



Preface

2003 finds RE in England and Wales in a state of uncertainty. The Education Secretary has taken personal charge of the subject and declared himself keen for change. QCA, the Government body charged with curriculum development, has recommended a national framework for the subject. Representatives of the Churches have gone further and called for RE, like other subjects, to be determined nationally. Change to the 14-19 curriculum is upon us: marketed as a new way of 'doing education'. What place, if any, will be found for *religious* education? It is not that Charles Clarke (so far as one can tell) is against the subject, rather that it seems very difficult to define exactly what RE is. The Government values success but what, advisers may be asked, constitutes success in RE?

This book is about the nature and purpose of religious education. My argument is that a religion needs to be taught for what it is, for its own sake and for the inspiration that it (uniquely) offers. It must not be taught as an example of something else, a relic of interest only to antiquarians or a form of benign social manipulation. Christianity can be taught in a way that does not compromise intellectual freedom and without excluding contrasting perspectives on life. It needs to be taught in a way that exudes confidence, hope and imaginative possibilities. Only so will the faith be able to enchant the young. But a situation has arisen where teachers possessed of Christian faith feel unsure of their role and hesitant about a display of affection for the faith. My book tells the story of how this has happened and how the profession was led, erroneously in my view, to disavow notions of *teaching* the faith in the 60s and 70s. I show the weaknesses of current theory and set out the case for the committed and theologically sophisticated teaching of Christianity. A chapter on the law shows that this vision is entirely consonant with legal requirements.

My own story? I started as a teacher of RE in the mid 70s. I had a theology degree, an excitement for the faith and a desire to open up its treasures in the classroom. My colleagues in school shared this vision but I became aware that it was a vision under threat. I read articles, began to engage with the theoretical literature and then, five years on, pregnancy put a stop to such matters. Ten years later I returned to teaching and taught RE in

comprehensive schools in Sefton between 1988 and 1998. I studied part-time for an M. Ed and began to write and publish articles. Increasingly unhappy with what it seemed I was expected to do and say in the classroom, and with my husband's support, I gave up my job to work on a book. Why was it that teachers like myself were expected to adopt the position of an agnostic? What was the point of having a teacher if her insights must be neutered in the classroom?

Could I, I wondered, make the case for the teaching of Christian faith from a committed point of view? It seemed an uphill task as I had come across no-one within the profession who was prepared to argue this. However I found support at the highest levels of academia. Professor Roger Trigg of Warwick, whose work I had read and admired, encouraged me to have a go. Professor Basil Mitchell, now retired from Oxford, showed great interest in my project. He walked me round the gardens of Blenheim Palace as we discussed RE and what had happened to it since he had first been involved as a member of a Commission set up by the Church of England in 1967 to make recommendations on the future of RE. He has acted as a mentor for the book, for which I extend my greatest thanks. Without his support and interest I would never have started. Martyn Relf is another supporter whose time and prayers I have valued more than I can say. I am grateful to the Bishop of St. Albans for kindly reading my book and contributing such a lively foreword. Edward Hulmes has shared his wisdom with me over many years. John Hull too has never failed to offer help, even though I am critical of his role in the development of religious education. William Kay, what can I say? He has always been there to encourage and inform me. I am grateful to the ex-bishop of London, Graham Leonard, who gave me three interviews as I struggled to grasp the idea that the law was indeed on my side. George Oliver and Richard Wilkins advised me over at least 15 years. Fred Naylor taught me a lot and I am grateful for his stalwart campaigning. David Harte helped me with the law, and made me feel that I had missed my vocation. To Ken Howkins and Mike Fearn I owe a particular debt. Both read through the manuscript at different stages and saved me from numerous errors. Marius Felderhof has read my work and inspired me. Jeff Astley is a giant and I am grateful for the gift of his magisterial work on Christian education. Trevor Cooling has suffered as much as anyone as I have tried to come to grips with my thinking on RE and I am grateful for his willingness to engage with my ideas. To John Sullivan at Hope, my special thanks. Thanks to our friends, Helen and Phil Hunter, to pupils and colleagues at Chesterfield, Range and Belvedere schools. I am grateful to Adrian Brink at Lutterworth Press. Others have contributed to this book and I thank them all.

My final thanks are for Andrew, my husband. He has always believed in me and not only supported me financially but offered advice (not always gratefully received). He has helped in countless ways and this book is dedicated to him.

Foreword

by the Bishop of St Albans

A book about religious education which is feisty, provocative and argued with passion is rare. This is such a book.

It takes on the giants of the religious education world and with audacity and verve challenges their influence and their power. That can be no bad thing, not because it is right to try to cut everyone down to size but because from time-to-time the accepted assumptions of any branch of education need to be rigorously re-examined.

There are some who might argue that the author tilts unfairly at some individuals and their causes, but then a quiet, balanced and moderate approach is unlikely, in a noisy world, to attract anyone's attention. This is a campaigning manifesto, a work of real courage which, no doubt, will be subject to some trenchant criticism. Nevertheless, the underlying issues which Penny Thompson seeks to address; the nature of truth, the nature of our society, the purposes of education, the significance of faith, the possibility of revelation, are those to which all of us need to give serious attention.

The gauntlet has been thrown down; it will be to the advantage of religious education, to children and to schools, if the challenge is accepted. A new and vigorous debate about religious education is long overdue – and this book by its sheer vivacity will make an original and important contribution to it.

Who will accept the challenge?