

At its meeting on February 10th 2014 all four Committees of the Birmingham Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) approved and adopted this commentary of the Religious Education Council's (REC) Review of Religious Education which was launched in October 2013

Executive summary

1. The REC Review largely ignored representations from bodies with statutory responsibilities for RE. As a result the views of faith communities and local authority representatives on SACREs are not adequately reflected.
2. The outcome of the review defines the 'core curriculum' and therefore centralises the direction of RE and constrains the freedom of communities and faith bodies to define their RE syllabus to meet their local needs.
3. The RE Review is unclear about the purpose of RE. While nominally accepting the benefits of 'learning from' religion it assumes that religions should be examined simplistically as human constructs that some people happen to adopt and others not. It constrains itself to merely 'learning about' religion.
4. The proposed non-statutory curriculum framework for Religious Education (NCFRE) while descriptive of religions, does not incorporate teaching how (through religious observance or non-religious adherence to a moral code) pupils can contribute to betterment of society through practice of behaviours such as charity, truthfulness, beauty, goodness or love. This misses the societal aspect of RE teaching which is highly valued by OFSTED.
5. The Review's Non-statutory Curriculum Framework for RE is mistaken in supposing there must be one common core to RE teaching to achieve the overarching aims of education. The very nature of a multi-cultural and multi-faith society supposes that different traditions of teaching and practices can *all* lead to varying degrees of spiritual and moral depth.
6. The RE Review is correct in seeing that the structural changes in education brought in by the 2010 Academies Act and by other decisions of the Secretary of State for Education will potentially have a detrimental impact on the quality of provision in RE. Since RE was the responsibility of Local Authorities, the 2010 Academies Act is subverting the roles and the supporting structures of SACREs

and ASCs. It is denying faith communities a role in defining the RE syllabus and effectively restricting the powers of the Church of England as the established Church to share in the determination of what is taught in state-funded schools without a religious foundation.

1. Introduction

1-1 The authors of the RE review are to be commended for their good intentions and the serious efforts they have put into developing the policies and strategies which they believe will lead to better religious education for all young people in this country. None of what follows is to cast any doubts on their goodwill yet we believe that the course they have set will lead the 'RE community' into a desert where it and the religious education they hope to provide to young people will perish. This will happen because they do not fully realise what the political will is that keeps RE alive in schools. This misjudgment begins with the complex process they have followed, which is then exacerbated by their understanding of the purpose, aims, content and pedagogy of RE.

2. Process

2-1 There appears to be a kind of forgetfulness in the Religious Education Council (REC) and, for that matter, on the part of the government and the Department for Education. The REC is a *voluntary body* made up of interested individuals who may or may not represent or consult with the bodies they are said to represent. Much is made in the RE review of the process they have followed to come to their conclusions, so their forgetfulness cannot be attributed to simple carelessness. They have overlooked the fact that whereas the REC is a voluntary body, there are also *statutory bodies* that actually have legal responsibility for offering advice, monitoring and overseeing the delivery of RE in schools and for providing the syllabus for RE in local community schools, namely, Local Authority Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education (SACREs) and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs).

2-2 In reviewing RE one might have expected the REC reviewers systematically to consult the statutory bodies, but they did not. Two SACREs insisted on offering evidence to the 'panel of experts'. The panel of experts, however, failed fully to engage with them, and did not discuss their evidence in the review. They might beneficially have analysed and discussed the reasons why, for example, some SACREs/ASCs did not follow the Non-Statutory

National Framework for RE drawn up by the Qualification and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and the DfE in 2004.

2-3 One of the reasons for the failure to consult the statutory bodies might be that whilst they did not consult with *individual* SACREs, the REC did have the National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) as one of its affiliated bodies. However, as the current chair of NASACRE, Lesley Prior explained in an e-mail “NASACRE’s role is not to express views on behalf of its members ... Rather, it is our place to ensure that the rights and responsibilities of those SACREs are acknowledged and respected within the current legal arrangements.” But even NASACRE could hardly be claimed actually to have endorsed the Review’s published report when, according to her, immediately prior to the publication of the report “the final version of the report has not yet been made available for circulation to member bodies, including NASACRE, so we have not discussed it at our recent Officers’ and Executive Meetings.” This last comment must raise a fundamental question mark over the degree of support claimed for the Review document amongst the membership of the REC¹ and most especially amongst SACREs.

2-4 The legal framework for RE was set up in the 1944 Education Act with great care and wisdom, and one dispenses with the framework of this statute at one’s peril. As regards the RE in county/community schools, the act provided for the need for agreement on a syllabus of RE between 1/ Local Authority Representatives, 2/ Teachers/educational professionals, 3/ the Church of England as the established church, and 4/ the other main religious bodies. Each of these four groups had an equal say. The ensuing process is representative of the ‘Big Society’. It is inclusive, giving faith communities a genuine say, whilst acknowledging the needs of the wider society through the voice of Councillors, and the demands of teaching through the voice of teachers and educational professionals. One can only observe that the prescribed legal framework and process makes for genuine moderation and communal ownership.

2-5 Although the structure of four distinct committees is followed by all SACREs, regrettably this is not the structure adopted by the REC which seems to be designed to appear to speak for people of faith whilst keeping their influence in check through their place in the general

¹ See e.g. the claims on p. 12.

membership. The REC should have consulted faith communities and their leadership directly on the draft of the Non-statutory Curriculum Framework for RE and asked for CoE approval via the bishop directly responsible for educational matters (Rt. Rev. John Pritchard, Bishop of Oxford).

2-6 The 1944 Act in addition to providing for a process determining the syllabus for RE in county/community schools, also gave teachers and pupils (via their parents) the freedom to withdraw from RE. Furthermore, the act provided for the creation of ‘voluntary aided’ schools and ‘voluntary controlled’ schools as effective measures by which faith communities could determine their own RE and educational ethos within the state sector of education. Now the RE Review is proposing that its proposed framework should be followed by faith schools too.

2-7 The RE Review quotes from the former schools minister, Nick Gibb, who made it evident that government policy “values the local determination of RE, which reflects the needs and traditions of the community, whether that is carried out by local authorities or schools.” The concentration on *defining a core curriculum* in the proposed NCFRE is not a way of helping local ASCs and schools but a way of telling them what they *must* do, even if NCFRE permits some variable extras. This is a fundamental effort at centralisation and against the desired course set by the political guidance.

2-8 Legally it is clear that humanism and secular philosophies are not properly included within religious education *except as critiques of religion*. They are properly included only as a means for clarifying and testing religious claims and insights, but they are not properly included *in their own right*². The ‘experts’ were certainly informed of this legal advice but they have simply chosen to ignore it by including Humanism and ‘worldviews’ generally in the curriculum starting with the recommended curriculum for Key Stage 1 (p. 18) (i.e. 5-7 year olds). This is despite the ‘official’ position of the CoE in the form of a statement made by the Bishop of Oxford, the Rt. Rev John Pritchard, that humanism should not be taught to children in its own right within RE.

² That was the core of the legal advice received by the City of Birmingham in 1974 and reaffirmed by further legal advice in 2009.

2-9 The review proposes teaching humanism and atheism by expanding the ‘religion’ in RE into ‘religion and belief’ or ‘religions and worldviews’³. The paragraph that speaks of the ‘Breadth of RE’ states:

The law requires that local authority RE agreed syllabuses and RE syllabuses used in academies that are not designated with a religious character ‘must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, while taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain.’ This means that from the ages of 5 to 19 pupils in schools learn about diverse religions and worldviews including Christianity and the other principal religions. Some schools with a religious character will prioritise learning about and from one religion, but all types of school need to recognize the diversity of the UK and the importance of learning about its religions and worldviews, including those with a significant local presence. (p.15)

2-10 The second half of the paragraph interprets the law incorrectly. The phrase ‘religions and worldviews’ appears to be shorthand for ‘religions and secular/atheistic philosophies’. The clause in the law only specifies the UK’s principal religions and says nothing about requiring humanism or atheism to be taught. Secondly, as stated in the first sentence of the paragraph the legal clause refers to community schools and to academies *without a religious foundation*. To then go on to suggest that *all types of schools* should recognize ‘the importance of learning about religions and worldviews’ is at variance with the legal position. It would be wholly against the principles of voluntary schooling and academies with a religious foundation to insist they teach humanism and atheism. These schools must teach RE in accordance with their trust deeds⁴.

2-11 It is neither possible nor desirable in a free and open society to shelter children from secularity, agnosticism, atheism and humanism, nor is it feasible to do so since much of the curriculum already presupposes methodologies and intellectual enquiries *etsi deus non daretur* (as if God does not exist). What is at issue is whether such a methodology, or methodologies, should be used in RE and thus whether religions and secular worldviews are ultimately on a par. The latter (worldviews) are seen as human constructs which might differ from time to time like the duck-rabbit optical illusion - now you see the world one way and now another. Religions, on the other hand, present themselves in a very different way, perhaps as a truth to do or as a command to be obeyed. Schools with a religious foundation in

³ See e.g. footnotes 7, 8 and 9 on page 14 of the Review where this spelled out in full.

⁴ The caveat in a footnote on p. 7 hardly undoes the damage that this paragraph does to the rights in law given to the governors of voluntary aided schools and of academies and free schools.

particular will resist any attempt to diminish the *sui generis* character of religious interests and the way this informs religious education. Agreed Syllabus Conferences should do the same to conform to the law as it stands.

3. Purpose

3-1 Much was made in the initial stages of the review about the confusion surrounding the purpose and aims of RE. See para 1.2 of appendix 1 p. 49. It was claimed that ‘Some people don’t get it.’ The RE Review itself does little to bring about the clarity that is necessary.

3-2 The first, perhaps minor, mistake lies in indirectly quoting the law (1988 ERA) as to the fundamental aims of education as a whole (p. 12):

“Every state-funded school must offer a curriculum which is balanced and broadly based, and which:

- promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and
- prepares pupils at the school for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life....”

In doing so, they omit the expectation in the law that the curriculum should also contribute to the development of *society* which is also mentioned in the ERA. This is important because there is still an all pervasive individualism in the Non statutory Curriculum Framework for RE that was so evident in the original NSNFRE of 2004 – though it is somewhat less pronounced. Thus one notes the intrusion of the word ‘own’ e.g. p. 18, p. 19, p. 20, p. 21 etc. When the document says that pupils “should raise questions and begin to express their own views ...” (p. 18, 21) the intrusion of the word ‘own’ suggests that it is not good enough for them simply to learn to express *their* views but that these views must somehow be set against those of others. This fails to recognise that we learn to articulate and express our views precisely in conjunction with, and through our relationships and in dialogue with, others. Not enough attention has been paid to the sociology of knowledge.

3-3 The most powerful argument that one can have for delivering religious education in school is that there is something intrinsically worthwhile about identifiable forms of religious life to which young people should be given access. Religious education cannot be done simply because the law requires it to be done but rather the law requires that it be done because many in society accept that these identifiable forms of religious life either have or may have this intrinsic merit. All education statute since 1944 in England up until the 2010 Academies Act have assumed that religious sensibilities might make this positive

contribution to the development of pupils and society hence the prescription of RE in contrast to systems in the US or France where religion is excluded from schools.. Young people without access to it would be impoverished spiritually, morally, socially and culturally speaking. It must, of course, be acknowledged that not everyone in society shares this judgment about religious life but religious educational processes cannot begin without it. The lack of universal agreement on this point is a good reason for maintaining the parental choice for pupil withdrawal clause in the law. But one must conclude that the purpose of RE is quite simple, namely, to enable religious sensibilities and religious life to contribute to the overarching aim of education. Religious traditions do so by articulating the nature and character of spiritual and moral life, and cultivating them through their acts of recollection of revelations, through their narratives, rituals, doctrines, social practices etc. that re-present or re-live the presence of God/transcendence. There can be no expectation that every religious tradition must be represented on the curriculum but whichever are selected, are selected because of the insight and contribution they might make to the educational enterprise in local and identifiable communities.

3-4 What the RE Review needs to make clear is how and in what ways, for example, that ‘knowing and understanding about a range of ‘religions and worldviews’ contributes to spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and society. Sadly it does not do so in sufficient detail to be of much use.

3-5 To illustrate: What precisely is the connection between

‘...questions about meaning and purpose in life, beliefs about God, ultimate reality, issues of right and wrong and what it means to be human’

and developing

‘an aptitude for dialogue’? They might as easily develop an aptitude for nihilism, cynicism, and relativism unless one can be more positive about the value of studying such matters.

3-6 In ‘enabling pupils to develop their ideas, values and identities’, can we be indifferent as to *which* ideas, values and identities are formed by individual pupils? It appears that the plural and secular context in which the RE Review is done silences the ‘experts’ about *how* a pupil might develop or *what* character and qualities ultimately lead to an open, cohesive, tolerant, and discursive society - even if they had such social development in mind. This is very different from the 2007 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus that spells out the relevant

dispositions and looks to religious traditions to show how they do, or might, contribute to developing these dispositions.

4. Pedagogy and Content

4-1 Part of the difficulty to be found in the NCFRE stems from the desire of the experts to provide a ‘core curriculum’ that will set the benchmarks for all RE syllabuses everywhere. However, a little reflection on the overarching aims of education would have shown that the ambition of defining a ‘core’ for RE is impossible. The aims, (which require the provision of a broad and balanced curriculum that leads to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and of society), can be met in a whole variety of ways. The very reason we live in a multi-cultural society is that there are diverse traditions with very different historical roots, and which have each, and separately, developed considerable spiritual and moral depth i.e. they have each used a different set of resources. To claim that there is one single core of teaching would be difficult to establish. To pretend that one must, however, know something about many or all religious traditions to attain spiritual depth is to pretend that all saints, prophets, gurus, apostles of an earlier age with little knowledge of the different traditions, were shallow in some important respect. It is conceivable that social and cultural depth in current circumstances requires some engagement with different traditions but to suppose there must be a single ‘core’ is not believable.

4-2 What is interesting is that the review has abandoned the two attainment targets of *learning about* and *learning from* widely used in earlier documents. This is replaced with the expectation “to know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study” (P.15). The original distinction in attainment targets was introduced to make it self-evidently clear that RE was not just a matter of transmitting information about the different religious traditions but that pupils should be encouraged to engage with them. The original reason for the introduction of this ‘*learning from*’ attainment target was to counter the rather voyeuristic tendencies in much multi-faith RE. It was certainly evident to teachers that pupils tend to find material boring unless it is made relevant to their lives.

4-3 If RE is to contribute to the development of pupils as the overarching aims of education demands, one must specify what bearing these religious matters should have for their character and life. Perhaps the words ‘to apply and understand’ or ‘gaining and deploying

skills' in the NCFRE are expected to serve the function of *learning from*. Yet the advice to 'apply' without specifying to what purpose and in what ways, is all but useless advice. The generality makes it far from clear how it will actually contribute to the spiritual and moral development of pupils let alone to their social and cultural development. Does it need to be said that the sheer requirement to be clear and coherent does not ensure that the beliefs, ideas, values etc are worthy of a pupil's allegiance? Similarly, whether one should respect the right of others to differ as the Review claims, would also depend on what the views are. One cannot for example freely express racist views in public nor is there a requirement to respect the people, who do so, for holding such views.

4-4 The RE Review has replaced the abandoned two attainment targets with three aims.

'Know about and understand...'

'Express ideas and insights...'

'Gain and deploy skills....'

This is a puzzling trio. One could have thought that expressing ideas and insights was an intellectual *skill*, whether one did so 'reasonably' or unreasonably, with or without 'increasing discernment'. The second aim is not readily differentiated from the third, just as *expressing ideas* cannot be easily separated from the supposed skill of *articulating beliefs*. On the other hand it is difficult to see how 'knowing about and understanding' can be achieved or demonstrated separately from 'expressing ideas' or thoughts. The response may be that the three aims cannot in practice be separated from each other. But the difficulty is the degree of abstraction that ultimately provides no direction to pupils, despite the references to 'appreciating and appraising'. This is the point of this form of RE, it fails to guide and is directionless. There is no indication that the appreciation and appraisals made by teachers and by others in society are grounded.

4-5 There is a general failure in the Review's NCFRE to recognise the complexity of the human person as having not only thoughts and ideas but also as having feelings and dispositions to act. Human beings struggle not only to acquire a growth in knowledge but with developing empathy or with feeling rightly about matters. And not infrequently, human beings struggle to find *the will* to do things. Such distinctions could have given a characteristic identity to the different aims and provided a kind of rationale that the current collection simply lacks. The aims would also have had more pedagogical force, for without

the recognition of knowledge, feelings and human will and an acknowledgement of the communal nature of our existence, there can be no effective educational communication.

4-6 One does not gain any sense from the document that for the writers of the report, religious sensibility is of paramount importance to the development of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural life of pupils. At best it is the experience of a secular RE that is supposed to be of benefit to pupils. Perhaps the RE community needs to review the way in which it presents its case and describe the tasks of RE. If they are unsure of the value of religious life itself why should anyone else care?

5. Politics and the wider context

5-1 The RE Review is on much stronger grounds in identifying some of the practicalities that are affecting the delivery of RE in schools. The development of an E-Bacc (English Baccalaureat) without any mention of RE as a legally prescribed subject was bound to have a negative impact. Just as the disappearance of RE advisors and advisory teachers impoverishes the resources on which schools may draw to support the delivery of RE in the classroom. The reliance on teachers without an educational background in theology weakens the subject. Connect this fact with the withdrawal of support for the training of RE teachers and it begins to create a picture of a political indifference to RE in schools.

5-2 The (political) indifference may well be shared by Faith communities because they have been supplanted by those with a professional interest in education. Faith communities which have examined the secularised RE on offer no longer see RE as serving religious life in any positive way. Only an RE that is expressly and openly committed to serving the spiritual and moral development of young people using religious resources, can be of interest to faith communities.

5-3 What the RE Review fails to do is to ask why the indifference to RE exists. No doubt the secularisation of society has something to with it, but then the 'RE community' has directly contributed to this by insisting that in RE one must 'study' and 'understand religion as a phenomenon', effectively from a secular perspective. Phenomena may, or may not, be interesting. Whether they are interesting will depend on whether the phenomena convey moral commands, present something beautiful that is worthy of contemplation, or reveal truths that need to be acknowledged and affirmed. So long as the RE community seeks to be

neutral and value free, so long as they exclude the passions of faith and keep faith communities at bay, they will have little of value to contribute to social life and will consequently be treated with indifference by politicians.