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CONTEMPORARY ISSUES FACING CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

ESSAY TITLE: Faith and character formation in Catholic schools: A view from England & Wales

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INTRODUCTION

In discussing faith and character formation in Catholic schools, we are surely discussing the teleology of the whole enterprise at whatever level we might be involved and in whichever country we might be living. Built upon the vision and generosity of our forebears – and if the collective endeavour of so many is not to be in vain – then Catholic schools should manifest their efficacy in this regard. Yet calibrating what might be termed success is not so easy as it might seem. Traditionally understood, there are two aspects to our understanding of faith: *fides quae* – the content of faith *which* we believe; and *fides qua* – the act of faith *by which* we believe. It can be perfectly possible, therefore, for someone to demonstrate impressive knowledge of the faith but for whatever reason, they cannot give assent to the truths contained therein. Moreover, as evidenced by the Synoptic Gospels (cf. Mt 4:1-11, Mk 5:1-20, Lk 4:34-35), Satan and his minions had excellent biblical knowledge and far better Christology than the disciples, but we would hardly want them in charge of character formation in our schools! Withal, religious education, character formation, and faith transmission are lively areas of current debate in the England context, and in what follows I hope to indicate why salient aspects thereof may be of more general and international interest.

Religious Education – Dogma v Debate?

Although there are over 150 Catholic independent fee-paying schools, the context within which some 2,000 Catholic state schools operate in England and Wales is distinctly privileged whereby almost all their capital and the entirety of their operating costs are met by Her Majesty's Government.¹ At the heart of these privileged arrangements, and perforce at the heart of the Catholic school, is Religious Education (RE) whereby there are statutory protections granting bishops, individually and collectively, the right to set their own syllabus. Informed by the words of John Paul II (1992), Religious Education in England is seen by the Bishops' Conference as 'the core of the core' curriculum, but of late it seems that there is increasingly a price to be paid for being intimately entangled with the State.² Education is an area of government which has been susceptible to pedagogical fashion, party political contestation, and policy changes for decades. While fully independent schools can, in theory, shape their curricula and their qualification matrices as they see fit, RE in state schools has of late been dominated by curriculum reforms and potentially far-reaching reports (see Towey 2016 and 2018).³

Associated with former education secretary, Michael Gove, and his successors, reforms implemented by the Government for all post-16 and post-18 curricula examinations from 2016 onwards unapologetically emphasized more intellectual rigour.⁴ In parallel, rather than identical to U.S. studies (cf. A. Lareau 2015⁵), their reasoning was underpinned by research which suggests the way in which education facilitates social mobility is by equipping pupils

¹Catholic Education Service (CES), *CES Census 2019*, (<https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/ces-census>). Accounting for some 10% of State provision at both primary [ages 5-11] and secondary level [ages 11-16 or 18]), the schools have historically had unfettered independence to set admissions criteria for pupils which favour baptized and practising Catholics while senior leadership posts in schools may be reserved for the same. While such arrangements are criticized by an increasingly vocal humanist lobby, Catholic state schools continue to repay the faith of Government by consistently returning superior results to those achieved by Anglican schools (comprising 26% primary, 6% secondary) and non-religiously aligned Community schools (63% primary, 81% secondary). Just as one example, my own local area authority, which covers parts of Southwest London and Surrey, recently published its league tables for the borough revealing that the top five state schools in the area were all Catholic: see C. MILLER, D. COMEAU, "The 10 best secondary schools in Surrey according to the Real Schools Guide 2019," *SurreyLive*, 11 July 2019, (<https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/surrey-news/10-best-secondary-schools-surrey-16560166>). Small wonder that even Catholics who can afford to send their children to private schools may choose not to do so since the life chances of their children are equally well served by their local state-funded / faith-guided provision.

² CES, "Religious education in Catholic schools," Catholic Education Service, 2019 (<https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/schools/religious-education/item/1002967-about-religious-education-in-catholic-schools>).

³ A. TOWEY, "RE reform: Big questions for Catholic schools," *The Pastoral Review*, 12 / 5 – 2016, pp. 18-24; and A. TOWEY, "Clarke-Woodhead on Religious education: The good the bad and the risky," *The Pastoral Review*, 14 / 5 – 2018, pp. 45-50.

⁴ See N. MORGAN, "Written statement to Parliament: Qualifications and curriculum reform," *Gov.UK*, 16 July 2014, (<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/qualifications-and-curriculum-reform>).

⁵ A. LAREAU, "Cultural knowledge and social inequality," *American Sociological Review*, 80 / 1 – 2015, pp. 1–27.

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with an inventory of ‘powerful knowledge.’ Associated with theorists such as Michael Young, it has appealed to both the educational and economic instincts of the political right, since it proposes that success in all curriculum disciplines demands a core of essential knowledge which can be identified by subject experts.⁶ Regardless of social background, it is claimed that mastery of this ‘powerful knowledge’ equips students with the necessary versatility to adapt and succeed in the modern workplace environment.⁷ This socio-educational vision is the polar opposite of both ‘Fordism’ (which risks offering education without aspiration to those earmarked too readily for a life of manual monotony⁸) and heuristic pedagogies associated with the liberal left, which despite their idealism, can sometimes fail to rise beyond what Geoff Whitty long ago summarized as ‘having a chat.’⁹

In the Catholic RE context, this has led to a more content-based programme of studies rather than the ‘hot topics’ approach which was dominated by ethical discussion. In short: less morals more dogma, less Oprah, more orthodoxy. Yet while leading figures such as Cardinal Vincent Nichols, Archbishop of Westminster, have warmly welcomed the reform and commended the collaboration between Catholic universities and the Catholic Education Service,¹⁰ it has led to a certain amount of disquiet for at least two distinct reasons.

First, the increased doctrinal content has proved demanding both for pupils *and* for teachers. This is all the more acute for enthusiastic RE practitioners in Catholic schools who have generally entered *all* students for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) public examination at age-16, but are now finding that a significant proportion of low-prior attainers are struggling to meet the standards required. By dint of God-given psychological evolution, it stands to reason that teenagers will be more interested in ‘big questions’ rather than ‘big answers’ and that the hot topics of the day relating to sexuality, war, and issues of life and death will be more familiar than the creedal treasures of the Church which for many are not being experienced in the context of lived Catholic practice. As one teacher has remarked, ‘It’s the level of content, it’s the quantity of the content, it’s the accessibility of the content, and it’s the language of the content’ - in short, however much one esteems the doctrinal treasures of the Church, it seems possible to have too much of a good thing.¹¹

A second area of disquiet concerns the decision by the Government to insist that all students attempting the GCSE qualification *must* spend 25% of curriculum time studying a second religion. A somewhat unsubtle response to nefarious things happening in a tiny number of schools in one city (Towey & Robinson, 2018), some commentators have argued that the 2016 reform saw the first step towards politicians deciding the content of RE even in Catholic schools (Whittle, 2016). Taking matters further, a series of reports on Religious Education published in 2018 problematize and even pathologize Catholic RE by advocating its replacement with new supposedly ‘neutral’ syllabi composed by experts not attached to religious denominations.¹²

⁶ M. YOUNG, “The return to subjects: A sociological perspective on the UK Coalition government’s approach to the 14–19 curriculum,” *The Curriculum Journal* 22 / 2 – 2011, pp. 265-278.

⁷ J. MULLER, M. YOUNG, “Knowledge, power and powerful knowledge re-visited,” *The Curriculum Journal*, 30 / 2 – 2019, pp. 196-214.

⁸ See J. AVIS, “Post-Fordist illusions: Knowledge-based economies and transformation,” *Power and Education*, 5 / 1 – 2013, pp. 16-27.

⁹ See J. MORGAN, “Michael Young and the politics of the school curriculum,” *British Journal of Educational Studies* 63 / 1 - 2015, pp. 5-22.

¹⁰ V. NICHOLS, “Faith in education” in *Id.*, *Faith finding a voice*, Bloomsbury, London 2018, pp. 91-108.

¹¹ See P. MCGRAIL, A. TOWEY, “Partners in progress? An impact study of the 2016 religious education reforms in England,” *International Studies in Christianity and Education* (special issue: *Critical Christian intersections between higher education and schools*) – 2019, pp. 1-21.

¹² Here I am referring to: C. CLARKE, K. WOODHEAD, *New settlement revised: Religion and belief in schools*, Westminster Faith Debates, July 2018, (<http://faithdebates.org.uk/>); M. CLAYTON et al., “How to regulate faith schools,” *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy* 25 – 2018 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/2048-416X.2018.12005.x>); and COMMISSION ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION, *Final Report – Religion and worldviews: The way forward, a national plan for RE*, Religious Education Council of England and Wales, London 2018 (<https://www.religiouseducationcouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>). Of the latter, *I was part of the commission for two years. As an aside, all recommend a change of name, Clarke and Woodhead propose RBV – ‘Religion, Beliefs and Values,’ the Commission suggest RW – ‘Religion and Worldviews,’ and the Impact group opt for CREaM, an acronym for ‘Civic Religious Ethical and Moral Education;’ it could prove to be the first time in history that we have a case of Cream rising to the bottom.*

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The Director of the Catholic Education Service, Paul Barber, has remarked that suggesting stakeholders of faith not contribute to Religious Education curricula is analogous to excluding native speakers from contributing to Modern Foreign Language study. Indeed, it does seem astonishing that those inclined to oppose Catholic schooling in England would find a collective focus on an area of undisputed curriculum strength, and even more surprising that the kind of sociological approach to Religious Education being suggested has the distinct hue of the pedagogical past. If RE practitioners are united on one thing it is that their subject should have a credibility and status equal to any other, and the recent reforms have, at least, put the subject on a similar, modern, deliberately demanding pedagogical footing. That said, it has long been recognized that RE as an encounter with *fides quae* does not necessarily inculcate *fides qua*, whatever its level of academic rigour. In that light, it might be argued that it is mistaken to think of RE as the 'core of the core' since at least one other focus for Catholic education is on offer.

Character Formation - Comportment v Content?

Some twenty years ago, Robert Davis made the acerbic comment that the price that Catholic schools have paid for being wedded to educational trends and the 'inflections of the Enlightenment curriculum' involves 'a restriction of their Catholicity to those features of school life where secular society is prepared to permit the manifestation of Catholic ideas – mainly worship, ethos and Religious education.'¹³ On this reading, freighting RE with all the Catholic ambitions of the school is a mistake since it short-circuits pressing questions about what constitutes a Catholic curriculum in the first place. Although this is a question which extends far beyond the purview of the UK (cf. Olsen, 2010; Buhrman, 2011; Grace, 2013¹⁴), it was recently given lucid expression by Michael Merrick, a Catholic school leader in the Northwest of England.

Why shouldn't we say that by a particular age we expect children to know particular things – these specific prayers? These specific figures of the Old Testament? These specific parables? These specific artefacts? And also further in the curriculum: these specific historic events? These specific places? This specific sculpture? This specific score of music?¹⁵

Yet the tide seems set against such specificity and instead seems to be moving towards the fostering of genericized attitudes via subjects such as 'Citizenship' and the propagation of 'British Values'. These latter have been identified by Prime Minister David Cameron as 'democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.'¹⁶ Reminiscent of the Westphalian settlement of 1648 *cuius regio eius religio* – 'in a ruler's land the ruler's religion,' these values are designed as a corrective to societal religious antagonisms, which, since September 11th, it now seems to be supposed faith schools exacerbate rather than ameliorate.¹⁷

In such a sensitive religious context, it is perhaps no surprise that a different approach based on *character and virtues* has been gaining ground. Acutely aware of the shortcomings of Catholic curricula in the English context,¹⁸ the Founder of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at Birmingham University, James Arthur, is one of a number of protagonists looking to reframe the enterprise of education with the help of ancient wisdom.¹⁹ Arthur's team,

¹³ R. DAVIS, "Can there be a Catholic curriculum," in J. Conroy (ed.), *Catholic education: Inside out/ outside in*, Lindisarne Books, Dublin 1999, pp. 221-222.

¹⁴ G. OLSEN, "Christopher Dawson and the renewal of Catholic education," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 13 / 3 – 2010, pp. 14-35; W. BUHRMAN, "Globalization, learning outcomes and possibilities for theological education," *Religious Education* 106 / 1 – 2001, pp. 44-62; and G. GRACE, "Catholic social teaching should permeate the Catholic secondary school curriculum: An agenda for reform," *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 5 / 1 – 2013, pp. 99-109.

¹⁵ M. MERRICK, "The Catholic curriculum," **from** Conference at Thorneycroft Hall, Macclesfield: *Perennial truths in a time of change*, Macclesfield 2018; transcript accessible at (<https://michaelmerrick.me/author/mrmerrick/>).

¹⁶ See this list also in T. MAY, "Policy paper: Prevent strategy 2011," *Her Majesty's Government*, June 2011, (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/prevent-strategy-2011>).

¹⁷ L. GEARON, *On holy ground: The theory and practice of religious education*, Routledge, London 2014, pp. 111-131.

¹⁸ J. ARTHUR, "The de-Catholicising of the curriculum in English Catholic schools," *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 5 / 1 – 2013, pp. 83-98.

¹⁹ J. ARTHUR et al., *Character education in UK schools: Research report*, University of Birmingham, Birmingham 2015.

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which now numbers some thirty academics, subscribe to an unashamedly Aristotelian view of education rooted in the *Nicomachean Ethics* II.ii. 'We are engaging in the investigation, not in order to know what virtue is, but to become good people, since otherwise there would be nothing of benefit in it.'²⁰ Importantly, the Centre publishes both research papers and also resource and evaluation materials for use in the classroom. Linking this work with that of Christian Smith at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana, USA), well known development expert Thomas Lickona affirms the prioritization of virtue being proposed:

Once we understand that virtues are the foundation of both personal achievement and interpersonal relationships, the false dichotomy between academics and character education disappears. Character education isn't something else on educators' plates, it is the plate.²¹

Linked to popular revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics by Martha Nussbaum and many others over the last few decades, the attraction of finding a common aim in *eudaimonia* – 'human flourishing' - and the desirability of developing *phronesis* - 'wise choice' - in character development has a universal non-confessional appeal in the field of education. Yet in a Catholic context, it can be argued that at least since the time of Aquinas, such things have never been out of fashion. Leading theoreticians such as Alasdair MacIntyre reference the priority of virtue at the level of academic exchange.²² In the English context the Diocese of Leeds, under the aegis of Bishop Marcus Stock and his Education Director, Dr. Chris Devanney, has developed a character education approach at the level of the teacher and pupil in a way that might inform the patterning of Catholic education. In an earlier contribution to the debate, Bishop Stock had emphasized *values* in his influential *Christ at the Centre*.²³ In turning now to look at Virtue, he explains:

Gospel values, rooted in the Beatitudes, constitute the 'outcomes of the educational enterprise in every Catholic school'. These values have to be enacted, though, through the practice of their corresponding virtues. Growth in the virtues, through the pursuit of a human excellence which exemplifies Gospel values and which is embodied in the whole life of the school community, is the means of achieving those outcomes.²⁴

It is perhaps significant that this change in policy direction is rooted in Devanney's research which sounds both encouragement and warning, finding, on the one hand, a school's *ethos* 'is the single most significant element that supports character education,' but on the other that 'there was a tendency for Gospel values to be seen as platitudes which have no deliberate or significant impact on character.'²⁵ Although the project is at a nascent stage, it is my belief that by giving school leaders a philosophically and empirically robust rationale, it will allow them to be clearer about the universal aims of their educational community, and also why, in such a context, the question of faith and ultimate human destiny is of supreme importance. Yet for some it is the response to that very question of faith which is the true measure of Catholic education, a matter to which we now turn.

Faith Transmission – Caught or Taught?

As part of the executive summary on *Character Education in Catholic Schools*, Devanney mentions that character education in the vast majority of schools was found to be 'implicit – a matter of *character caught* – not explicit – *character taught*.'²⁶ This comment is worth noting since 'caught not taught' has helped many teachers explain why

²⁰ ARISTOTLE, *Nicomachean ethics* (ed. and trans. C. Reeve) Hackett, Indianapolis, IN 2014 (340BCE).

²¹ T. LICKONA, "Forward," in J. Arthur et al. (eds.), *Character education in UK schools: research report*, University of Birmingham, Birmingham 2015, p. 4.

²² A. MACINTYRE, *After virtue: A study in moral theory* (3rd ed.), Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 2007.

²³ M. STOCK, *Christ at the centre*, Catholic Truth Society, London 2013.

²⁴ C. DEVANNEY, *Character education in Catholic schools: Growing in the virtues and celebrating human flourishing in Catholic schools*, University of Birmingham, Birmingham 2018, p. 3 (<https://www.dioceseofleeds.org.uk/education/re-catholic-life/character-education/>).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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their often brilliant RE lessons do not lead to pupils practising the faith. This is problematic for the subject since faith formation is something that Catholic schools are encouraged to foster:

Religious education is broader than catechesis, but it must also include catechesis, *since a principal goal of the Catholic school must be to hand on the faith*. The Gospel is the living centre which must animate and shape all that is said and done in the school. In such an environment, the pupils will be able to find the true inspiration and freedom which alone will encourage them to set out wholeheartedly on the path of service of God and neighbour.²⁷

Yet here there is a genuine mismatch between aspiration and actuality. Generally speaking, pastors in England tend to be both supportive and approving of primary schools, which in England are usually geographically proximate and spiritually connected to the spiritual and community life of individual parishes. Attitudes are less universally positive when it comes to secondary / high schools which necessarily have several parishes forming the catchment area for their pupils. Partly, by dint of their size and educational intensity, they generally render pupils and teachers less accessible to participate in pastoral care and in parish initiatives. Even more neuralgic for local clergy, however, is 'adolescent metamorphosis' whereby pupils who may once have been shiny-eyed participants in parish liturgies become awkward, estranged, or even hostile to faith. Certainly, it is not unknown for practising Catholics teenagers to be bullied by their peers in Catholic schools in a context where personal piety can risk social death.

And the clergy may have a point. Káren North's recent research among young adults in England, *How to Disrupt the Limbo of Non-belonging*, finds that for all the great effort expended on education by the Catholic community in England, it is not perceived as being particularly significant by those who are now identifiable as practising young adults.²⁸ North divides ecclesial context for young adults into 'domestic', 'local', 'transitional,' and 'global,' finding the experience of local Church (parish and school) less significant for practising young adults than their experiences of retreats, pilgrimages, world youth days, et cetera. However, even this study emphasizes that the 'domestic church' - the role of family members – are perceived to be most important in terms of faith transmission. In the English context this is not only coherent with the Sacramental promises made at Baptism but also with the stated aim of Catholic Education Service, which exists precisely 'to assist' families in the task of faith formation, not to replace them.²⁹ At a more subtle level, however, the research does point to the success of mentoring. In matters of sacramental preparation and faith maturation of older pupils or young adults, 'one-to-one' engagement may be more effective than 'one-to-crowd' work.³⁰

In fairness to all schools, however, it is self-evident that there has been a particularly devastating interruption of faith transmission across the Western Church in recent times. Perhaps best articulated by Lieven Boeve,³¹ he has in turn offered a deliberate reimagining of the educational enterprise in his model of 'Dialogue' schools whereby:

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Address *Ad limina visit*, 26 March 1992 (http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1992/march/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19920326_gran-bretagna-ad-limina.html).

²⁸ K. NORTH, *Research among Catholic young adults in England and Wales: How to disrupt the limbo of non-belonging*, St. Mary's University, Twickenham 2018, (<https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/aquinas/about.aspx>).

²⁹ Catholic schools, with RE at their core, exist in order to 'help parents, priests and teachers to hand on the Deposit of Faith in its fullness to a new generation of young people so that they may come to understand the richness of the Catholic faith, and thereby be drawn into a deeper communion with Christ in his Church;' see CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES, *Religious education curriculum directory for Catholic schools and colleges in England and Wales* (2nd ed.), The Department of Catholic Education and Formation of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, London 2012, p. vii.

³⁰ NORTH 2018, p. 25.

³¹ L. BOEVE, *Theology at the crossroads of university, Church and society: Dialogue, difference and Catholic identity*, T & T Clark, London 2016.

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Rather than choosing between either catholic identity, or openness to otherness, the Catholic dialogue school envisages, through the dialogue with the other, to stir the (re)discovery of one's own identity, and to introduce once again the Christian voice within the conversation.³²

In this context, despite the rise of pupils increasingly identifying as 'nones' in relation to religion, the school does not truncate the questions of adolescence, rather it without apology allows pupils to explore Catholicism, but within a 'Boeve' matrix of inclusive *conversation* with others. Already well developed in the Belgian context, it is unsurprising that academics across the globe are monitoring the way in which such dialogue schools are evolving, because one thing is for sure: if Catholic education doesn't evolve, it will disappear.

Concluding Remarks:

To conclude, it might be appropriate to note that in England and Wales, more souls attend Catholic schools during the week than go to Catholic Churches on Sunday – and they spend much longer in them. While Catholic education is not an end in itself, the sacred opportunity it provides to 'Come and See,' to invite pupils *and* parents to encounter Christ, is of inestimable value. At this point, probably the worst thing professional educators can do is to set up false oppositions between essential priorities. Woven properly, RE, character education, and faith transmission are all key strands forming a triple cord (Eccles 4:12), which might help us grapple with the God-given energies of adolescence. Hence to those who would say that 'RE is more than just an academic subject,' it is worth repeating the reply of the National Adviser, Philip Robinson: 'Yes. But it is not *less* than that!'³³ A renewal of taught theology - essential for the very concept of a Dialogue school - can go hand in hand with a renewal of interest in character education which likewise is congruent with providing the kind of liminal experiences and mentoring which can facilitate transformation of the heart and mind in God. The Kingdom is more about vocation than location. Wherever we are privileged to work in Catholic education, may it be at the service of human flourishing imbued with the Spirit of Christ.

³² L. BOEVE, "Faith in dialogue: the Christian voice in the Catholic dialogue school," *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 11 / 1 – 2019, pp. 37-50.

³³ Symposium on the Religious Education Curriculum Directory. St.Katherine's Limehouse, January 2019.