Chapter 4
What Have We Learned from Four Decades of Non-confessional Multi-faith Religious Education in England? Policy, Curriculum and Practice in English Religious Education 1969–2013

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Abstract If we date the beginning of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education in England to the formation of the Shap Working Party for World Religions in Education in 1969, we now have over 40 years of experience of attempting to construct policy and curricula for integrative religious education and to put these into practice in schools. Drawing upon academic research, reports from the government body responsible for inspecting schools in England (Ofsted) and other reports, and professional experience, the chapter will examine the factors leading to the introduction of this form of religious education, the aspirations of teachers in the 1970s, changes in English society and education, religious studies in universities, perceptions of the place of religions in a globalised world and consequent developments in religious education. It will examine the recent *Review of Religious Education in England* and *National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* (October 2013) produced by the Religious Education Council for England and Wales. The author was involved in this initiative as a member of the Steering Group, representing the subject at university level. Looking back over 40 years, and at the situation in 2013, the chapter will suggest the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities for religious education in England.

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on religious education in England rather than the UK as a whole, as religious education in Scotland and Northern Ireland has always been separately governed and RE in Wales has become increasingly different from that of

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England in recent years.[1] It discusses the factors that led to the introduction of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education, changes affecting religious education over the last four decades, and the strengths, weaknesses, challenges and opportunities for religious education in England at the time of writing (February 2014).

By "non-confessional, multi-faith religious education", I mean religious education that is an academic school subject with educational aims rather than religious ones. This means that although it may seek to contribute to a pupil's personal and spiritual as well as intellectual development, it does not seek to nurture them in a particular religious tradition, nor in any way to evangelise, proselytise, catechise or promote any particular religion or "religion" in general. The content of this subject is drawn from a wide range of religious traditions, including so-called "world religions", smaller indigenous traditions and more recent developments, as well as "non-religious" traditions which play a similar role to "religions" in people's lives, and, in England, also a range of philosophical and ethical issues. This type of religious education is suitable for students from all faiths and none, taught together. Hence it is called "integrative" religious education by Wanda Alberts (2007) and "religion education" in South Africa.

The two countries that pioneered this form of religious education over 40 years ago were Sweden and England/Wales. In Sweden, *religionskunskap* (knowledge about religion) was introduced into the new curriculum in 1969 (Tidman 2005), which was also the date of the formation of the Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education (http://www.shapworkingparty.org.uk/), a group of UK university lecturers, teachers and teacher trainers who championed the introduction of multi-faith religious education. An influential document in England and Wales was *Schools Council Working Paper 36* (Schools Council 1971) which recommended a phenomenological approach to a non-confessional, multi-faith religious education. Since religious education is organised locally rather than nationally in England, there is no single date for the start of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education in the country as a whole, but initiatives such as these soon spread to influence local syllabuses during the 1970s, with the 1970 Bath syllabus being a controversial early adopter of the Shap approach even before Working Paper 36 (Copley 1997: 99–100). Forty years later, non-confessional, multi-faith religious education is still a minority option for states around the world, that minority notably now including Norway, Denmark, Scotland and South Africa, as the majority opt either for leaving religion out of education altogether, or for confessional religious education, the latter either in the dominant religious tradition only or in separated faith groups. It is important to realise that for many countries, the concept of "non-confessional, multi-faith" religious education, is itself a novel paradigm for the subject (see for example Franken and Loobuyck 2011).

[1] Note: some of the material in this chapter reprises that in Cush (2011), but expanded and brought up to date.

4.2 Factors Behind the Introduction of Non-confessional, Multi-faith Religious Education at the End of the 1960s

Factors that influenced the introduction of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education include increasing religious plurality (in part attributable to post-war immigration from Commonwealth countries), increasing secularisation, the general social liberalism of the 1960s, liberal protestant theology, the development of religious studies as opposed to theology in British universities, the popularity of phenomenological approaches in religious studies, and the youth culture of the time which impacted on the pupils in schools and their teachers. The late 1960s and early 1970s saw an increase in, and increasing awareness of, the diversity of religious traditions present in England. This was partly as a result of immigration from the 1950s onwards, but also increasing awareness of a wider world through possibilities of travel and improved communications. Teachers in schools had to respond to the presence of children in their classrooms from Hindu, Sikh and Muslim religious backgrounds and Asian cultural backgrounds, before the introduction of multi-faith syllabuses. Such teachers and their trainers were part of the groundswell that led to the changes of 1969 and the early 1970s.

"Secularisation" is a very contested term, and to what extent England was 40 years ago, or is today, "secular", "Christian", "post-secular" or "diverse" (or all of the above) is much debated (see for example, Woodhead 2012: 5–11). Nevertheless, statistics of church attendance, the numbers of people prepared to call themselves "non-religious", and decreasing presumptions of Christian values certainly suggest a steady decrease in some spheres of the social influence of Christianity or theism more generally. Whatever the sociological theories say, in practice the presence of pupils and teachers identifying as "non-religious", or from "non-religious" families, puts a question mark over the suitability of confessional, even if "non-denominational", Christian religious education. In terms of numbers, the "secular" or "non-religious" pupils were and are a much larger proportion of the school population than pupils from non-Christian religions, especially away from the main urban centres (see Rudge 1998). The late 1960s saw a more general social liberalism, partly linked to the decline in influence of traditional Christianity, as evidenced by changes to laws relating to abortion and homosexuality (though in fact such changes were supported by some influential Christians). This more liberal and secular climate was supportive of a non-confessional, multi-faith religious education, as is evidenced by the contributions of the National Secular Society and British Humanist Association to the survey conducted by the Church of England's 1970 Report *The Fourth R* (Copley 1997: 98).

It is notable that the countries that introduced non-confessional, multi-faith religious education were those with (at least before 2000) an established and relatively liberal protestant church. Liberal protestant theology, beginning to be popularised in England in the 1960s (for example, in John Robinson's 1963 *Honest to God*), had been arguing for some time that divine revelation could be found in traditions other than Christianity (see Bates 1994). This openness to other faiths is clearly found in

the writing of the theologian and philosopher of religion John Hick, whose 1973 book *God and the Universe of Faiths* called for a "Copernican" shift in thinking that "involves a shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is *God* who is at the centre, and that all the religions of mankind, including our own, serve and revolve around him" (1973: 131). This provided a theological and philosophical justification for multi-faith religious education, even if not exactly non-confessional. (Hick's later writings are less theistic in language and it has been argued by Geoff Teece (2011) that if understood correctly, Hick's philosophy can provide an underpinning for non-confessional, multi-faith religious education).

A major impetus for non-confessional, multi-faith religious education was the development of religious studies as a discipline separate from theology in British universities. Although the study of "comparative religion" predated the 1960s by many decades, it did not take place in Departments of Religious Studies until the establishment of "new" universities in that decade. Particularly influential was the Department at the University of Lancaster, and scholars such as Ninian Smart who concerned themselves with the non-confessional study of religions, plural, at all levels of education; schools as well as universities. Smart was a founding member of the Shap Working Party, and Lancaster University hosted the Schools Council Project for Religious Education in Secondary Schools, between 1969 and 1973. Materials for schools were published between 1977 and 1981, for example *Journeys into Religion Teachers Handbook* (Schools Council 1977). Linked to the influence of Smart, and Lancaster, was the importance of a "phenomenological approach", to religious education, which was a major influence on religious education in England in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. At school level, this approach was mainly about the attempt to portray a variety of religious traditions in an impartial and empathetic way—in other words a synonym for "non-confessional, multi-faith" religious education as opposed to Christian confessional religious education, rather than any deeper engagement with phenomenology as philosophy.

A further important factor came from the pupils themselves rather than policies or professors. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, an interest in "alternative" ways of life was part of youth culture, and imagery from Eastern traditions and Paganism old and new became fashionable. The Beatles famously visited the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India in 1968. The International Society for Krishna Consciousness ("Hare Krishnas") came to London in 1969, and George Harrison's song "My Sweet Lord", featuring the Hare Krishna mantra, was the bestselling single of 1971. Whatever the official policies or set syllabuses, good teachers engage with the interests and questions of their pupils, and thus these traditions entered the classroom. Some of these pupils of the late 1960s and early 1970s were motivated to take a serious academic interest in a diversity of religious traditions, and were themselves teachers before the decade was out. The present author, for example, was teaching Hinduism and Buddhism to examination level from 1977.

The non-confessional, multi-faith religious education current in the 1970s in England tended to be characterised by the aim of "understanding" religions, as opposed to "being religious" or "explaining away" religions. It took a position of "methodological agnosticism" (encouraging an open-minded and impartial attitude

whatever one's personal stance; the phenomenological *epoché*) and sought to respect the believer (the phenomenological "empathy"). Those who favoured such religious education positioned it as an academic subject like any other, educational rather than religious, with no assumption of faith on the part of teacher or pupil. Religious education teachers were education professionals rather than an arm of the church. The content of the syllabuses tended to focus on the major so-called "world religions" with Christianity, Judaism, Islam and Hinduism gradually joined by Sikhism and Buddhism to become the "big six" traditions that feature in English syllabuses still today. However, religious education was not limited to the study of religious traditions, but also explored the experience and concerns of the pupils themselves, especially with younger children (see for example the Westhill Project in the 1980s (Rudge 2000)). Philosophy of religion and ethical and social issues were popular with older students, and examination syllabuses for pupils aged 16–19 had options in these areas in the 1970s, a choice that has increased in popularity in the following four decades.

To give the impression that all religious education in England in the 1970s was non-confessional and multi-faith would be misleading. There were pioneering locally agreed syllabuses and enthusiastic teachers but it must be remembered that one in three state-funded primary schools and one in six state-funded secondary schools in England were then and still are, to a greater or lesser extent, schools "with a religious character", connected to a religious organisation, the majority being Church of England or Roman Catholic. Thus the centrality of Christianity, and religious education as religious nurture, remained a substantial part of what was on offer in religious education. To complicate matters, some "church schools" were committed to the new multi-faith religious education, and some "county" schools had not yet caught up with it. In the Roman Catholic college for 16- to 18-year-old pupils in which I taught in the 1970s, the problem was addressed by having two sorts of religious education, the academic non-confessional type for examination purposes and the personal faith development type for everyone. However, we also covered a diverse range of faiths in the latter. It was never really that clear.

The 1988 Education Reform Act summed up the situation in the famous clause 8 (3) which still remains "the law" on religious education in Local Authority–run state schools and some categories of church schools to this day. Local Authority agreed syllabuses "must reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian, whilst taking account of the principal religions represented in Great Britain". This clause represents the acknowledgement at national level of multi-faith religious education, as well as the continuing importance of Christianity as the major "heritage" tradition.

4.3 Changes in the Last Four Decades

Much has changed in English society and education since the introduction of non-confessional, multi-faith religious education at the end of the 1960s, not least in the disciplines of religious studies and religious education themselves. Many have commented on the impact of major world events such as the 1979 Iranian revolution putting religion as a political force back on the agenda, the breakup of the "communist bloc" in 1989 releasing all sorts of religious revival and change in Eastern Europe, the association of religion with terrorism and security matters especially since 2001, and the 2008 financial crisis. A comprehensive picture of religion in English society today can be found in Woodhead and Catto (2012).

In some ways, the last four decades have just taken the changes of the 1960s further. Secularisation has increased, at least in terms of self-identification as "non-religious", as can be seen by comparing census data for 2001 and 2011. The number of people identifying as "Christian" falls from 71 % to 59 % and the number of people identifying as "none" rises from 16 % to 25 % (see Census 2011). There are a number of issues that would advise caution in interpreting these figures (see for example Guest et al. 2012: 61–2) but as a generalisation about increasing secularisation they illustrate a trend. There are those who, following Habermas, talk of having entered a "post-secular" phase, in that religion is now more obvious in the public arena, but the current author is wary of using that phrase, which may suggest both that religion went away and came back again and that secularisation is now decreasing.

The census data also illustrate an increase in plurality and religious diversity, with all non-Christian religions (except Judaism, which remains about the same) demonstrating a small but significant increase in numbers of adherents. There is also greater awareness of religious diversity, especially since the Equality Act 2010, which included "religion or belief" as one of the categories of "protected characteristics". An interesting recent piece of research (Weller et al. 2011) investigated the religious affiliation of staff and students in UK universities with the discovery that if the categories of "spiritual" and "pagan" were added to the options, "spiritual" scored higher than any non-Christian religion for staff, and both "spiritual" and "pagan" scored higher than any non-Christian religion, except Islam, for students. In attempting to replicate this research in our own university, student Lindsay Horler (2013, unpublished) discovered that many students could not put themselves in any of the boxes, but exhibited what Lähnemann (2008: 6) calls "patchwork religiosity", drawing upon several traditions in their own personal values. Eleanor Nesbitt has described this as an increase in the "existentially interfaith" (Nesbitt 2011: 232). Thus any account of the increase in religious plurality needs to recognise both "alternative" spiritualities and hybrid religious affiliations as well as traditional "religions".

Major social changes that do not require extended treatment here, but which have had significant impacts on religious education, include the communications revolution, Europeanisation, globalisation, feminism and other forms of diversity

awareness. Today's teachers have access to a wealth of digital resources unavailable in the 1970s. In the religious education world, organisations such as EFTRE—the European Forum for Teachers of RE (www.eftre.net)—and ISREV—the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (www.isrev.org)—have made the sharing of research and practice across the world possible. More attention has been paid to gender, sexual diversity and other equality issues. There have been two or three further generations of youth culture, in which religion or spirituality may not be very central for the majority, in spite of a general tolerance of religious diversity (see for example Savage et al. 2006). However young people from minority groups may see their religion as an important part of their identity.

4.4 Changes Within Religious Studies and Religious Education

In religious studies at university level, and religious education in schools in England, we can see several trends that have changed both subjects since the late 1960s/early 1970s. For a more detailed consideration of these, see Cush and Robinson (2014). However, it is worth listing some of the most important ones.

There has been an ongoing critique of the phenomenological approach from both religious studies and religious education. Examples would include Jackson (1997), Flood (1999), and Fitzgerald (2000). Phenomenology has been criticised for being essentialist about religion and religions, having a hidden agenda (whether that of liberal Christian theology or secular relativism), imposing Western categories on non-Western traditions, being superficial and descriptive, avoiding truth claims, cultural voyeurism, for being impossible (either to suspend your own views or to really empathise with the other) or unethical (engagement being preferable to an impossible "objectivity"). Whatever the validity of these criticisms, there has been a parallel stress on the importance of ethnographic approaches in accessing "real" religion, for example as practised by women and children as opposed to as taught in theory by elite males. Ethnographic approaches reveal diversity within as well as between religions. Examples supporting the ethnographic approach can be found in Jackson (1997, 2000, 2004), Nesbitt (2004), and Geaves (2007).

Religious education has seen a gradual growth in the interest in philosophy of religion and ethics, already present in the classrooms of the 1970s, perhaps in part through the stress on the need for critical thinking found in, for example, Wright's critical realism (e.g. Wright 2000), but also because teachers find that pupils enjoy topics where there is scope for their own views. This development in schools has had an impact on university curricula, such as the development of undergraduate degrees in religions, philosophies and ethics (all plural) at universities such as Bath Spa and Gloucestershire.

In addition to ethnographic/interpretive and critical realist pedagogies in religious education, other important pedagogies that have been developed since the

1970s include the "experiential", stressing pupils' own spiritual development (for example in the influential book *New Methods in Religious Education* (Hammond et al. 1990). The exercises in this book proved very popular with both teachers and pupils. Especially in settings where children interact with others from different faith backgrounds, the "dialogical" approach has proved important. Jackson (2004) gives a helpful summary of these and other developments in religious education responding to plurality, and Grimmitt (2000) introduces the most influential up to that date, including his own important "constructivist" pedagogy.

Important influences upon the study of religions at university level in recent decades have been feminist, queer and post-colonial theories. To some extent these have had an impact on religious education, in that textbooks are now careful to employ inclusive language and have illustrations with women and girls as well as men and boys, portrayals of Eastern and indigenous religions have attempted to escape from Western packaging and issues such as women priests or gay marriage are discussed. But we are yet to see an impact at a deeper level, and the implications of feminist, queer or postcolonial approaches to pedagogy are yet to be explored and developed.

4.5 1994, 2004 and 2014 (Late 2013)

Snapshots of the changing nature of religious education in the second half of our "40 years" can be gained by looking at documents produced in 1994, 2004 and late 2013. 1994 was an important year for English religious education in that it saw the production of the SCAA (School Curriculum and Assessment Authority) model syllabuses for religious education. There were two of these (advisory rather than statutory), and they portrayed a religious education which gave an important place to Christianity, as well as advocating a thorough coverage of the "big six" major religious faiths. These syllabuses were non-confessional, were multi-faith, were informed by both scholarship and consultation with representatives of faith traditions, and related the religious material to the experiences and questions of the pupils. These documents have proved very useful and influential upon agreed syllabuses to this day. However, critics (including the present author) noted the limited choice that only two models gave and argued that there were also some potential problems with the syllabuses. The authors of *A Third Perspective* (Baumfield et al. 1994) criticised the model syllabuses for limiting the content to the six religions, arguing at least for the inclusion of non-religious or humanist perspectives, given the number of children from "non-religious" backgrounds (originally the Humanists had been asked to contribute to the models, but then it was decided to limit them to the "six" religions). Baumfield et al. (including the present author) also thought that the models prioritised the religious material over the interests and concerns of the pupil, with a rather "top-down" approach to learning. The way that the religious material was presented, in six separate "boxes", suggested that religions are completely self-contained rather than interacting with one another, and this perhaps

stresses differences rather than similarities. We argued that there is a value in looking at topics thematically across religions, as well as studying one religion at a time. We suggested organising religious material by seven categories, which we argued were not distorting of religious traditions. This is debated in Copley (1997: 179). The authors have recently published an editorial in the *British Journal of Religious Education* (Baumfield et al. 2014) looking back on 1994 and developments in the following 20 years.

Ten years later, in 2004, the ongoing quest to get religious education right was represented by the publication of *Religious Education, the Non-Statutory National Framework* (QCA 2004). This document was widely supported by both religious education professionals and faith community representatives. The authors of *A Third Perspective* were pleased to see that it allowed for the study of a wider range of religious traditions, specifically naming Zoroastrianism, Jainism and the Bahá'í Faith, as well as "secular philosophies such as humanism" (QCA 2004: 12). It also allowed for an approach through themes as well as through religions, to enable both breadth and depth of content. In a roundabout way, via the Somerset agreed syllabus, the seven categories in *A Third Perspective* contributed to the six areas of enquiry found in the attainment targets for religious education in the 2004 document.

The learning objectives were challenging. For example, pupils aged 11–13 will, among other outcomes, be able to "analyse and explain how religious beliefs and ideas are transmitted by people, texts and traditions", "investigate and explain why people belong to faith communities and explain the reasons for diversity in religion" and "apply a wide range of religious and philosophical vocabulary consistently and accurately, recognising both the power and limitations of language in expressing religious beliefs and ideas" (QCA 2004: 28). These could easily be acceptable as learning outcomes at university level.

Twenty years on from the model syllabuses, in October 2013, the Religious Education Council of England and Wales published *A Review of Religious Education in England*, a document that included both a *National Curriculum Framework for Religious Education* and *Religious Education: the Wider Context*, the latter a document that discusses opportunities and challenges for the future of religious education in England. Again, the *National Curriculum Framework* is non-statutory, as religious education continues to be organised at Local Authority level, but the guidance is presented to assist those writing syllabuses to ensure that religious education is fairly represented alongside the subjects of the English national curriculum. As the number of different types of school has grown in accordance with government policy, "those writing syllabuses" now includes the compilers of Local Authority agreed syllabuses, but also Church of England, Roman Catholic and other religious groups who write syllabuses for faith-based schools, and the increasing numbers of individual schools or groups of schools who are in categories, such as "Academies" and "Free Schools", which are allowed to write their own syllabuses. One rather shocking fact is that the Religious Education Council had to fund the *Review of Religious Education* itself from donations and grants from member organisations and charities and rely on voluntary unpaid work from individuals. No government

money was provided, unlike the case for other subjects. However, some expenses have subsequently been provided for further guidance materials, due out in 2015.

The main impetus for the Religious Education Council's document was that the other subjects in the school curriculum (which constitute the "national curriculum") were subject to a review with a new curriculum to start in September 2014. Writing the document also gave the "religious education community" the opportunity to address some of the problems facing the subject.

There have been some criticisms, inevitably, but the document produced is generally welcomed as at least demonstrating that religious education has a vital place in the school curriculum, and is not going away without a fight. The framework seeks to clarify the aims and purpose of religious education and establish it as a challenging, academic subject. The aims cover knowing and understanding a diverse range of religions and worldviews and the impact they have on individuals and societies, enabling students to make their own responses to the ultimate questions raised by religions and worldviews, and developing skills to engage seriously with religions and worldviews. Examples of possible content are given for different age groups. There is certainly a stress on the intellectual challenge of the subject and its contribution to enabling diverse communities to live together respectfully and peacefully, as well as pupils being able to develop their own views. There is still an ongoing controversy about the inclusion of "non-religious" worldviews alongside "religious" worldviews in the framework.

We have yet to see the impact of the document on syllabuses and thus on practice in the classroom, but perhaps just as influential as the *National Curriculum Framework* will be the questions raised in *The Wider Context* about how best to assure the future of religious education. It remains to be seen whether the "Purpose of Study" statement (Religious Education Council 2013: 14), which argues that the subject is about challenging questions, understanding religions and worldviews and developing one's own perspectives, or the more radically expressed (but not really so different) one proposed by Chater and Erricker (2013:143), which argues that the subject assists pupils to question the big ideas that shape our world, and make up their own minds about what needs to change, will resolve the issue of the rationale for religious education. As the introduction to the document itself says "The outcomes of the Review may fall short of perfection but they constitute a significant development of RE in England, far greater than the sum of their parts" (Religious Education Council 2013: 10). Not least, the "religious education community" has demonstrated its resilience and determination in spite of governmental neglect of the subject.

As part of the process leading up to the review, an "expert panel" set up by the REC consulted widely on the strengths and weaknesses of religious education in England as it stood in July 2012. Their findings about the strengths and weaknesses of religious education are summarised in an appendix to the review (Religious Education Council 2013). There have been a number of important recent reports, research projects and analyses of the "current state of religious education" including the three most recent reports from the inspection service, Ofsted (2007, 2010, 2013), the REC's report from 2007(Religious Education Council 2007), the All Party

Parliamentary Group's report 2013, the Glasgow University 3-year research project *Does Religious Education Work?* (Conroy et al. 2013) and a thought-provoking book by Chater and Erricker (2013). The summary that follow draws upon these sources, as well as the professional experience of the author and colleagues.

4.6 Strengths of English Religious Education

Among the strengths of English religious education are simply that we now have over 40 years of experience of teaching non-confessional, multi-faith religious education, something that is still a novel idea in many countries. In spite of problems, it does seem to achieve its aims at least to some extent in some places. In the words of Jim Conroy, summing up the research findings which attempted to answer the question "Does Religious Education Work?", "a heavily qualified yes" (Conroy 2011). Significantly, it does seem to be a subject that pupils enjoy and find interesting even if they do not always consider it to be as important as other subjects like science, English or history (Conroy et al. 2013: 210). Certainly, between the late 1990s and 2012 the number of students opting to take examinations at 16+ and 18+ continued to increase year on year (REC 2013: 30). It does seem demonstrably to have contributed to the multicultural awareness of pupils and thus social cohesion (Ofsted 2010: 47–49). Students often see religious education's main purpose as helping them to be prepared to live in a multi-religious society, even if teachers may have other ideas about developing critical thinking or personal spiritual development (Levitt and Muir 2014).

Over the decades, a variety of useful pedagogies have been developed (see above) which, although they might disagree over the philosophy of religious education, can actually all be mined by the skilled teacher for successful lesson techniques (pedagogies as methods rather than total approaches). The involvement of faith communities in organisations such as the RE Council, and at local level on each SACRE (Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education), which advises the Authority on religious education and convenes the body that agrees the local syllabus) means that the representation of religion is checked for "authenticity", at least according to some adherents, though there are those who think the religions have too much say (Chater and Erricker 2013: 93–24). Nevertheless, there are real strengths to the local organisation, in that it provides an opportunity for teachers and faith communities to work together at the local level, and maybe this process matters more than the end product of a syllabus.

The stress for several decades on an "enquiry" approach to the subject has given students abilities to enquire, discuss and reflect, which they can take with them into university study or the world of work (noted in Ofsted 2013: 10, but seen as insufficiently widespread). Religious education, because of the stress on pupils' reflecting on their own beliefs, values, customs and identity, makes a strong contribution to spiritual and moral education. English religious education has strong professional organisations such as NATRE (National Association of Teachers of RE) and AULRE

(Association of University Lecturers in Religion and Education). In the opinion of the present author, the inclusion of "non-religious" worldviews is a strength of English religious education, illustrating that the subject is not just for "religious" people, though not everyone would agree. Another strength of religious education is that it can be "counter-cultural" (Conroy 2011) and question some of the values implicit in the education system, for example that the point of education is to get qualifications to get a good job to get money which will bring happiness.

Although reading the research and reports mentioned above can be quite depressing, both for internal weaknesses and externally imposed constraints on the subject, the verdict of Chater and Erricker that religious education deserves to die if it does not transform itself (2013: 146) is somewhat melodramatic in the opinion of the present writer. Perhaps anecdotal rather than research evidence (but women's experience is a source of authority), I have met many enthusiastic and creative religious education teachers, as well as welcomed on to degree courses students who have been inspired by them, and whose skills at asking good questions about religious and other issues (commented on by outsiders to the subject) must reflect their school experiences. There are many examples of good practice to be found and emulated on sites such as that of the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE http://www.natre.org.uk/) and RE:ONLINE (http://www.reonline.org.uk/), examples that have been provided by English religious education teachers. The author is a judge for the annual "Hockerill Prize" (http://www.hockerillfoundation.org.uk/) awarded for excellence in religious education, and there is some impressive work out there. One suspects that when the inspectors, researchers and experts leave and the classroom door is shut, there is actually valuable religious education taking place.

4.7 Weaknesses of English Religious Education

Many of the problems faced by religious education in England, in the opinion of the present writer, result from external factors outside the control of religious education professionals. Much could be put right with investment in training. Religious education has long been seen as a "Cinderella subject" (apparently a phrase popularised as long ago as 1961 (Copley 1997:69)) with low status, a situation which persisted through the changes to a non-confessional, multi-faith subject, and continues to this day. Report after report has demonstrated that religious education receives the least funding and has the most unqualified teachers, the least time on the timetable, the least input in training for primary teachers (for children aged 5–11), and the fewest opportunities for continued professional development (see most recently APPG [2013], but also Gates [1993], 20 years earlier, and Religious Education Council [2007]). The current government and university establishment has dealt a number of blows to religious education which have exacerbated the situation. The subject was not included in the review of the school curriculum to be implemented in September 2014, necessitating the RE Council's initiative to do it ourselves. It was omitted

from the list of subjects (known as the "English Baccalaureate") considered important and on which schools will be judged. It was omitted from the list of subjects, called "facilitating subjects", which was published in order to help school students and their parents decide how best to position themselves for gaining a place at the most prestigious universities. There has been a cut in the number of places for training teachers for secondary schools, leading six universities to date to cease such courses. This has recently been reversed, but too late to affect these decisions. Most subjects receive varying amounts of bursaries to help towards training fees, and religious education received nothing. However, a piece of recent good news is that the bursary for religious education training will be restored from 2015 to 2016, perhaps a sign of improvement in the status of religious education more generally. Policies encouraging the creation of "academies" and "free schools" which are funded directly from central government have significantly reduced the number of schools using the locally agreed syllabus, and this together with other budget cuts for local government have affected the ability of local authorities to support the subject. Fairer funding could solve many of the problems of religious education. These "externally imposed" weaknesses are also discussed in Religious Education Council (2013), Ofsted (2013), and Chater and Erricker (2013).

However, the subject must also own up to some internal weaknesses. The strange position of religious education in the English curriculum—a compulsory subject but one that is not in the national curriculum (the idea of a national curriculum being introduced in 1988)—tends to lead to its neglect. In report after report (2010, 2013) Ofsted have suggested that the "existing settlement" or "statutory arrangements" for religious education be reviewed—in other words, that local organisation is not working, at least, not everywhere. The natural response would be to campaign for religious education to be included in the national curriculum. However, the "religious education community" is very divided on this one, not only out of self-interest. It is natural that those dealing with religious education nationally would find one syllabus more convenient, and that those who are on SACREs would prefer to keep their local role. The danger of a compulsory national syllabus is that we may not like what we get, and the decision-making power is centralised. The current arrangement may be messy, but perhaps healthier (see Hunt 2008). In any case, the relevance of the national curriculum is being weakened as it is not compulsory for the newer sorts of schools like academies and free schools. One perhaps fruitful suggestion to cut through the national versus local debate is that the subject could develop a layer of regional organisation (Religious Education Council 2013: 38), especially for the training of and support for teachers.

A major weakness of the subject is that it is often given a low priority, by parents and pupils as well as school managers and governments. The subject needs better marketing, to show that it is valuable for both life and employment as well as providing a critique of current societal values. In England, especially when compared with countries like Sweden and Denmark, the subject is particularly neglected for older students at the stages where they take public examinations. If not choosing the subject for an examination, often very little is provided by schools for 14- to 16 or 16- to 18-year-olds. Some research also suggests that those who do choose the

subject for examinations have their learning distorted by inadequate syllabuses, associated textbooks and the pressure on teachers to get students high grades (Conroy et al. 2013 Chap. 6). At time of writing, groups including the current author are working on revised criteria for examinations with the aim of improving standards.

Other weaknesses observed are poor-quality teaching of Christianity, assessment and standards compared to other subjects, and the expectation to achieve too much in terms of a huge variety of aims. This latter weakness is repeated by every researcher and commentator, most forcefully by Conroy et al. who list 13 major human concerns that religious education is expected to address (2013: 43–44). The subject is compulsory but parents can withdraw their children—a situation that can be seen as a weakness (for why would anyone want to withdraw their children from a non-confessional subject) or as a strength in that it avoids any challenges on human rights grounds as happened with compulsory religious education in Norway.

Chater and Erricker claim that religious education has a tendency to portray religions positively (2013: 71), rather than honestly and politically, which they see as a legacy of phenomenology and anthropology, whereas Conroy considers that the subject neglects "transcendence" and "fails to engage with the epistemic challenges of religion" (2013: 124). Both these challenges deserve further discussion.

4.8 What Can We Learn from Four Decades of Trying to Teach Non-confessional, Multi-faith Religious Education?

Some of the main lessons of the last four decades are as follows. Non-confessional, multi-faith "integrative" religious education is an increasingly crucial part of the education of anyone growing up in this plural and interconnected world. A lack of knowledge and skills in this area is literally dangerous (hence the interest of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which sponsored the *Toledo Guiding Principles* (Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe 2007)). The subject must be made relevant to all pupils, whether "religious" or "non-religious", liberal or conservative. The content should therefore include major faith traditions, smaller and newer traditions and non-religious worldviews as appropriate to the local setting. It should also include philosophical, ethical and social issues, particularly those that interest the pupils, but this should not take over completely from the study of religions, or vice versa. There should be space for pupils to develop their own beliefs, values, customs and identity, to gain a vocabulary and grammar with which to discuss religious and philosophical matters in an intelligent and informed way. Religions should not be sanitised, with only the attractive aspects presented, and there should be room for critical evaluation. It is not the role of the teacher to be an apologist for religion in general, or indeed for secular philosophies of life, any more than for one particular religious tradition. On the other hand,

critical evaluation should not be premature, and the attempt to empathise and understand, as well as to respect those who differ from oneself, should be encouraged.

It is vital for teachers to be clear about their aims and objectives, even though there will never be complete consensus as to what these are or how they should be balanced. At least some distinction between main aims and purposes and "side-effects" could be made. According to Chater and Erriker, individual teachers need to develop their own personal pedagogy, which is not just a teaching method but an "existential stance" (2013: 108).

Pupils should be enabled to interact and if possible dialogue with those from other religious backgrounds, via technology if necessary but ideally face to face, as nothing breaks down barriers more effectively. Public understanding of the subject needs to be improved. A change of name (to what?) might help, as "religion" has negative connotations for many and it is easy to see why outsiders might conclude that "religious education" is about being religious—especially when in some situations, such as faith-based schools, it is. Research in religious education needs to be made available to teachers, and teachers need to engage in their own research. Religious education needs funding just as much as other subjects and should not have to rely on charitable donations. Finally, I would argue that the most important resource in the whole enterprise is the teacher, the best of whom can provide "compelling learning experiences" whatever the policy, syllabus or lack of resources. I disagree with Chater and Erricker (2013) and agree with Ofsted (2013) that this needs to include subject knowledge—which does not mean "facts"—as well as concepts and pedagogy. So high-quality initial teacher training and continuing professional development—investing in people—is where I would concentrate any efforts and funding to improve religious education in England or anywhere else.

4.9 Note on February 2014–February 2016

The above account reflects the situation as of February 2014. In the 2 years since there have been a number of developments worth noting. The criteria for examinations at 16+ and 18+ have been released (DfE 2015a, b) and require students to study two religions at 16+ and chose three papers out of four topics (a religion, a religious text, philosophy of religion and ethics). Three important reports have been published (Clarke and Woodhead 2015; CORAB 2015; Dinham and Shaw 2015) which have highlighted the need to revisit the legal framework including parental right of withdrawal, and supporting a national curriculum for religious education. The inclusion of non-religious worldviews continues to be debated in the light of increasing numbers of people identifying as 'non-religious.' The Religious Education Council is to set up a Commission to enquire into the changes, legal and otherwise, required to improve the quality of religious education in England.

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