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Religion and Worldviews: the debate continues

Stephen G. Parker

Across the associations which make up the Religious Education community in England the recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education, published as long ago as 2018, continues to generate vociferous debate (REC Council, 2018). Last month saw the publication of the Independent Schools Religious Studies Association response to the proposals to rename the subject (ISRSA, 2022), which in turn has stimulated a response from the former chair of the RE Council of England and Wales, Trevor Cooling, writing in a personal capacity

(<https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/acc6814f79ed0bf088b2c9797b7f7d001be4df6d0ee498c4eab139ee7daacc8/95193/TC-ISRSA-response-letter-17-06-2022.pdf> accessed July 2022), then, amongst others, Wendy Dossett

(<https://reformingre.wordpress.com/category/religions-worldviews/> accessed July 2022).

Religious Education has been a highly political matter since its inception in nineteenth century and it continues to be, even if it doesn't generate as much widespread passion amongst the general public as it did in the past (Parker et al, 2020). In this instance, the debate is, at least outwardly, concerned with the recommended use of the term 'worldview'. It is a debate amongst teachers and others invested in the future subject, committed to the subject's importance and relevance to young people's lives, securing the subject's place in the academy. However, the debate is more than about a name change, or differences of terminology to describe what the subject is for and how it should be oriented. At heart the controversy is really about the nature and purpose of the subject in schools amidst wider religious change in society – not just religious pluralism, which was a driver for change in the subject in the past – but present-day religious decline, suspicions about the integrity of belief and believers amidst the scandals of child abuse, as well as broader appeal of alternative spiritualities and stances for living. How can the subject be reframed in ways which lead to its reinvigoration, as one of appeal and meaning to students amidst such radical shifts in perspective and culture?

This issue of the journal captures a microcosm of the debate around about change in the subject. The stimulus for this is an article by the former Director of the Culham St. Gabriel's Trust, Mark Chater, to which others respond. Chater's article constitutes a call to affirm the recommendations of the Review, pointing to the conservative influence of faith groups in hampering the reform project. Trevor Cooling and Marius Felderhof in turn offer reflections on Mark Chater's observations from their point of view. Kate Christopher provides a reflections on the debate between Chater, Cooling and Felderhof from a teacher's viewpoint.

I do not propose to comment upon the specifics of the name change itself, though I have done elsewhere (Parker, 2021). I will, however, make two observations. First, that the wider conditions in which a name change for the subject might happen, the political will needed to do so, is simply not there, in my judgement. Secondly, should the name change happen – and it is more likely to happen on the ground in RS departments in schools, than at policy level – then one wonders if one desired outcome of the proposal, an increased recruitment to TRS at university, might in fact be hampered by it. If the subject is called one thing and does one thing in schools, then is called another and is disciplinarily different at university, doesn't this simply create confusion in the minds of students who might be tempted to study the subject at a higher level?

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