

MPs form group to protect teaching of religion

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The future of religious education in schools is under threat as a result of government reforms, MPs claim.

A new all-party parliamentary group is being set up to safeguard the subject, amid fears it is being sidelined after its omission from the list of subjects recognised by the Government's new English baccalaureate.

The new body, which will be supported by all the country's leading religious groups, as well as the British Humanist Association, follows a poll by religious education teachers showing that 30 per cent of schools had cut the time for RE since details of the new baccalaureate had become known.

This is despite warm words by David Cameron and - this week - the Queen, about the central importance of faith to today's society.

Speaking at a multi-faith reception alongside the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Queen said that she believes the concept of the established Church is "commonly under-appreciated" and "occasionally misunderstood".

Earlier this week Baroness Warsi, the Conservative party chairwoman, warned of the danger of "militant secularists" downgrading the importance of religion in public life.

On the subject

Religious education is a statutory subject for all pupils to learn up to the age of 16.

However it has a unique place in the curriculum because what is to be taught is not laid down as part of the national curriculum.

In practice it is down to Standing Advisory Conferences on Religious Education (SACREs) in local areas to determine the nature of the curriculum locally. The content has changed markedly over the years so that pupils now study a wide range of comparative religions and their

According to a 2011 survey, 53.5 percent of Britons identified themselves as Christian, while 39 per cent said they believed in "no religion".

She also derided the way in which across Europe and in the United Kingdom, "spirituality is suppressed and divinity downgraded".

RE has soared in popularity as a subject at GCSE level since the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York.

The number of students studying it has increased from 113,000 to 460,000 in the past 15 years.

Stephen Lloyd, Liberal Democrat MP for Eastbourne and Willingdon, who will chair the new all-party parliamentary group, said: "It is clear that pupils find it a rewarding and fulfilling subject." RE is a statutory subject on the syllabus for five to 16-year-olds, but it is not included as part of the national curriculum.

Local RE bodies have been given the task of interpreting how it should be taught in schools in their areas. Under the new English baccalaureate, students will qualify for it if they achieve five A* to C grade passes at GCSE in English, maths, science, a foreign language and a humanities subject. However, the humanities are restricted to history and geography with no mention of RE and art. The Religious Education Council, which includes 50 different religions, will provide professional support for the new group.

origins (although Christianity must be given a high focus)

In addition, a survey of 80 SACREs by the British humanist associations revealed that 62 of them included mention of humanism in their curriculum.

A typical GCSE syllabus for a religious studies exam includes topics on God, death, human relationships, poverty, and wealth, prejudice and discrimination, religion science and the environment, sanctity of life and war and peace.

Richard Garner

The Queen with the Archbishop of Canterbury, spoke about the role of the Church at a multi-faith reception in London last



week
REUTERS