Chapter 2

Religious education in the United Kingdom and Ireland

L. Philip Barnes, David C. Lundie, Stephen J. McKinney, Kevin Williams and Sandra Cullen

Introduction, by L. Philip Barnes

Although England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are constituent parts of the United Kingdom, there are different legislative frameworks and policies in relation to religious education. There is also much that is similar, as one would expect, particularly in England and Wales, both of which followed the same legislation up until 2006 when the Government of Wales Act granted the National Assembly of Wales the power to enact primary legislation on any subject except those specifically reserved to the UK Parliament. It is this common legislative history that justifies treating religious education in England and Wales together in what follows, albeit account is taken of recent developments where they differ. Religious education in Scotland and in Northern Ireland are sufficiently different from that of England and Wales and from each other to be considered separately.

This account of religious education in the United Kingdom is complemented by an account of religious education in the Republic of Ireland. When the latter became an independent state over a century ago, it self-consciously sought to develop a very different education system from the United Kingdom. Religious education in Ireland, for most of its history has been securely under the control of the Catholic Church, though that power has now been weakened by legislation, which in turn has been responding to increasing religious pluralism alongside increasing religious scepticism and to the growing number of parents that do not want a Catholic confessional education, in part the result of evidence of abuse by clerics and members of religious orders and of disenchantment with the historical influence of the Church over the organs and institutions of state (Inglis 1998; Gribben 2021).

England and Wales, by David Lundie

The nature of religious education policy

The previous edition of this chapter (in Barnes 2012) pointed toward a number of ongoing initiatives for legislative change which were under active consideration in

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the last decade. These included the *RE for REal* report written by Dinham and Shaw (2015), which drew attention to the need to focus on the complexity of lived religion in contemporary British society, rather than treating religions as bundles of doctrinal beliefs and ritual practices. This was followed by the *New Settlement: Faith and Belief in Schools* report from former Secretary of State for Education Charles Clarke and Professor Linda Woodhead (2018); this report called for a shared national entitlement to learning about religions, beliefs and values, with any confessional religious education offered in faith schools *additional* to that national entitlement. The concept of a national entitlement was also taken up by the Commission on Religious Education (2018) which called for an overhaul of the subject, drawing on both of the previous reports, under the title 'Religion and Worldviews', again in recognition that non-religious people have worldviews, and that no presentation of religion can be value neutral. Change, it seemed, was on the way.

The legislative inertia which followed these multi-vocal calls for change both obscures the reality of change, and reveals the reality of policy-making in contemporary English education. Concepts drawn from these policy recommendations, as well as significant pedagogical developments such as the Big Ideas scheme of work developed by Barbara Wintersgill and colleagues in 2019, made their way into the Ofsted Research Report on Religious Education in 2021. This long report, although not having legislative force, has a significant impact on practice, setting the standards against which schools justify the design and delivery of their own curriculum to school inspectors. The Ofsted report draws on the concepts of 'substantive knowledge' and 'disciplinary knowledge', acknowledging, in keeping with the reports in the previous paragraph, that studying religion in contemporary society requires multiple disciplinary lenses – philosophical, textual, sociological and historical analyses may all play a part in developing students' understanding of the 'substantive' concepts in each of the major world religions. A similar process of change through inspection can be observed in the context of Church of England schools, where a revised Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools framework was introduced in 2019, drawing on and dovetailing with the Church of England Education Office's 'Understanding Christianity' programme of study in 2019; while not prescribing this approach as a requirement for schools, nonetheless shifts norms and expectations for teachers and school leaders. For the avoidance of doubt, Ofsted does take the provision of religious education seriously, and has conducted a number of 'deep dives' into the subject, and has downgraded schools for giving statutory religious education a lack of curriculum time.

This increasing shift to governance through inspection is consistent with other changes across the education sector. In the following section, setting out the legislative history which continues to govern religious education as a subject area, a number of contested assumptions continue to be maintained. Local Authorities are still required to convene an Agreed Syllabus Conference, and have a Standing Advisory Committee on Religious Education, even though some 72 per cent of English secondary schools are academies, and are not required to follow the

Locally Agreed Syllabus. This change brings with it new challenges: whereas much legislation presumes a 'binary divide' between community schools without a religious character and Voluntary schools run by the churches, academisation brings with it a range of hybrid arrangements, including non-religious Multi-Academy Trusts running religious schools, and vice versa, Trusts motivated by a religious ethos running schools which do not have an explicitly confessional mission, and the UK's first state funded Buddhist, Sikh and Greek Orthodox schools. The provision of Department for Education circulars to guide schools in religious education, as in other curriculum areas, has lost prominence as a legislative instrument, and attention has shifted to the inspection framework as the primary policy 'lever' governments can pull to change the direction of practice (Coffield et al. 2007). Given the various ways that the national inspection framework might be at odds with local determination of the syllabus, this creates particular challenges for religious education teachers. Opportunities also arise – particularly the possibility that a consensus among religious education professionals may set the direction of *de facto* policy in a way that was at least more difficult with more direct and explicit forms of policy-making.

Legislative background

The history of religious education in the curriculum

Up until the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, religious education remained the only subject mandated by law to be taught in all schools in England and Wales. As early as the 1870 Elementary Education Act, a clause provided for compulsory Religious Instruction, though from its inception, religious education in the 'county school' was to be non-denominational, not following the catechism or formulary of any one church. From its beginnings, therefore, the unique character of English religious education was established – unlike the French or American education systems, religion is seen as an essential component of public education, but unlike the Irish, Spanish or Norwegian education systems, religious education was not to be a nurturing in the state religion. The compulsory nature of Religious Instruction, and its non-denominational character, was retained in the 1944 Education Act.

The 1988 Education Reform Act

The contemporary legal context for religious education in England and Wales is provided by the Education (Reform) Act 1988. In a few brief paragraphs in Sections 8 and 84–88, the subject is addressed. The basic requirements, and much of the language, of the 1944 Act are, for the most part, retained and reiterated, although the subject is tellingly re-named from 'Religious Instruction' to 'Religious Education.' Among these enduring requirements – the compulsory nature of religious education, the right of parents to withdraw their children from it (along with sex education, this remains the only subject in the curriculum with this right of withdrawal), to which is added the right of teachers to refuse to teach religious education. A number of additional demands are made by the 1988 Act:

i That any new syllabus for religious education 'shall reflect the fact that the religious traditions in Great Britain are in the main Christian whilst taking account of the teaching and practices of the other principal religions represented in Great Britain' (Section 8.3).
ii Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education (SACREs) *must* be established, and are granted extended functions, including the power to make determinations (exceptionally) to remove the requirement for Collective Worship to be of a broadly Christian character.
iii Further, SACREs are required to convene a statutory Agreed Syllabus Conference to review the locally agreed syllabus, at least every 5 years – the committee of the Agreed Syllabus Conference to be composed of:

- Committee A – religious groups other than the Church of England, to include the principal non-Christian religions represented in the area.
- Committee B – representatives of the Church of England
- Committee C – representatives of the teaching unions (note that the representatives are drawn from teaching *unions* and do not necessarily include religious education teachers)
- Committee D – representatives of the Local Authority.

All of these provisions were retained by the 1996 Education Act.

Interpreting the legislation – Department circulars

In the period immediately following the 1988 Act, debate continued in the professional community around what it meant for a syllabus to acknowledge that Great Britain's religious traditions are 'in the main Christian', and in what way to determine the other 'principal' religions and 'take account' of them. In response, the Department of Education and Science issued Circular 3/89, which broadly reiterated the language of the legislation, doing little to interpret or answer the kinds of questions teachers and SACREs were asking – how many religions were to be studied? How much time was to be devoted to Christianity and how much to other religions? Should students learn about the traditions and customs of other religions, or are they expected to gain personal insight from the teachings of each of the religions? The position expressed in the Circular was that it was for the Local Education Authority to determine whether or not a syllabus produced by its Syllabus Conference conformed to the new legal requirements. To date, there have been no challenges or determinations on the legal requirements in a court of law, and it remains for Department Circulars and Local Authorities to interpret the legislation.

It must be borne in mind that this legislation did not impose requirements 'out of the blue' – as early as 1971, *Schools Council Working Paper 36* had drawn attention to the increasingly secular nature of British society, and suggested the need for a phenomenological, multi-faith approach to religious education which rejected the implicit Christian faith formation of previous approaches. Many locally agreed syllabuses, following the example set by the 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus *Living Together*, had included teaching about non-Christian religious traditions for some years. There was still a great deal of variation in practice, however, and John Hull, at the time one of the most respected theorists among British religious education professionals, writing in an influential piece as editor of the *British Journal of Religious Education,* remarked on the 'assumed Christian monopoly' which persisted in some syllabuses (Hull 1989: 60). Hull's interpretation of the new requirements was that they gave legislative force to the kind of multi-faith religious education already widely practised in Britain 'for the past fifteen years or so… There is absolutely no suggestion [in the 1988 Act] that religious education should be "Christian based", "Christian centred" or should offer an undue emphasis on Christianity' (Hull 1989: 60). With hindsight, some commentators (e.g. Thompson 2007) have seen this as an undue departure from what is, on the face of it, legislation requiring religious education to be *in the main* Christian. In Hull's view, no syllabus meets the requirements to take account of the other principal religious traditions represented in the UK unless it includes the teachings and practices of 'Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, the Sikh faith, and Buddhism' (Hull 1989: 61).

The view that religious education ought to comprise the study of these five religions plus Christianity quickly established itself in classroom practice. In 1994, this view received government approval with the publication of Circular 1/94, and of two 'Model' syllabuses by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA), intended to exemplify good practice. Model 1, entitled *Living Faiths Today* followed in the phenomenological tradition, and can be seen as the forerunner of Attainment Target 1: learning about religions. Model 2, *Questions and Teachings* focussed on religious belief and practice, and has more of a focus on the skills which would later form Attainment Target 2: learning from religions. These model syllabuses, promulgated by the same body with responsibility for National Curriculum subjects, represented a significant shift in the meaning of 'local' determination of the agreed syllabus for religious education. In many ways, the processes leading to the drafting of these syllabuses, involving national representatives of the major faith communities, teachers and education professionals, and policy makers, mirrors the composition of Agreed Syllabus Conferences on the local level.

The SCAA model syllabuses have subsequently been superseded by a single *Non-Statutory National Framework* (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority 2004) which, while retaining the emphasis on the study of 6 major faiths, with the study of Christianity at each Key Stage, also 'recommends' the study of a range of further traditions 'such as the Baha'i faith, Jainism and Zoroastrianism' and 'secular philosophies such as humanism' (ibid.: 12). More recent guidance from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009) intended as a successor to Circular 1/94, explicitly stated that 'the Framework and its implementation are the basis of Government policy' (ibid.: 18). This advice, however, was promptly superseded by further DCSF guidance (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2010), which made no mention of the *Framework*, but recommends that Agreed Syllabus Conferences should 'reflect curriculum developments nationally… as set out in the RE programmes of study and learning' (ibid.: 23). The 2009 and 2010 guidance made two notable departures from previous circulars: firstly, it de-couples religious education from collective worship, treating only of the former; and secondly, in acknowledging, in line with moves in the wider curriculum, that a cross-curricular approach to religious education, particularly in the primary school, may be appropriate.

From policy to practice

The Non-Statutory National Framework and the Programmes of Study

While local determination remains a legal reality, on a number of practical levels, the influence of the *Non-Statutory National Framework*, published in 2004, mirrors that of the National Curriculum in other compulsory subjects: the framework includes level descriptors using the National Curriculum 8-level scale to standardise the assessment of student attainment in religious education, and while Ofsted inspectors will look to see that the Local Education Authority Agreed Syllabus is taught in schools, they will measure student attainment relative to the level descriptors in the *National Framework*. The Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency published exemplification materials to demonstrate to teachers how to assess student work using these level descriptors – the exemplification materials cover content drawn from the *National Framework*.

Perhaps the greatest challenge of the *National Framework* has been bringing together the two competing conceptions of religious education represented by the two previous model syllabuses, and this has resulted in the two Attainment Targets mentioned above. The distinction was first made by Michael Grimmitt in his 1987 book *Religious Education and Human Development* – Grimmitt distinguishes between 'learning religion', understood as a catechetical or faith formation approach, 'learning about religions', as a phenomenological or sociological process of learning about a particular faith's beliefs and practices, and 'learning from religion', as a personal reflective approach, encouraging a personal encounter with the key moral and metaphysical questions which religions seek to address. Writing in 2006, Mary Hayward notes that phenomenological approaches to learning about religions rooted in the model developed in the 1970s still dominated many agreed syllabuses in English religious education (Hayward 2006: 157). The balance achieved by the *Non-Statutory Framework* represented a tension between the continuing strength of followers of a phenomenological pedagogy and an emerging personal reflective approach, drawing on sources including the ethnographic work of Jackson (2004). In practice, however, this compromise had led to some confused and unhelpful pedagogical approaches, with some schemes of work separating entire lessons, or even entire topics into a 'learning about' unit and an unrelated 'learning from' unit. In Grimmitt's model, and in the model proposed by the *Framework*, learning from religions is intended to require a background in learning about religions, and the depth of understanding gained by learning from religions is intended to aid pupils in learning about the same. The idea that these three dimensions, the cognitive, reflective and affective approaches to religious learning can be separated has been criticised by, among others, Marius Felderhof, on the grounds that any attempt to communicate the '"truths" of religious life' must make a claim on the emotions and commitments of the learner (Felderhof 2007: 91). Emerson-Moering (2007: 11) describes the *Framework* as 'an "English compromise", pragmatic, written by QCA officials … clear but flexible and inclusive with a set of values whose origins are unclear', and is critical of the amorphous nature of the *Framework's* conceptual underpinnings, while acknowledging the enormous breadth of consensus between religious groups and teaching professionals in the agreeing of such a document.

With these difficulties in mind, the QCA published a series of programmes of study in 2007, intended as a supplement to the *Non-Statutory Framework*. For the first time, programmes of study recommend a particular pedagogy, 'Key Concepts', as a means of integrating the two attainment targets without artificial separation. Aside from this, the main changes introduced by the programmes of study are the integration of religious education with the language and aims of the National Curriculum and other cross-curricular policy developments such as 'Every Child Matters' and the recognition, at Key Stage 4, of the possibility of studying philosophy and ethics as the central focus of religious education, reflecting existing practice in many schools and the popularity of the Philosophy and Ethics paper in GCSE Religious Studies. Again, following the trend of decentralisation, the last version of the non-statutory national framework (2013) was published not by DfE, but independently by the RE Council of England and Wales under the title of 'A Review of Religious Education in England'.

The locally agreed syllabus

The SACRE

In a strict sense, educational policy is determined by the relevant legislation and the application of this legislation by government bodies and the courts. As we have noted, in the case of religious education, legislation makes provision, in the form of local Agreed Syllabuses, for the local determination of content, the Local Authority having discretion over whether the Agreed Syllabus complies with legislation. The Standing Advisory Committee, as noted above, is required by law to reflect the principal religious traditions in the area. An examination of the composition of English SACREs in 2008 confirms that there is broad variation based on the make-up of the local community: the St Helen's SACRE, for example, representing the Local Authority with the highest population of Christians in the UK (86.9%) was composed entirely of representatives of the Christian Churches – 5 from the Church of England, 4 Roman Catholics and one representative of the Free churches; by contrast, the composition of the Tower Hamlets SACRE, representing the local authority with the largest number of non-Christian religious adherents, was much more diverse – 7 Muslim representatives, 4 from the Church of England, 3 Roman Catholics, 1 representative of a black-majority Christian church, 1 Free churches representative, 1 Jewish, 1 Buddhist, 1 Hindu and 1 Sikh representative, a total of 20 members on Committees A and B. While these changes to composition have provided some impetus for the changes in religious education, those who frame and produce locally Agreed Syllabuses do not work in a vacuum, as we have seen. A contentious issue exists at present around representatives of non-religious beliefs on SACREs.

While the Non-Statutory Framework recommends the study of non-religious life stances, Humanist representatives are not permitted to sit as full members of Committee A, though they may be co-opted.

The Agreed Syllabus Conference

The Agreed Syllabus Conference is a separate body, convened by the SACRE, with a legal mandate to review the locally Agreed Syllabus every five years. In recent years, syllabus conferences have tended to adopt the National Framework, or to incorporate it in some form, although there are exceptions, most notably the 2007 and 2022 Birmingham Agreed Syllabuses. It is at this level that the trajectories of local policy, with continuities of practice and interest over many years, intersect with the trajectory of National policy, with its increasingly precise pedagogical and social intentions. The ways in which these policy trajectories collide do result in variation, although an analysis of a sample of 24 Agreed Syllabuses, drawn from a range of areas, urban and rural, more and less diverse, from Local Authorities under different political control, demonstrated mostly differences in quality and prescriptivity. Agreed Syllabuses in the sample varied from 15 to 192 pages in length, some accompanied by web-based teaching materials. A number of Local Authorities have begun to purchase the RE Today agreed syllabus, which again draws on the recommendations of the 2018 Commission on Religious Education report, and which RE Today Services' staff will tailor to the particular needs of the local area in consultation with the Agreed Syllabus Conference.

Some of the problems an Agreed Syllabus Conference can encounter may include the influence of a single vocal member who insists on a radical departure, either in pedagogical terms, or in terms of their personal understanding of a particular religious tradition, from the Nationally or locally agreed norms. Nonetheless, the history of the development of religious education in policy and practice in England and Wales has shown the effectiveness of some locally agreed approaches in influencing the National situation. The 1975 Birmingham Agreed Syllabus has already been addressed as perhaps the most prominent example. More recently, the idea of 'Key Concepts', adopted in the non-statutory programmes as a pedagogical device to bridge the gap between the two Attainment Targets, was borrowed directly from a similar pedagogy, 'Conceptual Enquiry' which was pioneered in the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus, subsequently adopted by Portsmouth, Southampton, Westminster and others, representing a meso-level through which local determination serves to disseminate best practice, eventually seeing the elimination of the learning about/learning from dichotomy in the 2013 national framework, as was also the case with the changes which filtered outward from Birmingham in the 1970s.

The National Exemplar Framework for Wales

The common legislative character which English and Welsh religious education had previously shared was ended with the publication in 2008 of the Welsh Assembly government's *National Exemplar Framework for Religious Education*. The Welsh *Framework* enumerates 3 core skills for religious education: engaging with fundamental questions, exploring religious beliefs, teachings and practice(s) and expressing personal responses. This approach represents a similar move to the introduction of Key Concepts in England, seeking as far as possible to bring out the 'learning from' dimension of religious education. While the Welsh *Framework* refers to 'Christianity and the other principal religions', no other religions are named. It must be borne in mind, however, that this *Framework* comes in the wake of 20 years of common policies and syllabuses with England, as discussed above. Subsequently, the requirement of the new Welsh curriculum for *Religion, Values and Ethics*, represents a significant departure from the English religious education curriculum. Specifically, in addition to the provisions of the 1996 Education Act, Religion, Values and Ethics curricula 'must also reflect the fact that a range of non-religious philosophical convictions are held in Wales' (Curriculum and Assessment (Wales) Act 2021, section 375A).

Inspecting religious education

Although Section 5 of the Education Act 2005 requires Ofsted inspectors to inspect whether religious education is being provided in accordance with the locally agreed syllabus, their responsibility to inspect pupil progress also means that they will usually have recourse to the curriculum principles in the Ofsted Research Report on Religious Education of 2021. This places a constraint on local syllabuses to be compatible, in terms of general orientation toward 'substantive' and 'disciplinary' knowledge, with the ways these are described in the Report. Religious education is not always singled out as a priority for inspectors. The arrangements for inspecting religious education in schools with a religious character (Section 48 inspection) fall within the bounds of the religious organisation sponsoring the school, and are discussed below.

Assessment in Religious education

Besides the statutory bodies addressed above, the most significant influence on religious education curriculum practice in the secondary school is the increasing importance of examinations. An increasing number of schools, often following the advice of their local Agreed Syllabus, or responding to resource-linked pressures to raise attainment, seek to provide their compulsory religious education at Key Stage 4 through the medium of a GCSE. The Ofsted report *Transforming Religious Education* notes the rise in examination entry as a positive development (Office for Standards in Education 2010: 5) but did not address the apparent tension experienced by many teachers between the academic aims of religious education as an examined subject and the expectations of the subject in 'promoting pupils' spiritual development', except to note that the demands of assessment could at times lead to a lack of continuity between Key Stages 3 and 4, '[i]n the worst cases, this lack of continuity distorted pupils' understanding of religion and belief' (6). Religious education is the only subject, besides Citizenship education, to be offered as a 'short course' qualification, comprising half of a standard GCSE. The market in exam-board-approved textbooks further reinforces the effect of the market, generating a critical mass of candidates for examinations in Christianity alone, Christianity and Islam and philosophy and ethics, but creating difficulties for teachers or students wishing to specialise in Sikhism or Buddhism at Key Stage 4.

The reauthoring of the Ofqual standards for GCSE and A-Level Religious Education in 2015 led to the requirement that all students study at least two religions at GCSE. Together with the removal of 'short course' GCSE from league tables of school performance, this has led to the near-total collapse of the short course GCSE. The more rigorous standards required by the new GCSE initially led to a dramatic drop in participation, from 253,712 students in 2017, before the new standards came into effect, to 229,189 in 2018 (Lundie and Ahn 2018), though there has been a steady increase since then. Religious character is becoming increasingly significant, with 95 per cent of students in Roman Catholic schools being entered for GCSE Religious Studies, 68 per cent of students in Church of England schools, but only 30 per cent in schools without a religious character. Much of the aforementioned drop, including 701 schools which ceased to enter a single student in GCSE Religious Studies (ibid.), has been in schools serving areas of socio-economic disadvantage. This change represents one of the most significant threats to the future of a universal entitlement to multi-faith religious education.

Non-religious worldviews

In 2015, a landmark ruling in the High Court (*Fox v. Secretary of State for Education*) found that the Department for Education had erred in law when developing the new Ofqual GCSE standards, which no longer allowed pupils to study non-religious worldviews on philosophy and ethics in Religious Studies. In response to this ruling, Department guidance stated that, while non-religious worldviews do need to be included in religious education, there was 'no obligation for any school or ASC to give equal air time to the teaching of religious and non-religious views… [and] no obligation on any school to cover the teaching of non-religious world views (or any other particular aspect of the RE curriculum) in key stage 4 specifically. Rather it is for the schools and ASCs to determine how they meet their wider obligations across the key stages' (Department for Education 2016). Nonetheless, the ruling makes clear that schools do need to give regard to non-religious worldviews in religious education, as does the Commission report, Ofsted Research Report and other recent developments. Another court ruling (*Casamitjana Costa v. League Against Cruel Sports 2020*) sets out the criteria for non-religious philosophical beliefs as protected under the Equality Act. To qualify as a 'worldview' in this sense, a belief:

- Must be genuinely held;
- Must be a belief and not an opinion or viewpoint based on the present state of information available
- Must be a belief as to a weighty and substantial aspect of human life and behaviour
- Must attain a certain level of cogency, seriousness, cohesion and importance; and
- Must be worthy of respect in a democratic society, not incompatible with human dignity and not conflict with the fundamental rights of others.

Schools with a religious character

A further significant influence on religious education in England is the increasing diversity of school provision. Academies are exempt from the provisions of their Local Authority Agreed Syllabus, but recent guidance suggests Academies without a religious character should follow it where practicable. The increasing diversity of the state sector, combined with the market forces of examination board choice combine to create a multiplicity of interpretations of the core guidance. In the meeting of these forces of governmental and parental control, the system established by statute, of Local Authority determination of the religious education syllabus, is increasingly elided out in practice.

The Church of England

The Church of England, one of the largest providers of denominational schooling, established the principal of 'additionality' in the provision of its syllabus for religious education, accepting the *National Framework* in its entirety, but also making provision for additional aims:

In a Church of England school RE also helps students:

a engage with the living faith
b understand how religious faith can provide a vision to sustain and develop their spiritual life

c develop a sense of themselves as significant, unique and valued
d become active citizens, understanding and serving their neighbour.
(National Society for Promoting Religious Education n.d.: 12)

Interestingly, in enumerating the Key Concepts set out in the QCA programmes of study, the Church of England advice and guidance suggests that the first 3 Key Concepts are 'predominantly learning *about* religion', with the latter 3 'predominantly learning *from* religion' (ibid.: 12–13), aptly illustrating the ability of mediating bodies to entirely misinterpret the aims of a new pedagogy in the interests of continuity.

The Roman Catholic Church

While the Roman Catholic Church's advice and guidance on religious education shares the principle of additionality discussed above, the form taken by Catholic guidance is somewhat different. While the Church of England's additionality is evident from the outside, the Catholic approach has been to present the key aims of the national guidelines, but from entirely within a Catholic faith framework. While acknowledging the changes that have taken place, and officially endorsing the new *Framework*, the Church has retained its *Icons* scheme of work, published with the support of the Bishops' Conference, and first published in 2001, though many schools supplement this work with other activities. The Catholic Church has also made explicit the desire for all pupils in Catholic schools to take accredited examinations (GCSEs and A-levels) in religious education at key stages 4 and 5, and several examination boards offer a syllabus tailored to the Catholic tradition. In recent years, there has been some debate about the effectiveness of Catholic religious education, in part prompted by the work of Bishop O'Donoghue (2007), whose approach recommended a return to the catechism, prayer and the sacraments, and avoiding an overly simplified phenomenological approach based on personal experience. The Catholic Education Service was highly critical of the *New Settlement* report's recommendations for Religion, Beliefs and Values, believing that it would require all schools to follow a sociological, rather than theological focus in religious education.

Questions

1 What are the pressures teachers face in balancing the pressures of national, local and faith community demands on their teaching?
2 What are the threats posed by a National Curriculum in religious education? Who are they a threat to?
3 What are the challenges facing teachers when considering legislation and statutory guidance which were created for an educational context that looked very different from the current reality?

Further reading

City of Birmingham Agreed Syllabus Conference (2021) The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education. Available online: https://servicesforeducation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Birmingham_Agreed_Syllabus_for_Religious_Education_2007.pdf. One of the few Agreed Syllabuses to openly challenge the non-statutory guidance, the Birmingham syllabus is notable for its distinctive focus.

Erricker, C. (2010) *Religious Education: A Conceptual and Interdisciplinary Approach for Secondary Level.* London: Routledge. Moving beyond Grimmitt's work (see below), Clive Erricker's ideas, which had a significant impact on the Hampshire Agreed Syllabus, and subsequently on the non-statutory Programmes of Study, seek to integrate the aims of learning about and learning from religions.

Grimmitt, M. (1987) *RE and Human Development.* Essex: McCrimmons Publishing Company. Grimmitt's work established the distinction between 'learning about' and 'learning from' religions – although many subsequent developments are a departure from the pedagogy he proposes, this distinction has been used in subsequent policy debates.

Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. (2004) *RE: The Non-statutory Framework.* London: QCA. The key curriculum document proposed by government, it forms the backbone of the majority of locally agreed syllabuses, and is fundamental to understanding the current stated aims of religious education in England.

Northern Ireland, by L. Philip Barnes

John W. Friesen's (2004: 235) remark that 'Combining religion and education in discussion is rarely a boring activity' is certainly true in the case of Northern Ireland. Commentators on the Northern Ireland Conflict, euphemistically called, the 'Troubles', which began in the late 1960s and lasted for three decades, frequently draw attention to the segregated nature of public schooling and predictably, if often uncritically, accredited it with much of the blame. For some (Dawkins 2006; Grayling 2006), Northern Ireland is the paradigmatic example of all that's wrong with linking education and religion (secular worldviews linking with education rarely receive the same attention or opprobrium). This linkage goes back to the creation of the state of Northern Ireland in 1921, when the Protestant majority in the most northern and eastern counties of Ireland made it clear that they would oppose by all means possible (including taking up arms) their incorporation into a new united Catholic Ireland that would deprive them of privilege and probably deprive them of some of their political and religious rights: this was the time when the Catholic Church still notionally affirmed that 'heretics have no rights'. The cry that 'Home rule was Rome rule' became the watchword of opposition to the hope of others for a newly constituted united Ireland. The combination in Northern Ireland of (what many regarded as) rival religions, rival claims to nationhood and interpretations of political independence and, more mundanely, rival claims to power and control produced a heady mix in which education often became the focus for controversy and bitter disagreement. A short historical review will illustrate the influence of these oppositions and prepare the way for a consideration of more recent developments.

A hopeful beginning

The first government of Northern Ireland had two major aspirations regarding education. The first was to introduce a thoroughly modern system of education, which took inspiration from developments in England, in particular the Education Act of 1918 (also known as the Fisher Act, after the President of the Board of Education, Herbert Fisher). Earlier attempts at educational reform in Ireland by Westminster had been made, the most recent through the Irish Education Bill of 1919 (sponsored by Sir James MacPherson), were frustrated by Catholic opposition (Edwards 1982). Reform would again be pursued by a new Unionist dominated government in Northern Ireland that was less concerned about Catholic disapproval than was Westminster. The second major aspiration, and one fully endorsed by Lord Londonderry, the first minister of education, was to challenge sectarianism and overcome community divisions by setting up an integrated system of schools that would be attended by all pupils. In pursuit of this aim the Education Act of 1923 excluded religious education from the school curriculum, though it granted 'ministers of religion and other suitable persons' access to pupils for half an hour each day if the parents so desired. The Roman Catholic church rejected the provisions of the Act, on the grounds that any system of education that did not yield complete control of education to the institution of the church was incompatible with a Catholic understanding of the chief aim of education, which was to reproduce Catholic faith in the life of the pupil, an aim realisable only when the curriculum is controlled and determined by the church, and managed by the clergy. Protestant opposition was more muted but also critical. The accusation was that an education system that appeared to position religion at its periphery was unacceptable to the Protestant churches and their adherents, which numbered most of the population. Both Catholics and Protestants united in the conclusion that Londonderry's Act sought to establish a secular system of education that was inappropriate to the needs of society and contrary to popular demands. The different churches continued to provide education for their respective adherents (see Akenson 1973: 39–71; Farren 1995: 35–128).

The state educational system did however become acceptable to the Protestant churches (after concerted lobbying and political agitation), but not the Catholic Church in 1930, when an Amending Act provided for religious education in the form of Bible instruction by teachers to be included in the school curriculum. As a result of this (and certain rights of representation on school management committees) the Protestant churches relieved themselves of the increasing financial burden of their schools and 'transferred' them to state control. From 1930s a 'dual system of education', comprising state schools (chiefly attended by Protestants) and Roman

Catholic schools, developed at both primary and secondary levels. In the same year the state agreed to pay Roman Catholic schools 50 per cent of capital expenditure and 50 per cent of maintenance costs (the state has always covered the full cost of staffing).

The Education Act in Northern Ireland of 1947 made a number of important amendments to the provision of 'religious instruction'. It introduced a conscience clause allowing teacher exemption from teaching it. More agreeably to the Protestant churches, the act laid down that in any 'county' (formerly provided or transferred) school

> religious instruction [be] given to any pupils in attendance [and] shall be 'undenominational' religious instruction, that is to say, instruction based upon the Holy Scriptures according to some authoritative version or versions thereof, but excluding instruction as to any tenet which is distinctive of any particular religious denomination.

In other words, religious instruction was to be part of the compulsory curriculum, and in a further effort to placate the churches, it was excluded from inspection by Ministry of Education officials, though ministers of religion were granted access, as a form of inspection. In addition, a collective act of worship was to begin each school day. Equally important, the rights of membership of various levels of management committees of schools were to continue much as before: church representatives at every level of the civic management of education would continue. The restructuring of education required by the act continued throughout the 1950s and into the early 1960s; for example, it was 1957 before the school age was effectively raised to 15.

Up until the 1970s (and in some cases well beyond this) it would have been appropriate to speak of religious education in state ('county'/'controlled') schools as providing an explicit form of Christian nurture. As society became more secularised, however, the aims of religious education in controlled schools were gradually modified to fit a less uniformly religious population. Religious education, under the influence of currents of thought emerged from England, associated with such figures as Ninian Smart (1968), John Hull (1984) and the philosopher Paul Hirst (1972), came to justify itself on strictly educational grounds and to focus narrowly on educational aims, such as the advancement of religious knowledge and understanding (though given that the majority of religious education teachers in state schools were religiously committed, the advancement of religious knowledge and understanding was and in many cases still is pursued within the context of a generally positive attitude towards Christianity). By contrast over this period and up to the present, religious education in Catholic schools (where the subject is named 'religion') is formally directed to the religious nurture of pupils. The challenge, however, is that as the Catholic community has becomes increasingly secularised, in terms of Church attendance and observance of the Church's sacraments, albeit at a later stage and slower rate than the Protestant community, so the assumption that schools are coherent worshipping communities has become less convincing, both to parents and to Church authorities.

Contemporary legislation

The 'dual' system of education, with Protestants attending state ('controlled') schools and Catholics attending Catholic schools, was challenged in 1981 with the creation of Lagan College, the first integrated school in Northern Ireland. By the end of the decade there were 10 such schools, all funded by parents, trust funds, and various foundations. Their aim was to establish a religiously and socially integrated secondary (mixed sex, mixed ability) school that would contrast with the (perceived) sectarian mould of existing church and state schools and promote the idea of schools that would be shared by the whole community (Dunn 1989). In 1987 the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education was established as a co-ordinating body, and from 1989, under the terms of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order, both it and integrated schools qualified for public funds, thus ensuring further growth. The churches, however, through their official representatives expressed opposition to the emergence of integrated schools. Some Protestant clergy argued that state schools already provide a neutral, non-sectarian environment where both religious traditions are valued. Catholic churchmen stated that pupils educated in integrated schools receive an essentially secular education, even though much of the original inspiration for such schools was Christian (a similar criticism is often made of state schools). In some areas during the 1980s, local Catholic bishops refused to confirm pupils who had been prepared for confirmation at an integrated school, even though the pupils had received instruction from a Catholic teacher using the official Catholic textbooks. In 2005, about 5 per cent of the school population attended integrated schools, yet by 2021 this had grown by only 2 per cent to 7 per cent (*The Irish Times*, 7 April 2021). The original hope that integrated schools would eventually come to challenge the traditionally segregated nature of Northern Ireland education is unlikely to be realised.

Alongside providing public funding for integrated schools, the Education Reform Order of 1989 (modelled on the 1988 Education and Reform Act for England and Wales) established the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, with responsibility for the management of Catholic schools, including administering procedures for the appointment, promotion, dismissal, and disciplining of teachers. The legislation requires it to be fully funded by the Department of Education (NI). The political origins of this development go back to the 1977 report of the Astin committee (so named after its chairman, Professor Alan Astin), which called for closer co-operation between the Department of Education and the Catholic Church and suggested that 'an upper tier of management for the Catholic Voluntary Maintained Sector' could be set up. Government support for Catholic schools was reinforced when new financial arrangements for schools were announced in 1993 that potentially provided 100 per cent public funding for capital expenditure. To receive such, Catholic schools had to agree to increased 'public' representation on boards of governors, though trustee nominated members and teacher representatives would constitute a majority. The

Department of Education (NI) pledged to appoint members to the governing bodies of schools only after consultation with the school trustees; thus 'the Catholic authorities will hold a *de facto* majority' (Gallagher et al. 1994: 515), effectively ensuring exclusively Catholic management boards, if desired, as it is in almost all cases. Most church schools have taken advantage of this financial provision, which contrasts favourably with the lower level of public funding provided for ('voluntary aided') church schools in England.

Church owned and managed confessional Catholic schools raised critical voices from different quarters. There were those who believed that 'segregated' education was one of the main causes of sectarianism and thus a driver of inter-community tension. Protestant church leaders brought a different perspective to bear on things. They envied the fact that Catholic children receive a confessional education, fully funded by the state, whereas state schools were required by law to cater for those of any religions or none; thus in a strict sense Protestant confessionalism was excluded. This sense of injustice was compounded by the establishment of the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, which gave the Catholic Church a privileged role in the management of schools; consequently from the late 1990s, the Protestant churches began to lobby for their own official representative body. It took almost twenty years of campaigning before the government acceded to their demands and on 1 September 2016 the Controlled Schools' Support Council was established to represent the interests of the original transferor churches – Church of Ireland, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches (see Armstrong 2017: 92–99; Barnes 2021a).

As well as providing supportive legislation and funding for integrated schools the Education Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 states that every grant-aided school must 'include provision for religious education for all registered pupils at the school.' Earlier provision that religious education in 'state' schools must be 'undenominational' and based upon the Holy Scriptures is retained. What was new in the Order in relation to religious education was that 'persons having an interest in the teaching of religious education', by which was meant representatives of the Protestant churches that originally transferred schools to state funding and management, along with the Catholic Church, which did not, were invited to draft a syllabus for use in schools. As entrusted by the Department of Education the churches set up a Working Party/Drafting Group of twenty-four members (twelve Catholic and twelve Protestant). The final version of the syllabus was produced in 1993 and is legally required to be delivered in all grant aided schools. The prescribed 'Core Syllabus' made provision for its content to be supplemented by additional material as schools felt necessary. The content was entirely Christian and was organised under (what are called) three 'Learning objectives': one concerned with biblical material (entitled 'The Revelation of God'), one concerned with material on 'The Christian Church' and one concerned with 'Morality': each of the four Key Stages structures material under the same three objectives. The syllabus required students to study 'two traditions' of the Christian Church at Key Stage 4. More theoretical matters are also addressed. The phenomenological approach is dismissed as 'psychologically ineffective', as well as leading to indifference or alienation on the part of the pupils towards religion (Drafting Group 1992: 5). Clearly these are weighty assertions, and it would have been helpful if some brief supporting argument or evidence had been adduced. Equally critical, though more philosophically sophisticated, remarks are made on the issue of the relation of personal autonomy to educational aims. The aim of personal autonomy is criticised for undermining traditional community identity and values. The Syllabus was presented to government and to the public by the churches as a model of Christian cooperation and unity, though it aroused considerable criticism upon publication (see Barnes 1997 for a review of the debate). It was revised in 2006, this time stipulating that the study of the Christian Church must include 'the Roman Catholic tradition' as well as 'at least one Protestant tradition'; material on world religions is also included for the first time. As formerly the Revised Syllabus has statutory force. For some, particularly in the Controlled sector, a Churches' syllabus compromises the subject's independence and that of 'professional' religious educators. Others, however, regarded the Churches' cooperation in establishing a statutory agreed syllabus as a positive development which guaranteed the subject's status in the curriculum.

Conclusion

Historically, the approaches to religious education in Controlled and 'Maintained' (Catholic) schools might be described as respectively neo-confessional and confessional. Today, the situation in Controlled schools is rather more complex. A largely Christian core syllabus 'sits less comfortably in "state" schools where the connection between religious education and Christian nurture is either rejected or is at least ambiguous' (Armstrong 2009: 310). The character of religious education has evolved differently in both. Religious education in Catholic schools remains (formally) confessional whereas in Controlled schools the movement towards *educational* religious education has eclipsed confessionalism. The distinction between confessional and educational religious education, however, is not that helpful. Christian 'identity formation' (Schreiner 2007: 12) need not exclude an educational religious studies approach. In other words, the distinction between confessional and non-confessional approaches has become blurred, and not just because a confessional approach can accommodate significant non-confessional elements but also because it is now becoming clear that non-confessional approaches have their own commitments and prejudices. Familiar binary oppositions look less credible in a new postmodern philosophical age.

Questions

1 What are the advantages and disadvantages of a statutory religious education syllabus for use in grant-aided schools that is under the control of the Christian Churches?

2 To what extent are the aims of confessional religious education compatible with educational religious education?
3 Why do you think 'Integrated sector of education' has not grown in size as many expected?

Further reading

Akenson, D. H. (1973) *Education and Enmity: The Control of Schooling in Northern Ireland 1920–50*. Newton Abbot: David & Charles. An authoritative history of the schools' estate in Northern Ireland.

Armstrong, D. (2009) Religious education and the law in Northern Ireland's Controlled Schools. *Irish Educational Studies*, 28 (3): 297–313. Examines the legislation in some detail pointing out anomalies and possible solutions.

Barnes, L. P. (2018) Religious education in Northern Ireland: conflict, curriculum and criticism. In M. Sivasubramaniam and R. Hayhoe (eds), *Religion and Education: Comparative and International Perspective*. Oxford: Symposium Books. Provocative account that contends that the important historical division between Catholic and Protestant influence over schools is giving way to a new frame of opposition, namely that between Christian and secular influences.

McGrath, M. (2000) *The Catholic Church and Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland: The Price of Faith*. Dublin: Irish Academic Press. A detailed history of Catholic schooling in Northern Ireland.

Scotland, by Stephen McKinney

Religious Education in Scotland has a complex and fascinating history and is inextricably bound to the history and development of state funding for schooling, and to contemporary state funded denominational and non-denominational schools. This section provides an overview of this history and highlights the post 1972 changes in religious education. In the late twentieth century, Religious Education was protected in legislation and Religious and Moral Education for non-denominational schools and Religious Education for Roman Catholic schools became embedded in the national curriculum. Despite these positive outcomes there are a number of pressing challenges in the support for teachers and delivery in the classroom that need to be addressed.

Religious education in Scotland has progressed considerably from the pre-1972 era when the practice of religious education in the non-denominational sector was reported to be anachronistic and ill-suited to late twentieth century Scotland. The Curriculum for Excellence, the Scottish Government curricular guidelines for ages 3 to 18, was introduced in autumn 2010 and confirmed Religious and Moral Education, whether Religious and Moral Education for non-denominational schools or Religious Education (Roman Catholic Schools) for denominational schools, as one of the curriculum organisers for all Scottish schools.

This account of religious education in Scotland is in four parts. The first part presents an overview of the history of Scottish state-funded schools. The next two parts will discuss the main stages of the history of religious education in the late twentieth to early twenty-first centuries: the 1970s and 1980s and the 1990s to 2020s. The section will conclude by discussing some recent developments and debates in religious education.

Scottish state-funded schools

Scotland aimed to introduce a national system of state-funded schooling in the late nineteenth century. After some unsuccessful attempts, the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 provided an opportunity for all denominational and other voluntary schools to transfer to the new system of non-denominational public schools, run by elected school boards (Anderson 2018). There was, however, no legislation to protect religious instruction and religious observance but it was expected that these would continue as before. The Act introduced the 'conscience clause': the right to withdraw children from religious instruction and observance.

The Post-Reformation Roman Catholic schools and many of the Episcopal schools, were anxious that they would lose their denominational status in the new state-funded system. This was compounded by concerns that the non-denominational public schools would be *de facto* Presbyterian schools (Cruikshank 1970). These two denominations declined the offer for their schools to become state-funded under the 1872 Act. In an extraordinary and egalitarian accommodation between a state and organised religion, the Education (Scotland) Act 1918 provided an opportunity for Roman Catholic and Episcopal schools (and other voluntary schools) to attain full state-funding, but allowed denominational schools to retain their denominational status, follow their own religious education programmes and approve their own teachers (McKinney 2020; McKinney and McCluskey 2019). From that point, the state school system was composed of two main sectors: the denominational and the non-denominational.

In the twenty-first century, the state-funded denominational schools in Scotland have become practically synonymous with Roman Catholic schools. The Episcopal schools were greatly reduced by the 1970s and only three remain. There is one Jewish primary school that has been state funded since 1982 and now shares a Campus with St Clare's Catholic primary school in East Renfrewshire. Currently there are 2,479 schools in Scotland: 2,002 primary, 356 secondary and 121 special schools (Scottish Government 2021a). Within these overall figures, the Roman Catholic schools account for 364 schools: 307 primary, 52 secondary and 2 Additional Support Needs schools. The Roman Catholic schools have been disputed in the political, academic and public arenas and sometimes mistakenly presumed to be a root cause of (ill-defined) sectarianism (McKinney 2018). They have been viewed more favourably by the Labour-Liberal Coalition Scottish Executive (1999–2007) and publicly supported by Alex Salmond and Nicola

Sturgeon, the first two leaders of the Scottish Nationalist Party Scottish Government (from 2007 to 2023).

1970 and 1980s

The Millar Report of 1972 was the catalyst for change in late twentieth century non-denominational religious education, but also, and perhaps inadvertently, had a significant impact on the organisation of religious education in Roman Catholic schools (Scottish Education Department 1972). It included an audit of religious education in non-denominational schools and of stakeholders' views on the present and future vision of religious education. The audit revealed that religious education was poorly resourced, very limited in scope and overly focussed on Christianity and bible study. There was often insufficient time, there were no Scottish public examinations and no inspections. There was no teaching qualification for religious education and therefore, no specialist teachers and no departments of religious education in schools. Frequently the teaching lacked imagination and motivation. This was exacerbated by the decreasing religious literacy of the teachers (reflecting the decline of mainstream Protestant Christianity in Scotland) who felt ill-trained and lacked confidence in the subject. Moreover, the cultural, ethnic and, importantly, religious landscape in Scotland was changing, and the cities, especially Glasgow, were experiencing the growth of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh communities (Bonino 2018).

The Millar Report and the subsequent Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education documents (*Bulletin 1* and *Bulletin 2*) proposed some radical changes in terms of rationale, aims and scope of religious education (Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education 1978, 1981). The title of the subject was amended to Religious and Moral Education (RME) to reflect moral viewpoints that were not based on a religious perspective. The subject aimed to explore the search for meaning as articulated in religion and to explore this under three main themes: Christianity (preserving the historical importance of Christianity for Scotland); World Religions and Pupil Search for Meaning – thus reflecting changes in Scottish educational thinking, demography and religious diversity. Teachers were to be trained in religious education at all levels and training courses were introduced, as were public examinations. The qualified specialist teacher of religious education began to be recognised as an important addition to the non-denominational secondary school.

The Roman Catholic schools in the early 1970s used a national syllabus for religious education in the primary schools approved by the hierarchy. Provision in the secondary schools was less co-ordinated and the resources varied from diocese to diocese. *The Approach to RE in the Catholic Secondary School* (1974) outlined a Christocentric and confessional vision (Sacred Congregation of the Clergy 1971; National Religious Education Committee 1974). Interestingly, many Catholic teachers in secondary schools, similar to their counter parts in non-denominational schools, felt ill-equipped and lacked confidence in teaching religious education.

Two years after the Miller Report a subsequent Report recommended that each secondary school should establish a proper department, headed by a qualified specialist teacher, supported by a chaplain and, where possible, a diocesan religious education advisor. The specialist teacher would direct and support the non-specialist teachers. The Roman Catholic schools moved quickly to appoint specialist teachers and establish departments by the end of the 1970s and by the early 1990s there were very few Catholic secondary schools that did not have a principal teacher (head of department). While many non-denominational schools also began to appoint principal teachers for new departments of religious education, there was a tendency, in smaller schools, to appoint at the lower level of assistant principal teacher – a position with much less status and authority in a school.

The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 provided a legal guarantee of the right of children to receive 'instruction in religion' (and religious observance) and the parental right to withdraw children. Further consolidation of religious education occurred through the introduction of public examinations in Religious Studies (RS) at Ordinary Grade (1982) and Higher Grade (1985). The subject began to be inspected by Her Majesty's Inspectorate in 1983 and the inspections were in relation to the quality of teaching and learning. Religious Studies was included in the major changes in public examinations from Ordinary Grade to Standard Grade introduced from 1984.

1990 to 2020s

In the late 1980s, there were growing concerns in Scotland about the educational efficacy of the transitions from primary school to secondary school (and between stages within the secondary school) and the related impact on continuity and progression in learning. The 5–14 national curricular guidelines in the early 1990s introduced a common curricular structure, organising language and concepts for all subject areas, including *Religious and Moral Education* (Scottish Office Education Department 1992). The three main areas of focus were Christianity, other world religions and personal search. There was some disquiet about the continued privileged position of Christianity and the reference to 'other' world religions. Personal search was conceived as being contained within the study of Christianity and other world religions but was perceived by some teachers to be a separate focus of study. Originally, it was envisaged that the same guidelines, with an appendix, would be used by the Roman Catholic sector. The Roman Catholic sector rejected this proposal as the guidelines failed to recognise the distinctive nature of Roman Catholic schooling and religious education. After a period of consultation with Roman Catholic schools, educationalists and other stakeholders, a document entitled *5–14 Religious Education (Roman Catholic Schools)* was published in 1994 (Scottish Office Education Department/Catholic Education Commission 1994). These guidelines, though adapted from the non-denominational guidelines, were contextualised within the vision of Christian faith formation of Catholic education. *Religious and Moral Education* was deemed to be an inappropriate title, as morality was perceived to stem from religion. There was greater emphasis on Christianity, though other world religions would be taught. The Roman Catholic guidelines included a greater focus on sacraments and liturgy and personal search was understood to be within the context of Catholic Christianity for Catholic pupils.

There were further changes in public examinations as the Higher examination became the more encompassing Higher Still. These changes, like the move to Standard Grades were designed to create a more inclusive examination system for a wider range of ability. Within the Higher Still framework, Religious Studies was changed to Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS) (Nixon 2008). The change in nomenclature reflected the importance of Philosophy and an increasing, but contested, diversification within the subject (Nixon 2009; Conroy et al. 2013). The Roman Catholic sector was strengthened in 2013 with the launch of the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES), the operational arm of the Scottish Catholic Education Commission.

The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was accepted by the Scottish Executive in 2004. The underlying purpose was to enable all children to develop their capacities as successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors to society. The aim was to produce a curriculum that is less crowded, more flexible and better connected but retain the breadth and depth associated with the Scottish tradition in education. The expectations for learning and progression are expressed within a series of experiences and outcomes, contained within curriculum organisers, which are intended to be inter-connected and will contribute to developing the four capacities. The eight curriculum organisers include *Religious and Moral Education,* which is sub-divided into RME and RERC (*RE in Roman Catholic schools).* This is the only curriculum area which has two different sets of experiences and outcomes. There was also a revision of the national qualifications. Standard Grade was phased out in 2013 and Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies began to be offered at National 3, National, 4, National 5, Higher and Advanced Higher (Scottish Qualifications Authority 2021).

The rationales for Religious and Moral Education and Religious Education for Roman Catholic Schools are outlined in the two *Principles and Practice* documents (Scottish Government 2021b, 2021c). The *Curriculum for Excellence: Religious and Moral Education* remains within the vision of the post-Millar Report tradition, with some modification. Christianity continues to be emphasised because of its historical and contemporary importance in Scotland. Other World Religions are now studied under the less pejorative title of World Religions. Personal Search has been replaced by Development of Beliefs and Values. *Religious Education for Roman Catholic Schools* has been organised under eight strands of faith, which are not mutually exclusive. These are: 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. The Scottish Catholic Education Service produced two documents to supplement religious education: *This is our Faith P1-S3* (2011) and, later, *This is our Faith Senior Phase* (S4–6) (2015; see Scottish Catholic Education Service 2020). The Curriculum for Excellence initiative appears to have strengthened the position of Religious and Moral Education in the curriculum for non-denominational schools and created an opportunity for the Roman Catholic sector to articulate a clearer theological vision.

Recent developments and contemporary debates

The legal right to receive instruction in religion (1980) for children in all denominational and non-denominational schools was re-iterated in the *Advice and Guidance on Curriculum for Excellence: Religious and Moral Education* (Scottish Government 2011). The legal right to withdraw was also reiterated, though a recent small-scale study by Nixon indicated limited uptake of this right (Nixon 2018). The *Advice and Guidance* document stressed that Religious and Moral Education makes an important contribution to the education and development of young people and helps them to 'reflect on their own values and capacity for moral judgement'. It also emphasised that the legal requirement included children and young people in all stages of primary and secondary schooling, including the senior pupils at S5 and S6, and that all children were entitled to be 'taught in a meaningful and progressive way'. There is a strong focus on the important role of qualified teachers of Religious and Moral Education and Religious Education, the quality of the learning experience in Religious and Moral Education and a reminder that the Local Authorities have a responsibility to ensure that all teachers 'receive continued support and access to continuing professional development opportunities'. These four points are explored in more detail in the *Religious and Moral Education 3–18. Curriculum Review* (*Impact Report*) (Education Scotland 2014).

The *Impact Report* restates the anxieties about children and young people not receiving their legal entitlement to Religious and Moral Education and adds that this seems to be the case in most non-denominational secondary schools. It further adds that few schools make adequate provision for S5 and S6 and that there is an increase in diminished provision for S4. Scholes (2020), drawing on a small-scale study, identified a number of reasons for the lack of adequate provision in the middle and senior phases (and across the school) in non-denominational schools that include: lack of support of the school leadership for the subject, parents and pupils perceiving little value in the study of religion and a lack of qualified staff.

The anxiety about the quality of the learning experience prompted the 2014 document to propose that there remains 'scope in many schools for children and young people to engage in more active, independent and collaborative learning'. It was stressed that the purposes of the learning should be clearer to the children and young people and there needs to be more attention to developing higher order thinking skills.

The decrease in students studying Theology or Religious Studies at university level has been problematic for the supply of candidates for preparation as religious education teachers (teaching is an all-graduate profession in Scotland and all teachers must complete Initial Teacher Education through one of the universities). This has led to a broadening of the subject qualifications for entry onto the teacher education courses, especially in the non-denominational sector (General Teaching Council of Scotland 2019). While this is helpful in maintaining teacher numbers, it does create further challenges in the levels of religious literacy of the students and the newer teachers. In the Catholic sector, the University of Glasgow re-introduced an Additional Teacher Qualification in religious education for Catholic teachers in 2019.

There remains serious anxiety about the commitment of University Faculties or Schools of Education to the subject of religious education. The responsibility for religious education in the majority of universities resides with one or possibly two persons, apart from the University of Glasgow which retains a mission to prepare teachers for Catholic schools. Religious education is mandatory in all Scottish schools and all primary teachers should be prepared to teach it. There have been some related issues with its status and position in non-denominational schools. As schools have moved from subject departments to Faculties that embrace a cluster of subjects, religious education has often been subsumed into a Faculty of Social Subjects. This has resulted in the loss of many posts of principal teacher of religious education in non-denominational schools, though a few have become Head of Faculty. Roman Catholic schools, on the whole, have maintained the position of principal teacher of religious education.

The Catholic documentation, while remaining part of the national initiative, has adopted a more catechetical approach. This approach requires considerable expertise and sensitivity in the classroom, as there is a very diverse pupil population in many Scottish Catholic schools, especially the secondary schools, and this includes children of other denominations, other faiths and of no faith. This has required in-service training for teachers as a major priority (see Reilly and Coll 2019).

Questions

1 To what extent does the diminishing religious literacy of contemporary religious education teachers (especially in the non-denominational sector) create an unwelcome return to the pre-1972 position?
2 How do the Catholic schools balance the distinctiveness of Catholic education and religious education with the inclusion of a diverse pupil population?
3 How will Religious and Moral Education and Religious Education (RC schools) be integrated in future national curricular developments?

Further reading

Bryce, T. G. K., Humes, W. M., Gillies, D. and Kennedy, A. (eds) (2018) *Scottish Education*, 5th ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. This is a comprehensive and invaluable collection of historical and contemporary accounts of the different aspects of Scottish education: includes chapters on Religious and Moral Education and Catholic Education.

Conroy, J. C., Lundie, D., Davis, R. A., Baumfield, V., Barnes, L. P., Gallagher, T. Lowden, K., Bourque, N. and Wenell, K. (2013) *Does Religious Education Work?* London: Bloomsbury. This important book discusses some major issues concerning religious education and its delivery.

Education Scotland. (2014) *Religious and Moral Education 3–18: Curriculum Review (Impact Report)*. Education Scotland. Available online: education.gov.scot/improvement/self-evaluation/religious-and-moral-education-3-18-curriculum-review-impact-report/ (accessed 30 November 2021).

This provides some excellent insights into good practice and the areas for development in non-denominational and denominational religious education in Scotland.

Education Scotland (2021) Religious and moral education. Available online: education.gov.scot/education-scotland/scottish-education-system/policy-for-scottish-education/policy-drivers/cfe-building-from-the-statement-appendix-incl-btc1–5/curriculum-areas/religious-and-moral-education/ (accessed 30 November 2021). This portal will provide access to the Curriculum for Excellence documents for Religious and Moral Education and Religious Education in Roman Catholic Schools.

Websites

Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES). Available online: https://sces.org.uk (accessed 30 November 2021). Information about Catholic schools in Scotland and the supplementary materials and resources produced by SCES for Roman Catholic religious education.

Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (2021) Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies. Available online: www.sqa.org.uk/sqa/45631.html (accessed 30 November 2021). Provides all relevant information and updates on national qualifications in Religious Moral and Philosophical Studies.

The Saint Andrew's Foundation for Catholic Teacher Education, University of Glasgow. Available online: gla.ac.uk/research/az/standrewsfoundation/ (accessed 30 November 2021). The portal to information about the Foundation including blogs and recordings of seminars.

The Republic of Ireland, by Kevin Williams and Sandra Cullen

This section first examines the legal framework for the arrangements for Religious Education in the Republic of Ireland and the controversy about these arrangements. The situation in primary and second level schools is explained and the efforts by the State to reconcile the claims of religious and secular versions of human self-understanding in providing for Religious Education are addressed.

Educational policy is one aspect of a general attempt to determine the relationship between Church and State in contemporary Ireland. The main pillar of State policy has been to remove from the State any role in prescribing the character of the ethos of schools on a national basis and to allow the Board of Management of each school discretion with regard to the ethos that it wishes to embrace. Yet there is a tension at the heart of provisions of the *Education Act 1998* between the right of patrons to maintain a particular ethos and the principle of 'respect for the diversity of values, beliefs, traditions, languages and ways of life in society' (Section 15) with regard to accommodating the children of parents who dissent from this, typically Catholic ethos. This ethos pervades the curriculum and the whole life of the school so the right to withdraw from lessons in religion does not prevent children being exposed to religion. So, what then are the arrangements for religious education in Irish schools?

Arrangements for religious education in Irish schools

At primary level, schools are largely state aided, with the state providing the major proportion of capital and current expenditure to supplement the educational initiatives of denominational and other bodies. There are over 3,000 primary schools and some 90 per cent of them are under Catholic management, patronage, or sponsorship. The other ten percent consists of schools are under the patronage of other denominations and faiths, non-denominational Educate Together schools, Irish medium schools, multi-denominational schools (called Community National Schools) under the joint sponsorship of religious bodies and Educational and Training Boards (ETBs), an arm of local authorities, and schools for children with Special Educational Needs.

In church-sponsored primary schools, one half hour per day is devoted to what is called 'religious instruction', that is, catechesis. This is provided under the guidance of the relevant religious authorities and the State has no role apart from ensuring that no child is obliged to attend religion class against the wishes of her/his parents. Normally the regular class teacher also takes the daily lesson in religious education and teachers in denominational primary schools are expected to do so. Where, however, a teacher objects on grounds of conscience, then arrangements may be made for that teacher to undertake other duties while someone else takes the class in religion.

The teaching of religion in the overwhelming majority of primary schools is catechetical in character. This means that its purpose is the continued initiation of young people into faith and the consolidation of their commitment to it. Although parents have the right to withdraw their children from religion class, it is not always for practical reasons regarding space and personnel to make alternative arrangements to accommodate children withdrawn from lessons in religious education. Even where parents ask to have their children withdrawn, this withdrawal could be said to have had a stigmatising effect leaving the children vulnerable to teasing and bullying. Withdrawal is even more complicated in the years when children are being prepared for Communion and Confirmation as activities related to this preparation require a more extensive time allocation than the normal half hour per day. Another area where conflict area arises concerns Relationships and Sexuality Education and especially the treatment of same sex relations. Consequently, it is hard to give force to the constitutional rights of parents to withdraw their children from religious education that cultivates faith. In practice, such withdrawal cannot be complete or absolute. The law does not oblige schools to change their ethos to accommodate the wishes of parents who have no option but to send their children to faith schools.

Ireland's dilemma

This leads to a dilemma. Legally the schools are under Church patronage and so they are entitled to promote the faith (usually Catholic), but staff, pupils or parents do not necessarily share the faith of the sponsoring church. This can lead to hypocrisy and alienation or else a very light touch or attenuated treatment of faith matters. In this treatment religion may be reduced to the promotion of an anodyne form of niceness.

Yet emphasising the religious identity of Catholic schools will inevitably prompt resistance from those parents and families who do not wish their children to attend such schools, but who have no alternative provision in their area. The very light touch approach to religious education and to ethos may possibly ensure that few parents will object to a school's faith regime. As a result, some school communities are Catholic in name only and the explicitly religious character of schools is neutralised whereby faith is not foregrounded and is present only is a general sense that is reflective of Irish culture. Mahon's (2017) research disclosed that some teachers find that faith formation is not a priority and Catholicism is present merely in a token fashion. This is hardly surprising and is reflected in a column by education correspondent Brian Mooney in *The Irish Times*, who regularly receives letter from non-believing teachers in Catholic schools about the obligation to engage in faith formation (Mooney 2019).

The future of faith schools and faith formation at primary level

Attempts have been made on the part of the State to introduce clarity into this whole contested area. An important change was made in 2016 by the removal of Rule 68 of the *Rules for National Schools*, promulgated in 1965, that required that 'a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school' (Government of Ireland, Department of Education 1965). This move followed efforts by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) to reduce the dominance of religious patronage. Over the years there has been increasing demand for Educate Together schools and Community National Schools. Two major reports, which draw on submissions from different interest groups, have also been published (Renehan and Williams 2015). These are the reports from the Irish Human Rights

Commission (2011) and from *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* (Government of Ireland 2012). These reports explain the divergent demands regarding the place of religion in schools and attempt to take account of the variety of religious and non-religious values in Irish education. The reports propose a wider choice of school type to end at least some of the conflict that exists currently in the system at primary level. There is, however, a reluctance on the part of elements within the Catholic hierarchy to cede the transfer of patronage of its schools to other bodies. The irony is that ceding patronage might well lead to a more vibrant faith-life in primary schools. The multi-denominational, publicly sponsored Education and Training Board schools at second level have been shown to retain a Catholic spirit, although control is shared to different degrees between the Local Authorities and the Churches (McCormack et al. 2019).

Religious education at secondary level

There are some 740 second-level schools in the country, almost evenly divided between church-sponsored and multi-denominational schools, while 22 are non-denominational under Educate Together (ET) patronage. Historically, as at primary level, post-primary religious education was legally the preserve of the churches that determined curricula, assessment and qualification with the result that religious education was something of an 'insider' discourse concerned with the faith formation of young people. The move towards a form of religious education not necessarily aligned with faith formation emerged after the Education Act of 1998. This allowed for examinations in religious education and thereby enabled the State to be involved in its provision, shaped by national policy developments in education.

Apart from the ET schools, all other schools are required to provide for two hours religious education per week though this is being increasingly challenged by claims of 'curriculum overload', and conscientious objections to religious education in schools. What form such religious education takes is up to each school. The introduction of syllabi for Junior Certificate Religious Education (2000) (JCRE) and Leaving Certificate Religious Education (2003) (LCRE) situated the subject within an educational framework, though the influence of faith communities could still be seen in the structure of the content. Schools are free to opt in or out of taking the examination model, leading to the unfortunate designation within schools of 'exam religious education' and 'non-exam religious education'. If a school offers the former then it is subject to the same evaluative processes as other subjects in the curriculum: publicly available subject inspection reports and whole school evaluation reports. Evaluation of student learning is done through the state examination system. In 2019, 41.83 per cent of students sat the JCRE examination, and 2.3 per cent of students sat the LCRE examination. The optional nature of introducing the State curriculum for religious education means that schools that adopt the State curriculum, with its version of religious education, are resourced in this area by the Department of Education and Skills (DES), whereas schools that continue with a model in keeping with the characteristic spirit of the school do not receive such on-going professional development or resources from the State.

Junior Cycle religious education

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, the pluralised and de-traditionalised social and cultural context of the Republic of Ireland raised significant questions about how education should best respond to the needs of students and society. In *A Framework for Junior Cycle* (2012), the DES identified twenty-four statements of learning to which any subject included in the suite of subjects offered in the Junior Cycle must be able to contribute. Religious education justifies its place in the curriculum insofar as it can demonstrate that it makes a distinctive contribution to the statements of learning.

In preparation for the introduction of religious education as a Junior Cycle subject in 2019, the *Background Paper and Brief for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2017) presented a vision of religious education for the future. This vision is responsive to religious and cultural diversity; human rights legislation; the voices of teachers and students; European perspectives on how to conceive of religious education in the public space; sustainable development; a need for religious literacy; the celebration of the diversity of religious practices and beliefs; and the role of religious education as a significant contributor to student wellbeing. The concerns of faith communities are not evident in the text.

The *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification*, introduced in schools in 2019, is structured around three interconnecting strands: expressing beliefs, exploring questions, and living our values. These strands are underpinned by the cross-cutting elements of enquiry, exploration, and reflection and action. A range of learning outcomes are identified that invite students to become active agents in their own learning. Though encouraged to draw on their own experience, students' personal faith commitment or religious affiliation is not subject to assessment. The purpose of religious education is to provide

> a particular space for students to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships. It encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret, imagine and find insight for their lives. The students' own experience and continuing search for meaning is [sic] encouraged and supported.
>
> (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment n.d.: 6)

Circular Letters 0013/2018 and 0062/2018

Circular Letter 0013/2018 from the DES was addressed to the Management authorities of community and ETB post-primary schools (the multi-denominational sector) on 'Religious instruction and worship in certain second level schools in the context of Article 44.2.4 of the Constitution of Ireland and Section 30 of the Education Act 1998'. The circular is an attempt to 'ensure that the rights of children to attend the school without having to attend religious instruction will be conducted in a manner that takes account of the likelihood, given changing demographics, of an increasing number of families wanting to exercise their constitutional right to withdraw' from such instruction (1). Of particular concern to those teaching religious education in the ETB and Community School sector was Section 5:

> The NCCA developed curriculum for Religious Education currently also serves to meet the religious instruction requirements of the Catholic Church and schools can continue this arrangement for pupils whose parents elect for Catholic religious instruction or other parents who wish to follow the NCCA curriculum, and where that is the case it is important in the information provided to parents that they are made fully aware that the curriculum is not necessarily confined to learning about religions.

In its response to Circular 0013/2018, the Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI), representing teachers in all school types, drew attention to the problematic nature of the use of the term religious instruction in the circular, arguing that it 'only serves to perpetuate misconceptions about the teaching of Religious Education by seeming to equate Religious Education with religious instruction in a particular faith'. The concern of the RTAI is that students may not be given the opportunity to participate in religious education on the basis of this misrepresentation and that the efforts being made by schools to provide for the 'fullest possible holistic education of their students' will be compromised (see Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland 2018).

Later in 2018, Circular 0062/2018 provided a clarification regarding Section 5 of Circular 0013/2018:

> Where a school decides to offer religious instruction in line with the requirements of any particular individual religious denomination, it must not be associated with or integrated to any degree with the NCCA-developed Religion [sic] Education syllabus being provided in timetabled class periods. … Such religious instruction must be provided as a discrete separate subject which will be external to the Department-approved NCCA Religious Education syllabus. Where the school is providing religious instruction having regard to the legal instruments created when the school was recognised, the school may provide the teaching resources from within the school's overall teacher allocation and the delivery must be in full class periods devoted exclusively to religious instruction.

The accompanying press release (Department of Education and Skills (Ireland) 2018), elaborated on the clarifications:

> where a school intends to provide religious instruction/faith formation, parents must give consent before admission to the class. This means that opt out does not arise because the parent has requested a place in the religious instruction class … [C]lasses following the NCCA Religious Education syllabuses cannot have any element of religious instruction or worship, which also means that opt out does not arise.

The implications of this clarification for the provision of religious education in all schools are being worked out in practice. This will demand striking a balance between the rights of parents, management authorities, faith communities, the concerns of the State, and the rights of the student, with due regard for the legally protected characteristic spirit of the school. One concern is that separating students for religious education could mean that some young people may not be afforded an opportunity to engage with their peers in addressing the questions and issues that are part of the subject. A second concern is that some schools are using the Circulars as a rationale for not offering any form of religious education. In a multi-belief and multicultural society, the subject might well provide the only space where people can learn with, and from, each other as they think deeply about the variety of religious and other responses to life's questions. In a democracy that respects freedom of, for, and from, religion, students and their parents must be supported in exercising their right to opt-out; however, it is not always evident that parents appreciate what they are opting out of.

In this context, it is interesting to note the requirements of the Teaching Council (2020) regarding the conditions to be met for recognition as a teacher of religious education. From January 2023, applicants must demonstrate that their degree includes the study of 5 of the following: (a) Sacred Texts including the Bible; (b) Christianity – Origins and Contemporary Experience; (c) World Religions; (d) Secular Belief Systems; (e) Ethics; (f) Systematic Theology; (g) Philosophy of Religion. In effect, a teacher of religious education is not obliged to have to have studied study theology or anything about the Christian tradition in order to be recognised by the Teaching Council. In opening up the subject to a broader range of perspectives from which to study religion, the Council has changed the nature of the subject. This development is significant because it potentially separates religious education from its religious sources and resources.

Conclusion

Since 2000, the development of a number of syllabi for religious education that may be studied by second-level students of any faith or worldview marks the beginning of the shift from understanding the learning and teaching of religion as solely the task of faith communities to appreciating it as a legitimate activity within the public domain, responsive to the educational aims of the State. The situation at primary level is still contested on account of the lack of choice for many parents due to the dominance of schools under Catholic patronage. Yet single religion faith schools are unlikely to be the main model of the primary schools of the future. The future will see the growth of more religiously inclusive schools.

Questions

1. Can a programme of religious education in Catholic schools be open enough to accommodate the children of non-Catholic parents?
2. In a common school serving a pluralist constituency, can a programme of religious education be designed that will meet the requirements of formative initiation into faith as well as a more general religiously non-formative religious education?
3. Is the solution to the growing pluralism in Ireland, the exclusion of formative religious education from all schools?

Further reading

Anderson, B., Byrne, G. and Cullen, S. (2016) Religious pluralism, education, and citizenship in Ireland. In E. Aslan, R. Ebrahim and M. Hermansen (eds), *Islam, Religions, and Pluralism in Europe*. Dordecht: Springer. This chapter provides a broad overview of the evolving situation in the Republic of Ireland with regard to the intersection of religious pluralism, education and citizenship.

Carmody, B. (2019) Ecclesial to public space: Religion in Irish secondary schools. *Religious Education*, 114 (5): 551–564. This research shows how the Irish experience offers an example of how religious education can become more central to publicly funded schooling.

Renehan, C. and Williams, K. (2015) Religion, education and conflict in the Republic of Ireland. *Ricerche di Pedagogia e Didattica – Journal of Theories and Research in Education*, 10 (1): 67–87. This essay examines the reports commissioned by the Government of Ireland in 2011 and 2012 on the place of religion in Irish schools. The divergence in views regarding the matter is reflected in the submissions examined.

Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review, 108 (429), Spring 2019. A collection of important articles on the theme of 'Catholic Education in a New Ireland'.

Williams, K. (2005) *Faith and the Nation: Religion Culture and Schooling in Ireland*. Dublin: Dominican Publications. The background to the issues raised in this part of the chapter are explored in detail in this book.