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Death knell or revival? Navigating religious education in the age of the non-religious

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Abstract

England and Wales are now amongst the least religious countries in the world. According to Census data between 2011 and 2021, the number of people identifying as having ‘No Religion’ jumped by over 8 million, from 25% to 37%. Further, although there was a small upward shift in those identifying with minority religions, during the same period, the number of people identifying as Christian dropped by 5.5 million to 46.2% of the population. Wales is particularly irreligious. Here, 47% ticked ‘No Religion’ compared to 44% ‘Christian’. But even in Northern Ireland, where the majority still identify with a Christian denomination, the non-religious population has nearly doubled (from 10 to 17%) in the last decade. This surge in the non-religious will (and ought to) affect policy in a wide range of areas, but it is likely to be most profoundly felt in education; be that via reforms designed to better accommodate non-religious learners or attempts to reverse what is seen as a threatening trend by some religious groups and organisations. In this paper I explore the implications of this rapid demographic shift on religious education (RE). I argue that, while some may view the growth of the non-religious as a ‘death knell’ signalling the subject’s impending demise, it actually presents an unparalleled opportunity for revitalisation.

Keywords Non-religious worldviews · Humanism · Religious education · SACREs · Human rights law

1 Introduction

England and Wales are now amongst the least religious countries in the world. According to Census data between 2011 and 2021, the number of people identifying as having ‘No Religion’ jumped by over 8 million, from 25% to 37% (ONS, 2022). Further, although there was a small upward shift in those identifying with minority religions¹ during the same period, the number of people identifying as Christian dropped by 5.5 million to 46.2% of

¹ For instance, the 2021 census records 6.5% of the population as Muslim compared to 4.9% in 2011 (ONS, 2022).

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the population. Particular growth in the non-religious has occurred in Wales. Here, 47% ticked 'No Religion' compared to 44% 'Christian'. But even in Northern Ireland, where the majority still identify with a Christian denomination, the non-religious population has nearly doubled (from 10% to 17%) in the last decade (NISRA, 2022).

This surge in the non-religious will (and ought to) affect policy in a wide range of areas, but it is likely to be most profoundly felt in education; be that via reforms designed to better accommodate non-religious learners and their families or attempts to reverse what is seen as a threatening trend by some religious groups and organisations. In this paper I will explore the implications of this rapid demographic shift on religious education (RE). I will argue that, while some may view the growth of the non-religious as a 'death knell' signalling the subject's impending demise, it actually presents an unparalleled opportunity for revitalisation.

2 The age of the non-religious

While the growth in the proportion of people identifying as non-religious in the 2021 Census was notable, it was not particularly surprising. The voluntary question, 'what is your religion?' was first introduced in 2001. At that point, 72% of the population identified as Christian and 15% as having no religion, so, although these numbers appear to be escalating as we move further into the twenty-first century, the growth of the non-religious is an established trend rather than a statistical blip. This is further borne out by the findings of the annual British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA, 2019) and its counterpart in Northern Ireland, the Life and Times Survey (NILT, 2023), which have consistently reported increases in the non-religious over the past two decades.

It seems likely that the proportion of non-religious people will increase even further by the time of the next Census. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that the non-religious have a younger age profile than the overall population, with the majority (91.2%) aged 65 or under (ONS, 2022). The median age of those identifying as non-religious is 32 meaning that, apart from Muslims (who have a median age of 27), every other religious group has a higher median age. Christians have the oldest average age, with a median of 51 (up from 46 in 2011). Amongst school-aged children and young people, 44% identify as non-religious compared to 35% Christian.

Of course, it is by no means certain that an individual who is non-religious in their youth will remain so in adulthood. For example, some have theorised that the discrepancies between the prevalence of belief in God in the young compared to older age groups is the result of 'an aging effect in which belief increases as the anticipation of mortality rises' (Smith, 2012, p. 5). However, the recent UK in the World Values Survey (WVS) found that the pre-war generation have seen the largest decline in religious identification² of any generation in Britain, with the proportion saying they see themselves as 'a religious person' dropping from 69% in 1981 to 46% in 2022 (Duffy et al., 2023, p. 16). During the same period, Baby Boomers also saw a decline in numbers identifying as religious (from 40% in 1981 to 32% in 2022) and belief in God also declined in both groups (p. 6). Since these are the groups for whom anticipation of mortality is likely to be most pronounced,

² This relates to the percentage of respondents who said they 'are a religious person' (Duffy et al., 2023, p. 16).

these statistics suggest that the proximity to death hypothesis does not adequately account for demographic differences between generations. And, although the WVS found British members of Generation X were slightly more likely to identify as religious in 2022 than they were in the late 1980's, the proportion who see themselves as religious has still been in decline since the mid 2000's while the proportion of people explicitly identifying as atheist has increased in every generation (p. 17). On this basis, irreligiosity doesn't appear to be something that Britons are aging out of, whether that be as the result of a decrease in youthful rebelliousness or fear of their own mortality. Instead, it is increasingly becoming an established part of their worldview or identity.

3 Counting the non-religious

The Census is generally considered the lodestar by which to determine the religious composition of Britain. Indeed, in the context of religious education, many local authorities in England and Wales use Census data to ascertain which religious groups should be represented on Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) and Agreed Syllabus Conferences (ASCs). Nevertheless, there is good reason to think that the number of non-religious people is even higher than the Census suggests. According to the British Social Attitudes Survey, 53% of Britons have no religion, with 37% identifying as Christian and 9% with other faiths (Humanists UK, 2021a). This survey also found that 68% of 18–24 year olds belonged to no religion. The primary reason for the discrepancy between the findings in the Census and BSAS is likely to be the wording of the question. While the Census asks, 'What is your religion?'—which appears to presuppose that you have a religion—the BSAS asks 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any religion? If yes, which?'. Prior to the 2021 Census, Humanists UK commissioned a YouGov poll on both types of question and found that 47% identified as non-religious on the Census-style question whereas 54% identified as non-religious on the BSAS-style question (Humanists UK, 2021b). The comparable figures for Christians were 41% and 36% respectively.

To be sure, however they are worded, large scale surveys are a fairly blunt tool and are unlikely to capture the nuanced range of beliefs and identities that fit under any one label. This is evident from the debate surrounding whether Sikhism is best described as a religion or an ethnicity (Jhutti-Johal, 2021) or what we should take from evidence to suggest many of those who are non-religious would nevertheless identify themselves as 'spiritual' (Waite, 2022). But, whatever the finer-grained data reveals, it is now undeniable that, more than ever before, the non-religious represent a significant proportion of the UK population and that this demands further consideration, particularly in the areas of our social and cultural lives where religiosity has been considered the norm.

4 The end of the 'Christian Era'?

Predictably, the Census results generated a great deal of media coverage, as well as wide ranging comment from faith and belief leaders. The Archbishop of York, Stephen Cottrell, said the findings were 'not a great surprise' and continued that 'we have left behind the era when many people almost automatically identified as Christian' (Sandhu, 2022). Andrew Copson, the CEO of Humanists UK, put the point somewhat more forcefully, arguing: 'No longer can anyone plausibly claim that the UK is a Christian country, and no longer can

decision makers and religious lobbyists justify the policies that have entrenched discrimination against the non-religious for decades...Everyone must have the right to live in a country that respects their universal right to freedom of religion or belief.’ (Copson, 2022). Muslim Council of Britain Secretary General, Zara Mohammed, maintained the increase in the non-religious was a ‘cause for introspection for faith leaders’ and thought it should prompt reflection about how people are ‘fulfilling the natural quest for spirituality’ (MCB, 2022).

5 RE in the age of the non-religious

Whether one sees the rise of the non-religious as something to be regretted, celebrated, or merely as an interesting (but morally neutral) fact about life in the UK, it seems clear that this demographic surge will (and ought to) have an impact on a range of policy areas, particularly those where representation and/or targeted support are of special importance. However, because education is the primary means by which society attempts both to reproduce and improve itself, these effects are likely to be most profoundly felt in the field of education. This could involve greater openness to non-religious people and their perspectives. However, it could also generate resistance to the inclusion of the non-religious and their beliefs in RE and other areas where religion and education intersect (e.g. collective worship, faith school admissions, etc.) as a result of attempts to reassert the dominion of religion (particularly that of the established Church) over public life.

One example of this kind of resistance can be seen in the Bishop of Southwark’s response to the Education (Non-religious Philosophical Convictions) Bill in the House of Lords (UK Parliament, 2023). The Bill, which, were it to become law, would only apply in England, seeks only to ensure the inclusion of non-religious worldviews on an equal footing with religious perspectives in RE and the bodies that develop and oversee the curriculum (SACREs and ASCs). However, during a Parliamentary debate pertaining to the Bill, the Bishop argued that, because non-religious worldviews are ‘[embedded] already across the curriculum’ and ‘taught, imbibed and breathed in and out virtually every minute of every school day’ the aims of the Bill should ‘be resisted’ (Hansard, 2023).

This argument echoes one made by L. Phillip Barnes who, in a paper maintaining that humanism ought to be excluded from RE, claims that ‘the curriculum of British schools, with the exception of RE, is almost exclusively devoted to secular interpretations of phenomena and to secular approaches to knowledge and belief’ therefore ‘the secular commitments of [h]umanism [already] enjoy a privileged position in British education’ (Barnes, 2015, p. 86). To put it another way, RE carves out a space in the curriculum where the unique value of religion can be conveyed. On this basis, to include non-religious perspectives like humanism, at least insofar as this is done in a way that considers such positions in their own right rather than as a counterpoint—or foil—to religious perspectives, is to, in some sense, undermine the disciplinary coherence and purpose of the subject.

As David Aldridge has highlighted, one reason the argument from uniqueness promulgated by Barnes and the Bishop of Southwark gets things wrong is because, if it is indeed the case that ‘the overall effect of the state curriculum is to commend to students some non-religious belief, this needs to be addressed at the level of the whole curriculum, rather than through the preservation of some sacred curriculum space in which religion can be commended by way of balance or compensation.’ (Aldridge, 2015, p. 101) When understood politically, that is, as ‘an approach to the ordering of communities, natures, and

states' (Copson, 2017, p. 1), secularism is about preventing religious domination of political life and public institutions while ensuring freedom of religion and belief for all. This need not (indeed, should not) involve relegating religious ways of thinking solely to the private sphere or designated areas of the curriculum. Of course, religious ideas should not be permitted to distort teaching³ or disciplinary methodology (e.g. the scientific method) but there are appropriate ways to acknowledge, examine, and explore such perspectives across the school curriculum in a manner that would be entirely consistent with secularism so understood.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that secular ideas are not, as Barnes and the Bishop appear to suggest, identical or synonymous with non-religious ideas. They are better understood as *areligious*; as taking no stand on or bracketing-out one's views on religious questions, including whether one answers the question of whether or not there is a God in the affirmative or the negative. True, this may mean that religious people have to act *etsi deus non daretur* (as if God did not exist) (Felderhof, 2012, p. 152) but it also requires the non-religious to suspend their conviction in the 'truth' that God is a fiction. Although this is rarely recognised, both requirements are equally demanding but open up a space in which those with varying perspectives are able to find common ground.

6 Exclusion, education and epistemic injustice

In his aforementioned critique of Barnes, Aldridge points out that the exclusion of humanism (and other non-religious standpoints) in the context of RE forecloses dialogue in a manner that is anti-educational. If we conceive of RE purely as a site for the serious consideration of the value of religions this does not '[foresee], or does not take seriously the transformation of the subject matter that is entailed when a child says "no" to religion' (Aldridge, 2015, p. 99). Since teaching in other areas of the curriculum does not address humanism *qua* substantive worldview, it does not generally give learners an opportunity to reflect upon their (non-religious) perspective as a (disputed) position about existential questions of meaning and purpose of the kind that distinguish RE from other subjects. True, while appearing to concede that humanism represents 'a relatively coherent view of life' (Barnes, 2015, p. 84; Felderhof, 2012, p. 148), opponents of teaching non-religious perspectives often argue that humanists constitute only 'a small sub-group' of non-religious people (Barnes, 2015, p. 83) with the majority lacking any kind of 'overarching narrative' (Felderhof, 2012, p. 148). Instead, non-religious views are often more properly understood as 'a set of negative challenges to theistic beliefs' (Aldridge, 2015, p. 100). I will briefly address the claim that humanists represent only a small proportion of non-religious people below. However, even if the perspectives of many non-religious people are 'contradictory, eclectic [and] ragged' (Felderhof, 2012, p. 148), this does not seem to be an issue that is unique to the irreligious; many theists will have similarly un(der)developed and unarticulated worldviews (Aldridge, 2015, p. 100). Furthermore, if Felderhof is correct about there being a basic human impulse to look for 'intellectual and emotional integration' in our conceptions of the good (Felderhof, 2012, p. 148) then it would seem unwise to suggest that

³ For a discussion of how such distortion currently occurs in relationships and sex education (RSE) see Wareham (2022b).

the kind of reflection that is likely to engender such integration should be provided to those with a predisposition towards religion whilst being denied to the non-religious.

Amongst other things, the exclusion of non-religious worldviews from RE that appears to be recommended by Barnes et al., lends support to the idea that religions have a monopoly on certain areas of life (ethics and morality, for instance) and that religious people are necessarily excluded from others (this notion is immanent in the view that science and religion are diametrically opposed and does much to harm learners' knowledge and understanding of both⁴).

Moreover, as Strhan and Shillitoe note from their work studying the experiences of non-religious children in RE, excluding non-religious perspectives from the subject may well constitute a form of 'epistemic injustice' (Fricker, 2007) because it denies such children 'interpretive resources to make sense of their own worldviews in a way that members of religious communities currently [enjoy]' (Strhan & Shillitoe, 2022, p. 262).

In light of the current demographic trends, the alienation likely to be caused by approaches to RE that seek to exclude or minimise references to non-religious worldviews represent more of a threat to the subject than any posed by attempts at inclusivity. RE already polls poorly in comparison to other curriculum subjects, with 61% of people responding to a 2017 YouGov poll saying the subject was 'not very important' or 'not at all important' (YouGov, 2018).⁵

Nevertheless, a 2021 survey commissioned by the Culham St Gabriel's Trust (CSTG, 2021) established that 71% of the UK population thought the subject should be reflective of the diversity of backgrounds and beliefs in the UK today, suggesting that an explicit shift towards a more inclusive approach may go some way towards addressing negative public perceptions.

7 The changing legal landscape

Of course, (perceived) utility—which is often reduced to the impact knowledge and understanding of a particular subject will have on a learner's ability to secure high paid employment—will always need to be balanced with other factors when determining what and how to teach. These include holistic concerns pertaining to the flourishing of individuals (and the broader society), such as the cultivation of personal autonomy, as well as civic and moral capacities (see Brighouse et al., 2018; Clayton et al, 2018). In addition, due consideration will need to be given to the views and opinions of subject experts when it comes to determining what constitutes core knowledge for each area of the curriculum, with RE being no exception. But there are also external constraints, such as legal frameworks to reckon with. Sometimes changes to these frameworks are implemented in order to reflect societal change that has already taken place. For instance, when the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced a requirement for agreed syllabuses to 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the

⁴ See for example Billingsley, Nassaji, Fraser and Lawson (2018).

⁵ A YouGov Tracker Poll shows the proportion of UK adults holding this view has remained fairly stable over time, with the most recent survey finding that 58% see RE ('religious studies') as not very or not at all important at secondary level (YouGov, 2023). Interestingly, despite their age group tending to be less religious, respondents aged 18–24 were less likely to hold this view, with 47% saying the subject wasn't important compared to 44% who said it was 'quite important' or 'very important'.

teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (ERA 1988, s 8(3)), this was, in part, a response to a growth in religious diversity in the years since agreed syllabuses were introduced as part of the 1944 Education Act (EA 1944, Fifth Schedule, s 2(a)). On other occasions, a change to the law is itself designed to ameliorate the behaviour of individuals or institutions. Human rights law is sometimes referred to as 'aspirational law' because, although rights may be implemented in concrete circumstances, with courts acting as 'enforcers of new reforms' when interpretations are disputed (Fancourt, 2021, p. 132), they represent a way to articulate goals concerning the kind of people and societies we wish to create (Harvey, 2004).

In Wales, the Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act (2021) recently broadened the scope of RE, renaming it 'Religion, Values, and Ethics' (RVE), requiring that non-religious philosophical convictions are included in syllabuses, and enabling the appointment of non-religious representatives to SACREs and ASCs. There is a sense in which these reforms are both responsive *and* aspirational. They not only seek to reflect the growing diversity of religion and belief in Wales but to explicitly draw the subject in line with the Human Rights Act 1998, which brings the European Convention on Human Rights into domestic law (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 28). Under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 (A2P1) of the Convention—known as the right to education—'the state owes parents a positive duty to respect their religious and philosophical convictions' (Fox v Secretary of State for Education, 2015, para. 39). In the context of state-run education, this includes 'a duty to take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in a pluralistic manner' (para. 39). Article 9 of the Convention protects freedom of thought, conscience, and religion for everyone including 'atheists, agnostics, sceptics and the unconcerned' (Kokkinakis v Greece, 1993, s 31). On this basis, the pluralism guaranteed by A2P1 encompasses non-religious perspectives.

While A2P1 applies across the school curriculum, it has particular relevance to RE and has formed the basis of several legal cases pertaining to the subject. In England, the High Court ruled that the British Government had made 'a false and misleading statement of law' when it asserted a new GCSE syllabus in Religious Studies (RS) that excluded the systematic teaching of non-religious worldviews like humanism would necessarily fulfil the statutory requirements for teaching RE at Key Stage 4 (Fox v Secretary of State for Education, 2015, para. 81). The case established that a curriculum focusing solely on religious perspectives that neglects or gives little 'air time' to non-religious beliefs, would be insufficiently pluralistic and thus unlawful (Wareham, 2022a).

The Fox ruling was further substantiated in May 2023, when humanist representative, Stephen Bowen, successfully challenged Kent County Council for refusing to admit him to Group A of the SACRE on the basis that, as a humanist, he 'does not represent "a religion or a denomination of a religion" for the purposes of Sect. 390(4)(a) of the 1996 Act.' (Bowen v Kent County Council, 2023, para. 2). Here, the Court found that, in order to comply with the Human Rights Act, it was necessary to interpret the reference to 'religion' in this section as inclusive of humanism. The judge did not think it necessary to 'decide whether the words to read in are "beliefs" or "non-religious worldviews" or "cogent philosophical convictions" or some other formulation in order to determine that it was an error of law to exclude Mr Bowen from consideration for appointment to Group A merely because humanism is a non-religious belief system.' (para. 106) Instead, he maintained that:

In interpreting section 390(4)(a) as KCC did, it failed to interpret the provision in compliance with the HRA 1998 when it was possible to do so. Whatever the pre-

cise wording that might in due course be adopted by Parliament, should it choose to do so, humanism is self evidently a belief system which is appropriate to be included within a religious education syllabus (not least because it overwhelmingly is already), and would be encompassed within any Convention-compliant interpretation of section 390(4)(a). (para. 106)

In Northern Ireland, a non-religious father and daughter brought a successful challenge against the content of the core RE syllabus and collective worship (JR87, 2022). The RE syllabus for Northern Ireland Schools (all of which have a Christian ethos) is currently written by the four main Christian Churches and is almost exclusively Christian in content. It includes just one module focusing on ‘World Religions’ at secondary level and no reference at all to non-religious perspectives (DoE, 2007). Drawing on the principles outlined in Fox and other notable cases (particularly *Folgerø v Norway* 2007), the Court found that ‘RE is not conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralist manner’ (JR87, 2022, para. 74) and that the relevant Northern Ireland legislation ‘is in breach of both applicants’ rights under Article 2 of the First Protocol ECHR read with Article 9 ECHR’ (para. 123).

Interestingly, both Fox and JR87 found that the presence of a right to withdraw from RE was ‘not an adequate substitute for the provision of an educational programme which accords the parents their right to respect for their convictions’ (Fox v Secretary of State for Education, 2015, para. 79; JR87, 2022, para. 121–122). This is because ‘the need to withdraw a child would be a manifestation of the pluralism in question’ (Fox para. 79; JR87, para. 121–122) rather than, as Felderhof has recently suggested in defence of the provision in the 1944 Act, signifying a policy that is ‘openly plural by avoiding any whiff of religious coercion’ (Felderhof, 2023, p.46).⁶

Despite what opponents like Barnes, Felderhof and the Bishop of Southwark might argue ought to be the case, human rights law is quite clear—non-religious perspectives have a place on the curriculum and must be treated with equal respect. This is not the same as a claim to ‘equal air time’ (DfE, 2015). Each state’s ‘margin of appreciation’ includes a right to issue a curriculum that reflects ‘the preponderance in its society of particular religious views, and their place in the tradition of the country’ (Fox v Secretary of State for Education, 2015, para. 39), meaning the elevated position of Christianity in England and Wales is lawful. Nevertheless, such coverage ought to be proportionate and balanced with the minority religions and non-religious beliefs held in the population (Juss, 2016, para. 7c). Once one accepts this proposition (as most key RE stakeholders in England and Wales now do (see Wareham, 2022a)), the question then swiftly becomes which non-religious perspectives should go on the curriculum? It is to this issue I now turn.

8 Which non-religious perspectives should go on the curriculum?

Arguably (and contrary to Barnes’s earlier suggestion that humanists ‘constitute a small sub-group’ within the non-religious) humanism is the primary non-religious worldview held in Britain today. True, not all non-religious people identify as humanist. However, a

⁶ Here it is also worth noting that, since the right to withdraw from RE only applies to parents, it still permits the ‘religious coercion’ of children and young people in schools where denominational RE is taught. This arguably undermines the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion set out in Article 14 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

2019 YouGov poll commissioned by Humanists UK found that more than a third of people in a representative sample of the UK population (of whom 51% said they were non-religious) either explicitly identified as humanist (7%) or had what could be described as humanist values and beliefs (29%).⁷ Of the latter group, 75% (22% of total sample) said they would be happy to self-identify as humanist once the similarity between their beliefs & humanist beliefs was highlighted (YouGov, 2019), suggesting that, because people tend to ‘discover’ they are humanists rather than being brought up that way (see Copson, 2021), humanism is far more prevalent than it might initially seem. A further issue arises when the Census is used as a measure of the number of humanists in any one area because, in order to have the opportunity to add ‘humanist’ as an alternative to the religions and beliefs listed, the 2021 Census compelled respondents to select ‘Other Religion’ rather than ‘No Religion’. Since humanism is a non-religious perspective, very few humanists were likely to select this option, especially as (in common with 2011) Humanists UK ran a public campaign to ‘[urge] people to tick the “no religion” box if they don’t believe in or practice a religion’ (Sherwood, 2021).

Moreover, as the judgment in the Bowen case makes plain, ‘humanism is self-evidently a belief system which is appropriate to be included within a religious education syllabus’ and, in England (and soon Wales) this is ‘overwhelmingly the case already’ (Bowen v Kent County Council, 2023, para. 106).

If humanism’s place in RE is established, should we now instead be searching for additional non-religious perspectives to include in the curriculum, especially if we wish to ensure that the subject is able to appeal to and adequately acknowledge the range of beliefs held in the UK today? I would argue the need to embark on such a search is overplayed. For one thing, although humanism has theoretically won the battle for its place on the curriculum, there is still quite some way to go before the aspiration of proportionate coverage is achieved in practice. In all too many syllabuses, humanism is only included in quite a cursory manner or, as discussed above, merely as a negative challenge to theism.⁸

In 2018, the final report of the Commission on RE argued for the adoption of a worldviews approach to the subject. There is some debate concerning the meaning of ‘worldview’ (see Cooling et al., 2020; Hand, 2012) but, in the view of the commissioners, the non-religious perspectives to be included should only be those ‘which make ontological and epistemological claims...as well as political and moral ones.’ (CoRE, 2018, 75, emphasis added). They are what Lois Lee has called ‘Existential Cultures’ (Lee, 2017). Alongside humanism, the report cites Confucianism and existentialism as examples, although nihilism arguably constitutes a theory of the meaning of life in the relevant sense. Purely political perspectives such as communism and nationalism, or economic theories like capitalism are ruled out due to their failure to grapple with ontological or epistemological questions.

⁷ These were defined as: (1) ‘trust in the scientific method when it comes to understanding how the universe works and rejecting the idea of the supernatural (meaning the individual is therefore an atheist or agnostic)’; (2) ‘a preference for making ethical decisions based on reason, empathy, and a concern for human beings and other sentient animals’; and (3) ‘the belief that, in the absence of an afterlife and any discernible purpose to the universe, human beings can act to give their own lives meaning by seeking happiness in this life and helping others to do the same’ (YouGov, 2019; Wareham, 2022a, 2022b, p.466).

⁸ Preliminary research conducted by Humanists UK suggests that the vast majority of syllabuses (at least 91%) include some reference to humanism but this is often non-statutory and more work needs to be done to establish the extent to which humanist beliefs are studied in their own right (Humanists UK, forthcoming).

A complicating factor is that, in common with others (including RE teachers), the CoRE report calls ‘secularism, agnosticism, and atheism’ non-religious worldviews (CoRE, 2018; Thalén & Carlsson, 2020; Everington, 2018). However, neither atheism nor agnosticism is expansive enough to be a worldview—they merely posit claims about the existence of God—and, as well as failing to cover enough conceptual territory, as previously discussed, secularism is a position that can be held by the religious and non-religious alike.⁹ Similarly, the new Welsh guidance for RVE (which refers to ‘non-religious philosophical convictions’) lists ‘veganism’, ‘principled opposition to military service’ and ‘pacifism’ as examples. However, these are single-issue convictions rather than worldviews. Furthermore, like secularism, they can be held by both religious and non-religious people, meaning it would be erroneous to introduce them as purely non-religious perspectives.

Ruling out these positions as examples of non-religious worldviews does not mean they should not be studied in RE or elsewhere in the curriculum—indeed, although the worldviews paradigm is currently in its ascendancy, other approaches may recommend a different way of delineating content than in terms of worldviews. Nevertheless, due attention cannot be paid to non-religious perspectives solely by considering these concepts or beliefs. Moreover, while there may be pedagogical reasons to cover perspectives like Confucianism, nihilism and existentialism *qua* worldviews, the proportionality (or ‘*due impartiality*’ emphasis added) requirement set out in the Fox judgment (para. 74 and 77) means that, since none of these perspectives is particularly prevalent or significant in terms of religion and belief traditions in the UK, there is currently no legal requirement to do so.

As Aldridge argues, ‘if we are going to view curriculum in dialogic terms... the dialogue is already underway... and [h]umanism is part of this dialogue’ (Aldridge, 2015, p. 98). This is not just because the beliefs humanists hold are of pedagogical interest, but because they are the beliefs (explicit or implicit) of a considerable proportion of the population. Of course, given Aldridge’s point about the anti-educational nature of prelimiting the content of RE, we should be cautious of policing its boundaries in a way that narrows the dialogic possibility for other non-religious perspectives to contribute to the discussion as and when they emerge. Nevertheless, at the practical level, we should also avoid placing undue focus on (or even manufacturing) diversity amongst non-religious people when we have yet to adequately recognise and accommodate what all the evidence suggests is the primary non-religious worldview held by people in the UK; namely, humanism. We must also recognise that, although it has been largely settled with respect to the inclusion of the ‘Big Six’ world religions, the question of what other perspectives warrant curriculum time (or representation on SACREs and ASCs) is not unique to non-religious worldviews—it applies to religions too. For example, in Bowen, the judgment highlights that, based upon Census data, the local authority ‘might already find itself having to decide whether SACRE should contain Satanist, Reconstructionist or Pagan representatives’ (Bowen v Kent County Council, 2023, para. 88) and this is to say nothing of the diversity within each faith perspective that already makes the cut.¹⁰

⁹ This conflation of the non-religious with the secular is repeated in the recent draft handbook for curriculum developers produced by the Worldviews Project, which refers to ‘the changing religious and secular diversity of the UK and the world’ (Pett, 2022).

¹⁰ Since the publication of the Theos report on the ‘Nones’ (Waite, 2022), I am regularly asked for my thoughts on diversity amongst the non-religious, including the proportion who consider themselves to be spiritual or who actually believe in God, life after death or the paranormal. I suspect (though do not know for certain) that religious people are not asked quite so frequently to comment on those amongst their ranks who do not believe in God, the truth of scripture, or the existence of heaven, even though many may also hold views that are (or appear to be) in conflict with their religious identity.

9 A RE-vival?

As we have seen, non-religious worldviews are already embedded into the legal framework, discourse, and overall fabric of the society within which RE operates in the UK. This does not always translate into inclusive practice, but it does illustrate why such practice is necessary.

Contrary to those who view the ongoing rise of the non-religious as an existential threat to the subject, I believe it is far from a ‘death knell’ signalling impending demise. Instead, these developments present an unparalleled opportunity for revitalisation, providing a ‘way-in’ to the subject for learners who may never have had an opportunity to reflect on their non-religious perspectives *qua* substantive theories about the meaning of life or to consider the similarities and differences between religious and non-religious perspectives. To put it another way, the demographic changes highlighted by the Census should encourage us to provide the kind of RE that allows learners to grapple with diversity in a way that is explicitly relevant to (and representative of) all, regardless of whether they identify as religious or not.

As Nick Spencer puts it: ‘If we are crass enough to want to know the real winners from the religious data of Census 2021, I would humbly suggest it is RE teachers and the BBC Religion and Ethics department. Or indeed anyone who is willing and able to help us honestly understand, respect, critique, and value the various non/religious commitments that now map the UK.’ (Spencer, 2022) It seems to me that RE stakeholders (including scholars) should now focus on how best to develop learners’ abilities to participate in this critical dialogue rather than seeking to police the religious boundaries of the subject, especially as, with respect to non-religious worldviews, these boundaries have already been well and truly breached.

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