

Ethnic Diversity, Christian Hegemony and the Emergence of Multi-faith Religious Education in the 1970s¹

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Abstract

This article provides a detailed reconstruction of the processes leading to the formation of the widely influential Birmingham *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction* (1975). This is contextualised within one of the most significant periods in the history of race relations in the United Kingdom. We discuss how this syllabus, and other landmark reforms in Religious Education (RE) in English schools from the late 1960s, responded to ethnic diversity by promoting supposedly culturally pluralist, multi-faith approaches to RE, which were subsequently perceived as eroding the Christian foundations of British/English national identity. We argue that the vilification of these curriculum reforms by culturally-conservative critics was in fact based upon an erroneous assessment of the extent to which these renounced the Christian hegemony of RE. We also critique the assumption that the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act represented a simple transition from culturally pluralist to assimilationist policies for the subject.

Keywords: Religious Education, immigration, assimilation, cultural pluralism

RE, dechristianisation, religious pluralisation and ‘racial’ integration

The 1960s are now regarded as a significant decade by historians of British secularisation, or more precisely dechristianisation.² Multiple symptoms and conditions have been identified which make the period demonstrably one in which there was a loosening of ties between Christianity, the churches and other cultural institutions that played a part in the perpetuation of Christian culture, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation.³ With regard to Religious Education (RE)⁴ in schools, the 1960s was a decade in which a number of leading thinkers called into question the appropriateness of a predominantly Christian and Bible-focused RE curriculum, the relevance of the Bible to young people, and the ability of children to understand religious concepts at all.⁵ Yet such views about curricular change were by no means uniform. The call for a new RE to match the changing cultural conditions led some, in a widely circulated *Open Letter to LEA* [Local Education Authority] *Religious Education Advisory Committees*, to advocate ‘reform ... along the lines of recent [psychological] research ... and to see the aim of religious education in terms of personal search rather than the imparting of a body of fact’.⁶ For others, as represented by an identically presented letter which opposed the approach taken by the signatories of first, RE should assist young people towards ‘the application of Christian faith in modern life’.⁷

² Dechristianisation is a more nuanced term than secularisation because it describes the decline in cultural affinity with Christianity rather than a decline in interest in, or attachment to, religion generally. See Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).

³ McLeod, *Religious Crisis*; Stephen Parker ‘“Teach them to pray Auntie”: Children’s Hour Prayers at the BBC, 1940-1961’, *History of Education* 39, no. 5 (2010): 659-676.

⁴ Since the 1944 Education Act, all pupils in England, except those withdrawn by their parents, have been required to receive weekly classes in RE, albeit that in the historical period under study, the subject was sometimes called Religious Instruction and Religious Knowledge.

⁵ Richard Acland, *We Teach Them Wrong*. (London: Gollancz, 1963) and *Curriculum for Life*. (London: Gollancz, 1966); Edwin Cox, *Changing Aims in Religious Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Ronald Goldman, *Religious Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964) and *Readiness for Religion* (London: Routledge, 1965); Harold Loukes *New Ground in Christian Education* (London: SCM Press, 1965). Similar concerns about the relevancy of History to young people were expressed by History educators at the time. See Keith Crawford, ‘A History of the Right: The Battle for the Control of National Curriculum History 1989-1994’, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 43 (1995): 435.

⁶ *An Open Letter to LEA Religious Education Advisory Committees*, undated, City of Birmingham Education Committee, Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE), 50, 4, 1, A12, 1965-1967. Birmingham Central Library.

⁷ *Another Open Letter to LEA Religious Education Advisory Committees*, City of Birmingham Education Committee SACRE, 50, 4, 1, A12, 1965-1967. Birmingham Central Library.

It has been argued that one key condition of dechristianisation was the ‘enormous increase in the range of beliefs and world-views accessible to the majority of the population ... not only new forms of Christianity and new political faiths, but many other religions and ‘alternative spiritualities’’.⁸ The increased access to, and encounter with, a range of religious and non-religious world-views, no longer at a distance, but found amongst the English population, facilitated a cultural relativism in which increasingly no ideology ‘could claim a condition of privilege’.⁹ For its critics, the development of multi-faith RE as a response to religious and ethnic diversity would come to represent further evidence of dechristianisation and the promotion of cultural relativism.

Amongst the many leading figures in the RE world who had had direct experience of non-Christian religions, and who had begun to accommodate knowledge of them in new approaches to the study of religion, was the influential Religious Studies scholar, Professor Ninian Smart. In his *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (1968), Smart argued that RE in schools should present the religious situation of the present as it is (i.e. a plural one and therefore with a plurality of truth claims), urging a new ‘neutral’, ‘undogmatic’ and ‘open’ approach to the subject.¹⁰ He argued: ‘it is one thing to present a faith sympathetically but openly (that is, by showing an appreciation of the alternatives to it); it is quite another thing to teach people that it is true ... it is one thing to present an understanding of religion; another to preach’.¹¹ Under Smart’s secularising influence the new subject of Religious Studies, which adopted a phenomenological approach, developed at the University of Lancaster. Subsequently, Smart’s views were also to be of direct influence upon developments in RE through his involvement in the work of the Schools Council and the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (see below).

⁸ McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, 1-2.

⁹ McLeod, *Religious Crisis*, 78.

¹⁰ Dennis Bates ‘Christianity, culture and other religions (Part 2): F. H. Hilliard, Ninian Smart and the 1988 Education Reform Act’, *British Journal of Religious Education* 18, no. 2 (1996): 85-102, 93.

¹¹ Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 96.

By the end of the 1960s, issues of immigration and ‘racial’ integration, rather than dechristianisation or religious pluralisation *per se*, were to become highly significant stimuli for reconsidering the aims and content of RE. The ethnic and religious diversity of post-Second World War England had increased dramatically. Immigration and its aftermath became a source of ‘moral panic’. This made it a highly political issue for successive Conservative and Labour governments from the late 1950s onwards, although divisions occurred across party lines over the need for, and administration of, immigration controls.¹² Initially, particularly in the 1950s, it was thought that immigration would be a temporary symptom of the unsettled global post-war situation, and that West Indian men, for example, who came to Britain alone in search of employment, would integrate successfully as ‘black Britons’ primarily because they were fellow English-speaking Christians.¹³ For similar reasons, it was assumed that the churches would be among the best agencies to facilitate assimilation.¹⁴ In practice, ‘post-war British society was an unwelcoming place for newcomers’. The Second World War had promoted a notion of British unity, coherence, strength and exceptionalism, as well as suspicions about ‘strangers in our midst’. There was also some resentment about having to share hard-won social advances with others.¹⁵ Complacent views of race relations were further challenged, and feelings of hostility were exacerbated, when new waves of immigrants, who differed markedly from the cultural majority in terms of language, religion and dress, arrived from the Indian sub-continent.¹⁶ Nevertheless, despite the inhospitality, and the Conservative government’s Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which was intended to control numbers of immigrants, immigration increased still further as the wives and children of earlier immigrants also came to settle in Britain.¹⁷

¹² Dennis Dean ‘The ‘liberal hour’? The Wilson government, race relations, immigrant youth and education, 1965-8, in *History, Politics and Policy-making in Education*, David Crook and Gary McCulloch, London: Institute of Education, 2007, 108.

¹³ *ibid*, 108-109.

¹⁴ *ibid*, 109.

¹⁵ *ibid*, 109-110.

¹⁶ *ibid*, 110.

¹⁷ *ibid*, 111.

The Labour government of 1964-1970 made various responses to the situation, combining policies intended to control levels of immigration with that of promoting integration. The latter placed the onus of adjustment on both the existing society as well as incoming groups.¹⁸ Moreover, segregation was opposed due to fears about the growth of ghettos, not least in parts of the West Midlands. In advice set out in the Department of Education and Science's (DES) Circular 7/65, *The Education of Immigrants*, LEAs were asked to pursue a policy of dispersal to ensure no school contained more than 30 per cent of its pupils from the New Commonwealth.¹⁹ The Labour government also passed two Race Relations Acts (1965 and 1968). The first established the Race Relations Board. The second changed the name of this Board to the Community Relations Commission to reflect the policy shift towards the promotion of 'harmonious community relations' as well as to control immigration further still.²⁰ By the end of the 1960s, the force of education policy was directed towards the 'adjustment' and 'integration' of the immigrant and the increased provision of equal opportunities.²¹ The dominant language was that of promoting 'race relations' and preventing 'racial discrimination'.²² The international backdrop to these national concerns included growing opposition to South African apartheid, as well as increasing unrest in Rhodesia, but it was the response of the United States government to the civil rights movement and related riots that was most influential on United Kingdom (UK) 'race relations' policies.²³

By the end of the 1960s, regular television depictions of racial disturbances in the United States raised alarm amongst the populace and politicians alike.²⁴ Fears were heightened still further by the Conservative Member of Parliament, Enoch Powell, who spoke of the deleterious effects of immigration and the 'the growth of positive forces acting against integration' in his notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech given in Birmingham on

¹⁸ *ibid*, 112-113.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 115.

²⁰ Sally Tomlinson, *Race and Education: policy and politics in Britain* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), 30.

²¹ Ian Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities: racism and educational policy in post 1945 Britain* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1997), 56.

²² Tomlinson, *Race and Education*, 20 and 26.

²³ *ibid*, 25 and 28. See also Mark Clapson, 'The American contribution to the urban sociology of race relations in Britain from the 1940s to the early 1970s', *Urban History* 33, no. 2 (2006): 253-273 and Dean, *The Wilson government*, 114.

²⁴ Dean, *The Wilson government*, 117.

20th April 1968.²⁵ Powell appealed for a return to an historic vision of English identity rather than ‘steady progress towards a multi-cultural society’, and expressed fear that the preservation and sharpening of racial and religious differences would lead to dangerous social fragmentation.²⁶ Other factors indicative of the politicization of ‘race’ as an issue were the growth of the right-wing National Front Party, founded in 1966, whose membership rose from 4,000 in 1968 to 17,500 in 1972, and the increasing industrial unrest about inequality in the workplace and unemployment amongst the Asian and African-Caribbean population. Overall, recent assessment of these years has described a situation in which ‘racial’ dissent was tangible and fear-invoking,²⁷ and that by the turn of the decade ‘racial prejudice was more deeply entrenched than it seemed’.²⁸

RE and immigration

Ian Grosvenor’s observation that the discourse around ‘race’ in Britain after the Second World War was characterised by a concern with numbers of immigrants, their ‘assimilation’ and ‘integration’, and the material well-being of the white population, as well as by a general problematisation of cultural difference, is evidenced by the correspondence between senior civil servants in the DES and Her Majesty’s Inspectors (HMI) about RE and immigration in the late 1960s.²⁹ Both agreed that a new form of RE was needed in order to respond to the ‘substantial number of children of other faiths’ and the related ‘problem of immigrant areas’ in some parts of the country.³⁰ The reasons for this were two-fold. First, from a sense of natural justice, it was argued that immigrant children had just as much of a right to learn about their own faith(s) as the ‘indigenous’ children had to learn about theirs (which was assumed to be Christianity). Nevertheless, it was

²⁵ From a full-text version of Enoch Powell’s speech: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> (accessed 12/07/2011)

²⁶ Dean, *The Wilson government*, 123.

²⁷ Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out: Britain in the Seventies* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 367ff and 445.

²⁸ Dominic Sandbrook, *State of Emergency, the way we were: Britain 1970-1974* (London: Penguin, 2011), 270.

²⁹ Ian Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities: Racism and Educational Policy in Post 1945 Britain* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1997), 24, pp. 49-68. Grosvenor also explains why ‘race’ is not ‘a valid explanatory and descriptive social fact in historical discourse’ (p.9).

³⁰ UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Correspondence on revised education bill and provisions. Letter from G. J. Spence to L. R. Fletcher, 21 July 1969.

also argued that the separatist approach of distributing pupils into religiously-differentiated classes or schools was to be avoided because it might lead to increasing ‘racial’ tension. Segregation, as addressed by DES Circular 7/65, was at odds with the integrationism underpinning contemporary education policy.³¹ Second, it was argued that ‘immigrant children should be given the opportunity to learn about the faith of the community within which *they* seek to integrate’.³² This two-pronged response seemingly made culturally pluralist concessions to minority rights, whilst also promoting an assimilationist policy that sought to introduce immigrant children to the ‘host nation’s’ religion. These governmental policy discussions reflected how RE theories and Agreed Syllabuses were to develop.³³

The new religiously and ethnically diverse situation was perceived as a specific challenge to religious educators by the then Labour Secretary of State for Education and Science, Edward Short, who wrote: ‘we turn the knob of our radio sets and the ether is a babel of tongues; we enter schools in many of our cities and are surrounded by children of a dozen races, cultures and creeds ... it is important that this diversity should not prove a barrier, but an enrichment. It can surely be so if we equip ourselves with the knowledge which dispels ignorance and the conviction that builds friendship and understanding ... The problems which confront the teacher are ... to inform himself ... of the different faiths [and] to relate them to each other so that they complement rather than conflict’.³⁴ Propelled by his belief that the ‘babel’ could be assuaged by a new kind of RE, Short organised a seminar at Windsor, in Easter 1969, which was attended by thirty invited participants including influential figures from the churches and affiliated ecumenical and professional bodies, LEAs, Colleges of Education, University Departments of Education, and HMI, as well as teachers and

³¹ Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities*, 56-57.

³² UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Correspondence on revised education bill and provisions. Commission on Religious Education: Brief Summary of Evidence presented to Commission [From Jack Earl to G. J. Spence, undated], [authors’ italics].

³³ The terms assimilationist, separatist and cultural pluralist are defined in the ‘Swann Report’ to categorise distinct responses to religious pluralism. Assimilationist approaches seek the absorption of minority groups into majority or mainstream culture and religion, and promote ethnocentric educational settings and curricula. Separatist approaches emphasise the withdrawal of minority groups to separate or supplementary ethnically-differentiated provision. Culturally pluralist approaches seek the equal participation of majority and minority groups in society and promote ethnically-inclusive and multi-religious provision. See Department of Education and Science (DES), *Education for All* (London, HMSO, 1985), 475.

³⁴ John Hinnells, ed., *Comparative Religion in Education* (Newcastle: Oriel Press, 1970), vii.

headteachers from both state-maintained and independent, primary and secondary schools.³⁵ The outcomes of this seminar were published as *Prospects and Problems for Religious Education* (1971) and its conclusions resonated with the discourse of civil servants and HMI cited above: RE should ensure ‘appropriate attention is paid to non-Christian religions’, but it should be ‘primarily concerned with what may be called the Judaeo-Christian heritage’.³⁶

Three landmarks

At the same time as the policy discussions above, there were three landmarks in the development of English RE which were all significant, in their own ways, in terms of a move towards the teaching of world religions in RE and the fostering of ‘racial’ integration. Though space does not permit a full discussion of each milestone, some comment about the ways in which they responded to ethnic and religious diversity needs to be made. First, the Shap Working Party, which was inaugurated in Shap Wells in Northern England in April 1969, was a group of academics and interested parties drawn together by the wish to foster the teaching of world religions at all levels, including in schools, and to do so on a national basis by the development of networks, teaching methods and resources.³⁷ The ‘prominence of discussions on immigrant questions’ and the contribution that the comparative study of world religions would make to ‘increase tolerance and understanding’ were stated as reasons for the origins of the Shap Working Party. Nevertheless, it also pledged to ‘stimulate [the child’s] appreciation of the distinctive Christian teachings’.³⁸ Similarly, early on in its history, it was iterated that RE may now ‘start with any religion, but Christianity is the natural starting

³⁵ Some of the delegates were also participants in the Church of England’s Board of Education and National Society’s Commission on Religious Education in Schools (1967-70). The most notable of these was its chairperson, the Right Reverend Ian Ramsey who was Bishop of Durham.

³⁶ DES, *Prospects and Problems for Religious Education* (London: HMSO, 1971), 17.

³⁷ Those present were: John Hinnells, then Lecturer in Religious Studies, University of Newcastle; Eric J. Sharpe, Lecturer in Comparative Religion, University of Manchester; Ninian Smart, Professor of Religious Studies, University of Lancaster; H. J. Blackham, Director of the British Humanist Association; O. R. Johnston, Lecturer in Education, University of Newcastle; E. G. Parrinder, Reader in the Study of Comparative Religions, King’s College, London; F. H. Hilliard, Professor of Education, University of Birmingham.

³⁸ The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Papers of the Shap Working Party, Box 11, Comparative Religion in Education: the Shap Working Party, dated April 1970.

point in Britain ... Christian parents must look elsewhere for the Christian education of their children ... the imam and the vicar will be faced with a new missionary task.’³⁹

Second, the Schools Council Working Party on RE, based at the University of Lancaster, under the chairmanship of Ninian Smart, began in October 1969. From the outset, it was concerned to respond to a range of factors, not least ‘the presence of non-Christian populations in this country.’⁴⁰ However, the final report, titled *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (1971), denied that it was ‘the presence of African, Asian, and Caribbean immigrants that forces us to recognize that religious education in Britain must not be limited to white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism’. Instead it asserted that ‘for many years pupils have asked for an introduction to other religions ... and that a significant proportion of the general public would like to see religious education in schools broadened in this way’.⁴¹ Nevertheless, *Working Paper 36* was clear that RE which included the teaching of world religions had a place in fostering the integration of children and mutual toleration amongst the populace, and that ‘immigrant children need to understand the religious heritage and the current religious outlook of the ‘host’ society as well as to understand the teaching and practice of *their own* faith’.⁴² Similarly, it maintained that ‘the ‘hosts’ need to understand and appreciate the culture, including the religious beliefs and practices, of their new neighbours’.⁴³ Thus, it asserted the pre-eminent cultural importance of the ‘host’s’ religious heritage, alongside the culturally pluralist language of mutual understanding, ‘dialogue’ and ‘appreciation’.⁴⁴

Third, the Church of England’s Board of Education and National Society’s Commission on Religious Education in Schools began in 1967 and was published in 1970 as *The Fourth R*. Its silence on the question

³⁹ The Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Papers of the Shap Working Party, Box 11, Comparative Religion in Education: the Shap Working Party, paper submitted by W. Owen Cole for discussion at meeting on 9 January 1971.

⁴⁰ Institute of Education, University of London. Schools Council Consultative Committee, SCC318.440.117. RE in secondary schools. Professor Smart. - Consultative Committee. 1969-1976, circular letter to the committee, 20 October 1969.

⁴¹ Schools Council, *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (London: Evans Methuen, 1971), 61

⁴² Authors’ italics

⁴³ Schools Council, *Working Paper 36*, 63.

⁴⁴ *ibid*

of immigrant groups and ‘racial’ integration is revealing, but unsurprising, given that its priority was to justify maintenance of the church’s influence in matters of schooling and religious education. Consequently, the Commission’s report stressed that the religious education of immigrant children was beyond its remit and complex, and that it should be dealt with at a local level and be subject to a separate enquiry.⁴⁵ This latter point puzzled Ninian Smart who demurred by stating, ‘I don’t think the immigrant tail should wag the RE dog’.⁴⁶ *The Fourth R* was keen to assert the hegemony of Christianity in the RE curriculum (whilst also endorsing the teaching of world religions at the upper end of secondary schooling) as an essential means of understanding the culture of the Western World.⁴⁷ Arguably, it was as much because the report failed to engage properly with the issues raised by religious and ethnic diversity in England at the time, as it was the ‘eruption upon the scene of what was sometimes called a ‘Shap-shaped’ approach to RE’, that the *Fourth R* only had a marginal influence over the RE’s development.⁴⁸ It was as late as 1974 that one religious commentator, Clifford Longley, was able to observe that up until that point the presence of other religions had ‘scarcely had any impact on the life of the Christian churches’.⁴⁹

It is possible to conclude that the development of culturally pluralist RE in England from the late 1960s in part grew from wider political exigencies concerning ‘racial’ integration and the ‘problem of immigration’. The ‘separatist’ alternative, which was religiously-differentiated instruction or schooling, was perceived to be divisive, a hindrance to the political goal of integration, and largely prohibited by administrative and/or financial limitations. Nevertheless, on the grounds of heritage and culture, many policy-makers, academics and professionals simultaneously argued, often with assimilationist tendencies, that Christianity should

⁴⁵ Commission on Religious Education in Schools. *The Fourth R: The Report of the Commission on Religious Education in Schools* (London: National Society/SPCK, 1970), 279.

⁴⁶ Ninian Smart, ‘What is Truth in RE?’, *Learning for Living* 10, no. (1), (1970): 13-15.

⁴⁷ Commission on Religious Education in Schools. *The Fourth R*, 97.

⁴⁸ Michael Grimmitt, ed., *Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion: an exploration of challenges and opportunities* (Essex: McCrimmon, 2010), 264.

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 11 February 1974 quoted in John Wolffe, ‘How many ways to God? Christians and religious pluralism’ in *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945*, ed. Gerald Parsons, (London: Routledge, 1994), 38. It was not until 1975 that the Church of England established the Archbishops’ Consultants on Inter-Faith Relations and 1978 that the British Council of Churches established a Committee for Relations with People of Other Faiths.

remain the pre-eminent subject content. Consequently, any tendency towards cultural pluralism was undermined by the prioritisation of the values and beliefs of the dominant culture.⁵⁰ It represented an unhappy compromise which was theoretically problematic, but perhaps politically unavoidable. Against this theoretical and political background, the next section explores the practical difficulties involved in forming a culturally pluralist (or multi-faith) curriculum, which were evident, most famously, in Birmingham in the 1970s.

Birmingham Agreed Syllabus (1975): a response to ‘racial’ politics and immigration

Few places in England exhibited the issues of ‘racial’ politics, and religious educators’ responses to religious and ethnic plurality in schools, better than Birmingham during the 1960s and 1970s. Birmingham itself had long been a religiously diverse city, and in the post-war years it became more so due to immigration from the Caribbean and the Indian sub-continent. The immigrant population rose from 51,500 in 1951 to 118,000 in 1966, or some 11 per cent of the city’s population as a whole.⁵¹ This made it, outside of London, and alongside Bradford, one of the most religiously diverse cities in the UK. In Birmingham, in the 1960s, along with the issues of overcrowding and the health of immigrants, concerns were expressed about the education of migrant children and their general attainment levels, their facility with English and their integration into wider society.⁵² Though a survey of public opinion undertaken by Westhill College in 1960 suggested that racism was not a problem amongst teachers and children in primary schools, and that parents did not mind their children being educated alongside immigrant children, there is evidence to suggest that the situation had changed by 1965. First, there were protests by parents and teachers in the city about the balance of immigrant and indigenous white children in some schools. Second, a report by the Birmingham Association of Schoolmasters stated that ‘racial’ enclaves were being formed in some schools.⁵³ Third, research found that

⁵⁰ Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities*, 61.

⁵¹ A. Sutcliffe and R. Smith, *History of Birmingham (Vol. III) Birmingham 1939-1970* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 207-208.

⁵² *ibid*, 382-384.

⁵³ *ibid*, 382-386; Tomlinson, *Race and Education*, 29.

the ‘socializing, anglicizing, integrating’ function of schools in which ‘teachers see their role as putting over a certain set of values (Christian)’ was becoming a particular problem where more than a quarter of each class were of immigrant origin.⁵⁴

It was in this context that the Birmingham *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Instruction*⁵⁵ (1975) (BAS) was produced. The BAS is widely accepted in the historiography as a milestone in English RE and has been referred to as a ‘major breakthrough’⁵⁶ and as ‘the total revolution of subject matter’ bringing about ‘a totally new orthodoxy’.⁵⁷ The BAS represents one of the first and most radical attempts in England - through a statutory Agreed Syllabus⁵⁸ - to move RE from a curriculum dominated by Christianity and Bible stories to one which sought to introduce children from the earliest ages to other world religions and (as they were specifically called in the syllabus) non-religious ‘stances for living’ (i.e. Communism and Humanism). Although it was not the first such syllabus to include multi-faith material - the Agreed Syllabuses of the West Riding of Yorkshire (1966) and the Inner London Education Authority (1968) had done so - the BAS was the first to include world religions in considerable measure and with the overt intention of providing a thoroughgoing and systematic education across the major faiths. For some, it represents the displacement of ‘the positive teaching of Christianity’ with agnosticism and scepticism,⁵⁹ while for others, it represents the creation of a new form of RE ‘which could meet the complex religious and cultural needs of a large, multi-

⁵⁴ John Rex and Robert Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict: a study of Sparkbrook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 237-238.

⁵⁵ City of Birmingham Education Committee, *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction* (Birmingham: City of Birmingham Education Committee, 1975).

⁵⁶ John Hull, *Studies in Religion and Education* (Lewes: The Falmer Press, 1984), 29.

⁵⁷ Jack Priestley, ‘Agreed Syllabuses: Their History and Development in England and Wales 1944-2004’, in *International Handbook of the Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education*. Part 2, ed. M. de Souza, K. Engebretson, G. Durka, R. Jackson, and A. McGrady (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 1001-1017, 1012.

⁵⁸ According to the 1944 Education Act, LEAs were required to produce their own Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Instruction; adopt one from another LEA; or combine elements from several other examples (Section 29). These had to be defined by a ‘Conference’ consisting of four committees representing (i) religious denominations, (ii) the Church of England, (iii) teacher associations, and (iv) the LEA (Section 29:2). All four committees had to agree unanimously (Section 29:5). Agreed Syllabuses could not include any catechism or formulary which was distinctive of any particular religious denomination (Section 26). The 1944 Education Act did not specify which religion was to be taught.

⁵⁹ Penny Thompson, *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2004), 86.

cultural and multi-faith city'.⁶⁰ What conditions locally and nationally drove this move in the direction of culturally pluralist, multi-faith RE in schools are disputed. Some accounts refer to the indirect influence of individuals such as Ninian Smart and his Schools Council project, the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, and the pervasiveness of a misguided liberal Protestant theology.⁶¹ Others identify existentialism, recognition of the importance of pupils' searches for meaning, and concerns about indoctrination as the motives for reform.⁶²

Below we provide a detailed narrative reconstruction of the formation of the BAS that is based upon previously unutilised archival sources. It is contextualised by local 'racial' politics, and debates about immigration and religious and ethnic diversity in schools, rather than by the decontextualised academic debates about the theological or ideological foundations of RE that dominate the existing historiography. The reasons for providing such a detailed account are numerous. First, even though the processes of curriculum change in RE are long-standing, complex and unique to the subject, they have not previously been the subject of an archivally based study. Beyond contributing to our present and particular purposes, the narrative below therefore also seeks to demonstrate the richness of the extant primary source material to other RE researchers.⁶³ Second, a narrative reconstruction enables us to reveal the layers of complexity and contestation in operation locally in RE curriculum development beyond the influence of well-known intellectual trends and key national figures.⁶⁴ Third, as Birmingham was one of the first major cities to

⁶⁰ Grimmitt, *Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion*, 268.

⁶¹ Penny Thompson, *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?*; L. Philip Barnes, 'The disputed legacy of Ninian Smart and phenomenological religious education: A critical response to Kevin O'Grady,' *British Journal of Religious Education* 29, no. 2, (2007): 157-168; L. Philip Barnes and Andrew Wright, 'Romanticism, representations of religion and critical religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 28, no. 1, (2006): 65-77.

⁶² John Sullivan, 'Dismembering and Remembering Religious Education' in *Inspiring Faith in Schools*, ed. Marius Felderhof, Penny Thompson and David Torevell (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Terence Copley, *Teaching Religion: Sixty Years of Religious Education in England and Wales* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2008), 96.

⁶³ For a critique of the existing historiography of RE, see R. J. K. Freathy and S. G. Parker 'The necessity of historical inquiry in educational research: the case of religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no. 3 (2010): 229-243.

⁶⁴ On this point we would criticise the generally excellent work of Dennis Bates (See 'Christianity, culture and other religions (part 1): the origins of the study of world religions in English education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 17, no. 1 (1994): 5-18 and 'Christianity, culture and other religions (part 2): F.H.Hilliard, Ninian Smart and the 1988 Education Reform Act', *British Journal of Religious Education* 18, no. 2 (1996): 85-102. See also Stephen Parker and Rob Freathy 'Context, Complexity and

experience religious and ethnic diversity, it became a test-bed for developments in RE which went on to have national and international influence, for example, through the publications of John Hull and the proceedings of the International Seminar for Religious Education and Values (est. 1977).

The need for revision

In 1967, the Reverend D. J. W. Bradley, the city's Anglican Diocesan Director of Education, indicated the direction that reform in RE might take. Writing in the local daily newspaper, *The Birmingham Post*, he observed that: 'despite the advent of a more extensively pluralist society in Britain, positive Christian conviction is still a formidable element in the national life - probably *the* most formidable *single* element ... We do not dispute the claims of other faiths or philosophies to an equal hearing...and this must be ensured far more effectively than it is at present, but we cannot abdicate...our responsibilities as custodians of the Christian tradition, which we hold in trust for future generations'.⁶⁵ The commitment to 'an equal hearing' appears spurious.

By 1968, it was clear to others that the political and educational challenges of responding to religious and ethnic diversity in schools were key justifications for revising the existing Birmingham *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Instruction*. Two members, in particular, of the Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education (SACRE)⁶⁶, which was the statutory body responsible for Religious Instruction in the city, were significant in proposing the revision to the now out-of-date 1962 Bible-based syllabus and both were Anglican clergymen. One, F. C. Carpenter, would later be involved in the Church of England's Board of Education and National Society's Commission on Religious Education in Schools (see above). The other, F. J. Williams, was a chaplain at one of the city's leading Secondary Grammar schools. Writing to the Chief Education Officer for

Contestation: Birmingham's Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education since the 1970s', *Journal of Beliefs and Values*, 32, no. 2 (2011): [To be confirmed].

⁶⁵ The Reverend D. J. W. Bradley, 'School and built-in religion', *The Birmingham Post*, October 24 1967.

⁶⁶ The 1944 Education Act permitted each LEA to constitute a SACRE to advise the authority upon matters connected with Religious Instruction, particularly regarding methods of teaching, choice of books and the provision of lectures for teachers (Section 29.2).

the LEA, Kenneth Brooksbank, Carpenter identified several reasons to justify revising the existing syllabus. First, he quoted remarks from the recently published ‘Plowden Report’ on *Children and their Primary Schools* about what might be appropriately taught in RE to younger children.⁶⁷ Second, he drew upon comments from the ‘Newsom Report’ - *Half Our Future* - about the disillusionment with RE felt amongst students in Secondary Modern schools.⁶⁸ Third, he noted the flexibility afforded by including a separate section of non-statutory ‘suggestions’ for teachers alongside a statutory Agreed Syllabus, as had been provided with the West Riding of Yorkshire’s Agreed Syllabus (1966).⁶⁹ Furthermore, Carpenter urged a move away from Bible-centred approaches to child-centred RE, taking into account where children lived in the city, and the ‘special difficulties, or the special opportunities, which present themselves in the diverse environment encompassed by the Authority’.⁷⁰ Williams similarly identified social change as a reason for revising the RE syllabus, arguing that ‘a more widely based syllabus might make some contribution to greater mutual understanding between British and immigrant children’.⁷¹ However, not all voices on the City’s Education Committee were in favour of syllabus reform or of accommodating the content of the existing syllabus to the new ‘racial’ and religious constituency of the city. One councillor in particular demurred with the words ‘are we going to change the whole approach because there are non-Christians among us’?⁷² Thus the initial response to the issues of ‘racial’ integration and immigration of those seeking to shape the development of RE in Birmingham could hardly be described as a wholehearted acceptance of the need for a culturally pluralist approach.

⁶⁷ Central Advisory Council for Education, *Children and their Primary Schools* (London: HMSO, 1967), 473.

⁶⁸ Central Advisory Council for Education. *Half Our Future* (London: HMSO, 1963), 58.

⁶⁹ County Council of the West Riding of Yorkshire Education Department. *Suggestions for Religious Education* (Wakefield: West Riding County Council, 1966).

⁷⁰ 19 February 1968. Letter from Rev. F. C. Carpenter to the Chief Education Officer City of Birmingham Education Committee – Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, January 1968 – March 1969, [Box 33, File 2]. Birmingham Central Library.

⁷¹ Paper to be circulated to the whole SACRE written by Reverend F. J. Williams, Chaplain of King Edward’s School, Birmingham, 15 (Edgbaston), 1 October 1968 City of Birmingham Education Committee – Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, January 1968 – March 1969, [Box 33, File 2]. Birmingham Central Library.

⁷² City of Birmingham Education Committee – Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference), beginning 25 March, 1969 [Box 37, File 2]. Birmingham Central Library.

One reason put forward to justify pausing before revising the existing syllabus was that a new Education Act was expected in 1969 or 1970. The mooted Bill would have been concerned, in part, with RE and its response to the ‘problem of immigrant areas’.⁷³ Discussed at ministerial level and amongst senior civil servants and HMI under the Labour Government of Prime Minister Harold Wilson (1964-70), the proposed Bill, which was never promulgated because of a change of government, would have had considerable consequences for RE. The proposals included a change in the name of the subject, from Religious Instruction to Religious Education; a loosening of the 1944 Education Act’s clause with regard to the statutory daily act of collective worship; an exemption for those over 16 years of age from attending compulsory RE and/or collective worship; and the replacement of locally determined and statutory Agreed Syllabuses with some form of non-statutory guidance produced by either a local or national committee.⁷⁴ However, senior HMI were aware that such changes, though welcomed by what they described as the more ‘liberal and forward-looking’, would rouse ‘sleeping dogs and sleeping consciences’ amongst traditionalists. The judicious middle-way, they asserted, would be the best course to take in any proposed changes.⁷⁵ Their assessment of the broader context seems prescient given both the uproar that occurred when Birmingham’s radical syllabus tried to enact some of the more controversial suggestions that had been put forward for inclusion in the proposed Education Bill, and the subsequent and ongoing debates about the relative place of Christianity within RE.

Responding to secular and religious diversity

On 9th May 1969, after much debate in the Birmingham Education Committee about the legitimacy and timing of the call for revision, it was pronounced that work on a new syllabus would begin.⁷⁶ Soon after, on

⁷³ As above: UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Correspondence on revised education bill and provisions. Letter from G. J. Spence to Mr Fletcher, 21 July 1969.

⁷⁴ UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Correspondence on revised education bill and provisions. Future Legislation: Provisions for Religion in Schools (MFL 69(6)). [Undated].

⁷⁵ UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Correspondence on revised education bill and provisions. Letter from G. J. Spence to L. R. Fletcher, 21 July 1969.

⁷⁶ City of Birmingham Education Committee – Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference), beginning 25 March, 1969 [Box 37, File 2]. Minutes of the meeting of the Finance and General Purposes Sub-committee, 9 May, 1969.

21st May, the radical decision was taken to include representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities amongst the nearly forty members of the Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) that would revise the syllabus.⁷⁷ More specifically, they were invited to form part of the committee representing ‘denominations other than the Church of England’ thereby limiting their voting power and influence to just one of the four ASC committees. Each committee, including that which solely represented the Church of England, held the power of veto. Meanwhile, the prospect of contributing to the revision of the Agreed Syllabus drew considerable attention from local Humanists, who from this point on regularly contacted the city’s Chief Education Officer, Brooksbank, requesting that their voice be heard.⁷⁸ The plea was initially parried politely, but firmly, by Brooksbank as he reiterated the legal position with regard to membership of any ASC, which did not include those of a non-religious disposition.⁷⁹ However, the local Humanists persisted. Perhaps they were buoyed by the words of H. J. Blackham who had responded to a call by the Secretary of State for Education and Science, Edward Short, for the Christian character of the country to be defended, by stating that ‘the decision that this country is or should be a Christian one could only be the decision of the majority’.⁸⁰ It was not until their meeting on the 14th November 1969, that the SACRE resolved to consult Humanists, where consultation was deemed to be important, and later went as far as co-opting a local Humanist, Harry Stopes-Roe, to the Agreed Syllabus Working Parties.⁸¹ Regardless of what the arguments were in favour of including Humanists on the ASC, it is clear that the more open membership of the ASC was originally intended as a response to what was perceived as the more significant and urgent matter of ethnic and religious diversity.

Birmingham Central Library. The person who called for work on the syllabus to begin, Councillor Scrimshaw, was also the councillor who later objected to the inclusion of Communism in the subject content of the completed syllabus.

⁷⁷ Not all of the city’s minority faiths were represented on the ASC, for instance, neither the Bahai nor Serbian Orthodox communities received an invitation.

⁷⁸ City of Birmingham Education Committee, SACRE, 55, 2, 1, A14, April 1969- July 1970, Minutes of the meeting 21st May, 1969. Birmingham Central Library.

⁷⁹ City of Birmingham Education Committee – Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference), beginning 25 March, 1969 [Box 37, File 2]. See, for example, note of a telephone call date 24 January 1969. Birmingham Central Library.

⁸⁰ ‘Religious Teaching in Schools to Stay’, *The Birmingham Post*, 11 January 1969.

⁸¹ City of Birmingham Education Committee, SACRE, 55, 2, 1, A14, April 1969- July 1970, Minutes of the meeting 14 November, 1969. Birmingham Central Library.

The attention of the local press had been drawn to the revision of the syllabus by the local Humanists as part of their strategy to ensure that the issues were publicly debated, but it also succeeded in generating a further degree of ‘moral panic’ which would later hamper the syllabus’s ratification. Would the new syllabus, as one newspaper commentator pondered, grasp ‘the nettle’ and ‘include instruction on religions other than Christianity?: will future generations of schoolchildren hear readings from the Koran as well as from the Bible in the morning assembly?: [will] groups of peripatetic teachers ... be employed to tour city schools giving specialist lectures [about religions] [because] awareness of other religions is seen as an important force in integration in a multi-racial society’.⁸² In private, Brooksbank articulated the challenges presented to those drafting the new syllabus. Stressing the importance of RE in promoting integration, he argued that it would be ‘regrettable’ if one syllabus was produced that is Christian in content for all the city’s children with the right of withdrawal being exercised by those of other faiths. Instead, he wondered whether there should be ‘an entirely new approach’ which takes ‘common themes’ from across religions, and focuses upon the ‘moral aspects’ with younger children, and then beyond the age of thirteen, provides the opportunity to study ‘a particular religion systematically’, or to undertake a ‘special study’ of ‘theological themes’ at a later stage. For Brooksbank, committing children to the study of a particular religion at too young an age, unless handled very carefully, could ‘emphasise the divisiveness of religion in society’.⁸³ Clearly his overriding concern was to promote social cohesion through RE. Perhaps it was for this reason that he was reluctant to accept belligerent Humanists, who may have been antithetical to the whole process and product, onto the ASC. What is also clear is that he needed to identify somebody capable of leading the ASC in a compatible direction.

⁸² Undated newspaper article in City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference) 37, 1, 1, A10 (i), 1970. Birmingham Central Library.

⁸³ City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference) 37, 1, 1, A10 (i), 1970, Report of the Chief Education Officer, The Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction in Birmingham Schools. Birmingham Central Library.

Although invited to join the ASC by Brooksbank, the selection of the non-Christian representatives essentially came by way of the personal recommendation of the now renowned philosopher of inter-religious understanding, Professor John Hick (1922-), who went on to become Chairman of the Syllabus' Coordinating Working Party. As an undergraduate, mainly as a result of his peer group, Hick had converted to a fundamentalist version of Christianity. After studying philosophy (at Edinburgh University) and the philosophy of religion (at Oxford University), he was ordained as a Presbyterian minister. In 1967, he succeeded Ninian Smart as the H. G. Wood Professor in Theology at the University of Birmingham (1967-1978). Under the influence of the Cadbury family,⁸⁴ the Theology department had developed a broader rather than narrower religious outlook.⁸⁵ In this context, Ninian Smart had shifted the department from an exclusive focus upon Christian theology towards a greater emphasis upon the study of world religions. Hick's theology developed partly in response to Smart's work, particularly whilst their term of appointment at Birmingham overlapped, but more because of his own encounter with people of other faiths in Birmingham.⁸⁶ Through spending time in mosques, synagogues, gurdwaras and temples, Hick came to believe that although 'all the externals were different ... at a deeper level ... essentially the same thing was going on in all these different places of worship, namely men and women were coming together under the auspices of some ancient, highly developed tradition which enables them to open their minds and hearts 'upwards' towards a higher divine reality which makes a claim on the living of their lives'.⁸⁷ For that reason, he began to hold that at 'this basic level the religions are at one'.⁸⁸ This led him to criticise those theologians who still maintained that Christianity was 'spiritually, intellectually or morally superior to all other religious traditions'.⁸⁹ It was a conviction that he began to articulate, whilst he was supporting the development of the syllabus, in *God and*

⁸⁴ In Birmingham, the Cadburys founded one of the world's largest cocoa and chocolate companies. The family dynasty was well-known for its Quakerism and philanthropy.

⁸⁵ John Hick. *John Hick: An Autobiography* (Banbury: One World Publications, 2002), 144 and 149.

⁸⁶ John Veitch, 'Creating a Legend: Recollections of an Up and Coming Ninian Smart, 1967-69', *Religion* 31, no. 4 (2001): 373-377, 375.

⁸⁷ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 60.

⁸⁸ *ibid*, 160.

⁸⁹ *ibid*, 147.

the Universe of Faiths (1973).⁹⁰ Moreover, Hick began spending his sabbaticals travelling to India, Sri Lanka and Japan studying Hinduism and Buddhism in order to inform his philosophical thinking. He believed that in order ‘to understand a faith you have to spend some time in its hinterlands’.⁹¹

Despite evidencing culturally pluralist tendencies, it has been argued that Hick’s religious pluralism was actually based upon an exclusive liberal Protestant theology, which enabled a subtle form of Christian hegemony to be maintained, whilst giving the appearance of conceding ground.⁹² However, we argue that his hugely significant influence over the development of RE in Birmingham in the 1970s was not the result of this re-conceptualisation of Christianity’s approach to other faiths (which was still being worked out), but a direct outcome of his participation in local ‘racial’ politics and debates about immigration.⁹³ More specifically, his participation in the Birmingham Community Relations Committee (from which members of the ASC were drawn) and in the campaigning group called *All Faiths for One Race* (AFFOR), which he co-founded in protest against apartheid and a proposed tour of England by the South African cricket team in 1970, reflect his motivation for getting involved in the development of RE in Birmingham at this stage.⁹⁴

In 1969, Hick was invited to become the chairperson of the Community Relations Committee’s newly established Religious and Cultural Panel. This met in the Council House with representatives from the Muslim, Sikh, Hindu and Jewish communities. On behalf of the panel, Hick wrote to Brooksbank in October 1969 having heard that the revision of the syllabus was under consideration and urging that ‘Muslim, Sikh and Hindu children in the City’s schools should be given adequate opportunity to receive religious instruction in their own faiths ... as a moral right created by the fact that Christian children receive Christian education as

⁹⁰ Hick began to articulate his views much earlier, notably at Carrs Lane Church Centre in Birmingham in February and March 1972. See John Wolffe, ‘How many ways to God? Christians and religious pluralism’, in *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945*, ed. Gerald Parsons (London: Routledge, 1994), 32.

⁹¹ Interview with John Hick, 7 November 2008.

⁹² Barnes and Wright, ‘Romanticism, representations of religion and critical religious education’, 69-72.

⁹³ Interview with John Hick, 7 November 2008.

⁹⁴ Hick, *An Autobiography*, 169f.

an integral part of their schooling, but also as providing an important stabilising factor in the life of the immigrant communities'. The new syllabus, he wrote, should be traditionally Christian in content, but should also meet the needs of 'the quite large non-Christian communities which have grown up in Birmingham since the present [1962] syllabus was devised'. Nevertheless, as the situation in schools demanded a speedy response, Hick argued that some of the religious needs of minority communities might be met in the interim by enabling separate religious instruction, some separate or even inter-religious worship, and by training and accrediting volunteers from the faith communities.⁹⁵ Brooksbank's response to this separatist proposal reiterated the current legal position that all pupils in LEA schools, except those withdrawn by their parents, must receive weekly RE as defined by a locally Agreed Syllabus. However, he tentatively agreed to the idea that religious instruction in the child's own faith could occur outside of school hours at the discretion of individual headteachers (a view, as we have seen above, that was counter to the position of the DES).⁹⁶ Undoubtedly, these local exigencies, particularly the pacification of religious and 'racial' tension, were a major factor in the drive towards a multi-faith syllabus, but even whilst recognising this, Hick and the multi-faith members of the Religious and Cultural Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee continued to assert the pre-eminent place of Christianity within the curriculum.⁹⁷

HMI took a particular interest in developments in Birmingham and visited the city to discuss the proposed arrangements being explored with representatives of the city's religious groups. HMI were particularly interested in the idea that each religious community might develop its own 'Agreed Syllabus' for use with

⁹⁵ City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference), beginning 25 March 1969 (Box 37, File 2): 15 October 1969. Letter from John Hick (Chairman of the Religious Education Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee) to Chief Education Officer, K. G. Brooksbank. Birmingham Central Library.

⁹⁶ City of Birmingham Education Committee, Revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction (Conference), beginning 25 March, 1969 (Box 37, File 2). Letter from Brooksbank to John Hick, 24 October, 1969. Birmingham Central Library. Brooksbank was perturbed when one Birmingham (Handsworth) school established supplementary and holiday classes run by parents and teachers to improve attainment amongst Black children in the area. See Sally Tomlinson, 'Race and Education in Birmingham: then and now', in *Immigration and Race Relations: sociological theory and John Rex*, ed. T. Abbas and F. Reeves (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 167.

⁹⁷ John Hick private papers, Religious Education in a Multi-Religious Society, a paper submitted by the Religious and Cultural Panel of the Birmingham Community Relations Committee to the City of Birmingham Conference to consider possible revision of the Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction.

children from the relevant faith group. Yet they did not believe that this separatist provision would be sufficient. They stated that whilst ‘no young person should be denied the opportunity of learning more about the religion and the culture which is his own ethnic background’, it would also seem right ‘to acquaint him with the cultural and religious backgrounds of all those amongst whom he works and plays’. Furthermore, it seemed preferable to the HMI, much in line with the Government’s integrationist policy, to contain the religious education of the young within the school, even if taught by members of each faith community, rather than permitting withdrawal to an off-site location which would jeopardise integration and breed ‘misunderstanding and suspicion’.⁹⁸ Thus, despite consideration of all of the alternatives mentioned above, the development of one Agreed Syllabus representing the secular and religious diversity of Birmingham was eventually seen as the best response to the issues of ‘racial’ integration and immigration.

A multi-faith process and product

Towards the beginning of the period of syllabus revision, a conference on the contribution of RE in a ‘multi-racial’ society was held in Birmingham in November 1969 under the auspices of the Christian Education Movement. It was designed to inform those working on the new syllabus. At this conference, John Prickett, Secretary of the Education Department of the British Council of Churches, reported on how schools in Huddersfield were managing the religious education of Sikh, Hindu and Muslim children. There were tensions between the wishes of headteachers to create ‘a community spirit’, and parental fears concerning the ‘indoctrination’ of their children into the Christian faith. As a consequence, some Muslim children in Huddersfield were being given up to three hours a day of additional religious education. In respect of the potential new Education Act, Prickett stated that in the view of the British Council of Churches, a body representing all mainstream Christian denominations except Roman Catholics, arrangements should be made

⁹⁸ UK National Archives. ED183-5. DES. Schools Branch. Registered Files. Minute from E. Lord (Metropolitan Division) to various HMI, 22nd January 1970. The view that supplementary lessons in the faith of the home could be a ‘bonus’ rather than an ‘imposition’, leading to ‘sympathy and understanding [...] in a potentially explosive area of activity’, was articulated further by HMI Eric Lord in an article titled *More Paths Than One* (unsourced and undated) which was distributed to members of the Birmingham ASC.

for the inclusion in ASCs of ‘representatives of other religions’ and ‘interested groups’ (e.g. Humanists). For Graham Sheen, who had attended the conference on behalf of the SACRE, this served to underline the legitimacy of Birmingham’s approach.⁹⁹

The Birmingham ASC was first formally convened in March 1970. There were four Working Parties representing different age phases: ‘A’ (5-8 years), ‘B’ (8-12 years), ‘C’ (13-16 years) and ‘D’ (16-18 years). Representatives of the ASC, and thus also representatives of different religions, were distributed across the Working Parties according to their age phase interest and experience. Each Working Party was responsible not only for drafting the content of the syllabus and suggesting resources, but also for providing substantive guidance on the approach to be taken in RE within their age-phase. The laborious work involved individuals drafting material for discussion at monthly meetings. Oversight of the final form of the syllabus was maintained by a Co-ordinating Working Party which was chaired by John Hick from mid-1971, underlining his own role and influence. Its task was to receive reports from each of the Working Parties on the progress of their activities, critiquing the content and tone of their drafts, whilst providing general direction for the syllabus as it developed.

On behalf of the Co-ordinating Working Party, for example, John Hick sent a memorandum to Working Party C in advance of its meeting on 14th May 1971, which included a framework upon which detailed syllabus planning could be based.¹⁰⁰ Hick reminded the Working Party that the Conference was not attempting to prescribe a single course of study to be followed by everyone, but to provide detailed syllabus suggestions to cover a range of needs. This would allow schools and individual teachers to make their own selection of blocks of study material. The two ranges of difference to be catered for, according to Hick, were (i) the academic ability range and (ii) the range of schools, which included a majority containing almost

⁹⁹ City of Birmingham Education Committee, SACRE, 55, 2, 1, A14, April 1969-July 1970. Notes from a conference Religious Education in a Multi-Racial Society, 29 November 1969, dated 1 December 1969. Birmingham Central Library.

¹⁰⁰ John Hick Private Papers.

exclusively 'Christian' children and a minority containing a sizeable number of Muslim, Sikh, Hindu or Jewish children. His three basic principles were as follows. First, the primary purpose of RE is to help children to encounter, and eventually evaluate for themselves, the religious aspects of human experience. The best way to introduce them to this is through a 'depth encounter' with one specific faith in its full concrete historical character as not only a set of beliefs, but also a form of life and worship with its own characteristic music, poetry, and mythology. This should normally be the faith of the child's own family and community. Second, the next purpose of RE is to give children the information they need about religion as a factor in human history and in the formation of cultures. Accordingly it should be part of education for life in Britain to study the historically and culturally pervasive phenomenon of Christianity, regardless of whether or not Christianity is also the faith through which the child will most naturally find his/her own personal encounter with the religious aspect of life. Third, it was no less necessary, according to Hick, in an increasingly cosmopolitan and religiously pluralistic Birmingham, to have at least a simple basic knowledge of those other great world faiths which were represented in the city in significant numbers.¹⁰¹ Notably, the assimilationist tendencies evident in Hick's emphasis on the Christian foundations of the nation's heritage and culture dominated his culturally pluralist advocacy of 'a simple basic knowledge' of the 'world faiths' represented in Birmingham. Thereby, his proposed curriculum would perpetuate the cultural pervasiveness of Christianity, whilst at the same time providing selected religious knowledge rather than the requisite skills and dispositions for life in an ever-changing multi-cultural society.

In addition to John Hick, the Co-ordinating Working Party was made up of a small group of co-opted members from across the Working Parties, the Humanist Harry Stopes-Roe, and a Head of RE from a local secondary school, Cecil Knight, who was seconded to facilitate the syllabus' revision. Space does not permit the precise detailing of the work of each Working Party or the Co-ordinating Working Party, but the following observations can be made. First, from the outset all the Working Parties were convinced of the

¹⁰¹ John Hick Private Papers.

need to respond to the religiously plural realities of the city and its ‘racial’ diversity. It was the intention to provide a ‘syllabus for the multi-faith society’, with completion anticipated towards the end of 1972.¹⁰² It was agreed that even the youngest children could be introduced to faiths other than Christianity; that ‘non-Christians in *our* society should be taught about Christianity as opposed to being taught to be Christians’; and that the syllabus should be ‘so designed that teachers will be unable to ignore or exclude other religions’.¹⁰³ Throughout the syllabus drafting process members of every Working Party encountered the common practical difficulty of resourcing the teaching of world religions, which they were intent on ensuring from the outset, due to the dearth of relevant published material. One solution for this difficulty was the co-option of members of different faiths not already represented on the relevant Working Parties. Quite early on, the Co-ordinating Working Party decided that the curriculum materials should be called *Living Together*, an idea proposed by Working Party C, and clearly redolent of the integrationist purposes underpinning the exercise.¹⁰⁴

The legal challenge

The syllabus took some four years in the drafting. A substantial amount of this time and considerable effort was taken by the Working Parties to write an extensive and detailed non-statutory handbook of suggestions for teachers. This was intended to become the main support for non-specialist teachers to enable them to fulfil the requirements to teach both the new content and new methodologies. The resultant BAS was submitted to the Finance and General Purposes Committee of the Education Committee of the City Council in February 1974. By this stage, the Birmingham City Council was under Labour control. The text was accepted, but certain Conservative councillors requested the deletion of the references to Communism which

¹⁰² City of Birmingham Education Committee, ASC, Co-ordinating Working Party Minutes, 23 March 1971. Birmingham Central Library.

¹⁰³ City of Birmingham Education Committee, Co-ordinating Working Party Minutes, 25 June 1971. Birmingham Central Library. Authors’ italics.

¹⁰⁴ City of Birmingham Education Committee, ASC, Coordinating Working Party, Report of the Chief Education Officer: Summary of Progress Made by the Four Working Parties since October 1970, dated March 1971. Birmingham Central Library.

had been included as an example of a secular ‘stance for living’ in the non-statutory handbook.¹⁰⁵ However, ‘if the whole enterprise was somehow to be stopped or corrected’, the Education Committee would have to raise objections to the one-page *statutory* Agreed Syllabus, rather than its *non-statutory* supplement, on the grounds that it did not fulfil the legal requirements of the 1944 Education Act.¹⁰⁶ There followed ‘months of debate in council, often passionate correspondence in the local newspapers, and questions in Parliament’.¹⁰⁷ It was the discussion about the legality and validity of teaching non-religious stances for living, as opposed to the inclusion of world religions in the syllabus, that was seized upon most enthusiastically by the local and national press. Indeed, for Hick, the inclusion of Communism and Humanism in the original documents acted as a lightning conductor, which distracted attention away from the syllabus’s inclusion of other faiths. There were even threats of violence from the National Front.¹⁰⁸ Perhaps for some the teaching of non-religious stances for living was a step too far, whereas for others, multi-faith RE might at least be used as a vehicle to promote a religious (ultimately Christian) view of life. After receiving legal advice and consulting with the DES, which asserted that the formal Agreed Syllabus was vaguely drafted, a sub-committee of the ASC was established in late 1974 to clarify and expand the single-page Agreed Syllabus.¹⁰⁹ This process led to the publication of the final version of the BAS in May 1975 followed four months later by *Living Together: A Teachers’ Handbook of Suggestions for Religious Education*.¹¹⁰

RE, Christianity and national identity

The controversy provoked by those who interpreted the BAS as a Trojan-horse for Communism disguised the extent to which its multi-religious content was similarly viewed as a threat. The syllabus, and other developments which were perceived as moving RE in England from a Christian model to a multi-faith one,

¹⁰⁵ John Hull, *Studies in Religion and Education*. (Lewes: The Falmer Press, 1984), 85; Copley, *Teaching Religion*, 107.

¹⁰⁶ Hull, *Studies in Religion and Education*, 104.

¹⁰⁷ Adrian Bell, ‘Agreed Syllabuses of Religious Education’, in *Social Histories of the Secondary Curriculum: Subjects for Study*, ed. Ivor Goodson (London: Falmer Press, 1985), 192.

¹⁰⁸ Interview with John Hick, 7 November 2008

¹⁰⁹ Hull, *Studies in Religion and Education*, 105; Hick, *An Autobiography*, 163-4; Copley, *Teaching Religion*, 108.

¹¹⁰ City of Birmingham Education Committee, *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction*; City of Birmingham Education Committee, *Living Together: A Teachers’ Handbook of Suggestions for Religious Education* (Birmingham: City of Birmingham Education Committee, 1975).

resonated with Enoch Powell's earlier pronouncements and exacerbated the 'moral panic' felt within certain sections of society about the extent to which culturally pluralist policies and practices were eroding British/English national identity and the Christian foundations underpinning it.¹¹¹ For the social campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, the BAS was a symptom of the wider social malaise brought about by the liberalism of the 1960s. This led her, in 1976, to establish a nation-wide *Save Religious Education in State Schools* campaign. Under these auspices, leaflets such as Charles Oxley's *Religious Education Under Attack* and Canon H. J. Burgess' *Save Religion in State Schools? A Call for Justice*, reiterated the view that Christianity is 'part of our national and cultural heritage'¹¹² and that, despite 'the decline in church attendance', Christianity is still 'significant to our pupils [...] as it is basic to our country's history and culture'.¹¹³ Although this movement, and earlier less prominent ones¹¹⁴, were not taken particularly seriously by religious educationalists at the time, the 'cultural restorationism'¹¹⁵ that they typified were reflected in the later policies of the Conservative Party after Margaret Thatcher's election as party leader in 1975.¹¹⁶ The extent to which these criticisms of the BAS and other landmark reforms were misguided will be explored below.

According to Ian Grosvenor, by the 1980s, Thatcher's 'New Right' had rejected multi-cultural and anti-racist policies, and promoted instead the superiority of the common historical experiences, culture, language and religion which, it believed, constituted British/English national identity.¹¹⁷ This is evident, for example, in its depiction of the changes to the History curriculum promoted by the Schools Council as an attack on 'national

¹¹¹ England's historical domination of the UK has meant that English discussions about national identity have tended to be framed in terms of Britishness.

¹¹² Charles Oxley, *Religious Education Under Attack* (Undated).

¹¹³ H. J. Burgess, *S.R.E.S.S. Save Religious Education in State Schools? A Call for Justice* (Undated).

¹¹⁴ Specifically the National Association for Teachers of Religious Knowledge, founded by Miss D. C. Howlett, and which organised a public meeting on RE at Birmingham Town Hall on 29th March, 1968. Miss Howlett was a lone, but vociferous campaigner on the subject throughout the 1970s. City of Birmingham Education Committee, Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, January 1968 – March 1969, 33, 2, Birmingham Central Library.

¹¹⁵ David Rose, 'The voice of the cultural restorationists: recent trends in RE policy-making', *Curriculum Journal* 14, no. 3, (2003): 305-326.

¹¹⁶ Ken Jones, *Education in Britain: 1944 to the present* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 110.

¹¹⁷ Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities*, 191. See also Michael Hatfield, 'People fear swamping by immigrants, Mrs Thatcher says', *The Times*, January 31, 1978.

identity'.¹¹⁸ Likewise, in terms of RE, Gerald Parsons argues that the clash of assumptions 'between an essentially liberal, secular and pluralist educational establishment and a number of religiously conservative groups' who advocated the virtues of a return to Christian confessionality was 'made explicit and brought forcefully into public debate by the religious aspects of the 1988 Education Reform Act'.¹¹⁹ This Act, passed during Thatcher's last term as Prime Minister, stated that Agreed Syllabuses should 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain', and that all pupils in maintained schools should take part in a daily act of collective worship that is 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character'.¹²⁰ According to Dennis Bates, the development of multi-faith education should have made Christianity 'first among equals in a multicultural society', whereas the 1988 Education Reform Act redefined 'the character of religious education and the relation between Christianity and other religions in English schools and society' in such a way as to underline Christianity's hegemony within the curriculum.¹²¹ Yet this judgement fails to recognise the continuities between the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act and the subtle assimilationism, inspired by the threat of separatism that was evident in the supposedly culturally pluralist curriculum reforms which took place in RE from the late 1960s. What has hitherto not been acknowledged in the existing historiography is that, in reality, what appeared to be culturally pluralist developments were only partially accommodating of ethnic and religious diversity. They gave some ground as a palliative, whilst always underlining Christianity's pre-eminent place in British culture.

¹¹⁸ Crawford, *A History of the Right*

¹¹⁹ Gerald Parsons, 'There and Back Again? Religion and the 1944 and 1988 Education Acts', in *The Growth of Religious Diversity: Britain from 1945, volume 2, Issues*, ed., Gerald Parsons (London: Routledge, 1994), 183.

¹²⁰ 1988 Education Act. Part 1. Chapter 1. Section 8(3) and 7(1).

¹²¹ Dennis Bates, 'Christianity, culture and other religions (Part 1): the origins of the study of world religions in English education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 17, no. 1, (1994): 5-18, 5.

Conclusion

The vilification of culturally pluralist multi-faith RE as it developed from the late 1960s by those who continue to seek to retain, or restore, the Christian foundations of British/English national identity, and the status of Christianity within the school curriculum, has been based upon an erroneous assessment of the extent to which landmark curriculum reforms sought ‘to end the Christian hegemony in RE’¹²² and the privileging of ‘the country’s national culture and history’.¹²³ A similar assessment has led others to misrepresent the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Reform Act as a change from culturally pluralist policies to assimilationist ones. In fact, these clauses evidence policy continuity as well as change. Our research demonstrates that the majority of those who significantly shaped RE from the late 1960s responded to issues of ‘racial’ integration and immigration by conceding to the demands for, and by promoting, the teaching of world religions in RE, while at the same time asserting the pre-eminent place of Christianity in the curriculum, on the basis that it provided the foundation of the nation’s heritage and culture. Indeed, the BAS and other landmark reforms were arguably developed with an assimilationist intent in the face of the perceived threat to social cohesion represented by separatist alternatives (i.e. distributing pupils into religiously-differentiated classes or schools). Although Ninian Smart, for example, saw the traditional role of the Christian churches in English education as an obstacle ‘to the open, pluralistic study of religion’,¹²⁴ he did not renounce the idea of Christianity’s hegemonic position within the nation’s cultural life, and the importance of RE as a form of enculturation, particularly for immigrant children. Moreover, the BAS, which we have characterised above as a largely culturally pluralist (or multi-faith) development, recognised ‘that education for life in Britain today must include an adequate treatment of Christianity as the faith which has, historically, moulded British life and culture and is still doing so’.¹²⁵ Furthermore, it acknowledged that ‘the Christian religion is still a source of guidance and inspiration for many people living in the city, and that

¹²² Thompson, *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?*, 72.

¹²³ David Conway, *Disunited Kingdom: how the government’s community cohesion agenda undermines British identity and nationhood* (London: Civitas, 2009), 99.

¹²⁴ Dennis Bates, ‘Christianity, culture and other religions (Part 2): F. H. Hilliard, Ninian Smart and the 1988 Education Reform Act’, *British Journal of Religious Education* 18, no. 2, (1996): 85-102, 93.

¹²⁵ City of Birmingham Education Committee, *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction*, 5.

Christianity is part of our heritage'.¹²⁶ Consequently, it stipulated that Christianity was the only religion that adolescents (12-16 years old) had to study. Thus, although the 1960s is now judged to be the decade in which dechristianisation was seeded, the idea that Christianity was the religion of the 'host' culture remained resilient. Accommodation of other religions within RE was always influenced by an assimilationist agenda which drew a fine line between the integration of immigrant children into what was perceived as the nation's dominant Christian heritage and culture and their inculcation into the Christian religion *per se*.

Politicians and policy-makers in the UK, and other former imperial powers, continue to wrestle with the long-term impact of colonial connections "played out 'at home' in varied ways", and not least in political and educational debates, including those specifically concerning RE, about how to assimilate "immigrant communities positioned marginally in metropolitan spaces", such as Birmingham.¹²⁷ The global terror attacks and civil disturbances in several European cities in the early years of the 21st century, coupled with increased religious and ethnic diversity due to mass migration, have recently foregrounded the significance of religion in UK society.¹²⁸ In response to the perceived problems associated with religious and ethnic diversity, a range of recent government policy documents have promoted a new discourse around the concept of 'community cohesion',¹²⁹ which has been defined as those 'situations in which individuals are bound to one another by common social and cultural commitments'.¹³⁰ Although the discourse may have changed from 'racial harmony' in the 1970s to 'community cohesion' today, RE has again been viewed by both the government¹³¹ and religious educators¹³² as having an important function.¹³³ Some have argued that 'community cohesion'

¹²⁶ City of Birmingham Education Committee, *Agreed Syllabus of Religious Instruction*, 5 and 7.

¹²⁷ Joyce Goodman, Gary McCulloch and William Richardson, "Empires overseas" and "empires at home": postcolonial and transnational perspectives on social change in the history of education', *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6, (2009): 695-706, 703.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Alexander Goldberg in 'Religion, no longer under the carpet', *The Guardian*, 28 December 2009.

¹²⁹ Home Office. *Community Cohesion: A Report of the Independent Review Team* (chaired by Ted Cante) (London: HMSO, 2001a); Home Office. *Building Cohesive Communities: A Report of the Ministerial Group on Public Order and Community Cohesion* (chaired by John Denham) (London: HMSO, 2001b).

¹³⁰ Home Office, *Community Cohesion*, 70.

¹³¹ Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), *Guidance on the Duty to Promote Community Cohesion* (London: DCSF, 2007).

¹³² Grimmitt, *Religious Education and Social and Community Cohesion*.

represents a move away from culturally pluralist to assimilationist approaches,¹³⁴ our detailed narrative reconstruction warns against making such generalisations. The current UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, for example, has criticised the ‘state multiculturalism’ of the past and its promotion of passive tolerance which ‘stands neutral between different values’. Instead, he argued for a stronger national identity based on the values of ‘muscular liberalism’ and transmitted through ‘a common culture and curriculum’.¹³⁵ However, in the specific area of RE in schools, our research has demonstrated that the landmark curriculum reforms most closely associated with ‘state multiculturalism’ in the late 1960s and early 1970s were arguably neither value neutral nor culturally pluralist.

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¹³³ Religious Education Council of England and Wales. ‘RE Council Statement on Community Cohesion’, http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/images/stories/pdf/recommunity_cohesionnov2009.pdf (accessed March 2010). See also DCSF, *Learning Together to be Safe: a toolkit to help schools contribute to the prevention of violent extremism* (Nottingham: DCSF, 2008) and Religious Education Council for England and Wales, ‘Resilience’, <http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org/content/blogcategory/48/77/> (accessed March 2010).

¹³⁴ Caroline Worley, ‘‘It’s not about race. It’s about the community’’: New Labour and ‘community cohesion’.’ *Critical Social Policy* 25, (2005): 483; Tomlinson, *Race and Education*.

¹³⁵ David Cameron, ‘PM’s speech at Munich Security Conference’, 5 February 2011, <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/speeches-and-transcripts/2011/02/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference-60293> (accessed 11/03/2011).

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