

VOICE OF THE ICONO CLASS ROOM

For god's sake, can we please drop compulsory RE in secondary schools, asks this issue's Voice...



It's time for the obligatory assembly and I have to stifle a groan before I walk into the hall. A religion no longer followed by the masses, teenagers with absolutely no interest in Christianity or any other creed, and a school that only has the occasional attempt at 'collective worship' because Michael Gove and his pals say we have to. Really, why bother? Sadly, religious education classes are not any better; a class of disengaged pupils who see no point in the subject and who have no interest in exploring what various people of faith believe and do equals a recipe for disaster.

Let's clear something up straight away. I am neither atheist nor of a minority religion. I do in fact go to church every week, follow the Christian faith and send my children to Sunday school. I think our local church's youth worker does a great job in schools but I still believe that forcing religion on teachers and pupils is effectively counterproductive.

Religious education today achieves very little. Even one of my students who does enjoy the subject feels that there are better ways of going about it. He finds it confusing and feels that teachers have to be very careful not to offend anyone, to the extent that they won't give an opinion. It is difficult to teach children who have different beliefs when you have a teacher who firmly believes one thing. At least in history, this student points out, teachers are more inclined to say what they believe, making it interesting.

His attitude is the most positive of my students. His peers are less encouraging. I have seen students in assemblies and religious education classes look thoroughly bored on many an occasion, others are what I kindly refer to as disrespectful. I have had young people (particularly those at that obnoxious stage where they are trying to find their place in life) who will argue for the sake of it, not listening to what the teacher is saying and having no interest in the answer.

The problems, in my opinion, are threefold: students are not on the whole interested; teachers are terrified of insulting one religion by saying the wrong thing; and the religious

curriculum is at best confusing.

Last year a survey found that the majority of UK pupils could not even name the four gospels. Another revealed that most young people find RE irrelevant and boring. Surely if schools are to go to the efforts of teaching children about religion they should achieve something? Other countries, such as France, do not require religious teaching at state schools. Why can't we follow suit? Many of my colleagues feel the same, and despite the provision of RE being a legal requirement, increasing numbers of schools are ignoring this rule. In 2011 the NUT and the ASCL (Association of School and College Leaders) sent a letter to Michael Gove asking for the requirement for daily worship to be abolished. We're still waiting.

One of my colleagues in another school argues that 'daily worship' often takes the form of a 'thought for the day' (as in the Today programme), and that this fulfils the legal requirements. In fact, nobody is quite sure what they are obliged by law to do, and what the aim of religious education in schools is.

So here are my suggestions. First, let's stick to making religious education obligatory in primary schools only (so children still get some grounding in the various religions). Secondly let's end religious assemblies. They serve no purpose and sadly have just turned religion into something students consider boring. Let's make religious education a subject students want to learn more about. A friend who is not a churchgoer admits that when the local church youth leader came to their school she initially thought, 'Oh no, here comes the God Squad', but after a few weeks she was impressed by how he got the pupils interested in Christianity.

Primary schools can teach the basics. But beyond KS2, religious education should be an option and an interesting one, at that, delivered more along the lines of the study of philosophy or Greek mythology. Religious education should be taught and experienced, in short, with the respect it deserves.



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

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