



Presentation to the Commission on Religious Education Birmingham, 4 May 2017

Context

The Free Churches Group is the successor body to the Free Church Federal Council, formed in 1940, and has its origins in an earlier grouping dating back to 1880. There are 24 Group members from England and Wales, in the Nonconformist, Evangelical and Pentecostal traditions. They range from the traditional Dissenting Christian denominations, such as the Baptist and Congregational Churches, to churches with different origins, like the Methodist Church and the Salvation Army, and new groupings of churches like the Council of African and Caribbean Churches UK.

The Free Churches are diverse in their practice and style, but are united in a common commitment to freedom of conscience and belief, and the Free Churches Group seeks to promote ways of working together in the “public square”, particularly in the areas of education, and healthcare and prison chaplaincy.

With this diversity comes a shared conviction of the centrality of discernment when coming to a view. The Free Churches take time to listen to the views of others, to consider them carefully and prayerfully, and to reassess their own positions in the light of what they learn. This along with the value placed on freedom of conscience means that contributions we offer to a debate, including the debate about the nature and purpose of RE, are not necessarily our final word, and there are most certainly those within the Free Churches who will hold other views than the ones I put forward here.

The Free Church Education Committee has existed from the early days of the Free Church Federal Council and works to encourage and support the involvement of the Free Churches in public education. Although there are numerous, and disputed, ways of determining membership of different religious groups, based on Church attendance in England (using 2015 figures), the Free Churches easily make up at least a third of the total, and arguably more, depending on which churches are included.¹

Most of our Group members do not have state-funded schools, with the exception of the Methodist Church, although we were involved in the very early days of widespread educational provision, through the British and Foreign Schools Society.

We have been members of the RE Council since it began, and we see the recruitment and support of Free Church SACRE members, of which we have 367 on our database, as an important part of our work.

Some of the issues that cause us concern as we consider RE (particularly the right of withdrawal) have their origins in the Free Churches’ championing of the right of freedom of conscience and belief. The provision of the right of withdrawal enabled Free Church parents to send their children to their local school, even if it were a Church of England or even, in some cases, a Catholic School, knowing that they would not have to be instructed in the 39 Articles of the Church of England, or the Catholic catechism. As a result of this accommodation, the majority of Free Church schools were willingly handed over to the State.

¹ Projection from Religious Trends 7, Peter Brierley

The scope and content of RE

As early as 1965, the Free Churches were working with a group of Humanists to look at the possibilities for Religious and Moral Education in “County Schools”. This group argued that children needed to be taught about the Christian faith “as part of their cultural history”. RE was a tool to help pupils make their “own personal commitment to a belief or a way of life”².

The legacy of being marginalised and, in earlier times, persecuted, has produced a concern for other groups whose voices are not always heard.

We value the inclusion of a wide range of religious traditions within RE, and we have, for many years, supported the inclusion of non-religious world views as an important element of the content of RE. In fact, a working party from the Free Church Education Committee was arguing for representation from “non-religious bodies of ideological philosophy” on SACREs as early as 1976.³

We continue to believe that RE must stand up as an academic subject, judged by sound educational criteria. We believe it is important that young people learn about Christianity as a global faith, and in relation to its role in the history and culture of Britain. It is clear to us, though, that RE must be inclusive and non-confessional. Faith nurture is the job of the family, not the school.

Our experience is that RE is often less good at dealing with diversity within religions and we would argue that this diversity is important. From the perspective of the Free Churches, there have been too many instances in text books and in teaching where Christianity is presented as consisting of the Church of England and the Catholic Church. Beliefs and practices from these two denominations are contrasted, often artificially, and other Christian churches are omitted altogether. The exceptions are where there is something that is seen as “peculiar” in another Christian denomination, for example baptism by immersion in the Baptist Church, or Quaker worship (often identified by what is not included). There needs to be more sophistication in the way in which diversity is approached, and this would enrich the understanding of students.

A new approach to the syllabus for RE

We have, historically, championed local determination of RE. There were good reasons for this. We felt it safeguarded the subject and those who taught it from undue influence from potentially influential groups. SACREs represented those with a responsibility for RE and there was a shared accountability.

We believe now, however, it is time for change. Few Local Authorities have the resources to employ RE Advisors who can work with SACREs and with schools. Whilst there are some excellent Locally Agreed Syllabuses, there are also some that are weak. If our aim is to raise the quality of RE across the country, we need to make a high-quality syllabus available in every part of the country.

We support the development of a national syllabus for RE. There are, however, some conditions:

It needs to be flexible, with options available for different types of study and different types of school. We already have a model for this, with GCSE and A Level syllabuses. The subject content (criteria) is set out, in some detail, with optional routes, and exam boards devise their specifications to meet them. This provides for high standards being set, centrally, with

² COLIN ALVES, et al., Religious and Moral Education. Some proposals for County Schools by a Group of Christians and Humanists. Leicester (1965), p.2

³ FCFC Religious Education in County Schools. London (1976), pp.3-4

flexible routes towards meeting them.

This approach would allow both for local content and for content that would meet the needs of schools with a religious character.

In practice at KS4 we already have a national curriculum for RE, called GCSE Religious Studies. This model could work at lower key stages too.

The setting of the criteria/subject content should be done by a body representing religious and belief groups, professionals and politicians, who would have to agree the criteria. The Secretary of State has a role, as s/he does in all matters pertaining to publicly-funded schools, but should not be the driver or arbiter of content or approach.

This approach would mean that RE would have National Curriculum status, a national flexible syllabus that could include common content, with additional material to suit the nature of the school and students.

A continuing role for SACREs

We do see a continuing and significant role for SACREs, but we may wish to argue that they need to be reconstituted in order to allow for a fairer and more balanced representation of the interests in the subject at a local level. There is no reason, in our view, that those representing non-religious worldviews that are studied in RE should not be full members of SACRE.

We would like to see SACREs broaden their focus and concentrate on supporting RE in their local schools through creativity rather than through formality. If RE is to have support to flourish, groups of local people providing training, generating ideas and making links between schools and faith communities, would seem to have a vital role. Although we lament the loss of funding for SACREs in many Local Authorities, much of this creative work could be undertaken without significant financial investment.

A syllabus for all publicly-funded schools

As the proportion of academies and free schools is increasing, there seems to be little point in focusing on RE only in Local Authority schools. Although academies and free schools are not required to teach the national curriculum, the inspection regime means that they do. Inclusion of RE in the English Baccalaureate may help this process by giving the subject more credibility and visibility at GCSE level.

Removal of the right of withdrawal

We have struggled with this issue. As I have mentioned, freedom of conscience and belief are of central importance to the Free Churches, and we have valued the provision of the right of withdrawal, not just for ourselves but also for others. However, the RE being taught now is not the same as the RE, or indeed RI, that was being taught when the right of withdrawal was put in place, and the world itself is a different place. If we put in place a high quality national syllabus, reflecting educational aims and approaches rather than confessional ones, there should be no need for parents to withdraw their children from RE.

We recognise there are significant issues connected with any proposals to remove the right of withdrawal but if we value RE, and if we want it to have parity with other subjects, we need to work to make the right of withdrawal unnecessary.

We are particularly concerned about selective withdrawal which, in some cases, allows parents to exercise their rights in accordance with their prejudices. There are also practical challenges in schools, which do not generally have the capacity for families to demand bespoke supervision for their children.

Compulsory RE to end at 16

If we are to argue that RE should have parity with other national curriculum subjects, it is hard to argue that it should be compulsory after 16. If this is the case, RE should be included in the English Baccalaureate, to give it an equal status with other humanities subjects. We need to differentiate here between compulsory provision (i.e. the school must offer it), and compulsory participation by students, who may opt for either History or Geography rather than Religious Studies at GCSE.

There are opportunities to integrate elements of RE within explicit SMSC post-14, and within the “understanding the world around you” side of PSHE.

A-level Religious Studies seems strong enough to survive, and many schools are providing very little in the way of RE post-16 at the moment, so it may not be a significant change at a practical level.

A role for RE in post-16 settings

We believe that there is a place for elements of RE within Further Education, in the provision of a continued entitlement for all post-16 students to SMSC, with enforcement through Ofsted inspection. Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education (fbfe) has advocated this approach and argued that “Students are not adequately prepared for work in a pluralist society, if they are not aware of the implications of culture, faith and belief for the services they will provide for customers and the teams in which they work”.⁴

A commitment to high-quality teacher education

We have an ongoing concern for teacher education in RE, and we were expressing our disquiet about recruitment as far back as the 1970s. In the past there were Free Church teacher training colleges, for example Southlands, Westhill, Westminster, where the Free Churches played an active part in equipping teachers in both primary and secondary schools. Although teacher education has changed significantly since those days, we are exploring ways in which we might support and resource both initial teacher training and CPD, with partner organisations.

High-quality resources are important and these must be accessible to teachers with specialisms other than RE. The best ones allow the teacher to develop his/her own confidence and skill at the same time as ensuring a good learning experience for the pupil. We are currently developing resources to enrich the teaching of Christianity and to equip teachers to deal with diversity and complexity within one religion.

Conclusion

Good religious education helps to nurture the individual into full personhood, promoting respect and empathy, a capacity to question, to imagine, to value self and others, and to have hope. Along the way, it does much to provoke questions about the meaning of life, ideas about God, issues of right and wrong and the nature of reality.⁵

Any proposals relating to RE raise at least as many questions as they attempt to answer. We are fully committed to embarking on this journey with others, listening to wisdom and contributing our energies and experience.

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On behalf of the Free Churches Group
4 May, 2017

⁴ fbfe Training Voices (2014)

⁵ FREE CHURCH EDUCATION COMMITTEE, A Free Church Voice on Education (2010)



Our Members:

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