

Ep 17: Thought for the Day | RE in Wales

Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o6Z_Gey3ht8

0:00:00.130,0:00:05.140 (Emma Park, EP): Hello and welcome to the National Secular Society podcast. I'm Emma Park	practice of human sacrifice, the Roman
0:00:05.140,0:00:08.950 and this week I'll be joined by Chris Sloggett and Helen Nicholls to chew over	0:00:58.749,0:01:03.850 poet Lucretius in the first century BC said "so great are the evils brought
0:00:08.950,0:00:14.260 an old bone of contention among secularists, BBC Radio 4's Thought For	0:01:03.850,0:01:08.439 about by religion". In the two millennia since then there is no doubt that
0:00:14.260,0:00:18.910 The Day. We'll be discussing whether it is right that this major program should	0:01:08.439,0:01:11.740 significant good has been done in the name of the major world religions
0:00:18.910,0:00:23.590 confine itself to, as its webpage explicitly states, speakers from the	0:01:11.740,0:01:16.930 however they have also been used to justify acts which, to anyone not sharing
0:00:23.590,0:00:28.210 world's major faiths and while we're on the theme of the influence of religion	0:01:16.930,0:01:22.299 their doer's beliefs, are to say the least unpalatable. At the same time,
0:00:28.210,0:00:32.469 on everyday life, should parents be entitled to withdraw their children on	0:01:22.299,0:01:26.140 philosophers from classical antiquity to the present have produced carefully
0:00:32.469,0:00:36.489 religious grounds from education on the national curriculum about sex,	0:01:26.140,0:01:30.219 reasoned ethical systems that do not rely on the existence of a deity to
0:00:36.489,0:00:41.289 relationships and religion itself? In the second half of the episode, I'll be	0:01:30.219,0:01:34.380 explain why it is a good idea to be nice to people and contrary to the argument
0:00:41.289,0:00:45.249 speaking to Stephen Evans and Alastair Lichten about a consultation recently	0:01:34.380,0:01:38.829 frequently made by religions, philosophy, science and the arts have long offered
0:00:45.249,0:00:49.059 launched by the Welsh Government on this issue and the national secular society's	0:01:38.829,0:01:42.939 cogent accounts of how it is possible to have a fulfilling life on this earth now.
0:00:49.059,0:00:58.749 planned response. Referring to the	0:01:42.939,0:01:48.340 In Britain today, roughly half the population is non-religious and seems to
	0:01:48.340,0:01:53.530

muddle through daily life much like the religious half. Nevertheless, Thought For

0:01:53.530,0:01:57.729
The Day on Radio four's flagship Today programme still retains a wholly

0:01:57.729,0:02:02.520
religious character. In the BBC's own words, the 3-minute series is about

0:02:02.520,0:02:08.050
'reflections from a faith perspective on issues and people in the news' but what

0:02:08.050,0:02:13.440
makes a faith perspective so special as to merit a daily slot on BBC Radio?

0:02:13.440,0:02:18.210
Is there any equivalent slot for non faith perspectives? Is the beeb really as

0:02:18.210,0:02:24.090
impartial, representative and diverse as it claims? To answer these questions, I'm

0:02:24.090,0:02:27.360
joined now by Chris Sloggett, Communications Officer at the National

0:02:27.360,0:02:32.970
Secular society and Helen Nicholls the Membership and Finance Officer. Chris

0:02:32.970,0:02:35.820
let's start with you...

John Humphrys was on good morning

0:02:35.820,0:02:40.080
Britain recently criticizing Thought For the Day. What was he, what point was he

0:02:40.080,0:02:45.900
making? (Chris Sloggett, CE): Yes, so John Humphrys obviously

former presenter of the today program

0:02:45.900,0:02:53.100
and who retired very recently, appeared on Good Morning Britain and he was asked

0:02:53.100,0:02:55.680
about Thought For The Day within this interview and he called it

0:02:55.680,0:03:01.200
discriminatory, rather pointless and anachronistic. Meanwhile also one of the

0:03:01.200,0:03:06.560
contributors to Thought for the Day - in the same week actually - Indarjit Singh

0:03:06.560,0:03:12.900
actually quit the slot because he said that the BBC had tried to block him from

0:03:12.900,0:03:18.180
discussing a guru from his religion - he's a Sikh - who fought against the forced

0:03:18.180,0:03:22.470
conversion of some Hindus to Islam in 17th century India. So, Indarjit Singh

0:03:22.470,0:03:26.340
was complaining that his free speech had been compromised essentially. In

0:03:26.340,0:03:31.590
response to John Humphrys' remarks, we at the NSS have written to the BBC to urge it

0:03:31.590,0:03:35.190
to reform or scrap Thought For The Day. (EP): So Chris, could you go into a bit more

0:03:35.190,0:03:40.440
detail? What are the NSS' main objections to Thought For The Day? (CS): So,

0:03:40.440,0:03:44.910
well John Humphrys I think was right to describe it as discriminatory - it

0:03:44.910,0:03:48.720
excludes non-religious people and also it encourages the idea that we all

0:03:48.720,0:03:52.709
benefit from a bit of religion in the

morning so that is a highly
0:03:52.709,0:03:57.720
contentious view. It also furthers
the narrative that morals come from
0:03:57.720,0:04:01.650
religion and many people would argue the
opposite and some people would see
0:04:01.650,0:04:06.450
religion as a source of ill. That, I
think, is a legitimate point of view and
0:04:06.450,0:04:09.720
a lot of people would say well their
morals don't come from religion. (EP): I
0:04:09.720,0:04:13.380
notice that the BBC used to have a
whole section on its website called
0:04:13.380,0:04:17.910
religion and ethics but it seems to have
cut that perhaps in reflection of these
0:04:17.910,0:04:23.310
ideas. Helen, on that point, how does the
NSS propose to reform Thought For The
0:04:23.310,0:04:27.510
Day? Do you want to get rid of it
altogether? (Helen Nicholls, HN): It's up to the
BBC
0:04:27.510,0:04:32.400
to decide how to reform it. If most
listeners find it tedious they could
0:04:32.400,0:04:36.210
scrap it all together however if they
want to keep it going, they could easily
0:04:36.210,0:04:40.800
open it up to non-religious people - some
new perspectives might also liven it up
0:04:40.800,0:04:44.800
a bit. (EP): Make it less boring?
0:04:44.800,0:04:47.130

(HN): You never know.
(EP): Chris? (CS): Yes, when we've written to
the BBC,
0:04:47.130,0:04:51.420
what we've suggested is reforming it
into an ethical current affairs slot, if
0:04:51.420,0:04:54.990
the BBC is committed to keeping Thought
For The Day so that would mean religious
0:04:54.990,0:04:59.130
people could still contribute but that
would be on equal terms, you wouldn't
0:04:59.130,0:05:02.250
have to shoehorn religion in in order to
get heard in, within these three
0:05:02.250,0:05:07.110
minutes and given the decline in
religious identity across the UK, if the,
0:05:07.110,0:05:12.450
religion, if the, if the BBC was treating
potential contributors equally, um... you
0:05:12.450,0:05:15.830
wouldn't necessarily expect religious
perspectives to dominate such a slot. (EP): On
0:05:15.830,0:05:19.950
the other hand though, Thought For The
Day is only about three minutes long -
0:05:19.950,0:05:24.630
does it really matter if such a short
slot is reserved for religious figures?
0:05:24.630,0:05:28.380
Aren't there plenty of other
opportunities for non-religious speakers
0:05:28.380,0:05:32.760
to contribute to the Today programme and
the rest of BBC Radio? Helen, what do you
0:05:32.760,0:05:37.520
think? (HN): If it was called sermon of the day
maybe it wouldn't matter quite so much.

0:05:37.520,0:05:42.870
The reason people feel so strongly about this issue is it represents a commonly

0:05:42.870,0:05:46.680
held view that only religious people are able to give meaningful comment on

0:05:46.680,0:05:50.880
ethics and how to live a good life. In many respects it's similar to the

0:05:50.880,0:05:54.120
collective worship requirement in schools which rests on the presumption

0:05:54.120,0:05:57.870
that children cannot have a meaningful school assembly unless they worship a

0:05:57.870,0:06:02.250
deity that some or even most of those present do not believe in. Thought For

0:06:02.250,0:06:05.970
The Day reminds me a lot of my high school assemblies - it gives us a brief

0:06:05.970,0:06:08.880
morning sermon in the hope that it will make us better people

0:06:08.880,0:06:12.750
however the exclusion of non-religious voices implies that they consider those

0:06:12.750,0:06:16.620
perspectives to be less worthy and less meaningful. (CS): Yes of course there are

0:06:16.620,0:06:21.120
plenty of other opportunities for non-religious speakers but those are

0:06:21.120,0:06:25.860
opportunities for religious speakers too, you know, there is, there's no part of the

0:06:25.860,0:06:30.120
today program where religious people are

excluded - there is a part of the today

0:06:30.120,0:06:34.260
program where non-religious people are excluded - that really is, is the key issue

0:06:34.260,0:06:39.840
there. (EP): Sure. How long has the NSS been campaigning on this issue, Helen?

0:06:39.840,0:06:46.020
(HN): Oh, for decades. Thought For The Day has existed since the 1970s. In 2002 we were a

0:06:46.020,0:06:49.740
signatory to a letter to the BBC governors asking for non-religious

0:06:49.740,0:06:53.580
voices to be allowed on the program. It led to Richard Dawkins being given the

0:06:53.580,0:06:58.350
slot to do a secular thought for the day however, they didn't let him go in the

0:06:58.350,0:07:01.890
regular slot, it was an extra - they didn't want him to desecrate the

0:07:01.890,0:07:04.710
religious segment with his presence and they didn't want to open the door to

0:07:04.710,0:07:08.880
other non-believers. (EP): As membership officer, have you had any response from

0:07:08.880,0:07:13.770
the NSS' members about this topic? (HN): This topic is dear to the hearts of our

0:07:13.770,0:07:18.480
members - it was raised at least twice at our last AGM and one of our affiliate

0:07:18.480,0:07:22.740
groups, southeast, the southeast London humanist group have a monthly protest

0:07:22.740,0:07:27.060

outside Broadcasting House. I went along once. There was quite a crowd and I saw

0:07:27.060,0:07:31.260

lots of BBC employees expressing their support as they walked past. While I was

0:07:31.260,0:07:34.650

there, Sarah Sands spoke to some of the organisers about coming on to the

0:07:34.650,0:07:38.490

Today programme to discuss the protest. I've since heard that they finally did

0:07:38.490,0:07:42.840

that a few months ago. Their focus is on getting a humanist on the programme and

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that's fair enough because they are a humanist group. We put our emphasis on

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the broader point that a person does not need to subscribe to any clearly defined

0:07:51.000,0:07:54.090

belief system into order to provide a spot of meaningful reflection at

0:07:54.090,0:07:58.020

breakfast time. (EP): Chris do you think there's a good chance that the BBC will

0:07:58.020,0:08:02.310

finally reconsider its position. (CS): Well the BBC's been quite stubborn on

0:08:02.310,0:08:06.960

this in the recent past. We have raised it a few times in the last few years but, um..,

0:08:06.960,0:08:13.890

I mean public opinion may mean that it decides change is overdue so we

0:08:13.890,0:08:17.850

commissioned some polling last year and that found that only 18 percent of

0:08:17.850,0:08:20.940

British people, that's fewer than one in five, thought that Thought for the Day

0:08:20.940,0:08:25.200

should always feature religious content and a lot of people sort of saw Thought

0:08:25.200,0:08:30.360

For The day as an irrelevance - they - more than half of respondents didn't agree or

0:08:30.360,0:08:37.169

disagree with the idea that Thought For The Day should still exist, so it may be that

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the BBC partly thinks 'well this just isn't going down very well with the

0:08:40.380,0:08:48.330

audience' and public opinion may just pressure it into changing as well. There's also I suppose the question of whether or not its compatible with the

0:08:48.330,0:08:52.860

BBC's commitment to impartiality. I think that's a question that the BBC should

0:08:52.860,0:08:56.220

certainly be asking itself - whether having three

0:08:56.220,0:09:00.120

minutes within a program which is specifically designed to pushing this

0:09:00.120,0:09:04.560

religious agenda and which I think, as Helen said, does endorse this idea that

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religion is the source of ethics and morals, whether that is compatible with a

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public service broadcaster that has a very clear remit to be impartial but

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the fact that prominent voices on the day program have spoken out suggest

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there may be some support for a forum within the BBC and I suppose that is an

0:09:23.610,0:09:26.670

encouraging sign but we'll just have to wait and see.

0:09:26.670,0:09:30.510

(EP) So whoever these mysterious characters are at the BBC hopefully they're

0:09:30.510,0:09:34.290

listening to this podcast now. Chris and Helen thank you very much. (CS): Thank you.

0:09:34.290,0:09:35.600

(HN): Thank you.

0:09:35.600,0:09:43.710

(EP) A new curriculum on religious education and on relationships and

0:09:43.710,0:09:47.700

sexuality education is due to be introduced in Wales in primary schools

0:09:47.700,0:09:52.230

and the first year of secondary schools in 2022. The Welsh Government has

0:09:52.230,0:09:56.160

recently launched a consultation entitled 'Ensuring access to the full

0:09:56.160,0:10:00.300

curriculum' which considers the impact that would be made on parents if they

0:10:00.300,0:10:04.740

were no longer allowed to withdraw their children from RE and RSE classes for

0:10:04.740,0:10:08.610

religious reasons. The Welsh Government is also considering whether to change

0:10:08.610,0:10:14.790

the title of RE to religions and worldviews. Are these good ideas? I'm now

0:10:14.790,0:10:18.690

joined by Stephen Evans, CEO of the National Secular society and Alistair

0:10:18.690,0:10:22.650

Lichten, Head of Education. Stephen, starting with you, why has the Welsh

0:10:22.650,0:10:27.290

Government launched this consultation, what's the purpose behind it and why now?

0:10:27.290,0:10:33.780

(Stephen Evans, SE): So this is all part of a broader project to overhaul education and create a new

0:10:33.780,0:10:37.380

curriculum for Wales - it's probably the biggest reform to Welsh schools for

0:10:37.380,0:10:41.460

decades. So as part of that reform the Welsh Government is proposing to

0:10:41.460,0:10:45.810

ensure that every child in a maintained school in Wales has the right to access

0:10:45.810,0:10:50.790

a broad, a balanced curriculum. This includes access to religious education

0:10:50.790,0:10:57.090

and relationships and what they're calling sexuality education - RSE - so to do

0:10:57.090,0:11:01.860

that they're reforming the subjects and removing the long-standing parental

0:11:01.860,0:11:06.060

opt-out. Now the government says, and I quote that it 'wants all children and

0:11:06.060,0:11:07.980

young people to have access to learning that

0:11:07.980,0:11:12.960
supports them to develop tolerance,
empathy and understanding of different

0:11:12.960,0:11:17.280
people, cultures and communities and in
understanding their rights and the

0:11:17.280,0:11:22.320
rights of others'. So this all sounds
really good - really positive but the

0:11:22.320,0:11:28.500
parental opt-outs have long existed in
education to protect parental rights and

0:11:28.500,0:11:32.900
religious freedoms particularly where
RE has sometimes be more akin to

0:11:32.900,0:11:39.090
religious instruction and not, not really
a proper academic subject like anything

0:11:39.090,0:11:44.280
else in school. So this is a contentious
move from the Welsh Government and I

0:11:44.280,0:11:48.060
think if they plan to remove the opt-out
of faith schools they may well have a

0:11:48.060,0:11:52.440
legal problem. So this consultation is
really about working out where the

0:11:52.440,0:11:56.640
crunch points are and what the
implications of this shift in policy

0:11:56.640,0:12:01.730
might be. (EP): Just picking up on the legal
problem - what would the legal problem be?

0:12:01.730,0:12:07.530
(SE): Well the legal problem is that the
parental rights to raise their child in

0:12:07.530,0:12:11.760
accordance with their own beliefs is
actually protected under human rights

0:12:11.760,0:12:19.200
legislation, so if the courts were to
decide that the way schools, the way in

0:12:19.200,0:12:22.950
which schools were teaching religious
education actually constituted a form of

0:12:22.950,0:12:27.780
indoctrination or inculcation into a
particular faith then there may be a

0:12:27.780,0:12:33.300
human rights problem. (EP): I see. Alastair,
what's the NSS assessment of the

0:12:33.300,0:12:39.210
proposal so far. (Alastair Lichten, AL): Well like
a range of civil society organizations we've
been

0:12:39.210,0:12:43.740
very involved in this process - this is a
process that has gone on for many years,

0:12:43.740,0:12:48.540
there's been lots of consultations,
there's been plenty of opportunity for

0:12:48.540,0:12:53.300
people to put their views across as, you
know, the evolving settlement has,

0:12:53.300,0:12:58.620
proposal has come forward and to be honest
with you, I feel like at every

0:12:58.620,0:13:02.490
stage of the process
if someone's asked me to summarize how

0:13:02.490,0:13:06.420
do we feel about the proposals at the moment
I probably just say cautiously,

0:13:06.420,0:13:11.310
cautiously optimistic and I probably try and
find
lots of different ways of phrasing cautiously

0:13:11.310,0:13:18.210
cautiously optimistic. That's because, if we look at the big picture stuff, we've

0:13:18.210,0:13:22.440
been very supportive of the aims and the values put forward by the current

0:13:22.440,0:13:28.440
Education Minister, Kirsty Williams and also her predecessor but then when we

0:13:28.440,0:13:33.029
look down the details we often see that this this big picture of great ambitious

0:13:33.029,0:13:38.339
stuff often gives way to a failure to tackle some of the more difficult

0:13:38.339,0:13:43.709
questions particularly entrenched religious interests. And as Stephen said,

0:13:43.709,0:13:51.020
obviously we all want students, pupils to have access to high quality inclusive

0:13:51.020,0:13:55.980
accurate broad and balanced religious, religion

0:13:55.980,0:14:00.930
and worldviews, religion or religious education and of course also RSE but

0:14:00.930,0:14:04.040
it's, there often the devil is in the detail.

0:14:04.040,0:14:10.110
(EP): Sure and on just looking at this particular issue of making sex education

0:14:10.110,0:14:15.120
and RE mandatory and picking up on what Stephen said a bit earlier about parents

0:14:15.120,0:14:18.600
rights to bring up their children in their own way,

0:14:18.600,0:14:23.040
how far do you think that the current proposals would infringe on parent's

0:14:23.040,0:14:26.820
right to bring up their children? Is there a danger that the state could be

0:14:26.820,0:14:33.810
meddling too much? (AL): I think we always need to be mindful of that danger but not, not

0:14:33.810,0:14:37.950
to, not take their concerns too far. Clearly this is one of the

0:14:37.950,0:14:43.500
contentious and difficult issues in the RE or the whole curriculum reform

0:14:43.500,0:14:47.700
process so we can see why the Welsh Government decided to separate this

0:14:47.700,0:14:53.010
question out into a separate consultation however it's also important

0:14:53.010,0:15:00.000
to separate the issues around the right to withdraw from RE and the right to

0:15:00.000,0:15:04.440
withdraw from what used to be called sex education - what is now called RSE

0:15:04.440,0:15:10.620
because the reasons these rights exist and the historic way in which they've

0:15:10.620,0:15:17.459
been used has some similarities but is also very different. In principle, again this is

0:15:17.459,0:15:21.270
going back to the big-picture stuff, in principle, we agree that all

0:15:21.270,0:15:26.610

children should receive all parts of the curriculum. No pupil in a school should,

0:15:26.610,0:15:33.150

should be shielded from some particular subject or some particular knowledge but

0:15:33.150,0:15:38.880

the right to withdraw from RE exists because there is a history of RE being

0:15:38.880,0:15:44.730

used to promote either specific religious worldviews or a more positive

0:15:44.730,0:15:51.270

view of faith in general. The reason the right to withdraw from what was called sex

0:15:51.270,0:15:56.610

education existed was much more because some groups wanted to shield pupils from

0:15:56.610,0:16:01.589

particular knowledge. I don't think people really want to, you know, by and large

0:16:01.589,0:16:05.040

want to shield people from knowledge about different religions, it's

0:16:05.040,0:16:11.070

just they have concerns over how RE is sometimes taught. So there are areas

0:16:11.070,0:16:16.890

where there's often a tendency within the RE community, and we see this very

0:16:16.890,0:16:22.529

much in the consultation document, to simply have a positive rose-tinted

0:16:22.529,0:16:26.279

glasses - all of the problems which necessitate the right to withdraw have

0:16:26.279,0:16:30.480

been solved and it's completely not necessary anymore and that's not really

0:16:30.480,0:16:36.960

the case - we do, we do still see cases where parents feel that RE is being used

0:16:36.960,0:16:41.010

to promote a particular worldview which they don't agree with, it's not how they

0:16:41.010,0:16:44.910

choose to raise their children and so they feel they have little choice but to

0:16:44.910,0:16:52.529

withdraw. (EP): Do you think the problem with this Aistair is really about continuing

0:16:52.529,0:16:55.440

the right to withdraw - do you think it's just a question of reforming the way RE

0:16:55.440,0:17:01.500

is taught? (AL): If we reform, if we get all of the reforms that we'd like to the way

0:17:01.500,0:17:05.970

RE or I guess we should start getting used to calling it RW is taught

0:17:05.970,0:17:12.030

then the right to withdraw shouldn't be necessary. A couple of years ago I did a

0:17:12.030,0:17:15.959

review of some guidance that came out from the Welsh Association of SACREs

0:17:15.959,0:17:18.900

and I think that kind of very much illustrated the problem with the right

0:17:18.900,0:17:24.270

to withdraw- this is a group of local, local authority groups that deal with

0:17:24.270,0:17:28.410

religious education and they point out some very common sense things that the

0:17:28.410,0:17:33.450

right to withdraw from RE is a bit of an anomaly, it causes problems and

0:17:33.450,0:17:37.800
confusions for schools sometimes and it
is sometimes used by parents for

0:17:37.800,0:17:44.190
prejudicial reasons but equally you
can't just entirely dismiss people's

0:17:44.190,0:17:47.670
legitimate concerns, particularly in
faith schools

0:17:47.670,0:17:53.100
where RE is inspected to ensure it is
promoting a religious worldview where it

0:17:53.100,0:17:59.490
has that continuing legacy of that
purpose. (EP): Stephen, what about the right
to

0:17:59.490,0:18:04.410
withdraw from sex education or RSE? is,
are there any circumstances in which

0:18:04.410,0:18:08.820
this would be justifiable or do you
think all children always should be

0:18:08.820,0:18:13.260
taught these subjects? (SE): No, with regard to
RSE, I think that all children should

0:18:13.260,0:18:17.700
have a right to access high-quality
relationships and sex education and I

0:18:17.700,0:18:22.110
think that should be LGBT inclusive as
well because all the evidence tells us

0:18:22.110,0:18:26.400
that this leads to better health
outcomes both sexual health and mental

0:18:26.400,0:18:29.670
health we're talking about there. So I
don't think parental rights should trump

0:18:29.670,0:18:34.590

children's independent rights in that
instance so I think I and certainly

0:18:34.590,0:18:37.980
the National Secular society would
support plans for an end to the right of

0:18:37.980,0:18:42.510
withdrawal from relationships and sex
education. (EP): Alastair, any further

0:18:42.510,0:18:46.560
comments on RSE.
(AL): Yeah, I mean we do see cases for
example

0:18:46.560,0:18:53.550
in an annex to our unsafe sex education
report of last year we identified faith

0:18:53.550,0:18:59.280
schools in Wales who were using RSE
for promoting particular religious world

0:18:59.280,0:19:06.300
views, particularly anti-LGBT teachings,
anti-reproductive rights information. The

0:19:06.300,0:19:11.460
solution, and so, you know, if a school
were using RSE just to promote the

0:19:11.460,0:19:16.320
idea that homosexuality is wrong, as
Catholic faith schools do, I can see why

0:19:16.320,0:19:20.700
a parent might want to withdraw their
child from that lesson but I think the

0:19:20.700,0:19:25.740
solution there is to fix that bad
practice rather than keeping the sort of

0:19:25.740,0:19:29.670
strange right to withdraw but you often
see if you keep it for one person, you

0:19:29.670,0:19:34.410
end up having to keep it for lots more.
(EP): Stephen, where do the children's human

0:19:34.410,0:19:39.960
rights to have RSE fit into all this.
(SE): Yes. Good question. Children's rights I

0:19:39.960,0:19:44.400
think often get neglected in these
conversations where I think there's an

0:19:44.400,0:19:50.000
undue focus and emphasis on parents
rights and the parents religious beliefs

0:19:50.000,0:19:55.050
but parents and children's best
interests aren't actually always in

0:19:55.050,0:19:58.920
alignment as some people seem to assume
so generally speaking I don't think

0:19:58.920,0:20:01.290
people's should have the right to
withdraw from

0:20:01.290,0:20:05.340
education, I don't think it's a kind of
pick and mix offering that schools have - I

0:20:05.340,0:20:09.390
don't think children generally speaking
should be able to just, you know, pick and
choose

0:20:09.390,0:20:13.290
what subjects they they learn
and what they don't but when that line

0:20:13.290,0:20:20.730
between education and instruction are,
even indoctrination, is crossed I think

0:20:20.730,0:20:25.560
not only parents but pupils should also
be free to opt themselves out so

0:20:25.560,0:20:30.810
particularly I think where acts of
worship are involved or where RE is used

0:20:30.810,0:20:36.480

as some sort of vehicle to inculcate
pupils into a particular faith then I

0:20:36.480,0:20:40.320
think pupils rights to freedom of
religion or belief should be respected

0:20:40.320,0:20:46.290
by them being able to opt themselves out
and certainly as children develop a

0:20:46.290,0:20:50.550
maturity and the ability to decide
things for themselves they should be

0:20:50.550,0:20:54.600
encouraged to do so and this is
recognized of course in law through

0:20:54.600,0:20:58.800
the Gillick principal - Gillick
competency it's known as, which

0:20:58.800,0:21:03.270
establishes that parental rights
diminish with the child's evolving

0:21:03.270,0:21:08.310
maturity but obviously because the Welsh
Government say that the reformed

0:21:08.310,0:21:12.990
religion and world views subject is
objective and broad and balanced they're

0:21:12.990,0:21:17.580
not actually proposing any pupil right
of withdrawal there, you know, there even

0:21:17.580,0:21:20.670
removing the parental right of
withdrawal but as we've already covered

0:21:20.670,0:21:24.900
I think there may be a problem when they
get to the area of faith schools which

0:21:24.900,0:21:30.450
obviously will teach about religion and
world views in a particular way. (EP): So is

0:21:30.450,0:21:35.760
the solution to, to allow children to
withdraw from particular subjects and

0:21:35.760,0:21:40.470
faith schools or is the solution to get
rid of faith schools. (AL): That's nice and

0:21:40.470,0:21:47.010
simple. (SE) Well certainly, I think all, all
parts of the school day in every school

0:21:47.010,0:21:52.020
should be inclusive of all pupils so I
think the only way you really get to a

0:21:52.020,0:21:57.000
properly broad balanced and pluralistic
education system is if you have an

0:21:57.000,0:22:01.170
inclusive secular education system and
you don't allow religious organizations

0:22:01.170,0:22:05.310
to run schools. (EP): Because speaking as a
former teacher, I would just be slightly

0:22:05.310,0:22:09.030
worried that if children had the right
to withdraw from certain lessons how're

0:22:09.030,0:22:13.300
they really to know what counts as
education and what counts as indoctrination?

0:22:13.300,0:22:18.310
(SE): Sure and as I said right at the
beginning I don't think pupils should be

0:22:18.310,0:22:21.460
able to pick and choose what areas of
curriculum they learn. I think the

0:22:21.460,0:22:24.520
emphasis should be on making sure the
curriculum is appropriate for all

0:22:24.520,0:22:28.180
pupils.

(EP): So who supports these changes apart
from

0:22:28.180,0:22:32.590
the NSS. (SE): Well I think that remains to be
seen. I think there is certainly broad

0:22:32.590,0:22:36.730
support for reform of religious
education and making sure that

0:22:36.730,0:22:41.380
non-religious world views are given a
fair hearing. Too often religious

0:22:41.380,0:22:44.770
education across the UK has been
dominated by religious interest, so

0:22:44.770,0:22:49.060
anything that takes us away from that I
think is positive and I think most

0:22:49.060,0:22:54.010
people whether religious or not will
actually recognize that but I imagine

0:22:54.010,0:22:57.900
that both faith and secular groups will
be concerned to see any reduction in

0:22:57.900,0:23:02.050
parental rights around religious
education and religious freedom so

0:23:02.050,0:23:07.120
whilst faith schools exist and RE can be
used as advertising space for religion

0:23:07.120,0:23:10.690
in schools, I'm certainly not convinced
and I don't think the NSS is convinced yet

0:23:10.690,0:23:14.620
that the time has come to remove the
right of withdrawal. (AL): It's interesting

0:23:14.620,0:23:18.910
actually, not so much talking about the right to
withdraw but RE reform more generally,

0:23:18.910,0:23:24.460

that the Catholic education service in England - they were just so radically

0:23:24.460,0:23:30.520

against the very similar proposals which were made there but seem to be either okay

0:23:30.520,0:23:34.900

or supportive of similar proposals in Wales and it, I think goes to show that

0:23:34.900,0:23:40.380

policy makers have more flexibility where faith schools are less entrenched.

0:23:40.380,0:23:45.400

(EP): And on that point Alastair, how great are the substantive changes that are going

0:23:45.400,0:23:48.610

to be made to the National Curriculum in these subjects rather than just the

0:23:48.610,0:23:54.490

changes in names. (AL): I think this is the largest curriculum overhaul project in

0:23:54.490,0:24:00.100

recent, in recent history in the UK. RE or RW is going to be embedded in a

0:24:00.100,0:24:05.200

broader humanities area of learning, something which we're in favor of but

0:24:05.200,0:24:09.400

we're still gonna see SACREs - that's local Standing Advisory Councils on

0:24:09.400,0:24:13.180

Religious Education - we're still gonna see faith groups determining the

0:24:13.180,0:24:19.120

syllabus within faith schools. There's a move towards reflecting the changing

0:24:19.120,0:24:25.090

religious demographics and greater inclusion of non-religious world

0:24:25.090,0:24:29.380

views. They've introduced something called the plural, the PLURALIST

0:24:29.380,0:24:33.070

REQUIREMENT and they've put that in capital letters - that sounds very

0:24:33.070,0:24:36.790

important and, but that doesn't solve every problem

0:24:36.790,0:24:42.100

I think there's often this idea that all these problems can just be solved by

0:24:42.100,0:24:48.280

greater breadth so, you know, RE has become what started off as just an advertising

0:24:48.280,0:24:52.960

space for Christianity and then it became an advertising space for

0:24:52.960,0:24:57.070

Christianity and also other religions and now let's give a bit of advertising

0:24:57.070,0:25:02.500

space for humanism but that doesn't solve all the problems. The consultation

0:25:02.500,0:25:06.610

document talks about that oh, there won't be, there won't be any indoctrination in

0:25:06.610,0:25:10.930

the subject but you can have bias within the subject without it rising to the

0:25:10.930,0:25:15.490

level you'd call indoctrination. You can have, you know, a bias view being

0:25:15.490,0:25:19.960

presented and inculcation and immersion in a religious way of thinking,

0:25:19.960,0:25:24.910

increasing focus on the importance of

religious views. (EP): So there are going to be

0:25:24.910,0:25:29.890

substantive changes to the content but what about the names of the subjects? In

0:25:29.890,0:25:34.270

fact there are two changes proposed - this idea that sex education is going to be

0:25:34.270,0:25:38.620

renamed relationships and sexuality education and that religious education

0:25:38.620,0:25:42.370

is going to be renamed religions and worldviews. Alastair can you tell us what

0:25:42.370,0:25:44.530

is the idea behind these proposed changes?

0:25:44.530,0:25:50.110

(AL): I think the RSE name change draws strongly on the recommendations of the

0:25:50.110,0:25:55.030

Welsh Government's own expert panel - it reflects that it's about rights and

0:25:55.030,0:25:59.020

responsibilities in all types of relationships and so it discusses a

0:25:59.020,0:26:04.560

wider range of issues than simply, you know, physics and mechanics of sex or

0:26:04.560,0:26:10.810

sexual relationships. RSE covers relations, peer relationships, relationships with

0:26:10.810,0:26:14.680

adults -the understanding of children - what their rights are so that it

0:26:14.680,0:26:23.440

draws in things like anti-bullying other other ethical issues. The RE/RW name

0:26:23.440,0:26:27.040

change - again that draws on recommendation of experts in this case

0:26:27.040,0:26:33.340

from the Commissioner on RE - that's intended to give the subject a fresh

0:26:33.340,0:26:38.860

start and increase the importance and the relative esteem of non religious

0:26:38.860,0:26:42.760

worldviews.

(EP): Are these name changes themselves going

0:26:42.760,0:26:46.960

to make a difference to the way the curriculum is taught or its content or

0:26:46.960,0:26:52.180

are they just window dressing? (AL): People in the RE community do love discussing

0:26:52.180,0:26:58.540

possible subject name changes so I think a subject name change can send an

0:26:58.540,0:27:03.070

important message but ultimately it is about more than just a name change. We

0:27:03.070,0:27:10.420

need to, you need a cultural change, you need the curriculum content and not just

0:27:10.420,0:27:13.450

the content but you need strong protections of what are the values of

0:27:13.450,0:27:18.610

this subject. I think we should also recognize that the name still frames

0:27:18.610,0:27:23.380

religion as the default - the subject, the curriculum content talks

0:27:23.380,0:27:28.090

about world views that are analogous to religion, so religion and worldviews and

0:27:28.090,0:27:33.220
that definitely places non-religious
worldviews in a quite limited, in a

0:27:33.220,0:27:39.220
limited sense of understanding so it leads to
just
non-religious world views and humanism

0:27:39.220,0:27:46.360
being used synonymously - it leads to
approaching the study of non-religious

0:27:46.360,0:27:50.290
well views as if they're also religious and it
frames

0:27:50.290,0:27:55.690
that religion is the important one and
non-religious world views are very much

0:27:55.690,0:28:02.590
secondary, so we do need the cultural
change to completely move beyond faith

0:28:02.590,0:28:07.780
promotion - we need to see that it's not
just a problem if a faith school or

0:28:07.780,0:28:12.520
another school is promoting just their
religion as true, it's also a problem of other

0:28:12.520,0:28:16.960
forms of bias and these can sometimes be
subconscious bias because many within

0:28:16.960,0:28:22.540
the RE community do see their job as
promoting a positive view of faith and

0:28:22.540,0:28:26.410
particularly in faith schools where it's
not just a positive view of faith but a

0:28:26.410,0:28:31.240
positive view of a specific faith - that's
always going to have an institutional

0:28:31.240,0:28:36.220

bias. (EP): So far we've been talking about
changes which apply to the maintained

0:28:36.220,0:28:41.890
sector in Wales. Stephen, what about in
the private sector and what about in the

0:28:41.890,0:28:46.480
rest of the UK? (SE): Well as you'd expect,
private schools do have greater freedoms -

0:28:46.480,0:28:50.740
they don't have to follow the National
Curriculum and parental rights of

0:28:50.740,0:28:52.980
withdrawal have actually only ever
applied in the

0:28:52.980,0:28:57.210
state sector - they don't apply in the
independent sector anyway. That

0:28:57.210,0:29:02.120
said, schools in the independent sector
should still certainly be held to

0:29:02.120,0:29:07.320
particular specific standards and they
certainly shouldn't be able to undermine

0:29:07.320,0:29:11.150
the rights of children as set out in the
UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

0:29:11.150,0:29:15.990
With regard to the rest of the country,
well in terms of religious education

0:29:15.990,0:29:23.070
progress has been and continues to be
painfully slow. Reform of RE appears not to

0:29:23.070,0:29:27.600
be high on the list of government
priorities, certainly in England. Last year we

0:29:27.600,0:29:31.620
saw the findings of an independent
Commission on religious education which

0:29:31.620,0:29:36.929
made various recommendations broadly in
the right direction, as far as we're

0:29:36.929,0:29:40.740
concerned, I think, but the, but the
response from the government has been

0:29:40.740,0:29:44.549
disappointing to say the least. You know,
make no mistake,

0:29:44.549,0:29:51.210
religious education is withering on the
vine certainly in England which you know

0:29:51.210,0:29:55.130
many people may think is no bad thing
with some justification I might add.

0:29:55.130,0:30:00.480
Community schools often neglect the
teaching of RE or do it badly. Faith

0:30:00.480,0:30:05.370
schools certainly teach it but tend to teach
it in a more biased and partisan sort of

0:30:05.370,0:30:09.809
way so the subject for me has little
credibility left and it really does need

0:30:09.809,0:30:15.630
a significant reform but there's no sign
of that reform anytime soon

0:30:15.630,0:30:21.059
unfortunately. What I think we need to see
is all vestiges of confessionalism removed

0:30:21.059,0:30:27.000
and in fact I would move away from the
whole concept of religious education as

0:30:27.000,0:30:32.400
a specific area of the curriculum, as a
separate and distinct subject. I

0:30:32.400,0:30:37.020
definitely think pupils should be
entitled to learn about religions and

0:30:37.020,0:30:40.799
beliefs, about a diversity of religions
and beliefs and their impact on society,

0:30:40.799,0:30:45.860
but you know teaching of religion and belief
could absolutely be part of a broader

0:30:45.860,0:30:51.660
civics based curriculum that teaches, yes
about religion and belief and about

0:30:51.660,0:30:56.280
religious diversity, but also about human
rights, politics, the democratic process

0:30:56.280,0:31:01.679
and what it means to be a citizen.
An education about secularism of course

0:31:01.679,0:31:06.809
I think would form part of that subject.
(AL): And we have an amazing range of free

0:31:06.809,0:31:11.659
sources at exploringsecularism.org
(EP) Steven, anything further to add to that?

0:31:11.659,0:31:16.470
(SE): Not really, just that I hope that
listeners in Wales will engage in this

0:31:16.470,0:31:20.610
consultation and certainly make their
views known. We'll be emailing members

0:31:20.610,0:31:25.230
and supporters. I'm sure we'll also be
posting details about how to get

0:31:25.230,0:31:29.669
involved in our weekly newslines
bulletin so yes, stay tuned.

0:31:29.669,0:31:38.249
(EP) Steven and Alastair, thank you very much.
(AL): Cheers. (SE): Thank you (EP): That was
episode 17 of the

0:31:38.249,0:31:42.600

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0:32:05.740,0:32:07.800