



An evaluation of the Catholic response to the Final Report from the Commission on Religious Education

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Abstract

The Commission on Religious Education's Final Report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, a national plan for RE* (<https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>, 2018), has been given a mixed reception by advocates and leaders of Catholic education in England and Wales. The reasons why such a significant education provider might take a hesitant stance to the findings of the Commission on Religious Education is deeply intriguing and stands in need of careful scrutiny. After presenting a brief summary of both the importance and content of the Final Report, a summary of the Catholic response to it will be presented. Then this paper will offer an analysis and some likely explanations for the form and content of this response. Finally, it will be argued that on theological and ethical grounds a far more positive and detailed response could have been offered to the Final Report in order to help bring about the much needed recommendations that the Commission on Religious Education called for.

Keywords CES (Catholic Education Service of England and Wales) · Religious education · Religious education in Catholic schools · Commission on religious education

1 Introduction

The Commission on Religious Education's Final Report, *Religion and Worldviews: The Way Forward, a national plan for RE* (CORE 2018) has been given a mixed reception by advocates and leaders of Catholic education in England and Wales. The official response is seriously lacking in detail. Surprisingly, Catholic schools account for a hefty ten percent of all schools in England and Wales. In these schools Religious Education is regarded as a central subject. In fact it is not uncommon for ten percent of curriculum time in English Catholic schools to be given over to classroom Religious Education, which often equates to up to three hours per week for every student. In order to deliver this level of Religious Education provision it means that well over twenty-five percent of all RE teachers in England and Wales, both primary and secondary, are to be found working in Catholic schools. Thus the reasons why such

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a significant education provider, which includes such a large proportion of Religious Educators, might take a mixed stance to the findings of the Commission on Religious Education is deeply intriguing and stands in need of careful scrutiny. This article will offer an analysis and some likely explanations for this response.

2 The importance of the Commission on Religious Education

It is important to appreciate the significance of the Final Report from the Commission on Religious Education (CoRE). The Commission met for two years, consulting, gathering evidence and listening carefully about the provision of Religious Education across England. The Commission was established by the Religious Education Council and it produced both an Interim Report (in 2017) and the Final Report (in September 2018). The aim of the CoRE was to review the educational content, policy, and legal frameworks for RE in England and to make recommendations to ensure the highest quality provision of RE. In the Final Report a vision of how best to change Religious Education in England is presented, along with a national plan built around 11 key recommendations (pages 16–21). The CoRE maintains that implementing these recommendations would secure high quality Religious Education for all pupils in the future. These recommendations amount to a national entitlement that sets out what all pupils should be learning in Religious Education. Ironically Religious Education enjoyed the status of being the only compulsory subject that schools had to teach until the introduction of the National curriculum in 1989. However, despite this the status and even the curriculum time to deliver Religious Education has faced a long down hill trajectory, with many schools just ignoring the legislation around this subject. Thus the CoRE's Final Report is important because it offers a convincing explanation about why every child needs to have an academically rigorous education about both religious and non-religious worldviews. It is an attempt to secure the future of Religious Education in all schools in England. It is an ambitious Final Report that has the potential, if the key recommendations are implemented, to secure the future of Religious Education in all schools, for the benefit of all students, and thus for society at large.

Before outlining the Catholic response to the CoRE Final Report, it is important to reiterate two points. First, the Final Report is presented and framed as a national report, which makes recommendations for Religious Education of what *all* pupils in England and Wales are entitled to receive in their schooling and education up to the age of sixteen. As such it is also addressed to the Catholic community of England and Wales, because they are a significant provider of state education—which now includes an increasing number of non-Catholic children. Second, one of the independent commissioners on the CoRE is a Catholic with some experience of teaching in a Catholic school, and was thus able to make the other commissioners aware of Catholic perspectives on issues relating to Religious Education in Catholic schools. However, the independence of the Commission needs to be emphasised, because the commissioners were appointed as individuals and not as representatives of particular groups or educational providers.

3 What has been the Catholic response to the CoRE Final Report?

When the Final Report was published in September 2018 the *Catholic Education Service of England and Wales* (CES) issued a statement in the form of a press release in response, in line with many other organisations who had a stake or interest in the provision of Religious Education. The CES is an organisation appointed by the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, to represent and safeguard their interests in matters relating to Catholic Education and Catholic schools. These bishops exercise leadership amongst the Catholic community in their respective dioceses, and through the CES they will express their collective stance on various educational matters. In effect a statement, albeit limited, from the CES is a proxy for the position of the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, and this means it is the closest we get to an official Catholic response. This statement is, to date, the only document issued by the CES about the Final Report. The brevity of the statement, being just over three hundred words, makes it possible to quote here in full:

A spokesperson for the Catholic Education Service commented: As a leading provider of Religious Education, we welcome the laudable efforts of the Commission to improve the quality of RE in all schools. However, for this noble aim to be achieved, there needs to be consensus among the RE community on what high quality RE looks like. Disappointingly, this report fails to produce such a consensus.

Any attempt to improve the quality of RE in all schools must be applauded and we are committed to working with the RE community to achieve this. However, this report is not so much an attempt to improve RE as to fundamentally change its character. The proposed name change to include ‘worldviews’ means that the scope of the subject is now so wide and nondescript that it would potentially lose all academic value and integrity. As we have always maintained, the quality of Religious Education is not improved by teaching less religion.

RE in Catholic schools is academically rigorous, rooted in the 2000-year-old theological tradition of the Catholic Church, and inspired by the greatest thinkers, from the theology of St Thomas Aquinas to the humanism of St Thomas More. This is why at GCSE, pupils in Catholic schools account for a fifth of all entrants and continually outperform the national average.

The Catholic Church will always welcome any move to improve the quality RE, our praise of the new, more academically rigorous GCSE is proof of that. Moreover, the Commission’s recommendation for the DfE to review the impact of excluding RE from the Ebacc is something we wholeheartedly agree with.

The quality of RE in all schools needs to be improved and there are many ways this can be achieved. Including it as an Ebacc subject is one, succumbing to this contentious redefinition of Religious Education is not. (CES 2018).

Thus, in this short statement the praise is devoted to the efforts and intentions rather than what is produced. It is the ‘efforts’ of the Final Report to improve the quality of Religious Education that is singled out to be praised, but the CES statement rejects it as an attempt to fundamentally change the character of this part of the curriculum. The name change to *Religion and Worldview Education* is seen as emptying Religious Education of its academic value, and more worryingly its academic integrity.

There is no real attempt to engage with the main recommendations of the Final Report and it could be maintained the tone is largely unexcited about the fruits of the CoRE. The argument of the CES statement is that the Religious Education in Catholic schools is an

academically demanding pursuit that results in students outperforming others (in non-Catholic schools) who take the Religious Studies GCSE course. In effect this argument is built around the claim that Religious Education in Catholic schools is a 'serious subject', one that, by implication, stands as an example to the Religious Education entitlement which the Final Report is calling for in *all* schools. This argument, despite its confident tone, is not backed or substantiated in the CES statement. Similarly, it is important to note that no supporting argument is given to justify the CES's assertion that the 'proposed name change to include *worldviews* means that the scope of the subject is now so wide and nondescript that it would potentially lose all academic value and integrity'. Clearly the CES strongly disagree with the proposal to change the name of Religious Education. The emphasis is on the significance and potential threat caused by renaming Religious Education as *Religion and Worldview Education*. Given the brevity of the statement no attention is given to the line of reasoning that incorporating *worldviews* is actually adding both enhanced academic breadth and depth to classroom Religious Education.

A disappointment with the statement from the CES is that its brevity means it just cannot properly engage with the Final Report's plethora of supporting arguments for the practical and academic value of defining and framing Religious Education around *Worldviews*, both Religious and non-religious (see paragraphs 1–14). A more detailed comment from the CES would have been helpful, at least in indicating where the supporting argument for their position might lie. Moreover, by not providing a detailed response it could fuel a suspicion that perhaps the CES takes it as a given that the Religious Education in Catholic schools is already far superior to what the Commission on RE is calling for. If this were the case, then it might be assumed that there is little need to give the Final Report a detailed response.

The reasons for the short response to the Final Report, rather than serious engagement with the main recommendations, is intriguing at a number of levels. In the next section attention will be given to some possible reasons which explain or make sense of this Catholic response to the CoRE. In the last section it will be argued that this failure to provide a detailed engagement with the Final Report is a serious missed opportunity for Catholic education in England and Wales to play a leading role in safeguarding and enhancing the provision of Religious Education for all children in all schools.

4 Possible reasons for the CES to be reticent about the recommendations of the Final Report

There are a number of possible reasons why a brief statement was the preferred response from the CES. In fairness, perhaps a main reason is eminently practical. Immediately prior to the publication of the Final Report the CES has become preoccupied by other serious matters when it comes to Religious Education, and it is these which may well have made it difficult to properly engage with the findings of Final Report. These matters concern a wide-ranging review and reformulation of the *Curriculum Directory* (CES 2012), which is the document that guides and underpins Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales. Although the current version was only issued in 2012 the subsequent government led revision of the GCSE public examinations in 2016 triggered the need for a more fundamental review of the directory. The changes to these very important public examinations were heavily influenced by the then Education Secretary, Michael Gove. Things became more complicated in the process of reforming the GCSE Religious Studies

specifications because there were fresh concerns about social cohesion and the role Religious Education could play in mitigating it (see Whittle 2018a, b). Thus it was a shift in government policy which resulted in a significant change to the content of Religious Education in Catholic schools. When the government instruction came that a second religion had to be studied as part of the Religious Studies GCSE it had an impact on what Catholic schools had to deliver. Ordinarily, in Catholic schools just Catholic Christianity and papers directly related to Christianity were studied for this examination. The government intervention forced Catholic schools to include a second religion in the syllabus for the Religious Studies GCSE. Thus for the first time ever, it was the British parliament stipulating aspects of the content of Religious Education in Catholic schools, rather than the Catholic bishops. In order to mitigate the effects of this decision and to safeguard against further incursions, a whole-scale review process has been undertaken. As part of this the CES has been involved in a laudable process of consultation with various stakeholders, from academics and diocesan advisors to serving teachers in Catholic schools. Prior to the outbreak of the Covid 19 pandemic there were even plans to listen to the student voice, by consulting with pupils from Catholic schools.

This important but very time-consuming work has kept the focus on internal issues and questions about Religious Education in Catholic schools. The initial indications from the review of the *Curriculum Directory* is that Religious Education in Catholic schools will endeavour to anchor itself as ‘school level theology’. This is of course to buy into the seductive line of argument associated with advocates of ‘powerful knowledge’ which argues for the disciplinary links between subjects on the school curriculum with their academic counterparts in the university. Framing Religious Education in Catholic schools in overtly academic terms may well serve only to reinforce the conviction that in Catholic schools this is a very serious and intellectually demanding part of the curriculum. This way of framing Religious Education as ‘school level theology’ may even become a way of marking out a defining characteristic of Catholic education. Thus, it could be argued that updating and fixing the *Curriculum Directory* has meant that there has been little time, or perhaps even inclination, to engage in a detailed way with the analysis and arguments of the Final Report. Moreover, given the time consuming nature of this revision, stretching over many years, it may well help to explain why there has been no further statement about the Final Report since 2018.

However, the situation remains that a significant educational provider in England and Wales has responded in a way that lacks detail, and given the evidence of the CES statement, it has not adequately engaged with the Final Report. This puzzling situation stands in need of further explanation. First, it can be argued that this might be found in the conviction of the CES that the Religious Education in Catholic schools in England is already high quality and thus currently more than meets the sort of entitlement the commissioners are calling for. There is, of course, abundant evidence of high quality Religious Education to be found from the special system for inspecting schools of Religious Character, that operate as Section 48 Inspections. These amount to targeted inspections, that focus on both the religious ethos and the quality of Religious Education. These targeted inspections are conducted every five years, and for over two decades the overwhelming majority have identified good or outstanding practice in the Religious Education provision of Catholic schools. A quick review of almost all twenty-two Catholic diocesan websites in England and Wales report the same situation, that in their schools the Section 48 Inspection Reports demonstrate that high quality Religious Education is being delivered, and students value this part of their learning. Moreover, the situation on the ground is typically very good for Religious Education in Catholic schools. Reference has already been made to the hefty amount

of curriculum time devoted to Religious Education lessons, with this provision continuing even into the Sixth Form in Catholic secondary schools and colleges. The recommendation from the CES is that Religious Education should receive ten percent of curriculum time. In Catholic schools the role of RE Coordinator (in primary schools) or Head of Department (secondary) is an important post of responsibility, and the subject is typically regarded as akin to the core subjects of English, Maths and Science. Almost all students are entered for the public examination (GCSE Religious Studies) in the subject. Thus when it comes to Religious Education, the situation in a Catholic school is very different to that found in the majority of non-Catholic schools—which are not schools of a religious character.

Moreover, in a Catholic school Religious Education teachers have the advantage of a nationally framed curriculum document (rather than being bound to the local syllabus specified by the SACRE). There are further levels of support, in that each Catholic diocese employs both primary and secondary Religious Education advisors to support schools and individual Religious Education teachers. With the demise of Local Authorities in England in the wake of schools converting to academies, the levels of additional support for Religious Education teachers outside of Catholic schools is beginning to evaporate. In addition, the CES employ a Religious Education advisor who is able to act at a national level to advocate for RE in Catholic schools.

Thus, Religious Education in Catholic schools is already in a fortunate situation¹ and perhaps because of this there might be an assumption that it is not really necessary to give the Final Report detailed attention. The CoRE's Final Report describes the situation in England where Religious Education is in a perilous state in many schools, but crucially not in Catholic ones. It is this fortunate situation which gives traction to a metaphor which depicts Religious Education in Catholic schools as basking in its own lush oasis. The Final Report gives a stark description of Religious Education in too many non-Catholic schools. The situation in Catholic schools is so much better, and in comparison Religious Education in these schools is enjoying life in an abundant oasis. If the CES statement is read in the light of this metaphor, then it becomes clearer why there might be less of a need to give a detailed response to the Final Report.

However, instead of framing Religious Education in Catholic schools in terms of being in a lush oasis, an alternative metaphor might be that of being in a 'bubble'—a Catholic bubble. This metaphor has perhaps more negative connotations and would better fit with the criticisms that the CES statement raises against the Final Report. Ideally, to be part of a bubble is to belong to a supportive, close and cohesive network. However, bubbles can be surprisingly large and extend over time. Recently it has become clear that in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic belonging to a supportive bubble is an important way of ensuring safety and security in the short and long term. In times of dealing with a pandemic they are very important, but at other times a risk of being in a bubble is that it reinforces an inward looking stance. To push this metaphor further, it can be argued that there is a real sense in which Catholic education can be likened to its own bubble, extending back from the *1945 Education Act*. In her recently published volume, Margaret Buck (2020), has persuasively demonstrated the unity of purpose amongst the English and Welsh bishops in negotiating the settlement built into the 1945 Act. Their unity of purpose in effect brought a unified Catholic education system in England and Wales into effect. It was not until around the 1990's that the first cracks began to appear (Arthur 1995; Buck 2020). Despite political

¹ Elsewhere I have employed the metaphor of an abundant and lush oasis to describe the fortunate situation of Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales (Whittle 2018c).

upheavals, a distinct Catholic system of education has continued up to present times in England and Wales.

This political settlement in 1945 allowed for very high levels of state funding for Catholic schools but also mandated a considerable degree of autonomy on the part of the Catholic bishops when it comes to determining the nature, scope and content of Religious Education (Morris 2012). Since 1945 Catholic schools have developed along parallel lines to the other types of schooling and the emphasis given to Religious Education has become a fundamental part of this. Thus as a parallel system of schooling, distinguishable most in the significance attached to Religious Education, Catholic education in England and Wales could be described as more bubble-like in the years since 1945. This is neatly illustrated through the system of targeted inspections referred to above. When these were first introduced as part of the legislation that established OFSTED (the 1988 *Education Reform Act*), the CES successfully negotiated that the inspection of religious ethos and *classroom* Religious Education would only be conducted by (Catholic) inspectors approved of by the Catholic bishops. These inspections, like OFSTED ones are funded by central government. This arrangement allowed for the creation of a highly benign system of inspection, in which only advocates of Catholic education are allowed to act as inspectors of Religious Education in Catholic schools. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Catholic inspectors have repeatedly identified numerous examples² of good or outstanding Religious Education in the Catholic schools they have inspected.

An inspection system composed of Catholic inspectors predisposed to the Religious Education in Catholic schools has over many years helped to reinforce evidence of strengths and positive perceptions about the rigorous or serious approach taken towards Religious Education in Catholic schools. Thus the Section 48 inspection system has helped to reinforce the sense of there being something akin to a Catholic bubble, especially when it comes to the provision, nature and scope of Religious Education. More generally, the diocesan structures of education officers, which include Religious Education advisors, have fostered the sense that there is a parallel 'Catholic' system to every aspect of a Catholic school which replicates the support which comes through the Local Authority. In addition, for a long time a system of 'protected' posts has existed to which only Catholics could be appointed in Catholic schools. Whilst now this is confined just to Headteachers and Deputy Headteachers, up until relatively recently it used to include Religious Education teachers, especially the subject leader. It is important to recognise that the bubble reflects the Catholic sector as a whole, rather than maintaining that Catholic schools are bubble like in only having Catholic Children enrolled. In recent decades there has been a growing proportion of non-Catholic children attending Catholic schools (see the annual CES census data 2019, for further evidence of this trend).

Of course a danger is that bubbles can be burst and thus they need to be carefully protected. If there is something like a Catholic bubble in relation to Catholic schools and Religious Education in England and Wales, there would be a strong sense or presumption that the structures around Catholic schools would find ways to support, reinforce and protect it. Against this context, the lukewarm stance of the CES statement about the Final Report would make eminent sense. In order to protect the Catholic bubble, any change to the current arrangements for RE would need to be safeguarded, and one effective way of doing this is by not seriously engaging with it in a detailed way. Hence even something as

² Ample evidence is found in Sect. 48 Inspection Reports which are readily available on diocesan websites.

superficial, such as changing the name of the subject to *Religion and Worldview Education*, would need to be treated with the upmost skepticism and rejection.

Protecting the bubble is the key priority. The concern over the name change is somewhat paradoxical, as within living memory in Catholic schools the name of the subject has changed from *Religious Instruction* to *Religious Education*.³ Here yet again it is the lack of detail in the CES statement that is the issue. Others have expressed grave reservations over the proposed new name, and the CES could appeal to, for example, Michael Hand (2018) who has raised cogent reservations over both the name change and the coherence of the notion of ‘worldview’. Unfortunately the CES statement rejects the proposed name change without any supporting arguments or reasons. The failure to supply this detail could fuel a suspicion that if you are inside the bubble, then you are free to name the subject in different terms, but others outside are not even allowed to tamper with the name, for fear of dire consequence.

This idea of protecting the Catholic bubble in relation to Religious Education chimes with some deep-seated anxieties that are shared by many advocates of Catholic education in England and Wales. For example in 1995 the publication of Arthur’s book, *The Ebbing Tide*, raised real worries about the Catholicity of Catholic schools dissipating away. Although many have challenged Arthur’s analysis [see Sullivan (1999) and Whittle (2018b)] there has remained ever since a worry about the need to protect Catholic education, particularly from any critical voices. This has rumbled on in the ‘faith school’ debate, in which concerns have been repeatedly raised about the place of schools of religious character within the provision of state schools. Whilst there are many legitimate concerns over faith schools (see Whittle 2014) for many advocates of Catholic education the ongoing nature of this sort of debate triggers a concern about Catholic education being unfairly under attack (Pring 2017). This allows for a defensiveness, where the default response is suspicion of any potential changes and being overly protective of current state of Catholic education. Moreover, there is a popular and seductive myth that in England and Wales, Catholic education is rooted in earlier centuries to a desire from the Catholic hierarchy to educate poor and needy Irish immigrants fleeing to England in the wake of the potato famine (for an example of this see Grace 2002). A popular reading of the history of Catholic education in England and Wales is that against the odds, a system of Catholic schools emerged in an overtly Protestant, and at times anti-Catholic, country (Arthur 1995; Grace 2002; Morris 2008, 2012). Thus in England and Wales a degree of suspicion and defensiveness has entered the DNA of the Catholic Church and matters of education remain a touch point for this. One trivial example of this is found in the decision, less than a decade ago, to name a brand new Catholic school in West London after a Catholic who had died during the English Reformation, over three hundred years ago.⁴ The choice of this name is perhaps indicative of a defensive or siege like stance, where old wounds are recalled and young people are subtly reminded of anti-Catholic tensions.

It may well be likely that the Final Report, despite its desire to bring about positive change for all English children, has not been responded to in a detailed way because it too

³ Moreover, it is not uncommon for Catholic secondary schools to rebrand the subject as ‘theology’ or ‘philosophy and ethics’. For example, the London Oratory School and St Benedictus in Ealing, where it is named Theology.

⁴ In 2012 a new all-through Catholic primary and secondary school was opened in Twickenham and named Richard Reynolds, who had died during the English reformation for refusing to give up his Catholic faith. See Whittle (2018c) for a further discussion of this issue.

was viewed with some level of suspicion. This is because any change to Religious Education, even outside of the Catholic sector, might have albeit unintended, negative consequences for Religious Education in Catholic schools. If you operate with the conviction that the current favourable situation in Catholic schools has been won over a long and difficult time, then not giving a detailed response to the Final Report might be seen as making strategic sense.

5 What ought to have been the response of Catholic education to the Final Report?

Up to this point the focus has been on explaining and making sense of the CES response to the Final Report. Here the focus will be on arguing why it amounts to a missed opportunity for Catholic education and individual Catholic schools to serve the wider needs of society. In effect, the focus is shifting onto a description of what a more appropriately detailed Catholic response to the Final Report ought to be.

A standard way of justifying Catholic education is that through the provision of Catholic schools the Church is serving the common good of society (*Gravissimum Educationis* 1965). In many LEDCs Catholic schools have been opened as a service to society and not primarily for Catholics, whilst in countries like the UK they have been established to help Catholic parents to be able to choose a pattern of state education that coheres with their religious beliefs. A sense of service to society is taken to be a defining characteristic of a Catholic education. In England and Wales the sense in which Catholic schools serve the wider society has increased in recent decades because these schools are no longer the preserve of just the children of Catholic parents. The annual Catholic school census conducted by the CES reveals an ever increasing decline in the number of Catholic children attending Catholic school, just sixty-eight percent in the most recent count (CES 2019). As I have argued elsewhere (Whittle 2018b, c) this decline looks set to continue in England and Wales as Catholic parents adopt more middle class attitudes to the schooling of their children. As such, the priority is to search out the best school for their child rather than following what might (in pejorative terms) be described as a more 'tribal' set of reasons for selecting a Catholic school. The sociologist Hornsby-Smith has repeatedly shown evidence of social embourgeoisement among the Catholic community in England (1978, 1999, 2009). The trend is firmly for an ever greater proportion of Catholic schools to be filled with non-Catholic students, largely because Catholic parents are choosing others schools, which they consider to be better. This means that in reality Catholic schools in England and Wales are no longer primarily just there to exclusively serve the preferences of Catholic parents but rather exist as a service offered to the wider society. Against this context the attitude taken towards a national commission exploring the state of Religious Education becomes more important. It clearly does deserve to be engaged with in a much more detailed way.

A practical concern for enhancing the quality of Religious Education in all schools ought to be a feature of Catholic Education in England and Wales. The CES statement offered no practical proposals of help with implementing the main recommendations in other schools, and certainly no commitment to review or check that they are indeed being fully met in the Religious Education in Catholic schools.

There is a strong case, grounded in Catholic doctrine, for why those leading and involved with Catholic education ought to be very attentive to the poor state of Religious

Education in other schools. This doctrine is drawn from the opening words of the Constitution of the Church in the modern world, promulgated as part of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). These words state that:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of human beings. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the Kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for every person. That is why this community realises that it is truly linked with humanity and its history by the deepest of bonds. (*Gaudium et Spes* 1965 par. 1).

A living and practical concern for the situation of others is the hallmark of the Catholic Church in the modern world. For Catholic bishops these are the definitive words of the magisterium and place a responsibility to be in solidarity with those whom Catholic Christians live with. Thus the CES has a theological imperative, in the light of *Gaudium et Spes*, to both respond to and fully engage with the anxieties, fears and hopes raised by the Final Report. The failure to do so is a serious shortfall. The Final Report paints a dire picture about the provision of Religious Education in schools where too many children are missing out on what they are entitled to. This is an important situation which the CES and those involved in Catholic education ought to engage with in a serious way. Any initial press release ought to have been followed up with meetings to work out how the Catholic sector could help bring about the recommendations of the Final Report in all schools. It could, at the very least throw its weight behind efforts to lobby the government for reform and implementation of the Final Report.

One way of supporting the work of the CoRE would be to blend the recommendations into the curricula reforms and developments currently preoccupying the CES. Framing the Religious Education curriculum in Catholic schools around the recommendations of the Final Report would be a highly supportive gesture of solidarity and bring a harmony between the sort of Religious Education found in Catholic schools and what the CoRE is advocating as the entitlement for all children in all schools. In a similar vein the name change to *Religious and Worldview Education* could be seriously considered for use in Catholic schools. For the Final Report a key strength of the proposed name change is that it acknowledges the complexity of the subject, especially in non-faith schools. If this name change is to be rejected in the face of the Final Report it needs to be done on the basis of reasoned arguments and not just unsubstantiated assertions.

6 Concluding comments

By way of summary, it is helpful to briefly reconsider the two metaphors used above to frame Religious Education in Catholic schools, that of the Catholic bubble and the image of the lush oasis. Both are suggestive of theological and moral challenges facing Catholic education in England and Wales and how it ought to have responded to the Final Report. First, if the metaphor of there being a Catholic bubble characterised by a defensiveness and unwillingness to engage is pushed further, then there is clearly a tension with the modern magisterium summed up in *Gaudium et Spes*. A defensive stance, whilst understandable given historical contexts, cannot today be justified theologically. Certainly under the influence of Pope Francis, the emphasis has been on the Catholic Church (which includes Catholic schools) being of service

to those who are disadvantaged, especially by poverty. Given this, it is incumbent on the CES to engage with the Final Report in a fully focused and detailed way. The Final Report makes a strong case about how a very high proportion of young people in England are seriously disadvantaged when it comes to the Religious Education they are currently receiving. A curt three hundred word statement, issued several years ago, is clearly an insufficient response that cannot be justified in terms of contemporary Catholic theology.

Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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