

A REPLY TO THE CATHOLIC EDUCATION SERVICE

CONCERNING THEIR RESPONSE TO 'A NEW SETTLEMENT' BY CHARLES CLARKE AND LINDA WOODHEAD

Dear Paul Barber,

Thank you for joining us at the launch of our Report.

In conversations both before and at the launch, and then in the CES's formal response, 'condemning' our report, you made a number of strong statements to which, after careful consideration, we have decided that we should respond publicly since we fear that your propositions are based, at best, on misapprehensions or, at worst, upon a desire to mislead.

(1) The 'tone' and 'narrative' of the report

The Bishop of Leeds, Marcus Stock, said:-

'Not only are their [Clarke and Woodhead's] recommendations largely incompatible within our sector, they were compiled with the knowledge that the Catholic community would find them unacceptable; this was explicitly stated in their report.'

You said to me on the phone before the launch that we had 'bought into' a narrative that is anti-Catholic, opposed to Catholic schools, and seeking to close Catholic schools. You mentioned passages of our report which you said stated that Catholic schools were the source of inter-communal tensions in some cities, and asked what our evidence was. You also said that some organisations to which we have spoken are determined to abolish Catholic schools in Britain.

At the launch Anthony Towey, whom we believe works closely with the CES, approached Charles Clarke, brandished the report in his face and pointed to the names of the Advisory Board for 'A New Settlement', claiming that they were an anti-Catholic cabal.

Another attendee at the launch stated that he thought that our Report had a 'hostile tone' towards Catholicism, citing passages on Pages 23, 39 and 41.

All of these assertions are absolutely wrong.

We have no anti-Catholic prejudice and neither does our report. Still less do we desire to close Catholic schools, or consider them a source of inter-communal tension (which is why we didn't offer evidence: it is not a belief we hold or state).

We did not 'explicitly state' that the Catholic community would find our recommendations unacceptable. Indeed we consider that our proposals form a good basis for wider consensus.

It is of course possible that some of our wordings are infelicitous and if so we take responsibility for that. However, our comments that 'The Catholic Church maintains that it is for their Bishops to decide (what is taught in their schools) and their authority cannot be challenged by the state' and that 'there is a considerable difference between the majority of Church of England schools, which exist to serve the whole local community, and Roman Catholic and many other faith schools which exist primarily to educate the children of parents who share that faith, and to pass on that faith' were based not upon prejudice but upon what you and your colleagues have told us. If we are wrong we would be happy to be corrected. If we are right, it implies a difference in practice between Church of England and Catholic schools which is significant and which it is important to name.

Whilst there are many groups that oppose the existence of all faith schools, for a variety of reasons, we have not come across any individual or organisation that desires to close Catholic schools in particular or wishes to make it impossible for them to exist. We have never supported or stated such a position ourselves.

It is news to us that there are anti-Catholic forces within the British RE community (what is the evidence?), and offensive and insulting to think that we hold such views.

2) The nature of Religious Education in schools

Marcus Stock states that our proposals

'are unacceptable for two reasons. Firstly, that the State can impose a national RE curriculum, which would dictate what the Church is required to teach in Catholic schools. Secondly, the curriculum they [Clarke and Woodhead] suggest contains no theological content, which is at the core of Catholic RE.'

Both of these assertions are completely wrong and misinformed.

On the first we recommend a national curriculum, whose content the Catholic Church would take an active role in determining (as would other faiths and beliefs). We advocate an independent body to set the curriculum following widespread discussions and consultations, including with the Catholic Church. We see no circumstances in which the State can impose a national RE curriculum which prevents Catholic schools teaching in the way that they see fit, at least on the basis of current practice, or forces Catholic schools to teach what they do not believe. We can only note that over the period that we have been engaged with this project no examples have been given of the ways in which a national syllabus might be at odds with Catholic teaching in practice.

Moreover we specifically recommend (Recommendation 3) that 'schools with a religious character should have the option of complementing the requirement with further provision as required by their religious designation', thus reinforcing our view that faith schools should be able to reinforce their own faith teachings without risk of sanction.

We should perhaps add that one of the reasons for our recommendations is that we are very keen to avoid a situation, such as in Scotland, where there are two entirely separate sets of Curriculum for Excellence guidelines, for RME in non-Catholic schools and for RE in Catholic Schools, which have no shared aims or frame of reference, and where universities have questioned whether it is even possible to train teachers in common for both subjects.

Marcus Stock's second reason for the 'unacceptability' of our proposals is that *'the curriculum they suggest contains no theological content, which is at the core of Catholic RE'*

He notes 'two approaches to the teaching of RE, the sociological Religious Studies approach which sees religions as a social construct and the theological approach which studies the human response to the divine.'

His assertion that our report follows the former but not the latter has absolutely no basis in fact since, contrary to his assertion, in fact we suggest no particular curriculum - as a cursory reading of our report will reveal. We quite consciously decided that in a discussion around the legal framework governing religion in schools there was no place for particular recommendations about the content of the RE (or RBV) curriculum. In that regard we look forward to the recommendations of the Commission on Religious Education in a couple of months.

Because Marcus Stock's second reason for the 'unacceptability' of our report is utterly invented and has no foundation whatsoever we can only conclude that it has been written in order to mislead.

3) Admissions and faith schools

The formal response of the Catholic Education Service makes no response to our recommendations in relation to the admissions policies of faith schools. However, both before and at the launch event both Paul Barber and Anthony Towey spoke very strongly against them.

We can only presume that the reason no formal response was made is that we make no recommendation of a change in the law in this area, so Catholic schools' existing practices are not threatened by our recommendations.

There was, however, an objection to our Recommendation 14 urging 'Churches and other faith bodies... to make strong and continued progress in reducing the numbers of their schools where faith is a criterion for admission'.

Paul Barber and Anthony Cowey suggested that there is a contradiction between this Recommendation and our Recommendation 11, that 'Children of families of faith should where possible be able to attend schools of that faith, and that their current legal right to be given priority in the admissions process should not be removed'

There is no logical contradiction at all between the two recommendations. Recommendation 11 asserts the right to attend schools of that faith, where possible. Recommendation 14 is about the number of schools which select on the basis of faith. Large numbers of 'faith schools' now have a faith ethos but no faith admissions criterion, and it is this that we commend.

We maintain that there is a strong case for those faiths which sponsor and support faith schools to describe openly and publicly which of their schools have admissions criteria based on faith and to explain what their policy is, for example in relation to oversubscription of places. Some would argue, though we have not made this recommendation, that the state would be entitled to require such transparency in the case of all faiths which sponsor schools. None of this would in any way contradict the right of children of a particular faith to attend schools of that faith.

In general we suggest that faith schools would earn a better foundation of public support if they were truly open to all, and willing to share their benefits more widely, and that the nearly 2,000 Catholic primary and secondary schools are no exception. Such a change would lead to a far more open and positive debate, which we would urge the Church to encourage, in the interests of its schools and wider society.

4) Conclusion

We are confident that you will agree that the discussion around the best contemporary relationship between religion and schools should be based upon accurate descriptions and not misrepresentations.

If you feel that we have misrepresented the views or practice of the Catholic Church in any way we would of course regret that and would be grateful if you could point out where, and in what way, we have done that.

Perhaps you would be good enough to acknowledge that you and some colleagues have seriously misrepresented the positions set out in our report, and we would of course appreciate any corrections that you felt able to make.

Finally, as we say in its introduction, our report is concerned with present-day realities in religion and schooling. For us the central division is not between religious and secular thinking but between those who are willing to try to ensure that schools deal well and accurately with religion and belief in a world where this subject is more and more important, and those who are not.

We firmly consider that the CES and the Catholic Church in general already make a major contribution, and our greatest desire would be that the Catholic bishops articulate the rationale for change from within Catholic social and educational teaching, which we very much hope can be done.

We are copying this to some media and placing this response on our Westminster Faith Debates website.

Yours,

Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead
July 24th 2018