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The Future of Religious Education: crisis, reform and iconoclasm

Stephen G. Parker, Rob Freathy, and David Aldridge

Against a backdrop of threat to the position and future of Religious Education in schools – the contextual details of which are outlined by Freathy and Parker in this special issue – two conferences on the future of the subject took place in mid-2013, from which the papers published here arose. First, at the University of Worcester, a public symposium was organised entitled ‘the Future of RE: Prospects and Problems for Religious Education (revisited)’, which harked back to a not dissimilar moment of opportunity for reform in Religious Education’s history, marked by the 1969 Windsor Report. This public symposium, sponsored by the St. Peter’s Saltley Trust and the Worcestershire Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education, dealt with current issues in Religious Education from historical, philosophical, national, and international perspectives.¹ The second event, sponsored by the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain and the Forum for Religious and Spiritual Education at King’s College, London, was entitled *Philosophical Perspectives on the Future of Religious Education: the aims, justification and subject matter of RE*. Each event brought together a range of stakeholders, professionals and academics, demonstrating both a diversity of perspective and an appetite for change of one sort or another.

To be sure, the prevalent air of crisis around Religious Education arising after the British General Election of 2010 has even now barely dissipated. One of the overall effects of this has been to galvanise a unity of purpose amongst religious educationalists in defence of the subject, notwithstanding some fundamental differences in outlook over its nature and purpose. The resultant collective energy has led to a number of notable initiatives. For instance, the Religious Education Council established its own review of Religious Education, leading to the production of a curriculum framework akin to that of other subjects.² Likewise, lobbying of politicians by concerned parties led to the formation of an All-Party Parliamentary Group, to discuss provision in the subject and provide advocacy for it amongst parliamentarians. Noticeable also has been the extent to which members of the various disparate professional and voluntary bodies within Religious Education have come to dialogue increasingly with one another. Some of these initiatives are likely to influence the trajectories of development in the subject in the longer term.

A nascent unity of purpose and optimism about the subject’s future amongst some religious educationalists has also fostered an observable iconoclastic mind-set. For instance, Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACRE), one of the principal means of subject governance proposed by the 1944 Education Act, and required since the 1988 Education Act, have latterly become the focus of critique in part due to their ill-fitting status in the context of a changing educational climate (the gradual demise of local authorities and the rise of academies in particular).³ This spirit of dissent in relation to SACRE, facilitated by social media, and led principally by the subject’s professionals and some of its leading advisors, provides but one illustration of the unresolved matter of the multiple claims to authority within Religious Education over its nature, purpose, content and pedagogy. The shift towards even greater prominence of the professional voice over each of these, though laudable, may not be unproblematic. Arguably, the professional context around Religious Education as it has grown up within England and Wales, not least since the 1944 Education Act, contrasts considerably

with other humanities subjects in that in RE it has never been professional stakeholders alone who have made the key decisions. Non-professionals, in the main the Christian denominations, especially the Church of England, and latterly also different faith communities, have also had a statutory and non-statutory function in defining Religious Education for, with, and sometimes even against their professional colleagues, through the legal mechanism of the Agreed Syllabus Conference. Finding a way to balance the historic, potentially competing, and ever-broadening, number of voices laying claim to the subject is only one matter confronting those responsible for reviewing Religious Education's future.

Specifically in relation to SACRE this begs additional questions, what might be lost (as well as gained) by the radical reform of this particular aspect of the subject's governance? What might the position of stakeholder religious groups be in the future of Religious Education? Does the public role of religion, evermore to the fore, include a continuing mandate for the religious communities in shaping the aims and content of Religious Education? How representative would any national body be which replaced SACRE? Could such a national body, however representative, have the same impact upon local Religious Education as good SACRE do? Why would RE want to move towards a national model of curriculum when the educational tide is moving in the opposite direction, freeing schools from such a statutory requirement? How might the diminishing importance of local voice serve to disenfranchise? What would happen to funds currently devoted to RE at a local level? What is clear is that none of the issues around finding a new legal position for the subject would be straightforward, even if the political will were there to move matters in a particular direction. Moreover, all of this is unlikely to be solved without greater coherence amongst religious educationalists, stakeholders, and the wider public, about the nature and purpose of the subject in maintained schools. However, we recognise the somewhat utopian character of such a vision.

If the contested nature of Religious Education is obvious from these wider debates, differences between academics about the subject are equally fraught. Some of the complexities of the positional, religious and epistemological differences represented amongst religious education researchers are reflected in the articles here.

In their article, Rob Freathy and Stephen Parker look 'back to the future', adding to their range of accumulating in-depth historical perspectives upon the history of English Religious Education in the 1960s and 1970s. In this instance they draw attention to the forgotten planned 1970 Education Act, which was talk of, but never enacted – because the Labour Party lost the 1970 General Election. This 'Short Act' that never was, neglected by the historiography, formed the backdrop to many of the debates occurring in RE at the time. This mooted Act, anticipated quite radical reform in the legal and curricular requirements around the subject, predicted – and may well have quickened the pace of – some of developments that have happened since. Moreover, this failed attempt at reform has left a number of issues and questions unresolved, even to the present. Further, they argue that without the hindsight that detailed historical study of Religious Education can provide, present debates about the future of RE lack a depth of contextual understanding, which inhibits judgement as the subject community moves forward.

The next two articles tackle from a philosophical point of view why Religious Education should be taught at all. In his wider work, Michael Hand has examined - and rejected - the range of reasons put forward to justify the teaching of Religious Education. Here he critiques what he terms the religious choice argument, the view that in order to make an informed selection from the available possibilities, children need to have a sense of the available possibilities from Religious Education. Hand rejects this argument instead arguing in favour of a 'possibility of

truth' justification for teaching the subject.

Similarly, Janet Orchard selects another of the standard reasons given for teaching Religious Education, that the subject prepares young people to become citizens in a religiously and culturally diverse society. Given that this is an oft-cited reason for teaching the subject, and topical one at that, Orchard's challenge to its justification here is most pointed. To the extent that two of the key justifications for the subject are undermined by the case put forward by Hand and then Orchard, clarity over the nature and purpose of the subject remains key to finding a more secure future for the subject.

In her article, Lynn Revell examines the extent to which RE offers children and young people the opportunity to engage critically with religion as it is lived. In this she finds a general sense that - at examination level at least - Religious Education does require the critical study of religions, not least Islam. Revell argues that a 'sociological turn' in Religious Education may offer an antidote to the current instrumentalism of the subject, in that its newest *raison d'être* is as a vehicle for 'British values' and anti-terrorism. Placing the subject in its socio-political context offers a potential critique of these agenda.

Bob Jackson's article offers a review and critique of Liam Gearon's recent volume *MasterClass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning* (2013), wherein Gearon traces the effect of the enlightenment on RE, arguing that the study of religion has moved away from religious life.⁴ Jackson argues that Gearon's case is fine as it stands except that it is undermined by a misrepresentation of the pedagogies he critiques. This dispute between religious educationalists concerning the trajectories of development in its own history is an interesting one, which again reveals how RE's collective memory might be enhanced by historical scrutiny. Moreover, it reveals that disputes over the nature and purpose of RE need to be informed by an honest acknowledgement of the multiple means by which RE has been shaped.

Philip Barnes offers a critical examination of the arguments put forward for the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in the Religious Education curriculum. Barnes finds these arguments - the imperative of inclusion and that RE is a means of challenging bigotry - wanting. Given that schooling is secular anyway, Barnes argues, including non-religious worldviews in the Religious Education curriculum is thereby unnecessary. Barnes' wider corpus, which consistently critiques the erosion of Religious Education by secular and liberal agenda, and his defence of a determinedly *religious* RE, which takes religious diversity and theological difference seriously, is further underlined in this piece.

In contrast, David Aldridge puts the case for the inclusion of Humanism in Religious Education. The open-ended and exploratory nature of the dialogic encounter he describes as occurring within Religious Education, both between teacher and child, and child and subject-matter, implies the possibility of necessary and unpredictable change of position, and the need to consider different perspectives, areas of knowledge, beliefs and practices. To preclude some and include others from consideration, in this case Humanism, would be unnecessarily restrictive to learning, and therefore Humanism may well need to be taught in RE.

Alone these articles do not adequately respond to the question 'what is the future for Religious Education?' However, collectively they do represent a snapshot of current debates within the subject about its nature and purpose, organisation and function - and the methodological positions one may adopt in studying the subject's past, present and future. It is hoped that in distilling some of our thoughts on the vexed questions around Religious Education just now may offer some wisdom to fuel further debate.

¹ The Future of Religious Education: Prospects and Problems for Religious Education (revisited). Summary Report on a Conference held at the University of Worcester in 2013. <https://eprints.worc.ac.uk/2532/>

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http://www.natre.org.uk/uploads/Free%20Resources/RE_Review_Summary%20&%20Curriculum%20Framework.pdf accessed January 2015

³ <http://www.reonline.org.uk/supporting/re-matters/news-inner/?id=28742> accessed January 2015

⁴ Gearon, L. 2013. *Masterclass in Religious Education: Transforming Teaching and Learning*. London: Bloomsbury.