

The RE Report – A missed opportunity

Posted: Fri, 25th Oct 2013 by Keith Porteous Wood?

The RE Council's report has been well received. However, with the decline in church attendance and increasing evangelism in schools, Keith Porteous Wood argues vital opportunities to reform RE have been missed.

The [Religious Education Council Report](#) is a missed opportunity because it fails to acknowledge how RE should be reformed to accommodate the decades of plummeting church attendances – now only 4% of pupils and their parents attend church on an average Sunday.

Presumably this, and RE being the least popular subject, is why the Report refers to the "RE community" feeling a "sense of crisis". Could the hand wringing and failure to grasp the nation's scepticism over religion be because the RE Council consists of 60 "faith groups", and deeply religious academics – many of whom have vested interest in promulgating their ideas in schools?

The Church of England's religious supremo, told the [General Synod](#): "The clergy ought to have a camp bed in [schools] for heaven's sake! We don't have to bemoan the fact that our Sunday school has collapsed if there are 200 children at the local church school. The first big challenge is truly owning the centrality of our church schools in our mission..."

The Chair of the Catholic Education Service [similarly says](#): "The Catholic ethos...should be incarnate in all aspects of school life, so that they may be effective instruments of the New Evangelisation."

Extreme evangelical groups are also targeting schools, even community schools. Parents are horrified when they discover that these groups are giving their children highly contestable messages on topics such as premarital sex and homosexuality. Our mailbag shows this proselytising is often done without parental permission.

It is no surprise that the Report failed to acknowledge this rise in school evangelism, or call — as it should have done — for publicly funded schools to be banned from evangelising and faith schools (that non-believing families are increasingly forced to attend) from claiming their denomination or religion is the only true one.

The RE settlement with the Government has not changed since 1944, England and Wales are the only countries on the world where daily (mainly) Christian worship remains mandatory in every school. The National Secular Society maintains it should not be the business of the state to try to revive these religions through pumping scarce time and public funds into raising knowledge about them. It should be the basics only, and on an objective basis. Any more, if desired, should be for the home or place of worship.

The whole subject should be completely rethought. A good start would be to abandon the implicit assumption that it is better to be religious than not, and call the subject *Philosophy and Ethics*. Yet the RE Council predictably dismisses this, it seems because it diminishes pupils' "understanding of the nature of religion in general". And the new subject should incorporate citizenship, a far better way of encouraging community cohesion than dwelling on the religious minutiae the divide us.

Keith Porteous Wood

Keith Porteous Wood is the president (and former executive director) of the National Secular Society. The views expressed in our blogs are those of the author and may not represent the views of the NSS.

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