



## The difficulties of providing an additional syllabus in Church schools

### Executive Summary

The RE curriculum in Church schools is objective, critical and pluralistic, and includes learning about a range of religions and worldviews. However, the basis on which the curriculum is constructed is completely different to most agreed syllabi, for a number of reasons.

- there are at least three broad bases for an objective, critical and pluralistic RE curriculum:
  - a “world religions paradigm” which gives similar time to a number of discrete religions and worldviews, common in many agreed syllabi;
  - a “worldview” approach from multiple perspectives, as advocated by the Commission on RE; and
  - deep fluency in one tradition, opening up a dialogical approach to other religious and non-religious traditions, which is the approach in Catholic RE;
- the starting point for curriculum building in an agreed syllabus is the 1996 Act and local demography, whereas for Church schools it will be the Church’s teaching documents;
- methodological approaches differ – e.g. RE in a Catholic school is primarily school-level theology, rather than primarily phenomenological, for example;
- an essential part of Catholic RE is the way in which it relates to the whole school including the rest of the curriculum.

Forcing voluntary aided schools to design and teach two separate, parallel, RE syllabi will have very significant practical and financial difficulties for voluntary aided schools and education budgets.

### Introduction

It has been suggested that requiring Catholic schools to have a curriculum that is in accordance with the agreed syllabus, as well as a Catholic RE curriculum should be relatively unproblematic. There seems to be a presumption that all it would require is the addition of those features of the agreed syllabus that were not already part of the Catholic curriculum. This is a naïve presumption and shows a lack of understanding of the difference between Catholic RE curricula and the agreed syllabus equivalents. The dual system of community and voluntary schools was designed to respect and protect this distinction, which is under threat by the Bill. This paper explains the four broad ways in which Catholic RE differs in its approach from the agreed syllabus and outlines the practical impact and costs which only Church schools would bear.

#### 1. Three different approaches to objective, critical and pluralistic RE

Catholic school RE curricula already meet the legally required “objective, critical and pluralistic” standard. However, an assumption that this means it would thereby necessarily share a basic core with other non-denominational curricula is erroneous. It would be a failure to recognise that there are several different ways a curriculum could meet these requirements.

For example, a curriculum could be objective, critical and pluralistic by implementing what many scholars call the “world religions paradigm” (WRP). This would be to treat a wide range of religions and worldviews discretely, giving each an equal share of the curriculum time. It also tends to treat all religions as bounded entities that are definable and monolithic. This has often been the way that agreed syllabus conference curricula have been shaped. Many people seem to assume that this is what is meant by an objective, critical and pluralistic curriculum. However, this approach is increasingly out of favour with the leading academics in Religious Education, who argue it reifies institutional views of

religion, ignores complexity and uncritically absorbs colonial definitions of religions, viewing them all through a Christian lens<sup>1</sup>.

A second approach could be that adopted by the Commission on Religious Education's report<sup>2</sup> in its new vision for Religious Education which argues for a reconfiguration of curriculum content around central existential worldview approaches to common human questions from multiple perspectives. This does not necessarily require the study of discrete religions but recognises the complexity of religious commitment and the interplay between religion, politics and identity. It approaches the religious questions critically and pluralistically because it opens them up to commentary from multiple perspectives without presuming in advance that the identity of religious believers is fixed, including personal as well as institutional worldviews. Such a curriculum<sup>3</sup> would look very different to one framed by the WRP, but would still pass the objective, critical and pluralistic test.

Finally, there is the kind of curriculum that would predominate in a Catholic school that concentrates on understanding the nature of religion through becoming fluent in one tradition first (in our case Catholicism) to open up a dialogical space with other religious and non-religious traditions from a well-informed and religiously literate starting point. A dialogical approach is only fruitful if at least one tradition is understood very well. It becomes objective, critical and pluralistic when those from within that tradition engage in critical dialogue from those of other traditions and can critically reflect on their own worldviews and presumptions. This is most assuredly an objective, critical and pluralistic curriculum but the range of other religions and worldviews studied is smaller than would be typical of an WRP curriculum, since the time given to each is much more extensive, and a school would in effect 'major' in its own tradition with a significant and large portion of the curriculum being given to the study of a limited number of other religions and worldviews in greater depth than would be true in most WRP curricula. (The overall time spent studying other religions and traditions in Catholic schools is no less – and often greater – than in other schools because of the much greater curriculum time devoted to RE.)

## 2. Different starting points for curriculum building

The second reason that a Catholic curriculum might look very different from an agreed syllabus curriculum, notwithstanding that both are objective, critical and pluralistic, is that their starting points are entirely different. An agreed syllabus curriculum would usually begin with the 1996 legislation and ensure that the curriculums reflect the demography of the UK or local regions and would largely enshrine a WRP approach to the inclusion of different religious traditions. A Catholic curriculum begins with the Bishops' *Religious Education Curriculum Directory*<sup>4</sup>. For Catholic curriculum builders this would be their normative starting point and they would see no need to consult any other authoritative source since by both statute<sup>5</sup> and canon<sup>6</sup>, the responsibility for determining the content of Religious Education in Catholic schools sits with the relevant religious authority, which for Catholics is the Catholic Bishops' Conference.

## 3. Alternative methodological approaches to the discipline of RE

The third reason that a Catholic curriculum might differ in essence from an agreed syllabus curriculum, has to do with different methodological approaches. Put simply, Catholic RE is, in accordance with

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<sup>1</sup> For a very accessible critique of the WRP, see this podcast page:

<https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/podcast-james-cox-on-the-world-religions-paradigm/> and <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/decolonizing-the-study-of-religion/>.

<sup>2</sup> Commission on Religious Education (CoRE), Final Report, 2018 <http://www.commissiononre.org.uk>.

<sup>3</sup> See the "big Ideas" approach to RE promoted by Barbara Wintersgill, which was very influential on the Commission ([https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/education/research/groupsandnetworks/reandspiritualitynetwork/Big\\_Ideas\\_for\\_RE\\_E-Book.pdf](https://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/education/research/groupsandnetworks/reandspiritualitynetwork/Big_Ideas_for_RE_E-Book.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> CBCEW, *Religious Education Curriculum Directory (3-19) for Catholic Schools and Colleges in England and Wales* (London: The Department of Education and Formation of the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> School Standards and Frameworks Act 1998, schedule 19, paragraph 4.

<sup>6</sup> The Code of Canon Law, canon 806.

Trust Deed requirements, essentially school-level theology, with other disciplinary approaches playing an important, but secondary role. Typically, an agreed syllabus curriculum would also use a range of disciplinary approaches, but theology is unlikely to be the central discipline – sociology or phenomenology, for example are likely to play a much more central role.<sup>7</sup>

#### 4. The relationship of RE to the whole curriculum

The fourth reason that a Catholic curriculum might be fundamentally different is the central place of Catholic RE in the school's curriculum and mission. In Catholic schools, RE is the 'core of the core curriculum'<sup>8</sup> and has a relationship with every other curriculum subject, as well as a bearing on the values and ethics of the whole school.

#### The practical impact on Church schools

Being forced to design two separate syllabi has a number of serious practical and resource implications for voluntary aided Schools.

- Professional Development for staff needs to be duplicated, as will the time required for curriculum development.
- Additional advisers will need to be found to support the agreed syllabus development alongside the existing diocesan RE advisers who support the denominational RE.
- In a school where pupils request the alternative syllabus, additional staff will be required to teach it in parallel with the existing RE. Since RE is at least 10% of curriculum time in Catholic schools, this will mean a staffing budget of approximately 110% its current size.
- The need for curriculum resources will double
- Additional accommodation will also be required even where the agreed syllabus is compatible with the school's Trust Deed, and it can be taught on site.
- Where the agreed syllabus is not compatible with the school's Trust Deed, it will need to be taught in a different location, either by making arrangements with a nearby school or hiring additional accommodation. These solutions will both require the arrangement and expense of transporting pupils and supervising them, and disruption to the school day.
- If large numbers of parents requested alternative provision, this could undermine the purposes of the Trust Deed and call into question the viability of the school.

All these additional costs and disruption would only fall on voluntary aided schools, and would have severe effects on education budgets.

#### Conclusion

In summary, it should be clear that there is no such thing as a single shared understanding of what an objective, critical and pluralistic curriculum looks like. Furthermore, a Church school does not start in the same place as an agreed syllabus conference. Church schools cannot be expected to begin with an agreed syllabus and modify it for their context. As a result, it is possible, and indeed likely, that the agreed syllabus and the syllabus used in a Church school will be very different in practice even if both meet the objective, critical and pluralistic requirement. Therefore, any requirement to produce an additional curriculum on top of a Church school RE curriculum would be an onerous and unreasonable additional burden on Church schools. Furthermore, as it is only Church schools that would be required to take on such an additional burden it is also contrary to the demand of natural justice, and possibly discriminatory.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the CoRE's draft '*National Entitlement*' (Interim Report, 2017) where theology is listed as the last of five disciplines.

<sup>8</sup> Pope St John Paul II, Address to the bishops of Great Britain, 1992.