

Religious Education Core Syllabus

Draft syllabus for Public Consultation

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Vision statement

Religious Education (RE) is the study of religious and non-religious worldviews, with the purpose of enabling all pupils to learn about and critically engage with their own and others' beliefs and practices, in order to equip them to participate respectfully in an increasingly diverse world. In doing so, RE contributes to pupils' academic, moral, social, cultural and spiritual development, supporting them to develop greater understanding of themselves and others. RE should be characterised by an informed, objective, critical and pluralistic approach, ensuring rigorous enquiry and meaningful engagement with a range of perspectives.

Within the new RE core syllabus, Christianity is the core element, reflecting its significant and enduring role in shaping the religious, cultural, historical, educational and social life of Northern Ireland and these islands more broadly. This includes an appreciation of Christianity's influence on values, traditions, institutions and public life, and of the way in which Christian beliefs and traditions continue to play an important role in the ethos and identity of many schools. The RE syllabus should therefore ensure that pupils develop a secure and nuanced understanding of Christian beliefs, practices, texts and lived experiences, and of the diversity that exists within Christianity itself across different denominations and traditions. At the same time, it is essential that all pupils feel equally valued and respected, irrespective of their religious or non-religious worldview. RE should therefore also provide opportunities for all pupils to learn about a range of other religious and non-religious worldviews, fostering mutual understanding and respect, and enabling them to engage constructively with difference.

RE should be explicitly purpose-led, underpinned by a clear educational rationale that connects content to broader aims of intellectual development, ethical reflection and civic participation. RE must also be knowledge-rich, drawing on carefully selected and well-sequenced substantive knowledge to support deep understanding and critical engagement. Furthermore, the RE syllabus should be continuous and coherent, with clear progression in both knowledge and disciplinary skills from Foundation Stage (Year 1) through to the end of Key Stage 4 (Year 12), enabling cumulative learning and well-supported transitions across phases. It should be specific and focused, clearly identifying and prioritising essential knowledge and skills at each stage. At the same time, RE must be inclusive and flexible, reflecting the diversity of contemporary society while maintaining academic rigour.

This approach affirms each pupil's own religious or non-religious worldview as a valid starting point for learning, while equipping them with the knowledge and skills to explore other beliefs, teachings, traditions and lived experiences in an informed and critical manner. It encourages engagement with how different worldviews address fundamental questions of life, meaning, purpose, knowledge, truth and identity. In this way, RE creates space for open and balanced exploration of beliefs and perspectives, and their application to real-world contexts.

Finally, the introduction and development of RE must be age-appropriate, pedagogically sensitive and respectful, ensuring that content is accessible, meaningful and appropriately adapted to meet the full range of pupils' abilities, including those with special educational needs. While the syllabus sets out core learning for all pupils, schools have flexibility in determining the sequence, depth, examples and pedagogical approaches most appropriate to their setting. This should enable schools to reflect their own ethos, community context and pupils' needs within the coherent, balanced, objective, critical and pluralistic character of RE.

Subject-specific categories

The study of Religious Education (RE) is organised into three categories:

- beliefs, teachings and sources
- practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences
- identity, meaning, values and ethics

This model provides a coherent, age-appropriate, sequenced structure, which ensures an RE syllabus that is objective, critical and pluralistic and places a clear focus on providing depth and continuity rather than breadth alone. Knowledge of other religious and non-religious worldviews is a prerequisite for objective, critical thinking and builds a capacity for religious understanding. Across all three categories, the syllabus adopts a thematic approach, enabling pupils to engage with key concepts, questions and issues through Christianity as the core element, while also encountering other religious and non-religious worldviews in meaningful ways. This thematic structure supports comparison, connection and critical reflection, helping pupils to recognise both the distinctiveness of particular worldviews and the ways in which beliefs, practices, values and lived experiences may relate to wider human questions and contemporary life. Whilst the three categories could be delivered sequentially, the thematic approach encourages links to be drawn between them throughout the academic year. Across the three categories, a series of non-statutory examples have been provided for illustrative purposes only.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Category 1 provides the knowledge-rich foundation of RE, focusing on developing an informed understanding of the beliefs, teachings and the sources that shape them (e.g. sacred texts, traditions, reason, experience). It reflects the core values and truth claims held by different groups and individuals, and how these shape their understanding of, and relationship with, the world. This area focuses on what people believe, why they believe it and where these beliefs originate. It makes use of a disciplinary approach to RE (theological and philosophical), enabling pupils to understand how worldviews are constructed and interpreted. It ensures an informed and nuanced understanding of Christianity through the Bible, key doctrines and the life and teachings of Jesus and awareness and familiarity with some of the main Christian denominations in Northern Ireland while also engaging with other religious and non-religious worldviews. Importantly, beliefs are treated as dynamic, interpreted, critiqued and lived.

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Category 2 refers to the diverse lived expressions of religious and non-religious worldviews in people's daily lives as seen through rituals, festivals, places of worship, symbols and everyday practices. It explores how beliefs are embodied in both community life and individual experience, and how practices vary within and across traditions, reflecting both historical continuity and contemporary relevance. It supports a deep and sustained understanding of Christianity through engagement with church life, patterns of worship and sacramental practice, including the diversity of Christian traditions in Northern Ireland. At the same time, it ensures that pupils encounter comparable practices across other religious and non-religious worldviews, enabling them to recognise both commonalities and distinctiveness in how beliefs are lived out in practice.

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Category 3 enables pupils to understand how religious and non-religious worldviews shape identity, relationships and public life. It is particularly significant in the Northern Ireland context, where religion has played a major role in shaping community identity, social structures and lived experience. It provides opportunities to examine the influence of Christianity in Northern Ireland and beyond, as well as engagement with other religious and non-religious worldviews, while fostering critical understanding of diversity, conflict, reconciliation and peacebuilding. This category encourages pupils to engage with fundamental questions of identity, meaning, purpose and ethics supporting both personal development and deeper understanding of others. It integrates philosophical, theological and ethical approaches, recognising that ideas about right and wrong are grounded in wider questions of truth, meaning and human flourishing. Through critical engagement with the teachings of Christianity and other religious and non-religious worldviews, pupils will learn to evaluate ethical, moral and spiritual perspectives and consider their implications for contemporary life. It also supports pupils in recognising both the positive contributions of religious and non-religious worldviews to society and the ways in which their roles and influence may be contested, while engaging thoughtfully with contemporary ethical, moral and spiritual issues. In doing so, this category aims to assist pupils with the understanding and judgement required for informed, respectful and responsible participation in a diverse and democratic society.

Foundation Stage

In the Foundation Stage, pupils begin to develop an awareness of themselves, their families and communities and the different beliefs, practices and traditions that shape people's lives. They encounter simple stories, significant people, special books, places and symbols, with Christianity as the central focus as well as introductory examples from Judaism or Islam and an awareness that some people hold non-religious worldviews. Through talk, play, stories, celebration, artefacts and creative response, pupils explore belonging, kindness, care, respect and responsibility. They begin to ask questions, express ideas and feelings, and develop curiosity about the world and what matters to themselves and others.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Pupils should learn:

- that people hold different beliefs and use stories, significant people, places and symbols to express what matters in their religious or non-religious worldviews
- that people draw on sacred texts and other sources to guide and inform their beliefs, values and actions
- that special places and symbols can help people reflect upon and share beliefs
- about simple practices such as prayer, giving thanks or helping others

Pupils should experience:

- listening to and talking about religious stories relating to beliefs
- expressing ideas about origins, belonging, care and what is important to them and others
- exploring feelings such as kindness, love and forgiveness
- encountering simple examples of sacred texts, people, places and symbols

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Pupils should learn:

- to recognise simple practices carried out in daily life and on special occasions (e.g. daily prayer, grace before meals, sharing food, candle lighting)
- to identify that people take part in repeated activities at particular times (e.g. Christmas, Easter, Sunday worship, Shabbat, Friday prayer, celebrations, gatherings)

- to recognise that people gather together in specific places for shared activities (e.g. home, church, synagogue, mosque)
- to identify those actions, objects and routines that are used during celebrations and gatherings (e.g. sign of the cross, use of menorah, prayer mats)

Pupils should experience:

- observing and participating in celebrations and engaging with stories linked to shared practices (e.g. birthdays, Nativity, Easter, Hanukkah, Ramadan and Eid, weddings)

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Pupils should learn:

- to explore the question “Who am I?” by identifying what makes them unique
- key stories from Christianity (e.g. the Nativity) and either Judaism or Islam (e.g. Hanukkah/Eid) that celebrate belonging (e.g. attending church/Mass, praying together, lighting the menorah, sharing food during Eid al-Fitr)
- that religious teachings and non-religious values can encourage care, kindness, respect and responsibility and how the feelings of others can be affected by our actions and behaviours
- that Christianity and other worldviews use creation stories to explain why the world is special and to explore wonder in the natural world

Pupils should experience:

- observing symbols of belonging in their school or local area
- discussing their own experiences, families and community
- developing vocabulary relating to feelings and behaviours
- exploring aspects of the natural world and how it is valued in religious stories and beliefs

Key Stage 1

In Key Stage 1, pupils begin to explore how people and communities express beliefs, values and belonging. They develop knowledge of Christianity as the central focus as well as Judaism or Islam and an awareness that some people hold non-religious worldviews. Through stories, simple texts, symbols, artefacts, celebrations, practices and places of gathering, pupils learn how beliefs shape daily life, community identity and moral choices. They begin to recognise similarities and differences within and between communities, ask questions, discuss ideas respectfully and reflect on how people show care, kindness, responsibility and respect for others and the natural world.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Pupils should learn:

- that Christianity and Judaism or Islam include beliefs about God, the world and its origins. They should encounter Christian stories (e.g. the Nativity and the miracles of Jesus) as well as selected stories from Judaism or Islam, recognising that each religion has its own distinctive identity, stories and teaching
- that the Bible and Torah or Qur'an are key sacred texts of teaching and authority for Christian and Jewish or Muslim communities
- that core teachings, places and symbols help religious communities express belief and belonging
- that some people follow religious beliefs while others hold non-religious worldviews about life and meaning

Pupils should experience:

- using simple extracts from sacred texts and encountering non-religious worldviews
- opportunities to explore how sacred texts and teachings shape religious beliefs
- discussing simple moral ideas such as kindness, sharing and forgiveness
- asking and responding to questions such as "Why do people pray?" or "What makes something special?"
- talking about what is important in their own lives and how people show belonging

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Pupils should learn:

- to describe key practices that take place in group settings (e.g. Sunday worship, Shabbat meals and Eid)
- to recognise the role of key practices and rituals (e.g. family traditions and events)
- to appreciate the role of attending special places (e.g. church, synagogue, mosque)
- to appreciate the significance of special times and celebrations (e.g. Christian celebrations such as baptism, Christmas and Easter; Jewish celebrations such as Passover and Hanukkah; Muslim celebrations such as Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha; and non-religious ceremonies such as naming ceremonies)
- to recognise that practices differ between communities in Northern Ireland (e.g. community events, Christmas traditions and saints' days, synagogue traditions, mosque traditions)

Pupils should experience:

- exploring simple practices within traditions (e.g. greetings, daily routines, prayer, charity giving)
- engaging with artefacts, music and materials used in practices and traditions (e.g. special clothing, crosses, pulpits, stained glass, menorahs, Torah scrolls, prayer mats, Qur'an stands)

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Pupils should learn:

- to explore the question "Who are we?" by identifying similarities and differences
- how religious and non-religious communities use stories, symbols, celebrations and practices to express beliefs and values
- how making decisions, based on shared values, influences our understanding of what is right and wrong
- how we should positively interact with and respect those who are different from us
- how religious and non-religious stories provide a guide for how we should live
- how human activities, such as caring for the environment, reflect beliefs and values about living things (e.g. the concept of Stewardship in Christianity, Tikkun Olam in Judaism or Khalifa in Islam)

Pupils should experience:

- using artefacts and symbols to re-tell a moral story, identifying how the story guides behaviours and actions

Key Stage 2

In Key Stage 2, pupils build on sequenced learning from the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 by developing greater breadth, depth and progression in their understanding of stories, sacred texts, beliefs, practices, values and belonging. Christianity continues to provide the principal context for learning throughout Key Stage 2. To support pupils in developing an objective, critical and pluralistic understanding of religion and belief, teachers also draw on selected examples from other religious worldviews and from one non-religious worldview. Across the three subject-specific categories, pupils compare beliefs, teachings and sources of authority, explore how practices and traditions are lived and interpreted, and consider how worldviews shape identity, values, ethics and ideas about life in local, national and global contexts. Over the course of Key Stage 2, with Christianity remaining as the core element and in keeping with the thematic approach adopted across the syllabus, pupils encounter introductory learning about Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism and one non-religious worldview, such as Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism. This provides a firm and manageable foundation upon which learning in the post-primary phases can build.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Pupils should learn:

- that Christianity and other religious worldviews have core beliefs shared within communities and expressed in different ways
- that religious traditions use different sources of authority (e.g. stories, artefacts, sacred texts, teachings, traditions, significant people and communities, and that these may be interpreted in different ways)
- that beliefs about God, human life and purpose shape core teachings and moral understanding and how these compare with beliefs in other religions
- about the life and teaching of Jesus as well as key figures from other religions
- that places and symbols can be important components of belief, identity, belonging and interpretation across different worldviews
- to examine similarities and differences between Christian denominations (e.g. Catholic, Presbyterian, Church of Ireland, Methodist and others) as well as other religious and non-religious worldviews, places of worship and what they reveal about belief and community

Pupils should experience:

- comparing beliefs and teachings across religions (e.g. baptism, prayer, fasting) and referring to the values of non-religious worldviews

- reading selected passages from a range of sacred texts and other sources to support understanding
- how core teachings are expressed across people, places and symbols
- discussing questions of meaning and approaches to moral issues (e.g. fairness, caring for others, honesty) using Christian teaching as well as other religious and non-religious perspectives
- reflecting on their own views and experiences, recognising similarities and differences with others, including non-religious worldviews

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Pupils should learn:

- to describe how religious and non-religious practices and traditions shape daily life, community belonging and cultural diversity (e.g. worship, Sabbath observance, acts of service, pilgrimage, remembrance, Friday prayer, langar)
- to recognise that practices and traditions may be interpreted and expressed differently within the same religious or non-religious worldviews (e.g. different styles of Christian worship, Sunni and Shia traditions within Islam, Orthodox and Reform Judaism, diverse Hindu practices)
- to describe the significance of special times, festivals and rites of passage for individuals and communities (e.g. Christmas, Easter, sacraments, weddings, Vaisakhi, Diwali, Ramadan and Eid, Hanukkah, Vesak, naming ceremonies)
- to identify the role of sacred spaces, artefacts, music, clothing and symbols in religious and community life (e.g. churches, gurdwaras, mandirs, mosques, shrines, prayer beads, kara, murti, icons)
- to recognise how acts of care, hospitality and service are expressed through lived religion and non-religious worldviews (e.g. volunteering, charitable work and giving to food banks, environmental action, langar, zakat)

Pupils should experience:

- exploring how festivals, worship and community events are celebrated in different traditions and communities (e.g. Easter/Christmas services, Passover meals, Eid celebrations, Diwali, Vaisakhi, Vesak)
- engaging with stories, texts and accounts connected to practices and traditions (e.g. pilgrimage stories, stories of charity and service, accounts of worship, preaching and celebration)

- examining artefacts, symbols, clothing, music and food connected to religious and cultural practices (e.g. cross, candles, sacred music, prayer beads, kippah, hijab, kara)
- exploring places where communities gather for worship, reflection and service (e.g. churches of various denominations, synagogue, mosque, gurdwara, mandir, community spaces)
- discussing how traditions and practices are maintained, adapted or changed over time and across generations

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Pupils should learn:

- to explore the question “What makes a good, meaningful and purposeful life?” by considering different religious and non-religious views
- how families and relationships influence identity, and how different religious and non-religious perspectives teach values about family life
- about ethical teaching found in sacred texts and other sources and how they are applied to modern themes including justice, compassion, stewardship, peace and forgiveness (e.g. the Sermon on the Mount in Christianity, exploring Ahimsa in Hinduism or the purpose of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child)
- how different faith traditions and non-religious worldviews, despite their differences, can and do co-operate through respectful and informed discussion to shape the future of our communities
- how to critically explore the difference between factual knowledge and personal or religious beliefs

Pupils should experience:

- selected passages from a range of sacred texts and other sources to support understanding

Key Stage 3

In Key Stage 3, pupils build on the introductory content developed at Key Stage 2 through a more rigorous and detailed study of religious and non-religious worldviews. Christianity remains the core focus, including its diversity and significance in Northern Ireland. In addition to Christianity, pupils extend their study of Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism as well as one non-religious worldview such as Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism. By adopting a thematic approach, teachers are encouraged to draw examples from Christianity and other religious or non-religious worldviews. Across the three subject-specific categories, pupils examine how beliefs, teachings, sources of authority, practices and traditions are interpreted, expressed and debated within diverse communities. They also explore how worldviews shape identity, belonging, ethics, social justice and community relations, developing the knowledge and analytical skills needed for further study at Key Stage 4.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Pupils should learn:

- that religious and non-religious worldviews have historical origins, have developed over time and contain diversity of interpretation and practice within them
- that sacred texts are interpreted in different ways within and across traditions, and that communities hold different views about the nature of textual authority and revelation
- that key figures, founders, leaders and communities shape how beliefs are understood, transmitted and applied and that authority is expressed differently across traditions (e.g. investigating the life and influence of Jesus as well as key figures from other religions)
- that core teachings may be interpreted differently and debated within traditions (e.g. Christian teachings about salvation, baptism and Eucharist/Holy Communion, and Muslim teachings about Tawhid and Khalifah)

Pupils should experience:

- examining diversity within traditions, recognising that beliefs are expressed and interpreted in different ways by different communities and individuals (e.g. examining rituals such as Christian baptism and initiation and comparing with initiation practices in other religions)
- discussing philosophical questions about existence, meaning, truth and knowledge that arise from religious and non-religious thought (e.g. "What is truth?" or "Why do people believe in God?" drawing on both religious and non-religious perspectives)
- discussing moral issues (e.g. forgiveness, justice, generosity) using Christian teachings and other religious and non-religious viewpoints

- reflecting on their own developing worldviews in light of their studies and articulating their own reasoned responses to questions of belief and meaning

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Pupils should learn:

- to explain how practices, rituals and traditions communicate meaning, belonging and identity within religious and non-religious communities (e.g. examine how rites of passage and life events express beliefs about community, commitment and identity such as baptism, confirmation, marriage, funerals, bar and bat mitzvah, Amrit Sanskar)
- to compare how worship, prayer, meditation and reflection are practised in different traditions; why these practices are significant for believers and communities (e.g. Eucharist, preaching, Salah, Puja, meditation, Sabbath observance)
- to recognise diversity and variation within traditions and explain how cultural, historical and denominational differences influence practice (e.g. Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christianity; Sunni and Shia Islam; different Hindu and Sikh traditions)

Pupils should experience:

- engaging with a range of sources and case studies that illustrate lived religion and contemporary practice
- investigating how individuals and communities discuss differing viewpoints and express and adapt traditions regarding worship, practice and observance in different contexts
- exploring places of worship and community organisations to examine lived practices and community roles
- exploring how media, technology and public events represent religious and non-religious practices and traditions

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Pupils should learn:

- how religious identity in Northern Ireland intersects with cultural and political identity, and how this affects community relations
- how different worldviews define the role of the family
- to evaluate the role of religious understanding and different worldviews responding to social challenges, racism, sectarianism, gender inequality, disability and poverty

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- about the significance of social justice, ecumenism, the role of forgiveness, restorative justice and peacebuilding organisations in developing relationships and transforming community conflict (e.g. the work of the Corrymeela Community, Co-operation Ireland, Community Relations Council and others)
- the core principles of the Sanctity of Life and respect for human life, comparing how these are applied across different religious and non-religious worldviews
- to evaluate absolute and relative ethical perspectives regarding capital punishment, pacifism, the just war theory, and animal rights (e.g. comparing Christian just war theory with Buddhist Five Precepts regarding harming living beings)
- to evaluate religious and non-religious responses to the Problem of Evil (e.g. comparing the Christian concept of Free Will with concepts of Karma in Hinduism/Buddhism)

Pupils should experience:

- researching and analysing diverse perspectives to understand how personal values and community traditions influence ethical decision-making
- facilitated dialogue and debate to practise the skills of mediation and respectful disagreement in a pluralistic society

Key Stage 4

In Key Stage 4, pupils build on the more rigorous and detailed study undertaken at Key Stage 3 by applying their cumulative knowledge with greater depth, independence and critical sophistication. Christianity remains the core focus as well as the in-depth study of one other Abrahamic, one Dharmic and one non-religious worldview. Across the three subject-specific categories, pupils evaluate beliefs, teachings and sources of authority, analyse how practices function and change in contemporary society, and assess how worldviews shape identity, public debate and responses to ethical, philosophical and social issues. Pupils develop sophisticated skills in analysis, evaluation and critical comparison, using evidence, argument and specialised vocabulary to construct well-reasoned judgements.

Beliefs, teachings and sources

Pupils should learn:

- that religious worldviews have developed historically and contain significant internal diversity (e.g. the Reformation, Tawhid and Brahman)
- that sacred texts and key figures are subject to different methods of interpretation, that communities debate questions of authority, revelation and application, and that hermeneutical approaches shape how texts are understood
- that core teachings involve sophisticated theological and philosophical concepts, that worldviews engage with arguments about the existence and nature of God and that beliefs about human nature and salvation and purpose have practical implications (e.g. design argument, problem of evil)

Pupils should experience:

- developing, articulating and defending arguments on religious and philosophical questions, using evidence and reasoning
- reflecting critically on their own developing worldview, the influences that shape it, and how it relates to the worldviews they have studied

Practices, traditions, lived religion and experiences

Pupils should learn:

- to critically evaluate how practices, rituals and traditions shape personal identity, community cohesion and social belonging
- to analyse the significance of worship, prayer, preaching, meditation, pilgrimage and ritual within different traditions and evaluate their role in contemporary life

- to evaluate differing perspectives on the purpose and relevance of festivals, sacred times and rites of passage in modern societies
- to analyse how migration, globalisation, secularisation and digital culture influence the development and expression of lived religion

Pupils should experience:

- engaging critically with case studies, testimonies and contemporary examples of lived religion and non-religious practice
- examining a range of viewpoints on tradition, authority, reform and identity within and across communities
- analysing representations of religious and non-religious traditions in media, public discourse and popular culture

Identity, meaning, values and ethics

Pupils should learn:

- how to apply teleological and deontological frameworks to evaluate complex moral dilemmas (e.g. utilitarianism)
- to explore and critically evaluate contemporary sanctity-of-life issues, including abortion, assisted dying and bioethics
- to examine theological, philosophical, historical and rational perspectives both for and against religious belief, including Christian and other worldviews' responses to ultimate questions of meaning, truth and value
- to explore the theological and philosophical implications of artificial intelligence (e.g. "Can a robot have a soul?" or "What does it mean to be human in a digital age?")
- to critically analyse religious and non-religious worldviews on sexual ethics
- to apply just war theory and pacifism to contemporary issues (e.g. the role and use of technology in modern warfare)
- to explore the ongoing role of reconciliation in Northern Ireland and other post-conflict societies

Pupils should experience:

- participating in sophisticated, formal debates using specialised religious and philosophical vocabulary

