An exploration of the contribution of Leaving Certificate Religious Education to the promotion of biblical literacy

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Education is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not, to the best of my knowledge, breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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(Lk 15:8-9)

[8] Ἢ τίς γυνὴ δραχμὰς ἔχουσα δέκα, ἐὰν ἀπολέσῃ δραχμὴν μίαν, οὐχὶ ἅπτει λύχνον καὶ σαρ οῖ τὴν οἰκίαν καὶ ζητεῖ ἐπιμελῶς ἕως οὗ εὕρῃ;[9] καὶ εὑροῦσα συγκαλεῖ τὰς φίλας καὶ γείτον ας λέγουσα, Συγχάρητέ μοι, ὅτι εὗρον τὴν δραχμὴν ἣν ἀπώλεσα.

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List of Abbreviations

AAR American Academy of Religion

ASTI Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland

DEIS Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools

DES Department of Education

JCRE Junior Cycle Religious Education

LCRE Leaving Certificate Religious Education, syllabus, 2003

NCCA National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

NGI National Gallery of Ireland

n.d. No date

n.p. No page

OECD Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

RTAI Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland

SBL Society of Biblical Literature

SEC State Examination Commission

TUI Teachers Union of Ireland

VCS Visual Commentary Scripture

Abstract

An exploration of the contribution of Leaving Certificate Religious Education to the promotion of biblical literacy.

This research considered the status of the Bible within Ireland's Leaving Certificate Religious Education syllabus [LCRE]. Building on the work of a range of international researchers in biblical studies (including R. A. Bowie, Margaret Carswell and Peta Goldburg), a case study focus was adopted to explore the experience of biblical literacy at this level. The study availed of two research cohorts. The first involved a written survey of Religious Education teachers (n=21). The second concentrated on students who had chosen to study Religious Education for the Leaving Certificate examination (n=18). The participants were drawn from three second-level school types, a Church of Ireland school, a Catholic voluntary secondary school, and an Education and Training Board (ETB) school. Beyond an initial interrogation of the presence of the Bible in LCRE, a range of sources were examined, including material from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Teaching Council, and from the State Examination Commission that is responsible for the assessment of LCRE as well as the occasional release of quantitative student data.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was employed to identify patterns and findings from the qualitative data. A combination of data tools provided insight into the reasons for selecting LCRE, Section H: The Bible as an area for study. The exercise revealed that despite linkages across several sections, the specific goal of biblical literacy was fundamentally limited to one optional section, leading to a concern that many students might not be equipped with the tools to attain a high level of biblical literacy. Findings reveal the significance of initial teacher education (ITE) in building RE teacher confidence to engage with the Bible. Some teachers and students had difficulty in identifying literary genres within the Bible. They also noted the challenge of moving beyond literal interpretations of biblical text. A further outcome indicated that the current assessment of the Bible demands less interpretative skills than other sections of the LCRE syllabus.

Appendices

Chapter One: Introduction, Rationale and Aim

1.1 Introduction

This research study explores if and how Leaving Certificate Religious Education (LCRE) promotes biblical literacy. No study has previously focussed on how the Bible at LCRE level is presented, represented, and engaged with in Irish schools. While a biblical section was included in the LCRE syllabus, there has been no analysis of how effective this has been in promoting biblical literacy. This research focuses on the views of LCRE students and teachers to ascertain how biblical literacy has developed since the introduction of LCRE. This first chapter outlines the context and rationale for the study and identifies the genesis of the research question. The researcher's understanding of key terminology and how this is used in the study is explained. The chapter ends with an overview of the five chapters of the thesis.

1.2 Identification of the research topic

The Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (LCRE) was introduced in 2003. It marked a paradigm policy shift in the relationship between the Irish State and Religious Education (RE). In the history of RE educational assessment in Ireland, Thursday, 23 June 2005 was a day of significance. 80 out of a cohort of 54,073 Leaving Certificate candidates participated in the first ever State examination of LCRE (SEC, 2005; 2008). LCRE thus assumed assessment parity with other curricular areas in the Leaving Certificate space. The importance of the inauguration of the LCRE assessment event cannot be understated. This occasion marked a public expression of a new relationship between the Irish state and Religious Education (Cullen, 2022b).

Prior to LCRE's genesis, longstanding historical factors had contributed to RE's marginalisation. *The Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act 1878* functioned as a legal impediment to block its evaluation at State level (Byrne, 2017; Coolahan, 2017; Cullen, 2022b; Devitt, 2000; Meehan and Laffan, 2021; NCCA, 2017b, p.7). The exclusion of religious instruction (as it was then called) from State oversight, preserved the status quo of church control of religious teaching which was particularly denominational. Religious instruction, not a neutral term and embodied a catechetical stance or learning *into* religion/

faith formation (Williams, 2005). Religious Education prior to The Education Act of 1998 was beyond State jurisdiction and evaluation.

The historical exclusion of RE from State assessment had many consequences; unlike any other subject, public money could not be invested in this discipline. RE experienced historical and educational dilution as a curriculum area in its own right, with the role of RE professionals who trained and taught the subject in second level schools diminished. The former director of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (hereafter NCCA), Albert Ó Ceallaigh observed that RE teachers were stifled in their ability to access funding for in-service training (Healy, 1996). The subject was sidelined, its assessment at national level was barred, and RE teachers' professional right to CPD was marginalised. The discipline, and those who taught it, remained in a curriculum wasteland until 2003, when its status was upgraded, establishing an equality with other subjects. It had taken RE eighty years to move from the status of balcony observer to dancefloor participant in the realm of curriculum parity.

Religious Education became an examination subject for Junior Certificate in 2000 and for the Leaving Certificate in 2003. This change mirrored a transforming relationship between religion and society. Ireland was becoming more multicultural due to the process of immigration and social change. Its changing landscape was reflected in the Education Act of 1998 which recognised the transformation of Ireland's social, cultural and religious milieu. This was reflected in the curriculum area of RE where the previous confessional model of religious instruction yielded to a more inclusive approach (Cullen, 2022b). The State assessment of RE reflected Ireland's commitment to a modern, pluralist place where the exploration of worldviews, diversity and reform were central. Bråten (2021) succinctly captures this nexus when he writes: 'there is always a relationship between religion and society but what that relationship is will change over time and be different from place to place' (p. 367).

The roots and fruits of the LCRE syllabus are the subject of this research. Underpinning the then new LCRE syllabus, were tacit assumptions about student competencies and literacies. One such example centres around the role, function and understanding of the Bible. Evidence presented in the following section will justify this claim leading me to the research question focussing on if, and how, LCRE promotes biblical literacy.

1.3 LCRE Syllabus – emergence of the research topic

While biblical knowledge and scholarship were not an overt aim of LCRE, this thesis will argue that the syllabus configuration mitigated against biblical engagement and knowledge development. LCRE is underpinned by five aims, communicating what the syllabus intends to accomplish:

1. To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples, of all ages, and at all times.
2. To explore how this search for meaning has found, and continues to find, expression in religion.
3. To identify how understandings of God, religious traditions, and in particular the Christian tradition, have contributed to the culture in which we live and how they continue to have an impact on personal lifestyle, inter-personal relationships and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts.
4. To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life.
5. To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student (p. 5):

LCRE is a particularly extensive syllabus and encourages the exploration of behaviour and beliefs. It does this through a syllabus configuration set up in three Units, containing ten thematic sections. These sections address themes such as liturgy and ritual, philosophy, theology, morality, sacred text and spirituality. Examples include Section A: *The search for meaning and values*, Section C: *World religions*, Section E: *Religion and gender*, and Section H: *The Bible: literature and sacred text*. Of these ten, students explore four sections in depth (see Appendix 3).

All students study Unit One, Section A: *The search for meaning and values* which explores the human search for meaning as expressed through religion and spirituality. Unit Two comprises of three sections, with students selecting two from Section B: *Christianity*, Section C: *World religions*, or Section D: *Moral decision-making.* Unit Three comprises of six Sections, and one is selected. These include Section E: *Religion and gender*; Section F: *Justice and peace*; Section G: *Worship, prayer, and ritual*; Section H: *The Bible*: *literature and sacred text*; Section I: *Religion: The Irish experience*, and Section J: *Religion and science.* A time-limited Leaving Certificate examination at two levels, Higher and Ordinary, accounts for 80% of the marks awarded for LCRE. The remaining 20% is awarded to an in-class coursework on one of two Sections chosen from Sections E-J. The function of coursework is to enable students to 'engage in extended reflection, research and analysis' (LCRE, p. 10). This investigation is based on one of two Sections nominated by the SEC

and drawn from Unit Three. Titles for the coursework are communicated by the SEC to schools (see Appendix 1).

Whilst acknowledging the extensive nature of the LCRE across ten sections, it is clear that not all sections or units are accorded equal value. The structure of the LCRE syllabus increases the incidence of engagement with some sections while diminishing it with others. A very high value is attributed to the philosophical Unit One, Section A: *The search for meaning and values.* This topic has compulsory status and is cited directly in two LCRE aims (p. 5). The mandatory nature of some sections and the optional nature of others establishes an axiological hierarchy; some parts are seen as more desirable or legitimate, with others as less palatable. In Unit Three for example, SEC data reveals that the sacred text component of Section H: *The Bible* experiences the lowest engagement, suggesting that it is perceived to be of lesser value than other units (SEC 2008; 2013). Section H: *The Bible* is placed in Unit Three, where it competes on a cyclical basis with six other topics for selection, whereas Unit Two consists of three sections, with students selecting two. While it could be argued that the Bible is a foundational text when exploring Section B: *Christianity*, the structure of the syllabus means that Christianity too is also optional. The implications of this for the Bible will be central to this thesis. The rationale for LCRE recognises the importance of Christianity in Ireland's cultural heritage (p. 3), yet the syllabus configuration makes it possible to study LCRE with only a passing engagement with the sacred text of Christianity. The Bible appears to be compartmentalised. In the Junior Certificate syllabus of 2000 which prefaces the LCRE, there is no overt reference to the sacred text of Christianity, the Bible. This is despite that fact that overt references to Christianity appear in the aims of both JCRE and LCRE (Byrne, 2015, p. 15; NCCA, 2000; 2003). The framework claims to facilitate an encounter with religious traditions in Ireland and elsewhere. This begs the question, what does biblical invisibility communicate about the significance of RE and its role in the education of Irish citizens?

1.4 Rationale for this study

Several factors have coalesced to identify LCRE, and specifically the notion of biblical literacy as an appropriate and important area of research. I am not a neutral researcher as my involvement in RE stems from a professional history of teaching RE both in Ireland and Aotearoa New Zealand. I have been immersed in post-primary RE for over two decades, giving definition and direction to my career. The LCRE syllabus was influenced by the RE curriculum of New Zealand, as developed by the National Centre for Religious Studies in 1991.

Understanding Faith (1991) played a shaping role in the evolution of LCRE (Devitt, 2000). The sphere of impact meant that thematic units such as sacred text, world religions, morality, ritual, theology, and human development have straddled geographic contexts. With regards to the Bible, students in New Zealand were challenged by the learning outcomes which demanded that they *describe, explain* and *analyse* biblical texts to yield their meaning (Ministry of Education, 2007). Acknowledging Aotearoa New Zealand and the wider Pacific's unique history and diversity, texts are seen as integral pathways into which

> individuals and communities communicate messages. Significant narratives and texts can communicate profound symbolic ideas and give an account of the origins of religious or spiritual beliefs. Diverse interpretations of narratives and texts can influence how people express religious or spiritual beliefs and practices. There is a dynamic relationship between beliefs and practices, and their expressions in narratives and texts. Narratives and texts and religious and spiritual traditions have a reciprocal relationship, informing the development of each other over time. (Ministry of Education, 2007)

Contextualisation and situatedness are cornerstones of the New Zealand approach to sacred texts. This research will explore Irish students' and teachers' experience of the Bible, questioning how or if, LCRE limits or promotes biblical literacy. The nexus between LCRE and the Bible lies at the core of this research.

A further rationale for this study emerges when exploring the important contribution, which the Bible has made to Irish society. Arguably, one cannot understand Irish art and culture without an appreciation of the influence of the Bible on the Irish imagination. Ó Fearghail writes that for 'nearly sixteen centuries the Bible has been an integral part of the religious and cultural situation of Ireland' (2012, p. 185). This can be seen though the conduit of its monastic history. Many biblical scenes have been depicted in visual form in some of Ireland's great illuminated manuscripts, including the Book of Kells, as well as on many High Crosses, crafted from stone. Collins, citing Motion, defines the Bible as 'an essential piece of cultural luggage' (2015, p. 72). Yet, in the LCRE syllabus, the Bible appears to function in very covert ways. This research will explore this claim, its apparent marginalisation, and consider the implications of this for contemporary students as lifelong learners. A danger of disengagement with the Bible means that students may not be equipped with skills to interpret biblical texts beyond the literal. This has the potential to direct readers to a fundamentalist reading of texts. In short, with LCRE valuing choice and flexibility in its schema, not all areas are equally presented. The Bible appears to be decidedly optional and somewhat devalued. The following section will develop this claim.

1.5 Chief Examiner's Reports

The decade of the 1990s was characterised by much educational change, and the development of LCRE represents one facet of this transformation. The Education Act of 1998, leading to the establishment of the SEC, the assessment arm of the Department of Education was another aspect or change (Coolahan, 2017; SEC, 2004). The SEC has responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation, and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state. From its genesis, the SEC was empowered to publish statistics pertaining to student examination outcomes on a cyclical basis (SEC, 2003). Based on information supplied by correctors, SEC Chief Examiner Reports are published for a selected number of subjects annually. LCRE has been selected twice, in 2008 and 2013. SEC data from these reports highlighted a problem with the Bible. Students who selected the optional Section H: *The Bible* experienced least success. Quantitative data captured by the SEC in the *Chief Examiner's Report for RE* in 2008, revealed that Section H: *The Bible* ranked least popular among candidates (9th lowest) as well as being the unit where student experienced the least success (in performance ranked lowest at 7th).

A: The Search for Meaning
B: Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions
C: World Religions
D: Moral decision-making
E: Religion and Gender
F: Issues of Justice and Peace
H: The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text
I: Religion: The Irish Experience

2008 Higher Level Leaving Certificate Religious Education					
		Performance		Popularity	
		Average Mark	Rank Order	Response Rate	Rank Order
Paper	Section A	51(64%)	3 (JOINT)	196 (98%)	2
	Section B	48(60%)	6	151 (76%)	3
	Section C	49(61%)	5 (JOINT)	131(66%)	4
	Section D	50(63%)	4	116 (58%)	5
	Section E	53(66%)	2	50 (25%)	8
	Section F	51(64%)	3 (JOINT)	51 (26%)	7
	Section H	44(55%)	7	13 (7%)	9
	Section I	49(61%)	5 (JOINT)	90 (45%)	6
Coursework	Parts A & B	59 (74%)	1	198 (99%)	1

Figure 1.1: Extract from the Chief Examiner's Report for RE (SEC, 2008, p. 21) *n=610*

Lest an assumption is made that this observation is linked to Higher level candidates only, Ordinary level RE students selecting Section H*: The Bible* in 2008 exhibited a similar trend. Here, it ranked lowest in terms of performance (joint 8th) and least popular (joint 8th).

2008 Ordinary Level Leaving Certificate Religious Education				
	Performance		Popularity	
Paper:	**Average Mark**	**Rank Order**	**Response Rate**	**Rank Order**
Section A	56 (70%)	3	40 (100%)	1
Section B	59 (74%)	1	13 (32.5%)	6
Section C	27 (34%)	7	22 (55%)	5
Section D	42 (53%)	5	31 (77.5%)	3
Section E	37 (46%)	6	10 (25%)	7
Section F	*	8 (JOINT)	2 (5%)	8 (JOINT)
Section H	*	8 (JOINT)	2 (5%)	8 (JOINT)
Section I	51 (64%)	4	27 (67.5%)	4
Coursework Parts A & B	58 (73%)	2	39 (97.5%)	2

* Because a very small percentage of candidates opted for questions in Section F and Section H it is not possible to engage in any meaningful statistical analysis of candidate performance.

Figure 1.2: Extract from the Chief Examiner's Report for RE (SEC, 2008, p. 11)

While the historical marginalisation of RE as a subject, can be attributed to an amalgam of statutory and cultural factors (Looney, 2006, 2014; Looney and Klenowski, 2008; Carmody, 2018), much less researched is why aspects of LCRE, specifically the Bible, are engaged with at such a low level. How are students in Irish society being prepared to understand the nuances of Christian texts? How is LCRE promoting biblical literacy.

1.6 Biblical literacy as an underexplored research area in Ireland

Much has been written about the theory of religious education in Ireland and how it has shaped the RE syllabi (Byrne, 2017; Kennedy and Cullen, 2021; Dillon, 2013; McGrady, 2014; NCCA, 2000; 2003, 2017a). Much less researched is the efficacy of LCRE's approach to the Bible and RE teachers' mastery to teach it. The approach to LCRE is framed by a particular educational paradigm developed by RE theorists such as Groome (1991), Jackson (2004) and Rossiter (2017). The LCRE syllabus framework is situated within a theoretical paradigm that communicates the appropriation of a suite of principles such as knowledge, skills, attitudes and understanding (p. 3). While Tupamahu, Murphy and Bonesho (2022) acknowledge the range of literary, narrative and cinematic approaches to the Bible, little if any research has explored how this theoretical approach as applied to the Bible within LCRE might operate.

Religion and the Bible in the Irish context have been distinctive in shaping Irish society and continue to do so, if at a changing level of impact (McGreevy, 2023). The Bible is a significant text for Christians, and moreover anchors Christianity to other monotheistic faiths, such as Judaism and Islam. Scharbach Wollenberg (2016), citing Vermes, indicates

that people of the Jewish faith were people of the Book 'in which practice and belief derived from the study and interpretation of Scripture'. For Muslims, the Qur'an would be a different sacred text without the Bible, as these three faiths share common creation narratives and biblical characters. Hoover (2016) writes that while the Islamic tradition has 'discouraged or banned reading the Bible', some Muslim adherents have found reason to engage with the text. They turn to the Bible to nurture their faith and support their doctrine (p. 87). The sacred text of the Christian/Catholic tradition is selected because it strongly links this country to its cultural roots. This is implicitly acknowledged as one of the five overarching aims of LCRE, which seeks to identify how the Christian tradition has 'contributed to the culture in which we live', and how religious traditions continue 'to have an impact on personal lifestyle, inter-personal relationships, and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts' (p. 5). Identifying the Bible as a cultural, social and religious artefact validates an analysis of how this sacred text functions indigenously in LCRE. An exploration of the text's influence in Irish culture will follow.

1.6 The Significance of the Bible in Irish Culture

The Bible is a book of inspiration in many realms of religious and other spheres of life, impacting on historical, literary, cultural and political arenas (LCRE, p. 77; Anderson, 2021). Biblical metaphors can frequently be seen or heard in the public domain. For example, the phrase 'no place for them in the inn' (Lk 2:7) was paraphrased on RTÉ radio with reference to Ukrainian refugees (Byrne, 2022). On the same radio programme, John Sweeney, a climate change proponent, commented on weather warnings and employed the biblical metaphor of 'a prophet crying in the wilderness'. This motif is derived from Isaiah 40:3 and intertextually features in Mk 1:3 and Jn 1:23. These examples illustrate that biblical religious imagery frequently appears in the Irish public domain with its texts and metaphors being employed rhetorically to focus public perception. Education and specifically RE have a role to play in society's awareness of the Bible.

The Bible has been a source of art inspiration in the public space (Anderson, 2021; Dillon, 2015; Goldburg, 2010). Public art hermeneutically communicates a meaning about the role and place of religion in Ireland. Art reveals a multitude of attitudes and concerns of society towards religion. LCRE has an important role to play in an emerging intercultural Ireland. An example in the Irish landscape is a large-scale photographic work by John Byrne entitled *Dublin's Last Supper* (2004), on display close to the River Liffey in Dublin. Byrne provides a vibrant example of how communities have reinterpreted biblical themes down through the

centuries (Thiselton, 2009). This mural is situated in the heart of a pedestrianised zone in Ireland's capital city. The subject of the mural is the Last Supper, which recalls a Jewish Passover meal (Mk 14:22-26b; Mt 26:26-30b; Lk 22: 17-20; 1 Cor 11:23-25). Jesus is present at a ritual table meal. The thirteen contemporary characters represent a range of cultures and gender that reveal Dublin's cultural landscape and faith perspectives (Byrne, 2020).

Figure 1.3: John Byrne (2004) *Dublin's Last Supper*

James is Veronica, a librarian. John is Julie Kerrigan, an employee at Pavee Point Travellers' Centre (Byrne, 2004). The biblical motif of an historical Jewish meal is recontextualised into Irish culture. Its situation invites pedestrians into exegetical interpretation. The art is architecturally positioned within a gastro-context as restaurants are located nearby. A gathering with friends over food is common to both contexts. The eucharistic nature of the image, the lexical meaning of the eucharist ευχαριστία to give thanks, enables the viewer to analyse the meaning of the image for themselves (Arndt *et al*., 1979). Goldburg (2010) writes that meaning can be derived from what we see and how we interact with the visual world, that every visual still has a lexicon of their own. A question emerges for research: how can LCRE assist in facilitating guided engagement with visual and biblical images?

The Bible has been further recontextualised in the National Museum of Ireland: Archaeology. The Fadden More Psalter is a ninth century book of Psalms discovered in a Tipperary peat bog in 2006 (National Gallery of Ireland, n.d.). Gillis (2012) states that 'Christianity is a religion of the book' as the Bible contains the Book of Psalms inspired this

psalter. Known as Israel's songbook, it was linked to Israel's agronomy with the Psalms connecting feasting with fasting (Society of Biblical Literature, 2023). This shows how a Jewish text, which formed part of the Christian sacred text, was translated into Latin and used in Irish culture. Succinctly, it embodies a synergy of language, translation, belief and culture.

Figure 1.4: Fadden More Psalter (National Museum of Ireland, n.d.)

The imagery of the psalter further encourages us to consider presentations of the Bible. The sacred text is echoed in film, tv, music, advertising and fiction (Collins, 2015). This has classroom implications as identified by Myles (2015) citing Ipgrave (2011) who claims that the Simpsons cartoons have had a more prominent place than the Bible in secondary RE lessons in the UK, showing that the Bible is invoked in our modern context via popular culture and the media. Several key terms will be central to this research. The following section will present a glossary of terms and frame their usage.

1.7 Clarification of terms

The meaning of words can be multivalent; this section will define key terms. These include words or phrases such as literacy, religious literacy, biblical literacy, visual literacy, scripture, the Bible and sacred text, concepts that are central to this research. Unless otherwise stated, no one comprehensive definition will be selected that might limit this study.

1.7.1 Terminology: Literacy

The concept of literacy is core to understanding religious texts. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), referring to 21st century learners, defines literacy as 'constructing and validating knowledge' (OECD, 2021, p. 5). Knowledge, Understanding, Skills and Attitudes are keys aspects of the LCRE syllabus (p. 9). The understanding of the term literacy has undergone profound change in its hermeneutical capacity. The PISA 2018 reading assessment programme summarises literacy as 'understanding, using, evaluating, reflecting on and engaging with texts in order to achieve one's goals, to develop one's knowledge and potential, and to participate in society'. They rightly observe that current readers are digital consumers whose reading is not limited to decoding written words, as they can access text and images in electronic forms (OECD, 2021, p.23). This is significant for the Bible. Originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, it was translated into other languages including Latin, French, German, English and Gaeilge. It is now available via online tools, such as *The Bible Gateway*. Digital platforms can host different versions of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version, the New International Version, and the Dyslexic Bible. A key question emerges; how do students learn to navigate the Bible and understand translation and genre? The importance of literacy and accessing text is pertinent to Section H, where the concept of text is an overt part of the section title, *The Bible:* ***literature*** *and sacred text* (researcher's emphasis). The LCRE is language-rich and requires a degree of literary and linguistic competence. This will be further examined as the thesis unfolds.

1.7.2 Terminology: Religious Literacy

Using literacy as a platform into religious literacy, Hannam et al (2020) in the UK context observe a dual function of religious literacy with respect to RE. Firstly, they determine the acquisition of literacy when one becomes acquainted with the 'codes' of a particular domain. Building on Paulo Freire's notion of 'reading the world', religious literacy also functions for these researchers in a way which engenders emancipation and empowerment (p. 10). They claim that the aim of religious literacy should be a primordial aspiration for RE. In addition, religious literacy should function as a principle for organising curriculum, pedagogy and assessment (p. 3). These are aims which are core to LCRE. Similar to the OECD's understanding (2021, p. 11), they write that 'literacy has undergone a metaphorical expansion from reading the text to reading the world'. The theologian Karl Barth (Von Balthasar, 2013) called for a reading of the Bible in one hand with a newspaper in the other.

Cullen describes religious literacy as 'not just the accumulation of content, but the ability to engage with the questions raised by the relationships between content and context and content and learner' (2019, p. 78). This project focuses on the nexus between content, context and learner.

1.7.3 Terminology: Visual Literacy

When exploring the Bible, several researchers have shown an inclination to highlight the benefits of encouraging visual literacy, with the written texts presented and supplemented in an alternative manner (Goldburg, 2010). Dondis (1973) especially champions this area of teaching:

> If the intervention of moveable type created a mandate for universal verbal literacy, surely the invention of the camera and all its collateral and continually developing forms makes the achievement of universal visual literacy as an educational necessity long overdue (p. IX)

Goldburg (p. 188) focusses on how the written texts are presented in visual form, indicating how theorists spend considerable time on print literacy at the expense of other literacies. These include verbal, media and visual literacies. Visual literacy illustrates the importance of images as a form of communication. Some call for a shift from a dominant word-centred approach (Goldburg, 2009, 2010; Postman, 1986). This concept calls for an alternative orientation of thought when approaching the Bible, reflecting changing cultures and technological opportunities. While the broader approach holds much potential, there are instances where curricular links to RE and the sacred text of Christianity are glossed over.

The National Gallery of Ireland (hereafter NGI) has a significant collection of art that is rooted in biblical inspiration. It offers resources to primary and post primary teachers that cover a range of curriculum areas. These include Art, History, Geography, Physics, Chemistry, English, Languages, Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE), and Science (NGI, 2021a, 2021b, 2022). Surprisingly, links to RE and hence to the Bible are not made. For instance, the sacred text functions as a source of inspiration for Caravaggio's famous *Taking of Christ.* However, the NGI teacher resources do not highlight the obvious link between this painting and its biblical or religious content (NGI, 2021a, 2023a, 2023b). The guide for post-primary teachers references Murillo's *The Prodigal Son.* Fundamental to Murillo's work is his interpretation of Luke 15:11-32. The Gallery does not mention either Bible as an inspiration or a context for his work (NGI, 2021b). Moreover, NGI's guide for primary teachers includes Evie Hone's stained-glass, *Resurrection*, produced c.1954 (2021a,

p. 19). Students are invited to sensorily create their own version of Hone's artwork. Once more, the Bible is not acknowledged as the source of Hone's inspiration (Mt 28:1-10, Mk 16:1-8, Lk 24:1-12, Jn 20:1-10). These examples reveal how the Christian sacred text is often overlooked in the Irish context, thus contributing to biblical illiteracy. Curriculum links to RE are invisible.

1.7.4 Terminology: Biblical Literacy

Sally Liddy (2009) significantly identifies biblical literacy as shifting from the baseline of minimally accepted knowledge of facts comprehended literally to interpreting and communicating the literary genres of its texts. The concept of literary genres is important as it features nine times in LCRE. However, it features only in Section H: *The Bible*. Given that the multiple optional choices within LCRE, this limits deeper engagement. The role of biblical literacy is to break the code of the ancient texts to determine both the original meanings and interpret their value for contemporary readers (Liddy, p. 1). Liddy's dual understanding of biblical literacy can be represented visually by an image from Roman culture, with the Roman god Janus shown as a character looking in two directions. Liddy influenced Australian researcher Margaret Carswell whose approach to Biblical literacy will feature in Chapter 2. Carswell (2018) looks at the 'truth behind the text' at a 'richer, spiritual level'. In an interview with Bowie (2020a), she singularly describes the Bible as a message wrapped in words.

1.7.5 Terminology: Biblical Literacy, a quantitative understanding

Exploring biblical literacy through an historical lens, Avalos writes: 'For most of the last one- thousand years, many Christians, especially in Catholic traditions, were discouraged from reading the Bible in vernacular languages' (2010, n.p.). He makes an important judgement, suggesting because of this historical disengagement from the Bible, biblical illiteracy became the norm throughout Christian history. This is countered by Byrne (2015) who defines biblical literacy as the ability 'to know the Bible, be familiar with popular Bible characters and stories, [and] being able to recognise common biblical phrases such as turn the other cheek and be able to connect the knowledge to references in literature' (p. 5). Hession (2015), writing from an Irish Catholic school perspective, defines biblical literacy as follows:

> understanding biblical metaphors; finding a Scripture reference; reading passages of Scripture with the correct pronunciation and understanding; outlying the structure of the

> Bible; exploring interpretations of Scripture in the Church; relating a phrase or passage to one's own life using critical faculties and creative imagination (p. 216).

Hession interchanges Scripture and Bible in her definition of biblical literacy. Prothero (2008) applies a similar quantitative approach to biblical literacy, defining religious literacy as the 'ability to understand and use the religious terms, symbols, images, beliefs, practices, scriptures, heroes, and stories that are employed in American public life' (p. 17). Prothero articulates a simple educational methodology to achieve this. He encourages students to learn vocabulary by simple memorisation (p. 17). His definition centres around a corpus of facts or knowledge whose function is to educate *into* religion. Prothero's solution to biblical illiteracy is to call for a literary approach to the text, encouraging students to explore the Bible-as-literature. He recommends that students in US public schools 'should read all of Genesis and the Gospel of Matthew'. They should learn that the Protestant Bible has sixty-six books whereas the Catholic Bible had seventy-three (2008, pp. 166-167). He claims that this Bible-as-literature approach is 'relatively uncontroversial' (p. 166). Prothero's approach seems to be very factually centred with less focus on interpretative skills. Dillon (2015) and Myles (2015) consider that this represents a drive for knowledge about the Bible, with little or no focus on comprehension and critical thinking. To interpret biblical text, LCRE employs narrative and historical toolkits yet Section H: *The Bible* does not overtly name these two methodologies. Methodologically LCRE refers once to 'redaction criticism' and how this approach has influenced biblical interpretation (p. 77).

1.7.6 Terminology: Biblical Literacy, a qualitative understanding

Moore's (2014) definition of religious literacy has been promulgated through her work as a writer for the American Academy of Religion (AAR). She presents a framework which hinges on a distinction between an assumption of religious devotion and a study of religion that is underpinned by facts and devotional claims (p. 379).

> Religious literacy entails the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses. Specifically, a religious literate person will possess
>
> 1. A basic understanding of the history, central texts (where applicable), beliefs, practices and contemporary manifestations of several of the world's religions traditions as they arose out of and continue to be shaped by particular social, historical and cultural contexts.
>
> 2. The ability to discern and explore the religious dimensions of political, social and cultural expressions across time and place (Harvard Divinity School, n.d.).

Moore's methodological approach to RE is teaching *about* religion rather than teaching *into* religion (2005, 2015). Dillon (2013) supports Moore's thesis that Religious Education however is primarily learning *about* religion. Hoven (2008) identifies Moore's method as a secularist approach (p. 590). This research benefits from her definition of religious literacy because it emphasises intersection with the sacred text. This raises the question: what does it mean to understand the Bible?

Biblical competency is a concept central to this research. Having surveyed the field across a range of terms from the macro to the micro: from literacy, religious literacy to biblical literacy, this researcher identifies biblical literacy as a suite of text centred competencies. It involves deconstruction of the text, and reconstruction to facilitate personal meaning making. Encompassing both knowledge based and interpretative hermeneutical skills, biblical literacy is broader than a litany of facts about the text. More deeply, it means unlocking the text to yield its meaning, revealing contextual insights for the historical and contemporary reader/hearer. Attention to interdisciplinary approaches which support narrative, historical and visual criticism are central tools in the pathway to making meaning in and of biblical text. Though one of the stated aims of LCRE is 'to contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student', the actual structure of the syllabus sections, the identification of learning outcomes, key concepts and assessment modes, mitigate against such engagement and personal meaning making.

1.7.7 Terminology: Sacred text

Another central aspect to this research is that of sacred text. In the Junior Cycle Religious Education (JCRE) syllabus, the NCCA (2019a) define sacred texts as those that religious traditions consider to be foundational and/or central to the practice of their beliefs, or thought to be authoritative and to reveal the word of God/the Divine/the Transcendent. In JCRE (NCCA, 2019a), learning outcome 1.9 more specifically identifies sacred text as 'the Bhagavad Gita, the New Testament Gospels, the Qu'ran, the Torah and the Tripitaka' (p. 29). Whilst acknowledging the importance of multiple cultures and religions in the Irish landscape, this study will focus on the Bible and not on other sacred texts. Sacred text is a term of choice used within LCRE. It can be seen in Section E: *Religion and Gender*, with a reference to the 'place of women and men in the sacred texts and living traditions of different religions' (p. 53).

1.7.8 Terminology: The Bible

In this research, the term Bible will be used rather than the term scripture when referring to the sacred scripture of the Christian tradition, especially as the term appears in the naming of Section H: *The Bible: literature and sacred text*. The Bible, (η Βίβλος) meaning books in Greek, refers to the collective text. The Bible is a historical culmination of oral storytelling, narratives, redaction and canon formation. Due to the variety of its original languages, Liddy writes that the Bible 'requires a great deal of skilled interpretation' (2009, p. 1362). This skill of interpretation is key to this thesis' understanding of biblical literacy.

1.7.9 Terminology: Scripture

It is often observed that the term Bible and scripture are used interchangeably (Hession, 2015). While the Bible is perceived as religious literature, scripture on the other hand applies to the use of the Bible in faith environments. Biblical writings are held by the Christian community to represent the symbolic word of God as mediated through humanity. The term scripture features in Section E: *Religion and Gender* where a key objective is to explore the roles of women and men from the perspective of a variety of religious traditions, and 'in particular the Christian traditions' (p. 51, 52). Significantly, two nuanced systems are used in the LCRE syllabus to identify scriptural elements. 'Hebrew scriptures' is the term used when referring to the books of the First/Old Testament, a compendium recognised by Jews and Christians (Protestant and Catholic). While early Christians largely, thought not exclusively read their scriptures in Greek and not Hebrew, Jewish scriptures might therefore function as a more apt term. However, when referring to the twenty-seven books in the New Testament, the capitalised 'Christian Scriptures' is noted (p. 55). This creates a nuanced and punctuated, division between the canonical sections. This concept of separation is at variance with the thesis of Docherty who spotlights bridging the two sections through an overt focus on the Jewishness of Jesus (2024; 2025). Her golden thread seeks to make overt links between Jesus' socio-cultural location and the Hebrew scriptures which straddle both First and New Testament texts. Attentive to narrative and social cultural coding, Docherty advocates reading the New Testament with Jewish lenses. In doing so, awareness is sharpened as to the prophetic and messianic tropes found therein (2018a, 2018b). She observes how the Christian texts are permeated with allusions to Hebrew writings. At the crucifixion for example, the Gospel writers place the words 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' on the lips of Jesus (Mk 15:34, Mt 27:46). Acknowledging Jesus' cultural location, her insights spotlight that these words are derived from Israel's songbook, the Book

of Psalms (Ps 22:1). Docherty's perspective has particular strengths to offer the pending Senior Cycle reform of RE. This is because it is envisaged that future LCRE iterations will have Hebrew Studies incorporated in the domain of RE (NCCA, 2022).

1.8 Structure of Thesis

This chapter has identified concerns regarding RE and the notion of biblical literacy. Acknowledging LCRE's evolution, this research focuses on LCRE teachers and students to ascertain how biblical literacy has developed since the introduction of LCRE. In historical terms, the Bible holds an important place in Irish life for Protestants and Catholics. The Church of Ireland was instrumental in translating the Bible from Latin into Irish. Chapter 2 will review literature that explores approaches to the Bible. Bringing the case of Bible literacy to the fore, it will look at the research of Barbara Stead, Margaret Carswell and Robert Bowie. These theorists utilise Bible-centric approaches to RE curricula. Chapter 3 will outline the researcher's knowledge, epistemology, and ontological framework to explore the place of the Bible in LCRE. Chapter 4 will report and analyse findings from data derived from RE teachers and students of LCRE via a dominant quantitative case study analysis. Chapter 5 will explore the relevance and implications of this research.

Chapter 2: The History of LCRE

2.1 Introduction

Chapter 1 outlined developments in education policy that led to the first State sponsored LCRE curriculum. This research will consider the role of and emphasis on the Bible in LCRE, considering its level of primacy in relation to biblical literacy. It presents a review of literature which 'aims to synthesise areas of conceptual knowledge that contributes to a better understanding of the issues' (Jesson, Matheson and Lacey, 2011, p. 15).

2.2. Evolution of LCRE

LCRE was officially introduced in schools in 2003; its shape had emerged from consultation and several draft iterations. The following section will attempt to track this journey whilst making inferences based on scattered evidence. Attempts were made to source key documents from the NCCA, the curriculum agency at the centre of this process. However, key records could not be located (NCCA, 2023a). This timeline summarises this process.

Table 2.1: LCRE development timeline

LCRE, Year	Event
1995	Course committee established (detailed composition to follow)
1995	First draft RE syllabus produced
	Consultation
1997	Redraft LCRE syllabus produced
	Pilot phase
2003	LCRE introduced into schools
2005	First year of LCRE assessment (*n*=80 out of total 39,816)

The decades of the 1980s and 1990s were characterised by developments which signalled new thinking about education, curriculum and assessment. Cullen argues that the 1998 Education Act marked the beginning of a divergence in religious education policy between the State and the churches (2022b, p. 118). The development of LCRE arose from an amalgam of political, cultural, and pedagogical realities. These included the influence of the *Green Paper: Education for a Changing World* (1992), and the *White Paper: Charting our Education Future* (1995) which prefaced the Education Act of 1998. The Act removed legal impediments to the assessment of RE at State level. This paved the way for its inclusion in the suite of examination subjects offered to students at Junior and Leaving Certificate level.

Central to this process was the Curriculum Development Course Committee that constructed the syllabus (SEC, 2003, n.p.). This group, 'central to the day-to-day work of the NCCA' (Gleeson, 2010, p. 263), was established in 1995. The subject Course Committee determined the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes to be embedded in the syllabus (NCCA, 2023b). This led to the publication of the first version of the LCRE Draft Syllabus (Quinlan, 1996). The Committee comprised of the following stakeholders:

- Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland
- Teachers Union of Ireland
- Joint Managerial Body
- Association of Community and Comprehensive Schools
- Subject Association
- Irish Vocational Education Association
- National Council for Educational Awards
- Conference of Heads of Irish Universities
- Department of Education and Science (Inspectorate) (LCRE, n.p.).

Other influential policy bodies included the Teaching Council of Ireland and the State Examination Commission (hereafter SEC), who were not represented on the Committee. The former recognises qualifications and provides certification for RE teachers, while SEC has responsibility for the development, assessment, accreditation and certification of the second-level examinations of the Irish state, principally the Junior Certificate / Cycle and the Leaving Certificate. The SEC evaluates student engagement with the syllabus, determining the nuances of assessment. The role of the SEC in relation to LCRE will be further analysed in Chapter 4.

2.2.1 Evolution of LCRE: inclusion and exclusion

Central to any curriculum development, Posner (2004, p. 34), citing Schwab (1971), identifies four key stakeholders. These four commonplaces of education include teachers, learners, subject matter and milieu. The involvement of RE teachers in curriculum deliberation was incorporated through the appointment of representatives from the Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (hereafter RTAI). RE teachers brought situational understanding of how policy would impact on classroom practice across a range of school

types and ethos. Teachers were doubly represented by the inclusion of representation from their unions, namely the Association of Secondary Teachers, Ireland (ASTI) and the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI). The role of the ASTI is to 'promote and protect teachers' interests' (ASTI, 2024). Its members teach in Voluntary secondary schools, as well as in Community and Comprehensive schools. The TUI chiefly represents those employed in the ETB sector (formerly Vocational schools), in Community Colleges, Community and Comprehensive schools, and 'other Post Primary schools' (TUI, 2024). The 'subject-matter' entity in curriculum development was also provided for through University representation (Irish Universities Association, 2024). Third level representatives brought significant expertise to the discussions relating to the academic study of RE, the appropriation of RE theory, whilst also attentive to psychology and an understanding of how students learn. Significantly, they also represented pre-service RE teacher education. Finally, related to the milieu pillar, personnel from the range of school types where LCRE would be taught were involved, with representatives teaching in Voluntary schools, Community and Comprehensive schools, and ETB schools. The Educate Together (ET) network, set up to provide equality-based, co-educational, child centred, and democratically run schools, did not participate. While in existence from 1978 (Coolahan, 2017), no ET secondary schools existed until 2014 (Educate Together, 2024). The Inspectorate from the Department of Education and Science (DES) were also involved.

Granville (1994), cited by Gleeson (2021, p. 721), indicated concerns regarding Course Committees whose 'members gave a low rating to their own experience in curriculum development' (2010, p. 265). Moreover, in this case, the Course Committee exhibited over-representation from the adult sector, leading to a potential blind spot. The perspective of any RE learners or any group representing the student voice was absent. This is despite the voice of children being championed in the United Nation's *Charter of Children* (UNCRC, 1989). The viewpoint of students was not considered. Further, given the contextual nature of curriculum development, the gap in representation for Gaelscoileanna is also perplexing. An Foras Pátrúnachta, founded in 1993, operates as the patron of Irish-medium schools (An Foras Pátrúnachta, 2024). This entity was not involved in the RE syllabus deliberations.

In summary, stakeholder gaps from the process of LCRE development and design are noted. Significant oversights were observed. The adult centric make-up of the Course Committee revealed the invisibility of student representation, and Irish language education groups.

Having addressed representation on the LCRE Course Committee, the following section will consider consultative feedback from their output.

2.2.2 Evolution of LCRE: Curriculum consultation

A review of source documents reveals that the period of LCRE evolution was characterised by several broad consultative conversations. Acknowledging the shaping force of religious beliefs and more secular worldviews in Irish culture, Pollak (1997) noted consultative deliberations with 'education and church partners'. Walshe (1999), citing NCCA CEO Albert Ó Ceallaigh, referenced the importance in the early phase of widespread dialogue with the main Catholic and Protestant Churches as well as the Jewish and Muslim faiths. Anne Looney, then NCCA Education Officer for RE, endorsed this in 1996: 'We have representatives from the four major Christian churches on the course committee and we have consulted with representatives from a wide range of faiths including Buddhists, Jews, Muslims and also humanists'. Acknowledging the Irish context, Looney stressed that 'a special place is reserved for Christianity in the syllabus because the Christian religions are those which have the greatest influence in our society'. She continued: 'Wherever we encounter Christianity it shapes our lives and impacts on our society' (Pollak, 1997, n.p.). Her comments root the syllabus in the contemporary milieu, confirming that the body of LCRE knowledge does not function independently of culture (Cullen, 2022a). The medium for transmission has cultural and epistemological considerations.

Having briefly outlined the broad LCRE consultation process, the next section will consider the principles that underpinned it and the structure that emerged as a result of the professional conversations.

2.2.3 Evolution of LCRE: The shape of knowledge, LCRE Draft (1995) and Redraft (1997)

The LCRE Draft (Healy, 1996) document reveals that RE knowledge was initially constructed in two-part configuration, as represented below. The syllabus structure comprised of two components, where choice was valued, and no section was compulsory. For Part A, students would study one of three sections: *The Search for meaning, World religions,* or *The origins of Christianity*. In this iteration, *The Search for meaning* held equal status with *World religions* and *Christianity*. Part B comprised of seven sections, requiring students to select three. These included *Women, religion and the Christian tradition; Issues of justice and peace; Religion and spirituality in Ireland; Spirituality: worship, prayer and*

ritual; The Bible: literature and sacred text; Religion and science, and finally *Moral decision making* (Healy, 1996).

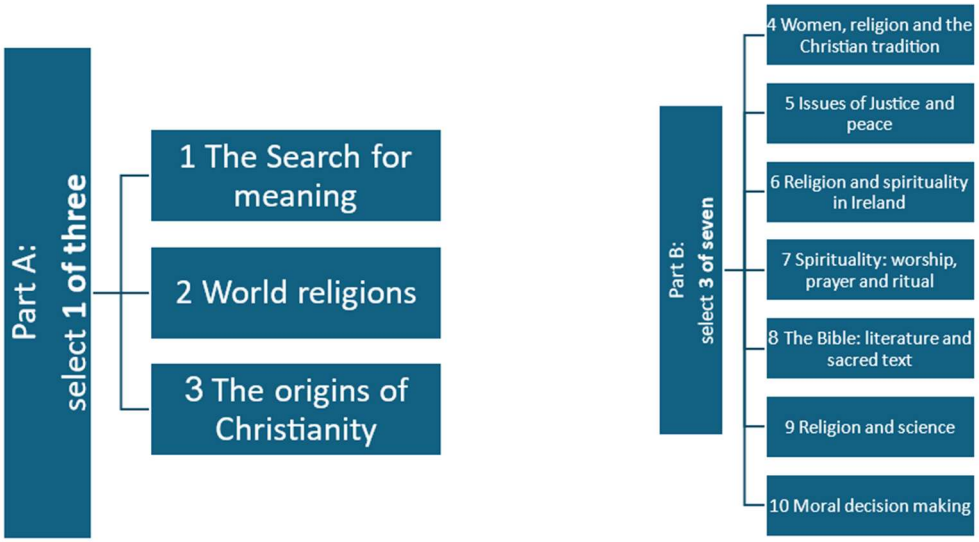


Figure 2.1: The format of first draft LCRE syllabus, NCCA, 1995 (Healy, 1996, n.p.)

The range of topics revealed a comprehensive knowledge-based approach drawing on a broad range of religious themes. Whether intentional or not, it would appear that the first LCRE iteration presents sections in segregated rather than in interlinked form. Missing however was an overt section devoted to Christian religious history, a unit which could have offered an expansion of horizons into religious heritage and Western culture. It is well known that Christianity has been a significant force of influence in the evolution of Western civilisation that extended globally (MacCulloch, 2009). History would offer a broader exploration of past contexts, thereby linking instances of change, beliefs, and revolutionary movements. Its study nurtures a sense of curiosity about the world and the experience of being human. It would have highlighted awareness of Ireland's unique and complex religious milieu.

In summary, the draft LCRE embodied key aspects: knowledge, curriculum breadth and depth, as well as sectional choice. From a broad suite of ten sections, students would study only four. As the syllabus evolved, this proportional aspect did not change, and schools were allowed to make localised choices regarding unit selection (Healy, 1996; NCCA, 1997; 2003). The following section will outline how the shape of LCRE evolved in the post consultation phase.

2.2.4 Evolution of LCRE: The form and shape of LCRE 1997 - a curriculum hierarchy emerges

Decisions about what to include in any curriculum are not value-free. In all phases of the consultation, it became apparent that various axiological considerations were at play. Feedback from the first draft (Healy, 1996) led to a revision, and the publication of NCCA's redrafting of the LCRE syllabus (1997). A thematic hierarchy developed, with a large number of optional sections jockeying for position beside the dominant compulsory elements. The syllabus structure moved from a two-part configuration to a three-tier shape. In this format, priority was awarded to *The search for meaning and values* which commanded newly held compulsory status in Unit A. This contrasted with the earlier iteration where this philosophical unit held optional status with *World religions* and *Christianity*. As the LCRE discussions evolved, it was ultimately deemed to be obligatory.

This decision clarified that a central aim of RE was to engage with life's big questions and to explore a range of worldviews. In the 1995 schema, the placement of *Moral decision making* in Part B was problematic. Its placement here meant that it was part of a suite of seven optional units (Kearns, 2018). Here *Moral decision making* was positioned within a broad range of thematic competitors would dilute its impact and uptake.

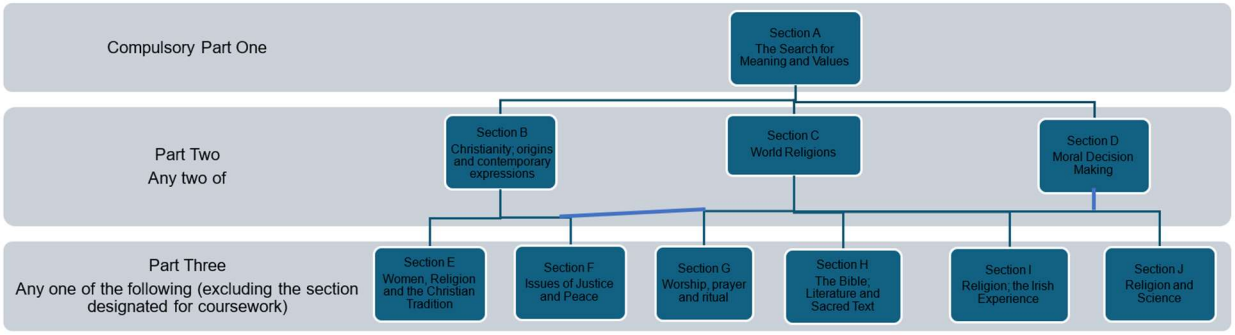


Figure 2.2: The form and shape of LCRE (NCCA, 1997, p. 37)

The significant element of curriculum choice was groundbreaking in terms of syllabus design (NCCA, 2023b). It enabled students and teachers to determine the material to be studied at school level (see Appendix 3).

Cullen (2022b) argues that this level of LCRE configuration could lead to minimalist engagement which the programme had not envisaged. She suggests that the NCCA 2005 *Guidelines for Teachers* encourage a 'maximal approach' through the promotion of 'active

and participative methodologies' (p. 135). The *Guidelines* were designed to support teachers of LCRE in planning their programmes, in designing the learning experiences for their students, in assessing and evaluating those experiences, and in guiding the students in preparing for the Leaving Certificate examination (NCCA, 2005, p. 3). The *Guidelines* illustrate how linkages between sections might operate. However, the optional nature of sections often mitigated against thematic linkages.

The following section will demonstrate the increased significance accorded to morality within LCRE.

2.2.5 Evolution of LCRE: LCRE and Morality

The moral dimension of the human experience is core to LCRE. One education rationale as put forward by the NCCA in 1997, and included in LCRE, argues that the curriculum area of RE 'makes a significant contribution to a curriculum which seeks to provide for the moral development of students' (NCCA, 1997, p. 4, p. 34; LCRE, p. 3). Ways to foster moral maturity are central to the syllabus, a claim which has roots in the prioritising of morality in JCRE, the precursor to LCRE. In JCRE, Section F: The moral challenge enjoyed compulsory status, a designation not given to the sections A: Communities of faith, B: Christianity, or C: Major world religions. The thematic nature of the JCRE (NCCA, 2000, p. 7) is outlined below.

Part 1 (select two)

Section A: Communities of faith

Section B: Foundations of religion – Christianity

Section C: Foundations of religion – major world religions

Part 2 (select all)

Section D: The Question of faith

Section E: The Celebration of faith

Section F: The *moral* challenge (writer's emphasis)

Moral strengthening can be seen in JCRE Section F: The moral challenge; it contains significantly more aims and broader content knowledge than is required for Sections A, B,

C or E. Pollak (1997) claims that the 'NCCA course committee wanted to emphasise the moral and spiritual dimensions' of LCRE. However, it appears that the theme of morality was favoured over spirituality. The upshot of this consultation meant that morality was moved to Unit Two where it had an increased possibility of uptake. Here, this Unit offered the study of any two of three themes: Christianity, world religions or morality. This would suggest that a key aim of LCRE was behavioural, with a desire to influence students' sense of morality and behaviour. Tipton (2017) wonders if moral beliefs are to be taught through the lens of Christianity in Irish culture only. Aim three of LCRE Section D: *Moral decision-making* indicates that students should draw on the moral codes of two systems, specifically Christianity, and one other world religion (LCRE, p. 41). LCRE sets out to establish a frame whereby students can reflect on moralistic actions and values.

Despite the unique place held by Christianity in Irish culture, this Christianity unit was optional for both JCRE and LCRE. More significantly, because of the LCRE configuration, it is possible that a student of State assessed RE might have limited systematic engagement with Christianity at all. This tenet of syllabus construction would have implications for biblical engagement and literacy.

Ultimately, LCRE took on a linear sequential form. An introductory comment of the syllabus structure suggested a sequence starting with Unit One, followed by Unit Two, and then Unit Three (LCRE, p.7). Significantly, this was modified two years later when the LCRE *Guidelines for Teachers* (NCCA, 2005) offered an alternative cross-sectional model for LCRE delivery (pp. 6-10). By way of curriculum contrast, New Zealand's approach to RE favoured a spiral form, as can be seen from the next figure. Themes such as sacred text, history, morality, and beliefs are scaffolded as students progress through their studies. In this format, concepts are revisited repeatedly but at higher levels of cognitive sophistication which contrasts to LCRE's somewhat linear form. Posner (2004) claims that a spiral curriculum approach is influenced by Piaget's epistemology which takes cognitive development into consideration. The sacred text strand in the New Zealand RE context, as shown in Figure 2.3 which follows, draws on incremental examples ranging from 'describe the purpose of a sacred text within a religious tradition' at level 1, to 'explain a significant theme in a religious text within a religious tradition' at level 2, and finally to 'analyse the meaning in a sacred text within a religious tradition' at level 3 (Ministry of Education, 2007).

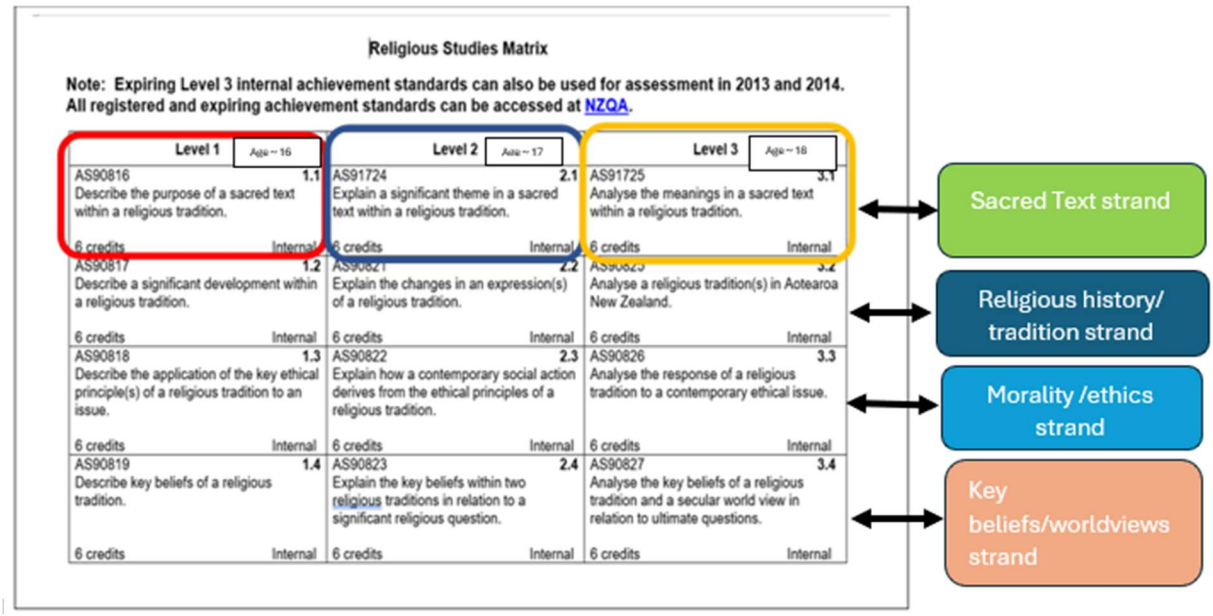


Figure 2.3: New Zealand, Religious Studies Matrix demonstrating a spiral approach to the assessment of the syllabus (Ministry of Education, 2007)

The question remains, what happened to the theme of spirituality? This is a particularly crucial question, as the fifth aim of LCRE indicates that religious education should 'contribute to the spiritual and moral development' of students (NCCA 1997, p. 5; 2003, p. 5). Cullen highlights Hull's contention that a 'learning from religion' approach refers to 'the kind of religious education which has as its principal objective the humanisation of the pupil, that is, making a contribution to the moral and spiritual development of the pupil' (2022b, p.130). NCCA documentary analysis from Table 2.2 which follows, reveals that two sections had the word spirituality expunged from their titles. Firstly, *Religion and spirituality in Ireland (1995)* became Religion: The Irish experience (2003). Secondly, *Spirituality: worship, prayer and ritual* (1995) became *Worship, prayer, and ritual* (2003). The spiritual and moral entities of the human were not equally held. The syllabus is predicated on the general aims as outlined in the Education Act (1998). These are identified as cultural, religious, social, moral and spiritual, with spiritual and moral accorded equal measure. Analysis reveals that parity was not reflected in the LCRE syllabus configuration. This has serious implications for the consideration of Bible. The nexus between spirituality and the Bible has historical and contemporary linkages, with the sacred text often used to nourish relationships with the Divine. The following table tracks the evolution of the sectional titles across three LCRE iterations, 1995, 1997 and 2003.

Table 2.2 The evolution of the sectional titles across LCRE iterations (NCCA, 1995; 1997; 2003).

First Draft RE Syllabus 1995	Redraft RE Syllabus May 1997	LCRE 2003
The search for meaning	The Search for meaning and values	The search for meaning and Values
The origins of Christianity	Christianity; origins and contemporary expressions	Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions
World religions	World religions	World religions
Moral decision making	Moral decision making	Moral decision-making
Women, religion and the Christian tradition	Women, religion and the Christian tradition	Religion and gender
Issues of justice and peace	Issues of justice and Peace	Issues of justice and peace
Religion and spirituality in Ireland	Religion and spirituality in Ireland	Religion: The Irish experience
Spirituality: worship, prayer and ritual	Worship, prayer and ritual	Worship, prayer, and ritual
The Bible: literature and sacred text	The Bible; literature and sacred text	The Bible: literature and sacred text
Religion and science	Religion and Science	Religion and science

Having explored the range of revisions between 1995 and 2003, this research will continue by exploring LCRE aims, goals, and objectives.

2.3 Framework of assumptions about the learner and society

The goals of LCRE as identified in Chapter 1 are situated within a broader context. They take account of Governmental educational principles, conveying society's expectations of the desired outcomes of schooling. The Education Act (1998) was a lens for this, recognising the value of education as a 'common good' (Tuohy, 2013). The aims and goals that apply to all Leaving Certificate programmes are outlined as a preface to the LCRE syllabus document:

> [the] general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, expressive, intellectual, for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure (LCRE, n.p.).

The general prefaces to the syllabi for JCRE and LCRE show common goals. However, divergences can be seen between the overarching 'Aims and Principles' that relate to the 'development of all aspects of the individual' (NCCA, 2023b, p. 57). For the JC general principles outlined in 2000, aspects of the human including moral and spiritual are mentioned. This contrasts with the LC general listing where they do not feature. Was this an oversight? An LCRE syllabus aim indicates that it should contribute 'to the spiritual and moral development of the student' (p. 5), yet this is not overtly identified in the general LC aims as outlined below. Posner (2004) communicates the importance of the link between the learning rationale and the characteristics of intended learning. What implications does this level of dissonance have for the presentation of the Bible in the LCRE classroom?

Aims and Principles

The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development, for personal and family life, for working life, for living in community and for leisure.

JCRE (2000, n.p.)

Aims and Principles

The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, expressive, intellectual, for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure.

LCRE (2003, n.p.)

2.3.1 LCRE Aims and objectives

The educational rationale for LCRE argues that RE can claim to be an integral part of any curriculum which promotes the holistic development of the individual (LCRE, p. 3). RE plays an active part in actualising societal goals, as communicated through the rationale and preamble to LCRE. RE's desired contribution to society is outlined as follows:

- Exposure to a broad range of religious and the non-religious interpretation of life
- Tolerance and mutual understanding
- Meaningful engagement with those of other or no religious traditions
- An 'informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions' that promotes 'the critical and cultural development of the individual' in their social and personal settings
- Diversity, mutual respect and global citizenship
- The holistic development of the human (p. 3)

RE can also make a 'significant' contribution to students' moral development, ethical codes, behavioural norms, and the development of a 'thought-through moral stance' that will 'serve

as a foundation for the decisions they will face as adults', and shape 'how they will relate to their local communities and to the world in general' (p. 3).

Given that LCRE aims to present an 'informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions', this research will explore how the Bible plays a part in enacting this aim. This review identified that the overarching holistic aim is potentially diluted when it comes to the focus on the moral aspect, at the expense of other aspects of the human such as the spiritual. This thesis will now turn to an analysis of LCRE course content.

2.3.2 LCRE Content and subject matter

LCRE packages and presents knowledge in a particular way. The subject matter comprises of a series of sections, labelled A-J. Each section is prefaced with a unique set of aims outlining in broad terms their purpose, and how they link to the overall LCRE aims. The aims are followed by a series of subsections which 'map out the teacher's effort' (Eash, 1991, p. 68). They are outlined in the following figure.

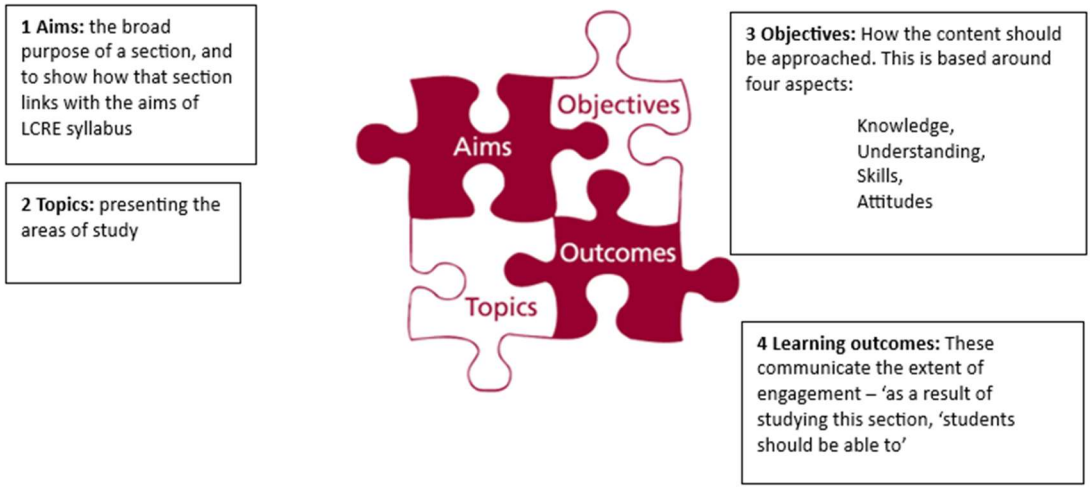


Figure 2.4: LCRE (2003, p. 8)

Learning Objectives

LCRE is scaffolded within a framework of four pillars: knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes (K.U.S.A.). Key here is the development of religious knowledge (Devitt, 2000, p. 17). The K.U.S.A. framework functions multi-directionally. On a cognitive level, it prioritises knowledge whilst also endeavouring to develop understanding, skills and attitudes in the affective domain. This draws on learning outcomes expressed as an 'appreciation of', 'openness to', or 'engagement with'. LCRE quantifies learning by employing the

educational theory of Bloom. This taxonomy is a classification of the different outcomes and skills based on learning outcomes (Arneson and Offerdahl, 2018). Assessment of religious education in the Leaving Certificate examination is based on the aims, objectives, and learning outcomes for each section of the course (LCRE, p. 9). This is important for the Bible as it offers a framework to ascertain which level of skills, knowledge and understanding is required to develop biblical literacy.

KNOWLEDGE	UNDERSTANDING	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
key terms, definitions, descriptions, and distinctions.	understanding of the variety of religious and non-religious interpretations of life	analysis, application and synthesis	genuine engagement with the subject
accuracy and adequacy of information	key concepts and their application in a variety of contexts	comparison and contrast	appreciation of and respect for the richness of religious traditions
depth of knowledge appropriate to level (higher/ordinary)	understanding of the links between belief and practice especially as expressed in morality	discerning evidence of religious belief	appreciation of and respect for the non-religious interpretation of life
evidence of research/study	awareness of the interplay between the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, moral, and social aspects of human experience	identification of causes and consequences	openness to individual and collective search for meaning
indicating the inter-relatedness of different topics on the course	awareness of the variety of ways in which religious beliefs are expressed	appropriate use of, and critical reflection on, texts and resources	openness to dialogue and the search for mutual understanding

Figure 2.5: Framework for assessment (NCCA, 2003, p. 9)

Bloom's educational objectives

Bloom's taxonomy is significant for LCRE in that it overarches categories of educational activities (pp. 98-99). Learning Objectives are framed as command words that function as educational objectives.

The SEC has stated that in constructing questions for examinations, it is important to reflect Bloom's taxonomy 'to the greatest extent possible' (SEC, n.d., p. 49). In this *Taxonomy*, the first level of knowledge 'involves the recall of specifics and universals, the recall of methods and processes, or the recall of a pattern, structure, or setting' (Bloom, 1956). It focuses on cognitive learning skills within a framework which quantifies learning into learning objectives. Objectives describe abilities and skills which learners can demonstrate. The taxonomy encourages the assessment of learning in behavioural terms, i.e., that 'students should be able to'. Learning objectives are prefaced with action verbs that range from lower

level ‘recall or knowledge of’ to higher cognitive demands requiring analysis and synthesis. This is important in this review as it will ask what cognitive levels are demanded in teaching the Bible, and further, are they at the lower or higher levels of the taxonomy? The following section will apply this to the concept of biblical literacy.

Leach (2016) uses Bloom’s *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* to establish clear criteria for determining the notion of biblical literacy. He asserts that the first three levels of Bloom’s Taxonomy - knowledge, comprehension, and application - provide ‘solid benchmarks for measuring an individual’s level of biblical literacy’ (p. 88). Barnes (2018) develops Leach’s insight, identifying at a concrete level where a Bible reader might be situated. For the opening level of knowledge, the student should be able to indicate rudimentary elements of a biblical narrative. He includes the following question: ‘Is the person aware of the basic structure of the Old and New Testaments?’ (p. 59). Bloom’s second level of comprehension ‘refers to a type of understanding or apprehension such that the individual knows what is being communicated and can make use of the material or idea being communicated without necessarily relating it to other material or seeing its fullest implications’ (Bloom, 1956, p. 204). For the second level of comprehension, Barnes states that a student should be comfortable with using the term, *Why?* He includes the following exemplar: ‘Why is it important that Jesus actually died’ (pp. 59-60). Bloom’s third level of application refers to the

> use of abstractions in particular and concrete situations. The abstractions may be in the form of general ideas, rules of procedures, or generalised methods. The abstractions may also be technical principles, ideas, and theories which must be remembered and applied’ (Bloom, 1956, p. 205).

Barnes does not give any exemplars here, preferring instead to suggest that the ‘ultimate goal of biblical literacy’ is to enable a student ‘to be transformed by the biblical story as evidenced though one’s words and actions’ (p. 60). Barnes’s social notion of application is out of kilter with his understanding of the first two levels, where he looked to be specific in describing how the student might be brought up to this level of understanding.

2.3.3 LCRE Methodology and assessment

Methodology refers to ‘innovative approaches to learning emerging as a result of research into how young adults are motivated, how they learn, and how they evaluate their own learning’ (NCCA, 2005). LCRE is overarched by a series of fundamental educational principles based on the Education Technology Model (Devitt, 2000). Central to this concept

is the explicit development of religious knowledge based on aims and objectives marking growth in understanding. Endorsed by Groome's 'shared praxis,' the goal is that students know, understand and can adapt religious traditions for the context of today. This framework approach is underpinned by aims and objectives which guide knowing 'to what extent one has taught successfully' (Devitt, 2000, p. 19). The LCRE examination is predicated on the aims, objectives and outcomes, as outlined below (LCRE, p. 9). Section A: *The Search for meaning and values* overtly draws on the vocabulary used within the K.U.S.A. frame. The K.U.S.A. phrase under the heading of *Attitudes* – 'search for meaning' – is replicated in the Section A heading. In addition, in the *understanding* column, the term *morality* is partially subsumed within the Section D title, *'Moral decision making.'* Once more, these units have been prioritised in LCRE's configuration.

KNOWLEDGE	UNDERSTANDING	SKILLS	ATTITUDES
key terms, definitions, descriptions, and distinctions.	understanding of the variety of religious and non-religious interpretations of life	analysis, application and synthesis	genuine engagement with the subject
accuracy and adequacy of information	key concepts and their application in a variety of contexts	comparison and contrast	appreciation of and respect for the richness of religious traditions
depth of knowledge appropriate to level (higher/ordinary)	understanding of the links between belief and practice especially as expressed in morality	discerning evidence of religious belief	appreciation of and respect for the non-religious interpretation of life
evidence of research/study	awareness of the interplay between the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, moral, and social aspects of human experience	identification of causes and consequences	openness to individual and collective search for meaning
indicating the inter-relatedness of different topics on the course	awareness of the variety of ways in which religious beliefs are expressed	appropriate use of, and critical reflection on, texts and resources	openness to dialogue and the search for mutual understanding

Figure 2.6: The frameworks for assessment of LCRE (LCRE 2003, p. 9)

In terms of coursework, key skills assessed include reflection, research and analysis (LCRE, p. 10). The leading verb *investigate* is central to this assessment type. An example of LCRE assessment at higher and ordinary levels for 2024 is found in Appendix 6.

The form of assessment applied to LCRE has varied little over the last twenty years. This format makes assumptions about students' writing skills and literary capacity. Essay-style responses are demanded, with command verbs including 'describe', 'explain' and 'outline'. LCRE assessment papers are quite instructional, requiring almost exclusive memory recall with little emphasis on evaluation or interpretation of resource materials. This is particularly pertinent when students are required to analyse key passages from the Bible. Unlike the provision of Log Tables to assist students in Maths, Science, and Technology examinations, a Bible is not supplied to students. The examination paper exhibits a dominant literary style with some stylised images that serve as visual prompts to assist students. LCRE students require significant mastery and competence in textual analysis. A key question emerging is how students are prepared in class to respond to and understand the style of assessment. Core to this is the role of textbooks. UNESCO (2010), citing Altbach (1991), contend that 'textbooks are one of the most important educational inputs: texts reflect basic ideas about a natural culture' and are 'often a flash-point of cultural struggle' (p. 7). Textbooks function as interpreters of the syllabus. Examples of this claim will be illustrated as the research unfolds. *Faith Seeking Understanding* is the title of the LCRE textbook series, a phrase attributed to St Anselm of Canterbury (Magilore, 2004).

Having looked at assessment and the next section will focus specifically on the Bible or its synonyms as featured in the syllabus, as well as examining how some aspects of the LCRE syllabus have been interpreted by textbook writers.

2.4 Where does the Bible feature? A quantitative analysis

LCRE uses a variety of terms for the Bible which function in different ways across the syllabus. While Chapter 1 considered the exploratory meanings of these terms, this section will review their incidence as they appear in the syllabus. A synopsis is found in Table 2.3 which follows.

Table 2.3: Table showing the incidence of key terms across LCRE syllabus

		Unit A Compulsory	Unit B Select any two			Unit C Select any one					
Term	**# usage across of LCRE**	**A** **Search for meaning and values**	**B** **Christianity: Origins and contemporary expressions**	**C** **World religions**	**D** **Moral decision-making**	**E** **Religion and gender**	**F** **Justice and peace**	**G** **Worship prayer and ritual**	**H** **The Bible**	**I** **Religion Irish Experience**	**J** **Religion and science**
Bible	54								54		
Sacred Text/s	15					1		1	13		
Scripture/s	16					12	1		3		
Gospel/s	16		2			4			10		
Hebrew Scriptures	9					6			3		
Christian Scriptures	3					3					
Religious texts	2	2									
New Testament	1								1		

Unit A, Section A: The Search for meaning and values

Section A: *The search for meaning and values* uses the term religious text twice when referring to the Bible, or the Bible as sacred text. The term is employed with respect to the theological concept of God. The phrase religious texts in this section is used to indicate God's revelation across a variety of traditions. Students must be able to 'show the impact of the concept of divine revelation on religious practice and on the interpretation of religious texts in the two religious traditions' (LCRE, p. 17). It is appropriate to use a broad term as students can explore sacred texts from a variety of religious traditions. However, the nuanced term religious text is the term of choice in LCRE and not sacred text.

How are students equipped with the skills needed to interpret these religious texts, such as the Bible or its equivalent? Students are required 'to show' or make links between the religious text and the concept of divine revelation. This action verb requires demonstration of low-level interpretative skills. Students are further required to 'name and explain three traditional and contemporary images of God'. In the supporting textbook for LCRE Section A, Goggins and McCarthy-Dineen (2004) narrow the understanding of God, naming God as male, a statement that appears over ten times (pp. 98-99). Mary Daly writes, 'If God is male, then male is God' (Kotke, 1973, p. 19). Australian researcher Buchanan writes, 'a good religious education textbook has the potential to not only act as a sound educational tool but may have the potential to transform the learner's view of the world in the religious realm' (2006, p. 751). Textbooks like syllabi are not axiologically neutral and carry values which adults believe students should be exposed to. Here the textbook can be used oppressively to exclude a female or otherwise non-gendered identity.

Unit B, Section B: Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions

The Bible as a descriptor is not chosen in this section. Here, LCRE favours a much broader concept for the naming of sources without naming the Bible *per se*. None of the analysed key terms such as sacred text, scripture, Hebrew/ Christian scriptures, Bible or religious texts which might have been expected to appear, feature. When exploring the evidence for the historical Jesus of Nazareth, Section B favours the term *religious sources* (LCRE, p. 25). This has broader reach than the Christian textual sources of the Bible/Old Testament; these include the 'evangelists', 'Paul' and 'Josephus'. Other sources include Roman texts such as Pliny and Tacitus, the Gospels, Acts and Letters. This wide range of sources shows how Christianity used the sacred writings of the Jews for apologetic purposes (Williams, 2023,

p. 157). LCRE favours a much broader concept of sources without referencing the Bible. The Bible appears to function implicitly rather than explicitly.

Unit B, Section C: World religions

Holm (1994), citing Müller, claims that 'the person who knows only one religion does not know any religion' (p. vi). The optional Section C: *World religions* explores the 'major living religious traditions' and new religious movements. LCRE requires students to select between any Christian denomination or Judaism, and either Islam, Buddhism, or Hinduism (p. 34). The methodological approach to this topic encompasses a phenomenological framework whereby students are encouraged to consider certain aspects across a range of religions, to 'compare and contrast elements' and to 'recognise similar motifs and characteristics' (LCRE, p. 33). LCRE suggests some potential comparative tools: religious history, beliefs, the place of community, the image of the human person, the notion of authority, hierarchy, social structure, rites, rituals and challenges (LCRE, p. 37). Sacred texts, whether the Bible, Tanakh, Qur'an, Gita or Tripitaka, are not nominated as entities to invite comparisons. LCRE higher students, however, use sacred text when exploring the concept of 'authority' (p. 37).

Moiselle (2005), author of the World Religions student textbook, allocates a chapter to each of a range of world religions. In Chapter 5, 'Judaism -the Way of the Torah', she does not mention the sacred text of the Jews, the Tanakh. Her Christian preference is observed in her declaration that 'the greatest gift that Judaism has bequeathed to Christianity … is Jesus himself' (p. 56). Moiselle rightly mentions the rich store of Psalms and prophetic writing but omits reference to their Jewish canonical location in either the Torah, the Ketuvim, or Nevi'im. The *knowledge* dimension of Section C: *World religions* demands that students demonstrate knowing 'the origins of the particular relationship between Christianity and Judaism' (p. 36). The demonstration of this link across shared sacred texts is reductionist at best. At the end of each chapter, Moiselle presents a word box of key terms pertaining to the individual religions, Judaism (p. 60) and Buddhism (p. 75), Christianity (p. 86), and Islam (p. 97). While this is a helpful tool for the scaffolding of literacy, she generally omits the sacred texts as a valued entity of major traditions. Here, the sacred texts of Islam, Christianity and Buddhism are not included in the list of key terms. The only exception is a reference to the sacred text for Judaism the Torah, a part of the Tanakh. Buchanan writes about the transformative nature of textbooks (2006, p. 751) yet the minimalist approach to sacred text in this student textbook makes it less likely to promote change.

Unit B, Section D: Moral decision-making

One of the aims of this unit is to 'introduce and examine the Christian moral vision and the moral vision of other major world religions' (LCRE, p. 41). LCRE Section D does not employ identifiers of key terms such as the Bible, Sacred Text, Scripture, Gospel, Hebrew/ Christian Scriptures or religious texts. A knowledge outcome requires students to be familiar with 'the ethical teachings of Jesus of Nazareth and the incorporation of these into the moral teachings of the Christian traditions' (LCRE, p. 44). The use of the Bible as a source is inferred here. The *Decalogue* is cited as a source of moral teaching. Known alternatively as the Ten Commandments, LCRE focuses on the text but at the expense of not emphasising the Jewish rootedness of this biblical text (Ex 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21). The *Decalogue* is located in the Torah section of the Tanakh which forms a sectional component of the Bible. Considering that the central aspect of learning centres on Jesus the Jew, the topic 2.1, Morality and the Christian tradition, more correctly might read *Morality and the* ***Judeo****-Christian tradition* (emphasis mine, LCRE, p. 45). An outcome of this learning is that students should be able to 'briefly outline the religious, social, and cultural context of the Decalogue and Covenant' (LCRE, p. 45). The action verb to *briefly outline* the background to the *Decalogue* does not encourage an analysis of the text itself, with minimal exegesis demanded. The content proceeds with coverage of 'the ethical vison of the preaching of Jesus' (LCRE, p. 45). The phrasing of this section is morally challenging as the LCRE appears to 'Christianise' the Jewish Jesus, thus sidelining his cultural embeddedness in a Jewish moral and social location (Levine, 2006; 2014). In Section D: *moral decision-making,* aspects of the Bible are used to endorse moral themes at the expense of Jewish cultural considerations.

Unit C, Section E: Religion and Gender

Pollak, citing NCCA (1997), revealed that feedback on the Draft LCRE syllabus identified this section as challenging. It was considered less than inclusive. Uniquely, Section E employs a wide variety of synonym terms for the Bible. These include 'sacred texts', 'gospels', 'Hebrew scriptures' and 'Christian Scriptures'. Scripture is the term of preference and used in 11 out of 14 incidences in Section E. One of the topic aims requires an understanding of the 'place of men and women in Hebrew and Christian scriptures' (LCRE, p. 54). Despite the fact that this section focuses on the role of women, male priority can be seen in the secondary reference to women. The topic 'Women and men in the Christian scriptures' explores the encounters between Jesus and women in the 'gospels', as well as the

'presentation of women and men in Acts or in the letters of Paul' (LCRE, p. 54). As a consequence of studying this unit, students should be able to 'profile Mary as presented in the gospels' (LCRE, p. 54). Acts and the Book of Revelation are not included here as New Testament sources. By so doing, the opportunity to broaden the understanding of Mary as a New Testament figure and symbolic links to Rev 12:1-17 are missed, a hermeneutical link established from the 6th century (Levine and Brettler, 2011, p. 557). In the section on 'Gender and Christianity', one topic description relates to 'the presentation of women and men in Acts or in the letters of Paul'. Students are asked to describe, retell, explain and discuss the 'relevance of the story today for gender debates' (LCRE, p. 55). These action verbs mostly call for a lower-order examination, requiring minimal hermeneutical analysis.

Unit C, Section F: Justice and Peace

This optional section calls for social analyses in the exploration of issues of social justice at local, national and international level. Given the attention accorded in LCRE to the whole person, the promotion of an attitude of 'sensitivity to issues of justice in the student's own lives and the lives of others' is worthy of mention (p. 60). Here LCRE acknowledges the role of student experience as a locus for social justice analysis. In the topic on *Religious perspectives on justice and peace*, students are required to make 'reference to one scripture/source' (p. 63). This conveys a requirement of minimal engagement with the Bible, is devoid of analysis and quite cursory.

A subsequent section outlines 'the religious imperative to act for justice and peace' (LCRE, p.65). The LCRE uses the creation texts from the book of Genesis as a lens to explore this concept. One outcome asks students to 'relate the concepts of stewardship and dominion found in the creation texts to one current environmental crisis' (LCRE, p. 65). The LCRE rightly acknowledges the plurality of suitable elements located in Genesis (Gen 1-2:4a; Gen 2: 4b-24, Gen 3), yet the concentration on Genesis text minimises the potential richness of other excluded First Testament texts. Examples include Isaiah 40-66 and Israel's song book, the *Psalms.* This limiting of text selection impedes exposure to the range of texts where this theme is observed, thus limiting the potential for biblical literacy development.

Section G: Worship, prayer and ritual

Carr in Eaude claims that 'the link between spirituality and religion is so close that spirituality makes no sense without engagement in a religious tradition' (2005, p. 240). LCRE embodies this claim with the inclusion of optional Section G: *Worship, prayer and*

ritual. Within Judaism, Islam and Catholicism, spirituality has a heightened status (NCCA, 2023b, p. 117). This unit alerts students to a variety of spiritualities, prayers and rituals (Cassidy and Devitt, in Hegarty, 2003, p. 10). *Sacred text* is the term of choice in this section when referring to the Bible. Prayer, meditation and contemplation are part of the content, and a unit aim for this section calls for development of the 'awareness of the spiritual dimension of human life' (LCRE, p. 67). LCRE requires students to outline the use of sacred and inspirational texts in prayer. An outcome of 'Meditation and Contemplation' requires students to 'explain' the origins of the practice of meditation and to account for its significance in the 'prayer and worship of two major religious traditions'. The focus therefore can be termed as both religion-specific (prayer) and common religious aspects (contemplation) (Hartvigsen, 2020). In relation to 'meditation … with [a] sacred text' (such as the Bible), students are asked to consider how it is used in contemporary prayer (LCRE, p. 74). This would suggest the employment of reception theory focussing on pupils' interpretations of the Bible as a tool for prayer.

Section H: The Bible: literature and sacred text

The word Bible features fifty-four times, signalling its primacy in this section. The Bible is presented as both a classic text (literature) and a holy text (sacred text). The sacred text functions as a significant literary classic for 'western civilisation' and is seen as a book of influence across a variety of domains including 'art or music' and 'literature' (LCRE, p. 77). Noteworthy in this section is the exploration of approaches to the biblical text. While the unit is attentive to historical critical textual analysis, this methodological approach is not identified (LCRE, p. 81). For example, students are asked to 'describe the context of a given parable' and to 'explain the impact for the original audience' (LCRE, p. 81). While these questions are essential to an historical critical methodology, the spotlight is more on 'structure' and backstory than on the text itself. Redaction criticism is the only approach that is overtly named (LCRE, p. 77, p. 79). This however is reserved for Higher level students only. In the domain of biblical studies, a common way to illustrate the redaction concept is to explore the synoptic Gospels in parallel form. LCRE however, applies redaction criticism to the 'formation of the Hebrew scriptures' (LCRE, p. 79), a task made much more complex due to the breadth of literature involved.

Higher level students are exposed to the symbolic apocalyptic literature, with an outcome requiring that students give examples of this literature genre (LCRE, p. 81). Section H places little emphasis on biblical exegesis or meaning making analysis. Using Bloom's

terminology, students are asked to 'explain myth, epic and apocalypse' (LCRE, p. 81) but not to analyse any biblical myth, epic or apocalyptic text to yield its meaning in antiquity or today.

Section I: Religion: The Irish Experience

Acknowledging how culture shapes worldviews, this section presents a focus on the nexus between faith and culture. Cassidy and Devitt in Hannon contend that the syllabus 'offers a generous acknowledgement of the importance of Christianity in the Irish context' (2005, p. 9). Yet despite this claim, there are no references to the sacred text of Christianity in Section I. Students are expected to 'describe the significance of community in monastic Ireland and the role of monasteries as centres of learning and worship and healing' (LCRE, p. 92). While there is no doubt that monasteries functioned as centres of learning and hospitality, LCRE misses the role that the monastic scriptorium played in the production of Bibles. Examples of monastic sacred text production include the *Fadden More Psalter*, *The Book of Kells*, or *The Book of Kildare* with its 'concordance of the four gospels' (Levine and Brettler, 2011).

Gunning's textbook presents a hermeneutical reading of Section I, nominating the Bible as an example of the development and characteristics of Irish Christianity (2006, pp. 43-45). Here, the student text highlights the role of the monks in copying biblical texts in the monastic scriptorium, especially the gospels (p. 45). The Bible and its message are the conduit of the Christian tradition, and reception theory spotlights how humans culturally adapted to represent the sacred text. High crosses are visual artforms captured in stone, another important indicator of the history of Christianity in Ireland (p. 71). This visual tradition helped the individual to interpret the stories of the Bible within Ireland's cultural milieu. An example from the textbook (p. 46) shows panels from the High Cross at Moone, Co Kildare. Reception theory shows visually how the Irish stone masons interpreted the narrative of the Flight into Egypt (Mt 2:13-15). Gunning writes, 'as with the artistic manuscripts, the high crosses proved to be an ingenious and imaginative way to teach the story of salvation to many who could not read the stories for themselves' (p.46). Though Gunning goes some way to redress the Bible gap, the textbook could be more overt in making this link between image and text.

Section I is a dominant, gendered, male presentation of Irish monasticism. LCRE calls for the study of male founders of monasteries in Europe and Ireland (LCRE, p. 92). While not born in Ireland, St. Patrick features at the expense of reading over indigenous St. Bridgid.

Harrington (2002) references other women who were involved in the spread of Christianity including Ita and Monenna (p. 39). Armstrong's multi-religious approach to scripture (Kristof, 2019) shows awareness of the role which the feminist readings have contributed to a paradigm shift in awareness of the notion of gender and the study of religion. She argues that in the case of major world religions, women played a leading role in association with the leader but were then removed to the background in the case of Mohammed, Jesus and Buddha (2019, p. 282). Kreitzer (2002), writing about the connections between contemporary literature such as Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and the Bible, entitles his chapter 'Blessed are the Silent', a phrase that succinctly captures the historical relationship between women and religion.

Section J: Religion and Science

This optional unit in Unit C makes no reference to any written sacred text or the Bible. Students are asked to consider two 'alternative images of God' and consider their use in the 'debate between science and religion.' The syllabus focuses on cosmologies, requiring students to 'outline' the 'understanding of creation' within one major religious tradition, including Christianity (LCRE, p. 100). Outline is defined as 'the student setting out the main points of information on a topic' (NCCA, 2005, p. 130). Students are also asked to 'outline the contemporary ecological crisis,' and to present the perspective of a scientist and a theologian on this crisis. A gap between 'outline' and a more rigorous 'analyse' excludes the possibility for creation text scrutiny. The SEC in their manual for drafters of examination papers define the skill of analysis as dividing material into parts so that its structure may be understood, that students can see patterns, and recognise hidden meanings (SEC, n.d., p. 98). This selection of *outline* as a lead action verb minimises the skills of making meaning and hermeneutical rigour.

Having reviewed Sections A-J of LCRE through the lens of the Bible, the following section will focus closely on how LCRE develops biblical literacy.

2.5 Review of LCRE syllabus and texts - key findings

Finding 1: Problem of curriculum coherence

A review of LCRE reveals several findings which will now be discussed. Firstly, the syllabus is historic in its origins; its uniqueness can be seen in its structural makeup. LCRE featured both compulsory and optional components. Comparing RE to other curricular areas, the

significance of choice cannot be minimised (NCCA, 2023b). This flexible approach to curriculum enabled RE teachers and students to gravitate to sections which appealed to their interests and expertise. Despite this, a problem of curriculum coherence emerged. While a strength of LCRE is its cross-sectional linkage, these function best when complementary units are chosen. For example, in Section A, all students are exposed to how cultures have engaged with mythical language and symbol as a meaning-making tool (p. 15). Yet in Section H, when considering genres, myth is a concept reserved for Higher students only. Rather than build on concepts, where one can assist the scaffolding of another, in this example curricular dissonance limited Ordinary level students.

Finding 2: Sacred texts presented in a reductionist manner

While there are some indications that biblical literacy is a skill that is developed as a result of syllabus engagement, LCRE leaves open the possibility that students might engage superficially with sacred text. Section C: *World religions* employs a phenomenological methodology which uses a toolkit facilitating comparison between religious traditions. Examples of comparative tools across concepts include ritual, religious history and hierarchal structure. While common to world religions, sacred text is not included in the analysis toolkit. This is despite sacred text being a root source for other phenomenon such as history and rituals. The sacred texts of the major world religions feature in very reductionist terms and are interpreted by textbook writers in a very simplistic form. Limited exposure to sacred text minimises attainment of the LCRE aim of engaging with a 'broad range of religious and non-religious interpretation of life' (NCCA, p. 3).

Finding 3: LCRE limits how students can make meaning from sacred texts

LCRE is limited in its development of higher-level skills that encourage interpretation or analysis of texts. An analysis of action verbs from the LCRE syllabus used in relation to the Bible/sacred text include terms such as 'relate', 'describe', 'retell,' 'briefly outline', 'give an overview' or 'show'. These leading verbs communicate surface engagement only. While students are exposed the concept of genre, a major emphasis on developing meaning from texts was removed from the Redraft Syllabus (1997). In summary, the incorporation of sacred writings / the Bible was not to the forefront of the LCRE development group. The configuration and sectional choice in LCRE show that it is possible to fulfil syllabus requirements with minimal interface with the Bible.

The following section will review Section H*: The Bible* to establish what levels of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes are demanded of this unit.

2.6 LCRE (2003) - Section H: *The Bible*

The following table indicates the range of revisions and iterations relating to the intended aims of Section H: *The Bible*.

Table 2.4: Comparison of the aims of Section H (NCCA, 1997; LCRE, 2003)

Aims: 1997 Redraft LCRE syllabus (p. 70)	**Aims: 2003 LCRE syllabus (p. 75)**	**Commentary/Observations**
1) To explore how the Bible has functioned as a literary and sacred text since its formation, and how it continues to have an impact on modern life.	1. To explore how the Bible has functioned as a literary and sacred text since its formation.	Aim 1 (1997) was subdivided into two aims in the 2003 syllabus.
	2. To examine the impact of the Bible on contemporary society.	Modern life in 1997 became contemporary society; 'contemporary' features 104 times in the 2003 syllabus
2) To examine how the Bible was formed as a text and the impact of different processes of translation on that text.	3. To examine how the Bible was formed as a text	Aim 2 (1997) originally asked students to consider the 'impact of different processes and translation' on the text. This was removed in the 2003 syllabus.
3) To introduce the variety of literary genres found in the Bible	4. To introduce the variety of literary genres found in in the Bible.	No change
4) To explore the understanding of the Bible as the Word of God and as expression of the relationship between God and humankind.	5. To explore the understanding of the Bible as Word of God and as expression of the relationship between God and humankind.	The word *the* was removed from the original phrase, 'the Word of God'

LCRE (2003) - Section H: *The Bible* – changing aims

Analysis reveals that the initial four aims for Section H: *The Bible* (1997) were expanded to five in the final syllabus. Aim 1 in the NCCA Redraft (1997, p. 70) was subdivided into two distinct areas The first focused on the Bible as literary and sacred text, with the second examining the impact of the Bible on contemporary society. The intention was to clarify that the original Aim 1 proposed two distinct approaches and areas of content. The reference to the Bible's contemporary importance incorporated important dimensions of the Department of Education's general aims and principles for Leaving Certificate programmes, including preparation 'for personal and home life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure' (LCRE, n.p.). Hogan, citing Tracy (2014), names this as the domain of three

theological publics. Another aim sought to examine the 'impact of different processes and translation on that text' (NCCA, 1997, p. 70). This, however, was removed from the final syllabus version. Documents from the consultative phases identified biblical translation as problematic and thus nullified the possible exploration of how the Bible intersected with the Irish language. For instance, William Bedell, an English Anglican Bishop who served as Provost of Trinity College Dublin from 1627 to 1629, commissioned a translation of the Bible into Irish (Anderson, 2018; Ó Fearghail, 2018). The Bible *as Gaeilge* became known as the 'Bíobla Bedell' (Ó Muraíle, 2024, n.p). The NCCA Review Committee requested a revision of this section, observing that it was 'both too historical and too difficult for 'Ordinary' level students' (Pollak, 1997). The following section will further consider this issue by analysing the Section H content.

LCRE (2003) - Section H: *The Bible* analysed – Content and issues with symbolic language

A comparison between the Syllabus Redraft (1997) and the LCRE final 2003 version revealed there was no change in the broad body of knowledge which was selected for coverage. The common objectives (NCCA, 1997; 2003) included:

Part one: The Bible as living classic and sacred text

Part two: Text and community

Part three: The Literature of the Bible

Part four: Biblical texts

One of Section H's knowledge aims requires students to analyse selected texts from a nominated list. Documentary analysis for this review shows that aspects of this unit proved to be problematic. The objective of part four - *Biblical texts* - requires a 'detailed knowledge of certain key texts' (NCCA, Redraft, 1997, p. 70; LCRE, p. 82). While a range of selected texts is identified by LCRE, a comparison between the 1997 and 2003 syllabus reveals that the range of textual option was reduced. As can be seen from the table which follows, the First/Old Testament selection from the Redraft went from a choice of eight texts to just three in 2003. The New Testament range was reduced from 18 in 1997 to three in 2003 (NCCA, Redraft, 1997).

Table 2.5: Section H, biblical texts, Comparison between LCRE Redraft (1997) and LCRE (2003)

	1997, pp. 73-74	2003, p. 83
Topic **The Bible**	Part four Biblical texts	Part four Biblical texts
Knowledge Students should be able to have detailed knowledge of certain key texts	Ordinary level students select 3 Higher level students select 5 Gen 12:1-3 The Promise of Abram Exodus 13:17-14:31 The crossing of the Red Sea **Exodus 20:1-21 The Ten Commandments** **1 Sam 2:1-10 Hannah's Song of Thanks** 2 Chron 5:2-6:11 The Dedication of the Temple **Is 52: 13-53:12 Israel restored** Amos 2:6-16 The Crimes of Israel Ezekiel 37 The Valley of Dry bones Matthew 5:17-48 The Old and the New Law Matthew 26:14-29 The Last Supper Mark 1:1-8 John the Baptist **Mark 9: 2-13 The Transfiguration** **Luke 6:20-49 The Sermon on the Mount** Luke 10: 25-37 The Good Samaritan **John 1:1-18 The Prologue** John 10: 22-42 The Feast of Dedication Tim 1-2 The Life of Paul Rev 21-22:5	Ordinary level student cover one Higher level students cover two **Exodus 20:1-21 The Ten Commandments** **1 Sam 2:1-10 Hannah's Song of Thanks** **Is 52: 13-53:12 Israel restored** Ordinary level students to cover one of the following, Higher level students to cover two **Mark 9: 2-13 The Transfiguration** **Luke 6:20-49 The Sermon on the Plain** **John 1:1-18 The Prologue**

This revision had radical implications for genre considerations. Initially, the New Testament texts were equally represented across the Gospels (Mt, Mk, Lk, and Jn) as well as two books of Letters: Timothy and Revelation. The LCRE narrowed the range of nominated texts, restricting exposure to the range of biblical genres and canonical books. The 1997 list had included Rev 21-22:5 and Tim 1-2, both substantial examples of the letter genre, leaving New Testament texts of Mk, Lk and Jn only. The omission of Mt - the most Jewish of the Gospels (Binz, 2017; Brown, 1997) - limited the analysis of Judeo-Christian links and the image of the Jewish Jesus. This counters the LCRE aim of forging awareness of the 'intrinsic link … between Jewish and Christian communities' (LCRE, p. 80).

First Testament revisions led to the loss of the prophets Amos and Ezekial, with prophetic literature now represented by Isaiah only (Is 52:13-53:12). This raises the question, why narrow the prescribed texts at all? The 1997 variety of exemplars offered extensive choice, an important principle underpinning LCRE. Further, the exclusion of the existing breadth of texts limited exposure to a range of genres and narratives which had implications for biblical

awareness and literacy. Cassidy and Devitt in Hegarty (2003) wrote in the introduction to the commentary volume for *The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text* that 'the section on the Bible was to be welcomed'. Significantly, they called for greater attention to be paid to the role of the Prophets in the Old Testament and to Paul in the New Testament (p.7). Their call however came too late as these texts were axed in the LCRE version.

Section H: *The Bible* – texts for analysis

A knowledge aim requires students to have a 'detailed knowledge of certain key texts' (LCRE, p. 82). The LCRE New Testament texts for selection include:

- Mark 9: 2-13, The Transfiguration.
- Luke 6:20-49, The Sermon on the Plain.
- John 1:1-18, The Prologue.

While the LCRE claims to promote the growth and development of the human, the inclusion of texts which are more student friendly could have been considered. The Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-49) incorporates the Beatitudes (v. 20-26), love for enemies (v. 27-36), and avoiding violence (v. 37-45). This sermon genre has informative moralistic overtones, serving to develop behaviours and perspectives that are in step with the LCRE rationale (LCRE, p. 3). This attributed title assists students with identifying the genre as 'sermon'. However, by beginning at v. 20, its geographic context is omitted. This limits potential inter-curricular links to the domain of Geography, as topographical elements such as 'a level place/plain', Judea, Jerusalem, coastal Tyre and Sidon are identified (v. 17). Moreover, the call of the 12 disciples in the four verses prior to Lk 6: 12-16 marks another exclusion which could have deepened contextual understanding. The nominated sermon theme associated with the LCRE prescribed text, Lk 6:20-49, potentially could be used to exemplify the notion of discipleship.

The Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-49) warrants further critique. Surrounding Lk 6:20-49 are a litany of texts where children feature, and this has audience resonance with the LCRE student community. Examples include the healing of Jairus' daughter (Lk 8:40-56), the healing of the widow's son at Nain (Lk 7:11-17) and the healing of the boy with an evil spirit (Lk 9: 37-43). Yet none of these are prescribed for analytical study. This omission is also observed in the case of Mark's Gospel where the Markan prescribed text of The Transfiguration (Mk 9: 2-13) is directly followed by the healing of the boy with an evil spirit (Mk 9: 14-29). This is followed by the narrative where Jesus takes a child into his arms (Mk 9: 33-37). Children centric texts are in the Bible but are overlooked in the LCRE Bible text

prescription. It is important that students see themselves in the curriculum and learner identity promoted. A curriculum that reflects students' identity enhances engagement and academic achievement (DES, 2018). National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) emphasises learner identity, voice, and inclusion in its ongoing curriculum reform work (2017).

The 1997 LCRE Redraft called for students to 'link Biblical interpretation of the genres with other literary interpretation of the same genres' (LCRE, p. 71). Unfortunately, this element was removed from the LCRE final configuration (see Table 2.6). The loss of this skill had implications for emphasising textual analysis both inside the canon of the Bible and outside of the prescribed suite of texts such as biblical-themed art. In the prescription of nominated texts, LCRE's selection of First Testament texts that function intertextually with New Testament texts would have strengthened students' genre skills. For example, the Healing of the Possessed Boy [Mk 9:11-29/Mt 17:14-21/Lk 9:37:43] intertextuality aligns with 2 Kings: 4:11-37, where Elisha's servant, Gehazi fails to perform a healing (Levine and Brettler, 2011, p. 88). As well as deepening genre through parallelism, the pattern would have strengthened Jewish-Christian links, an intention of the programme.

LCRE (2003): Issues with symbolic language of the Bible

A challenging aspect of LCRE pertains to genre, a key facet of text interpretation. LCRE identifies genres such as poetry, narrative, myth, epic and apocalyptic texts. Psalms are presented in the form of poetic prayer. The close alignment of the language of story, reflection, and of symbol can be seen in the following comparative chart, figure 2.6. However, there is one significant caveat for Ordinary level students. Apocalyptic texts were included in 1997 but excluded in the final iteration. In Section A (LCRE, p. 15), all students explore the concept of how language functions symbolically. Section G if selected requires exploration of the link between symbol and ritual (LCRE, p. 69). Given these two conceptual injunctions, the assumption that Ordinary level students have not the ability to engage with the genre of apocalyptic texts as part of Section H is surprising, and it further narrowed the range of possible engagement. The designation suggests that the concept of symbolic language already encountered in Section A, was somehow beyond their comprehension in Section H. It also closed off the possibility of developing Ordinary level students' understanding of texts beyond the literal.

LCRE Part Three: Literature of the Bible

Table 2.6: Comparison of Section H, Part Three, Literature of the Bible (NCCA, 1997; LCRE, 2003)

	1997 Topic: The Literature of the Bible	2003 Topic: The Literature of the Bible
The language of story	The parables of Jesus	The parables of Jesus (three from Mt and one from Lk, prescribed)
The language of reflection	Poetry as Psalms (Higher only)	Poetry as Psalms
The language of symbol	• Myth • Epic • Apocalyptic texts (Higher only)	• Myth (Higher only) • Epic (Higher only) • Apocalyptic texts (Higher only)
Skills	1. Navigate the format and structure of the Bible, 2. differentiate and identify some of the literary genre found in the Bible, 3. identify biblical motifs in literature and art, 4. and compare and contrast key texts. 5. Link the Biblical interpretation of the genres with other literary interpretation of the same genres.	1. Navigate the format and structure of the Bible, 2. identify and differentiate some of the literary genres found in the Bible, 3. identify biblical motifs in literature and art, 4. and compare and contrast key texts.

The following section of this review will explore the contribution of specialists who have studied the use of the Bible in RE. While they would not be in a position to remark on the structure of LCRE, their general findings on the classroom presentation of the Bible have applicability in this area.

2.7 Reviewing the work of researchers who have examined the use of the Bible in Religious Education

The work of a range of researchers such as Barbara Stead (1996), Peta Goldburg (2010, 2019), Margaret Carswell (2018, 2021), and Robert Bowie (2016, 2018) will provide a broad overview of the themes that have emerged in examining the relationship between the Bible and its use in school-based RE. The following themes emerged from the literature review, and they provide a focus to further consider issues associated with the promotion of biblical literacy.

1) RE teachers' limited biblical skills
2) The Bible as used for proof-texting
3) Poor RE syllabus design
4) The Bible and visual culture/creative arts
5) Cultural literacy
6) Interpretation, drawing on reception theory

2.7.1 RE teachers' limited biblical skills

Influenced by Bastide (1987, p. 121), Stead's research with primary teachers in Australian Catholic schools revealed the limitation of RE teachers' engagement with the Bible. They showed an overreliance on Luke's gospel which contained uniquely Lukan narratives such as the *Good Samaritan* (Lk 10:25-37) and the *Prodigal Son* (Lk 15:11-32). The primacy of this Gospel came at the exclusion of others, thus presenting a limited image of Jesus (Stead, 1996). Teachers further exhibited limited exegetical expertise. Some key questions in relation to LCRE arise from Stead's research. What skills do RE teachers possess to interpret the Bible, and how has ITE (Initial Teacher Education) prepared RE teachers to analyse texts and teach beyond the literal? While her study has high relevance to this chapter review, it must be remembered that Stead's work is contextually and geographically based on an Australian Catholic primary school setting and as far as is known, no comparable study has occurred in the post-primary sector in Ireland. Stead's contribution to the field of biblical RE is not without merit as she spotlights the link between critical biblical skills and textual interpretation.

2.7.2 The Bible as used for proof-texting

Bowie's work explored how the Bible is used in the secondary school sector. His research into the use of sacred texts (the Bible and the Qur'an) in State examinations reveal that sacred texts are used in proof-text fashion. This is where a biblical story or verse is used to endorse the theme of a unit of assessment. Bowie claims that when the Bible was interpreted in a fixed scientific manner, RE was characterised as a series of truths to be proved, with the Bible used to justify this approach (2016, 2018, 2022b). In other words, texts were shoe-horned to support student thematic responses, and texts were interpreted in uniform ways allowing no room for subjective interpretation. Bowie asks if RE classrooms are helping students to become good interpreters of religion, worldviews, and sacred texts, assisting them to explore what it means to be a sacred text scholar (Bowie and Coles, 2018; Bowie et al, 2020). Armstrong (2019) draws attention to the problem of reading texts that are divorced from context. She writes that the difficulty with 'proof texting' in the case of the Qur'an is that it used to 'justify terrorism, the Torah to deny Palestinians the right to live in the Land

of Israel, and the Bible to condemn homosexuality and contraception' (p. 403). Such exegesis offers a challenge to society. A literal interpretation occurs when the text is separated from its contextual and linguistic anchors, cutting off any core meaning intended by the original authors.

2.7.3 Poor RE syllabus design

Carswell researched how the Bible functions within RE syllabi. In 2005 she analysed RE curricula in Melbourne (2006) and RE programmes in England and Wales (2018). Carswell critiques poor curriculum design where the starting point begins with an overarching topic, theme or idea, presented in hierarchical fashion. This is usually followed by a prescribed sequence of units, content, outcomes and assessments. Her research revealed that scripture (Bible) was employed in a secondary fashion to support themes in the curricula, with minimal consideration given to the value of biblical texts as entities. There is little if any regard given to canonical-positioning within the Bible and to how the text was historically anchored and interpreted. Carswell (2021, n.p.) writes,

> Like wardens standing at crossroads directing the oncoming traffic, the unit theme, with its predefined outcomes, intentions, success criteria, resources, activities, teacher background reading, and even title, point to how passages are to be understood.

Carswell's research demands an exploration of LCRE to see if the Bible functions in a similar way. Evidence from the topic analysis earlier in this chapter reveals that LCRE as currently constituted, facilitates an orientation towards a high level of literal reading of scripture. Carswell's theoretical framework is underpinned by specific learning outcomes where benchmarks act as barometers against which knowledge and skills are quantified and measured (Carswell, 2018). Carswell's call was to build a new culture in RE where pupils are expected to interpret and find the meaning of Scripture. As she succinctly writes, 'Don't just use, don't just read it, don't just even analyse it, interpret it' (2021). This review of literature will continue by exploring how creative arts intersect and support biblical meaning-making.

2.7.4 The Bible and visual culture/creative arts

Goldburg (2010) harnesses visual tools from the creative arts as her principal methodological approach to RE. Termed *Critically Engaging Creative Arts (*CECA), she argues cogently that knowledge and understanding emerge when readers engage visually with the biblical texts. These include representations in visual form where film images serve to unlock

meaning in the Bible for RE students. Goldburg, citing historian MacCulloch (2009), observes how in the past, mosaics, stained glass and statuary as well as dramatic narratives via the creative arts were primary tools of theological and religious communication (2004, p. 176). Taking the example of the Jewish Jesus, Goldburg coins the term, 'The reel-cinema Jesus'. Here, visual images and film are harnessed to unlock meaning in biblical texts. In Mel Gibson's movie*, The Passion of Christ* (2004), the director coalesced four Gospels into a unified story. The viewer is engaged with a visceral interpretation of the Bible, thus inverting the meaning-making process. Goodacre observes that failure to achieve meaning is merely 'poor art' (2004, p. 29).

Goldburg's framework stands on the shoulders of Postman (1986) who calls for a shift in the appropriation of knowledge from a dominant word-centred approach to an image centred one. This idea is promoted also by Edwards (2012) and Dillon (2015) who see this as a refracting platform for Biblical themes which can be recycled though the arts. Echoes of Goldburg's epistemological pathway can be found in the Irish early childhood curriculum, *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA, 2009) which stresses the importance of the visual by noting that a child learns by seeing first before speaking (p. 34). Goldburg's theory also draws on the work of Kreitzer (1993), who explored the intersection between theology and film. In this nexus, the viewer is hermeneutically empowered, as the medium of film enables the viewer to examine the visual Biblical text for meaning. Goldburg does not envision engaging with the arts by way of entertainment. She calls for a *critical* engagement with the arts and the text where visual images function as a pathway into the biblical text. This interaction creates a dialectical relationship between the text and the viewer, producing a circle of interpretation. Through this, knowledge of the Bible is deepened and critiqued. The hermeneutical circle involves an interplay between reader and the text that brings about meaning (Thiselton, 2009; 2012). Osborne (2010) uses the term 'the hermeneutical spiral'. This denotes an upward and constructive process of moving from earlier pre-understanding to fuller comprehension, and then returning back to check and to review the need for correction or change. We cannot arrive at a picture of the whole without scrutinising the parts or pieces, nor can we tell what the individual pieces mean until we have some sense of the wider picture. Viladesau (2000) offers a very plausible critique of Carswell, wondering how effectively this methodology challenges religious traditions that view the arts as iconoclastic, such as naming the Divine in Islam and Judaism. Neale (2015) questions if art can be used as a pedagogical tool and what might the implications be for religious traditions. Examples from the Irish context show the relevance of Goldburg's

insights. During Holy Week, the RTÉ Arts programme *Arena* described religious art as the 'Bible for the illiterate' (RTE, April 2020). Goldburg (2010) writes that each cinematic still is a lexicon frame: it communicates a message, with the subjects coming from a variety of sectors, cultures and genders. Referenced in Chapter 1, John Byrne's photographic work *Dublin's Last Supper* (2004) includes customers, diners, commuters, tourists, and visitors to the Italian Quarter, thus radically interpreting Leonardo Di Vinci's famous fresco. The Last Supper or Passover/Pesach sits in the context of Jesus's last meal with his friends (1 Cor. 11:23-25; Mt 26:17-30; Mk 14:12-26; Lk 22:7-39; Jn 13:1-26). This visual still communicates a message about the place of religion in Irish society.

2.7.5 Cultural literacy

Moore, rather than call for Biblical literacy as such, suggests that we should be looking at the notion of cultural literacy (Hine, 2015, p. 60). Moore's research focuses on education for religion in the public sphere and her case studies draw on students attending private rather than public secondary schools. Moore calls for the study of Religion in a cross curricular fashion. Her research has relevance for 'sacred texts' as she advocates a pedagogical approach to texts by using foundational literature of world religions as a conduit to improving biblical literacy. An intercultural approach demands the examination of the Bible as literature, not as a standalone text but in tandem with other foundational religious texts such as the Qur'an, the Hindu Mahabharatha, and Tao Te Ching (Moore, 2007).

2.7.6 Interpretation, drawing on reception theory

Bible research would not be complete without the discussion of reception theory which acknowledges the reader's world in its theoretical underpinning. Biblical reception theory is an expanding area within biblical studies. It straddles the past to ascertain how biblical texts have been and continue to be interpreted within diverse cultural contexts such as art and popular culture, politics, fashion and sport (Dillon, 2017). Parris defines reception theory in this way: it

> rescues the Bible from being approached like other ancient texts, as a relic from the past. At the corporate level, it provides a means for us to engage our rich heritage of Bible interpretation in a manner that not only allows us to grasp how our tradition has shaped who we are, but also to realize that we are active participants in the ongoing process of that living tradition (2009, p. ix).

Reception theory dismisses value-neutral objectivism. The transformative nature of engagement with the text is such that 'it shapes readers by giving them a vision of what lies

beyond the self.' It delivers readers from 'narcissistic bondage to the self, from self-centred horizons, from self-affirmation and from self-love' (Thiselton, 2012, p. 290). Jauss, influenced by Gadamer, insists that texts carry 'a still unfinished meaning'. This challenges Learning Outcomes that are fixed and defined (Thiselton 2012). The LCRE LOs measure achievement and success in quantifiable terms but limit subjective interpretation.

While Parris's reception theory opens new insights on the role of the interpreter, there is an assumption that they are male or 'he' (2009, p.301). Given the patriarchal nature of the Bible, this researcher must guard against a singular gendered assumption which may limit the worldview of the reader. This theory is observed intertextually within the Bible when the writer of Luke places the words of Isaiah on the lips of Jesus in the Synagogue (Lk 4:17-21). Caravaggio's treatment of the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane is captured in *The Taking of Christ (1602)*, a painting that now hangs in the National Gallery of Ireland (Mt 26:47-56, Mk 14:32-52, Lk 22:47-53, Jn 18:2-12). The story of the Last Supper is given a local slant in John Byrne's *Dublin's Last Supper* (2004). Succinctly, reception theory goes beyond the binary of text-reader dialogue. It is also cognisant of a third aspect, that of the text's interpretation and application. Having reviewed the suggestions of scholars on how the Bible functions in the RE classroom and interpretive theory, this chapter will conclude with a summary of key learnings.

2.8. Chapter summary

The literature review serves to yield themes which inform and shape analysis. It enables a researcher to provide an overview of relevant methods, theories and gaps in existing works (Grant and Booth, 2009). This review adopted two key review pathways: firstly, an analysis of key LCRE documents and secondly, looking at the insights of biblical RE theorists who have developed a variety of paradigms and epistemological approaches to the sacred text. Chapter 2 presented a history of LCRE's evolution over 20 years and continued with a thorough assessment of the biblical sections in the syllabus. This shift in focus placed a lesser emphasis on the previous approach via the transmission of faith and an emphasis on knowledge. The focus on sacred text is warranted because it has played a unique and shaping role in Irish society. The review has exposed shortcomings within the LCRE syllabus. In the world of biblical studies, a variety of biblical centred approaches to text analysis exist such as narrative, historical, redaction and canonical criticism. However, LCRE employs very few. Beyond Section H, the Bible emerges as relatively peripheral within the programme, continuing a trend observed within JCRE. While focussing on the Bible, attention to its

expression as a sacred text across religious traditions reveals that Sacred Text as a phenomenon of religion is very underrepresented. Analysis of the perspectives of RE theorists such as Bowie, Carswell and Stead identified issues with some biblical approaches whilst suggesting how a changed perspective might benefit RE teaching within the Senior Cycle review (NCCA, 2019b). In 2029, it is envisioned that RE will incorporate Hebrew Studies (NCCA, 2022). Given the Bible encompasses part of the Jewish sacred text (the Tanakh), this is a current weakness within LCRE. The review identifies a need to survey Irish students and teachers on their engagement with the Bible in secondary LCRE classrooms. Chapter 3 sets a methodology to ascertain how Section H promotes biblical literacy considering this practitioner engagement with LCRE.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The Bible is widely held to be a sacred text of significance for Christianity and other religious traditions. From the ancient world to the present, the Bible's appropriation, transmission and reception in religious and cultural contexts has been the subject of much focus. Areas influenced by biblical texts include law, literature, politics and the arts (Anderson, 2018). Chapter 1 identified the problem that there is a perceived lack of engagement with the Bible in LCRE as evidenced by SEC data. Chapter 2 reviewed literature pertaining to the origins of LCRE and showed how the syllabus configuration limited the use of the Bible. It also explored the contribution of scholars in the field of biblical and religious education. To ascertain how equipped students are to engage with sacred text and how biblical literacy is promoted, chapter 3 presents a methodological pathway for the analysis of attitudes towards Section H. An important question for consideration is how the researcher views the Bible, synchronistically or diachronistically. On the one hand, is there one static Bible, historically anchored and objectively held, fixed with uniform, and singularly interpreted? Or, are there many 'Bibles', influenced by culture over time, as illustrated by the impact of language translation, visual arts and literature? This chapter seeks to outline a research process considering ontological and epistemological positioning and will justify why the employment of a case study is a best fit (Yin, 2014; Thomas, 2016).

3.2 Philosophical assumptions – Seeking Truth and Exploring a Best-Fit

Creswell and Creswell (2018) write that any research enquiry is driven by the quest to determine meaning, seek understanding and locate truth. Given the Bible centric focus of this research, biblical imagery will be employed to demonstrate research approaches. This quest for truth is echoed in the verbal interchange between the Roman Procurator Pontias Pilate and Jesus in the Passion narrative of John's Gospel (Jn 18:28-37).

> "You are a king, then!" said Pilate.
>
> Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. In fact, the reason I was born and came into the world is to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."
>
> "What is truth?" retorted Pilate. (Jn 18: 37-38a)

The informed researcher needs to ascertain what is known and unknown, whether truth can be observed objectively, or if there are multiple, subjective truths. The deciphering of philosophical tenets is paramount because of a tight relationship between the locus of truth and research practice (Dibley et al, 2020). The researcher must be aware that the investigator does not approach any aspect of the research endeavour from a neutral place or unpositioned blank canvas (Slife and Williams, 1995). Put another way, 'whether we are aware of it or not, we bring certain beliefs and philosophical assumptions to our research' (Creswell and Creswell, 2013, p. 15). This section will explore possible paradigms and outline the researcher's positionality.

3.2.1 Philosophical assumptions

Within the individual lies a unique suite of values and beliefs about the world, impacting upon the choice of a research pathway. Brown (2019) suggests that the importance of one's philosophical stance is such that when approaching research, the glasses the researcher wears are fitted with lenses which affect the approach and design. The individual's perception of knowledge or ontology, the location of truth or epistemology as encompassed through worldviews, must be acknowledged in the research endeavour. Sefotho (2015) identifies worldviews as 'cognitive, perceptual and affective maps that people use to make sense of the social landscape' (p. 25). Scholars incorporate these ideas into theories which are applied in different ways to frame and develop knowledge within the social sciences (Salmons, 2019, p. 41) The researcher's epistemology animates the methodological approach they bring to the research problem. The next section will explore worldviews to ascertain the best-fit for this research.

In the realms of educational enquiry two dominant paradigms are identified by Creswell and Creswell (2018) and Salomon (1991). Likened to the uprights of goal posts observed on a Gaelic football field, each upright illustrates an ontological, epistemological and oppositional stance.

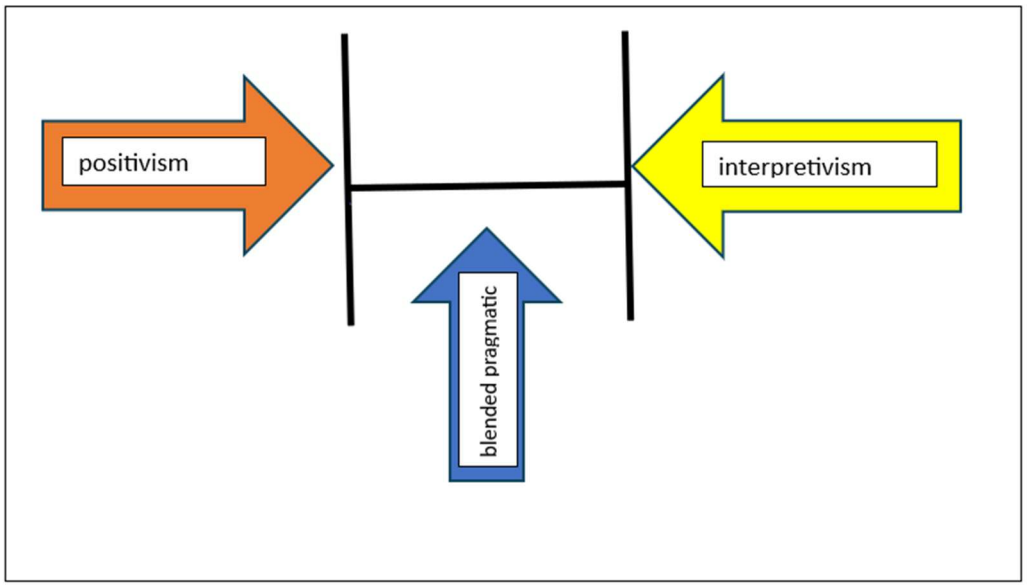


Figure 3.1: Representative image of research paradigms

For decades these research positions, differing in the view of truth and method, were akin to two biblical characters in the mythical narrative of the Philistine Goliath pitched against the Jewish David (1 Sam 17: 1-8; 48-50). In applied terms, these two cultural tribes or paradigms have historically been aligned against one another. The following section suggests that each paradigm is singularly limited by the intention of the research; however, their incorporation in a blended form holds potential.

3.2.2 Strategies of inquiry - The false promise of objectivism

David and Goliath 1 Sam 17:1-6

> 1 Now the Philistines gathered their forces for war and assembled at Sokoh in Judah. They pitched camp at Ephes Dammim, between Sokoh and Azekah. 2 Saul and the Israelites assembled and camped in the Valley of Elah and drew up their battle line to meet the Philistines.3The Philistines occupied one hill and the Israelites another, with the valley between them.
>
> 4 A champion named Goliath, who was from Gath, came out of the Philistine camp. His height was six cubits and a span.[a] 5 He had a bronze helmet on his head and wore a coat of scale armor of bronze weighing five thousand shekels[b]; 6on his legs he wore bronze greaves, and a bronze javelin was slung on his back. 7His spear shaft was like a weaver's rod, and its iron point weighed six hundred shekels.[c] His shield bearer went ahead of him.

The 'Goliath' paradigm dominated the research landscape until the 1980s. Shaped by an epistemological and ontological stance where truth is viewed objectively, positivism is underpinned by a belief that knowledge exists independently of the researcher (Salomon,

1991; Rahman, 2017). Truth is derived quantitatively and serves to validate theory (Leedy and Ormond, 2005, p. 95). The literature review in Chapter 2 identified an ontological truth derived from SEC data where truth is measured in Learning Outcomes. The *Chief Examiner's Report* (2008) revealed problematic engagement with Section H: *The Bible* in terms of popularity and achievement levels. A similar trend was observed with SEC's analysis of JCRE in relation to Section B: *The Foundations of Christianity* with its biblical links (NCCA, p. 22; p. 24).

The employment of an exclusive 'Goliath' paradigm brings forward several challenges and limitations. While the data supplied by the SEC helped to evaluate student response to aspects of the examination paper, negatively it objectifies students and takes no account of context such as school characteristics. Researching the importance of culture in the educational arena, Timperley (2015) identifies the embedded, wrap-around nature of context as 'wallpaper'. An objective 'Goliath' approach cannot be employed as the artefact is shaped by the colour and hue of its surrounds. The Bible, a book written by human authors and interpreted across time, is not detached from the reader/interpreter and their place. While oftentimes, believers in the Christian traditions saw the sacred text in static, objective terms, every phase of the evolution of the Bible has been interpreted and thus nuanced.

A positivist paradigm assumes that all schools engage with the Bible in value-free contexts and that schools react in uniform ways. This assumption warrants serious consideration as it can be axiologically problematic. Schools do not sit in value-free contexts, e.g. DEIS (Developing Educational Equality in Schools). They range in terms of stated ethos from Voluntary Catholic, Church of Ireland, Educate Together (ET), Education Training Board Ireland (ETBI), or Gaelscoileanna. Each school type will relate to the Bible in different ways, adopting a unique and sophisticated approach that pays nuanced attention to a variety of ethos and cultural contexts. A web of relationships emerges between the school and Section H: *The Bible*. Human experience is complex and multi-layered and a singular and exclusively positivist paradigm view of truth and reality will not capture this. Denscombe, identifying a positivist stance as a quantitative methodology, in her terms calls this, 'false promise' (1998, p. 205).

A further negative outcome of an exclusively positivist Goliath paradigm concerns sample size. Of the 52,144 sitting the Leaving Certificate in 2008, 778 (or 1.5% of the cohort) opted for RE; 610 students Higher Level and 168 Ordinary level (SEC, 2008). SEC reveal the sample size of those undertaking Ordinary level present a statistical problem. Candidates

opting for Section H: *The Bible* are reduced to statistical insignificance by an asterisk symbol. The *Chief Examiner's Report for RE* (SEC, 2008) states, 'it is not possible to engage in any meaningful statistical analysis of candidate performance' (p. 10).

In summary, while ontologically a positivist perspective observes one side of the methodological goalpost and communicates a positivist epistemological truth, this paradigm singularly employed, is ontologically and methodologically flawed. It does not capture the constructed meaning of social behaviour in a unique context (Sims and Smythe, in Dibley et al., 2020, p. xiii). It misses the subjective and interpretative nature of biblical engagement.

3.2.3 Strategies of inquiry - A constructivist subjective paradigm

In Figure 3.1, the second upright can be likened to the biblical role of the Jewish David, as outlined here:

1 Samuel 17:8-11; 48-50

> **8** Goliath stood and shouted to the ranks of Israel, "Why do you come out and line up for battle? Am I not a Philistine, and are you not the servants of Saul? Choose a man and have him come down to me. **9** If he is able to fight and kill me, we will become your subjects; but if I overcome him and kill him, you will become our subjects and serve us." **10** Then the Philistine said, "This day I defy the armies of Israel! Give me a man and let us fight each other." **11** On hearing the Philistine's words, Saul and all the Israelites were dismayed and terrified.
>
> **48** As the Philistine moved closer to attack him, David ran quickly toward the battle line to meet him. **49** Reaching into his bag and taking out a stone, he slung it and struck the Philistine on the forehead. The stone sank into his forehead, and he fell facedown on the ground. **50** So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine and killed him.

This stance represents not one singular ontology or singular truth, but rather multiple subjective realities which requires interpretation (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Termed relativism (Salmons, 2019) or constructivism or interpretivism (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004), this worldview can accommodate multiple subjective realities. In Ireland, for example, there have been nuanced differences in how the Bible is utilised across religious traditions. Prior to 1965, Catholics were discouraged from reading the Bible, a practice not acceptable to other Christian denominations (Acheson, 2002; Anderson, 2018). They did however hear the sacred text read in the context of liturgy. The text was embedded in Irish life for all denominations. Engagement by readers of the Bible, including this researcher, is neither uniform nor dictated. Rather, multiple meanings are influenced by factors such as life experience or ethos. Ontologically, the locus of truth and reality cannot be reduced to the simple or singular. Meaning is derived through the negotiation of experiences within the participant's social world, shaped by their socio-cultural milieu (Domoney-Lyttle, 2024).

Here, this is principally represented by the Church of Ireland or Catholic traditions, or the non-designated ETB sector. A suite of tools such as case studies, narrative capture and open interviews are required to elucidate the range of voices within this constructivist worldview.

3.2.4 Strategies of inquiry - The middle way of pragmatism

This research takes a blended qualitative-interpretivist approach, as represented in the crossbar or blended pragmatic paradigm in Figure 3.1. Both positivist and interpretivist paradigms work in synergy, helping to best understand how LCRE can develop biblical literacy. The strength of the blended approach results in a broader understanding of the phenomena for scrutiny than one paradigm alone might offer. A mixed method methodology can open up dynamic and innovative pathways. Clark and Ivankova define mixed methods as

> a process of research in which researchers integrate quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis to best understand a research purpose. The way this process unfolds in a given study is shaped by mixed methods research content considerations and researchers' personal, interpersonal and social contexts (2016, p. 3).

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie write that 'epistemological and paradigmatic ecumenism is within the research paradigm of mixed method research' (2004, p. 15). While a pragmatic research design blending positivist and constructivist stances is appealing, it is not without issues. The research paradigm net needs to be wide enough to capture a range of voices. This hybrid approach calls for a macro picture and brings to the fore several actors or groups that are essential parts of this narrative, including the SEC, DES, RTAI and the Teaching Council. Other important components for consideration include textbooks such as Sheehan's (2006) *The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text*, and Hegarty's teacher supplementary commentary on *The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text* (2003). Neither quantitative-positivist or qualitative-constructionist methodologies alone will offer a holistic picture. A qualitative-interpretivist approach employing a case study approach has greater and broader network capacity. Wieczorek and Hosseini (2021) argue that a uniqueness of social scientific research is its intention to understand social phenomenon and its ability to influence policy. The following section will outline the case and how it relates particularly to LCRE.

3.3 The Selection of the Case

The case focuses on the relationship between biblical literacy and the LCRE programme. A case study approach has a number of attractions, and its exploratory nature allows for the

use of data from multiple sites. It yields a snapshot of the LCRE's impact over two decades. A major advantage of a case study, as defined by Yin, is framed by

> the desire to understand complex social phenomena. In brief, the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real live events - such as individual life cycles, small group behaviour, organisational and managerial processes, neighbourhood changes, school performance, international relations and the maturation of industries (2009, p. 4).

This is supported by Cohen**,** Morrison and Mannion (2007) who consider that case studies 'enable readers to understand how ideas and abstract principles fit together' (p. 253). The holistic theory which underpins the case can be seen in the interconnectedness of units exhibited in the systematic literature review in Chapter 2. The research question seeks to explore the contribution of LCRE to the promotion of biblical literacy. Whilst endeavouring to build a picture of engagement with the Bible in the RE classroom, the researcher needs to guard against an assumption of a linear cause and effect scenario. While it is tempting to identify and methodologically analyse the individual parts in a piecemeal fashion, an informed approach should take account of a consistent and informed framework that is attentive to the whole and not just some parts. This is illustrated in the Figure 3.2 which follows.

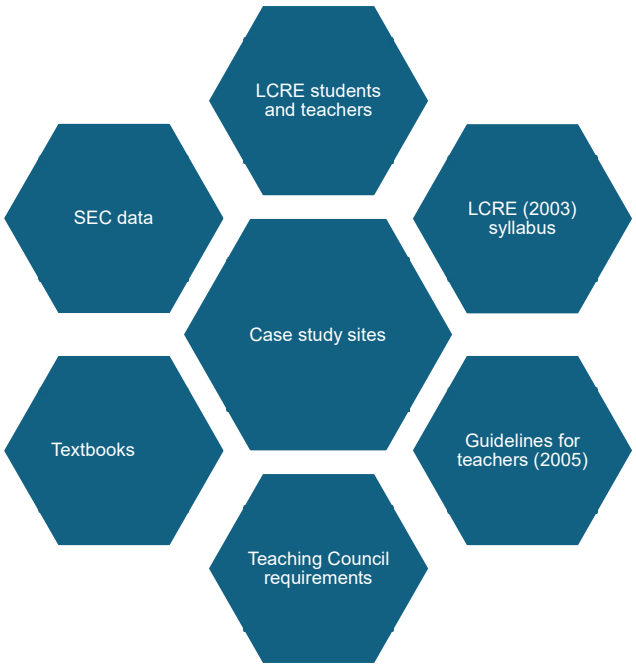


Figure 3.2: Aspects of the case

The case study permits a high level of investigation, a process that is akin to using jigsaw pieces to establish coherence within a range of evidence. The research will look at a variety of areas - the Bible in LCRE, SEC data, documentary analysis of Syllabi including LCRE 2003, the redrafted LCRE (NCCA, 1997) and JCRE (NCCA, 2000). Creswell and Creswell write that documentary analysis is an unobtrusive source of information (2018, p. 188). Morgan (2022) supports this by revealing how documentary analysis as a research method reduces ethical concerns; this will be further acknowledged in section 3.4.6. Cursory reference will be made to the Religious Education Leaving Certificate Guidelines for Teachers (NCCA, 2005), a document that was crafted to offer supportive guidelines and to assist RE teachers. The following section will review the Bible as a case study.

3.3.1 Aspects of the Case: The Bible

The role and function of the Bible in Irish culture is multifaceted, requiring a methodological approach that has a degree of sophistication (Blunnie, 2018; McNamara, 2018). There is not one universal or uniform Bible but rather several expressions or editions that straddle a range of languages (Acheson, 2002; Beal, 2011; Ó Fearghail, 2018; Perry and Grubbs, 2020). Examples include an indigenous Irish translation of the Bible (An Bíobla Naofa), the Contemporary English version (CEV), intended for those with lower levels of literacy, and the Dyslexic Bible. A qualitative interpretivist approach will be employed to determine how the Bible is viewed in RE curricula. The concept of the Bible is broadened by the multiple interpretations and visualisations. Examples include Children's Bibles (Dalton, 2016) and the 'Biblezine' that presents the Bible in comic style (Beal, 2011, p. 64; Domoney-Lyttle, 2024).

The Bible is shaped by how it has developed within particular traditions. For some Voluntary schools, education *into* the Bible is a process that encourages faith development by moving the hearer/reader towards faith. Other schools such as non-designated Education Training Board schools (ETB) approach RE and thus the Bible as education *about* the sacred text. Given the ETB multidenominational ethos, the Bible as a source is learned *from* the tradition and is not given priority status. It is held alongside sacred texts from other religious traditions. The case or 'phenomenon' under study therefore experiences multiple interactions in wide-ranging contexts. The goal is to strive for a 'thick' description (Geertz, 1973) which aims to shape a narrative regarding the cultural artefact of the Bible and its role in RE in the Irish context. The next section will identify another aspect of the case, that of SEC data.

3.3.2 Aspects of the Case: SEC data

The jigsaw piece in 3.2 represents the aggregated results of 6th Year RE students in their examinations. SEC data provides one piece of the research puzzle, as part of a complex and interwoven set of 'puzzle pieces' that can illuminate attitudinal response to the Bible by students and teachers. The case study draws on numerical information, derived from the sample cohort of LC students in 2008 and 2013. The data is drawn from the examination context, namely a time-limited and pressurised situation. LCRE is completed over two school years and students sit either Higher or Ordinary level paper. It is assessed in a two-hour (Ordinary level) or a 2.5-hour (Higher level) examination.

3.3.3 Aspects of the Case: LCRE Syllabus

The syllabus warrants a case study methodology that is robust enough to facilitate the analysis of documents to highlight relevant insights. A documentary analysis of the syllabus is another approach which provides a contextual backdrop to the syllabus worthy of methodological consideration. All syllabi are ideologically constructed, and syllabus inclusion also exhibits a syllabus exclusion. This rationale applies to the Syllabus as the first State-approved Religious Education syllabus (Cullen, 2022b). The significance of this reality cannot be methodologically underestimated. Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2007), citing Habermas (1972), note that knowledge and its selection is neither neutral nor innocent, calling the researcher to acknowledge a heuristic exploration of phenomena. They see the rationale behind curriculum as controlled, uniform, predictable, and largely behaviourist in outcome, thus sharing commonality with a positivist paradigm (p. 31). Education is not politically neutral and syllabus document deconstruction is influenced by the interchange of actors and informs the final syllabus document. Given LCRE is also interpreted by textbook writers, the following section will explore this aspect.

3.3.4 Aspects of the Case: LCRE textbooks and Teacher Support texts

Student textbooks prepared for LCRE and Section H are part of the case analysis. The syllabus has been hermeneutically interpreted by textbook writers (Sheehan, 2006; Hegarty, 2003). Hegarty was the author of the Section H volume which captured his nuanced approach within the context of LCRE. When the RE syllabus was crafted, Cassidy and Devitt in their preface to Unit H: *The Bible* identified the need to support LCRE teachers with background materials across the units. A series entitled *Into the Classroom* was one such support. At this point, it is notable to state that the JCRE (NCCA, 2000) does not mention the Bible in the

entire syllabus. The analysis of terms in Chapter 2 indicated that this term does not feature in LCRE Section B: *Christianity*.

3.3.5 Aspects of the Case: The Teaching Council of Ireland

The Teaching Council, established under the Teaching Council Act of 2001, sets out requirements for teacher registration, assesses teacher credentials, and determines the preservice accreditation that RE teachers must have so that they can teach in the post-primary sector. To teach RE, the Council requires a 'degree in RE or Theology or Religious Studies (Level 8 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NQF)'. The RE syllabus, crafted by the NCCA and approved by the Minister of Education, ensures that Universities prepare pre-service teachers to attain these standards. Examples of tertiary providers and their degree titles include:

- St Patrick's Pontifical College, Maynooth (SPCM) - B Theol / BA Theol
- D.C.U. /Mater Dei – B Rel Ed, Bachelor of Religious Education/B Rel Sc, Religious Science
- Trinity College - BA Religion
- St Angela's Sligo - BEd Religious Education (with Home Economics)
- St Patrick's College, Carlow - BA in Arts and Humanities
- BA in Education, Business Studies and Religious Studies, MIC, Thurles
- University College Cork BA - Religions and Global Diversity

The degree titles highlight the range of expertise taught in these colleges, whether it be in Theology, Religion(s) or Religious Education. The nuanced difference in providers is evidenced by the fact that SPCM for example, has had a long-established faculty of biblical studies. Under the umbrella of the National University of Ireland, UCD taught Hebrew and related semitic languages up until 2008 (Anderson, 2018). These determined the expertise of RE teachers in niche areas, including their biblical familiarity.

Bell and Watters' documentary process states that the 'guiding principle in document analysis is nevertheless that everything should be questioned' (2014, p. 126). Teaching Council requirements for RE teachers, outlined in *Teaching Council Registration Curricular Subject Requirements Post-Primary* (Teaching Council, 2013) has evolved over the lifetime of LCRE. Two most recent guiding documents for preservice study requirements for RE teachers will be analysed.

Table 3.1: Teaching Council Registration, Curricular Subject Requirements for Post-Primary 2013-2020

Time period: from 2017 – 2022 (Teaching Council, 2013)	Time period: from 1 Jan 2023 onwards (Teaching Council, 2020)
Study **all** of the following six areas	Study **5 out of seven** of the following areas
I. Sacred Texts including the Bible II. Christianity - Origins and Contemporary Experience III. World Religions IV. Secular Belief Systems V. Ethics VI. Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion	i. Sacred Texts including the Bible ii. Christianity – Origins and Contemporary Experience iii. World Religions iv. Secular Belief Systems v. Ethics vi. Systematic Theology vii. Philosophy of Religion

As part of ITE, during the period 2017-22, six key areas for compulsory study included 'Sacred Texts including the Bible'. This changed form 2023, as Table 3.1 demonstrates. University providers had to ensure that their degrees covered five of seven curriculum areas. Introducing the value of choice had implications for the Bible, given its prior compulsory status. There has been no compulsion for RE teacher graduates from 2023 onwards to have engaged substantively with the Bible in Tertiary contexts. Future analysis might evaluate the impact of this decision on teacher classroom confidence to promote biblical literacy; this will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Changes in the Teaching Council requirement have implications for teaching the compulsory philosophical area, Section A: *The Search for Meaning.* This is because the *Philosophy of Religion*, like *Sacred Texts/The Bible*, was previously a compulsory area of study but now had optional status in preservice University studies. The Council insists that RE teachers demonstrate 'sufficient knowledge, skills and understanding to teach the Religious Education syllabus' (Teaching Council, 2013, p. 43; 2020 p. 31). Given the optional nature of preservice themes including *Philosophy of Religion* and its compulsory status in LCRE (Section A: *The Search for Meaning*), RE teachers may not necessarily be fully prepared to teach LCRE in its current form. This has further ramifications for other optional units such as Section B: *Christianity*, Section C: *World Religions*, and Section D: *Morality,* which have biblical links. The analysis of Teaching Council documentation reveals that the status of the Bible is in possible further jeopardy. The following section will profile LCRE teachers and students who form part of this study.

3.3.6 Aspects of the Case: Data Collection, LCRE Teacher survey

The aim of the research is to ascertain how LCRE develops biblical literacy. In order to obtain an overview into this question, two descriptive surveys were used. The importance of engaging with LCRE teachers and LCRE students is a central exploratory aspect. An initial survey of RE teachers was undertaken to ascertain teacher experience, perception of and attitudes to the Bible in LCRE. According to the Teaching Council of Ireland, whose function is to register all teachers and their credentials as certified to teach, a cohort of 4078 teachers were registered to teach RE (Teaching Council, 2020). Many RE teachers registered with the Teaching Council share membership of the RTAI and it was through this conduit that access to RE teachers was obtained. This subject association is a non-statutory organisation whose purpose is to resource and support RE teachers in the Republic. The RTAI has typically between 200 and 300 members. However, their membership in 2018 rose to a record 400 when a contentious policy Circular Letter 0013/2018 and Circular Letter 0062/2018 were issued (Roe, 2020). The response rate of 21 RE teachers who then engaged with a research survey (n=21). In this initial phase, data was derived from a questionnaire designed by this researcher using Google forms and carried out between May to July 2021. The online self-administered survey investigated teacher engagement with LCRE and the Bible. This method is a convenient way of deriving nationwide data across school type and geographical spread. The instrument is conducive to engagement with an online format which is cost-effective and methodologically meaningful. The survey had a significant portion of open qualitative questions to determine general trends and broad patterns of

observance (Appendix 12). It also served to explore the levels of synergy or dissonance between LCRE policy and practice, or syllabus intention and classroom reality. The study was ethically approved by DCU Ethics committee and all who participated in the process gave permission for their data to be used (see Appendix 8 and 9). The twenty-one teachers were identified by the anonymised code T1 to T21. All LCRE teachers were qualified to teach RE under the Teachers' Council pre 2023 requirement, meaning that 'Sacred Texts including the Bible' were a mandatory part of initial teacher education. Given this ontology and epistemology, a survey methodology was required to establish information about current practice by asking RE teachers to respond to survey questions such as:

(1) Do you teach the optional Section H: *The Bible*. Why / why not?
(2) Which Bible texts are used and why are these selected?
(3) What methodologies do you employ when engaging with Bible texts?
(4) What is your previous experience with the Bible?

In 2019, the number of LCRE students nationally was 1293. In 2022, this number dipped to 983 (see Table 3.3). While it is outside the remit of this thesis to explore why numbers are low, this has a direct bearing on the available pool of LCRE teachers and students. Of the 21 RE teachers, all taught the syllabus. However, a minority (n=3) had prepared students for the LCRE examination. The small scale of RE respondents needs to be highlighted (n=21). Munn and Drever (1995), whose work focuses on small-scale research, contend that that 'you can prove anything with statistics' (p. 49). They suggest that researchers should interpret results by leaning away from numeracy, and bridging connections between responses. Engaging with their insights, some general statistics will be used to profile the cohort. Greater emphasis will be placed on network links through harnessing insights. LCRE teacher respondents taught in both rural and urban schools in the Republic. 86% (n=18) identified as female and 14% (n=3) as male. The majority had more than five years teaching experience. Educators from a range of school sectors were represented: 66% (n=14) from Voluntary Catholic, 9.5% (n=2) from Voluntary Church of Ireland, 9.5% from ETB (n=2), and 14% (n=3) from Community / Comprehensive. The Educate Together sector was not represented for reasons outlined in Chapter 1. The teacher profile did not include any LCRE teacher in a Gaelscoil context.

Across school type, the socio-economic profile was broadly represented. This was observed by participants identifying their DEIS status (Developing Equality of Opportunity in Schools). This DES policy is designed to give targeted support to schools who experience concentrated disadvantage. Here the intentional consequence is to improve educational

outcomes and student engagement (DES, 2017). One-third of the teachers identified as DEIS schools (*n*=7), while two-thirds were from a non-DEIS setting (*n*=14). Most respondents 86% (*n*=18) taught in non-fee-paying schools, with 14% (*n*=3) working in fee-charging schools. A range of religious and other-than-religious views were represented with 81% (*n*= 17) of teachers identifying as Catholic, 9.5% (*n*= 2) Church of Ireland, and 9.5% (*n*=2) who identified with no religious tradition. All respondents met the requirements to teach RE as outlined by the Teaching Council and referenced earlier.

Profiling the 21 respondents, as mentioned, only 14% (*n*=3) teachers had taught Unit H for the LC examination. Two were Voluntary secondary (one co-ed; the other, boys only), the third being an ETB (DEIS). SEC quantitative data shows a relatively balanced gendered-uptake of the subject (2008; 2013; 2022). Attentive to scale, Munn and Drever (1995) note that the pool presented is too small to validate patterns.

3.3.7 Profiling and Data Collection: LCRE Students and Teachers

A second survey directed at the LCRE cohort was undertaken in order to discern how students experience and navigate LCRE. Given that approximately 2% cohort of students study LCRE, the challenge was to source students who would volunteer to take part in focus group interviews. The SEC indicated that LC examinations are held at 718 second-level schools and 102 non-school institutions such as Youthreach and other further education centres; special schools; private colleges; prisons and youth detention centres SEC data revealed 92 centres where LCRE was examined (SEC, 2020). From this a range of schools were approached and invited to participate (see Appendix 7).

Focus group methodology was employed as a way to obtain detailed information on 6th Yr LCRE students. This focus group instrument was selected for a variety of reasons. Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2007) identify group interviews as a useful tool with minors as they function in a way that is less intimidating than individual interviews (p. 374). Allowing dialogue and conversation, the student focus group stands out as a valuable instrument within the qualitative research tool kit. Morgan (1988) in Cohen, Mannion and Morrison (2011, p. 376) defines the focus groups approach as

> a form of group interview, though not in the sense of a backwards and forwards, between interviewer and group. Rather, the relevance is on the interaction within the group who discuss a topic supplied by the researcher.

Focus groups are attentive to the power dynamic between researcher and participants. Moreover, focus group interviews can challenge existing power balances. Group interviews invite open responses from the collective, not the individual, whilst challenging and extending respondents' ideas and introducing new ideas into the discussion (p. 375).

This researchers' philosophy of education, situated epistemologically in a liberational paradigm, views participants as active agents of knowledge and experience (Lundy, 2018). Focus groups are one way in which participants are empowered to speak in their words, a way not dominated by written literacies, a skill which the SEC captures through its data. Orality on the other hand is a conduit and a data pathway not utilised by the SEC. Focus groups enable the researcher to gather data on opinions, values and attitudes (Cohen, Mannion and Morrison, 2007, p. 376). The principal goal is to establish how students understand and make sense of their lives in relation to the LCRE syllabus and the Bible. Student voice functions as a triangulation tool. The data derived from the student focus groups broadens the perspectives as students are sourced from three school types: Church of Ireland, Voluntary Catholic, and ETBI.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007) acknowledge the limitation of using a small group of students. They are in an 'unnatural' setting; as such, they are somewhat contrived as being unrepresentative of the entire cohort. This was mitigated by the gathering of student focus groups in their familiar school situation. Questions were posed, responses were gleaned, and student interactions observed. This process was recorded using a laptop and a transcript was generated within MS Word. Focus groups were sourced through contact with the RTAI; schools of interest were identified and emailed directly to ascertain availability to participate. Three schools were selected, each with six self-nominated students from each site, or 18 in total (n=18). All student participants had taken the State examination at JCRE level and were preparing to sit LCRE. The analysis of student responses will take a twofold pathway. Initially analysis will ascertain student engagement with LCRE in broad terms, specifically their motivation for selecting LCRE.

Schools A, B and C are identified as follows and a summary of their context and level of LCRE engagement follow.

Table 3.2: Coding summary of the three LCRE schools

	School A	School B	School C
Ethos	Voluntary Catholic	Education and Training Board (ETB)	Church of Ireland (CoI)
Sitting State LCRE	Yes	Yes	Yes
Mixed school	No	Yes	Yes
Broad location	Urban	Large urban	Semi urban
Studied Section H: *The Bible*	Yes, coursework	No	Yes, coursework
Studied Section B: *Christianity*	Yes	No	No

Strategies were employed to protect the identity of participants, via the process of employing pseudonyms. This is guided by an ethical approach to research and data collection which is underpinned by the value of respecting the privacy of participants (Appendix 8, 9 and 11). The student identifiers for the three schools are as follows:

	School A	School B	School C
Student identifier	SA1-SA6	SB1-SB6	SC1-SC6

LCRE students were drawn from a range of cultures and school ethos. The profiles of the three schools follow.

- Participant Profile for School A

Six 6th Year LCRE students would take the LCRE exam in June 2022. These students had two years' experience of the LCRE syllabus and completed Section H: *The Bible* as part of their coursework. This was an all-girls voluntary school in a regional urban centre outside of Dublin. These six students came from a range of cultural backgrounds, self-identifying as either Irish, African or Polish.

- Participant Profile for School B

Six students had two years' experience of LCRE syllabus and attended an ETB mixed school in a satellite town of Dublin. They were approaching the end of 6th year in 2022. They had two years' experience of the LCRE syllabus, and had not selected Section H: *The Bible* as part of their coursework. These six students represented a variety of cultural backgrounds and genders.

❖ Participant Profile for School C

Six students had two years' experience of LCRE syllabus and attended a mixed Church of Ireland outside Dublin. The school has a history of offering LCRE since its inception in 2003. They completed *Section H: The Bible* for terminal examination, not as coursework.

The macro profiling of LCRE students at a national level reveals their minority status in terms of subject selection. Less than 2% of LC students selected RE as one of their examination subjects (SEC, 2023). Despite a gradual but marginal increase in uptake from its first year of assessment in 2005, current trends which Table 3.3 reveals, illustrate a contraction since 2011, but a slight increase in more recent years.

Table 3.3: Uptake of Religious Education examination at Leaving Certificate from 2005-2024

Year	Total number of Leaving Certificate candidates	Total number of LC candidates sitting Religious Education	% total LC candidates sitting Religious Education
2005	54,073	80	0.1%
2006	50,955	352	0.7%
2007	50,873	535	1.1%
2008	52,144	778	1.5%
2009	54,197	1013	1.87%
2010	54,480	962	1.77%
2011	54,344	1085	2%
2012	52,592	1186	2.3%
2013	52,767	1280	2.4% (highest)
2014	54,025	1221	2%
2015	55,044	1167	2.1%
2016	55,707	1320	2%
2017	55,770	1309	2%
2018	54,400	1189	2.2%
2019	56,071	1293	2.3%
2020	61,063	1306	2.1%
2021	61,125	1119	1.8%
2022	61,107	983	1.6%
2023	61,736	1013	1.6%
2024	60,839	1250	2%

(data adapted from SEC and rounded to the nearest whole number)

Research beyond the domain of this study is recommended to ascertain why the uptake of LCRE is particularly low. Given RE's fringe status, it would be of benefit to explore why students select RE or not, as part of their optional suite of LC subjects. Bronfenbrenner's theoretical framework may provide some insight here and is further discussed.

Similar to data from the teacher cohort, the information derived was closely examined. Codes were allocated identifying categories which were then synthesised into themes. Examples of Braun and Clark's thematic analysis (2013; 2022) can be found in Appendix 10. The following findings will be discussed in Chapter 4, through the theoretical LCRE framework:

- LCRE develops students' knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes (KUSA)
- Bible Assessment: benefits and challenges
- Limited knowledge of the Bible

3.3.8 Pilot Teachers and students

The Google Forms questionnaire was piloted prior to the administration of the actual survey of RE teachers and students. Of the four adults involved in this pilot, two were supervisors of this research. All respondents were or are RE teachers. The pilot survey instrument was also undertaken to ascertain the level of clarity in the questions. A pilot study was undertaken with a group of 6th Yr students in a mixed cohort school (not involved in the final cohort). Questions were trialled to ascertain the field-validity of the survey (Creswell and Creswell, 2018). Preliminary interviews were conducted to evaluate the nature of the survey items and questions presented.

The Feedback indicated that only a small level of modification of the initial questionnaire was needed for both groups. During this trial, the functional operation of the devices to record focus group data was also tested. Post piloting, ten focus group questions were sent to the candidates' RE teacher in advance of data collection (Appendix 2). This was to give students time to consider their reposes as they were invited to speak about their experience of the LCRE curriculum. The following section outlines how RE teacher data and student data will be analysed using thematic analysis, a common mode of evaluation in the domain of social sciences. This is defined as 'a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clark, 2006, p. 79).

3.4 Approach to Data Analysis: Thematic coding and analysis

Thematic analysis is a 'garden path analysis' (Richards, in Bazeley, 2009, p. 9) used by social researchers such as Braun and Clark (2006; 2013; 2022). Data is derived from the grounded realities of teachers and students. Thematic analysis regards truth not as a finite end point but as an orientation or signal. This approach has been selected because as well as reporting on the relationship between participants and the Bible, it also serves to

communicate how participants understand text. Braun and Clark stress that this approach reveals not only the themes that are derived from data, but also the theoretical and conceptual bedrocks that help to shape this. One disadvantage of this approach is that its interpretive nature can lead to concern regarding trustworthiness. This can be mitigated through the process of triangulation. Thematic analysis encompasses six phases. Braun and Clark (2013; 2022) stress the wisdom of not applying a strict linear engagement, or a uni-directional analysis. It shares common ground with the concept of the hermeneutical circle from Chapter two, where the interplay between reader and text brings about meaning (Thiselton, 2009; 2012).

Phase 1: Data familiarisation and writing familiarisation notes

Phase one asks what is significant about the data. Known as the bedrock phase, this stage demands that the researcher holds on to the research question while initially surveying the responses. This is to ascertain what perspectives or assumptions emerge in the responses. Acknowledging the reflective nature of the research process, the researcher is invited to question how one feels when reading and reacting to the data.

Phase 2: Systematic Data Coding

The second phase involves systematic data coding, tagging all segments of the text where research-relevant meaning is found (Braun and Clark, 2022, p. 53). This means that a code is attached to capture what is analytically systematic in the data. Open coding will be used which does not employ pre-determined codes (Maguire and Delahunt, 2017). The researcher needs to ask if the codes are semantic or latent. Semantic meaning looks at how participants intentionally communicate at a surface level. Latent codes call for deeper analysis as they refer to the values and assumptions that underpin the communicated meaning, to the beliefs and values that underpin participant response, and the hidden curriculum. Reflecting on the RE teacher data, the knowledge-based theory of RE appropriation which underpins this curriculum came through in RE teacher responses.

Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Codes are likened to bricks which are used as building blocks for themes (Braun and Clark, 2022, p. 69). Through the lens of shared meaning, the focus of this phase is to cluster responses into a central idea or concept, drawing codes together. Braun and Clark favour a consideration of the role frequency plays in working with data, unlike Bazley (2009) who calls for a tally of quantitative, or numerical responses.

Phase 4: Developing and Reviewing themes

This phase identifies the theme, and the data employed to support the theme. Having explored the nature and character of the theme, it examines if the themes capture the wide-ranging story of the data set. It involves checking the themes against the coded collated data.

Phase 5: Refining, defining and naming themes

By attaching a name or label that can divide the theme into levels including subthemes, this phase is characterised by a definition of the main theme. The researcher is prompted to review and ensure that the theme relevantly captures the story or concept.

Phase 6: Writing the report

This involves telling a story and convincing the reader of the validity of the analytic claims.

Having presented how data will be analysed, the following section will outline Bronfenbrenner's conceptual framework. This will assist awareness of the how the individual is influenced by different environmental contexts. This is important where biblical literacy is concerned, as a relationship with the sacred text may be captured across multiple spheres.

3.5 Culture and Context matter: Bronfenbrenner's conceptual framework

The RE curricula consistently call for the holistic development of the individual. Bronfenbrenner's framework will be used as a lens. This views the individual as more than a statistic. Thomas (2016) drawing on Bronfenbrenner's idea of an ecological system will be employed during data analysis in Chapter 5. Represented visually below, the model favours a strong sense of individuality, as it is aware of the complexity of human lives. It defines context or 'microsystem' as a specific setting or set of circumstances. In the case of students, this includes the immediate setting of the classroom. This locus is where the participants directly interact within the case study. This theory is pertinent when exploring specific school types and the values these entities stand for. Culture and context matter. The positivist SEC data takes no consideration of this, but a constructivist case study does. Greene and Harris (2011) in their *Growing Up in Ireland: National Longitudinal Study of Children* observe that Bronfenbrenner's conceptual framework embraces a system where the child is central, while acknowledging the multi-layered influences on the human (Bronfenbrenner, 1996). The model parallels this and presents a whole-child view.

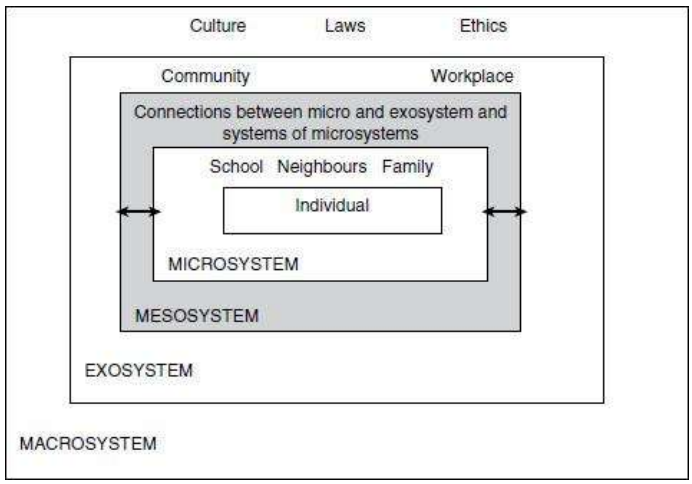


Figure 3.3: Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems

(as sourced from Thomas, 2016, p. 59)

The theory is particularly pertinent with reference to the Bible, as the text is often misunderstood or read in a uniform or one-dimensional manner. Bible interpretation is influenced by school ethos, culture and religious tradition. The model allows for a review of school cases to ascertain how schools operate in different contexts, whether they are Church of Ireland, Catholic, or ETBI (non-designated). The case study approach facilitates an exploration of the web of relationships between the school, its ethos and tradition. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems supports this method.

3.6 Ethical considerations: use of pseudonyms, validity and reliability

In order for the research process to be valid, rigour needs to be applied and demonstrated. Yin (2009) identifies several aspects including construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability. Creswell and Creswell (2018) use synonyms to explain validity such as 'trustworthiness', 'authenticity' and 'credibility' (p. 200). This is mirrored in Lincoln and Guba who posit that trustworthiness of research is important to evaluating its worth (2013). Quality control mechanisms include 'multiple validity procedures' (p. 200). The employment of triangulation is one such example. Synergy is observed when quantitative and qualitative evidence from multiple sites is used in a coherent manner. Examining convergence across the loci of data collection will allow for triangulation and integration. Power dynamics have been addressed in section 3.4.7.

3.7 Chapter summary

Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2011) claim that 'the setting up of the research is a balancing act, for it requires the harmonising of planned possibilities with workable,

coherent practice' (p. 73). This chapter clarifies the research paradigm, as not all approaches hold equal status in terms of epistemologies, ontologies, or methodologies (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011, p. 13). The perspectives of 21 LCRE teachers and 18 LCRE students has been examined to ascertain how LCRE promotes biblical literacy. Chapter 4 will present the findings from the data collected from LCRE teachers and 6th year students. This research sits in the interpretivist paradigm and favours the mixed method case study as a robust tool. Case studies strive to portray 'what it is like' to be in a particular situation, to catch the 'close up reality … of participants' lived experiences, of thoughts about and feelings for a situation' (Cohen, Manion, Morrison, 2011, p. 254). Morais, as cited by Stynes (2014, pp 80-81) defines a case study as a 'rather versatile qualitative research technique'. Sitting within the realist philosophical perspective, it has high external validity because 'the emphasis is on the synthesis rather than the measurement' of statistical generalisations.

Chapter 4: Themes, Discussion and Findings

4.1 Introduction

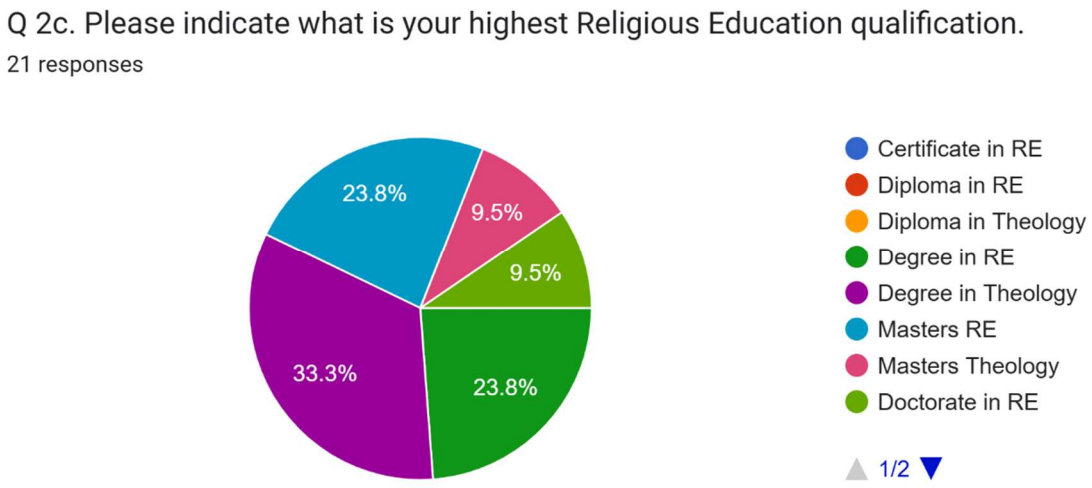
This chapter has a two-pronged aim. It will begin by presenting findings from LCRE teacher and student narratives regarding their engagement with the Bible in LCRE. Ascertaining to what extent the LCRE promotes biblical literacy, this will be followed by an analysis of themes and findings arising from the survey. The aim is to present a narrative which in the words of Patton (2015) 'can be a rich story about a person, an event, organization, event, campaign or program' (p. 259). The chapter will begin by outlining how data was analysed.

4.2 Thematic Map

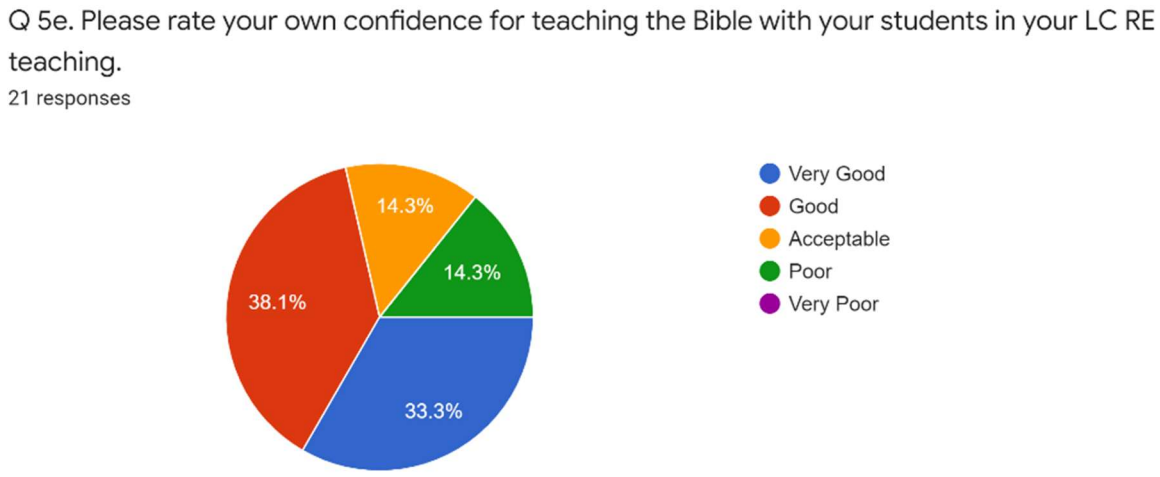
Braun and Clark's thematic analysis is rooted in the domain of the social scientific (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The six phases of coding as referenced in Section 3.5 were adopted and demonstrate how data was analysed and findings derived.

4.2.1 LCRE Teacher data, Theme 1: Teacher confidence linked to qualifications

Teacher responses revealed that the RE teacher cohort was highly qualified. All teachers hold a Level 8 degree (Teaching Council, 2020, p. 31). Within this group, two have doctorates, five have a Masters in RE, and two have a Masters in Theology. These exceed the Teaching Council's essential requirement for teaching RE.



Teachers' confidence in teaching the Bible was assessed via a Likert ranking question. 86% identified their self-confidence as acceptable, good or very good, while 14% identified their confidence as being poor in this area.



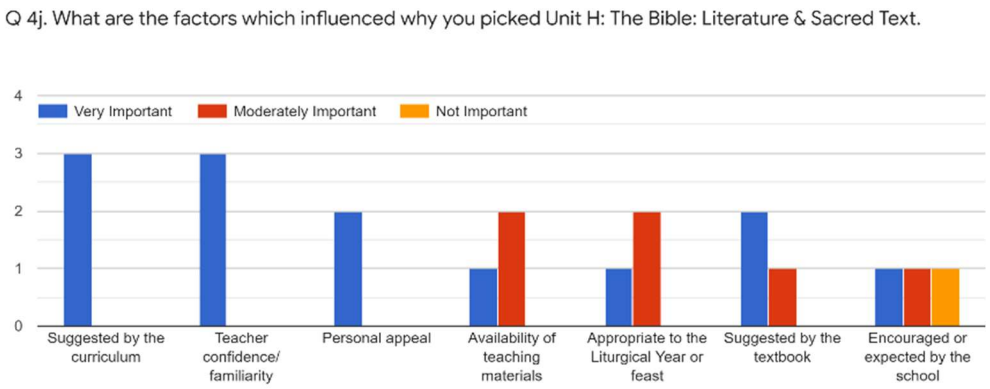
A significant correlation in attitudes was revealed between teachers' undergraduate area of study and their expressed level of confidence. Positively, one teacher said: 'My background in Biblical studies in … University has helped my confidence' (T15). While another wrote: 'I have a primary degree in Hebrew, Theology and Biblical Studies [and] a Masters in Theology' (T21). Confidence when engaging with the Bible was noted by another RE teacher who had 'studied theology' and had 'a fair appreciation of biblical exegesis' (T19). Yet another cited their interest in Judaism as a helpful anchor when approaching the Bible. The relevant RE undergraduate degrees/qualifications in Irish universities cover a range of different emphases, with competencies ranging from Religious Education to Theology, to Arts courses specialising in Religion. Biblically confident LCRE teachers were identified as practitioners who had studied biblical studies as a component part of their degree. Collectively these responses suggest a strong link between foundational biblical studies as part of preservice training, and biblical competence. In summary, the significance of engagement with biblical studies as part of teacher qualification appeared to account for increased teacher competence and confidence.

Less confident RE teachers cited a lack of familiarity and competence with the biblical text. Acknowledging a deficit, one wrote: 'I felt I could really benefit from CPD in this area' (T1). Teachers further identified a dearth of resources to support their teaching of biblical studies, coupled with a call for CPD to support teaching and learning in this area. The text-heavy nature of the Bible was identified as problematic. One wrote: 'the difficult content and context of the various books on the Bible has deterred me' (T1). Yet another felt that 'the

current school textbook isn't great' (T15). In summary, LCRE teachers state that their preservice university education played a significant role in determining their positive engagement and view of the Biblical text. However, its text nature coupled with limited resources were identified as barriers to engagement. The following section will explore how LCRE influences teachers' use of the Bible.

4.2.2 LCRE Teacher data, Theme 2: Teacher engagement with the Bible is influenced by LCRE

The survey revealed that LCRE strongly influenced teachers' engagement with the Bible in their classrooms. 86% (*n*=18) agreed or strongly agreed that Bible use was attributed to its presentation within the syllabus. As their guiding document, LCRE influenced their level of engagement with the Bible.



Teacher specifically employed the Bible in the optional unit Section B: *Christianity: Origins and Contemporary Expressions* 86% (*n*=18). Other responses include:

- 'All sections, but *Section B* much more than others' (T3)
- 'Section B: *Christianity'* (T7)
- '*Christianity section* [Section B] and elements of the *Search for Meaning section [section A]*' (T16)

Almost all teachers were positive in how they saw students benefitting from studying the Bible. Commenting on the LCRE framework, teacher responses include:

- Positive skill development, 'Research skills' employed' (T19)

- Affective domain where study of the Bible 'opens their minds to different possibilities and perspectives (T5).
- Development /growth in knowledge (self and other) where study of the Bible lead to a 'deeper understanding of what they have previously learned about it at junior cert level (T13)
- Growth in understanding: 'It can elaborate on Section B Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions' (T20).

Significant in the responses are the insights the Bible offers into history. The links between the Bible and history were noted by several respondents where its study led to an historical 'understanding [of] the close links between Christianity and Judaism,' as well as the impact it has had on the world'. It might benefit students, making them to be more aware of the 'reality of the Bible and its influence as opposed to many misconceptions of what it is about or has to say on many issues.' (T15). Historical and interdenominational links were forged when study of the Bible lead to 'increased understanding of Jewish and Christian sacred traditions' (T3). Some of these responses correlate with teachers who had read biblical studies during their pre-service training, increasing their confidence and competence.

Teachers were asked to give an example of where and how the Bible was used in class. *S*everal RE teachers employed text from the Bible when exploring *The Passion Narrative* (Mt 26-27, Mk 14-15, Lk 22-23, Jn 12-19). Here, Gospel texts were used to illustrate the contextual background to the Passion of Jesus (Mk 14:53-65). Asked what the foundational aim behind this selection was, one RE teacher wrote about the supporting nature of the text: 'Section B - Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus' (T3). Another wrote, 'We used a lot for the Passion' to understand 'the contemporary view of the day' (T13). 19% (*n*=4) overtly referred to using the Bible when undertaking the optional unit Section H. For example, one wrote 'Elective on the Bible [Section H] if undertaken' (T11). Some teachers identified the influence of LCRE on biblical text selection: 'It really depends on the sections I happen to be covering' (T12). Another wrote:

> doing the philosophers like Plato and Socrates is less likely to refer to gospels, but when covering the Section B part of the course [Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions], they come up every week. In Section A [The search for meaning and values] divine revelation would require looking at the Bible a lot, while doing Descartes obviously not! (T15).

These sentiments chime with another practitioner (T12) who availed of 1 Corinthians 13 to demonstrate 'the centrality of the transformative power of Agape in our search for meaning'. The meaning-making component of engagement with text was cited by

another RE teacher (T16) when engaging with Section A, citing John 10:10 ['you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free'] as a 'reflection on the meaning of life'. This directly links to Section A which aims to 'to examine the philosophical and religious answers to the questions of the existence of God, and the nature of divine revelation.' (LCRE, p. 11). In summary, engagement with the Bible was influenced by a selection of factors. Firstly, the configuration of the LCRE syllabus, and whether RE teachers/students had selected the optional units Section H: *The Bible* and/or Section B: *Christianity*. Secondly, the issue of teacher confidence. Teacher responses demonstrate the flexibility and malleability of the Bible as a source which can be used across multiple units. However, as noted, several of these units are optional.

4.2.3 LCRE Teacher data, Theme 3: Type of Bible used and teacher personal relationship with the text

RE teachers were questioned about the type of Bible they used to ascertain their platform of choice for engagement with the text. Some teachers identified the use of a physical Bible (T1; T12) while others turned to digital Bibles, preferring contemporary media forms. Those identified included 'The Brick Testament' (T18) and 'the Internet Bible' (T16). These responses show that biblical engagement takes several forms, suggesting overtly how biblical skills can be developed and encouraged through visual literacy. Locating biblical texts demands employment of the skill of biblical referencing, with awareness of book, chapter, and verse. Nowhere is it stated in LCRE how this skill is to be developed. Indeed, a latent assumption underpins the syllabus, and one wonders how this student skill could be acquired, a basic skill that encourages close engagement with the text.

As a corollary, one teacher wrote: '[I] do not get the students to physically look up the Bible as they do not know how to use it – time issues as the curriculum is heavy' (T20). Some practitioners revealed that class time was not allocated to developing this skill, due to the pressure of time. Interestingly, two RE teachers wrote that the Bible was 'not covered yet' (T13), while another wrote 'I haven't'. (T15). This was despite the fact that the survey was undertaken at the end of the two-year LCRE programme. One teacher indicated that 'the students are aware that the course can be generally covered without really delving into the Bible' (T18).

A higher number of RE teachers in the sample displayed a stronger relationship with the Bible text as children or teenagers than those who developed this relationship as adults.

Almost half (*n*=10) experienced this during their teenage or pre-teen years, with 29% (*n*=6) experiencing this as adult RE teachers. Invited to comment on their historical relationship with the Bible, one male participant referenced the importance of learning Bible stories within his religious community including services and Sunday School and patterns which extended into family life. This theme was also noted in relation to students in the Church of Ireland school. The RE teacher wrote,

> As a child growing up in a Church of Ireland family, I was encouraged to know Bible stories and attended Church of Ireland services and Sunday School where these were told and discussed. As a family, references to stories from the Bible both Old and New Testament were made in an informal way. This is part of my background.

One teacher referred to the influence of the Catholic church biblical tradition. Outlining their relationship with the Bible, they wrote: 'I do not read the Bible regularly as I attend mass on Sundays and am happy enough with listening to the readings and Gospel there'. Yet another RE teacher in a large Voluntary school identified her relationship with the Bible as being influenced by her own school experience. As a teenager she remembers,

> My 1st Year Mass (when I was a student) was a Bible blessing ceremony and the Bible was used in each religion class throughout school. It was also a given in my school that each child had access to a Bible at home (T14).

These responses demonstrate points of socio-cultural and religious convergence, meaning that RE teachers acknowledged a relationship with the Bible before qualifying to teach RE. This connection is context dependent, related to family circumstance and cultural milieu. Oxford researcher Bowie (2017) notes that teachers' encounters with the Bible at different phases in their lives conditions their degree of engagement in the classroom. The theory of Bronfenbrenner acts as a lens to assist a macro, holistic view of how the individual engages with the sacred text.

4.3 Summary of LCRE teacher themes

LCRE teacher findings reveal that the Bible is occasionally rather than regularly employed. The syllabus influences as to when and where it is used, with explicit syllabus links to Sections B, E and H. However no RE teacher referenced the potential of biblical engagement in Section F: *Justice and Peace* or Section J: *Religion and Science*. While the Bible text has many uses such in theological, historical, cultural and spiritual areas, many RE teachers surveyed employed the Bible as a tool of moral, and less so, for spiritual endorsement. The Bible is used as a tool to support a purpose other than knowledge about the text.

Teacher responses illustrate the malleability and flexibility of the Bible; its multipurpose use can be seen, with some engaging with the text to support existential principles and values. For example, the text [‘Love is…’] can be used to highlight ‘the importance of respect, love, justice and the golden rule, [to promote] active citizens’ (T17). Having explored how LCRE teachers use the Bible, the following section will review the findings of the 6th Year focus groups.

4.3.1 LCRE Student data, Theme 1: LCRE develops students’ knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes (KUSA)

As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, LCRE is underpinned by the theory of knowledge appropriation.

The analysis of student findings will be related to the application of the knowledge-based framework KUSA (Knowledge, Understand, Skills and Attitudes). This analytical pathway has been used to obtain a sense of students’ broad engagement with the syllabus. Initially, a general finding revealed how LCRE students chose the subject. Given the low numbers who selected RE, this sentiment is captured by one student who said, ‘I didn't choose RE originally. I chose Home Economics…..I also had a chance to go back to RE and chose to stay because the first essay we did was making meaning [Section A] like, through music and literature, and I thought it was really interesting, and so I decided to stay’ (SA4). Some were challenged by essay writing aspects, assessment and textbook resources. These themes will be explored in the following sections.

Knowledge

The desire for knowledge, a pillar which underpins LCRE, was acknowledged through the focus groups. The action verb ‘to learn’ was repeated ten times across the interviewees.

Students across all schools communicated how LCRE promoted a desire to learn about the human. Through the syllabus, students revealed a natural curiosity about general culture, a curiosity which LCRE satiated.

> I didn't know much. What I did know is that I really wanted to know about different people's cultures and opinions because me, myself, I'm Protestant but I think it's just amazing to understand other people's cultures. That's why I chose religion because I wanted to learn about that (SC1)

> Then, just really interesting, different religions other than just Catholicism, other than just Christianity. I wanted to know more about other religions (SB1)

These responses show that LCRE piqued student curiosity by exploring concepts pertaining to cultural and religious identity. The syllabus supported student desire to understand self, other and society. This is mirrored in some of the LCRE aims, with a number of students suggesting that the syllabus supported interpersonal development:

> as a teenager growing up, I found it [RE] really useful because we're trying to figure ourselves out what we stand for and what we don't stand for and having a space to talk about it. The golden rule, all of those kinds of things, just to have words for what we want to figure out, and everything I think is really good (SC2)

Moving from the macro to the micro, students revealed that the selection of Section H deepened student awareness of the Bible. Knowledge based findings were acknowledged when one said:

> I did Section H. I had no clue on some of the stories that were even on the theme that you to choose from, 'cause it was like, a set of six. Like, three from the Old Testament, three from New Testament, and you had to pick one from each. And, so like, I got to like, read stories I've never heard of before, and so I felt like that was quite good. I did the 10 commandments 'cause that was like, the only one that I heard of before, …..the context in the background with them all, and then how different relationships are expressed through them (SA6).

Skills

Students identified a range of skills derived from LCRE study. Several alluded to the way in which LCRE facilitated critical thinking. Across the focus group responses, students referenced this cognitive skill many times. They said:

> There are not a lot of subjects in school that you get to think for yourself besides maybe English (SB4)

> Because it involved a lot of opinion, and I thought it would suit me (SC1)

The skills which coursework developed were particularly pertinent for the student cohort. One said, 'I like researching myself, the kind of enjoyment of researching, doing that all myself' (SC4). Another said:

> I find the coursework really interesting in being able to do my research and doing everything. I find because it's similar, more similar to stuff you do in college, so I find that kind of beneficial to have that kind of leeway. Being able to do my own research, I find really interesting compared to exam work, which I still like very much (SC5)

In summary, students referenced a variety of skills derived from engagement with the LCRE including debating, enquiring, researching, and wondering skills.

Attitudes: 'I put myself into other people's shoes…'

Alongside knowledge, skills and understanding, all participants highlighted how LCRE influenced their attitudes. Given it is one of the four foundational pillars of the LCRE framework (KUSA), this finding is not surprising. Typical responses indicated how the syllabus called for openness, including awareness of others in tandem with appreciation and respect. The LCRE consistently challenged participants to exercise an awareness of the views and ideas of others. LCRE exposed students to different views and worldviews. One 6th Year said: 'I feel they [RE] encourage you to keep an open mind about the different things' (SC6). Others said:

> I feel like opening your mind to other views as well because you're going to come into content with a much different view to you and you really have to be able to open your mind and be, "Oh," think that way. I think another way. (SB1)

> I put myself into other people's shoes or whatever when I'm thinking about. For the outcome, I think about what everyone would think about it, other than just me or my friend. I would try to understand from every perspective what's right, what's wrong, what would benefit everyone or no one (SB2)

Students appreciated the even-stronger inclination of LCRE to act reflexively where syllabus content and discussion encouraged students to check their positioning and assumptions. One 6th Year said it 'makes you question your own viewpoint, too. It's like, "Do I think this way? Am I correct in my viewpoints?"' (SB6). Another student expressed a similar sentiment, emphasising how LCRE endorsed moral component. The student said:

> It's also a very different subject from other subjects in schools. In other subjects, you learn things off and you do different stuff like that whereas in religion it's you're looking at different things, you're learning about morals. Your questions are very

> much like your actual thought process behind it matters. It's not learning off the page. (SC3)

To conclude, LCRE was observed to have significant import in the lives of 6th Yr students showing a high degree of the knowledge, skill and attitudes acquired. The following section will explore students perception of LCRE assessment.

4.3.2 LCRE Student data, Theme 2: Assessment

Findings from LCRE students revealed insights into the two pathways of LCRE evaluation. The in-class project assessment was an area of enjoyment: 'we got to do independent work, and there was also like, a broad range of something we could do, and I chose to do Section H, and it was the Bible literature and stuff like that' (SA6). The dominance of essay writing for the LCRE exam, while enjoyed by some, posed literacy challenges for others. 'I chose it [RE] because I'm a big fan of essay subjects, and I find them much easier to do than practical subjects' (SB6), said one. Yet, the structure of the LC examination was a challenge for others, 'it's such a short amount of time for so many essays (SA6). Others mentioned their preference for the Junior Cycle short questions style of assessment: 'in Junior [Cert], so we had short questions first, and then you'd have your essays. But now we have eight essays.' Having explored 6th Year response to LCRE in general, the following section will explore student responses to the Bible particularly and the unique aspects of KUSA connected with this topic area.

4.3.3 LCRE Student data, Theme 3: Limited knowledge of the Bible, 'I had no clue on some of the stories'

Knowledge and Skills

Several definitions of biblical literacy in Chapter 1 identified the link between Bible familiarity and biblical referencing (Hession, 2015). Students demonstrated good knowledge of this skill and its application. The importance of prior RE experience, either at JCRE, Primary school level or contexts outside of school, emerged as significant building blocks. These experiences reveal students' engagement with the Bible in their context, as a cultural artefact across a range of spheres. Students said:

> Sunday schools where it would be for people of like the youths and like they would teach you how to, just for example, like find Exodus 2:6, they'll show you how to do it. And that's just how I went out to find back the references (SA7).

> I learned in Junior Cert religion, I think. I think we did a whole class and actually how to cite the Bible. I can't really remember. It was a long time ago. I think I had

> an idea before, but I think I fully learned it in Junior Cert religion, maybe second year or something (SB7).
>
> When I went to a Protestant school and also my dad and his side of the family is highly religious. They're pretty religious. I learned in primary school (SC4).

Findings however from some students reveal that they had difficulty identifying literary genres. The significance of the literary form is such that it functions as a tool for decoding textual meaning, and challenging biblical literalism. Some students from school A opted not to respond when the question was ~~posted posed?~~ to their focus group, despite the availability of the questionnaire in advance. The social world of the student is further revealed with the analysis of the student response revealing both comment and silence, the later most likely revealing zero awareness.

> Psalms, it's more composed of poetry and like … like, you can tell us like poetry and that's what I really like about Psalms. It just has a nice flow to it (SA6).
>
> [silence]
>
> I didn't even know about the Psalms thing to be honest … that's the first time hearing that Psalms are supposed to be like poetry. I never knew that (SA5).
>
> I feel like for me with the Old Testament and New Testament, that's how I can like differentiate it. I feel like the Old Testament would be like before Jesus and like predicting Jesus, like coming, and then the New Testament would be like, Jesus, like Jesus' life and the Revelations, would kind of be like the future (SA4).

Whilst cognisant of the investigative nature of this research, a cautious finding is the possible link between the absence of selecting Sections B or H for study, and an increase in biblical literalism. This is exemplified in the responses from School B where one student said:

> Fantasy. I mean, it's a bit self-explanatory, I suppose. It's not every day when an angel comes down, tells you that you're going to have the Son of God. It's a bit of a dream along with a very vague semi-historical text (SB5)

This contrasts with School C students who studied Section H. They demonstrated significant understanding of biblical genre, and consistently presented an interpretation of the Bible beyond the literal. One described it as 'a collection of parables … not meant to be taken literally' (SC5). In the same vein, others said:

> If we took everything word for word … I think there's stuff about us not being able to cut our hair, about us not being able to wear mixed fabrics. I don't think we should be doing that, as well as the fact that I think religion is everybody's individual, its

> own thing. We could be following the same God, but that God to us is completely different to the next person (SC2).
>
> Even if you look at different translations, the original Greek is completely different to some of the English translations with different words being changed, or even the Church itself changing the words to have more control over people. It's very much like the original things. Unless you get the original handwritten documents, you cannot follow it literally, even if that were the right thing to do, which I don't believe is (SC3).

Here students demonstrated an understanding of text as interpretation with examples from the Jewish Torah law, and the significance and implications of translation. In theological terms, student comments from School C demonstrate the potential of multiple and not singular interpretation. These students also demonstrated an awareness of authorship.

Attitudes

Section H, as previously stated, is optional. In one school, students were allowed a democratic choice as to whether they wanted to do Section H or Section E. One voice from the student cohort claimed there appeared to be little appetite for selecting the Biblical unit.

> We got to decide if we wanted to do the Bible, and nobody really did. Then we got to decide between *Justice and Peace* [Section F], and *Religion and Gender* [Section E]. We chose *Justice and Peace* because I feel like it's more to do with the real world. I don't know about if everyone was thinking that, but I feel like you can actually apply it to real-life scenarios. Obviously, you can with the Bible, it gives people a way of living and stuff (SB4).

It was not possible to ascertain if the teacher influenced the choice, but this student strongly identified a disconnection between the Bible and their life and world. Further findings reveal negative attitudes to the sacred text. For some, the text represented a symbol of division in national and international contexts: 'The Bible has been the face of suppression for a very long time' (SC2). The Bible, whether applied to contentious moral issues or read literally, did not fare well.

> Because I think there are people who are extremists, that believe in the Bible so much that for you to even believe in the Bible, it feels wrong in this modern day and age because of the amount of verbal attack and physical attack that I think the people associated with the Bible have brought upon family and friends (SC2).
>
> I think especially in recent years with fights for gay rights, gay marriage, abortion, it's all very much -- If you look at the side who are trying to stop it, most of them were using the Bible to try and stop this. Not meaning that people on the other side weren't using the Bible to try and have it go ahead, but it very much was a negative (SC3).

Further responses reveal that the presentation of the Bible appeared to be siloed, rigid and divorced from its cultural interlinkages into Judaism. School B did not study Section B: *Christianity* or Section H:

> I'd say if you're doing the section about the Bible, it would help, but we didn't do it. I think I remember seeing exam questions on it. It's like, "Explain the relationship between Jesus and the Pharisees," let's say. If you knew, if you read the Bible maybe, and then the Pharisees didn't like Him. They thought they wanted to keep the Romans in power, so they were rich. That would help you a bit, so you have a bit of a back story. That's what I mean. It's having the back story to it, which might help you if you were doing that section (SB1).

The idea of the Bible's perceived rigidity was reiterated by several students from the same school who said:

> I think that we, as a class, more enjoy the flexible things where we can put our own perspective on it, and we can explain it in different ways. The Bible is very much metaphor and some stuff like that. It has a meaning that you can't really be flexible with and get around (SB4).

This perception chimed with a student from school C who showed awareness of the Irish cultural context and said:

> I feel it is a very heavy focus on Christianity. While you do learn about other religions, it is very much focused on Christianity, which I understand where a majority of our country is in Christianity, but I think having even at a tiny bit more broad, so you learn more about even maybe the top five religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Jewish, a bit more, it would be a lot more beneficial just because I think it is very much dominated by Christianity (SC3).

In summary, findings drawn from data reveal the many challenges that confront teachers of the Bible. Views pertaining to predetermined perceptions of rigidity, orthodoxy, and misuse promote disengagement. These perceptions, ranging from null to some engagement with LCRE, reveal the challenges to biblical engagement at LCRE level. It shows that student engagement with Section H influences student literacy and biblical competence. The following section will report findings on the biblical skills as demonstrated by LCRE students. A key issue here is how ~~it~~ the Bible is used~~,~~ and the range of skills employed in its engagement.

4.4 The Lens of Bronfenbrenner, calling for a holistic view

Quantitative SEC data reveals a potential problem over the role and place of the Bible in LCRE, as well as the cultural link between the Bible and Irish society, and its role in the

lives of LCRE participants, whether as students and teachers. Bronfenbrenner's theoretical ecological system (1996) offers a network perspective of their prior relationship with the Bible. It assists this researcher to understand why students might opt into LCRE and how Bible literacy could be developed prior to study at this level. Several students spoke about their Christian background and the cultural influence of faith as a reason for subject selection choice, an echo of the *macrosystem* sphere as shown above:

> For myself, I'm really interested in religion and stuff and spirituality. I got good grades in religion Junior Cert. I was as well, it wasn't just because of the good grades, but it was a factor and stuff (SB1).

The shaping power of the students' social context envisages RE as a subject that acts as a prism that assists and challenges the individual in their world of belief. The significance and influence of the *exosystem* can be seen where students referenced siblings studying this subject before them, with their positive experience encouraging them to select the LCRE programme. For some, in essence, RE unwittingly chose the students. RE was a second-choice subject for some, where another preferred choice was not available. For others, the human search for meaning in Section A as expressed though music or literature captured the students' interest. The breadth of the course, and the aim of exploring morality, and philosophy, and science were also cited as reasons for selection.

Students indicated the significance of their prior experience of RE, referencing several positive formative experiences which included Junior Cycle RE, Transition Year RE, and a nod to RE as a curriculum area at Primary school level.

> I just always liked the subject. During Junior Cert, it was fun and I never got bored of it, so I just decided to do it for Leaving Cert as well, but that's it (SB2)

> I did Transition Year and going through the religion course that they had for transition, the six weeks there, it was actually somewhat decent. It's a bit philosophical, a bit political, I like that stuff, so I figured why not. It's all right (SB5).

> Student A3: I picked religion because I always had an interest in it. My sister had done it a few years ago, and I'd seen like, her notes and I also really liked Junior Cert and you get to learn like, a bit in morality, and philosophy, and science (SA3).

Collectively, these responses show complex engagement with the Bible. A student or teacher is not value-neutral when they interact with the text, displaying a prior relationship based on historic engagement and experience. The theoretical ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1996) assists the researcher to understand the relationship between RE teachers and their

microsystem of influence, principally that of family and school. Teachers referenced their Christian background, with the cultural influence of their Churches establishing and shaping a relationship between participant and the Bible, an echo of the *macrosystem* sphere. To summarise, while conscious of the small numerical scale involved here, it is possible to conclude that students who studied Sections H and / or Section B showed a greater awareness of genre and demonstrated some biblical literacy skills, arising from a degree of informed interpretation which counters literalist reading. Students who did not engage with Section B or Section H revealed a tendency for greater word for word interpretation, characterised by very little movement beyond a literal understanding of the biblical text.

4.5 Section summary: what the themes reveal

The influence of the syllabus on Bible engagement cannot be underestimated. Significantly, where teachers had studied the Bible as part of their preservice university experience, they declared a high level of competence in this area. Teachers who acknowledged a lower level of confidence asked for more CPD resources. With nine teachers holding a level 9 or level 10 degree, this highly qualified cohort is clearly open to receiving and delivering a modicum of CPD. Almost all teachers believed that students would benefit from studying the Bible; teacher responses indicated the influence that early contact with the Bible heightened their sense of engagement with the Bible. In classrooms, teachers frequently explored the contemporary relevance of significant stories from the Bible. The impetus arising from use of digital sources opens up an opportunity to develop the skills of visual literacy. However, the pressure to cover other aspects of LCRE meant that some teachers considered that students ~~did~~ not need to study the Bible in depth, a situation which can be addressed in the current Senior Cycle review.

Students showed an awareness of how LCRE promoted critical thinking while not necessarily using this term. The benefit of independent research, ethical considerations and the ability to learn about other cultures proved to be attractive components of LCRE. Students understood the need to write essay responses in their final examination and hinted at a need for a less-pressured environment to identify, for instance, a range of complex genres. Students who had not studied Section H often demonstrated evidence of biblical literalism. Students also were conscious of the contemporary use of the Bible to criticise traditional views.

Visual representations offer the Bible a fresh supplemental approach, and both students and teachers attested to the value of this ~~strategy~~ ~~approach~~. One RE teacher used *The Brick Testament* as a classroom teaching tool (T16). In this digitised scenario, the biblical characters are stylised in Lego, enabling different levels of engagement with the biblical characters. This finding was supported by students who identified how art could assist with understanding the meaning of particular events: 'Christian art … could give us a big insight into the original message' (SC1). For another, the role of the arts, including music, was a reason to select LCRE (SA3). The use of imagery while studying the Bible can liberate the text from a traditional perspective. Boyne's 'Last Supper' (2004) includes representatives from Ireland's minority and migrant population in the 12 disciples as referenced on page 8. A discussion of the findings will follow.

4.6 Discussion of findings

The first part of Chapter 4 revealed the themes which emerged from the research relating to biblical literacy. This part of the chapter will consider the findings including how the curriculum design of LCRE has impacted on biblical literacy acquisition, how the Bible within in LCRE is used for proof texting and moral endorsement, and moreover how literacy is influenced by the nature and form of assessment. A further discovery is the potential which visual culture holds to increase engagement with the Bible. Lastly, findings reveal how encounters with the text prior to LCRE engagement influence a reader's relationship with the Bible.

This research study has been guided by the primary research question: An exploration of the contribution of the Leaving Certificate Religious syllabus to the promotion of biblical literacy. The enquiry straddled an interdisciplinary platform, incorporating Religious Education, theology and education to ascertain what extent the LCRE syllabus promotes the notion of biblical literacy though meaningful engagement with the sacred text. While SEC data does not paint a positive engagement with Section H, the lens of Bronfenbrenner's conceptual framework offers a much more holistic and positive insight. This section will review the research approach undertaken and continue analysing the findings that emerged, placing them in dialogue with the review of literature in Chapter 2.

4.6.1 Finding 1: Curriculum design impacts the acquisition of Bible knowledge

Several findings point to the engagement of the Bible in LCRE in objective rather than subjective terms. While priority is observed in the title and focus of Section H, the Bible

unintentionally functions in an anchor role supporting themes in other sections which select aspects of the Jewish Christian sacred text to support themes in other sections. ~~In Section J: *Religion and Science*,~~ little provision is made for analysis and inter~~pter~~ion of text. Its language-rich essence requires a set of sophisticated skills, yet key aspects of text analysis are not developed in LCRE. Such examples include attention to linguistic features of text such as genre, and its impact on text interpretation. Overt references to traditional and contemporary approaches to biblical exegesis are lacking. There is much room for the inclusion of reception theories acknowledging how the Bible interacts with contemporary culture. Teachers view the Bible as an important text with its use being primarily determined by the LCRE syllabus. One RE teacher observed that,

> In specific sections, the Bible plays a pivotal role in teaching. For example, the section on Christianity [Section B], it would be remiss of a teacher to overlook the role of the Bible in this section as essentially it plays a key role in your sources of information. I find at times it is important to provide the passages in the Bible while also paraphrasing as the language at times can be overwhelming for students (T15)

A counter view was expressed by some teachers, noting that students were aware 'they need to know quotes for their essays, but I don't think they actually understand the real significance of the Bible' (T14). However, common to both students and teachers was an acknowledgement of the text-centred nature of the Bible as problematic. Some observed its misogynistic properties, while other highlighted its literary rich nature. Teachers realised that students bring particular views about the Bible, with one teacher observing: 'Sometimes there are preconceived notions that it will be boring or a negative experience' (T4). Some of these views were shared with LCRE students. In response, one student said that 'learning about the Bible, it's just a bit boring' (SB5). Issues arising included its literary dominance as text, and the nature of its message. Teachers and students often expressed the opinion that misogyny was embedded in some biblical texts with one teacher expressing the concern that, 'This is tricky to navigate in an all-girls school' (T13). This possible point of triangulation with SEC data might explain why there is concerning disengagement with the Bible as evidenced by the SEC statistics.

As a curriculum area, RE is not unique when engaging with the problematic nature of text. Patriarchy and misogynism are core to curriculum texts which had featured in the Leaving Certificate English syllabus for three sequential years. In 2019, 2020 and 2021, Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* featured as a text for optional selection on the list of prescribed texts for the Leaving Certificate English Examination (Department of

Education, Circular Letters 0006/2017; 0024/2018; 0023/2019**;** Wilson, 2021). A parental complaint to the Minister of Education Norma Foley claimed the book was 'nothing but sadistic, upsetting and of no moral learning or value to students'. An English teacher offered a counter opinion who claimed that the novel served to

> display an immense humanity and central to both are themes such as the enduring strength of the human spirit, resilience and parental love. Teachers use these texts as vehicles to engage and inspire students, to allow for a critical engagement with issues that are not always palatable. Rather than censor the curriculum, it should be lauded, as through it, teachers and students can explore challenging themes in the safety of a classroom (Cooper, 2021).

Foley, responding on behalf of the DES, noted that the curriculum decision makers involved working groups convened by the NCCA and 'comprised of teachers, third-level lecturers, staff from relevant support agencies and experts in children's and young adult literature'. It appears that students were silent partners in curriculum deliberations for English and RE. Another example can be seen in the curriculum area of History which challenges the myopic supremacy of race as exemplified in the Nazi campaigns against Jews and others. In the JC English syllabus, Harper Lee's novel *To Kill A Mockingbird* deals with the theme of civil rights and the uncomfortable concept of racism. Gleeson (2021, 2024) argues that the demand placed on curriculum is the expectation that it evolves to serve and challenge the beliefs of cultures; in other words, texts function to disturb, challenge and hold a mirror to society. The Bible with its range of genres and narratives has much to offer within this controversial space as it brings past and present worldviews into dialogue.

4.6.2 Finding 2: Bible use is inclined towards moral endorsement

Practitioners were asked to nominate one passage of the Bible used with their LCRE class, and to outline the associated aims for the lesson. This open question was intended to ascertain what biblical skills were employed in classroom contexts and how texts are read hermeneutically. 90% (*n*=19) identified texts from the New Testament, with a majority selecting Gospel texts. A Christian-leaning choice emerged with only two teachers selecting a text from the Hebrew/ First Testament, Deut 6:5, and Gen 34, the story of Dinah as used within Section E: *Religion and Gender*. New Testament examples chosen by others included the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37), and the Feeding of the 5000 (Mt 6:30-44). Of the four canonical Gospels, Matthew was the most cited, followed by Mark and John equally, and lastly Luke. This finding contrasts with that of Stead (1996) whose teacher cohort relied on Luke's Prodigal Son. She demonstrates a New Testament priority applied

by RE teachers that concurs with these results. While there are 21 letters in the New Testament, this genre was cited by only one teacher who identified 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 (T16). In short, an emphasis on New Testament material and specifically Gospel centred priori was identified. Teachers nominated references, and their Bible genres.

The research of Carswell (2006, 2018, 2021) was instrumental in exploring why RE teachers selected their text. Incorporating this query in the LCRE survey study established that moral validity emerged as the main reason given by LCRE teachers. The Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:1-20) was used to help 'understand Jesus on morality' (T4). Another used Mt 22:37-40 to 'talk about right relationship and morality in Christianity … as well as looking at ethical monotheism in Judaism' (T15). This respondent was attentive to the interreligious links between Christianity and its Jewish bedrock. Yet another (T8) used the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25-37) to look 'at morality in the Christian sense'. Finally, an LCRE teacher wrote:

> Two-pronged [aim]: teaching non-exam JC religion - after looking at 'people living out religious beliefs,' [the] class started, looking at morality in the Christian sense. [I] began by using resource I created from media - little girl sitting on side of road eating dinner from soup kitchen. Segue into morality here, then finished with lesson on Christian sacred texts and purpose/teaching. (T8)

Biblical texts were deemed not to be studied in their own terms as texts within the Bible. Rather, teachers preferred to select texts on the basis of their moral credentials and moreover, to proffer ethical argumentation. Only one teacher made links to the use of the Bible and the spiritual dimension where the text was used as a platform to engage with the ethos of the 'Dominican Sisters, a contemplative order beside our school, to learn more about the role of prayer, contemplation and liturgy in their lives.' This perspective resonates with Section G: *Worship, prayer and ritual* where the unit aim is for the development of the 'awareness of the spiritual dimension of human life' (p. 67). One wonders if because of its optional status, this view is presented as a minority. Several theorists showed awareness of the links between the spiritual and the Bible. Carswell (2018) for instance references the 'truth behind the text' at a 'richer, spiritual level'. Findings reveal that the classroom use of the Bible for this purpose appear to be quite scant. The placement of Morality in the LCRE configuration also had an influence. Placing it alongside *World Religions and Christianity* makes for an interesting syllabus set-up. It would appear that the absence of the moral aspect has little effect here with teachers preferring to read over the syllabus and be more guided by the textbooks.

4.6.3 Finding 3: The limiting nature of a proof texting approach to the Bible

The initial objective of this research was to explore the contribution of the Leaving Certificate Religious syllabus to the promotion of biblical literacy. A key question of this research was to explore where and how students learned to navigate the Bible. Underpinning this was a desire to establish if the Bible was employed in LCRE in a proof texting fashion. Findings revealed that it was, but in instances where schools did not select Section B or Section H. The research of Bowie (2018, 2020b) and Armstrong (2019) revealed that Bible verses were used in selected contexts to support positions and taken out of biblical context. This tendency was revealed when one teacher stated, 'I believe the Bible is backing up statements, but I don't have time for the students to research them. I would rather use that time to debate or write essays' (T4). Another said, 'I think they [students] like to use Scripture references to give evidence and weight to the points they make in their essays' (T1).

Bowie et al (2022), reflecting on textual hermeneutics, considered that it reduces text to playing a kind of positivist function of a quasi-science. While undoubtedly present in some aspects of religion, in their view, this hardly reflects the rich ways in which texts are engaged by religious communities in their differing ways and contexts (p. 271). When questioned about the importance of genre as a tool to help understand the deeper meaning of text, a level of surface literalism was to be seen. One student said, 'It's not every day when an angel comes down, tells you that you're going to have the Son of God' (SB5). Another stated,

> I agree [with Student 5]. It is a bit farfetched sometimes when you put it into perspective … If you were to explain it to someone who never heard of religion before, and you said, "There's this big man up there, and he controls everything," it would sound a bit farfetched. (SB4)

Almost all teachers agreed that awareness of genre was key to understanding the deeper meaning of text, thus supporting the concepts of the Bible functioning subjectively. Students who had studied Section H could demonstrate significant understanding of biblical genre, exhibiting an understanding of the Bible beyond the literal. One student for example, described the Bible as 'a collection of parables … not meant to be taken literally' (SC5), while another said:

> Even if you look at different translations, the original Greek is completely different to some of the English translations with different words being changed, or even the Church itself changing the words to have more control over people. It's very much like the original things. Unless you get the original handwritten documents, you

> cannot follow it literally, even if that were the right thing to do, which I don't believe is (SC3).

Genres are categories of text that equip readers with a roadmap to deepen meaning. Bowie (2018) demonstrates how a counter to proof texting is hermeneutics where texts are methodologically analysed to determine meaning. Though this process, the Reader-Text relationship is altered in how the text is read and understood. Exposures to genres gives students tools and clues to comprehend different text types and authorship agendas. The absence of genre awareness can lead to a deficiency of understanding, as exemplified by these student comments:

> I didn't even know about the Psalms thing to be honest … that's the first time hearing that Psalms are supposed to be like poetry. I never knew that (SA5)

Liddy (2009) identifies biblical literacy as being able to interpret and communicate the literary genres of its texts. The wisdom of the 1997 LCRE Redraft was attentive to this, and required students to 'link Biblical interpretation of the genres with other literary interpretation of the same genres' (p. 71). However consultative feedback suggested that the draft was 'both too historical and too difficult for Ordinary level students' (Pollak, 1997). OL students are denied exposure to apocalyptic genre texts, revealing stark gaps in attention to these key hermeneutical skills. Biblical literalism is writ large. While genre features several times in LCRE (Section H only), the syllabus construction limits engagement. The concept of genre is not part of JCRE, LCRE's percussor. A key question of this research was to explore where and how students learned to navigate the Bible and to locate genre as a literary convention: evidence of engagement at this level was scant.

4.6.4 Finding 4: Assessment type influences Bible engagement

The evidence presented in the front-end of this chapter reveals that engagement with Section H: *The Bible*, is greatly influenced by the assessment tool which evaluates its knowledge, skills and understanding (Sections 4.7 and 4. 8). LCRE students, reflecting on their experience of the Junior Certificate, commented on the student friendly nature of this assessment style. Section 1 of the JCRE examination paper featured a series of short questions. They observed how the nature of assessment had changed significantly: 'Like, in Junior, so we had short questions first, and then and then you'd have your essay ... now it's six essays' (SA2). Student perspectives triangulated with SEC data revealed this was the most popular JCRE section, leading to the greatest student achievement (2008). The multi-choice free response question style led to a performative success rate of 91% (SEC, 2008).

Encompassing both colour and images, this section was particularly attentive to aspects of cognitive learning theory relating to visual, kinaesthetic and reader/writer (VARK) learners. While a feature of JCRE assessment, this style does not feature in the LCRE examination paper. Rather, 80% of the LCRE assessment requires exclusive essay-type responses demanding significant literacy competence.

Some students from school A, given a choice between Section E or Section H, chose the latter for their coursework. One student said, 'it's self-directed learning and people find that beneficial. Some people don't find it as beneficial as the type of performance that is head-on, timed writing exam in a certain setting.' (SC5). This raises the question whether in fact terminal summative assessment actually suits assessment of the Bible as prescribed by the LCRE. The SEC guide document for *Drafters, Setters and Assistant Setters* (SEC, n.d.) outlines procedural steps involved in crafting an examination paper from 'draft to press' (p. 7). This process is informed by a range of 'assessment and examination literature' (p. 4). Examination questions fall into two broad categories: selected-response and constructed-response. Selected-response comprises of 'multiple-choice, true/false, and item-matching questions' (p. 36), with this style allowing for assessment of a greater breadth of syllabus. Student responses and SEC data reveal how the nature and type of questions positively affect education achievement. LCRE, however, encompasses exclusively of 'essay-type questions' or constructed-response questions (SEC, n.d.). Constructed-response rather than selected-response limits 'breadth of content coverage' (p. 37) with this mode of assessment demanding a significant degree of literacy competence. The exemplar of the form and shape of the LCRE sample in 2005 (see Appendix 5) cannot be underestimated here. Students communicated how cross-curricular skills derived from their English essay writing abilities benefitted their LCRE performance: 'English … helps to write tons of essays and also plays a part in like how you write your essays in religion as well' (SA6). None of the focus group students sat Section H: *The Bible* in time-bound examination conditions. This raises the question, might the provision of a Bible during examinations by the SEC augment student achievement and support the skill of text interpretation? In its present form, Section H: *The Bible* demands skills of recall and rote learning. Consider the skillset required to answer the following SEC question from 2015 where no Bible or source texts were provided, requiring students to rely on memory recall of the biblical texts needed to answer the question: 'Discuss the importance of Q in the formation of two synoptic Gospels' (SEC, 2015, see Appendix 4). Q refers to the Quelle source theory which attempts to hypothesise why the gospels of Matthew and Luke share common material. Q is estimated to be over 200 'verses

or parts of verses' (Brown, 1997, p. 117). The absence of a Bible text requires significant memorising if students are to demonstrate understanding of, for example, Mt 5:15 / Lk 11:33 [not putting lamp under a bushel], or Mt 7:3-5 / Lk 6:41-42 [speck in brother's eye, log in one's own] (Brown**,** 1997, p. 118). An analysis of action verbs which feature on the LCRE examination papers reveals 'discuss' appears as one of the most frequent leading verbs at Higher level (SEC, examination papers, 2007; 2009; 2011; 2012; 2014; 2015; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024). 'Discuss' implies that the student will examine different perspectives or opinions on a topic and then come to their own conclusion/viewpoint' (NCCA 2005, p. 130). In this case, the range of views would reference Matthew and Luke, but without a Bible to analyse specific verses, there is a stress on students to demonstrate their knowledge and awareness.

Another example is observed in the corresponding marking schedule for this question. This task shows the value of knowledge-based outcomes, which underpins the LCRE syllabus. This marking scheme however requires scrutiny as students are asked to compare two Hebrew texts framed by the leading verb 'Compare' which focuses on similarities and differences. The example provided by the Chief Examiner does little to communicate how these texts show connection between Hannah's song and the Decalogue. The level of guidance they offer demands consideration and revision.

4.7 Chapter Summary

The findings of this study reveal that Bible engagement in LCRE is influenced by several factors, including teacher confidence, competence, and their relationship with the text. Some students and teachers see the Bible as a tool to augment analytical and research skills, to support faith today, and to understand the context of the past. The Bible is objectivised to function as a support for proof texting, moral, and less so, spiritual endorsement. It is striking what is less articulated: how the Bible might be used to empower students to self-interpret text and derived negotiated meaning. While curriculum design limits the acquisition of Bible knowledge, visual culture holds out the promise of an effective biblical methodical tool. This opens up the possibility of integrating a variety of arts and visual approaches, as well as adopting a broader cultural approach to the Bible by harnessing the visual to augment meaning. These approaches proffer the possibility of a more sophisticated understanding of the Bible and religion in Irish classrooms, as well as changing perceptions of its role in public art and life. Changes in Teaching Council criteria for the registration of RE teachers means that the previous compulsory requirement that teachers study a module on Sacred Texts / the

Bible as part of their preservice training is now optional. This revision has the capacity to dilute teacher competence and confidence in terms of understanding the challenges of presenting the Bible in an educational context. Chapter 5 will present the limitations, potentiality and conclusions of this study.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The issues around the presentation of the Bible in LCRE and the promotion of biblical literacy were identified in Chapter 1 and signalled through an analysis of SEC data. This research acknowledged the value of lifelong learning, and the presence of RE in the public domain. The significance of the phenomena of religion in Irish culture is particularly noteworthy. Chapter 2 presented a review of literature highlighting the varied dimension of the research. It placed LCRE under the microscope and observed the forces at play in curriculum design and the implications of this for the Bible. Chapter 3 discussed research approaches and settled on the notion of mixed method case study. Bell and Waters (2014) reference how documentary analysis facilitates engagement with a problem-oriented research pathway; the case study approach set out to explore the status of the Bible as Sacred Text in LCRE. Given the desire for narrative capture and the dominant qualitative nature of this research, Chapter 4 presented findings from the cohort of LCRE students and teachers who had first-hand engagement with LCRE. These voices were central because of the influence of current education paradigms that values democracy and the presence of meaningful voice (Lundy, 2018). Chapter 4 also analysed these findings and found that student and teachers' prior engagement with the text was positive and significant. This chapter will continue by providing a clear answer to my research question. It will also present recommendations for policy, practice and research, whilst acknowledging the limits of this project. It will also comment on the strengths and relevance of this investigation.

5.2 Answering the research question: does LCRE promote biblical literacy?

The research undertaken set out to explore how LCRE promotes biblical literacy. It explored how LCRE develops understanding of biblical tropes in the public arena though the medium of the visual. The findings clearly reveal that LCRE incorporates the Bible as sacred text and seeks to develop critical biblical literacy skills. If Section H is undertaken, biblical literacy and competencies can be seen, with students meaningfully and effectively engaging with the text. Findings however do highlight the low rate of engagement. Where the optional Section H is not undertaken, biblical literalism can be observed and potential literacy gains mitigated. Minimal engagement is observed and syllabus structure limits progression: as one teacher commented, 'students are aware that the course can be generally covered without really

delving into the Bible' (T16). That said, qualitative data from LCRE teachers and students painted a much more positive view of the text not captured by quantitative SEC data.

The RE landscape in Ireland has experienced significant policy change in the last two decades. 2000 and 2003 witnessed the introduction of the first centralised, national curriculum with textbooks and supporting documents written to accompany the syllabus. The discipline of RE bears the weight of many aims. Curriculum structure determines educational function, and this research observed that priority is not given to the understanding of a common cultural history. This is because of the linear and hierarchal approach to curriculum rather than a spiral integrated approach. While Ireland's Christian heritage is emphasised in the subject of RE, of concern is the decision to treat historical elements thematically rather than chronologically, leaving glaring gaps both in students' grasp of facts and how they interconnect. Anne Looney describes curriculum as 'the set of stories which one generation chooses to tell the next' (2014, p. 17). The presentation of the Bible as an aspect of religious history has been limited within LCRE.

A study such as this can raise more questions than it answers. NCCA (2024) communicates that

> Leaving Certificate religious education promotes tolerance and mutual understanding. It is a broad course which seeks to develop the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other or of no religious traditions.

It its current form, how LCRE embodies this vision through the lens of sacred text is problematic. The future for the study of the Bible appears bleak. Currently, the Teaching Council require a demonstration of 'sufficient knowledge, skills and understanding to teach the Religious Education syllabus' (The Teaching Council, 2013, p. 43; 2020 p. 31). However, recent Council changes for preservice RE teachers will have implications for LCRE. These changes were brought about because of 'developments in teacher education, teachers supply issues and Junior Cycle reform'. For the Teaching Council, the consequence is a modification of the content knowledge requirements for newly-registered RE teachers. From 2020, applicants need only to have studied five out of seven designated areas in university, with the study of the Bible now optional. Broadly, preservice gaps in RE teacher knowledge and skills in this area may dilute teacher capacity to teach the Bible at LC level. Further research is called for to ascertain the impact that this decision may have on the promotion of biblical competence.

5.3 Recommendations for policy to support biblical literacy: SEC data

The SEC Chief Examiners Reports and other SEC data (2008; 2013) offered a singular perspective on student engagement with the Bible at LCRE level. It highlights too, a place for policy development. These Examiner reports, issued periodically and erratically, provide information and 'insights into how candidates perform with respect to the various assessment objectives and offering advice to future candidates.' (SEC, 2004). Potential gains for students, teachers and policy makers were limited as only one Chief Examiners' Report SEC report, in 2008, was produced for JCRE. Across twenty years of LCRE, only two reports pertaining to LCRE (2008 and 2013) have been published. This low rate of publication is unfortunate as they can be used to determine the style of CPD that may be appropriate to provide for RE teachers. While acknowledging the limits of quantitative methodology with respect to the Bible, findings call for more frequent, even annualised, feedback. This policy change would allow for a more-timely response to the current low levels of student engagement with syllabus sections. Without the publication of SEC data, the relationship with LCRE to the Bible and more broadly sacred text may not have been obvious.

The significance of this SEC data cannot be underestimated. During COVID-19, this national data was used to determine the grade awarded to each student in their subject, a system known as Accredited Grades (Government of Ireland, 2021, p. 8). This was because LCRE was not assessed in the traditional form during the pandemic, with results used as a tool to determine future career pathways. Moreover, pre and post Covid, these statistics were used as tools to track the progress within schools in relation to educational achievement. This practice was encouraged by DES across DEIS and non-DEIS schools (2015, p. 6). The DEIS initiative functions as the key policy tool of the DES to support students at risk of educational disadvantage and to improve student outcomes (DES, 2023). The SEC data plays an important anchoring role here.

National SEC data, in its present form, is limited. It does not publicly include reporting categories such as school type (DEIS/non DEIS, ETB, Vol, An Foras Pátrúnachta) or student cultural identity. That said, it is possible for education systems to learn from another. The review of literature in Chapter 2 observed how feedback from assessment agencies differed, in this case, namely between the SEC and New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA). While the SEC data is based on categories such as gender and question responses only, New Zealand performance data is produced annually, with reports on broader analytical categories including culture, geographical location and school patronage. Robust data capture is used

to shape the development of an education policy which is responsive to cultural nuances. This is a pedagogical approach that is attentive to classroom culture. In New Zealand's bi/multicultural context it has been a characteristic marker of education *(Ministry of Education*, 2020, 2022, 2024; Bishop et al, 2009).

An example of how this is expressed can be seen in the policy initiative *Ka Hikitia – Accelerating success: The Māori education strategy 2013–2017* (Ministry of Education, 2013). Further developed in 2024, it is underpinned by the belief that that Māori learners 'will do much better when education reflects and values their identity, language and culture' (p. 6). It is premised on the belief that learners excel when education reflects and values their identity, language and culture. The idea that context matters underpins deep learning. Research by Lynch and Rata (2018) explores the 'type of knowledge best suited to raise the educational underachievement of indigenous students in post-colonial societies' (p. 391). Conscious of the destructive impact of imperialism, they posit that the way to raise educational attainment is through 'sociocultural horizonal knowledge'. Lynch and Rata rightly challenge the assumption of universal and uniform knowledge. Knowledge is always contextualised, a perspective from which Ireland has can learn.

The Irish educational system could benefit from attention to culturally responsive pedagogy. Students need to see themselves in curricula. A 2024 DES report addressed the needs of 'children, young people and adults from the Traveller and Roma communities with the aim of enhancing their education and outcomes.' It builds on a curriculum audit undertaken by the NCCA (2019c) and aims to progress awareness of communities by supporting 'teaching and learning about Traveller culture and history within the curriculum (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 29). The NCCA curriculum audit for the report identified pertinent Traveller themes such as ancestry, nomadism, social codes, kinship and rituals. However, they did not exemplify any relevant biblical links. Examples might include the migration of Hebrews from Egypt into the Holy Land (Exodus), and the genealogies of Jesus (Mt1:1-17; Lk 3:23-38). RE and the Bible have much to offer in this multicultural space. The cultural significance of the Bible was acknowledged by LCRE students and teachers. One teacher said it 'gives my students a depth of knowledge, language, culture, traditions and values. It also helps them to challenge and stimulates debate and diverse responses' (T5). This view was mirrored by a LCRE student who said it 'gives you a sense of perspective about other cultures and religions as well' (C6).

The desired outcome for DES and intercultural education is that Traveller and Roma have 'their cultures and ethnic identities … acknowledged, visible and valued' (Government of Ireland, 2024, p. 20). By so doing, contexts emerge 'where all children and students, and specifically those from the Traveller community, would encounter content directly related to themselves, to their experience and their own culture and identity' (NCCA, 2019c, p. 132). Culturally nuanced SEC data through the conduits of RE and the Bible have much to offer. This is because the original remit of the NCCA was considered to include:

> advise the Minister on appropriate methods for the assessment of the effectiveness of the education provided in schools, with particular regard to mechanisms whereby students who have problems achieving their potential may be identified as early as practicable, and assisted (Government of Ireland, 1998).

In summary, this analysis calls for a broadening of SEC data to consider taking account of elements of social and cultural attainment.

5.4 Recommendations for policy to support biblical literacy: call for a religious history strand

Central to LCRE is an exploration of the relationship between religion and culture. A review of the curriculum reveals this strand could be strengthened, streamlined and integrated. In historical terms, religion has been a vital force in Western Culture. In the Irish context, to tell the story of religion against the background of Irish history, facilitates understanding of the situations that the Christian churches face today. An informed and critical understanding of Christianity's historical origins and development would indicate how religious change impacts on society at large. NCCA (2024) suggests that 'Religious Education gives students an important framework for understanding past and present events, actions and beliefs and their impact within the context of people's lives. It also promotes an understanding of religions as dynamic, internally diverse and evolving over time.' Franchi (2018) recognises the contemporary emphasis on inclusion and diversity in educational systems. He argues that there is need for shared understanding of the language and purpose of Religious Education in schools. Franchi proposes, and this is very relevant to the promotion of biblical literacy in Ireland, that an 'International Directory of Religious Education, written collegially by qualified lay people and clergy,' could build stronger foundations for 'shared understanding of the aims and scope of Religious Education among key stakeholders in Catholic schools', and offer 'firmer ground for dialogue' with those who manage and teach Religious Education in 'non-denominational' schools.

Moore (2007, p. 4) writes that an individual's education is 'not complete without a study of … the history of religion and its relationship to the advance of civilisation', insisting that the Bible was worthy of study for its literary and historical qualities. This is supported by Conroy (Cooling, 2013). His ethnographic examination of religious education in public schools leads to some substantive conclusions about deficiencies in the curriculum that are of interest to educators in any setting. He argues that the failure to teach theological history obscures the genesis of religious ideas and reduces religion to mere sentiment. The Bible as an artefact of cultural history has much to offer. Rather than attempting to recover the original meaning of texts, the history of interpretation can be explored. The Bible therefore straddles historical paradigm and contemporary methodology, and can be used in a broader frame than simply relying on any one tradition. Brenner, in his foreword to Aichele (2000), challenges the notion that the Bible might only be taught in an RE context:

> Bible scholars shall be brave enough to focus on the Bible's heritage in our culture … [T]he gain of doing cultural/biblical studies so-called, outside organised religion especially, may be enormous. Who knows, this way the Bible may continue to exist as a book for life, an identity cultural marker. Redefining it as a cultural commodity which, yes happens to be a religious book may save the Bible from popular oblivion (p. 11)

5.5 Limitations of research

The introduction to this thesis noted that very little research had taken place on the Bible in the LCRE syllabus. This research is intended to go some way to redress this deficit. One area that is rich for further analysis concerns the factors that limit student engagement with LCRE as an examination subject. From its inception to the present day, SEC data reveals only 2% of the Leaving Certificate cohort select this curriculum area.

In 2023 for example, the number of students studying Polish and Arabic combined (n= 1207) exceeded the number selecting RE (n=1016) (SEC, 2023). Cassidy and Devitt (in Hegarty, 2003), remarking on the inauguration of the LCRE Syllabus write,

> For those concerned to promote a religious sensibility in young Irish adults it is hard to exaggerate the importance of this event. It both represents a formal recognition by society of the value of religious education in the academic lives of second-level students, and it also reflects the importance which Irish society attaches to promoting the personal growth of students, including their spiritual and moral development (p. 5).

The perspective of Cassidy and Devitt in Hegarty (2003) appears to be aspirational and over-optimistic when viewed against the low take-up of LCRE, with approximately 98% of

students not selecting it as one of their nominated examination subjects. In some regards, the valid expectation that LCRE would be highly valued by society as a curriculum area has not materialised, as evidenced by the low numbers. There is an urgency for researchers to understand why such a gap between expectation and actuality exists. There are valid grounds for a wide-ranging evaluation to consider why in the Irish context, some two decades on, there is a persistent and minimal endorsement from the LC student population.

Another area that is rich for study is the impact on how LCRE is engaged with in gaelscoileanna. Irish immersion education accounts for about 2% of the educational cohort. Given the emphasis in the research on the links between LCRE, the Bible and culture, teachers in gaelscoileanna found it difficult to source the LCRE syllabus as Gaeilge, to access textbooks translated into Irish, or to have the benefit of an Irish language version of the supplementary teacher support book series (*Into the Classroom*). The intersection of the Bible and Gaeilge has further historical relevance for schools as William Bedell was instrumental in commissioning a translation of the Bible into Irish (Anderson, 2018; Ó Fearghail, 2018). Ó Muraíle (2024) expands this concept when he writes that a translation of the New Testament (An Tiomna Nuadh) was completed in 1602 by the Protestant Archbishop of Tuam, William Daniel. By 1685 the Old Testament was known as the 'Bíobla Bedell' (Ó Muraíle, 2024, n.p). Ireland was slow in producing a vernacular translation of the Bible, editorial decisions were made about the textual emendations such as Ulster dialect (Ó Muraíle, 2024). Indeed, it was not until 1981 when the entire Bible was printed as a single volume in the Irish language. This is an example how the sacred text functioned ecumenically in the Irish context.

5.6 Recommendations for practice to support biblical literacy: Call for resources

Several LCRE teachers identified a dearth of resources to support their teaching of biblical studies, coupled with a call for CPD to support teaching and learning in this area. Allied to this was the strong connection between the study in university preservice settings of the biblical component, and teacher confidence to teach the Bible. A reflection on some teacher supports follow.

5.6.1 Recommendations for practice: The Visual Bible

The use of visual approaches has potential for strengthening biblical education, as espoused by Goldburg (2010). The *Scriptural Traces* research series explores how biblical texts have been influenced by the Arts (Dalton, 2016; Domoney-Lyttle, 2024). The engagement of the

Arts arena contributes to the holistic development of the human, an important aim of LCRE. Ireland's leading educationalist, John Coolahan (2015), reflecting on the Education Act of 1998, observed that exposure to, and

> participation in, the arts help to cultivate creativity, artistic appreciation, imaginative exploration, experimental initiative and empathic awareness, all of which are valuable for young people's development. Exposure to the arts is part of their entitlement to a holistic education.

Cultural criticism, while an approach and not a method, can illuminate how meaning can be derived from the text (Wainwright and Culbertson, 2010; Domoney-Lyttle, 2024). The gap in the provision of Arts as a cultural endeavour from within and outside of school, convinced the DES, in conjunction with the Department of Arts, Heritage and Gaeltacht, to publish a policy response to the Arts-in-Education Charter (2012). The notion of arts-in-education refers mostly to interventions from the realm of the arts into the education system, by means of artists of all disciplines visiting schools or by schools engaging with professional arts and cultural practice in the public arena (DES, 2012, p.3). The main intention is to enrich the curriculum and the wider life of the school (p. 5). Embodying the principles and key skills from the *Framework for Junior Cycle* and the *Arts-in-Education Charter*, they provide teachers with practical and creative methodologies to use in their professional classroom practice.

Incorporating elements of reception theory to explore the Bible is beneficial in that image and text can be interrogated simultaneously. Visual critical exegesis focuses on how the creator and their understanding of the text is reflected in their creative output (Goldburg, 2010; Domoney-Lyttle, 2024, p. 20). Both student and teacher respondents acknowledged the positive role of the visual in biblical engagement. Findings call for a mixed approach to the Bible, straddling the arts and literature. Given the current review of RE at Senior Cycle (NCCA, 2022), these findings have the potential to inform future RE syllabi at this level. This is partially pertinent as the NCCA revealed recently that a redeveloped Leaving Certificate Religious Education specification will be introduced into schools in 2029 as part of the ongoing revision of subjects. Hebrew Studies, currently a distinct subject, will be incorporated into this redeveloped subject (NCCA, 2022).

The following section reviews potential avenues of support. Two initiatives, the VCS and the BibleProject, strive to augment biblical meaning by effectively harnessing visual literacy in the biblical sphere. Each would be of high value to LCRE practitioners. Within the LCRE,

some emphasis is currently placed on the visual, but there is further potential for development.

LCRE Section	Description of Content	Outcome
Section A (p. 13)	key questions concerning the goal and purpose of life, the meaning of good and evil, and the experience of suffering	give two examples from contemporary culture that illustrate the human search for meaning. Examples may be taken from music, art, literature, or youth culture
Section A (p. 15)	rites of burial and sacrifice	provide evidence of religious behaviour in ancient societies from each of the following: rites of passage and initiation; rites of burial and sacrifice; sacred art and artifacts
Section B (p. 22)	images of Jesus in contemporary culture [in] music, art, film and literature	provide a brief analysis of these images in terms of their inspiration and relevance for contemporary culture and society.
Section H (p. 77)	the influence of the language of the Bible	give an example of biblical influences on a piece of art or a piece of music.

The findings from this study reveal the dominant text approach in LCRE, presenting a barrier to interactive engagement at a visual level. Within the arts, the area of visual commentary also offers the potential to assist JCRE teachers to meet important learning objectives, and to provide alternatives. Encouraging the visualisation of curricula has particular significance for JCRE teachers, given the nature of some of the Statements of Learning mentioned in the Junior Cycle Specification (NCCA, 2015). Statement of Learning 3 demands that the 'student creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts'; text in this situation refers to audio, music, tactile, electronic and digital (p. 12). More specifically, JCRE includes LO 1.9 that insists that students should be able to 'explain what was involved in the development of a particular sacred text within a major world religion and consider its continued significance for the lives of believers' (NCCA, 2019a, p. 17). The following section will analyse the findings of some who alluded to harnessing the visual.

5.6.2 The Bible Project, a visual literacy tool

The importance of the aesthetic and how it benefits hermeneutical meaning making is mirrored in the perspective of one student who said

> if we looked at certain countries like Ethiopia has lots and lots of Christian artifacts dating way back in time and Christian art, and that could give us a big insight into the original message (SC1).

The BibleProject is a support site with tremendous classroom potential to develop visual literacy in the classroom. The site encourages people to 'experience the Bible in a way that is approachable and transformative'. It showcases the 'literary art of the Scriptures,' tracing key biblical themes from Genesis to Revelation (BibleProject). Mackie (one of the site's founders) shows sensitivity to the Jewish texts by identifying them as scroll. However, his stance is specifically catechetical, intending to lead 'readers to Jesus'. The library of visual tools designed to deepen biblical literary include themes such as Sabbath, Elohim, God, The Messiah from book collections such as The Torah, Luke-Acts, Wisdom, Shema and Gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] series. Each video presents a 'short, visual explanation of how the Bible's unified story points to Jesus'. The site looks at biblical texts in context, is attentive to line-by-line hermeneutics, and focuses on literary conventions such as repetition and themes. Meaning is derived from exploring the text's immediate context 'within the scroll and the whole bible story.' For instance, Mackie and Collins note the intertextual links between the covenant theme of the Garden in Genesis which extends into Isaiah 61.

5.6.3 The Bible Project – an educational tool making a literacy-rich book accessible

The aim of the Bible Project is to assist students to become biblically literate. Founded by Tim Mackie and Jon Collins, their collective aim was to 'help people read through Scripture while avoiding the common pitfalls and misunderstandings'. They wondered how they might present complex biblical themes in a way that was real and unapologetic but approachable (Mackie, 2023). Mackie's strengths in theology and semitic languages coalesced with Collins's expertise in digital visual storytelling. Their materials aimed to deepen bible literacy 'through … visual storytelling and technology'. Attentive to the challenge which Biblical texts can present they write:

> Many people have misunderstood the Bible as a collection of inspirational quotes or a divine instruction manual dropped from Heaven. Most of us gravitate toward sections we enjoy while avoiding parts that are confusing or even disturbing. Our Bible Resources help people experience the Bible in a way that is approachable, engaging, and transformative. We do this by showcasing the literary art of the Scriptures and tracing biblical themes from beginning to end. Rather than taking the stance of a specific tradition or denomination, we create materials to elevate the Bible for all people and draw our eyes to its unified message (Mackie, 2023).

They recommend the promotion of visual strategies within teacher education. In the 21st century, the ability to interpret digital, visual and audio media is as important in terms of literacy as reading and writing skills. Visual thinking skills are identified as

> the ability to find meaning in imagery. It involves a set of skills ranging from simple identification (naming what one sees) to complex interpretation on contextual, metaphoric and philosophical levels. Many aspects of cognition are called upon, such as personal association, questioning, speculating, analyzing, fact-finding, and categorizing. Objective understanding is the premise of much of this literacy, but subjective and affective aspects of knowing are equally important (Yenawine, 2016).

Visual literacy supports textual literacy and gives educators a chance to increase the quality of teaching and learning whilst connecting with students in more diverse ways. Ritchhart, Church and Morrison (2011) emphasise the acquisition of the habits of visual literacy: students are engaged through their responses to imagery. Their approach is supported by Freathy and Freathy (2013) who call for students and teachers to dialogue not only about what is taught in RE via content and aims, but moreover through methodology, of how RE is taught. Significant pedagogical benefits can be harnessed through visual literacy, with the latter recognised as a critical skill in a globalising and digital world (Goldburg, 2010; Eilam, 2012).

5.6.4 The Visual Commentary Scripture, a visual literacy tool

The effective perspectives espoused by Goldburg (2010) and others (Blyth, 2021; Myles, 2015) can be seen in the established structure of Visual Commentary Scripture (hereafter VCS), an online biblical literacy tool from Kings College, London. Seeing the Bible as the 'most formative text' (Quash, 2023), it aims to '(re)discover the Bible in new ways through the illuminating interaction of artworks, scriptural texts, and commissioned commentaries' (VCS, 2023). It provides a cross-disciplinary commentary on scripture, straddling the domains of Bible studies, theology and art history. It sets out to 'open new dialogues between image and text so that the Bible and the selected works of art come alive in new and vivid ways' (VCS, 2023). VCS provides supplemental material on both the First Testament/Hebrew Bible, and New Testament. However, unlike the BibleProject, the VCS includes parts of the Apocryphal section of the Bible, 1 Maccabees and Prayer of Azariah in the Book of Daniel for example (VCS, 2023). The BibleProject's focus is on the 66 books of the Christian Bible.

5.7 Concluding remarks

This thesis set out to ascertain if and how the LCRE syllabus enables students to explore what it means to be a reader and scholar of the Bible. On 23 June 2005 at 2pm, the first LCRE exam took place. Two decades later, it is clear that the setting of the Bible within LCRE is unsatisfactory. It warrants a realignment as part of the Senior Cycle review on RE

(NCCA, 2022), accentuating at a higher level the promotion of biblical literacy. Looking at lessons from the current LCRE programme, the domain of sacred text appears to be a natural fit for the Bible, with a greater emphasis needed on the contemporary uses of the Bible, especially in the areas of art and film. While LCRE is aspirational in its links between Judaism and Christianity, there is much room for growth here. This is of particular significance given the future vision for LCRE in 2029 which will include Hebrew Studies (NCCA, 2022).

Hyland (2023), speaking about issues for 21st century education, argues coherently about the challenges often facing education. She considers that curriculum has the negative potential to counter transformation and endorse stagnation. In the light of proposed Senior Cycle reforms, she cites Andreas Schleicher [head of the education division of the OECD]: 'There's a big gap between what the word needs and what our education systems are designed for'. Ireland is at a watershed moment in terms of education, its purpose and design.

This research emerged from my reflections on my own experience of the role that the Bible plays in the teaching of RE in Aotearoa New Zealand and Ireland. I set out to explore the question how or if, LCRE limits or promotes biblical literacy. The nexus between LCRE and the Bible lies at the core of my research question. As demonstrated in the study, LCRE does not necessarily equip students with the skills to interpret biblical texts beyond the literal. The study does show however, that where the teacher has a good level of biblical studies in their own educational background and opts to teach Section H, then students demonstrate a facility for interpretation that moves beyond a literal engagement. What the study did not reveal is if the students draw on the Bible as a text for meaning making in their own lives. As a teacher committed to the rich potential of the Bible, I concluded the study by suggesting that engaging students' visual literacy and cultural literacy skills with their biblical interpretive skills could provide them with the tools to develop their own meaning making capacities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Circular Letter 2022 Coursework LCRE

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission
Corr na Madadh, Baile Átha Luain, Co. na hIarmhí.
Cornamaddy, Athlone, Co. Westmeath.
Telephone: +353-90-64 42746. Fax:+353-90-647 3080. Web: www.examinations.ie. E-mail: info@examinations.ie

S59/20

To: Management Authorities of Second Level School
Leaving Certificate Religious Education, 2022
Prescribed Titles for Practical Coursework

1. A syllabus for Leaving Certificate Religious Education was introduced in September 2003 and examined for the first time in 2005.

2. The syllabus indicates that the assessment of Religious Education will have two elements: (1) a final written paper, and (2) coursework.

3. The subject will be assessed externally at Ordinary Level and at Higher Level. At both levels, coursework will account for 20% of the marks.

4. The titles for coursework for the Leaving Certificate examination 2022 are attached. These titles are common to Ordinary Level and Higher Level. Candidates are required to submit coursework on **one title only** taken from *either* Section E *or* Section H. Candidates should note that they will not be examined on these sections of the syllabus in the written examination in 2022.

5. Guidelines for undertaking coursework are included in *Religious Education Leaving Certificate Higher and Ordinary Level - Guidelines for Teachers* which was issued with the syllabus in June 2003.

6. The coursework must be submitted in a standard form in a booklet, which will be issued in due course for that purpose. The Religious Education Coursework Booklets will be marked online from 2021 onwards. When the candidate's Coursework Booklet is returned to the SEC, it will be scanned and become an electronic script. The scanned images of a candidate's Religious Education Coursework Booklet will then be marked on screen by examiners using specially designed software. Candidates should write within the spaces provided in their Religious Education Coursework Booklet, using black or blue pen only, as this will ensure that all of their Coursework Booklet is captured in the scanning process. Anything written

outside of these areas or in the margins of the Coursework Booklet may not be seen by examiners.

The coursework booklet will be broken into two components, Part A and Part B.

Part A — a summary of the candidate's investigation of the chosen title.

Part B — the candidate's personal reflection on the learning, skills and experience gained through undertaking coursework on the chosen title.

7. Please bring this circular and the attached list of coursework titles to the notice of the teachers concerned.

8. Please provide a copy of this circular to the appropriate representatives of parents and teachers for transmission to individual parents and teachers.

9. If you have any queries regarding this circular please telephone 0906442746/0906442825.

Philomena Mulvihill

Executive Officer
November, 2020.

PRESCRIBED TITLES FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION COURSEWORK

IN THE LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION, 2022

A choice of two titles is given in each of Sections E and H below. Candidates should base their coursework on **one** title only, taken from *either* Section E *or* Section H.

SECTION E RELIGION AND GENDER

E. 1 Research the influence that the humanity of Mary, the mother of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels, has on **two** religious practices which are popular within a Christian denomination today.

E. 2 ● BIOLOGY ● PHILOSOPHY ● PSYCHOLOGY ● SOCIOLOGY

Profile how insights from **two** of the above, on the understanding of gender, influence the changing roles of men and women in society.

SECTION H THE BIBLE: LITERATURE AND SACRED TEXT

H. 1 An examination of the Bible's influence on **two** of the types of literature listed below.

■ A CONSTITUTION ■ A DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE ■ A FAMOUS SPEECH

H. 2

List A	**List B**
◆ Hannah's Song of Thanks (1 Sam 2:1-10)	◆ The Prologue (Jn 1:1-18)
◆ Israel Restored (Is 52:13-53:12)	◆ The Sermon on the Plain (Lk 6:20-49)
◆ The Ten Commandments (Ex 20:1-21)	◆ The Transfiguration (Mk 9:2-13)

An exploration and analysis of **one** text from List A and **one** text from List B above in relation to **each** of the following points:

- The text's original background/context.
- What the text says about the relationship between God and God's people.

Appendix 2: Focus Group Questions, Religious Education Students

1. In the list of subjects available to you in your school, why did you choose LC RE as an examination subject?
2. What in your view are the best aspects of the LCRE (2003) syllabus and why?
3. What are the aspects of the LCRE (2003) syllabus that you do not enjoy and why?
4. What skills have you learned through your study of the LCRE (2003) syllabus?
5. Did you study the optional Unit H The Bible? Why/why not?
6. Do you know how to find a Bible reference and if yes, where did you learn the skill?
7. When you go the movies to see a film, each one has a unique genre or style e.g. horror, documentary, comedy, action, historical. Genre can also be applied to what we read in literature, for example, diary genre, crime genre, poetry genre, narrative genre. What do you know about genre in the Bible?
8. Are there any links between themes in the Bible and any other literature you are studying, e.g., Gaeilge, English, Languages? If yes, are any of these links made in your classes?
9. Comment on the following statement: The Bible should be read as a literal word-for-word truth and not in a metaphorical symbolic way.

10a Rate the significance of the Bible in your RE class

High		Moderate		Low
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating

10b Rate the significance of the Bible to you

High		Moderate		Low
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating

10 C Please rate your own confidence using the Bible

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating

11. How do you think engagement with the LCRE (2003) syllabus will help you in the future?
12. Any other comments are welcome.

Appendix 3: LCRE (2003) Syllabus Structure

SYLLABUS STRUCTURE

It is intended that the syllabus should be taught in the sequence outlined below. The course consists of three units.

UNIT ONE

SECTION A The search for meaning and values

UNIT TWO

Any two of:

SECTION B Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions

SECTION C World religions

SECTION D Moral decision-making

UNIT THREE

Any one of the following (excluding the two sections designated for coursework).

SECTION E Religion and gender

SECTION F Issues of justice and peace

SECTION G Worship, prayer, and ritual

SECTION H The Bible: literature and sacred text

SECTION I Religion: the Irish experience

SECTION J Religion and science

Appendix 4: LCRE assessment format and marking advice, from 2015 examination.

This marking scheme demonstrates evidence of marker response.

3 H b) Discuss the importance of the 'Q' source in the formation of two Synoptic Gospels. (40M)

Marking Criteria
An excellent answer will show knowledge of how the Gospels came to be written by examining the 'Q' source and drawing accurate conclusions about the role it may have played in the formation of two Synoptic Gospels.

Possible Points

- 'Q' — Quelle or source, is a hypothetical document that may have once existed which contained a collection of Jesus' sayings; Gospels of Luke and Mathew have non-Marcan material in common; 'Q' source provides a credible reason why there are similarities between the Gospels of Matthew and Luke etc.
- The 'Q' source is not important in the formation of the Synoptic Gospels in that while there are close parallels between the three Synoptic Gospels, there are significant differences e.g. the order in which the events and sayings of Jesus are placed in the Synoptic Gospels etc.
- Etc.

Note: Allow descriptive answers.

Code MC in left margin where the Marking Criteria is first evident in the candidate's answer.

Excellent	*Very Good*	*Good*	*Fair*	*Weak*			*Marks*
40 > 34	33 > 28	27 > 22	21 > 16	15 > 10	9 > 4	3 > 0	40M

Appendix 5: LCRE Draft Sample Paper, Ordinary and Higher Level (SEC, 2004)

M96

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - ORDINARY LEVEL

DRAFT SAMPLE PAPER

Total Marks: 320

TIME: **2 hours**

General Directions for Candidates

CANDIDATES MUST ATTEMPT THE FOLLOWING:

- **TWO** QUESTIONS FROM UNIT ONE
- **TWO** QUESTIONS FROM UNIT TWO
- **ONE** QUESTION FROM UNIT THREE

UNIT ONE

(80 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **TWO** OF THE FOLLOWING THREE QUESTIONS.

(All questions carry 40 marks each)

SECTION A THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND VALUES

QUESTION 1. PHILOSOPHY

a. What does the term "philosophy" mean? (15 marks)

b. Name **one** ancient Greek who has contributed to the development of philosophy. (10 marks)

c. Briefly outline **one** philosophical idea of the person you have named. (15 marks)

QUESTION 2. MYTH AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

"In the ancient world myths gave people answers to key questions in the search for meaning."

a. Briefly outline **one** ancient myth that provided an answer to **one** key question in the search for meaning. (20 marks)

b. Explain how the myth you have outlined gives an answer to this key question of meaning. (20 marks)

QUESTION 3. GOD AND THE GODS

a. What does the term "polytheism" mean? (15 marks)

b. Name **one** religion that is an example of polytheism. (10 marks)

c. Briefly outline the way in which the religion you have named is an example of polytheism. (15 marks)

UNIT TWO

(160 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 60 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **TWO** OF THE FOLLOWING THREE SECTIONS.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

SECTION B CHRISTIANITY - KINGDOM OF GOD

a. Outline the Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God at the time of Jesus. (30 marks)

b. Jesus gave people a new understanding of the Kingdom of God through the parables he taught. Outline **one** such parable. (20 marks)

c. Explain the understanding of the Kingdom of God in the parable you have outlined. (30 marks)

SECTION C WORLD RELIGIONS - RITES OF INITIATION

a. What is a rite of initiation? (20 marks)

b. Describe **one** rite of initiation in *either* Judaism *or* Christianity. (30 marks)

c. Explain the symbolism of **one** ritual associated with this rite. (30 marks)

SECTION D MORAL DECISION-MAKING - VALUES AND CODES

a. Outline the difference between a personal value and a community value. (20 marks)

b. Outline **one** moral code or charter that maintains a balance between personal and community values. (30 marks)

c. Explain how this balance between personal and community values can be seen in the code you have outlined above. (30 marks)

UNIT THREE

(80 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **ONE** OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR SECTIONS.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

SECTION E RELIGION AND GENDER

It has been suggested that men and women have not always been treated equally in religion.

Using an example of a person or group you have studied, discuss whether this suggestion is correct.

(80 marks)

SECTION F ISSUES OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

a. Outline the key principles of the Just War Theory. (40 marks)

b. Select the principle you think is most useful and explain why. (40 marks)

SECTION H THE BIBLE: LITERATURE AND SACRED TEXT

"*Like all good stories the story of Job has something in it for everyone.*"

a. Outline the story of Job in your own words. (40 marks)

b. Explain what you think is most valuable in it for the modern reader. (40 marks)

SECTION J RELIGION AND SCIENCE

a. Identify **one** way in which Darwin's theory of evolution was seen to be in conflict with any one religious understanding of creation. (40 marks)

b. Describe how **one** community of faith responded to this perceived conflict. (40 marks)

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

LEAVING CERTIFICATE EXAMINATION

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION - HIGHER LEVEL

SAMPLE PAPER

Total Marks: 320

TIME: **2 ½ hours**

General Directions for Candidates

CANDIDATES MUST ATTEMPT THE FOLLOWING:

- **ONE** QUESTION FROM UNIT **ONE**
- **TWO** QUESTIONS FROM UNIT TWO
- **ONE** QUESTION FROM UNIT THREE

UNIT ONE

(80 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **ONE** OF THE FOLLOWING TWO QUESTIONS.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

SECTION A THE SEARCH FOR MEANING AND VALUES

Question 1.

Snark International

Imagine you can speak with Plato about life's great questions as they feature in the world today.

a. What questions do you think he would focus on?

(40 marks)

b. What do you think he would say to you about these questions?

(40 marks)

Question 2.

● Christianity ● Islam ● Judaism

a. Briefly describe the concept of God in **one** of the above world religions.

(40 marks)

b. Explain how this concept has implications for the moral values by which people live in this religious tradition.

(40 marks)

UNIT TWO

(160 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 60 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **TWO** OF THE FOLLOWING THREE SECTIONS.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

SECTION B CHRISTIANITY: ORIGINS AND CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSIONS

Describe how Jesus is understood and represented in contemporary culture. Assess to what extent this representation is true to the historical life of Jesus.

(80 marks)

SECTION C WORLD RELIGIONS

Yet sometimes when the sun comes through a gap
These men know God the Father in a tree.

– Patrick Kavanagh

This quotation expresses a sense of the sacred in the ordinary things of life. Discuss the relationship between "sacred" and "profane" in **one** of the following religious traditions:

● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism

(80 marks)

SECTION D MORAL DECISION-MAKING

"God is love and whoever lives in love lives in union with God and God lives in union with him."

(1 John 4:16 *Good News Bible*)

"God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them."

(1 John 4:16 *New Revised Standard Version*)

"God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in him."

(1 John 4:16 *The Jerusalem Bible*)

Outline Jesus' understanding of the law of love and trace its influence on the understanding of sin and reconciliation in **one** Christian denomination.

(80 marks)

UNIT THREE

(80 marks)

YOU SHOULD SPEND APPROXIMATELY 30 MINUTES COMPLETING THIS UNIT.

YOU MUST ATTEMPT **ONE** OF THE FOLLOWING FOUR SECTIONS.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

SECTION E RELIGION AND GENDER

An examination of sacred texts shows that in principle religions carry an essential message of equality.

Investigate the accuracy of this statement with reference to the role of men and women in **one** of the following world religions:

● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism

(80 marks)

SECTION F ISSUES OF JUSTICE AND PEACE

a Compare the understanding of justice and peace in **two** of the following world religions:

● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism (40 marks)

b Outline how the understanding of justice and peace in any **one** of the above world religions can influence a person's response to -

i. A situation of violence

or

ii. An environmental issue

(40 marks)

SECTION H THE BIBLE: LITERATURE AND SACRED TEXT

Outline how redaction criticism has contributed to the understanding of the synoptic gospels.

(80 marks)

SECTION J RELIGION AND SCIENCE

Fourth Estate Ltd

The NASA website reports that in 1971 the Apollo 15 astronauts dropped a hammer and a feather in the near-vacuum of the moon. The two objects plummeted to the lunar surface, untroubled by air resistance, and landed at precisely the same moment, proving Galileo correct, 328 years after his death.

Assess the significance of any **one** of Galileo's discoveries for the relationship between science and religion.

(80 marks)

Appendix 6: LCRE Examination Paper, Ordinary and Higher Level (SEC, 2024)

2024.M97 2024L223A1EL

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit
State Examinations Commission

Leaving Certificate Examination 2024

Religious Education

Higher Level

Tuesday 25 June Afternoon 2:00 – 4:30

Total Marks 320

General Directions for Candidates

Candidates must answer the following —

- **One** Question from Unit One
- **Two** Sections from Unit Two
- **One** Section from Unit Three

Do not hand up this question paper.
This document will not be returned to the State Examinations Commission.

The 2024 examination papers were adjusted to compensate for disruptions to learning due to COVID-19. This examination paper does not necessarily reflect the same structure and format as the examination papers of past or subsequent years.

Unit One

You must answer parts (a) and (b) from **one** of the following two questions.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

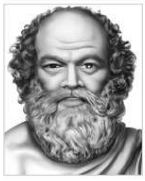
Section A The Search for Meaning and Values (80 marks)

Question 1

Answer (a) and (b).

(a) **(i)** Imagine you are working in a group choosing a person who could be honoured for the part their ideas played in the development of philosophy.

Explain a reason why Socrates could be selected for the part any **one** of his ideas played in the development of philosophy. (20)



(ii) From your knowledge of Socrates' thinking outline the points he might emphasise for people today on **one** of the following ideas:

- The moral good
- The importance of essence

(20)

(b) Describe **two** examples of how an interest in the spiritual can be seen in the lives of people who lived in an ancient society. (40)

Question 2

Answer (a) and (b).

(a) 'There is an unprecedented spiritual hunger in our times.'

Assess the evidence for this statement, referring to **two** different ways that an interest in spirituality could help a person in their search for the meaning of life. (40)

(b) The development of a secular value system can be traced back to particular points in time, such as how a focus on human rights followed the French Revolution, etc.

Describe **two** other examples, from different points in time, of how a secular value system developed. (40)

Unit Two

You must answer **two** of the following three sections.

(All sections carry 80 marks each)

Section B Christianity: Origins and Contemporary Expressions (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts (a), (b), (c).

(a) ● Essenes ● Pharisees ● Sadducees

Outline a similarity and a difference in the reaction of **two** Jewish groups listed above to Roman rule in Palestine at the time of Jesus of Nazareth. (40)

(b) Describe two examples of how the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth is remembered by Christians today in **one** of the following ways:

● The search for Christian unity ● Rites of Christian worship (40)

(c) Examine the effect that returning to the original teaching of Jesus of Nazareth had on members of **two** of the following Christian movements:

● Céli Dé ● Early 19th Century Protestantism ● Liberation Theology

● Luther's Reforms ● Mendicant Orders ● The Second Vatican Council (40)

Section C World Religions (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts (a), (b), (c).

(a) **(i)** Describe a religious ceremony that marks the entry/initiation of a new member into **one** of the following religions: ● Buddhism ● Hinduism ● Islam (20)

(ii) Outline a similarity in how the entry of a new member is marked in the religion described in part C (a), (i) above and the way this is celebrated in either Christianity or Judaism. (20)

(b) Suggest a similarity and a difference between the religious practice of members in a major world religion and the lifestyle of believers in **one** of the following:

● An African Traditional Religion ● A New Religious Movement ● Baha'i Faith

● Chinese Religion ● Sikh Religion (40)

(c) Describe **two** examples of how the sense of awe and mystery associated with the 'sacred' can be communicated through individual people within a religion. (40)

Section D Moral Decision-Making (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts (a), (b), (c).

(a) Imagine you are taking part in a discussion group with young Christians in your area.

From your knowledge of Jesus' teaching on 'right relationship' and the law of love, outline **two** points that Jesus might emphasise for Christians living in the world today. (40)

(b) Examine how a balance between 'the common good' and 'individual rights' is encouraged in t**wo** examples of Irish civil law. (40)

(c) Name a moral theorist and describe what is involved in **two** stages of moral development they suggest a person might go through before reaching moral maturity. (40)

Unit Three

You must answer **one** of the following four sections.

(All sections carry 80 marks each)

Section E Religion and Gender (80 marks)

Answer (a) or (b).

(a) ● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism

Explain how roles men and women play within **two** of the above religions are connected to their image of God/gods/the transcendent. (80)

or

(b) ● Founders & Reformers of Religious Orders ● Religious Writers
● Social Reformers ● Spiritual Thinkers

Outline a similarity and a difference in the way **two** women, from different categories listed above, contributed to the development of their religious traditions. (80)

Section H The Bible: Literature and Sacred Texts (80 marks)

Answer (a) or (b).

(a) **(i)** ● The Sower (Matthew 13:1-9) ● The Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-13)

Describe the context in which **each** of the above parables was first told by Jesus of Nazareth, as outlined in a Gospel. (40)

(ii) ● The Labourers in the Vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16) ● The Ten Wedding Attendants (Matthew 25:1-13)

Explain the impact that **each** of the above parables had on listeners when they were first told by Jesus of Nazareth, according to Matthew's Gospel. (40)

or

(b) **(i)** Outline **two** ways that there are similarities in how the life-story of Jesus of Nazareth is presented in all of the synoptic Gospels. (40)

(ii) Examine **two** differences that exist between any of the synoptic Gospels. (40)

Section I Religion: The Irish Experience (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts (a), (b), (c).

(a) Describe the pattern of Christian belief and practice found in another part of Europe at the time that Saint Patrick came to Ireland. (40)

(b) Using examples, explain the difference between secularism and secularisation and how each can be seen in Ireland today. (40)

(c) ● Contemporary Ireland ● Monasticism ● Spirituality and Land
● Spirituality and Reform ● The Enlightenment

Discuss the reasons why **two** of the above have been described as key moments in the development of Christianity in Ireland. (40)

Section J Religion and Science (80 marks)

Answer (a) or (b).

(a) **(i)** Explain **two** reasons why the work of Descartes could be seen as supporting the view that religion and science exist in harmony with each other. (40)

(ii) Science is 'an activity of a community of motivated believers …'

Discuss the evidence for this statement, referring to the role being part of a community plays in both religion and science. (40)

or

(b) Outline a similarity and a difference in the concerns that religion and science each bring to current debates on an issue to do with **one** of the following:

● The origins of the universe/natural world

● Genetics (80)

Acknowledgements

Images

Images on page 2: First Picture: https://www.creativefabrica.com/product/socrates-hyper-realistic-watercolor-coloring-page/
Second Picture: www.vecteezy.com/vertpr-art/15091049

Image on page 4: https://pngtree.com/free-school-clipart/book

Images on page 5: First Picture: https://www.publicdomainpictures.net/en/view-image.php?image=153185&picture=celtic-cross
Second Picture: https://civility.co/uncategorized/

Texts

Text on page 2: Anam Chara, John O'Donohue (1997) HarperCollins e-books (2008) ISBN:9780061865855

Text on page 5: Adapted from Religious Education Leaving Certificate Ordinary Level and Higher Level Guidelines for Teachers © 2005 Government of Ireland ISBN 0-7557-1378-8 p. 102; Southgate, Christopher and others (1999) God, Humanity and the Cosmos: A textbook in Science and Religion T & T Clarke Limited/Trinity Press International p.22.

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Leaving Certificate – Higher Level

Religious Education

Tuesday 25 June
Afternoon 2:00 – 4:30

Coimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit

State Examinations Commission

Leaving Certificate Examination 2024

Religious Education

Ordinary Level

Tuesday 25 June Afternoon 2:00 – 4:00

Total Marks 320

General Directions for Candidates

Candidates must answer the following —

- **One** Question from Unit One
- **Two** Sections from Unit Two
- **One** Section from Unit Three

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The 2024 examination papers were adjusted to compensate for disruptions to learning due to COVID-19. This examination paper does not necessarily reflect the same structure and format as the examination papers of past or subsequent years.

Unit One

You must answer parts (a) and (b) from **one** of the following three questions.

(All questions carry 80 marks each)

Section A The Search for Meaning and Values (80 marks)

Question 1 The Tradition of the Search

Answer (a) and (b).

(a) Imagine you have the chance to talk with Aristotle about how his ideas could help people today in their search to find the true meaning of life.

From your knowledge of Aristotle's ideas, suggest **two** points that he might talk about to help people searching for the meaning of life today. (40)

(b) Explain **two** reasons why a person could lose interest in searching for the meaning of life today. (40)

Question 2 The Tradition of the Response

Answer (a) and (b).

(a) Profile how an idea put forward by a person associated with the humanist tradition could influence an answer to a question about the meaning of life today. (40)

(b) Using examples, examine how polytheism played a role in the founding story of **two** of the following religions: Christianity, Islam, Judaism**.** (40)

Question 3 Communal Values

Answer (a) and (b).

(a) Explore how **two** questions about human suffering are expressed in today's art, literature, music or youth culture. (40)

(b) **(i)** Describe **one** example of how symbols are used by either individuals or groups to express what is of meaning in their lives. (20)

(ii) Explain why symbols are used in response to questions about the meaning of life by either individuals or groups today. (20)

Unit Two

You must answer **two** of the following three sections.

(All sections carry 80 marks each)

Section B Christianity: Origins and Contemporary Expressions (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts: (a), (b), (c).

(a) Outline a way that returning to the original teaching of Jesus of Nazareth helped **two** of the following movements to rediscover the message of Jesus for themselves:
● Céli Dé ● Early 19th century Protestantism ● Liberation Theology ● Luther
● The Mendicant Orders ● The Second Vatican Council (40)

(b) **(i)** Analyse what inspired the image of Jesus of Nazareth presented in an example from **one** of the following: art, film, literature or music. (20)

(ii) Examine the relevance for Christians today of the understanding of Jesus of Nazareth referred to in part (b), (i) above. (20)

(c) Describe an example of how members of a Christian denomination today try to live out the teaching of Jesus in **one** of the following ways: ● Creating a just and inclusive society
● Responding to those who are dying ● Responding to violence, intolerance, sectarianism
● Sharing the earth's resources ● Supporting Christian community life (40)

Section C World Religions (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts: (a), (b), (c).

(a) Using an example, explain how inter-faith dialogue has helped to promote a good relationship between **two** of the following religions:
● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism (40)

(b) Describe two examples of how the influence of religious belief can be seen in the lifestyle of believers today from **one** of the following: ● An African Traditional Religion
● A Chinese Religion ● A New Religious Movement ● Baha'i Faith ● Sikh Religion (40)

(c) Outline how the influence of primal religion can be seen in the religious practice of members today from **two** of the following religions:
● Buddhism ● Christianity ● Hinduism ● Islam ● Judaism (40)

Section D Moral Decision-Making (80 marks)

Answer any two of parts: (a), (b), (c).

(a) ● Media ● Peers
Using examples, explain how **each** of the above could influence a person's decision about what is right and wrong in a situation. (40)

(b) Virtues such as courage, patience, truthfulness etc. have been described as qualities of character that prompt a person to do the right thing.
Describe **two** examples of how 'virtue' can play a part in a person's growth towards moral maturity. (40)

(c) Using examples, describe how a decision about what is right and wrong on an issue could be influenced by **each** of the following points of view:
● Fundamentalism ● Relativism (40)

Unit Three

You must answer **one** of the following four sections.

(All sections carry 80 marks each)

Section E Religion and Gender (80 marks)

Answer part (a) or (b).

(a) ● Founders & Reformers of Religious Orders ● Religious Writers
● Social Reformers ● Spiritual Thinkers

Choose **one** woman in any of the above categories and outline her life story using each of the following headings:

(i) Her key insights/actions. (40)

(ii) Two questions raised by her life and work for people today. (40)

or

(b) Describe **two** examples of how one woman dealt with the challenges she faced in the part she played in the story of salvation, outlined in either the Hebrew or Christian scriptures. (80)

Section H The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text (80 marks)

Answer part (a) or (b).

(a) ● The Gospel of John ● The Gospel of Luke ● The Gospel of Mark ● The Gospel of Matthew

(i) Using examples, outline how oral traditions have been preserved in **two** of the above Gospels. (40)

(ii) Explain **two** reasons why oral traditions played a role in the development of the above Gospels. (40)

or

(b) **(i)** Describe **two** examples of what can be referred to as 'storytelling' that are found in the Bible. (40)

(ii) Explain the reasons why **two** examples of storytelling, found in the Bible, are relevant for people today. (40)

Section I Religion and the Irish Experience (80 marks)

Answer part (a) or (b).

(a) Using examples, explain **two** reasons why Pre-Christian practices were adapted during Saint Patrick's mission in Ireland. (80)

or

(b) ● Contemporary Ireland ● Monasticism ● Spirituality and Land
● Spirituality and Reform ● The Enlightenment

(i) Explain why **one** of the above can be described as a time of change in religion within Ireland. (40)

(ii) Examine how what happened during **one** of the above moments influenced the development of Christianity in Ireland. (40)

Section J Religion and Science (80 marks)

Answer part (a) or (b).

(a) **(i)** Outline **two** ideas that were put forward by Galileo through his experiments and discoveries about the universe. (40)

(ii) Trace **two** ways in which an idea put forward by Galileo influenced the relationship between science and religion. (40)

or

(b) **(i)** Explain why being part of a community is important for both science and religion, referring to the advantages of objective and subjective investigation. (40)

(ii) Religion and science share questions in common.

Discuss the extent to which religion and science share an interest in **two** particular questions about life and living today. (40)

Acknowledgements

Images

Images on page 2: First Picture: http://www.sawanonlinebookstore.com/aristotle
Second Picture: http://www.Kindpng.com/imgv/bmJwxb_question-mark-clip-art-free-clipart-images-image

Image on page3: https://media.istockphoto.com/id/1307082448/photo/right-or-wrong.jpg

Image on page 4: https://t3.ftcdn.net/jpg/00/50/56/62/360_F_50566276_IDXSYBRL96ZJcYw0ac3mkRW8uiHs95UI.jpg

Images on page 5: First Picture: https://catholicsaintmedals.com/saints/st-patrick
Second Picture: https://medium.com/science-and-philosophy/a-tribute-to-astronomer-Galileo-Galilei

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Leaving Certificate – Ordinary Level

Religious Education

Tuesday 25 June
Afternoon 2:00 – 4:00

Appendix 7: List of Post-Primary schools offering LCRE

Academic Year	Roll Number	Official School Name	Address 1	Address 2	Address 3	Address 4	County	Subject Code and Desc
2022-2023	60030V	Blackrock College	Blackrock College	Co Dublin			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60050E	Oatlands College	Mount Merrion	Co Dublin			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60100Q	Castleknock College	College Rd	Castleknock	Dublin 15		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60120W	Mount Sackville Secondary School	Tower Road	Chapelizod	Dublin 20		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60122D	Coláiste Bríde	New Road	Clondalkin	Dublin 22		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60130C	Loreto Abbey Secondary School	Dalkey	Co Dublin			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60140F	Mount Anville Secondary School	Mount Anville Road	Dublin 14			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60180R	Christian Brothers College	Monkstown Park	Dun Laoghaire	Co Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60250M	Holy Child Secondary School	Military Road	Killiney	Co. Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60260P	St Joseph Of Cluny Secondary School	Ballinclea Road	Killiney	Co. Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60272W	The Kings Hospital	Palmerstown	Dublin 20			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60310E	De La Salle College	Upper Churchtown Road	Churchtown	Dublin 14		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60340N	Loreto High School	Beaufort	Grange Rd	Rathfarnham	Dublin 14	Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60481I	St. Aidan's C.B.S.	Collins Avenue Ext	Whitehall	Dublin 9		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60500J	Marian College	Ballsbridge	Dublin 4			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60511O	Beneavin De La Salle College	Beneavin Road	Finglas	Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60530S	Gonzaga College	Sandford Road	Ranelagh	Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60560E	St Marys College	73-79 Lower Rathmines Road	Dublin 6			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60561G	St Michaels College	Ailesbury Road	Dublin 4			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)

Academic Year	Roll Number	Official School Name	Address 1	Address 2	Address 3	Address 4	County	Subject Code and Desc
2022-2023	60650F	St Andrews College	Booterstown Ave	Blackrock	Co Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60710U	Muckross Park College	Donnybrook	Dublin 4			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60720A	St. Dominic's College Ballyfermot	Ballyfermot	Dublin 10			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60800V	Loreto College	Crumlin Road	Dublin 12			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60870T	Our Lady Of Mercy College	Beaumont	Dublin 9			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	60910F	Alexandra College	Milltown	Dublin 6			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61060M	St Patrick's College	Cullies	Cavan	Co. Cavan		Cavan	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61140K	St. Leo's College	Dublin Road	Carlow			Carlow	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61260U	Meanscoil Naomh Ioseph	Presentation Secondary School	Castleisland	Co. Kerry		Kerry	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61340S	St. Brigid's Secondary School	New Street	Killarney	Co. Kerry		Kerry	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61550G	Meánscoil na mBráithre Criostaí	Sráid Shéamais	Cill Channaigh			Kilkenny	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61570M	Kilkenny College	Castlecomer Road	Kilkenny			Kilkenny	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61590S	Presentation Secondary School	Loughboy	Kilkenny			Kilkenny	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61680T	Newbridge College	Newbridge	Co. Kildare			Kildare	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61690W	Cross And Passion College	Kilcullen	Co Kildare			Kildare	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61780A	St Marys College	St Mary's Rd	Arklow	Co Wicklow		Wicklow	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61800D	Presentation College	Putland Road	Bray	Co. Wicklow		Wicklow	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61940T	Meánscoil na mBráithre	Ennistymon	Co. Clare			Clare	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	61950W	Scoil Mhuire	Ennistymon	Co Clare			Clare	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62140P	St Aloysius College	Main Street	Carrigtwohill	Co.Cork		Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62520C	Christian Brothers College	Sidney Hill	Wellington Road	Cork.		Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62570R	Presentation Brothers College	The Mardyke	Cork			Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62661U	Mount Mercy College	Model Farm Road	Cork			Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62770C	Scoil Mhuire Secondary School	St. Oran's Road	Buncrana	Co. Donegal		Donegal	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62840U	Loreto Secondary School	Letterkenny	Co Donegal			Donegal	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	62930V	St. Cuan's College	Castleblakeney	Ballinasloe	Co Galway		Galway	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)

Academic Year	Roll Number	Official School Name	Address 1	Address 2	Address 3	Address 4	County	Subject Code and Desc
2022-2023	63090I	Holy Rosary College	Mountbellew	Co Galway			Galway	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63190M	Marist College	Retreat Road	Athlone	Co. Westmeath		Westmeath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63280N	St Finian's College	Longford Road	Ballyglass	Mullingar	Co Westmeath	Westmeath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63290Q	Loreto College	Mullingar	Co Westmeath			Westmeath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63300Q	Wilson's Hospital School	Heathlands	Multyfarnham	Co. Westmeath		Westmeath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63451O	Scoil Chriost Ri	Presentation Secondary School	Borris Road	Portlaoise	Co Laois	Laois	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63550Q	F.C.J. Secondary School	Bunclody	Enniscorthy	Co Wexford		Wexford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63620L	St. Mary's Secondary School	Irishtown	New Ross			Wexford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63660A	Loreto Secondary School	Pembroke Hill	Ballynagee	Wexford.		Wexford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63760E	Meán Scoil Muire	5 St. Joseph's Road	Longford Town	Co. Longford		Longford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63841E	St Mary's Diocesan School	Beamore Road	Drogheda	Co. Louth		Louth	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63850F	Our Lady's College	Greenhills	Drogheda	Co. Louth		Louth	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	63860I	Sacred Heart Secondary School	Sunnyside	Drogheda	Co Louth		Louth	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64150F	Glenstal Abbey School	Murroe	Co Limerick			Limerick	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64310B	Villiers Secondary School	North Circular Road	Limerick			Limerick	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64350N	St Patrick's Classical School	Moatlands	Navan	Co Meath		Meath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64630T	Jesus & Mary Secondary School	Gortnor Abbey	Crossmolina			Mayo	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64660F	Sancta Maria College	Louisburgh	Co Mayo			Mayo	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64971W	Our Lady of Mercy Secondary School	Ozanam St.	Waterford			Waterford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	64990D	St Angela's Secondary School	Ursuline Convent	Waterford			Waterford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	65150K	Jesus & Mary Secondary School	Pier Road, Enniscrone,	Co Sligo			Sligo	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	65300D	Rockwell College	Cashel	Co Tipperary			Tipperary	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	65460C	Presentation Secondary School	Thurles	Co Tipperary			Tipperary	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	65610S	Colaiste Choilm	O'Moore Street	Tulach Mhor	Co. Offaly		Offaly	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	65620V	Sacred Heart Secondary School	Daingean Road	Tullamore	Co. Offaly		Offaly	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)

Academic Year	Roll Number	Official School Name	Address 1	Address 2	Address 3	Address 4	County	Subject Code and Desc
2022-2023	65630B	Killina Presentation Secondary School	Rahan	Tullamore	Co Offaly		Offaly	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	68067P	St Nathy's College	Chapel Street	Ballaghaderreen	Co Roscommon		Roscommon	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	68068R	Coláiste Íosagáin	Portarlington	Co. Laois			Laois	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	68081J	Temple Carrig Secondary School	Temple Carrig	Greystones			Wicklow	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	68083N	Le Cheile Secondary School	Hollystown Road	Tyrrelstown	Dublin 15		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	68141B	Ardscoil na Mara	Summerhill	Tramore			Waterford	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	70080T	Lucan Community College	Esker Drive	Lucan	Co Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	70081V	Rath Dara Community College	Rath Dara Community College	Blanchardstown Road North	Dublin 15		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	70141N	Mount Seskin Community College	Jobstown	Tallaght	Dublin 24		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	70920O	Colaiste Ghobnatan	Baile Mhic Ire	Machromtha	Co Chorcaí		Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	71102I	Schull Community College	Colla Road	Schull			Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	71430C	Columba College	Killucan	Co Westmeath			Westmeath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	71780G	Scoil Ui Mhuiri	Barn Road	Dunleer	Co. Louth		Louth	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	71950F	St Peter's College	Dunboyne	Co. Meath			Meath	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76062B	Castleknock Community College	Carpenterstown Road	Castleknock	Dublin 15		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76064F	Glanmire Community College	Brooklodge	Glanmire	Co.Cork		Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76078Q	Skerries Community College	Skerries Community College	Balbriggan Street	Skerries	Co Dublin	Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76082H	Abbey Community College	Abbey Rd	Ferrybank	Waterford		Kilkenny	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76084L	Moville Community College	Carrownaff	Moville	Co Donegal		Donegal	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76098W	Coláiste Pobail Setanta	Colaiste Pobail Setanta	Phibblestown	Clonee	Dublin 15	Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	76129H	Ardgillan Community College	Castlelands	Balbriggan		Co Dublin	Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	81001I	Newpark Comprehensive School	Newtownpark Avenue	Blackrock	Co Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	81002K	Mount Temple Comprehensive School	Malahide Road	Dublin 3			Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91302F	Phobailscoil Iosolde	Oak Court Avenue	Palmerstown	Dublin 20		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91305L	Ballinteer Community School	Broadford Road	Ballinteer	Dublin 16		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)

Academic Year	Roll Number	Official School Name	Address 1	Address 2	Address 3	Address 4	County	Subject Code and Desc
2022-2023	91325R	Malahide Community School	Broomfield	Malahide	Co. Dublin		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91332O	St Marks Community School	Cookstown Rd	Tallaght	Dublin 24		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91336W	Old Bawn Community School	Old Bawn	Tallaght	Dublin 24		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91339F	Hartstown Community School	Hartstown	Clonsilla	Dublin 15		Dublin	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91406R	Carndonagh Community School	Carndonagh Community School	P.O. Box 4	Carndonagh	Co Donegal	Donegal	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91461C	Ballyhaunis Community School	Knock Road	Ballyhaunis	Co.Mayo		Mayo	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91491L	St.Brendan's Community School	Birr	Co Offaly			Offaly	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91499E	Kinsale Community School	Kinsale	Co Cork			Cork	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)
2022-2023	91503P	Pobalscoil Inbhear Scéine	Kenmare	Co. Kerry	V93 K580		Kerry	223 Religious Education (LC Exam)

Appendix 8: Plain Language Statement

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Plain Language Statement – Leaving Certificate RE students

Introduction to the Research Study

Title: An investigation into the extent to which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Religious Education syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy in Irish second-level schools.

This research aims to explore to what degree the Leaving Certificate Religious Education syllabus (2003) encourages and promotes biblical literacy in Irish secondary level schools.

It is being carried by Philomena Clare (Doctoral student at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University) with the supervision of Dr. Sandra Cullen and Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons. This research is being conducted as part of my D.Ed. thesis [and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of DCU].

My contact details are:
Philomena Clare, philomena.clare2@mail.dcu.ie 08X-XXXXXXX

Dear Leaving Certificate Religious Education student,

My name is Philomena Clare a teacher of Religious Education and I am currently a doctoral student (D. Ed.) in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU). I have been in touch with your school Principal and R.E. teacher XXXXXX. As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting research to ascertain how the Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy. You are receiving this letter as you are studying Leaving Certificate RE as an examination subject.

I am asking to hear your voice though a focus interview. As a student of this programme, you are invited to take part in the phase which invites four LCRE students from your school to participate in a semi-structured focus group. This is a form of group interview regarding your collective experience of the Leaving Certificate RE syllabus (2003). This meeting would be arranged for a day and time suitable to you the participants, and it is important to emphasise that you are not required to answer any questions they may wish not to engage with. A list of questions about the LCRE syllabus will be provided to you in advance of the interview. Your time and participation in this research would be greatly appreciated.

About the interview

This interview will be recorded, and the transcript of this interview will be provided to you prior to any data analysis occurring. This ensures accuracy and allows you to correct or amend any part of your contribution. If you wish not to be recorded, it can be arranged where the notes of the interview will be handwritten by this interviewer.

Confidentiality

Your identity and the school you attend will be fully pseudonymised which means that your identity and school will only be known to myself and my supervisor. Your name and school will not appear in the thesis or any other documents emanating from this research.

It is however important to outline that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions. The analysis and transcribing of the interview will be done by the researcher.

If you wish to discuss any aspect of this invitation, you are welcome to call me on 08XXXXXXXX.

With blessings to you and your school community in this school term. **If you are happy to participate, I invite you to <u>complete the informed consent</u> form with follows.**

Is mise le meas,

Philomena Clare

Philomena clare

Appendix 9: REC Approval Certificate

Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath
Dublin City University

DCU

Ms. Philomena Clare
School of Human Development

Dr. Sandra Cullen
School of Human Development

8th February 2021

REC Reference: DCUREC/2021/007

Proposal Title: **A multimodal investigation into the extent to which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Religious Education syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy in Irish second-level schools.**

Applicant(s): **Ms. Philomena Clare and Dr. Sandra Cullen**

Dear Colleagues,

Further to expedited review, the DCU Research Ethics Committee approves this research proposal.

Materials used to recruit participants should note that ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Should substantial modifications to the research protocol be required at a later stage, a further amendment submission should be made to the REC.

Yours sincerely,

Geraldine Scanlon

Dr Geraldine Scanlon
Chairperson
DCU Research Ethics Committee

DCU
Research & Innovation

Taighde & Nuálaíocht Tacaíocht
Ollscoil Chathair Bhaile Átha Cliath,
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Appendix 10: Sample of Coding

Participant	Specific Research Question 1: In the list of subjects available to you in your school, why did you choose LC RE as an examination subject?	Data response highlighted/identified	Codes used across the data gathering process: Generating initial codes (Braun and Clark, 2006; 2020)
LCRE Students	**Student 2:** I found out personally for myself before I even came into the class, I didn't know much. What I did know is that I really wanted to know about different people's cultures and opinions because me, myself, I'm Protestant but I think it's just amazing to understand other people's cultures. That's why I chose religion because I wanted to learn about that. **Number 3:** It's also a very different subject from other subjects in schools. In other subjects, you learn things off and you do different stuff like that whereas in religion it's you're looking at different things, you're learning about morals. Your questions are very much like your actual thought process behind it matters. It's not learning off the page. **Number 4:** For me, I'm not that religious, but my family is. For me I just I want to understand different religions to a higher extent. My sister did very good and had really good numbers I guess. That's it. [silence	• Philosophy • Morality • Understand religions • Understand cultures • Thinking allowed ++ • Learning • Family Influence	❖ Knowledge growth ❖ Desire to learn ❖ Allowed to wonder ❖ Interest in self-other-world

Research Question	Responses	Codes used across the data gathering process Generating initial codes (Braun and Clark, 2006; 2020)
LCRE Teachers **As a teacher, what are the difficulties that you associate with teaching Unit H: The Bible: Literature & Sacred Text?**	Just that the language can put them off and they can be overwhelmed at where to start carrying out research as they are unsure about looking up the references and the amount of text on a page. They do grow in confidence though but it can be a slow start.	Text nature of the Bible Limited interpretative skills
	The challenging content and context of the various books on the Bible has deterred me but I would like to try it and plan to do so soon. CPD on this topic would be welcomed!	Limited interpretative skills Teacher support/ confidence
	My knowledge of the bible is limited.	Teacher confidence
	Lack of resources	Resources /support teaching the Bible
	My personal competence in the whole area	Teacher confidence
	The current school textbook isn't great	Resources /support teaching the Bible
	The lack of teaching material that is broken down in a simple and accessible way. A lot of literature out there is quite in depth and too over whelming for students, therefore there is a lot of pressure to design my own notes which are student friendly which is incredibly time consuming.	Resources /support teaching the Bible Text nature of the Bible Resources /support teaching the Bible

Appendix 11: Student Consent Form

DUBLIN CITY UNIVERSITY

Informed Consent Form

Research Study Title
An investigation into the extent to which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Religious Education syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy in Irish second-level schools.

This research is being carried by Philomena Clare (Doctoral student at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University) with the supervision of Dr. Sandra Cullen and Dr Sabrina Fitzsimons. This research is being conducted as part of my D.Ed. thesis [and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of DCU].

My contact details are:
Philomena Clare, philomena.clare2@mail.dcu.ie
08XXXXXXXX

Participant – please complete the following (*Circle Yes or No for each question*)

i.	I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No
ii.	I understand the information provided	Yes/No
iii.	I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	Yes/No
iv.	I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No
v.	I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No
vi.	I am aware that my interview will be recorded	Yes/No
vii.	I understand that involvement in the research study is voluntary	Yes/No
viii.	I understand I may withdraw from the research at any time	Yes/No
ix.	I understand that legal limitations may exist around the confidentiality of data	Yes/No
x.	I understand that my data will be destroyed should I withdraw consent from the research or at the end of the lifespan of the research	Yes/No
x1.	I consent to participate in this research study	Yes/No

I have read and understood the information in this form. My questions and concerns have been answered by the researcher, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project

Signature:

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 12: Survey Questions, Religious Education teachers

Participant Profile – Gender

F M other prefer not to say

Participant Profile – Teaching Experience

How long have you been teaching?

0-5 years 6-10 years 11-15 years 16-20 years 21 + years

How long have you been teaching RE?

0-5 years 6-10 years 11-15 years 16-20 years 21 + years

Participant Profile - Qualifications

1. Do you have qualifications in RE Y/N
2. Do you have qualifications in RE as accredited by the Teaching Council of Ireland Y/N
3. How did you gain certification to teach RE?
    - B Rel Ed Mater Dei/DCU
    - BA Theol /B Theol Maynooth
    - B Div
    - BA in Religious Studies (Trinity/UCC/UL/MIC - Thurles)
    - B HomeEc/RE (St Angela's UNIG)/Sion Hill/TCD
    - Dip Catechetics UCD
    - Arts Degree + H.Dip./PME
    - Other – specify

4. **What is your highest RE qualification?**

Certificate in RE
Diploma in RE
Diploma in Theology
Degree in RE
Degree in RE Theology
Masters RE
Masters Theology
Doctorate in RE
Doctorate in Theology
No qualification to teach RE
Other

5. **LCRE Curriculum Questions**

Are you teaching the NCCA Leaving Certificate RE syllabus (2003) Y/N?

How long have you been teaching LC RE (NCCA 2003 RE syllabus)?

0-3 years 4-7 years 8-12 years 13-15 years 16-17 years

Rate the significance of the Bible in your RE class

High		Moderate		Low
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating

Please rate your own confidence using the Bible

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating

Please rate your own confidence using the Bible with your students

Low		Moderate		High
1	2	3	4	5

Suggest reason/s for your rating.

6) How often do you use the Bible in RE with the students you teach?

From the following sections of the Bible, please rate your frequency of use with your students.

1-never, 2-seldom, 3-once, 4-monthly, 5-weekly

- The Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy)
- Historical books (i.e. Joshua, Samuel, Kings)
- The Prophets
- The Psalms
- Wisdom books
- Gospels
- Acts of the Apostles
- Letters of Paul
- Letters to James/Peter/John/Jude/Philo

- Revelation

7) The Leaving Certificate syllabus encompasses several optional units. Do you teach Section H: The Bible: Literature & Sacred Text Y/N

Why do you choose /not choose this topic?

Section H: The Bible, and Coursework

Have your student's undertaken coursework in Section H? Y/N

What are the benefits of this section?

What are the difficulties associated with this section?

8) Do you have any other comments to make about this survey topic or the Bible in the LCRE syllabus?

Appendix 13: Teacher Consent Form

Anonymous Online Consent Form Template- Religious Education teacher survey

Research Study Title

A multimodal investigation into the extent to which the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Senior Cycle Religious Education syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy in Irish second-level schools.

This research is being carried by Philomena Clare (doctoral student at the Institute of Education, Dublin City University) with the supervision of Dr. Sandra Cullen. This research is being conducted as part of my D.Ed. thesis [and has been approved by the Ethics Committee of DCU].

My contact details are:

Philomena Clare, philomena.clare2@mail.dcu.ie

08X-XXXXXXX.

Clarification of the purpose of the research

My name is Philomena Clare and I am currently a doctoral student (D.Ed.) in the Institute of Education, Dublin City University (DCU). As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting research to ascertain how the Leaving Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (2003) promotes biblical literacy. My supervisor for this research project is Dr Sandra Cullen (School of Human Development, DCU).

This research project is being conducted in three phases – a documentary analysis, an online survey of Religious Education teachers, and semi-structured focus interviews of 6th Year Leaving Certificate students (aged18 years and over).

I am writing to invite you the Religious Education teacher to take part in an online self-administered 10-minute survey, which will used to investigate your use and engagement with the Bible in classrooms. Your time and participation in this research would be greatly appreciated.

About the survey

The survey data will be recorded and analysed. If Religious Education teachers do not wish to participate, they can choose not to engage in the survey.

Confidentiality

Your identity and the school you teach will be fully pseudonymised which means that your identity and school type will only be known only to myself and my supervisor. Participants' names and school will not appear in the thesis or any other documents emanating from this research.

It is however important to outline that confidentiality of information can only be protected within the limitations of the law - i.e., it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting by some professions.

The teacher surveys will be administered through Google Forms and analysed by the researchers.

Participant – please complete the following (Click *Yes or No for each question*)

i.	I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes/No	
ii.	I understand the information provided	Yes/No	
iii.	I understand the information provided in relation to data protection	Yes/No	
iv.	I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes/No	
v.	I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes/No	
vi.	I am aware that my survey responses will be analysed		Yes/No
vii.	I understand that involvement in the research study is voluntary	Yes/No	
viii.	I understand I may withdraw from the research at any time	Yes/No	
ix.	I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me) and I understand that legal limitations may exist around the confidentiality of data		Yes/No
x.	I understand that my data will be destroyed should I withdraw consent from the research or at the end of the lifespan of the research		Yes/No
xi	I consent to participate in this research study		Yes/No