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cc: BE
SUBJECT cc MASTER

10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

24 March 1988

Dear Tom,

EDUCATION REFORM BILL: RELIGIOUS EDUCATION (RE)

The Prime Minister met your Secretary of State and the Minister of State (Mrs. Rumbold) this afternoon to discuss her meeting next Tuesday with Lady Cox, Michael Alison MP and James Pawsey MP about Christian religious education in schools. Professor Griffiths (No. 10 Policy Unit) was also present. (Michael Alison sent the Prime Minister a memorandum on the subject, a copy of which I sent you yesterday.)

Your Secretary of State described the position reached in his discussions with the Bishop of London, Cardinal Hume and the Leader of the Methodist Church. The Churches wanted Clause 2 of the Bill to be amended so that RE would be identified as part of the "basic curriculum". This would give RE equivalent status to the core and foundation subjects without making the RE syllabus subject to determination by the secular authorities. Instead, the curriculum would be determined by the Local Advisory Conferences, which would be put on a statutory basis for the first time. The Anglicans in particular placed great store on reviving this system of local determination of RE syllabuses, which had in some places fallen into disuse. The Churches which your Secretary of State had consulted were opposed to including a requirement, on the face of the Bill, that RE should be Christian or Christian-based. He thought that they would be equally opposed to a requirement that RE should be Bible-based. They were not thereby arguing that they did not wish RE in schools to have a strong Christian content; indeed, Bishop Konstant, who spoke for the Catholic Church on education matters, had argued that the Christian faith would, under the procedures favoured by the Churches, be a fundamental part of locally agreed syllabuses. Rather, the Churches' point was that they did not want a secular authority to determine the content of the syllabus, a point of particular importance to the Methodists. They believed that it was up to local Churches to determine the syllabus through the Local Conferences.

The Secretary of State believed that the result of the route which he had suggested would be a largely Christian-based system of RE. The Minister of State thought

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that there was a better chance of exposing more children to the Christian faith if the Bill adopted the provisions suggested by the Secretary of State, rather than those favoured by Lady Cox.

The Prime Minister said that she believed that it was essential that every child in this country was exposed, throughout his or her schooling, to good teaching about the Bible. Otherwise, children could not appreciate the culture, history and way of life of their own country. She was most surprised to learn of the Churches' attitude to the sort of approach favoured by Lady Cox. She wondered whether teachers would be able, under the arrangements suggested by the Secretary of State, to teach the essentials of the Christian faith. Some teachers, she understood, had been pilloried in staff rooms for wanting to present such teaching in their schools. The Secretary of State commented, on this point, that the new power in the Bill to permit parents a right of appeal would help deal with such cases.

The Prime Minister concluded that she had to recognise that, in view of the Churches' attitudes reported by the Secretary of State, it would be most difficult for the Government to support the approach put forward by Mr. Alison and Lady Cox. But she believed that if the Churches' approach was to work effectively, they should give strong and adequate guidance to their representatives on the Local Advisory Conferences so that they were well-equipped to prepare proper Christian-based RE syllabuses. She hoped that the Secretary of State would encourage the relevant Church leaders to devise and implement such arrangements. The Secretary of State said that he agreed with this approach.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretary to Mrs. Rumbold.

Yours sincerely

Nigel Wicks.

N. L. Wicks

Tom Jeffery, Esq.,
Department of Education and Science.