

Curriculum for Wales Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE) guidance

Consultation response form

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The three co-authors of this response are all sociologists of religion. We are all present or past committee members of Socrel, the largest British academic association for the sociology of religion, and we hold positions related to sociology of religion at UK universities. We have a shared research interest in childhood and religious education, and co-authored the recent document [Worldviews: A Multidisciplinary Report](#) (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe 2020), commissioned by the RE Council.

Responses should be returned by **16 July 2021** to

Curriculum Realisation Unit
Curriculum and Assessment Division
The Education Directorate
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

or completed electronically and sent to:

e-mail: curriculumforwales@gov.wales

Question 1 – How well does the guidance explain the scope of RVE and its context within the Humanities Area ?

Not well at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not well	<input type="checkbox"/>	Acceptable	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Well	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very well	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer (no more than 250 words).

From a sociological perspective, RE has often been criticised for not equipping pupils with the tools to navigate a (non-)religiously diverse world (Dinham and Shaw, 2015). The RVE guidance clearly broadens the scope of RVE, and offers the opportunity to rethink RE as it is located within the Humanities Area.

As it stands, the contribution of RVE to the Humanities Areas is clear but seems limited. For instance, the proposed RVE guidance does not seem to encourage “a critical understanding of how societies are and have been organised, structured and led, in the learners’ own locality and in Wales, as well as in the wider world” (Welsh Government, 2020).

We therefore make the following recommendations:

- Religion has inspired work to bring equality and justice to society, and also to inflict harm. The RVE guidance needs to be updated to encourage SACs/schools to provide contexts for meaningful discussions around the topic of religion and power in society, and how religion has been/is used as a locus of power (see Q.3).
- The RVE guidance needs to explicitly address the role of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) in education, and in society more broadly, and how it has been/is used as a classificatory system in society (see Q.3).
- The RVE guidance should be updated to invite SACs/schools to engage in discussions about power dynamics, and the discriminatory practices and actions that may result towards religious and non-religious philosophical convictions that are (re)presented at ‘Other’ (see Qs. 3 and 10).

Question 2 – Is the guidance, as a whole, clear and helpful for you in your role?

Very unclear	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slightly unclear	<input type="checkbox"/>	Neither clear nor unclear	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slightly clear	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Very clear	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer.

From a sociological perspective, Religious Education (RE) has often been criticised for presenting ‘world religions’ as “discrete, self-contained, clearly defined traditions” that could be studied in isolation from one another (Cooling, Bowie and

Panjwani, 2020: 24). As a result, RE has regularly been accused of failing to reflect the lived experiences of religious (and non-religious) communities (Benoit, 2020; CoRE, 2018).

The interdisciplinary approach taken to the Humanities is welcomed, and the contribution of RVE to the Humanities Area is not only relevant but also important. However, **the proposed RVE guidance fails to give pupils the opportunity to learn what religion really is, how it is understood in the modern world, or how it can be taught as a challenging, exciting and intellectually stimulating subject.** We recommend that a sociological approach be also adopted in RVE to study the phenomenon of religion and non-religion.

We are also concerned that the RVE guidance does not take the opportunity to explicitly adopt a decolonised and anti-racist curriculum. We therefore propose that the RVE guidance be updated to explicitly address issues around power in contemporary society, and make the following recommendations:

- The RVE guidance needs to acknowledge the constructed nature of the concept of religion, and its Western and Christianised bias; learners need to spend time learning about religious philosophical convictions that are present in modern Wales, but very different from Christianity.
- The RVE guidance needs to explicitly address the role of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) in education (see Q.3), and in society more broadly, and how it is used as a classificatory system. This could contribute to tackle (religious) racism.
- The RVE guidance needs to acknowledge that the religious and non-religious are not diametrically opposed and that the boundaries between the two categories are fluid and permeable (see Q.10). The concept of worldview may be helpful to approach this issue.

Question 3 – Does the guidance offer relevant information to support practitioners when designing their school curriculum for RVE?

Not relevant at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slightly relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Moderately relevant	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very relevant	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer.

While the guidance offers a number of relevant information to support practitioners, it fails to engage adequately with the concept of religion, which is key to RVE. As a result, it does not “encourage a critical understanding of how societies are and have been organised, structured and led, in the learners’ own locality and in Wales, as well as in the wider world” (Welsh Government, 2020).

Below, we reflect on gaps in the RVE guidance, and how these might be addressed.

3.1 Defining Religion

The RVE guidance defines religion in “conventional or ordinary” ways (i.e. belief in a supreme being, worship/religious practice, organisation). As post-colonial scholars have shown, such a definition is “grounded in ethnocentric assumptions that reflect the long hegemony of Christian theology” (Hanegraaff, 2015: 102). In other words, to be classified as a religion, a tradition needs to share a number of aspects with Christianity, including scriptures, a churchlike organisational structure with a priesthood, a belief in a single divine power, and a doctrinal system (Smith, 1964; Dubuisson, 2003). Such a definition excludes certain traditions, such as New Religious Movements (NRMs).

By defining religion in this way, and codifying it along colonial, Western, Christianised discourses, the RVE guidance reproduces dominant, normative understandings of religion. It excludes communities and/or organised movements that do not conform to the definition of religion, and that do not identify as non-religious (e.g. NRMs). As the definition adopted in the RVE guidance is likely to be used by SACs/schools, we warn against the danger of uncritically reproducing dominant narratives about religion(s), and of othering certain communities or rendering them invisible.

We recommend that the RVE guidance either i) does not define religion at all, or ii) acknowledges the limitations of its own proposed definition, and its colonial, Western, Christianised bias.

3.2 RVE and Deconstructing Religion

The RVE guidance states that “[u]nderstanding the concept of religion will enable learners to build a well-rounded understanding of religion, and the significance of the different ways that it is defined” (2021: 6)¹. Clarification regarding the second half of this statement would be welcomed. Is the guidance implying that RVE needs to foreground lived experiences of religion (i.e. lived religion, which is mentioned on two occasions in the guidance)? Or is it about engaging with the concept of ‘religion’ as a social construct? We argue that RVE needs to do both.

The RVE guidance seems to adopt a similar position, since it states that RVE is to “develop rich contexts for enquiry into the concepts of religion, lived religion [...]”. However, **it remains unclear whether RVE is to provide children and young people with the space to engage in discussions about the concept of religion and its constructed nature.** The confusion emerges from the fact that the RVE guidance adopts a “conventional” definition of religion, and does not explicitly indicate that school curriculum design should give pupils the space to reflect on religion as a concept, and discuss where that definition came from, or what alternative definitions might be proposed.

¹ <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2021-05/consultation-document-curriculum-for-wales-religion-values-and-ethics-guidance.pdf>

Given that the concept of religion is notoriously difficult to define, and its meaning often contested, **we recommend that Section 5 in the RVE guidance be updated** to include another bullet point under “School curriculum design should”:

- provide rich contexts for engaging with the constructed nature of religion, its situated and contextual meanings, and its usage in contemporary society, as well as providing opportunities for learners to reflect on issues of power that arise from labelling movements and/or organisations as religions, cults, sects, or other.

3.3 RVE and the World Religions Paradigm

In order to provide children and young people with the opportunity to meaningfully engage in conversations about the concept of religion, **RVE needs to acknowledge the existence of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP), and its influence in education and in society.** Since the 1960s, the WRP has been influential in the teaching of RE. Over the last five decades, the WRP has informed RE syllabuses, which have tended to be organised around Christianity and other ‘world religions’, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism (Owen, 2011). As mentioned in section 2.1, the concept of ‘world religion’ is informed by colonial, Western, Christianised discourses. The WRP has therefore been the object of criticism, as it can be restrictive as well as normative (Hanegraaff, 2015). The WRP also contributes to a hierarchical ordering of religions (Masuzawa, 2005); as certain traditions are labelled as ‘cults’ or are qualified as ‘primitive,’ they are associated with pagan movements and are not recognised as legitimate forms of religion.

[A] world religion is simply a religion like ours, and that is, above all, a tradition that has achieved sufficient power and numbers [...]. All ‘primitives’, by way of contrast, may be lumped together, as may the ‘minor religions,’ because they do not confront our history in any direct fashion. From the point of view of power, they are invisible (J.Z. Smith, 1998: 280).

Movements such as New Age or NRMs therefore have tended to not figure in RE syllabuses, and have become the “invisible Others” (Cotter and Robertson, 2016: 8).

The WRP has also been criticised for ignoring “the complexities and diversity within traditions, as well as the permeabilities of their boundaries” (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020: 7). Traditions have tended to be taught as “discrete, self-contained, clearly defined” (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020: 24). Even where non-religious traditions are included, the approach taken to them mirror the WRP (2020: 24).

While there is a call for RE to move away from the WRP among scholars and education professionals, ignoring it altogether would be a disservice to children and young people. **Our societies have assimilated the WRP as a major system of classification, and pupils need to learn to recognise it and understand its**

flaws. The WRP should not be ignored in RVE, and children and young people should be given the opportunity to critically engage with it, alongside the concept of religion, in order to “recognise how real people actually construct their world” (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020: 8).

It has been noted that ‘R’ in RVE stands for Religion, in the singular, rather than plural – which suggests a move away from the traditional approach to learning about/from ‘world religions’, and to engage with religion as a concept instead. This may respond to criticisms about using Religions (plural), which implies the study of discrete entities (i.e. ‘world religions’) to be studied in silos, rather than a conceptual category with which to engage critically (NATRE, 2019. REC, 2019; TRS-UK, 2019). However, by not explicitly naming the World Religions Paradigm in the RVE guidance, nor explicitly **providing a space for children and young people to critically engage with its place and role in contemporary society, the RVE guidance fails to adequately equip learners with the tools to become ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world.**

We recommend that the RVE guidance be updated to invite SACs/schools to design a curriculum that provides opportunities to engage in conversations about the WRP and distribution of power in society. **By actively engaging in discussions about power dynamics, and the discriminatory practices and actions that may result towards othered religions, RVE could contribute to a decolonised and anti-racist curriculum** (Brown, 2021).

Question 4 – Thinking about each section of the guidance, do you feel there are:

- any gaps in information? If so, what should be added?
- any sections that are particularly helpful? If so, in what way are they helpful and to whom?

RE has often focused on the cognitive and intellectual aspects of (non-)religion, while lived and embodied experiences have been neglected (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020). Such an approach is anchored in Western constructions that separate the body from the mind (Miller, in press: 122). For Brown, decolonising RE therefore “requires the individual to reconnect with their mind and body. This is not exclusively an intellectual exercise. We must constantly struggle to be holistically present” (2021: 2).

In the RVE guidance, we welcome “Example Learning Journey 7: The journey of life”, where a parallel is drawn between the physical and the spiritual journeys. We also welcome the section on “Connections to the Wider or Natural World”, which engages learners through use of the senses. We, however, believe that **embodied (e.g. experiential, emotional) experiences ought to be also be included in all sections, and that explicit reference to lived and embodied experiences be made in section 5** (‘Designing Your Curriculum’).

We recommend that the RVE guidance explicitly states that (non-)religion can include embodied experiences, which are as significant as consciously thought-out and articulated approaches.

Question 5 – Does the guidance offer all practitioners sufficient support for their planning and teaching of RVE?

Insufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>	Somewhat insufficient	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Neither insufficient nor sufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>	Somewhat sufficient		Sufficient	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer.

Research conducted in Birmingham (UK) shows that if SACs/schools are not explicitly equipped to critically engage with the concept of religion and with the WRP, teachers are likely to keep reproducing dominant Western Christian discourses about religion(s). For example, Benoit’s (2020) research shows that despite adopting a syllabus organised around 24 ‘dispositions’ (i.e. values), teachers continued to teach about/from ‘world religions’. In her research, teachers explained that they used the values (such as ‘being thankful’, ‘Caring for Others, Animals and the Environment’) to teach about ‘world religions’, and failed to take the opportunity to rethink RE. They adopted a comparative approach to ‘world religions’ by exploring how different traditions interpret the 24 dispositions/values. As a result, they did not engage with the concept of religion critically nor provided learners with the opportunity to do so. They also did not know about the World Religions Paradigm, and were not supported to move beyond Western, Christianised understandings of religion(s). Consequently, they failed to challenge stereotypes or religious racism, and unknowingly reproduced existing power dynamics.

Practitioners need to be explicitly given the tools to understand the baggage ‘religion’ comes with, and how it can be used as a locus of power in society (see Q.3). They need to be provided with examples of how to teach beyond the World Religions Paradigm, otherwise the RVE guidance is likely to be understood through its lens.

Question 6 – Is additional support (e.g. professional learning and resources) needed to ensure the successful implementation of this guidance?

If so, please provide more detail.

Yes	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	No	<input type="checkbox"/>	Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer.

Additional resources are needed to engage with the points/recommendations made above. Resources from the field of sociology of religion would complement the RVE guidance well. Guidance can be sought from the authors directly, as well as from [Socrel](#).

A number of teacher training sessions will be needed to support teachers – the World Religions Paradigm has informed RE for over five decades, and informs the way we think about religion and classify religious traditions in contemporary society. As such, teachers will need support to move beyond this dominant way of understanding and representing religious and non-religious philosophical convictions.

Question 7 – This question is aimed at local authorities and Standing Advisory Councils for religious education (SACs).

Is the guidance a helpful document for developing agreed syllabus conferences?

Not helpful at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slightly helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Somewhat helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Extremely helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Is the guidance a helpful document for SACs?

Not helpful at all	<input type="checkbox"/>	Slightly helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Somewhat helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Very helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>	Extremely helpful	<input type="checkbox"/>
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Please explain your answer.

n/a

Question 8 – We would like to know your views on the effects that the RVE guidance would have on the Welsh language, specifically on:

- i) opportunities for people to use Welsh
- ii) treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

What effects do you think there would be? How could positive effects be increased, or negative effects be mitigated?

Supporting comments

n/a

Question 9 – Please also explain how you believe the RVE guidance could be formulated or changed so as to have:

- i) positive effects or increased positive effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language
- ii) no adverse effects on opportunities for people to use the Welsh language and on treating the Welsh language no less favourably than the English language.

Supporting comments

n/a

Question 10 – We have asked a number of specific questions. If you have any related issues which we have not specifically addressed, please use this space to report them.

10.1 Non-Religious Philosophical Convictions as Values and Ethics

The RVE guidance identifies 'Values and Ethics' as one of the lenses through which to view RVE concepts. We would like to express caution when viewing religious and non-religious convictions as values and ethics. Benoit's (2020) research shows that when religious and non-religious philosophical convictions are solely viewed through the lens of values and ethics, several problems may emerge:

- All 'world religions' are constructed as sharing the same universal values, and thus as sharing a universal transcendental core. This liberal notion of universal theology is informed by Western Christian discourses.
- Values and moral codes are likely to be viewed as valid if they conform to liberalism. As a result, teachers and learners tend to view religious and non-religious convictions that abide to liberalism as 'good', and religious and non-religious convictions that don't as 'bad'.²
- Teachers tend to focus on religious and non-religious philosophical convictions that promote a 'good life', and tend to avoid 'destructive spiritualities'.³ In other words, "even in cases where religion is constructed as complex and multi-layered, there remains an emphasis on the positive or creative aspects of religion, often ignoring its more unsettling aspects" (Benoit, 2020: 182).
- Teachers and learners are likely to locate 'true religion' in the realm of everyday morality and ethics. Religious and non-religious philosophical convictions that do not abide by the universal code of values and ethics are likely to be perceived as 'false'.

We recommend that the RVE guidance acknowledges the common issues noted above, and to invite SACs/schools to move away from binaries and engage in discussions about power dynamics and hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. We also recommend that the RVE guidance be updated on page 14 to state that "Lenses in RVE include: [...]"

- **Values and Ethics**

How and why people make moral choices and how this influences their actions; How philosophical convictions can be constructed as 'good' or 'bad', or 'true' or 'false' in society."

² The good/bad dichotomy reflects "a long tendency [...] to divide religions up into good ones, in which the self finds the resources to live a purposeful life in an orderly social world [...], and bad ones, which deprive the individual of will and autonomy and self-control" (Orsi, 2005: 171).

³ Destructive spiritualities is explained by McGuire as follows: "[J]ust as there are creative spiritualities, there may also be destructive spiritualities. Just as some people may seek spiritual practices that bring their lives into a greater sense of harmony, beauty, peace, and compassion, others may engage in practices that develop a purer hatred of the Other and that literally, as well as figuratively, embody violence and aggression" (2008: 116).

10.2 Binarities

10.2.1 The Religious and Non-Religious

In the RVE guidance, a clear distinction is made between the religious and non-religious. While we understand that the aim of the guidance is to be inclusive of both religion and non-religion, “drawing a binary opposition between religious and non-religious worldviews risks reifying worldviews, especially in handling the complexities within and between traditions [...]. It also implies a clear separation between the religious and the secular in which one ‘cannot be both or anything in between’ (Holloway, 2016). Many have argued that the distinction between the religious and nonreligious is a fake dichotomy, and call for a more inclusive system of representation” (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe, 2020: 24).

Arguably the notion of ‘religion’ is a Western construct (Asad 1993), and the religious/non-religious binary, as well as the fencing off of ‘religion’ from ‘nonreligious worldviews’, are of an artificial nature. It would be fair to question whether indigenous traditions/cultures/ worldviews would fall into either or both of these categories (Freathy and John, 2019: 31).

Additionally, by constructing worldviews/perspectives/insights as either religious or non-religious, there is the added danger of “polarising” those, and “setting up an opposition between religious and scientific perspectives or between theistic and atheistic positions” (Everington, 2019: 20).

We therefore recommend that the RVE guidance be updated to include a note that the religious and non-religious ought not to be constructed as diametrically opposed, but as informing one another, and as having fluid, permeable boundaries. We also recommend that the RVE guidance be updated to invite SACs/schools to provide contexts for children and young people to critically engage with the concept of non-religion (as well as religion).

10.2.2 Institutional vs. Personal

The RVE guidance seems to give little focus to the teaching of the institutional form of religion. On one occasion, the RVE guidance differentiates between institutional and personal worldviews. In our multidisciplinary report on Worldview (Benoit, Hutchings and Shillitoe 2020), we warn against the risk of ignoring “the many levels on which worldview can work in between, and around the two realms” (2020: 29). For instance, Jackson’s work on the interpretative approach to RE demonstrates that there is a third category between the personal and the institutional: the community. The current institutional/personal dichotomy ignores this level, as well as others. Following from Kuusisto et al.’s work, who highlight a tendency to “neglect the global, societal, cultural and communal aspects” (2019: 398), we question whether a twofold (or even a threefold construction) of worldview may be too limited and limiting. We encourage greater attention is given to the notion of worldview(s), and encourage a sharing of resources between English and Welsh RE.

10.3 Summary of recommendations

- The RVE guidance should be amended as it currently does not explicitly equip schools and Standing Advisory Councils (SACs) to adopt a decolonised and anti-racist approach to RVE.
- Religion has inspired work to bring equality and justice to society, and also to inflict harm. The RVE guidance needs to be updated to encourage schools and SACs to provide contexts for meaningful discussions around the topic of religion and power in society, and how religion has been/is used as a locus of power.
- The RVE guidance needs to acknowledge the constructed nature of the concept of religion, and its Western and Christianised bias; learners need to spend time learning about religious philosophical convictions that are present in modern Wales, but very different from Christianity.
- The RVE guidance needs to explicitly address the role of the World Religions Paradigm (WRP) in education, and in society more broadly, and how it is used as a classificatory system.
- The RVE guidance needs to acknowledge that the religious and non-religious are not diametrically opposed and that the boundaries between the two categories are fluid and permeable. The concept of worldview may be helpful to approach this issue, and encourage a sharing of resources between English and Welsh RE.

Responses to consultations are likely to be made public, on the internet or in a report. If you would prefer your response to remain anonymous, please tick here:

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