

# TEACHING ..... RELIGION

NEW UPDATED EDITION

SIXTY years  
of religious education  
in England and Wales

Terence Copley

# TEACHING RELIGION

## Sixty Years of Religious Education in England and Wales

NEW UPDATED EDITION

*Teaching Religion* remains the only book to chart the course of religious education in England and Wales from 1944 up to the present day. It is an indispensable guide for teachers, students and all those interested in the history and politics of religious education.

This fully updated edition, which includes a substantial new chapter covering 1995–2007, sets changes in religious education against a backcloth of social, historical and educational developments. Through a judicious use of documentary sources, including interviews with key policy makers and practitioner experiences, Copley explores the interaction between religious thinkers, religious educators and politicians.

In examining the transition of religious education from Cinderella status to rising star of the curriculum at a time when institutional religion in the UK experienced massive decline, this book explores the suggestion that how we handle religion within the national education system can offer insights into the sort of society we aspire to be.

**Terence Copley** is Professor of Educational Studies (Religious Education) at Oxford University *and* Emeritus Professor of Religious Education, University of Exeter. He was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate of Divinity in 2008.

**Praise for the 1997 edition:**

‘. . . a fine work, in which clarity and good humour are combined with scholarship and attention to detail to tell the RE story for the end of the 1990s . . . Students, teachers and colleagues in universities will use this, often with a smile, for many years to come.’

*Resource (the journal of the Professional Council for RE)*

‘The book is well researched, well written and in a non-combative style. It offers a challenge to all involved in RE, whether politicians, the churches or RE teachers.’

*Journal of Beliefs & Values*

‘[an] evocative and perceptive text . . .’

*Times Education Supplement*

‘. . . a formidable survey of the political and social context in which religious education has developed since the landmark Education Act of 1944.’

*The Tablet*

# TEACHING RELIGION

Sixty Years of Religious Education in  
England and Wales

*New Updated Edition*

Terence Copley

UNIVERSITY  
*of*  
EXETER  
PRESS

First published in 1997 as *Teaching Religion:  
Fifty years of religious education in  
England and Wales* by  
University of Exeter Press  
Reed Hall, Streatham Drive  
Exeter, Devon EX4 4QR

[www.exeterpress.co.uk](http://www.exeterpress.co.uk)

This new edition published 2008

© Terence Copley 2008

The right of Terence Copley to be identified as author  
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with  
the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data**

A catalogue record of this book is available  
from the British Library

Paperback ISBN 978 0 85989 819 5

Hardback ISBN 978 0 85989 818 8

Typeset in 10/12pt Sabon  
by Kestrel Data, Exeter

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Antony Rowe Ltd, Chippenham

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	vii
<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	xi
<i>Introduction: The Context</i>	1
1 The Shadow of War: The 1940s	15
2 Post-War Reconstruction: The 1950s	43
3 Iconoclasm in RE: The 1960s	61
4 Controversies in RE: The 1970s	89
5 A New Deal for RE: The 1980s	115
6 Post ERA—RE at the end of another era: The 1990s	153
7 RE in a New Millennium: The 2000s	186
<i>Postscript: RE: ‘Always an important part of school life’</i>	199
<i>Appendix 1: Starting out in RE, 1935</i>	213
<i>Appendix 2: Starting out in RE, 1968</i>	216
<i>Appendix 3: Starting out in RE, 1995</i>	220
<i>Appendix 4: Starting out in RE, 2005</i>	223
<i>Appendix 5: The Withdrawal Clause in RE</i>	226
<i>Notes</i>	229
<i>Select Glossary</i>	241
<i>Bibliography</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	259



## Acknowledgements

I have been helped by many people, including some of the key players in the events of the sixty-year period of this study. Kenneth Baker, Education Secretary at the time of the 1988 Education Reform Act, discussed issues relating to the religious clauses in that Act. References to that interview appear at several points in the text, particularly in Chapter 5. Baronesses Caroline Cox and Nancy Seear answered questions about the 1988 House of Lords debates about RE. Lord Rodney Elton wrote a reminiscence of the passage of the 1988 bill through the House of Lords in a letter dated 21 March 1996. Colin Alves (General Secretary to both the General Synod Board of Education and the National Society and responsible with others for briefing the Bishop of London in the Lords debates) helped me by telephone and by personal interview. He also documented the precise sequence of events in relation to the Anglican response to the original proposals in the bill. Liz Allen, Labour Education Policy Officer at John Smith House, answered questions about Labour and RE in the 1988 Act and provided information about comments by Derek Enright MP on the 1993 Education Act. Charles Clarke MP and Education Secretary from 2002 to 2004 discussed Labour and New Labour attitudes towards RE.

I met Sir John Acland several times to discuss the involvement of his late father, Sir Richard Acland, in religious education. Sir John generously allowed me access to various unpublished documents including his father's political diary for the war years and unpublished autobiographical writing which his father entitled 'A Political Record'.

Sallie Crispin, Kathryn Wright and Emma Collins contributed Appendices 1, 3 and 4 'Starting Out in Religious Education, 1935', '1995' and '2006' respectively. These anecdotal accounts capture the mood of their respective times and together with Appendix 2, 'Starting Out in Religious Education, 1968', provide subjective but real 'windows' into the period at four critical points. Sadly, Sallie Crispin died in 2007.



Sir Geoffrey Holland, onetime Permanent Secretary of the DFE, provided an insider view of DES/DfEE structures and operations and how RE was administered.

John Hull, Emeritus Professor of RE at the University of Birmingham and Honorary Professor of Practical Theology in the Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education, Birmingham, generously supplied me with source lists in connection with the Birmingham Agreed Syllabus debate of 1975 and cuttings from his personal collection.

The *Bath Chronicle* supplied archive material relating to the controversy that took place over the City of Bath agreed syllabus in 1970.

Stephen Orchard, formerly General Secretary of the Christian Education Movement, allowed me access to the CEM archive then in Derby, including Minutes of the Executive and the General Council and discussed the role of CEM or Christian Education as it is now known. Gwen Palmer as Chairperson of the RE Council during the period of the 1988 Act described its work, in particular the lobby for RE before and after 1988.

Rheinalt Thomas of Canolfan Genedlaethol Addysg Grefyddol, the Welsh National Centre for Religious Education, was most helpful in identifying some of the key documents in relation to RE in Wales.

In preparing the second edition of this book, I am keenly aware that writing recent history is always a hazardous activity. In the course of adding a new chapter for the second edition along with a new conclusion, I consulted a number of experts so as to reduce what may still be a subjective presentation of the period 1995–2007. I am extremely grateful to the following for their insights—although I take full responsibility for what I have chosen to write:

Dr Philip Barnes, King's College, London, Education Department.  
Lat Blaylock, Editor of *RE Today* and RE adviser.

Professor Brian Gates of the University of Cumbria and Chairperson of the RE Council at the time of the second edition of the book.

Professor Robert Jackson, University of Warwick Institute of Education, latterly Editor in Chief of the *British Journal of RE*.

John Keast, former Principal Manager for RE, Citizenship, PSHE at QCA and now Consultant for RE.

Barbara Wintersgill, onetime senior RE officer with the NCC and SCAA, later HMI specialist adviser for RE and now an independent consultant.

Technology, and especially computer technology, moves very rapidly. In preparing the second edition of this book I am most grateful to the

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All Saints Educational Trust for a grant that enabled the re-scanning of the original text so that revision and major additions could be easily undertaken by the writer and publisher.

To all these and other unnamed helpers, thanks.



## Preface to the Second Edition

This book originally set out to trace the history of RE against the context of educational and social change in England and Wales between 1944 and 1994. As such it was aimed not just at trainee teachers and researchers in RE, but all those interested in the history of education and in the presence of religion within the curriculum of UK schools. Such interest has increased in those parts of Europe, North America and beyond that share a concern about how to educate in this highly sensitive and vitally important area. But it is more than a decade since the first edition appeared. Much has changed in UK RE and in how RE is perceived in society at large. Who would have predicted in the 1950s that RE in the 2000s would show a massive surge in 16+ examination entries that would overtake even history, geography and French? Or that a national syllabus for RE would be on the horizon in 2008? So this edition includes necessary revision of all that was written before, but also an extension to finish the chapter on the 1990s and a new chapter covering 2000 to 2007. A new concluding chapter examines the significance of the whole sixty-year period. Finally a new short autobiographical appendix provides the story of a teacher setting out in RE in 2006.

Every book is limited by its subject and its length, but more by the latter. Our concern is with teaching religion over more than six decades in the classrooms of what the UK rather inaccurately calls ‘state schools’ and North America knows as ‘public schools’. School worship, the position and role of faith schools and of religious education within them and spiritual development as a cross-curricular theme are major subjects in their own right but space does not permit their treatment here. Similarly moral education, later known as personal and social education (PSE), later still as PSHE (‘health’ was inserted after the rise of AIDS) and citizenship have been omitted, except where the debate about them directly impinges on RE. For reasons of space we also exclude the different educational systems in Scotland and Northern Ireland in which

RE has its different place—in Northern Ireland, for example, world religions teaching was mandated only in 2007, some forty years after it happened in England. Therefore this study is confined to England and Wales.

The period covered begins with the landmark Education Act of 1944 and ends in 2007 with a major report by OFSTED on the state of religious education and a House of Commons statement emphasizing the importance of RE by the Prime Minister. Each intervening decade witnessed major change in religious education, so that, without forcing the subject matter to fit too strictly into artificial compartments, most chapters can be placed in the context of an approximate calendar decade.

Each chapter starts with a section on the wider political, social and religious change in British society during that decade. The selection of material for this has been inevitably subjective and has sometimes included the sensational, e.g. famous executions, which provided subject matter for ethical debate in some RE lessons. But the main aim of including this has been to provide a reminder for some or a flavour for others of the back-cloth against which religious educators operated.

The sixty years of this study was also a period of some significance for me. During much of it I experienced at first hand religious education as pupil and teacher in half a dozen schools, then in many more classrooms in different parts of the UK as part of my work researching and teaching RE within a higher education context. Within a professional lifetime spent in RE, I held a Chair in RE in education departments in two universities and taught theology in four universities. The questions, creative tensions and opportunities that these very different experiences—of RE, of theology and of the classroom and children—created in my mind mirror those faced by religious education in the UK in the period under review and in the years ahead. What is the essential identity of RE? How has it changed? How has it happened that RE has not only survived the collapse of institutional Christianity in the UK after the Second World War but actually thrived?

One question that preoccupied 1950s and 1960s RE was ‘Will it survive?’ The question for 2010s RE is not about survival, but about what its subject matter will be, what pedagogy will be appropriate and the precise form of its presence in curriculum. Should RE relate to the humanities, notably history and geography? To personal and social education? Is citizenship as a subject the natural friend or foe of RE? Should RE relate more closely to the creative arts and subjects that seek to nurture the imagination? Or is RE a loner, offering something unique and distinctive? There is also a growing issue about the control of RE—

will a national syllabus appear? If so, who will define it and how much detail will be prescribed?

It is strange to those outside the UK that we talk about religious education, but not history education or mathematics education. Here it is common to talk of ‘teaching RE’ or strictly, *teaching Religious Education*. It is even the title of a book (Stern, 2006). Gabriel Moran, an American commentator, asks ‘Does one teach the child education?’ Perhaps the alternative, ‘Teaching Religion’, smacks too much of indoctrination to the British mind.

In the end, the system and praxis of religious education we have is uniquely British, or to be more precise, Welsh and English. The story has its peaks and troughs. Without RE an implicit secular indoctrination in the curriculum might have reigned unchecked, pupil choice would have been further reduced and perceptions of religion among children would have been left to scandals misreported in the tabloid press and the chilling media images of religiously motivated terrorism. But in 2007 it was a tabloid newspaper, the *News of the World*, which called for GCSE Religious Studies to be compulsory for all, stating that ‘the classroom is the ideal place to engender understanding and respect for each other’s beliefs’ (17.6.2007). Times had indeed changed. The rich evidence from the past that we are about to review may, in explaining how we came to be where we are, offer insights for the future.

My decades of involvement in the process and profession we call religious education have convinced me that RE is crucial for individuals and for societies. It may be one piece in the jigsaw quest for a peaceful planet. Certainly it is an entertaining and intellectually and personally absorbing quest—plenty to occupy a professional lifetime.

Terence Copley

Harris Manchester College, Oxford, and  
Oxford University Education Department, 2008

## Note on gender

It is a characteristic that for the earlier period under review, language was more male-gender oriented than is now the case. Head-teachers were often presumed to be ‘headmasters’. The child or pupil—not yet metamorphosed into ‘the student’ of current education jargon—was usually ‘he’ etc. Quotations reflecting this are allowed to stand verbatim without further comment. The obsequious ‘sic’ has been kept to a minimum.

