

# Rethinking RE: Religious Literacy, Theological Literacy and Theological Enquiry

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## Context

- *Realising the Potential*, Ofsted (2013)
- *RE: The Truth Unmasked*, APPG on RE (2013)
- *A Review of Religious Education in England and Wales*, REC (2013)
- *Making a Difference*, National Society (2014)
- *RE and Good Community Relations*, APPG on RE (2014)
- *A New Settlement*, Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead (2015)
- *RE for REal*, Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw (2015)
- *Fruits of the Spirit*, CofE (2015, discussion paper)
- *Living with Difference*, Report of the Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life (2015)

This is a discussion paper intended for RE advisers and consultants, those involved in RE curriculum design, and those interested in the pedagogy of RE.

## Key Questions

### 1. Why are we asking the question about the purpose of RE (in CofE schools)?

A range of recent reports and discussion papers highlight confusion about the purpose of RE:

- *A Review of Religious Education in England and Wales* (2013) cites evidence contained in the *Realising the Potential* report produced by Ofsted in 2013, stating that there is a lack of clarity of purpose at secondary level that impedes curriculum planning.<sup>1</sup>The same report also notes the impact of this lack of clarity on the public perception and understanding of RE.<sup>2</sup>
- *Making a Difference* (2014) states that there is “confusion about the underlying purpose of [RE]” in Church of England primary schools.<sup>3</sup>
- *A New Settlement* (2015) also identifies confusion about the purpose of RE,<sup>4</sup> although it does not include clarity of purpose in its final recommendations.

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<sup>1</sup> *A Review of Religious Education in England and Wales* (2013), 30

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 51

<sup>3</sup> *Making a Difference* (2014), 7 (2.2)

- *RE for Real* (2015) notes that three out of four sample groups – pupils, parents and employers – felt that the purpose of RE is to “learn about religion and belief diversity, with the goal of managing difference and cohesion”,<sup>5</sup> recognising that many in these groups also acknowledge a personal and spiritual purpose of RE.<sup>6</sup> Specialist RE teachers, however, felt that the primary purpose of RE was to develop secure religious literacy, recognising the diversity and impact of religions and beliefs.<sup>7</sup>
- The most recent report that considers RE, *Living with Difference* (2015), does not explicitly deal with the issue of the purpose of RE, but its recommendations in relation to RE refer to its relevance to promoting a cohesive society, as well as reflecting “the realities of present society”.<sup>8</sup> To this end, the report recommends that any approach to reviewing RE take account of the importance of encounter with religions and beliefs.<sup>9</sup>

#### Specific context for Church of England schools

RE holds a special place in Church of England schools where staff and pupils come from all faiths and none. It is not a place for religious instruction, but it is valued as a core subject. The *Statement of Entitlement for Religious Education* issued by the National Society does not define the purpose of RE in Church of England schools. However, it is made clear that outcomes in RE relate to pupils’ theological understanding of Christianity, the development of informed and respectful attitudes towards religion and critical reflection on religion and belief.

As four RE advisers who undertake work for Church of England Dioceses, we feel very strongly that the purpose of RE in both church and non-church schools needs clarification so that it is accessible to all stakeholders: pupils, teachers, senior leaders, parents, employers, clergy, advisers, consultants, and so on. Our roles mean that we frequently advise all types of schools, including non-church schools, in accordance with the Diocesan Boards of Education Measure 1991, and we see confusion about the purpose of RE in all schools, both church and non-church.

The confusion about the purpose of RE arises from both its legally inseparable connection to collective worship in the 1944 Education Act and 1988 Education Reform Act, and the variety of

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<sup>4</sup> *A New Settlement* (2015), 29

<sup>5</sup> *RE for REal* (2015), 28

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 17

<sup>8</sup> *Living with Difference* (2015), 36

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

pedagogies associated with RE since the 1960s.<sup>10</sup> In order to identify an appropriate pedagogical approach to RE, we must first be absolutely clear about the purpose of RE.<sup>11</sup>

We consider the purpose of RE in all schools to be secure religious and theological literacy. This is because we feel that RE is the most appropriate curriculum area in which pupils are afforded the opportunity to engage with and investigate the beliefs that drive themselves and others. With religious literacy, we focus on the human experience of religion and belief; with theological literacy we focus on the big concepts upon which religions are founded, such as God. This is relevant to both church and non-church schools and allows space for a deep and meaningful engagement with religion and belief, such that pupils are able to engage with the realities of religion and belief with a grasp of the foundations that underpin them.

This paper explores the categories of 'religious literacy' and 'theological literacy' in more detail and suggest an appropriate pedagogy for securing theological literacy in RE.

## 2. What do we mean by 'religious literacy'?

It is part of the human condition to search for meaning and truth. **Religious literacy focuses on the human experience of religion and belief.** It is the means by which pupils can understand and encounter the richness, depth and diversity of religion and belief, as well as engaging with its significance in the world today.

Religious literacy includes:

- a. Asking enquiring questions about religion and belief and making informed responses to them;
- b. Investigating the nature of religion and belief itself;
- c. Understanding the impact that religions and belief can have on individuals and society;
- d. Understanding the beliefs, practices, values and ways of life of religious and non-religious world views;
- e. Understanding the diversity of religion and belief in the contemporary world;
- f. Understanding the use of religious language and the context in which it is expressed.

**At every stage of teaching and learning, the question should be asked, 'how is this piece of learning helping our pupils to hold an informed conversation about religion and belief?'**

The words of Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* are helpful here in terms of understanding that the power of literacy (of all kinds) lies in the capacity for skills to shape

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.reonline.org.uk/knowning/how-re/> (accessed 31/01/16)

<sup>11</sup> <https://kathrynfenlodge.wordpress.com/2016/01/16/does-this-happen-in-maths/> (accessed 31/01/16)

life.<sup>12</sup> This would suggest the function of religious literacy is not only to know about religion and belief, but to be able to use this knowledge to communicate in an informed way with others.

We need to ensure that our common understanding of religious literacy is clear, straightforward and coherent so that all those involved in teaching and learning can grasp the idea that religious literacy is the primary purpose of RE.

### **3. What do we mean by ‘theological literacy’ as distinct from ‘religious literacy’?**

It is worth stating that we are working with a specific definition of ‘theology’ before we define what we mean by ‘theological literacy’. Our understanding of ‘theology’ is the study of the concepts at the heart of a religion, for example, God.

We believe that theological literacy is an essential and distinctive element of religious literacy. **Where religious literacy focuses on the human experience of religion and belief, theological literacy focuses on the big concepts upon which religions are founded, such as God.**

See **Figure 1** below.

Theological literacy includes:

- The foundations of ideas about (e.g.) God (e.g. scripture, tradition, reason, experience);
- The development of the ways in which ideas about (e.g.) God have emerged and changed over time;
- The ways in which ideas about (e.g.) God relate to each other (e.g. how Trinity relates to Incarnation);
- The ways in which ideas about (e.g.) God are applied in everyday living.<sup>13</sup>

Etienne Gilson once described scholastic theology as a ‘cathedral of the mind’; this is an analogy we would like to apply to our understanding of theological literacy. Just as cathedrals are built to enable people to encounter God, theological literacy enables pupils to encounter the fundamental concepts upon which religions are based; it debates them and considers how they relate to each other. Just as cathedrals evidence the changing nature of Christianity over time, theological literacy considers how the fundamental concepts of a religion have been shaped over time. It helps pupils to understand religion “as a synthesis of ideas capable of undergirding every aspect of life”.<sup>14</sup> To paraphrase Alister McGrath, theological literacy can be to the world of ideas what cathedrals are to the world of architecture.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Cited by the Education Development Centre, [https://www.edc.org/newsroom/articles/what\\_literacy](https://www.edc.org/newsroom/articles/what_literacy) (accessed 29/01/16)

<sup>13</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 101-2

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 29

<sup>15</sup> Ibid

**At every stage of teaching and learning, the question should be asked, ‘how is this piece of learning helping our pupils to hold a theologically informed conversation about religion and belief?’**

Specific context for Church of England schools

In the context of Church of England schools, secure theological literacy enables pupils to hold a theologically informed and thoughtful conversation about at least Christianity as a living and varied faith.

#### **4. How can teachers secure theological literacy?**

Our suggestion is that theological literacy is best developed through theological enquiry or, as the *Making the Difference* report states, ‘by thinking theologically’.

We suggest that theological enquiry is a process of investigating key religious concepts and beliefs that includes depth of understanding and wrestling with the meaning and impact of these concepts and beliefs. This would include:

- **Foundations:** Considering the foundations of these concepts and beliefs
- **Development:** Considering the ways in which these concepts and beliefs have developed over time
- **Relationships:** Considering the ways in which these concepts and beliefs relate to one another
- **Applications:** Considering the ways in which these concepts and beliefs are applied to the way in which people live their lives

This would ensure that theological enquiry goes beyond the mere collecting of information about religion and belief.<sup>16</sup> See **Figure 2** for an example of ‘thinking theologically’ in RE.

Theological enquiry would be one pedagogical approach to teaching and learning, and would specifically be used to develop theological literacy. Teachers already use a range of disciplines within their RE teaching, such as sociological enquiry, historical enquiry, philosophical enquiry. Theological enquiry would sit alongside these other approaches.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Making a Difference* (2014), 28 (5.32)

This pedagogical approach also acknowledges that from within the Christian context, ‘thinking theologically’ goes beyond the confines of RE. However, it also firmly emphasises that it is possible to gain theological literacy *without having to confess the faith that is being studied*. Kathryn has tried to explain this in her blog:

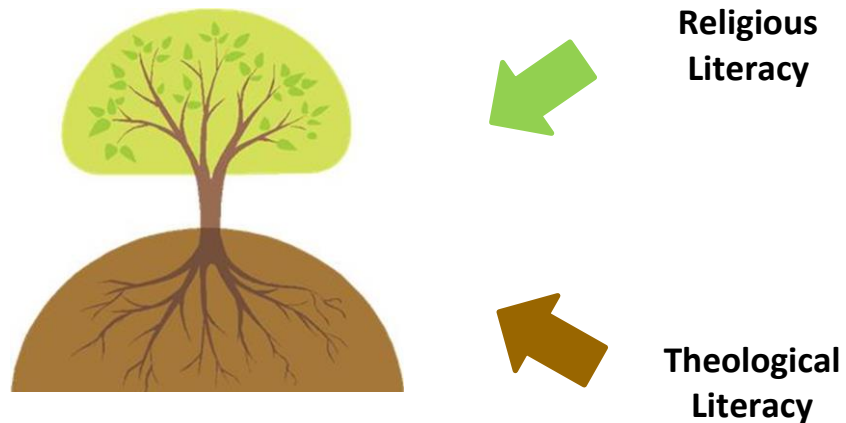
<https://kathrynfelodge.wordpress.com/2015/07/29/everyone-a-theologian/>.

### Figure 1

It may help to consider the purpose of RE as a tree with deep roots:

- **Religious literacy is analogous to the tree above the surface**
- **Theological literacy is analogous the roots below the surface**

Both elements are absolutely essential to the whole.



Different tools (strategies) are needed to work both above and below the soil. For example, working below the soil requires tools that can dig deep, whereas different kinds of tools are required to tend the branches and leaves. For example, scriptural reasoning was recently identified by Daniel Moulin<sup>17</sup> as a method to support theological literacy, that is, digging deeper into the concepts at the heart of a religion.

<sup>17</sup><http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/think-piece-we-need-theological-religious-education-not-politicised-religious-education-daniel-moulin/> (Accessed 1/2/2016)

Figure 2

### Example of 'Thinking Theologically'

In the same way that Jacob wrestled with God (**Genesis 32:22-32**), 'digging deeper' into religion, or 'thinking theologically', is about wrestling with the deeper meaning and impact of key concepts. One way of doing this may be to explore the same concept in a variety of different ways:

#### Key Concept: salvation in Christianity.

Theological enquiry would involve all or a selection of the following:

<b>Biblical Studies</b>	Biblical criticism and interpretation	Textual analysis and interpretation of salvation using texts such as Genesis 1-3, Exodus 3-19, Matthew 1, John 14:6 <b><i>Pupils engage with the biblical text; tasks set to enable them to explore the meaning, context, intended audience, etc.</i></b>
<b>Systematic Theology</b>	Presenting a clear and ordered overview of the main themes of Christian faith (often following pattern of Apostles' Creed, sometimes ordered by topics)	Considering the Church's teaching on and around salvation (e.g. atonement theory, substitution theory) <b><i>Pupils explore the idea of Jesus paying the debt of humanity's sin by looking at the language of the Apostles' Creed and relating it to a story such as The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.</i></b>
<b>Philosophical Theology</b>	Finding the common ground between Christian faith and other areas of intellectual activity; clarifying ideas and concepts (philosophy as resource or dialogue partner)	Considering the significance of salvation to the broader picture of the religion and beyond the religion in order to clarify the concept <b><i>Pupils compare different perspectives on salvation from within Christianity by looking at the difference between cross and crucifix, for example. Pupils compare different perspectives on salvation between Christianity and Judaism.</i></b>
<b>Historical Theology</b>	Considering the particularity of Christian beliefs whilst acknowledging that its message is believed to be universal; exploring the historical situation in which ideas developed or were specifically formulated	Considering the ways in which the Church's teaching on and the Christian understanding of salvation has changed over time and in different contexts <b><i>Pupils look at the ways in which the Christian understanding of salvation has altered over time (e.g. the doctrine of the impassibility of God and Jürgen Moltmann's crucified God).</i></b>
<b>Pastoral Theology</b>	Considering the social applicability of Christian beliefs; offering Christian models for transformative action	Considering the ways in which the Christian understanding of salvation impacts on the ways in which Christians live their lives and try to bring about change in society <b><i>Pupils could consider Christians who have lived out the concept of salvation (e.g. Jackie Pullinger).</i></b>
<b>Spiritual/Mystical Theology</b>	Considering aspects of the devotional practices of Christianity and the interior individual experiences of believers	Considering the ways in which Christian practices live out Christian beliefs about salvation (e.g. Eucharist, fasting, entering into monastic life) <b><i>Pupils could consider the symbols used in the Eucharist and their meanings and significance.</i></b>

The *Making a Difference* report indicates that there is ongoing confusion in Church of England schools between RE, Collective Worship and Christian Values.<sup>18</sup> In the 1944 Education Act, RE was defined as religious instruction (the classroom subject) and collective worship.<sup>19</sup> Although the 1988 Education Act redefined RE as religious *education* (the classroom subject), collective worship is addressed first and at length under the redefined name of religious education, which has led to some ongoing confusion about the purpose of RE in school policies and planning.<sup>20</sup>

In order to raise standards and at the same time to ensure that RE contributes to the Christian character of the school we need to clarify **how** RE contributes, without confusing it with either worship or values. As it states in *Making in Difference*:

*In describing the relationship between RE and the wider life of a Church school can we use the analogy of a ball and socket joint? Some schools are in danger of separating the ball from the socket so RE is a 'separate thing' to the wider Christian life of the school. For others the ball is grating against the socket too much and the joint becomes damaged as a result. What we need are ways of enabling the joint to work properly; to enable the RE to support the ethos, but also enabling it to function well in its own right as a rigorous academic subject.*<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, we suggest here that RE's distinctive contribution to the Christian character of Church of England schools may be to provide secure *theological* literacy (about Christianity in particular) through a process of *theological* enquiry. This is not to limit RE to this, but to say that this is the core of RE in church schools that supports the Christian character of the school. The outcome would be to ensure that pupils are able to hold a theologically informed conversation about Christianity as a living and varied faith.

The specific contribution of RE to the Christian ethos of a church school is therefore through a distinctive pedagogy, i.e. theological enquiry with the outcome of secure theological literacy. This "enables RE to function well in its own right as a rigorous academic subject."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Making a Difference (2014), 13 (4.8), 21-23 in particular

<sup>19</sup> Terence Copley, <http://re-handbook.org.uk/section/intro/a-short-history-of-religious-education#tab-2> (accessed 28/1/16)

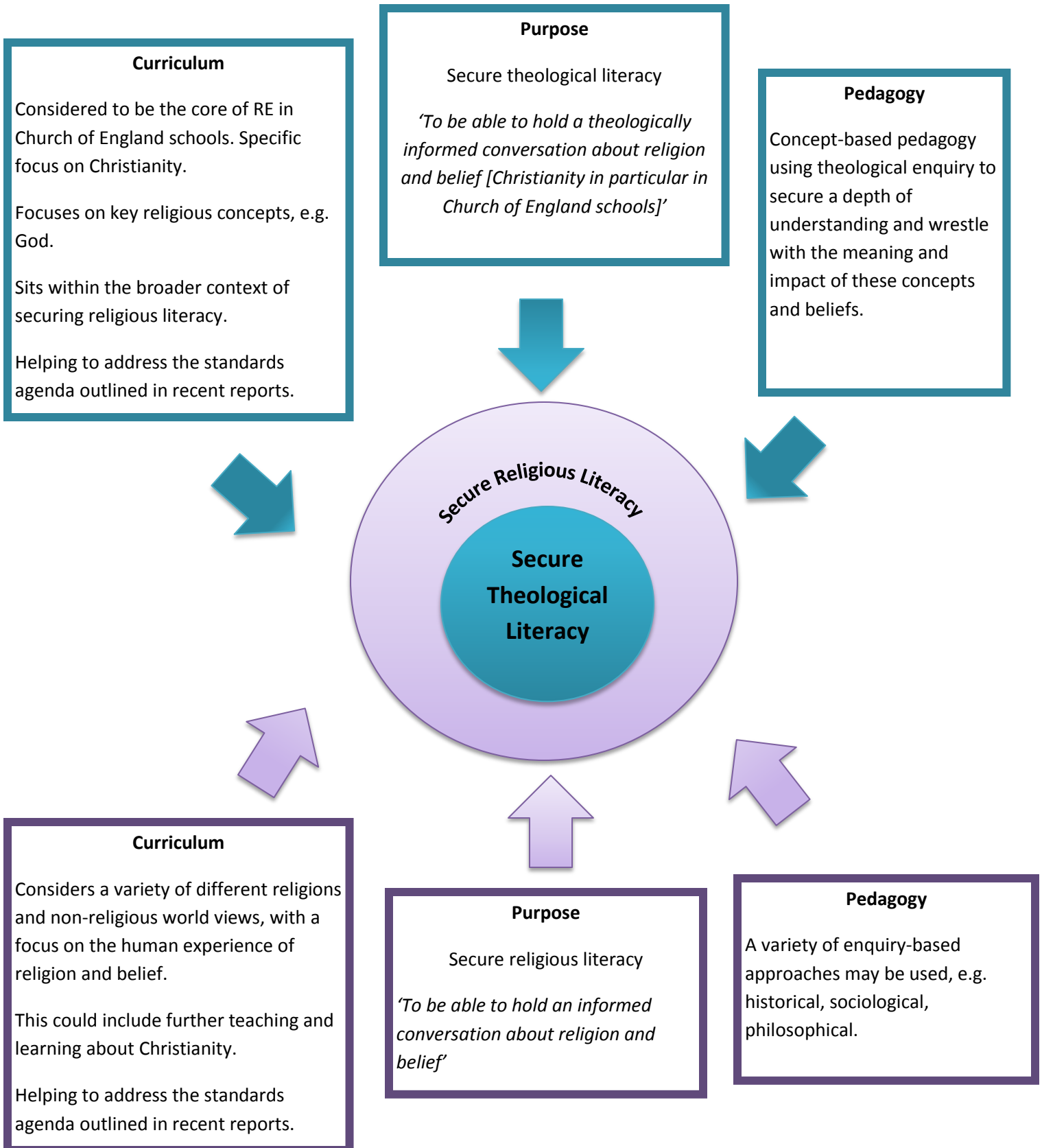
<sup>20</sup> Education Reform Act (1988), 1.6

<sup>21</sup> Making a Difference (2014), 21 (5.5)

<sup>22</sup> Ibid



# THEOLOGICAL LITERACY



# RELIGIOUS LITERACY