

# The British Council of Churches' influence on the 'Radical Rethinking of Religious Education' in the 1960s & 1970s<sup>1</sup>

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It is widely accepted that during the later 1960s, Religious Education in English state-maintained schools underwent a significant transition, moving from a Christian 'confessional' approach to an academic study of world religions. A detailed examination of the activities of the British Council of Churches' Education Department during the period reveals examples of an active promotion of this study of world religions, something that hitherto has been absent from the historiography of Religious Education. For example, the Education Department organized key conferences, meetings, and consultations, at which future directions for Religious Education were considered and discussed. A research project undertaken for the department in the later 1960s, which led to the 1968 report '*Religion and the Secondary School*' (edited by Colin Alves), was prompted by the identification that 'Today the needs of children and young people demand a *radical rethinking* and reshaping of the purpose and method of religious education'. This report included a statement specifically encouraging the study of non-Christian religions, a statement repeated in later key documents. This paper will show how the British Council of Churches' Education Department played a role in the development of the 'non-confessional' study of world religions in English state-maintained schools from as early as the late 1940s.

Keywords: British Council of Churches, Religious Education, study of world religions

## Introduction

The 1944 Education Act made the provision of Religious Education (hereafter RE) compulsory in all state funded schools in England, and a status that the subject retains today. Having developed at a particular intersection of educational, ecclesiastical and societal influences, RE thus holds a unique position in the curriculum of English schools, and as a consequence it has a religious, educational, and political importance.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of the subject's history, there is a general consensus amongst scholars that during the 1960s and 1970s, a new chapter in the history of English Religious Education began; consequently, the period is highlighted as a moment of great transformation. Between the post-war introduction of compulsory RE and the mid-1960s, most RE in English publicly-funded schools was delivered through a confessional, often proselytizing, pedagogy, whereby children were nurtured in and encouraged to adopt the beliefs and practices characteristic of the Christian faith.<sup>3</sup> During the mid-1960s this Christian 'confessionalism' was swept aside,

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<sup>1</sup> The author is grateful to Dr. Annmarie Valdes, Professor Rob Freathy and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.

<sup>2</sup> L. P. Barnes, 'The Misrepresentation of Religion in Modern British (Religious) Education', *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54 (2006), 395-411; Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) *Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion* (London 2007); DCSF. *Religious Education in English Schools: Non-statutory Guidance 2010*. (Nottingham 2010).

<sup>3</sup> For example, L. P. Barnes, and A. Wright, 'Romanticism, representations of religion and critical religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 28 (2006): 65-77; R. Jackson and K. O'Grady, 'Religions and

and replaced by a 'post-confessional, multi-faith', phenomenological, liberal, Study of World Religions (hereafter SWR),<sup>4</sup> with the publication in 1971 of the *Schools Council Working Paper 36 – Religious Education in Secondary Schools* often being situated as the locus of transformation.<sup>5</sup>

There has been a great deal of historical analysis of this change, mostly undertaken through the lenses of pedagogy, curriculum theory and national policy.<sup>6</sup> However, much of this has been reliant on analyses of a restricted range of policy documents (at local and national levels), with certain highly problematic assumptions made about policy implementation, including the notion that these documents are *descriptive* of classroom practice, when in reality, they were and are *prescriptive* (Freathy and Parker particularly, highlight examples of these prescriptions' not being followed).<sup>7</sup> This has led to the development of a 'ruling' historiography which constructs a narrative of rapid change in the nature and purpose of RE, while failing to differentiate adequately between policy and classroom practice.<sup>8</sup> A review of a wider body of material shows that the widespread adoption of SWR in English schools became possible as a result of a series of complex, concurrent, interlinked, and networked changes which took place over a longer period than has previously been described, being more evolutionary than sudden and revolutionary;<sup>9</sup> changes in classroom practice became widespread, eventually creating circumstances in which a change in policy at both national and local levels became possible.<sup>10</sup>

Further, these developments appear to have been driven by a complex combination of educational, theological, and socio-political changes. These changes not only fuelled the

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Education in England: Social Plurality, Civil Religion and Religious Education Pedagogy', in R. Jackson, S. Miedema, W. Weisse and J-P. Williame (eds), *Religion and Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates* (Munster, New York, 2007), 181-201.

<sup>4</sup> For example: L. P. Barnes, 'Ninian Smart and the Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education', *Religion* 30, (2000): 315-22; L. P. Barnes 'Developing a new post-liberal paradigm for British religious education', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28 (2007): 17-32; Barnes and Wright, *Romanticism, representations of religion and critical religious education*; L. P. Barnes, 'An alternative reading of modern religious education in England and Wales', *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 30 (2009): 607-19; L. P. Barnes, 'Developing a new post-liberal paradigm for British religious education', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 28 (2007): 17-32; Kevin O'Grady, 'Professor Ninian Smart, phenomenology and religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 27 (2005): 227-37; G. Teece, 'Too many competing imperatives? Does RE need to rediscover its identity?', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 32 (2011): 161-172; Stephen Parker and Rob Freathy, 'Context, complexity and contestation: Birmingham's Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Education since the 1970s', *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 32 (2011): 247-63; 'Ethnic Diversity, Christian Hegemony and the Emergence of Multi-faith Religious Education in the 1970s', *History of Education* 41 (2012): 381-404.

<sup>5</sup> Schools Council, *Schools Council Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools* (London, 1971). For an example of the situating of WP36 as transformational, see Phillip L. Barnes, "Working Paper 36, Christian Confessionalism and Phenomenological Religious Education." *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 6 (2002): 61-77.

<sup>6</sup> Rob Freathy and Stephen Parker, 'The Necessity of Historical Enquiry in Educational Research: The Case of Religious Education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 32 (Sept 2010): 229-243. See also 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* 18:2 (1996): 85-102; Penny Thompson, *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* (Cambridge, 2004); L.P. Barnes and A. Wright, 'Romanticism, representations of religion and critical religious education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 28 (2006): 65-77; Terence Copley, *Teaching Religion*. (Exeter, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Parker and Freathy, *Context, complexity and contestation*; also Jonathan Doney "'That Would Be An Ecumenical Matter'. Contextualizing the Adoption of the Study of World Religions in English Religious Education Using 'Statement Archaeology', a Systematic Operationalization of Foucault's Historical Method." Doctoral Thesis, Unpublished, University of Exeter, (2015): 84-87.

<sup>8</sup> See Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter' for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>9</sup> See Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 66-69 for more detail on this contrast.

<sup>10</sup> Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 111-12.

furnace in which modern English Religious Education was forged, but were significantly affected by, and affected, race and community relations as well as by the advance of inter-faith dialogue and partnerships. Technological developments in communication and world-wide travel made it possible to learn about and experience other cultures and countries in ways previously unimaginable. Increasingly, such encounters were not just happening overseas.

Immigration was a significant political and social issue. Racially motivated riots in Nottingham and in Notting Hill in 1958<sup>11</sup> triggered a national debate over immigration control,<sup>12</sup> and although immigration control may have reduced numbers, it did not reduce tensions.<sup>13</sup> The controversial election of Peter Griffiths as MP for Smethwick in 1964, the formation of the National Front in 1967 and Enoch Powell's *Rivers of Blood* speech given at Birmingham in 1968 all attest to the complex and dynamic state of race and community relations during this period.<sup>14</sup> However, the discussion of immigration has been insufficiently nuanced; tending to focus on colour and/or country of origin, issues of religious affiliation have been marginalised.<sup>15</sup> Whilst Peter Webster highlights the fact that children growing up in the 1950s and 1960s were the first generation that 'had widespread experience of having neighbours who practised other faiths',<sup>16</sup> the extent to which, during the earlier part of this period at least, many of the families settling from overseas were Christian has been overlooked. A survey by the Schools Council, circulated to a sample of 213 schools in 1969, requested information about 'Christian immigrant children' and 'non-Christian immigrant children', reporting that numbers within each category were approximately equal (1.3% of children being 'non-Christian immigrant children' and 1.8% being 'Christian immigrant children').<sup>17</sup>

Against this complex backdrop, there was a rise in interest in non-Christian religions and their practices, perhaps influenced by the Beatles phenomenon and the growing influence of teachers such as Marahashi Yogi.<sup>18</sup> All this took place in the context of a reduced interest in institutional Christianity, arguably contributing to a further reduction of interest.<sup>19</sup> On-going discussions, through the work of the Catholic Church and the World Council of

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<sup>11</sup> R. Karapin, 'The Politics of Immigration Control in Britain and Germany: Subnational Politicians and Social Movements', *Comparative Politics*, 31(4) (1999): 423-444: 429. Similarly motivated riots took place in Middleborough (1961), and St Helens (1963): Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat. A History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties*, (London, 2007): 665.

<sup>12</sup> Economic factors were already moderating immigration, with immigration rising and falling in line with the British economy, with a 3 month time lag (Paul Rich, 'Black People in Britain: Response and Reaction, 1945-62.' *History Today*, 36 (1) (1986). See Karapin, *Politics of Immigration Control* for a detailed discussion; note however, that Karapin erroneously claims that the 1958 riots 'put the issue of immigration control on the political agenda for the first time since World War II' (p429). This overlooks a House of Commons debate of 5<sup>th</sup> November 1954 (Hansard, Commons Vol 532, cc 821-32); see also Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities*, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Karapin, asserts: 'Black immigration dropped from 85,000 per year in 1960-62 to 40,000 per year in 1963-66; Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1992): 13.

<sup>14</sup> On the election of Griffiths, the formation of the National Front, and Powell's speech, see Sandbrook, *White Heat*.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Grosvenor, *Assimilating Identities*.

<sup>16</sup> Peter Webster, 'Race, Religion and National Identity in Sixties Britain: Michael Ramsey, Archbishop of Canterbury and his Encounter with Other Faiths'. In Charlotte Methuen, Andrew Spicer and John Wolffe (eds) *Christianity and Religious Plurality, Studies in Church History*, Vol, 51 (Ipswich, 2015), 385-398: 385.

<sup>17</sup> Schools Council, *Working Paper 44, Religious Education in Primary Schools*, (London: Schools Council, 1972): 78, Table 9.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Terence Thomas, *The British: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>19</sup> Freathy and Parker, *Secularists, Humanists and Religious Education*, where the authors make a robust argument for using the term 'de-Christianization' rather than 'secularisation'.

Churches (WCC, established 1948), expanded between Christians and those of other worldviews (both religious and non-religious) during this period. Increasingly such activities were seen as a legitimate activity of the Christian Church, especially in the light of the *Nostra Aetate*, the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council promulgated in 1965, and the work of the WCC.

Whilst highlighting the change in English RE during the 1960s and 1970s, the existing historiography of RE fails to attend to the context in which these developments took place, despite the dominance of the Church in both the provision and the development of RE.<sup>20</sup> Specifically, the role of the British Council of Churches' has hitherto been overlooked. This article draws on a three-year project which considered the influence of the ecumenical movement, globally and locally, on the development of the classroom SWR, focusing particularly on the role of the British Council of Churches' Education Department (hereafter BCCED).

### **The role of the BCCED in encouraging the study of world religions**

In contrast to earlier attempts at formal ecclesiastical co-operation in Britain, the British Council of Churches, formed in 1942, was both successful and fruitful. It soon established effective departments for Youth and Publications, developed work in Scotland and by 1949 had established over 170 local 'Councils of Churches'.<sup>21</sup> In 1946 BCC set up an Education Committee, formally constituting the Education Department (BCCED) in 1951, some seven years after the provisions of the 1944 Education Act had come into force.<sup>22</sup>

A detailed examination of the work of the BCCED during the 1960s – the period in which RE in schools was undergoing the change from Christian confessionalism – reveals a number of examples of its active promotion of SWR. Against the backdrop of expanding opportunity for engagement between Christians and those practising other faiths, the examples that follow relate to the expansion of the concept of RE, seeing it as not only facilitating discussion but seeking to encourage the involvement of non-Christian faiths.

In 1961 the BCCED was made aware of a 'Conference on Teaching about World Religions in schools', through an invitation issued by the organisers.<sup>23</sup> The programme included sessions on 'knowing about religions', 'teaching about world religions in the

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<sup>20</sup> Terence Copley, 'Is UK religious education failing to address its own cultural context?' In Rune Larsson & C. Gustavsson (eds), *Towards a European Perspective on Religious Education*, (Skellefteå, Sweden: Artos & Norma, 2004): 80-89; Rob Freathy and Stephen Parker, 'The Necessity of Historical Enquiry in Educational Research: The Case of Religious Education', *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, no.3 (Sept 2010): 229-243.

<sup>21</sup> On unsuccessful earlier attempts, see for example, Stephen Charles Neill, 'Plans of Union and Reunion'. In Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill (eds), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948*, (London, 1954): 484-495.

<sup>22</sup> Church of England Record Centre, (hereafter, CERC), BCC/ED/2/3/3 - *Correspondence & papers re the formation of the CEC and its subsequent development, 1939-1955*: 1944 (Nov 4<sup>th</sup>) Meeting of 'Committee on Christian Education' under the chairmanship of Walter Moberly. On the formation of the Education Department see CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/10 - *Representation on the Education Department, 1951-1958*: Correspondence re membership of committee.

<sup>23</sup> The conference was held at the University of London's Institute of Education under the chairmanship of Professor W. R. Niblet, the then Dean (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/7 - *School-church relationships: papers and correspondence, 1953-1965*: 'Programme of, and letters relating to, Conference on Teaching About World Religions in Schools, Saturday 9th December, 1961').

secondary school' and 'report on work done with junior school children'.<sup>24</sup> The organisers expressed the hope that an observer from the BCCED would be able to attend, stressing that the conference was 'the first of its kind'.<sup>25</sup> The Acting Secretary of the BCCED responded to this invitation positively, undertaking to 'let other members of the Department know about this',<sup>26</sup> but no record has been found of who attended the event, or their reactions.

Eight years later, in 1969, a 'Consultation on Religious Education in a Multi-Religious society', convened by BCCED in collaboration with the Community Relations Committee (later to become the Race Relations Board) was held at Harrogate, in Yorkshire.<sup>27</sup> It brought together those 'who were in some way concerned to take advantage of the possibilities of educational enrichment offered by the presence of considerable number of children of non-Christian faith in our schools', and included 'representatives of the Islamic, Sikh, Hindu and Christian communities'.<sup>28</sup> One outcome of this consultation was an expressed desire to consider how 'non-Christian religions could form a significant part of RE syllabuses'.<sup>29</sup>

Running parallel to preparations for this Consultation, a working party had been established in May 1969 by BCCED to consider the issue of 'Recruitment, Employment and Training of Teachers Concerned with Religious Education in Schools'.<sup>30</sup> Evidence was invited from the Council of Christians and Jews, the 'Immigrant Communities, and Denominational education representatives'.<sup>31</sup> Responses were received from the Indian High Commission,<sup>32</sup> Sikhs,<sup>33</sup> Hindus,<sup>34</sup> the Community Relations Council,<sup>35</sup> and the National Secular Society.<sup>36</sup> The compilation of the submitted material resulted in a suggested list of elements that should be included in Religious Education at secondary level, including 'a knowledge of other religions and philosophies of life combined with a tolerance for those who hold other beliefs'.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> These sessions were to be delivered by E.G. Parrinder, F. H. Hilliard and Mr B. Cousin, respectively (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/7: Programme of Conference on Teaching About World Religions in Schools, Saturday 9th December, 1961).

<sup>25</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/7: Letter from Mr Cousin to Rev Stanford, 22 November 1961.

<sup>26</sup> In the absence of Rev. Standford, (outgoing Secretary), Nina Borelli (acting Secretary) replied (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/7: letter from Nina Borelli to Mr B. Cousin, 28 November 1961).

<sup>27</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/2 - *Education Department Minutes Nov 1963-Jan 1972*: Mins of Education Department Meeting 13 February 1969. A press release circulated after the event claims this meeting to be 'the first of its kind to be held in this country' (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/58 - *Immigrants/Interfaith - West Yorkshire Consultation 1969: various papers and correspondence*: Press release issued by The British Council of Churches on 4th March 1969).

<sup>28</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/58: Minutes of Executive meeting 21 May 1969, item 69/13 records the debate about the positioning of the BCC in relation to the event, concluding 'It would not be a BCC publication but reference would be made to the fact that BCCED had been responsible for convening the consultation'.

<sup>29</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/58: Report on Consultation, p5.

<sup>30</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/6/2 - *Various papers submitted to the working party on Recruitment, Employment & training of teachers*.

<sup>31</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/6/1 - *Various papers including evidence, reports, etc. submitted to the Working Party on the Recruitment, Employment & Training of Teachers together with copies of unsigned minutes, 1969-1970*: Minutes of First meeting of Working Party on Recruitment, Training and Employment of Teachers concerned with Religious Education in Schools, 27 May 1969.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, Enclosure G.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, Enclosures H and I.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Enclosure J.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Enclosure K.

<sup>36</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/6/3 - *Working party on the Recruitment, Employment & training of teachers, various papers*: NSS Pamphlets including: *Religion in schools*; *Surveys on religion in schools*; *Morals without religion*; *Submissions for a new education act*; *Educational reform* and *Religion and human rights*.

<sup>37</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/6/2: Compilation of material gathered, 11 February 1971, p18-19.

A seminar on ‘Religious Education in a multi-religious society’, organized by the BCCED, took place in September 1970, in London.<sup>38</sup> The event demonstrates that the pattern of involving representatives of a variety of faith communities was becoming routine, or normalized.<sup>39</sup> Here, attendees were asked to discuss a list of ten questions relating to the place of Christianity and other religions in RE. One of the questions asked was: ‘In multi-racial county schools, is a totally Christian syllabus of religious education justified?’; the recorded answer, an emphatic ‘no’.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, in summer 1972, a Conference on ‘Interfaith Dialogue in Education’, organized by the BCCED in collaboration with the Office of Education at the WCC, and the Government’s Department of Education, took place in Leicester.<sup>41</sup> This not only demonstrates the establishment of a tri-partite link between the Department, the WCC and the DES, it also strongly suggests that the BCCED had a positive orientation towards interfaith dialogue within education generally, and within RE specifically.

These examples – in different ways – demonstrate a focus on resolving the tension between the teaching of non-Christian worldviews (initially other faiths, but increasingly, non-religious viewpoints too), and the dominance of Christianity in the curriculum. Key to achieving such a balance was the expressed desire to justify RE on ‘valid educational grounds’.<sup>42</sup> This expressed itself in the enthusiasm expressed at Harrogate in 1969 to ensure that SWR would not be just a response in those areas with high proportion of immigrants, but ‘educationally beneficial’ on a much wider scale. This approach was further illustrated at the London Conference, where the relationship between up-to-date scholarship on child development and teaching methods was explored. In summary, these events and discussions demonstrate that the BCCED was actively involved in promoting SWR at a time that RE was changing in classrooms across England.

## **Radical Rethinking of Religious Education and the Alves Report**

But from where and when did these ideas emerge? An exploration of the wider discourses of the BCCED reveals that, in the period leading up to the late 1960s, there had already been an

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<sup>38</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/57.

<sup>39</sup> The meeting was attended by about 40 people, including HMIs, University tutors, members of the BCC and FCFC together with representatives of the Christian, Hindu, Islamic, Sikh and Jewish communities, (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/57: attendance list, Seminar 15 September 1970).

<sup>40</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/57: Religious Education in a multi-religious society, 15th September 1970, Working Party Paper I. Further questions focused on the relationship between child development and the benefits to the pupil of being ‘exposed to religious material from faiths other than his own’ and an evaluation of the potential for ‘newer techniques of teaching religious education help or hinder in a multi-religious approach’.

<sup>41</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/2: Minutes of Education Dept 14<sup>th</sup> May 1971, Item 71/9 (10) [Conference on Religious Education in a Multi-religious community, Meeting 3-5 May 1971]; Minutes of Education Dept 25<sup>th</sup> Jan 1972, Item 71/9 (8) [Joint WCC/BCC Conference on interfaith dialogue in Education, 1972]; CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/11: 61st Meeting of BCC Autumn 1971 Ed Dept Report, 10 [WCC/BCC Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Education, 10-14 July 1972, Stamford Hall, Leicester. Paper M]. The meeting took place on July 10-14<sup>th</sup> 1972, at Stamford Hall, Leicester (CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/69 - *Inter-faith dialogue: various papers, 1972-1974*: Minutes, Conference on Religious Education in a Multi-religious community, 3-5 May 1971, item 71/9 (10). Also CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/2: Minutes, 25<sup>th</sup> Jan 1972 and 14<sup>th</sup> May 1971, item 71/9 (8) [Joint WCC/BCC Conference on interfaith dialogue in Education, 1972].

<sup>42</sup> The study groups which met in preparation for the 1972 Leicester Conference had as their terms of reference to meet ‘in order to consider some of the issues that emerge in trying to provide a religious education *valid on educational grounds* in a multi-faith society, and having theological cohesion acceptable to Christian people’ (CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/11: 61st Meeting of BCC Autumn 1971 Ed Dept Report, 10 - WCC/BCC Conference on Interfaith Dialogue in Education, 10-14 July 1972, Stamford Hall, Leicester. Paper M). The term is also used a number of times as an underpinning principle within Schools Council Working Paper 36 (e.g. pp 16, 37).

expressed desire for change, which finds particular expression through two calls, about a decade apart, for a ‘radically rethinking’ of Religious Education. In 1963, prompted by the upcoming twentieth anniversary of the passing of the 1944 Act, a campaign was launched, calling for ‘the full implementation of the 1944 Education Act.’<sup>43</sup> In 1962 the BCCED had initiated a discussion of their frustration regarding the lack of success in religious education (even though the success criteria were disputed), which observed that ‘from neither the statutory nor the independent stream do we find an influx of committed Christians commensurate with the effort made in schools. Is it a possible task?’<sup>44</sup> The BCCED agreed that a review of the religious provisions of the 1944 Education Act was necessary, concluding that:

Today the needs of children and young people demand a *radical rethinking* and reshaping of the purpose and method of religious education, both in the material itself, in the manner of presentation, and the way in which it is related to life in the school and beyond it.<sup>45</sup>

However, the phrase ‘*radical rethinking*’ did not originate here. It is first found in the discourse of the BCCED in 1958. Discussing period of fourteen years since the 1944 Education Act, and considering the future of RE, the Executive of the BCCED ‘took the view that what was required ... was a *radical re-thinking of the purpose of Religious Instruction*’.<sup>46</sup>

This attempt to rethink religious education led to the establishment of a special Committee of the BCCED in 1963. This Committee set in motion a detailed research project, funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation (Lisbon), which offered funding of £5000 over two years,<sup>47</sup> Colin Alves, who was Lecturer in Divinity at King Alfred’s College, Winchester, was seconded to the BCC’s Education Department to act as Investigating Officer for the duration of the project.<sup>48</sup> Unlike some other projects at the time, which focused on local policy documents, Alves’ work centred on issues arising from classroom practice. He deployed a large-scale questionnaire survey, undertaken during 1965-1966 with secondary school pupils, and focusing almost entirely on biblical knowledge, Christian religious practice (including personal Christian affiliation), and Christian morality.<sup>49</sup> The final report, *Religion and the Secondary School*, was published in 1968, however the status of this report is a complex.<sup>50</sup>

In mid-1967, a draft report was considered by BCCED, with the status of the report with regard to the BCC being a focus of some discussion.<sup>51</sup> As the ‘main body of the report was to the Gulbenkian Foundation’, it was ‘agreed that a factual statement that [the report]

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<sup>43</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/40 - 1963 Campaign for Education: Various papers and correspondence: 1963 Campaign for Education flyer.

<sup>44</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1: Mins of 17th Meeting of Ed Dept 21-22 June 1962 – Report on *Nature of Religion & Religious Instruction*; CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1: Appendix 1 to 44th Meeting of BCC 12<sup>th</sup> March 1964, ‘Spring 1964. Programme of Investigation into the nature and future needs of Religious Education In Schools’.

<sup>45</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1: Appendix 1 to 44th Meeting of BCC 12<sup>th</sup> March 1964, ‘Spring 1964. Programme of Investigation into the nature and future needs of Religious Education In Schools’. Emphasis added.

<sup>46</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1: Minutes of Executive Committee, 27th Oct 1958, Item 225. Emphasis added.

<sup>47</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1 Minutes of 20th Meeting of Education Department, 12<sup>th</sup> Nov 1963, item 64/2 [Research of nature and future needs of Religious Education].

<sup>48</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1: Appendix 1 to 44th Meeting of BCC, 12<sup>th</sup> March 1964, item 64/12 [appointment of Colin Alves as Investigating Officer]; Colin Alves, *Religion and the Secondary School*, (London, 1968).

<sup>49</sup> Alves, *Religion and the Secondary School*, specifically Survey 65 and 66, pages 36 and 129 respectively.

<sup>50</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/46: *Papers and correspondence re. investigation into the nature and future needs of religious education in primarily country schools re. working party, 1963-1966*. See also CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/1.

<sup>51</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/1/2: Minutes of 26th Meeting of Education Department, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1967.

had been presented to the BCC would be adequate.<sup>52</sup> Consequently, the 'Foreword' in the published report, written by the then General Secretary of BCC, opened with the emphatic statement: 'THIS IS not an official Report of the British Council of Churches, but the Council is glad to have been able, through its Education Department, to initiate the research project it describes'.<sup>53</sup> The Foreword also suggested that '[Mr. Alves]' conclusions should be assessed on their own merits and not necessarily as representing the views of the British Council of Churches.<sup>54</sup> However, the published report also incorporated a 'Report of the Special Committee appointed by the Education Department of the British Council of Churches', which introduced Alves' work, reflected on its findings, and suggested courses of action.

This later section appears to have had a more authoritative status within the BCC; it is this *Report of the Special Committee* that sets out a proposed 'New Deal' for RE.<sup>55</sup> The *Report of the Special Committee* discussed 'limiting factors which are within the power of the educational system to change', including the restricted supply of suitably trained teachers, the unsuitability of many public examinations and qualifications that were available to students, the lack of timetabled periods for RE and the loading of 'the scales of professional advancement ... against religious education specialists'.<sup>56</sup> In addition, this part of the Report included an explicit encouragement of the study of non-Christian religions: 'We can, and should, learn from men of other faiths theistic and non-theistic and they from us'.<sup>57</sup>

The study of non-Christian religions in Religious Education in English schools, as called for in the 1968 BCCED Report, was, however, not novel. Evidence from elsewhere testifies to this. For example, the evidence provided to the Durham Commission during 1968 in response to the question 'Should provision be made ... where circumstances appear to justify it, for religious education other than Christian education?'<sup>58</sup> shows that a number of respondents believed that the case had already been made,<sup>59</sup> and that in some schools such practice was already established.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the evidence submitted by the Church of England's National Society for the promotion of Religious Education commented not only that the practice was already established, but that representatives from non-Christian traditions were involved in the Agreed Syllabus Committees that set out the content and aims for RE teaching in County Schools.<sup>61</sup> This claim is corroborated by contemporaneous agreed syllabus documents from a number of local education authority areas.<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, looking further back, there is evidence that the study of non-Christian worldviews was taking place in schools from as early as the 1920s, even if it was at that point limited to some schools, and in them restricted to later phases of schooling.<sup>63</sup> There are also

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<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Alves, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 11, emphasis original.

<sup>54</sup> Foreword to Alves, *Religion and the Secondary School*, by Kenneth Sansbury, Bishop, (General Secretary of the British Council of Churches) October 1967.

<sup>55</sup> Alves, The Report of the Special Committee §1, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 13.

<sup>56</sup> Alves, The Report of the Special Committee §9, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 16-18.

<sup>57</sup> Alves, The Report of the Special Committee, §7, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 15.

<sup>58</sup> CERC, NS/7/8/1/14 – Questionnaire (question 6).

<sup>59</sup> CERC, NS/7/8/1/14 – Paper 16 - Response from County Councils Association.

<sup>60</sup> For example, CERC, NS/7/8/1/14 – Paper 15 - Evidence from Girl's Public Day School Trust.

<sup>61</sup> CERC, NS/7/8/1/18 – National Society proposed evidence to Commission on Religious Education.

<sup>62</sup> For more analysis of this, see Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', chapter 2.

<sup>63</sup> Terence Copley, 'Rediscovering the Past: Writings on Religious Education in Religion in Education Quarterly, 1934-39, Raise Some Questions for Today's Religious Educators', *British Journal of Religious Education* 20, (1998) 80-9. See also G. E. Phillips, 'The study of other religions in schools'. *Religion in Education* 6, (1939): 221-226 and A. Mayhew, 'The Comparative Study of Religions in Schools', *Religion in Education Quarterly* 4, no.1. (1937): 14-21.



examples of the study of other religions during the post-war period – following the provisions of the 1944 Education Act – suggesting an openness towards the study of non-Christian worldviews. Even before the establishment of BCCED in 1951, there are indications that the study of religions other than Christianity was being discussed by some within the ecumenical movement. A sequence of letters in 1946 between Tissington Tatlow, Director of the Institute of Christian Education, an ecumenical group established in 1935 concerned with engendering cooperation between ‘Christianity and Education ... at home and overseas’,<sup>64</sup> and Sir Walter Moberly, then Chair of the BCC’s Committee on Christian Education, the forerunner of BCCED, provides evidence of this inclusion of non-Christian material.<sup>65</sup> The discussion between Tatlow and Moberly objected to the age group for which such material was included rather than to its inclusion *per se*; the inclusion of the material was limited to students who had reached the age of 15, thus excluding the vast majority of school students, who left school at fifteen.<sup>66</sup> However, it is clear that teaching material dealing with other faith traditions was available, that the BCC Education Committee was aware of this material, and that the Committee was involved in active promotion of it. For example, one list, circulated in 1948, headed ‘Publications [that] can be ordered from BCC’, included the following titles:

*The Mind of Japan* – Marcus Knight.  
*Ancient Faiths and Lore of India*, Milford and Garrad, 1947.  
*Chinese Philosophy and Religion*, F.A. Smalley, 1947.  
*The Mind and Ways of Islam*, Miss Mabel C Warburton 1947.<sup>67</sup>

These examples from the BCCED and others from the professional journal for RE teachers, *Religion in Education*, established in 1934, support the claim that including SWR alongside the study of Christianity in the RE classrooms of England, whilst perhaps still unusual and not wide-spread, was not entirely novel, even in the late 1940s.<sup>68</sup>

### **Encouragement to study non-Christian faiths in English RE**

Whilst Alves’ *Religion and the Secondary School* does not appear to have been widely circulated (perhaps because it only considered RE in relation to county schools),<sup>69</sup> the recommendation itself became influential through repetition.<sup>70</sup> The recommendation by the Alves report that the study of other religions and belief systems should be encouraged was repeated in *The Fourth R* (1970), often known as *The Durham Report*,<sup>71</sup> which was circulated more widely, perhaps because it considered RE in both county and church schools.<sup>72</sup> In this way the recommendation was established into the ecclesiological discourse.

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<sup>64</sup> For a historical account of the Institute of Christian Education, see Stephen G. Parker, Rob Freathy & Jonathan Doney, ‘The professionalisation of non-denominational religious education in England: politics, organisation and knowledge’, *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 37 (2016): 201-238.

<sup>65</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/7/1/3: Letter from Tatlow to Moberly, 28 November 1946.

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> CERC, BCC/ED/2/3/3: Publications can be ordered from BCC, 1948.

<sup>68</sup> On the history of the Journal, see Parker et al., ‘The professionalisation of non-denominational religious education in England’.

<sup>69</sup> Alves, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> For more on the authoritative nature of repeated statements see Doney, ‘That would be an ecumenical matter’, 141-9.

<sup>71</sup> Citing Ian Ramsey (ed), *The Fourth R. The Durham Report on Religious Education*, (London: National Society and SPCK, 1970), §216.

<sup>72</sup> Ramsey, *The Fourth R*, Chapter 4 ‘Religious Education in Schools with Special Reference to County Schools’ and Chapter 7 ‘Church Schools’.

The encouragement to study world religions was further repeated in the subsequent Schools Council Working Paper 36, *Religious Education in the Secondary School* (1971), which quoted directly from *The Fourth R*.<sup>73</sup> Thus the recommendation was introduced to the educational discourse. The Schools Curricula and Examination Council (generally known as the Schools Council) had been launched in March 1964 as a representative body to monitor curriculum and examinations in England, taking over responsibility from the Secondary Schools Examinations Council (SSEC, formed in 1958) and the Curriculum Study Group (CSG, formed in 1962).<sup>74</sup> The Schools Council was seen as an authoritative body, looked to by Government at local and national levels, as well as by the Inspectorate and individual teachers.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, publications under its banner, particularly its series of Working Papers, were considered as having some degree of authority, or even 'official' sanction.<sup>76</sup>

There are strong textual similarities between Alves' report to the BCCED, *The Fourth R* and Working Paper 36 with regard to learning from non-Christian faith communities, demonstrated through the repetition of a key statement which had first appeared in the *Report of the Special Committee*: 'We can, and should, learn from men of other faiths theistic and non-theistic and they from us'.<sup>77</sup> This statement is repeated in *The Fourth R*, in a chapter that Alves was involved in drafting.<sup>78</sup> The statement is further repeated in Working Paper 36. The historiography of English RE has generally presumed that Ninian Smart had authorial responsibility for Working Paper 36, but archival research has revealed that final editorial control was actually vested in the hands of Alves: publication was agreed by the relevant committee, 'subject to any amendments being referred to Mr Alves'.<sup>79</sup> Whilst it would not be true to claim that Alves was solely responsible for the repetition of the statement, the common thread of his involvement in all three reports is evident, although his contribution has hitherto been unacknowledged.

Thus, although Alves' recommendation in the BCCED report cannot be claimed as the moment at which everything changed in English RE, it can be considered a watershed in the process of the legitimization, normalization and eventually, widespread adoption of SWR as the dominant approach to Religious Education in English schools in the later 1960s. Alves' report for the BCCED marked a differentiation of the practice within the national ecumenical discourse, positively articulating an emerging classroom practice for the first time. This

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<sup>73</sup> Schools Council, *Working Paper 36*, 19, See Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 159-214.

<sup>74</sup> P. Gordon, 'The Schools Council and Curriculum: Developments in Secondary Education' in Lowe, R. (ed) *The Changing Secondary School*. (London: Falmer Press, 1989): 52-71; P. Fisher, Curriculum Control in England and Wales: The Birth of the Schools Council, 1964, *Journal of Educational Administration and History* 14, no.2, (1984): 35-44; R. Manzer, 'The Political Origins of the Schools Council', *Secondary Education* 4, no.2, (1974): 47-50.

<sup>75</sup> Schools Council, *Working Paper 36*; Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 159-214.

<sup>76</sup> Manzer states 'Almost everyone admitted that the bulletins and working papers which the Council's secretariat soon began to produce were useful and even influential documents' (Manzer, *Political Origins*, 50); Gordon, *The Schools Council and Curriculum*, 56-7; 68. Stewart highlights the influence of Schools Council publications overseas, linking its influence and authoritative standing to its role in regard to examinations (see M. Stewart, 'The Growth of the Schools Council 1966-1973', *Secondary Education* 4:2, (1974): 51-3).

<sup>77</sup> Alves, *The Report of the Special Committee*, §7, *Religion and the Secondary School*, 15.

<sup>78</sup> CERC NS/7/8/1/7 – '[Durham] Commission on Religious Education', Draft for discussion – Chapter 4 – 'Religious Education in County Schools'.

<sup>79</sup> The National Archive, EJ 1/210: Minutes of Eighteenth Meeting of RE Committee, 28th October 1970. The files of neither the Consultative Committee, nor the Religious Education Committee of the Schools Council include drafts of WP36, therefore it is currently impossible to ascertain the exact nature and extent of Alves' editorial work.

approach in RE, supported by the BCCED, became widespread. By the mid to late 1970s it was reflected in national and local policy documents.<sup>80</sup>

## Conclusion

This exploration of archival material from the British Council of Churches reveals that the BCC's Education Department played a hitherto unreported role in the adoption of SWR as a dominant approach to English Religious Education. Two calls by the BCCED, a decade apart, for the 'Radical rethinking of RE' led ultimately to the 1968 report *Religion and the Secondary School*, produced under the direction of Colin Alves. Alves' encouragement of the study of non-Christian religions in the RE classrooms of England was repeated, and thus imbued with authority, in two spheres. Firstly, it entered the ecclesiastical sphere, through being taken into *The Fourth R*. Secondly, it entered the educational sphere via the Schools Council Working Paper 36. Alongside this, there is evidence of the BCC's active promotion of SWR in the classroom, shown in its encouragement of co-operation with other religions in a series of conferences and meetings in the late 1960s and in the inclusion of, and consultation with, representatives of faith communities beyond Christianity.

The tracing of this active encouragement by the BCCED to expand Religious Education in English schools beyond the boundaries of Christianity shows that it was not, as previous studies have suggested, a novel development in the later 1960s; nor did the practice originate with Alves. The beginnings of the practice of studying non-Christian religions in the English RE classroom date back to the inter-war period. From the late 1940s onwards the BCC was making available materials to support the teaching of non-Christian religions.

It is therefore clear that during the later 1960s, the BCCED's *radical rethinking* of religious education led to a practical engagement with non-Christian faiths, together with an explicit call to study these faiths in the RE classroom. In this way, the work of the BCCED gave some legitimacy to the study of non-Christian faiths, playing a role in the normalization and eventual widespread adoption of the study of world religions in English Religious Education classrooms.<sup>81</sup> This adoption took place at a time when national policy was generally silent on the issue, and when local policy was often constrained to confessional Christianity, and at a time of growing interaction between different religions as immigration began to change the demographic of local communities. Consequently, in many parts of Britain, school students undoubtedly experienced a shift to the study of world religions in RE classrooms earlier than the expansion of their own inter-religious experience.

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<sup>80</sup> For a detailed analysis of this process of legitimization and normalization, as traced through the contents of the main professional journal for RE teachers of the time (*Learning for Living*), see Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 66-81. In terms of policy change, see The National Archive, ED 135/35 – *HMI Memos 1975*: Memo 3/75, discussed in detail in Doney, *op cit*, p78-9; also Department of Education and Science, *Education For All - The Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Education of Children from Ethnic Minority Groups* (The Swann Report), (London: Her Majesty's Stationary Office, 1985) and Great Britain, *Education Reform Act*, Elizabeth II. c. 40, (1988), section 8(3).

<sup>81</sup> More detailed analysis of this process of normalization can be found in Doney, 'That would be an ecumenical matter', 66-81.