

# The Contribution of Religious Education to Pupils' Character Development

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FOR CHARACTER & VIRTUES

## The Contribution of Religious Education to Pupils' Character Development

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*‘The curriculum for a maintained school or maintained nursery school satisfies the requirements [of law] if it is a balanced and broadly based curriculum which [...] promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society’*

*(Education Act 2002, Section 78).*

*‘Pupils must be taught ... the different roles played by worldviews in the lives of individuals and societies, including their influence on moral behavior and social norms’*

*(Commission on Religious Education, Religion and worldviews: a way forward, 2018, p.11).*

### ***Background: religious education in ‘non-faith’ schools***

Religious education (RE) is a part of the basic curriculum, and, as such, is a compulsory subject in all schools in England – including those of no religious affiliation. The relevance of character education to the mission of schools aided or controlled by the Church of England and the Catholic Church has been recognised, and is already the subject of fruitful discussion and pedagogical innovation (see CoE, 2015; Devanny, 2017). In this paper, we open up this conversation to consider RE for schools of no specific religious character: non-confessional and multi-faith RE as currently mandatory in primary and secondary academies, city technology colleges, free schools and schools remaining under local authority control.

It should be noted that at present, the legal entitlement for the provision of RE in the non-faith sector is frequently ignored. For example, analysis conducted by the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE, 2018) shows that in 2016, 43.7% of secondary academies did not offer RE at Key Stage 4 – a 2.1% point increase in non-compliance from the previous year. The exclusion of RE from the English baccalaureate, and the demise of the educational oversight of local authorities are commonly attributed as the cause of this crisis, which in turn, has led to a renewed debate about the subject’s curriculum (Lawton, 2017).

At present, the law states that RE syllabuses should be determined locally by a committee convened by the local authority (although some limited non-statutory guidance has been given nationally (QCA 2004, DFCSF 2010)). In practice, and with some exceptions, locally agreed syllabuses are often ignored and at best, result in the patchy provision of RE across England (CoRE, 2018). After a period of consultation, the Commission on RE has campaigned that this system be replaced with a national entitlement – a nationally determined curriculum that is statutory in all publicly funded schools. These recommendations have received some public interest, primarily on account that the subject be renamed ‘Religion and worldviews education’ to take into account secular perspectives (Burns, 2018; Mail on Sunday Reporter 2018; Turner, 2018). In order to inform ongoing debate at a time when RE is being revaluated and reconsidered, this short discussion paper considers the role RE may have in the development of pupils’ character, and how this could be relevant for both locally agreed syllabuses and any future national guidance for the subject.

### ***Religious education and moral and spiritual development***

As the epigraphs suggest, RE in non-faith schools has a longstanding association with the legal requirement of schools to promote spiritual and moral development. Moral and spiritual aims can be traced to the origins of RE in the educational settlement brokered between the state and various sectarian interests in the nineteenth century. At that time, while it was impossible to find consensus among the competing Christian denominations for RE based on any creedal formulary, universal education was inconceivable without a grounding in Biblical morality.

At landmark legislation and guidance in its history, similar aims and purposes for RE have been reaffirmed, using broad language to engage with diverse perspectives. The use of the word ‘spiritual’ in the 1944 Education Act serves as a good example of this. The original Bill’s authors in 1944, advised by Archbishop Temple’s representative, Canon J. Hall, feared using the word ‘religion’ in case of its divisiveness, but wished to preserve the Christian aim of education in all schools in some sense (Priestly, 1997). Consequently, the controversial and

ambiguous term still holds force in the Office for Standards in Education inspection regime (Ofsted, 2015).

RE's supposed contribution to moral development is also contested and ambiguous. This has been articulated to varying degrees over the years, developing alongside other changes in the subject. Perhaps the most important 'turn' occurred from the late 1970s onwards when RE evolved from undenominational Christian education to the multi-faith model endorsed by the 1988 Educational Act. This mandated RE take into account 'the teaching and practices of the other principal [non-Christian] religions represented in Great Britain' (HMSO, 1988 p. 6). This development is important because what had been moral instruction in the Judeo-Christian tradition became a 'multi-cultural' model that drew upon the moral resources of the major world traditions (Barnes 2011).

Although some have advocated a value-neutral RE, separated entirely from the business of moral education (e.g. Schools Council 1971), recent discussions about the subject's future have reaffirmed the relevance of RE to moral development to justify its place in the curriculum (Clarke and Woodhead 2015; Felderhof and Thompson 2014; Stern 2018). A literature review undertaken by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has identified three kinds of general approach to moral development in RE which can each be articulated in a virtue ethics framework or deontological ('rule based') approach (Moulin-Stožek and Metcalfe, 2018).

The first kind of approach to moral education in RE is universalism. Commonly regarded as a particular kind of confession in itself, universalism sees the teachings of religions as expressions of the same universal moral laws. Although prevalent among some denominations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, universalism is problematic as a model for RE because it does not suitably acknowledge religious diversity. The second approach, the vicarious approach, shares some of the assumptions of universalism, but principally emphasises the moral teachings or practices of 'other' religions in order to support a religious (usually liberal Christian) worldview. This approach to

morality was common in the multi-cultural model whereby world religions were appropriated in terms of their supposed similarities to Christianity. For this reason, the vicarious approach is therefore also inappropriate. The third approach, probably the most widely used at present, is an instrumental approach. RE serves a multi-faith society by educating about religious diversity. Religions should be studied to promote the competences and knowledge necessary to live well and harmoniously in a religiously plural context. While several models of RE have been advanced along these lines of argument, such as the critical realist approach of Wright (2007) or the interpretivist approach of Jackson (1997), perhaps the most relevant practice-orientated expression of this aim is the current Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (2007) which centres learning about faith around the promotion of 24 dispositions.

### ***Neo-Aristotelian character education as a framework for schooling***

Character education has become increasingly important in national and international educational agenda. The importance of pupils' character development has been recognised by the Department of Education, and was recently included in the Office for Standards in Education draft inspection framework (2019).

Character education may be defined as education that cultivates positive personal traits, dispositions or virtues that enable students, and ultimately, society to flourish (Jubilee Centre, 2017). As such, character education permeates all curriculum subjects and can be said to be taking place even when there is no explicit character education programme. Reviews of research findings show, however, that when the promotion of character is made an explicit aim, students of all ages are more likely to succeed in educational attainment, and also benefit from increased well-being (Earl and Arthur, 2018).

While any model of character education rests upon a psychology of moral development, character education promotes individual and prosocial traits that go beyond the moral dimension. The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues advances an integrated framework on this basis explaining how students may acquire virtues according to the Aristotelean

principle of habituation (2017). In addition to moral virtues (e.g. compassion or justice), target virtues can be intellectual (e.g. curiosity or reflection), performative (e.g. confidence or resilience) or civic (e.g. volunteering or neighbourliness). An individual's character develops by 'catching' virtues through the culture of the school and example of teachers; being 'taught' the language, knowledge and understanding of virtues (virtue literacy); and then, by actively engaging in choosing his/her own commitments (virtue action, practice, identity and motivation). Perhaps the strongest evidence for these processes concerns the teaching of virtue literacy. The *Knightly Virtues* project conducted by the Jubilee Centre explored how learning virtues through stories boosted participating students' knowledge and understanding of target virtues, which in turn had an impact on how they reported applying them in real life situations (Arthur et al, 2014).

### ***Raising questions of character for religious education***

Character education provides a language and holistic framework to consider educational outcomes beyond attainment in exams and tests. As a broad and encompassing vision of educating the whole person, The Jubilee Centre's *Framework for Character in Schools* (2017) therefore has obvious links to the legal mandate for the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils. In this wide sense, it is applicable to RE as it is to other curriculum subjects.

However, given the nature of its subject matter, RE raises distinctive questions when considered in relation to character education. These include questions about the moral aims and efficacy of the study of religions, and whether it is possible or desirable, in a religiously plural context, to try to locate and cultivate virtues equivalent in, or common to, all religions and worldviews. As discussed in the previous section, RE is susceptible to distort religions and worldviews if it inappropriately emphasises or homogenises the universal, vicarious or instrumental nature of virtues across divergent and incommensurate traditions.

Nevertheless, the word 'virtue' has religious connotations. On a scholarly basis, this association is not without justification. Research shows relationships between religion and

character. For example, researchers in the Jubilee Centre have shown that students across diverse contexts who practise a religion are more likely to score higher in moral reasoning tests (Arthur et al, 2015), or more likely to do voluntary activities outside of school (Moulin-Stozek et al, 2018). Scholars have also argued that virtues are inextricably linked to the development of both civilization and religion. For example, Karen Armstrong (2006) argues that the emergence of sages preaching the virtues of compassion, respect, empathy and love in the axial period (800 – 300 BC) represented a step change in human history. Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jeremiah and Lao Tzu each emphasise the moral imperatives of self-reflection, responsibility and cooperation necessary for societal flourishing. Philosophically, it is also of note that the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) have engaged with Aristotle's ethics to a greater or lesser degree in the development of their ethical systems.

While arguments for the importance of virtues across cultures and religions can be made, scholarship of all kinds also shows how religious commitment and involvement is associated with particular ideals of virtue, which across diverse traditions are distinctive and unique in their concepts, practices and beliefs. As RE in the non-faith sector can neither promote religious commitment, nor give an exposition of virtues solely located in any one religion or worldview, the role of RE in promoting character development must be distinct from the formation processes to be found in religious traditions themselves.

It should also be noted here that while virtue concepts can be found in religions, religions seldom prioritise the development of human character traits over and above God. By way of illustration, three famous religious thinkers in the Abrahamic faiths who engaged with Aristotle's account of virtue ethics in the middle ages – Ibn Rushd (Averroes, 1126-1198), Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, 1135-1204), and Tommaso d'Aquino (St Thomas Aquinas, 1226-1274) – could not straightforwardly reconcile classical philosophy with their respective traditions of revelation.



### ***How can RE contribute to pupils' character development?***

The purpose of this brief paper is to introduce some of the key issues to be raised in a discussion about how future RE syllabi may contribute to pupils' character development.

Given the diversity and importance of religions and worldviews across all dimensions of human experience and behaviour, it is unlikely that promoting pupils' character could ever capture or encapsulate the aims, pedagogy and content of RE, nor provide an adequate framework for understanding religions themselves. We note that approaches to RE that present virtues as universals across religions and worldviews without duly acknowledging diversity, are liable to distort religious traditions. Religions place primacy on concepts of salvation that go beyond the development of human virtues, and these soteriological systems are usually located in distinctive accounts of revelation.

However, the framework for character education in schools provides a coherent, evidence-based way of approaching the duty of schools to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development. RE, as a subject with the acknowledged remit to explore diverse worldviews and their related moral norms and behaviours, presents opportunities for these broad aims, and can therefore also be informed by the insights offered by character education.

We therefore conclude by offering four broad areas for further consideration and discussion, each based on the ongoing work of the Jubilee Centre. Given the importance of maintaining the academic integrity of RE, and making care not to distort religious traditions or secular worldviews, we invite further reflection and discussion about how each of these dimensions of character development may be incorporated into RE.

#### **1. The contribution of RE to pupils' knowledge and understanding of virtues**

Without a vocabulary of character, pupils are less likely to be able to think and communicate about issues of character and develop accordingly. The study of religions

provides ample opportunities to become well versed in the language of virtue. Furthermore, as virtues are often located within a particular cultural context and worldview, RE provides opportunities for understanding how and why moral norms, principles and actions may differ in different settings.

## **2. RE and pupils' virtue reasoning**

Pupils can benefit from the opportunities to learn about diverse ethical theories – including those of secular ethical systems such as utilitarianism. In doing so, RE could provide pupils with opportunities to discern ethical dilemmas or moral situations in which virtues conflict or collide, and learn to reason about what deliberative action could be taken.

## **3. Opportunities for reflection when studying religions and worldviews**

Reflection has been shown to be beneficial to character-building activities (Arthur *et al*, 2017). RE encourages pupils to reflect on issues of ultimate meaning and purpose through their interaction with a range of ideas and stories. As part of this learning, RE invites students to reflect as a necessary part of its common pedagogy, but also introduces pupils to traditions and worldviews which in themselves offer diverse ways of reflection.

## **4. RE and virtuous action and practice**

RE gives opportunities for pupils to engage with cultural diversity and difference, perhaps more so than any other subject. Through this, RE introduces pupils to different ways of thinking and being. Central to this experience is the development of the virtues of empathy, respect and curiosity. These virtues of intercultural and interreligious dialogue are transferable beyond the RE classroom, and can be developed and practiced in a range of activities commonly found in RE, such as learning about religious texts, art, practices and buildings.

This is an introductory discussion paper. We will be considering these questions and other questions in more detail in further briefing papers, and through our ongoing empirical

research conducted with RE teachers. Please follow the developments of the project on the [Jubilee Centre Website](#). Project researchers Daniel Moulin-Stožek and Jason Metcalfe can be contacted via email ([d.p.j.moulin-stozek@bham.ac.uk](mailto:d.p.j.moulin-stozek@bham.ac.uk)) or ([J.M.Metcalfe@Bham.ac.uk](mailto:J.M.Metcalfe@Bham.ac.uk)).

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