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10 DOWNING STREET

LONDON SW1A 2AA

From the Principal Private Secretary

9 June 1988

Dear Tom,

CHRISTIAN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

The Prime Minister had a short discussion with your Secretary of State, the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Privy Seal after Cabinet this morning about amendments likely to be tabled at the report stage of the Education Reform Bill concerning Christian religious education.

I should be grateful if the recipients of this letter could ensure that it is seen only by named individuals on a strictly need to know basis.

Your Secretary of State explained the amendments which the Bishop of London was likely to table at report stage, which would have the effect of referring to Christianity three times on the face of the Bill. The Bishop had said that his approach carried the support of Cardinal Hume, the Free Churches, the Methodists, the Evangelical Group, Christian Teachers and Education and possibly the Chief Rabbi. Your Secretary of State then explained the amendments favoured by Lady Cox. Her approach seemed to have the support of Lord Boyd-Carpenter, Lord Renton, Lord Thorneycroft as well as other senior Conservatives in the House of Commons, including perhaps Lord Hume. The Lord Privy Seal pointed out that the issue was potentially one of great divisiveness among Conservative peers.

In discussion, it was agreed that the churches had moved, in response to pressure, a long way in the right direction. Certain of Lady Cox's amendments seemed to have substantial flaws, for example the stipulation that Christianity would be the base of religious education in every maintained school provided that qualified people were available to teach it. This gave an obvious loophole which might be exploited by unscrupulous authorities in other directions. In addition, the requirement that governors of a maintained school should make provision for the religious education of children of other faiths would institutionalise the teaching of other religions within schools and could, in the ultimate case, lead to the teaching of a non-Christian religion at the expense of Christianity.

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Summing up the discussion, the Prime Minister said that the Secretary of State should, as a first step, secure the Bishop of London's agreement to show his amendments to Lady Cox, Mr. Michael Alison and others of her supporters. He should then write to Lady Cox a reasoned letter explaining, in measured language, why the Government were unable to support her approach. The Churches had considerably moved their position and the more detail included in the legislation, the greater the risk of undesirable complication. For these reasons, the Government were willing to support the compromise put forward by the Church of England. The Secretary of State or the Lord Chancellor as appropriate, should either write, or visit, Lord Hume to enlist his support for the Bishop's approach. Lord Whitelaw should be kept in touch with developments. She was ready to write, though her diary next week made meetings very difficult indeed. While the Government should be ready to recommend a course to the House of Lords, it was recognised that on a matter concerning religious issues there would have to be a free vote.

I am sending a copy of this letter to the Private Secretaries to the Lord Chancellor and the Lord Privy Seal.

*Truly
Nigel Wicks*

(N. L. WICKS)

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

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