

Response to Trevor Cooling and Marius Felderhof

Mark Chater, Professor of Practice in Worldviews Education, University of Cumbria, UK

It has been said of the Religious Education (RE) community that if you place two practitioners into a room, they will emerge with three viewpoints. Yet even if that were true, I am grateful for the opportunity to read and reflect on Professor Cooling's and Dr Felderhof's responses. There is substantial agreement between myself and Prof Cooling concerning structures. He concurs with my critique as 'important' and 'legitimate', and my shining a spotlight on sectional interests as 'helpful'. There is less agreement between myself and Dr Felderhof overall.

Firstly, I draw out three critical points that Cooling has made and offer a brief response to each.

Prof Cooling believes that my essay exhibits hostility to religions in general and evangelical Christianity in particular. This is clearly of some sensitivity and concern, but I do not think it is demonstrated in his response. My essay is concerned with, firstly, reporting the actions of individuals and groups, actions which disempowered the REC and obstructed Government implementation of the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE) recommendations. The actions were from different religious organisations and the facts, as I have shown, are in the public domain. My second expressed concern is the danger that, having successfully impeded reform, some religious groups might leave RE stranded as it is, or even attempt to assert more religious control. I do argue an overlap of interests between a particular type of Evangelicalism and political conservatism – hardly a novel point. Perhaps the term Evangelicalism has become almost unhelpful since as a movement it now has so many conflicting identities? I agree with Cooling that the type of Evangelicalism that poses a threat to reform of RE is profoundly different to the socially engaged, inclusive Evangelicalism of many British churches. Epistemologically, the level of control exerted by religious groups and non-religious belief groups over RE's purpose and content is, as I have stated, in itself dangerous, and made more so when in some of those groups' control over knowledge is held by authority structures that have welcomes religious diversity, as we each do, there can be room for critical engagement with the role and behaviour of belief groups without being accused of religionism or hostility?

A second criticism from Prof Cooling is that I have focussed on structures instead of mindsets. It is true that my essay has a particular reading of the power that operates in the current mechanisms governing English RE. Probably both structures and mindsets are relevant. To argue that reform along the lines proposed by CoRE will come solely from conversations that gradually change minds and win hearts in the religious organisations, while leaving the current imbalanced power structures unchanged, would be naïve – and Prof Cooling's response does not quite go there, I am glad to note. His response describes a religious 'entitlement mindset that is nurtured by the current structures' and argues that 'mindset . . . should be a key concern, not just structures' (my emphasis). Perhaps structures and mindsets are chicken and egg? It does not matter which we start with, as long as both are involved in order to bring about the changes that CoRE argued for, and which he and I support.

Thirdly, Prof Cooling points out that I have provided no solutions; that is true. The essay is designed to analyse the problem, and it closes with a call for wider discussion among RE organisations. When the RE community's organisations are willing to air the issue and reach some common views, it will be time for possible new models to be considered, including a new, financially self-reliant single RE

association. Perhaps in due course this journal could host articles positing a range of structural models?

Dr Felderhof's response is sadly marred by its ad hominem and overheated tones. Once one moves beyond these features, the response makes heavy weather of misunderstanding my two evidenced points about power structures and finance in the RE world. It shows a lack of awareness of the realities of RE teaching and policy. For example, it is not true that the CoRE proposed to 'eliminate' the withdrawal clause. They recommended reviewing it (Commission on Religious Education 2018, 63–68). And it is not accurate to describe leading RE professionals as a 'small self-appointed group' who are 'hoping to seize the financial benefits and any kudos associated with the delivery of RE', or to suggest that they are 'indifferent to the nature of religious life'. That is a slur against RE professionals, indicating a worldview adrift from reality, as any RE teacher will know.

However, I think there might be one critical point of interest in Dr Felderhof's response. He proposes an inversion of my argument on producer capture, whereby (in his way of seeing it) the teachers are the main producers and religious communities are the central investors in the enterprise of RE. Teachers as producers are, it is suggested, not to be fully trusted, or only when guided by syllabus-making which has substantial involvement from religious communities, as is the case in the Birmingham SACRE in which Dr Felderhof has been for many years a leading light. To see teachers as the producer class, and religious communities as investors, would require a definition of RE that is somewhat at odds with the practice in most classrooms and would no longer be viable as a model of RE that could command wider public consent. In a plural and secularising society such as the UK, fewer than 50% of the population are in any way invested in formal religious beliefs or structures; and amongst young people only 30% claim religious adherence (Woodhead 2017, 247–262). A subject mainly owned and managed by religious interests could not hope to command public consent. This is because consent for a subject needs to be rooted firmly in its appeal to truths which proved themselves morally corrupt and unaccountable. This is treated more extensively in Chapter 4 of *Reforming RE* (Chater 2020, 65–72), where I explicitly state that the majority of religious organisations do more good than harm. In the essay above I also explicitly warn about non-religious groups, arguing that their influence over RE is as inappropriate as that of religious groups. Surely within a plural society, which are self-evident to the majority – for example, that everyone has a worldview, and that worldviews deeply affect individuals, families, communities and nations. The pursuit of a Commission-based model that can command public consent, and thrive as a coherent subject, is impeded by stakeholder interests. Dr Felderhof's reply is, if nothing else, a useful demonstration of that. Moreover, if there is a legitimate case against reform, I'm afraid I do not see it stated in terms that are courteous and well-informed in the piece which Dr Felderhof has supplied.

Beyond the confines of RE in the English system, what lessons might be drawn from my critique and Dr Felderhof's response? Globally, we do not need to look very far to see examples of where a worldview has an impact that is both religious and secular, as well as both ethno-nationalist and ideological. Currently in the western world the study of worldviews will often touch on particularly sensitive issues such as women's rights, ethnicity, and the legacies of slavery and colonialism. In eastern Europe, worldviews relate to matters of basic survival, self-determination, and freedom and safety from aggression. In central or south-eastern Europe, central Africa or central Asia, a society that cannot agree on its historical narrative and belief identity is a society that cannot agree who or what it is as a nation state. Such a society is disabled from framing a coherent curriculum in citizenship or democracy or worldviews.

The ways in which fundamentalism (religious or secular, or a blend) adheres to ethnic identities and manipulates modern democratic mechanisms to advance turmoil are well charted by the

Fundamentalism Project (Marty and Appleby 1997). The pattern creates a dangerous circumstance for the world in general and for the structures that frame knowledge in specific nation states. 'Who controls the knowledge that feeds a worldview?' is self-evidently a political question. Knowledge is not properly the possession of producer organisations. In particular, it should not be the part-property of organisations seeking to promote their own worldview. For these reasons, structures and stakeholder arrangements need to balance the interests of teachers, academics, and interest groups, ensuring that professionals have the casting vote.

As societies change, they evolve different understandings of their own past, their identity(ies), and their ethical situations. A system of identifying knowledge to be taught needs to be robust enough to hold a society together, and flexible enough to allow challenge and change. A by-product of education systems that give curriculum influence to belief groups (religious or secular) is that the curriculum is prone to becoming divided into identity sectors, determined by the relative strength of the belief groups around the table. This produces a collapse into identitarian pedagogics, as an escape from difficult questions of power and stakeholdership. With great clarity Kwame Appiah warns against identitarian frames as being illusory. As he indicates, identities of all kinds have a 'promise and peril' in that they create walls which 'will not let in fresh and enlivening air' (Appiah 2018, 218). Identities make it possible for education to speak to the selfrecognised conditions of particular groups, encouraging those groups to see themselves as distinct, and for that reason they are also dangerous (Appiah 2018, xvi). Therefore, knowledge frames need to draw on our common humanity, a need which is 'no longer a luxury; it has become a necessity' (Appiah 2018, 219).

Education about worldviews and the influence they can have is surely a fascinating subject, one intimately connected to human meaning-making, democratic participation, and peace. If the subject is to do any good, it cannot be left in the hands of local or national belief groups to shape it in defence of their own belief systems and power. It must be set free.

References

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