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***Does Religious Education Work?***

***A Multi-dimensional Investigation***

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This publication represents the findings of a major *Religion and Society* research project initiated in 2007 by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. The three-year project was led by scholars from the University of Glasgow, King's College London and Queen's University, Belfast.

The size and scope of the project is impressive. The research was driven at professorial level, drawing on expertise in theology, anthropology and psychology as well as education, and involved teams of fieldworkers investigating 24 different schools across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The omission of Wales is justified because RE was seen to be structured and delivered under the same system as England 'at the time the research was first conceived'. The recognition that it has diverged in the years since then merely underlines further the diversity in Religious Education across the United Kingdom. The authors, quite justifiably I believe, argue that RE differs across the constituent nations even more than do other curriculum subjects.

Those in countries where Religious Education is absent from the public education system are probably already bemused by its obligatory nature in the UK. To discover that policies and practice vary across the nations of the UK can only add to their bemusement, but one of the strengths of this book is the way it makes one consider the different approaches that are possible for a compulsory RE programme, albeit approaches that have changed over recent decades.

'A somewhat odd volume' is how Conroy and his colleagues describe their book, which is one of the fruits of the research project. The investigation they have conducted is avowedly multi-dimensional. They admit that their methodology leads to findings from which it is hard to generalize, but they are more concerned with getting under the skin of the subject, uncovering its 'inscape' (to borrow a term from the poet Hopkins) and posing provoking questions. This is not a work that follows the path of some lazy post-modern approaches, hiding behind the irony found in discontinuities. There is a genuine attempt to address the question in the title: *does* Religious Education work? And what do we want it to do anyway? Any educational research, they argue, will inevitably be normative as well as descriptive and analytical, because 'education is ineluctably a normative activity'. Their research is not just an attempt to understand how Religious Education functions, but also 'to contribute to capacity-building in the study of RE'.

The book is in two parts. Part I deals with methodological and structural questions, and Part II with the substance of Religious Education. The authors begin by looking at *why*

Religious Education is such a strange subject. Differences in legislation across the UK mean that although education in general looks very different across the constituent nations, the desired outcomes are remarkably similar. Except in RE – here, ‘the imperatives differ somewhat across the United Kingdom and between schools serving different communities’.

Much previous research into Religious Education in the UK has adopted either a philosophical and normative approach or has employed quantitative analysis of students’ attitudes and dispositions. This project, however, is located mainly in qualitative research: reflections on policy lead to a largely ethnographic approach, with an eclectic bundle of add-ons: Delphi methods, Actor Network Theory, student questionnaires, and analysis of texts. Chapter 1 gives an overview of the methodology, which itself reflects the strangeness of the subject, explored further in Chapter 2, which is aptly entitled ‘The Strange Position of Education in Religion in Contemporary Political Culture’. The complexities of UK policy and practice are analyzed in Chapter 3, before a discussion of the confusions and challenges posed by three particular conceptual questions in Chapter 4: the rationale for RE, the role of the teacher (their principles and pedagogy) and the significance of truth claims in RE.

The substance of the research emerges in Part II, although this is by no means a blow-by-blow account of what the ethnography uncovered. The schedules and questionnaires are published in detail in the appendices; the main text, however, concentrates on key emergent themes. One senses that the range of schools in the survey reflects stronger divergences in practice than do policy differences between the systems in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Denominational schools, particularly Roman Catholic schools, are distinctive in more ways than one. All the schools in the survey (which are given pseudonyms) are within the public education system. Their varying level of participation reflects to some extent their commitment to the delivery of RE. This emerges in the discussions. Chapter 5 explores the extent to which RE contributes to the inculcation of good citizenship and ‘committed pluralism’ – what is the place of the ‘other’ in RE’s social and civic aims? Chapter 6 considers the importance of the text books used in RE – an emergent theme that seems to have surprised the researchers. To what extent is pedagogy controlled less by the teacher and more by text books published to prepare students for examinations at the age of 16? This feature, it is acknowledged, may have arisen because the research was focused mainly on students in Year 10 or its equivalent. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with two other aspects arising from the study – the stories communities of practice tell themselves about RE and student perspectives on the subject. Data for the latter was derived from questionnaires, the most quantitative part of the research, though not necessarily the most reliable as the level of response was skewed towards schools (notably Catholic) where RE is held in higher regard. However that result in itself contributes to the overall story.

A concluding chapter, ‘Imagining and Re-Imagining Religious Education’, reverts to the more philosophical and reflective. It includes a rather ironic note: many students enjoy

RE, it appears, but not always for the right reasons. 'If the goal of RE was to relax and have a good laugh, then we might observe that it did indeed work', say the authors. But Conroy *et al* conclude with a question of some profundity: 'should classes in RE be enjoyable at the expense of the creation of a flat-pack theology, where students are somehow invited to build their own version of religion that embraces their spirituality but pays little attention to the linguistic and conceptual demands of the genealogically rich traditions of religious systems, and the otherness that they embody?'

I found myself concurring with the expected answer. But I also found the book had made me reflect again on my own experience – the Religious Education I was taught and later taught myself, which I went on to research and later to inspect in schools across England. What do I expect it to achieve? As a SACRE member, how can my colleagues and I discover if RE in our neck of the woods is working? I feel slightly better equipped to deal with this question having read this book.

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