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Religious and Moral Education

Leon Robinson and Leonardo Franchi

Religious Education (RE) in Scotland is unique amongst the eight curricular areas of Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in as much as it has two completely different iterations, one for Catholic Schools (RERC), another for non-denominational schools (RME). In the former, a faith-based approach is taken (which while controversial to some, has an admirable clarity of purpose), while in the latter, the nature and purpose is increasingly contested, for reasons which will become clear below. Only by being strong and well informed advocates of the subject in terms of its unique and distinctive contribution to pupils' education and development can those interested in the continuation and development of RE hope to leverage adequate time and other resources.

Religious and Moral Education in Non-Denominational Schools

The foundational document for RME is *Principles and Practices: Religious and Moral Education (P&P)*, which outlines the nature and the purpose of the curricular area in the context of the non-denominational school. This is supported by the *Experiences and Outcomes* document (E&O) which outlines the required coverage in three discrete sections, namely 'Christianity', 'World Religions Selected for Study' and 'Development of Beliefs and Values'. There have been growing divisions between schools and practitioners in how these documents are understood and implemented, as noted in the 2014 *Impact Report (IR)* on Religious Education. This lack of consistency has led to young people in many schools not having a sound grasp of significant aspects of learning within RME: 'In most secondary schools, young people are not receiving their entitlement to religious and moral education in the senior phase' (IR, p. 4). The Benchmarks for the subject, published in March 2017, are an attempt to 'draw together and streamline a wide range of previous assessment guidance (including significant aspects of learning, progression frameworks and annotated exemplars) into one key resource', and it remains to be seen whether these will help support a more consistent interpretation of the aims of RME.

The non-statutory guidance document for RE in English schools (2010) has a clear statement on the purpose of RE, identifying it as being ‘important in its own right and [making] a unique contribution to the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils’. In CfE there is nothing quite comparable to this unequivocal support for the subject in non-denominational schools. Although it is stated in CfE that ‘subjects are an essential feature of the curriculum [and] provide an important and familiar structure for knowledge, offering a context for specialists to inspire, stretch and motivate’ (*Building the Curriculum 3* p. 20), there is no mention of the unique contribution that Religious Education can and should make to the ‘spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils’. There is a lack of clarity as to what is expected and required of a subject specialist in Religious Education.

In a recent study, *Does Religious Education Work*, (Conroy et al. 2013, p. 220) identified that ‘the terms of reference within which Religious Education operates and its consequent objectives are so multiple, diffuse and fluid as to make it well-nigh impossible to offer anything like a comprehensive answer’. The sources of disagreement and difference are manifold. The entirely appropriate move away from largely uncritical, confessional Christian RE (a move which started shortly after the Second World War) has not so much evolved or developed the subject into a critical exploration of religion as an important phenomenon of human cultures and societies, but rather shattered it into countless, often poorly-considered iterations of ‘RE’, many of which, significantly, shun the very label of ‘religious’ education, in favour of ‘philosophy, ethics and citizenship studies’ or some combination of these and other, variously and tenuously related terms. A similar line of thought is found in the Scottish Government’s *Impact Report*: ‘The current variation in levels of support for the subject area are leading to inequity within the quality of delivery and in the amount of time given to the subject across Scotland’ (IR, 2014, p.4).

It is clear that within the teaching profession, there are those who might prefer there not to be an ‘R’ in ‘RE’, preferring, perhaps, a move towards ‘philosophy’. One senses advocacy for this idea, for example in Nixon (2008). The supposed increase in status conferred by these reconfigurations masks what could be described as an evangelical secularisation, which may just be as questionable a project as the old forms of religious confessionalism. This leaves a significant gap in the distinctive aims of RE:

In a significant number of schools, children and young people need more opportunities to develop their own beliefs and values through learning about a range of religions and other beliefs. A clarification of beliefs and values which underpin and inform the non-denominational approach to RE is needed in order to support pupils in this important area of their education and development (IR, p. 4).

There remains, however, an ‘R’ in the curriculum. It is the ‘R’ that makes the subject unique, distinctive and valuable. Without the ‘R’, the case for RE vanishes. The unique perspectives of religions, demonstrated specifically by the religiously literate (as distinct from the other, secular perspectives on religious matters) are dimensions of human experience and wisdom which are inaccessible and incomprehensible to those unwilling or unable to explore religions on religious terms. While the other Social Subjects aim to develop pupils’ understanding of their ‘own values, beliefs and cultures and those of others’, RME is unique in its exploration of ‘questions about the nature and meaning of life’ (E&O p 1). While other areas refer to making ‘meaningful’ contexts for, and connections between curricular areas, only RME refers to meaning in a teleological sense.

Levels of religious literacy, amongst teachers as well as pupils, are lamentably low. Even in the Conroy study, focussing exclusively on schools in which RE was seen as strong, there was too often a lack of sophistication in teachers’ understanding of religion. Notwithstanding AC Grayling’s questionable critique of the subject’s defenders, that ‘Those who defend religious studies do so only because of vested interests’ (Grayling, 2015), there remains a unique value to the subject, which is only contained in its religious dimension.

Unlike the situation in England, both religious and non-religious views are included in the Scottish curricular guidelines. The aim is that pupils will ‘recognise religion as an important expression of human experience [and] learn about and from the beliefs, values, practices and traditions of Christianity and the world religions selected for study, other traditions, and viewpoints independent of religious belief’ (P&P. p. 1).

It is a fundamental principle that all children and young people throughout Scotland will consider a range of faiths and views, whatever their own situation and local context. In an increasingly secular Scotland, ‘an ability to understand other people’s beliefs’ and to ‘sensitively take account of and value the religious and cultural diversity within their own

local communities, using relevant contexts which are familiar to young people' is part of the RE project, which should 'actively encourage children and young people to participate in service to others' (P&P, p. 1).

In order effectively to achieve these aims, Religious Literacy is required. Unfortunately, according to Conroy's team, 'there was minimal evidence of the use of primary religious texts as a resource for understanding the claims and experiences of religious communities, their histories and theologies.' (Conroy et al, p. 221). Where secondary and even tertiary sources are used, to the exclusion of original, primary religious sources, there is a great danger that pupils will be exposed to inaccurate or even biased accounts of religious perspectives, beliefs and practices. While there is diversity within every tradition, care must be taken with how any tradition is represented and interpreted (Jackson, 2012).

The structural incentives which mark the 'success' of a school subject in terms of its achievements in public examinations highlight the sometimes irreconcilable tensions in RE, between the 'soft skills' of 'respect', 'reflection, discernment, critical thinking and deciding how to act when making moral decisions' articulated in the *Principles and Practices* document and the requirements of an examinable subject discipline. This tension 'is not self-evidently conducive to effective education or to the cultivation of religious literacy' and 'ambition is certainly frustrated by the performative imperatives of an examination-driven curriculum' (Conroy et al, p. 220ff).

While children and young people often have good opportunities to develop literacy, numeracy and health and wellbeing through RME, it is important not to justify the continued existence and support of RE solely on its contribution to the development of knowledge and skills which could be learned elsewhere. Only by focussing on the distinctive contribution of RE can it be preserved as a meaningful subject on the school curriculum.

In RME, a clear focus is needed. What is it trying to achieve? How will the learning be organised? How will success be measured? These are the questions which need clear answers if firm grounds are to be established on which to base a defence of the subject. As the IR notes, 'Not all children and young people experience high-quality teaching and learning. There is scope in many schools for children and young people to engage in more

active, independent and collaborative learning' (IR, p. 4). While children and young people need more learning that supports them to develop higher order thinking skills, this raises the question as to how well RE practitioners are applying their understanding of these skills in the work pupils are asked to complete. Having 'high expectations' in the abstract is not much use. Clearly structured approaches are needed, which will support pupils in developing these skills, through requiring responses from them which cannot be met without employing these skills. Too often, children and young people are not clear enough about the purposes of their learning and how to improve their achievements. Sharing 'learning intentions' is not the same as communicating the purposes of learning.

Religious Education in Catholic Schools

Catholic schools in Scotland are part of the state system and hence supported by the wider educational provision offered by the apparatus of government. Alongside this national system of support, Religious Education is rooted in the Church's own theological and educational traditions. This arrangement seeks to accommodate universal guidelines with local cultural dynamics. Such balancing acts are a feature of Catholic school systems across the world.

The Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome oversees the Church's educational initiatives. It offers guidance and support for Catholic schools throughout the world. Interestingly, the Congregation has said very little about the nature of Religious Education as a curriculum subject, focussing instead on the wider cultural and identity issues which surround Catholic education. Only one document, issued in 2009, deals specifically with RE. The *Circular Letter to Presidents of Bishops' Conferences on Religious Education in Schools* brings together various strands of thought which had appeared in its wider guidance on education published since the Second Vatican Council, which ended in 1965.

The provision of RE in Scotland is overseen by the Bishops' Conference of Scotland, composed of all eight of Scotland's bishops. Normally one member of the Conference is responsible for overseeing educational matters on behalf of the Conference although each Bishop retains responsibility for provision in his own diocese. *The Scottish Catholic Education Service* (SCES), an agency of the Bishops' Conference, has responsibility for all

matters pertaining to Catholic education, and is now recognised by the Scottish Government and local authorities as the ‘one stop shop’ for issues regarding Catholic schools.

The dedicated *Principles and Practices* document for RE in Catholic Schools summarises neatly the purpose of the subject:

Religious education in Catholic schools takes place within the context of the wider Catholic faith community, in partnership with home and parish. It is an integral part of the Catholic school, which is itself a community of faith.

The Scottish Government’s commitment to CfE allowed the Church to develop a new syllabus for RE which would be in line, broadly, with the principles of CfE but consonant with the doctrinal and educational traditions of the Church. This was no easy task given CfE’s commitment, in theory at least, to some local construction of curricula.

To make the most of this opportunity, SCES brought together a range of education professionals to write the curricular documents now known as *This is Our Faith* (TIOF). The version for P1 –S3 was issued in 2011 and the senior phase edition (S4-S6) was published in 2016. Both syllabi have been given approval (*recognitio*) by the *Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelisation* in Rome, the body responsible for confirming the suitability of programmes of Religious Education for Catholic schools. The arrival of TIOF in Catholic schools has encouraged some schools / clusters to create their own planners as road maps through the necessarily detailed curricular guidance.

TIOF, while set within the overarching structure of CfE, proposes a body of core knowledge to be taught across the stages. This approach is supported by a host of resources on SCES’s website, as well as the relevant documentation from the Scottish Government. Such dual guidance again signals the extent of the educational partnership in Scotland between the Catholic Church and the Scottish Government.

This Is Our Faith: Structure and Implementation

Scotland, of course, is not immune to the advance of secular ways of thinking. This is not the place to analyse the causes of a perceived drop in religious commitment but it is worth noting

that in TIOF we see a hope that a robust approach to RE will go some way to addressing the challenges raised by the phenomenon of low levels of religious practice.

TIOF is grouped around eight *Strands of Faith*. These serve as the axes around which all teaching and learning revolve. The *Strands of Faith* are as follows: Mystery of God, In the Image of God; Revealed Truth of God; Son of God; Signs of God; Word of God; Hours of God and Reign of God. In using the eight themes as the core of the curriculum, RE is playing a key role in supporting the aims and purposes of a Catholic as a community rooted in a faith tradition. Each strand sets out in considerable detail the core knowledge and skills pupils should attain at each stage of their journey through primary and secondary school. The introduction of relevant subject Benchmarks in 2017 offered a summary of the key topics for study while retaining the framework of the *Strands of Faith*.

One of the principal issues for curriculum reform in any subject is that of teacher expertise. In this respect, TIOF is ambitious in scope: the material presented for study, especially in the senior phase of secondary education, requires teaching staff to be well grounded in Catholic theology. Much RE in Catholic secondary schools is taught by ‘generalist’ teachers working alongside specialist teachers of RE. Although those invited to become generalist teachers will normally be in possession of the *Catholic Teacher’s Certificate in Religious Education* from the University of Glasgow, the high level of specialist knowledge proposed in TIOF, especially in the material in the Senior Phase, might be an argument for rethinking ways of preparing teachers to teach this material. SCES and the School of Education of the University of Glasgow are collaborating to devise fresh approaches to the theological formation of prospective and serving teachers,

Clearly a considerable amount of staff development is needed for TIOF to be implemented successfully. It is worth noting that, thanks to the work of SCES, there is a substantial amount of guidance for teachers in TIOF itself: as such, TIOF could be categorised as a form of teacher’s manual. Nonetheless, SCES has recognised the need for ongoing theological development for teachers and, in partnership with other stakeholders in Catholic education, has set up a co-ordinating group to oversee and develop a more coherent and robust approach to ‘professional learning’ for teachers in Catholic schools. In time this welcome move should provide a sufficiently strong pipe line of theologically qualified teachers for service in Catholic schools.

Concluding Remarks

The introduction of subject Benchmarks (2017) in RME/RERC, part of a wider initiative in Scottish education, is an attempt to give further clarity to teachers in the planning/teaching/assessing cycle. It remains to be seen what effect, if any, this will have on attainment in RE but the Benchmarks should offer solid curricular signposts to teachers.

How healthy is the subject? This is a wider issue but available data on the number of pupils presented for national qualifications shows a reasonable level of interest: 247p pupils sat the Higher RMPS in 2015 and this increased to 4384 (Scottish Qualifications Authority, Attainment Statistics: 2016 and 2015). Nonetheless, the ongoing development of RE in both denominational and non-denominational schools still requires some form of solid base. Currently, RE is located in a complex mesh of faculties and stand-alone departments with varying levels of academic qualifications in those who lead the discipline. It is the task of the Scottish Government and its partner agencies to address this issues and take the steps necessary to underpin the subject with sure and lasting foundations.

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