

New Religious Education Syllabus For British Independent Schools

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tion of mutual understanding.

Positive Effects

A syllabus which appears to be as well motivated as this one is likely to be positive in its wider effects on the British community. At the very least it promises to create an atmosphere in which more people will be willing to listen to, for instance, the message of Islam in an unprejudiced way.

Muslim parents will continue to make their own choices on what they allow their children to hear, but in the very mixed society of Britain today they are bound to hear about other faiths and various attitudes of unbelief anyway, no matter what parents do. A very central aim of the syllabus is to give children from any background whatever some basic intellectual grasp of religion as a formative element of the world they live in, while leaving them free to make their own decisions.

Within this framework non-Muslim British children will be encouraged to take an interest in Islam and its teaching. The makers of the syllabus concede that the way it actually works will vary greatly from school to school, so the quality of the information must also be variable, but some information will be transmitted.

Perhaps more to the point, children will be taught to approach Islam with an attitude of respect. That is built into the foundations of the new syllabus, which also includes classes in socially relevant topics such as racial prejudice, the environment and north-south economic issues, all in the context of religious education.

Informed Opinions

The declared aim of the syllabus is to let British children in independent schools know and understand the beliefs and practices of Christianity and at least two other religions, while developing informed opinions of their value to themselves and others.

The part relating to children aged 4-7 states: "The selection of another religion should reflect the needs of the school and its environs." It goes on to say: "There is a strong argument for introducing only the 'home' religion at this stage, which for some will not be Christianity."

"This syllabus takes the view that the religious educator is not a religious instructor on behalf of a particular faith community and that Christianity should therefore receive the majority of the time at this stage. It is a recognition of the increasingly diverse nature of this society, however, that another religion will be introduced at this stage". (Which other religion is a matter of choice for the school).

The part of the 4-7 syllabus relating to Islam includes teaching about Allah, the Koran, Ramadhan, and the Muslim community. For older children there is considerably more detail, for instance on the Five Pillars, Muslim ethics, the history of Islam and the life of Muslims in Britain. It is in its long-term impact on their own community's life that Muslims will judge the new syllabus, whether for independent or maintained schools, but while many will see it as only a tentative measure, it represents the partial opening of a door that once was firmly closed.