

A contested subject: religious education and faith schools

Posted: Tue, 23rd Sep 2014 by [Alastair Lichten](#)

Reports of a Cabinet row over plans to require faith schools to teach more than one religion at GCSE level show that even baby steps towards greater objectivity in religious education will face fierce opposition, argues Alastair Lichten.

Secularists have had cause to be concerned about the Education Secretary's views on the relationship between religion and state; but Nicky Morgan's [purported](#) suggestion that faith schools should teach about at least two religions in GCSE religious education (RE) should be welcomed as a baby step towards much needed reform.

Objectively learning **about** different world views is an important part of a holistic education. For young people to understand the role religion plays in many people's lives and to decide for themselves what, if any, role they'd like it to play in theirs requires exposure to multiple viewpoints. This sends a message that they have the right to draw their own conclusions and make their own choices rather than have these dictated by adults – whether teachers, their parents or school authorities.

For both secularists and those that believe that state education should promote specific religious viewpoints, religious education is a key battleground.

One of the biggest concerns about faith schools is their ability to teach religious education from one specific viewpoint –which undermines both social cohesion and their pupils' right to an objective education.

Outrage about the biased approach towards religion tends to be more widespread when it happens in supposedly 'secular' schools, as in the case of some schools in Birmingham.

Following the 'Trojan Horse' affair, the Education Select Committee, among others, [picked up on](#) the problem of a "narrowing of the world view of the pupils" with religious education, at least in some of the schools, focusing exclusively on Islam.

The Education Secretary, Nicky Morgan, believes that requiring all schools – including faith schools – to teach more than one religion will expose children to a wider range of views and help reduce extremism. The Home Secretary, Theresa May, whose disagreements with Ms Morgan's predecessor over tackling extremism reportedly contributed to him being moved on, is said to support the proposal.

It's unfortunate that this debate has been framed in terms of reducing extremism in schools. Although a good education probably does contribute to less extremism, framing the debate only in terms of counter extremism fails to recognise objective education as being important in its own right.

The Church of England, who this week admitted to serious weaknesses in the teaching of RE in Anglican schools, is said to be supportive of the new proposals.

The Church of England is the biggest beneficiary of state funding for faith schools and Christianity enjoys elevated status on the curriculum.

Being used to teaching about a variety of religious viewpoints – with theirs given special prominence - it's unsurprising that the Church feels less threatened by the proposals.

Catholic and Jewish schools, however, are more likely to teach RE from an exclusive position and both the Chief Rabbi and Archbishop of Westminster are reported to oppose the proposal. Even more than the Anglicans, Jewish and Catholic leaders may recognise that their faiths face an uncertain future in a country which is already majority non-religious and witnessing an unprecedented rise in the Muslim population.

It's not the first time that Ms Morgan's response to the problems highlighted by the 'Trojan Horse' affair have come under criticism from religious commentators. This week the Catholic Herald carried an [editorial](#) bemoaning that the promotion of 'British values' such as equality and tolerance would undermine Catholic schools' RE classes that teach the exclusive doctrine of "outside the Church no salvation".

Unsurprisingly, opposition from within the Cabinet has come from the Minister with a specific brief to apparently promote religious privilege. Eric Pickles, Community Secretary and new Minister for Faith, is, according to one Government source, concerned that this could: "Have a knock-on effect on the freedom of Catholic and Jewish schools to restrict their teachings to just their faith and preserve their distinctive ethos".

This statement is a microcosm of the problem with how religious education is arranged, and raises two important questions: what is the purpose of religious education and whose religious freedom is really at stake in our publicly-funded schools?

Advocates of RE as an academic subject argue that religious beliefs form an important part of many people's worldview. Good RE, goes the argument, is therefore important and necessary to help pupils understand the views of others – and of course, pupils need not accept the religious viewpoints discussed.

The sincerity of such claims needs vigorous scrutiny, as there is no doubt that the promotion of 'religious literacy' is sometimes used as a smokescreen to facilitate deference to religion. Mr Pickles' comments show the naked desire, most others at least try and politely obscure, for state education to be used to promote specific religious views.

In no other subject would the way in which we organise RE be seen as acceptable. No other statutory subject has its curriculum decided at a local level. No other subject has its content decided through the wrangling of religious special interest groups.

Mr Pickles' statement reflects a mind-set that 'religious freedom' doesn't belong to individuals but to faith groups. Their freedom to receive state support to spread their beliefs seems to be the only concern.

What about the religious freedom of pupils to decide for themselves? Faith schools label children by their parents' beliefs, and abuse the trust placed in them to deliver state education by using RE to enforce this identity.

A young person's educational experience will differ depending on what school they go to for all sorts of reasons. But whether a young person finds themselves at an academy, community or faith school, this shouldn't materially affect their right to a broad and balanced education.

Freedom of religion and belief protects the individual – not beliefs – and it seems education is the area where entrenched religious privilege impacts most on people's day to day lives.

With RE taught in such an inherently biased way, we should of course defend pupils and parents' rights to withdraw. But secularists must also set out a positive vision for how pupils can learn **about** religious, non-religious and secular philosophies and worldviews in an objective and balanced way. The National Secular Society briefing paper on [Religious Education](#) addresses many of these issues and sets out proposals for how we can move forward.

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