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Two Roads Diverged: Policy Shifts in Second-Level Religious Education 1998–2020

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Introduction

New questions arise in every generation at local, national, and global levels concerning the intersections between religion and education in terms of school patronage, ownership of property, employment legislation, school ethos, parental choice, the rights of the child to freedom for, of, and from religion, as well as the diverse understandings of what the limits and scope of these relationships are. It is within this larger framework that any discussion of religious education is situated. However, in the complex debate about the relationship between religion, church patronage and a publicly funded education system, the subject 'religious education' can be overwhelmed by issues outside of its domain and in effect lose its identity and purpose. Stripped back to its most basic understanding religious education can be described as the activity of teaching and learning religion within the school context. Historically this activity

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has been the concern of faith communities wishing to teach people how to be religious in a particular way and how to understand the faith they profess. However, when religious education is taught in schools in receipt of any form of public money, then its provision must align with a State's particular social and historical context and overall vision of the purpose of education.

The purpose of this chapter is to consider the evolution of policy developments and shifts in post-primary religious education in the Republic of Ireland. Drawing on the image of 'two roads diverged', the chapter proceeds to argue that 1998 marks the beginning of a divergence in religious education policy between the State and the churches. Prior to the Education Act of 1998, which emerges as a watershed moment in the development of religious education in post-primary schools in Ireland, the provision of religious education was solely the preserve of the churches. This chapter will trace the evolution of the State's understanding of religious education as demonstrated through the background papers, frameworks, curricula and syllabi for religious education from 2000–2020, the impact of Circulars 0013/2018 and 0062/2018, and *Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective* (IHRC, 2011). These documents have been selected because they are considered to be normative in the way that they have shaped the actual practice of religious education. From this practice, a policy direction for religious education provided by the State has begun to emerge. Arguably the evolution of the State's approach to curriculum and policy development in religious education has been shaped by what Gleeson describes as "legitimation, contestation and fragmentation" (Gleeson, 2000, p. 16). Where this is most evident is in the contested use of terminology to describe teaching religion in post-primary schools. This study suggests that tracing how the terms religious instruction and religious education have been used in Ireland offers a useful lens for considering how teaching religion has been both legitimised and contested as it is increasingly shaped more by the concerns of the public space than faith communities (Carmody, 2019).

The State's Understanding of Teaching Religion Prior to the *Education Act* (1998)

Prior to the Education Act of 1998, the status of teaching religion in the Republic of Ireland was determined by the declaration of the *Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act*, 1878, that "no examination shall be held in any subject of religious instruction, nor any payment made in respect thereof" (Section 5, subsection 4). In effect this meant that the State could not directly endow or involve itself in the teaching or assessment of religion such that it could be construed as promoting a particular religious viewpoint. The State could however provide *for* the teaching of religion through its inclusion within the school timetable and the payment of teachers who held formally recognised teaching qualifications. With no oversight from the State inspectorate, provision for in-career development, or resourcing of the subject other than in a voluntary capacity by the churches and religious communities, religious education was effectively the sole responsibility of the churches whose concern was for the faith formation of its members. The dominance of the Catholic Church in the provision of schooling ensured that nearly all religion teaching and the discourse around it reflected the theological and educational vision of the Church's educational mission and had, in some instances, more in common with international ecclesial trends than national educational priorities (King, 1970; Williams, 2005; Tuohy, 2013). The model for the teaching of religion within this system was in the sense that a single religious tradition was taught from the inside and teachers assumed to be believers who shared in the church's educational ministry (Hull, 2002). It is this understanding of teaching religion which the State adopts when it uses the term religious instruction in its legal sense.

The State's Understanding of Religious Instruction

In the Republic of Ireland, religious instruction is the constitutional and legal term to describe the provision which is made for education and practice in particular faiths (INTO, 1991, p. 2; Whyte, 2010; O'Connell, 2000; Williams, 2005). Though more publicly debated in the primary

sector through the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism (Coolahan et al., 2012), the focus here is on how the term is used in the post-primary context.

Although perhaps inevitable in twentieth century Ireland, where an emerging national identity was strongly tied to a particular confession (Fuller, 2002; Williams, 2005; Anderson et al., 2016), the close identification between the State's aims and the aims of a dominant church had notable effects on the way formal post-primary education was designed. This finds particular expression in how the purpose of continuation education (what later became known as vocational education) is described in *Memorandum V. 40* (1942, p. 230):

> To develop, with the assistance of God's grace, the whole man with all his faculties, natural and supernatural, so that he may realise his duties and responsibilities as a member of society, that he may contribute effectively to the welfare of this fellow man, and by doing so attain the end designed for him by his Creator.

To achieve such a purpose, pupils "should receive instruction in the fundamental truths of the Christian faith" (1942, p. 231). The insistence that such instruction be integrated into the whole organisation of the school underscores the claim that religious instruction was primarily concerned with facilitating nurture into a particular religion. Catholic secondary schools followed a prescribed *Programme of Religious Instruction in Catholic Secondary Schools and Colleges*, with written examinations each year, in Dogma, Holy Scripture, Sacred and ecclesiastical History, Sociology, Liturgy and Gregorian Music. With some minor revisions, this programme remained in effect until 1966 (King, 1970). Such instruction quickly became associated with the systematic teaching of the catechism, in question and answer format, twinned with an annual examination in religious knowledge, and was all too easily caricatured in the literature of James Joyce, Brendan Behan and Frank O'Connor. Significant changes to the Catholic Church's understanding of the nature, purpose and scope of religious instruction emerged in the decades post Vatican II which arguably had a greater impact on what was happening within schools

than any discussion in State circles (Lane, 2013; Tuohy, 2013; Coll, 2015; Hession, 2015).

The place of religious instruction in publicly funded schools emerged again in public awareness through the 1998 legal challenge taken by the Campaign to Separate Church and State against the Minister for Education in opposition to the funding of school chaplains (Irish Law Review, 1998). In his judgement, Justice Barrington distinguished between religious education and religious instruction, describing religious education as a "wider" concept than religious instruction. His view was that though Article 44.2.4 of the Constitution guaranteed the right of a child not to have to attend religious instruction at a publicly funded school, it did not protect the child from being influenced by the religious ethos or curriculum of the school, "provided this does not constitute religious instruction as such". The implication is that explicit religious instruction may be avoided but that a broader implicit ethos may not be preventable. Whyte (2010, p. 9) interprets Barrington to mean that "parents had the right to have religious education provided in the schools which their children attend and were not obliged to settle merely for religious instruction." Whyte's use of the word "merely" in this instance draws attention to the distinction between the specifically doctrinal aspect of denominational religious instruction and the Constitutional provision for the broader spiritual and moral formation of children (however that is to be conceived of) that may be considered to be better named as religious education. The constitutional provision for the right of parents to withdraw their child from religious instruction further underscores an assumption of its formative nature (Article 44.2.4). This right of withdrawal is reiterated in the Education Act Section 30(2), which states that: "The minister … shall not require any student to attend instruction in any subject which is contrary to the conscience of the parent of the student or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years". Such legal protection is consistent with policy, if not necessarily with practice, across Europe (Valutytė & Gailiūtė, 2014; Fokas, 2019). In its 2010 Discussion Paper, the Irish Human Rights Commission drew attention to the human rights issues involved in the lack of provision of State education free 'from' religious influence. The concern raised by the IHRC is that the role of religious nurture implied in religious

instruction raises legitimate questions in "relation to the system of religious education/instruction in Ireland and its adherence to relevant human rights standards" (IHRC, 2011, p. 18; Mawhinney, 2015). What is of note for the purposes of this survey of policy directions in religious education is the use of language in the submissions to the IHRC consultative process. The term religious instruction is only used by those calling for the removal of faith based teaching of religion from school. Other than in that instance the respondents refer to religious education. It is apparent however that neither term is used univocally. What is apparent is that those involved in teaching religion prefer the term the religious education (Cullen, 2017).

Circular Letters 0013/2018 and 0062/2018

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

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

Section 5 does not acknowledge the vision of religious education being adopted by the NCCA through the *Background Paper and Brief for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2017b); the *Consultation Report: Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2017a), in preparation for the *Junior cycle religious education specification* (2019b). In its response to Circular 0013/2018, the Religion Teachers' Association of Ireland (RTAI), representing teachers in all school types, drew attention to the problematic nature of the use of the term religious instruction in the circular, arguing that it "only serves to perpetuate misconceptions about the teaching of Religious Education by seeming to equate Religious Education with religious instruction in a particular faith". The concern of the RTAI is that students may not be given the opportunity to participate in Religious Education on the basis of the misrepresentation and that the efforts being made by schools to provide for the "fullest possible holistic education of their students" will be compromised" (http://www.rtai.ie/rtai-response-to-circular-0013-2018-2/).

Later in 2018, Circular 0062/2018 (DES, 2018b) provided a clarification in respect of Section 5 of Circular 0013/2018:

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

The accompanying press release (DES, 2018a), elaborated on the clarifications: (1) where a school intends to provide religious instruction/faith formation, parents must give consent before admission to the class. This means that opt out does not arise because the parent has requested a place in the religious instruction class; (2) classes following the NCCA Religious

Education syllabuses cannot have any element of religious instruction or worship, which also means that opt out does not arise.

The implications of this clarification for the provision of religious education in all schools are being worked out in practice. This will demand a balancing act between the rights of parents, management authorities, faith communities, the concerns of the State and the rights of the student, with due regard for the legally protected characteristic spirit of the school (Meehan, 2019). A concern being voiced is that separating students for religious education could mean that some young people may not be afforded an opportunity to engage in the questions and issues dealt with in religious education with their peers. In a multi-beliefs and multicultural society, religious education might well provide the only space where people can learn with and from each other as they think deeply about the variety of religious and other responses to life's questions. In a democracy that respects freedom of, for and from religion, students and their parents must be supported in exercising their right to opt-out; however, it is not always evident what people think they are opting out of.

The Emergence of the Use of the Term Religious Education

Arguably, the emergence of religious education as a concern of the State has its origins in a letter dated 16th February 1976, from the Episcopal Conference of the Catholic Church in Ireland requesting that the Department of Education introduce Religious Studies as an examination subject. This request reflected an understanding of Religious Studies in which the in-depth presentation and study of the faith of a believing community, what the catholic church means by religious instruction, would become part of the State examinations system. The concern underlying the request of the Episcopal Commission was the perception that little was being done in schools in terms of the academic study of religion, with the result that religion was both losing academic credibility within schools and not providing a sufficiently rigorous education in faith. Providing a more rigorous academic programme, they argued,

would alleviate some of the difficulties being encountered by teachers of religion. This concern emerges within the context of the employment of appropriately qualified teachers of religion who were bringing to the table changing understandings of the distinctions between religious instruction and religious education and arguing for a shift from an ecclesial understanding of the study of religion in school to an educational understanding. Parallel to this was an emerging post-Vatican II vision of catechesis that resonated with the child-centred curriculum of post 1960s educational policy (Byrne, 2018; Coll, 2015; Looney, 2006).

In 1977, subsequent to the refusal of their request to the Department of Education, the Episcopal Conference set up a Working Party to draw up a draft syllabus for *Religious Studies for Leaving Certificate*, an amended version of which was submitted to the Department of Education in 1982. However, due to the prohibition on the State examination of religion neither proposal was accepted. This prohibition came under scrutiny again in 1986 when questions about the submission from the Episcopal Conference about the possibility of the introduction of Religious Studies as a Leaving Certificate examination subject were raised in the Dáil. The Dáil Proceedings show that the response of Minister for Education, Gemma Hussey, drawing on advice from the Chief State Solicitor, was that an amendment to the Intermediate Education Act, 1878 would be necessary in order to introduce religious studies as a subject in the Leaving Certificate programme, and that the issue was being considered by the DES. In 1989, Minister O'Rourke signalled that she was "considering the introduction of an examination in religious studies". She continued, "[in] this connection the question of amending the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act, 1878, is being considered at present in consultation with the Government's legal advisers". It should be noted that the term religious studies was taken in the Episcopal submission, and it appears in this instance, by the Department of Education, to mean the academic study of Catholic faith and doctrine, and is in line with what the Catholic church means by religious instruction, rather than what is generally perceived now to mean a phenomenological or sociological discipline (NCCA, 2017a).

Whither Religious Education? The Weafer and Hanley Report

Weafer and Hanley's (1991) Report *Whither Religious Education?* was a significant marker in the use of the term religious education to describe the teaching of religion at post-primary level in Ireland. This publication reported on the findings of the first national survey of post-primary religion teachers. Based on a survey of 665 religion teachers in a variety of contexts, the research size and wide sampling elicited a comprehensive overview of how those teaching religion understood their task. By the time of the publication of the Report the term religious education was being used increasingly to describe a model of educating in faith that was moving away from a transmissive model to a model engaging with contemporary educational practice, but still firmly rooted in the apostolate of catechesis. What is of note in the survey is that it assumes that all of the respondents were unanimous in their understanding of a religious education that is catechetical in nature, scope, and intent. This is in keeping with what the State understood as religious instruction, though it is clear again from the respondents that there was little inclination for using this particular term.

The findings of the Weafer and Hanley survey suggest that the majority of teachers understood that the primary aim of their task was to foster a personal Christian faith (41%) or to assist pupils' spiritual development (44%). Responses to the question on the 'desired impact of religious education on pupil's lives' stressed the personal and spiritual dimension of the lives of the pupils, with most emphasis placed on encouraging 'responsibility and personal development' (47%). The view that religious education is primarily, if not exclusively about faith development is also evident in the response to the question of the role of teachers' faith in the classroom. 74% of respondents strongly agreed that a teacher's faith is a vital component in fostering faith in the classroom, with 57% saying that one 'cannot teach religion without faith'. Commentaries on the survey share an unquestioned assumption that religious education in the post-primary school is understood as being an ecclesial ministry. The question

of whether religious education should be taught, or what form it should most properly take in the classroom, did not emerge in the research.

In its analysis of the examination status of religious education the survey found that those who had a formal qualification in religious education were more likely to be in favour of religious education being assessed as a Leaving Certificate subject (51%). When the question of certification and assessment at Junior Cycle was raised, only 34% were in favour of examinations, with 38% opposed and 28% who ticked the 'don't know' box. Of the responses opposing the introduction of examinations in religious education, the most common reason given was the fear that the introduction of an examination would 'destroy the faith dimension of religious education'. However, the introduction of the Junior Certificate Programme in 1989 established the role of assessment as an integral function of teaching. If religious education was to take a formal place in the suite of subjects offered for Junior Certificate, then it would have to be very clear about what could be assessed in a State examination. What could be assessed is the ability to understand religion and to empathise in a knowledgeable manner with the encounter with religions and with people of religious commitment. In the absence of a serious academic approach demanding an imaginative engagement with religion, it would be difficult in the future to convince schools that religion had a place in an academic curriculum, with the result that time for the teaching of religion would be eroded. The call for a State-certified examination of religious education was about more than assessment; it paved the way for a more public discussion about the nature and scope of religious education as both a societal task and a more formal educational task for which the State has some responsibility.

Though limited in its impact, the significance of the survey was twofold (1) the voices of those teaching religion in a variety of post-primary school contexts were being heard in a public way and (2) the term religious education, however that is understood, had become the widely accepted term for the teaching of religion at post-primary level.

The Trajectory Toward State Provision of Religious Education

In the 1995 submission from the NCCA to the DES four reasons were advanced for advocating State provision of religious education on educational grounds and as no longer solely an ecclesial project. The reasons given were, (1) the increasing professionalisation of teachers of religious education, (2) the growing range of institutions offering specialist degrees in theology, religious education and religious studies, (3) the changing patterns of religious affiliation and practice, and (4) the political imperative to build relationships between the major religious traditions in Ireland. The submission also proposed an educational rationale for the inclusion of religious education in the curriculum:

> Religious education, in offering opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions, should be part of a curriculum which seeks to promote the critical and cultural development of the individual in his or her social and personal contexts. (NCCA, 1995; Looney, 2006)

The submission from the NCCA was situated within the context of the vision of education espoused in the concern of the 1995 White Paper, *Charting our Education Future* for a more comprehensive philosophy of education that prepares people to be engaged in a lifelong education that is both student centred and globally focussed in terms of emphases. Its vision that "education should value and promote all dimensions of human development and seek to prepare people for full participation in cultural, social and economic life" (Government of Ireland, 1995, p. 7), finds explicit expression in the aim of education adopted by the Department of Education and Science:

> 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. (2000)

Underpinning these aims is a vision that all education is inherently formative of the whole person and that the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students is a concern of the State. This vision is reinforced in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) which states in section 9 that one of the functions of a school is, "to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school". Section 15 (b) of the Act determines that the function of the Board of Management of a school is to "uphold the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school". The spiritual rather than the religious aspect of a person is identified in the general aim of education, however, religious and moral education was designated as one of the eight areas of experience included in the 1989 framework for the Junior Certificate curriculum. This decision suggests that, for the designers of the curriculum, spirituality and morality were to be understood in terms of their religious expression. Despite the reference to the 'non-religious interpretation of life', there appears to be a privileging of the contribution that religion makes to spiritual and moral development. While not all school subjects contribute in the same way to each dimension of the development of the student, all subjects must be taught in such a way as not to undermine any of the other dimensions. It is this inclusive approach to the education of the person that allows ideologically for the adoption of religious education as a legitimate activity of the State. The State assumes that religious education has something to contribute to the development of the learner; however, what that 'something' is, or its source, is continually in need of interpretation.

A Syllabus for Junior Certificate Religious Education

In 2000 the DES introduced a syllabus for Junior Cycle Religious Education (*JCRES*), the aims of which are:

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

The *JCRES* presents a vision of religious education as a subject that engages learners in the process of constructing meaning from the knowledge they acquire. It places interpretation at the heart of learning. It is evident that the *JCRES* is envisaged as providing an opportunity for students to learn not just *about* but *from* religion. As used by Hull (2002), 'learning *from* religion' 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" (Hull, 2002, p. 108). However, this sense that religious education contributes to the holistic education of the learner is not borne out in the 2002 information leaflet provided by the NCCA for students and their parents, which states that:

> In Religious Education (RE) you will learn about what people believe, why they believe and how these beliefs influence their own lives, the lives of others and the world around us. You will explore how many religions, particularly Christian religions, have shaped the Ireland you live in today.

According to this summary, the study of religion appears to be purely descriptive and a factual approach promoted. This factsheet, either as a result of an oversight or for some other reason, limits the study of religious education to a sociological or phenomenological approach. In this instance, the NCCA's approach is not entirely in line with the values

espoused by the syllabus. It is suggested here that religious education is solely a phenomenological study of religion that does not necessarily invite the learner to experience religion from the inside. The complexity the NCCA conjured with in defining religious education in the *JCRES* has, in this instance, been ignored or forgotten. Contrary to this, Byrne notes that the syllabus sought to avoid alignment with any one particular religion or denomination (2018). Instead it provided a framework for students of all religions and none, "for encountering and engaging with the variety of religious traditions in Ireland and elsewhere" (*JCRES*, p. 4), and emphasised that the students' own experience of religion and their search for meaning was to be both encouraged and supported. The notion of encounter expressed in the syllabus refers to the engagement between learner and religion in such a way as to facilitate students' negotiation of the complex world of religion, their own religious identity, and the personal demands of religious belief. It provides them with a compass to find their way in it. Like all education, religious education makes a claim on the learner. This commitment allowed for the syllabus to be adopted in schools under religious patronage. In the case of Catholic schools, the syllabus was supported by the *Guidelines for Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students* (1999), through which the Catholic bishops endorse the State syllabuses as an appropriate basis for religious education in Catholic schools while reinforcing the importance of ongoing faith formation and development so that young Catholics are supported in reflecting on their own faith tradition.

The approach advocated in the *Junior Certificate Religious Education Guidelines for Teachers* (2001), reinforces the principle that religious education is not just focused on learning about religions, it is also about critical engagement leading to the development of skills, attitudes and dispositions needed for living as a thoughtful, respectful and reflective citizen in a pluralist society. As such, religious education is both informative and formative. Of note however, is the confirmation that, "while students will draw on their experience in an examination: their personal faith commitment and/or affiliation to a particular religious grouping will not be subject to assessment of national certification' (2001, p. 55).

A Syllabus for Leaving Certificate Religious Education

Leaving Certificate Religious Education (LCRE) is situated within the context of preparing students for "their role as participative, enterprising citizens" by promoting "a spirit of inquiry, critical thinking, problem solving, self-reliance, initiative and enterprise". (Department of Education and Science, 2003). All subjects contribute to the programme but are independent of each other. Religious education is situated within the social groups of subjects which explore issues common to all people living in society and promote the skills and knowledge used to manage personal resources and guide human behaviour. The DES acknowledges that religious education has a particular contribution to make to a Leaving Certificate programme by facilitating a student's "reflective engagement with the particular knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes which form the foundation of the religious education syllabus" (DES, p. 4). The syllabus is constructed around key sections: The search for meaning and values; world religions; moral decision making; Christianity: origins and contemporary expressions; religion and gender; religion and science; religion: the Irish experience; the Bible: literature and sacred text; issues of justice and peace; and worship, prayer and ritual (Byrne, 2005). The emphasis in the syllabus is on the experience, expression and value of religious belief and is assessed in terms of the contribution that religions and religious belief can make to citizenship rather than in terms of what religion itself contributes. This suggests a phenomenological approach to the syllabus which, in keeping with the liberal democratic principles of tolerance, diversity and plurality, requires an understanding of a variety of religious and secular worldviews, but does not concern itself with any of the truth claims of any of the religions. One way of reading the LCRE syllabus is as a response to negotiating the cultural fact of religion.

The 2003 syllabus for LCRE has the same aims as the *JCRES*. However, the two syllabi describe the general aim of education in slightly different terms. In contrast to the *JCRES* statement about the aim of education, the syllabus for LCRE defines the aim of education in the following way:

> 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.

The marked difference between the two statements is the inclusion of the "expressive" aspect of the individual in the Leaving Certificate statement, but the exclusion of the "moral, physical, political, social and spiritual" aspects of the person. It is not clear what philosophical outlook held sway in arriving at this change. LCRE fits less comfortably within the general aim of education as articulated here. From this it seems that, for some, it is perhaps easier to argue for the inclusion of religious education at junior level than at senior level. If one's experience of the syllabus is restricted to only reading it, one could assume that despite its stated aims the actual content of the syllabus could be construed as a cultural religious education. Such a minimal approach, however, is at odds with the maximal approach suggested by the active and participative methodologies proposed in the *Guidelines for Teachers of LCRE*. The inclusion of methodologies such as a Shared Praxis approach, teaching controversial issues, critical questioning, and teaching for diversity, demonstrates a commitment to support an active pedagogical approach that belies any type of reductionism to learning about religion. As with the JCRE syllabus, LCRE is supported by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference (2004).

Leaving Certificate Applied: Draft Syllabus for Religious Education

The two year Leaving Certificate Applied Programme (LCA) is situated within the general framework for Senior Cycle education and shares the same general aim of contributing to the development of all aspects of the individual, but with a particular focus on preparation of the students for their role as "participative, enterprising citizens". The purpose of religious education within the programme is:

> to support the holistic aims of education by promoting personal growth and facilitating spiritual development. It engages the students in the human search for meaning and offers them an opportunity to reflect, understand

> and interpret that experience in the light of our changing world. It invites students to examine religious stories, and where appropriate, their own religious story, and to value their place within it now and in the future. It exposes them to a broad range of religious traditions and encourages the promotion of mutual understanding and tolerance. It facilitates moral development through the application of a process of moral decision-making.

This rationale describes the purpose of religious education in terms of 'learning *from* religion', and addresses Hull's question, 'what is the educational advantage to be gained by the study of religion?' (2002, p. 106). What is it that people learn that is valuable for their lives? Consistent with the general aims of education adopted by the Irish State, religious education is justified insofar as it contributes to the personal growth of a student in the context of 'the promotion of mutual understanding and tolerance'. Religion is for the person, not the person for the religion. In contrast to the citizenship education approach that is evident in the LCRE syllabus, the approach to LCA religious education owes more to a personal development approach than a phenomenological one.

A Curriculum Framework for Senior Cycle Religious Education

Popularly known as 'non-exam' RE, the *Curriculum Framework for Senior Cycle* outlines its rationale for religious education in the following terms:

> In exposing students to a broad range of religious issues, religious traditions and ways of understanding the human search for meaning, the framework can help contribute to the spiritual and moral development of students from all faiths and none. It can also help develop a healthy respect for the beliefs of others and an openness to dialogue in search of mutual understanding. (DES, 2005, p. 152)

The focus of this framework is on the personal, spiritual, and moral development of the student and merges the approaches of both the JCRE and LCRE. Though students will study a range of issues and traditions,

the overarching purpose is to contribute to their own spiritual and moral development in a manner that is respectful of the beliefs of others. This is in line with the JCRE approach, but somewhat at odds with the approach of LCRE which has a greater focus on the development of critical questioning with the aim of engaged citizenship. The inconsistency is that those students following the LCRE syllabus will have a different and arguably narrower experience of the aims of religious education than their peers who are following the Curriculum Framework.

Schools are required to provide religious education; however, they are free to opt in or out of taking the examination route, leading to the unfortunate designation within schools of 'exam RE' and 'non-exam RE'. RE is subject to the same evaluative processes as other subjects in the curriculum: publicly available subject inspection reports and whole school evaluation reports. Evaluation of student learning is done through the State examination system. As such it is accountable to the aims of the State. In 2019, 22,233 students (41.83% of all Junior Certificate students) sat the JCRE examination, and 1293 students (2.3% of all Leaving Certificate students) sat the LCRE examination. The publicly available *Chief Examiner's Reports* of 2008 and 2013 gives an understanding of the results up to that point. The optional nature of introducing the State curriculum for religious education has led to the situation in which schools that adopt the State curriculum, with its understanding of religious education, are resourced in this area by the DES, whereas schools which continue with a model in keeping with the characteristic spirit of the school do not receive such on-going professional development or resources from the State.

The Introduction of Junior Cycle Religious Education

Since the 1998 Education Act developments in RE respond to and are shaped by national policy developments in education. This is particularly apparent in the revised Junior Cycle curriculum, a framework for which was first proposed by the NCCA in its 2010 document *Innovation and Identity: Ideas for a New Junior Cycle* and adopted by the DES as *A Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015). The focus of this revision is on the

student as a learner engaged in learning for life. The justification for the inclusion of any subject in the revised framework is its potential to contribute to at least some of the twenty-four statements of learning identified as core aims of the syllabus. Religious education makes a distinctive contribution to the following statements of learning:

> The student creates, appreciates and critically interprets a wide range of texts … The student has an awareness of personal values and an understanding of the process of moral decision-making … The student appreciates how diverse values, beliefs and traditions have contributed to the communities and culture in which she/he lives … The student values what it means to be an active citizen, with rights and responsibilities in local and wider contexts … The student values local, national and international heritage, understands the importance of the relationship between past and current events and the forces that drive change … The student takes action to safeguard and promote her/his wellbeing and that of others. (DES, 2019)

The *Background Paper and Brief for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2017) presents a vision of RE informed by CSO figures on religious and cultural diversity; human rights legislation; the voices of teachers and students; and European perspectives on how to conceive of religious education in the public space; sustainable development; a need for religious literacy in the public space; the celebration of the diversity of religious practices and beliefs; and a significant contributor to student wellbeing (Meehan, 2019). The concerns of faith communities are not evident in the text.

Shaped by this context the argument for the inclusion of religious education in the *Framework for Junior Cycle* is based on a vision of RE as an educational pursuit which goes beyond an information based approach and instead facilitates a depth engagement with questions of meaning that offer wisdom and insight for the student's own life. Though the *Background Paper* (2017b) eschews the notion of specific faith or religious formation it operates out of the assumption that all education is deeply formative. The state cannot form somebody in a particular religious viewpoint, but the state has the right to form an informed citizenry regarding religion. Such an approach to RE is grounded in values of

freedom, dignity, inclusion, justice and equality which contribute to "building a more socially cohesive society; a society that is plural but integrated, diverse but responsible, truth-seeking but respectful and compassionate" (NCCA, 2017b, p. 7).

Junior Cycle religious education is an activity in the public domain and therefore accountable to the aims of the State. However, its implementation is, by virtue of the nature of the subject, shaped by the insights and concerns of school patrons and management bodies. In 2010 the Catholic Bishops offered a definition of religious education which allowed for religious education, as part of a holistic vision of education, to be seen as part of a continuum of the faith development of a Catholic student; the curricular subject religious education does not have to carry the whole weight of expectation:

> Religious Education is a process that contributes to the faith development of children, adolescents and adults … it can also teach people to think profoundly, allowing them to make free and consistent choices in the way they live their religious, and other, commitments. (*Share the Good News*, 2010, p. 57)

This is further refined by the Bishops in *Religious education and the framework for junior cycle* (2017), which observes that, "Religious Education seeks to be life-enhancing by promoting the freedom, dignity, equality and uniqueness of every student in the school irrespective of race, colour, sex and religious or belief stance … Engagement with other religious traditions and secular worldviews is also important. RE seeks to help students develop the necessary skills and attitudes to engage positively in this conversation, while at the same time providing them with an essential space for their own spiritual reflection and religious development" (2017, p. 6).

The context for religious education in Ireland is also responsive to developments in the European context. Across Europe there is an increasing expectation that religious education in the public space will equip students for responsible citizenship by helping them to cope with and engage constructively in a pluralist society. There is no agreed rationale for how this will happen but there is increasing cooperation between

stakeholders (Schweitzer & Schreiner, 2020). Developments such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (OECD, 2007) situate teaching about religion in public schools in the context of a human rights framework and a commitment to religious freedom. Through its work on *Signposts, policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious worldviews in intercultural education* (2014), and *Competences for Democratic Culture, on living together as equals in culturally diverse democratic societies* (2016), the Council of Europe promotes teaching about religions as well as the development of sensitivity and respect, literacy and understanding. This background contextualises the rationale for religious education presented in the *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (2019b, p. 6):

> Religious Education promotes the holistic development of the person. It facilitates the intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual and moral development of students. Religious Education provides a particular space for students to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships. It encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret, imagine and find insight for their lives. The students' own experience and continuing search for meaning is encouraged and supported.

Religious education seeks to allow for a safe but challenging space where faith and reason can meet in a creative way to assist students in making sense of life. Religious education in the Junior Cycle, introduced in schools in 2019, is structured around three interconnecting strands: expressing beliefs, exploring questions and living our values. These strands are underpinned by the cross cutting elements of enquiry, exploration, and reflection and action. The specification then identifies a range of learning outcomes which invite the student to become active agents in their own learning. Though encouraged to draw on their own experience, students' personal faith commitment or religious affiliation is not subject to assessment.

Findings from research with post-primary students suggest that religious education has played an increasingly significant role in providing opportunities for them to engage with religious and spiritual questions

they may not get to consider in any other context. 85% of those surveyed said that studying religion in school helped them understand people of other religions, 84% agreed that we must respect all religions, and 71% said that studying religion in school shaped their own views about religion (Byrne et al., 2019). Data from the *Growing up Irish: Life perspectives among young people in the Republic of Ireland* research (Lewis et al., 2009) provides evidence of the continuing and active role of religion within contemporary Irish society, but also how religious expression is adapting. The data also suggests that young people perceive that religious identity may be a resource for identity formation, but it cannot be assumed to be the sole source of their identity formation. Religious identity is a choice rather than an inherited identity. The person chooses the religious option among the many options available to them, and may choose to express their identity within traditional religious categories or outside of a traditional frame (Cullen, 2019; Arweck, 2017). The views of students and teachers in Ireland, outlined in section 3.2 and 3.3 of the *Background Paper* (2017b), suggests that students value the opportunities for space to reflect on their own spiritual and moral development.

If the responses of students are indicative of what the perception of religious education is, then we can infer that, while there has been a positive attitude towards religious education and an arguably successful implementation of some of its aims, there has been a dramatic shift away from the sense of religious education as inherently education in faith within a particular religious tradition. The voices of young people are important constituents in the shaping of future policy direction in religious education.

Looking Ahead: Senior Cycle Review

The suggestion in *Proposals for the Future Development of Senior Cycle Education in Ireland* (2005), that religious education could be a short course designed by the school but not assessed by the State, has not made its way into the later documents. *Towards Learning: An Overview of Senior Cycle Education* (2009), observes that moral and spiritual values have been distinctive in shaping Irish society. No mention is made of the way

in which these values are expressed in religion. There is no mention of religious education in the *Interim Report of the Review of Senior Cycle Education* (2019a). The *Interim Report* affirms that the core purpose of senior cycle education is to help every student towards fulfilling their potential by deepening their knowledge, skills and qualities as they mature. The report emphasises the holistic development of every student, their agency and wellbeing, and their right to an education which equips them for diverse and sustainable futures (2019a, p. 7). To be included in a revised approach to Senior Cycle, religious education will have to be very clear about the value it offers to an already over-crowded curricular space.

Teaching Council Requirements

To be recognised as a teacher of RE by the Teaching Council (2013) an application must demonstrate that the applicant has studied the following modules as part of their degree: Sacred Texts including the Bible (b) Christianity—Origins and Contemporary Experience (c) World Religions (d) Secular Belief Systems (e) Ethics (f) Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion. This was in keeping with the theological studies undertaken by teachers of religious education. However, from January 2023 in order to meet the requirements applicants must demonstrate that their degree includes the study of 5 of the following: (a) Sacred Texts including the Bible; (b) Christianity—Origins and Contemporary Experience; (c) World Religions; (d) Secular Belief Systems; (e) Ethics; (f) Systematic Theology; (g) Philosophy of Religion. In effect, a teacher of religious education will not have had to study theology or anything about the Christian tradition in order to be recognised by the Teaching Council (2020). In opening up the subject to a broader range of perspectives from which to study religious education, the Council has changed the nature of the subject. This development could be significant in shifting religious education from its religious sources and resources and could perhaps be at odds with the NCCA's vision for the subject which invites students to grapple personally with the depth structures of the world's religions and the variety of responses to questions of meaning and values.

Conclusion

A number of conclusions have emerged from this review of evolving policy developments in the State's understanding and provision of religious education in the post-primary sector.

(1) The context for religious education in Ireland has traditionally been shaped by an ecclesial discourse rooted in an understanding of teaching religion as the concern of the churches. (2) The State's use of the term religious instruction has not kept pace with national and international developments in the broad area of religious education so has become somewhat arcane and pejorative in its usage. (3) The continuing conflation of the terms religious instruction and religious education has hindered progress in developing a philosophical rationale for religious education in the public space. (4) Developments in religious education have been reactive in response to issues pertaining to the complex intersections between religion and education. (5) The concern of the churches and faith communities for the identity and nature of religious education has played a significant role in curriculum development. On the one hand this allows for a textured understanding of the nature and purpose of religious education, but on the other it could lead to a separation between forms of religious education on the basis of what is perceived to be the aim of religious instruction. (6) There is a lack of consistency both between syllabi as well as within syllabi prepared by the State which suggests a lack of unity of purpose in the State's approach and demonstrates Gleeson's concept of fragmentation (Gleeson, 2000, p. 7). Arguably the *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2019b) demonstrates a growing confidence in proposing a religious education that is educationally justifiable on the grounds of what it contributes to the common good and to the holistic development of students.

The 1998 Education Act allowed for the State to take an active role in the religious education of its citizens. What form and shape that takes continues to evolve. Drawing on the image of two roads diverging, we suggest that 1998 marks the beginning of a divergence in policy between the State and the churches, exemplified in the various ways that the terms religious education and religious instruction have been used. While there

are points of convergence between the aims of the State and the churches in the understanding of the nature, scope and purpose of religious education in post-primary schools, the increasing accountability of religious education to the concerns of the State will necessarily take precedence over the policies of religious patrons in schools.

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