

# Whatever Happened to Religious Education?

## Penny's crusade

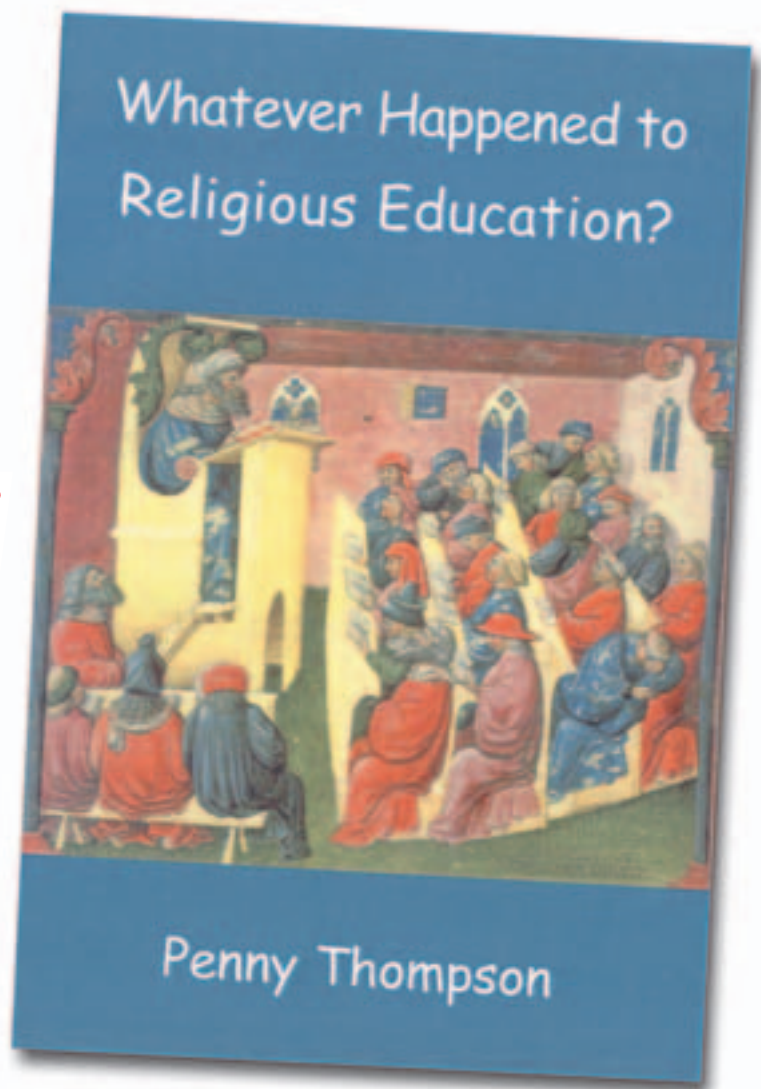
Penny Thompson writes from the heart. The issue with which Penny has wrestled in her book has been one with which she has been struggling for a number of years. *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* is extensively researched – there are no less than fifteen pages of carefully annotated footnotes at the end of the book – and whether or not one agrees with Penny's crusade, one cannot help but admire her painstakingly thorough analysis of every major RE conference and significant publication relating to RE since 1961.

*She critiques the rapid shift away from teaching the subject with a strong bias towards confessional Christianity towards a much more open-ended, secular, 'neutral' approach*

Basically Penny is unhappy at the direction RE has taken in schools in the last 40 years. She critiques the rapid shift away from teaching the subject with a strong bias towards confessional Christianity towards a much more open-ended, secular, 'neutral' approach – characterised by David Hargreaves as a 'multi-faith pick 'n' mix tour of religions [which] easily trivialises each faith's claims to truth' (p172).

## Without favour and discrimination

Penny quotes Philip May, a highly-regarded lecturer sympathetic to evangelical thinking in RE in the 1960s: '...society was officially Christian... Christianity was the religion of this country... 95% of parents supported Christianity... we were not pluralist in any meaningful sense' (p23). She also cites *The Newsom Report* (1963): '... children need to know what answer the Christian faith gives. The schools of the land immediately need Christian teachers...'



Penny Thompson  
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Penny then traces the challenge to this position, largely initiated by Professor Ninian Smart (appointed in 1968 to the Chair of Religious Studies at the University of Lancaster). Smart wanted to introduce the principle of neutralism into RE teaching in schools for three reasons:

- Because the structure of British society was rapidly changing into a multi-cultural, multi-religious society.
- Because Christianity was no longer accepted as the one recognised religion of Britain.

- Because society was becoming increasingly secular.

In short, Smart concluded that RE should no longer aim to inculcate the Christian religion into the minds of our children, rather it ought to educate them to live in the multi-faith society in which they were growing up. These views were mirrored by John Hull who openly stated that the only acceptable RE in schools was one given ‘without favour and discrimination.’

## A religious dimension to life

If the primary purpose of RE is not to instil Christianity in children, what is its objective? Is it to introduce them to a ‘religious dimension to life’? Is it to teach them about religions? Is it to present children with a wide-reaching menu of religious/spiritual morsels from which they can construct their own personalised belief-system?

This was the dilemma I was faced with when I took up senior positions in RE at Watford Grammar School for Boys and later at Slough Grammar School. In both cases, the student profile mirrored the local multi-faith environment – I taught Christians, Jews, Muslims, Sikhs and, of course, a number of students who claimed to have no religious commitment whatsoever.

In a sense, what I taught was determined for me: both schools had to follow an agreed RE syllabus produced by the LEA which followed the well-trodden path of pilgrimages, holy books, etc. But even if I had been left to my own devices I could not, in all conscience, have ignored my responsibility to teach about the major religions represented in my classes. To have taught a syllabus limited to my own faith would have given many of my students the impression that their



cultural beliefs were being deliberately ignored and therefore devalued and slighted by me. Of course the system did give me the opportunity to teach my own faith as well.

## Research findings

I recently carried out a mini-research project for the Farmington Trust. I was aware that some committed Christians teaching RE might still struggle with a multi-faith curriculum. I interviewed seven Heads of RE, all of them committed Christians. Without exception they assured me that they underwent no spiritual crisis when asked to teach a multi-faith curriculum, but made sure that they acted as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the classroom, communicating their faith by example more than by teaching only about Christianity.

## *They acted as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the classroom, communicating their faith by example more than by teaching only about Christianity*

So, on reflection, do I actually agree with Penny’s thesis, as set out in *Whatever Happened to Religious Education?* Whilst in some ways I do share Penny’s sadness at the direction of RE teaching in the last 40 years, when I draw on my own classroom experience and my research findings, I am obliged to conclude that:

- Society in 2004 has changed quite radically from where it was in 1960. We are more secular than we were and, for better or for worse, Christianity is not regarded as ‘our’ nation’s default religion.
- We are now living in a multi-faith society and this has, quite rightly, influenced what is taught in RE (and across the curriculum) in our schools.
- Children are encouraged not merely to accept ideas as given, but to think them through and to make their own value judgements and decisions.
- Teaching needs to be duly sensitive to these changes.

## Christian teachers of RE

Nonetheless, I earnestly believe we urgently need more Christian teachers of RE in our schools who are willing to cope with the tensions I have outlined above and to act as ‘salt’ and ‘light’ in the classroom.

- David Edgington