, rather than instilling the knowledge of the core philosophy and teachings of the religion required to pass the exam. The characterisation of attitudes to religion in faith schools is subject to hyperbole and can definitely vary depending on the strength of the adherence to the faith. However, certain expressions of religion in schools risk being “dogmatic and can be prone to quite heavy-handed indoctrination (7)” as, by definition, the process of teaching a person or group to accept a set of beliefs uncritically could unintentionally develop in some methods of religious education if it is taught with bias, instead of ina meticulously “responsible and accurate setting forth of what each religion teaches (7).” In 2019, this principle was established under the term ‘small i indoctrination’ in an academic paper written by Dr Wanda Alberts (Professor of the Study of Religions, Liebniz University). Alberts argued that approaching Religious Studies from a subjective religious perspective in an integrative learning model, whilst neglecting to include secular alternatives, fortifies “the exceptional position of Christianity amongst the religions in RE (11).” This results in stereotyping religions we have historically ‘othered’ due to the misconception that they do not fit the criteria for the pseudo-universal religious default because an “unquestioned discursive hegemony of a particular (Christian) notion as a frame of reference for almost all education about religion (11)” has been allowed to foster. As a result, the author argues, the study of religion should be approached from a non-theological perspective, as the current polarisation between secular and religious approaches to education could, in some academic institutions, result in an inequitable favouritism towards certain religions which is detrimental to the effective exploration of religious studies.

In avoidance of this indoctrination, both in faith schools and the general educational climate, knowledge provided to students should be removed from the teacher's personal bias, to allow opinions – which are innately subjective – to be developed by the student themselves, affording them critical thinking and analytical skills which are inherent to a successful education. If a curriculum is inextricably linked to a church or any other highly influential body holding a set of beliefs, it not only risks indoctrination but it detracts from a fair and comprehensive education. It is senseless that religious education becomes reminiscent of that, as it merely builds barriers in a multicultural, secularist society.Therefore, it can be inferred that the separation of faith and academic education could promote a less biased and more representational education which will equip students with an accurate understanding of the diversity of world beliefs, including the acceptance that people will differ in religious understanding. Augmenting the curriculum within faith schools and education generally is achievable as, whilst religion is intrinsically subjective, the facts of teachings, scripture and practices can be objectively taught because they are largely comprehensive within denominations. As part of a solution to this discord in religious education, we propose that the faith school should have the opportunity to educate the students on a certain religion in a greater depth than the syllabus would usually cover, as denoted by their function, however, this should be removed from structure of the academic portion of the child’s learning – namely the curriculum. This would demonstrate to the students the separation between academic knowledge and their faith, enabling them to benefit from both equally. For example, a Christian faith school could choose to educate their students in Islam and Judaism under the AQA syllabus, whilst also holding masses and separate Christian education similar to the PSHE lessons that are mandated by the government. In this way, the parents and the church are still administering the religious knowledge that they deem necessary and important, yet not in a setting that risks the integrity of an objective academic education.

*Education standards:*

In order to properly evaluate the accessibility of the curriculum advertised in this essay, the current status quo for education standards set by the government and other authorities of education should be assessed: would this adaptation be possible in GCSE curriculums, and how substantial would reform have to be? The purpose of education since the election of the Conservative government has centred around the economy, culture and adult opportunities - as outlined by Nick Gibb in 2015. Crucially, aspirations for education reform have converged around the premise that “we must resist attempts to divide culture from knowledge. (6)” Therefore, the inclusive curriculum that this essay outlines is also called upon by these basic principles, as it is evident that our culture has been sculpted by secularism as much as its foundations are rooted in religion. Furthermore, many an “attempt to ensure children” receive “a broader education (6)” have always been made by successive governments who wished to use education as tool to improve opportunities and catalyse economic prosperity. This proposition has always been met with queries objecting to a comprehensive rather than in-depth curriculum, however, in a review of the current curriculum written by Ofsted, an ideal religious studies curriculum was persistently characterised as content which should collectively allow “pupils to grasp a bigger picture about the place of religion and non-religion in the world. (8)” Therefore, despite the potential for the addition of secularism and an increased focus on philosophy to be considered a ’sacrifice’, it is the consensus of influential academic authorities that we should strive for broader curricula in academia. The goal should be to offer a plethora of valuable knowledge to students, instead of overwhelming them with detail that sets a precent where total comprehension is required. In this study, they also emphasised a concept, entitled ‘depth of study’, which would ensure the integration of “contrasting religious and non-religious traditions so that pupils avoid developing misrepresentations, (8)” testifying to both: our assertion that a focus on purely tradition religions can risk indoctrination and ignorance, as well as demonstrating the need to prepare pupils to “engage in a complex, multi-religious and multi-secular world. (8)”

*Feasibility:*

Despite the validity of the strongly evidenced arguments presented thus far, it is imperative to assess the feasibility of this change. This includes: its practicality when being put into practice, an evaluation of which education model we should ascribe to (depth or breadth), and how to maintain an equilibrium in representation, to ensure that religious beliefs are not side-lined whilst we attempt to afford parity to non-religious beliefs. The most prominent worry featuring across sources which present rebuttal to our proposal is that adding yet another focus – secularist beliefs covered in the form of humanism and philosophy – would make the curriculum too broad to cover. Many GCSE courses, but especially humanities ones such as Religious Studies, are supremely content heavy; an already prominent criticism of Britain’s current KS4 examination system, which this addition could risk exacerbating further. Nevertheless, at the core of this essay is the question: what kind of sacrifices should educational authorities be willing to make in order to ameliorate the representation which is currently skewed? I believe that the aforementioned ‘depth of study’ concept, which should include both Secularism and Religion, should be prioritised at the heart of the RS curriculum. However, in order to avoid the issues of overwhelming content and broadness within the curriculum, the amount of the course which is devoted to the study of Christianity, as this is currently over 50% on the AQA and Edexcel exam boards, must be sacrificed to some extent. While it is imperative to honour the way in which the “Bible is such a fundamental building block in Western civilisation,” one of the many examples being “language and idioms (7),” this same principle of biblical literacy can be applied to the necessity of being well versed in philosophy and viewing the world without a God/any gods. Knowledge such as this will equip students with the ability to think critically through actively questioning human existence, morality, and ethics, just as understanding the Bible allows them to consider whether there is a being greater than ourselves. Therefore, we should keep part of the syllabus which allows students to explore Judeo-Christian philosophy and teachings, however, I believe sections expecting students to memorise the minutiae of religious practices could be condensed to provide room for secularism and modern philosophy.

In response to this arguably progressive change, many may provide arguments questioning the very relevance of secularism as it may “not be a suitable addition to the content given the nature and purpose of a qualification in Religious Studies (9).” To this it must be stated that the world has evolved, as have the beliefs of British citizens’ and the world. In order to ensure our education system produces educated, conscious and accepting young adults, we must accept that Religious Studies is a redundant and insufficient term for a subject which tackles the question of our very existence. While this revelation may seem unfortunate, Religion is not the only answer to this question anymore; therefore it has been argued that the subject title ‘Religious Studies’ should be swapped in favour of “‘Worldviews’, or ‘Religion and Worldviews’” – defined by the Religious Education Council (REC) as constituting “Christianity, other principal religions represented in Britain, smaller religious communities and non-religious worldviews such as Humanism” – therefore allowing the curriculum to “accommodate the study of a wider spectrum of beliefs (7).” This argument has been supported by the British Humanist Society, the UK judicial system and “twenty-eight religious leaders, including the former Archbishop of Canterbury (10),” all of whom support the ruling that an ‘error of law’ was made by the British government when the option to study Humanism was excluded from the updated 2016 curriculum, which “legally breached their duty to reflect the pluralistic nature of the United Kingdom (10).” The unified front of people of all religions and none intersecting behind this principle of religious parity in education, demonstrates that the current curriculum is an agenda that no leader endorses nor ascribes to, but beyond this, they all willing to surrender some of the time which might otherwise be spent learning their own religious practices to achieve this. Overall, it is clear that reforming an education system to better forge understanding and respect amongst all people has been proven in this essay to be feasible in two ways: practically, under the condition of restructuring the GCSE, and well as in a manner that pertains to society and what would be accepted within the wider community.

*Conclusion:*

In conclusion, secularism must be represented in the RS curriculum if this country wishes to be at the forefront of education that pioneers inclusivity in the most modern form. Secularism in British society and the world stage is a permanent ideology, not a phenomenon; this influential evolution deserves to be represented accordingly in the study of religion, as it is prominent is every other area of society, and to exclude it from RS would be to affirm the fate of this subject as one which would be even further disconnected from modern society, fuelling the growing conception that Religion is no longer a relevant humanity to study as its principles do not reflect that of a society which is increasingly isolated from the Christian idea of ‘God.’ The specific example of faith schools I presented shows how education oriented around one religion acts a polarising barrier to what this essay is proposing, however, the current model not only risks indoctrination and ignorance but it is counter-intuitive, as knowledge of non-religious views would inspire critical debate which may ultimately strengthen the faith of their students. The solution of a clear separation between the academic Religious Studies syllabus and the in-depth, ideological study of the school’s chosen religion works respectfully in synthesis with their aims to educate their students with certain religious doctrines at the forefront of their ethos. Furthermore, evaluating the educational standards in Britain disclosed that expert opinion can be divided into two strains: what is currently being taught, and what leaders in education have proposed yet failed to implement. The duality in the status quo ultimately converged into one main goal of connecting students to culture in order to prepare them for the dynamic of the working world; a concept which has been universal in British education standards for the past 20 years, despite the fluctuating political orientation of a government or their policies. Therefore, this essay proves that there is room for the changes we have proposed if they have can be proven to be viable. Feasibility is at the crux of this argument, as we have shown that secularism is a presence which must be addressed from a social and educational point of view, and therefore it is imperative that we change our understanding of what Religious Studies in order to nurture and develop the multifaceted and nuanced potential of this subject. The greatest challenge that this proposal faces is the risk of education being too broad, however, this breadth could translate into fostering an intersectional and diverse understanding of our ideological thought processes as a universal collective.

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*Evalutation:*

I am extremely proud of the work I have produced at the end of this, at times, daunting and extensive process. The multi-pronged nature of this project has allowed me to obtain valuable research and documentation skills which have helped me to develop a more innate understanding of the criteria I should be evaluating a source with, including its reliability and relevance. Furthermore, I feel that the essay is logical and clearly structured, qualities which I feel are imperative to maintain over prolonged projects such as an EPQ.

Partner work, time management, and argumentation are three themes which I perceived as areas where improvement can be made in the future, yet also demonstrate perseverance. My partner was absent from school for a period of a few months during the introductory stages of this scheme, and online communication was periodically difficult from both ends. However, we overcame this well as we had clearly divided up our roles pertaining to research subsections; hence, despite only later learning that we were expected to write separate essays with our combined research, this posed no hinderance as we quickly adapted and were able to inform each other of the work we had completed thus far.

The deadlines we had to set early on in our planning encouraged me to hone my self-organisation skills so I could predict my availability. Sticking to these goals were at times difficult, when faced with challenges such as my end-of-year exams (doing GCSE standard tests for the first time alongside an EPQ gave me an idea for how to maintain an intensive workload, like at A-Level) but allowing myself to recognise when a deadline was impossible to meet was another important lesson, as I realised everything could not be done all at once. Ultimately, my partner and I reached the summer in a position which meant we only had to concentrate on the final few stages of the project.

Finally, although I feel I argued my point well and supplied a range of credible sources to back up the argument, ultimately the essay would be strengthened by having more sources contradicting our argument. This would transform the slightly biased, persuasive nature of this essay into a more objective evaluation. However, this links to the difficulty of knowing what to research for in the early stages of our project when we were still unsure how the essay would pan out. We had to cut sources and wrote record sheets that ended up being less relevant, but upon final analysis, this provided clarity to our writing as we knew that the selected evidence was precise and relevant.