



## notes in the post

### Dear Editor

Kathleen Wood, Education Officer for the Methodist Church, put forward a well argued plea for a national syllabus for Religious Education in England in the last edition of *ACT Now*.

Certainly a national syllabus would offer advantages over the present locally agreed syllabuses. It would be easier for teacher trainers to prepare students for teaching RE and for progress to be maintained at KS3 since all children, in theory, would have covered the same ground. It would reduce the cost incurred by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) which have to carry out a review of the syllabus every five years. But these are not RE's most intractable problems, and, as Wood herself suggests, can be addressed within the present system.

Wood's main argument for change is that the agreed syllabuses are, in general, not good enough (even though the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA] states that many syllabuses are good). The problem of poor syllabuses could be resolved under the present system. Where an LEA has appointed an RE Adviser the locally agreed syllabus is likely to be good. The answer therefore is for LEAs to appoint RE Advisers and not to make them redundant once the syllabus is written! It would also be possible for Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools (HMI) to assess syllabuses and recommend reviews. This would require a change to current legislation.

Towards the end of her article, Wood alludes to two problems which may be less easy to resolve within the present system. Firstly, current legislation requires that syllabus conferences should have representation only from faith groups present in the locality, a fact which leads to many syllabuses reflecting local, rather than national or global realities. Secondly, the conscience clause still exists, which she views as an anachronism. She then goes on to ask what sort of RE we would look for, were we to start with a blank sheet.

Her aims are set out as outcomes of the teaching process ('what we might hope to achieve for our young people').

- *Pupils are to have an understanding of how and why religious and non-religious world-views impact on society and individuals.* It is unclear exactly

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what is meant here by 'an understanding'. A Marxist understanding would be very different from a Freudian, a Muslim from a humanist and so on. Furthermore, the statement gives no indication *which* world-views, how many and in what proportion. These are very important decisions which a national syllabus would need to address. Pupils are to learn about religions because of their impact rather than because of their intrinsic worth or importance as claims about reality. This could turn into a sociological or cultural study.

- *Pupils are to be taught that people are entitled to differ in their beliefs.* There is an element of unreality about this aim. Who actually says this? Not the Athanasian creed which is notably intolerant of divergent beliefs. Modern day creeds are equally intolerant. Are people entitled to differ in their beliefs about democracy, racism, the freedom of the press, gender discrimination...? It seems to me that what lies behind this aim is the view that people may differ in unimportant matters such as religious beliefs. Pupils are being taught that religion is not a matter upon which anything serious turns. It does not matter what you think. As Wood puts it, pupils are to learn to articulate their beliefs, and listen to others doing similarly. Does this mean that pupils may express any opinion at all? It would be important to help pupils to understand that, at the very least, an opinion based on ignorance is likely to be wrong.
- *Pupils are to respect those with different moral codes.* This aim is similar to the previous one, except it concerns codes of behaviour rather than beliefs. It is doubtless right to accord all human beings respect, *qua* human beings. But it is self-evidently not right to require children to respect moral codes just because certain human beings happen to live by them. It would be more useful to teach children that certain moral codes are evil and have led to genocide, torture of the innocent and suicide bombing.
- *Pupils are to participate in debates on ethical, scientific and political issues where religion is a factor.* This would seem to be an important aspiration

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continued on page 13

and we certainly need well informed citizens who can engage usefully in debating such matters. But the focus of this aim is not religious or even non-religious beliefs. Once more religion is marginal to the real issues in life, ethics, science and politics. The idea that ethics, science and politics might need to come under the critique of a religious voice is notably absent.

This is hardly a radical rethink of Religious Education and hardly a recipe for exciting, engaged teaching. Wood admits that these aspirations are not those espoused by the 1944 Education Act. Archbishop Temple will be turning in his grave, not because aspirations have changed, but because of the nature of the aspirations recommended here. They are a repetition of current liberal secularism and its paucity of ideas. Anyone reading Wood's article would certainly consider that citizenship can cover the ground more than adequately (once one has turned the RE teachers into citizenship specialists). In my opinion, it represents a capitulation and heralds the demise of *religious* education.

In a recent speech to academics and religious leaders at 10 Downing Street, the present

Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams set out, quite brilliantly, the dangers that beset RE. He asked us to be suspicious of an approach to RE that subjects great religious traditions to the untutored scrutiny of immature pupils, rather as if there were a default position to be attained, whereby the human mind is poised to decide upon its values. He called such a position a 'dangerous fiction' since it has forgotten the darker side of human nature. He argued that we should be suspicious of attempts to turn RE into a 'therapy for religious unreason'. In this scenario the task of the (secular) educational system is to put a question mark over religious beliefs. All religions, not just Christianity, are domesticated as secularism is allowed, once more, to reign over us. Kathleen Wood's approach is, unwittingly, entrenching all the wrong thinking in RE that abounds.

Yours sincerely

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