



GATEWAY DOCUMENTS 1.4, 1.5 AND 1.6

Why do people have different beliefs?

Why do people have different interpretations of the same religion?

Why are the consequences of faith not the same for all people who profess the same religion or tradition?

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

REsilience is about teaching controversial and contentious issues. The issues included in the *REsilience* programme are to do with religions and non-religious belief systems and their interpretations. This gateway focuses on understanding diversity within and between religions and non-religious philosophies.

KEY QUESTIONS

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

Students need to develop understanding of key religious and non-religious beliefs and also of the major variations of position within them.

Students need to be aware that well-publicised beliefs or practices associated with a religion or philosophy are not necessarily, or even likely, to be held or practiced by all, or even most, adherents of that religion or philosophy. For example, the IRA's belief that the problems in Northern Ireland should be addressed through the use of violence, was sometimes portrayed by the media as a Roman Catholic position. In fact, the majority of Roman Catholics never shared this view. Similarly it is a gross mistake to imagine that most Muslims support the use of terrorism to achieve political ends.

There is wide diversity of faith, belief and practice among people in this country as well as around the world. This gateway examines three questions that lie at the heart of *REsilience*:

- Why may people have different beliefs – both in general and in their religions or philosophies?
- Why may people have different interpretations of the same religion or philosophy?
- Why do the consequences of belief not seem to be the same for all people who profess the same religion or philosophy?

What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

When teaching these issues it is important to bear in mind that students may have difficulty understanding the concept of religious diversity. There is, in particular, a risk of conflating ethnicity and religion or confusing the two, so it is very important to clarify the distinction. There is also the risk of overstatement and oversimplification: even at GCSE level there is a tendency for students to write, for example, 'Christians believe...'. Many RE textbooks are guilty of failing to portray the distinctions within a tradition, or dismissing them as relatively minor denominational differences. They also sometimes give the impression that all members of a particular denomination believe the same thing (e.g. 'Catholics believe ...' or 'Orthodox Jews believe ...'). Perhaps the most common inaccuracy is that 'Christians believe in the Genesis account of creation while scientists believe...'. This is bad RE and a crude generalisation about scientists! This Gateway probes the more complex issues of diversity, which go far deeper than denominational differences.

How can teachers address such challenges?

- It is important to avoid overstatement of similarity of beliefs and practice between different sections of a particular tradition (see Appendix on diversity within traditions). Resources should reflect the depth of diversity between and within religions and non-religious beliefs (see below).
- It may help to encourage students to use 'I' statements and to avoid generalisations.
- Teachers should ensure that students understand what beliefs are. It would be helpful to explore with them key terms such as *belief*, *opinion*, *knowledge*, *truth*, *fact*, *proof* etc and how such terms are used in particular contexts (even if agreement cannot always be reached on meanings).

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

OUP *Short Introduction to ...* series covers a range of religious traditions and atheism and humanism including sections on sectarian differences within the tradition concerned.

<http://ukcatalogue.oup.com/category/academic/series/general/vsi.do>

One World Publications 'Short guides to religions' cover a range of religious traditions and also has volumes on religious texts, inter religious dialogue and the psychology of religion

www.oneworld-publications.com/cgi-bin/cart/commerce.cgi

Signposts for further resources

Council for Christians and Jews *Citizenship, identity and difference* DVD for KS3 classroom

<http://pof.reonline.org.uk/> The RE Online website has a section called *People of Faith* which consists of video statements by young people from a range of perspectives within particular religious traditions.

<http://www.interfaith.org.uk> There may be an inter faith group in the school's locality (contact details for local groups are given on the website). At meetings people holding different beliefs seek to learn from each other. Although beliefs may vary, often common or shared values are promoted.

Signposts for further action

Review school's resources for RE in the light of recommendations of the Warwick Resources Research Report, making sure resources adequately reflect religious diversity (link from www.religiouseducationcouncil.org). See NATRE's *Guidance for teachers on the selection of resources for RE* at www.natre.org.uk.

See Gateway 2.2 'Displaying sensitivity to the home backgrounds and the beliefs of pupils' to consider whether RE department can contribute further to whole school understanding of diversity in context of pastoral care.

APPENDIX

Some examples of diversity within religious traditions

- **Different groupings within religious traditions.** Within most religions there are groups, movements or denominations, some large and powerful, others small and relatively little known. These groupings may have come into existence because of theological or philosophical differences, divergent views about sources of authority and leadership, social, cultural and linguistic differences and a host of other factors.

Most of these groupings have their own official teachings (those of the larger groupings are often to be found in RE text books). Within almost any religious tradition there are scholars and writers who give a range of interpretations of the tradition's teachings – sometimes agreeing with the tradition's formal leaders, sometimes not. Within every religion are individuals who accept the teachings of its leaders alongside others who hold more conservative or more radical views, or others who accept some but not all its beliefs. In some traditions authority (whether vested in an individual leader or a collective whose powers to interpret the tradition are recognized) is regarded as very important, whilst in others the conscience of the individual adherent is given more weight. In all

these cases, the differences could be plotted across a spectrum, rather than being clustered at extremes.

- **Different ways of expressing commitment and/or belonging.** Religious allegiance is also expressed differently, both by individuals and as a characteristic of particular traditions. For some, religion is a matter of deep personal commitment; this may be seen in regular attendance at worship, daily prayer and reading of sacred texts. For others religion is an important aspect of cultural life; family traditions (e.g. naming, marriage) are celebrated in a religious context and major festivals may be celebrated with the whole religious community. Religion plays a more important role in the lives of some individuals than of others. Statements such as 'Islam teaches that Muslims should pray five times a day' are more accurate than 'Muslims pray five times a day'. Some people express their religion in different ways depending on the situation: for example, they may feel more strongly that they want to celebrate their religion's special days when they have moved to a new country where they are in a minority.

Some reasons for religious diversity

- **History:** some countries or areas have present or historical affiliations with a particular religion or philosophy. For example, most European countries have a long history of having been primarily Christian countries, some with well-established but relatively small Jewish populations. However, the aftermath of colonialism and changing economic circumstances have brought quite large Muslim, and smaller Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist and other communities to Europe. There is also now a significant proportion of the population who have drifted away from religious commitment or made a positive decision in favour of a non-religious worldview. Conversions and intermarriage have added to the non-Christian religious populations of many European countries.
- **Family:** most people who follow a religion were introduced to it in childhood. For example, if parents are Hindus the likelihood is that the children will also be Hindus. Where one religion dominates in a country or geographical area, then a family is likely to belong to that religion. However, when families move to another country, for example from Pakistan to the UK, they will usually continue their religious allegiance rather than adopt the religion (if there is one) of their new country. In many traditions, religious identification with a particular community is as important as, or more important than, religious beliefs
- **Personal commitment:** it is not uncommon for young people who have been brought up in a religious family to question the beliefs and traditions in which they have been brought up. Some leave the religion of their childhood, in the sense that they no longer take any active part in its worship or traditions and do not subscribe to its core beliefs. Others will, at some point in their lives, come to a personal decision to return to that religion, although not necessarily in the same form (e.g. a child brought up as an Anglican may affiliate to a Roman Catholic or Baptist church in later life)..
- **Changing one's religion or belief stance:** some people 'convert' from one religious or non-religious belief to another. This may happen when people of different religions or

beliefs marry. Different religions, and different traditions within single religions, have their own rules in relation to conversion. For example, conversion to Judaism traditionally required a period of study prior to a ritual bath (mikvah) taken in the presence of three rabbis and, for men, circumcision; but progressive congregations may dispense with all or some of those requirements. Conversion to Islam does not usually involve any ceremony. A person is considered a Muslim from the point at which he or she makes the profession of faith (the shahadah), 'There is one God - Allah - and Muhammad is His Prophet'. The term conversion is used in a number of ways in relation to Christianity. Some people convert on marriage, or for some other reason decide to adopt a form of Christian belief and lifestyle. Some Christians claim to have moved from practising Christianity as a habit to making a full Christian commitment as a result of conversion. The term conversion is used in a particular way in relation to those who claim to have a conversion experience that has led to them being 'born again' or being 'saved'. The circumstances behind such experiences vary widely. Within many religious traditions there are disputes about the validity of conversions both into and out of particular traditions.

- **Experience:** people's life experiences may lead them to a belief that God does or does not exist, and therefore to join or leave a particular religious tradition.
- **Personality:** some people are inclined to take a traditional, conservative view of life, whether in religion, politics or social issues, whilst others are more inclined to take a liberal view; some feel it is better to have a source of authority to turn to, whilst others feel strongly that they should examine their own consciences as a guide to behaviour. People's individual personalities will dispose them to align themselves to a particular point on a broad spectrum ranging from profoundly conservative to extremely liberal. This is likely to influence their religious or philosophical beliefs as well as other aspects of their lives.