

Glossary of terms used in RE

It is very important that everyone is clear on the meaning of words and expressions commonly used in RE.

As children develop they “absorb” words without necessarily understanding them and as adults we use words on the assumption that others understand them to mean the same as ourselves.

“I know what a word means when it leaves my mouth but I have no idea what it means when it enters your head.”

Many of the key terms used in RE are contentious – different people have different meanings for the same word and they can be very unhappy if someone defines them differently. We have included alternate definitions, and raised some questions, for those words where we are aware of differences of opinion.

Comments and suggestions about this list are welcome.

Word	Definition
Abrahamic religions	Those religions that share holy books that refer to prophets such as Abraham. These include Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Bah’ai and perhaps others. The term is preferred to the older, non-inclusive, “Judeo Christian” or “Judaic Christian.”
Agnostic	Someone who maintains that the existence of a god can be neither proved nor disproved. Agnostics are atheists, they do not believe in gods.
Assertion	A statement often claiming to be true. <i>“All pigs can fly”</i> is an assertion but not a truth. See the definition of “truth.” <i>“It must be true because it says so in my holy book”</i> does not turn an assertion into a truth.
Atheist	Someone who has no need to propose the existence of a god to answer the big question of life and therefore does not believe in one.
Atheism	This word has no meaning since there is no common ideology shared by atheists. If used, it simply means a state of non-belief in a god.
Belief	Accepting that something is true. See the definition of “truth.” In the religious context it means acceptance of some received theology - a set of statements and assertions derived from holy books or tradition and which require faith for belief. A person claiming “non-belief” in the religious context does not mean that he or she has no beliefs (everyone has beliefs of some sort) but that he or she does not need a belief in a god or a life after death.
Believer	In the religious context this is someone who believes in a god (or gods) and/or some part of us (the soul) that survives death. A non-believer sees no need to propose the existence of either god or soul.
Community	A group of people sharing certain beliefs, language, traditions or way of life and often living in the same area.
Culture	An impossible word to define since it means completely different things to different people. All attempts to define a uniquely “British” culture have failed. Beyond something (undefined) shared by a group of people it means nothing.
Ethics	The study of the moral and social rules that humans draw up to govern their personal and social behaviour. See the definition of “morality.”
Ethnic group	There is no clear definition of this term beyond a group of people sharing something where the “something” is difficult to define. They may come from the same part of the world, they may share a set of beliefs, then may share a language.
Evangelical	A person who wishes to spread the news about their beliefs.
Evil	Religious believers tend to use this to mean something <i>“against the will of god as defined in holy books”</i> though they are often happy to accept the definition posed by non-believers. Non-believers try not to use the word because of its associations with religion. If forced to define it they would say <i>“man’s inhumanity towards man – anything that causes unnecessary harm to anyone.”</i>
Faith	Belief in something that cannot be proved rationally. Does faith mean <i>“belief in a creator entity (or entities) and/or a belief in some form of life after death?”</i> Some faiths don’t have creator entities - are they really religions?
Fundamentalism	Belief in the literal truth of holy books.
God	A indefinable, supernatural creator entity. Most religions believe that the Universe was created by a god or gods.

	<p>The characteristics of a god change not only from religion to religion but also within an individual religion. Linguistically there is no such thing as "god" - just multiple definitions of the same word.</p> <p>For example: the Abrahamic god, shared by Judaism, Christian and Islam, is often described as "loving" and "benevolent" while at the same time, in the holy book shared by the three religions, promoting genocide, racism, ethnic cleansing and slavery on behalf of its "chosen people". The image of "god" presented in the Christian New Testament is certainly not the same as the god described in the Abrahamic Old Testament's Leviticus and Deuteronomy. (Deut 3:6, 7:2, 7:3, 7:10 etc.) In some religions the "god" is considered to be warlike and its followers have the legal right to carry weapons in public.</p> <p>It is commonly assumed that the one attribute that is shared by gods is that of being the creator of the Universe. However, this is not the case with those religions with multiple gods where a "god" may be defined as the embodiment of a particular characteristic - the "god of love", "the god of war" etc.</p> <p>"God" is often referred to as "he" - unfortunately this has led to the oppression of women in many religions. Since god is neither male nor female perhaps it should be referred to as "it."</p> <p>A god is frequently assumed to be "good" but this raises an old philosophical argument as to whether goodness is itself defined as "what god does" or defined as "an attribute that god has" - i.e. "god" is good in the same way that a person could be described as being good. If it is the first then "god" is free to define anything as "good" - even things humans would think of as bad. If the second, then "god" represents something which is defined by humans so "god" itself must have been defined by humans.</p> <p>In some religions the "god" speaks directly to its followers while in others its "rules" and "words" are mediated through a prophet. For example: Moses for Judaism, Jesus for Christianity and Mohammed for Islam. Most religions are happy for their prophets to be humans with a direct connection to their god. Christianity takes a different line since it claims that its prophet was a physical manifestation of the Christian god.</p> <p>"God" is certainly not a unitary concept about which all religious people agree so it would be dishonest to use the term "god" without qualification. Use on its own also makes two unsubstantiated assumptions: that there is such an entity and that there is only one of them.</p> <p>To be honest we should always qualify the word "god" as "a god", "their god", "my god", "our god", "some god", "the god of Christianity", "the god of Judaism" etc.</p> <p>Many people who call themselves "religious" or "spiritual" are unhappy claiming that they believe in a god because they are aware of the arguments that arise from such a claim. Instead they claim to believe in "something out there" or "something in here." Their attitude is understandable but "something out there" is "god" and something in here" is the concept of self - though they may extend it to include some part of self that they hope will survive death.</p>
Good/bad	See the definition of "morality."
God of the gaps	Non-believers claim that god is used to fill the gaps in our understanding - gaps which become smaller as our understanding increases.
Heaven/Hell	<p>Some religions believe that part of us survives death and goes to a place called heaven. Some religions believe that only those who have been good in life will go to heaven, those who have been bad will go to hell - a fearful place ruled by the an evil spirit called the devil.</p> <p>The concepts of heaven and hell are still used by some religions to rule by fear and threat.</p>
Humanist	<p>Someone who enjoys a responsible and happy life without god, religion or superstition.</p> <p>Humanists are atheists so humanism is not a religion.</p>
Logic	<p>The science of reasoning, proof, thinking or inference. A chain of reasoning and the incorrect, or incorrect, use of argument.</p> <p>Logic governs what can be fairly claimed, proved or inferred in argument - it identifies who is cheating - for example, by trying to use an assertion as proof.</p> <p>Anyone who makes a proposal must prove it - it is not up to someone else to disprove it. For example, if someone proposes that "<i>the Earth rotates in space on the tip of the nose of an invisible dancing Pink Hippopotamus</i>" it is up to them to prove it. Those who do not propose it can rest assured that it is nonsense until proved – it is not necessary to prove it wrong!</p>
Miracle	<p>An event without an apparent natural explanation. Believers may say that such an event was the result of god's intervention.</p> <p>On impartial investigation almost all "miracles" have natural explanations or are the result of fraud. Non-believers say that there may be insufficient evidence, through passage of time or change in physical circumstances, to provide explanations for the remainder.</p>

Monotheist / polytheist	<p>Monotheist religions have a unitary god, polytheist religions have multiple gods often arranged in a hierarchy.</p> <p>It has been argued that Christianity is a polytheist religion with its "father, son and holy ghost." This was a major cause of conflict in the early Christian church which the Emperor Constantine tried to have resolved in 325AD. It remains a cause of difference today – the Unitarian Church treats Jesus as a man not as divine.</p>
Morality	<p>A sense of what is "right/good" and what is "wrong/bad".</p> <p>For some religions morality is a set of rules defined in a holy book.</p> <p>For others morality is far more complicated - for every black and white moral decision there are hundreds of shades of grey based on "but what if ..."</p> <p>A black and white view of the world is common in young children before they begin to understand the complexity of people's lives and the world around us.</p> <p>Non-believers feel very insulted when some religious believers claim that moral rules are a function of religion - and defined in holy books. Rules are always required if societies are to function harmoniously - and such rules existed long before any of the world's current religions were created.</p> <p>It seems to many believers and non-believers that religious morals are sometimes far too obsessed with sex, sexuality, sexual behaviour and procreation.</p>
Non-believer	<p>Someone who does not believe in a god (or gods) and some part of us (the soul) that survives death. Non-believers are atheists.</p>
Philosophy	<p>The study of knowledge. Philosophy deals with questions such as: "what can we 'know' or 'prove' to be true as opposed to simply 'believing' to be true?"</p> <p>A philosopher once said <i>"Philosophy is questions that may never be answered. Religion is answers that may never be questioned."</i></p>
Proselytise	<p>To attempt to convert someone to a particular religion or belief.</p> <p>This is not permitted in schools – our duty is to inform, not to convert.</p>
Race	<p>This is difficult to define beyond the colour of someone's skin.</p> <p>We are all the products of the mixture of our genes and the 19th century obsession of applying labels to people does not really help when there are no clear definitions of what the labels mean or what they can be used for.</p>
Reincarnation	<p>Some religions teach that part of us survives death and returns in another life - possibly as another human or possibly as a different animal.</p> <p>For non-believers death is the end of our conscious selves and the atoms that make up our bodies are recycled in the universe which has no beginning and no end.</p>
Religion	<p>The law does not define "religion" but section 44 of The Equality Act 2006 makes it clear that "religion", "lack of religion", "belief" and "lack of belief" should be treated equally.</p> <p>All religions contain some sort of supernatural element but beyond that they vary considerably.</p> <p>A definition of religion must make it clear what non-religious people are not. For example any definition of religion must not be so broad as to include atheists or humanists.</p> <p>Some possible definitions:</p> <p><i>"A general term used... to designate all concepts concerning the belief in god(s) and goddess(es) as well as other spiritual beings or transcendental ultimate concerns" and "human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, spiritual, or divine."</i></p> <p><i>"Reverence for God or the gods, careful pondering of divine things, piety ..."</i></p> <p><i>"A set of common beliefs and practices generally held by a group of people, often codified as prayer, ritual, and religious law."</i></p> <p><i>"Both the personal practices related to communal faith and to group rituals and communication stemming from shared conviction."</i></p> <p><i>"Organised religion generally refers to an organisation of people supporting the exercise of some religion with a prescribed set of beliefs, often taking the form of a legal entity."</i></p>
Respect	<p>Belief in religious ideas is a matter of personal choice – unlike skin colour, gender, sexuality, age or disability. Accepting ideas means accepting the consequences of those ideas.</p> <p>People are not entitled to respect simply because of their sincerely held beliefs – after all, Hitler's sincerely held anti-Semitic beliefs led to the death of millions.</p> <p>People earn respect by what they do, not by what they believe in – ideas cannot be offended.</p>

	<p>Section 29J of the Race and religious Hatred Act 2006 makes it clear that free speech takes priority over ideas and beliefs:</p> <p><i>“Nothing in this Part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any other belief system or the beliefs or practices of its adherents, or proselytising or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practising their religion or belief system.”</i></p>
Right/wrong	See the definition of “morality.”
Science	<p>The study of the Universe around us.</p> <p>Science works by creating theories (possible explanations) for things and then testing those theories through observation and experiment. Those theories that withstand testing are retained, those that fail are rejected.</p> <p>Science makes no claim to understand everything - it is the study of what we do not yet understand that makes science so exciting for many people.</p>
Secular	<p>Secular means of this world, concerned with the here and now.</p> <p>Secular aims include disestablishment of the Church of England, removal of bishops from the House of Lords, transfer of all segregated religious schools (“faith schools”) to local authority control and the removal of religion-dictated elements from our legal system.</p> <p>Secularists may be believers or non-believers and many individuals and groups within the Church of England have secular aims</p>
Secularism	There is no ideology called “secularism”. If used, it simply means the set of aims defined under “secular.”
Sect	<p>Part of a religion which disagrees on points of principle with the other parts of the same religion.</p> <p>There are many different sects including Catholics and Protestants in Christianity and Sunni and Shia in Islam.</p> <p>Sectarian and inter-religious conflict is a major cause for concern in the world today</p>
Sin	<p>Something against the rules defined in holy books or against the word of god. The word tends to be used less and less by liberal believers.</p> <p>The word, with all its religious overtones, is not used by non-believers.</p>
Spirituality	<p>This is an almost impossible word to define - Acts of Parliament use it but fail to define it, Ofsted reports and RE books do the same.</p> <p>The "spirit" part is off-putting to non-believers because it seems to imply a supernatural element.</p> <p>However, it seems to mean some form of psychological and emotional inner well-being - a sense of understanding and being at one with the wonders of the Universe. As such it can be shared by religious and non-religious believers - "awe and wonder" are universal emotions.</p>
Soul	<p>Religious people claim that this is the part of us that survives death.</p> <p>Non-religious people do not use the term but they assume that what religious people are referring to is human consciousness and sense of self - that part of you behind your eyes looking out at the world, the "inner" you.</p>
Truth	<p>That which can be proved. An assertion is not necessarily a truth – many things can be asserted that are patently false,.</p> <p>The problem is that one person's truth is often another person's falsehood and people do not agree on the nature of proof.</p> <p>Truth is certainly not subject to a vote - if 50 million people believe a foolish thing, it is still a foolish thing.</p>
Worship	<p>This is defined in Para 57 of Education Circular 1/94 as <i>"reverence or veneration paid to a divine being or power."</i></p> <p>You cannot have worship without a god. The moment you worship you are assuming a god and it is this assumption that causes non-believers to oppose all forms of worship in schools.</p>
Values	See the definitions of “ethics” and “morality”