

The importance of Religious Education

1. Understanding Religions and Beliefs

Religious education is important because it helps children and young people gain *wisdom* in the following areas of life:

- **artistic, musical and literary:** many great artists, composers, musicians and writers had deep religious and/or philosophical motivation and inspiration for their work. Many use religious themes and employ references to religious literature and thought in their work. How can we understand the insights they are communicating without a knowledge of some key religious ideas and stories?
- **cultural, historical and philosophical:** what is the meaning of life? Where are we going? What is 'true'? What is 'best'? Where do we come from? Why are people different and why do they have different tastes and preferences? What is to be gained from a diverse society? How can we understand the history and traditional cultures of Britain and other countries without a knowledge and understanding of the religious and philosophical traditions which helped to form them?
- **moral and ethical:** in the light of the many moral and ethical dilemmas we meet in life, ranging from the personal to the global, what is it to lead a good life? How do we know? Whom should we trust? How can we decide? Religious and philosophical principles and insights can help guide us when faced with moral dilemmas.
- **personal:** How can I be happy? How can I best manage my relationships? What skills do I need to succeed in life? What emotional resources do I need to maintain a healthy lifestyle? We can get insights from religions and philosophies studied in RE and get practice in 'skills for life', such as empathy, sensitivity, humility, and in thinking and communicating well.
- **political, social and psychological:** How can we best understand the relationships between people? Why do religion and belief feature in the news so much? What do religious and belief groups say about various contemporary issues? How can we best understand the religious practices and festivals celebrated by our neighbours? What motivates people? Why are our public institutions set up in the way they are? How do/should people behave when in positions of power? How do/should people react when others have power over them? Without a knowledge of religions and beliefs our understanding of these big questions will be incomplete.

2. The history and location of the Bristol and Somerset area

In exploring these areas of life, this syllabus prompts teachers, *where appropriate to their school community*, to introduce local features as well as those with national or global significance.

Amongst those with strong Somerset and Bristol connections and significant contributions to religion and belief that might be studied in RE are Christian Sunday School pioneers, Joseph Alleine, from Taunton, and Hannah More from Bristol and Cheddar; several Bishops of Bath & Wells, including those who became Archbishop of Canterbury, most recently George Carey, and the great hymn writer Bishop Thomas Ken, buried in Frome. Alfred the Great, George Muller, Mary Carpenter, George Williams (founder of the YMCA) and William Wilberforce are five more famous individuals with Somerset and Bristol connections whose religious beliefs and convictions are worthy of study. Ram Mohun Roy, the

Hindu Reformer, is buried in Arnos Vale Cemetery in Bristol.

Glastonbury Abbey was once the most important Monastery in the UK. It was, and is, a place of pilgrimage, and also offers a wealth of resources for schools to explore the links between RE, history and art.

There is huge Christian diversity in the Somerset area, with strong non-conformist representation. John Wesley founded Kingswood School in Bath and his first Chapel is in the centre of Bristol. Schools might also include Christian saints such as St. Dunstan (Glastonbury), St. Aldhelm (Frome) and St. Congar (Congresbury) in their RE programmes.

There is growing religious diversity in the area, with long established synagogues, mosques, temples, Buddhist centres and gurdwaras in Bristol and in Exeter. There are mosques in Bath and Yeovil and a recent survey has revealed organised groups of Bahá'ís, Tibetan and other Buddhists, Sai Baba followers, Pagans, Druids, Rastafarians and independent Christian churches. Many new religious movements are represented in Glastonbury and Humanists also have a presence throughout the Somerset and Bristol area.

As well as individuals and local communities, schools may choose to illustrate broader investigations with a study of places of significance for religions and beliefs. These will include local churches and the cathedral in Wells or Bath Abbey, but also visits to the places of worship of the other major religions. Study might also be made, in the right context, and perhaps as a cross-curricular project, of other 'sacred spaces' such as Stonehenge or of the exhibitions of religious art and artefacts in museums or galleries.

Not all of these can be studied within the RE curriculum, of course, so this syllabus will indicate where opportunities exist to choose specific examples for local study where the school feels it is appropriate to do so.