

Ep 44: Post-Christian Britain and religion in schools

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[Emma Park] It depends how you define religion, but if you define it like we do for surveys

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and censuses, we are definitely becoming, with every year, a less religious country.

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You're listening to Episode 44 of the National Secular Society podcast, produced by Emma Park.

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In this episode I'll be considering the place of religion in Britain today, and in particular

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its place in our education system. The number of people in Britain who identify as religious is

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decreasing year by year. In particular, the number of people who consider themselves Christian,

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and especially who attend church, has been on the decline for over a century.

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There are a large number of adherents today, and 100 years ago, to other faiths including Judaism,

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Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism, but they are still

in a small minority in the country as a whole.

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This all raises the question of how far Britain can still be said to be a Christian nation,

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or even a multi-faith nation, as opposed to a nation that is predominantly not religious at all.

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But even if we're not religiously Christian, are we still in some sense culturally Christian? Do the

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structures of Christianity, or of systems analogous to it, still have a role to play in our society? And

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is any of this sufficient justification for the fact that a third of state schools in England and

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Wales are still faith schools, with admissions criteria which discriminate against applicants

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whose parents do not share the school's faith?

Related to this is the issue of how and what

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religious education should be taught in schools.

At the moment RE is the elephant in the classroom.

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It's the only subject on the national curriculum that is not standardized across all schools.

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Should faith schools be allowed, as they currently are, to teach RE from a denominational perspective,

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regardless of their students religious beliefs or lack of them? Should parents be allowed to

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withdraw their children from RE lessons, or should they need to do so? And if RE provision in this

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country needs reform why have successive governments failed to do anything about it?

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To discuss these questions, I'm joined now by Linda Woodhead MBE. Linda is distinguished professor in

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the Department of Politics, Philosophy and Religion at Lancaster University. Her research focuses on

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the decline of Christianity, and the rise of new spiritualities, values and non-religious

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commitments in Britain. Her books include The Very Short Introduction to Christianity,

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and a co-authored study That Was The Church That Was:

How the Church of England Lost the English People.

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In May this year she is going to deliver the postponed Cadbury Lectures at Birmingham

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University, a series of public lectures on the history, theology and culture of Christianity.

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Her title will be "Values are the New Religion: Britain's post-Christian Culture".

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Linda, welcome.

[Linda Woodhead] Hi. Lovely to be here.

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[EP] First of all, the title of your upcoming lecture series sounds intriguing.

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What do you mean by a post-Christian culture, and how far does it apply to Britain today?

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[LW] It applies a lot to Britain today. I think Britain is at the leading edge of countries that were once

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Christian countries and have become non-religious countries. The majority of people

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in this country now, when they're asked about their religion, say they have no religion.

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And in Britain that's been happening for a long time, I mean, maybe a century. It's happening very

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quickly in some other countries now, like the USA, but here it's really a long-standing trend.

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[EP] What's your position, are you a christian yourself?

[LW] I am. I'm a Christian. I'm Church of England by

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upbringing and baptism, and I still have a lot of affection for that, but I'm not an active

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member. I'm not a church goer. I've become very disillusioned with the way the Church has behaved.

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[EP] Now you talked about how we're sort of becoming post-Christian, of course we've got other beliefs,

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other religions have become more important in Britain in the last hundred years. Would you

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say that, overall, having a religious belief is a minority in Britain and and would you say that the

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numbers of people who have some sort of religious affiliation are increasing or decreasing, relative

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to the non-religious, say, over the last decade?

[LW] If by religious you mean that people identify

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with a religious organization, and are members of it, and use that label to label themselves, we

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are no longer a religious country. It's a minority position to do that, whereas once it was a majority

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position. When I say once, even amongst people in their 60s or 70s, still the majority

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will say that they're Catholic or Church of England or Church of Scotland or whatever.

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So that's quite a recent shift. That's one way of defining religion, in terms of your identification

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or or association with organized religion. If you define it in terms of something like believing

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in God or a higher power, it's not so clear because that hasn't fallen in the same way.

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Some practices, like astrology and tarot, they're growing, but many people

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wouldn't classify them as religious.

They're spiritual or something in between.

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So the short answer: it depends how you define religion, but if you define it like we do for

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surveys and censuses, we are definitely becoming, with every year, a less religious country.

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[EP] And taking Christianity in particular, it would therefore mean that it would be

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wrong to say that we are a Christian country these days.

[LW] That's an interesting one. David Cameron,

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you might remember, said that we were a Christian country, and there was some protest but not much.

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I have asked people on surveys - I do quite a lot of surveying with yougov of the British population -

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whether we're a Christian country. If you give a range of options,

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a plurality of people say that we are a multicultural or multi-faith country. That's

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the most popular option, and I think that's accurate.

I think people see that's where we are.

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Christian is a smaller group. However, I suppose

the sense in which people don't object is that we

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are, by heritage, a Christian country. It's absolutely baked into our landscape, our built

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landscape, our calendar, our week, our road signs. In that sense people will accept it.

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I've had Muslim friends say to me 'Don't be daft. Of course you're a Christian country. You just

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can't see it, because it's like the water you swim in. We see it, because it's still

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so pervasive, even though you don't see it.'

[EP] Sure. I guess in that sense we might be all sorts

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of things. We might almost be a classical country.

[LW] Well, a pagan country,

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and they're trying to revive that aspect of the country. But the history does matter.

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It really does matter. So you can't just take a snapshot of the population today and do a survey

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and say "that's what we are" because there are all

sorts of parts of our past that still shape us.

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[EP] Why do you think it is that we have become less religious, or less affiliated to established

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religions over the last hundred years?

[LW] That's the \$Million question which sociologists, like

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me, spend our whole lives arguing about, and there

are lots of different theories. I raised this

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question in a book called "That Was The Church That Was, [...]"

about the Church of England, which was

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the largest church by far in this country until recently, yet which declined precipitously from the

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1980s onwards. Andrew Brown, from The Guardian,

and I asked that question. Why? How did that happen?

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And our answer about the Church of England was that all churches were having to deal with

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huge changes that they found very difficult, like the movement of women into the labor force

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and into higher education on increasingly equal

terms with men, like changing sexual morality, like

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changes in the family, and like multi-faith

- other religions - becoming much more prominent.

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The Church of England dealt with those problems about as badly as it possibly could.

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Its leadership really fought

and resisted each of those changes.

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It fought against remarriage for divorce.

It fought against women's ordination.

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I'm talking about the leadership, not the rank and file who are in favor of all those things.

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It's still fighting against same-sex marriage.

So I think, whereas it had always,

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since the 16th century, it had

always managed to keep in step,

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really, with society. It just fell apart, partly because the leadership became increasingly

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Christian conservative and most Anglicans weren't,

and so they lost their own congregations. But more

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importantly, they lost that sort of ambient Christianity, where people just generally

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didn't go to church, but trusted the Church and

went for their important rituals. That all stopped.

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So that's a long answer, in a concrete sense,
as
to why one church collapsed. I think it was

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about poor leadership, that was out of step,
and it
was about the inherent difficulties.

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The reason I'm emphasizing the the poor
leadership
is because it hasn't happened to all churches.

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So if you look at the sister churches, very
similar
churches, founded at the same time, similar
beliefs,

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like the churches in Scandinavia, they haven't
all declined in the same way. The Church of
Denmark

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still baptizes a majority of people, does the
funerals of a large majority, and has much
more

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buy-in from people than the Church of
England.
[EP] And the Church of England, at

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least the leadership, is still fighting very
hard to keep bishops in the House of Lords.

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[LW] It's fighting very hard to keep bishops in
the House of Lords.
It's fighting for establishment on the one
hand,

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and yet on the other hand it wants to be
exempted from

the law of the land, like equality law.

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So I think this is unsustainable, it can't have its
cake and eat it.

[EP] Do you think that people who

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are non-religious, if a majority of the
population
isn't affiliated to a specific religious system,

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do these non-religious people tend to look
for an equivalent of a religious system or a

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so-called world view to replace religion?
Do you think many people still need the
equivalent

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of religious rituals and doctrines to shape
their lives?

[LW] I think that's an absolutely spectacular
question,

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and it's really the one that obsesses me,
and that I spend

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my whole life trying to think about, because
i'm trying to think about what replaces

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the churches, what replaces the role that
religion had. Is the answer 'nothing'?

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People don't need those things and
now that they don't go to church, they stop

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worrying about those things and get on with
life?

Or do other things take their place?

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I think it's the absolutely crucial question and that's why I say "history matters".

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If something's really embedded in us, I suspect we're gonna find other ways of doing things.

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Well, my answer is provisional. I don't think I'll ever answer it completely. But my answer

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is that religions as we think of them - if you take Christianity. Christianity is a compact mixture of

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all sorts of different functions, activities. So it used to hold together ethics and values,

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belief and doctrine, relationship with God, the cult part of things -- worshipping,

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rituals, and so on. And I think that those things now are coming apart.

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There are different answers for each one. Some of them people still need, and

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find new ways of doing, like ritual. Take funerals - well it's true that not everyone

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has a funeral now - but many people do still want ritual around their end of life, most people do.

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But they're finding new ways to do it, including by secular providers or doing the rituals themselves.

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If you take values, I think they've floated free of religion, and people work through their own values.

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We find new new symbolic carriers of our values, like the National Health Service for

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example, rather than Christianity. [EP] Now that's very interesting you say the National Health

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Service in the current situation. In what respect has the NHS become a new carrier of values?

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[LW] I think we've seen that during the pandemic it became a focus for national unity,

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both in England and Wales, and in Scotland, starting off with that ritual clap for carers,

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which is classic collective ritual reinforcing a shared ideal,

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and it took over from, I mean it literally did take over the Church of England historically.

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It was founded after the second world war, with the active participation of the

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Archbishop of Canterbury, and a lot of the founders of it were Christians. They saw it as a way to

offer the universal care that the Church of England and Scotland used to, but

in a more professional and universal way. So it always had a big Christian underpinning.

What they didn't see was that it would really take over as a symbol of one of our

highest values, which is caring for other people, and also national unity. So now it serves

those functions, whereas before the national churches used to serve those particular functions.

[EP] With that background, let's now talk specifically about religious education in schools, and the

dual system that currently operates in England and Wales of faith and non-faith

schools. So let's start with faith schools. Linda, in 2018 you co-authored a study

entitled "Choosing a faith school in Leicester: admissions criteria, diversity and choice",

which was published in the British Journal of Religious Education. As you point out, and as we've

discussed, religion, at least affiliation to an organized religion, is in decline in Britain,

and no religion is growing. But despite this, in England and Wales a third of schools are still

designated faith schools, including not only Catholic schools, but also schools of other faiths

such as Islam and Judaism. So, first of all you looked at Leicester in particular for your study.

Why did you choose to focus on this area? [LW] I wrote that with a colleague, Mairi Levitt, and we

chose Leicester because we thought it was probably the most multi-faith for the

longest time, but also manageable to study, unlike

London. We wanted to look at all the schools

as our case study, all the schools in that city. [EP] What different faiths were represented in your study?

[LW] The main Christian faith, Catholic and Church of England, Islam and ...

[EP] Was there a Hindu primary school? [LW] Yes there was. Also,

there might even have been a Sikh school. As you know, there are very very few Muslim, Sikh or Hindu

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schools; there are slightly more Jewish ones. Most of the faith schools are Anglican or Catholic.

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But Leicester has the biggest range we could find in a

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medium-sized city. What we were looking at in that study was the admissions criteria only.

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We were looking to see how strenuous the selection was by faith, and whether it would

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exclude people who didn't share the faith of that school. That was our concern, because

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our concern in that paper was: is it unfair on any particular religious or non-religious groups

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that it's still permissible, it's still legal in this country, for state-funded schools to select

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their entrants, that's particularly when they're oversubscribed, to select by faith?

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[EP] What did you find? What were your results?
[LW] We found that the criteria were quite stringent,

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and they all have to be published on the website, and the more complicated those criteria are,

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the more off-putting they're going to be to parents and children who don't share the faith.

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So, whilst a lot of those schools say that they are open to anybody, and many of them

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are, unless they're oversubscribed, in practice, if you see a whole set of criteria which you think

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"oh that looks very very religious, I'm not sure I want to send my child there" it's exclusionary.

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Even if they're not oversubscribed, even if they don't apply those criteria,

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it sends a very strong signal, and I think a lot of the schools use it

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knowing that. So we concluded that if you look at whether there's a fair and efficient

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school system in that one place, that doesn't disadvantage anyone of any faith or non-faith, you

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could not conclude that that is the case. There's an obvious advantage to Christian parents,

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many more choices for them. There's a particular,

we thought, disadvantage to non-religious

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parents and their children, who've got far fewer schools that they might consider. And whilst the

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more middle class ones can probably game play and pretend that they go to church or

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whatever it might be, for poorer, busier, more working class people, that's even worse. So the

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really disadvantaged group there, we concluded, would be non-religious families who don't

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have high education and affluence. [EP] In other words, the families whose children

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most desperately need to go to a good school. [LW] That's exactly right, isn't it? And I think that's why it's a concern.

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[EP] Suppose you had a non-religious family who wanted to send their

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children to a faith school, what test did the faith school require parents to show

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in some way that they were religious? [LW] Yes. The most common case is Church schools.

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The criteria are different depending on [the school]. This is part of the complication. It's just very, very

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complicated, even for the Church of England and the Catholic church. It's up to the individual schools.

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There's not a uniform policy across them all, so you have to look at a particular school. For

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church schools though, the most common criterion is some form of regular church going. So of course you

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can game play that. Anyone can go to church, even if you don't believe, which is a very distasteful

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thing, to be - coercing's a bit strong but - for parents to be pretending

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to a faith just in order to get their children into a better school. Because some of the Catholic

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and Church of England and, in fact, one Muslim school were very high performing schools. There's

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no question about that. So some parents will do whatever it takes to get their children into those

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schools, particularly the Christian ones
for many parents who are very

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aspirational for their children.
[EP] So in a way it makes a mockery of the
entire selection process.

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[LW] Yes. Charles Clarke and I, who
work in this area, recommend that faith

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bodies, and the church is included, should
voluntarily remove their selection

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criteria. If you think that your faith, your
religion matters,

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that it's good for children to be offered that,
we know that parents are keen to send
children to

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faith schools, they're often good schools, why
select at all? Why not let everyone have the

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benefit of going to a Jewish school or a
Catholic
school or whatever? But be really clear and
upfront

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that that's the nature of your school. But
throw
it open to everyone. Why should the fact that

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your parents have a particular faith mean that
some children have different choices from
others?

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So I think it would be very desirable to

have those criteria removed altogether.

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[EP] How representative is your study of
schools across England?
[LW] Well, I actually have a PhD student

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at the moment, Charlotte Hobson, who is
building
a huge database of a fully representative, very

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large sample of all schools in England and
Wales -
which of course you can do from the DfE
website

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where they're all available - so she's doing a
random selection of all of them.

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We haven't published yet, but we're getting
a much clearer picture. We can then

0:20:28.720,0:20:34.560
say authoritatively about how many faith
schools have selection criteria, of what kind,

0:20:34.560,0:20:41.365
what sort of values they have, what sort of RE
they offer,
what they say about their own ethos, and so
on.

0:20:41.365,0:20:47.300
So it's a work in progress, but we are getting
there.
[EP] What patterns are emerging so far?

0:20:47.300,0:20:52.880
[LW] I think there is probably more
selection by faith than you would imagine. A
lot

0:20:52.880,0:20:56.240
of people think, and the Church of England

often says, particularly the Church of England,

0:20:56.240,0:21:01.535

which is such a big provider, particularly of primary schools - people often say "they're just community schools,

0:21:01.535,0:21:08.260

only a very small number have selection by faith".

Actually it's larger than you'd think.

0:21:08.260,0:21:12.160

[EP] Have any faith schools, following on your first study, voluntarily

0:21:12.160,0:21:18.480

removed their selection criteria by faith?

[LW] We haven't gone back and checked in Leicester.

0:21:18.480,0:21:24.640

We are working with one or two diocese, and with a Catholic church. We're in regular contact with them,

0:21:24.640,0:21:31.440

talking about this. Interestingly the pandemic, because of the closure of places of worship,

0:21:31.440,0:21:38.720

has led them all to have to make special measures, because the criteria of church going can't apply.

0:21:38.720,0:21:44.320

So they've all had to be thinking about their admissions criteria, and that's a real opportunity

0:21:44.320,0:21:48.240

to think about whether you need them, and if you are going to have them, to at least

0:21:48.240,0:21:55.680

make them uniform, so it's much simpler for parents - and they don't need a PhD - to try and work out what

0:21:55.680,0:22:00.740

it is they need to do to get into that school. [EP] But it's a work in progress at the moment.

0:22:00.740,0:22:06.640

[LW] It's a work in progress. Yes.

[EP] Overall, do you think that the continued existence of faith schools in

0:22:06.640,0:22:12.640

England and Wales is in the best interests both of children and of society?

0:22:12.640,0:22:18.640

[LW] What I think about that is irrelevant, because there is not going to be a change.

0:22:18.640,0:22:25.920

Because of, again it's history, because the largest education providers in the country were

0:22:25.920,0:22:33.360

Christian, because they still own a lot of those schools, and have governorship over them,

0:22:33.360,0:22:39.520

- a third of them as you mentioned before - government, society, cannot afford

0:22:39.520,0:22:45.600

to build that number of schools, and staff them, and get them up to the level and the quality

0:22:45.600,0:22:52.400

that those schools have been building for decades, centuries. So they are part of our education system

0:22:52.400,0:22:57.760

and that's not going to change. So I think the interesting important question is how they are

0:22:57.760,0:23:03.440

fully integrated into the system in a way that's completely fair.

[EP] Would disestablishment

0:23:03.440,0:23:10.320

help speed up the process a bit?

[LW] Well, you can convince me it would, but,

0:23:10.320,0:23:13.920

it's not that I'm against disestablishment, but I can't see that it would. In some ways you

0:23:13.920,0:23:22.530

might argue that hugging the bishops closer gives politicians a better chance of influencing them in this area.

0:23:22.530,0:23:27.680

[EP] But of course you have Muslim or Jewish or Sikh or Hindu faith schools,

0:23:27.680,0:23:32.560

religious communities who don't have any representatives in Parliament, but

0:23:32.560,0:23:40.000

presumably similar issues apply to them.

[LE] Yes. You're right. But the numbers are

0:23:40.000,0:23:46.640

tiny, really tiny, so very few children are affected: point one. Point two: of

0:23:46.640,0:23:50.720

course there are many representatives of those [faiths], personally they're members of those

0:23:50.720,0:23:55.985

faiths in government at the very highest

level, but they're not officially representing it.

0:23:55.985,0:24:00.480

[EP] You're quite right, like the bishops are in the House of Lords. So, one possibility,

0:24:00.480,0:24:05.200

I think, if there is ever reform of the House of Lords, is that representatives of those faiths

0:24:05.200,0:24:09.680

will be brought in. There are two possibilities, aren't there? One is you get rid of that

0:24:09.680,0:24:14.640

ex-officio role altogether, the other is that you widen it to better reflect

0:24:14.640,0:24:19.920

the religious makeup of the country today. [LW] I'm skeptical about religious leaders having any

0:24:19.920,0:24:24.800

representative function, because they don't represent, they're not democratically elected.

0:24:24.800,0:24:28.800

We know that they don't speak for their followers.

They have no idea what their followers think.

0:24:28.800,0:24:33.780

They don't poll them. They don't really want to know.

I mentioned before how, on issues like same-sex marriage,

0:24:33.780,0:24:39.870

they completely misrepresented what their followers thought.

So to treat them as representatives is folly.

0:24:39.870,0:24:45.480

[EP] Yeah, absolutely. Quite apart from the fact that it's

difficult to see how you could have a non-religious

0:24:45.480,0:24:51.855
representative in the House of Lords.
[LW] Exactly. So if Parliament is working well,

0:24:51.855,0:24:56.540
it should be representative of the whole
country,
shouldn't it? Of all faith and none and that
should be fine.

0:24:56.540,0:25:01.460
I think that probably is where i'm gonna end
up on that position.
[EP] Moving on

0:25:01.460,0:25:06.720
to religious education within schools, first
of all, Linda, from your perspective, what is
the

0:25:06.720,0:25:12.160
purpose of religious education or what should
the purpose of religious education be in
schools?

0:25:12.160,0:25:17.680
[LW] I think the purpose is just like any other
subject.
I don't see it as any different from any other
subject.

0:25:17.680,0:25:22.960
I would say that, wouldn't I? Because
I've spent my life teaching religion

0:25:22.960,0:25:28.800
at university level, and the study of religion
is not treated any differently from the study
of

0:25:28.800,0:25:34.400
history or of english or of any other arts and
humanities subject. Unfortunately, in schools

0:25:34.400,0:25:39.200
it's not like that. It's got a very anomalous
status, as I'm sure you know. It doesn't have a

0:25:39.200,0:25:45.600
national curriculum, most importantly, unlike
all
other subjects, and I think that needs to
change.

0:25:45.600,0:25:50.720
[EP] Of course, with the way religious
education
and the syllabus is determined is,

0:25:50.720,0:25:55.920
correct me if I'm wrong, by these local
bodies made up of committees representing

0:25:55.920,0:26:00.000
the Church of England other religions,
the local authority, and teachers groups.

0:26:00.000,0:26:07.840
How well does this sui generis system work
in producing syllabi, and how far do faith
schools

0:26:07.840,0:26:13.885
follow these syllabi?
[LW] It produces a very, very large number of
syllabi.

0:26:13.885,0:26:22.160
So, if you look at the country as a whole, some
of them are
excellent, but it produces an incoherent
whole. And

0:26:22.160,0:26:29.280
it is bizarre that if you move your children
to a different school, they might end up with a

0:26:29.280,0:26:33.360
completely different way of approaching the
subject, even with completely different
religions

0:26:33.360,0:26:40.640
to study. That often has no relation to the

to the locality or anything obvious. Even worse

0:26:40.640,0:26:46.635

than that, it means the Government doesn't take it seriously as a subject, and schools often don't.

0:26:46.635,0:26:52.320

So it's often under resourced, teachers aren't as likely to be qualified in the subject.

0:26:52.320,0:26:58.875

It's a dumping ground for all sorts of other subjects, like sex education or citizenship.

0:26:58.875,0:27:02.910

It all gets muddled up together and it becomes a complete mess.

0:27:02.910,0:27:09.600

[EP] How do school children and their parents perceive RE in England and Wales today?

0:27:09.600,0:27:14.400

[LW] We don't know a lot about that. There was one poll which shows they just see it as a

0:27:14.400,0:27:22.045

not very high status subject, which sadly is the case, because of the way it's taught.

0:27:22.045,0:27:27.440

It shouldn't be. All countries have always had religions. It's one of the most fascinating

0:27:27.440,0:27:33.920

subjects, one of the best ways to understand many different cultures, but it has to be taken

0:27:33.920,0:27:39.840

more seriously in this country, and treated as a proper subject, put on a professional footing.

0:27:39.840,0:27:45.000

[EP] As an academic subject, in other words. [LW] Academic subject, exactly.

0:27:45.000,0:27:52.800

[EP] At the moment, in faith schools, is RE sometimes used as an opportunity for proselytizing?

0:27:52.800,0:27:58.720

[LW] I don't think you can generalize about that.

I think it's so varied. We've just talked about how

0:27:58.720,0:28:06.000

varied it is in terms of syllabus and selection criteria, and it's very dependent on the teacher

0:28:06.000,0:28:13.760

as well, and even the schools that are most keen on doing that, like Catholic schools, the

0:28:13.760,0:28:20.640

the teachers don't always do what they're told. I keep coming across examples of that. So

0:28:20.640,0:28:24.960

you have to go into each individual school, I think, and and see whether that is actually being

0:28:24.960,0:28:31.680

done. If it's being done, it doesn't work. We do know

from studies that those who go to a faith school

0:28:31.680,0:28:35.280

are no more likely to come out believing at the end, in fact they're probably slightly

0:28:35.280,0:28:40.960

less likely. It seems to be counterproductive. So it's very ineffective if it is being done

0:28:40.960,0:28:46.080

[EP] At present in England and Wales, school children or their parents have a right to withdraw from RE

0:28:46.080,0:28:52.518

lessons under certain circumstances. How well does this right work in practice for children both from

0:28:52.518,0:28:58.240

religious backgrounds and from non-religious backgrounds?

[LW] Yes. Another anomaly. It's the

0:28:58.240,0:29:04.400

only subject where you can take your child out of that. Again, completely contrary to

0:29:04.400,0:29:10.400

anything that should be the case with a proper academic subject. It shouldn't be necessary to

0:29:10.400,0:29:16.000

take your child out for a start. There should be nothing objectionable or coercive in it.

0:29:16.000,0:29:21.520

So Charles Clarke and I call for the removal of that urgently. How is it being used in practice?

0:29:21.520,0:29:30.480

It seems to be shifting. So it can be used now, and is in some cases, by more fundamentalist

0:29:30.480,0:29:37.920

parents to refuse to have their children encounter other faiths, or sometimes go on a trip

0:29:37.920,0:29:43.280

to a place of worship of another faith.

It can be used to withdraw the children from

0:29:43.280,0:29:49.680

from learning about faith that they regard as objectionable w.

[EP] What about for children from

0:29:49.680,0:29:54.720

non-religious families who are, say, in a faith school? Do you think the right to withdraw

0:29:54.720,0:30:00.160

should be kept to enable parents to stop their children being indoctrinated?

0:30:00.160,0:30:06.569

[LW] No. I just think that no subject should indoctrinate.

That's the important thing.

0:30:06.569,0:30:12.720

I actually haven't seen any evidence of indoctrination in a class. And if there is

0:30:12.720,0:30:17.440

indoctrination, as you put it, I think that's much

more likely to be something that would happen

0:30:17.440,0:30:23.491

in school assemblies, which are - and this is something again that we campaign against -

0:30:23.491,0:30:29.600

they are still by law required to be daily and to offer collective worship of a broadly

0:30:29.600,0:30:36.000

christian kind. Very inappropriate to the multi-faith and non-religious country we are today.

0:30:36.000,0:30:41.840

So there is, and there should be, a right to withdraw from that. But there have

0:30:41.840,0:30:48.640
been recent cases like the Burford school in 2018, I think it was, where non-religious

0:30:48.640,0:30:54.320
parents objected because, yes, they were able to remove their child from a very

0:30:54.320,0:31:00.320
proselytizing Christian assembly, but they were just set in a room on their own with an ipad and given

0:31:00.320,0:31:06.000
no alternative provision.
[EP] In general would you say then that it's better for

0:31:06.000,0:31:12.480
all schools, faith or non-faith, to have the same system, have a standardized RE syllabus, and to have

0:31:12.480,0:31:19.280
no obligatory worship in their assemblies?
[LW] We recommend it would be best to have a national

0:31:19.280,0:31:24.880
syllabus, yes, like other national syllabuses. That's light touch, it's guidance, it still

0:31:24.880,0:31:33.120
allows a lot of freedom for teachers, quite rightly, as to how they teach it and which they focus on.

0:31:33.120,0:31:39.840
With assemblies, we've done some polling on this. There is no appetite to stop

0:31:39.840,0:31:46.800
doing them on the part of teachers, and actually

parents are quite positive about them, but to allow

0:31:46.800,0:31:53.040
schools to conduct them according to their particular values and ethos.

0:31:53.040,0:31:58.910
[EP] So, in other words, faith schools would have religious assemblies and non-faith schools might not.

0:31:58.910,0:32:03.270
[LW] Absolutely.
[EP] In Wales, the Welsh government is currently reforming

0:32:03.270,0:32:10.560
the RE curriculum, and it's trying to maybe change the title to RVE, Religion, Values and Ethics, or something to do with world views.

0:32:10.560,0:32:18.720
Is it time to make reforms to RE in England?
[LW] It is time to make reforms to RE in England.

0:32:18.720,0:32:23.760
I'm watching what happens in Wales and trying to learn more about it, with interest, to see whether

0:32:23.760,0:32:31.600
that will be a good model. It's an ongoing political battle at the moment,

0:32:31.600,0:32:37.920
with the churches not wanting, of course, to give up what they have at the moment, or faiths not wanting

0:32:37.920,0:32:42.640
to give up what they have at the moment, which is a chance to influence syllabuses.

0:32:42.640,0:32:47.200

So it'll be very interesting to see. I think it's a possibility that Wales will end up kind of with

0:32:47.200,0:32:52.400

both things - it'll have national syllabus for Wales and the churches will

0:32:52.400,0:32:58.160

be able to teach it as well, which might not be an ideal place to end up. It'll be interesting to

0:32:58.160,0:33:05.120

see what changes come about, whether that syllabus is more suitable for non-religious children, and

0:33:05.120,0:33:12.240

whether it will help bring reform in England. [EP] Why have reforms taken such a long time in England?

0:33:12.240,0:33:17.600

[LW] Great question! You're absolutely right, they have. It's the only area where we're

0:33:17.600,0:33:24.800

still bound by the 1944 Education Act. So every government has fought shy of bringing the changes

0:33:24.800,0:33:31.680

that are needed, unlike other subjects. Why? There have been attempts, there have been some strong

0:33:31.680,0:33:39.100

attempts to change it, but they've never got very far. I think the political capital required is very high.

0:33:39.100,0:33:45.920

This is a very controversial area. You will get a lot of more conservative Christian backlash.

0:33:45.920,0:33:53.120

Christianity is oddly overrepresented, I think, in parliament. So there'll be a lot of lobbying, and,

0:33:53.120,0:33:58.320

do people in the country care enough about it for some government to put itself through these

0:33:58.320,0:34:05.520

really bad headlines and controversy to get the change we need? I hope the answer will soon be "yes".

0:34:05.520,0:34:10.365

I hope there'll be a minister who sees how incredibly important this now is.

0:34:10.365,0:34:15.440

Nobody disagrees that it needs reform, I don't think. The teachers unions,

0:34:15.440,0:34:22.160

endless public inquiries and commissions, anyone who's really thought about it and looked about it

0:34:22.160,0:34:29.600

can see it's a mess and it needs reforming. We just need someone who's got the guts to really see

0:34:29.600,0:34:37.680

this through. But, final point, it would help a lot if the Church of England and the Roman Catholic

0:34:37.680,0:34:44.880

church would come on board and be supportive.
I think if that were the case, a minister would be

0:34:44.880,0:34:50.720

much, much more likely to enact reform in this area.
[EP] Why should the the C of E and

0:34:50.720,0:34:57.200

the Catholic church get on board with these reforms?
[LW] Because good education about religion

0:34:57.200,0:35:05.280

really matters. I don't see any reason why they should disagree with that statement. And, similarly,

0:35:05.280,0:35:11.040

the fact that at the moment probably more than a third of schools are breaking the law by

0:35:11.040,0:35:16.960

not holding any kind of assembly, because they know they can't do Christian worship. They should care

0:35:16.960,0:35:21.840

about the fact that the law is being broken and many pupils are getting nothing.

0:35:21.840,0:35:27.440

They should care about the country as a whole and not their own particular

0:35:27.440,0:35:38.070

proselytizing evangelizing needs.
[EP] Professor Linda Woodhead, thank you very much.

0:35:40.240,0:35:44.800

i'm joined now by Alastair Lichten, Head of Education at the NSS.

0:35:44.800,0:35:51.040

Alastair, just reflecting on the interview that I just did with Linda, she mentioned that the

0:35:51.040,0:35:57.200

current basis for religious education in the UK, or certainly in England, derives from the 1944

0:35:57.200,0:36:04.920

Education Act. Do you think it's time that we updated RE based on the changing composition

0:36:04.920,0:36:11.600

of people in this country, in terms of what they believe?

[Alastair Lichten] Yes, and I think Linda Woodhead's

0:36:11.600,0:36:17.440

work on a new settlement, this suggestion that the 1944 Education Act was a

0:36:17.440,0:36:24.320

massive settlement, and we need a new one for education, is very interesting. I think what Linda

0:36:24.320,0:36:28.880

told us that's very interesting was a narrative that came through. What she was

0:36:28.880,0:36:35.600

talking about, that we did have in 1944, although we should

0:36:35.600,0:36:43.440

point out it was not held by everyone, but the sense of ourselves as a Christian nation,

0:36:44.000,0:36:50.480

within which the structural arrangements for religious education in England and Wales kind

0:36:50.480,0:36:57.760

of made sense. And then there was a transition to see ourselves more as a nation of multiple

0:36:57.760,0:37:04.160
distinct faiths. In that context, again, the structure for religious education in England and

0:37:04.160,0:37:10.160
Wales kind of worked and kind of made sense, but they just haven't kept up with that

0:37:10.160,0:37:17.920
continuing evolution of our sense of ourselves as a nation, towards this nation that is

0:37:17.920,0:37:26.000
majority non-religious, very religiously diverse, has a Christian heritage, but not necessarily a Christian future,

0:37:26.000,0:37:34.710
and that belief is becoming more individualized and personalized. People don't identify with a very distinct

0:37:34.710,0:37:40.320
belief label and follow leaders of that group. [EP] Yeah. In particular

0:37:40.320,0:37:46.960
she said why should you have leaders of a faith in parliament, because they don't necessarily,

0:37:46.960,0:37:53.280
by any means, speak for many of the adherents of that faith. [AL] Also, why should you have leaders of

0:37:53.280,0:37:59.520
a faith deciding how that faith is covered in religious education,

0:37:59.520,0:38:05.760
when the lived experience of someone who is

very active within a religious organization

0:38:05.760,0:38:12.980
is very, very far divorced on many issues from the lived experiences of people

0:38:12.980,0:38:19.360
who identify to varying degrees with that faith?

Typical examples that Linda raised

0:38:19.360,0:38:25.280
were just how out of touch the leaders of the Church of England are on many social issues.

0:38:25.280,0:38:30.720
[EP] Supposing RE were made a properly academic subject, would that remove the NSS's

0:38:30.720,0:38:36.240
requirement that there should be this right to withdraw?

[AL] I think if RE was

0:38:36.240,0:38:43.360
a genuinely academic, critical look at the full diversity of religion and belief, then it would be

0:38:43.360,0:38:51.120
very difficult to justify the right to withdraw remaining.

However, as it's not currently operating

0:38:51.120,0:38:56.480
like that, I think we need to defend the right to withdraw, and we need to look at the reasons

0:38:56.480,0:39:03.520
and the concerns parents have over withdrawing. Also, a big reason that people withdraw from RE is

0:39:03.520,0:39:11.280

because of the very variable quality, rather than necessarily concerns over proselytization

0:39:11.280,0:39:17.600

or prejudice against particular religion or belief groups, although those both do exist.

0:39:17.600,0:39:22.800

[EP] Linda said that the reforms in Wales might potentially provide a model for reform in England.

0:39:22.800,0:39:28.640

What stage are the Welsh reforms of the RE curriculum at, and do they look promising?

0:39:28.640,0:39:35.250

[AL] So, on the day this episode comes out, it should be the penultimate stage of the Curriculum Reform Bill

0:39:35.250,0:39:41.040

in Wales, working its way through the Senedd, and that will hopefully become law

0:39:41.040,0:39:46.240

in the weeks after this episode comes out. So these reforms at a very advanced stage.

0:39:46.240,0:39:52.800

There's some really good positives there. All pupils in Wales should theoretically have

0:39:52.800,0:39:59.520

the chance to have a genuine, pluralistic RE option, although faith schools will still be able to teach

0:39:59.520,0:40:06.000

their faith-based RE as default. Often there are issues around it, and areas where we feel

0:40:06.000,0:40:12.560

the reforms don't go far enough. But it is very

clear that the changes in Wales have taken account

0:40:12.560,0:40:16.960

of some of the best practice, and some of the suggestions that have been made

0:40:16.960,0:40:22.000

and have, unfortunately, fallen on deaf ears for changes in England. So that could potentially offer

0:40:22.000,0:40:28.560

a route forwards.

[EP] Great. What is the NSS doing about RE reform in England?

0:40:28.560,0:40:36.640

[AL] All of our RE reform across the UK falls under our campaign called "21st Century RE for All".

0:40:36.640,0:40:44.880

We campaign to remove religious control of curriculum, and to introduce, across the four

0:40:44.880,0:40:50.080

nations, an approach to learning about religions and worldviews, which moves away from this

0:40:50.080,0:40:58.000

advertising space mentality, that moves towards a truly pluralistic and critical look at religion

0:40:58.000,0:41:05.440

and belief issues. We are agnostic on whether or not the subject of RE should continue in the same

0:41:05.440,0:41:09.760

way that it does. But definitely the structures for determining that curriculum need to be moved

0:41:09.760,0:41:15.680
to be controlled by educational experts,
rather
than having such an input from what has been

0:41:15.680,0:41:20.880
termed "producer communities", effectively
religion and belief groups lobbying to have
their

0:41:20.880,0:41:27.200
version and their idea of RE. We need to
develop
a shared understanding about what the point

0:41:27.200,0:41:32.240
of learning about different religions and
worldviews is. If we have that shared

0:41:32.240,0:41:36.560
understanding, there's less room for people to
put in their own particular agendas, whether

0:41:36.560,0:41:41.680
that's promoting a positive view of religions,
as unfortunately the evidence is that a clear

0:41:41.680,0:41:47.680
majority of RE teachers across the UK view it
as
their job to promote a positive view of
religions.

0:41:47.680,0:41:51.360
I recently wrote to the Education Minister
in Northern Ireland about the Independent

0:41:51.360,0:41:57.520
Education Review. We'll be engaging in that
for opportunities to change the RE curriculum

0:41:57.520,0:42:02.560
in Northern Ireland, which is even more
controlled
by religious bodies than elsewhere in the UK.

0:42:02.560,0:42:09.360

We've been active in curriculum reform in
Scotland
and in Wales, particularly over the last few
years.

0:42:09.360,0:42:15.520
But England it is a bigger target. England has
a
bigger faith school sector than the other
countries put

0:42:15.520,0:42:20.720
together. It is, unfortunately, the area of the
UK where there has been the most resistance
to

0:42:20.720,0:42:27.920
reform. That is largely because of the level
of entrenchment of religious influences

0:42:27.920,0:42:32.480
in the education system.
[EP] So, we'll see how things go in Wales, but

0:42:32.480,0:42:35.916
a lot of work is still to be done on RE in
England.
[AL] Yeah.

0:42:35.916,0:42:42.245
[EP] Alastair Lichten, thank you very much

0:42:43.200,0:42:47.680
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0:42:47.680,0:42:52.240
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0:42:52.240,0:42:56.720
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0:43:09.040,0:43:19.840

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