

APPG Report on Religious Literacy – NASACRE Reflection

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Religious Education (APPG/RE), under its new Chair Fiona Bruce, MP, took many people by surprise when it branched out into an enquiry on Religious Literacy, having already dispensed with its previous partners from the Religious Education Council (REC) as facilitators for the APPG, in favour of House of Commons support.

The APPG/RE set up a consultation process, with evidence being heard from a number of invited individuals and organisations, and with a general invitation to all interested people and groups to submit material.

Given the complexity of the field of enquiry, it is remarkable that the APPG/RE has now produced a **report** of its findings “Improving Religious Literacy” in such a relatively short space of time. It is even more remarkable that, in spite of signs of hasty production (two clashing numbering systems, some typos), the report stands up well, with a wide range of pertinent recommendations. It contains an impressive list of references (enough for several PhD theses!), and it is a compelling and substantial contribution to public debate, not just about RE, but about the healthy development of society as a whole.

The report is eminently quotable at many points. It is a vigorous and stimulating document. However, its working definition of “Religious Literacy”, comprising four elements, is less quotable and will call for the reader’s powers of concentration and acuity. The cumbersome and laboured formula may point to a sense that the concept of Religious Literacy is not entirely self-explanatory, and perhaps also to an awareness that discussion of Religious Literacy has not been without controversy.

Much more positively, many of us will heartily echo the report’s summary of the predicament facing RE today: (Para 6.6)

Many of the difficulties identified in the teaching of RE were long-term and structural. The situation is now urgent. Respondents argued that RE in many schools has been marginalisedSome schools are not fulfilling their statutory requirementtoo often RE lessons are being taught by teachers who are not specialists in the subject and who do not have access to (adequate) continuing professional development. ...other factors have also had an adverse effect on the quality of the subject, including the exclusion of RE from the English Baccalaureate and a decline in resources for SACREs. This report is not the first to note such findings.

Equally trenchant, and strongly affirming, are the words of the APPG/RE Chair in her foreword:

“We are....entering a defining period for our country, our national life and our national identity. The shape of *our religious landscape is changing, as is the place of religion in the public sphere, our private lives and our local communities..... It is more important*

than ever that....we all have the knowledge and skills required to engage effectively with religion."

"...the provision of high quality school-based RE, and good teaching and learning about religion beyond the school years in the whole of life context, cannot be allowed to fall off the agenda of the government or Parliament. I will continue....to highlight to government the importance of providing excellent RE for every child...."

Of the report's twenty four recommendations, the first ten relate to RE. Many of these ten are concerned with ensuring that RE is taught to a consistent standard of excellence by a plentiful army of specialist or properly prepared teachers who have good access to continuing professional development (CPD), to which we all loudly say "Amen". In addition, the report calls for training in Religious Literacy to be incorporated into all Secondary Initial Teacher Training and to be available more widely in CPD programmes for all teachers. It also encourages the Minister to re-examine the exclusion of RE from the EBacc, and "for all relevant parties to participate in the ongoing discussions about the legal framework for RE in schools and other major issues."

The remaining recommendations underline the argument that while RE is an essential resource for promoting Religious Literacy, the responsibility for improving Religious Literacy within society as a whole cannot be left entirely at the RE door, or even in schools themselves. Rather, this responsibility rests on all of us, with the Government needing to take the lead. So within the report there are recommendations for various government departments and civil servants, for the media (e.g. that the new BBC Charter should include a commitment to promote Religious Literacy), for expert editorial scrutiny of policy documents, for encouraging public engagement in inter-communal dialogue, projects and outreach, for channeling funding into community initiatives delivering Religious Literacy, and so on.

The title page of the report makes it clear that the report has no official status; it is simply "A Contribution to the Debate". Nevertheless, it has been produced and issued by a group of people who do have influence, and who have access to key government ministers and departments. We must hope that the report will add significantly to the case being constantly put to the government that good quality RE in schools, while crucially important for our personal and societal wellbeing, is unsustainable in the present circumstances: something must be done, soon.