What place should religion have in modern schools?

"Educating the mind, without educating the heart is no education at all" Aristotle

Aristotle's writings highlight the importance of moral development and virtue as an important part of learning - which one might think is the purpose of a religious education.[1] Many philosophers, scientists and critical thinkers have argued that religion contributes to moral character building and ethical guidance. Yet the place of religious education in schools varies worldwide and has become increasingly controversial and sparked debates among governments, parents and teachers. In some countries, such as France, education is expected to follow a secular approach and not include the formal teaching of religion. The American Constitution also bans the endorsement of any one religion in education. The frameworks for Religious and Moral Education in England, Scotland and Wales take a middle ground.[2] This essay will explore how religious education should be understood in modern schooling and consider what place, if any, religion has in future, pluralistic societies from a range of perspectives.

When religion is taught in schools it typically takes three main forms. The first involves the traditional teaching and instruction of religion as a compulsory, classroom-based subject up to a certain age (usually primary level). The second is by the teaching of RS/PT as an academic subject in secondary school, and in GCSE/A Level choices. Some schools, however, also provide a religious and moral/ethical ethos. This is through the wider calendar of school activities, including assemblies, chapel services and the celebration of religious festivals such as Easter, Christmas or Diwali. Each approach has its own advantages and limitations reflecting different priorities. These approaches emphasize different roles religion can play in modern schooling.

To thinkers such as Plato, Sir Thomas Aquinas, and C.S Lewis, religion is viewed as important to study and have access to from a young age. Religion-based lessons offer opportunities and ideas that are commonly absent from core subjects and other lessons. Lessons such as philosophy and religion encourage intellectual growth and independent thought. This also helps students to formulate and justify their own theories and reasoning as opposed to just recalling information others have provided. From this, students can achieve deeper thinking and the chance to flourish through a well-rounded education. This was supported by Martin Luther King who famously said "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education."[3]

Martin Luther King Jr's quote outlines the values and points that an ideal education system should hope to embody. His emphasis on thinking critically and intensively highlights the

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[1] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics,* https://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html
[2] https://natre.org.uk/about-re/
[3] Martin Luther King, 'The Purpose of Education' (1947), https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/purpose-education

importance of giving students freedom to explore religion and philosophy rather than being told what to think. As well as that, the idea of intelligence plus character highlights the importance of a broad curriculum. Maths and sciences develop logical thinking and analytical skills while religious studies, english and other humanities hope to achieve social and cultural thinking.

Although a controversial topic religion is at the heart of contemporary society. As a result of this, religion is a key part of both conflicts and current affairs. Even when religion contributes to tension, conflicts and wars, understanding it as a subject will remain important. The opportunity to study religion supports children to interpret world events and engage with diverse communities.

However, this positive view is not unanimously supported. Critics have argued that teaching religion is a distraction from other subjects and contradictory to scientific subjects. Thinkers such as biologist Richard Dawkins, and philosophers David Hume and Frederick Nietzsche challenge the benefits of religious education. On a wider scale, groups such as modern secularists, humanists, and civil rights activists have campaigned for more neutral, secular education systems. Unlike Religion, Science is always the same, water boils at 100 degrees in every country. Maths is always the same, A squared plus b squared equals C squared no matter who you are. Religion, however, is personal and varied across countries and cultures. This makes Religious Education unique and therefore, hard to find the best approach to teach.

One could argue religion is creating more confusion than clarity and intellectual growth. Many schools have struggled to incorporate religion without promoting particular beliefs. Concerns arise around indoctrination and highlight the difficulty of providing a neutral religious education. To follow that, religion may divide students in schools. Identity and faith are of course both important but if there is a strong religion presence, factors such as discrimination, social exclusion and conflicts may happen. Therefore, from a perspective prioritising social unity and avoiding division, secularism may be seen as a preferable alternative. This approach is evident in places such as France and India where religious tension and previous conflicts have led to the implementation of neutral education policies for a more unified, stable community.

The previous sections have argued why we need a religious education and also the challenges of how it should be done, yet none of that makes a difference if nobody can agree on what the education should entail. A school cannot teach every religion in enough depth to effectively support and inform students in a neutral way. The average religious education time in most schools is approximately one 50-minute lesson per week. Therefore, curriculums and timetables simply cannot incorporate every religion.

Firstly, the major factor in this issue is deciding which religions to include. One approach would be to incorporate the most common religions. However, the most common religion will vary depending on the type of school or geographical placement. Therefore, one must consider whether equality of teaching is more or less important than learning about ones' own ethnic religious background. Another approach would be to teach the religions with the highest global following. For example, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism

and Sikhism. However, each of these religions are unique and contradictory. This could be viewed as confusing or too much information for an effective outcome.

Subsequently, many countries have adopted approaches surrounding alternative religious educations. Lessons such as Religion and World Views, Philosophy and Theology, or Religion and Moral Values have increased in popularity. These subjects are examples of middle ground among education. The Welsh education system currently focuses on RVE (religion, values and ethics) following a curriculum change in 2022.[4] This system covers major religions in Wales, non-religious beliefs (like humanism), and philosophical questions. The subject is mandatory for ages 3-16 and parent withdrawal is not permitted. In this sense, students can still reach their potential without always being told what and how to think. Many believe prioritising intellectual growth over religious information and instruction is more appropriate for the average student. Countries that have followed this include France where religious education now comes from a strictly historical and cultural perspective only learned about within history and English lessons.

England's education system still follows a more traditional RE. It is compulsory for all state-funded schools to include (ages 5-16, up to 18 in sixth form) but isn't part of the National Curriculum, leading to inconsistent quality and provision, with parents able to withdraw children from religious teachings. This however leads to gaps in the child's education and inequality among students. Therefore, many have tried to debate if this should be permitted when core subjects such as maths or history are mandatory.[5]

Ultimately, one must ask what the goal of the teaching should be. Approaches include teaching for exams (GCSE, A Level), teaching for wider knowledge and epistemology or teaching for social unity and the least complication among other subjects. Some have argued that studying for exams is important because it directly affects the student's future whether that be through university, employment or just GCSEs. However, many maintain the belief that wider knowledge and deeper understanding is more important due to the skills acquired being useful throughout life no matter where individual students end up. Finally, plenty have prioritised unity and simplicity over intellectual gain. Overall, one could argue there is no right answer, but the approach should have the students' best interests at heart not any ulterior motives such as indoctrination or financial gain.

After considering the challenges associated by religious education including diversity social unity, conflicting opinions and practical complications, it may seem easier and smoother to remove religion from schools altogether. However, I believe this way to be wrong. I propose that religious education should remain as an academic subject which incorporates philosophy and ethics, world views and moral values. This model is already evident in places such as Wales. This approach maintains equality and inclusivity while achieving a balanced intellectual curriculum. Religious practices, doctrines and beliefs should not be promoted or

[4] https://educationwales.blog.gov.wales/2022/07/19/religion-values-and-ethics-replaces-religious-education-under-curriculum-for-wales/

[5] https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report

impeded and be strictly voluntary. This approach secures a balance between full secularism and full faith biased schooling while supporting deeper critical thinking and maintaining both equality and inclusivity. Religion is a topic that will always have a place in the world; therefore, it should also have a place in the education frameworks of modern schools.

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