Chapter 17
Religious Education in Irish Secondary Schools: A Future?

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Abstract Religious Education has space in the school curriculum as an academic subject but faces the challenge of being an attractive option for students. In planning ahead, it thus needs to have high appeal not only for its religious content, but also for its academic exchange value. To achieve a satisfactory balance between being academic and faith forming, it is argued that Religious Education should be philosophically grounded through a distinctive branch of critical realism.

Keywords Catholic Religious Education · Critical realism · Intellectual conversion · Faith formation · Self-knowledge · Non-confessional

Introduction

How can the Irish secondary school provide a Catholic education and Catholic Religious Education mainly but not exclusively in Catholic government-aided schools? [1] This question is being addressed largely because of what has evolved, whereby the setting of the Catholic school has shifted from when it had a predominantly Catholic population to where it can no longer assume that a major part of its students or staff is even nominally Catholic.[2]

Context

In the past, Catholic Religious Education operated within the school setting where Catholic faith could be presumed.[3] Catholic Religious Education was included as an intrinsic part of the Catholic school where it could be conceptualised in terms of James Arthur's holistic model.[4] As time marched on, especially in the 1970s and beyond, this cultural background changed as a commitment to Catholicism declined.[5]

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In response, Religious Education has been re-conceptualised, particularly through the introduction of the National Council for Academic Awards (NCCA) publicly examinable syllabi in the early days of the century.[6]

What emerged is that in Catholic schools Religious Education was often composed by the school's Religious Education staff, while adoption of the NCCA syllabi as publicly examined remained low.[7] In the light of changes in the overall secondary school curriculum, Religious Education is now challenged to compete for students' choice of subjects.[8]

Aim of Chapter

That Religious Education continues to feature in the educational agenda of the *Department of Education* is an achievement. However, the Catholic Church is concerned that its schools should not only provide Religious Education in what has become a market-focused setting, but also that it should be evangelical. By looking at the present situation and applying what can be learned from the past, this chapter proposes a way forward.

Current Situation

The Catholic school and others face the challenge of placing Religious Education on the curriculum as a subject like others even though, as noted, few schools adopted the NCCA courses as an examination subject over the past fifteen years. Reasons for this varied but perhaps a significant perspective was that these syllabi were perceived to weakly include 'faith formation.' They were rather seen to be abstract, resembling a form of Religious Studies. In addition, teachers claimed that non-examinable Religious Education opens the door to greater freedom for the students to reflect on personal matters. This could mean that there was little or no space even for reflection on the so-called big questions whose presence is seen by students to be desirable.[9] This perceived blemish of the NCCA syllabus was not universally acknowledged. However, it draws attention to the need to clearly include 'faith formation,' though the meaning of this can be ambiguous.[10]

Continuing to operate a programme that is more suited to 'faith formation' in a narrow sense of Catholic instruction but non-publicly examinable (if feasible), while attractive from the point of view of the church, could mean that the study of religion would remain in danger of being viewed as a kind of 'doss' subject. This had often been thought to be true before the introduction of the NCCA syllabi. Indeed, the catechetical and apologetic approach historically to the study of religion for Catholics still tends to tarnish how Religious Education even as an academic offering is perceived.[11] By inheriting this kind of perspective, Religious Education has had a hard task in being accepted by students as a truly academic option.

It is, of course, true that as non-examinable, Religious Education retains a *sui-generis* flavour which means it can follow its own pathway but this tends to marginalise it from the main academic flow of the school. The Catholic school then resembles what Arthur described as dualistic.[12] While this can have advantages in being able to give more attention to personal issues, it weakens religion's perceived value in what is an increasingly secular environment, where school subjects have a high exchange value.

In such a setting, it is suggested that anything which detracts from its image of being respectably academic seems unwise. Leaving its catechetical moorings of the past, in so far as this has been done, is generally seen to have been a positive step. This has been enhanced through bringing Catholic theology to the university, as well as by relocating teacher education largely done formerly in denominational colleges to university. It could be argued that, overall, the study of religion has entered the publicly examinable domain which needs to be treasured as it continues to struggle to compete with other subjects on the curriculum in the eyes of students and parents.

Looking to the Future

Having RE in public space in line with other subjects, while a major achievement, needs support. Within this context, in looking ahead, it might be useful to learn from the past by reviewing those schools which followed an NCCA programme for examination and profit from their experience of how 'faith formation' featured. Theoretically, NCCA syllabi were seen to make space for 'faith formation'. How was this seen to be achieved?

Religious Education in Catholic Schools

Looking ahead, Amelee Meehan proposes, in the light of the new secondary school 'well-being' curriculum, to have Catholic Religious Education in Catholic schools as an academic offering. She argues that the NCCA will not do this, judging from what will be permitted in *Education and Training Board* (ETB) schools. These schools may offer Religious Education in the classroom but without 'religious instruction or worship of any religion forming any part of class activity.' This signals that this is how Religious Education needs to be presented academically from the official Education Department's point of view.[13] Does this necessarily exclude 'faith formation'?

Meehan's proposal thus adopts an alternative model within the new well-being context which might do justice to the concern of the Catholic Church. It could include worship and allied practices.[14] One might ask how this proposed model resembles what we have referred to above when schools combined the NCCA examinable course and viewed themselves to have contributed to 'faith formation'? Admittedly, then it could have included the aspects of 'faith formation,' that is 'religious instruction or

worship of any religion forming any part of class activity' as identified by Meehan. Now, these are clipped. Nonetheless, could Meehan's model not build on that experience and consider if 'religious instruction or worship of any religion forming any part of class activity' excludes 'faith formation.'?[15]

More precisely, Dr. Meehan's proposed model has two dimensions where it first deals with teachings and values of the Catholic Church and then advances to 'faith formation.' This she proposes could be crafted as a Christian/Catholic lens on well-being.[16] The proposal builds on the approach to Christian Religious Education which Thomas Groome developed.

From the viewpoint of this discussion, Meehan's suggestion underlines the opportunity to provide a Religious Education that is academic but at the same time meets denominational concerns. This appears to be promising as it is generally accepted that the study of religion needs to be more than academic.[17] In supporting this issue, Thomas Groome contends that the academic should enhance 'faith formation'—the informative should be a prelude to the formative, which he claims to be intrinsic to his approach.[18]

Professor Groome, a teacher for many years in Catholic educational settings of the United States, outlined a pedagogy which he developed over his lifetime, namely shared praxis.[19] Building on the thought of the Catholic philosopher of education, Paulo Freire, this approach engages the learner existentially but advocates engagement with tradition, and thereby makes the study of the Catholic/Christian faith both academic and personal.[20] While the approach had wide appeal, would adoption of Meehan's version of it be right for Catholic schools in Ireland?

In considering this, we note that Catholic schools and colleges in the United States are private. Students are thus often required to take modules on Catholicism. The courses have an assured captive audience. They do not necessarily include liturgy and adjunct Catholic programmes. This is normally the domain of chaplaincy. It is not clear how much, if any, content they include from non-Catholic sources. The Irish schools which we are concerned about are in large part state-aided. They may, according to Meehan, be regarded as semi-private and so permitted to make Christian/Catholic Religious Education a required course. If so, they would closely resemble what happens in Catholic colleges in the United States, though such colleges, as noted, do not necessarily require worship.

It would seem in the context of the well-being framework that like other subjects, Religious Education would be an academic option. For Meehan, this could be Christian/Catholic Religious Education. In such a setting, Religious Education or Christian/Catholic Religious Education has to compete with a range of subjects. Even though the NCCA examinable Religious Education programme was academic like the other subjects, its uptake as non-denominational was weak. Would a Christian/Catholic Religious Education offering be likely to pick up significant numbers of students?[21] This needs market research in terms of what parents and students want. A potentially useful perspective might emerge from the experience of Loyola's undergraduate programme at Trinity College where Catholic theology had little attraction. Though at a higher level, it may help identify possible trends. It might also be worth recalling that when teaching the NCCA programme, teachers reported that they were

sometimes led to begin with religions other than Christianity because of what they perceived to be a sense of *deja-vu* among the students if they started with Christianity.[22] Others went further to suggest that it might be more helpful to change the name of the subject so as to steer clear of its catechetical vestiges. What I am concerned to highlight is that offering Christian/Catholic Religious Education as an academic option risks, if optional, being something of a white elephant. On the other hand, if it were permitted to be compulsory, it would appear to work against the well-being framework which appears to be underpinned by highlighting student's freedom of choice.

Similarly, one might also wonder if Groome's approach to the study of Christianity/Catholicism, given the setting of a private institution requiring courses in Catholic theology, adequately respects the learner's freedom? Could Groome's approach not face the kind of criticism which Michael Grimmitt's 'learning from' religion faces, which essentially is that it is overly subjective and so fails to do justice to the authenticity of tradition or traditions.[23] By extension, this could mean a subjectivist student's view of Catholicism. Though Groome's movement three and four may be seen to address this, it is not clear that they do.

Non-confessional Religious Education

In an attempt to provide Religious Education which avoids any ambiguous foregrounding of Catholicism, Sean Whittle proposed to approach it philosophically. He speaks of non-confessional Religious Education by adopting the philosophy of the Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner. It is true that Rahner's focus is existential and purports to be inclusive as it speaks of the human experience of mystery or limit situations. For Whittle, this has the advantage of being open to various traditions and is Catholic in the sense that Rahner's philosophy keeps the student within the orbit of Catholicism.[24]

Whittle's approach holds promise if it can be established that the philosophy in question leads openly and impartially to Catholic and other traditions. It does not seem that it can do this.[25] The philosophy in question may be satisfactory in a Catholic seminary or even a Catholic college which is where Rahner did much of his teaching but it is hardly right in a government-aided Catholic school where Catholicism needs to be addressed impartially in a context of other denominations and faiths.

Critical Realism

Philosophy may nonetheless provide a good prelude to Catholic or other Religious Education but it needs to be the kind of philosophy that empowers the student to be truly critical. It requires not only to inspire reflection on deep-rooted universal questions, evoking human mystery, which much philosophy and literature do, but

it needs to go further. It needs to provide the learners with tools by which they are enabled to free themselves from enslavement within their interpretive mind-sets. We are thus seeking a type of Religious Education that is non-confessional in the sense of being non-colonising. This means that the learner needs to become adequately secure in him/herself to be truly open to the other.[26] It brings us to the perennial challenge of acquiring a proper balance between subjectivity and objectivity.

In his discussion of Religious Education, Andrew Wright speaks of moving from what he calls comprehensive to political liberalism, that is, Religious Education that is largely subjective, which in his view, is widespread in England to religious literacy that enables one to engage with truth.[27] For him, this entails the development of what he calls critical realism.[28] He observes that such capacity does not come easily when dealing with differing worldviews. Yet, he argues that one can move beyond seeing traditions as equally true; one can reach more truthful positions, which is of high value in the Religious Education classroom.

Intellectual Conversion

Addressing this concern with objectivity, the Catholic philosopher-theologian, Bernard Lonergan also spoke of critical realism, indicating the subtlety of what realism can mean.[29] Like Wright, he argues for the importance of truth, particularly when dealing with different religious or other viewpoints. His route to evaluating truth claims, clearer and more sure-footed than Wright's, entails a distinctive critical awareness which emerges from what he calls intellectual conversion.[30]

To be intellectually converted, the learner needs to move through what Lonergan calls dialectic which entails growing in appreciation of conflicting viewpoints on what is real and emerging with a capacity to identify for oneself what in truth constitutes reality.[31] This process has been likened by Lonergan to what takes place in psychotherapy.[32] It entails a focus on one's self as operating emotionally, intellectually, morally and religiously. Without this, the danger of remaining overly subjective persists when interpreting tradition.[33] What such intellectual conversion enables the learner to do is to discover a basis within him/herself for true knowledge and from there he/she is ready for an authentic choice of worldview. For Lonergan, this is not achieved simply by reading even a treatise on philosophy, Catholic or other. One needs to identify what is being expressed in one's consciousness which is a foundational pattern of how we come to know and decide.[34]

While Lonergan's initial focus, like Rahner's, is also on the universal experience of mystery, the philosophy with which he operates leads to critical self-knowledge from which free commitment to a form of religion, Catholic or other, is possible.[35]

Lonergan's approach to the study of religion thus calls primarily for intellectual conversion which is a philosophical tool, opening the way to developing the learner's capacity to move towards but beyond the threshold of theology and objectively interpret religion in its various manifestations. Without this, Religious Education may be informative, even deeply moving, but not sufficiently self-critical to enable the learner to choose the worldview that he/she has reason to value.

Implications

What we have been concerned to argue is that, while as Meehan says, there is a unique opportunity to place Catholic Religious Education on the curriculum, it needs to be both academic and open to the other denominations and faiths. In what is an increasingly secular setting, it is suggested that any Religious Education might be better perceived and approached, where potential pupils are more likely to be nominally Catholic or non-Catholic, by presenting it more impartially even calling it by a different name.[36]

To capitalise on what has been achieved where the NCCA syllabi have helped raise the status of the subject, Religious Education that is open to the Catholic tradition seems to have the best chance of succeeding by being unambiguously academic and non-partisan. At the same time, within this, it needs to accommodate 'faith formation', more clearly defined, which was seen to be weak in the NCCA syllabi.

To effectively include both, we looked at Groome's approach in line with Meehan's which concurs generally with the phenomenological and anthropological study of religion represented by Robert Jackson in England, and now widely adopted in Europe.[37] Groome's work, however, incorporates a more political and public dimension, in that, it employs the framework of Freire and use of praxis.'[38] Approaching the issue non-confessionally, Whittle's perspective is seen to be in need of a better philosophical basis.

Though all of this scholarship is enriching, it is contended that when encountering religious traditions more is needed. It is argued that Religious Education needs to be more critical. While the use, particularly of existentialist philosophy, may have pedagogic value in touching the deeper dimension of the person in terms of the kind of fundamental questions we all ask, it needs to be critical in a way that enables the learner to be able to judge the truth value of how traditions respond.

To achieve this, we have noted the development of critical realism described by Wright but more clearly mapped out by Lonergan needs to be included. The pupil-centered focus needs to lead to addressing traditions objectively. For this, an emphasis on the promotion of intellectual conversion is required. In this way, the student is gradually enabled to be ready to assume responsibility for his/her worldview whether that is to be religious, Catholic, or not.

Conclusion

It has been argued that, while specific religious traditions (including Catholicism) can be presented to the student, he/she needs to be prepared to interpret them in a way that is not overly subjective. When this is achieved to some level of satisfaction in accordance with the learner's age and background, the Catholic perspective, as one among others, can be offered in whatever detail time permits. Within the Catholic school, this could be enhanced through ethos and practice as educational rather

than as catechetical. It should also be appropriate for the many schools that are not directly Catholic. In their case, enhancement, helpful but questionably essential, of specifically denominational programmes may not be acceptable. Given the present Irish situation with its secularist undertow, much of what the NCCA syllabi and material linked to them had crafted could be edited for inclusion in the development that has been outlined. It has been argued here, however, that any such review needs a critical realist methodology and a clear conception of 'faith formation.'

Notes

1. There are 720 secondary schools in all of which 320 are voluntary aided (Catholic owned) which means that they are free to have a Catholic programme. The remainder are under the patronage of other religious groups. Numbers fluctuate: See Browne 2018.
2. Grace (2018), Coll (2019).
3. Gallagher (2008).
4. Arthur 1995, pp. 231ff.
5. P. Share et al. (2012), pp. 330–339, Mullen (2015), Walsh (2020).
6. NCCA (2001a, b), Carmody (2019).
7. NCCA Background Paper for the review of Junior Cycle Religious Education (NCCA 2017), p. 15.
8. Meehan (2019a).
9. NCCA Background Paper, p. 21.
10. Byrne (2018).
11. McCourt (2006), pp. 158–161.
12. Arthur (1995), pp. 227–228, Lonergan (1973), pp. 366–367.
13. Meehan (2019b).
14. A. Meehan, "Is there a Future …?" p. 87.
15. Meehan, "Is there a Future…?" p.87.
16. Meehan, "Is there a Future…?" p. 90.
17. Gallagher (2010), p.113.
18. Groome (2012).
19. Groome (2006).
20. Bonnett and Cuypers (2003).
21. Byrne (2018b), English (2018), p. 10.
22. NCCA Background Paper, p. 22; Byrne and Devine (2018).
23. Teece (2010).
24. Whittle (2014, pp. 104–155, 2015).
25. Carmody (2017).
26. Carmody (2015).
27. Wright (2007), pp. 3, 8–9, 47–49, 116, 126, 203 ff.
28. Wright (2017); See also: Go (2019), pp. 21–57, Pring (2019), pp. 16–26.
29. Walker (2017).
30. Lonergan (1973), p. 84.
31. Giddy (2011).

32. Lonergan (1974), p. 269.
33. Bonnett and Cuypers (2003).
34. Walker (2019).
35. Carmody (1988, 2015).
36. This was suggested in my interviews. It is also something that has been proposed in England.
37. Jackson (2019).
38. Freire (1993), Noddings (2013).

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