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Faith in education

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In *R (Fox) v Secretary of State for Education* – a recent judicial review brought with the support of the British Humanist Association – Mr Justice Warby examined the state's duty in teaching religious and non-religious worldviews at GCSE level.

The ruling has been widely reported as requiring schools to teach non-religious views, such as humanism, on an equal footing with religious ones.

The judge said that the state owes parents a positive duty to respect their religious and philosophical convictions. It has considerable latitude in deciding how this duty should be performed, but must have regard (among other things) to local conditions, the preponderance in its society of particular religious views and their place in the tradition of the country.

In his decision, the judge looked at the religious breakdown of the population drawn by the 2011 census. Some 59.3% of people answered the question 'what is your religion?' with 'Christian'. The next highest proportion, 25.1%, replied they had none and 7.2% did not say. The five non-Christian religions yielded responses ranging from 4.8% (Muslim) to 0.4% (Buddhist).

Section 375 of the Education Act 1996 requires religious education to be taught according to an agreed syllabus which must 'reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian while taking account of the teaching and practice of the principal religions represented in Great Britain'.

Thus, while priority may be given to imparting knowledge of Christianity above others where it is practised or adhered to by a majority in society, equal respect must be applied to different religious convictions and non-religious beliefs, and the curriculum must be conveyed in a pluralistic manner.

The judgment may come as a surprise to those with a Christian or other religious worldview. But for that quarter of people who answered 'what is your religion?' with 'none', the judgment may be welcomed as ringing in a new phase in the religious history of Great Britain.

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