

McGrail Towey, Autumn 2020

Reconciling Catholic Responses to Religious Education Reform in England – Empirical & Analytical Reflections

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ABSTRACT

Recent policy reforms regarding Religious Education in England and Wales have provoked a variety of reactions among faith communities, ecclesial stakeholders, academics, practitioners, senior leaders and students themselves. In this article we assess the situation in the Catholic context using empirical and analytical tools which shed light on the nature of the subject in a manner relevant to the non-faith sector and internationally. We demonstrate that vectors of reform have drawn attention to key pedagogical *aporia* in Religious Education such as ‘academic accessibility v academic rigour’, ‘confessional truth v critical doubt’, ‘exclusivity v inclusivity’ and ‘information v formation.’ Although these risk fomenting partisan binaries at an important time in the evolution of the subject, we contend that such tensions actually underpin the discipline, helping to articulate both its peculiarly holistic ambition and its transformative possibilities. Thus understood, Religious Education becomes a spacious place, deliberately mapped by co-ordinates of paradox.

Keywords: *Religious Education, Catholic schools, Examination Reform, Pedagogy, Paradox.*

Introduction

As we have outlined in detail elsewhere, since 2014, a substantial proportion of our research engagement has been in Religious Education (RE), working at the interface between government, examination boards, ecclesial stakeholders, subject practitioners and students in the classroom (McGrail & Towey, 2019). Schools in England and Wales retain a statutory commitment to RE impacting upon the classroom experience of some nine million students, a commitment enjoying particular endorsement in the Catholic sector which allocates 10% of curriculum time to the subject. Government involvement in school RE may seem anomalous to readers overseas, given Britain’s reputation as a significantly secularized country, but such involvement is not without consequences. Recent Department for Education (DfE) reforms to public examinations in the subject have elicited contrasting responses among theoreticians and practitioners and intensified reflection on the very nature of the subject. On the one hand, the emergence of novel methodological and policy proposals appear to risk an irrevocable ‘parting of the ways’ between those stakeholders holding fast to the centrality of faith traditions and those keen to recast the subject in an existential/ heuristic/self-realisation mould (cf. Clarke Woodhead 2018; Hall et al 2018; Clayton et al 2018). On the other, even among those strongly adhering to the Catholic tradition, the reforms have provoked varied reaction and reflection on the nature of the discipline (Cf. Bowie & Coles 2018; Towey & Robinson 2018; Whittle 2016).

To analyse what lies behind such responses, the current article marshals evidence from our empirical research, public engagement and policy proposals using predominantly theological analytics to map a way forward beyond the current contestations. The argument is organized around a series of *aporia* - ‘apparently intractable contradictions’ - which will be immediately recognizable to those familiar with the subject. We have identified these to be ‘academic accessibility v academic rigour’, ‘confessional truth v critical doubt’, ‘exclusivity v inclusivity’ and ‘information v formation’. Empirically it reviews the way that Government backed reforms have played out in the Catholic educational context using qualitative and quantitative data gathered from practitioners, students and

school leaders. These voices help frame the analysis which aims to move the discourse beyond sterile and limited binaries to a renewed consensus based on:

An approach which sees the tensions inherent to the discipline as natural to the seedbed of the subject;

A perspective that recognizes such tensions are not unique to RE but are possibly made more intense by its existential concerns;

A proposal that the sovereignty of paradox adverted to by Christian theology provides the epistemological key for re-purposing the subject.

Methodological Note

The findings presented in this article are largely drawn from the second phase of a lengthy research project into the implementation of the revised RE curricula carried out by the authors from 2017-2019. The research project grew directly from the authors' membership from 2015 of an interdisciplinary group comprising academics drawn from various Catholic Higher Education Institutions in England and Wales¹ and representatives of two key bodies in the world of Catholic RE. The first of these is the Catholic Education Service, the national agency of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales with responsibility for Catholic Schools. The second is the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors (NBRIA), which is the professional association of those responsible for overseeing religious education at diocesan level and for conducting the periodic inspection of the delivery of RE in schools. The group, known as CREDO ('Catholic Religious Education Opportunities'), performed a steering and consultative role across the lifetime of the project.

The first phase of the project was a qualitative investigation into the experience of schools and colleges in the lead-up to the examinations sat by the first cohorts of students to be taught under the new curricula. 18 schools and colleges across the country were drawn into this research, which was carried out during the first half of 2018 (for methodological details sensitive to insider-outsider research considerations and salient findings see McGrail & Towey 2019). A number of recurring themes emerged from the first phase and members of CREDO were concerned to learn whether or not these had persisted beyond the first examination cycle which took place in 2018. Accordingly, the authors undertook a second phase, using an online questionnaire as the investigative instrument. The topics for discussion were agreed with CREDO in the light of the first phase findings and of initial stakeholder analysis of the first cohort's examination results. A draft questionnaire was produced, and was externally reviewed both academically and by stakeholders before going live between February and March 2019 using the JISC Online survey platform. Prior ethical scrutiny was carried out by Liverpool Hope University, and approval received.²

NBRIA facilitated dissemination of the invitation to participate to subject leads in Catholic schools, and a total of 204 school practitioners completed the survey which constitutes some 15% of all subject specialists nationally drawn from over one third of the schools. Happily, the sample set neatly mirrored take-up of the GCSE across the three different Catholic GCSE pathways which has meant the results are an indicative response to the reform as a whole and not a reaction to a particular examination, curriculum or awarding body.³

Yet it was in synthesizing the responses that the authors noticed a persistent nuance typified as 'x good – however – y not so good' which has demanded further attention, since this pattern seems to point to tensions inherent in the nature of the subject itself which have been made clearer by the specifics of the reform under review. And because the readership of ISCE is essentially international, it has therefore seemed best for us to frame our findings as a series of *aporia* according to the

pattern we have identified, contextualizing them in the English milieu, but opening them up for application in different settings.

Academic Rigour v Accessibility?

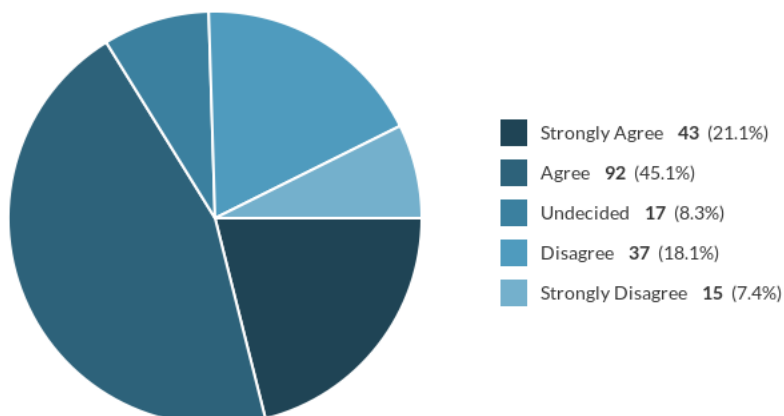
The first of the *aporia* to consider surrounding Religious Education in England is the perceived incompatibility between on the one hand the ambition to make the subject rigorous and credible as an academic discipline and on the other the ambition to make the subject accessible and relevant to young people today. Rehearsing findings laid out in more detail elsewhere both by the authors and others, hitherto there has been a perception that Religious Education has lacked scholarly rigour (cf. Chater and Erricker 2013, Myatt 2018, Towey 2016). Although rooted in good intentions, pedagogical concern to engage interest and find success pathways for low-prior attainers via classroom debate had led to a tectonic shift of the subject in the UK context away from specifically religious traditions towards ‘hot topics’ such as the Existence of God, Euthanasia, Nuclear Warfare etc. Examination Boards essentially aligned themselves accordingly with tests designed to elicit and reward personal opinion about such matters leading to a perception that RE was a ‘soft touch’ exemplifying a pedagogical reluctance to be directive, at worst a classroom variation on ‘having a chat’.⁴

In such a context, the reforms imposed by Government and endorsed by religious stakeholders have constituted a twofold challenge to RE practitioners. Embracing theories that link social mobility to ‘powerful knowledge’ (cf. Young 2010, Morgan 2018), the Department of Education radically altered the amount of subject content necessary for success in RE examinations at 16 and 18 and placed paramount importance on referencing sources such as sacred texts to underpin personal views (DfE 2014a). At the same time, by involving discrete faith communities in setting curricula, the subject content became more particular and specialized at a time when social trends imply the religious affiliation of young people is contrastingly becoming more vague and generalized.⁵

At one level, it might be thought that a drive towards higher attainment in RE would be *most* welcomed within the Catholic sector which has traditionally enjoyed higher results in state examinations at age 16 commensurate with the higher profile and resourcing allocated to the subject.⁶ Yet the research conducted by the authors in 2018 and 2019 found the drive towards higher standards had garnered a mixed response among school leaders, teachers and students none more so than in the area of academic rigour v academic accessibility.

Data Analysis

We can see from the graphic below that a two-thirds majority of respondents to the online survey indicated that academic rigour had been substantially raised by the 2016 revisions:



One of the reasons that classroom practitioners surveyed during the qualitative phase of the research welcomed the increased academic rigour of the revised curriculum was that it raised the credibility of the subject. This continued to be reflected in the online survey, with one teacher writing, 'the subject content and assessment criteria means that RE is equal in rigour and difficulty to any other subject.'⁷ The teachers reported that students, too, now perceived the subject to be difficult: 'Yes, student feedback is that it is one of the most challenging GCSEs they study.'⁸ However, even in recognizing this academic step change, there were concerns operative in two distinct directions. The first in terms of *engagement* with the subject – its increased demands being off-putting making the subject no longer enjoyable;⁹ the second in terms of the reduced degree to which students with lower abilities felt able to access the material. One teacher wrote:

My less able students struggle to gain marks. This can be extremely demoralising and makes my job as their teacher even harder. There is so much content to include, and yet the examination itself is so unforgiving. I think these new GCSEs really alienate students new to the language or who are lower ability. I realise this is probably the point of the GCSE reform anyway, but isn't it such a shame that some students just do not stand a chance, no matter how hard they try.¹⁰

For good or for ill, the data indicates this sentiment is widely shared. Some 70% being content regarding the achievement outcomes for high prior attainers, dropping to 40% for median prior attainers with only 20% satisfied and over 75% being dissatisfied with examination outcomes for low prior attainers.

Now it is surely axiomatic that *no one* involved in Religious Education is actually committed to lower academic standards and that equally *everyone* is committed to making difficult material, concepts and content as accessible as possible.¹¹ However, what possibly disturbs the attainment-accessibility polarity in RE is an often sub-conscious Christian egalitarianism which plays out in at least three ways:

- Traditionally, Catholic schools in England and Wales have entered *all* students for public examination in RE. In the light of the mixed reception of these reforms, we conclude that non-entry of a low prior attaining pupil to GCSE RE is 'felt' as an unjust denial of access in a way that non-entry to, for example, GCSE History is not.
- Although step changes in standards may be celebrated by academics and policy makers, they have meant that it is harder for low prior attainers to succeed. Spreading a sense of failure among the 'academic poor' and risking further marginalization of the already marginalized has not been an outcome universally welcomed by classroom practitioners.
- Despite more rigorous examinations and differentiation of results being a key component of recent reform, it can be argued that examination systems themselves celebrate a discrimination which Religious Education *by its nature* should resist – *a fortiori* if 'teaching the test' further distorts the more holistic learning outcomes of the subject.

On this reading of the evidence, there is a danger that however treasured, uncritical holistic ambitions for how RE should be taught risk becoming an obstacle to academic excellence. Hence while among students consulted in the qualitative phase there was only wry affection for a GCSE which could be passed 'by constant use of the Golden Rule'¹² it is equally clear that teachers remain more sensitive to the changes effected by the reform for the simple reason that they have experienced a 'previous' which their students had not.¹³

For our part, however, we would argue that the polarities of attainment and accessibility necessarily compass the space within which any subject discipline operates. If Chemistry were all about excitement, there would be more explosions and fewer equations. Every subject, even music has a necessary grammar which once mastered enables the student better to express themselves. Yet while Religious Education does not occupy a different disciplinary planet, it does seem to operate within a particularly sensitive climate. Mindful of the acute concerns of both practitioners and policy makers, it may be helpful for us to draw attention to two of the more subtle findings which emerged from our research.

First, and most straightforwardly, there was the provocative idea proposed by one head teacher that RE should come more in line with other subjects by deliberately offering an access route for Low Prior Attainers through well designed curricula which have a practical dimension.¹⁴ Could RE imagine pathways of community service that would mirror practical scientific qualifications which form part of the matrix of qualifications available in the British system like those available in e.g. Animal Care? This need not be seen as a *thoughtless* option, much more a *thoughtful* option connecting confessional insights with the common good along the lines of Cardijn's famous paradigm of 'See, judge, act.'¹⁵

Secondly, and more subtly, in the first, qualitative stage of the research, one of the pupil cohorts consulted was a group of Low Prior Attainers who happened to be studying Mark's Gospel. For reasons explained elsewhere, this choice option has become rare in Catholic schools and (counter intuitively) even rarer in non-Catholic schools.¹⁶ It may be of interest but unsurprising that their experience of engagement with the text was positive.¹⁷ After all, accessing religious truth through literature is as old as the Scriptures themselves – human beings are story-tellers and the Jesus Himself chose Parable as method.

The Gospels constitute deliberately involving literature, an inter-discourse which brings forth the born-again, where the 'spectator is invited to become the spec-actor' (Myers et al 1996, xiii). Nowhere is this more obvious than in the Gospel of John where the hearer/ reader is invited to become a *martyr* – a 'witness' - in what can be understood as an extended courtroom drama (Bekken 2014). From John the Baptist to the Cana steward (cf. 1:30 & 2:10), from Nicodemus to the Woman at the Well (cf. 1:40 & 4:20) we encounter figures who are the most unlikely evangelists. By the time a Man born Blind is seeing more clearly than the religious experts we are well on the way to the pivotal moment when Pilate is asking 'What is Truth?' when Truth is staring him in the face (Cf. 9:33 & 18:38). If it is written as dramatic literature, why not teach it thus and consider re-patterning assessment matrices accordingly?

Triangulating this finding, we would note the recent work of Catholic scholars such as Bob Bowie and Margaret Carswell who suggest that Hermeneutics needs to take centre stage in Religious Education.¹⁸ We would also make mention of the resounding success of the Anglican 'Understanding Christianity' curriculum designed by Stephen Pett and others so widely used in Community schools in England and Wales.¹⁹ Along with the even more familiar work of Chesterton, Tolkien, Lewis et al, they provide ample evidence that 'story still works'. We would therefore endorse recent indications that story will play a cohering role in the new Religious Education Directory being prepared on behalf of the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales since it at least offers the chance that access to the subject is not precluded *ab initio*.

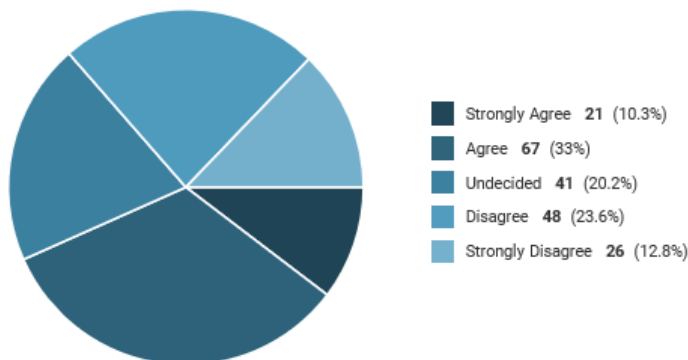
Confessional Truth v Critical Doubt

A second *aporia* in Religious Education emerging from the research responses is the perceived contradiction between credal propositions and critical approaches. Traditional Catholic scholarship would probably classify this as a variation on the perennial ‘faith and reason’ debate which resolves under the principle of universal truth. Analytically, there can be no contradiction between confessional propositions and rationality since both have their root in the First and One, God, the source of all Truth.

That said, as Aquinas himself acknowledged, things may not be so clear at the phenomenological, experiential and existential level. ‘Does God exist? Apparently not’ is the famous proposition at the start of the *Summa Theologiae*²⁰ but non-believing critics classically exemplified by Bertrand Russell have long called into question the objectivity of confessional philosophy since faith has already outranked rational enquiry (Russell 1946, 462). Now, given that Russell himself spent most of his *Principia Mathematica* which he co-wrote with Alfred North Whitehead proving that $1+1=2$, one might be inclined to dismiss his view (Whitehead & Russell, 1927). However, on the English scene at least, what has been well described as the ‘privileging of the agnostic position’ has carried with it an implicit assumption which deems belief to be irrational (See Towey 2018, 10-11).

If this were not problematic enough, an equally deep rooted perception has been the presumed incompatibility of science and religion. Despite abundant empirical evidence (*sic*) that faith is not inimical to scientific insight (cf. Copernicus [Solar system], Newton [Gravity], Faraday [Electromagnetics], Mendel [Genetics], LeMaître [Cosmology] and perhaps most relevant today - Jenner [Immunology]), the popular perception fostered by Richard Dawkins (2006) and Carlo Rovelli (2016) is otherwise, a misconception that until recently could be found in at least one examination board mark scheme which classified Catholic views on Genesis as literalist.²¹

Ostensibly the reforms of 2016 *prima facie* offered a way forward insofar as they realigned the subject more explicitly on religious foundations and as noted above, looked for greater dexterity in the use of sacred sources. Again, one might assume this would be universally welcome in a Catholic context but a concern that the *amount* of Catholicism that teachers are required to cover was crowding out time for discussion and critique had been present in the initial qualitative stage of our research (McGrail & Towey 2019, 291). This perceived lack of balance between confession and critique may be a factor in the responses to the question as to whether the reform has led to an enhanced understanding of Catholicism, 43% agreeing but fully one third disagreeing with a substantial 20% undecided:



While our interim findings had suggested that one could have ‘too much of a good thing’, that a substantial minority of teachers think understanding of Catholicism has actually diminished, demands scrutiny. Some sense of their unease is conveyed by the following comments:

- [We are] considering what 'religion' is in a narrower way than used to be the case. I am not sure that this has deepened the students overall engagement with faith. There is certainly an increased knowledge of things but I am not sure this has translated into understanding.
- It is too early to say yet, but [previously] . . . the students could see the relevance of what they were learning in their lives. The parents appreciated what we were teaching. Whilst this wasn't necessarily rigorous enough and could be taught with limited religious content, this meant the students engaged more.
- The reformed GCSE has made Catholicism seem more abstract and at times students struggle to see how it fits in with them personally. We are now covering less issues that directly relate to their lives.

culminating in

- Please reduce the A-Level to two papers and remove the necessity to study a religion. Most students do not want to study a religion that they have already studied, in even greater depth. They would be interested in a different one but it is unwise to teach a religion which has not been taught prior to A-Level. Most students are interested in Philosophy and Ethics because they are relevant and allow them to seek answers to the Big Questions.²²

To understand this ambivalence in the face of an increased ‘confessional component’ of the subject at GCSE and A-Level, it may help international readers to understand not just how far the focus of the subject had drifted from traditional religious foci but also why some scholars are arguing that philosophy should replace theology as the heart of the RE curriculum at least in senior school.

- a) Most students studying the popular A-Level ‘Religious Studies’ curriculum could do so entirely through the prism of Philosophy and Ethics with little reference to religious faith or practice. The *addition* of more explicitly religious material at both A-Level and GCSE has undoubtedly presented a challenge to classroom teachers both in terms of subject knowledge deficit and curriculum crowding.
- b) In terms of psychological and physical development, puberty/ teenage is a God-given period of growing independence from the mindset and minding of guardians as the child emerges into adulthood. It can be argued, therefore, that however challenging this may be to parents, pedagogues and priests, the subject should reflect this reality and equip students with properly analytical tools rather than risk shutting down criticality in favour of confessional content. (Cf. O’Shea 2018, 67-94)
- c) Faculties of Catholic learning have long recognized the key role of Philosophy as *ancilla theologiae* - the ‘handmaid’ which prepares scholars for the rigours of theology and which remains a compulsory feature of priestly education today. No wonder then, that Catholic educational theorists associated with this journal have argued that *more* not less emphasis on the teaching of Philosophy in our schools is necessary, even to the point of replacing any trace of a confessional curriculum (Cf. Carmody 2017, Walsh 2018, Whittle 2015).

If this is the situation within the Catholic context, it is paralleled further afield in the UK which is witnessing intense interest in a ‘disciplinary approach’ to RE. This proposes that the subject content of RE is best appraised through a series of discrete ‘lenses’, entailing the application of different

methodologies such as the philosophical and the sociological but certainly not just the theological (cf. Kueh 2018, Georgiou & Wright 2020). Yet while *per se* this approach is attractive and consonant in large part with Catholic pedagogy, when reduced to slogans that identify philosophy with thinking, sociology with observable phenomena and theology with belief, it tends to remove the notion of revelation as an epistemological category and risks reducing theology *merely* to a quest for meaning rather than a pursuit of truth. As Chesterton avers:

You cannot evade the issue of God. Whether you talk about pigs or the binomial theory, you are still talking about Him. Now if Christianity be a fragment of metaphysical nonsense invented by a few people, then of course, defending it will simply mean talking that metaphysical nonsense over and over. But if Christianity should happen to be true – then defending it may mean talking about anything and everything. Things can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is false. But nothing can be irrelevant to the proposition that Christianity is true²³

Aspiring to a ‘theory of everything’ is not just a religious quest, it unites Science and Philosophy and indeed all human enquiry as Newman famously outlined in *The Idea of a University* (1852) and Stephen Hawking happily endorsed in his bestselling *Brief History of Time* (1988). RE practitioners should not feel apologetic about its central place in the school curriculum on grounds of critique since RE is exactly concerned with discovering the ground of our being. What is perhaps needful, however, is a lively sense that even among those happy to profess the faith, in the classroom the propositions of doctrine must rightly come under scholarly scrutiny. In this the Jewish idea that ‘argument for the sake of heaven’ can be helpful here since it so directly links the quest for truth to the quest for God (Sacks 1990). The injunction to love God with all our mind comes from the Lord himself and that believers be ready to give reasons for the hope that they hold likewise sets faith and reason in a cohering rather than contradictory context (cf. Luke 10:27 & 1 Peter 3:15).

If we accept that a lazy agnosticism predicated on an absence of engagement with critical questions must be challenged in the classroom then so too lazy confessionism and lazy atheism must be put under scrutiny. However, it is equally true that the position on faith taken by an individual may be rooted in experiences that elude common description and which for the purposes of this discussion we might characterize as transcendent. While recent theorizing in RE seems to be screening out this aspect of experience which humans often categorize as an encounter with the divine, it seems to us that the subject must preserve this component as part of its unique selling point.²⁴ Where else can consideration of the holy, the miraculous, the angelic, the supernatural be taken seriously? And if Plato was happy to consider the phenomenon of ‘NDE’ (Near Death Experience) in the climactic discourses of the *The Republic*, why would the contemporary RE teacher want to exclude eschatology from the curriculum due to a pre-circumscribed notion of rationality?²⁵

In such a fashion, eliding our research with adolescent development, pedagogical preferences and the felt pressures of classroom time, we would think any future patterning of the subject would look to ring-fence scope for discussion and resist an overloading with content that precludes quizzical space. In the meantime we see merit in at least recasting the presentation of doctrinal positions in a manner that invites lively debate – contrasting symbolic, liberation, colonial and feminist readings of scripture. Finding ways of presenting Augustinian, Thomist and Scotist theological matrices as exciting, insightful, original and differently orthodox. Exploring iconography in all its divine inspiration and mundane manipulation, acknowledging in a critical context the power of art ‘to spread out the logic of speech to the most inaccessible folds of significance’ (Kristeva 1982, 132). Most of all, perhaps, to acknowledge in a critical context the sovereignty of paradox which is at the root of the created order, defies our simplistic binaries and is the essential grounding for any mind wishing to ponder a Virgin Birth, an incarnate Son, a salvific death and a Triune God.

'Exclusivity v inclusivity'

Yet while the paradoxes at the heart of Christianity are precious to its adherents, outside the faith-school sector an increased sensitivity to complexity and relevance has contributed to a current of opinion strongly critical of the 'religious turn' manifest in the recent reforms. It begins with the reasonable query as to whether one can meaningfully talk from 'official' standpoints when the views of affiliated individuals are so varied (Dinham and Shaw 2015). It continues through the ruminations of the Commission on RE as to whether a focus on religious traditions risks alienating 'nones' (the increasing numbers of non-believers)²⁶ and finds fullest expression in the criticism that confessional viewpoints restrict freedom.²⁷ While in theory, the current 'post-modern' tolerant climate confers validity on *any* standpoint, in practical terms religious views come under suspicion because absolute claims are ironically declared intolerable in the name of tolerance.

Given that RE aspires to be 'a safe place to discuss difference', the accusation of intolerance in an educational context has had ramifications for the methodology and teleology of the subject (cf. McKain 2018 & Chater 2020 71). An obvious solution pursued in the UK context has been to teach a number of different religions according to the taxonomy popularized by Ninian Smart while according pre-eminence to the Christian tradition.²⁸ This, however, has endured sustained criticism for its Westernized analytical matrices and false 'outsider' objectivity which in fact 'others' the views of different religious traditions by means of its implicitly superior perspective (cf. Hand 2007 and Sahajpal 2018). The response of Government in framing the 2016 reforms was to emphasize 'insider' views which were garnered from representative bodies of major religious traditions. Unsurprisingly this was welcomed by what might be termed the 'confessional stakeholders' who were finally able to challenge misrepresentations of their views and construct curricula mirroring more accurately their core beliefs (DfE 2014b).()

Despite this decisive policy shift, the vexed nature of this question perhaps inevitably led to moves in the opposite direction occasioning radical discussions among the RE community in England and Wales regarding what shape the subject should take in order to be *relevant* to unaffiliated individuals holding no religious belief. The proposed solutions have varied widely, including revisiting an idea to recast the subject as a non-religious wisdom endeavour called 'sophology' and another re-envisioning it as an heuristic curriculum across a matrix of Big Ideas (cf. Francis 2013 and Wintersgill 2017). The aforementioned Commission on RE has suggested renaming the subject 'Religion and Worldviews' in order to signal inclusion of non-faith perspectives *ab initio* though whether this will prove practical, teachable or examinable remains to be seen.²⁹

In part, the presenting problem when adopting an approach which is inclusive of all 'worldviews' is infinite complexity. For all that Smart's taxonomy is unfashionable, determining what might be considered a worldview worthy of the name in a classroom setting of unformed, uniformed and uninformed opinions about life the universe and everything risks rendering the category meaningless or employing ever more refined criteria in the name of inclusivity. Religious education practitioners may be both weary and wary of according curriculum time to traditions based on numbers of adherents, but if it is difficult to attribute significant phenomenological, cultural, intellectual, architectural, textual or ethical features concomitant with a worldview, it calls into question what exactly is under review and indeed what, if anything, can be assessed with any objectivity.

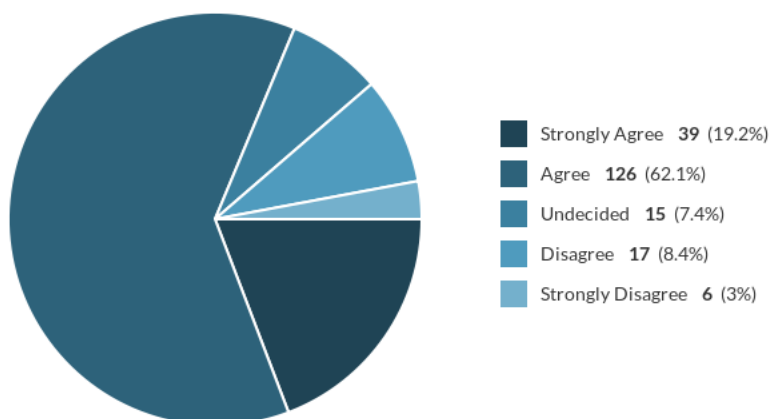
It seems to us, then, that for all their untidiness, the meta-narratives of enduring religious traditions must remain central to the subject. Hence, two current attitudes towards faith emerging from 'insider-outsider' debates seem important to avoid. The first tendency discernible in recent debate is

the pathologizing of *faith* itself as ‘a problem’ in RE based on it being concomitant with prejudice (e.g. Chater & Brine 2020). Historically, from the French Revolution onward, the shadow side of *laïcité* has often been freighted with hostility to those professing confessional stances which are caricatured as irrational and intolerant. In the modern West this is manifest, for example, in the desire to exclude stakeholder representatives from educational policy making in RE.³⁰ As Paul Barber, Director of the Catholic Education Service has remarked, this seems akin to excluding native speakers from discussions and decisions on how to speak in their mother tongue. Moreover, the way human beings learn would suggest that being articulate in the vocabulary and grammar of one religious tradition can and does lead to engagement with other worldviews just as linguists tend to find mastery of second and third languages increasingly easy (Towey 2018b).

The second is that a corollary to the concern for ‘nones’ in the curriculum is the risk of making the question of faith central to the classroom experience of RE. While this might appeal to everyone’s inner Luther, it would impoverish the discourse of the discipline immeasurably were ‘theism’ v ‘atheism’ to become its pivotal aspect. One of the odd side-effects of the 2016 GCSE reforms in England is that *non-religion* is the *only* standpoint that *every religion* has to study (McGrail & Towey 2019). The existential gravity of having such a fundamental option constantly at the forefront of a curriculum subject does not seem prudent and would hardly diminish the baleful propensity towards othering which bedevils social harmony and which is so resoundingly challenged by the Great Commandment and the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

On both counts, then, it is interesting to note in our findings an essentially unanimous contentment with the way both students and practitioners have engaged with the study of another religious tradition. This was one of the most controversial aspects of the reform since hitherto, study of a second religion had not formed a compulsory part of the examined syllabus in Catholic schools.

The Reform has led to a better understanding of Judaism/Islam:



Confirming sentiments expressed in the qualitative phase, the 2019 survey saw almost a third of respondents highlighting the second religion element as one of the most engaging components ‘students have thoroughly enjoyed learning about Judaism.’³¹ Taken together, these findings would seem to suggest that while church schools may have imbued in students a degree of Catholic familiarity and confessional *specificity*, this has neither fomented *exclusivity* still less *hostility* in relation to the study of different religious traditions. And on this count there may be grounds for mastering the language of fewer religions well rather than learning to say ‘hello’ in an attempt to give equal billing to a hundred different worldviews. Recast as ‘specificity v sympathy’, this particular *aporia*, seems readily transformed into opportunity for dialogue.³²

Information v Formation

The last *aporia* we will consider in this article can be cast across a spectrum of guises – ‘verity v virtue’, ‘content v comportment’, ‘thinking v doing’ and possibly even ‘faith v works’. For our purposes we are compassing this space fairly neutrally as ‘information v formation’ but it is hardly contentious to say that there is an implicit ‘change agency’ in the enterprise of ‘education’ (Latin – ‘to lead forth/ draw out’). Linking nurture with nature, Aquinas has it as a fundament of Natural Law (ST 1a2ae q.93 art.2) and we can observe that subject disciplines have a formative dimension such that just as the study of biology forms a biologist and history an historian, so the teleology of religious education can be the forming of a theologian.

But should it? Besides humanists objecting that ‘theologian’ is already a confessional term (Francis 2013), the local priest, parent or catechist might prefer the outcome of RE to be the formation of a saint. After all, according to Acts the original disciples of Jesus were followers of ‘The Way’ (Acts 9:1-2; 19:9; 19:23; 22:4,14,22) and one can see from the Letter of James a clear continuity with the Jewish hermeneutic of *halakah* (HLK – ‘to walk’). *Pace* St. Paul whom James appears to be correcting, it also calls to mind the critiques of Christ who was far more impressed with what people did rather than said (cf. James 2:18 & Matt 7:21-23).

Moreover, while Leonard May has convincingly argued that the ultimate religious question is ‘how do I love?’ (2005), it would be myopic to think that only persons of faith have this as their ultimate concern. This is surely an advantage in the heterodox RE classroom and the recent revival of ‘Virtue Ethics’ is one of a number of trends that highlight a certain self-actualization as a concern proper to the educational enterprise. Linked to the revival of Aristotelian categories over the last few decades, the attraction of finding a common aim of *eudaimonia* – ‘human flourishing’ and schooling students in *phronesis* ‘wise choice’ has a universal non-confessional appeal in the field of education. This principle of transformative learning which aims to *change* an individual for the better is not new, but rather underpins the pedagogical endeavours of the West since to paraphrase Aristotle, the aim of our education is not to be smart but to be good.³³

In a search for universality, a case can be made that ethics and religious education should be studied separately as Kate Christopher has argued recently.³⁴ One problem this approach would solve is the overloading of RE with the all the Christian aspirations of a school. As others have long argued, this is a mistake since it precludes important questions about what constitutes a Catholic curriculum in the first place, an issue which extends far beyond the purview of the UK (cf. Olsen, 2010; Buhrman, 2011; Grace, 2013).

However, a separation of the subject and re-classifying the ethical dimension under Philosophy or Citizenship not only risks defusing religious truths as catalysts for change, it also means on a very practical level that one has to find another place for ethics in a curriculum which is already crowded.³⁵ Moreover, it would seem self-defeating to remove or even reduce perhaps the most attractive aspect of the subject from the High School classroom. Certainly our research findings point to anxiety among teachers that over emphasis on information has been at the expense of formation. Whilst most (though not quite all) respondents agreed that RE was an academic subject, many voiced a sense that RE had a broader, developmental frame of reference:

It is a highly academic subject and is becoming just that with the content demands of the subject. However, it also goes further than this and shapes students into the adults they will become through exploring world issues, cultural, spiritual, morally and ethically. It allows students to understand their place and purpose in society

and our global community. In a society where communication is highly deepened on social media it brings people together as a community where greater understanding of support and love for one another is an integral part of human needs.³⁶

In part this involved a desire that RE should also assist students in developing their own spirituality:

There is a lot more complexity and subtlety going on in RE. Unlike other subjects that aim just to deliver a body of knowledge and help with understanding and examination and assessment of the knowledge and understanding RE is about helping students on a spiritual journey. To explore and tackle the bigger picture of the meaning and direction of life and ultimately to invite students to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of their own spirituality and even an invitation to encounter a deeper understanding and experience of God Himself. I do not think that this is the aim of any other subject. Also RE unlike most other subjects touches on and encounters the important and fundamental struggles that young people are encountering in their lives as they grapple with ultimate meaning and life.³⁷

Does this therefore open the way to a more deliberate rather than accidental inclusion of character formation/ self actualization into the syllabus for RE? Can the subject learn from James Arthur, who has long questioned whether current curricula can do what Catholic schools in the English context would like them to achieve? (See Arthur, 2013). Founder of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtue at Birmingham University, Arthur and his team of some thirty academics would happily recast the entire enterprise of education in a classical mould since 'Character education isn't something else on educator's plate – it is the plate.'³⁸

It is important to note that this 'character turn' can all too easily be denuded of Christian content by the generalized but vague use of the term 'Gospel values' in an educational context (Boeve 2016). The situation is further clouded in the UK where national efforts to prevent religious radicalization have led to the identification of a distinct set of 'British values' pinned at the entrance of every school.³⁹ Yet the astonishing rise of 'mindfulness' as an educational category has to be noted by a discipline which has spirituality and prayer as part of its subject content. Likewise the millions who access two-hour online lectures on Genesis interpreted through the eyes of the Jungian analyst, Jordan Petersen, are *possibly* witnesses to a constituency ignored by a subject loathe to trespass 'psych-ology' – 'soul studies'.⁴⁰

After all, in the longstanding Catholic tradition, following Aquinas and others, such things have never been out of fashion. Internationally, not only have figures such as Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) successfully profiled the category of virtue at the theoretical level, at the classroom level of teacher and pupil the centrality of virtue is key to the way Bishop Marcus Stock understands the task of teaching Gospel values:

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.⁴¹

Yet there is perhaps a more pressing point. We have noted above and elsewhere that among the aims behind recent Government reforms in England has rightly been a desire to remove the

impression that High School RE is a classroom version of a daytime TV show. Yet this is in the teeth of infiltration by a social media culture which has contributed to a sense that the whole of life is an extended debate classified by the clickbait binary of like v dislike. In 1964 Marshall McLuhan famously claimed mass-media had rendered the world a global village but by now we would suggest social media has rendered it something of a global bedroom. Given that casual browsing reveals nothing too important, nothing too trivial, nothing too intimate, nothing too public for perusal, it may be that retaining space in the RE classroom for moderated debate and maturation is actually more important than ever.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

Summary

Although Heraclitus observed that the only permanent thing is change, the dynamics of educational policy and pedagogical flux retain the power to surprise even experienced theorists and practitioners. Rehearsing our argument, Government reforms designed to increase the academic rigour of public examinations in High Schools have not only effected curriculum change in RE but also thoroughgoing reflection about the nature of the subject among academics and practitioners. In researching the outworking of the reform in the Catholic sector using contextual, empirical and theological analytics, recurring tensions/ binaries/ *aporie* have led us to choose a distinct taxonomy to present our findings.

Academic Rigour – Accessibility. The aim of the reform was to improve academic rigour and our findings suggest that whether we look at examiner reports, student interviews or practitioner surveys it has succeeded in this aim. Tougher exams which are allaying concerns about the credibility of RE have, however, proved challenging for Low prior attainers raising concerns that the ‘academic poor’ are being marginalized. While the authors note that specialists in every discipline want to foster participation in their subject and for it to be loved, the existential depth of a subject which touches so deeply on matters of identity and destiny exacerbates the issue of alienation, especially in a context where the subject is compulsory. At one level, we would make no attempt to resolve this *aporia* given that a different qualifications matrix which includes short courses and practice based options might be helpful and would mirror what happens in other subjects. At a deeper level, however, we would suggest that patterning the subject hermeneutically through a more biblically based/ literary-prism might prove beneficial and allow engagement at the imaginative level for all students. In this respect, the ‘road map’ laid out by *Dei Verbum* remains a sure guide (Towey 2009). Not only does it understand *revelation* in a relational, inter-personal manner, enfolding Christian history into a salvation narrative, it respects the very nature of human beings as first and foremost story-tellers navigating our lives in songlines.⁴²

Confessional -Critical. Although traditional Catholic intellectual formation has long linked theology, philosophy and science in a unified pursuit of truth, the contemporary *zeitgeist* is suffused with a view that faith precludes rationality. In this view RE risks being classified as catechesis and a curriculum rich in Catholic philosophy rather than Catholic theology would be preferable and more aligned to the critical rather than confessional propensities of the adolescent mind. While our empirical evidence demonstrates a degree of sympathy for this argument, it would surely signal a failure of the imagination to drain Catholic RE of its credal treasures which are demonstrably the fruit of both conviction and contestation. Excitement, disagreement, humour, art and architecture all help cohere a Catholic theological tradition that is happily confessional *and* critical in the manner that the greatest mysteries of physics and greatest mysteries of faith are characterized by paradox.

Exclusivity-inclusivity. The analysis noted that although the 2016 curriculum changes in England and Wales signalled a certain *liberté* from *laïcité* by its affirmation of ‘insider’ religious narratives

articulated by confessional stakeholders, this aspect of the reform has not been universally welcomed. The assumption that religious convictions are inevitably intolerant has traction on the English scene which, when set alongside a concern not to alienate ‘nones’, has the perverse consequence that in some quarters faith is now seen as a problem in RE. This view is soundly challenged by the experience of reform in Catholic schools which contrary to prior expectations has found study of a second religion in depth to be one of the most welcome features of the new curricula among teachers and students. Although this aspect of our findings merits further research, we may at least surmise that Catholic *specificity* in the curriculum does not engender *exclusivity* in religious attitudes still less *hostility*. If mastering the grammar of belief through the language of one religious tradition is a better grounding for community cohesion than attempting to learn superficial traits associated with a multiplicity of worldviews, then reframing this *aporia* in terms of specificity and dialogue would seem to be an obvious way forward.

Information v formation. It can be conceded that all subjects have formative dimension and while many taught disciplines have an inherently utilitarian nature (engineering produces engineers) matters are a little more complex in the polyvalent, inter-disciplinary, inter-personal world of RE which perhaps should be aiming to produce saints but is instead producing theologians! Some might indeed lament that the public funding and therefore accountability of faith schools does not permit RE in England and Wales to have a more pronounced discipleship character as might be possible in some international school contexts.⁴³ Yet somewhere between information and formation is the agency of inspiration and the subject would be wrong in our view not to participate in the growing popularity of mindfulness, spirituality and character education. As Philip Robinson has insightfully remarked, ‘RE is more than an academic subject but it is not less than one’⁴⁴ and it seems to us this quite naturally allows the discipline to have challenging intellectual content *and* rewarding personal side effects.

To conclude, unlike the periodic table of elements, RE is perhaps better imagined as a watered glade where practitioners and theorists need to resist the temptation to tidy up too much. The subject needs coherence, but it also needs to allow space for surprise and to be a soil in which students can grow. To that end, RE needs to soften its sense of exceptionalism, accept the tensions of its discipline as the space within which it operates and see in the paradox of Christ a paradigm for the subject which in the words of Newman is inclusive of all others, ‘indivisibly one, inexhaustibly various.’⁴⁵

¹In early discussions with the Department for Education these included Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, Heythrop College, Leeds Trinity University Liverpool Hope University, Newman University, Birmingham and St. Mary’s University, London.-

²External reviewers included education experts Dr. Joanne Pearce (University College London) and Dr. Ann Casson (Canterbury Christ Church University) as well as diocesan RE advisors.

³Catholic pathways for 14-16 year olds were offered by three of the four national awarding bodies, AQA, Edexcel and Eduqas – see reference list for details.

⁴Geoff Whitty quoted in Morgan 2015.

⁵See British Social Attitudes survey, 2019. Accessed 7th July, 2020. <https://www.natcen.ac.uk/news-media/press-releases/2019/july/a-britain-that-is-losing-its-religion,-has-faith-in-science-and-is-adopting-more-liberal-ideas-about-sex-and-relationships/>

⁶ E.g. in 2020 the top five schools in Surrey at GCSE were all Catholic, an astonishing metric given they number just 10% of the schools in the county. <https://www.getsurrey.co.uk/news/surrey-news/10-best-secondary-schools-surrey-16560166.amp>

⁷Respondent # 43554532

⁸Respondent # 43551004

⁹Respondent # 43772936

¹⁰Respondent # 43990882

¹¹Respondent # 43567678 As a counterpoint, it is noteworthy that a teacher in the qualitative phase questioned why technical language was regarded as such an obstacle in High School when her 8 year old was using the term transubstantiation at primary level. School 2Tb

¹²School 2S5

¹³Moreover, when combined with *realpolitik* on the part of school leaders who are themselves under pressure to maximise the number of 'pass' grades, this tension between attainment and accessibility has the potential to threaten hard won policy coherence between local diocesan and national ecclesial bodies.

¹⁴School 7P

¹⁵ School 1P

¹⁶See Towey and Robinson, 2018. The pattern of the reform has forced many schools to choose between the Bible or Ethics with the result that only about 10% of Catholic schools and 1% of other schools are opting for Scripture modules with AQA, the largest GCSE provider.

¹⁷School 3S4b. E.g. Question. 'Which has been the most interesting thing you have studied in the last 18 months?' Answer. 'Mark's Gospel and like how it would impact like on our lives now.'

¹⁸See for example 'A Message wrapped in Words' https://youtu.be/MOx_Dcnu04o accessed 7th July, 2020.

¹⁹Understanding Christianity 'used in over 4,500 schools across the country.' Accessed 7th July 2020 <https://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk>

²⁰ST 1a q.2 art.3 'Videtur quod Deus non sit'

²¹They were admittedly hectic times but the hermeneutical calumny regarding Genesis formed part of set of online model assessment answers which were taken down at the insistence of the author. Even more astonishingly, it was pointed out to another exam board that they had managed to design one third of an A-level in Christianity with no reference to Jesus, an oversight that was hastily rectified.

²²Respondents ## 4357131, 43871697, 4351004, 43560366 respectively

²³ Chesterton IDaily News, 12th December 1903 quoted in Paul Rowan (2017) *The Scraggy Evangelist*, .p.173.

²⁴ E.g. The category of transcendence is present in the interim report of the Commission on Religious Education (2017) and it is absent from the final publication (2018) – for details see Towey 2019.

²⁵It is noteworthy that in *The Republic*, Plato uses story to lay the foundations of his ethics in Book II (Myth of Gyges) epistemology in Book VII (Allegory of the Cave) and anthropology in Book X (Myth of Er).

²⁶The Commission on Religious Education was an independent body which met regularly over a period of two years 2016-18 chaired by the Dean of Westminster. Rev. John Hall with one of the authors, Towey, among its appointees. It was convened by the Religious Education Council, a body of individuals and stakeholder affiliates from faith traditions which has exercised a degree of oversight around the subject since the 1970s.

²⁷See Clayton et al, 2018.

²⁸See National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) outline of statutory obligations, accessed 7th July 2020 <https://www.natre.org.uk/about-re/legal-requirements/>

²⁹Despite these reservations, the Welsh Assembly are at the time of writing holding a consultation on adoption of the central tenets of the Commission's recommendations which can be accessed via <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/final-report-religion-and-worldviews-the-way-forward-a-national-plan-for-re/>

³⁰Hall et al 2018, *Final Report*, p.14 section 3b.

³¹Respondent # 44490888. Some 28% identified the second religion as the most or among the most engaging topics.

³²Cf. pioneering development in Belgium of the 'dialogue school' Boeve, 2016, 174-199.

³³ Aristotle *Ethics* II.ii.

³⁴Curriculum Directory Symposium, St. Katherine's, Limehouse, Jan 5th 2019.

³⁵ E.g. the 1990s saw Citizenship and Critical Thinking introduced but neither have flourished particularly well.

³⁶Respondent # 43612152

³⁷Respondent # 44030882

³⁸Thomas Lickona in Arthur 2015, p.4.

³⁹British values were coined by Prime Minister David Cameron as "democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect for and tolerance of those of different faiths and none." Designed to curb extremism, they call to mind for us the slogan *cuius regio eius religio* – 'in a ruler's land the ruler's religion' which *inter alia* formed part of the Treaty of Westphalia which ended Europe's religious wars.

⁴⁰See <http://jordanbpetersen.com>

⁴¹Stock in Devanney, 2018, p.3.

⁴²An allusion to Bruce Chatwin's travel memoir of the same name which examines how aboriginal humans found their way across the trackless outback.

⁴³ E.g. one might contrast the English with Australia see Rymarz 2017 & 2018.

⁴⁴ National Catholic RE Advisor

⁴⁵'The word 'God' is a Theology in itself, indivisibly one, inexhaustibly various, from the vastness and simplicity of its meaning.' *Idea of a University* II:3.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- A-level Advanced level. Public examinations usually taken by 18-19 year olds in England and Wales.
- AQA Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Manchester
- CES Catholic Education Service
- CORE Commission on RE
- CREDO Catholic Religious Education Development Opportunities
- DfE Department for Education
- Edexcel Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in London
- Eduqas Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Cardiff
- GCSE General Certificate of Secondary Education. Public examinations for 16 year olds in England & Wales.
- HEI Higher Education Institutions
- NBRIA National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors
- OCR Provider of GCSE and A-Level examinations based in Cambridge
- RE Religious Education

