



Religion and worldviews in 1944 and 2021: a sociological analysis of religious education in two sociohistorical contexts

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Accepted: 4 September 2021 / Published online: 14 September 2021
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Abstract

Religious education was established as a compulsory curriculum requirement in all schools by the 1944 Education Act. It was intended to provide instruction to all pupils in the basic tenets of the Christian faith and ensure that every successive generation of pupils understood the role of Christianity in British history and the national sense of British identity. In examining the sociohistorical context in which this groundbreaking education act emerged it is evident that at that time religious education had a very clear purpose and unambiguous *raison d'être*. It was a key element in the socialisation process of children which familiarised them with the prevailing societal norms of behaviour, social values and dominant beliefs. By the second decade of the twenty-first century this certainty about a rationale for RE had been lost. Widespread confusion had developed about what the point of religious education actually was, and inspections of RE teaching revealed the subject to be in a parlous state (OFSTED in: *Religious education: realising the potential*, 2013; in: *School inspection handbook*, 2019). In 2016 the Religious Education Council of England and Wales established the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) in an attempt to bring some clarity back into the subject. In the years between 1944 and 2021 social norms, values and beliefs had changed significantly and consequently the world RE teachers were seeking to socialise children into was and is very different. The solution proposed by the CoRE is to concentrate on teaching 'worldviews' to prepare pupils to respect the diversity of beliefs in contemporary society. Far from saving the subject, however, this shift of focus can be seen in many ways which are explored in this paper to be more likely to hasten the end of RE as a curriculum subject and to accelerate its replacement by an enhanced form of citizenship education.

Keywords Socialisation · Worldviews · The dual system · Religious literacy · 1944 Education Act

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1 The 1944 Education Act

The subject of religious education owes its position on the school curriculum to the 1944 Education Act. In its time the 1944 Education Act was an extraordinary political achievement, creating a new post-war consensual framework for a more equitable system of schooling. For the first time ever primary and secondary education would be provided to all free of charge in England and Wales.

The historical context in which it emerged was not encouraging. There were the depression years of the 1930s and then World War in the 1940s. And throughout the years between the first and second world wars there had been bitter struggles over education and religion, painfully slow progress and a widespread view that publicly provided education was a drain on the Treasury.

In 1938 most children, approximately 80%, left school at 14 having only attended an all age elementary school in which class sizes of fifty were not unusual. The churches controlled over half of all the schools in the country, some 10,553, against the publicly provided sector number of 10,363 (Barber, 2000, p. 24). They were largely funded by historic trusts and local donations. Their managers were perpetually short of funds and the local education authorities had no power over them. Consequently many of them were in a dire state of repair and housed in inadequate and dilapidated buildings. As Jones (2013) observes, 'they were the epitome of low level mass education' (p. 18). The standards of educational achievement were generally low. It was found, for example, that a quarter of wartime conscripts were functionally illiterate (Barber, 2000, p. 4).

During the Second World War there emerged a widespread feeling that once it was over Britain should be a better place, a New Jerusalem, as a popular contemporary phrase had it.

This quasi religious sentiment is neatly summed up in the general view that 'a country worth dying for must also be worth living in—not merely for the fortunate few but for all citizens' (Simon, 1991, p. 35). It was hoped that there would be a more closely knit society reflecting the social solidarity of wartime. There had been an unprecedented mixing of social classes which had broken down the rigid social order. Mass evacuation of children to the countryside had revealed shocking levels of deprivation. The campaign for 'secondary education for all' emerged as a major part of this hope for a better world in the future. There was a positive spirit of optimism, and 'a passion for making social reconstruction plans seized the press, the politicians and the public' (Middleton & Weitzman, 1976, p. 207).

At the same time the Board of Education which had responsibility for public schooling found itself adopting a more interventionist role in national planning as a result of managing evacuation, bombing devastation and other problems associated with wartime. This set the scene for a move to a more recognisably national system of education.

2 The dual system

The division of responsibility between the churches and the public authorities was known as the Dual System and had been the subject of controversy for decades. The deplorable state of the non-provided voluntary sector, i.e. the church schools, was perceived to be a national disgrace. Middleton and Weitzman (1976) comment that

'children in voluntary schools were in general at a serious disadvantage as compared with those in council schools' p. 243.

The president of the National Union of Teachers, GCT Giles, referred to the church schools as 'pigsty schools' (quoted in Gillard, 2018).

However the task of resolving the problems of the Dual System was replete with intractable difficulties. Civil servants in the Board of Education anguished over means of channelling more public money into the church schools in a way which would be politically acceptable. As far back as the 1902 Balfour Education Act any idea of using public funds for church schools had provoked huge opposition, expressed for example in Lloyd George's phrase, '*Rome on the rates*', referring to taxpayer grants going to Catholic schools (Barber, 2000, p. 25).

And of course the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church were wary and suspicious of what they saw as state meddling in their schools. What they wanted was maximum state funding with minimum state interference (Barber, 2000, p. 24). In particular they did not want to hand over their buildings to the state. Dent (1942) observes that 'it is easy to appreciate the churches' concern that children shall be instructed in the Christian faith according to their particular tenets, but it is difficult for the impartial observer to reconcile the tender care they manifest for their children's souls with the disregard they exhibit for their bodies' (p. 24). And the Board of Education itself emphasised that 'the need for modernisation or replacement of much of the non-provided school accommodation for junior and infant children, a large number of whom are housed in conditions little short of scandalous, faces the churches with a financial problem greater in extent and no less urgent than that in respect of senior children, a problem which they have shown themselves quite unable to meet in recent years' (Board of Education, 1941, para 127).

And to complicate matters further the non-conformist churches, which had very few schools themselves, resented the idea of public money being spent on the promotion of the Anglican and Catholic religions. The churches also had legal advantages which brought negative consequences. The LEAs had no power to close church schools even where they had spare capacity to replace them. And at the same time the churches were free to open new schools even where the LEA was already able to accommodate adequately all the pupils in the area.

It had been clear for a long time that this state of affairs was quite unacceptable. As Dent (1942) notes (The Dual System) 'had caused persistent trouble ever since the State began to assume responsibility for public education, and time and again has wrecked promising schemes of reform' p. 24. The crisis of war accentuated this longstanding problem and created a strong political impetus for real change.

3 The role of RA Butler

Cometh the hour, cometh the man. Richard Austen Butler was an ambitious and politically astute young Conservative MP, whom the prime minister, Winston Churchill, had made president of the Board of Education in 1941. Butler understood that something radical had to be done, but knew also that it would have to be done carefully, diplomatically and skillfully. There were so many large and powerful opposing interests at stake. But he did have the advantage of cross party support in the wartime national government. And his deputy was James Chuter Ede, a Labour politician who was fully in support of what Butler was hoping to do. Barber (2000) contends that 'Chuter Ede's role in the passage of the 1944

Education Act can hardly be overstated. He complemented Butler perfectly.....Ede was meticulous, thorough and a safe pair of hands’.

During 1943 Butler famously spent a fateful weekend at Chequers where, after a lot of difficult debate and argument, he succeeded in persuading Churchill to support his far reaching proposals for a fundamental reform of schooling (Barber, 2000). This had not been an easy task. Churchill had been involved in the earlier wrangling over the Dual System and thought that too much time and attention spent on educational reform would distract from the war effort, cause controversy and upset the large number of conservative MPs on whose support he and his War Cabinet depended. In response to a letter from Butler, Churchill had written: ‘It would be the greatest mistake to raise the 1902 controversy during the war, and I certainly cannot contemplate a new education Bill’ (Middleton and Weitzman, 1976, p. 244). However Butler was a consummate politician and extremely persuasive, and Churchill eventually yielded. Later when the Education Bill had passed through Parliament Churchill sent Butler a telegram saying: ‘Pray accept my congratulations. You have added a notable act to the Statute Book and won a lasting place in the history of British Education. Winston S Churchill’ (quoted in Butler, 1971, p. 122).

4 Compulsory religious education and the 1944 settlement with the churches

Clearly one of the greatest problems Butler faced at the time was persuading the churches to support his plans. Given the control they exercised over half of the schools they were in a strong position. If they objected Butler knew that Churchill would not want any confrontation with them and this might then put his whole project at risk.

Butler effectively managed to buy the churches off by agreeing that the State would pay for their schools, including the cost of repairing many inadequate buildings. He gave the churches a choice between having voluntary controlled schools where they received more funding but less control and voluntary aided schools where they received less funding but had more control. And very significantly he also agreed to what they wanted in terms of religious education. The church schools would be allowed to determine the nature of their schools’ daily acts of worship and their syllabuses for religious instruction, albeit with an opt out right of withdrawal for any parents who might want it, and all local authority schools would be required to provide religious instruction in Christian belief.

Butler achieved what he had wanted: a national system of schooling, locally administered by local authorities originally established by the 1902 Education Act which would now have additional powers and be responsible for implementing the reforms. And the churches got what they wanted. They exchanged total control over education in their schools for more religious influence in all schools, and secured substantial state funding in the process.

But what is particularly noteworthy is that the Act said nothing about the school curriculum. It was silent on which subjects should be taught at any particular stage. Politicians of the time assumed it was not their place to make any determination on matters of curriculum and pedagogy. Teachers and individual schools were trusted to know what subjects should be taught. Broadly this was the so-called three R’s of reading, writing and arithmetic. They were free to design their own syllabuses and teach as they saw fit.

Religious education was the only compulsory curricular prescription for all age groups. The legislation specified that “the school day in every county school and in

every voluntary school shall begin with collective worship on the part of all pupils". And then every local education authority was to be responsible for drawing up "an agreed syllabus of religious instruction", which schools in its area would be required to follow. To help it in this process legal power was given to constitute a Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) the constitution of which was to 'reflect the principal religious traditions in the area'. This was an important compromise to prevent inter-denominational conflict over exactly what kind of Christianity children should be taught. The SACREs later became permanent bodies with legal powers as part of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Prima facie it does seem extraordinary that a government should introduce radical educational change but specify nothing about what pupils should be taught, only which religion they should be inducted into. The politicians of the time reflected the society around them. Britain was an overwhelmingly Christian country with an established church whose supreme governor had always been the reigning monarch. There was a clear general expectation that children should be brought up in the Christian faith and that the ethics and morals taught in schools should be Christian ones. The Church of England was perceived as the bastion of national ethical values to which it was the duty of loyal subjects to give assent. Being Christian, or at least professing to be, was part of British national identity. The only legally specified job of schools, both Church schools and LEA schools, was to give instruction in Christian doctrine. As Green (2000) observes, '(the 1944 Act) was a measure of avowedly Christian stewardship: advanced by a Christian minister, passed by a Christian parliament, directed towards the goal of creating a truly Christian population' p. 149. In 1940 *The Times* newspaper had declared that 'The future of religious education involves the future of the national life and character. And Sir Fred Clarke, the influential Director of the University of London Institute of Education, had written:

the aim of all education is the attainment of a right understanding of the eternal and the expression of that understanding in and through the ways of common life (Clarke, 1943).

This neatly summarises a common view of the time, that education should be a preparation for the next life as well as this one, because the nation at the time broadly accepted the Christian perspective on its life and destiny. It is in this context that compulsory religious education can be understood as of such national importance.

In planning their religious instruction LEA schools were expected to follow the agreed syllabus of religious instruction, and church schools to follow their own religious syllabus. The aim was to produce the next generation of Christians, and the teaching was expected to be confessional and doctrinal. Kate Christopher comments that 'from the beginning, academic expectations were not set. RE was never an academic or critical intellectual project. The original aim of Religious Instruction was to nurture children into Christianity' (in Chater, 2020, p. 85.)

In this sense in 1944 religious education had an obvious and clear *raison d'être*. It was to ensure that each successive cohort of pupils understood and believed the dogmas of the Christian religion as part of their overall understanding of who they and their nation were. Although it was called religious instruction it is arguable that in fact it was in essence a process of socialisation, preparing children to live in a society where everyone was assumed to know the Lord's Prayer, to be familiar with Bible stories, to believe in the divinity of Christ, and to accept that all social life should be governed by the ethical teachings of Christianity, a process of initiating children into a national identity based on a very specific theological ideology.

5 Religion and worldviews 2018

Over subsequent decades however this certainty about the purpose of religious education was lost. Perceptions of the Church of England changed and the question of national identity became much more complex. Without these two underpinning supports a clear rationale for religious education became difficult to establish. There have been many attempts to suggest alternative rationales for its continuance but none have commanded universal approval. For many years there has been deep uncertainty about exactly what RE is for. Brine and Chater comment:

Historically the position of RE within the curriculum has been sustained by its legal position rather than a robust educational rationale or connection to a recognised intellectual discipline. The past 25 years have seen a determined but ultimately failed, attempt to create a credible basis for its position in the curriculum (in Chater, 2020, p. 27).

By the second decade of the twenty-first century there was real and generalised unease about the state of religious education. OFSTED inspections of the subject revealed it to be in a very poor condition. In their major 2013 report entitled 'Religious Education: Realising the Potential' they observed that in the schools they inspected RE teaching was found to be less than good in 60% of primary schools and 50% of secondary schools. They identified eight serious problems characterising the teaching of RE at the time: low standards of pupil achievement, weak teaching, problems in developing a curriculum for RE, confusion about the purpose of RE, weak leadership and management, weaknesses in examination provision at Key Stage 4, gaps in teacher training, negative impact of recent changes in education policy. And crucially they reported that amongst teachers there was widespread uncertainty about the rationale for, and the aims and purposes of, RE. Similarly Clarke and Woodhead (2018) noted that 'Even where RE is well resourced and supported by the headteacher, it is burdened by outdated legislation and other impediments' p. 5. And the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (2018) published research showing that over a quarter of secondary schools reported in 2018 that they provided no dedicated curriculum for the subject.

In 2016 the Religious Education Council of England and Wales established the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) to 'review the legal, education and policy frameworks for religious education'. Reflecting this concern, the Dean of Westminster, Dr John Hall, who chaired the commission, wrote in the forward to the final report published in 2018 '*RE has significantly changed its approach in response to the changing nature of society*'. He declared that a new vision for RE was needed '*if it is not to wither on the vine*'. This new vision is summed up in the phrase 'Religion and Worldviews' which is to replace the term 'religious education'. Children, he writes, now need to be prepared '*for a world of great religion and belief diversity*'. This appears to be tantamount to an admission that RE has no internal disciplinary structure and coherence but is simply a part of the ongoing processes of socialisation in society. Its changes are not its own, but are rather entirely determined by changes in the nature of the enviroing society.

Considering these changes between 1944 and 2021 it could said that RE in the 1940s essentially said to children 'you must assent to the Christian worldview because it is the only truth'; whereas in the 2020s RE says to children 'you must respect each person's different worldview because it is true for them'. It is difficult to imagine any other subject on the school curriculum performing such a complete volte face. The teaching of mathematics,

history, or physics are recognisably similar in the two sociohistorical contexts. The overall aims of each are the same through time. Changes that have occurred are largely the result of developments internal to each subject. Not so for RE. The CoRE report can be read as a formal recognition of this fact. It specifically states that *'in an increasingly diverse society understanding religious and non-religious worldviews has never been more essential than it is now'* p. 5.

The use of the word 'worldviews' is itself revealing. The report explains that it is taken from the German 'Weltanschauung' meaning *'a person's way of understanding, experiencing and responding to the world'*. In the executive summary the Report explains that it is the school's responsibility to help each individual pupil to *'understand, reflect on and develop their own personal worldview'*. This proposal is highly significant. The job of the RE teacher now is not to induct pupils into a religion, not even mainly to teach them about the variety of religions that other people believe in, but rather to focus on helping them to formulate their own individual credo and conception of reality which they can then expect everybody else to respect. And this credo is to be based very much more on the world of here and now and how people relate to one another rather than on questions of ultimate significance and meaning.

It is arguable that the CoRE report is a response to the widespread perception that RE as a distinct subject on the school curriculum really is now disintegrating and in the process of disappearing. In the introduction to his book 'Reforming RE' Mark Chater writes of the 'fall' of RE as *'a gathering collapse of its presence in schools, an already weak intellectual credibility, and a completely outmoded legal basis. Nothing less than a full recognition of this fall - nothing less than a resolution to leave the imagined landscape behind us - will serve. It is a death'* (p.19). In his comment on the cover of the same book, Professor Trevor Cooling, Chair of the Religious Education Council of England and Wales talks of the *'real possibility that it will shrivel away'*.

6 The future of RE hangs in the balance

The fundamental thesis of the CoRE report is that RE can be saved by concentrating on teaching children about the diversity of human worldviews. But there are a number of reasons to doubt the validity of this thesis. Firstly, curriculum content which teaches worldviews already exists in other subjects such as history, literature, languages, social studies, sociology and philosophy. Indeed the Report itself points out that *'at school level the study of worldviews is inherently multidisciplinary'* (p37 no 45 e). It seems self-evident that if it is multidisciplinary and already covered by other subjects the question will inevitably be more and more raised: what is the point of RE?

Secondly, the proposed skills which the CoRE report suggests the study of 'Religion and Worldviews' will develop have nothing specifically to do with religion, for example:

analysing a range of primary and secondary sources, understanding symbolic language, using technical terminology effectively, interpreting meaning and significance, empathy, respectful critique of beliefs and stereotypes, and representing views other than one's own with accuracy'. (p. 29 point 30), and 'teaching must promote openness, respect for others, objectivity, scholarly activity and critical enquiry p. 13.

These are generic skills of great importance but are not inherently religion related. They are already being taught and there is no necessity for RE to replicate them.

As for the suggested content of the proposed national entitlement, here too it is far from clear that there is much uniqueness to be claimed for a subject called RE. The Report determines that pupils must be taught:

that worldviews are complex, diverse and plural (p. 12 no 2).

the ways in which patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times (p. 12 no 4).

the different roles that worldviews play in providing people with ways of making sense of their lives (p. 34 no 6).

The whole emphasis behind these proposals is on helping pupils to understand difference and diversity and to respect other people in all their variety. In 1944 when national identity was organised around a monocultural collective belief in Christianity it was necessary for RE to be about Christian theology and doctrine; in 2021 when national identity is based on pride in Britain as a diverse multicultural and multiethnic society with a huge variety of beliefs, religious practices, languages and ways of life then RE needs to be about the sociological understanding of difference. It is as if in 1944 the State said to the child 'you must believe these theological dogmas'; but in 2021 the State says to the child 'you must respect people's differences'. The most important thing pupils in school in 1944 had to know was that Christ was their saviour; in 2021 the most important thing they need to know is the supreme significance of equality and respectfulness towards diversity. So while RE in 1944 was based on theological propositions about the divine, RE in 2021 is based on seeking to inculcate an appreciation and valuing of individual and group differences.

7 Curricular territory already colonised

The major problem for RE now, however, is that this territory is already well covered not only by other subjects but also by other established curriculum requirements. These existing curriculum elements are already providing much of what the CoRE report proposes that RE should now do. The requirement on schools to teach spiritual, moral, social and cultural education (SMSC) is one example. The OFSTED School Inspection Handbook (2019) refers to this requirement developing pupils' ability to:

- Be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life.
- Know about and have respect for different people's faiths, feelings and values.
- Show interest in investigating and offering reasoned views about moral and ethical issues, and ability to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of others on these issues.
- Appreciate the range of different cultures in their school.

Similarly the requirement to teach Fundamental British Values (FBV) also includes an emphasis on engendering mutual respect. And a comparable stress on tolerance, respect and multicultural values is evident in the requirements for personal, social, health and economic education (PSHE) and relationships and sex education (RSE). It appears that the field that the CoRE report wants to take RE into appears already somewhat crowded. And if RE is simply reproducing what is already provided many may be again prompted to ask what is the point of the subject?

8 Civic education in secular countries

The significance of this question is underlined when considered in the light of the situation in other avowedly secular education systems with no history of RE. They too are vitally concerned with teaching their pupils about social justice and diversity. In France, for example, lessons in *éducation civique et morale* are expected to offer *'un temps d'apprentissage et de réflexion sur ce qui fonde la relation à l'autre dans une société démocratique'*—a time of reflection on the basis for one's relationship to others in a democratic society.

Such lessons are expected to develop such skills as:

'savoir exercer son jugement et l'inscrire dans une recherche de vérité; être capable de mettre à distance ses propres opinions et représentations, comprendre le sens de la complexité des choses, être capable de considérer les autres dans leur diversité et leurs différences'—to know how to exercise one's judgement and incorporate it into a search for the truth; to be capable of setting aside one's own opinions and beliefs, to understand the meaning of the complexity of things, to be capable of appreciating others in their diversity and in their differences.

's'exprimer en public de manière claire, argumentée, nuancée et posée; savoir écouter et apprendre à débattre; respecter la diversité des points de vue'—to express oneself in public in a manner which is clear, reasoned, nuanced and considered; to know how to listen and to learn to debate; to respect the diversity of different points of view.

All of these declarations are taken from official guidance to French schools issued in 2019 (Bulletin Officiel de L'Éducation Nationale spe 572 annexe 1). These skills parallel remarkably closely the skills intended to be developed as described in the quotes above from the CoRE report.

On this basis it is arguable that in its curriculum for civic and moral education the secular French education system is doing more or less exactly what the CoRE Report argues should be the focus of religious education in England and Wales. Moreover the French curriculum is explicitly taught without reference to anything specifically religious or theological because the tradition in France is that state education from its inception in the nineteenth century should be *gratuite, laïque et obligatoire*, ie free, secular and compulsory with religion(s) perceived as a divisive issue to be avoided. It seems ironic that the CoRE Report should seek to rescue RE by copying a specifically non-religious programme of civic education. The aim of RE according to the CoRE Report is the same as the French aim: to teach respect for others in their difference and diversity. The moral objective espoused by both is identical.

9 Religious Literacy

As noted earlier, the Commission on Religious Education continue to think that as well as teaching the current morality centred on diversity it is helpful in achieving this aim to spend curriculum time describing to pupils the particularities of a variety of differing religious (and non-religious) beliefs and practices. This is a form of religious literacy, a term which has been much used in discussions about RE in recent decades, but about the meaning of which there is no real agreement. A frequently used definition, although not one that is universally accepted, is that of Diane Moore (2015): 'a basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary

manifestations of several of the world's religious traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts...and...the ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place'. Adam Dinham (2016) describes religious literacy more concisely as:

a degree of general knowledge about at least some religious traditions and beliefs....and the confidence to find out about others.

But the most important question now about the claimed value of religious literacy appears to be: is it really necessary to know the intricate details of other religious groups' conceptions of the world in order to understand the principle that people should be respected whatever they believe?

If the main aim now is that pupils should learn to value and respect human diversity the most important thing for them surely to understand is that they should have respect for other people because they share their humanity and, in the school context, also their citizenship and national identity. The moral principle of respect for diversity is based only on shared humanity and citizenship and not on understanding every detail of a group or a person's worldview, which in any case is obviously an impossible task.

Indeed it is arguable that presenting children with the details of religious (and non-religious) convictions can be positively unhelpful and counter-productive. Many religions (and political ideologies) have a lamentable record on treating particular groups and individuals with prejudice, discrimination and cruelty. And in many parts of the world where such religions and ideologies continue to exercise power they still do. Any child being taught about the doctrines behind the treatment of women, gay people or free-thinkers for example, in such countries is at risk of developing a profound feeling of negativity towards the followers of the religion which espouses them. And this is obviously unhelpful to the main aim. In discussing such 'abusive theologies' Chater (2020) writes 'in RE if we ask young people to respect any religion which has abusive theologies, reactionary positions on human rights or unquestioned authority structures; if we invite young people to spiritualise abusive material; if we overlook abusive stories as untypical of the 'true heart' of a religion; then surely we risk complicity', p. 76.

And even if the teaching of religions and ideologies advocated by the Commission on Religious Education does not lead children to view particular ones negatively the question still has to be asked: what is the point? They do not need this information to understand the morality they must now embrace. It is also important to note that the British society in which pupils will live out their adult lives is one in which the majority of people now report that they have 'no religion'. Linda Woodhead (2016) has described this situation as 'the emergence of a cultural majority'. This is especially the case amongst the young, of whom 70% no longer identify or engage with religion personally (Woodhead, 2017). It is arguable therefore that pupils' attention should be drawn not to the diverse array of competing religious claims about the nature of the universe but rather to the truth that most people live secular lives. Time is hugely pressured in the modern curriculum. There are so many legitimate demands based on things which it is absolutely essential for pupils to know, understand and be able to do in the contemporary world. It seems likely that the religious literacy component of RE will come under increasing pressure because it looks like a waste of precious curricular bandwidth.

10 Conclusion

This paper has sought to portray the very divergent forms that RE has taken in two socio-historical contexts: Britain in the 1940s and in the 2020s. From this analysis two clear findings emerge:

- (A) RE as a subject does not have any internal disciplinary coherence;
- (B) RE in the present situation is in terminal decline.

Religious education is approaching its inexorable end for several important reasons:

1. it has no agreed defined *raison d'être* or clear purpose;
2. there is no longer any generally accepted religious perspective for it to teach;
3. it has no internal logic or methodology but is a process of socialisation into a national identity which changes as social and cultural attitudes, values and beliefs change;
4. it is now replicating what is already being done in other subject areas and by other statutory curriculum requirements;
5. it continues to exist only because of outdated legislation from more than seventy-five years ago;
6. there is no need for children to spend time studying the particularities of a diverse array of religious and non-religious beliefs;
7. the majority religious position in the UK now is 'no religion';
8. the most important thing for children now is to be prepared for the rights and duties of their future roles as citizens, not to spend time studying other-worldly theological concerns.

As far back as 1973 Lawson and Silver observed:

the nature of religious instruction was to be the subject of constant discussion; very often it came to be barely distinguishable from civics or general or social studies p. 419.

The main conclusion of this paper is that this is exactly the position that RE still languishes in but its place on the curriculum is even more vulnerable now because the case for its continuance has weakened yet further and there are so many more immediate and pressing demands on time in schools. Some schools are struggling to provide RE as required by law and generally the quality of teaching is poor. The CoRE Report's recommendation of a switch of focus towards the teaching of 'worldviews' is likely only to hasten the subject's demise, and its eventual replacement by an enhanced form of secular citizenship education.

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