

# The Future of Religious Education: Prospects and Problems for Religious Education (revisited) Summary Report on a Conference

Held at the University of Worcester  
19 June 2013



## FOREWORD

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In response to the present situation in RE (outlined in detail below), the University of Worcester were pleased to host a day conference on the future of the subject in June 2013. With the intention of drawing together delegates representing a range of organisations and views to reflect upon input provided by a spread of expert opinion, the day conference provided a forum to debate many of the current issues challenging of the subject's future. The five keynote addresses on the day were followed by opportunities to respond to the issues raised, as well as more general questions around the aims and purposes of the subject, curricular content, structures and organisations—these views were noted, collated and are summarised here. The summary below is by no means an exhaustive one—that would be beyond the scope of a brief report such as this. Neither is this report meant to be conclusive, though it may prove of some use to those wishing to gather evidence on the range of opinions being expressed on matters at the present. However, that there was agreement at many critical points amongst both speakers and delegates, given their fundamentally differing starting-points, is both fascinating and encouraging as a way forward for the subject is sought in the wider context.



Thanks must go to sponsors of the event, the St. Peter's Sattley Trust and Worcestershire County Council SACRE. Additionally thanks go to the Student Partner who worked with me on the event, Ryan Parker, and to my colleague Alan Brown, without whom the event would have been less well-co-ordinated and hosted on the day.

**Professor Stephen G. Parker**

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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At a perceived moment of 'crisis' in religious education (RE), delegates from a variety of perspectives gathered on the 19 June 2013 at the University of Worcester to discuss issues around the future of the subject. The day consisted of five keynote addresses, with break-out discussions in delegate groups, and a plenary debate and final remarks concluding the seminar. Specifically, the keynotes were: Dr Stephen Parker and Dr Rob Freathy (How did we get to here in RE? Prospects and problems revisited); Dr Lynn Revell (The national situation); Professor Michael Hand (Philosophical perspectives); Professor Robert Jackson (Developments in European policy and practice) and Dr Mark Chater (Does RE have a future?). Each breakout discussion was allocated an amanuensis to record the themes emerging from delegate discussions. The prominent themes were:

### CURRICULAR AIMS

- Affirmation of the benefits of cross-curricular links between Religious Education and other subjects, due to the fact that religious faith and beliefs often permeate other areas of the curriculum. Yet, the subject should first clarify its aims and rationale so as to provide justification as a compulsory subject itself, before promoting too heavily such a move. Furthermore, care should be taken to ensure that cross-curricular links are not made for the sake of it, but should develop pupils' knowledge and spirituality through effective planning and clear learning objectives.
- That RE should strive to maintain its status as a compulsory subject (although some delegates advocated a subsuming of the subject into Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) or Citizenship).
- There is a need for clarification of the aims and rationale of the subject in order to assist practitioners. Such clarification can only aid justification of the subject within the curriculum.
- Social cohesion was regarded as a main aim for RE for many: though one keynote (Hand) challenged this view. It was argued that RE can promote intercultural understanding, and empower pupils from minority faiths.

### CONTENT, LEARNING AND TEACHING

- The importance of learning activities outside of the classroom (such as visits to sacred places), as well as inviting faith/belief speakers in, in engaging pupils and providing opportunities for experiential learning. Such opportunities were regarded as being effective in pupil learning and spiritual development.
- That space needs to be given within syllabi for pupils to consider world events and media coverage in order to engage with the issues of fundamentalism, misrepresentation and stereotyping. In particular, the promotion of a positive view of Islam to foster a realistic perspective on this religion, challenging the commonly held view which equates fundamentalism with Islam.
- It was observed that the 'RE space' is often regarded by pupils to be 'safe'; one in which they can explore ideas, debate, and ask ultimate and/or controversial questions in a non-judgmental context.
- That examination-led curriculum design need to include more opportunities for pupils to be listened to and express themselves vocally, for example through debates, opinion formation and argument development. Such opportunity for pupil voice allows for greater pupil engagement and personal development.
- The importance of RE in contributing towards pupils' spiritual development was affirmed, yet it was stressed that other subjects can also contribute towards it.
- RE should develop both knowledge and skills, the latter including reflection, critical analysis and evaluation. General consensus emerged that pupils had a lack of knowledge about Christianity and the denominational variations and similarities within religions, and there are calls for the teaching on this to be improved.
- The religions and beliefs studied should be extended beyond the 'big six' to encompass the broader questions around diversity and spirituality in the world. Such a move should be carefully considered in terms of curriculum space and teacher subject knowledge, especially with regard to the fact that many teachers of RE are not specialists in the subject.
- The teaching of religions should include a blending of approaches including philosophical thinking and enquiry-based learning, in which focus is placed upon 'meaning' rather than 'religious truth'. Religion should be taught as embedded in the lives and context of the society around pupils, and not as an abstract phenomenon.
- Opportunities should be available for 'pupil voice' to inform RE syllabi in schools, although the extent to which pupils could determine syllabus content was debated. Some delegates believed a pupil-led syllabus would engage

pupils and cover more effectively their questions regarding religious beliefs, yet there was concern that key aspects of religion would be missed.

## ORGANISATION AND STRUCTURE OF RE

- There are presently too many representative organisations for religious education, a factor which perhaps causes confusion and a lack of direction in the subject. It may be more beneficial to have one central organisation which has a greater involvement of teachers and pupils.
- That those promoting RE are too distant from the classroom resulting in top-down 'mis-match' rather than 'bottom-up' developments. Specifically, this concern was raised with regard to university researchers, SACRE leaders and the bodies/organisations who create and inform syllabi, aims and rationale.
- Concerns over personal agenda in SACREs and their relevancy in the new locally determined educational environment led to calls from a number of delegates for change in SACRE structures. Yet these institutions could still provide support and advice to schools, benefitting from strong connections with local faith groups.
- That RE is locally determined is both a prospect and a problem for RE. Omissions from the curriculum of certain faith/secular viewpoints were seen by some as an issue; examples of partnerships between schools, SACREs and Higher Education Institutions demonstrate good practice.
- The perception that faith schools are bastions of segregation guarding a vested interest was debated. It was agreed that generalisations on this were not possible due to the diversity of such schools.
- Agreed Syllabus Conferences are outdated, and there is a growing need for advisory support for RE with the rise of academies and free schools and local authority support decreasing. Youth SACREs are interesting initiatives that should be developed further.
- The subject name 'Religious Education' is no longer a suitable one. However no consensus arose from the delegates as to what the subject should instead be called. Other suggestions, such as Beliefs and Values Education, were noted to all have their own semantic and/or practical problems.

## RELIGIOUS EDUCATION PRACTITIONERS

- That high quality teachers with a strong subject knowledge are vital for effective RE. The reduction in ITT places, the lack of support through CPD and a reluctance of teacher take up in development opportunities caused concern in regard of the future of the subject and pupil learning. The number of non-specialists teaching the subject could also be problematic.
- Clarity is needed about the levelling of pupil work and establishing a balance between both attainment targets in lessons, as there is confusion voiced by many practitioners. Clear exemplars for practitioners and CPD opportunities would be useful

## THE FUTURE OF RE

- The historical perspective is useful in informing future decision making in religious education. Delegates agreed that this illuminates the subject's fundamental purpose, as well as highlighting the often complex and recurring nature of many debates and issues faced.
- RE is given poor standing in the curriculum, in some instances reflected by its limited resourcing, and provision of CPD. That some universities view the subject at A-level as of lesser value than others, again negatively affect the subject's standing.
- It may be of assistance to examine and learn from how RE is approached in other countries, particularly those in the wider European scene. Policy-makers should be encouraged to commission such comparative studies, although 'policy-borrowing' would be problematic due to varying social and structural systems between countries.

## INTRODUCTION

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More than forty years since the publication of *Prospects and Problems for Religious Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1971), Religious Education has, once again, reached a moment of crisis. With threats to its standing in the curriculum, and the legal and organisational structures which have previously maintained it, the time was felt (again) ripe for a consideration of questions around the subject's future. On the 19 June 2013, delegates from a range of backgrounds gathered at the University of Worcester for the seminar entitled *The Future of Religious Education: Prospects and Problems for Religious Education (revisited)*, to discuss such issues.

In recent years in particular, there has been a range of reactions from the Religious Education community to a perceived crisis for the subject, in part instigated by the changes in the educational landscape implemented by the Coalition Government. The REC Task Group, for example, have initiated a three-part subject review (the first of which has been completed (December 2013), with the second part forthcoming), which aims to clarify 'the subject's distinctive place in the wider school curriculum as well as giving guidance about suitable content' (p.4). Amongst other foci, this working group recommends a clarification of the aims of Religious Education, as well as the development of strategies 'designed to structure and sustain the future of RE' (RE Council, 2013b). In addition, the National Association for Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) and the Religious Education Council for England and Wales (REC) have reacted to the crisis through online campaigns, calling for teachers and members of the public to show their support for the subject in order to bring to a halt its neglect by the Coalition Government and the Secretary of State for Education (see for example the ReThink RE Campaign, 2013c).

## TRAINING AND RESOURCING

Prominent within these publications is *RE: The Truth Unmasked*, a report published by an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Religious Education in March 2013 which elicited many findings of deep concern for the subject in regard to teacher training. These included:

- a lack of expertise or relevant qualifications for over of half of teachers delivering the subject in both the primary and secondary phase;
- that in the primary phase, the subject was often taught by someone other than the class teacher, which in the majority were teaching assistants;
- that there is in many cases inadequate access to continuing professional development, further impacted by a reduction of local authority funding;
- the academies programme initiated by the current Coalition-government (academies of which, it must be noted, can choose to opt out of using the Agreed Syllabus provided by SACREs), have hindered the ability of SACREs to provide support for those teaching Religious Education at a local level. Where provision does take place, it is 'a postcode lottery', with a huge disparity existing between those SACREs who are well funded and consequently resourced and those who receive a minimal budget;
- that applications for secondary Religious Education has fallen considerably for 2013/14, due to a reduced number of Initial Teacher Training (ITT) places and the loss of bursaries;
- where initial teacher training did occur, particularly in university-based courses, there was a vast difference in the time trainees spent in learning about the subject, with some only undertaking as little as two hours per year;
- for those in school-based training courses such as the Graduate Teaching Programme, a significant number of school placements for trainees were undertaken in schools where the Religious Education departments were weak, therefore resulting in trainees receiving inadequate supervision;
- a vicious cycle emerging in which a lack of high quality teachers in the subject would likely result in pupils being less enthused about the subject. This in turn could result in fewer pupils pursuing theological and/or religious studies undergraduate degrees, which reduces the pool for those wishing to enter initial teacher training to teach Religious Education. As a consequence, there would be less high quality teachers of the subject in schools, potentially re-starting the cycle;
- such an occurrence would also affect Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACRE), as their strength in the teacher membership would dwindle, potentially leading to less effective provision in schools.



A survey of primary teachers undertaken by NATRE, published in June 2013, backed up many of the conclusions of the APPG report. The survey found that in just under two-fifths of schools RE was taught by a person other than the class teacher, either a different teacher who specialises in RE, but more frequently a 'full or part time teacher who is covering the class-teacher's planning, preparation and assessment time or by a teaching assistant' (p.2). Furthermore, respondents to this survey reported that they felt that provision for RE on their own ITT was insufficient 'to allow beginning teachers to feel confident about delivering the subject' (p.2). Indeed, just under a quarter of respondents stated they received no RE sessions during their initial teacher training and under half received less than three hours (p.2). A lack of RE sessions was also reported for those teachers who undertook a three or four year bachelor degree encompassing qualified teaching status, with 14.6% receiving no sessions on RE and 18.11% receiving less than three hours (p.2). As a consequence of the lack of RE sessions within initial training education, less than 5% of primary teachers responding to the survey 'described themselves as very confident about teaching RE when they started teaching and 37% as only reasonably confident' (p.2). This report states that the remaining 58% of primary teachers were not confident or slightly confident in teaching RE (p.2). Moreover, 'only 47.7% of teachers currently delivering RE describe themselves as 'very confident' about teaching RE. The remaining say they are reasonably confident or less' (p.2).

Due to the limited access of trainees to sessions on RE in ITT as identified through the survey, as well as the finding that 'teachers are most likely to hold the position of RE subject leader for less than two years...and less likely to continue beyond 5 years', the NATRE (2013, p.1) report stresses the importance of continual professional development. The report declares that new leaders 'need to have access to continuous professional development... and to reliable resources to support the leadership of the rest of the team delivering the subject' (p.1).

This latter point on resourcing was also analysed by the NATRE survey. Of the primary teachers responding, 61.5% regarded the resourcing of the subject as 'adequate', but the survey found that schools with a religious character (26%) are more likely to describe resourcing as 'more than adequate' than schools without a religious character (19%)' (p.1). In addition, the survey identified the most popular resources utilised by teachers in the planning and assessment of the subject, specifically the local agreed syllabus (77.6%), web-based resources (67.2%) and local schemes of work (41.3%) (p.2). The report suggested that due to the reliance on web-based resources teachers should receive training in the use of materials 'in order to avoid reproducing inaccurate, misleading or even offensive representations of a religion or belief' (p.2).

The NATRE primary survey also found issues around timetabling. The responses presented a considerable variation in the time allocated to the teaching of RE in the curriculum of schools, particularly between 'schools with and without a religious character' (p.2). The survey found that Religious Education was allocated less than 45 minutes a week in 37% of schools without a religious character, 10% of which taught the subject for less than 30 minutes (p.2). These percentages were 13% and 3% respectively for schools of a religious character (p.2).

A number of publications have confirmed the issues identified by the APPG and NATRE report, as well as identifying further ones. A working paper for Culham St. Gabriels completed in March 2013 elucidated a need for Secondary Initial Teacher Training in RE to be more thought out, concluding that 'a richer and more nuanced account of the good RE teacher is needed at a theoretical level which needs mediating into ITT provision if standards of learning, teaching and professional formation in the subject are to improve' (Orchard and Whately, 2013, p.3). Likewise, Chater and Erricker (2012, p.48) draw attention to the potentially vicious circle emerging of RE teacher populations, and state that the quality of SACREs may be negatively affected in future years by a reduction of places on ITT courses as their teacher membership dwindles.

## **STRUCTURES IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

Another key issue that has received much deliberation is the organisation of RE structures. With impetus for local determination by the Coalition Government bearing fruit through an increasing number of free schools and academy conversions which create their own communities, there has been the suggestion that SACREs may find that they are not 'local enough' (Chater and Erricker, 2012, p.96-100). Furthermore, Gearon (2013, p.61, 62) highlights that the local determination agenda provides religious groups the opportunity to open schools which utilise a theological basis on which to retain the link between Religious Education and the religious life.

## **AIMS AND RATIONALE**

A particularly prominent theme within publications is the confusion of many practitioners as to the aims and rationale of the subject (see for example Chater and Erricker, 2012; Gearon, 2013). The offering of various subject rationales through the history of the subject, as opposed to a coherent and consistent rationale echoed from all in

the RE community, has led to such a situation (Parker & Freathy, 2011; Gearon, 2013, p.141), and there are calls for clarity from within the RE community (see for example Chater and Erricker, 2013). It has also been suggested that plural rationales has rendered what constitutes clear progression in the subject difficult (Gearon, 2013, p.134-137). However, Gearon (2013, p.141), has castigated the 'grandiose goals' of pedagogies in which fail to consider the fact that the subject is usually given only an hour of curriculum time per week in most schools.

It has also been frequently noted that RE is being used for, and thus increasingly basing its subject credibility upon, socio-political aims through a social cohesion rationale (Gearon, 2013, p.29; Jackson, 2004). There has been extensive research from the 'Religion in Education. A contribution to Dialogue or a factor of Conflict in transforming societies of European Countries' (REDCo) Project. One such example is the edited volume by Meijer, Miedema and Lanser-van der Velde (2009), *Religious Education in a World of Religious Diversity: Religious Diversity and Education in Europe*, which charts the situation of Religious Education within a number of European countries, including England, with particular identification and advocating of a socio-political aim and rationale of the subject. Furthermore, Gearon (2013, p.35) describes what he sees as a 'pedagogical-political convergence', in which the top-down political goals are informing research agendas relating to how socio-political aims can be incorporated into classroom practice.

## STATUS

Many have declared concern for the status of the subject, particularly in the light of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc) proposals (see for example NATRE, 2012). There are fears that the credibility of the subject is being undermined, and Religious Education is being perceived as irrelevant and thus receiving less curriculum time (NATRE, 2012). In addition, Gearon (2013, p.78, 97) notes how Religious Education has allied itself with not only political aims, but also many other disciplines such as psychology and philosophy in order to justify itself as a credible curriculum subject. However, after analysis, Gearon (2013, p.97) fears that: 'the ground for which so many religious educators have sought to justify their subject is being used against them by the secular intellectual traditions with which they had sought to ally themselves', a situation which is reflected upon historically in Freathy and Parker (2013). A clear example of this is provided through a discussion of the subject of Citizenship, in which there is a voice in the educational sphere that with the increasing focus upon religions within this subject it could subsume RE (Gearon, 2013, p.79-86). Moreover, there has been fruitful discussion on the cross-curricular potential of RE, but it has been acknowledged that no other subject requires the breadth of knowledge of its teachers as Religious Education does, and daunting is the proposition of the knowledge required of the effect of religion upon culture (Gearon, 2013, p.159-160).

## PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS (1971)

Although the RE community has recently declared that the subject is in crisis, such moments of crisis and the subsequent exhortations are not new. For example, in 1969, the then Secretary of State Edward Short called to fruition a group thirty strong at St. George's House, Windsor, in order to contemplate the future of the subject in the light of an increasingly diverse society and meet the needs of pupils and society alike. The outcomes, published as *Prospects and Problems for Religious Education* (Department of Education and Science, 1971), analysed their present situation and responded.

In contemplating the Prospects and Problems (1971) report, it is of interest to note the similarities (and differences) between the perceived issues at the time of the Windsor seminar and those leading to present seminar at the University of Worcester. Indeed, although several issues central to the 1971 seminar receive less focus in the contemporary context (such as the relationship between religious education and moral development (p.7-13) and how the subject should best serve an increasingly diverse and multi-cultural society (p.37, 38)), there are numerous issues which are notably similar to those purported as facing the subject of RE in contemporary times. Specifically: both seminars were gathered to consider the aims and rationale of the subject (1971, p.14-20); the role of the religious education teacher, teacher training and subject knowledge, including the concern that primary teachers are 'inadequately prepared' and one-third of secondary teachers 'have no special knowledge or training' in the subject (1971, p.26-29); an agreement on the importance of and greater need for continual professional development (1971, p.29); the impact of educational developments which call into question the place of religious education (1971, p.28); that the factors especially impacting the subject are its status, timetabling, resources, supply of qualified teachers and attitude of the head (1971, p.33); and, the benefit of cross-curricular links with other subjects (p.34, 35). Furthermore, it is of interest to note the declaration of a Working Party commissioned by the seminar at Windsor 'to enquire into the supply and training of teachers of religious education' (1971, p.29). With the APPG report published in March 2013 on the same topic, it seems that history within the subject has repeated itself, and issues have remained unresolved.

## SECTION 1 – KEYNOTE ABSTRACTS

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### HOW DID WE GET TO HERE IN RE? PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS REVISITED

**Dr Stephen Parker (University of Worcester) and Dr Rob Freathy (University of Exeter)**

So RE is in a state of crisis, but what's new? Based upon on-going research into the history of religious education, our presentation challenges the view that the current parlous state of RE is the result of present government policy alone. Instead we argue that the issues troubling the subject just now are latent and longstanding, having been left unresolved from previous decades and centuries. Our presentation urges all stakeholders to look more closely at the history of RE, to better understand and explain these enduring issues and perennial problems, so that our journeys in the present and the future can be guided by the most accurate maps possible of past theories, legislation, policies and practices.

### THE NATIONAL SITUATION

**Dr Lynn Revell, Canterbury Christ Church University**

There often appears to be a gap between the way religion is experienced and presented in modern life and the religion that is presented in Religious Education. It also appears as though this gap is likely to widen as political and cultural developments influence the changing significance of religion today. This lecture explores the reasons why these factors challenge the nature of RE and how the future of RE will be shaped by the way the subject responds to these developments.

### IS THERE A GOOD ENOUGH JUSTIFICATION FOR COMPULSORY RE? PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

**Professor Michael Hand, University of Birmingham**

The model funding agreements for Academies and Free Schools currently require that provision is made for 'religious education to be given to all pupils'. But the requirement is no longer statutory and at least one Free School proposer has already sought exemption from it. Moreover, with no obligation to teach a nationally or locally agreed RE syllabus, Academies and Free Schools have carte blanche to interpret the requirement as they please. In this context the question of the justification for compulsory RE takes on a new urgency. I will consider and reject a number of possible justifications, then outline what I take to be the best argument for compulsory RE and the curriculum content it implies.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN EUROPEAN POLICY AND PRACTICE

**Professor Robert Jackson, University of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit**

This presentation gives an account of the emergence of an interest in the study of religions in publicly funded schools by various European and international institutions, with particular attention to the Council of Europe. Brief reference will be made to the Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions in Public Schools and to the work of the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations programme. However, the presentation focuses on the on-going work of the Council of Europe in encouraging schools across Europe to introduce an impartial study of religions and other worldviews as a dimension of intercultural education. Particular attention is given to the 2008 Recommendation from the Committee of Ministers (the Foreign Ministers of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe) on teaching about religions and non-religious convictions in schools, and to current work on its dissemination. In 2011, the Council of Europe and the European Wergeland Centre set up a joint committee to produce a 'roadmap' on implementing the Recommendation adapted to different contexts across Europe. The presentation includes an explanation of the process of consultation with stakeholders and summarises key issues to be addressed in the document, which will be aimed primarily at policy makers, schools and teacher trainers.

### DOES RE HAVE A FUTURE?

**Dr Mark Chater, Director, Culham St. Gabriel's Trust**

Summary of my presentation: Does RE have a future? Mark Chater will describe and evaluate different strategic futures for RE, making reference to curriculum and pedagogical developments in and beyond the subject community. He will place a particular emphasis on outcomes for pupils.



## SECTION 2 – HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

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A focus of the seminar was the history of the subject and its use in informing future decision-making within religious education. There was strong agreement amongst delegates that the historical perspective can and should illuminate discussions about the subject's fundamental nature and purpose.

Moreover, delegates felt that the historical perspective highlights that there is no one simple solution to overcoming the issues faced by religious education. Additionally, history shows that issues faced by the subject are often recurring, and some delegates, reflecting back upon the 1971 Prospects and Problems seminar, found it frustrating that many debates and issues in religious education remain unresolved. One example was the problem of the supply of specialist RE teachers. Moreover, some delegates stressed that we are to an extent 'hamstrung' by past agendas, and Religious Education falls victim to longstanding issues.

There was a call from the delegates present that historical perspectives should inform the contemporary setting, and that there is also a real need to be 'future driven' in religious education.

## SECTION 3 – PEDAGOGY, PRACTICE AND POLICY

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A frequently discussed aspect of the teaching of Religious Education focused upon to what extent cross-curricular links should be made with other subjects in the curriculum. A broad range of views pertaining to this issue were discussed, with many agreeing that were benefits in pursuing connections between RE and other subjects. However, there were concerns that the Religious Education community should first and foremost provide clarity as to its aims and rationale, providing justification as a compulsory subject itself, before investing too heavily in such a move. Many felt that Religious Education would not become stronger if it were cross-curricular, and care would need to be taken to ensure that when it did take place, effective planning and clear learning objectives fostered a high standard of Religious Education.

Whilst the majority of delegates maintained that religious education should retain its status as a compulsory subject, some delegates advocated a subsuming of the subject into Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), Values Education or Citizenship. Such a move, it was argued, would allow religious education to survive within the curriculum. However, there was

much difference of opinion on this. There was, however, general consensus that in some cases the line between RE and other subjects was in danger of becoming blurred, particularly that between Religious Education and Citizenship.

Central to many of the discussions throughout the day was the need to inspire pupils in the subject. A particularly prominent theme emerging was the importance of undertaking learning activities outside of the classroom. Delegates held the view that trips, such as those to places of worship, allowed for pupil engagement and experiential learning. Although it was agreed that pupils may not necessarily develop spiritually as a result of visiting places of worship, there was a call for clarity regarding the criteria that is used to identify such development and experience. Likewise, there was general consensus that visiting speakers from faith and belief communities are beneficial for pupil learning, yet these need to be well planned and considered in order to overcome any potential problems that may occur and to maximise the potential learning of the opportunity for pupils.

There was much discussion throughout the day regarding the pedagogy of Religious Education. It was agreed that the Religious Education curriculum needs to be varied, and that within this pupils have chance to reflect upon their own responses to topics, issues and to explore their own questions. Examples put forward by delegates included the space for pupils to respond to world events and media coverage, especially relating to religious zeal and fundamentalism, allowing the opportunity for teachers to introduce thought upon misrepresentation, extremism and stereotyping. Moreover, it was stressed that it is important for teachers build good relationships with pupils and to create a 'safe space' in which pupils can explore ideas, ask ultimate and/or controversial questions in a non-judgmental context. Such an atmosphere is pivotal in allowing critical thinking skills to be developed. Practitioners need to listen to pupils more. This was particularly stressed in the consideration of the examination-led curriculum design, which delegates felt often limited subject scope and the focus upon debates, opinion formation and argument development which RE uses to help enhance the pupil in child-centred pedagogy.

A considerable number of delegates described the importance of Religious Education in the spiritual development of pupils. It was stressed, however, that this was not limited to Religious Education, and other subjects could contribute towards it. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the spirituality of the teacher affects the way they teach spirituality.

Delegates expressed concern about the rise of a knowledge-based curriculum. Firstly, many delegates felt that call for such a curriculum neglected the development of skills, which are crucial aspect within education. Especially in the light of Attainment Target

two of 'learning from religion', it was agreed that pupils required the skills of reflection, critical analysis and evaluation to develop and make effective progress in Religious Education and the wider curriculum. Secondly, there was general consensus that children had a lack of exposure to religious issues in society as well as a lack of knowledge about Christianity, and there were calls for the teaching of Christianity to be improved. A few delegates presented their experience from within Church of England schools, children were often more knowledgeable about faiths other than their own. This was agreed to be a complicated issue related to synthesis of religions and time given to them on the RE curriculum. Thirdly, it was agreed that pupils were lacking in appropriate knowledge of the cultural and denominational variations and similarities within a religion as well as between religions.

Within the seminar discussions, there were calls that, alongside the deliberation on content in the Religious Education, there should be a consideration of process. In particular, discussions centred on how religious traditions should be taught, and there were a wide range of suggestions on this matter. A view expressed by some delegates that Religious Education as it currently stands is ring-fencing religion as a world view occupied by a select few faiths. It was stated that such representation was not embedded in the realities of operational religion. Furthermore, there was general consensus that the religions and beliefs studied should be extended beyond 'the main six' religions to encompass the broader questions around diversity and spirituality around the world. This said, such a move would need to be considered practically, as non-specialist teachers may be lacking in subject knowledge of world spiritualities and be naturally apprehensive. Moreover, the current policies and practice in Religious Education in which Christianity is to be taught in the main alongside two other religious traditions, coupled with the fact that the subject typically receives only an hour a week, renders such a move to incorporate wider spiritualities into syllabi problematic.

With regard to the process by which religion should be taught, there was a strong agreement that presenting religions as 'truth', which often have conflicting 'truths', was a characteristic of RE. A blending of approaches was considered to be effective in response to this challenge, in which pupils engaged with philosophical thinking, enquiry-based learning and focus upon 'meaning' rather than 'truth'. Furthermore, it was agreed that religion should not be taught as an external, abstract phenomena but one that is embedded in the lives and context of the society around pupils.

Practically, in deliberating upon the planning aspect of religious education lessons, delegates agreed that 'what if?' open-ended questions were effective. However, the levelling of work, as well as establishing a balance between Attainment Target one ('learning about religion') and two ('learning from religion'), were

identified as aspects with which practitioners were uncomfortable. Delegates voiced a need for clarity from the religious education community and effective exemplars, as well as opportunities for CPD on these aspects in order to overcome these uncertainties.

## SECTION 4 – FRAGMENTATION AND UNITY

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A common theme that emerged through delegate discussion was that of fragmentation within the religious education community. There was general consensus that there are presently too many organisations representing RE. It was suggested that it may be more beneficial to have one central organisation which had a greater involvement of religious education teachers, (as well as pupils) to have a voice in communicating their beliefs and values and desires for the subject. Furthermore, it was noted that there are often sporadic passionate meetings across the country which aim to discuss how to improve the religious education of pupils. A central individual or organisation would allow for lobbying on the next steps to be more effectively pursued.

Another concern voiced was the distance between those promoting Religious Education, university researchers, SACRE leaders and the bodies/organisations existing for religious education, and the teachers and pupils within schools. The question was raised as to whether these individuals/groups were too far away from current pedagogy and school climate, resulting in a top-down 'mismatch' rather than 'bottom-up' developments. On this latter point, it was agreed that the notion of teachers as researchers was a fruitful prospect. With regard to SACREs, it was observed that practice varies enormously from SACRE to SACRE, a key factor being the funding available.

## SECTION 5 – ORGANISATIONAL AND STRUCTURAL REFLECTIONS

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### STANDING ADVISORY COUNCILS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (SACRE)

A topic that frequently arose during the day was that of the organisation and structure supporting Religious Education. The nature and role of SACREs received particular attention and although there were a wide range of views from amongst the delegates, a common agreement emerged that a change of SACRE structure and purpose was needed. Some delegates raised concerns regarding the possibility of bias amongst SACRE representatives, and the fear that Agreed Syllabus Conferences may promote unrepresentative types of syllabus. The dissolving of SACREs was mooted, as was the view that they were unrepresentative. However, all delegates agreed that SACREs are on the whole well respected voluntary groups who do a huge service for the subject.

Discussion frequently centred upon the extension of SACRE membership to include a greater number of teachers. However, it was concluded that this would not solve the problem of personal bias and representation. In addition, there was consideration of widening representation on SACREs to other religious and non-religious groups. Amongst those groups considered were Humanists.

Discussion also took place on the issue of SACRE awareness. Many delegates agreed that SACREs are little known to the public, yet a range of views abounded as to whether it would benefit the subject in raising awareness of them. It was agreed, however, that it is important for SACREs to establish and maintain strong connections with local communities, particularly local faith groups.

Many delegates raised the question of the effect of academies and free schools upon SACREs. It was acknowledged that these local schools had no requirement to utilise their Locally Agreed Syllabus, and, as such, the number of school utilising such a resource may fall. Some delegates went as far as to state that in such an educational landscape SACREs lose their relevance, and should be replaced by an 'RE champion' in each school. Others stated that SACREs can still be a useful institution of support, being able to offer advice to teachers and schools.

### ACADEMIES/FREE SCHOOLS

The rise of academies and free schools was heavily discussed at the seminar. Delegates agreed that the local determination agenda was both a prospect and a problem for Religious Education. On the one hand, threats to the subject included the precarious nature

of Religious Education in academies, in which there may be a fragmentation of syllabi and a move away from the local agreed syllabus, thereby threatening the role and position of SACREs. Furthermore, there is a fear that Religious Education as a subject may be lost if the legal compliance is removed. On the other hand, it was raised that academies offer more opportunities for advancement in the subject of Religious Education through reciprocal partnerships, such as across schools/academies. Further opportunities arise through the potential for outreach and working in alliance with Higher Education institutions.

The importance of having headteachers who are sympathetic and supportive of RE was affirmed.

### FAITH SCHOOLS

Faith schools are perceived to be problematic by many, as they are assumed to be bastions of segregation guarding a vested interest. Delegates agreed that this was not the case. It was noted that faith schools tend to be outward looking, and as well providing a protection of Religious Education as a core subject within their curriculum.

Additionally, the view emerged through break out discussions that these schools must ensure that they have the language and appropriate structures in place to work with and incorporate diversity on top of their established theology. Furthermore, the effect of the local determination agenda was contemplated upon such faith schools, with delegates pondering the extent to which Religious Education could change with the requirement to follow the locally agreed syllabus lifted in such schools.

### NATIONAL STRUCTURES

The question was discussed throughout the seminar whether changes to the national structure in the RE lobby would strengthen its position as a subject amongst policy-makers, stakeholders and professionals. Delegates agreed that this was a difficult issue indeed, but consensus arose that there were too many organisational bodies representing religious education. It was stated that many of these bodies have vested interests, as with many of the stakeholders such as religious institutions. Some thought Agreed Syllabus Conferences were out-dated. Those structures that were advocated from those present were the need for advisory support for Religious Education available for practitioners, especially with the rise of academies and free schools and with the support from local authorities decreasing. Furthermore, Youth SACREs were discussed to be of benefit for the subject in terms of pupil engagement and informing SACREs over syllabus content.

## SECTION 6 – NAME OF RE

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Prominent throughout the seminar was the assertion from some delegates that the name of 'Religious Education' was no longer a suitable name for the subject. One view expressed was that the wider spiritualities and non-faith positions covered in syllabi rendered the name of 'Religious Education' inappropriate. However, there was no consensus on what the subject should instead be named. Many options were put forward, such as 'Moral Philosophy'; 'Beliefs Education'; and 'Beliefs and Values Education'. Furthermore, a number of delegates held the view that Religious Education should be subsumed into the subject of Citizenship or PSHE. Yet it was discussed that all of the alternative names had their own semantic and/or practical problems, and a change of name would only help if there was clarity on what the aims and content of the alternative are. Regarding Beliefs and Values Education, which received considerable support from amongst the delegates, the position was presented that such a title would only be appropriate if the aim of Religious Education was to develop the beliefs of pupils. Beliefs, it was stated, can be covered in a wider aspect in the curriculum – such as through PSHE and Citizenship – and it should not be covered to the detriment of learning about the world religions. It was clear that consensus was lacking on this issue, yet delegates agreed that for headway to be made towards consensus 'religion' needed to be understood properly as a term. Although a wide range of views, there was optimism that this was an issue that should be further considered by the RE community.

## SECTION 7 – AIMS OF RE

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There was a call throughout the seminar for a clarification (and where appropriate a revision) on the aims and purposes of the subject. Furthermore, a key challenge is to manage the scope of the subject.

### SOCIAL COHESION

Promoting social cohesion was asserted as a main rationale for the subject. The need of Religious Education in promoting respect for one another, the tackling of stereotypes and consideration of misrepresentation and extremism, were perceived as a vital aim for the subject by many. Of particular need was to promote a positive view of Islam and an understanding that fundamentalism is a minority activity.

In addition, emerging from delegate discussion was the need for effective Religious Education to promote inter-cultural understandings. Not only would this allow

pupils from vulnerable minority faiths to be empowered, but that RE also fosters mutual understanding amongst pupils.

## SECTION 8 – PUPIL VOICE

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Consensus emerged amongst delegates that pupils should be provided with opportunities to contribute towards their Religious Education throughout school, and schools and SACREs should respond to 'pupil voice'. However, the extent to which pupils should be given the opportunity to inform their curriculum was disputed. Some delegates advocated allowing pupils the state the content they would like covered in a unit, with the teacher striving to answer all questions and aspects raised within the respective lessons. Other delegates agreed that pupils should have this opportunity but with restrictions, due to the concern that essential aspects of units (such as religious traditions) would not be covered'.

Whatever stance delegates took, there was greater consensus on the fact that pupils should be listened to more, and that a good opportunity for pupil voice could be through Youth SACREs.

## SECTION 9 – ROLE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATOR

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When discussing the role of the religious educator, the responses collated were multi-faceted. However, a frequent assertion was the recognition that Religious Education teachers had a role in developing the spirituality of pupils, through allowing pupils to gain an awareness of and engage with their spirituality. It was emphasised that out of classroom activities and visits to places of worship should be utilised further to aid such development and awareness of other religions.

Further stressed was the need for teachers to allow time in the curriculum for pupils to reflect upon and create their own responses to world events and media coverage involving religion, and to engage with challenging questions surrounding aspects such as fundamentalism and stereotyping.



## SECTION 10 – TEACHERS AND TRAINING

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The issue of teachers and training received considerable attention during the seminar. Delegates regarded high quality teachers with strong subject knowledge as essential for quality Religious Education in schools, yet many raised concerns over the supply of these in future years. Firstly, there were concerns over the reduction in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) places for Religious Education at many universities. The concern was present that this will have a marked negative effect as the number of qualified Religious Education specialists would diminish, a situation particularly significant as the subject is currently threatened in a number of secondary schools. Secondly, there were concerns that there is a lack of support for teachers in Religious Education at present, with considerable fears about how this would affect Newly Qualified Teachers. Where continuing professional development (CPD) was offered, there was reluctance by teachers to take this on, raising questions as to the subject's current status in schools, and teachers' facility to take advantage of such opportunities.

There were also concerns regarding the use of non-specialists to teach Religious Education, as they may not have the required subject knowledge to provide pupils with an informative experience and answer their questions. The lack of CPD opportunities and/or take up for such a group was considered as particularly significant for the pupil experience of Religious Education.

It was acknowledged by delegates that the definition of modern 'competence' is itself a tricky task. Delegates identified a fear present amongst less confident practitioners of 'getting wrong' key beliefs and practices of religious groups. As a consequence, pupils may be losing out on being able to ask deep questions about religious life and traditions.

## SECTION 11 – STATUS OF RE

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The status of Religious Education was an issue that was discussed at length throughout the seminar. There was consensus from delegates that the status of the subject needed to be raised, especially in the light of contemporary Religious Education receiving a lack of support within schools (through resourcing, opportunities for CPD, the reluctance to take up of CPD, and the 'dumping' of the subject upon non-specialists/teaching assistants during PPA). In addition, the reduction of allocation of time was perceived as another disciplinary challenge as RE has begun to lose its 'protected' status. There were concerns from delegates that the subject no longer has a parity of esteem with

other subjects as it has become marginalised even among the humanities. Furthermore, the point was raised that market factors influence Religious Education in a new consumer market. For example, that some universities do not accept the subject as of equivalent value to others has had a negative effect upon the status of the subject.

Delegates agreed that Religious Education was an extremely important subject and covered areas of high social concern. In the light of concerns over the lack of status of the subject, it was considered whether Religious Education should 'go-it-alone' or be twinned with another subject. The majority of delegates agreed that Religious Education should strive to keep itself a distinct subject, yet there were a minority who strongly considered twinning with another curriculum subject, in order to protect its place on the curriculum to some extent.

However, the point was made that as Religious Education is continuously having to defend its place, energy is being expended on defence and the focus shifts from developing a more innovative and creative curriculum. Yet the blame was not directed to external factors such as the local determinism agenda. Delegates agreed that the questioning by schools and headteachers over the relevance and benefits of Religious Education is in part the RE community's fault. The onus was accepted as being on the RE community to increase awareness of the need for the subject and the benefits for pupils studying it. Indeed, with regard to schools delegates agreed that the status given toward the subject is often linked to the position of the leaders within school over the usefulness of RE. General consensus was held that the subject needed 'RE-marketing', in order to raise the profile of the subject and improve perceptions in schools, particularly those whose school leaders held a negative perception of the subject.

A theme frequently emerging throughout the day was the desire for the Religious Education community to be unified and future driven. In such an instance, with a clear vision, aims and rationale of the subject, stakeholder buy-in would be greatly improved. Noting that this was crucial for the subject's survival and flourishing, the stakeholders identified included pupils, headteachers, teachers, governors, policy makers and further decision-makers in schools. Furthermore, delegates agreed that internally within the Religious Education community debate over the subject was detailed and complex, and stressed the need for such debates to occur more widely in the public sphere.

## SECTION 12 – COMPARATIVE RE

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The benefits of examining the nature and purpose of Religious Education internationally was contemplated by delegates at the day seminar. It was acknowledged that it is of use to look to and learn from the implementation of the subject in other countries. However it was noted that each country has its own educational systems, mitigating factors and local/national situations which render straight 'policy borrowing' problematic. Moreover, it was acknowledged by delegates that comparative religious education often has its own methodology influenced by supra-national factors.

## APPENDIX 1

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From a historical perspective, it is of interest to compare the delegates of this seminar with those of the Prospects and Problems seminar of March 1969/1971. Called to fruition by the then Secretary of State Edward Short, the seminar at St. George's House, Windsor was attended by a total of twenty-eight delegates. The delegates were comprised individuals from a range of backgrounds and roles, amongst them the Chief Inspector of Schools (Mr L J Burrows); the then Bishop of London (The Rt Rev and Rt Hon Robert Wright Stopford); as well as a number of headteachers, local authority advisors and prominent academics. Indeed, forty-four years on, the likelihood that a government minister would call a conference on RE and instigate an Education Act from it seems unlikely, contrasting the centrality and status of the subject within education between these two educational periods.

List of delegates:

**Sue Adeney**

Education Officer, Worcester Cathedral

**Sarah Arrowsmith**

Education Officer, Hereford Cathedral

**Hilary Barber**

Halifax Minster

**Alan Brown**

University of Worcester

**Dr Mark Chater**

Culham St. Gabriel's Trust

**Ven. Tenzin Choesang**

Worcestershire, SACRE

**Anita Clark**

Eastnor Primary School, Herefordshire

**Jody Crutchley**

PhD student, University of Worcester

**Jonathan Doney**

PhD student, University of Exeter

**Dr Rob Freathy**

Senior Lecturer, University of Exeter

**Professor Michael Hand**

University of Birmingham

**Allan Hayes**

Leicester Secular Society

**Ronan Head**

King's School, Worcester

**Ellie Hill**

Senior Lecturer in Education, University of Northampton

**Jane Install**

Martley Church of England Primary School, Worcestershire

**Hifsa Iqbal MBE**

Deputy Lord Lieutenant of Staffordshire

**Professor Robert Jackson**

University of Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit

**Gill Johnson**

Education Development Officer, Wakefield Diocesan Education Department

**Ken Johnson**

Religious Studies Resource Centre, Nottingham

**Ian Jones**

Director, The Saltley Trust

**John Keast OBE**

Chair, RE Council

**Zoë Keens**

Chief Executive, Christian Education/RE Today Services

**Richard Lacock**

Gloucestershire SACRE

**Jenny Lockwood**

South Gloucestershire SACRE

**Sarah Mills**

Faculty Leader (Social Studies), Avon Valley School

**Philip Mitchell**

Educational Consultant, Worcester Diocese

**Leah Osborne**

South Gloucestershire SACRE

**Peter Lefroy Owen**

Independent Delegate

**Ryan Parker**

PGCE Primary and Student Partner, University of Worcester

**Dr Stephen Parker**

University of Worcester

**Dr Lynn Revell**

Canterbury Christ Church University

**Chris Street**

Dorset Humanists

**Kathryn Symons**

RE Advisory Teacher, South Gloucestershire Council

**Carrie Trill**

Bedford Borough School Standards and Interventions

**Liz Warwick**

Gloucestershire SACRE

**Nancy White**

Halifax Minster

**Lucinda Williams**

Heritage Education & Volunteers Officer, University Church of St.Mary the Virgin

**Mary-Anne Wilmoot**

Deputy Chair of SACRE, South Gloucestershire

**Dr Richard Woolley**

Head of Centre for Education and Inclusion, Institute of Education, University of Worcester

**Two delegates from Notts County Council**

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All views reported upon here are summaries of opinions expressed on the day. The views reported here are not attributable to any individual attending; neither do they represent the opinion of the University of Worcester.

For further information about this event, and any follow-up activities please email [s.parker@worc.ac.uk](mailto:s.parker@worc.ac.uk)