



# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

John Gay  
Jan Greenough  
Brian Kay  
Eric Lord

Culham College Institute

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**1,750 Heads of RE express their views**

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First published in 1995 by  
Culham Educational Foundation  
The Malthouse  
60 East St Helen Street  
ABINGDON  
Oxon OX14 5EB



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ISBN 0 907957 44 7

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Price £2.00

# RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS

## 1,750 heads of RE express their views

### *RE in secondary schools*

A survey was conducted in summer 1994 among heads of RE in English and Welsh secondary schools. It sought advice and information for use on two fronts. First, Culham in partnership with the Jerusalem Trust, one of the Sainsbury Family Charitable Trusts, was embarking on a new collaboration with BBC Education to co-produce a TV series looking at Christianity in Britain. Information from the survey has been used by the production team in their tailoring of the resources to suit teacher needs. Secondly, some of the information will be of interest to those arguing the case at both local and national levels for better staffing levels, in-service training and resourcing for RE teachers, and it is these areas which are the prime focus of this report.

An earlier survey had been conducted in summer 1989 among the heads of RE in English and Welsh state maintained secondary schools, and the results were published in a newsletter from Culham. The results of this survey have been extensively quoted by those pressing RE's case at local and national levels and formed part of the influential Gates Report published by the RE Council in 1993. The survey also led to the commissioning of the *Christianity in Today's World* BBC TV series. Certain questions were the same in both surveys, and so some comparisons have been possible between the two sets of results and are recorded below.

### *The questionnaire*

The questionnaire was distributed to the head of RE in every state maintained secondary school in England and Wales during the summer term 1994. Questionnaires were sent additionally to every independent secondary school. An eventual response rate of 36.2% was achieved from state schools and 37.7% from independent schools giving an overall response rate of 36.5%. The replies were analysed to see the extent to which they represented the national position. As Table 1 (overleaf) illustrates, the replies from the state maintained schools reflect surprisingly accurately the national pattern. Also the various types of geographical and social location appear to be adequately represented.

Within the independent sector, the response rate from the Girls' School Association (representing the main girls independent schools) was 47%, and from the Headmasters' Conference Schools, (representing the main traditionally boys' independent schools) the response rate was 39%. Responses from schools in the other three main groupings were: the Independent Schools Association Incorporated – 17.2%; the Incorporated Association of Preparatory Schools – 43.8% and the Society of Headmasters and Headmistresses of Independent Schools – 20%. The preparatory schools were included where they took pupils up to 13.

*Table 1 - State maintained secondary schools*

Type of school	National percentage	Questionnaire respondent percentage
County	68.3	66.9
Grant Maintained (former county)	11.0	12.8
Church of England		
Aided/Special Agreement	2.3	3.0
Controlled	1.2	1.1
Grant Maintained	1.1	0.6
Roman Catholic		
Aided/Special Agreement	8.5	6.3
Grant Maintained	2.2	2.4
Other voluntary	5.4	6.9
All state maintained schools	100.0	100.0

Six years ago a similar questionnaire to the heads of RE in all state maintained secondary schools in England and Wales achieved a 32% response rate. Since then pressures on teachers especially in terms of paper work have grown significantly and so the actual increase in the current response rate to 36.5 % is especially gratifying.

Clearly many schools did not reply for a variety of reasons including general pressure of work on RE teachers, questionnaires getting lost or buried and a significant disapproval of questionnaires on principle. Over 100 teachers wrote to us explaining why they could not complete the questionnaire and responses included "no time for answering questionnaires – sorry!" "normally happy to answer questionnaires but OFSTED looming ...", "I disapprove of questionnaires", "this questionnaire is far too detailed". These sorts of reasons are likely to have been distributed randomly and so are unlikely to have skewed the overall results.

The one important caveat is that a proportion of schools may not have responded simply because there was no one in the school who had a clear designation as head of the RE department, or if there was, the person was inundated with other responsibilities: "only one RE teacher wearing three hats of responsibility", "I am only part-time", "Apart from RE in Year 8 there is, regrettably, no timetabled teaching of this subject in the school", "RE does not feature as a separate subject but is taught in Humanities and PSE". To this extent our survey probably represents a better and more optimistic position than might otherwise have been the case as it inevitably excludes those schools where RE is taken less seriously. We have not attempted to estimate the size of this group of schools.

## Money allocation for RE

Totally reliable comparisons about that proportion of RE funding which is at the disposal of the head of department (HoD) are difficult because the basis of funding varies considerably. In some cases the budget figure includes stationery and consumables, in others not. Some departments receive periodic injections of funds, e.g. to purchase new sets of text books. One HoD had bid for additional funds each year and received some each time; another department, within a faculty structure, has an arrangement whereby different subject areas in the faculty take turns to use funds for major purchases. In some Humanities faculties RE and PSE share in the funding as one sub-group. However, despite the differences in financial arrangements between schools, the figures on an aggregated basis present a realistic view of the overall funding of RE and allow for comparisons to be made across different types of schools. Furthermore, the same question was asked in the 1989 survey and so any changes in the overall position during the five-year period can be highlighted.

Table 2 shows the annual capitation for RE on a per pupil basis thus allowing for comparisons. In terms of the type of schools, certain categories have been excluded from the analysis simply because the numbers of such schools were too small – Church of England controlled and grant maintained schools and other voluntary schools.

Table 2 - Annual capitation for RE

Amount per pupil per year	Type of school (percentages)					Total state	Total independent
	RC (VA)	RC (GM)	CE (VA)	County	GM (county)		
Under 50p	1.3	-	5.0	19.3	11.4	16.6	18.4
50-99p	2.5	-	30.0	43.0	28.5	36.4	19.6
£1.00 - £1.49	11.4	12.9	27.5	23.7	32.9	23.7	17.3
£1.50 - £2.49	46.8	35.5	20.0	11.6	16.5	15.5	22.7
£2.50 and over	38.0	51.6	17.5	2.4	10.8	7.8	21.9
Under £1.00	3.8	-	35.0	62.3	40.0	53.0	38.0
£1.00 and over	96.2	100.0	65.0	37.7	60.0	47.0	62.0

Looking at the position in state schools as a whole, 53% of them spend less than £1.00 per pupil per year on RE. There is a widespread view among respondents that this allowance is seriously inadequate especially when compared with that given to other subjects. Nevertheless, even after making all the adjustments for inflation, the position has improved since 1989 when 83% of schools gave less than £1.00 per pupil. One school specifically noted that funding for the RE department has been substantially increased following an OFSTED inspection. This inspection process, coupled with launches of new agreed syllabuses and other activities to improve the significance of RE in schools, has no doubt had some direct effect on school budget allocations. However, this improvement is only modest when the low starting base is taken into account.

Comparisons between state and independent schools always have to be treated with caution but overall it seems that independent schools allocate more money per pupil to RE than state schools. However, when the state schools are broken down by type, it seems that the Church of England schools have a profile more similar to independent schools and that the real disparity is between county and independent schools. This could be expected considering that many independent schools have a religious foundation.

Looking specifically at the different types of school, Roman Catholic schools allocate considerable resources to RE with virtually all of them spending over £1.00 per pupil on the subject. The biggest spenders appear to be those Roman Catholic schools which have gone grant maintained with 51.6% spending over £2.50 per pupil compared with 38% in similar Roman Catholic aided schools. Whatever the Catholic Bishops' fears about the effects of GM status on the overall Catholic nature of such schools, there does not as yet appear to be any diminution in the financial support that such schools give to RE.

Church of England aided schools spend less on RE than their Catholic counterparts but significantly more than county schools, reflecting a similar position in 1989. There is an interesting difference between county schools and similar such schools which have gone GM, where GM status again appears to be associated with higher spending on RE.

Because the allowance is so low in many schools, resourceful HoDs are often engaged in various forms of fund raising. Additional resources frequently come from PTA funds and, less regularly, from a variety of other sources: local churches, diocesan grant-making sources, local educational charities and, in several cases, sponsored discos. Many RE teachers themselves support their departments financially: "staff pockets when allowance used". One estimated his or her own contribution as being "£1,000 - £1,200 per annum". Others mentioned that they bought their own teaching materials, and many teachers provided the video cassettes for recordings they make. One teacher said, "I have provided a TV and video player to be used."

### ***Use of resources***

In this section all the analysis is based on the aggregated results from both state and independent schools.

The very large majority of schools (91%) make use of BBC and/or Channel 4 schools broadcast material in RE lessons. As one would expect, the constraints of the school timetable mean that only 7% of schools ever use material at the time it is broadcast, the normal practice being to record the programmes on video tape for future use. In any case, this latter would be seen as better practice as it enables teachers to preview the programmes and use the teacher support material written specifically for the purpose. The most common methods of recording are for teachers to do this themselves at home (69%), followed by technical support staff recording at school (49%) and teachers recording at school (16%) – some departments will, of course, use more than one method.

An additional supply of cheap resource material comes from making use of broadcast material which was not produced specifically with schools in mind. Some 80% of schools use such material in addition to their use of school broadcasts. The programmes most frequently referred

to are series which explore questions of beliefs and values directly – as in *Everyman*, mentioned by 20% of respondents, and *Heart of the Matter* (11%); or, like *Panorama* (9%), and *World in Action* (6%), hold up to scrutiny aspects of contemporary life as illustrating human life and behaviour.

Whilst many schools additionally use purchased pre-recorded video tapes, the cost savings of recording off air, especially in view of the meagre budgets, are no doubt clearly appreciated by many teachers.

Although very little use is made of directly recorded radio programmes, 52% of schools report use of audio tapes in lessons. The decision by BBC Education eventually to phase out its live broadcasting and to go over to a cassette service, at least in secondary schools, is likely to suit the needs of teachers.

A question was asked about the ease or otherwise with which RE departments can access various forms of technology. Table 3 below gives the results. Basically, video recorders are readily available in four out of every five departments and available in principle to most of the rest. CD-Roms are beginning to penetrate departments with 23% having easy access and 43% having them available in principle.

*Table 3 - Access to equipment (percentages)*

	CD-Rom	CD-i	Audio CD	VCR
Readily available to RE departments	23	7	18	80
Available in principle to RE departments	43	13	20	15
Available in school but not to RE departments	24	11	21	4
Not available in school	10	69	41	1

A specific question was asked relating to resources which might be produced to link with a new set of TV programmes. These would be in addition to the teachers' printed back-up material normally produced to accompany such programmes. As seen in Table 4 the enthusiasm was essentially for more of the material traditionally used by teachers. Photocopiable masters topped the list and were way ahead of all other resources. Next came wall charts and pupil books. Relating specifically to the TV series, nearly half said they would find a boxed video of the TV programmes very useful – presumably to have them to hand if they forgot to record the series or found the recording process too difficult. There was also enthusiasm for further archive resource material to be transmitted on night-time TV.

*Table 4 - Requested resources (percentages)*

	Useful	Very useful	Useful & very useful
Interactive CD	34.8	18.5	53.3
Night-time TV	46.3	38.8	85.1
Wall charts	42.7	52.2	94.9
Boxed video	33.6	48.9	82.5
Photocopiable masters	18.3	80.0	98.3
Audio tapes	40.6	12.5	53.1
Pupil book	50.0	40.6	90.6

Reflecting the poor penetration of interactive technologies into RE departments there was less enthusiasm for interactive CDs, though considering that only 23% of RE departments had ready access to CD players, the fact that 53% said they would find interactive CDs useful or very useful points to the potential for development in this area. Without good RE software teachers will not be in a position to start using and developing the technology.

### **Staffing**

In this section all the analysis relates only to teachers in the state school sector so that direct comparisons can be made with the results obtained from the 1989 survey.

*Table 5 - Age profile of heads of department*

Age	1989	1994
20s & 30s	47%	38%
40s	32%	40%
50s & 60s	21%	23%

As illustrated in Table 5, there has been a 9% fall between 1989 and 1994 in the number of HoDs in their 20s and 30s. This clearly has implications for the future development of the subject. Also there has been a slight decline in the number of HoDs who hold specialist qualifications in RE, this having dropped from 89.2% in 1989 to 82% in 1994. In relation to the percentage of time that HoDs spend teaching RE, there has been a slight increase in the percentage teaching RE full time between 1989 and 1994 from 38% to 41% and a similar increase in the percentage teaching less than 50% RE from 17% to 20%.

*Table 6 - Number of pupils taught per week by head of department*

Number of pupils	1989	1994
250 & over	58.9%	56.4%
350 & over	33.6%	35.2%
450 & over	15.6%	17.1%
550 & over	6.0%	6.4%

Table 6 illustrates the fact that many HoDs were teaching large numbers of pupils in 1989, and the situation had not improved by 1994. Over one-third of all HoDs teach over 450 pupils and 6.4% of them teach over 550 pupils per week. Inevitably this high turnover of pupils per week makes it difficult to establish the personal rapport that is an essential element in RE.

In 11% of the schools the HoD has no colleague to help with RE. There has been a very significant decrease in this percentage from the 1989 figure of 24%. In the 89% of schools where there is a second teacher of RE the age profile of this second teacher is no different from that of the HoD. Overall just under half the schools have three teachers of RE or fewer while at the other end 10% have nine or more.

HoDs were asked to what extent they felt their RE department had within it the necessary expertise to teach the six major world faiths up to the appropriate level at KS4. Some 70% of departments had strong confidence in their ability to teach Christianity, and smaller but nevertheless significant numbers also felt able to do the same for Judaism (38%) and Islam (32%). However, less than 20% of departments were confident in their ability to teach Buddhism, Hinduism or Sikhism. Conversely 27% of departments felt they had little or no expertise in Buddhism, 19% in Hinduism and 23% in Sikhism.

### ***In-service training***

One or more members of staff in 70% of the RE departments in state schools had taken part in formal RE INSET in the previous year. About 22% of those had attended courses on or linked with a newly revised agreed syllabus. The next largest INSET groups were either on one of the world religions other than Christianity, most usually Judaism or Islam, or on the new GCSE syllabuses where exam boards were sometimes the providers. Then came assessment and recording (11%), preparation for OFSTED inspections (9%) and courses on non-examination RE at KS4 (9%).

Teachers in independent schools seemed on the whole to have less access to INSET: 42% from that sector either stated they had not been on any INSET courses in the previous 12 months or left the section blank. Where INSET was undertaken, it usually took the form of conferences or working groups of teachers and the courses they had attended were mostly associated with examinations at GCSE, A Level or Common Entrance.

It terms of INSET needs, by far the most frequent request of teachers in maintained schools was for courses on world religions other than Christianity (requested by 20%) after which came assessment, and developing schemes of work from new Agreed Syllabuses. Next came RE for non-exam pupils at KS4, differentiation, and help for non-specialists, each mentioned by seven or eight per cent. Priorities for teachers in independent schools were not strikingly different. World religions led the list, followed closely by GCSE and, less frequently, guidance about resource materials and new RE syllabuses not least for Common Entrance.

Replies on the preferred modes of the desired INSET fell into two groups. The first, and much the largest group (from both maintained and independent schools) asked for instruction, mediated by experts, on particular world faiths, on method in RE and on RE in public

examinations. As one respondent put it: "Practical guidance from experts rather than get into groups and try to work it out for yourselves." The second and smaller group of respondents sought "Group work. *Not* lectures and lots of idealistic handouts," and some stressed the value of meeting other RE teachers, and of visits to schools other than their own.

### ***Improving the quality of RE***

The final question invited those responding to look forward over the next three years and to identify the most important factors which they associated with improving the quality of RE in secondary schools. What follows is based on a broad-brush analysis of these open-ended responses and was very valuable in identifying teachers' overall priorities for the future.

The top priority for both state and independent schools was more specialist teachers (35% and 25% respectively of all responding to this question): "Far too many RE teachers are either non-specialists or specialists with inadequate knowledge ... a great amount of INSET is needed across the country." Some asked specifically for better initial training for PGCE students who can offer RE as a second subject, while others lamented the experience of ill-equipped, unwilling assistants pressed into teaching RE: "No other curriculum area would be exposed to an army of non-specialist teachers. This army ... also hampers innovation within the department."

The second highest priority for both groups (26% and 18%) was the provision of more and better resources. There were frequent references to TV and video material, good computer software and also curriculum material geared specifically to the needs of the less able. Some saw a particular need for video material covering other world faiths while others argued that Christianity was under-provided.

Not far behind came a plea for more time (25% and 14%) and for many there was great frustration at the hopelessness of trying to create an effective RE course within a totally unrealistic time allocation. The need to raise capitation allowances above derisory levels was mentioned frequently, particularly by teachers in state schools: "The allocation of money must match up to that given to other departments. I have about 75p per child for the whole year." Time, money and resources were all seen as limited to a considerable extent by the low esteem in which the subject was frequently held within schools.

This question of the status of RE was an issue about which many RE teachers expressed themselves strongly. The ill-effects on RE of the National Curriculum were highlighted as was the unsympathetic attitude of headteachers, especially in independent schools: "As an RE specialist I am continually fighting against the apathy and hostility of management, staff, parents and pupils who perceive that RE has no relevance in today's society." A number of teachers saw the low esteem in which RE was held as reflecting the attitudes of society: "The major difficulty is that we are living in a secular society where religion has little or no value. This obviously affects pupils and colleagues and is very debilitating." They drew attention to the low valuation placed on examination qualifications in RE by universities, parents and society in general.

Both groups urged the need for more stability and less interference, especially from government, and the exasperation of many teachers was made clear by their comments on the influence upon government of right-wing activists. However, many also felt that a national involvement was important in order to raise the status of the subject ("not being a national curriculum subject hasn't helped") and that this might be achieved through SCAA and the Dearing Report: "I should like to see more agreement on what all schools should be doing nationally in RE. It is very difficult to keep the pupils aware and interested when as staff we are still unsure of what we should be teaching."

Teachers differed about the place of Christianity in RE. Many independent school teachers and a number of teachers from state schools asked for a return to more traditional syllabuses and a greater emphasis on the teaching of Christianity. "Most of my middle-class pupils come from a so-called Christian background ... for most their 'own' religion is unknown to them ... therefore they have no basis to look at other religions and compare and contrast ... basically this is a plea not to attempt too broad a grasp of many religions before the basics of Christianity are in place." Others, however, felt that Christianity was being given too dominant a role: "Remove the inflated view of Christianity from the curriculum and promote the view that any religion worth its salt should stand on its own two feet."

There were requests for more realistic expectations of RE on the part of politicians and other leaders: "Encourage politicians to support the good valid work being done by RE teachers and not to set them impossible or inappropriate tasks e.g. being the moral guardians of some past golden age." One of the most difficult areas mentioned by teachers in state schools was KS4, and there was a substantial feeling that work needed to be done to develop an appropriate approach at this stage and also to provide good resources: "We are desperate for KS4 videos to meet the new criteria."

In relation to a number of the points mentioned above, developments have occurred since they were written in summer 1994. The SCAA model syllabuses have been launched, Sir Ron Dearing recommended 5% curriculum time for RE, a new short course GCSE in RE is being developed for KS4 pupils and OFSTED inspections are encouraging senior management to take RE more seriously. It would be interesting to see in three years' time the extent to which the picture has changed since 1994.

In the replies to this final section looking at ways of improving the quality of RE, it was rare to find much real optimism. However, several schools appear to have achieved a high status for RE which unlocks the door to the subject's needs in terms of time, money and resources. The HoD in one school writes: "We have an exciting RE course at this school – it is broad, including social issues, it is exciting, it is personally and academically challenging, it is anti-racist and it is tailored to this school. This has all changed students' attitudes from hatred and resistance to RE to enthusiasm and enjoyment." The essential challenge is how present and future teachers of RE can be equipped so that this type of scenario becomes widely diffused among the majority of secondary schools in England and Wales.