

# Sowing the seeds of the future: an exploration of human beliefs and values



## *Introduction*

*A good question is never answered. It is not a bolt to be tightened into place but a seed to be planted and to bear more seed toward the hope of greening the landscape of idea.*

John Ciardi, American poet

If any area of the school curriculum illustrates how new ideas will seed change it is religious education. Not only has the pedagogical approach itself evolved over the years—from confessional instruction to a more inclusive look at the phenomena of religion and belief—each of our traditions has had to respond and adapt as global movements of people bring new perspectives to familiar ways of thinking.

This on-going confluence of ideas is the reason that the study of human beliefs and values remains so important. Children are not just growing up in an increasingly diverse society; they also have unprecedented access to a wide—and occasionally wild—variety of beliefs via the Internet. Exposure to the traditions of others can facilitate understanding; however it is also vital that pupils develop critical thinking skills so that they can learn to distinguish between ideas that cause them to flourish and those that will eventually limit their options in life.

*Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.*

Nelson Mandela

In a free society such as ours debate can be incredibly creative. From the moment they enter school, pupils in Ealing have the opportunity to forge friendships with children from a wide variety of backgrounds. One of the positive consequences of this is that they learn that genuine fellowship does not necessitate that everyone think the same. In fact, quite the opposite: engaging with someone who disagrees with you can go a long way towards helping you formulate and understand your own point of view.

Celebrating cultural difference fits in well with the modern approach to religious education, which allows for diversity of belief at the same time as it promotes community cohesion. In addition, mainstream schools are welcoming increased numbers of pupils with special educational needs (SEN). And for the significant number of children in Ealing with English as a second language, RE lessons provide opportunities to talk about and share something with which they are already familiar, and in doing so, to grow in self-confidence.

*Nothing is permanent except change.*  
Heraclitis (c 535-475 BCE)

In the past several years religious education as a discrete area of the curriculum has come increasingly under threat to the point that it is often marginalized; this is in spite of the fact that legally schools are still required to give it equal standing in relation to core and foundation subjects. It is also the main area of the curriculum where students have access to accounts of moral and spiritual development, which is important if schools are to fulfil their duty to promote SMSC.<sup>1</sup> The best way to ensure the survival of the subject is to make it forward-looking and challenging, and providing compelling learning experiences for all pupils—regardless of their religion or philosophy—will keep them engaged.

Ealing's teachers and RE co-ordinators will be relieved to discover that, although this can be considered a significant revision of the syllabus, much of the content remains the same. So, what are the main innovations?

- 1) A more structured programme of study to ensure that pupils arrive at key stage 3 having covered more or less the same content.
- 2) Themes that unify and root the material in common human experience.
- 3) The incorporation in the schemes of work of learning and thinking skills, the community of inquiry approach, and activities geared for both gifted and talented pupils and those with special educational needs.
- 4) A single attainment target.
- 5) Learning objectives and an example assessment task with differentiated outcomes for each unit.

#### *A more structured programme of study*

In Ealing's previous syllabus, the content to be covered, outlined in the programme of study section, was to be delivered via a certain number of core and optional units. However in order to ensure that pupils arrive at key stage three having covered generally the same material there will now be a fixed set of units, with the unifying themes providing overall structure.

The requisite units will be those for which schemes of work have already appeared on the Ealing Grid for Learning. Although teaching each of these units will be required, it will be up to individual teachers to decide which of the activities in each scheme to cover in order that their pupils have a sound understanding of the objectives. That is, it is more important to ensure that pupils have a good grasp of one or two key concepts for each topic than to attempt to cover the breadth of material available—in any case an impossible task. In addition RE co-ordinators will

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<sup>1</sup> Spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development; how well a school promotes SMSC remains a key inspection focus for Ofsted.

still have flexibility in setting out their whole-school timetable. For example, a school with a large percentage of pupils from Muslim backgrounds might choose to teach the unit on Islam early in key stage 2, to give their pupils a chance to share their knowledge and develop their literacy and communication skills.

The revised programme of study also includes some interesting new material. Two of the topics—*Seeds of Unity* and *History of Belief in the UK*—are to be taught across key stages 2 and 3.

*Seeds of unity (1 and 2)*: These resources were initially created for Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI). The *Seeds of Unity* resources<sup>2</sup> contain activities focussing on the relationship between plants and belief and the ethics of environmental stewardship.

*History of belief in the UK (1 and 2)*: One of the aims of this material is to put the appearance of mosques, mandirs and gurdwaras in our towns and cities into the context of Britain's long history of immigration and the influence each new group has on the landscape of ideas. Part 1 will look at how historians and archaeologists draw conclusions about the beliefs of early cultures from a variety of sources (e.g. archaeological evidence, textual references, remnants of ancient rituals in contemporary practices). In part 2 such topics as Celtic influences on early Christianity, the birth of the Church of England, the persecution and expulsion of the Jews during the Crusades and their subsequent return, the confrontation between religion and science following publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and the arrival of other religions in further periods of immigration will be considered.

Rather than contributing to the deepening of the chasm between those who define themselves as 'religious' compared to those who do not, we intend to continue to seek—and nurture—common ground. Thus we have created a new key stage 3 unit in the 'sources of inspiration' thread that *compares religious and metaphoric thinking to scientific thinking*. The purpose of this unit is to initiate discussion and formulate questions: for instance, how can a person be both religious and a scientist? And, how can different beliefs creatively co-exist?

All of the above units can be studied in conjunction with other areas of the curriculum. The *Seeds of unity* material is relevant to biology, PSHE and citizenship, and the *History of belief* units will obviously find useful links to the history curriculum. Although perhaps not immediately obvious, the key stage 3 unit on different modes of thinking will help pupils understand how the approach required for analysing scientific data differs to that we employ when engaging with a religious text or when writing poetry.

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<sup>2</sup> This project was funded by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. To see how classroom activities can be enriched by visits to local botanic gardens such as Kew visit the BGCI web site: <http://www.bgci.org/education/2542>

*When the words come, they are merely empty shells without the music.  
They live as they are sung, for the words are the body and the music the spirit.*  
Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)

By linking content in thematic threads we are hoping to show how the traditions being studied are responses by people across the globe to *common human experiences and predicaments*. It is impossible to understand the nature of religion without acknowledging that it is built round these experiences—the ‘music’ so to speak. It is also important to acknowledge that these experiences can be appreciated and interpreted in non-religious ways. Highlighting the perennial questions themselves is ultimately geared towards encouraging pupils to formulate their own questions and solutions.

The following shows how the required units fit into eight thematic threads:

Units				
Themes	Foundation	Key stage 1	Key stage 2	Key stage 3
Stories that guide	Bible stories featuring water Stories from other traditions	Special days	Special books	Founders of religion
Answering life questions			Christianity Judaism Islam Hinduism Sikhism Beliefs re: death 1	Buddhism Humanism The Baha’i Faith Creation stories Why do we suffer Beliefs re: death 2
Belief and identity	Myself	Special days Living together	Initiation practices Signs and symbols	What belief means to me
Acting ethically			How belief affects living: moral dilemmas Rules for living	Moral dilemmas 1 Moral dilemmas 2
Humankind and the environment		Our world: caring for new life	Seeds of unity 1(new)	Seeds of unity 2 (new)
Human experience and belief		Special food	History of belief in UK 1 (new)	History of belief in UK 2 (new)
Sources of inspiration	Precious things	Special places	Festivals of light Journeys: pilgrimage Special leaders Religious buildings	Modern day leaders Religious/poetic thought/expression of scientific thinking (new)
Human experience and spiritual expression		The importance of water	Prayer, meditation, and cultivating the inner life Religion in art	Religion in sound and music

*Learning without thought is labour lost; thought without learning is perilous.*  
Confucius (c 551-479 BCE)

It is important for pupils to understand how well they are learning and how they can improve, and for that reason it is a legal requirement that parents and carers are informed on an annual basis as to their child’s progress in any given subject. To facilitate this process there will be an example assessment task provided in each scheme of work, although it is not expected that a formal assessment will be performed for each unit taught.

In this syllabus we have decided to adopt a single attainment target<sup>3</sup> which emphasises the importance of the interpretation of concepts:

**Interpreting religion and belief in relation to human experience,  
where *interpret* is understood in terms appropriate to age and ability<sup>4</sup>.**

<i>Level</i>	<i>Interpret to be understood as...</i>	<i>Example</i>
Foundation	...engaging with and responding to.	Engaging with, and responding to, the concept of <i>respect</i> given to special objects in the unit on “Precious things”.
Key stage 1	...making sense of.	Making sense of how water is used symbolically in the unit “The importance of water.”
Key stage 2	In addition to ‘making sense of’ pupils will recognise that there may be a variety of interpretations of a single concept. So it can also be understood as ‘differentiating between’.	Understanding that there are different ways of marking the <i>important life-transitions</i> in the unit “Initiation practices”. Also, understanding that there are many different ways that the seed is used to symbolise certain religious/philosophical concepts in the unit “Seeds of unity (1).”
Key stage 3	...making sense of and differentiating between. But also students need to be challenged to give a coherent explanation of.	Being able to explain why Easter is so important to Christians in the unit “Christianity: beliefs and practices.” Also, being able to discuss what might inspire a Humanist to choose right over wrong.
Key stage 4	...all of the above. In addition students need to be challenged to <i>examine critically</i> .	Being able to discuss and comment on specific concepts such as <i>covenant</i> and <i>redemption</i> in a unit of work on Judaism within a GCSE syllabus.

<sup>3</sup> This target is based on one introduced by Hampshire SACRE in their syllabus “Living Difference”.

<sup>4</sup> More on assessment and level descriptors including P scales can be found on page....

*[Imagine] a niche and within it a lamp: the lamp enclosed in glass: the glass as it were a brilliant star: lit from a blessed tree, an olive, neither of the east nor of the west, whose oil is well-nigh luminous, though fire scarce touched it: Light upon Light!*

The parable of the light, Qur'an 24:35

Whether an individual believes in a god or not, whether they consider themselves a person with a soul, there is a part of all of us—the core of our being, our essence—that needs to be both nurtured and protected. And while it is proper in modern religious education that we teach children to take a step back when learning about the phenomena of religion, it is also right that we keep the door open to awe, that we encourage them to honour their own unique mystery.

Formulating the good question is at the heart of this: sometimes, for some children, this will be as straightforward as giving them the confidence to complain about hunger or to ask without shame for something to be explained in a way that they can understand. To live a balanced, creative life we all need to develop intellectual, emotional and practical intelligence. In other words, at the same time as we need to develop critical enquiry and build the capacity for awe and inward reflection we also need to foster common sense, to get children to consider whether a particular idea, belief or course of action is creative *for them*: this is of course one of the most difficult of life lessons.

*But, after all, who knows, and who can say  
whence it all came, and how creation happened?*

Rig Veda X, 129.

In a debate<sup>5</sup> on the changes in the religious landscape of Britain, Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University said: “we’ve got to stop talking as if religions are packages of unchanging conservative dogmas, rituals and values. They are for a few people—but not for most. The majority are a bit religious and interested in exploring things for themselves. They want religion to give meaning to their lives—they don’t want to give their lives to a religious system.”<sup>6</sup>

This leaves us with the challenge of contemporary religious education: opening eyes to the rich history of human responses to the perennial life challenges, at the same time as helping pupils develop the skills to work out their own answers. Or as the noted Italian educator Maria Montessori said:

The secret of good teaching is to regard the child’s intelligence as a fertile field, in which seeds may be sown to grow under the heat of flaming imagination. ... We do not want complacent pupils, but eager ones: we seek

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<sup>5</sup> “Trends in Religion and Values”, Westminster Faith Debate, 2 May 2012.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/News/Latest/Pages/Britishreligionhaschanged.aspx>

to sow life in the child rather than theories, to help the child grow mentally, socially, emotionally and physically.<sup>7</sup>

In this syllabus we would of course want to add 'to help the child grow spiritually', but using the word in a way that embraces all, whether religious or non-religious.

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<sup>7</sup> From *To Educate the Human Potential*, Maria Montessori, 1948.