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Editorial: reforming religious education

The recently published *Reforming RE: power and knowledge in a worldviews curriculum* (Chater 2020) is a further call for legal and curricula changes to religious education in England. It adds to the volume of accumulating contributions for reform emanating from various quarters, notably from Clarke and Woodhead (2018), the Religious Education Council's Commission on Religious Education (2018) and Wintersgill (2017).

Reforming RE, in brief, is divided into two sections, provocatively headed the 'Fall of RE' and the 'Rise of Worldviews'. Contributors to each part (RE advisers (and former advisers), teachers (in the majority), and academics (in the minority)) diagnose the problems of RE as it is, putting forward a number of proposals to remedy the perceived malaise. In particular, the volume is rallying cry for 'a different relationship with faith and belief stakeholders . . . so that no belief group is able to dominate by imposing content, claiming minimum time, or insisting on the exclusion of others' (p.108) and for a repositioning and renaming of the subject as 'religion and worldviews', framing it particularly as a cross-disciplinary study of the latter, including use of the disciplines of philosophy, theology and the social sciences. The book makes a persuasive case for reform, based upon a sense of dissatisfaction with the subject as it is, marginalised within the rest of schooling, governed by different educational norms, and thus missing out on wider developments in the research on the curriculum and learning. Its authors want change to happen in RE, and they want it to be driven and led by teachers.

The relativising effect of the term 'worldviews' has yet to win widespread support (for instance, Clarke and Woodhead recommend a subject name change to 'religion, beliefs and values' and in the different jurisdiction of Wales the name being considered is 'religion, values and ethics'). It will be fascinating to see how what this book calls for, alongside other protagonists' cases for reform, ultimately pan out.

I read *Reforming RE* alongside a similarly titled book published more than 30 years ago, *Reforming Religious Education: the religious clauses of the 1988 Education Act* (Cairns and Cox 1989). This book, published in response to legislation covering England and Wales, the Education Reform Act of 1988. Although clearly written for a different purpose – to contextualise and explain the new legislation to practitioners – even so, it makes for relevant reading in light of its 2020 counterpart. Reading Cairns and Cox, it cannot escape notice that for a very long time RE has been on a treadmill of dissatisfaction with itself. Persistent calls for reform go far and above normal levels of critical self-reflection and desires to improve in other areas of the curriculum. It strikes one that RE in England and Wales seems to be in an almost endless cycle of introspection and internal identity wars. As an historian of the subject one can see just how far back these unresolved tensions go (see Parker and Freathy 2020), a continual warring over the nature of religious education and its place in maintained schools in England; identity politics only thinly veiling denominational protectionism.

Josephine Cairns dates RE's problems from later, 1944. She argued that the 1944 Education Act produced a 'narrowly conceived religious education' which 'failed the newly emerging culture by not allowing its values to become conscious and to be expressed and celebrated.' She concludes:

Had those opportunities been taken there might have arisen an educated post-Christian democracy, conscious of its values, instead of one which grows confused, turbulent and increasingly aggressive. A foundation might then have been laid for a reasoned and purposeful pluralism to take shape in the rapidly changing post-war community (p.12)

Cairns wrote in hope that the 1988 Education Act provisions would do the work that the 1944 Act did not. That 30 years on there remain calls for reform in the subject suggests that the intervening years were equally unsatisfactory in positioning the subject as one which meets the needs of the school population and society at large. If the latest proposed reforms are given due attention and backing by the sitting government it will be interesting to see if the subsequent changes do provide a sustained level of according amongst those with an interest in religious education, revitalise the subject and make one of meaning to students and teachers into the middle of the current century.

Disclosure statement

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