

Chapter 6

Taking Control of RE from the Churches



Syllabus conferences were (and are) part of the tradition of RE in England and Wales. This chapter sets out this tradition of RE and explores efforts to remove control of the subject from the churches and the syllabus conferences.

RE before 1870

Before 1870 free education for English and Welsh children was largely provided by the National Society, an Anglican Society, and the non-conformist British and Foreign Schools Society. Religious education and daily worship were part of the remit of these schools. By 1870, despite Government grants, it was clear that the churches could not provide for the increasing numbers of children. The 1870 Forster Act provided for school boards (precursors of the local education authorities) to build and maintain schools. The tradition of religion in education was continued, but not without difficulty. Denominational rivalry was eased by the Cowper Temple clause, enabling a compromise to be agreed: board schools could begin each day with worship and teach religious education, but nothing distinctive of a particular denomination was taught. The years after 1870 were dogged by controversy, however; RE was sometimes reduced to the mere reading of the Bible for fear of contentious interpretation.

To overcome this problem the first syllabus conference was set up in 1923,¹ when teachers and representatives of the Churches came together in West Riding with the blessing of the local board, to agree a syllabus for the schools in their area. This meant that principles, aims and methods could be established for the subject in a thorough manner. It also set a precedent of local determination of RE by agreement, which continues today.

The 1944 Education Act

The 1944 Act built on and strengthened previous practice. It made it compulsory for local education authorities (LEAs) to set up an Agreed Syllabus Conference (ASC). The ASC was made up of four committees, each committee having one vote. All committees had to agree a syllabus for it to be adopted. Committee A was made up of representatives of the non-Anglican churches, Committee B the Church of England, Committee C the

teachers' representatives and Committee D the LEA. RE and a daily act of collective worship were made compulsory. In Wales there were three committees, the Church in Wales being included with the other churches. As had been the case since 1870, parents could withdraw their children from either classroom instruction or worship or both, and teachers could also withdraw from worship and/or giving instruction. LEAs were given the option of setting up a committee, called the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE). The SACRE was a body whose role was to oversee the implementation of the syllabus and give advice on RE and collective worship.²

The Act and the clauses on RE were the result of a three-year consultation, often referred to as a settlement or partnership between the Government of the day and the churches. It established the 'dual system', whereby the state undertook to support both church and county schools in differing proportions. The religious question was of particular significance since many schools at the time were still owned and run by the churches. Many of these schools were in poor condition and could not maintain either their buildings or sufficient staff and so they welcomed state finance, although they were at the same time worried that the schools would lose their religious purpose under control of the state. Butler's solution was to allow for the churches to have representation on governing bodies of county schools and to guarantee that the religious needs of children would be met by making RE and worship compulsory. The provisions of the Cowper Temple clause of 1870 were taken over and applied to the new situation where many of the church schools, particularly the non-conformist schools, had now joined the state system.

The Act did not specify that RE should be Christian. It was felt that a court would have difficulty making a judgement on a theological definition if a challenge were made to the effect that a syllabus was not of a Christian nature. Furthermore, it was thought that syllabus conferences, with strong representation of the churches, would use their veto to make sure that syllabuses were based on the teaching of Christianity. However there were schools where there were significant numbers of Jewish children. The word 'religious' was sufficiently flexible to allow for Jewish children to have a syllabus agreed that was suitable for them.³ Syllabuses agreed between the years 1944 and 1971 show that this is how the law was understood for the years immediately following the passing of the Act. Syllabuses were essentially introduction to the Christian faith, with some treatment of other religions at the upper end of the school.

Churches should give up control of RE

In an editorial in the summer of 1973 John Hull commented on the major emphasis that had been placed on world religions in RE since 1970. Insufficient attention had been given to the 'subtle change in the relationship between the religions and religious education. The religions have always been thought of

as the sponsors of RE. The religions have controlled the content of religious education. They have done this either through having their own schools or (as in the case of the Church of England and other Christian denominations) through their control of the Agreed Syllabuses granted by the 1944 Education Act'.⁴ The change in relationship would be hard for the religions to swallow but swallow they must: 'It is not pleasant to discover that religious educators, the very ones who might be expected to be the front line troops, are no longer willing to identify themselves first of all with the interests of the religious institution or to place as their number one priority the spreading of religious faith. When for centuries you have had power to bind and loose it is very humiliating to be told that you are only a very interesting object of study.'⁵

Hull declared that it would be a 'serious injustice' not to treat the religions as in principle alike: 'the monopoly of Christianity is thus broken and from this break flow all the questions about the place of Christianity in religious education today'.⁶ He castigated religions and ideologies for always wanting to take control of education to promote their own particular point of view. All religions, not just Christianity, were cast in the role of control merchants needing to be tamed. A similar argument occurred in a chapter of a book published by the National Foundation for Educational Research: 'the effect of removing religious education from its traditional context within Christian nurture is that there is now in principle no closer relation between Christianity and religious education than there is between Islam and religious education.'⁷

Others sought to drive a wedge between the churches and RE. Lefroy Owen wrote to the editor of the Times Educational Supplement (TES), complaining about the way the TES handled RE: 'Forgive me for illustrating my point from the last inset of 9 April 1971: page 39 includes the title, in large bold letters, "Religious Education" yet the article in the front page is called "Can the Church survive?" The fact is that the educational aspects of a curriculum subject called "RE" are quite unrelated to the survival or otherwise of the established church, or any minority religion for that matter.'⁸ McClure's response to ARE was to say that their view was a minority one and that 'most educationists still hang on to the approach that RE is the Church's fifth column into the maintained system'.⁹ Lefroy Owen invited his readers to write in: 'If you think Stuart McClure seems to have as yet an insufficient understanding of the present position, or if you feel the TES has any responsibility in helping to give cognisance to the unashamedly educational viewpoint, why not drop him a line and tell him what you think?'¹⁰

Furthermore, church representatives would not have sufficient knowledge to prescribe what should be taught. This view was expressed in 1971 by John Sutcliffe, Secretary for Christian Education for the Congregational Church in England and Wales: 'the more religious education develops into an exploration of world religions and cultural attitudes the less church people will be competent to collaborate on Agreed Syllabus

Committees were these . . . still thought desirable'.¹¹

ARE submitted a statement to the meeting set up to look into the creation of a national RE council (REC). Lefroy Owen told the churches to refrain altogether from making statements on RE; any representations that they made would not, the statement said, help the cause of RE. RE must stand apart from confessional bodies and be seen by all concerned not to be promoting the cause of any one religion, but rather to be promoting 'educational' concerns: 'RE in this country has a long history of ecclesiastical domination to live down and the new approaches to the subject can best be helped by confessional bodies avoiding any representations which are implicitly or explicitly "on behalf of RE".'¹² The Church of England, Lefroy Owen recommended, should not be represented on the full RE Council, but rather be granted associate membership only. The Free Churches should hover even lower down the scale, somewhere between associate and observer status.

Agreed syllabuses should be given up

In his third volume as editor, Hull recommended abandoning agreed syllabus procedures and replacing them with teams of teachers who could take advice from the churches and other bodies. Others made the same case. Jean Holm said: 'There can be no place in the future for Agreed Syllabuses as prescribed in the 1944 Act.'¹³ Alan Loosemore, adviser to West Riding, concurred. He traced the history of the agreed syllabus in the West Riding and suggested that the next step would be the abolition of the procedure. Owen Cole called for a new Act that would end the partnership between the church and school: 'the old partnership between church and school is at an end and the open study of religion (which must include alternatives to religious approaches to life) is seen to be incompatible with a compulsory act of worship in state schools'.¹⁴ Worship, agreed syllabuses and the withdrawal clauses must go, and the only remaining area for legislation concerning religion in education should be that concerning denominational schools.

A different argument was put forward by Allan Wainwright. He argued that the agreed syllabus system needed to go because it allowed teachers to continue with the old approach. The prescription needed to rein teachers in was unlikely to be written into an agreed syllabus; it was too controversial and would not find agreement by committee. He said: 'to spell out a particular approach to RE which specifically rejects the aims and approaches which many people hold to be the essence of the task is a very different matter. One questions whether the present Agreed Syllabus Conferences are the appropriate bodies. The mere fact that in Schedule 5 of the Act the representatives of the Churches come first on the list is an

indication of the way they will be considered. And even if the Church representatives are themselves convinced that to propose a non-Church approach is the right thing, they have to remember that an agreed syllabus is a public document, and that it will do no good for the sort of storm to break over such a document as – in my view – is inevitable.’¹⁵ Clearly, the plan to give more control to teachers did not extend to giving control to teachers with the wrong ideas.

ARE too wanted the law changed to give teachers control of the syllabus. ARE recommended the setting up of National Guidelines which could then, if desired, be taken up by local groups of teachers who would implement them as appropriate for local conditions. The LEA would have the right to convene conferences of teachers to do this. ARE suggested a draft wording for a new Act. Reorganisation of local government was taking place and there was the prospect of numerous new syllabus conferences being set up to agree new syllabuses. To pre-empt this, ARE suggested that a circular be sent to all authorities in advance of the new Act, instructing them to set up meetings of teachers to work on guidelines that the RE Council would be asked to write. The ARE paper shows that they, like Wainwright, anticipated opposition and were prepared to act despite it: ‘Faced with the prospect of the statutory conferences being convened as a result of local government reorganisation, we decided that amendments should be made sooner rather than later. Amendments are a calculated risk now, in the light of present opinion in Parliament and the nation; but such opinion is quite unpredictable even five years ahead.’¹⁶

What Future for the Agreed Syllabus?

In 1975 the move to abolish syllabus conferences and the links with the churches found expression in a discussion document published in glossy format by REC called *What Future for the Agreed Syllabus?* In fact one of the first tasks REC set itself was to consider the future of the agreed syllabus system. A working party, set up in November 1974, stated that RE had changed and new structures for its delivery were needed. A new ‘public definition of the subject’ was needed, together with guidance to teachers in selecting material and methods. This was, of course, what syllabus conferences did. The document revealed concern about the teaching profession who had not been trained to teach the ‘new’ subject. Therefore, they could not be entrusted with the task of writing syllabuses and so the working party advised that a legally constituted body be set up to work on compulsory national guidelines. Groups of local teachers would then work out ways of implementing such guidelines locally. The national conference proposed by the working party was to be entirely independent of the faith communities. Such bodies should have the opportunity to submit

suggestions but 'the drafting body should be under no obligation to, or subject to the veto of, any sectional interest'.¹⁷

At this point the representatives of the churches and religious groups on the REC proved decisive. At the November meeting of the full REC it became clear that members had serious reservations about the recommendations. The Council did not adopt the working party report and no clear policy on the matter could be relayed to the Government. Instead Edwin Cox was charged with writing a further paper, published as a further contribution to the debate, not as a policy document. Edwin Cox forwarded a copy to Shirley Williams, the Secretary of State for Education. In February 1978 Williams wrote: 'Thank you also for forwarding a copy of your report on the future of the agreed syllabus. I note that it has been published as a further contribution to the continuing re-examination of religious education and hope that it will help to promote wide and informed discussion.'¹⁸ She took no action.

Moves to set up a National Advisory Group

Another early initiative of the REC was to instruct Howard Marratt, Jack Hogbin and James Thompson to look into the question of the supply and training of RE teachers. Surveys were sent out to the 33 LEAs that had RE advisers, to colleges of education and to the teachers' professional organisations. The report recommended more initial training of teachers, more in-service training, more effort to attract recruits, better RE provision in schools, more RE advisers and a national framework for the subject.¹⁹ In-service training was a priority, linked with the need for a new understanding of the subject. REC recognised that many teachers had been trained to do a very different job from that now seen as necessary. But surveys showed that in-service attendance was poor. Head teachers did not turn up, even when the topic was worship, for which they had a direct responsibility. Only 20% of RE teachers invited ever attended.

The final paragraph contained a surprise. A plea for a national advisory group to oversee RE was made: 'The respondents were of the implicit and sometimes explicit opinion that a national impetus to the situation is necessary. Such an impetus would need the support and involvement of HMIs, who would need to be brought together at national level with representatives from LEAs, colleges and teachers. Such a group would have the necessary professional status for its guidelines to carry weight in local situations.'²⁰ Guidelines were to be drawn up without reference to churches or religious groups. It seems that the poor response to training in new approaches led the working party to argue that nationally imposed guidelines were needed to secure compliance. But existing arrangements could cope with an increase in in-service training, more teachers and better

resources. Shirley Williams was not impressed. On 29 June 1976 she wrote back: 'In the circumstances I think it would be open to misunderstanding to consider the establishment of a national religious education advisory group. Under the Education Act 1944 it is for each local education authority to adopt an agreed syllabus which has been recommended by local representatives to reflect local needs and interests. The Government have no present plans to change the law in this respect as I again made clear in answer to a Parliamentary Question on 13 January.'

Attempts to change the law were beginning to look fruitless. However, an attempt to get round the agreed syllabus occurred in Bradford during this period.

The Bradford Supplement

Agreeing a syllabus could be a long business, and conferences were unpredictable. Owen Cole was part of an initiative in West Riding to set up a working party to advise on a new direction for RE in Bradford schools, where increasing numbers of families from non-Christian faiths had been settling throughout the 1960s. This working party produced what became known as the Bradford Supplement, issued as a supplement to the existing 1966 agreed syllabus some time between 1972 and 1974. The supplement, entitled *Guide to Religious Education in a Multi-Faith Community*, stated that RE was concerned with 'the objective study of the phenomena and beliefs of religion and with a personal search for meaning'.²¹ It is clear that the opportunity afforded by the cultural situation offered hope of making progress with the new concept of RE: 'The supplement is produced in the belief that to base religious education solely on Christianity does justice neither to the local scene nor to the reality of religious experience. . . . The situation is a demanding one for the teacher since new and far-reaching responses are required if the opportunities existing in Bradford are to be seized; a reconsideration of attitudes as well as the acquiring of a new body of knowledge may well be involved.'²² Teachers were encouraged to adopt the approaches outlined in Working Papers 36 and 44 and to make use of CEM's Primary scheme. The supplement consisted largely of information about five religions with some short theoretical sections. It adopted the view that no criteria exist upon which objective judgements can be made as to the truth of a religion, arguing that such judgements are a matter for personal choice.²³ It was assumed that the teacher would no longer engage in apologetics in the classroom and that a change of stance on the part of the Christian teacher would be necessary. The responsibility for beliefs and attitudes lay largely with the home: 'even in matters of personal hygiene, school can only co-operate with the home. So with religion, what the parent does not provide he cannot expect the school to give.'²⁴ This rather undermined the reason for having schools at all. It also

underestimated the effect of being taught that there is no way of coming to an objective decision in the matter of religion.

The supplement had no legal force. To the extent that it was offered without the agreement of a legally constituted conference, it verged on being illegal. Although it instructed teachers to use material in the supplement in conjunction with the agreed syllabus, no attempt was made to relate the new material to the agreed syllabus at any point. Rather than point the reader to the sections in the agreed syllabus for material on Christianity, it had its own sections on Christianity. It was hinted that some of the material in the agreed syllabus on the Old Testament would have to go, as also would some church history. The reader receives the strong impression that the supplement was intended to be a replacement.

Although written for Bradford schools, the working party considered its work to have implications for a wider area and to be suitable for all children. It produced a statement of policy that was widely distributed: it was sent to every LEA in the country and to the Secretary of State for Education, for example. Bearing a close resemblance to the recommendations of the REC's document, the statement recommended that control of RE should be in the hands of teachers, working with representatives from the religions: 'Guidance to schools may be given in a voluntary handbook of suggestions or through a local advisory panel, but whatever the source, the agreement as to the matter to be taught and the method by which it should be taught would (in contrast to the provisions of the 1944 Act) be between teachers and representatives of the major world religions and other stances for living.'²⁵

The Bradford Supplement and the statement which followed it, were examples of a group actively promoting a shift in RE, while bypassing the agreed syllabus system. But it could not be guaranteed that other authorities would allow an *ad hoc* group to have such influence. Still, it set a precedent. What nobody could have known was that a properly constituted syllabus conference was soon to be convened, which, in view of the Government's reluctance to change the law, would set a much more important precedent.

The Birmingham agreed syllabus of 1975²⁶

In the late 1960s Birmingham City Council was making provision for the increasing numbers of Asian families that had settled in the city. The education committee asked the Birmingham SACRE to consider a new syllabus of religious education that would take into account the presence of immigrant communities adhering to non-Christian faiths. The SACRE was addressed by Geoffrey Parrinder of London University, an expert in non-Christian religions. Following this meeting, an Agreed Syllabus Conference was set up. John Hull was involved early on as was John Hick, a professor of theology at Birmingham University. These two powerful

figures in the university, keen to see change in RE, found themselves on Committee A, the other churches' committee. It was particularly ironic that John Hull, vigorously arguing that the churches should cede control of RE, should find himself in a key role in his capacity as a churchman, not an educationist. One representative each from the Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Hindu communities was appointed to membership of Committee A. A sub-group was appointed to work out the principles upon which the syllabus would be based. John Hick was largely responsible for the work of this sub-group, and at a meeting of the full conference, with Alderman Easey in the Chair, a paper outlining principles and a framework for the syllabus was enthusiastically accepted. Working parties were set up to work on material for different age groups, with one having an overall co-ordinating role. On the insistence of John Hick, Harry Stopes-Roe, the campaigning member of the British Humanist Association (BHA), was co-opted on to both the working party for the sixth form and onto the important co-ordinating working party. He was not however a member of the conference itself.²⁷ On the teachers' committee was Peter Lefroy Owen. Some of the most powerful voices for change to the basis of RE found themselves sitting on the conference. In addition Edwin Cox and Ninian Smart delivered lectures to the conference.

Further consultation was not thought necessary. The Rev. Charles Buckmaster was a member of Committee B, but did not discuss the syllabus with his colleagues at St Peter's College in Saltley, so that they only knew about it after the draft was made public. In the aftermath of controversy, Knight visited the Bishop of Birmingham to discuss the syllabus; it seems that the syllabus was news to the Bishop also. It is significant that to Knight, their proposals did not seem particularly controversial.

The Birmingham ASC were, however, aware of the pioneer status of their work, and felt that what they were doing might well prove to be as influential in its day as the Cambridgeshire syllabus was after the 1944 Education Act. Limiting consultation to the professionals in RE was a sign of the times, and fitted in with the new mood that wanted to disassociate school RE from any notion of being an 'arm of the church'.

The Syllabus

The syllabus, finally agreed and adopted by the Education Committee in 1975, was a slim document with an introduction and set of topics to be covered at different ages.²⁸ RE was an 'educationally valid component of the school curriculum', devoted to a 'critical understanding of the religious and moral dimensions of human experience and away from attempting to foster the claims of particular religious standpoints'. Pupils were to be assisted in a search for personal meaning by informing them in a 'descriptive, critical and experiential manner about what religion is'.²⁹

Between ages three and eight a selection was to be made from each of five topics: festivals of five religions (more from the Christian religion than the other religions put together), rituals and customs, stories from world religions, the world of nature and relationships in five religions. For eight to twelve year olds there were five areas: ideals for everyday living, festivals and customs in the five religions, sacred places in five religions, sacred literature (including the Bible, the Gita, the Upanishads, the Ramayana, the Qur'an and the Granth) and ways of living which involved stories from world religions of founders and exemplars of faith. Particular reference was to be made to Jesus, Peter, Paul, Rama, Sita, Krishna, Muhammed, the prophets, Abraham and Moses, the Rabbis, Nanak and Gobind Singh. From twelve to sixteen pupils were to engage in systematic study of religion by taking one major and three minor courses, one of which must be Christianity. One of the minor courses offered was a non-religious stance for living. Also included were problems such as identity, morality, relationships, the aged, race and community issues, war, famine, etc. Study in the sixth form included Buddhism, philosophy of religion, the arts and religion, mysticism, great leaders motivated by both religious and anti-religious feelings.

A thematic approach to religion was to be taken at primary level, followed by a systematic approach at secondary level. Selection was left largely up to the teacher since it was felt that every situation was different.

The Handbook to the syllabus

The Handbook to the syllabus covered a great deal of ground. It is one of the most thorough and teacher-friendly handbooks ever produced. It was packed with resources, bibliographies, ideas for lessons and essays on topics such as worship. All this befitted a publication that was breaking new ground.

The Handbook did not envisage schools as explicitly religious communities: it wrote of a 'growing realisation that county schools cannot be regarded in any sense as religious communities'.³⁰ It followed John Hull in proscribing much of what had been done in collective worship prior to the early 1970s for example.³¹ Yet throughout the Handbook there was reference to introducing children to the 'heart of religion'. At nursery/ reception level, teachers were to provide a secure environment where children felt loved and safe. By doing this teachers would be playing a 'vital part in preparation for a deeper understanding of life', since 'dependence and trust lie at the heart of religion'.³² Experience of the religious life was to be a present reality too: 'Religious Education in a very broad sense is taking place through every activity, every encounter, every relationship . . . it is through underlying assumptions of school life that religious education is going on.' Teachers were to create an environment in which many of the values fundamental to religions could be appreciated and felt emotionally. Values included the view that life is meaningful,

that human life is about living freely and responsibly, that care for others is an absolute value, along with moral values such as honesty, courage and perseverance. A sense of wonder was to be developed. Pupils should grasp the 'wholeness' of things, and should develop into people who were thoughtful and tolerant adults first, and Muslims, Christians, Jews second. A particular theistic view was said to be a presupposition of the theology of themes: 'The thematic method presupposes that however else God may speak, he speaks to men through their apprehension of the physical universe and of the moral, personal and specifically human aspects of their own lives.'³³

Pupils were to engage in community service, to develop particular moral qualities, to develop positive attitudes of caring towards the aged, the sick and the community in general. Pupils should choose responsibly and learn to avoid 'blind commitment' by arriving at their own value and belief system after thinking at depth about the various options. The adoption of a coherent way of life was to be approached via a study of as many of the options as was possible, given time constraints. The inclusion of humanism, even communism (later to come under fire from the public) must be seen in the light of the perceived need to make pupils aware of the widest possible range of views so that they could make an informed choice. What beliefs and values were adopted did not seem to matter.

Reaction to the syllabus

It came as a bitter surprise to the conference that the education committee rejected the syllabus outright. Legal opinion was taken. Counsel stated that the four page syllabus did not give adequate information as to the nature of the syllabus, and that non-religious stances for living could only be presented in contrast to religions. More detail was put into the syllabus, and the following sentence was added by Hick and Knight in relation to non-religious stances for living: 'such contextual studies contribute towards a critical appreciation of the distinctive features of religious faith'. By this means the units of work on communism and humanism were saved and the syllabus adopted. A public outcry ensued. Objections centred largely, but not solely, on the fact that communism and humanism formed part of the syllabus. A debate was held in the Cathedral, the Bishop summoned Knight, and letters were written to the papers. But it survived.

Conclusion

For a syllabus which claimed not to promote any one set of beliefs, Birmingham 1975 was remarkably prescriptive. It insisted that pupils become personal idealists (a point taken up in the next chapter). At the same time pupils were taught that there was a 'heart of religion' which

emitted a recognisably Christian beat. The Birmingham syllabus bears the imprint of John Hick's philosophy, a pluralist paradigm of religion where all religions are seen as attempts to conceive the 'Real' and none may claim to have a greater grasp on the truth than any other. This was the religion that was to form the common basis of the school. Yet it is by no means clear that everyone endorsed such a religion, nor that the public, parents and Parliament had given its blessing to such a view.

What Birmingham showed was that the agreed syllabus system could be used to bring about the sort of RE that the profession wanted. Legal objections to the syllabus were advanced, but not sustained. After Birmingham, concerns about changing the agreed syllabus system were not so evident. While the law might require non-religious stances for living to be presented in contrast to Christianity rather than in their own right, such a slant could be disguised by wording in the syllabus to allow teachers to exercise their discretion. The profession learned that it could turn the law to its advantage.

However, there was a world outside, and that world was beginning to take notice of what was happening in RE.