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Religious Education in England: The Story to 2013

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Abstract

The article gives an outline of law and policy on religious education (RE) in England up to 2013. A few comments are made about the systems in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The English dual system of Government funding for both community and certain faith-based schools is considered. The devolution of syllabus design and support for religious education to local authorities in England is explained, together with a trend towards non-statutory national guidance. The article considers the main drivers for change, including secularisation and pluralisation, which led to a change of aims for the subject and its broadening to include a range of different religious traditions. The influence of government policies is considered, including the previous Labour Government's policy of building community cohesion, and a range of current Coalition Government's policies often indirectly having a negative impact on religious education. These include privileging certain school subjects other than RE, the diminution of local authority support for religious education, the lack of an equivocal legal requirement for religious education in Academies and Free Schools, and erosion of specialist teacher training for religious education at initial and in-service levels.

Introduction

This article aims to show how the development of law and policy on religious education (RE) in England has been evolutionary, until radical changes introduced to the English education system since the election of a Coalition Government of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010.

The English dual system of Government funding for both community and certain faith-based schools is considered. The devolution of syllabus design and support for religious education to local authorities in England is explained, together with a trend towards non-statutory national guidance. The policy, under the present Coalition Government, of greatly expanding the number of Academies and introducing Free Schools, both of which are independent of local authority control, is seen as a threat to the subject as it has developed since 1944. The main drivers for change since 1944 are considered, including the factors of secularisation and pluralisation, which led to a change of aims for the subject and its broadening to include a range of different religious traditions represented in Britain. The influence of Government policies is considered, including the Labour Government's policy of building community cohesion, and a range of current Coalition Government's policies often indirectly having a negative impact on religious education. These include privileging certain school subjects other than RE, the diminution of local authority support for religious education, the lack of an unequivocal legal requirement for religious education in

Academies and Free Schools, and erosion of specialist teacher training for religious education at initial and in-service levels.

As a preliminary, a few comments are made about the systems for religious education in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Northern Ireland and Scotland have separate and different systems for religious education from those in England and Wales. The Welsh system was virtually identical to that in England. However, since devolution of power to the Welsh Assembly Government, the Welsh system has diverged in some ways from that in England, especially in resisting some of the radical changes made to the English system.

Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales

Although the scope of this article covers religious education in England, a few comments will be made about Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

Northern Ireland's system is very much shaped by its own history and religious demography. Religious education (RE) policy and practice in Northern Ireland continues to be influenced by Christianity to a greater degree than the other nations of the UK (Barnes, 2007).

Scotland has a devolved Government which is responsible for its education system. Both denominational and non-denominational state-funded schools are fully funded by the state. Only one Jewish primary school represents non-Roman Catholic schools within the state-funded denominational sector. In non-denominational primary schools the subject is known as 'religious and moral education', and as 'religious education' in Catholic schools. In non-denominational secondary schools the subject is variously called religious and moral education, religious studies and religious, moral and philosophical studies. Non-denominational schools take a non-confessional approach in which religious and moral education enables young people to explore the world's major religions and non-religious life stances (Scottish Education Department, 1972; McKinney & Conroy, 2007).

Although the character of religious education in Welsh maintained schools is close to that of England, the Welsh system, post devolution, is gradually diverging from the English in certain respects, and resisting some radical policies from Westminster. The key difference between RE in England and Wales has been in the structure and power relations of Agreed Syllabus Conferences. While the Church of England, as the Established Church, has its own committee (with a vote) on English Agreed Syllabus Conferences, in Wales it is simply included in the committee that covers all faith groups. With regard to RE in Wales, since devolution, there has been a complete curriculum review, including the production of a guidance document, The National Exemplar Framework for Religious Education for 3 to 19-year-olds in Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2008). In practice, the Framework provides the basis for new Welsh Agreed Syllabuses. Some of the more radical educational reforms currently taking place in England (notably the introduction of semi-independent Academies) are being resisted successfully in Wales.

England

The main drivers for change in the context of religion and schools (and, of course, these have influenced all systems in the UK) have been processes of secularisation and pluralisation (both in terms of diversity of religions and theological and cultural diversity within Christianity), most obviously experienced through the

migration and settlement of peoples, but also through increasing global awareness. A subsidiary driver from the 1970s was the emergence of the scientific study of religions in universities (itself subject to secular and pluralistic influences) and various developments in pedagogical theory and practice, supported by educational research. To exemplify this academic influence briefly, religious education writing from the mid 1960s to the early 1970s began to take account of the increasing secularity and plurality of British society, notably Edwin Cox's book *Changing Aims in Religious Education* (Cox, 1966) and Ninian Smart, *Secular Education and the Logic of Religion* (Smart, 1968). There was a general move towards an epistemological and social justification of the place of RE in the curriculum based, not on religion's self-evident or publicly agreed truth, but on its role as a distinctive area of experience, 'form of knowledge' or 'realm of meaning', and on its active presence in society.

Smart's ideas were influential partly because they underpinned the Schools Council Secondary Project on Religious Education (established in 1969 and based at the University of Lancaster under Smart's direction) but also because they responded to the increasing dissatisfaction of many RE professionals with dogmatic approaches to their subject still being adopted by Agreed Syllabuses. *Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, the project's working paper (Schools Council, 1971), advocated the 'phenomenological' or undogmatic approach to RE which saw the subject as developing understanding of religions without promoting any particular religious stance, a process drawing on scholarly methods to generate empathy with those holding religious worldviews.

Although phenomenologists of religion themselves have characterised their discipline in different ways, the main proponents aimed to 'bracket out' their own presuppositions when attempting to understand another's faith and to study parallel phenomena in different religions in order to expose basic structures and forms which give insight into the essence of religious reality. The first of these aspects of phenomenology had much more influence on religious educators than the second. The notion of an impartial study, with both teacher and pupil attempting to suspend their own presuppositions in empathising with religious believers, was consistent with what many teachers and students, who found theologically loaded approaches to RE to be inappropriate, were *already* doing in practice (Jackson, 2012a). A set of 20 research case studies in schools shows a variety of approaches – including textual, philosophical and experiential – to be in widespread use in English schools (Jackson *et al.*, 2010), while pedagogical approaches other than the phenomenological approach have been developed by educators and researchers and have been in use for years via teacher training and professional development programmes (eg Grimmit, 2000; Ipgrave, Jackson & O'Grady, 2009; Jackson, 1997, 2004).

Other influences, coming to the fore at different periods, are changing social and political policy towards areas such as community and 'race' relations, citizenship and community cohesion. The 1990s brought an interest in promoting democratic citizenship in schools, which influenced religious education (Jackson, 2003), while, post 9/11, in England and Wales especially, there was an increase in attention to community cohesion under the last Labour Government (defeated May 2010), which had an impact on RE (DCSF, 2010).

However, a further influence, experienced in England around the time of writing (2013), is that of negative knock-on effects from recent Government education policy (a coalition Government composed of members of both the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats). The radical policies set out to

dismantle an education system with high local authority involvement, aiming to increase parental choice. This is inflicting damage on religious education through a preoccupation with a prescriptive knowledge based curriculum (Labour's community cohesion agenda was abandoned, for example), privileging certain core subjects at examination level (not including religious education), diminishing the role of local authorities (massively reducing the role of specialist advisers in RE at a local level, running down any expansion of community schools, not requiring the use of Agreed Syllabuses for RE in favoured types of schools) and reducing specialist teacher training in universities (APPG, 2013; Orchard & Whately, 2013).

The main resisters to change over time have tended to be those wishing to maintain the status quo for one reason or another and whose interests are not served by change. The topics of religious education in schools and state funded religious schools continue to be the subject of heated debate. However, until recently, changes to religious education and religious schooling since the 1944, and even since 1870 (both dates of major Education Acts), can be seen to be evolutionary, adapting and building on earlier experience and law.

It should be noted that there has been a good deal of European and international research (Jackson, 2012b) and discussion on the place of religion in public education in recent years which has had some influence on national debates in the UK, but mainly through universities and professional associations, rather than through Government. Currently there is a climate of scepticism towards European institutions from the political right. European contributions come, for example, from the Council of Europe, which supports the study of religions and beliefs in public education as part of a broad intercultural education (Council of Europe, 2008; Jackson, 2009, 2013). Similarly, the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, with 56 participant states, advocates a form of education about religions and beliefs grounded in the human rights principle of freedom of religion or belief, but adapted to the social contexts of particular countries (Jackson, 2008; OSCE, 2007).

The Development of Religious Education in English Schools

Essentially, modern religious education in England has evolved in its legal requirements and organisational arrangements since the introduction of state education in 1870. Religious groups have been involved since the nineteenth century in partnership with the state in the provision of schools and the curriculum subject of religious education (known then as religious instruction). Institutionally, in England, the Church of England still holds a privileged place as the established church and a prime provider of mass education prior to 1870. The rise of a globally oriented Religious Studies in British universities (notably Ninian Smart's work) in the 1960s had some influence on the ethos and content of the school subject, bringing a global dimension and impartial approach. Changes in society led to more equality within education between religious traditions, initially for the Roman Catholic and Jewish communities and more recently for other religious traditions, including Muslim, Sikh and Hindu communities. Social changes in the United Kingdom have included increasing secularisation, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, and increasing religious plurality, mainly through migration and settlement.

The combination of the intellectual shift in religious studies, the social change towards the recognition of religious plurality in Britain and grass roots initiatives in schools together made a powerful driver for change. A 'citizenship' agenda – representing a trend in many European countries and in the Council of Europe – came to the fore in the 1990s (citizenship was introduced into the English secondary

national curriculum in 2002, but it remains to be seen whether it will still be there in the reformed national curriculum) and has made its own impact on RE. The responses to the events of 9/11 in the USA and the London bombings of July 2005 included a community cohesion agenda linked by Government to subjects such as religious education and citizenship education in schools. However, the 2010 Coalition Government, in effect, dropped this programme (although some resources are still available on websites) and introduced radical educational policies privileging particular subjects at examination level (not RE), promoting a ‘knowledge-based’ curriculum, reducing the involvement of local authorities and support for teachers at local level, massively expanding the semi-independent Academies programme, introducing Free Schools and reorganising teacher training. All of these policies, sometimes indirectly, are having negative effects on religious education and the supply of specialist RE teachers.

County/Community and Voluntary Schools

Following the 1944 Education Act, fully state funded schools, administered by Local Authorities, were called ‘county schools’. The 1988 Education Reform Act renamed these as ‘community schools’. They were distinguished from voluntary schools, which were mainly schools with a religious foundation partly or wholly funded by the state. Voluntary aided schools nearly all have a religious character and receive partial (but substantial) state funding; Voluntary controlled schools (also of a religious character) receive full state funding and are therefore ‘controlled’ by the state, and have the same arrangements for RE as community schools.

The educational structures and arrangements that produce syllabuses for religious education in the fully state-funded schools (community schools and voluntary controlled schools) in England and Wales (known as Agreed Syllabuses) have evolved from those of earlier times. In these schools in England and Wales, religious education aims to foster an understanding of Christianity and the other main religions represented in British society, and also to help pupils to form their own views and opinions on religious matters. In mainly state-funded faith based schools (e.g. voluntary aided schools), however, religious education continues to include religious formation or nurture. That said, Church of England Board of Education all national policy encourages Church of England voluntary aided schools to follow the locally agreed syllabus for religious education, with the addition of particular Christian elements.

Syllabuses for RE in community schools in England are drafted at local level by an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC) which includes four committees: representatives of teachers; the Church of England; other denominations and religions; and local authority representatives. Thus the interests of professional educators, religious bodies and local authority representatives (including local politicians) come together at a local level in determining syllabus content. There is also a trend towards a national pattern for the subject (see below on the Non-statutory National Framework for Religious Education).

The Legal Framework

The 1944 Act made mandatory the use, by fully state-funded schools, of Agreed Syllabuses for Religious Instruction. Each English Local Education Authority (LEA) had to convene a Syllabus Conference consisting of four committees. Two of the four committees represented religious constituencies: the Church of England and ‘other denominations’. In practice ‘other denominations’ meant ‘other Protestant Christian

denominations’.¹ It was not until the 1970s that some LEAs liberally interpreted the Act as allowing representatives of non-Christian religions on to the ‘other denominations’ panel.

Changes to religious education brought about by the 1988 Education Reform Act have to be seen against the background of the introduction of England’s first national curriculum, with compulsory core and foundation subjects. Partly because of the local arrangements for religious education that already existed, and partly because of legal complications over the right to withdrawal, RE was not included in the national curriculum. The 1988 Education Reform Act retained many features of the 1944 Act, but introduced changes which strengthened RE’s place in the curriculum and acknowledged some recent developments in the subject. A significant change was the use of ‘religious education’ to replace the term ‘religious instruction’ with the latter’s suggestion of deliberate transmission of religious beliefs. The subject now had to justify its aims and processes on general educational grounds. For the first time in law, representatives of faiths other than Christianity were ‘officially’ given a place on Agreed Syllabus Conferences, on what used to be the ‘other denominations’ committee. Moreover, the role of local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education was enhanced under statute.

The Education Reform Act requires that any new Agreed Syllabus ‘shall reflect the fact that 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’ (UK Parliament, 1988, Section 8.3). However, the Act specifically prohibits indoctrinatory teaching. New Agreed Syllabuses needed both to give proper attention to the study of Christianity and, regardless of their location in the country, had also to give attention to the other major religions represented in Britain. The Education Reform Act also sets religious education in the context of the whole curriculum of maintained schools which ‘must be balanced and broadly based’ and must promote ‘the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society...’ (UK Parliament, 1988, 1 (2) para 2). Religious education then, as well as being broad, balanced and open, should not simply be a study of religions but, like the rest of the curriculum, should relate to the experience of pupils in such a way that it contributes to their personal development.

National Initiatives: The Model Syllabuses and the National Framework for Religious Education

In 1994, two model syllabuses were published by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), including material on six religions in Britain (Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism) and produced in consultation with members of faith communities.² The two models (SCAA, 1994a, b) were non-statutory; they were for the use of Agreed Syllabus Conferences, who could choose to ignore them or could edit or borrow from them. The model syllabuses used the terms ‘learning about religion’ and ‘learning from religion’ (AT1 & AT2) as the two attainment targets for religious education. This

¹ In Wales, there are 3 committees, the Church of England being part of the committee that includes faith group representation.

² Humanism was not included on the grounds that there had been an earlier court ruling (not in the context of RE) that it was not a religion. Many SACREs and AS conferences have co-opted humanist members or have ensured a humanist presence on the committee including representatives of teachers.

terminology has achieved wide circulation since the publication of the Model Syllabuses and is affirmed in the non- statutory National Framework (see below).

Further work took place at national level in 2003-4. The Department for Education and Skills commissioned the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to produce a new national framework for religious education in consultation with faith communities and professional RE associations, for use by Agreed Syllabus Conferences and others, including 'relevant authorities with responsibility for schools with a religious character'. The document (published in 2004), referred to hereafter as the National Framework, received the approval of all the professional associations and faith communities (Gates, 2005a). It aims to clarify standards in religious education, promote high quality teaching and learning, and recognize the important contribution of the subject to pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development by supporting local SACREs and local Agreed Syllabus Conferences (QCA, 2004). The National Framework is intended to ensure that local syllabuses meet the needs of pupils, and to facilitate the development of more national support materials for RE. It is also intended to increase public understanding of religious education by providing clear guidance on what is covered in the subject. Like the Model Syllabuses, the National Framework lists Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism as the principal religions that should be studied in addition to Christianity. The National Framework notes that 'It is important that ASCs and schools ensure that by the end of Key Stage 3 pupils have encountered all of these five principal religions in sufficient depth' (p. 12). Christianity should be studied across the Key Stages. The National Framework also states that 'To ensure that all pupils' voices are heard and the religious education curriculum is broad and balanced, it is recommended that there are opportunities for all pupils to study other religious traditions such as the Bahá'í faith, Jainism and Zoroastrianism' and 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (p. 12).

The National Framework also explains how religious education can contribute to intercultural understanding and citizenship education. The structure of the National Framework closely follows that of national curriculum requirements.

Since the publication of the National Framework, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales, representing professional organisations and faith communities, lobbied for the development of a national strategy for the subject based on the National Framework. The strategy includes improving the quality of the religious education taught in maintained community schools and schools with a religious character (commonly known as faith schools), encouraging those responsible for RE in faith-based voluntary aided schools, academies and independent schools to consult and use the National Framework in planning their RE syllabuses, and encouraging schools generally to strengthen an inclusive approach to the subject, by developing links with faith communities in their local areas. Funding was provided by the pre 2010 Coalition Labour Government for extending and improving in-service training of teachers through the development of continuing professional development materials. Funding was also provided by the pre-coalition Labour Government for a project on teaching about religious extremism (eg Miller 2013; see also <http://www.re-silience.org.uk>), and for research on materials used to teach about world religions in schools in England (Jackson *et al.*, 2010).

State-funded religious schools

The existence of state-funded religious schools acknowledges institutionally an element of plurality in English education. Towards one third of maintained schools in England are faith based schools of one type or another. The close collaboration

between Church and state in education in England goes back to the 1870 Education Act. The 'Dual system' of partnership between the state and the churches was developed further in the 1944 Education Act. This distinguished different types of maintained (i.e. state-funded) schools. County schools were entirely publicly funded and had no Church appointed governors. Voluntary schools, originally funded by religious bodies, went into voluntary partnership with the state.

Voluntary schools were of three types: Aided, Controlled and Special Agreement.³ In Voluntary Controlled schools, the RE syllabus was provided by the LEA. In Voluntary Aided schools, (Church of England, Roman Catholic, some other Christian schools and, significantly, a few Jewish schools⁴) had a majority of governors appointed by the sponsoring religious body. Since 1988, Voluntary Aided schools, like all other maintained schools, have had to follow the national curriculum. However, they have continued to teach religious education and to have collective worship according to the religious tradition represented in the school using, in the case of the Church of England, for example, diocesan syllabuses. However, all the major religious traditions have acknowledged the importance of the National Framework for Religious Education in influencing their approach to religious education and the survey and case studies from recent research indicate that it is not uncommon for 'faith schools' to include some teaching about 'world religions' in their RE (Jackson et al. 2010).

The 1998 School Standards and Framework Act introduced the concept of 'religious character' and modified the range of types of school receiving state funding (UK Parliament, 1998). This provided four categories of school within the state system: Community (formerly County schools); Foundation; Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled. All Community schools must use the local agreed syllabus as a basis for religious education and may not have a religious character. Schools within the other categories may have a 'religious character'. Most, but not all, Voluntary Aided and Voluntary Controlled schools and some Foundation schools have a religious character. All schools with a religious character can have collective worship that is distinctive of the religious body concerned. Only Voluntary Aided schools can have 'denominational' religious education. Voluntary Controlled and Foundation schools with a religious character have to use the local agreed syllabus, except in the case of children whose parents have specifically requested 'denominational' religious education. In effect, a wider range of religious schools was incorporated into the state system, partly for reasons of fairness and partly because such schools were recognised as potentially having certain qualities that might be more difficult to develop in some Community schools (DCSF, 2007a).

Academies

As an example of its confidence in the ability of religious bodies to make schools work in difficult social settings, the Labour Government, in March 2000, announced its intention to develop semi-independent Inner City Academies (later called Academies) catering for children of all abilities. Some of these are sponsored by Church related bodies. Under Labour, there was the intention to introduce a limited number of schools in socially deprived areas. However, the 2010 Coalition Government changed the concept of Academy to include as many state funded schools as possible (including primary schools), regardless of their social circumstances, and is implementing a massive expansion of Academies (UK

³Special Agreement Schools had curriculum arrangements close to those of Aided schools.

⁴ There were some Jewish schools with public grants even before 1870 (Gates, 2005b).

Parliament,2010, 2011). The policy is intended to erode the role of local authorities in state education.

Academies are schools directly funded by central government and independent of direct control by local government. An Academy may receive additional financial or other support from sponsors, must offer a broad and balanced curriculum, but does not have to follow the national curriculum. Like maintained schools, Academies are required to have a broad and balanced curriculum promoting the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and preparing them for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. Academies are self-governing and most are registered charities or are operated by educational charities. Most are secondary schools, for pupils aged 11 to 16, but, since 2012, an increasing number caters for children of primary age upwards. Interestingly, since devolution of education policy, there are no Academies in Wales, where the policy has been resisted successfully by the Welsh Assembly, whilst the number in England is increasing rapidly. The knock-on effects on religious education in England are very significant, since Academies, although they have to teach RE, do not have to use a locally Agreed Syllabus (UK Parliament,2010), although, like Agreed Syllabuses, their curriculum must reflect the fact that the religious traditions of Britain are mainly Christian but take account of the teachings of other principal religions represented in Britain. RE remains part of the funding agreement of individual Academies, but future funding agreements could, in principle, seek to omit religious education. Following the passing of the Education Act (UK Parliament,2011), Local Authorities needing to create a new school must in most circumstances seek proposals for an Academy or Free School. They can only propose a community school if no suitable Free School or Academy is proposed. This policy will enhance the demise of a state system which has guaranteed the place of an open and impartial religious education via agreed syllabuses for all in the majority of its schools.

Free Schools

Free Schools were introduced by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government via the Academies Act (UK Parliament,2010). To set up a Free School, groups, such as those run by parents, education charities and religious groups, apply to the Department for Education. They do not have to follow the national curriculum but are expected to offer a broad and balanced curriculum, and are subject to the same inspection arrangements as community schools, voluntary schools and Academies. Free Schools have to provide religious education, and a daily act of collective worship. The type of RE and collective worship, is determined by its funding agreement and depend on its religious designation. Requirements reflect the provisions that apply to local authorities and schools in the maintained sector, but no Agreed Syllabus for RE has to be used. Free Schools with a religious character have to provide RE and a daily act of collective worship in accordance with the tenets of their faith. Collective worship in a Free School without a religious designation should be of a broadly Christian nature – the same requirement that applies to community schools.

Supporters argue that Free Schools will create more local competition, drive-up educational standards and increase choice for parents. Critics argue that the policy is socially divisive, and will benefit only middle-class parents with time and resources to establish Free Schools, and that they will divert money away from other schools.

Although the number of Free Schools so far is small, they present a further threat to the kind of open and inclusive religious education offered through agreed syllabuses in community schools. Although the model funding agreements for Academies and Free Schools require that provision is made for 'religious education to be given to all pupils', that requirement is no longer statutory and could change, in principle, with a change of funding agreement.

Independent schools

Independent schools, which receive no state funding, may or may not have a religious character. There is great diversity within the independent school sector – from schools with ancient foundations, often religious foundations, although not necessarily now formally designated as having a 'religious character' – to small, financially struggling schools offering distinctive education. Independent schools can make their own arrangements for teaching religious education.

Community cohesion

The 'duty to promote community cohesion' formed part of the Education and Inspections Act 2006 [21 (5)]. Between September 2007 and the election of the Coalition Government in 2010, there was a requirement for schools to promote community cohesion, partly through curriculum subjects such as religious education and citizenship, and this requirement influenced the development of some materials for use in religious education in schools. The non-statutory guidance on community cohesion required that 'Every school – whatever its intake and wherever it is located – is responsible for educating children and young people who will live and work in a country which is diverse in terms of cultures, religions or beliefs, ethnicities and social backgrounds' (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF], 2007b) *Guidance on the duty to promote community cohesion*, July 2007). The non-statutory guidance for religious education stated that effective RE will promote community cohesion at each of four levels:

- 'the school community – RE provides a positive context within which the diversity of cultures, beliefs and values within the school community can be celebrated and explored;
- the community within which the school is located – RE provides opportunities to investigate the patterns of diversity of religion and belief within the local area and it is an important context within which links can be forged with different religious and non-religious belief groups in the local community;
- the UK community – a major focus of RE is the study of the diversity of religion and belief which exists with the UK and how this diversity influences national life; and
- the global community – RE involves the study of matters of global significance recognising the diversity of religion and belief and its impact on world issues.' (DCSF, 2010, p.8)

Community cohesion is not a priority for the Coalition Government; for example, this element is no longer inspected. However, the non-statutory advice on community cohesion referred to above is currently still available on the Department for Education website.

Conclusions

The development of religious education in community schools in England, and also the provision of state-funded schools with a religious character have been, until recently, evolutionary. Although there was some expansion of schools with a religious character, the great majority of state-funded schools continued to be community schools. Although voluntary aided schools within the maintained sector may teach forms of religious education which promote a particular faith, there has been agreement that the National Framework is an important tool in facilitating forms of religious education that are outward looking and inclusive of learning about the main different religions represented in Britain. However, in England, the rapidly increasing number of Academies, and the potentially growing number of Free Schools have no clear statutory requirement at present to provide an inclusive form of religious education; if funding agreements change, there could be attempts to change the character of RE from that required by the 1988 Education Reform Act. Also, many Academies and Free Schools themselves have a particular religious character.

Religious education professionals, teacher trainers, researchers and concerned Members of Parliament point out the negative effects on religious education of recent and current Coalition Government educational policies (egAPPG, 2013; Orchard and Whately, 2013). Religious education in Academies and Free Schools is guaranteed by funding agreements only, and is not determined by legislation which governs community and voluntary schools. The Academies Act (UK Parliament, 2010) does not require Academies to teach RE according to a locally agreed syllabus. The abolition of the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) by the present Government removed advice on religious education at a national level, as well as sources of information relevant to maintaining and improving standards in RE, such as the annual analysis of reports by local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education. Moreover, all national exemplars and programmes of study were removed from Department for Education websites in 2011. Religious Education was excluded in 2011 from the group of subjects at examination level forming the English Baccalaureate. In relation to teacher training, targets for religious education Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) places were reduced in 2011 by at least one third, putting many courses in risk of closure. The removal of bursaries for religious education PGCE applicants has meant a very significant decline in student applications for religious education teaching. With regard to in-service training, there has been a substantial loss of religious education advisory posts in local authorities, as well as diminishing budgets and professional support for Standing Advisory Councils in Religious Education (SACREs). This has resulted in the virtual disappearance of local religious education continuing professional development in many areas.

The quality of RE teaching in English schools is mixed. Recent school inspection evidence shows that in primary schools where achievement was graded by the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) as 'satisfactory', weaknesses included a lack of knowledge and confidence among teachers to plan and teach high quality RE lessons. In secondary schools the impact on RE of recent changes to the wider curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3 (11-14) was judged to be negative (OFSTED, 2010). The OFSTED report shows much variability in the quantity and quality of support for RE provided to schools at a local level, with many schools having difficulty in finding effective training. Other research evidence confirms the mixed quality of subject provision and its under-resourcing (Conroy *et al.*, 2012) and shows a need for the production of higher quality materials on the various religions

studied in RE, that reflect high standards of scholarship and pedagogy (Jackson *et al.*, 2010).

On a positive note, a key success over the past 10 years or so has been the improvement in pupils' attitudes towards RE. In most of the schools visited in collecting OFSTED evidence, pupils clearly understood the importance of learning about the diversity of religion and belief in contemporary society (OFSTED, 2010). This finding is supported by qualitative and quantitative research in English schools conducted as part of a European project (Ipgrave & McKenna, 2008; McKenna, Neill & Jackson, 2009) and by a project on Young People's Attitudes Towards Religious Diversity in the United Kingdom conducted by the University of Warwick as part of the Religion and Society programme (eg Francis *et al.*, 2012).

One might ask why a study of religions in schools has not fully incorporated non-religious ethical philosophies, as it has, for example, in the Canadian province of Quebec. The British Humanist Association has taken a long interest in the debates about religious education and has made a positive contribution, both to the literature and to policy and practice, especially through co-option of humanist representatives on to Agreed Syllabus Conferences and SACREs. However, law determines that the content of religious education should be 'religions', and legal precedent defines humanism as not being a religion. Nevertheless, the National Framework (QCA, 2004) assumes that non-religious worldviews such as humanism should be studied as well as religious ones, perhaps under the influence of human rights codes and wider European thinking about how to deal with teaching about religions and beliefs in schools. The nearest 'official' synthetic approach is that of Scotland, which has religious and moral education in primary schools and religious, moral and philosophical studies as a pathway at standard grade in secondary schools. Arguments based on human rights principles, as embodied in European Convention on Human Rights, for example, and on the interculturality of the European continent, rather than on the demography of particular nations, could eventually gain ground, and could broaden the scope of the subject to incorporate the study of non-religious philosophies.

Each of the nations of the United Kingdom continues to support a system which includes state funding for some faith based schools, institutions which maintain a 'nurturing' form of religious education. There are clear historical reasons why this is so, but the heated debate about public funding for faith based schools will continue (Jackson, 2004). What has emerged in recent years, however, is a policy of encouraging faith based schools to be outward looking and to form partnerships with other kinds of schools.

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