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Catholic Religious Education: Lessons in Liberation?

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## Catholic Religious Education: Lessons in Liberation

### A thought experiment

'It is the best of times, it is the worst of times.' At this juncture we find Catholic RE enjoying what might be called an embattled renaissance. On the one hand, Catholic RE enjoys robust health and with new RE curricula, new Section 48 measures on the horizon *and* a new RE Curriculum directory – it is a lively and creative space. Yet on the other hand a series of public reports in 2018 implicitly critique, perhaps even pathologise Catholic RE by suggesting that the historic statutory right of the Bishops to determine what is in the curriculum should be effectively abolished. Here I'm referring to Charles Clarke and Linda Woodhead's *New Settlement*, the Impact Pamphlet on *How to Regulate Faith Schools* by academics from UCL and Warwick and the *Final Report* of the Commission on Religious Education which I was part of for two years. All in different ways and ostensibly for different reasons, propose that a standard supposedly 'neutral approach to RE' be established which Catholic schools would be expected to follow.<sup>i</sup>

As Andy Lewis has pointed out, it is quite astonishing that what can be perceived as an attack on the 1944 settlement regarding faith schools has found its focus on an area of undisputed curriculum strength.<sup>ii</sup> It is tempting to ask why some cannot understand the simple notion that theology from a confessional standpoint can be properly critical. That said, given the vast range of content possible in RE (aptly described by Jim Conroy as a subject 'stuffed full of agendas')<sup>iii</sup>, there may be mileage in the suggestion associated with academics such as Richard Kueh, Kathryn Wright and Kate Christopher that commonality be sought via agreed *approaches* rather than *content*.

Catholics shouldn't be too troubled by this insofar as there has long been a layered tradition of training in Pontifical Institutions– obtaining *a licence* to teach by beginning with Philosophy, continuing with Theology and then offering specialisation opportunities in a range of disciplines which have long included subjects such as Sociology. In that light, it might be worthwhile to engage in a thought experiment as I pitch what I think should be included in C A T H O L I C RE and invite you to do the same. After all, *kath-olon* means 'according to all' or as James Joyce is thought to have characterised it: 'Here comes everybody.'

**C** – Well – it could be for *Critical Thinking* and perhaps more obviously *Christology*. Yet while I do personally regard Jesus as the Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, in a bid for maximum inclusivity and Catholic universality, let's start with **Cosmology** for several reasons:

- (a) As the *Sound of Music* has it: 'Let's start at the very beginning, it's a very good place to start' and that is exactly what Genesis does. An ancient meditation on creation, it considers the wonder of the world which in turn triggers fundamental lines of theological, philosophical and scientific enquiry. Indeed another famous *Sound of Music* line 'Nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could . . .' was quoted by



Anthony Flew (the Richard Dawkins of his day) as pivotal in his forsaking atheism for theism.<sup>iv</sup>

- (b) Not only does any fair-minded engagement with cosmology nail the ridiculously false opposition between science and religion (where would we be without Copernicus [a priest], Newton [who regarded his religious writings more important than his calculus], Faraday [evangelical pioneer of electromagnetics], Mendel [genetics - a monk], and the author of the Big Bang theory [Georges LeMaître – Jesuit]), it is a topic which necessarily includes consideration of our common home. Whatever tribe we're from or stripe we wear, we are creatures in a relationship with the earth. Reality is relational, atoms are relational, it is sub-atomic relationality that holds us together. Indeed the great excitement about the discovery of the Higgs-Boson particle is related to this since it proves that God is a Catholic – you can't have Mass [*sic*] without it (cf. Jn 1.3 and Col. 1.15).
- (c) Meanwhile, the testimony of Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'*, organisations such as Friends of the Earth, the vegan movement and children protesting ecological damage cannot be ignored. I remember people like Fr Rob Esdaile trying to open my deaf ears to conservation as a moral issue some 30 years ago. It all seemed a bit trendy to me, but if we check Genesis 1.29 – 'you shall have the seed bearing plants as your food' we have to concede that vegetarians might have been right all along. Moreover, the first Creation account also introduces us to Shabbat/Sabbath (Gen. 2.2-3). On the seventh and perfect day we find liberation from *doing*, but we are so addicted to function we create mental pecking orders in its 40 watt man-made light. (Let me enjoy a spiritual discipline on you – the next time you meet a stranger, try *not* to ask them what they do). Sabbath is a day of rest and liberation for everyone even for the slave and the beast of burden – a day where C is for Contemplation or even just *chillin!*

**A** – So if we are not our function, what are we? This is why I think the 'A' in Catholic should turn our minds as educators to what it is to be human – a study which traditionally comes under the umbrella of **Anthropology**.

- a) If Genesis is correct, our irreducible baseline dignity is to understand ourselves as human beings made in the image of God or, quite frankly, just *humans*.

Too many of our GCSE curricula, A-Level specifications and even University courses still present ethical theories of what humans should *do* independently from consideration of what human beings *are*. In Genesis we find the basic picture painted by the Bible is that we are groundlings breathing the breath of God (Gen. 2.7). We are beings at a confluence of infinity and mortality. Was it Gerard Manley Hopkins or Pink Floyd who described us as 'Jack Joke Potsherd' and 'Immortal Diamond'? Consequently, while we would acknowledge that such concepts are not universally



held (and our religious education lessons already reflect that), *ab initio*, this view provides a liberation from the mad metrics of significance framed by capitalism where you are only as welcome as your money and risk 'knowing the price of everything and the value of nothing.'<sup>v</sup>.

**T** – While 'T' might be for Theology itself, I'd like to go for **Transcendence** which may be defined as 'existence or experience beyond the normal or physical level'. Forget Kant, Transcendental Thomism etc. for a moment. I'm talking about much more basic experiences common to all of us like picking up the telephone and finding the person you are about to ring is already on the end of the line. Or knowing without looking that you are being stared at.<sup>vi</sup> What is all that about? And without necessarily going all Prince Charles and talking to plants in RE, which part of the mainstream curriculum in our schools even dares to deal with what might be called non-material reality?

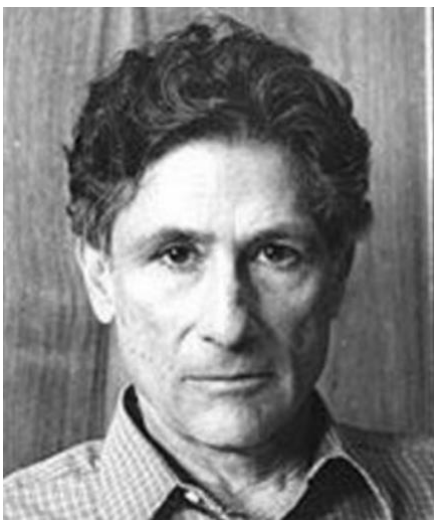
Eagle-eyed viewers conversant with the *Interim Report* of the Commission on Religious Education and the *Final Report* might notice that in the description of a National Entitlement, section F of the former has largely disappeared. Codenamed 'Paragraph Spooky', it would have entitled all students in English schools the right to consider 'the importance of experience including extraordinary experiences in shaping worldviews and how worldviews are used to interpret experience'.<sup>vii</sup> This late edit is to be lamented since it risks confining our young people to a restricted material view of reality. Surely we should be liberating them to embrace the possibility of a spiritual realm, quantum entanglement, collective consciousness – call it what you will – but essentially something we see in every shoal of fish, every flock of birds, every football crowd and something so very many of us have experienced at points in our religious journey.

To rule out transcendence is to rule out the witness of the saints, the miraculous, the *mysterium fascinans et tremendum* – the idea of the *holy*. To rule out transcendence is to rule out God.

**H** – Having mentioned the Holy, I can leave open what H might stand for. I've gone for **Hermeneutics** – a word derived from the Greek messenger Deity Hermes meaning 'interpretation'.

The way authoritative texts are used and misused in RE is vitally important and much work is needed in this area at all levels of education and society. Hence I'm pleased at this juncture to mention Bob Bowie at CCCU and Farid Panjwani at UCL who are currently examining the hermeneutics of the Bible and the Qur'an in a joint project. Far too often, literate and educated people disengage their brains and employ fundamentalist or literal readings of particular texts as if the library that is the Bible somehow fell out of the sky instead of attending to its origin in oral tradition, unfathomable events and contentious circumstances. In Catholic understanding the Bible is the Word of God in the Words of Humanity. It is God-breathed – yes (2 Tim. 3.16-17) but it also bears the smudges and thumbprints of generations of authors, scribes, editors and copyists never mind the travails of translators. Those wedded to a particular type of biblical piety may object to this apparent contradiction, but it is commensurate with the central paradox of Christianity which proposes a God-Man, a Word made Flesh, a Virgin birth, a life-giving death and a Triune God. But why wouldn't our doctrine reflect reality, given that our foundational quantum truths are paradoxical and light itself seems to be both particle and wave?

In this light (*sic*) we might note that Catholic interpretation of Scripture has always considered the *sensus plenior* the ‘fuller meaning’ of the text – its symbolism, its moral importance and eternal significance should all play a full part in the discourse of academic biblical scholarship. Yet for years appreciation of subtlety in biblical interpretation has not necessarily been helped by Examination Boards, who in their bid to set questions for exams construct binaries such as ‘fundamentalists believe this, liberals believe that’ and have therefore given unnecessary airtime to extreme views. It should not have taken until 2016 for Examination Boards to heed that Catholic hermeneutics are neither confined to literal readings nor their consequent fundamentalist beliefs. Moreover, since one of the odder consequences of the 2016 Reform is that the study of Scripture *per se* at GCSE and A-Level is more likely in a Catholic school than any other type, it may be timely that the Bishops have announced a *Year of the Word* which will redouble energies addressing biblical literacy in our schools.



**O** – If you want to hear example of what I mean by good hermeneutics then let’s look at ‘O’ – not with a focus on orthodoxy but on the baleful practice of ‘orientalism’ or **Othering** by which we consider our group superior. Associated with the work of Edward Said, I’ll use the Good Samaritan as an example. I’ve lived a long life now and no student has been concerned about what might be called historico-critical aspects of the text such as how old he was, what day of the week he found the man attacked, nor even whether it happened or not. Yet this *story* is *perennially true* because it challenges prejudice like the lawyer who in describing who was a good neighbour can’t even say ‘the Samaritan’ but couches his mealy-mouthed response as ‘the one who helped him’ (Lk 10.37). *The challenge to othering is all over the Gospel.* The Prodigal Son - who wants

his dad to hurry up and die and ends up having a party thrown in his honour. Subconsciously we ‘other’ idiots like him and as the elder brother in the story, we distance ourselves (Lk 15.28). The late-coming labourers in the vineyard who get as much as the first to our annoyance (Mt 20.1-16) Yet the reason we get cross is by and large we are the people who have been picked first for the school team, or the debating society, we have enjoyed physical strength or academic ability, so we don’t know what it is like to be left behind at the third, sixth and ninth hour. *Others* tend to come first in a kingdom where the last shall be first, children are more important than adults, women proclaim the Resurrection, the poor are blessed, the mournful weep and this is before we think of folk from other races who will come from the East and the West if the chosen don’t pay heed to the word of God (Lk 13.29).

Fragmentation of society is obviously a concern for everyone and without being dominated by it, given that the Holy Family are presented as both asylum seekers and economic migrants (Mt 2.13-14 & 19-23), Catholic RE should advert to its inherent universalism. To see in the blind, the lame, the criminal, *the other*, not the stranger but the sister and the brother (Mt 25.40).

**L – Love.** I’ve often said that outside the context of faith, Catholicism may be broadly perceived as a five syllable way of saying ‘No!’ Yet for all the troubles of the Church, I don’t think it is Catholicism but rather ‘No’ that needs a makeover. Let me explain.

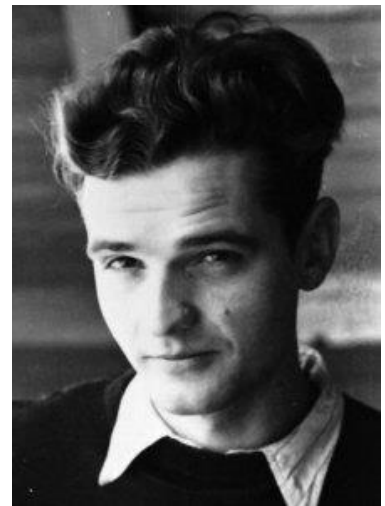
Back in the garden we can recall that it was the *desire* for the fruit that proved irresistible (Gen. 3.6). We don't have to be in Lent or even religious to know that our appetites present us with a challenge either to our waistline or to our mental health. An addict, after all, is someone who can't say 'no' to something and is therefore enslaved by a peculiarly powerful appetite such that their personal liberation and perhaps their very life becomes *dependent* upon being able to say 'No!'

'No' is a freedom word and I think it is credible to understand the wisdom inherent in the covenants described in the Bible as that of the challenge to humans as gifted individuals *to learn to choose the good*. In this reading, far from being a narrow confessional collection, the biblical books become an extended case study in character ethics – an area of development in RE currently associated with the University of Birmingham. As Aristotle says, the aim of our studies is not just *to know* what virtue is but to *become good*.



As **Leonard May** says, the supreme religious question is 'How do I love?'<sup>viii</sup> Yet while love is essentially a decision, its presentation in our contemporary context is ludicrously driven by Eros and rarely characterised by restraint

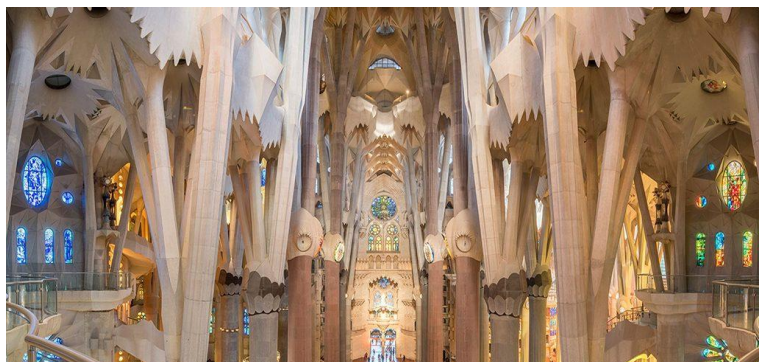
in our unbuttoned culture. This, despite the fact that the **#metoo** campaign is a global cry that there is more to intercourse than sex.



In such light, it is a little disappointing that the Department for Education pathway options presented by the recent GCSE reform on Relationships and Family almost entirely focus on *partners* while hardly discussing the generally more enduring parent-child relationships, still less siblings and grandparents. As counter-

balance, I put before you Sophie and Hans Scholl who gave their young lives in Christian defiance of the Nazi regime long before their more celebrated compatriot Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Siblings, who as surely as any couple, epitomise the romantic heroism of human love. Friendship, too, should be a constituent part of our curricula and in considering the kingdom as a life of love, it needs to be acknowledged that **such a life of love** can be lived fully by those who are single – another area where Jesus might be seen as model and liberator.

I – Despite the competing merits of *identity*, the notion of *institutions* and the claims they make on us, and even proposals around big *ideas*, I'd be most concerned here to stress **Imagination**. The 2016 Reform of RE has allowed the possibility of this becoming a more formal part of the syllabus and I, for one, am delighted. It has led to some interesting choices, and examples from the GCSE text books published so far include Adele on love,



Fauré's Requiem and Mumford & Sons on eschatology. Dramas such as *Les Misérables*, the art of Elizabeth Wang, the architecture of Gaudí<sup>ix</sup> . . . the list goes on. It remains early days into this reform but Catholic RE should be a place where the imagination is nourished and provoked. Art can provide a refuge from the desiccation of wordage. I'm indebted to Kevin O'Donnell, one of my doctoral students, for a line from Julia Kristeva who remarked that even in the most odious days of the Inquisition 'art provided *sinner*s with the opportunity to live, openly and inwardly apart . . . since they spread out the logic of speech to the most inaccessible folds of significance.'<sup>x</sup>

C – Contingency, Conscience, Character, I hope no one will mind if under this last heading I do finally focus on **Christology** in a manner inclusive of what has preceded, such that a bit like T.S. Eliot's famous quotation, we might 'arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.'

I'm not trying to undermine propositional understandings of revelation but if we follow the logic of the Gospel we are looking for truth as a life lived and that will involve thoughtful rather than trite engagement with the person of Christ. The first words of John's Gospel deliberately connote Genesis and the warning to the reader is that there is a new creation afoot. Folk familiar with John's work, however, will know that for all the wooziness of the text there is a contentious seam running throughout which has led some scholars to characterise the Gospel as an extended law suit,<sup>xi</sup> almost a TV style courtroom drama, a sort of cosmic trial of truth concerned with 'what it is to be human, what it is to be free' in which you are invited to be a witness. John the Baptist appears first (1.6) but then at Cana you are privy to the nameless servants *secretly* knowing a symbolic miracle of new life has happened (2:9). Subsequently, a Samaritan woman of serial partners in romantic circumstances becomes a witness (4.39), then a lame man (5.15) and by the time a blind man is seeing the truth that Jesus is offering more clearly than his religious betters you are meant to be figuratively murmuring at the TV (9.33). After Lazarus is raised (11.44) and Pontius Pilate is asking Jesus 'What is truth?' (18.38) you are meant to be shouting at the screen 'You idiot, you are looking at It!' The Resurrection, which has John presenting Jesus as the New Adam, the gardener in a garden, with a *woman* redoubles the sign that **on?** the Eighth Day, a New Creation has dawned (20.11-18). Thus understood, this Christology proposes that humanity has been saved – nay liberated - from *itself*. And if it is written as a drama, why don't we teach it as a drama?



## CONCLUSION

The task of Catholic RE, and I would say the core task of St Mary's University, is to keep this dangerous, liberating memory of Jesus alive. For someone like myself, that is because I believe that it is more than a memory, but a living power at work among us. But for those who disagree with that view, I would suggest that even as a teacher of wisdom or as an exemplar of sacrifice, the religious education proposed by Christ is sufficiently paradoxical, counter-intuitive, morally demanding and personally liberating to merit the deepest consideration by anyone interested in the nature and destiny of humanity.

This same Christ challenges those of us in the Catholic sector to cross the barricades wherever possible and lend support to those who are in less propitious RE

circumstances. It is, I think, a matter of great significance that the recent symposium on the new Curriculum Directory chaired by Philip Robinson of the CES had a number of observers and participants from outside the Catholic RE sector. In reciprocal fashion, I hope it will be recognised that in saying 'no' to some of the suggestions currently being made by colleagues across the RE world, we are saying 'no' to what could become a modern form of *cuius regio eius religio* - the sixteenth century idea that the state should determine what the religion of its people should be. I think that is wrong. I do not think it is liberal and I think it denies the richness of what it means to be human. Indeed, the determination of Catholics to preserve their freedom to teach RE is actually an essential defence of liberty, which is surely one of the values we all share, whether we call it 'British' or not.

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<sup>i</sup> See Towey (2018) 'Clarke Woodhead on Religious Education: The Good, the Bad and the Risky' in *Pastoral Review* 14(5), 45-50.

<sup>ii</sup> Textbook writer and Head of RE at St. Bonaventure's Plaistow, Andy blogs regularly at <https://sites.google.com/view/andyLewisre/blog>

<sup>iii</sup> Conroy J (2016) 'Religious Education and religious literacy – a professional aspiration?' *British Journal of Religious Education*, 38(2):163-176,

<sup>iv</sup> Flew, A., with Varghese, R., (2007) *There is a God How the world's most notorious atheist changed his mind*. New York: HarperOne.

<sup>v</sup> The definition of a cynic from Act 3 of Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan*, written in 1892.

<sup>vi</sup> Sheldrake, R., (2011) *The Sense of Being stared at and other unexplained powers of the human mind*. Randolph VT: Park Street Press

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Commission on Religious Education (2017) *Interim Report* with (2018) *Final Report* both available at <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/>

<sup>viii</sup> May, L. (2005) 'Shakespeare for the soul' *Pastoral Review* Vol.1(5) 22-5.

<sup>ix</sup> See e.g. Towey, A., & Robinson, P., (eds.) (2017) *The New GCSE Religious Studies Course for Catholic Schools: AQA – Component 1*. Chawton: Redemptorist

<sup>x</sup> Kristeva, J., (1982) *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (trans. L. Roudiez). New York: Columbia University Press, p.132

<sup>xi</sup> E.g. Bekken, P.J., (2014) *The lawsuit motif in John's gospel from new perspectives: Jesus Christ, crucified criminal and emperor of the world*. Leiden: Brill.