

Ep 28: RE in Wales: a chance for fundamental change

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gD2syE26heQ>

0:00:05.680,0:00:09.920

Emma Park, (EP): You're listening to the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park.

0:00:09.920,0:00:13.759

In October last year, I talked to Stephen Evans and Alastair Lichten

0:00:13.759,0:00:17.039

about a consultation launched by the Welsh government on changes to the

0:00:17.039,0:00:21.840

religious and sex education syllabi. Since then the consultation has closed

0:00:21.840,0:00:24.560

and the proposals have developed significantly.

0:00:24.560,0:00:28.400

It is now anticipated that RE will be replaced by a new subject called

0:00:28.400,0:00:32.640

Religion, Values and Ethics or RVE for short. The aim is to make this

0:00:32.640,0:00:36.800

subject more pluralistic and less proselytizing than the old RE

0:00:36.800,0:00:40.160

but, the NSS argues, there are still problems.

0:00:40.160,0:00:43.440

Another controversial idea is to remove the parents' right

0:00:43.440,0:00:46.640

to withdraw their children from religious education,

0:00:46.640,0:00:49.760

something I wrote about from the perspective of a former teacher

0:00:49.760,0:00:54.320

in Spectator Life. In today's episode I will be speaking to Stephen and Alastair

0:00:54.320,0:00:56.160

again for an update on where the current

0:00:56.160,0:01:00.079

proposals have got to, how far they meet with NSS approval

0:01:00.079,0:01:05.039

and where there is still, in their view, room for improvement.

0:01:09.840,0:01:14.640

Hi Stephen and Alastair. So let's start with a sort of broader question -

0:01:14.640,0:01:18.799

What has the National Secular Society's role been during the Welsh government's

0:01:18.799,0:01:23.119

development of its new RVE proposals?

0:01:23.119,0:01:28.400

Stephen Evans, (SE): Uh, well over six years ago now I think it was back in March 2014, the Welsh

0:01:28.400,0:01:33.360
government asked professor
Graham Donaldson to carry out a

0:01:33.360,0:01:37.520
root and branch review of the curriculum
in schools in Wales and I suppose that's

0:01:37.520,0:01:40.640
what started the current debate about RE
in Wales.

0:01:40.640,0:01:44.399
We've been involved right from the
start and we play an active part in

0:01:44.399,0:01:50.720
helping to shape this area of policy. So
the Donaldson review reported back in

0:01:50.720,0:01:53.920
2015
and it recommended that religious

0:01:53.920,0:01:58.799
education should remain
a statutory curriculum requirement and

0:01:58.799,0:02:02.799
form part of the humanities area of
learning.

0:02:02.799,0:02:08.239
Um, so the question from there on in
was, was I suppose what would RE look

0:02:08.239,0:02:12.480
like? and
I met with the Education Secretary at

0:02:12.480,0:02:15.120
the time, Huw Lewis, who appeared to be
persuaded

0:02:15.120,0:02:18.560
that there was a real need to transform
religious education

0:02:18.560,0:02:21.760
and I think his view at the time was he
wanted to see it

0:02:21.760,0:02:26.000
transformed into a broader philosophy
and ethics

0:02:26.000,0:02:30.160
kind of subject with an explicit
commitment to allowing children to

0:02:30.160,0:02:34.879
explore ideas around ethics, citizenship
rights and responsibilities and,

0:02:34.879,0:02:37.920
you know, what it means to be a citizen
of a free country and this was

0:02:37.920,0:02:41.519
very much in line with what we were
recommending, uh, and so

0:02:41.519,0:02:50.239
and to some extent it, it's where we
are right now. His plans inevitably met with
some opposition from faith groups, um, and
some

0:02:50.239,0:02:53.040
within the RE community who saw it as a
sort of

0:02:53.040,0:02:56.160
watering down of a more traditional
model

0:02:56.160,0:02:59.680
of RE and I suppose the public policy
debate has been

0:02:59.680,0:03:03.200
ongoing ever since and, you know, we've
had subsequent meetings and

0:03:03.200,0:03:05.519
correspondence with the current

Education

0:03:05.519,0:03:09.200

Minister, Kirsty Williams, who I met I think last in January,

0:03:09.200,0:03:12.400

but, you know, we've exchanged correspondence throughout as we have

0:03:12.400,0:03:14.959

with various leads within the curriculum team

0:03:14.959,0:03:18.000

to try and shape this really important area of policy and,

0:03:18.000,0:03:22.800

and, you know, take it in a more secularist direction.

0:03:22.800,0:03:26.000

(EP): That's a, a really, yeah, that's interesting - a really long sort of

0:03:26.000,0:03:29.840

involvement by the NSS there. Alastair, did you have anything to add to that?

0:03:29.840,0:03:33.519

Alastair Lichten, (AL): I've had quite productive meetings with various members of

0:03:33.519,0:03:38.159

curriculum teams in Cardiff and also other stakeholder events

0:03:38.159,0:03:43.200

and, you know, I think we've seen a few 'light bulb' moments when we've

0:03:43.200,0:03:46.720

been in a meeting and we've pointed out a problem

0:03:46.720,0:03:51.040

caused by faith schools and there's sort

of a light bulb going on, like 'Oh

0:03:51.040,0:03:55.040

yeah, we hadn't, we hadn't thought of, we hadn't thought of that issue'

0:03:55.040,0:03:58.080

but mainly we've been there, you know, pushing

0:03:58.080,0:04:04.959

them to be braver and to go further. (EP): Sure and, and talking of this, one of the,

0:04:04.959,0:04:09.760

the things that the NSS has really been campaigning about, um,

0:04:09.760,0:04:14.400

is this issue of whether parents have the right to withdraw children

0:04:14.400,0:04:18.880

from religious education. Now one of the current proposals by the Welsh

0:04:18.880,0:04:22.400

government is for um, religion and values and ethics

0:04:22.400,0:04:24.800

education to be compulsory in all schools

0:04:24.800,0:04:28.000

and to completely abolish the right of parents to withdraw

0:04:28.000,0:04:31.840

their children. Let's look at the effect of that, um,

0:04:31.840,0:04:35.280

in mainstream non-faith schools to start with.

0:04:35.280,0:04:38.800

So as far as non-faith schools are

concerned Stephen,

0:04:38.800,0:04:42.639

are you happy with where the Welsh government's proposal is at now?

0:04:42.639,0:04:47.040

(SE): Oh well it's certainly good to see RE evolving -
uh, the subject has been crying out for

0:04:47.040,0:04:50.479

reform for a long time and it's great to see the Welsh government

0:04:50.479,0:04:56.400

grasping this nettle, uh,
and the new legislation will make it

0:04:56.400,0:05:01.199

explicit that
any agreed syllabus for RVE must reflect

0:05:01.199,0:05:04.320

both
religious beliefs and also non-religious

0:05:04.320,0:05:07.039

beliefs and that's a long
overdue development which is very

0:05:07.039,0:05:11.919

welcome. So we certainly welcome the principles uh underpinning the move to

0:05:11.919,0:05:16.080

replace RE with a new
religion, values and ethics syllabus and

0:05:16.080,0:05:19.919

the ambition
of this being a more pluralistic and, and

0:05:19.919,0:05:23.360

more balanced in nature
but I, I do think the plans the

0:05:23.360,0:05:28.160

government have come up with
fall somewhat short of that ambition

0:05:28.160,0:05:31.759

uh for reasons which we'll probably get
into a little bit later on

0:05:31.759,0:05:35.360

um and with regard to the right of
withdrawal, uh,

0:05:35.360,0:05:38.560

uh, with, you know, regard to that being
removed,

0:05:38.560,0:05:42.880

well, if we had a genuinely objective
critical and pluralistic

0:05:42.880,0:05:47.680

RVE syllabus then I think the arguments
for a right to withdrawal would fade away

0:05:47.680,0:05:50.479

and become redundant
but I don't think that's where we're at

0:05:50.479,0:05:53.199

at the moment
and particularly when you look at the

0:05:53.199,0:05:56.639

arrangements for faith schools which I'm
sure we'll get into,

0:05:56.639,0:06:02.000

uh even more concerns arise. So, yes um,
Are these proposals a step in the right

0:06:02.000,0:06:07.440

direction? Yes.
Could they be improved? Absolutely.

0:06:07.440,0:06:11.360

(EP): Sure, I mean as, as far as non-faith
schools are concerned,

0:06:11.360,0:06:15.440

um, do you think that where the proposals are now,

0:06:15.440,0:06:21.120

you're happy for the right to withdraw to be gone in, in non-faith schools?

0:06:21.120,0:06:24.639

(SE): Uh, not really, no - for reasons we'll get into, I still think

0:06:24.639,0:06:29.759

um, it's a necessary evil, shall we say, for the time being.

0:06:29.759,0:06:34.560

(EP): Okay, fair enough, um, and, and on that subject, um

0:06:34.560,0:06:37.840

non-faith schools will also no longer be obliged to

0:06:37.840,0:06:42.560

offer faith-based religious education, um, just because the parents request it - in

0:06:42.560,0:06:45.919

other words, all children at non-faith schools will have to follow

0:06:45.919,0:06:49.680

the same, um, RVE curriculum. This seems like

0:06:49.680,0:06:53.280

something of a positive step, I mean what do you think about that Alastair?

0:06:53.280,0:06:57.039

(AL): I'm not sure that there is any substantial take-up of this

0:06:57.039,0:07:00.880

provision at the moment so it does seem like a bit of a no-brainer just to do

0:07:00.880,0:07:05.440

away with it.

The historic idea behind this was

0:07:05.440,0:07:09.919

particularly for Catholic families but also for other minority religious

0:07:09.919,0:07:13.919

groups in England and Wales - they were concerned

0:07:13.919,0:07:19.000

that locally determined RE in non-faith schools would be

0:07:19.000,0:07:24.000

pro-Anglican by default, so they wanted the ability to have that

0:07:24.000,0:07:28.560

opt-out to provide an alternative denominational RE.

0:07:28.560,0:07:32.800

I think the Catholic education service will probably be the only group

0:07:32.800,0:07:36.560

really fighting to maintain this - they view it as

0:07:36.560,0:07:39.840

Catholic parents' jobs to ensure their children receive

0:07:39.840,0:07:43.120

a particular denominational religious education and

0:07:43.120,0:07:46.960

obviously they see it as the state's job to fund that.... (EP): And that, that is regardless

0:07:46.960,0:07:50.000

of what type of school their children are at, yeah. (AL):but this, but,

0:07:50.000,0:07:54.960

as I say, this provision is not really taken up - it's a bit of a

0:07:54.960,0:07:58.400

dead letter so it makes a lot of sense just to get rid of it.

0:07:58.400,0:08:04.240

(EP): I see, whereas in contrast, um, the ability to have an opt-out in faith

0:08:04.240,0:08:07.120

schools from their denominational provision is

0:08:07.120,0:08:10.879

something which, which has had teeth - so let's have a look at that

0:08:10.879,0:08:14.560

now. So in faith schools - state-funded faith

0:08:14.560,0:08:16.639

schools - the, the Welsh government's latest

0:08:16.639,0:08:20.080

proposal means that parents will have two options:

0:08:20.080,0:08:23.520

either they will have to allow their children to be taught

0:08:23.520,0:08:26.720

RVE from a denominational perspective whether Catholic,

0:08:26.720,0:08:31.840

C of E, Muslim, Jewish, whatever or they will be able to opt their children

0:08:31.840,0:08:35.360

into classes which teach religion from a pluralist,

0:08:35.360,0:08:39.279

non-denominational point of view. However, parents will not be able to

0:08:39.279,0:08:42.399

withdraw their children altogether from religious education -

0:08:42.399,0:08:45.519

they will have to choose one of the two available options

0:08:45.519,0:08:50.560

in faith schools. So, um, I know, I know the NSS has concerns about this,

0:08:50.560,0:08:54.560

so um, Alastair what is your view? um, what, is this a step in the right

0:08:54.560,0:08:57.920

direction or are there still problems with this provision in faith

0:08:57.920,0:09:02.320

schools? (AL): I think for some people it will be a step in the

0:09:02.320,0:09:05.600

right direction but, I mean, this just looks like it's

0:09:05.600,0:09:08.720

going to create mess - it really feels like a last minute

0:09:08.720,0:09:12.160

attempt to try and please everyone that is just gonna

0:09:12.160,0:09:15.920

backfire. Amusingly enough, we've heard that

0:09:15.920,0:09:21.120

some in the faith-based RE community view this as a Trojan horse to try and

0:09:21.120,0:09:25.440

undermine faith
schools but overall

0:09:25.440,0:09:28.720

it's just deeply disappointing that the
Welsh government appear to have

0:09:28.720,0:09:32.080

backtracked or backed down from their
own

0:09:32.080,0:09:36.000

far simpler suggestion of just requiring
all schools to teach

0:09:36.000,0:09:41.279

pluralistic RE and really the more you
think about this at a practical level,

0:09:41.279,0:09:44.720

the more you actually, like, consider how
practically this would,

0:09:44.720,0:09:49.040

this is going to work in faith schools,
the sillier it begins to look.

0:09:49.040,0:09:53.120

So just imagine a teacher in a faith
school,

0:09:53.120,0:09:56.640

possibly selected based on religious
grounds,

0:09:56.640,0:10:01.200

is supposed to teach faith promotion,
promoting

0:10:01.200,0:10:05.839

denominational RE from nine o'clock till
ten o'clock,

0:10:05.839,0:10:09.680

then the bell rings - it's a, it's a new
period -

0:10:09.680,0:10:14.800

and suddenly from 10 to 11 they're meant
to teach pluralistic RE.

0:10:14.800,0:10:19.279

Are they gonna have different textbooks,
different lesson plans?

0:10:19.279,0:10:22.399

Are they going to have gone on different
cbd days?

0:10:22.399,0:10:25.600

How are they going to suddenly switch
between those two very different

0:10:25.600,0:10:28.800

cultures?

What about inspection? because, you know,

0:10:28.800,0:10:34.720

RE in many faith schools is inspected
to ensure it is promoting a faith ethos -

0:10:34.720,0:10:38.560

how would that work with pluralistic RE?

(EP): I mean, would they just, I mean wouldn't

0:10:38.560,0:10:41.920

they just have in that case the same
standards to apply to um

0:10:41.920,0:10:45.360

non-denominational RE
um in faith schools as in non-faith

0:10:45.360,0:10:49.839

schools? Wouldn't that be the theory?

(AL): Yes, but they, that, the culture

0:10:49.839,0:10:52.560

isn't in place

and the, the inspection regime isn't in

0:10:52.560,0:10:56.160

place 'cos in many faith schools

uh RE is inspected in a dif, in a

0:10:56.160,0:11:00.079
different way
and, you know, we'd probably see huge

0:11:00.079,0:11:03.839
pressure by some faith schools to
dissuade parents from taking up this

0:11:03.839,0:11:07.760
pluralistic option
in much the same way that we see um,

0:11:07.760,0:11:10.480
similar,
currently many faith schools really

0:11:10.480,0:11:15.680
discourage the right,
right to withdraw so this pluralistic RE

0:11:15.680,0:11:19.519
in many faith schools would be poorly
resourced, it would, you know, probably

0:11:19.519,0:11:24.640
have a poor reputation -
it would be marginalized. Now, of course,

0:11:24.640,0:11:28.160
I'm sure in some faith schools it could
work.

0:11:28.160,0:11:33.120
Faith schools that have less of a
an aggressive tradition of promoting

0:11:33.120,0:11:37.279
their religious ethos - it might
work better in those but, I mean, just -

0:11:37.279,0:11:40.640
there's a much simpler option on the
table - it's surprising that they've

0:11:40.640,0:11:45.120
backed down in this way. (EP): Sure, I mean -
just talking about the process, because you

0:11:45.120,0:11:48.560
said parents might be feeling under a
lot of pressure from the schools -

0:11:48.560,0:11:53.760
is there a problem that, that the fact
that parents have to sort of choose

0:11:53.760,0:11:57.040
specifically to opt-in to
non-denominational

0:11:57.040,0:12:01.040
RE, um, does that make it more difficult
because the onus is on them

0:12:01.040,0:12:04.079
to, to get the school to do something
different from what it would normally be

0:12:04.079,0:12:08.000
doing?
(AL): Very clearly and we, we see that with
how

0:12:08.000,0:12:12.639
withdrawing from RE or, you know, even
questioning aspects of RE in some faith

0:12:12.639,0:12:16.720
schools is
really discouraged. (EP): Sure. Um Stephen,
did

0:12:16.720,0:12:19.120
you have anything
to add to that from your experience of

0:12:19.120,0:12:22.720
of this issue? (SE): Uh, not really. I think
Alastair is right that, that.....

0:12:22.720,0:12:27.120
Listen, it is a positive that children in
faith schools will have access to a

0:12:27.120,0:12:31.519

pluralistic curriculum but the
the practical problems this throws up

0:12:31.519,0:12:34.639
are, are quite significant but, you know, for

0:12:34.639,0:12:37.279
me, you just have to go back to the
original ambition

0:12:37.279,0:12:40.560
of the Welsh government and that was to
make sure that all children have equal

0:12:40.560,0:12:46.320
entitlement to a pluralistic
and balanced form of RVE

0:12:46.320,0:12:50.399
and for me, I think implementing the duty
on all schools to teach

0:12:50.399,0:12:54.079
the subject in an objective, critical and
pluralistic manner

0:12:54.079,0:12:58.480
without exception has to be the starting
point. So in that way, these proposals

0:12:58.480,0:13:01.680
just fall short
but, you know, practically they throw up

0:13:01.680,0:13:05.920
enormous problems too.
(EP): Sure, so let's get this straight because

0:13:05.920,0:13:10.639
um this, this right to withdraw,
as far as I understand, at the

0:13:10.639,0:13:14.639
moment,
the NSS um, still wants to keep the right

0:13:14.639,0:13:17.040
to withdraw in place although in the

long term

0:13:17.040,0:13:21.360
um the position is that, you know, if, if
the Welsh government does actually get

0:13:21.360,0:13:23.760
all faith and non-faith schools to provide

0:13:23.760,0:13:28.880
pluralistic, objective RVE to everyone then
um, the NSS would

0:13:28.880,0:13:31.440
oppose, um, keeping the right to withdraw. Is
that

0:13:31.440,0:13:37.200
correct, Alastair?
(AL): Um, pretty much I, I think Stephen

0:13:37.200,0:13:40.560
just earlier called it a necessary evil....
(EP): Yup.

0:13:40.560,0:13:44.720
(AL):and no, I'm not in love with the right
to
withdraw -

0:13:44.720,0:13:48.880
I think everyone who supports the
continuing right to withdraw

0:13:48.880,0:13:52.880
acknowledge that there's problems with
it, acknowledge its potential

0:13:52.880,0:13:57.199
to be misused, its potential to undermine
the subject.

0:13:57.199,0:14:03.199
Ideally all pupils should just have a
genuinely critical, pluralistic education

0:14:03.199,0:14:07.199
and then it shouldn't be up to parents

to pick and choose what parts of that

0:14:07.199,0:14:11.279

they want,
but, um, to give you an example of how

0:14:11.279,0:14:14.399

this is often misrepresented, a few years ago I

0:14:14.399,0:14:17.760

did a review of some guidance from the Welsh

0:14:17.760,0:14:21.760

association of SACREs
on managing the right to withdraw.... (EP):

0:14:21.760,0:14:23.839

And just to say that those SACREs are
the

0:14:23.839,0:14:27.440

local Standing Advisory Councils on
Religious Education which advise on the

0:14:27.440,0:14:31.680

RE syllabus
(AL):yeah. So they produced, and I believe
they,

0:14:31.680,0:14:34.320

every couple of years they produce
guidance on managing the right to

0:14:34.320,0:14:37.279

withdraw
and reading through it, it has a lot of,

0:14:37.279,0:14:40.880

you know, practical
advice for schools, you know, if a parent

0:14:40.880,0:14:44.800

wants to withdraw,
discuss with them, see if you can address

0:14:44.800,0:14:48.079

their concerns
but it was in the overall context of

0:14:48.079,0:14:53.279

sort of presenting
this idea that parents only have

0:14:53.279,0:14:57.519

prejudicial or ill-informed reasons for
wanting to withdraw

0:14:57.519,0:15:00.800

as if there is, if there are no
legitimate concerns with the way the

0:15:00.800,0:15:04.240

subject is taught
and that parents just need to put up

0:15:04.240,0:15:07.519

with proselytization and poor quality
teaching.

0:15:07.519,0:15:13.120

If you want to end the right to withdraw,
you should make it so it's not necessary.

0:15:13.120,0:15:20.880

(EP): Yeah. Is the concern, um,
more with um, in, in faith schools.....

0:15:20.880,0:15:24.959

would, would you be happy, I mean, that to
remove the right to withdraw if faith

0:15:24.959,0:15:27.360

schools were required to teach in a pluralistic

0:15:27.360,0:15:31.839

manner or do you think
that the very existence of faith schools

0:15:31.839,0:15:34.399

means that it would be very difficult
for those schools

0:15:34.399,0:15:38.160

to ever teach um religious studies in a
pluralistic manner?

0:15:38.160,0:15:44.000
(AL) Obviously, as we always say, faith schools vary widely in terms of how aggressively

0:15:44.000,0:15:50.560
they promote their religious ethos and so that has a big, a big impact.

0:15:50.560,0:15:54.639
Faith schools can do better or worse at this but

0:15:54.639,0:15:58.639
it is really difficult where you have a culture of a school

0:15:58.639,0:16:02.160
being organized around a religious ethos for that

0:16:02.160,0:16:07.519
not to impact how subjects are taught. So you can make it more pluralistic and

0:16:07.519,0:16:11.680
more critical but making it pluralistic and critical

0:16:11.680,0:16:16.240
enough within a faith school culture seems very

0:16:16.240,0:16:19.040
difficult. (EP): And I guess that's one of the reasons

0:16:19.040,0:16:23.600
why the NSS objects to faith schools in general. (AL): One of many.

0:16:23.600,0:16:26.800
(EP): Yeah. Now talking about the, the

0:16:26.800,0:16:31.279
religious education syllabus in general, um, Stephen, the Welsh government has said

0:16:31.279,0:16:33.680

that it's going to retain these SACREs - these

0:16:33.680,0:16:37.759
Standing Advisory Councils - which determine the RE syllabus

0:16:37.759,0:16:41.040
um, now how exactly does this work, um Stephen,

0:16:41.040,0:16:46.480
and why does the NSS object to the Welsh government's decision to keep them?

0:16:46.480,0:16:50.079
(SE): Well the objection really is because it means what gets taught in schools will

0:16:50.079,0:16:52.560
still be heavily influenced by faith groups.

0:16:52.560,0:16:56.079
So the new RVE curriculum framework itself

0:16:56.079,0:17:00.560
won't be particularly prescriptive - the agreed syllabus -

0:17:00.560,0:17:05.600
what actually gets taught in schools, will largely be formulated by these

0:17:05.600,0:17:10.319
local committees dominated by enthusiastic faith representatives which

0:17:10.319,0:17:13.120
for me fundamentally undermines the subject's

0:17:13.120,0:17:17.520
credibility. Now the law will be clear that these committees need to include

0:17:17.520,0:17:20.959

non-religious representatives which, in effect, probably

0:17:20.959,0:17:24.559

just means humanist representatives but nevertheless

0:17:24.559,0:17:29.200

reforms should liberate the subject from the privileged influence of special

0:17:29.200,0:17:32.160

interest groups whether religious or secular um,

0:17:32.160,0:17:36.480

you know, I've often thought of RE as sort of advertising space for religion

0:17:36.480,0:17:39.440

and beliefs in schools and I'm afraid under these proposals I

0:17:39.440,0:17:43.280

think that will still be the case. So, there's also a question of who funds

0:17:43.280,0:17:48.160

the syllabus - the syllabus design and the resources

0:17:48.160,0:17:51.039

and again we see religious groups with an agenda

0:17:51.039,0:17:54.240

providing the teaching materials and resources

0:17:54.240,0:17:58.559

and while claiming not to indoctrinate, their material isn't exactly impartial

0:17:58.559,0:18:03.360

and this situation in Wales, the reform in Wales was really a golden

0:18:03.360,0:18:05.840

opportunity, I think, to liberate the subject

0:18:05.840,0:18:10.480

from these special interests but I think the retention of SACREs mean that

0:18:10.480,0:18:14.000

opportunity has been missed, um... (EP) Who would you say that,

0:18:14.000,0:18:17.520

that - I mean what would the NSS's view, position - who ought to be um

0:18:17.520,0:18:22.160

designing the um RE syllabus? (SE): In the same

way as other subjects - no other subject

0:18:22.160,0:18:24.799

has this kind of local determination structure about

0:18:24.799,0:18:29.120

it and as the name change makes clear as well

0:18:29.120,0:18:32.880

this subject is supposed to cover much more than religion

0:18:32.880,0:18:37.360

but still the SACRE system gives religious interest groups

0:18:37.360,0:18:40.640

the opportunity to dominate and exert control over it.

0:18:40.640,0:18:43.760

Having said that, I should be clear actually that the schools

0:18:43.760,0:18:48.400

um, will be required I think, I think that there will be a duty on schools to

0:18:48.400,0:18:52.720
develop their own syllabus
and they will merely have to pay regard

0:18:52.720,0:18:55.679
to the agreed syllabus created by SACREs
and the

0:18:55.679,0:18:58.960
the ASC - the Agreed Syllabus Conference -
which is

0:18:58.960,0:19:02.880
basically the same committee as the
SACRE but they will be free to

0:19:02.880,0:19:08.240
depart from that agreed syllabus but
so, so, partly to answer your question

0:19:08.240,0:19:10.400
there,
schools will be responsible for

0:19:10.400,0:19:14.080
creating the syllabus
but I think in reality I expect many

0:19:14.080,0:19:17.919
schools will simply adopt
the agreed syllabus as they have been

0:19:17.919,0:19:22.240
doing lock stock and barrel and that,
as I say, gives religious groups

0:19:22.240,0:19:25.440
and other special interest groups, too
much influence

0:19:25.440,0:19:28.640
over the subject and it's partly for
this reason I think the right of

0:19:28.640,0:19:33.120
withdrawal has to remain
even in non-faith schools for now. (EP): Okay,

0:19:33.120,0:19:37.280
and I guess that with this influence
of the SACREs and the independence

0:19:37.280,0:19:42.240
of schools that would also depend on
how, how strong the schools were

0:19:42.240,0:19:45.120
themselves as faith schools, how strong
an interest they had in keeping a

0:19:45.120,0:19:50.240
religious element in, in their syllabus.
(SE): Absolutely. (EP): Yeah. Now you
mentioned

0:19:50.240,0:19:53.039
Stephen that, that
non-religious representatives will be

0:19:53.039,0:19:56.000
allowed on the SACREs and,
and you mentioned that it will

0:19:56.000,0:19:59.760
probably be humanists.....
I mean, why humanists? Have, have the

0:19:59.760,0:20:04.480
humanists specifically become
to be viewed as, as the sort of the, the

0:20:04.480,0:20:07.600
only or the sort of standard representatives

0:20:07.600,0:20:12.480
of everyone who is not religious?
(SE): Well in the case of RE, if you're

0:20:12.480,0:20:16.000
going to have a system whereby
committees made up of religious groups,

0:20:16.000,0:20:20.000
um, are charged with the task of coming
up with the syllabus,

0:20:20.000,0:20:23.440
then to make it more pluralistic and
non-discriminatory the obvious thing to

0:20:23.440,0:20:27.440
do is include, uh, non-religious voices

0:20:27.440,0:20:34.559
and humanists, um, are really
the only group that kind of identify

0:20:34.559,0:20:38.000
around non-religion. Humanism is really in, in

0:20:38.000,0:20:42.159
many respects an attempt to package
and codify non-religious views and

0:20:42.159,0:20:46.559
ethics in a way that is
analogous to religion, so humanism in

0:20:46.559,0:20:50.159
many ways has the appearance
of religion. Um, it's not a

0:20:50.159,0:20:53.120
religion, of course, but it does have the
appearance of it a little bit

0:20:53.120,0:20:57.280
um, and, and that's quite convenient in a
society that organizes things around

0:20:57.280,0:21:02.080
religious identities.
Um, it enables humanists, um,

0:21:02.080,0:21:06.799
to well, it enables the non-religious via
humanism to join the party, so to speak,

0:21:06.799,0:21:10.320
um, it makes interfaith more inclusive - so
humanism is really

0:21:10.320,0:21:14.480

quite convenient in that way. The problem
is of course,

0:21:14.480,0:21:17.520
that not all non-religious people
necessarily

0:21:17.520,0:21:21.280
identify with humanism - they might not
want to wear that particular label

0:21:21.280,0:21:25.919
or have it assigned to them, um, you know,
the non-religious tend not to organize

0:21:25.919,0:21:28.960
around their lack of religion - some
people are just indifferent to religion

0:21:28.960,0:21:32.080
or religiously unconcerned or uninterested

0:21:32.080,0:21:37.280
so it's a mistake I think
to think that non-belief and all secular

0:21:37.280,0:21:41.200
thought and history should be subsumed
under the banner of humanism, so

0:21:41.200,0:21:44.480
sometimes we need to think outside of
that religious box and not view

0:21:44.480,0:21:46.640
everything,
view everything through the prism of

0:21:46.640,0:21:50.320
religion and in the case of RE,
I think that means liberating the

0:21:50.320,0:21:54.960
subject from all vested interests,
whether religious or secular. (EP): Absolutely

0:21:54.960,0:21:58.000
and let's talk about this - just, just a

tiny bit of detail

0:21:58.000,0:22:02.240

Stephen about, um, what this RE syllabus should include.

0:22:02.240,0:22:06.320

Now, um, you yourself have argued and the NSS has argued from time to time

0:22:06.320,0:22:08.720

that, um, religious studies shouldn't be a

0:22:08.720,0:22:12.000

separate subject at all - it should be absorbed into

0:22:12.000,0:22:14.720

humanities - other humanities subjects - you mentioned

0:22:14.720,0:22:18.240

earlier, um, citizenship or possibly, you know,

0:22:18.240,0:22:21.840

some parts of it should go into literature or history. I mean

0:22:21.840,0:22:26.240

with this religion, values and ethics syllabus proposed by the Welsh

0:22:26.240,0:22:29.840

government, um, isn't there an opportunity there

0:22:29.840,0:22:32.720

for teaching, I don't know, religious views about the

0:22:32.720,0:22:36.080

world and religious approaches to life and to ethics

0:22:36.080,0:22:40.080

along with, um, philosophical ways of sort of interrogating

0:22:40.080,0:22:44.640

them and non-religious beliefs. I mean, in a way, religion and different types of

0:22:44.640,0:22:48.080

philosophy sort of approach the same ethical

0:22:48.080,0:22:50.720

problems such as how to live, how to be good

0:22:50.720,0:22:54.159

but, um, you might say that philosophy proceeds by reason

0:22:54.159,0:22:57.600

whereas, um, religion proceeds on divine authority.

0:22:57.600,0:23:01.679

So, I mean, what about a subject which allowed children to explore these

0:23:01.679,0:23:06.159

different methods for themselves and then decide which they preferred?

0:23:06.159,0:23:09.039

(SE): Sure.

There is no one right way of teaching

0:23:09.039,0:23:12.240

about religion in schools. I think everyone will have their own idea

0:23:12.240,0:23:15.679

about how religion and belief should be approached. I think most people,

0:23:15.679,0:23:18.720

I would have thought, would agree that there's a value to teaching

0:23:18.720,0:23:24.960

pupils critically about the diversity of, and within religion and about, as you say,

0:23:24.960,0:23:28.720
a range of religious
and philosophical outlooks and ethical

0:23:28.720,0:23:32.240
perspectives
and the question is, I suppose, whether

0:23:32.240,0:23:34.720
that should be in a separate and ring-fenced
subject

0:23:34.720,0:23:38.720
similar to RE that's a compulsory part of
the curriculum for pupils for the

0:23:38.720,0:23:43.200
entirety of their school lives.
I think having a subject of RE with no

0:23:43.200,0:23:46.400
clear educational rationale as we have had

0:23:46.400,0:23:50.320
means that we spend, have spent, a
disproportionate amount of time on

0:23:50.320,0:23:52.720
religion in schools - it's often not done
well

0:23:52.720,0:23:56.480
which has wasted pupils' time and
sometimes it's been

0:23:56.480,0:24:01.520
abused - it's been used to indoctrinate
and inculcate children into a religion

0:24:01.520,0:24:05.600
or even just make them look favorably
upon religion so I think

0:24:05.600,0:24:11.039
RE is outmoded as a concept
and needs to be abolished but there are

0:24:11.039,0:24:17.200

a range of options of how you replace it.
The philosophy and ethics approach

0:24:17.200,0:24:21.360
which you suggest is certainly one way. I
think a study of world views could quite

0:24:21.360,0:24:24.000
easily be part of a wider humanities
subject

0:24:24.000,0:24:29.039
along those lines because, you know, yes, a
degree of religious literacy is useful

0:24:29.039,0:24:32.080
but all I'm saying is let's not allow
religion to

0:24:32.080,0:24:37.760
marginalize, uh, marginalize all
the other important aspects of learning

0:24:37.760,0:24:40.240
that are out there
and by that I don't just mean the core

0:24:40.240,0:24:44.320
subjects - maths and english etc. -
uh citizenship, human rights, moral

0:24:44.320,0:24:47.120
philosophy,
critical thinking - and god we need more

0:24:47.120,0:24:50.720
of that right now - uh
cultural and political literacy, even

0:24:50.720,0:24:55.279
financial literacy
will probably be more practical to

0:24:55.279,0:24:59.120
future citizens
and society than theology. So, yes, there's

0:24:59.120,0:25:02.240

a good reason to teach about religion but all

0:25:02.240,0:25:04.559
I'm saying is it needs to be done proportionally,

0:25:04.559,0:25:08.559
critically and impartially. (EP): Yep. Alastair, do you, would you agree with

0:25:08.559,0:25:12.640
Stephen on that?
(AL): Yes. I mean, the key point Stephen

0:25:12.640,0:25:18.080
identified there is that there's a lack of clear rationale or agreed rationale

0:25:18.080,0:25:22.480
for what the purpose of RE is and then that, that leads

0:25:22.480,0:25:26.000
to just so much stuff being dumped into RE

0:25:26.000,0:25:30.960
and allows these quite outdated ideas of, like, promoting a,

0:25:30.960,0:25:35.279
promoting religion to be, to remain smuggled in.

0:25:35.279,0:25:39.840
There's a lot that is currently included in RE

0:25:39.840,0:25:44.080
that definitely needs a really clear home in the curriculum

0:25:44.080,0:25:49.120
to ensure it is provided consistently and at a high quality

0:25:49.120,0:25:56.480
but I'm not convinced that RE or

RVE or RME is the necessary or the right home for that.

0:25:56.480,0:26:00.559
So personally, I'd like to see a lot more

0:26:00.559,0:26:05.039
provision for philosophy in schools and a philosophy subject could act as a

0:26:05.039,0:26:08.400
home for the philosophy of religion

0:26:08.400,0:26:10.799
or the philosophy of belief aspects of RE

0:26:10.799,0:26:14.559
but that, those aren't the only good aspects of RE that need to be kept so

0:26:14.559,0:26:18.960
alongside that I think we need massively better provisioned

0:26:18.960,0:26:22.400
citizenship subject which could be home to the

0:26:22.400,0:26:29.039
cultural, ethical and social issues that are currently covered in RE but the

0:26:29.039,0:26:36.320
faith promotional, uh, the in-depth study of certain, you know, not massively

0:26:36.320,0:26:40.000
important religious ideas and their theological aspects -

0:26:40.000,0:26:44.080
they don't necessarily need a home, they really can just be dropped

0:26:44.080,0:26:48.080
and I know we're obviously a long way

from that at the moment

0:26:48.080,0:26:52.159

but I do believe that such an approach could dramatically improve

0:26:52.159,0:26:55.840

education about religion and beliefs in schools.

0:26:55.840,0:26:59.840

(EP): Yeah absolutely um and get children just thinking a bit more critically

0:26:59.840,0:27:02.480

about it all and certainly I agree with both of

0:27:02.480,0:27:07.360

you that it's very difficult to see um how teaching about religions should

0:27:07.360,0:27:09.520

really um take up a lot of space on the

0:27:09.520,0:27:13.039

syllabus when we've got so much science and maths and

0:27:13.039,0:27:17.760

languages education to get on it as well especially from GCSE onwards.

0:27:17.760,0:27:21.120

(AL): And if you ask, you know, all the research shows,

0:27:21.120,0:27:24.880

when you ask pupils what they're interested in, about,

0:27:24.880,0:27:29.440

about RE it's, it's not the bible story,

0:27:29.440,0:27:36.720

it's not learning, rote learning

of religious stories or learning in

0:27:36.720,0:27:39.279

detail what religious rules are on certain

0:27:39.279,0:27:42.799

issues - they're interested in how their stuff interacts with real life they're

0:27:42.799,0:27:46.240

interested in the conversations about religion in the

0:27:46.240,0:27:50.159

workplace, religion in politics and current affairs, uh, the

0:27:50.159,0:27:53.440

impact of this on, on moral issues and on stuff they see in

0:27:53.440,0:27:57.039

the news every day. (SE): Which is really all about citizenship

0:27:57.039,0:27:59.200

and human rights education though, it really falls

0:27:59.200,0:28:03.200

more on that, I think, more than religious education.

0:28:03.200,0:28:07.120

(EP): Absolutely. Well thank you, thank you both for those um really interesting

0:28:07.120,0:28:10.399

and thought-provoking answers. Alastair, just one final point um

0:28:10.399,0:28:14.960

if supporters of the NSS have a view on these proposals, how can they get

0:28:14.960,0:28:19.360

involved in

um, this, these ongoing discussions

0:28:19.360,0:28:23.279

by the Welsh government. (AL): Well obviously the

0:28:23.279,0:28:27.200

current proposals are not the fixed, be-all-and-end-all - there is a consultation

0:28:27.200,0:28:30.399

going on at the moment. We'll have links in the show notes to

0:28:30.399,0:28:34.480

our campaign page on this. If you live or if your children

0:28:34.480,0:28:37.840

attend school in Wales, we're really encouraging you to respond to the

0:28:37.840,0:28:40.799

consultation. We've put together a briefing and our

0:28:40.799,0:28:45.200

online form which make that really easy. We've also got a template

0:28:45.200,0:28:49.679

letter for your members of the Senedd and finally, wherever you are in the UK,

0:28:49.679,0:28:52.559

we're asking supporters to fill in our short

0:28:52.559,0:28:56.799

survey on RE reform more widely and the right to withdraw

0:28:56.799,0:29:00.960

and that will help feed into our own position both for this current

0:29:00.960,0:29:04.800

consultation

and for our ongoing work in the area.

0:29:04.800,0:29:07.200

(EP): Great.

So lots to be getting on with, um,

0:29:07.200,0:29:09.080

Alastair and Stephen, thanks very much.

0:29:09.320,0:29:11.600

(SE): Thanks. (AL): Thanks very much.

0:29:15.440,0:29:22.240

(EP): That was episode 28 of the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park. My guest speakers were Stephen Evans and

0:29:22.240,0:29:25.120

Alastair Lichten, both staff members at the NSS.

0:29:25.120,0:29:28.640

If you would like to help us challenge unfair religious privilege and support

0:29:28.640,0:29:31.120

freedom of and from religion in Britain today,

0:29:31.120,0:29:35.039

why not become a member of the NSS? Full details are on our website

0:29:35.039,0:29:38.559

at secularism.org.uk/podcast.

0:29:38.559,0:29:42.159

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0:29:42.159,0:29:53.279

this episode on the website. Thanks for listening.