

Ofsted: Christianity sidelined in poor quality RE lessons



Pupils are leaving school with a “very limited understanding” of Christianity because of an alarming dip in standards of religious education, according to Ofsted.

In a damning report, the education watchdog warned that teaching about Britain’s principal religion was “one of the weakest aspects” of RE lessons in English state schools.

Classes often descend into little more than a “superficial” analysis of different faiths, with many schools sidelining religion altogether in favour of topics such as exploring feelings, charity activities, visiting old people’s homes and even putting on Christmas pantomimes, it was claimed.

Ofsted found that overall standards of RE were poor in six-in-10 primary schools and just over half of secondaries.

The subject was a “very low priority” in many schools, inspectors warned.

It was also claimed that the Coalition’s education reforms had driven down standards because teacher training places had been cut and RE had been excluded from the English Baccalaureate – a controversial league table measure that ranks achievement in core academic subjects.

Currently, RE is compulsory in all state schools but it is not part of the national curriculum. Instead, individual schools and councils draw up their own syllabuses in an attempt to reflect the local community.

But Ofsted recommended that the system should be put under review – opening the possibility of placing RE on the national curriculum for the first time.

It follows an admission from Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, in July that the Government had not “done enough” to promote the subject.

Michael Cladingbowl, Ofsted’s director of schools, said: “Religious education in schools matters. It

develops children's understanding of belief and the world in which we live.

“We saw some great examples of this during the survey, but too often we found religious education lessons being squeezed out by other subjects and children and young people leaving school with little knowledge or understanding of different religions.

“This just isn't good enough when religion and belief are playing such a profound part in today's world. Pupils deserve much better.”

Ofsted's latest report was based on visits to 185 community schools – those not attached to a particular faith – over a three-year period.

The regulator warned that its last report on the subject in 2010 found that “too many pupils were leaving school with a very limited understanding of Christianity” and the situation had failed to improve in the last three years.

Teaching about Christianity was inadequate – the lowest possible ranking – in a third of primary schools, making it “one of the weakest aspects of RE provision”.

In many cases, Christian stories, particularly miracles, were reduced to little more than asking pupils to “reflect on their own experience without any opportunity to investigate the stories' significance within the religion itself”, it emerged.

Pupils' understanding was “not only superficial but involved a distorted understanding of religious life”, adding: “While pupils could usually identify, for example, that Catholics and Protestants had different views about a range of ethical issues, they could rarely explain why these differences existed.”

Inspectors said it was “not uncommon” for RE lessons to be almost devoid of religion altogether, with subjects including healthy living, charity work, visits to old people's homes, practising pantomimes and “literacy work on topics such ‘feelings’” taking priority.

In a series of other conclusions, the report also found:

- Schools were unwilling to discuss controversial subjects surrounding religion and often focused on issues with a “happy end”;
- Many primary schools dropped the subject altogether, with inspectors finding “long gaps in pupils' RE books when no work had been done”;
- Lessons in secondaries were often “highly formulaic” and devoted to children copying lesson objectives into their books;
- In more than half of schools visited, RE was taught by teachers with no specialist training in the subject;

- A decision to exclude it from the English Baccalaureate – which measures achievement in English, maths, science, languages, history or geography – had “led to a decline in RE provision in some schools”;
- The number of pupils taking a full or short-course GCSE in the subject had dipped from 427,000 to 390,000 in the last 12 months.

Graeme Paton - The Telegraph