REsilience

GATEWAY DOCUMENT 1.7

How do different traditions find answers to ultimate questions and ethical issues?

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Ethical issues and ultimate questions – those to which there are no proven answers – interest and engage people of all religious and non religious beliefs. They can both divide and unite.

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Teachers and their students need to be very clear that the theological and ethical teachings of any religion are not necessarily, or even likely, to be adhered to by all who identify themselves with that religion. Also, different members of a tradition may interpret its teachings in different ways. For example, individual Christians hold very different beliefs about the use of violence. These range from complete pacifism to belief in the concept of 'just war' (see Gateway 3.1). Teachers and students might *know* this to be the case but may not understand *why.* The reasons will depend partly on the weight individuals and groups give to different sources of authority. In the case of Christian beliefs (about war, for example) these sources include the Bible, especially the teachings and example of Jesus; interpretations of the Bible by theologians across the centuries; opinions of church leaders; a person's own conscience and the application of reason. Similar considerations would apply in other religious traditions.

The tendency towards personal interpretation in areas of religion has developed with literacy and education. In previous centuries relatively few believers in any tradition had the education or the material resources required to study their religious tradition and scriptures and were therefore dependent on religious leaders for guidance as to God's law (for Jews and Muslims), God's will (for Christians and Sikhs), or the requirements of dharma (for Hindus and Buddhists). Today, not only can believers study scripture for themselves, but also they can read of the differing interpretations of scripture by a wide range of religious scholars from all over the world before coming to their own conclusions. Even for those who cannot read, or who do not know the languages in which their sacred scriptures are written,

television and the internet give access to a wide range of sermons and lectures from scholars and lay preachers. Further, democracy, broadcast media and the market economy have made people increasingly used to having their preferences and thoughts listened to and taken seriously. Even the most desultory attention to current debates within the Anglican church would assure any onlooker that the Archbishop of Canterbury does not command, and in some cases hardly influences, the religious beliefs and moral behaviour of all Anglicans. The same is true for religious leaders in all the major religious traditions.

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

Material about ethical issues and ultimate questions forms the underlying content of many GCSE syllabuses, to the extent that many schools have re-named RE at Key Stage 4 'philosophy and ethics'. Herein lies a weakness in RE teaching and learning, identified by HMI inspecting RE in secondary schools. Too often, RE is reduced to a shallow overview of ultimate questions and ethical issues where the focus is heavily on the 'issue' while the teachings of religions are ignored or given brief coverage. This point was also made by the recently published report by Warwick University (see *Signposts* below).

Ofsted has identified two further weaknesses in GCSE teaching about theological and ethical issues, particularly in relation to the GCSE short course where some schools allow insufficient time for pupils to gain a thorough understanding of the subject:

- The use of 'proof texts'. This is the practice of giving pupils a list of quotations from sacred texts and occasionally from religious leaders and writers, which are then used to 'explain' why certain beliefs are held. For example, 'Thou shalt not kill' is frequently given as an explanation for why some Christians oppose all cases of abortion and euthanasia.

- Lists of 'reasons'. This is the practice of encouraging students to learn and use in the examination lists of arguments for and against an issue.

Unfortunately it has proved all too possible for students to gain a good GCSE grade by using such methods. However, neither knowledge of 'proof texts' nor 'lists of reasons' is likely to give students (or teachers) any depth of understanding of the reasons for the widely differing beliefs within a religion because they do not get to the root of diversity.

How can teachers address such challenges?

- When teaching ethical issues and ultimate questions, achieve a proper balance between allowing pupils to share their opinions, and providing the resources for them to explore the views of others, including religious viewpoints. This exploration will enrich their understanding and make them more able to make informed and balanced judgements.

- Get to grips with the complex reasons for the diversity of opinion within religions (see Gateway 1.4/5/6). Only a simplistic and generalised presentation of a religion would suggest that all its members turn to particular sacred texts and favour a literalist reading of them for answers to life's questions. While it is true that some people <u>do</u> turn to their sacred texts for guidance, they vary in the way that they do so. For example, some

Christians take the Ten Commandments as definitive guidance to decision making while others look rather to Jesus' more concise summary of the commandments, 'Love God and love your neighbour as yourself'. For other people of faith, traditional interpretations within their community, or commentaries by highly respected scholars, or rulings by religious leaders, can be as important as scripture as they are viewed as authoritative interpretations of scripture, or expressions of God's will. Examples of non-scriptural authoritative texts would include papal edicts (Roman Catholicism), the Talmud (Judaism) and Hadith (Islam), but here it must be understood that in each of these cases authoritative interpretations from the past are themselves subject to further contemporary interpretation.

- Teaching about denominations and groups within a religion has to be carefully done in order to avoid categorising believers' views in an over-simplistic and inaccurate way. There is diversity within as well as between denominations. This is because, for many individuals, beliefs are arrived at by a complex process of interaction between influences of religion, education, culture and reason (see Gateway 1.4/5/6).

- It follows that the 'ten reasons for and ten reasons against' an issue (e.g. euthanasia) is usually an over-simplification of a complex issue. It is additionally dangerous because it may give students the message that all complex moral and religious questions can be reduced to banal summaries. Teachers need to use strategies and materials which help students to understand the issues rather than just learning these 'reasons' by heart.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Brown, A. (2000) The Chichester Project: Teaching Christianity: A world religions approach, in Grimmitt, M. (ed.) *Pedagogies of religious education: case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE*, McCrimmons.

Cooling, T. (2000) The Stapleford Project: Theology as the basis for religious education, in Grimmitt, M. (ed.) *Pedagogies of religious education: Case studies in the research and development of good pedagogic practice in RE*, McCrimmons.

Jackson, Robert and O'Grady, Kevin (2007) Religions and education in England: social plurality, civil religion and religious education pedagogy*, in Religion and education in Europe: developments, contexts and debates* Warwick Research Archive Project http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/2926/

Qualifications & Curriculum Authority (QCA) (2004) *Religious Education: The non-statutory national framework* available at: http://betterre.reonline.org.uk/good_re/Non-Statutory_National_Framework_for_RE_0410.pdf

Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2010) *Religious education in English schools: non-statutory guidance*

Signposts for further resources

Clear Vision Trust (2009), *Us and Them. Buddhists and community*, DVD pack

Jackson, R. (ed) (2010) *Materials used to teach about World Religions in Schools in England*. Research Report DCSF-RR197 available at
https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationDetail/Page1/DCSF-RB197

Signposts for further action

Build up contact with members of local faith and belief communities, who can be invited into school to take part in class discussions on specific ethical issues and/or ultimate questions. An ideal situation would be one where several members of the same faith or belief tradition were invited to respond to the same issue, so that students were able to question visitors about the different weight each of them gave to different factors in ethical decision making.

APPENDIX

The main focus of this Gateway is the topic of how people come to answers about ultimate questions and ethical issues. The relationship between religious education and moral education is an important one for the RE classroom as well. In this appendix, Professor Brian Gates gives an overview of this interrelationship.

Recognising the interweaving of religion and ethics

Historically in the UK religious education and moral education were seen as naturally juxtaposed within a common matrix of Christianity. This was challenged philosophically by the assertion of the 'autonomy of ethics'; there was no need for religious support as morality was grounded in its own logic. It was also challenged sociologically by the evidence of religious diversity both nationally and globally; whilst human beings may not have ceased to be believers, the nature of those beliefs is quite varied, and not all of them are religious.

Neither of these challenges has, however, removed the need for good religious education and good moral education. In the context of *REsilience*, it is important to recognise the strategic importance of the interweaving of religion and ethics for effective RE. That will include the recognition that their relationship is more complex and sophisticated than an authoritarian one. In any case, obeying an exterior authority is only one mode of moral thinking.

Typically four different modes are commonly identified in theoretical discussions of moral development:

	Obeying	Considering
Other	**Heteronomous**	**Altruistic**
Self	**Intuitive**	**Prudential**

For some, recollections of the 'Ten Commandments' in the Bible leave a long-lasting impression that what is morally right is simply determined by divine decree. A superficial reading of the Qur'an may also lead to a similar conclusion. The *heteronomous* mode certainly does abound in 'Abrahamic' scriptures. But within and alongside that element, the other modes are just as much in evidence. That of self-considering *prudence* also figures, in the shape of both threat and promise. The carrot is the prospect of living longer, and in a promised future, but the stick is that punishment will work itself out over several generations. The other-considering *altruistic* mode is also there in the encouragement to be attentive to the needs and interests of others. And fourthly, there is expectation that *intuitive* recognition of the intrinsic rightness and wrongness will be part of the total response that will include the voluntary appropriation of the whole commitment.

This is evident across religions generally. Consequences flow from every particular faith as to how personal life is best lived and social life ordered. Beliefs have consequences for values in all four modes of being and doing:

	Obeying	Considering
Other	**Heteronomous** The Priest, the Guru, the Imam says so. Decreed by fatwa, Sangha, or obligations of caste. The Gita / Qur'an / Adi Granth teaches this.	**Altruistic** Love of neighbour, care for poor, the sick, the stranger and lonely. Life of Muhammad, Way of the Buddha, self-sacrifice of Krishna, ecumenism of Nanak.
Self	**Intuitive** 'I can do no other'; 'It's just wrong, I know deep down'; mindful compassion, conscience, voice of God within, eternal Tao.	**Prudential** Prospects beyond death: heaven / hell, higher/lower being; impact on children / succeeding generations.

In encouraging young people to develop and refine their individual moral sense, to extend and deepen the framework of beliefs that inform their lives, greater clarity about the interweaving of religion and ethics will be important. There will be benefit from a recognition that moral order as set out in the law of the land, political correctness or formal religious teaching is qualified, tested, and applied, when it is directly set alongside the other reference modes which are then used to give it internalised meaning.