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Humanism and the Death of Religious Education

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Background

In the UK, RE is a statutory subject with a non-statutory programme of study. On behalf of the Local Authorities (LAs), *Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education* (SACREs) draw up Agreed Syllabi, which community schools are legally obliged to follow. The 1988 Education Reform Act, stipulates that SACREs are to be made up of 'such Christian and other religious denominations as, in the opinion of the authority, will appropriately reflect the principal religious traditions in the area', failing to represent rival non-religious beliefs (emphases added, ERA 11:4 (a)). The Reform Act also stipulates that 'Any agreed syllabus ... shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (emphasis added, 8:3). While, there is no compulsion, the syllabi may be modelled on the National Framework for Religious Education (NFRE, 2004). Humanism is included on the NFRE, albeit without equivalent emphasis to the six (major) world faiths.

Research Questions

I ask whether the inclusion of 'secular philosophies such as humanism' in RE is defensible, whether RE ought to be compulsory and whether the scope of arguments in the affirmative extend to embrace such secular philosophies as humanism and whether they ought to be studied together.

Methods

In this paper, I look at legal and curricular structures, including the 1944 Education act, the 1988 Education Reform Act (ERA), The Religious education: Programme of study (non-statutory) for key stage 3 and attainment targets, an extract from The National Curriculum 2007, and the National Framework for RE. I critically discuss various rationales for RE and investigate their scope alongside various attempts to explain the relevance of non-religious beliefs to the study of religious beliefs, especially in the work of Jo Pearce and British Humanist Association literature. In this context I discuss three promising arguments: 'Rational development of pupils' worldviews,' 'Secular answers to religious questions' and 'Indoctrination by Omission'. By critically engaging with current legislation and curricula, I recommend their non-trivial reform.

Frame

I will be discussing this topic from within the tradition of analytic Philosophy, that is, by a priori conceptual analysis.

Research findings

This paper argues that RE ought to be scrapped and that humanism and other non-religious views ought to be taught alongside religious views in schools. This is not an argument for the inclusion of humanism in RE, but an argument that since humanism cannot be included, RE ought to be replaced by another subject incorporating the religious and rival non-religious positions (which will mean reform of legal and curriculum structures).

Just as religions ought to be taught in schools, their non-religious rivals ought to be taught in schools; since pupils ought to know about the variety of beliefs held by others and have a right to know about religious and non-religious beliefs since they may turn out to be true. I say 'rivals' so as to pick out

those non-religious beliefs relevant to religions, relevant because they are incompatible with religious beliefs. Clearly non-religious beliefs, qua non-religious beliefs are irrelevant: If RE considered its interest to be in 'religious and non-religious beliefs' as such, then it would be so broad as to include all beliefs.

However, 'religious' education precludes non-religions in the same way that 'mathematics' precludes non-mathematical topics. 'Religious Education' is not just a name, but a (sometimes mistaken) description of what is taught under its banner. It would be odd not to take the name seriously, to do so would in effect to make it at best superfluous or at worst a lie. There is some substantiation in the 1988 Education Reform Act when it stipulates that 'Any agreed syllabus ... shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (emphasis added, 8:3).

Since it is only natural to teach religions and rival non-religious positions together, I recommend that RE be replaced by a new subject covering both. I thus sympathize strongly with the British Humanist Association's (BHA) 'campaign for a reformed subject of Belief and Values Education, or Philosophy, or (as in Scotland) Religious and Moral Education/Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies, which would be characterized by inclusiveness, impartiality, objectivity, fairness, balance and relevance' (BHA website, 'Religious Education').