



- Workload: Learning the kids' names, marking their work, planning, all on one lesson per week or fortnight – the direct consequence of a shortage of specialists.
- Isolation: There are too few RE specialists. This is the result of government targets for initial teacher training.
- Raising standards: who doesn't want to do this? Yet the instruments we have been using, particularly the two (and sometimes three) attainment targets, are diluting our subject and confusing the pupils. The legal basis from which our syllabuses are created requires too much breadth of RE. Depth and rigour are sacrificed.
- Lack of access to CPD and research: RE-specific opportunities exist, but it is hard to make them a priority because ....
- Misunderstanding from colleagues and Heads: for example, that RE is not statutory, or that it is in some way educationally inappropriate (the name doesn't help), or not important other than in a general, be-nice-to-each-other sort of way. Here we so often stumble on the misapprehensions about RE coming from its legally anomalous status: RE is statutory but not national curriculum; compulsory, but you can withdraw; local, but not that local; different if you are an academy; populated by over 100 syllabuses, all broadly similar in content, but in form and structure so different and complex that it takes an army of advisers and consultants to interpret – an army we no longer have. The current rules on RE are so complicated that Heads, governors, Ofsted itself and even civil servants get them wrong.

### **How did we get here?**

The period 2013-15 has seen five major pieces of evidence on the state of RE in England, all pointing towards the necessity of change. The 2013 inspection survey (Ofsted, 2013) reported with concern that six out of ten lessons in RE were less than good – a serious criticism and one which has its roots in the confused pedagogical purpose of RE, and its anomalous status in law. The inspectors concluded that a review of the legal basis was necessary in order to raise standards. 2013 also saw the publication of a wide-scale and detailed ethnographic study of RE teachers at work, revealing both the extent of their good will and efforts, and also their underlying epistemic confusion brought about by a lack of legal and pedagogical clarity for the subject (Conroy et al, 2013).

Confusion among teachers might be quite easily solved but for deeper demographic patterns and legal structures. Research led by Professor Linda Woodhead of Lancaster University has indicated changing patterns of religion and belief in the UK: declining numbers of people identifying as religious, accelerating growth in numbers self-identifying as spiritual or 'nones', the rise of narrow or extremist minorities and a decline in moderate committed religious opinion (Woodhead and Catto, 2012). These patterns have led her to conclude, in a report co-written with a former Secretary of State for Education, that RE's structures are no longer fit for purpose and need reform (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015).

Research from the Faith and Civil Society Unit in Goldsmiths University of London (Dinham and Shaw, 2015) argues that religion and belief communities have changed significantly, meaning that the 'real religious landscape' is often quite different from the official theologies that pupils are required to study – theologies often formed twenty or more years ago. The ethnographic element of

Dinham and Shaw reveals a strong interest among young people in studying the realities of religion and belief, and a recognition amongst parents and employers that this forms an essential part of the curriculum, promoting positive attitudes to religious and cultural diversity. Dinham and Shaw bring evidence that teachers, employers and parents feel RE's position in law needs to be strengthened and clarified.

Finally, a major independent commission on religion and belief in British public life (Woolf Commission, 2015) points to the changes in patterns of belief, and concludes that the present legal structures of RE need reform, with a statutory entitlement that establishes content and learning objectives related to religious and non-religious world views.

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

The policy ground has shifted under RE's feet, making its current legal mechanisms weak and in some places obsolete. Reforms to school provision have introduced diversification of types of school, leading many schools to exit from local government control and become academies or free schools. This process has accelerated since 2010: already a majority of secondary schools are academies; the Department for Education is set to continue this trend, meaning that by 2020 most if not all maintained secondary and primary schools will be academies. This impacts on RE because the legal mechanisms for syllabus making and accountability have not kept pace with school reform. RE Syllabuses are created by local authorities, through bodies called Standing Advisory Councils on RE (DCSF, 2010). In many places, these bodies have become weaker and less relevant during the academisation period; there is a widely shared hypothesis that they can no longer be said to provide effectively for RE. Academies and free schools have no corresponding national framework for RE, and are left in limbo. As a result, some academies have opted for a narrow model of the subject, promoting doctrinal conformity and intolerance (Clarke, 2014), while many others have neglected RE.

These unintended consequences of educational reform have created confusion among school inspectors, school Head Teachers and policy makers. Prominent academics and politicians are beginning to feel there is a need to tidy up the anomaly in ways that promote excellence and open-mindedness in everyday teaching of RE, delivered by qualified, confident and knowledgeable teachers who have the confidence of their Heads (Clarke and Woodhead, 2015). Charles Clarke, a former Secretary of State for Education, is on record as believing that the anomalous position of RE must be resolved urgently. These developments have been critical both in the sense of suggesting improvements and also in touching on the core issues and challenges. The coming together of these critical reports in a two-year period, and the wider realisation amongst teachers, policy makers and academics, has created an unusual moment of opportunity for evidence-based reform. This set of circumstances has also prompted the RE professional community to grasp the moment by seeking to create new structures and pedagogical paradigms for RE suited to the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. This is a historical opportunity. Culham St Gabriel's and others see this moment as potentially evolutionary step, critical to the continuing survival of RE.

### **A national commission to gather evidence and make proposals on RE**

The RE Council intends to instigate a wide-ranging, inclusive and evidence-based review of the legal and wider policy framework for RE. The output of the review will be recommendations designed to inform policy-makers about these areas. The aim and focus will be improving the quality of children's experience of RE, for example by proposing legal structures and other measures that would promote the highest quality teaching and learning. The REC intends that this process should begin in mid 2016 and be completed by early or mid 2018. This timescale is suggested in part by the urgency of the issues and in part by an aspiration to present the current government with legislative options in the middle of its electoral cycle.

The REC Board has resolved unanimously to make progress in the review by establishing a major commission of distinguished public servants. The commission's terms of reference, out for consultation at present, are:

- To consider the nature, purpose and scope of religious education.
- To identify barriers that currently limit the provision of high quality RE.
- To identify what changes are needed to ensure the highest quality provision of RE.
- To ensure that recommendations focus on realistic and specific proposals aimed at implementation.

In considering the above 4 tasks, the REC has identified the following areas for the Commission to consider:

- The quality of teaching and learning in RE
- The legal & structural arrangements
- The status of the subject
- Recruitment, ITT & CPD
- Who should be studying RE (i.e. age range, right to withdraw, etc.)
- Whether there should be a common entitlement to RE, and if so what the entitlement should be

The REC expects the Commission to address the evidence base for and the conceptual clarity of the recommendations they make.

Examples of the kind of questions that could come up in the commission, and which were thoughtfully discussed in NATRE's Executive, are:

- Who should study RE? In an age when RE includes a wide range of religious and non-religious world views, is the parental right to withdraw any longer appropriate? (The so-called conscience clause dates from 1944, when RE was predominantly confessional. It is now being widely abused by parents with an Islamophobic or other hate-motivated agenda.) Does the right to

withdraw signal weakness in RE, is it a comfort for those with unexamined prejudices, or a useful safety valve in a diverse liberal democracy?

- Up to what age should RE be studied? Presently, the law requires RE to be studied in schools up to 18, but this is anomalous and widely ignored. Should RE come into line with other subjects? 16? 14?
- Who should write statutory curriculum documents for RE? Should the current system of agreed syllabuses in each local authority continue? What about the majority of schools that are now academies? Would the requirements on RE be clearer and easier to enforce if there were a minimum entitlement having the same force as a national curriculum document? Can we find ways to set schools and academy trusts free within the kind of national parameters that exist for all other subjects? If so, who would hold the pen?
- How can RE teachers be better supported? How can we work with policy makers to improve recruitment of specialists, strengthen the CPD offer, underpin solid subject knowledge, and create appropriate research opportunities?
- And the golden thread that would help solve all the above challenges: what, in the end, is the purpose of RE? We cannot go on having syllabuses with four, five or six different aims, pulling in the different directions of community cohesion, spiritual development, character development, academic excellence, or faith nurture. Can we stop chasing after every initiative in the hope of attracting funds and approval? Can we be both more modest and more profoundly ambitious in setting a single aim, for example promoting religious and theological literacy? Would this kind of clarification make us more easy to understand, and more credible, in the minds of Head Teachers, Governors and civil servants?

## **Vision**

My personal vision for RE is that it produces pupils who are religiously literate and who function well in a theologically and philosophically diverse world. Imagine an Ofsted survey report on RE in 2020: it reports that 7 out of 10 teachers are clear that the core purpose of RE is to promote religious literacy; that teaching is usually good or outstanding and based on a clear progression pathway; that there is excellent support for primary and secondary teachers of RE; that local bodies help to resource RE and national expectations are consistent and clear; and that RE is an entitlement for all pupils up to 16, parents having accepted the nature of RE and seeing no need to withdraw their children.

## **Why is the moment now?**

This is urgent because the continued weakening of RE's infrastructure is already damaging the provision of RE in schools. RE lessons are being reduced, RE specialists are hard to find, RE's quality is inconsistent, and RE's credibility is confused and contested. If RE continues as it is, by 2020 there will be little left of it outside schools with a religious character. There is a need to act now to prepare a viable future for RE. This means a change in the legal arrangements, and a more simple, straightforward purpose for the subject. Change can be troubling, perhaps especially if individuals feel a sense of familiarity with the current arrangements, or depend on them for their income. Yet sooner or later, this change has to be made. It will either be a change created by the RE profession, led by teachers, and supported by other stakeholders – or a change forced on us by expedi-

ency.

We in the RE profession need to start thinking now about the change we want, in time for it to become a reality by 2020. If we work with each other to be clear and united on what we want, we can get it. As a professional community, we have the scholarly knowledge and leadership capacity to create a new future for our subject, on a secure professional educational footing. You, as leading and successful teachers of RE, are crucial to this process. You are the heroes of this narrative. Please make your voices heard and your visions known.

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