

WHERE IGNORANT ARMIES CLASH BY NIGHT: A Critical Examination of the Present and Future Politics of Religious Education

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Abstract

What do we as a nation expect our young people to know and understand about religion and belief? How can we ensure that they are achieving this? School-based education about religion and belief has been the subject of intensive scrutiny in the period 2013-15. As a result, policy challenges have come to light, and are the subject of much public debate.

This paper gives a polemical picture of RE as it is, based on existing evidence taken from formal and informal data sources including Ofsted inspection evidence, ethnographic studies of RE teachers, and policy papers. It will be shown how an increasingly diverse population in Britain has generated not only many religious and cultural identities, but many different uses of identity. In an attempt to impose order on fluidity, a succession of religious policy frameworks, including spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, values development, community cohesion, 'British values', and the Prevent duty, have been superimposed on the education system's efforts in relation to cultural diversity, religion and belief. As a result, the policy basis for the subject is a contested and confused locus, a 'darkling plain, ... where ignorant armies clash by night'.

Because of this religious and secular contestation, the 1944 and 1988 policy settlements for RE are now unjustifiable; and under the pressure of new liberal policy developments, the settlement has entirely broken down. The relationship between structures and standards is no longer conducive to clear purpose, nor to professional growth based on shared understandings of good practice.

The paper then points up areas where more evidence is needed, relating to patterns of religion and belief, perspectives on its importance, and different forms of stakeholdership and expertise, and suggests how this might be obtained and sifted. Based on the known evidence and lacunae, the paper prognosticates two futures for RE, influenced by different factors. The paper will conclude with a vision for a better RE, based on the working principle that the system needs to move from a history of neglect and interference to a new paradigm of positive engagement in which national expectations and localism are both positive forces.

Our landscape: getting to know religious education

- Religious Education (RE) is a compulsory subject in state maintained schools in England.
- RE is determined by a set of laws dating from 1944 and 1988, giving local authorities the statutory responsibility to set the curriculum. It was first called RI and was changed to RE in 1988.
- Local authorities must establish SACREs composed of four sets of stakeholders: the C of E, other Christian denominations and other religions, teachers, and local councillors.
- Parents may withdraw their child from RE whole or in part. Teachers may also, except in some faith schools, withdraw from teaching RE.
- Inspection evidence reveals that while many pupils enjoy the subject and recognise its importance, it is not well taught in six schools out of ten. The reasons for this seem to lie partly in a paucity of teacher training and development opportunities but also, more pervasively, in RE's confused identity, anomalous legal status, and the ways in which religion has changed in this country.
- The RE Council (REC) is the umbrella body representing some 65 member organisations that support RE in schools. The member organisations include the mainstream churches, other religious communities, interfaith groups and associations of RE professionals, all united in a desire to strengthen and improve the quality of RE.
- 2015 saw the publication of three major reports touching on RE: by Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead, Adam Dinham and Martha Shaw, and the Woolf report of the Woolf Commission chaired by Baroness Butler-Sloss and written by Ed Kessler. All three, among other things, called for a reform of RE.

The argument for change in RE

This section surveys the existing evidence for the need to resolve the underlying issues in support of a stronger model of RE.

The complex nature of learning and teaching in RE, characterised by contested truth claims of the religions, internal and external diversities, and capacity to create both conflict and harmony, makes it a fascinating and highly necessary discipline for pupils in schools. The legal and professional mechanisms that govern RE are

similarly complex, and over time have fallen into a weakened state. There is an urgent and sensitive need to research and produce evidence for a new identity, with mechanisms and measures that can underpin the highest quality of teaching and learning in English RE for years to come, and provide an exemplar that could be of use to other education systems globally.

Religious Education in England: distinctive successes and next evolutionary steps

Almost unique among the world's education systems, England offers a school subject called RE, which is established by law, accredited as a professional qualification for teachers, and has a suite of pupil qualifications at age 16 and 18. It is a popular subject, enabling many young people to study Theology, Religious Studies or Philosophy at University; its popularity has grown steadily over the last three decades, with younger demographic groups tending to feel more positive about the subject (REC, 2012). RE is also recognised as a key contributor to positive communal and interfaith relationships (REC, 2014) on account of its capacity to create opportunities for well-informed discussion and dialogue, and to promote tolerance and respect. Typically, RE combines learning about diverse world religions in an open-minded and objective way, engaging with their timeless truth claims to promote critical understanding, and exploring life's big questions in order to promote spiritual wellbeing and wisdom.

RE's success in England is in marked contrast to many other national education systems where there is either a secular hegemony in which no RE is permitted in state schools, or it is controlled by one religious group which imposes doctrinal limits on content. By contrast, RE in England enables pupils to explore a range of religions (and, if we follow legal precedent, secular world views) openly and critically, studying them objectively and drawing life-relevant wisdom from them. Syllabuses must reflect the fact that religion in Britain is predominantly Christian, but are also required to take account of the teachings and practices of other principal religions (DCSF, 2010). This requirement, however, must be read differently in the light of the Human Rights Act, to give non-religious world views the same rights as religious ones, if not in quantity of time then certainly in their presence in the curriculum. Up to a point, this open, positive, critical and enquiring project called RE is highly unusual worldwide, and has many strengths.

The next evolutionary steps for RE have become necessary because of the changing face of religion in the UK and globally, and because of educational reforms in England affecting the basis of RE. These two factors - religious and educational - have combined to catalyse a widespread realisation that RE needs to change in order to continue thriving.

(Move through this quite fast if they know it) The period 2013-15 has seen five major pieces of evidence, all pointing towards the necessity of change. The 2013 inspection survey (Ofsted, 2013) reported with concern that six out of ten lessons in RE were less than good – a serious criticism, and one which has its roots in the confused pedagogical purpose of RE, and its anomalous status in law.

The confused purposes take the form of agreed syllabuses where the purpose of RE change whenever one crosses a county boundary. Some syllabuses, written by consensus, embrace five or more aims for the

subject, for example to promote knowledge and understanding, to develop skills of enquiry, to deepen personal response, to foster good community relations, to contribute to spiritual and moral development. In so-called faith schools, this string of aims takes on the additional twist of an expectation that RE will somehow contribute to the nurturing of faith identity, although that expectation is differently handled in the different kinds of faith school, making the apparently monochrome category 'faith school' misleading to a considerable extent.

The anomalous status of RE in law, already mentioned, has led to a situation where senior experts in the education system make mistakes and evince levels of confusion and discomfort. For example:

- The current rules on RE are so complicated that Heads, governors, Ofsted itself and even civil servants get it wrong. RE is statutory but not national curriculum; compulsory, but you can withdraw; local, but not that local; different if you are an academy; populated by 151 syllabuses, all broadly similar in content, but in form and structure so different and complex that it takes an army of advisers and consultants to interpret – an army we no longer have. The SACRE system created in 1944 is falling apart under the pressure of factors beyond RE's control.
- Many syllabuses are more prescriptive than NC documents: this makes local determination a restricting factor, not a liberating one. In some cases, the syllabuses contribute to low standards in RE by being too complex and defining RE's purposes too widely and incoherently. Many trainees struggle to work with the multiplicity and complexity of syllabuses.
- The agreed syllabus system is profoundly out of step with school-led educational reform; it is called local determination, but it is not local enough to allow for school autonomy; it was a local authority monopoly, which is now broken permanently and not coming back. It is also wasteful, intellectually and financially. There will be little if anything left of the system by 2020; it reflects a view of the UK's religious landscape that was accurate 70 years ago. If we cling to it, we will sink. If we create something new, we can survive and prosper.

The inspectors in 2013 concluded that a review of the legal basis was necessary in order to raise standards. They had taken a similar position in 2007 and 2010. Then 2013 also saw the publication of a wide-scale and detailed ethnographic study of RE teachers at work, revealing both the extent of their good will and efforts, and also their underlying epistemic confusion brought about by a lack of legal and pedagogical clarity for the subject (Conroy et al, 2013).

Confusion among teachers might be quite easily solved, but for deeper demographic patterns and legal structures. Research led by Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University has indicated changing patterns of religion and belief in the UK: declining numbers of people identifying as religious, accelerating growth in numbers self-identifying as spiritual or 'nones', who are now the majority among young people: they identify as spiritual, religiously serendipitous, but not religiously affiliated; and the rise of narrow or extremist minorities and a decline in moderate committed religious opinion (Woodhead and Catto, 2012). These patterns have led her to conclude, in a report co-written with a former Secretary of State for

Education, that RE's structures are no longer fit for purpose and need reform (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015). Research from the Faith and Civil Society Unit in Goldsmiths University of London (Dinham and Shaw, 2015) argues that religion and belief communities have changed significantly, meaning that the 'real religious landscape' is often quite different from the official theologies that pupils are required to study – theologies often formed twenty or more years ago. The ethnographic element of Dinham and Shaw reveals a strong interest among young people in studying the realities of religion and belief, and a recognition amongst parents and employers that this forms an essential part of the curriculum, promoting positive attitudes to religious and cultural diversity, and a degree of facility with religious information and argument that has become known as religious or theological literacy. Dinham and Shaw bring evidence that teachers, employers and parents feel RE's position in law needs to be strengthened and clarified. Finally, a major independent commission on religion and belief in British public life (Woolf Commission, 2015) points to the changes in patterns of belief, and concludes that the present legal structures of RE need reform, with a statutory entitlement that establishes content and learning objectives related to religious and non-religious world views.

All five sources affirm the good that RE can do in promoting religious and theological literacy and enabling young people to function constructively in religiously and culturally diverse communities; and all five also point to structural and pedagogical improvements that could strengthen the effectiveness and credibility of RE.

RE's policy landscape - the politics of epistemology

The policy ground has shifted under RE's feet, making its current legal mechanisms weak and in some places obsolete. Reforms to school provision have introduced diversification of types of school, leading many schools to exit from local government control and become academies or free schools. This process has accelerated since 2010: already a majority of secondary schools are academies; the Department for Education is set to continue this trend, meaning that by 2020 most if not all maintained secondary and primary schools will be academies. This impacts on RE because the legal mechanisms for syllabus making and accountability have not kept pace with school reform. RE Syllabuses are created by local authorities, through bodies called Standing Advisory Councils on RE (DCSF, 2010). In many places, these bodies have become weaker and less relevant during the period of public sector reform, dating from 2000, that has produced accelerating academisation; there is a widely shared hypothesis that they can no longer be said to provide effectively for RE. Academies and free schools have no corresponding national framework for RE, and are left in limbo. As a result, some academies have opted for a narrow model of the subject, promoting doctrinal conformity and intolerance (Clarke, 2014), while many others have neglected RE. These unintended consequences of educational reform have created confusion among school inspectors, school Head Teachers and policy makers. Prominent academics and politicians are beginning to feel there is a need to tidy up the anomaly in ways that promote excellence and open-mindedness in everyday teaching of RE, delivered by qualified, confident and knowledgeable teachers who have the confidence of their Heads (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015). Charles Clarke, a former Secretary of State for Education, is on record as believing that the anomalous position of RE must be resolved urgently.

These developments have been critical both in the sense of suggesting improvements and also in touching on the core issues and challenges. The coming together of these critical reports in a two-year period, and the wider realisation amongst teachers, policy makers and academics, represents a concentrated shift in our consciousness of who we are as a subject, and who we are as a country in the world. The title of this paper refers to Matthew Arnold's melancholy poem of 1867, *Dover Beach*. Like *Dover Beach*, RE's story begins in a lyrical depiction of England as different from the rest of the world, and enters into mourning at the retreat of religion 'to the breath of the night wind', leaving the world naked.

But the world is not naked: the rise of the spiritual 'nones' belies this pessimistic theory of a catastrophic loss of meaning and identity arising from what we now call secularisation. Woodhead and others recognise the ambiguities: our country is both religious and secular, becoming more religious at the margins and more secular in the middle, but no less spiritual or moral. Far from being naked, today's young people clothe their existence with a creative patchwork of meanings and values. The 'withdrawing roar' of the poem has become a roar of rage from the religions, particularly from their mostly male superstructures, a roar at their loss of power and influence, their loss of control over moral discourses.

The ebb and flow of the religious tide is detectable in much of RE: two examples will suffice here. The construction of learning outcomes in RE as 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion, very common in agreed syllabuses from the mid-1980s onwards, may be seen as a compromise between the secular project of understanding and coming to terms with religions, as objectively as possible (learning about), and the religious project of continuing and if possible restoring their influence over personal development (learning from). Curriculum design experts have frequently concluded that these two projects cannot live with each other within the same subject. A second example can be seen in the structure of SACREs and agreed syllabus conferences. The combination of religious and professional forces, two committees each, builds in a balance (for those who believe this works) or a permanent contestation (for those who don't) and makes agreed syllabus writing a proxy war for the larger, longer ebb and flow of religious control and influence. It has been common enough to hear SACRE members railing against the morals of young people, bewildered as to why RE cannot sort out the young generation, save them from secularism, protect them from sexualisation, and make them respect their heritage. The locus in which the RE curriculum is written may therefore be described as an epistemologically and religiously contested locus, a 'darkling plain, swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, where ignorant armies clash by night.'

Matthew Arnold fails to resolve this contestation, except by a pathetic fallacy, appealing to love. We in RE must resolve it. This means facing up to the impossible contradictions that lie in the epistemological and political structure of the subject, and reconstructing them in some more honest way that reflects our identity as a nation now. In passing, I mention the escapist option offered by Barnes () and Gearon (), of a 'post-liberal' model of RE, both lacking in any epistemological detail, and both suggestive of a disguised longing to return to a pre-modern dispensation, seemingly unaware that such an enterprise will not be

possible in this country. For Barnes and Gearon, the way out of the darkling plain leads back to the cliffs of England.

The ebb and flow has been further complicated by side-currents and eddies emanating from the successive governments. Their political need is to address the ways in which the nation manages its cultural and religious diversity; and, latterly, to protect citizens from violent or non-violent extremism. But rather than having a positive influence on the education system, these policy agendas have taken the form of wave after wave of distracting and dangerous cross-currents: for example: young people are losing their moral compass - let's make spiritual, moral, social and cultural development an inspectable element in schools; young people are not engaged in politics: let's invent a new subject called Citizenship; young people may be vulnerable to extremism: let's quickly concoct four values and call them British; let's require schools to discuss controversial issues but monitor the pupils whose views are heterodox. These moral panics have resulted in further distorting an already disputatious enterprise in schools. They complete a picture of long-term, endemic neglect and short-term, convulsive interference.

The critical reception to this set of circumstances has prompted the RE professional community to grasp the moment by seeking to create new structures and pedagogical paradigms for RE suited to the 21st century. This is an historical opportunity.

The Religious Education Council's Commission to review RE

The RE Council, as the representative umbrella body for RE, works with and through its member organisations to strengthen RE provision. REC staff and office holders work closely with the media, government and policy makers in all the mainstream political parties to promote a solid public understanding of RE. In 2013, the RE Council recognised the importance of the legal and policy issues and accepted a need to explore the current challenges with policy-makers (REC 2013, p35). It recognised that there was a growing concern amongst teachers that the structures RE had inherited were no longer working well, that SACREs were not the only stakeholders for RE, and that the present system was excluding RE from benefitting from national initiatives and from the new freedoms on offer to schools in all other subjects. At its 4 November 2015 General Meeting, the Council received and enthusiastically discussed a resolution from its Board to instigate a policy review. The full membership of the REC is diverse in its opinions about the best legal and policy settlement for RE: this diversity is its great strength as an organisation, making it the appropriate body to lead a review. Even in this diversity, there is a significant though not complete consensus that the present settlement needs to be reviewed for the sake of high quality learning in classrooms.

The RE Council intends to instigate a wide-ranging, inclusive and evidence-based review of the legal and wider policy framework for RE. The output of the review will be recommendations designed to inform policy-makers about these areas. The aim and focus will be improving the quality of children's experience of RE, for example by proposing legal structures and other measures that would promote the highest quality teaching and learning. The REC intends that this process should begin in early 2016 and be completed by early or mid

2018. This timescale is suggested in part by the urgency of the issues and in part by an aspiration to present the current government with legislative options in the middle of its electoral cycle.

The REC Board has resolved unanimously to make progress in the review by establishing a major commission of distinguished public servants. The commission's terms of reference, still under discussion at present, are likely to include:

- Considering the name, nature, purpose and scope of RE;
- Identifying barriers that currently limit the provision of high quality RE;
- Identifying what changes are needed (both legal/structural and policy in relation to recruitment, training, pedagogy and resources)

Changes might include, for example, the scope, nature and purpose of RE, teachers' professional development and research opportunities, syllabus-writing, the role of SACREs, the right to withdraw from RE and the role of central government. The commission will not examine collective worship, faith school admissions policies, or employment of staff on the basis of religion or belief, as these matters are separate from RE. Commission members will be particularly charged with securing a firm and transparent evidence base for their legal and policy recommendations, and making the recommendations both realistic and detailed enough for legislation to follow.

The REC Board intends to finalise the terms of reference and commission membership by June 2016. The commission will then begin work, with an initial focus on summarising the already existing evidence. It will conduct hearings and commission research in order to chase down further evidence. The intention is to have an interim report in mid 2017, and a final set of recommendations in early or mid 2018.

This is urgent because the continued weakening of RE's infrastructure is already damaging the provision of RE in schools. RE lessons are being reduced, RE specialists are hard to find, RE's quality is inconsistent, and RE's credibility is confused and contested. If RE continues as it is, by 2020 there will be little left of it outside schools with a religious character. There is a need to act now to prepare a viable future for RE. This means a change in the legal arrangements, and a more simple, straightforward purpose for the subject. Sooner or later, this change has to be made. It will either be a change created by the RE profession and its stakeholders – or a change forced on them by expediency.

Change by 2020, if it involves legislation, needs to be planned from now. From the government point of view, legislation should not take place too close to a general election in 2020. Therefore, a Bill would optimally pass through parliament in 2017-18. For this to be fully prepared and inclusively debated, the work needs to start this year and continue through to 2018.

These questions have to be answered for the pupils and teachers of now and the future. Many RE teachers are clear and determined that we can do better than the present arrangements, but we do not have all the answers. RE is a subject that is ready to govern itself by new rules.

The nature of stakeholderhood in RE

Who are the stakeholders? Anyone who has followed the argument so far will see the connection between the political structures governing the subject, and the implied or explicit epistemologies that rule in the minds of teachers and pupils. We need to end up in a place where the structures reflect an appropriate epistemology, one that is clear, consistent and honest.

Stakeholder theory will be an important agent of change and a source of ideas for a new model. The concept of stakeholderhood emerged to replace bureaucratic and static forms of capitalism from the 1960s onwards, and burgeoned under the globalisation measures of Thatcher, Reagan, Blair and Bush. Notions of stakeholderhood - of who has an interest or concern in an enterprise, why they do, and how their interest or concern might be channelled - have enabled both private and public sectors to liberate themselves from static client/owner dichotomies. Under pressure from consultant, mere capitalism and global movements of goods, money and people, local governments and other monopolies have retreated - another melancholy withdrawing roar - to create space for a more expansive and experimental set of definitions of who is or should be involved. Stakeholder theory has it that this new dispensation is dynamic, fluid, and more morally rich than what went before (Freeman, 2010). Some of the key characteristics of the cultural transactions associated with stakeholderhood include fluid mechanisms, definitions of stakeholderhood that are open to debate and to gradation, and that change over time. A growing interest in ethics and the environment, physical and social, are also associated themes. It is not particularly difficult to see how stakeholder theory might be applied to the question of reforming the political structures of RE, which still resemble pre-globalised habits: corporatist, restrictive, compliance- focused. The SACRE structures, with their four committees, exclude as of right whole sectors that the rest of the education sector would now recognise as vital stakeholders: for example secular organisations, parents, employers. In accepting that there is a case for reform, RE is merely catching up with an education sector that became dynamic, diverse, and fluid more than a decade ago: and this acceptance will both reflect and affect the change in epistemology.

A change in stakeholderhood for RE will bring about resultant flows of evidence that are blocked, or running slowly, at the moment. For example, the views of those who do not call themselves religious, and whose rights are highlighted in, for example, the Toledo Principles, are not channelled in the present structures. New forms of evidence about the epistemologies that it is appreciate to assume will be brought about if the structures are reformed.

Conclusion – and invitation to conversation

Is there a way out of the darkling plain? We urgently need a successor to RE which has real intellectual integrity, reflects the reality of religion and belief in the modern world , and makes an excellent contribution to pupils' education. RE needs the structures that can deliver this. I am not critical of the people who

operate in the present structures. I am only able to teach and to present these ideas because of the great work done by leading RE people in the past and present. I owe them my thanks. It is the *system* that is broken and indefensible, because it is not serving teachers and pupils well enough. I appreciate that change is a challenge for people who have invested time, talent and reputation in the present system. To go for change may well feel like a betrayal, or a risk. But surely the greater risk, the greater betrayal, would be to recognise that our structures are failing, and leading our subject to weakness and irrelevance, to know that we could do better – and to do nothing? What will the teachers who come after us say to us then? The historical moment is on us now. It is dangerous to do nothing and left the situation drift. I hope we will have an informed and inclusive conversation in order to shape our future.

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