It's no longer just the Bible

John Hall, who chairs a new Commission on Religious Education in schools, tracks the changes in the subject over the past century

IN MY first lesson as a new teacher, I had hoped to have an interesting conversation with the 30 14-year-old girls (the boys were at PE) about the purposes of religious education. I was to be disappointed. "Sir, why can’t we talk about sex? That’s what we did with the last teacher." This was 45 years ago, in a former grammar school that had recently turned comprehensive. I would teach there for two years before going to theological college. We omitted to talk about sex, but did discuss religion. They were formative years for me.

In 1870, when elementary education was first offered to all pupils up to the age of 13, the purpose of education in government-provided schools was clear. According to W. E. Forster, speaking in the House of Commons on 17 February 1870, the aim was for "good secular teaching for these children, a good Christian training, and good schoolmasters". He continued: "Children of these ages can hardly be supposed to require doctrinal or dogmatic teaching to any great extent. We have no doubt whatever that an enormous majority of the parents of this country prefer that there should be a Christian training for their children — that they should be taught to read the Bible."

There was doctrinal teaching in voluntary schools, provided by the National Society (C of E) from 1811, the British and ForeignSchool Society (Free Churches) from 1814, and in Roman Catholic schools from 1847. But, in the Board schools, it was just the Bible.

EDUCATION legislation in 1902 and 1944 made no substantial changes to the purpose and character of RE. Even the Inner London agreed syllabus of 1968 still presupposed RE’s purpose to be simply "good Christian training". The subject, however, underwent significant change in the 1970s. Influenced by Professor Ninian Smart, of Lancaster University, a phenomenological approach to RE was introduced, and the subject was broadened to include other world religions, with a focus on the attitude of the believer.

In practice, teaching tended to focus instead on the external characteristics of religions, often becoming little more than an anthropological study of quaint religious practice. Later, encouraged by Professor Robert Jackson, of Warwick University, an attempt was made to relate the study of religions more closely to the pupil’s own experience of religious or non-religious faith. At least then it became acceptable to address doctrine: what religious people believe, not just what they do.

Before the end of the last century, two attainment targets for RE began to emerge: pupils should learn about religion and from religion. The risk of offering pupils a smorgasbord of religious doctrines is that they might, in so far as they develop their own religious understanding, feel free to pick and choose from a laden table.

FIFTEEN years ago, after 9/11, attitudes to RE changed dramatically. A lecturer in RE told me that, whereas previously students had queried the point of RE, now they saw its importance. Religion, rather than simply fading away, had become dangerous, and therefore had to be studied. And, at examination level, Religious Studies now attracts increasing numbers of students, and the contemporary approach to the philosophy and ethics of religion is particularly welcome.

Twelve years ago, a large group of RE professionals and faith leaders agreed on a non-statutory framework for RE, with the support of Charles Clarke as Secretary of State for Education. The framework was influential with the advisory bodies that decided the content of RE on a local basis. As the Church of England’s chief education officer in those days, I was glad to be
involved in that significant work.

Now, a new step is to be taken, as the context for RE and education generally continues to evolve. The Religious Education Council of England and Wales has asked me to chair a commission with wide-ranging membership to review the legal, educational, and policy frameworks for RE. I hope that we will provide a new vision for the subject.

The Very Revd John Hall is the Dean of Westminster; he was Chief Education Officer of the Church of England 2003–06.

Bible study: before the 1970s, RE did not cover other religions

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