

A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools – Charles Clarke & Linda Woodhead

The publication draws on the collaboration of Professors Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead at Lancaster University, where Charles Clarke has been Visiting Professor in Politics and Faith since 2010, and where Professor Woodhead directed Britain's largest ever research programme on religion and society. Charles Clarke has been an advocate for RE ever since he was Secretary of State for Education and was invited to attend a Standing Advisory Council of RE meeting. He reckoned that SACREs were such a good idea that every subject should have one. On his watch, the subject flourished. All the gains that we had made were swept away by Michael Gove's inept 'reforms'

Linda Woodhead is loathed by many church people because she is an acute observer who tells truths that they don't want to hear.

18 policy recommendations are made, covering the act of collective worship, the content and formation of the legally required RE curriculum and the operation of faith schools. The report also calls for a strengthening of the inspection regime to ensure that all schools, faith or otherwise, "contribute to the promotion of community cohesion".

The Government and media don't understand enough about role of religion in public life. The statutory requirement is more important now. The world has changed since 1944 Education Act – the SACRE framework is no longer fit for purpose. With our global community, local syllabuses don't make sense. There is insufficient support which is crippling effectiveness. SACRE should extend to faith and independent schools. There should be more involvement of local faith communities in schools. Include non religious stances too. RE – change the subject's name but that would be a can of worms. KS4 is most relevant when teenagers are questioning. There was a lost opportunity to integrate its structure as recommended by Tomlinson Report. Community cohesion should be put back into the OFSTED framework. The right to withdraw is outmoded – though it clashes with European rights of child.

The report tackles the role of faith schools. It recognises there is a legitimate question of whether such schools should be publicly funded, balancing it against the equally legitimate question of the rights of parents to choose a school that reflects their faith values. The authors conclude that there is a strong public desire for faith schools which means abolition is not an option, however they could be better.

The report recommends that faith schools improve their admissions policies to ensure they are fairer, whilst also reviewing recruitment practices.

This has been welcomed by humanists and by many faith communities including the Roman Catholic Church though disliked by some traditionalists.

Rev Nigel Genders, Church of England education chief, said: “The Church continues to be committed to the provision of high quality RE in schools which is vital for a balanced understanding of the world today where more than 80 per cent of the population are people of faith. The Church strongly supports the statutory requirement for collective worship in all schools and there is plenty of flexibility in the provision to enable all pupils to benefit without compromising their faith or lack of it. Where there are real objections it is a parent’s right to withdraw their child from worship, and the very few who take up that right demonstrates that schools have found exciting and creative ways of using collective worship to further children’s spiritual and moral development. There is no expectation of commitment and the exposure to the range of religious traditions encourages community cohesion.”

Rabbi Dr Jonathan Romain, chairman of the Accord Coalition for inclusive education, said: “Collective worship belongs to a previous century when everyone was religious and everyone was the same religion, but not in multi-faith Britain today, and it is unfair to make children of one faith, or no faith, sit through worship of another faith every day.

“Collective worship also confuses the role of schools, which are to educate and be objective, and the role of churches, synagogues or mosques, which are confessional and subjective. Faith should come from the home, family and places of worship, but not from the school system, where knowledge and values should be the only task.

“However, changing school assemblies to a more inclusive role and concentrating on shared values is not sufficient; it should be accompanied by making RE itself broad-based too, so that children of different faiths learn about each other’s traditions and it encourages social cohesion.”

Keith Porteous Wood of the National Secular Society said: “England and Wales are the only countries in the world to require a daily act of mainly Christian worship in every maintained school, and the National Secular Society has been advocating its removal for decades. The removal is long overdue, the religious landscape of England and Wales has changed out of all recognition since the requirement was brought in 70 years ago. The majority of pupils and their parents are no longer practising Christians, so forced worship is increasingly irrelevant and divisive; the state should not be imposing religion on unwilling pupils. Assemblies should focus on ethical issues in a way that better involves all pupils equally.

“Although there is a statutory right of withdrawal from Collective Worship, parents are reluctant to exercise it because doing so marks children out as different.

“We welcome reform of religious education and it being centrally determined rather than by local religious representatives. An even more fundamental review is needed, and probably a change of subject name, to recognise that the emphasis should be on wider philosophy and thinking skills, and perhaps also citizenship and cohesion.”

“The Catholic Education Service welcomes the Westminster Faith Debates report *A New Settlement: Religion and Belief in Schools* as an important contribution to the debate on the place of religion in schools. The report acknowledges the important role

which Church schools play in the public sector and supports Catholic parents' right to send their children to Catholic schools.

“We welcome the report’s support for the admission and employment criteria in Catholic schools. Catholic schools serve first and foremost the Catholic community, reflecting the vast contribution that the community makes in terms of their provision and ownership of the land and school buildings, financial contributions and support given by parents and governors.

“The purpose of Religious Education (RE) in Catholic schools differs from that of community schools. RE is at the core of a Catholic school and must make up 10% of curriculum time. Catholic RE equips students with the skills to discern and deepen their faith and teach them about the faiths of other religious communities in order to respect and understand them. Regular Diocesan inspections of this curriculum holds Catholic schools publicly accountable.

“Given the distinctive nature of RE in Catholic schools, any national RE curriculum would not fulfil the purposes of RE in both Catholic and community schools. Catholic schools will continue to follow the RE curriculum as set out by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales.”