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# Religious Education – reform, not abolition: A reply to Matthew Clayton and David Stephens

## Abstract

This paper is a reply to Matthew Clayton and David Stephens's 2018 article 'What is the point of religious education?' I begin by problematising the 'acceptability requirement' used to justify the authors' conclusions. I then disambiguate the key claim made in the paper. If interpreted broadly, as an attack on curricula that teach about religions, then their claim is implausible, and not one that the authors themselves should endorse. However, if interpreted narrowly, as an attack on the prioritisation of religion at the expense of non-religious views, then their view is one that is already widely endorsed. I then clear up some relevant empirical considerations about current Religious Education policy and practice in England and Wales. I suggest that there are sufficiently weighty, non-partisan reasons for a curriculum subject not dissimilar to what is currently taught in schools. Whilst Religious Education is in need of reform, it would be the wrong conclusion to draw from their paper that Religious Education should be abolished.

## Keywords

Moral education, political liberalism, Rawls, religious education, tolerance

## Introduction

In their 2018 article, Clayton and Stephens (2018) question the place of religious education on school curricula. The authors endorse an 'acceptability requirement' (AR), which says that government principles and policy should be justified by reasons that cannot be rejected by reasonable citizens. This principle, they argue, is 'a condition of social unity' (p. 71). Their article draws out one implication of this principle for education policy: any compulsory subject must pass the test of being justifiable to all reasonable citizens. Clayton and Stephens argue that religious education stands out as failing this test. They identify a strong prima facie case for thinking this: citizens who reject theism will reject an emphasis on learning about and from traditional theistic religions (p. 72). The remainder of the article is devoted to considering a number of arguments that might be used to justify religion having special priority on the curriculum. The authors argue that these arguments either fail the AR – they are not public reasons – or they are over-inclusive, failing to pick out religious views as especially significant.

A strength of the article is the authors' flexibility in terms of the practical implications of their argument. The authors 'endorse … a subject content that is geared toward examining arguments for different religious and anti-religious claims' (p. 73) and acknowledge that there are public reasons for studying religions at least 'to some degree' (p. 66). These include the need to foster 'toleration and civic unity' and to help students adequately grasp other subjects such as History (p.67). However, I argue that this imprecision about the target of attack lends an unwarranted attractiveness to their

argument. If interpreted broadly, their view is implausible, but if interpreted narrowly, their view is one that is already widely endorsed. Moreover, the AR on which their argument turns is problematic, something that becomes particularly evident when we reflect on its implications for concrete education policies and specific curricula.

## The acceptability requirement

The authors hope that they have 'shown that the acceptability requirement is both attractive and has significant consequences for the design of the curriculum' (p. 78). Whether they succeed is an important question, because it is religious education's supposed failure to meet the AR that leads to their negative appraisal of the subject.

Have they succeeded in showing the AR to be attractive? The AR, sometimes referred to as a 'neutrality principle' or as a requirement for 'public justification', is a key idea within political liberalism. Thus it is surprising that the authors hope to have convinced us from a brief presentation of two reasons and without responding to the vast literature critiquing this principle.[1] Rather than attempting to summarise the problems left unanswered by Clayton and Stephen's defence, here I show how thinking about the implications of the AR for curriculum design brings out some important difficulties.

Clayton and Stephens give English Literature as an example of one subject that passes the AR. English Literature can be publicly justified on the basis that it helps children 'develop their sense of morality and their capacity to form and revise a conception of how to live a life' (p. 72). Yet similar arguments can justify the place of Religious Education (RE)[2] on the curriculum: in order to cultivate reasonable citizens, a curriculum subject is required that focuses on exposure to and engagement with different conceptions of the good or comprehensive doctrines.[3] This I take to be (at least a part of) the essential essence of RE.

Clayton and Stephens would reply that a subject prioritising religious claims at the expense of non-religious claims is unjustifiable to secular citizens. But this argues against a *particular instantiation* of a possible RE curriculum – one which, I will argue shortly, is highly unpopular within the profession. It is also possible to reasonably object to particular instantiations of the English Literature curriculum. For example, someone might reasonably object to the dominance of texts written by white, English men. Thus by equivocating between the *essence* of the subject (which is capable of a public justification) and *particular instantiations* of the curriculum (which may face reasonable objections), Clayton and Stephens make putting the AR into practice seem less problematic than it in fact is, as well as wrongfully excluding RE from the set of publicly justifiable subjects.

An example will help bring out how the AR might disrupt, rather than promote, 'social unity'. There have been several cases of parents who are Jehovah's Witnesses objecting to their child studying specific texts as part of the English Literature curriculum (for example, Macbeth, which discusses witchcraft) (TES, 2013; LoveGrove 2013). Unlike in RE, where individual exemptions are allowed, there is no requirement for schools to allow such exemptions, because English Literature is a National Curriculum subject. A political liberal can endorse this policy position by saying that this is not a *reasonable* rejection of the curriculum. Indeed, it is part and parcel of adopting the AR that you must have an accompanying definition of 'reasonableness' to take with you, since policies need only pass the test of being justifiable to *reasonable* citizens.[4] A distinction has sometimes been made between 'ethical' and 'epistemic' notions of 'reasonableness'.[5] Roughly, on the former understanding, a person is 'reasonable' if they hold certain, co-operative attitudes towards other citizens and to law-making, whilst on the latter understanding, they must hold 'reasonable comprehensive doctrines' that adhere to

certain epistemic standards. Clayton and Stephens seem to take the 'ethical' interpretation of 'reasonableness'; reasonable citizens are 'citizens who respect the rights and interests of other individuals' (p. 71). But on this understanding, the Jehovah's Witness is not obviously 'unreasonable'. The parent is perfectly willing to respect the rights of other citizens, and has no wish to *ban* Macbeth as a curriculum text (i.e. to impose a policy *on others* based on their own, non-public justification). Rather, she just wants her child to be exempt from study of this text.

There are two further routes by which the political liberal might say that the Jehovah's Witness objection is unreasonable and therefore undeserving of an exemption. Both of these face significant problems.

First, the political liberal can expand the ethical notion of reasonableness along Rawlsian lines. Rawls (2005: 138) says that reasonable citizens recognise that since reasonable people can arrive at different, conflicting views, it would be wrong for exercises of political power to be based in non-public reasons. Roughly: reasonable citizens accept the AR. The Jehovah's Witness goes wrong by presenting a non-accessible, non-public, and therefore inadmissible reason for rejecting the curriculum. However, even if the Jehovah's Witness accepts that it would be wrong to invoke non-public reasons to justify a law that will coerce *other* citizens, it requires a further step to say that she is unable to appeal to her sectarian beliefs in response to coercive policy that has an influence on *her*. The Jehovah's Witness can accept 'People should not be subject to coercive policy justified by sectarian beliefs' whilst at the same time rejecting 'Sectarian beliefs should be entirely left out of decision-making about coercive policy'. Further argument is needed here for the political liberal to fully justify why this sort of objection to a coercive law is illegitimate.

Second, the political liberal can appeal to the epistemic notion of reasonableness, as Rawls at times appears to do. Rawls (2005: 59) says that 'reasonable persons affirm only reasonable comprehensive doctrines', where 'a reasonable doctrine is an exercise of theoretical reasons', is 'more or less consistent and coherent', and expresses 'an intelligible view of the world'. The Jehovah's Witness objection may then be said to be unreasonable because, for example, it is not part of a coherent or intelligible worldview. But dismissing the Jehovah's Witness's doctrine as 'unreasonable' does not seem consistent with 'respecting persons' (an idea which is often used by political liberals to motivate the AR).[6] Nussbaum (2011: 29) has argued that a state should not be in the business of scrutinising the comprehensive doctrines of citizens (except to the extent that they violate an ethical conception of reasonableness). To do so denigrates citizens, failing to treat them as equals. Moreover, it brings in an element of perfectionism; it violates the 'abstemiousness towards controversial epistemological and metaphysical doctrines that political liberalism rightly asks us to insist on' (Nussbaum, 2011: 33).

It seems that either the Jehovah's Witness is left wondering why their sectarian beliefs must be discounted when it comes to their plea for exemptions, or they are left designated as 'unreasonable' and thus potentially feeling that they are not being treated as equal citizens. Both of these options seem likely to disrupt social unity, thus undermining one of Clayton and Stephens's defences of the AR.

This one example is indicative of a wider problem. The political liberal must define 'reasonable', and yet whichever route they take to do so, they run into problems. These problems become particularly evident when we come to look at specific instantiations of curriculum content (like the decision to include texts involving witchcraft), rather than general justifications for a subject's 'essence'. And yet it is at this specific level that Clayton and Stephens judge RE to fail the AR.

## The need for exposure to different conceptions of the good: arguing against the broad claim

At some points in their paper, Clayton and Stephens appear to be making a broad claim: roughly, that there should be no curriculum requirement to learn about religion. For example, they say that they want to critically examine 'whether the curriculum should be used to foster an understanding of religious viewpoints' (p. 66). Their abstract promises that the article will challenge the requirement that schools 'offer non-directive but, specifically, religious education as part of the curriculum' (p. 65). Yet if by 'challenge' they mean 'offer reasons to reject such a requirement', then their view is implausible.

There are, after all, numerous good reasons for why a political liberal should value a subject that exposes children to different conceptions of the good.[7] In Easton (2018), I give a number of reasons for why someone who endorses the AR should also endorse discussion of and engagement with a diversity of (religious and non-religious) conceptions of the good as part of the compulsory curriculum. For example, it contributes to the development of civic virtues that reasonable people should value in future citizens, such as honesty and candour. It is through conversations with others about their differing conceptions of the good that children can grasp the reality and permanence of deep disagreement, and this understanding is required for genuine respect and tolerance (Easton, 2018: 201). Critical discussion of different views and their respective justifications also aids with the development of epistemic virtues, and part of what it is to be a good citizen is to be able to distinguish between plausible and implausible reasons (Easton, 2018: 205).

There are good reasons to think that in fact Clayton and Stephens do not endorse the broad claim. They say that 'every child has an entitlement to an education that develops his or her understanding of different conceptions of the good so that he or she has the resources to develop his or her own view, reflect upon it in an informed manner, and rationally pursue it' (p. 77). Elsewhere, Clayton (2006: 147) talks about the virtues that deliberative citizens possess, including 'skills related to articulating a position and the reasons for its affirmation; listening skills; the ability charitably to understand the views of others; analytical skills that facilitate a critical assessment of different positions; an appreciation of the benefits of exchanging ideas'. This sums up well some of the main aims of the religious educator. At present, RE is the only subject on the curriculum in England and Wales that allows for a dedicated pursuit of these aims. Thus, the AR points towards a compulsory subject whose essence is consideration of different conceptions of the good, many of which will be religious.[8]

## The majority position in RE today: agreement with the narrow claim

It seems more likely that Clayton and Stephens wish to endorse a narrow claim: roughly, that there should not be a curriculum subject that prioritises religion *at the expense of* considering non-religious views. They present this as a controversial claim, yet it is noteworthy that they do not identify a specific opponent who makes this 'special pleading for theistic views' (p. 66).[9] In fact, their view is widely endorsed: by political theorists, by scholars of religious education, by RE teachers and by advisory bodies.

It is true that in the past, religious views have often been seen as meriting special political and legal treatment. However, it is now the dominant view amongst political theorists that religious conceptions of the good should not have precedence over non-religious ones, because of the difficulty of picking out what is distinctively normatively salient about religion. Cécile Laborde (2017) calls this the 'ethical salience' problem, and she reviews the three most plausible responses. First, we could take

the strategy of 'dissolving religion' – biting the bullet by saying that there is nothing special about this category (e.g. Dworkin, 2013). Second, we could take the strategy of 'mainstreaming religion' – analogising aspects of religion with non-religious, protection-worthy categories (e.g. Eisgruber and Sager, 2007). Third, we could 'narrow religion', protecting only beliefs (religious or non-religious) that prescribe duties (e.g. Maclure and Taylor, 2011). None of these strategies suggest that religion should have special treatment, and Laborde's own conclusion is that 'religion is not uniquely special' (2017: 3). It is notable that at a recent two-day symposium bringing together leading political theorists to discuss Laborde's book, none of the participants took issue with this crucial idea within her work.[10]

At least since the 1970s, people have been arguing for the inclusion of non-religious views on the RE curriculum. For example, study of Secular Humanism and Marxism was proposed as part of the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus. The scholar Andrew Wright has consistently called for a pedagogy of 'critical' RE, where the key aim is to 'enable students to engage with questions of ultimate truth, and attend to the task of living truthful lives in an informed, critical and literate manner' (Wright, 2007: 3). Wright is explicit that good RE will engage students in discussion of religious and non-religious truth-claims (e.g. 2007: 113). In their recent book exemplifying what this pedagogy looks like in practice, Easton, Goodman, Wright and Wright (2019: 103) argue that the views of the atheist are *as important* as those of the theist. This is borne out in their chapter exemplifying an Ethics scheme of work, where theistic and non-theistic approaches (including Buddhism, utilitarianism, egoism, and Humanism) are given equal coverage.

This 'critical' approach to RE is not just a novelty of the academy – it is practised in many schools across the UK, where it is popular amongst staff and students (Goodman, 2018). A recent study suggested that even before becoming aware of critical pedagogy as a theory, many of the teachers interviewed felt that they were already embracing the approach (Goodman, 2018: 237).

Regardless of the pedagogy embraced by the teacher, it is near consensus amongst RE teachers that RE should include consideration of non-religious views. In a rough poll on a popular RE teachers' forum, 96% of 161 participants agreed with the statement that 'non-religious views should form part of the RE curriculum' (Save RE, 2018). In almost all school settings, including many faith schools, non-religious views are considered. This teaching frequently takes place not as a systematic study (for example, of Humanism), but in relation to relevant topics such as funerals or abortion. Often such teaching simply occurs as a natural variation to the religious view or practice under consideration, because of the predominance of secular views within UK society.

Lastly, it should be noted that influential advisory bodies recommend including non-religious worldviews on the RE curriculum. Most notably, this is the view taken in a recent report by the RE Council of England and Wales (REC), which also recommends a change of name of the subject to 'Religion and Worldviews' (REC, 2018a).[11] The non-statutory national curriculum framework for RE (proposed back in 2013) talks throughout about 'religions and worldviews' and refers to non-religious worldviews such as Humanism on several occasions (REC, 2013). Secular views increasingly get explicit mention on Agreed Syllabi. For example, the recent Milton Keynes syllabus refers to 'secular philosophies' and 'secular beliefs' throughout, and the 'syllabus both allows and encourages the teacher to teach about secular and Humanist worldviews where they feel it to be appropriate' (Milton Keynes Council, 2017: 9). It is likely that this trend will continue, especially following recent clarification from the Welsh Government (responding to a challenge to existing practice) that it is legitimate to include representatives of non-religious groups on Standing Advisory Councils for RE (Welsh Government, 2018; REC, 2018b).

In light of all this, why is it that non-religious views do not have parity with religious views in the schemes of work in most schools? It is not possible to fully explain this here, but it is worth briefly mentioning some of the contingent, practical obstacles to such parity. First, change in education is often slow, especially in a poorly funded subject (APPG, 2013), and few resources exist that explicitly teach about non-religious views. Humanists UK provide good resources, but these represent just one of many non-religious positions. Second, many teachers lack understanding of what a systematic study of non-religious views should involve, not helped by the fact that these views are often not systematic or 'comprehensive' in the way that many religious systems are.[12] Third, teachers have to prepare students for examinations, and to its shame, the Department for Education did not include a systematic study of non-religious views in their recent 'reform' of the GCSE, despite receiving huge numbers of objections to its non-inclusion.[13]

Clayton and Stephens are right to draw our attention to the need to keep pressing for recognition of non-religious views. But they leave us with the impression that they are presenting a novel, highly controversial view, whereas in fact the view they attack has few supporters.

## Current policy and practice

Clayton and Stephens take themselves to be examining 'whether there are sufficiently weighty reasons to justify the kind of approach to teaching religion that the example of England and Wales typifies' (p 66). It is therefore important that we have our facts straight on exactly what this approach involves.

Clayton and Stephens say that

> 'it remains to be seen whether these aims justify the kind of curriculum taught, for instance, in England and Wales, where Religious Education is a stand-alone, compulsory subject for pupils aged 5 years through to 16 years…' (p. 66)

This description lacks a referent. First, there is no requirement that RE be taught as a stand-alone subject and frequently it is not taught in this way (Strangwayes-Booth, 2017; REC, 2017). Often RE is taught solely through form time and assemblies or is part of a 'carousel' with PSHE.[14] Second, whilst it is compulsory for schools to offer RE, RE stands in an unusual legal position as the only subject (except for sex education) from which parents can withdraw their child. It is odd that there is no mention of this in the paper, especially since this marks a contrast to the situation with regard to other, controversial topics that are compulsory, such as the teaching of 'fundamental British values'. Third, the statutory entitlement to RE remains *throughout* school, and so technically does not stop until 18 years of age (although this requirement is ignored by the majority of schools).

Clayton and Stephens complain about the position of 'privilege' (p. 78, n.2) which RE occupies, but this complaint does not match reality. Indeed, there are many reasons to view RE as a neglected subject on the curriculum. In many schools RE is not taught as a stand-alone subject, and in some schools it is not taught at all. Over a quarter of secondary schools (28%) admit to giving *no* curriculum time to RE (REC, 2017: 5). The subject is frequently taught by non-specialists (APPG, 2013), a situation that is unlikely to improve due to the poor incentives to train to teach RE, with bursaries being roughly a third of what is offered in Geography and Classics (REC, 2018c). Moreover, the non-inclusion of RE in the Ebacc, as well as the exclusion of GCSE Short Course Religious Studies from Attainment 8 (the new accountability arrangements) have further contributed to the lowering of status of the subject (Easton et at., 2019; APPG, 2013; REC, 2018a: 8).[15]

## Policy implications

Despite beginning their article with reference to RE policy in England and Wales, Clayton and Stephens stop short of offering policy recommendations in light of their discussion. The only explicit conclusion that they offer is that 'religion cannot continue to be the primary reference point for teaching about ethical and normative matters' (p. 78). This is correct. Urgent reform is needed to ensure that policy reflects the practice of the majority of schools of studying non-religious views. Strategies also need to be in place to ensure that it becomes more common to give explicit and systematic consideration to non-religious views.

However, the reader could easily draw the conclusion from their article that RE should be scrapped from the curriculum. This would be a mistake. A subject is needed which has as a key aim that students encounter a variety of conceptions of the good. A public justification can be given for the inclusion of this subject on the curriculum, because it aids the development of civic and epistemic virtues that are required for participation in a healthy democracy. If RE were to go, the risk is that it would not be replaced with a subject that is comparable in this sense. Reform, not abolition, therefore seems like a safer response to current inadequacies with the subject.[16]

Changing the name of the subject to 'Worldview Studies' or similar alternatives has been popular in schools (Teece 2017). This may be the right way to go, and perhaps a radical reform of the subject at national, policy level would lead to a change of name as part of the de-prioritisation of religious views that Clayton and Stephens push for.

## Conclusion

Clayton and Stephens's article has an imprecise target. If their attack is on a subject that teaches about religion, then the acceptability requirement does not forbid this, but rather, requires it. If their attack is on the prioritisation of religion, then they are right in identifying this as a problem. However, there is already wide agreement on this issue, and so Clayton and Stephens would do well to have a more precise target for who they hope to convince (perhaps the Department of Education). I have given reason to question the acceptability requirement upon which Clayton and Stephens's main argument rests. Yet even if we agree with the acceptability requirement, this would justify a subject dedicated to discussion of different conceptions of the good. As things stand, a revised form of RE is the 'best fit' for fulfilling this requirement. The subject should therefore be reformed, not abolished.

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[1] For critical discussions of neutrality, see Merrill (2014), Pallikkathayil (2017), Pallikkathayil (forthcoming), Wall (2012) and Wall and Klosko (2003). Pallikkathayil (2016: 173) specifically argues against political liberalism's 'acceptability constraint'.

[2] When capitalised, 'Religious Education' (abbreviated to 'RE') refers to a specific curriculum requirement. In contrast, 'religious education' refers to a form of education (like 'moral education' or 'arts education').

[3] For the purposes of this paper, the terms 'comprehensive doctrines' and 'conceptions of the good' are interchangeable, both referring to belief-sets held by individuals (or groups), many of which will have implications for how we should live.

[4] In Clayton and Stephens' own words from an earlier article: 'For political liberals the appropriate justificatory constituency is limited to reasonable citizens' (2014: 69).

[5] For discussion of ethical versus epistemic notions of reasonableness, and the difficulties interpreting Rawls on this matter, see Nussbaum (2011: 22-31).

[6] For respect-based justifications for neutrality, see Klosko (2003: 169), Larmore (1990: 348-9) and Nagel (1991: 159).
[7] RE may have additional, publicly justifiable aims beyond this, but I do not consider these here.
[8] Other thinkers who adopt the AR (e.g. Neufeld and Davis, 2010) say that exposing children to other conceptions of the good should *not* be part of compulsory education, because that would promote moral autonomy, which is too perfectionist an aim for the political liberal (Neufeld, 2013: 784, 789). I have argued elsewhere that the position Clayton and Stephens take is a consistent position, because moral autonomy is developed as a by-product of promoting other, neutrally justifiable goods (Easton, 2018: 209).
[9] This is not to say that such opponents do not exist. Birmingham's Agreed Syllabus for RE explicitly restricts itself to religious views (Birmingham City Council, 2007). Marius Felderhof, who drafted this syllabus, has been vocal in defending the exclusion of non-religious views from the curriculum (Felderhof, 2012; Felderhof, 2014; Parker and Freathy, 2011).
[10] Symposium on *Liberalism's Religion*, Nuffield College, Oxford (31 May and 1 June 2018).
[11] The authors say that their view is 'widely shared among teachers and subject experts' (REC, 2018a: 1), further supporting the argument of this section.
[12] Humanists UK's 'Annex on Humanism for GCSE RS' provides an attractive suggestion for a systematic study of one non-religious view (Humanists UK, 2014). But it represents only one strand of non-religious thought. Moreover, it is not clear that people hold this set of beliefs in the way that it is (more) common for a Christian to hold the set of 'Christian beliefs'. Provided these points are made clear to students, neither of these concerns represent obstacles to teaching such a scheme of work.
[13] The Government justified its decision by claiming that once the campaigning by the (then) British Humanist Association had been discounted from consultation responses, only a 'significant minority' (21% of other respondents) shared this view (DfE, 2015). But it would be wrong to take from this that most teachers were satisfied with the non-inclusion of a systematic study of non-religious views. First, the respondents were not asked for their opinion on this issue; rather, they were directed to comment on questions such as the 'level of challenge' and whether the proposed content covered 'what students need to know in order to progress to further academic and vocational education' (DfE, 2014). Second, since 94% of the 2,093 respondents deemed the proposed content 'inappropriate', there clearly were significant, unrelated concerns with this new GCSE which needed to be prioritised in their responses. Third, given the widespread practice of considering non-religious views in relation to most topics anyway, many teachers may have felt that separate consideration on the GCSE was unnecessary.
[14] PSHE is Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education, currently a non-statutory subject but taught (with varying degrees of formality and organisation) in most schools.
[15] The REC report offers additional evidence for the lowly status of the subject (2018a: 5-8).
[16] It is notable that Humanists UK have continually campaigned for *improvement* (rather than abolition) of RE.

## Author biography

Christina Easton is a doctoral student at LSE. Her work is primarily in Political Philosophy and its application to education policy. Prior to taking up the scholarship at LSE, she spent 8 years teaching Philosophy and Religious Studies to 11-18 year olds. Christina's recent publications include 'Educating in Respect: Against Neutral Discourse as a Norm for Respectful Classroom' (*Philosophy*, 2018) and the co-authored *Critical Religious Education in Practice: A Teacher's Guide for the Secondary Classroom* (Routledge, 2019). For more information regarding research and publications, see http://personal.lse.ac.uk/davisce2/.