

ISRSA Statement on Religious Studies

The IRSRA affirm that Religious Studies is *an academically rigorous subject of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice*. This short statement seeks to unpack this conviction.

An academically rigorous subject

In contrast to the many inadequate approaches that could be taken to the subject, we prefer *a critical realist approach*¹ which focuses on understanding and evaluating truth-claims made by theistic and non-theistic worldviews² – including atheism and agnosticism. This assumes that there are true answers to the worldview questions³ and education is all about understanding more of the truth about reality. Construed along such lines, Religious Studies asks and seeks answers to the questions below and behind every other subject, enabling students to develop a conceptual framework (worldview) into which all other disciplines fit. For example, a convincing theory of Economics must be based upon an adequate response to the worldview question, what is a human being?⁴

Of vital relevance for human flourishing

There are a number of clear benefits to this approach:

- It gives essential understanding of the theological-philosophical⁵ arguments that drive key movements in the contemporary world, as well as the ability and space in which to critique them.
- It engages every student by emphasising the primacy of beliefs within each worldview. Since every person seeks answers (to a greater or lesser extent) to the basic existential questions it is relevant to all.
- It satisfies the need for intellectual rigour by focusing upon reasons, evidence and argumentation, as well as textual analysis⁶.
- It fosters tolerance by teaching students that they are allowed to disagree strongly with each other within the context of listening and empathising which are crucial for the common pursuit of truth; such an approach is conducive to the kind of friendships that can cope with differences.
- It introduces students to the different approaches of theologians and philosophers and in so doing ties the subject to the noble intellectual heritage of Theology and Philosophy as academic disciplines.

¹ Cf the work of Professor Andrew Wright, Kings College London; especially, 'Critical Religious Education, Multiculturalism and the Pursuit of Truth', University of Wales Press, 2007.

² An excellent definition of a Worldview is provided by James Sire: 'A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) that we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being.' (The Universe Next Door, Fifth Edition, p.20)

³ Examples of such questions include: Who am I? Is there a God? Why is the world in a mess? How should we live? Is there a future? How can We Know?

⁴ To give another example, a person's approach to Music, Maths and Morality are all tied to their view of the structure of reality.

⁵ The terms theological and philosophical, as deployed in this document, are to be taken in the broadest possible sense. So 'theological' here refers to all varieties of theology (Christian, Islamic, Jewish etc) and indeed to all reflection on worldview questions in relation to God. Similarly, 'philosophical' here refers to all varieties of Philosophy, Eastern (including Buddhism) as well as Western and indeed to all reflection on worldview questions from the human perspective.

⁶ Research in the United States has shown that students studying Philosophy score higher on the university graduate entrance examinations than students who major in any other field of study apart from Mathematics and the Natural Sciences.

Furthermore, philosophy scores higher than every other subject in developing students' verbal skills. Source:

https://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.apaonline.org/resource/resmgr/Data_on_Profession/2014_Philosophy_Performance_.pdf

- It can provide a vital under-girding and conceptual framework for the whole educational enterprise, especially if education is conceived of as *learning more of the truth about reality in order to flourish as human beings*⁷.

This unique contribution to the development of vital skills (such as argumentation and interpretation), essential virtues (such as truthfulness, tolerance and empathy) and an educational-conceptual framework (worldview) demonstrates the clear and vital relevance of the subject.

With a challenging and timeless voice

One profound benefit of studying ideas, arguments and texts from outside one's own culture is that it enables us to think critically about prevailing cultural norms rather than merely drifting along with the tide. This means that the subject must be guarded from serving political agendas in a way that compromises the classical theistic and non-theistic worldviews. The major religious traditions cannot be squeezed into a political agenda and leaders of integrity have always sought to resist this⁸. It follows that Religious Studies will always and rightly be an uncomfortable subject which is an essential part of both its appeal and its importance. In this sense Religious Studies lessons ought to avoid the temptation to merely echo the world; the search for true answers to the most significant questions transcends the present needs of a particular society. This is because the subject is primarily theological-philosophical rather than psychological or sociological.

Having said this, it is also true that one's present needs will benefit from Religious Studies, rightly construed. Taking *humanity's search for meaning* seriously will provide a sound basis for human flourishing in challenging times⁹. Nevertheless, when the subject is reduced to nothing more than a social agenda its intellectual engagement and academic credibility dissipates. *'The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualises himself.* What is called self-actualisation is not an attainable aim at all, for the simple reason that the more one would strive for it, the more he would miss it. In other words, *self-actualisation is possible only as a side-effect of self-transcendence.*'¹⁰ (Italics added) By emphasising the meaning acquired by the development of a worldview – an essentially theological-philosophical task – there is a profound psychological and sociological benefit which could never have been attained if that were the chief objective. In order to preserve its challenging and timeless voice Religious Studies must retain a primarily theological-philosophical focus and resist political agendas which would have the subject serve merely psychological or sociological ends.

So we maintain our conviction that Religious Studies is a *rigorous academic subject of vital relevance with a challenging and timeless voice* and as such it deserves a central place in any adequate conception of the school curriculum.

⁷ This definition of education requires further exposition elsewhere, but will be assumed for the purposes of this statement.

⁸ Bonhoeffer and the Confessing Church being a stark example.

⁹ It is a profound insight from Victor Frankl that when humans lack adequate meaning other things go wrong. '...there are various masks and guises under which the existential vacuum appears. Sometimes the frustrated will to meaning is vicariously compensated for by a will to power, including the most primitive form of the will to power, the will to money. In other cases, the place of frustrated will to meaning is taken by the will to pleasure. That is why existential frustration often eventuates in sexual compensation.' (*Man's Search for Meaning*, p.112)

¹⁰ Frankl *ibid*, p.115; for a theological expression of this principle see C.S. Lewis' observations on true humility at the end of book 3 chapter 8 of *Mere Christianity*.