

Chapter 11

Religious Education in Hong Kong Catholic Schools: Past, Present and Future

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Introduction

This chapter explores the religious and moral education (RME) in Catholic schools of Hong Kong over the last five decades, in the domains of curriculum development and teacher professional development in particular. This chapter depicts the trends of curriculum development and the professional qualifications of the teachers of RME during this period. The review provides a context for a discussion on the present situation and future challenges of RME in Catholic schools.

The Catholic Schools in Hong Kong

The provision of Catholic education in Hong Kong dated back to 1841, the same year when the British commenced the occupation of Hong Kong. The missionaries of various religious orders from Europe and the USA started providing education to the local Chinese people soon upon their arrival. Schools were later set up by the local diocesan authorities, mostly after the Second World War to meet the dramatic increase in population. The demand for access to education increased as the colony became a haven for Chinese refugees fleeing the civil war in the second half of 1940s between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist government until the eventual Communist take-over of mainland China in 1949. The Caritas organization also began to provide vocational education in the 1960s as Hong Kong was transforming itself from an entrepot between China and the West into a leading

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industrial and manufacturing centre of Asia (Mok, 2007). The Catholic diocese of Hong Kong is currently the largest education provider of kindergarten, primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. It runs 31 kindergarten, 107 primary and 85 secondary schools, as well as 41 vocational institutes, totalling 264 schools, with 165,781 students and 11,278 teachers. 9.71 % of the students and 25.58 % of the teachers are Catholics. There are three main types of Catholic schools in Hong Kong. They are managed by different sponsoring bodies, including 103 religious schools run by religious orders, 98 diocesan schools directly by the Catholic Education Office (CEO) of the diocese and 49 schools run by Caritas. The religious schools are being run by various religious orders according to their own mission and vision, with a high degree of autonomy and little supervision from the diocesan authorities. The diocesan schools, however, are more closely supervised by the Episcopal Delegate for Education. The Caritas schools also enjoy a high degree of autonomy and are accountable to the Caritas management board rather than to the diocesan Catholic Education Office. While the overarching educational goals and ideals of all Catholic schools in Hong Kong are in line with the teachings of the Catholic Church, the management styles of different types of schools vary considerably. Consequently, the curriculum across these schools is far from uniform, even in the area of religious and moral education (RME) which is upheld as the identity of a Catholic school. In the Catholic schools in Hong Kong, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between the curricular areas of religious education, moral education, life education, spiritual education and even civic education. These areas have been closely connected and overlapped to certain extent. In this chapter, RME is adopted as an umbrella term to refer to the curriculum domain which comprises all these related areas.

In the 1960s

The 1960s was a transitional decade for the Catholic Church with the convening and aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The Catholic atmosphere in school was still very pervasive with many Catholic students joining various religious activities. There was a strong presence of clergy in the school campus, particularly during religious education lesson. There was no formal professional training on religious knowledge for the teachers. The priests and nuns were presumed to have expertise pertaining to biblical and catechetical knowledge. The pedagogy adopted was largely didactic and rote learning was the norm.

The subject title “Religious/Biblical Knowledge” on timetable could pinpoint the orientation of the subject. The Bible and the Catholic Catechism were the two main sources of knowledge to be learned. The Diocesan Catechetical Centre established in 1963 was responsible for educating young people in Christian principles and values. It began to dominate the provision of teaching materials as well as professional training to teachers of RME for the subsequent five decades ever since.

In the 1970s

The Second Vatican Council was a turning point for religious education in Catholic schools all over the world (Buchanan, 2003; 2005). It taught that non-Catholic students should not be forced to accept the Catholic dogmas or to attend religious activities. This implied that religious education should not be equivalent to catechism classes. Teaching of ethical issues encountered by students in their daily life in religious education lessons began to make sense. Fr. Peter Brady, a Jesuit in Hong Kong, published a series of five books on ethics for secondary students between 1974 and 1985. There was an obvious shift of focus of the RME books from biblical knowledge to personal experience of students. The Diocesan Catechetical Centre published a series of religious education textbooks for primary school in 1973 and 1974. While the biblical and catechetical knowledge still formed the backbone of the series, there was an obvious effort to relate the teachings to the personal experience of students. As far as professional qualifications were concerned, most of the RME teachers were untrained. In-service professional development opportunities were also rare. There were no courses on teaching of RME or the like offered in the schools of education of the two local universities. The Diocesan Catechetical Centre was the only training ground of RME teachers for Catholic schools at that time. The major change between the 1960s and 1970s regarding RME teachers was a steady increase of lay people, partly due to the decline in the number of clergy, coupled with an increase in Catholic schools in Hong Kong. Acknowledging their own inadequacy both in subject matter and pedagogic knowledge, the lay RME teachers of the diocesan secondary schools found it necessary to set up the Committee of Panel Heads of Religious Education of Diocesan Secondary Schools to support each other to teach the subject well by means of sharing teaching materials and experiences.

In the 1980s

The 1980s was a significant decade for the curriculum development of religious education in the Catholic schools of Hong Kong. The shift towards moral education with Catholic values and away from catechetical religious education, a trend first emerging in the 1970s, accelerated in this decade to the extent that by the end of the decade, a majority of RME teachers preferred moral education to religious education (Chan, 1990). The publication of a series of six textbooks on moral education by Fr. Luke Tsui (1981 to 1988) gave impetus to such development. The preference for moral education in the context of Hong Kong could be explained by the fact that the teachers regarded it more practical and beneficial to bring up morally educated persons as the primary objective of RME. This reasoning was based on the supposition that most of their students were not expected to become converts of the Catholic faith. Religious education, with an emphasis on the dogmas, history, institutions and

liturgy of the Catholic Church, was perceived as comparatively less relevant to the life of students. However, the shift towards moral education was far from complete up to the end of the decade. Many Catholic schools remained committed to the study of the Bible, and Fr. Tsui's books on moral education were far from popular after the first few years. A demand for "drafting a uniform, or at least a core, curriculum for all Catholic schools" was raised by senior RME teachers (Chan, 1990, p. 126). While the strength of clergy continued to shrink in the 1980s as few missionaries were sent to Hong Kong from Europe and the USA, more opportunities were open to lay RME teachers for professional development during this period. The Diocesan Catholic Board of Education ran a series of workshops on moral and civic education for teachers of all Catholic schools in the mid-1980s and began to offer overseas scholarships in 1989 to RME teachers of Catholic schools to subsidize further studies. The 1980s was also a watershed in the contemporary history of Hong Kong. The fate of Hong Kong to be returned to mainland China in 1997 was confirmed in the *Sino-British Joint Declaration* signed in 1984. Its impact was immediately felt in the educational field. Civic education to prepare youngsters for the "return" during the transitional period (1984–1997) began to draw the attention of both politicians and educators in the second half of this decade, although a heated debate on the nature and objectives of civic education only reached its climax ten years later (Chan, 2004). In most of the Catholic schools, the element of civic education was gradually infused into the religious-moral education programmes. The RME of Catholic schools, thus, became even more diversified and complicated in such a politicized social context of Hong Kong of the late 1980s.

In the 1990s

The RME curriculum of Catholic schools was further enriched with the inclusion of civic education and life education in the 1990s. The series of civic education booklets entitled *Xiang gang qing*、*zhong guo xin* (*Love of Hong Kong, Concern for China*) published by the Catholic Education Office between 1995 and 1997 was the most obvious response of the church to the political challenge posed by the "1997 Question". This series was originally conceived as a pre-emptive move to prevent the future Special Administrative Region (SAR) Government of Hong Kong from imposing its version of civic education onto Catholic schools in post-1997 Hong Kong (Chan, 2004). The basic stance of the series was that the three identities of the Hong Kong Chinese Catholics after 1997, namely, being Hongkongese, Chinese and Christians, were compatible and that the Catholic Church and its adherents should take a positive view of the future of Hong Kong. The RME of Catholic schools could contribute to the "return" of Hong Kong to the motherland by bringing up a new generation of responsible and patriotic citizens. However, this series was not well received by most Catholic schools. Although 1997 was already at the door of Hong Kong and proper civic education deemed indispensable for youngsters, many principals and RME teachers of the schools regarded it as too pro-China

in its stance for the RME of Catholic schools. The issue of where the focus and emphasis of RME should lie surfaced again among RME colleagues at this occasion.

At the same period of time, the RME curriculum of Catholic schools was further expanded to include themes on life education which became popular in Hong Kong schools in the 1990s. The revised series of RME textbooks for primary schools published by the Diocesan Catechetical Centre in the mid-1990s has been popular and more well received than its precursor of the 1970s which shows that the experiential approach to RME became more acceptable in the 1990s than in the 1970s, and the shift from dogmatic catechism towards moral education from a Catholic perspective continued to gain ground among Catholic primary schools over the years.

In the junior secondary level, the Catholic diocese also published a series of textbooks entitled *En rong zhi dao (The Road of Blessings and Honor)* in 1995 and 1996. This series is also an attempt to relate the biblical and Church teachings to the daily life of students. The authoritative and didactic approach to RME of the 1960s was eventually replaced by a much more inquiry approach of learning and an interactive mode of teaching in the classroom. In other words, both the subject matter and the pedagogy of the RME in Hong Kong Catholic schools have undergone significant shifts over the last four decades.

One of the prominent features of RME curriculum of Catholic schools in the 1990s was its diversification in subject content with varied emphasis on religious education, moral education, civic education, life education or spiritual education which began to gain ground in this decade, according to school-based decisions. These schools did enjoy ample freedom in making curriculum decisions. There had not been any official top-down core and centralized RME curriculum for all schools until 2006.

The situation of teacher's professionalization in RME did not improve much in the 1990s. The Diocesan Catechetical Centre continued to be the main provider of training for novice RME teachers with its two-year certificate course which, however, was not a prerequisite for teaching the subject. In this decade, more teachers also began to attend part-time courses on theology and biblical studies offered by the local Holy Spirit Seminary to strengthen their subject matter knowledge, although the enrolment was still very low if compared with the total population of the RME teachers.

In the 2000s

The first decade of the new millennium has seen significant RME curriculum initiatives of the Catholic Church of Hong Kong, as responses to her internal needs and external pressures of the educational reforms launched by the SAR government after 1997. A thorough and comprehensive review of the current situation of the diocese in the Diocesan Convention (March 2000 to December 2001) set a list of priorities in various domains of works of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong.

Greater attention to and better coordination of the RME in schools was among the top ten items for immediate concern (The Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, 2002).

In 2006, a centralized RME curriculum for all Catholic schools (*Religious and moral education curriculum of Catholic secondary schools, primary schools and kindergartens*) was promulgated (Task force of Religious and Moral Education curriculum of the Hong Kong Catholic Education Office, 2006). Three months later (September 2006), a professional centre of RME specialists, the RME Centre, was immediately set up in the Catholic Education Office to prepare for the implementation of the new curriculum.

The issuance of the RME Curriculum (2006), coupled with the setting up of the RME Centre for its implementation, was undoubtedly a significant curriculum initiative of RME of the Catholic schools (Woo Lo Ming & Chan Nai Kwok, 2007). Firstly, the most significant contribution of the document lies in its clarification that “the ultimate aim of this curriculum is mainly about moral and spiritual values and not religious values. It is not the kind of ‘catechetical education’ in which students’ acceptance of Christian faith is assumed” (Task force of Religious and Moral Education curriculum of the Hong Kong Catholic Education Office, 2006, p. 33). This is a clear defining and positioning of RME for Hong Kong Catholic schools in the 2000s by the diocesan authorities for the first time.

Second, the document delineates a clear core scope of study ranging from the kindergarten to the senior secondary level. The list of themes suggested in the curriculum is comprehensive and well organized, serving as a useful standard guide for schools to follow. It is expected that from now on the RME programmes of all Catholic schools should be modelled upon this official curriculum as far as possible. Eventually, the demand for a centralized and core RME curriculum from schools since the 1980s has been met.

Third, the document also proposes to introduce traditional Chinese moral values into the RME curriculum. As morality has played a prominent role in the culture of China and most of the people in Hong Kong are ethnic Chinese whose daily lives are still significantly shaped by the moral teachings of their ancient sages like Confucius, Mencius and Lao-tzu, the diocese finds it morally obliged to alert the students with the great value of the treasures of their cultural heritage for the contemporary age. The document argues that the Christian and Confucian traditions are, to a large extent, both compatible and complementary. In some cases, the Confucian values can also be supplemented and thus enhanced by their Christian counterparts. This becomes the official stance of the diocese.

Fourth, the document recommends Thomas Groome’s “Shared Christian Praxis” (Groome, 1991) as a preferred approach to RME. This approach emphasizes “bringing life to faith and faith to life” (Groome, 2006, p. 763) or “the integration of life and faith” (p. 763) and “offers a pedagogy that is communal, conversational, and participatory” (p. 765). Groome’s approach is adopted, it is hoped, to improve the status quo of religious education.

Fifth, the setting up of the RME Centre in September 2006 is also significant in the fact that it is the first standing professional centre of the Hong Kong Catholic diocese to provide curriculum support to the implementation of RME in its schools.

Since its establishment, the centre has been writing materials and running professional development activities for over 3,000 RME teachers. Most importantly, by the summer of 2015, the centre will have published textbooks for 12 year levels. Similar to the situation in Australia (Buchanan, 2006c), this new set of textbooks, regarded as being with high quality and user-friendly, is warmly received by most classroom teachers. The RME Centre is thus pinned with high hopes to enhance the quality of RME in Catholic schools continuously by providing useful teaching resources and much needed professional training to teachers concerned.

On the other hand, the diocese perceived the array of rapid educational reforms being launched by the SAR government after the political take-over in 1997 as potential threats to the traditional curriculum status of RME in Catholic schools. In December 2005, the bishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal Zen, issued a directive to all Catholic schools stating that no less than 5 % of formal curriculum time should be devoted to RME, no matter how the school timetable will be rearranged to accommodate the curriculum changes imposed by the government. This measure has showed that the Catholic Church is determined to uphold the identity of Catholic schools by strengthening RME amidst changes and challenges after 1997.

Challenges Now and Direction Ahead

By now, the RME in Hong Kong Catholic schools is facing a number of internal and external challenges, either carried over from the previous decades, as explained above, or newly emerged due to changing political and social contexts. Internally, while the needs of designing appropriate curriculum and publishing suitable textbooks have partly been met by the efforts of the RME Centre since 2006, the tasks of inducing the school leadership and strengthening the teachers to implement the 2006 curriculum and new textbooks adequately are still daunting.

One of the immediate internal challenges for the diocese authorities in 2010's is the implementation of the new centralized RME Curriculum in all the Catholic schools. While all the diocesan schools directly managed by the Catholic Education Office have to adopt the new textbooks written according to the new curriculum by the RME Centre, the response of the schools run by religious orders, which are more autonomous, is far from being uniform. While some are enthusiastic and willing to try the new curriculum approach embedded onto the new textbooks to improve the situation of the teaching and learning of RME, more than half of them are still reluctant to adopt the new curriculum and textbooks due to various reasons.

One of the major reasons of the reluctance lies in the great inertia towards curriculum change on the part of teachers. It has been argued that there are favourable factors to assist curriculum change in religious education. The provision of opportunities of professional development for teachers is a crucial one (Buchanan, 2006a). If the new curriculum approach is seen to be an important step to improve the situation of RME, more efforts from the Catholic Education Office are indispensable to order to convince the principals and teachers concerned of these schools that such

an initiative holds the key to the provision of appropriate religious education at this stage of its curriculum development.

A challenge now for the diocese is the need to prepare adequate number of qualified RME teachers to implement the new curriculum and to use the new textbooks properly. Without appropriate levels of subject matter and pedagogical knowledge, it is likely the RME teachers will impede the curriculum change (Buchanan, 2006b). While the professional development programmes and new textbooks prepared by the RME Centre over the last 8 years might be able to help solve partly the teachers' puzzle of "why to teach, what to teach and how to teach" RME, more effective measures need to be put in place to provide professional development programmes for them.

The RME Centre has proposed to work together with the Diocesan Catechetical Centre and the first Catholic University in Hong Kong (to be opened in a few years and run by the Caritas) to offer degree and certificate courses on RME. It is envisaged that, in the long run, all RME teachers of Catholic schools should receive academic and professional qualifications recognized by the diocese authorities. In particular, the expertise of the head of the RME Panel (similarly to the post of Religious Education Coordinator in Australia) in school should be strengthened, especially in the mastery of the relevant theory of curriculum change if the recent curriculum initiatives are to be implemented successfully (Buchanan & Engebretson, 2009).

The internal challenges of implementing the new curriculum effectively are now exacerbated by external threats which are perceived as looming large on the horizons by the Catholic diocese in Hong Kong. The Catholic Church has always been concerned that its schools and RME in particular would be marginalized due to the 1997 take-over by communist China (Tan, 2000). Cardinal Zen, the then bishop of Hong Kong, was already attentive to this concern when the new SAR government began to launch a series of educational reforms in 2000. In 2002 the government attempted to enact an ordinance to enhance the power and status of the management committee of individual schools by setting up the Incorporated Management Committee (IMC). The IMC was intended to replace the existing management committee. Its proposed role and power immediately became the focal point of contest and conflict between the diocese and the government. Cardinal Zen perceived the enactment of the new ordinance in 2004 in the following way: "the Government takes away the right of running schools from the school-sponsoring bodies, calling it decentralization, but, actually, it is decentralization of schools from the school-sponsoring bodies, to then centralize the schools under the absolute power of the Government" (Zen, 2011).

One of his major protests to such an attempt was that the ordinance was a breach of the Basic Law as the mini Constitution of Hong Kong after the 1997 reunion. Cardinal Zen accused that the new law would undermine the power of the Catholic diocese and a number of religious orders, as sponsoring bodies of nearly 300 schools, to control their schools. A key concern was that, sooner or later, even the vision and mission of Catholic schools with religious education at the core could be jeopardized. Thus, Cardinal Zen took the case to the court for judicial review. Yet, his appeal was eventually turned down by the Court of Final Appeal in 2011 and, as

a result, all Catholic schools are required to set up the IMC by the school year of 2014–2015. Although the Court also ruled that the right of giving religious instructions and organizing religious activities in these schools are protected by the Basic Law, Cardinal Zen claimed that the ordinance is part and parcel of a master design by the government to erode the enormous influence of the Christian churches over education in Hong Kong (Zen, 2011).

The belief of Cardinal Zen and his sympathizers was further consolidated by the Incident of National Education in the summer of 2012. The SAR government was not satisfied with the weak identification with their motherland among the young people even after Hong Kong has been returned to China for 15 years. It proposed to introduce national education as a compulsory and independent subject into the curriculum of all primary and secondary schools. This was a direct reversion of the long-standing policy of promoting civic and political education by a permeation approach. Strong accusations and suspicions of the government's attempt to launch communist indoctrination accumulated into large-scale parades and demonstrations from groups of parents, students and political activists. The Catholic Education Office also speculated whether the real intention of the curriculum move of the government was, in a long run, to establish the legitimacy of the communist ideology in school education at the expense of other faiths being taught in schools with religious background. It was thus decided that the existing religious education in their schools should be safeguarded by all efforts in the process of entertaining the government's request of promoting national education in case the new policy could get through. However, in face of huge opposition from the community, the government had to back down with its curriculum initiative eventually.

The mistrust of the SAR government after 1997 by the Catholic Church in Hong Kong should be understood in the context of the persistent hostile relationship between Vatican and Beijing since the communist take-over of China in 1949. Their rivalry over the question of who should be the legitimate and ultimate authorities to appoint Chinese bishops has continued to be a dragging and sensational issue. Cardinal Zen, a vocal critic of the Beijing regime, worries about the fate of the Catholic Church in mainland China. He also tends to understand the local educational policies of the new Hong Kong SAR government against such a backdrop of Vatican-Beijing rivalry (Zen, 2011). Moreover, many clergy in Hong Kong or their relatives in the mainland have suffered severe personal persecutions due to their Christian faith in the last 60 years. It is thus difficult to dispel their nightmare that the communist regime in Beijing will try every means to get rid of all Christian schools and their religious education sooner or later. Any discussion over the future of religious education in the Catholic schools in Hong Kong has to take into consideration the factor of the political dominance of the sovereign power which is antireligious in its ideology.

However, from an optimistic perspective, the Hong Kong SAR is promised by Beijing to be ruled according to the formula of "one country, two systems" and "high degree of autonomy" for a period of 50 years after 1997. It is written into the Basic Law that religious education in school is protected from political interferences from the outside. Thus, as long as the judiciary in Hong Kong which is a highly

respected institution will continue to be independent and capable of upholding the rule of the law, the prospects of religious education need not necessarily be dim and gloomy as speculated. The future will also hinge upon, to a large extent, the courage and determination of the Church with numerous followers who are leaders in various fields of society to stand firm to defend its legitimate and legal rights.

These perceived external threats have prompted the diocese to safeguard and consolidate the orthodoxy and prominence of Catholic values in school life, although values of other schools of thought would still be mentioned in the school curriculum to honour the educational principle of pluralism. It is repeatedly argued by the diocese authorities that it is both the legitimate right and moral obligation for Catholic schools to offer Catholic education to students who choose to study there, although most of them are non-Catholic. Thus, as a response to the IMC challenge, five core Catholic values (truth, life, justice, family and love) are deliberately written into the new constitution of all Catholic schools with IMC set-up. Moreover, the school leaders are asked by the diocese to promote these core values with great strength by a whole-school approach, that is, through RME as an independent and compulsory subject, other formal school subjects and informal school programmes and activities. This can be understood as a pre-emptive and proactive strategy adopted by the Church to combat the perceived imminent threats.

In view of the fact that all teachers in school are expected to help promote the core values and yet most of them are non-Catholic knowing little about the Catholic perspective of these values, the diocese is aware of the need to support them with appropriate resource materials and professional development programmes. For example, the Catholic Education Office is planning to enhance the power, status and competence of the Religious Education Coordinator in every Catholic school to ensure that the person in the post can be equipped with adequate expertise on the Church doctrines and teachings in order to serve as a gatekeeper on the quality of the RME curriculum as well as a resource person to lend professional support to other colleagues in need.

Conclusion

This chapter has depicted the shifts in focus of and approach to RME in the Catholic schools over the last five decades. The main trends of the story are broadly in line with the experience in Australia, although the shifts and turns of the development in Hong Kong have been much less theoretically driven (Buchanan, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c). The aim of RME has shifted obviously from converting students in the 1960s to “learning from” the teachings of Jesus by students (Grimmitt, 1987) in 2010s. Moreover, it becomes generally accepted that in any RME programme there should be integration between life and faith. Biblical teachings should be appropriated by learners to shed light on their own personal experience if RME is to be meaningful and relevant to their lives. The series of textbooks published by the RME Centre to implement the 2006 RME Curriculum is the latest attempt to promote religious education along such a line of argument.

Over the last five decades, the professionalism of RME teachers in Catholic schools has still been a key issue of concern of the diocesan authorities of Hong Kong. The situation has not improved much till now (Chan, 1990; Lam, 1997). As teachers are the key to the fate of any planned curriculum at its implemented stage, such a discrepancy has seriously constrained the development of religious education inside the school, while challenges from the outside such as unfavourable educational policies imposed by the SAR government could also undermine the status quo of this curriculum area so cherished by the Catholic Church.

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