

SACRE Bleu: the politics of difference

Some musings by the REC chair as shared with National Association of SACREs (NASACRE) AGM May 2007

SACRE Bleu! - This is the expression I remember from childhood. It was associated with comic characters often with a French Foreign Legion connection. For many years I knew only of the French word and not of the English acronym.

When I trained as an RE teacher, I came across it as I explored the ins and outs of the 1944 Education Act, but I was more aware of the significance of ASCs than SACREs. If a minority of LEAs developed their own Agreed Syllabuses rather than adopting those of others, even fewer had SACREs. There is evidence that even the notion of a SACRE let alone its reality was far from common knowledge amongst RE teachers. It was hardly known at all with others.

This changed somewhat in 1988, when legislation regarding SACREs altered from permissive to obligatory. This was one of the several substantial changes for the better for RE that the ERA put in place.

My choice of title wasn't only intended as a touch of humour, it also makes a serious point. SACREs are known about and matter greatly to all of us present. Elsewhere – whether within teaching profession, amongst politicians (local and national), or even within the CofE, and the other denominations and religious communities – they are not well known. That is changing, but slowly. It may even be that the name is counter productive. Just as there is a 'cringe factor' associated with R word ('Religion') in our contemporary culture, that may even be true for some with a word which is associated with 'Sacred'. I'd like to think we are at last emerging from that dominant cultural suspicion, but we've some way to go..

If 1988 was a critical moment for RE, I think that we may now be at another one.

We experience what in effect is a daily advertising campaign against Religion – the news. It's not just bad press for Islam, but for all religions. Wars in every continent, suicide bombing, sexual abuse – all seen to be directly associated with institutional religion - and so it goes on.

It's no surprise that Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion* has been on the best seller list for several months, nor that Philip Pullman recommends it as obligatory reading in all schools.

There's a massive challenge from all this for RE. But it also presents an opportunity to help build better understanding of religion and religions:

- exposing its distortions
- acknowledging its weaknesses

- enabling children and young people to become discerning about important beliefs and values
- ensuring depth as well as breadth in their own emerging world views.

It is in this context of responding to challenge that the *National Strategy for RE* and as part of this the *Report of the RE Teaching Commission* have been developed by the RE Council of England and Wales. Both were published at the REC's AGM at the London Muslim Centre on May 2nd.

For those of you who do not know much about the RE Council, let me explain: it is a broadly based conglomeration of the many different national organisations directly engaging with RE – some fifty in number. It is owned by the RE community at large and endeavours to hold together for mutual advantage the educational interests of the different faith communities, professional RE associations, and wider collations such as the Inter Faith Network UK, NASACRE and WASACRE. Since 1973 when it was first established it has depended on modest subscriptions from the member organisations and on elected honorary officers. The REC is now a limited Company and registered Charity and its elected Board/Executive is constituted in such a way that it reflects the range of professional interests and different faith perspectives.

In recent years the REC has taken on a stronger role in promoting the standing of the subject and in recognition of its integrity and representivity in this regard the DfES entered a partnership with it in March 2006 to consider ways of further enhancing the subjects interests. The Commission Report and the National Strategy are interim fruits of that partnership.

As many will know, much of the work on the *Report of the RE Teaching Commission* was done by Dave Francis, meeting with a core group drawn from across the RE community, and making use of a wide evidence base, including submissions from some of those present today, including NASACRE officers, and from government agencies. Once again, this report exposes the extent of poor provision for RE – in primary schools, in secondary schools, in sixth form colleges and in higher education provider institutions. Patently, there is not enough time allocation nor resource funding and most especially there is a lack of teacher learning and expertise.

The proposals for a National Strategy have been designed to change things for the better and they make the case for massive injection of funding by government. Both documents were approved by the REC Board in March and submitted thereafter to the DfES and Ministers. Alan Clarke, Joint Head of the Curriculum Section of the DfES, gave a general welcome to both documents when he spoke to the Council at the time of their subsequent launch. Response is now awaited.

Access to both documents is available via the REC website:

<http://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org>

The full text of the National Strategy proposals can be downloaded from there. So can the 11 page summary of the *Report of the RE Teaching Commission*. Copies of that whole report can be purchased for £7.50 (inc postage).

It's clear that there are some current deficiencies in the present arrangements and provision for RE

Many **Agreed Syllabuses** are excellent. But not all are, as the research of Mary Hayward has shown.

Many **SACREs** work very effectively. But not all are – this is evident from the variability of their Annual Reports or from the successive annual commentaries on them as reviewed successively by NCC/SCAA/QCA, or indeed from the observations from Ofsted

Many make excellent use of local expertise, especially highly experienced teachers, advisers, consultants, wise ones from faith communities and sometimes even from HE. But sometimes that expertise base is not as effectively drawn on as it might be, sometimes it is not cultivated, sometimes the expertise bought in from outside is only superficially tuned into the distinctive strengths on the ground.

RE in many **faith schools** - Anglican and Roman, Jewish, Muslim, and Sikh - is excellent. But at the moment other schools and indeed SACREs are largely isolated from them, when they might have something to learn from them. At the same time, not all faith schools excel in RE. As a result of the absence of any representation for these schools on SACREs, there's presently a limit on their public accountability in regard to RE or the additional support which they might receive through them.

RE in **academies and trust schools** may also be excellent, but except when there are Ofsted inspections there is no means of knowing and the statutory reference points for public accountability are weak or missing. Such schools are multiplying, and at the same time Ofsted inspections of individual schools are diminishing.

With a few exceptions RE in **primary Initial Teacher Training** is poorly provided – both for all students as prospective class teachers and for potential subject leaders/coordinators. ITT providers generally educate and train their students to work in schools throughout their region or indeed much further afield –ie not in a local authority, nor a local diocese. In all other subjects there are national syllabuses. Only recently has there been a non statutory National Framework which could be regarded as a generally indicative reference point for RE across maintained education.

SACREs can bring added value on all these fronts, but realistically that will only happen if they are appropriately strengthened.

Let's imagine three scenarios

A. Status Quo

Good work continues, but patchily. Energy and enthusiasm carries the day, but in most cases it is dependent on lots of good will and only minimum resources. Capacity to monitor the quality of RE in local schools and colleges is limited, and in ITT even moreso. There is no thought of extending the brief

to include faith schools, trust schools and academies because that's not part of the statutory brief and the very thought of it is too demanding to contemplate. QCA continues its overview role – sometimes welcomed, sometimes resented as an intrusive threat to LA autonomy.

B. Deterioration

As trust schools and academies increase in numbers, the number of LA community schools diminishes, as does the power and budget of the LAs themselves. Instead of increasing, the funding for individual SACREs is reduced. The QCA led Curriculum Reviews engender a much more flexible approach in which syllabus content is downsized in all NC subjects. Not so in RE. Whilst sometimes in tune with this, there is an uneven match in RE because of the plurality of different arrangements and expectations

C. Enhancement

There's direct acknowledgement by government of the centrality of RE throughout Education 3-19. It's in the front line of any community cohesion agenda. It's fundamental to ensuring that beliefs and values are critically explored and developed. SACREs are recognised as a vital agency for promoting this. Additional resources are seen to be both necessary and justifiable because their brief needs to be widened and strengthened. They become the point of public accountability for RE throughout the maintained system in its entirety.

I hope that each of these scenarios is recognisable. I think that each is presently possible. However, I'm in no doubt that **it's the third, which we need vigorously to pursue.**

This is what the REC's nationally strategic proposals for RE do.

1. They press for a much higher profile for RE in DfES thinking and priorities – to be reflected within its different sections, eg Curriculum, Faith Schools, FE and Teacher Supply; and extended to all relevant government agencies: NCSL, Skills Councils as well as QCA.
2. They ask for direct recognition of the importance of SACREs as agencies for community cohesion, with additional investment in
 - their regular working
 - recruitment and training for members from minority groups, as also for all their members
 - support for annual monitoring of a 10% sample in their schools and colleges
3. They suggest that consideration be given to extending the brief of SACREs to cover RE in throughout the maintained system. Though that would indeed mean more work, it would have several advantages, including
 - an extension of the avenues of opportunity in relation to community cohesion and for mutual enrichment between the different kinds of institution
 - a challenge to the offensive implication that community schools lack any faith dimension, or that faith schools lack community

- direct local attention to the 16-19 experience in 11-19 schools, sixth form and FE colleges.

Very significantly, it would also provide justification for the extra investment in SACRES which government might well otherwise shrug off.

There are many other aspects of the National Strategy, but the one seeking major funding is that for **CPD/INSET** – systematically covering all primary schools during a 3-5 year period; the needs of secondary schools for depth of specialists; and, for the first time, the equivalent for FE colleges. This CPD is where the bulk of the estimated £60m of additional investment would go. One distinctive feature of the delivery of such is the regional consortia involving local advisers and consultants, higher education institutions, SCITTs, dioceses and faith communities – with performance monitored by SACRES

It's probably necessary that I should say something about **the balance of local, regional and national frames within the Strategy.**

1. **Local** is absolutely central – it's there where the teaching and learning take place. Teachers as reflective practitioners are absolutely fundamental here. The SACRES are vital in monitoring what is happening on the ground – in the overall quality of RE and in the nature and depth of supports available from professional agencies and from faith communities.
2. **National** is also important in establishing the overall parameters of what is involved in RE for all children and young people, with notional criteria of what it means to be religiously educated at any particular age – religiate. Our best agreed reference point for such so far is the Non Statutory National Framework. Thanks to the work of Mark Chater and the KS3 and 4 Review Group, this is having powerful effect in QCA's acknowledgement of the relevance of RE for the whole curriculum.
3. **Regional** I think is a necessary bridge between the two for co-ordinating available resources, ensuring that high quality education and training for teachers is available to every school in every part of the country.

Here I would add **a personal word about Agreed Syllabuses.** If I'm pressed about them, though they are of variable quality, I confirm that I will battle for their continuing existence until such time as they cease to be necessary. If however SACRES are made secure, with guarantee of long term funding to carry out the various roles I've outlined, then I become less anxious. A crucial question for me will be what will best enable every primary teacher to be pedagogically confident and competent in their understanding of Religion and RE. That might be 150 different LA syllabuses, plus a range of faith school syllabuses. But it might not.

The National Strategy does not propose the ending of locally agreed syllabuses. However, it recognises that there is evidence and argument that the present statutory arrangements leave RE vulnerable:

- there is evidence of poorer levels of provision and overall quality of delivery relative to National Curriculum subjects, as continually reported by Ofsted

- there is a risk that in QCA primary and secondary curriculum reviews RE gets sidelined in the thinking of other subjects precisely because of its peculiar status
- there are doubts about RE's part in the community cohesion agenda in faith and trust schools and academies
- RE is only required in 16-19 institutions operating within school regulations – but, now that it is proposed that the education leaving age should be raised to 19 for all, should that not now be extended to all?
- criticism of RE provision by some secularists is given undue credibility because of the absence of legal recognition for Humanists on SACREs (ie not just co-option) – arguably made the more anomalous in light of EU Human Rights legislation with its 'Religions and Beliefs' usage
- It is reported that the conscience clause is being abused as a cover for racist withdrawal from the teaching of Islam within RE.

In light of such evidence, the National Strategy recommends that there should be a review of the current statutory provisions for RE. What changes need to be made for it to become better fit for purpose in the 21st century? To be effective such a review will need to include the withdrawal of Circular 1/94 and a greater readiness to face up to the challenges of Collective Worship.

There are **other aspects of SACREs and the national RE condition which also deserve attention.** Let me mention two in passing.

Firstly: the inclusiveness of the scope of RE and of SACRE membership in terms of the faiths covered. Two criteria are commonly invoked – the range of faith communities found within a local authority and the principle established in 1988 that RE should be attentive to the principal religions found in the UK. Sometimes limited diversity within the local area is used against representation relating to one or more of the principal religions. In discussions about membership – including the extension to Humanists, and in some areas to Baha'is, Jains and Zoroastrians – it would be fruitful to engage with philosophical and theological considerations as to the justifications for representation/disqualification. If crude numbers are in any sense determinative, Jehovah's Witnesses might well warrant inclusion. Without suggesting that it should be changed, what is the actual basis for judging that Paganism and Scientology have no place in either RE or SACREs?

Secondly: SACREs have long provided a statutory opportunity for inter-faith dialogue. Every local authority has had an obligation to establish ecumenical councils which include different churches and faiths. The opportunity to see them as such has however often been missed. In the last five years the existence of local Inter Faith Groups and Councils has seen a massive proliferation throughout the country – evident in the Local Inter Faith Directory, published by the of the Inter Faith Network UK (www.interfaith.org.uk). Sometimes there is a direct link between these local groups and SACREs, but often not. An opportunity for new energy and enthusiasm from this resource to carry over into schools is missed. The link with SACREs is often also missed in local government initiatives to promote inter-religious initiatives and sensitivity. Here are opportunities for SACREs to show their vibrancy and their relevance for the local political arena.

Reverting to the main thrust of this presentation. We are I do believe at a critical moment nationally in the challenges faced by RE and SACREs. This moment is also one of major opportunity of the kinds which are set out in the *Report of the RE Teaching Commission* and in the proposals for a *National Strategy for RE*.

SACREs are central players for addressing the challenges creatively. Accordingly, their significance is not best conveyed by the single colour Bleu. Rather, they are VIBGYOR (Violet, Indigo, Blue, Green, Yellow, Orange, Red) – the rainbow covenant colours for every living creature.

Brian Gates