



Speech of Jim Knight MP at the NASACRE conference

I'm delighted to be here today.

The satirist – and Anglican vicar – Jonathan Swift wrote that: “We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.”

If improving religious education three hundred years ago could have helped us love one another and one another's religions, there's all the more reason to do so today.

Because Swift's comment resonates even more loudly in today's globalised society, where people with different faiths and from different cultures live, work and play, side by side, every day, in a way that Swift could never have imagined.

Learning about different religions and cultures should be an essential part of every child's education because it is essential to building a society that is fair and tolerant.

Religious education is important because it helps bring social cohesion.

If young people understand why others wear a turban or a crucifix, eat different foods, have different beliefs and often have the same prophets, they will learn to respect each other and respect diversity.

It is important because without even a basic understanding of religion, you can't possibly understand the history of this country, nor what's happening around the world today.

How could you understand Tudor history, the troubles in Northern Ireland or conflict in the Middle East without knowing what it means to be Protestant and Catholic, or Muslim and Jewish? How could you start to understand how to find peace without the same basic foundations?

It is important because it helps young people's intellectual development.

For many children and young people, religious education will be when they first start to ask the big questions about life, death and purpose. In an era of computer consoles and television, it can be a subject that stretches children and provokes questions about right and wrong.

And it is important because it helps to prepare young people for their adult lives and the world of work.

A doctor or nurse will be hampered in treating patients of different faiths without understanding their core beliefs. To achieve the best results, teachers need to know and understand who they are teaching. And any employer needs to appreciate why religion might mean that some employees might not be able to work at certain times of the day or on certain days of the week.

So religious education will always be an important part of school life. I know there are worries about how much there is in the curriculum. It's a crowded place. But I want to make it absolutely clear that we do not want religious education to be squeezed out.

In fact, it's great to see that religious studies is more popular than ever before.

It's the third fastest growing subject at GCSE, with more than 170,000 young people taking the full GCSE every year. And they're not just studying the subject; they're also doing well. Last year, more than 71 per cent achieved a higher level GCSE.

This is testament to the work that many of you do to make sure that schools really take the opportunity to provide pupils with engaging and inspirational learning.

Before we introduced the first ever National Framework for religious education in 2004, schools had little guidance and were more or less left to their own devices.

A single sentence saying nothing more than that "any syllabus should reflect the fact that the religious traditions are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain".

Now though, we have agreement between all of the major faiths to teach children and young people in a way that reflects the country – with inclusion, tolerance, diversity and interfaith dialogue at the heart of children's learning.

And that has led to many more imaginative approaches to teaching about religion.

At Soar Valley College in Leicester, pupils with Hindu, Sikh, Muslim, Christian and no religious beliefs at all didn't just study the theory; they all went to a Mosque to observe Muslim practices. And the result was a much deeper, more vivid and real understanding of what happens, as well as a link with the outside community.

Other schools are bringing different communities into their classrooms by taking pupils on virtual tours of mosques, synagogues and even the Vatican.

And linking with schools in different areas by video-conferencing.

This is a credit to you – whether that's NASACRE and the QCA, the REC, NATRE, AREIAC and all the representatives of the different faith and belief communities here today.

The challenge ahead

But all of that said, we can't be complacent.

We can't ignore the conclusion of last year's HMCI Annual Report.

It agreed that: "at its best religious education equips pupils to consider issues of community cohesion, diversity and religious understanding"

But went on to say: "standards overall are not high enough and there are wide variations in the quality of provision. Achievement by pupils in RE has improved over the past five years but remains very inconsistent."

We need to make sure that all children and young people can benefit through a much more widespread improvement in the quality of RE teaching and learning. You have a key role to play in making this happen.

We know that where RE is well-taught, local authorities are working with SACREs, drawing on the expertise of SACREs to shape and deliver the right kind of provision within their areas.

Provision such as in Greenwich in South East London where the syllabus now reflects the beliefs and practices of its many Swaminarayan Hindus.

While a few miles north, Haringey's syllabus now reflects its large Indian Tamil Shaivite community.

It's your local knowledge which will build a curriculum and encourage ways of teaching that will engage and inspire pupils.

In time, we expect that all local authorities to adopt the National Framework. And we will work with colleagues at the Department for Communities and Local Government to raise the profile of SACREs.

But at the same time we want to work with you all make the current system work more effectively at both a national and local level.

We have already introduced incentives to encourage more of the best graduates to become RE teachers.

Since September 2006, people taking PGCE courses in RE have been entitled to a training bursary worth £9,000 and a "golden hello" of £2,500 after working in a school for a year.

As a result, the number of people achieving qualified teacher status has been growing steadily to well over 500 in the most recent year on record.

And I can today announce a further £1million package of support measures to help spread best practice across the schools and authorities that need to do more to reach the level set by the best.

To help teachers, this money will pay for the creation of new on-line support material, including video case-studies and a toolkit of activities, which will support RE as a subject in the revised secondary curriculum. Schools will be required to follow from this September.

It will also pay for the production of state of the art learning materials on world

religions, specifically including help with handling the kinds of issues that pupils are increasingly raising – like 9/11, and the issues of hate crimes and religious fundamentalism.

Importantly, it will also mean we can rationalise and quality assure the many RE teaching resources that are already out there. We know that these vary enormously in quality and appropriateness. And today's teachers simply don't have the time to trawl through hundreds of websites and information packs to find the best ones.

And in support of this, we will improve training for RE teachers.

Together with key stakeholders like the Religious Education Council, the National Association of Teachers of RE and Ofsted, we will identify how continuing professional development and initial teacher training can be improved.

To support SACREs themselves, we will use the experience from last year's successful pilots to improve training and increase the diversity of ethnic minority members.

And we will work with colleagues in other Government Departments, including the Department for Communities and Local Government, to raise the profile of SACREs.

Finally, I can also announce today that we will begin a consultation on updating the current guidance on RE.

I am delighted that the leaders of the main faith groups are supporting what we are doing.

We must bring it up to date to include references to the non-statutory framework and to support schools in their new duty to promote community cohesion.

In doing so, we will separate guidance on RE from guidance on collective worship, as the faith and belief communities and RE professionals have asked. We will not review collective worship guidance for now, while we focus on RE. But that is something that we will consider doing in the future.

Conclusion

None of us would be in this room today if we didn't believe RE was important.

You are the experts and I hope the initiatives and consultations I have announced today will put us on the path to raising the standard of religious education in every school.