

## GATEWAY DOCUMENT 1.3

# Terminology related to religious education

## WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Religious language is used to express, communicate and ask questions about religious beliefs and experience but its use in the classroom raises a whole range of questions. For example, two people could both use the term 'God' but may mean different things by it. To have a sound basis for discussion, the meanings of key terms need to be defined and varying definitions explored. It is important to have a shared understanding of the way such terminology is to be used in the classroom context if discussions are to be meaningful for all participants.

## KEY QUESTIONS

### How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

There will be plenty of issues on which students disagree, but clarity about terminology and language will help to eliminate those which arise from misconceptions rooted in the different use and interpretation of words. It may be necessary at times for people to agree to differ but at least all concerned will know what they and others mean or intend by particular terms. Structured use of appropriate tools for enquiry may be useful (see *Signposts to further resources*). Regular attention to definitions of words and phrases will help students to recognise both the potential for misunderstandings and the need for clarification to avoid them.

If students are encouraged to be thoughtful and precise in their use of key terms this will help them develop improved communication skills generally. This is particularly important where profound beliefs and sensitive issues are involved.

### What classroom challenges might arise in RE?

- The need to understand diversity within and between traditions. In every religious tradition there are differences between its adherents regarding the interpretations of sacred writings and teachings. Meanings can be changed in translation; words change their associations and resonances over time; teachings first articulated in sacred writings many centuries ago may be interpreted literally as doctrines which stand for all

time and in all places, or alternatively be seen as exhortations related to a particular time and place that need to be reinterpreted for life in the 21st century. Historically, some of these differences of interpretation have led to major religious divisions so it would be surprising if there were not also profound disagreements in the classroom. Often such disagreements in religious traditions hinge on the weight given to commentaries on the scriptures (or authoritative oral traditions or writings) as a means of interpreting statements in the scriptures themselves.

- The need for teacher knowledge and confidence in dealing with this area. Many students may feel distinctions between words and how they are used are academic and irrelevant to their interests and needs, particularly if they have no religious beliefs themselves. As in other areas of the RE curriculum, lack of teacher confidence and knowledge may result in such areas not being tackled in any depth, leading to superficial coverage and inadequate student understanding.
- The need for teachers to be sensitive in their own use of language when a class is engaged in critical examination of writings which are sacred to some members of the class or school community. When raising questions, especially about background and interpretation of sacred texts, there may be a fear on the part of students or parents that the purpose of the study is to undermine or challenge their firmly held beliefs.

### **How can teachers address such challenges?**

- It is important for students to explore how vocabulary is used in particular contexts. This will involve considering, defining and using words such as belief, proof, evidence, reality, truth, theory, knowledge and opinion, and might fruitfully include debate and dialogue with a range of people from faith and non-religious backgrounds in the classroom.
- Beliefs expressed in religious language are sometimes taken literally and examined as though they could be proved empirically, even if that was not always the intention of those who originally formulated them. Students should have opportunities to broaden their awareness of how language is used in different ways according to context and function. For example religious experiences are described using analogies, symbols, and models to explain them to others. Controversy may occur when people make empirical claims about religious experiences that transcend the ordinary e.g. someone who claims to have had a miraculous experience.
- Most religious traditions accept that there is a fundamental limitation to what can be expressed in words. But without models, nothing can be communicated (e.g. 'God' described as an 'eternal father'; the qualifying word 'eternal' describes something beyond what we can see; 'father' refers to God seen as male).
- Subject specialists can plan in a cross-curricular way, linking topics and showing the links to learning across the disciplines. Liaison between science and religious education departments may help students see both in a broader context and avoid feeling that they necessarily have to 'take sides' with one subject or the other. For example,

teachers could plan to explore with classes issues such as the nature, function and limitations of both religious language and scientific language and the extent to which the truth claims of religion and science can be upheld. History is also very important for an understanding of religious/cultural traditions in context.

- When people use sacred writings and religious teachings to argue their cause, beliefs or actions, teachers need to help students understand the context of these texts so that they can acquire an informed view about their use to support an argument. The skilled RE teacher will help students to understand the possible practical implications of interpreting a statement in one way rather than another.
- The purpose of such activities is not to suggest that one interpretation is right and another is wrong. The REC's *Code of Practice for Teachers of RE* may help to reassure parents or students who have concerns about this.
- It is important for schools to be aware of the religious profile of both the families of the students attending the school, and the population of the area local to the school. Where schools do not have other ways of gathering this data it can be collected as part of a unit of work undertaken by students themselves within the context of religious education or a wider humanities project.

## NEXT STEPS

### Signposts for further reading

Cole, P. and Lee, J. (1994) *Religious Language*, Abacus

Thompson, Mel (1997) *Teach Yourself Philosophy of Religion*, Hodder

### Signposts for further resources

Cottrell, Stella (2005) *Critical Thinking Skills: Developing Effective Analysis and Argument*, Palgrave Study Guides

[www.srsp.net](http://www.srsp.net) Science and Religion in Schools Project

[www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum](http://www.ibo.org/diploma/curriculum) The International Baccalaureate specification on Theory of Knowledge has a very useful section on 'Ways of knowing'; a range of support materials is available.

<http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/content/blogcategory/50/80/> *Everyone matters in the classroom. A practice code for teachers of RE* (2009), Religious Education Council of England and Wales

<http://www.humanism.org.uk/documents/4421> A dialogue between a Humanist and a Hindu with some discussion of different and similar understanding of particular terms

### Signposts for further action

Review with colleagues in science or English departments opportunities for cross curricular work on language and its nature, function and limitations in different contexts.