

Teaching about Christianity in the new RE Syllabus for Worcestershire

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One of the peculiarities of Religious Education during the compulsory years of schooling is that each Local Authority has been required by law, since 1944, to have its own RE syllabus, the content of which has to be agreed by four committees on a syllabus conference: teachers, Church of England; other faiths and denominations and local councillors. As there are now over 150 Local Authorities there are over 150 RE syllabuses. Into this politically created maelstrom was pitched, in the Education Reform Act (1988), the legal requirement that Christianity should be taught and that each syllabus should be reviewed every five years. This event is currently taking place in Worcestershire.

This report on current progress of this quinquennial review aims to reflect on developing a more creative approach to teaching about Christianity. As all RE syllabuses have to pay particular attention to the teaching of Christianity a great deal of RE classroom time is spent on it. Arising from this is the need to ensure a progression in learning and teaching across all key stages. The outline contained in this document provides some thoughts on how progression in Christianity might be achieved. It is a 'working document' in the sense that it is still under discussion and is amended regularly but the intention is that it will form the basis for a significant contribution to support the next Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education in Worcestershire.

One has regularly has to remind teachers that the Bible was not written for children, though it is often taught as if it were. The events and stories contained within the Bible are the bedrock for teaching about Christianity and it will remain a major source for pupils' learning and teaching. Many adults appear to remember the 'simple stories of Jesus' as if referring back to a golden age; but the Bible was put together over hundreds of years and reflects many different styles of writing and many different ways of making important points. Children have the capacity to see and recognize in people and events meanings which can be lost to adults because children relate these events and stories to their own experiences. Their capacity for interpretation will change, as it does with adults, as they grow in experience, knowledge and understanding of their world and the world of others. The process of learning promoted in these pages allows pupils, indeed it encourages them, to see Christianity through their own eyes and relate the stories and events to their experiences.

The new syllabus suggests five aspects of Christianity with which pupils should be familiar by the end of Key Stage 3. These are:

Jesus, The Bible, The Church, Festivals, Challenging Questions Children Ask.

Although the topics and the age ranges will differ, there can be a common approach built on the **Key Skills** currently listed in the RE Syllabus. These are:

investigation, interpretation, analysis, explanation, synthesis, reflection, evaluation, empathy.

In line with some of the work already taking place in Worcestershire it would be useful to place the emphasis on pupils learning and acquiring certain Key Skills.

We might follow a pedagogical model of:

- **Synthesising**
- ↑
- **Creating**
- ↑
- **Evaluating**
- ↑
- **Analysing**
- ↑
- **Applying**
- ↑
- **Understanding**
- ↑
- **Remembering**

The bottom rung is **Remembering**. Then the tasks for each pupil move up the ladder.

Allied to this is the skill in asking questions. 'Great teachers ask great questions'. Questions should invite further questions and seek to engage the pupil in the search for answers and then on to ask more questions. The process required of teachers would be to build on the exemplary model below:

Remembering

- **Key words:** describe, tell, find, write, name, select, choose
- **Sample questions:**
What happened after....?
Who was it who...?
Describe what happened when....?
Here is a set of pictures of the story of Jesus' birth (or other aspects of his life). Can you put them in order?
Choose one part of the story and paint a picture of it.

Understanding

- **Key Words:** explain, distinguish, outline, predict, compare, discuss, interpret.
- **Sample questions:**
What do you think could have happened next....?
Who was the most important character in the story....?
Who do you think....?
Can you compare/ distinguish between....?
Can you provide an example of what you mean....?

Applying

- **Key words:** solve, illustrate, use, examine, classify, construct
- **Sample questions:**
Do you know another time when...?
What would you change in the story if you could...?
From the events in the story can you illustrate....?
What questions would you like to ask....?
If ...had not happened what might the end of the story been...?

Analysing

- **Key words:** analyse, compare, contrast, distinguish, identify, advertise, investigate
- **Sample questions**
What is the underlying theme of....?
How similar is this to....?
What are some of the problems of....
What were the motives behind....?
What was the most important part of the story....?

Evaluating

- **Key words:** judge, decide, recommend, argue, debate, assess, prioritise
- **Sample questions**
How would you feel if....?
How would you have responded....?
What changes would you make....?
How important was in the story?
How effective was? in the story?

Creating

- **Key words:** determine, imagine, justify, verify, express, reflect.
- **Sample questions**
Can you express howwould have felt?
Can you compose/select a piece of music that captures your feelings about....?
Can you judge the value of ... in the story?
Can you write a poem or design a book cover for the story?
Why is the story so important for some people?

The key to any success in this strategy will be in the willingness of teachers to change their approach. Will they be less concerned with transferring information and more willing to engage with the means by which information can be delivered and processed? The Worcestershire website will contain a great deal of advice and support but it is based on this strategy.

The second part of this report uses an example of teaching about Jesus to indicate how the skills listed above may be applied. Jesus is the central figure in Christianity but Christians have different views and opinions about him. No study of Christianity, however, can be complete without a knowledge of who Jesus was, what he is reported as doing, and the range of beliefs that what Christians have about him. Traditional Christianity believes that Jesus was fully God and fully man with no

diminution of either in his physical presence on earth. This is a complex idea that leads to such questions as: Did Jesus know he was God? Did he know how and when he was going to die? If he did know, why didn't he stop it? If he was fully man, how did he walk on water? How did he rise from the dead?

The approach is to provide pupils with sufficient information for them to begin to ask their own questions in order for them to make sense of the range of beliefs Christians have about Jesus. The key to successful and effective teaching is the strategy of using questions and activities that fall within the area of posing open, searching and imaginative questions (see above). There is an implicit progression which implies that, for example, once something is known of the stories of Jesus one can move on to another step.

This first step is intended to give pupils a 'feel' for the life of Jesus. They should be allowed to enjoy the **stories** as stories, using their own experiences to understand and interpret them as they would with any other stories. Teachers can select a range of stories appropriate to the age and abilities of the pupils.

We know nothing about the early life of Jesus. The only insight from the Bible is his trip to Jerusalem in his early teens where he left his mother and father to teach in the Temple in Jerusalem while they set off home to Nazareth. We can, however, reconstruct the sort of home life that would be typical for a family living where he did in the era he did. Joseph was carpenter, a respected trade, so Jesus would grow up in a well-to-do household with a skilled and respected father. He would go to the school, a religious school, where he would learn to read the Jewish scriptures, he would learn about the history of his people and keep the festivals and fasts of the Jewish year. This step would link naturally with the pupils' age and home life. What happens in their house? They could look at names and see if there are family names handed down or whether some names describe certain skills – like Carpenter, Thatcher, and Butcher etc. Some pupils may come from families in which there is a family business.

Jesus told parables and stories. Many of these are well known, almost too well known as their familiarity can inhibit original thought. Pupils will gain an insight into stories, through the power of telling and listening. Pupils will also be able to use some of the skills they are learning in literacy to look behind the stories to see other, deeper meanings: wondering why the writer wrote the way he did, reflecting on the context of the event/story, developing an understanding about Jesus' importance.

Miracles can be controversial. For the purposes of study at this age the miracles can be clustered into two main groups: healing miracles and what are often called 'nature miracles', where Jesus appears to have power over natural events. One can approach teaching about the miracles in two ways. One would be with regard to the healing miracles. Jesus was demonstrating his power, and therefore God's power, over physical and mental illness. But healers were not uncommon in Jesus' time and indeed, they are not uncommon today. So while Jesus was doing something remarkable, it was by no means unique and has continued to be part of Christian teaching to the present time. Teaching about nature miracles where Jesus appears to break all physical laws can be handled in a similar manner. The Jewish scriptures (virtually the Christian Old Testament) are full of the actions of prophets and others who appeared to do miraculous and impossible things. Jesus was not doing these miracles in a vacuum: people had done some of these things during the history of the Jewish people. Those who listened to Jesus and watched him would be familiar with the great events from their scripture readings in the synagogue. Jesus was not doing

or saying anything new. All his teaching can be paralleled in contemporary Jewish teaching. What is distinctive is who he was, or who he claimed to be.

The fifth step, Jesus' crucifixion and death is a gruesome business and is often sanitized with regard to the age of the pupil. Some of the strategies for teaching about Easter and the key aspects of Jesus death and crucifixion are covered in material on the website. Some pupils may be able to recognise the way in which one can move from sadness to happiness and perhaps identify examples in their own lives – losing and finding things etc.

The sixth and final step will be the resurrection and ascension which may challenge pupils' beliefs. One aim might be to explore what we mean by believing the unbelievable! This could include various scientific, naturalistic aspects of the world that appear to be impossible but do actually exist. Are there things the pupils believe in for which they have little or no evidence but have a firm conviction of the truth of their belief? Are they, the pupils, always believed? How do they retain their belief if others around them don't? This step is crucial for Christians as all Christians believe that in some inexplicable way Jesus rose from the dead.

This report highlights some of the thinking behind one aspect of the syllabus. It may be considered controversial as it offers a challenge to a common and accepted style of teaching about Christianity. It is also controversial because some other religions might find the open and investigatory style also difficult to accept if it were to be applied to their own religion.