

Ep 50: The Church of England's influence over education

<https://www.secularism.org.uk/podcast/2021/05/ep-50>

0:00:08.560,0:00:12.080

"One school that I worked at, there were little pads on each table for

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'prayer' jelly babies and 'Samantha sorry' jelly baby or all these types of things get

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into children and make it difficult for them to kick against it and they want to be good

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and they want to go along with it and they want to believe that these things are true."

0:00:31.920,0:00:36.080

You're listening to Episode 50 of the National Secular Society podcast produced by Emma

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Park (EP). If you asked many adults today whether they would send their children to a Church of

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England school they would probably say yes. C of E schools are often well established and have a

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reputation for providing high quality education.

Often too they are the only option within

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commuting distance. But is the influence of the

Church of England along with, to a lesser extent,

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other religious organisations - always so benign.

The evidence presented in two reports recently

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published by the National Secular Society suggests otherwise. In particular it indicates that

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in recent years the Church of England has been quietly gaining greater influence over State

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schools, even those that are not faith schools. One of the NSS's reports on this topic is entitled

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'Religiosity inspections: the case against faith-based inspections of State schools'.

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It studies the impact of mandatory inspections on faith schools by their sponsoring religious group

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and presents the key arguments for abolishing such inspections.

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One of my guests on this episode, Matthew Hill (MH), contributed to this report.

0:01:33.280,0:01:37.440

My other guest, Chris Selway (CS), wrote a report for the NSS about the Christian

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educational resource 'Understanding Christianity'.

The report examined the ways in which the Church

0:01:42.160,0:01:45.680

of England has been strengthening its holding for religious education in recent years.

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Together my guest speakers and I will consider

the ways in which the Church of England is

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increasingly shaping the content of religious education, particularly in primary schools,

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and its impact on other aspects of school life, such as collective worship. We will consider the

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potentially damaging effect which this can have

on children's education. We will also be looking

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at why the C of E continues to be so involved in schools in England and Wales and supported

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by the education system, despite the lack of religious belief of much of the population.

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(EP): I'm joined now by two former teachers who

have seen for themselves the influence which the

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C of E can have on education. Matthew Hill (MH)

is a former head teacher at primary school and

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an educational consultant. Chris Selway (CS) is a former RE teacher who has also worked

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in teacher training. Matt and Chris welcome to the podcast. (MH) and (CS): Hello. (EP):

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Let's start by just thinking about the structure of the different types of schools in England and

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Wales because it's a very complicated system and

different religious organisations, especially

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the Church of England, can have an influence on

schools - both faith schools and schools which

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aren't technically faith foundations but somehow have religious influence coming in

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in other ways - so if you could perhaps just give

us a brief outline of what the different types of

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schools are. And Chris could we perhaps start with

you? (CS): Okay well I mean a lot of schools were

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started by the Church back in Victorian times
so
by default there were sort of 'Church
schools'.

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And then local authorities developed
community
schools which became the majority for quite
a

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long time. Then some time ago
'academisation'
was brought in and then there were
academies and

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some of the academies have got a church
foundation
and some of them don't. And then there are
the

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Church schools of which there are two broad
types:
There are Church of England voluntary
controlled

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schools, which are essentially community
schools
built on Church land which don't receive
funding

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from the Church and should provide RE that
is in line with the locally agreed syllabus;

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and then there are voluntary aided schools
which
are partly funded by the Church and also have
a

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majority of foundation governors. So Church
governors and the RE in those schools should

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be in line with the trust deed, so should be in
lines with, you know, a Christian formation as
it

0:04:16.400,0:04:21.120
were. (EP): Great thanks Chris. Matt did you
have
anything to add to that? (MH): Well you know
we're

0:04:21.120,0:04:27.760
talking about a lot of schools here in England.
I mean we're getting on for nearly nearly
5,000

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Church of England schools and academies in
England
and that's, you know, works out about over a

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million pupils, so it's a lot of pupils, a lot of
different levels of Church schools and the
Church

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of England are now I believe the largest
sponsor
of multi-academy trusts in England as well,
so

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it's still got a major influence on education.
(EP): And that's even outside schools which
are

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specifically Church of England foundation
schools.
(MH): Yes that's happening as well there
have

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been some cases recently in the news of schools that have been taken over by church-sponsored

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multi-academy trusts and then having the religious aspects fostered upon them. (EP): Just quickly,

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this podcast is largely about the Church of England because it is by far the largest

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religious organisation that has an influence on schools. How does the Church of England's

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influence compare with that of other religious organisations - either say the Catholic church or

0:05:29.280,0:05:35.760
Muslim organisations or Jewish organisations?
(CS): I mean the Church of England's got a massive

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impact on all schools apart from the Catholic schools which tend to do their own thing. They

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have their own GCSE, they have their own syllabus and they've got their own system of religious

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education. Muslim schools I can imagine do a similar sort of a thing. They can devise their own

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syllabus. In mainstream education, the Church of England still has a massive effect upon education,

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particularly religious education, and of course collective worship. (MH): A lot of schools now are

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changing, moving away from the agreed syllabus and the Church have actually come up with a new

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curriculum called "Understanding Christianity" which is coming in and it's a lot more rigorous

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in terms of the distinct Christian nature of it. (EP): Yup, absolutely. Let's start by thinking of

0:06:29.680,0:06:35.360
some of the specific ways in which the Church of England exerts an influence on schools.

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Matt you contributed to the NSS's recent report on religiosity inspections whereby religious

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organisations can inspect particular types of schools and this is in addition to OFSTED

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inspections. So State schools are liable to be inspected by their sponsoring religious group

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so it matters. As a headmaster of a C of E primary school you had experience of these

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inspections which are called SIAMS (Statutory Inspections of Anglican and Methodist Schools)

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inspections when we're talking about C of E and Methodist schools. So what

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did these inspections involve and how did they influence the direction of the school? (MH): Well

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historically the SIAMS inspections, they used to come after an OFSTED inspection

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and they're all kind of part of the head teacher's accountability world that head teachers live

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in now and dependent on how effective as a Christian school the diocese sees your school,

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you will have a SIAMS inspection every three or five years. So it's on a rolling schedule.

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The focus is really on the impact of the Christian vision. So the explicit Christian vision and the

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impact that that has on the pupils and the adults, so all the stakeholders teachers, parents as well.

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So there are seven strands that the inspector will

come in and look at and the way that it operates

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is that somebody from the diocesan education team will come in, probably about a year in advance and

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have a sort of initial discussion with the head teacher. And they will discuss how you're getting

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on against the SIAMS inspection framework. And it's like a small Christian OFSTED inspection.

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And this will be done under the guise of them supporting you. So they'll say, "We're coming in

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to support your SIAMS inspection because we want you to do really well. There's four gradings and

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we want you to be excellent.". And it's created the same as an OFSTED inspection would be. So you

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can come out as 'Excellent', you can be 'Good', you can be 'Requires improvement' or you can be

0:08:39.920,0:08:44.960
'Inadequate'. (EP): Why do the SIAMS inspections matter? (MH): That's a really good question.

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It's the governing body; if you're a Church school you will have those foundation

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governors on board. And also the vicar of the local church and as Chris said previously the

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Church will either own the land or the school that you've got. And head teachers want to do well and

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they want their schools to do well in any form of accountability measure. So any form of inspection,

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if the school was previously an excellent Church school a head teacher won't want that

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to drop or to be seen as dropping. It's all about perception. Parents probably won't understand the

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full nature of a SIAMS inspection, but if it comes out and says 'Oh the school used to be 'Excellent'

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at an 'Excellent church school' and now it's a 'Requires improvement Church school',

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that's not good PR so there are various ways that the SIAMS inspection exerts that influence on head

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teachers and school leaders. (EP): So in your

own experience what did the SIAMS want you to do

0:09:48.880,0:09:52.640

to make your school an 'Excellent' church school? (MH): Well you've got to prove

0:09:53.680,0:09:58.160

all these things. So you've got to prove that all of your school values are firmly rooted in

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an exclusively Christian narrative. And you've got to prove that you work effectively alongside the

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local diocese or the local church or the youth workers. And that you have the church in and they

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they're working with the children on a regular basis. (EP): And are the children meant to do

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anything to or are they meant to sort of be able to speak about religion in a certain way? (MH):

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Yes well they, the inspector, will come in and they will interview the children on, across all

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of the seven strands and they'll take groups of children from different year groups and they'll

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ask them what their experience of collective worship in the school. I mean they can ask some

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really in-depth kind of technical questions.
I mean the kids remember, some of the children

0:10:44.560,0:10:52.320
were asked about the Trinitarian nature of God and really probes on that and how collective worship

0:10:52.320,0:10:56.400
talked about the Trinitarian nature of God. (EP):
And how old are these children? (MH): These are

0:10:56.400,0:11:02.560
children that can be anything from 5 to 11. They talk about, they wanted the children to explain

0:11:02.560,0:11:08.160
the varied liturgical traditions of the Anglican faith, talk about the eucharist, all these sorts

0:11:08.160,0:11:13.920
of things. And this is in a community village school that because 150 years ago it was founded

0:11:13.920,0:11:18.160
by the church is a church ringing school. (EP):
Even though many of the children attending - their

0:11:18.160,0:11:23.600
families may not be particularly Anglican? (MH): Oh, the vast majority of parents see

0:11:23.600,0:11:27.600
the school as a local village school that they want to go to because they want the kids to be

0:11:27.600,0:11:31.040
with their friends. They want them to go to a local school. They want to walk to school.

0:11:31.040,0:11:35.200
The fact that it's a Church of England school is not particularly of any importance to them.

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But I don't think many of them understand, because of the SIAMS inspection schedule, because of

0:11:41.040,0:11:47.600
diocesan education 'SUPPORT', I'll say in inverted commas, and the involvement sometimes of the local

0:11:47.600,0:11:53.280
church, they don't always realise what's actually happening on the ground in in some schools. (EP):

0:11:53.280,0:11:58.880
Basically these children are required to be much more Christian, to know a lot more about it than

0:11:58.880,0:12:01.520
their parents may know? (MH): Absolutely yeah. (EP): Just to pass the SIAMS inspection? (MH):

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Just to pass the SIAMS inspection yeah. (CS):
Could I add to that a moment? (EP): Yes. (CS): One

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of the things that they do expect is that you as a Church school, you're able to produce good results

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so they will look at your SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) results and expect

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those to be tied to the fact that it's a good Christian education that is underpinning that,

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in order to help prove the fact that Church of England schools do produce better results,

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you know their better education. Which is one of the myths that is perpetrated by the Church

0:12:35.840,0:12:41.040

of England. (EP): Is there any evidence that being in a school that is Christian per se

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helps children to achieve better results in SATs?

(SC): If you don't take demographics into account,

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then across the board Church of England schools

do produce marginally better results. But

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the reason for that is because you've got selective schools where parents who want to

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get their children to schools that are performing

well, that happen to be church schools, will then

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take their children to church, get a piece of paper signed by the vicar to say that they've

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attended church or they've been baptised, just

to get them into those schools, to get a place.

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And that happens with a small minority of people but it does have an impact. It also

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depends on the sort of catchment area, those sort

of issues. There is no direct correlation between

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the matter that it's a faith school - I mean when you take the fact that they've got fewer

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children who have got special education needs

or got behavioural difficulties - those sort of

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issues across the board a lower percentage.

You

know you take those sort of factors into account,

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then on balance there's no evidence that being

a faith school produces better results. (EP):

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Matt would you agree with that? (MH): Yeah,

I would absolutely. And if I just go back to

0:14:07.200,0:14:14.320

the SIAMS inspection and then the new framework

it appears to me, reading between the lines, that

0:14:14.320,0:14:18.720

the Church of England are actually upping the ante in terms of that control that they

0:14:18.720,0:14:24.640
exert through the inspection schedule.
Because
now they're saying that they want to see
that

0:14:24.640,0:14:30.880
school leaders within the school environment
have had diocesan professional development
as

0:14:30.880,0:14:36.720
'Church school leaders' not as 'educational
leaders' but as 'Church school leaders'/ And
you

0:14:36.720,0:14:44.480
know for example if you want to be classified
as
an 'Excellent school' in a SIAMS inspection
you've

0:14:44.480,0:14:49.840
got to prove that you've been used as what
they
call 'A centre of excellence'. I don't know
how

0:14:49.840,0:14:55.040
they decide which is the 'centre of excellence'
but this is all about developing future

0:14:55.040,0:15:02.960
Christian church school leaders and, as the
SIAMS
inspection says, 'the person God made them
to be'.

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Which again is very loaded. (EP): The idea
that
children should be assessed according to
whether

0:15:11.680,0:15:15.600
this definition of 'the person God made them
to

be'; I mean what does that mean? Who
decides what

0:15:15.600,0:15:23.120
God made someone to be? Now Matt briefly
mentioned
this new RE resource 'Understanding
Christianity'

0:15:23.120,0:15:28.480
and Chris that was something which you
wrote a
report about for the NSS recently. Could you
just

0:15:28.480,0:15:33.520
talk briefly about what is this 'Understanding
Christianity' resource? How is it influenced
by

0:15:33.520,0:15:39.520
the C of E and how is it used to sort of shape
the
direction of religious education in schools?
(CS):

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Okay, well I wrote quite a lengthy paper, it's
about 20,000 words, did an awful lot of
research

0:15:46.560,0:15:52.320
in order to put it together and for quite a
number
of years a number of people have been
pushing for

0:15:53.120,0:16:01.840
a more distinctly Christian form of education.
So
from september 2013, 2014 over 2015 they
wrote ,

0:16:01.840,0:16:08.560
'RE Today' wrote this 'Understanding
Christianity'
resource. And it is a resource, not a
curriculum,

0:16:08.560,0:16:15.280
although it is often used as a curriculum for the Christianity aspect of RE. (EP): And just so to

0:16:15.280,0:16:23.840
clarify who are 'RE Today' ? (CS): So 'RE Today' are a major, I mean THE UK's major publisher. They

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are prolific in the work that they do. They do teacher training sessions, they support

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SACREs (Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education) with advisory and writing syllabuses,

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they help support the National Association of Teachers For RE, in fact they fund it and

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help guide it. So you know a massive massive interest. (EP): Okay so 'RE Today' the major

0:16:48.960,0:16:55.120
publisher of RE resources, that published this 'Understanding Christianity' resource - now how

0:16:55.120,0:17:00.640
is it used and how does it enable the Church of England to influence religious education in

0:17:00.640,0:17:07.040
schools? (CS): When 'Understanding Christianity' was being devised there was a lot of talk,

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a lot of excitement about it. The Church was quite

adamant that they wanted it to be a benchmark,

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not just for their schools, but in fact for all schools. They wanted this to be,

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you know, a new yardstick by which it was really going to up the quality of religious education.

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(EP): So this resource is for Reception to Key Stage three, so that's primary school

0:17:28.880,0:17:34.720
age basically. So what sort of specific things does the resource want teachers, RE teachers,

0:17:34.720,0:17:41.600
to teach children at primary school? (CS): A lot of the activities are quite fun activities. So if

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they're talking about creation they'll go outside they'll look at nature, they'll collect sticks and

0:17:46.160,0:17:52.560
there's a lot of arty sort of activities which are all very nice. It's designed to engage children

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and to get them talking about God, those sort of things to get them thinking theologically.

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So there are ideas in there like, for example, 'Who was responsible for the the death of

0:18:05.520,0:18:10.720
Jesus?' and they make a pie chart about who was

responsible for the death of Jesus. You know,

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was it the Christian, uh sorry, was it was it the Romans was it the Jewish leaders,

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was it Judas, was it Jesus himself, was it God (you know because it's God's plan),

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and then the children have this sort of theological debate about it.

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I mean to my mind it's an interesting activity and it's something that can engage children

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but is it actually productive in teaching them about the phenomenon of religion and religiosity?

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It doesn't teach them about the fact that who was responsible for the death of Jesus was to blame

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for anti-semitism for centuries from Christianity.

That's completely glossed over. (EP): Does it

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teach them to think critically about religion? (CS): It teaches them to think about Christianity

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as a viable way of seeing the world. So no, it's not methodologically agnostic.

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Which is where religious studies traditionally is, it should be methodologically agnostic so it

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has no opinion on whether these truth claims or religious claims have validity or not.

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Whereas the resource actually invites children to look at texts from the Bible, see how these impact

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upon Christians, which is really just based upon anecdotal evidence. There's no statistical data

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to back that up at all because it really falls flat there when you look at statistical data.

0:19:42.720,0:19:46.480

And then see how these things could apply to themselves.

0:19:47.200,0:19:52.480

And therein lies a problem. (EP): Does it adopt the assumption that these things are

0:19:52.480,0:19:59.680

just true? (CS): It's very very cleverly worded. It's well worded in that it doesn't

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push these things as being the truth but it guides children towards believing that this is what

0:20:06.080,0:20:10.480

all Christians believe and this is how Christians

act. (EP): So it doesn't make any distinction

0:20:10.480,0:20:14.400

between different types of Christians?

(CS): It does mention different things like

0:20:16.960,0:20:22.560

Quakers are mentioned, Roman Catholics are

mentioned, but it doesn't really explain

0:20:23.200,0:20:28.480

how those different churches came about or how those different manifestations of Christianity

0:20:28.480,0:20:35.520

came about. There's no historical framework so it's kind of, it's disjointed from that point of

0:20:35.520,0:20:41.440

view. And it's quite open about the limitations.

To be honest, if you go on the website it says

0:20:41.440,0:20:47.520

this is a resource that is based upon Christian theological framework. It's not going to give you

0:20:47.520,0:20:53.440

a history of Christianity. If you want that you'll need to look somewhere else. Unfortunately, when

0:20:53.440,0:21:01.840

it's built into a syllabus which it has been done increasingly, there isn't the room then to go and

0:21:02.400,0:21:09.040

use those historical resources and it just begs belief why the Church didn't make the theological

0:21:09.040,0:21:16.400

aspect lighter and actually include some of the historical aspect and produce a more credible

0:21:16.400,0:21:22.160

resource. (EP): In terms of other respects in

which the Church of England influences schools,

0:21:22.160,0:21:27.440

even non-specifically Church of England schools, it's a legal requirement in England and Wales that

0:21:27.440,0:21:34.320

schools should have an active collective worship every day. Matt, how does this collective worship

0:21:34.320,0:21:39.520

requirement work and how far does it enable the Church to have extra influence over schools? (MH):

0:21:39.520,0:21:45.360

Well, it does exert influence through collective worship. I mean you know the fact that,

0:21:46.480,0:21:52.880

and again through the religiosity inspection, it gets wrapped up and you should be calling

0:21:52.880,0:21:58.800

it 'collective worship' or 'worship' rather than 'assembly' because and it's also because of the

0:21:58.800,0:22:05.120

Victorian trustee that Chris talked about earlier, the foundation governors who are appointed by

0:22:05.120,0:22:13.680

the Church, one of their jobs is to monitor collective worship and to really come in and

0:22:13.680,0:22:20.240

observe it and make notes on it and check that

it is actually of a deeply Christian character.

0:22:20.880,0:22:28.800
so linked with the SIAMS inspection you see that when a school is talking to the diocese about an

0:22:28.800,0:22:38.960
upcoming inspection, you'll see that the level of Christianity and evangelism really gets ramped up.

0:22:39.760,0:22:45.280
And you'll see things like that, liturgical colours coming in, and you know 'we're doing this,

0:22:45.280,0:22:50.160
we're having everything's going to be purple' or they'll talk in much more proselytising

0:22:50.880,0:22:57.600
manner to the children, more evangelical. You'll get people through SIAMS you have to work,

0:22:58.400,0:23:04.720
prove that you work very closely with, with the youth workers and the local church people.

0:23:05.280,0:23:11.760
So they will be asked to come in and they will see it as - for you know you can understand it from

0:23:11.760,0:23:16.000
their point of view - but they'll see it as a way of evangelising and they'll talk to the children

0:23:16.000,0:23:23.280
directly and I've seen vicars giving very sort of powerful sermons to very small children. (EP): Can

0:23:23.280,0:23:29.360
you give a particular example? (MH): Well I can remember a vicar coming in and sort of walking,

0:23:29.920,0:23:36.640
walking through all of the infant children, literally shouting at them and pointing in

0:23:36.640,0:23:42.560
their faces and saying 'Jesus loves YOU' and 'Jesus loves YOU' and 'Jesus loves YOU'

0:23:42.560,0:23:50.960
and this went on for about five minutes and it was, it just seemed for a community school you

0:23:50.960,0:23:56.400
know, I would have been quite shocked to see that in a church let alone a village primary school.

0:23:57.120,0:24:03.840
(EP): What extent do you think that this religious influence affected the children in your school?

0:24:05.040,0:24:10.000
(MH): Well I mean, most of them, don't get me wrong, most of the messages are about love and

0:24:10.000,0:24:18.000
compassion and tolerance but children want to be good so if you have a Christian head teacher

0:24:18.000,0:24:23.200
or if you have Christian teachers, the fact that it is a Church school, teachers will use that as

0:24:23.200,0:24:30.000

a way of being more evangelical or proselytising, and they will talk about Bible stories as fact.

0:24:30.560,0:24:36.800
They will talk about Noah's Ark as facts, Jesus's miracles. They will talk about that in class and

0:24:36.800,0:24:41.520
it can be very confusing for children and they'll go back and I had you know several parents coming

0:24:41.520,0:24:47.360
in and saying, asking me about what the child had been told, about why a rainbow

0:24:47.360,0:24:51.840
existed or why it was raining and things like that. And they've been told a very sort

0:24:51.840,0:25:01.200
of creationist answer to these questions. So the church school 'badge' if you, not all, Christian

0:25:01.200,0:25:05.680
teachers but some Christian teachers and some Christian head teachers can use that to validate

0:25:07.280,0:25:13.680
a more evangelical approach. (EP): So and this is at the age at which children can't yet learn

0:25:13.680,0:25:20.800
to distinguish between scientific facts and things in the Bible? (MH): Absolutely yeah, we're talking

0:25:20.800,0:25:26.320
about four and five-year-olds yeah and it's

very very common in Church of England schools

0:25:27.360,0:25:32.960
for Christian teachers in worship and assemblies and things like that to speak in these

0:25:32.960,0:25:38.240
terms. (EP): Chris what was your experience as an RE teacher of primary school children

0:25:39.040,0:25:44.880
were you able to teach in such a way as to get children to distinguish between the stories of

0:25:44.880,0:25:54.080
the Bible and scientific fact or historical fact? (CS): Yeah I was because I came from

0:25:54.080,0:26:04.400
a religious studies background and the way that, I mean before we adopted the 'RE Today' syllabus

0:26:05.600,0:26:11.680
and even when we adopted the 'RE Today' syllabus, because I did ignore swathes of it, I taught Year

0:26:11.680,0:26:19.440
4 about myth and we looked at creation myths and I told them, you know this is a story that's not

0:26:19.440,0:26:26.480
true; it's not meant to be true; it's meant to be a story that's got meaning. So the creation story,

0:26:26.480,0:26:32.320
the Christian creation story was taught alongside,

you know Egyptian creation stories of Mesopotamia

0:26:32.320,0:26:36.080

and those sort of things from all around the world. And we looked at commonalities

0:26:36.080,0:26:40.400

like the flood theme and those sort of issues. (EP): So that's how you taught it right? But

0:26:40.400,0:26:45.920

how does understanding Christianity...? (CS): Understanding Christianity has to unpick it;

0:26:45.920,0:26:53.520

in typically in Year 5 they do a unit that is 'Creation and Science, Conflicting or

0:26:53.520,0:27:01.760

Complementary'. In that unit it unpicks the sort of the harm that was done by teaching Creationism

0:27:02.400,0:27:07.840

in Key Stage One and it says... well actually, this is the 'Big Bang' and this is how it

0:27:07.840,0:27:16.560

happened, you know the scientific idea. So some Christians, and it sort of belittles them really,

0:27:16.560,0:27:23.120

it says some Christians believe in Creationism. You know, I mean it is about 6% in this country

0:27:24.480,0:27:31.120

and it tends to be the sort of highly Evangelicals in the States as well that are Creationists.

0:27:34.240,0:27:40.800

But then it uses for example Christian scientists

to evidence that in fact there are scientists that

0:27:40.800,0:27:48.080

are quite happy to you know say that you know it happened along scientific lines but God guided

0:27:48.080,0:27:54.720

that so although it doesn't acknowledge the fact that the majority of scientists aren't religious

0:27:56.800,0:28:04.000

and it shows a lot of scientists cherry-pick, some scientists that are Christians, and they explain

0:28:04.000,0:28:10.880

how you know they can be complementary. It just guides children to believe that the two things are

0:28:10.880,0:28:16.240

complementary rather than conflicting which is of course how the Church of England sees it. (EP): So

0:28:16.240,0:28:21.600

that's even in Year 5 but before that children are not even taught that Creationism is just

0:28:21.600,0:28:28.640

one story? (CS): Well they're, no because they're not taught there are different creation stories.

0:28:29.200,0:28:35.360

So for their formative years where children are most susceptible they are just given a diet of

0:28:35.360,0:28:41.280

Christianity and a lot of that is based upon the old, very old-fashioned approach

0:28:42.000,0:28:48.160
of the Bible Studies from you know almost Victorian times where they started with the

0:28:48.160,0:28:55.920
story of Noah's Ark and Genesis and those types of things. And as Matt has already said children

0:28:55.920,0:29:00.640
at that age are not equipped to tell what is the truth and what isn't the truth and what is it,

0:29:01.360,0:29:06.640
what is the story, what is the belief and what is a myth? (MH): Just and as well just talking

0:29:06.640,0:29:13.440
about the syllabus that they're taught in schools, the lack of a National Curriculum for RE, I worked

0:29:13.440,0:29:23.120
for a head teacher that scrapped the agreed syllabus and taught an exclusively Christian

0:29:24.080,0:29:28.000
syllabus for the whole of primary, so Key Stage one and Key Stage two,

0:29:28.000,0:29:34.240
and even went so far as to Year 6 study of evolution in science - took that out and said

0:29:34.240,0:29:39.360
that this was all done in consultation with the local church and the diocese - and that this is

0:29:39.360,0:29:47.120
what we had to do. (EP): So that's just an example

of the way in which individual head teachers and

0:29:47.120,0:29:53.680
individuals. (MH): Yeah it can be yeah because it's a bit of a grey area in terms of OFSTED

0:29:53.680,0:30:01.600
inspection in terms of what is taught you know, it can be, there, can be abuses in

0:30:01.600,0:30:07.280
these areas. (EP): And the system allows for that? (MH): Yes. (EP): A lot of people I've spoken to

0:30:08.160,0:30:13.360
over the years, despite being fairly moderate or irreligious themselves, don't see any harm

0:30:13.360,0:30:18.960
in sending their children to a C of E school. A common reaction is "I went to a C of E school

0:30:18.960,0:30:24.080
and it didn't do me any harm"; C of E schools often provide a good education in other respects

0:30:24.080,0:30:29.040
because they're well established and well-funded and many people see Christian values as little

0:30:29.040,0:30:34.960
more than being nice to people. Matt what would your response be to this attitude? Is the C of E's

0:30:34.960,0:30:40.640
influence on the education system and on students purely benign? If a school has a Christian ethos

0:30:40.640,0:30:45.600
does that mean primarily that it encourages students to be nice to each other? (MH): I think

0:30:45.600,0:30:53.200
generally yes because most of these human values are universal. They're not exclusively Christian

0:30:53.200,0:30:58.800
although you are expected to say how the values that you have in your church, in your school

0:30:58.800,0:31:05.120
are exclusively Christian. But I think most parents certainly just want to have a good

0:31:05.120,0:31:12.880
local inclusive school. They don't mind you know a bit of Bible stories and things like that. I don't

0:31:12.880,0:31:20.240
think that most parents understand the nature of the religiosity inspections and the impact that

0:31:20.240,0:31:26.240
that has on schools. I think that Chris alluded to earlier that the church schools are good

0:31:26.240,0:31:32.240
schools. There's this myth again that achievement is better, that behaviour is better, that they're

0:31:32.880,0:31:39.120
I think is still encouraged by the diocese invited by the Church of England. They definitely want

0:31:39.120,0:31:44.960
it to be to be seen like that. But I think most most people are happy to send their children to a

0:31:45.680,0:31:49.840
church school because of what you said: they're established, they tend to be well-funded

0:31:50.800,0:31:56.400
and they've been around for a long time. (EP):
Do you think the C of E is exploiting this to

0:31:56.400,0:32:00.960
make the schools more religious than they would otherwise have been? (MH): I think they definitely

0:32:00.960,0:32:06.320
are and I think that it's actually in a time that you would imagine education would be more

0:32:06.320,0:32:13.360
secular. I think they're upping the ante and that through things like 'Understanding Christianity',

0:32:13.360,0:32:20.480
through the setting up of Christian multi academy trusts and the rewriting of the framework in terms

0:32:20.480,0:32:26.640
of preparing school leaders to be church leaders and Christian leaders, I think it's

0:32:26.640,0:32:34.640
definitely a way for them to control schools and to exert pressure for schools to be places

0:32:34.640,0:32:41.840

where evangelical practice can occur. They're very careful with their words. They wouldn't write that

0:32:41.840,0:32:48.720

down but certainly you know there's an expectation that church, that school leaders are Christian,

0:32:49.680,0:32:55.120

that the bulk of the populous and the children and the parents and the stakeholders are Christian

0:32:55.120,0:33:00.800

and that they fully support the messages that they're giving to kids. I mean a lot of the things

0:33:00.800,0:33:05.120

are done under the radar as well. I mean there's a big thing around where I live at the moment about

0:33:06.080,0:33:11.120

a behaviour system that's all funded by a Christian group and it's this sort of Christian

0:33:11.120,0:33:15.120

behaviour 'robot' that sets out the way that the children should behave

0:33:16.080,0:33:20.720

and that's all done through collective worship assemblies. There's one school that I worked at

0:33:20.720,0:33:26.640

there were little pads on each table for prayer jelly babies and there were different colours

0:33:26.640,0:33:32.560

of jelly babies that represented different forms of prayer, that the children could you know pray:

0:33:33.200,0:33:36.640

'Samantha sorry' jelly baby you know all these types of things

0:33:37.760,0:33:42.160

get into children and make it difficult for them to kick against it and they want to be

0:33:42.160,0:33:46.160

good and they want to go along with it and they want to believe that these things are true. So,

0:33:46.160,0:33:52.160

there is an influence and it's not good in terms of critical thinking I think as Chris said as

0:33:52.160,0:33:57.600

well. (EP): Chris would you agree with that? (CS): Yeah I'd agree with that. The notion is

0:33:57.600,0:34:02.560

quite clear from the Church that collective worship should be invitational by nature

0:34:03.520,0:34:07.520

and if you're in a position of authority if you're a teacher and you're in front of a

0:34:07.520,0:34:13.520

whole school full of children and you invite those children to sit up straight those children will

0:34:13.520,0:34:18.400

sit up straight because you're in a position of authority. If you invite them to put their hands

0:34:18.400,0:34:24.720

together and bow their heads they'll comply.
If
you invite them to join in a prayer they'll join

0:34:24.720,0:34:30.240
in the prayer. You know at the end of the day
I've
got nothing against prayer. If you want, you
know,

0:34:30.240,0:34:34.480
if we want to have a collective worship
corner
and you want to come in at play time or lunch
time

0:34:34.480,0:34:40.720
and you want to have a quiet prayer, by all
means
you can go and you can do that. I've no issue
with

0:34:40.720,0:34:46.800
that whatsoever. Nobody ever did. Lots of
children
during lessons would say "Can I go to the
toilet?"

0:34:46.800,0:34:52.560
and not one ever child ever said to me "Can I
stop for a prayer break?" because we didn't
have

0:34:52.560,0:34:58.800
religious children you know. We had less than
5%
of our catchment in the village school we
were in

0:34:59.360,0:35:06.000
actually identified as Christian. Which is you
know it matched the national demographic.
As Matt

0:35:06.000,0:35:11.840
said they are universal human values at the
end

of the day: compassion, forgiveness, those
sorts

0:35:11.840,0:35:17.280
of things. Those are great human values. (EP):
But they're not specifically Christian. (CS):

0:35:17.280,0:35:24.800
Absolutely not no but children are taught to
articulate it as though they are and certainly

0:35:25.680,0:35:30.640
through the SIAMS inspection framework in
the school that I was in over 18 years,

0:35:31.280,0:35:38.800
and it was very much like a community school
when
I went into it, we gradually had to up the
visible

0:35:38.800,0:35:43.840
aspect of it being a church school so there
were more sort of Christianity displays going
up

0:35:44.480,0:35:50.400
and then towards the end with the new
framework
which I was charged with implementing. And
I

0:35:51.120,0:35:56.720
had to leave through ill health before
it actually, before we actually had our

0:35:56.720,0:36:02.720
inspection and I was quite grateful to have
escaped it to be honest. But I found out

0:36:02.720,0:36:09.840
that we didn't get an 'Outstanding' after I left
because the children weren't able to
articulate

0:36:10.640,0:36:17.920
how the Christian ethos impacted upon their

learning. Because they were expected to do that by

0:36:18.480,0:36:23.600

quoting from the Bible. (MH): Yeah I heard exactly the same thing. (EP): Yeah Matt

0:36:23.600,0:36:29.120

could you explain a bit more? (MH): Yeah just in

terms of you know talking when the inspectors,

0:36:29.120,0:36:37.280

talking to groups of children, and they couldn't give specific examples from the Bible and link

0:36:37.280,0:36:41.840

their learning to biblical teachings. You know you're not going to get an 'Excellent'.

0:36:41.840,0:36:47.120

We got 'Good' eventually which is probably the same as what Chris got but it is like a little

0:36:47.120,0:36:51.920

it's like a little kind of Bible study thing that they, that the children have to speak about. And

0:36:52.560,0:36:57.040

you know these children weren't church-going Christian kids. They just thought they were going

0:36:57.040,0:37:02.720

to their local village school. (EP): So there's this strange irony that although Christianity is

0:37:02.720,0:37:08.400

meant to be something which is voluntary, actually what the C of E is trying to do is really impose

0:37:08.400,0:37:13.440

religion on children from a very early age indeed, before they can think critically about it, and not

0:37:13.440,0:37:18.000

encourage them to think critically about it. (MH):

Yeah and I think that's what the SIAMS inspector

0:37:19.120,0:37:25.440

framework does. I think it is an attempt to impose a particular kind of Anglican Christianity

0:37:26.080,0:37:33.280

onto communities. (EP): What about the teachers?

Matt I think you said to me when we were talking

0:37:33.280,0:37:37.600

before that one of the reasons you left your position as head teacher was because of the

0:37:37.600,0:37:43.280

C of E's increasing influence on your school. How did you find the C of E's influence, I mean

0:37:43.280,0:37:49.040

in your long teaching career changing and have you seen it affecting other teachers now that you're

0:37:49.040,0:37:55.280

a consultant? (MH): Well I've worked in in four

schools for decent lengths of time and I worked in

0:37:55.280,0:38:01.600

two community schools and two Church of England

schools so I'm in quite a good position to see

0:38:01.600,0:38:06.960

those differences. The majority of teachers just think "Well I work in a Church of England school,

0:38:08.080,0:38:15.440

this is what it's like". I have seen head teachers be very manipulative and exploit their lack of

0:38:15.440,0:38:23.360

understanding about what a church school actually is to implement some really quite dangerous

0:38:23.360,0:38:29.760

things. I talked about the syllabus earlier. I've seen teachers get very angry about it and not

0:38:29.760,0:38:36.400

understand it. Remember the Year 6 teacher when he was told that they weren't going to be studying

0:38:36.400,0:38:41.840

Evolution and was very angry and started looking for a different job. But for me it was just this

0:38:41.840,0:38:46.800

sort of sense of cognitive dissonance really. It was just kind of like I was expected to lead

0:38:46.800,0:38:53.440

something, lead a process that I fundamentally disagreed with. And you know what? It's a church

0:38:53.440,0:38:58.880

school and I would have been quite happy to you know have a little bit of 'learn the good things

0:38:58.880,0:39:03.360

about bible stories and compare them to other things' and have the vicar coming in and talking

0:39:03.360,0:39:10.080

but it's this kind of, I felt this relentless pressure from the diocesan education department,

0:39:10.080,0:39:16.000

who I don't really know what their qualifications are in terms of education, increasingly

0:39:16.960,0:39:24.560

having an influence. And it definitely ratcheting up in terms of the expectation of the evangelical

0:39:24.560,0:39:29.760

practices in schools through very good, lovely, good-meaning people the vast.. you know they're

0:39:29.760,0:39:33.520

all nice people that think they're doing the right thing for the children, the youth workers,

0:39:33.520,0:39:40.240

the parish workers, the PCC (?) but I was seeing more and more direct influence and

0:39:40.240,0:39:46.800

more and more kind of indoctrination of the children and I didn't like it. I mean most

0:39:46.800,0:39:52.400

of the governors I had were great and they were lovely people but it's the governing body, it is

0:39:52.400,0:39:58.200

definitely another way I think of exerting control and power that the church use. (EP):

0:39:58.880,0:40:04.720

As a final question Matt and Chris what would you say is the way forward from the current

0:40:04.720,0:40:09.360

situation of this excessive influence of the Church of England upon education

0:40:09.360,0:40:16.320

in England and Wales? First of all Matt, how do we stop this sort of influence ? (MH): Well I think

0:40:16.960,0:40:24.800

campaigning bodies such as the NSS and 'No more faith schools' are doing a vital job holding

0:40:25.760,0:40:30.800

people to account. Whether it's the government or the Church of England I think it's got to

0:40:30.800,0:40:37.200

come down to publicly questioning things, publicly questioning frameworks such as science

0:40:37.760,0:40:45.600

in schools, questioning religious involvement in schools and even things like parents questioning

0:40:46.320,0:40:50.560

your children about what they're being told at school and then going back and asking the school

0:40:50.560,0:40:56.240

about it and saying, "What are you telling my child?". Bodies questioning politicians. I

0:40:56.240,0:41:01.120

think people have got to stand up against it. It's really hard if you're a head teacher or a school

0:41:01.120,0:41:07.840

leader because you want to do a good job. You're concerned about your career and the vast majority

0:41:07.840,0:41:15.600

of people while they're in post toe the party line and try not to cause too many ripples. But

0:41:17.040,0:41:22.160

I think you know the campaigning bodies such as the NSS really are doing a great job of holding

0:41:22.160,0:41:28.800

the church and government to account. (EP): Chris as far as RE is concerned, is there a

0:41:28.800,0:41:33.520

way of reforming it given the current realities of the influence of the Church of England and

0:41:33.520,0:41:39.120

other religious bodies or do you think the subject should be scrapped altogether or amalgamated with

0:41:39.120,0:41:45.040

another subject? (CS): The best thing RE going forward it doesn't look like there's going to

0:41:45.040,0:41:51.680

be any meaningful reform. It's unlikely, very unlikely to happen but I would suggest that if

0:41:51.680,0:41:59.120

you want to do away with the right to withdraw
and you want to give pupils actually a you know

0:41:59.120,0:42:06.000

an understanding about religion and culture that is meaningful and is actually practical,

0:42:06.640,0:42:11.600

then it needs to be built into a brand new subject that is mandatory for all schools

0:42:12.160,0:42:19.680

that is part of say a citizenship subject which is about diversity in society. And it breaks

0:42:19.680,0:42:25.760

away from the way that RE is taught completely and it's, is reappraised and redesigned from

0:42:26.880,0:42:32.880

root and branch reform. You know complete start from scratch approach. (EP): Matt,

0:42:32.880,0:42:35.920

Chris, thank you very much. (MH and CS): Thanks thank you very much.

0:42:40.600,0:42:41.600

(EP):

0:42:41.600,0:42:45.920

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0:42:45.920,0:42:49.840

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0:42:50.560,0:42:55.120

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