

CHALLENGING SACRES

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Thank you, it is a great pleasure to be here, and to be able to celebrate twenty years of NASACRE with many dear and esteemed RE colleagues in this time of challenge and austerity.

We have heard Ofsted's evidence about RE. What follows from me is an interpretation of the evidence. You're either going to love this, or hate it. I was asked to be challenging.

We all remember those jokes about definitions of socialism, capitalism and so on, all beginning 'you have two cows.' The normal example is: '[Traditional capitalism: You have two cows. You sell one and buy a bull. Your herd multiplies, and the economy grows. You sell them and retire on the income.] Here is a topical one that I received the other day:

RBS venture capitalism: You have two cows. You sell three of them to your publicly listed company, using letters of credit opened by your brother in law. Then you execute a debt/equity swap so that you get all four cows back, with a tax exemption for five cows. The milk rights of the six cows are transferred via an intermediary in the Cayman Islands... and it goes on like this, ending: The public then buys your bull.

What, I wonder, might be the RE and SACRE equivalent to this? You have 152 cows. The government takes away your pasture land and says the milk is no longer wanted.

The economic crisis is never very far away from us, or from our thoughts; and part of what I'm going to say about SACREs is in that context of austerity and that context of misuse of power. Another part, of course, is based in my own experience of working with SACREs.

The constituencies that make up SACREs are teachers, politicians and members of faith communities. Whichever group we may belong to, we are here for the teachers. The teachers are here for the children and we are here for the teachers. Many of us have living professional heroes or heroines. One of mine is an adviser who programmed her phone with the words: 'will it help the teachers?' So every time anyone rang with a request, the words 'will it help the teachers?' flashed up on the screen. That adviser's post was made redundant some two years ago. Another hero of mine is a teacher in George Green's school in the Isle of Dogs. A secondary school in a very deprived area of Tower Hamlets, literally in the shadow of Canary Wharf, this school's challenges are living proof of the argument in *The Spirit Level*¹ that inequality is bad for us all. This teacher – I'll call her Georgia – reinvented herself energetically, belligerently, day after day to be everything those children lacked: mother bear, counsellor, homework bully, bringer of justice, passionate persuader that it made sense to work and to admire excellence. I spent a term there on secondment from the QCA, and I felt that I learned a great deal from her.

My question now, my challenge, is: what do national and local education structures offer to heroes and heroines like that? If the answer isn't very clear, then why are those structures in place.

So I've been asked to think about the challenges for SACREs. My basic message: the challenges are many, and they are not all the fault of this government, or of central government generally.

*Leviathan*², the work of political theory by Thomas Hobbes in 1651, used biblical language to conjure up a sea monster of enormous power. 'Any hope of subduing him is false; firebrands stream from his mouth; smoke pours from his nostrils; when he rises up, the mighty are terrified; they retreat before his thrashing.'³ Hobbes' argument, fashioned in part by the English Civil Wars, was that the people should make a social contract with their ruler, not recognising a ruler's divine right but according

¹ R. Wilkinson and K. Pickett, *The Spirit Level*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010.

² T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651, Oxford University Press Clarendon Edition, Oxford: University Press, 2012.

³ Job 41: 1-34

absolute power by agreement with the people. Thus would be created a Leviathan, an invincible power, the only protection against chaos and the war of all against all, the only guarantor of political reasoning in a commonwealth. A dictator, yes, but in Hobbes' view a benign and necessary one. The social contract slays the Leviathan of royal divine right and replaces it with another Leviathan of absolute power with consent. Over time, the concept of a Leviathan has stayed in our imaginations as a tentacled threat, a remorseless, malign and predatory bureaucracy. The English imagination connects it with jobsworths, health 'n' safety gone mad, local and national government. Those who believe in small government usually think the best thing governments can do is to get out of the way. There is a long pedigree to this thought, and it has influenced the American constitution and some US political strands today.

What could all this have to do with SACREs? We all know what SACREs are, how they are composed and what they are supposed to do. They have to review their local agreed syllabus (a strange word, syllabus – no other subject uses it) every five years, they are composed of four groups and they have strict rules about who can and cannot be on those groups, rules that seem rather arbitrary nowadays. SACREs have a slightly strange-sounding, vaguely religious name. No other subject has them. Local authorities have to be carefully persuaded and managed and coaxed in their understanding of how to use a SACRE. SACREs have an ambiguous accountability chain. They have more responsibility than power. Increasingly they have little money. There are 152 of them, a honeycombed or imbricated pattern of devolved power. Being honest, if we had to design from scratch a system of governance and support for RE, how many of us would design the SACRE system we presently have? Think about it. How many would design the present SACRE system? Let's have a show of hands. *(Out of an audience of eighty, four people raised their hand.)*

I sometimes think that in Leviathan terms, SACREs are both the accusers and the accused. For many years RE has been so hyper-vigilant about state power that it has chosen to isolate itself rather than be drawn in. The message to ministers and their civil servants has been clear: don't touch local

determination! Leave us alone. Local determination is a hurrah word, a self-evident good. It's very difficult to argue against local determination, and ministers don't even try to, because none of them wants to be accused of being Leviathan. The result over many years has been neglect. My critique is not of the people on the SACREs, but the system that keeps them there. My evidence is from my four years' work with the QCA, accepting invitations from nearly half the nation's SACREs, reading their annual reports and publishing annual summaries, and working with a third of SACREs on the agreed syllabus collaboration initiative. My critique of SACRE structures is that they are SACRE: semi-detached, antiquated, compliance-fixated, rigid and extravagant.

Semi-detached: the fact that SACREs exist only for RE, and not any other subject, increases the isolation of RE. It is often hard for local authorities to get their head round how to use a SACRE, precisely because it is *sui generis*. Just as SACREs are semi-detached from the LA structure, so RE is semi-detached from the rest of the curriculum. That semi-detached state has over many years damaged RE's educational credentials. It is time we faced up to this and demanded something better for our children and teachers.

Antiquated: the membership structure. For humanists, pagans, parents, universities, employers, school leaders, no official place: indefensible. For pupil voice, to tell us what RE really looks like: yes in some places, but not enough: could do better. Granted, several SACREs are adept at bending the rules and opening their membership out. But rules that have to be bent are bad rules.

Compliance-fixated: The programme to make all secondary schools academies by 2015 is making rapid headway: where will this leave the SACRE monopoly on RE in community schools? Nowhere. As regards subjects other than English and Maths, compliance culture in schools is over, and is not coming back. No change of government will bring it back. When RE people complain that the law is being flouted and Heads are getting away with it, this just sounds awful, like special pleading. When we demand that academies should use their local syllabus, it just shows that we don't get the policy direction. It makes us sound like people who are against freedom. School autonomy over the

curriculum is here to stay and is going to grow. It needs nurturing and CPD⁴, not resistance and attempts to claw them back into old ways. The legal compliance argument is dead, it is worse than useless because it makes us look as if we have a weak case. We should take a deep breath and stop using it.

Rigid: Part of the trouble with local determination is that it is not local enough. Academisation has leapfrogged over SACREs and gone to a level of devolution that the SACRE system cannot match. Large academy chains are in effect new, non-territorial local authorities. Dioceses are forming multi-academy trusts. Community schools are becoming single academies or small chains. (There is some vagueness in the DfE about how small or big a chain must be, to be called a chain. But I am sure they will sort that out.) The point here is that in improving the quality of teaching and learning in RE, local authority structures are becoming increasingly irrelevant. School improvement always tries to nail down the causes of variance in pupil progress and quality of teaching. Variance means unexplained variations in pupil achievement. Variance happens within schools and between schools, not between local authorities. The agreed syllabus system blindsides RE from regional or national efforts at improvement because it cannot get at variance patterns between schools that are statistical neighbours in other local authorities. This just increases the isolation of RE, and embeds its under-performance.

Extravagant: it may seem strange to say this in these austere times, but yes, a system that drafts 152 different syllabuses is extravagant. When Nick Gibb came to the REC AGM last year, he opined that local determination was a good thing for demographic reasons:

⁴ RSA and Pearson Learning, *Unleashing Greatness: getting the best from an academised system*. London: RSA 2013, <http://www.thersa.org/action-research-centre/learning,-cognition-and-creativity/education/reports-and-events/reports/unleashing-greatness>, accessed 5 May 2013. An RE response to the report can be found on the Culham St Gabriel's website at <http://www.cstg.org.uk/2013/01/unleashing-greatness-and-re/>

‘We know local determination of the curriculum is hugely important to meeting the specific needs and traditions of local communities.’⁵

What needs are met? The breadth of content, as we know, is broadly the same across all 152. Rightly, RE should be preparing young people for life in a globalised world. To draw in local communities of religion or belief, to involve them in RE through visits or conferences, you do not need to have them write an agreed syllabus. The deficit incurred by a system of 152 broadly similar syllabuses – all being revised on different cycles, unconnected to national developments – all similar in content, but widely different in complexity and structure, so that teachers changing jobs from one place to another must constantly accustom themselves to a new document – the deficits of this need to be taken seriously and weighed in the balance against the clear benefits of local stakeholdership. There is extravagance of another kind when local authorities trumpet their RE syllabus, confusing municipal pride (a natural emotion) with high quality (a more elusive goal).

We in RE have turned the national curriculum into Leviathan, when in earlier times it could have been our friend. We look at the new draft national curriculum with horror: we look at what has been done to history and shudder, and we say ‘thank goodness for local determination’. That is undeniably a strong argument, but I think it ignores three other factors. First is that even with local determination we are not protected. The safe honeycomb, the imbricated system of protected spaces, is itself being damaged by national policy. Second, there is the collateral damage done by local determination to our credibility and our engagement with national priorities that could pull down money and harness energy. We have chosen mostly to live without that, and RE has suffered. The third factor is more speculative. I make a rash prediction that this national curriculum is the last we shall see. Mr Gove, in driving the national curriculum in the direction he has, has made it ridiculous; he has inadvertently slain it. In two years from now the national curriculum will be irrelevant. If there are any more versions, they will be just aims and requirements on breadth and

⁵ Gibb, N. Speech to RE Council, in unpublished minutes, London: REC, 2012.

balance, and nothing more. Leviathan is dead: it has speared itself with its own trident. That being the case, we should end our self-incarceration and start thinking about what comes next.

One key challenge is the question of accountability for single and small-chain academies. I'm reliably informed that the DfE is nearly at breaking point on this, because it cannot cope with the increasing number of academies, each with their information thread leading back to Sanctuary Buildings.

Sooner or later, some new, more sensible accountability system will come into existence. If we are smart we will make sure that RE is part of it, not sitting outside it.

Robin Alexander, in the Cambridge primary review, proposed a system of local community curriculum panels for all subjects. These panels would have a non-statutory remit to help implement the whole curriculum, by identifying local needs and opportunities while leaving schools with autonomy over the curriculum⁶. This idea was not devised with RE specifically in mind, but it would be an elegant solution for us, overcoming many of the weaknesses in the present structure. I only mention this as one example of a possible future out there if we choose to engage with others and take hold of it.

What characteristics would we want our new structures to have, and what kind of national/local settlement would work best for RE? I'm not going to do detailed constitution writing here, but I will say something about the character of the structures we could aim for. To describe this, let me abandon one vaguely Latin-wounding word, SACRE, in favour of another: FIDES. Our new structures should promote an RE that has freedom, innovation, democracy, engagement and standards.

Freedom – real freedom from compliance culture, and freedom to create learning experiences in schools within the parameters set by a brief, empowering national document.

⁶ R. Alexander, ed., *Children, their world, their education: final report of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London: Routledge, pp494-5.

Innovation – a system that uses technology to celebrate change and improvement in RE, led by research and looped back into classroom practice.

Democracy – a system with real openness to all the faith and belief communities relevant to RE, an end to the implied hierarchies of religions, a bold and courageous subject that enquires into all religions and beliefs.

Engagement – a commitment to learning in consort with the rest of the curriculum. Yes, pedagogy is unique in each subject. But RE is too fond of saying we are unique, and too stand-offish about creating cross-disciplinary enquiries. Cinderella can come to the pedagogical ball! She can come and dance with several partners; she does not always have to dance alone.

Standards – a subject driven by content coverage and compliance has a natural inbuilt tendency to dumb down. A subject driven by enquiry into real-world issues, really doing theology and philosophy, will be as challenging and rigorous as we all want.

If our structures are FIDES they will serve us well, and better than present arrangements.

Can we make this happen? The cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, who was born 103 years ago, famously said: 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.' This belief reflected her work in cultural change and innovation, published as *Continuities in Cultural Evolution* in 1964⁷. This is a feelgood statement, but is it actually true? Well I think so, and I feel a pent-up energy in the RE community that is ready for change.

We have lived in a state of fear and compliance for long enough. Leviathan is dead, but other Leviathans threaten our children: inequality, extremism, debt, apathy, affluenza, climate change. Let us pay attention to the real threats, not the imagined ones. Let us not fear freedom. Let us not be

⁷ M. Mead, *Continuities in Cultural Education*, New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1964.

passive victims. Let us not imagine for a minute longer that we can go back to the way things were.
Let us lead in creating the new structures that will transform and sustain RE today and tomorrow.

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