

How important is religious education in 2018?

A report from the 2nd RE Youth Debate 2018



 **NATRE**
National Association of Teachers
of Religious Education

RE Today
Services

 **Religious Education Council**
of England and Wales

On Monday 9th July 2018, 80 Year 10-12 students from schools across England came to Parliament to debate some of the key issues around the teaching of Religious Education (RE).

The students discussed some of the fundamental issues facing the subject, such as whether, in an increasingly secular society, RE is still a vital component of balanced, modern curriculum, and whether pupils learn more by studying other people's belief than your one.

Numerous MPs, Parliamentary researchers, policy advisers and other interested parties witnessed the debate, which showcased the students' engagement with the subject through their range and depth of thinking around these complex questions.

The schools

20 schools came from across the country to take part in the debate.

- Amery Hill School, Hampshire
- Broughton High School, Lancashire
- Cherwell School, Oxfordshire
- Devonport High School for Girls, Plymouth
- Greenford High School, London
- Guildford County School, Surrey
- Highfield Leadership Academy, Blackpool
- Hull Trinity House Academy, Kingston-upon-Hull
- Mulberry School for Girls, London
- Oakwood School, Surrey
- Passmore's Academy, Essex
- Prenton High School for Girls, Merseyside
- Rainham Mark Grammar School, Kent
- Ratton School, East Sussex
- Studley High School, Stratford-on-Avon
- The Redhill Academy, Nottinghamshire
- The Regis School, West Sussex
- The Thomas Hardy School, Dorset
- Trinity Church of England High School, Manchester
- Whickham School and Sports College, Gateshead



Four of the schools involved are members of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales (REC) Young Ambassador scheme. For more information visit: www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/young-ambassadors

Liz Twist MP and Professor Francesca Stavrakopoulou

Liz Twist MP and historian of religion, Professor Francesca Stavrakopoulou joined the talented students for the debate, which was hosted by William Wragg MP and organised by the REC and the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) and funded by Culham St Gabriel's Trust.

Liz Twist, MP for Blaydon gave an introduction to the debate. Since her election in 2017, Liz has championed RE in Parliament. She recently challenged the Government about the provision of subject knowledge enhancement grants to encourage people to train as RE teachers.

The second Guest Delegate was Francesca Stavrakopoulou, Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Religion in the Theology and Religion department of the University of Exeter. A Patron of Humanists UK, Professor Francesca has



Liz Twist MP hosted and Professor Francesca Stavrakopoulou introduced the debate

produced programmes on the biblical history for the BBC and Channel 4. After the debate she said:

"The level of debate was extremely impressive – the pupils were bright, passionate and rigorous in their arguments. They demonstrated great skill in debating difficult topics with enormous sensitivity and generosity to those with whom they disagreed."

"It is clear to me that RE remains a vital and relevant element of a balanced curriculum. I hope that the Government takes steps to ensure it is protected, well supported and properly resourced."



Professor Francesca Stavrakopoulou



The format

The debate took the form of a moderated caucus to give all students the opportunity to speak and for the debate's content to be driven by the students' own ideas. Two student chairs from Mulberry School for Girls introduced each of the three topics and chose contributions from the floor one at a time, with a strict time limit of 30 seconds per statement.

After each topic had been discussed for ten minutes, Liz Twist MP and Professor Francesca were invited to sum up the discussion and pull together key themes or areas of dispute. A vote was then taken on whether the pupils agreed or disagreed with the hypothesis for each topic.

The debate

1. In an increasingly secular society there is no need for RE

The opening session explored the potential of RE and the importance of skilled and experienced teachers. Schools should see RE as "something bigger" and important in preparing young people for life in modern Britain, argued some. Others turned the spotlight on STEM subjects and RE's place alongside other subjects: "It's no good having a generation of scientists and engineers who understand nuts and bolts, but not the diverse nature of the society they are serving."

The verdict? Strongly in favour of the need for RE. Liz Twist MP reflected on an eloquent and stimulating debate which clearly showed the role of RE as a subject in a modern, secular society. "We must be clear on the difference between acts of worship in school, and the skill of learning about diversity through RE as a humanities subject," she said.



2. If religious literacy is fundamental to challenging extremism, the Government should repeal the right to withdraw.

The floor opened to a broad-ranging discussion that covered choice, the root causes of extremist views and parent power. Those in favour of repeal said parents had a responsibility to allow their children to make their own decisions based on knowledge; opting a child out of RE was fuelling divisions and a dangerous "them and us culture". However, for those against repeal, choice was key: "Just as pro-choice doesn't mean you have to have an abortion, the right to withdraw from RE doesn't mean you have to do so."

The students voted narrowly in favour of repealing the right to withdraw. Summing up, Professor Francesca and Liz Twist MP agreed, the subject should "stay confident" but the very nature of religion is personal. We need to understand why young people are being withdrawn and consider this in any change.



3. You learn more by studying other people's worldviews than you do by studying your own.

The final debate was the most philosophical, highlighting RE's ability to promote dialogue and critical thought. Statements questioned what is meant by a 'worldview' and reflected on the role of faith and belief in identity. The benefits of understanding were clarified, including countering divisive narratives in the media and better connections to others in society. Those opposing the motion were keen to emphasise the importance of being comfortable with your own identity before reflecting on others', drawing attention to the complexity of identities.

Professor Francesca noted an impressive thought process on a tricky question, after the majority supported the motion. Drawing on her own teaching experience she said that whilst we can naturally learn more about ourselves if we look to others, before we start we do need to "hold a mirror" to ourselves.

MP support

The students received a huge level of support from numerous MPs and Parliamentarians throughout the day. Many students met their local MP and talked through the issues the debate raised, while some groups were taken on a tour through the Palace of Westminster.

Parliamentarians who came to the debate and/or met with their constituents included:

- Emma Hardy MP
- Robert Halfon MP
- Anne Milton MP
- Rehman Chishti MP
- Liz Twist MP
- Simon Howe MP
- Luke Pollard MP
- Steve Pound MP
- Gordon Marsden MP
- Jim Fitzpatrick MP



The debate was expertly chaired by pupils from the Mulberry School, Jubeda Choudhury and Taznin Chowdhury

We would like to thank all the Parliamentarians who came to the debate and/or met with the participating students on the day and ask that they continue to support RE. RE, when taught effectively by qualified teachers and given an appropriate amount of curriculum time, can make a strong contribution to the education of all young people and prepare them for life in a modern, multicultural Britain.

We believe that efforts should be made to protect RE's place as a statutory subject on the school curriculum, that more effort is required to ensure a sustainable supply of qualified RE teachers, and that RE should be included in future educational reforms as part of a balanced curriculum.

“Learning about other religions and faiths is essential for children and young people, who become more open-minded and tolerant. I was delighted to see so many passionate students debating and sharing different opinions. It was also great to see my local Blackpool students from Highfield Academy taking part, building on the strong civic and citizenship emphasis at the school.”

Gordon Marsden, MP

“I was delighted to Chair the Parliamentary Youth Debate. Understanding how religious and non-religious worldviews affect our society is incredibly important for children and young people. It was inspiring to see so many students debating in a well ordered and considered way.”

Liz Twist, MP

“Religious Education is incredibly important in ensuring that our children and young people understand the faiths, religions and non-religious worldviews that they live amongst. Good RE promotes respect and tolerance, and I was delighted to support the parliamentary youth debate”.

Simon Hoare, MP



Anne Milton MP for Guildford meets students from Guildford County School



Stephen Pound MP meets pupils from Greenford High School

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