

Dear Editor

I found David Edgington's review of Penny Thompson's book *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* featured in the Autumn 2004 edition of *ACT Now* a little confusing and even disturbing. Whilst David Edgington describes the purpose and scope of the book reasonably accurately, he seems to have totally missed the implications of the depth and rigour of the critique that Penny offers to Christian thinkers about RE.

He says he agrees with Penny's thesis but argues for an acceptance of current RE practice by Christian RE teachers, whose Christianity is expressed merely in their 'salt and light' presence. He appears to abdicate his Christian responsibility to think Christianly about RE teaching by saying that 'what I taught was determined for me'.

It is unfortunate that he describes her position as 'confessional'. This word has almost become a pejorative term in the RE field following its invention and usage by the influential RE *Schools Council Paper 36* in the 1970s. 'Confessional Christianity' has almost become code for 'evangelism' which is not what Penny is advocating.

David Edgington seems to suggest that Penny is advocating 'teaching only about Christianity' according to a syllabus 'limited to my own faith'. This is certainly not what Penny advocates. She raises legitimate concerns about introducing children to other faiths before they have had a firm grounding in one. She argues powerfully that other faiths are *better* understood from the secure standpoint of one faith at a later stage in a student's development when they are more fully equipped to understand and evaluate. In our culture and tradition, that faith would most naturally be Christianity.

He quotes his own experience in the local multi-faith environments of Watford and Slough. It would seem he did not read carefully enough Penny Thompson's analysis of the legislators' intentions when they

devised the 1988 Education Reform Act. She persuasively reveals that the intention of the Act was to allow local determination of RE to reflect such multi-faith situations. However, the wording used in the legislation, as opposed to its clear intention, was used by RE professionals to drive through the multi-faith RE agenda throughout the whole of England and Wales.

It is one thing to acknowledge that our society is more secular. It is another thing to accept a pedagogy that has embraced secular humanism as its undergirding philosophy. Penny documents the relentless programme, under the guise of 'professional RE', employed by humanists since the 1960s to replace a Christian based RE. Thoughtful Christian approaches to RE were systematically airbrushed out. The total sidelining of the most thorough report on RE in the last 50 years, the Church of England's *The Fourth R*, published only one year before the *Schools Council Paper 36*, is just one example among many cited. Some brave Christian educators tried to maintain a rearguard but the climate was distinctly hostile.

David Edgington makes no mention of Penny Thompson's critique of the two current standard RE attainment targets 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' which are at the heart of most current RE practice. Among many points Penny makes, she argues:

- Other religions actually become subtly re-interpreted and domesticated to a western world-view. In RE we are not so much 'learning about Hinduism' as 'learning about our western interpretation and understanding of Hinduism.' We basically kid ourselves that we are learning about other faiths.
- Because the stance of the RE teacher is deemed to be neutral and no one faith is to be *commended* over another then effectively what is happening in the classroom is *induction into agnosticism*. As far as the student is concerned the importance and relevance of the 'living' religions studied is on a par with the religions of the Babylonians, Aztecs or Romans.
- 'Learning from Religion' as illustrated by QCA, becomes an exercise in '*personal religion making*'. Because the choices of the individual are sacrosanct they become elevated to the point where, logically, the religion of Jedi Knights must be regarded as of equal validity and worth as Christianity or Judaism. The

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wisdom of ages, to say nothing of divine revelation, is submitted to the ultimate sound bite – the opinion of a teenager.

Penny Thompson's views are controversial, well researched and challenging and deserve a more thoroughgoing critique. It would be good to hear from others who may disagree with her conclusions.

Finally, I want to express sympathy with David Edgington as he has to grapple daily with the issues in the pressure cooker of the RE classroom. I did this for nearly 20 years in the 1970s and 1980s. Penny's book recalls vividly the journey of RE in those seminal decades. I admit that for those years I adopted virtually the same position as David. As a Christian I felt ill equipped to confront the humanistic tide: a tide that was hugely persuasive and plausible. George Oliver's *Ten tips for Christian RE tight rope walkers* were immensely helpful, but still

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left a residual discomfort and a feeling of living a compromise.

It is only since leaving teaching and, in particular since coming across Penny's research, that I have begun to understand more clearly the nature of the compromise. As a SACRE representative I now try to articulate an alternative to the current RE paradigm. I am personally grateful to Penny Thompson for her brave stance.

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Dear Editor

I am writing to let *ACT Now* readers know about an exciting new initiative from the Relationships Foundation, a charity which seeks to promote a relational society from a Christian standpoint. The initiative is called *Keep Time for Children*. It aims to highlight the fact that while weekend working is often the result of consumer choice, it leaves little choice to those who work at weekends, because it unjustly separates them from their children. *Keep Time for Children* seeks to enable parents of school age children to have a working week where at least one weekend day can be shared with their children.

New findings from the National Centre for Social Research, commissioned by *Keep Time for Children*, reveal that around 1.4 million parents are working regularly through the whole weekend and over 2.5 million families are affected by a parent working regularly over the weekend. All the evidence shows that weekend working is having an adverse effect on families across the UK, particularly on disadvantaged households. Sarah Jackson, Chief Executive of Working Families, says, 'Low-waged parents are particularly vulnerable to work at weekends. They simply can't afford to lose their job, and often can't risk arguing for working hours which will let them spend time with their family'.

Keep Time for Children is active on a number of fronts: to promote new research into the issues, to campaign for changes in public policy to allow parents the choice not to work on both weekend days and to provide advice and support for parents living with these concerns.

I would like to invite all *ACT Now* readers to prayerfully support *Keep Time for Children* as it:

- challenges employers and government to begin to safeguard the crucially important time children share with their parent or carer
- takes practical measures to support parents in giving priority to their children, particularly at weekends so that the family can spend time together.

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