

Understanding Christianity and the study of religion and worldviews: How the C of E has gained control of religious education

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This original independent research by Chris Selway (supported by the NSS scholarship programme) explores how the Church of England's preferred theological approach to religious education has come to dominate the subject.

The report examines these wider issues through the specific case of the *Understanding Christianity* resource and its impact.

The report finds that major resource providers funded by Christian trusts have increasingly assumed control over RE and moulded it to suit their vision.

It adds that a government failure to provide funding for academics and other experts to guide the subject has helped to make this possible by creating a vacuum of leadership.

The lack of an external body to set out a clear disciplinary field for religious education has led to a situation where Christian-funded and oriented organisations have been increasingly able to seize control of the subject.

This has led to a surge in resources that emphasise scriptural-based learning and a predominance of theology as a discipline for studying religion, particularly when studying Christianity.

It seems clear that the way RE is administered, resourced, taught and monitored need to be remodelled, to ensure religion is taught in a balanced way.

Chris Selway (Report author)

Executive summary

- The development of religious education syllabuses in the UK is not managed or funded by central government but by regional advisory councils; many of these are poorly funded.
- Key players such as training organisations, national teaching organisations who support the subject and major resource providers, all funded by Christian trusts, have increasingly assumed control over the subject and moulded it to suit their vision.
- Opportunities for major reform have been and are being used to reshape the subject in a more Christocentric way by pushing for a narrowing of study that promotes more distinctively

Christian ways of studying religion.

- Some local authority SACREs are being used as a vehicle to disseminate syllabuses that are designed to suit the purposes of the Church of England rather than a plural and predominantly non-religious society.
- Over a third of RE syllabuses are written by a commercial resource provider that is funded by a Christian trust working closely with the Church of England to promote its approach to teaching Christianity. This is binding many community schools to what is, in effect, a Church of England syllabus. Over 10% of authorities have adopted a syllabus that largely relies on the Church of England resource *Understanding Christianity* for teaching that faith.
- Despite admissions that *Understanding Christianity* lacks coverage of what many would consider essential aspects of the study of a religion, such as the socio-historical aspects, it is taking up a disproportionate amount of syllabus time, particularly in Church of England schools and in community schools who are legally bound or choose to use it.
- RE Today Services, the publishers of *Understanding Christianity* and over a third of locally agreed syllabuses have restricted public access to what schools are legally bound to teach. This is in spite of NASACRE guidance stating that they are statutory documents agreed by a public body and paid for out of public funding budgets.
- Despite efforts to reform the subject, the vested interests of the power groups who control the subject are seemingly leading it in a regressive direction. Christianity is increasingly being taught on its own terms: the teaching of Christianity rather than teaching about Christianity.
- Relatively little is being done to promote a realistic, critically engaged, impartial and pluralistic study of religion and worldviews that is suitable for wider society today, particularly in primary education and at GCSE level.

Too often RE is dominated by vested interests and associated group think, and this paper powerfully highlights the way it's been used to advance the Church of England's interests.

RE currently lacks a unified framework and agreed purpose, leaving the door open for unaccountable groups to impose their own. Everyone who cares about education on religion and belief should be concerned.

Chris Selway's report makes a significant contribution to debate in this area, and should prompt some uncomfortable questions at both local and national levels.

Alastair Lichten (Head of Education, National Secular Society)

[Check out this research on how the C of E's theological approach has come to dominate religious education.](#)

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