

## Why RE's radical reform could fail: The politics of epistemology and the economics of producer capture

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### ABSTRACT

This article, which is developed from a keynote given to the Humanists UK RE conference on 28 November 2020 draws attention to the interest groups that operate in and around the world of professional religious education (RE) in England. It argues that reform of RE could still fail. Two factors could spell its end. First is the politics of epistemology, the embedded power structures that shape knowledge and curriculum in the subject. Second is the economics of producer capture, which takes up critical questions about how the RE world is structured, organised, and funded, and how its stakeholders' interests operate. My definition and exploration of these two factors is followed by a description of how they apply in the RE community. I conclude by urging the RE professional community to face these issues and create new structures which more appropriately serve schools and children.

### Introduction

If change is a wind, as MacMillan (1960, 9) suggested, then change in RE may now be described as a zephyr, gently and harmlessly teasing those it touches, yet unfelt by some: certainly not the steady breeze, gust or hurricane that makes history happen. This article argues that the historical changes called for in the Commission on RE's Final Report (Commission on Religious Education 2018), which could do so much to rejuvenate the subject by giving it a new identity, are in danger because of vested interests. After some notes on the context, the article examines closely the politics and economics of RE in England. It introduces the concept of the politics of epistemology, which enquires into the embedded power structures that shape knowledge and curriculum in our subject. It asks: who creates knowledge in Religious Education (RE) or, as the Commission calls it, Religion and Worldviews (R&W)? In what forums is the knowledge created? How does the forum and the creation process influence the knowledge? It argues that the politics of knowledge in RE is skewed in favour of a number of influential organisations seeking to protect their interests. A second concept, the economics of producer capture, is introduced and takes up critical questions about how the RE world is structured, organised, and funded; and how its stakeholders' interests operate. Producer capture is what happens when any business sector is run more for the benefit of its workers than for its clients. The economics of producer capture in RE raises questions such as: what is the relationship between professional interest, belief group interest, managed consensus, sustainable funding, and coherent strategy for RE? The article shows how the structures inhibit necessary change, and why many RE people do not recognise this. It calls for a reorganisation based on a national definition of the educational needs of children learning about religious and non-religious worldviews, and of teachers and schools in providing that education. A personal note and declaration of interest is in order. I could not have written these thoughts without a lifelong career in RE – teaching, developing teachers, researching, consulting and setting policy, and running a major grant-giving charity to support RE. I was fortunate enough to have close dealings with many of the RE professional associations

mentioned here, including some years as a Board member of the RE Council. This close acquaintance with the way RE works, its politics and economics, is part of the source material for my argument for change. For the sake of transparency, I acknowledge that I have been part of the system I criticise. Colleagues who were there with me will have heard some of these arguments and pleas for change from me on several occasions. This article is a development of those earlier conversations, written from the privilege of retirement.

#### Context: Commission and aftermath

In 2015–16, many of RE's national leaders recognised that the subject was in serious decline, and felt the urgent need of a policy reset. The RE Council, the umbrella body that brings several RE organisations together, decided to establish an independent and high-level commission to bring forward proposals relating to curriculum, policy and law. The commission members were drawn from RE teaching, and from a number of related fields of expertise: human rights law, cultural diversity, school leadership, governance, inspection, and academic theology and religious studies. Their remit, membership, and final report and recommendations in 2018 are all available online (Commission on Religious Education 2018) and have been widely circulated and discussed in and beyond the RE profession. A full account of their work, written by the report's writer, Tharani (2020), accurately shows the scale of the task and achievement. After taking evidence, the commission reached the settled view that the current provision and legal basis for RE were unsustainable, and needed to be replaced. This was the commission's essential vision: a subject with a new identity as an essential area of study for all pupils, a statutory national entitlement to high-quality teaching applicable in all schools, significant investment in teacher development, and a legal reform to the structures supporting the subject. The vision was made concrete by eleven recommendations covering the new subject's name (Religion and Worldviews), its curriculum scope and structure (in a national entitlement statement), and concomitant changes to SACREs, examinations, initial teacher training, continuing professional development, inspection, and accountability measures (Commission on Religious Education 2018, 11–18). The national entitlement, a short statement covering two sides of A4 (Commission on Religious Education 2018, 12–13), was designed to be the basic DNA of curriculum programmes of study and to be, eventually, a legal requirement. It is profoundly different in kind from the current RE curriculum in most schools or local authorities. Its focus is not so much on the study of individual worldviews; more on the nature of worldviews, what is of central importance to them, how they are internally diverse, how they evolve over time, and what difference they make to individuals and communities. A crucial new dimension to the entitlement is its advocacy of an intentional focus on methods and disciplines, each discipline providing a distinctive lens for studying, interpreting and understanding. The national entitlement is a vigorous shake of the kaleidoscope for curriculum thinking in a new subject called Religion and Worldviews. The vision for change and the recommendations were widely discussed in and beyond the RE world. I have read and heard many RE people sharing their assumption that the reform movement for RE was gathering strength. The report had a sobering and galvanising effect, and to some extent catalysed an already growing movement for curricular and structural change. RE people would never be likely to agree on every detail of the Commission report or the national entitlement, but many (though not all, as we shall see) accepted that change was necessary.

The change argument, at its simplest, could be set down as five logical steps:

(1) Historically RE has failed to evolve and is still anchored in legislation from 1944, while the religious and cultural composition of England, and the structures of its education system, have changed considerably since then;

(2) Successive publications in the last eight years have called for radical reform, and paved the way for the Commission (Ofsted 2013; Chater and Erricker 2013; Conroy et al. 2013; Clarke and Woodhead, 2015, 2018; Dinham 2015; Woolf Institute 2015).

(3) The Commission report is itself a game changer, and is not about tinkering, it is about a new identity;

(4) RE's capacity to reform is disabled by its own thinking – a set of self-images and ways of speaking about itself that perpetuate a victim mentality, RE as the misunderstood and martyred subject, constantly done down by negligent governments, fanatical secularists, and hostile headteachers. In reality we are held down by our own tolerance of an identity;

(5) The change process is made more difficult by the power structures of the RE world, which embed the vested interests of those individuals and organisations that profit, financially or in terms of professional kudos, from the present system. This includes the existence of faith schools, which currently generate and attract more energy for their type of RE, and are out of balance with the community schools. Please note, this is not an argument against the existence of faith schools; it is simply pointing out an imbalance in resource and influence. I have heard some colleagues who argue that even the Commission did not adequately address the influence of faith schools, for fear of upsetting key stakeholders.

Those five points are the essence of the diagnosis in Part 1 of Reforming RE (Chater 2020a, 17 – 90). Patterns of religion and belief in Britain have changed, and religion, particularly religious institutions, seem to be on the wane (Bruce 2020). Empirical sociological data show unmistakably the growth of other religions in the UK, and the substantial increase in those of no religious affiliation (British Social Attitudes 2018). The emergence of a significant majority of 'nones', particularly among younger people, has created new sensibilities that make scant reference to any institutional religion in the UK (Woodhead 2016, 245–261). The shift in patterns of belief is, for many, a rationale for a new subject, with a new identity that reflects who we are now as a nation, as well as taking account of global patterns. These realities, together with the commission's evidence and proposals, were widely discussed in the RE world. Then what happened was that the Secretary of State for Education in 2018, Damien Hinds, rejected the commission report and ended any prospect of imminent policy and legal change. The reasons are discussed in detail in this article. Leaders of RE who believed change was necessary had to content themselves with a much slower process and little or no certainty as to outcome.

Since then, the RE Council has developed an ambitious plan of work to carve out a clear understanding of religion and worldviews, leading to exemplification for teachers in classrooms. The REC has obtained partial funding for this project. Practical outputs are expected in 2022–3. The academic work to explore what might be meant by worldviews has led to initial output from leading academics (Bowie, Cooling, and Panjwani 2020; Benoit, Hutchings, and Shillitoe 2020). The practical work to explore curriculum design has resulted in several blogs on the Reforming RE website (Reforming RE 2020) and on RE:Online (RE:Online 2020a), two knowledge organisers based on the national entitlement (RE:Online 2020b), and a book with teachers' lesson design perspectives on metacognition in worldviews (Doney et al. 2019). All this is encouraging, but its wider impact is slow, and does not yet reach a wide range of RE teachers. There is a distinction between slow change and

no change, but the former might mutate into the latter. There are still many teachers relying on sources of information and advice that are Commission- blind, or Commission-agnostic, that do not try to promote any understanding of Worldviews or the national entitlement. In the Facebook group called REspect, (Respect 2021) formerly Save RE, used by thousands of teachers, any mention of the Commission or national entitlement is extremely intermittent. This state of affairs adds up to a paucity of understanding about the reform envisioned by the Commission. A lot of teachers still carry around the victim narrative which I critiqued in *Reforming RE* the book, where I described the RE community's habit of seeing itself as a heroic underdog (Chater 2020b, 65–68). There is a widespread assumption on social media that the change is simply about including non-religious world views in their curriculum and that is it. These are dangerous misapprehensions, because they could lead us right back to where we started – an over-crowded curriculum with a mainly religious or spiritual agenda. The lack of clarity puts the reform in jeopardy. We could sum it up as what I call the Cassius Principle, as uttered by Cassius: 'The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars But in ourselves, that we are underlings'. (Julius Caesar, 1:3:140-1) It is vital that RE teachers who see themselves as change agents, and their allies among school leaders, recognise these power dynamics. We need to talk about them openly, and work together to transform them, in the interests of keeping reform alive.

### The politics of epistemology

Who holds the pen that writes the curriculum? Who controls the flow of subject knowledge for teachers? When reforms are proposed, who whispers 'no' in the Secretary of State's ear? These are just three practical questions that illustrate what I call the politics of epistemology, the power-play in how, where and by whom knowledge is shaped. On SACREs and in Agreed Syllabus Conferences, faith and belief groups constitute, by law, 50% of the votes needed to approve an agreed syllabus. *Reforming RE* gives instances of the abuse of this power by particular groups that want their belief represented to their liking (Chater 2020b, 70). Perhaps the best way to highlight the inappropriateness of the politics of epistemology is to imagine what it would look like in any other school curriculum subject.

So if RE were Design and Technology:

- Committee A on the equivalent of SACREs would include Wickes and B & Q, but not independent ironmongers.
- Committee B would include Sainsbury's, Waitrose, Tesco, and Aldi, but not independent fruit stands or butchers.

While a powerful, well-informed adviser will work with or round these interest groups, it remains a fact that the interest groups are entrenched in law, and have the final say in who can be included in decision-making. Also, many SACREs are now dependent on external consultants, having lost their local authority's specialist adviser.

If RE were English, its stakeholder organisations in the equivalent of the REC, exerting influence on policy, curriculum and resources, would include the Jane Austen Society, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Plain English campaign, the English Spelling Society, the Bronte Parsonage Museum, Penguin Books, and the National Association of Teachers of English. They would all exert, notionally, equal power. Now perhaps, through this comparison, we see how RE is manipulated, is pulled in so many different directions, as to become incoherent.

But the politics of epistemology does worse than create incoherence. The frame of reference is distorted because it is still predominantly religious in a country where most young people have no engagement with institutional religion. A glance at syllabuses in general, or at school-based units of work, shows pupils receiving units of work with titles that assume a religious interest: How do Christians live out their belief in the resurrection? What questions would you want to ask God? What do atheists think about God? With these and similar enquiry questions, the problem is not so much the taught content; rather it is the assumption embedded in the question. The assumption is that the questions religions pose, or the answers they propose, are of intrinsic interest to all young people. In a nation where religious practice is declining but spiritual interest is thriving, it behoves teachers to step back from that assumption, and use their wider angle of vision to consider larger-scale patterns of change in belief. Factors to consider should certainly include the long-term impact of religious and philosophical texts on our culture and laws, the ways in which religious traditions have evolved in the face of modernity (or not), and the influence that a world view can have on an individual or community, nation or continent. For example, a renewed and sharper awareness of colonial, imperial and racist mindsets creates a whole new lens for seeing the historical development of Christianity (Missous 2020) and the nature of Islam (Saleh 2020). Major traditions such as Christianity or Islam, both of them having expanded through conquest, have a historically troubled relationship to smaller, subjugated traditions such as Paganism, indigenous religion, or Bahai. The latter three resemble some of the 'independent fruit stands' in the comparison above – crowded out of RE by the Waitroses and Tescos of the religious world.

The politics of epistemology means that our structures bequeath to us a distorted menu of content, which no longer reflects the reality of who we are as a nation. Research conducted by Goldsmiths University found that pupils and parents in the UK wanted RE to teach the 'real religious landscape', including syncretism and non-religious world-views, rather than the landscapes imagined and desired by leaders of dominant religious groups (Dinham and Shaw 2015). Responding to polling data on the decline of religion, the then Chief Executive of the REC called for a different identity for the subject, one which recognises how worldviews have changed: 'It's vital that young people learn about the breadth of religious and non-religious world-views that their friends, neighbours, future work colleagues, and fellow citizens have. It's not enough to just learn about their own religion, their own worldview. They've got to learn about their fellow citizens and the many different ways that they live their lives and follow their beliefs.' (Lockhart 2019)

The current polity of RE allows the interests of the 'big six' religions – in global and historical terms, an arbitrarily selected group – to predominate; and allows the official leadership of those groups to determine how their religion is described. This is a distorting lens; it causes RE frequently to fall short of the goal of being academically rigorous and personally inspiring. That goal, widely sought by many teachers, may or may not be fully attainable; but it is made more distant by the way knowledge is framed. The distorting lens affects the way the public sees RE. A survey by Opinion Research asked more than 1,800 adults who attended UK secondary schools which subject they thought was the least beneficial to their education. Just over one in five (21%) said RE (Opinium 2013). The danger is that a low level of public consent for the subject could continue and contribute to the weakening of RE's status at a time when religion itself is in decline. If RE were truly academically rigorous and personally inspiring, the public perception of it would not be low. RE, perhaps more than other subjects (because of its unique legal status), relies on a level of public consent. My own experience, and conversations with teachers, suggests that consent is low in part because RE is seen as being too influenced by religions and religious leaders. In short, a sinking religious credibility is dragging the RE boat down with it.

Belief groups will argue that they do not wish to indoctrinate or proselytise, they simply want young people to know about them. This begs an interesting question: whether those groups want to submit to being known from outside, or would prefer to control how they are known. It is noteworthy that most reactionary voices and practices are seen in RE as normative of the belief from which they originate – the best current example being the issue of sexuality. In urban centres of the western world, religious people are more likely to be homophobic than the population as a whole (Roggemans et al. 2015).

Sexuality is a disputed issue in the Church of England, dividing priests, bishops and laity (Church House 2020) and causing the church to be increasingly behind public opinion (Brown and Woodhead 2016). It is now recognised in the Catholic church that abusive theology can facilitate abusive behaviour, and is fostered and/or covered up by authority structures (Lamb 2020; Martel 2020). Some of the theology taught in some schools – for example, that being LGBT is deficient, sinful or taboo – is abusive (Chater 2020b, 74–77). In examination syllabuses, the influence of religious authorities is seen in content on creation, the status of scripture, marriage, and the roles to be played by men and women (OCR 2018; AQA 2021). While specifications usually include a mention of the different interpretations and emphases held by different groups within the religion, the official positions are taught as normative of the religion as a whole. The role played by authority structures which give their approval to forms of knowledge and interpretation, while tolerating or covering up abuse, suggests a tainted relationship between power and knowledge. This taint creates dangers because approved forms of interpretation, approved attitudes to authority, and approved moral teaching can lead to actual abuse. To give those structures a say in shaping curriculum and policy in RE is to taint RE with the possibility of complicity. The politics of epistemology allows this situation to continue.

Another instructive case study in how the politics of epistemology distorts the subject can be seen in the All-Party Parliamentary Group on RE. The APPG was established through the efforts of the RE Council. Immediately after the 2015 election, it was taken over by Fiona Bruce MP (REC 2016). Bruce is a longtime opponent of inclusive RE and of legal and policy reforms (Humanists UK 2020). Following her election as Chair, the group ceased holding the Government to account on policy failures related to RE. Bruce's main support comes from evangelical Christians, but other religionists have also given her solace. She is a Patron of the Conservative Christian Fellowship (CCF, n.d.a). While the CCF holds no particular denominational or theological position, its language and actions over many years place it characteristically in the public-school evangelical wing of Christianity. Its website talks of being 'salt and light' in British politics, and claims that 'the Holy Bible and prayer are foundation to all we do' (sic) (CCF, n.d.b). The Fellowship has a strongly pro-family ethos, which includes anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality elements.

In 2020 Bruce was appointed as the Prime Minister's envoy on freedom of religion and belief. In the same year another evangelical, a former Director of CCF, Colin Bloom, was appointed as Faith Engagement Adviser at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. He set about a review of the government's faith engagement (not engagement with religion or belief: only with faith). The review was designed to show evidence of how best the government could engage with faith communities in England (Gov.uk 2020). It is important to read these developments accurately. In my view they do not suggest that the Prime Minister or cabinet are well disposed to evangelicals when it comes to policy on RE or religion and belief. Rather, what these developments show is that access to the Prime Minister on these matters is controlled and rationed by evangelical Christians, who have organised themselves and won attention more effectively than anyone else. It is highly unlikely that Johnson cares about or has an opinion on RE: he has simply handed out gatekeeping

roles to those who pressed hardest and had the best access. In the politics of epistemology, this matters because it is a direct threat to political access for advocates of reform. We only have to look across the Atlantic to note the consequences of a long-term conservative evangelical strategy of access to power. Then we might look back here and imagine what would happen to RE if Fiona Bruce were Secretary of State for Education.

To sum up so far: in the RE world, the politics of epistemology creates curriculum incoherence as to the aims and content of RE; it shapes curriculum and policy in ways that protect the interests of selected religious elements, or sometimes one particular religion, which wish to control the way they are known, limit access, and resist reform.

### The economics of producer capture

Producer capture is a theory originating from economists in the 1970s. It argues that organisations ‘tended to be run in the interests of those who worked in them rather than those who paid for or used them’ (Talbot 2010). The narrative behind the concept takes two forms. On the political right, the narrative is of ever-expanding bureaucracies, forever hungry to consume more and more taxpayers’ money; on the left, of high-status professions, such as doctors and teachers, colonising the welfare state and distorting it to suit their interests. RE, already a liminal entity, has a large range of voluntary associations running it. In the voluntary sector, producer capture ‘describes the process whereby the goals of an organisation reflect the interests and pre-judices of its employees (the producers) rather than those it is supposed to serve (the consumers, customers or citizens). More precisely, given that workers in a customer- friendly organisation will see their own interests served by serving the customer, capture is evident when producer interests are not aligned with those of the consumer and it is the former that predominate’ (Taylor 2008).

Let us examine how this works in RE’s structures. In the language of economics, the consumers and customers are schools, pupils/students, and their parents/carers. The employees, or producers, are those who work in RE associations, or in faith/belief groups specialising in RE, and the groups which employ them. In the RE world, this is made complicated by the multiplicity of different organisations that qualify as producers – about 60. Mainly they are organisations of two types: those representing different sections of RE professionalism, such as teachers, advisers, academics, SACRE members – nine such organisations; and those representing belief groups, religious, inter-religious and non-religious – over fifty of those. There is a handful of groups that could count as both, such as the Association of Teachers of Catholic RE, or the Church of England Education Office. While this might give the impression of a binary between professional and belief- based organisations, the reality is more fluid, since several belief-based organisations include professional teachers, advisers or academics, and professional organisations are made up of individual members with specific beliefs.

The nine professional associations include two for academics (AULRE n.d.; TRS-UK n.d.), and one each for advisers (AREIAC n.d.), SACRE members (NASACRE n.d.), teachers (NATRE n.d.), Christian teachers (ACT n.d.), independent school teachers (ISRSA n.d.), teachers of Catholic RE (ATCRE n.d.), and Catholic advisers (NBRIA n.d.) – each with its own Chair, committee, national conference, budget, and strategy. The very existence of these separate associations is a built-in inefficiency. Some of them have started to work together more closely in the last ten years. Very few of them pay cognisance to new thinking on curriculum design, unit design and lesson design that is coming from English, science and history and is well supported by school leaders, for example in blogs provided by

The Soak (n.d.). None of them has seriously considered any strategic relationship or merger. Sectional interest holds them separate.

All these groups come together under the umbrella of the RE Council (REC n.d.), the body that represents RE's interests (assuming they can agree what they are) to the media and government. Each of the 60 organisations has the same number of votes in the general meetings. So, the Network of Buddhist Organisations theoretically wields the same influence as each of the four Jewish, four Hindu, two Church of England, and four Catholic member organisations (REC members n.d.). Each possesses the same voting power as the National Association of Teachers of RE, which has a membership made up of people who live with RE every day. Whether they are professional associations or belief communities, or a hybrid of the two, they have an interest in being member organisations, because they produce and sell resources or expertise into the RE market, through policy forums, SACREs, or direct links into schools. Some of them own or govern schools. Virtually all of them have a producer interest because they gain income or cultural influence by their involvement in RE. Awarding bodies for qualifications, while not members of the RE Council, also wield influence as producers and have economic relationships with consumers in large school sectors such as schools with a religious character.

The REC's constitution places more power in the Board than in general meetings. General meetings elect members of the Board and Officers, who are expected to promote the REC's interests, not to represent their member organisation (REC Board n.d.). Despite these protections, the fact that the REC's electorate is predominantly religious and producer-led does inevitably create conditions for producer capture. NATRE is fairly widely recognised as the principal voice of professional teachers, and it would seem rational for that organisation to carry more authority, and have more say, than most others. Yet NATRE is one amongst sixty. It does not actually exist as a legal entity. It has no AGM or annual audited accounts. Operationally it is run by RE Today, one of the not-for-profit publishing and consultancy trading arms of a charity called Christian Education (RE Today, n.d.a). RE Today holds the funds and manages the finances, providing membership support, marketing and communication, websites, resources, and a termly magazine for NATRE members. NATRE's members elect its Chair and other Officers. Its steering group and national executive are independent from RE Today. Nevertheless, NATRE provides a ready market for RE Today's published output, and RE Today provides the organisational underpinning for NATRE's Officers and members.

Collectively, the RE Council's membership fees seem to account for less than 20% of its annual income (Charity Commission 2020). The remainder is found from external funding sources, mostly charitable trusts, most of them religious, most of those Christian, for obvious historical reasons. A group of charitable Trusts, all but one of them Anglican, have capital originating in the closure and sale of church teacher training colleges. These are independent Trusts in the sense that they are controlled by their own Boards of Trustees, not by the church. Of these, Culham St Gabriel's Trust (CSTG n.d.a) is the largest and also the one closest to the RE world and its organisations. The church college Trusts (CSTG, n.d.b) work together to pool their intelligence but have widely variant levels of understanding about the RE world. They each manage their own funds and employ their own staff. These Trusts have proved to be the most constant supporters of RE organisations. Other Christian funders exist, and have periodic involvement, but their priority is normally the advancement of Christianity rather than a pluralistic religious education. The same is true of some funders from other religions and worldviews, who also wish to advance their own belief.

In general, the weakness of this long-term situation is that the REC is not financially self-reliant, the external funding is not long-term, and some of the funding sources lack a clear understanding of RE and the Commission. This has a damaging effect on the REC's sustainability and capacity to operate



with confidence in the medium and long term. There is also a problem of perception, in that some people will be uneasy about the extent of Christian financial support. In practice, however, I know of no instances where Christian funding has coerced the REC into anything it did not want to do.

Taken all together, the RE organisations and funding arrangements are fragile. It is remarkable, and a cause for congratulation, that the REC has achieved a profound change in the conversation about the future of RE, even though it has yet to land any concrete changes in policy or law. The REC's leadership has been pulling against a drag anchor of sectional interests. If we were creating voluntary structures for a new subject, and wanted to avoid or at least minimise producer capture, would we start from here? The centripetal forces of money, membership and the manufacture of consensus combine to inhibit clear forward strategy-making. Sooner or later, RE must create more effective structures for the whole subject community, defining the gradations and limits of stakeholdership and enabling the movement for change to make its natural impact. For example, there could be a single Religion & Worldviews Association, with a mass membership of individual teachers, advisers and academics, and with associate membership awarded to organisations with a legitimate stake in the subject. Such an organisation could significantly reduce inefficiency, increase political clout, and place professionals in the driving seat while offering some appropriate involvement to belief communities.

If the politics of epistemology creates curriculum incoherence and protects the interests of selected religious communities who wish to control the way they are known, the economics of producer capture bolsters that power. It creates a fragile, unstable market, dependent mostly on the votes and money of religious groups. Failure to acknowledge these issues, and unwillingness to address them honestly and publicly, is likely to undermine the entire change process.

#### The Upton Sinclair principle and RE's political economy

The early 20th century US politician Upton Sinclair, using the gender-exclusive language of his time, wrote: 'It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it'. (Judt 2020, 168) His remark may have some bearing on the economics of RE's organisations and structures. If we apply some economic analysis to the case of RE, we begin to see the functions of the various member organisations, the nature of their stake in RE. What Marx called the 'law of value' (Mandel 1983, 190), perhaps the least controversial and most enduring component of his economic analysis, was and remains a mechanism functioning in any market economy. Value is measured by exchange, so that one commodity may be sold in exchange for another. In a free market, the price is determined by levels of demand (Marx 1867, 125–6). Labour is a commodity exchanged for wages. Its value changes with time and place. According to the law of value, commodities are exchanged – labour for money – in order that the needs of the two groups might be met.

If we were to apply Marx's economic understanding to the RE world, it might be objected that his theory of value is inherently materialistic and therefore inappropriate to the ethos of our subject. The theory of exchange value might be said to ignore the cultural or spiritual dimensions of elements of the RE community. Marx's theory does encompass the added value of commodities, and the Marxist tradition recognises cultural and spiritual realities; (Gramsci 2011) but Marx himself was a dialectical materialist. However, the objection of materialism only has salience if we are discussing the value of RE as a whole in some attempt to reduce it to the material. That is not the aim in this discussion: rather, it is to examine the way the internal political economy of the RE world works.

By looking critically at the internal RE political economy, we begin by recognising that the publications and consultancy services of RE professionals and religion/belief communities can be seen as commodities, as can their labour. The value of what advisers, academics, and faith/belief representatives sell into the RE market fluctuates. Academics and advisers as a group have what might be called a class interest. They find that the value of their labour increases if the teacher's task is more complicated, and decreases when the task is more straightforward. Where teaching and curriculum design are straightforward enough for teachers to perform them unaided, and without the interventions of elaborate syllabuses or nuanced research outputs, the value of adviser and academic labour decreases to almost nothing. Thus, for example, an academic or teacher trainer may criticise a knowledge-rich approach to curriculum design, because the model renders the academic and advisory roles relatively redundant, and the training relatively irrelevant or perhaps even harmful (Birbalsingh 2020, 207; Khattab 2020). The academic's objection that such-and-such a piece of knowledge is too simplistic – the cry 'but it's contested' (Chater 2020c) – is essentially to be understood as an attempt to intervene in the market in order to raise the value of elaboration and complexity, and thus increase the value of their labour. Therefore, it is within their class interest to ensure an RE polity that enshrines their labour as necessary within law and practice.

The role of representatives of religion or belief organisations – the majority of RE Council's membership – is also conditioned by market behaviour, although in different ways. Numerically smaller faiths in the UK, such as Sikhi, Bahai, or Sanatan Dharma, will often promote the cause of their faith having more or better coverage in a syllabus or national guidance document. This is a form of lobbying for the cultural value of their faith product. The cultural value can be exchanged into monetary value when representatives sell their knowledge of the faith, or their advice on how 'best' to approach teaching about their faith. Larger faiths, such as Catholicism, Anglicanism or Islam, have a viable market for their product in the form of their own schools, enabling them to determine the curriculum and examination syllabus to their liking. Some belief organisations produce highly developed resources and training programmes, and use their access to market them into the RE world. Examples of this are Understanding Humanism, the product of Humanists-UK (n.d.a), and Understanding Christianity, conceived by the Church of England and written by RE Today (n.d.b).

Markets fluctuate, making the appetite for a product variable. Labour – in RE's case, the producers of resources, training, advice, local syllabuses, research output, or religion/ belief specialist knowledge – is vulnerable to those fluctuations, unless it can influence the social conditions which determine value. And in RE we have a set of structures which favour those producers: the 60 organisations working to promote their interests, with the RE Council attempting to manage a consensus while making policy progress. Some of its member organisations seek to obstruct change by stating the case frankly for their product, (Metcalf n.d.; NASACRE 2018) in order to ensure that the RE market is unchanged.

An early example of this was the reaction to the introduction of Academies, schools independent from local authority control. Up until academisation, the local authority agreed syllabus system was more or less a monopoly. By law, it captured 100% of the non- faith state school market. Academisation effectively broke that monopoly. Some RE organisations, and particularly those dependent on income from agreed syllabuses, have attempted to market their product into the new reality as if it were the old reality (RE Today, n.d.c), even though over 50% of state schools in England are academies or free schools, no longer bound by the monopoly (DfE 2018). It is also common in these organisations to hear articulations of political resistance to academisation, a narrative suggesting that things were better under the monopoly. For example, the monopoly of the local syllabus system is praised as a bulwark against the neo-liberal policy of academisation, the author

being Chair of the National Association of SACREs (Smalley 2020). Such views do not usually become official positions, but they exist in the minds of many RE producers. The point here is about interests. It is perfectly normal economic behaviour for an organisation to market its product, and to seek to influence the structure of the market in ways that are favourable. What is being observed in RE is that this economic behaviour crowds out an objective, strategic consideration of what might be in the best interests of schools and children.

In a more specific example, the Commission's final report in 2018 met with a broadly positive response. However, a handful of REC member organisations, three of them religious, briefed against the Commission report and were partly responsible for the then Secretary of State's rejection of its recommendations (Board of Deputies 2018; CES 2018). They continue as member organisations to this day, even though full implementation of the Commission report is REC policy. The National Association of SACREs gave a predominantly negative reception to the Commission's recommendations. NASACRE's producer interest in perpetuating the current arrangements was particularly evident in their comment on the recommendation about reforming the agreed syllabus system: We reject Recommendation 4, which removes the requirement for an Authority to convene an ASC. We do not find the report to give a convincing rationale for why the requirement should be removed. We are not aware of any 'poor quality' AS produced in the last few years. We do not see whole LA areas where there is poor RE provision in schools (NASACRE 2018, 12).

Some other instances of the self-interested behaviour of the producer class in RE are given in Chapter 4 of *Reforming RE* (Chater, 2020a, 70–72). They include direct and private interventions at national government level, in agreed syllabus construction, and disputes about which religious or secular organisations should or should not be consulted, including intra-religious disputes in Islam and Buddhism. Those disputes are significant because they reveal an interest in controlling who is in the producer class and who is excluded. Thus we have the perpetuation of a closed market in RE, in which the value of products is kept at artificially high levels, while producers, having made themselves stakeholders, undermine any policy development which seems to threaten their interests.

It is now hard to name any other sector of the UK's economy where closed markets operate with such power. In the west, heavily regulated economies began to buckle in the 1970s under the pressure of inefficiency, stagnation and inflation. They were further weakened by mass unemployment and the energy crises. Then the 'big bang' of the 1980s led to wide-scale deregulation. The resultant neo-liberalism, with all its faults, came about partly as a reaction to the inefficiency of the closed national markets that preceded it (Steger and Roy 2010, 5–10).

Certainly, no other curriculum subject resembles RE's closed market. It privileges the class interests of producers of resources, training, advice, research, and specialist religion/ belief knowledge, which are diverse but consistent enough to put brakes on change. This political economy has proved relatively immune to technological developments which would normally change the value of labour. Because of RE's anomalous status in law, it has been able to cling to a set of associations and structures which restrict its capacity to change. Because we live and work inside that closed market, and some of us earn our living or our professional status from it, a clear view of its confining force acting on us can be hard to obtain. This is the nub of the Upton Sinclair principle: our cognition and imagination for change are restricted by our current arrangements. It seems fair to note that the closed economy of RE is in itself a 'worldview' which we can only understand and change if we see it from outside.

Marx predicted that scientific analysis of the laws of value would be met by furious self-interest (Marx 1867, 89). In the structures of the RE world, the reception to arguments for radical change tends to be polite and usually follows a strategy of gently ignoring what is seen to be awkward.

Where do we go from here? What might be the economic alternative to the closed market? The emperors of globalised neo-liberal economic policy, and their acolytes, are widely known to be naked (Judd, 2010, 161). Neither the nation nor the newly emerging Worldviews polity needs an excursion into a laissez-faire wide-open market of unlimited stakeholdership. Indeed, it would hardly be appropriate if we in RE now embraced a liberal economics just as the rest of the world was turning against it. Nevertheless, that danger exists if we do not take some control of our destiny. The funding and policy strains on our current RE organisations might become so intense that they collapse into a deregulated state, in which any belief group or producer can make itself a stakeholder in RE. It is not hard to envisage this happening in the near future. Our pathway needs to be different. In charting it, we have at least five intellectual tasks to address quite quickly. They are mainly tasks of argumentation, distribution and organisation, and they include

- Enabling the RE community to understand the serious weaknesses in a closed market: structural isolation, strategic inefficiency, policy stagnation, and the dominance of entrenched interest groups;
- Critically addressing the fallacious and self-serving argument that the current RE settlement of local syllabus-making promotes democracy;
- Studying and emulating what is best in the politics and economics of other curriculum subjects;
- Piloting and evaluating some new structural models to replace the politics of epistemology and the economics of producer capture with an economics of a socialised market, in ways that protect the integrity and objectivity of the pilot from the influence of current producers;
- Re-defining the nature and limits of stakeholdership in Worldviews, in ways that place schools, teachers and the interests of the children at the heart of the enterprise. This could mean having a single association with professional teachers at the centre, belief groups at the periphery, and commercial interests kept transparent and on a level playing field, all operating within a tight national definition of the subject – a socialised market.

What seems evident is that RE's political economy is inefficient, and needs to change its structures. At present, there is not sufficiently deep or wide cognition of this issue.

#### A note on non-religious belief organisations in the RE world

This article began life as an address to the 2020 conference of about sixty Humanists-UK representatives, who serve as SACRE members or RE speakers in schools. Humanists-UK was one of the founder members of the RE Council, and has a longstanding interest in promoting an inclusive RE based on principles of objectivity, pluralism and criticality. Entrenched religious interest has frequently attempted to exclude Humanists from membership of SACREs, even though legal precedent demonstrates that this is an illegal form of discrimination (Humanists UK, n.d.b). Humanists-UK have seen how the politics of epistemology works. My message to them included this passage (slightly adapted for this piece): You captured the castle. You have been central to the formation and development of the REC; you have won the battle for your right to be on SACREs, at least in terms of legal precedent; and it is widely recognised that Humanism and other non-religious worldviews must be in the RE curriculum. But Humanism has no more right to determine the

Worldviews curriculum than Sikhi, Islam, or Catholicism. Whether we see those faiths as more or less benign, more or less malign, is beside the point. The same principle should apply to all belief groups: when they have too much of a stake in the politics of epistemology, things go wrong for the subject.

I was with you in the battle to capture the castle. Now I am asking you to knock the castle down and work with others to build a new one. What we have is the wrong castle – a castle that defends producer interests, and legitimises inappropriate levels of religious influence on RE. The struggle for a change of power in our subject means, in effect, a journey towards making your role on SACREs redundant, eventually. I think the immediate prospect is that you stay in the castle, or keep battling to get in. But never start feeling at home in that castle. Never start thinking of that castle as our long-term solution. Instead, raise the issue of RE's political economy. On a practical level, consider proposing your SACRE for a pilot of the Commission recommendation on Local Advisory Networks (Commission on Religious Education 2018, 16). Start building the future now.

## Conclusion

Most of the current political economy is invisible to RE teachers, parents and school leaders. They live with its effects, without understanding how it works. Until teachers and others combine to challenge these powers, RE will never be free to become Worldviews.

I began by saying that the movement for reform of RE could fail, that hopes for reform could die of neglect. That is only a possibility, not a prophecy. But what we have to realise is that, if reform dies, we won't know the moment it dies. The death of reform might not be a bang, but a whimper – a slowly drawn-out fudge, with the member organisations, in their committees and annual general meetings, congratulating themselves that they have reached a consensus that enables continuity. The enemies of reform, who have increasingly effective political access, are counting on this. Meanwhile outside, the subject will continue to wither in the wind. Naturally enough, I hope I am wrong.

To prevent this, imaginative positive action is needed. Is there an RE organisation, or a network of leaders, willing to host a critical discussion of RE's interest groups and structures? Is there a funder willing to support a systemic review, with networking and development work to create better structures? If so, please step up.

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