



**Focus: Church and School -
Education in India and England**

In the light of recent political comment in Ireland regarding the amount of time given to christian education in schools, this article is offered for consideration. Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden write in the February edition of Evangelicals Now -

A debate has begun in India and in England about Religious Education.

State schools in India do not teach any religion due to the fear of imposing the teaching of one religion on all pupils. The rise of Islamic and Hindu extremism and violent attacks by such extremists has outraged the majority who are suspicious about any religion being promoted.

For nearly two hundred years Church/ Christian Schools in India taught Christian Scripture as a subject of study for all students. After Independence in 1947 many Christian schools began to abandon teaching scripture or offered it only to Christian pupils. Some were able to ensure scripture teaching for all students by asking non-Christian parents to agree in writing that they had no objection to the practice of the school. It was also a condition for school admission. Non-Christian parents eager to have their children educated

in such Christian schools had no other option and hardly any parent contested it legally.

In the 1960's Christian Schools experimented with "Moral Education"

Its focus was on ethics rather than religion. Moral universals were presented with no grounding in a particular religion and failed to make an impact on the students.

Research has shown that what non-Christian pupils gained from the study of the Bible was its moral and ethical teaching. The fears of some of the non-Christian parents that their children might convert to Christianity through their study of the Bible proved to be unfounded.

Vinay Samuel argues: "In India we need to open a national debate about teaching Religion and Ethics in Schools particularly now when the horror of the sickness in Indian culture on gender matters is so public and there is despair about bringing any cultural transformation."

Religious Education in England

In Britain public education began with religious communities. A prime purpose of the 1944 Education Act was to counter the influence of totalitarian, authoritarian secular world views emanating from mainland Europe and to imbue other values through the whole of the educational process, protecting children and young people and providing them with a vision for living. The successive acts in 88, 96 and 98 (The Acts) renewed these principles for their time.

These Acts give Faith communities the opportunity to participate in education through voluntary aided and voluntary controlled schools and RE taught according to the trust deeds of the school. They provided for a standing advisory council on religious education and agreed syllabus conferences in each education authority.

But since 2010, academies and free schools without a religious foundation are not required to teach their locally agreed syllabus. This undermines aspects of the existing legislation with respect to Religious Education. A proposal was made in autumn 2013 by an RE Council to develop a national RE curriculum for all schools. Unfortunately it treats religion as a 'museum' subject to be observed externally, rather than as a subject to draw on the resources of religion personally for life.

Much current educational practice is rightly focused on developing skills and qualifications for jobs and economic advancement. Religious Education should be founded on essential complementary principles which acknowledge and build on humanity's obligation to God and other people, and enable children to participate and flourish in society with a characteristically relational vision of themselves with others. One symbol of contemporary society is the 'selfie' and its suggestion of an all pervasive self-absorption, which contrasts with a religious view that relates the individual to others and to God.

The nature and purpose of RE.

The study of religion is neither religious instruction (which is concerned with faith development within a defined

community) nor religious studies (the external observation of religions). It is the study of the sacred that is at the heart of moral communities. It is a study of the non-ordinary, transcendent reality in which humans live out their 'ordinary' lives. Ethics that communities live by are linked to their view of the sacred. A study of religion and ethics is necessary even in contentiously religiously plural societies like India.

A student can best grasp the nature of religion by studying one religion in some depth. It is essential that ethics is shown as part of the way a moral community uses religion to order its life.

Religious education needs to take account of the whole person and the development of their character: in its cognitive (intellectual), affective (emotional), conative (the faculty of the will) dimensions and the relationships of a pupil to others in community.

There is no core knowledge in RE since there is no core knowledge about religions as though they were variants on a single theme. RE needs to focus on the core dispositions that all religions own which contribute to character development and life skills to achieve RE's function of supporting the spiritual, moral, social and cultural developments of pupils and society and encourage the development of pupils spiritually and morally using the resources of religious traditions.

An Oxford Centre for Religion and Public Life team is facilitating this approach and discussion in the UK and in India.