Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be objective, critical, and pluralistic?

An investigation into the views of Catholic Religious Education advisers at the frontier of faith and culture.

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Abstract

This research explores the question of how, if at all, Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the legal test set by the European Court of Human Rights (2007) to be objective, critical, and pluralistic. In addition, it sought to explore how well-equipped the Catholic Church in England and Wales is to practically respond to the requirement to provide Religious Education that meets all three components of that legal test. In my literature review I explore the purpose of Religious Education in different kinds of schools and the philosophical and empirical analyses of each of the components of the legal test: objectivity, criticality, and plurality.

The research was carried out with 25 Catholic diocesan Religious Education advisers, both primary and secondary, who collectively belong to a professional and ecclesial association with a long history: the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers (NBRIA). The research methodology employed was interpretive, and I collected the data using semi-structured interviews. In analysing the transcripts, I made use of a qualitative research tool called reflexive thematic analysis, a method identified and described by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2019, 2017).

The research revealed that the advisers had different views on the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools and, consequently, different views on whether the subject could pass the objective, critical and pluralistic test. I also found that any successful defence of Religious Education in Catholic schools required a professional agility on behalf of the advisers to navigate the complexity of the landscape surrounding this contested curriculum space. Their ability to do this was constrained to some extent by the performativity pressures that accompany acting as a representative of the institutional Church and by the underinvestment in their role at both the regional and national levels. However, when the advisers had received good formation and had been allowed the space to respond creatively to the best thinking to be found in the wider community of Religious Education practice and research, as NBRIA had historically done, then they were able to respond to the challenge convincingly and with confidence.

A note on terminology

Church

The word 'church' carries several layers of meaning in ordinary English usage. In almost every case, when I use the word 'Church' I am speaking about the Catholic Church[1] when it is operating institutionally. Examples of this are when it functions as a legislator (such as when it issues directives to its schools through the office of the diocesan bishop), or a source of teaching for Catholics (such as when it promulgates teaching documents that have magisterial authority for Catholics), or when it functions as a civic or political agent (such as when it funds the opening or sustains the governance of a Catholic school). It may also be used in a looser sense to indicate the Catholic community, and their collective interests, in England and Wales.

Religious Education

My research is asking questions about the curriculum subject, which since at least 1998, and until very recently in England and Wales, has been referred to as 'Religious Education' (RE). The name of the subject has recently changed in Wales where it is now referred to as Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE). Equally, there are calls in England to change the name to 'Religion and Worldviews'. At the time of writing, the subject is still known as Religious Education in England and for the sake of convenience I will use the shorthand RE as the umbrella term for the subject throughout this thesis, even when speaking about RVE in Wales. This is not only a convenience but makes clear that we are still speaking about substantially the same subject, even when it is referred to by different names. Because of the nomenclature used in the Church's teaching documents, in Catholic schools the subject is always referred to as Religious Education, even in Wales, and will no doubt continue to be referred to as such even if the name is changed in England also.

It is also important to note that I am speaking about RE as a curriculum subject, a subject which all schools are statutorily required to provide in the UK. This is to be distinguished in the Catholic context from a broader understanding of 'Christian education' which would include moral formation and initiation into the liturgical and prayer traditions of the

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[1] For this author, the term Catholic Church refers to that institution that in England, especially in legal texts, is often referred to as the Roman Catholic Church (see, for example, The Education (School Inspection) (England) Regulations, 2005, para. 9(a)). The addition of the qualifier 'Roman' to 'Catholic' appears to be an English peculiarity and it is not the way the Catholic Church refers to itself in its teaching documents, nor the way in which this author frames his own identity when referring to himself as a Catholic.

Catholic faith, as well as the study of religion as a curriculum subject (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para. 2). I am not using the term Religious Education to refer to Christian education in this broader sense in this thesis, but rather to the narrower meaning the term takes when referring to the curriculum subject. The capitalisation of the two words and the use of the initialism (RE) are meant to indicate this more precise usage.

State-subsidised schools

In addition, my research was limited to an exploration of RE only in state-subsidised Catholic schools in England and Wales.

By 'state-subsidised', I mean those schools whose running costs are paid for by the state through general taxation. These are to be distinguished from those schools where the costs are covered through fees paid by parents. There are a small number of fee-paying Catholic schools in England and Wales[2] but this research does not deal with them because the problem the research was seeking to explore does not arise for them in the same way, since the curricula of fee-paying schools is entirely independent of the state in any case.

There are two kinds of state-subsidised Catholic school in England and Wales. The first are those which are maintained through the allocation of funds by the local authority out of an educational grant they receive from central government. Such schools are referred to as voluntary aided (VA) or maintained schools. The second are Catholic schools that have converted to become academies. Such schools receive a grant directly from central government to cover their running costs. These two types of school I refer to collectively as state-subsidised schools. I use the term 'state-subsidised' rather than 'state-funded' schools since the Church contributes towards the capital costs of maintained schools and academies and, in almost every case, owns the land and buildings that make the existence of a school in that location possible in the first place.

The Directory

Since 1996 the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have produced a curriculum document that is canonically normative for all Catholic schools in their jurisdiction. It has always functioned, more or less, like a National Curriculum document does in other school subjects. There have been three editions of this curriculum document (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, 2012, 2023) each bearing slightly different (and

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[2] There are over 2,100 Catholic schools in England and Wales, of which 99 are fee-paying independent schools.

increasingly longer) titles. For ease of reference, I refer to them all as the *Directory*, differentiating them from each other by reference to their year of publication, or the ordinal number of their edition.

Chapter 1: The research rationale and context

1.1 The impetus for the research

In state-subsidised Catholic schools in England and Wales, RE has enjoyed relative autonomy from the UK government and has been largely under the exclusive jurisdiction of the Catholic Church. This autonomy and exclusivity of jurisdiction is required by the law of the Church (Code of Canon Law 1983, can. 804) and is also currently protected by statute in UK law (HM Government 1998, schedule 19(4)).[3] In England and Wales, this jurisdiction is specifically the prerogative of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (CBCEW) and is administered by their agency the Catholic Education Service (CES). I am an officer of that organisation and was its RE adviser at the time this research was carried out.

The ability of the Catholic Church to maintain its autonomy from the state in relation to the RE it provides in state-subsidised schools accompanies another legal provision that grants parents in all schools the right to withdraw their children from RE lessons. The existence of state-subsidised schools that have a religious character, and a legal right to withdraw one's children from RE in any kind of school are both means of securing another more basic right which asserts that, in providing education for its citizens, a state must ensure that it respects the rights of parents and thereby guarantee an education which is in conformity with their religious and philosophical convictions (European Court of Human Rights 1952, Article 2; 2024). The provision of schools with a faith designation, such as Catholic schools, provides parents (in this case Catholic parents), with an education in conformity with their own religious convictions. The right of withdrawal provides an additional safeguard for parents since it provides them with a means of shielding their children from any part of education that is contrary to their own religious beliefs or convictions. It also gives the parents of non-Catholic children in Catholic schools, who may have had no choice about which school their children attend, a means of avoiding the specifically Catholic RE which may be contrary to their own religious beliefs and convictions. The two pieces of legislation are therefore mutually reinforcing. Schools with a religious character are free to teach an RE curriculum that is denominationally specific precisely because the right of withdrawal removes the compulsion on any particular child to receive it.

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[3] At the time of writing, this remains the case, however in November 2024, the newly elected UK government launched a curriculum and assessment review which may well alter this historical settlement.

However, the right of withdrawal is not an absolute right for parents under the European convention since children themselves have a right to an education, and the state also has a general interest in promoting cohesive societies in which democracy can function and the right of withdrawal must be balanced against 'the general intertest of society in avoiding the emergence of parallel societies based on separate philosophical convictions and the importance of integrating minorities into society' (European Court of Human Rights 2024, para. 71). In achieving this balance, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled that parents may only exercise the right of withdrawal if it can be demonstrated that a subject that a school requires all pupils to participate in is not 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (European Court of Human Rights 1976, para. 53). Therefore, when a state determines that a subject may no longer offer parents the right to withdraw, then those who provide education in that subject will need to be able to demonstrate that it passes the 'objective, critical, and pluralistic' (OCP) test. In this respect, as curriculum providers of that subject, they now become answerable to a higher body, such as the ECHR, who may be called upon to make a determination about the objectivity, criticality and pluralism of a school's curriculum offer, if a legal challenge is made.

It is with this background in mind that my first reason for selecting this area of research becomes clear. For the first time in UK law, one of the devolved nations (Wales), determined in 2020 that RE (or RVE as it is now called in Wales) would no longer be a subject from which parents could withdraw their children (Williams 2020). This includes from RE in Catholic schools. This was because the new curriculum for Wales would include RE (as RVE) which would be demonstrably 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (Senedd Cymru 2021b, sec. 2), thereby obviating the need for parents to exercise a right of withdrawal. Furthermore, although Catholic schools in Wales would still be able to follow the curriculum prescriptions laid down by their bishops, they would now have to have regard to[4] the mandatory RVE curriculum that pertained in other schools without a religious character (Senedd Cymru 2021a, schedule 1, paragraph 4(4)). The removal of the right of withdrawal, and the invocation of the OCP test to justify it, resulted in a (admittedly caveated) dilution of the Church's autonomy in relation to RE in Catholic schools in Wales.

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[4] The phrase 'have regard to' is a technical legal requirement which means that a particular piece of legislation or guidance (or in this case a curriculum prescription) must be taken into account when making decisions and that if a decision-maker departs from the advice given they must have clear reasons for doing so. It 'involves a greater degree of consideration than merely to "consult"...but plainly does not mean..."follow", or "slavishly obey"' (England and Wales High Court, 2015, para. 58).

Furthermore, the continued exemption of Catholic schools by the Senedd from the requirement to offer the same RVE curriculum as other schools rests upon the understanding that, while denominationally specific, RE in Catholic schools was, in fact, objective, critical, and pluralistic. If it were not, the right of withdrawal could not have been removed, as it has been, for all schools in Wales.

Indeed, during the CES's exchanges with the Welsh Government approaching the implementation of this new legislation, arguments were made that the authority granted to the new curriculum, at the expense of the authority of the bishops, was unnecessary since the RE that Catholic schools offered was already objective, critical, and pluralistic.[5] I wondered whether such a claim could be justified and recognised the ways in which this legislative shift in Wales may have future ramifications for Catholic schools in England. At the time the research was carried out, the then UK Conservative government was broadly supportive of schools with a religious character. However, it was not so clear that future administrations would not impose on Catholic schools in England, the same obligation the Senedd had imposed on them in Wales – that is, to demonstrate that RE in Catholic schools is objective, critical and pluralistic. While the CES's submission to the Welsh government was taken at face value and the objectivity, criticality and pluralism of Catholic RE recognised, it has never been challenged in a more exacting legal context. I wanted to find out whether RE in Catholic schools could pass a more thorough application of the OCP test because failure to do so could potentially mean the end of the bishop's exclusive jurisdiction over RE, and by extension pose an existential threat to the continued provision of state-subsidised Catholic schools in England and Wales.

The second reason for my interest in this research is a practical concomitant of the first. If the Catholic Church in England and Wales must ever demonstrate that its own Religious Education meets the demands of the OCP test, it will require of those called upon to respond, a depth of both intellectual insight and political shrewdness. Such a task would, in practice, fall to those professionals the Church employs to support and oversee the

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[5] In the CES's submission to the consultation on the proposed changes to the curriculum in Wales, it was asserted: 'All schools currently have the obligation under the Human Rights Act 1998 and case law to teach RE in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. Schools also have the freedom to teach RE as a rigorous academic subject at the heart of the curriculum, in a way that both it and the whole curriculum support the whole school's formation of pupils in values, virtues and ethics. Catholic schools already do all of these things, and do them well...Catholic schools offer a distinctive and coherent Catholic Religious Education...As required both by the teachings of the Church and by law, it is taught in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner.' (Catholic Education Service, 2020)

provision of Religious Education in its schools. This has historically been done by educational advisers, employed by each diocese, who carry out this work on behalf of their bishop. These advisers collectively belong to a professional and ecclesiological association called the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers (NBRIA). The existence of such a body goes back at least as far as the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in 1852 and probably predates that point (Ward 2021). Initially these advisers were exclusively clerics or members of religious congregations, but by the time I was made an RE adviser for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle in 2011, most members of NBRIA were lay people and former teachers of Religious Education.[6] The majority, even in 2011, had some level of theological formation (something which was a given when the advisers were all clerics). Since that time, I have witnessed the steady decline in membership of this professional body, as dioceses struggle to sustain education departments in the face of declining church attendance and an accompanying drop in funds. This has been exacerbated by the change to the way in which state-subsidised schools are funded. The emergence of large Catholic multi-academy trusts in many dioceses over the past ten years, and their ability to offer larger salaries than most dioceses can compete with, has in practice meant that the diocesan officer role, which for many Catholic professionals would historically have been seen as a worthy career aspiration, no longer appears so attractive. At the same time, and perhaps because of it, I was aware that the depth of theological formation of those who remained (myself included) was shallower than the generation of NBRIA advisers they succeeded. When existential threats arise for Catholic education, as the changes to legislation in Wales may foreshadow, the professional wing of the Church – NBRIA – will be required to respond, and I wondered how well-equipped it would be to make such a response.

The legislative change in Wales along with the coincident perceived decline in the influence and expertise of Catholic educational advisers, points to the emergence of a potential crisis for RE in Catholic schools in England and Wales. My sense that such a crisis was imminent provided the professional impetus for this research.

1.2 The legal context

European human rights legislation asserts that compulsory education provided by the state must always be 'objective, critical and pluralistic.'(European Court of Human Rights, 1976,

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[6] Of the 26 advisers I interviewed, only 2 were ordained clerics.

para. 53) This was first asserted in 1976[7] but has been reiterated often since, most notably for the purposes of this research in 2007, when in the case of *Folgerø and Others v Norway* (European Court of Human Rights, 2007), a number of non-religious parents argued that they ought to be allowed to withdraw their children from KLR, the Norwegian equivalent of Religious Education,[8] as it violated their right to an education in conformity with their own religious or philosophical convictions (European Convention of Human Rights, 1952, article 2). In its judgement on this case, the court reiterated the 1976 precedent when it cited:

> ...the State, in fulfilling the functions assumed by it in regard to education and teaching, must take care that information or knowledge included in the curriculum is conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner. The State is forbidden to pursue an aim of indoctrination that might be considered as not respecting parents' religious and philosophical convictions. That is the limit that must not be exceeded. (European Court of Human Rights, 2007, para. 84(h))

The court found, in this instance, that the Norwegian state had not taken sufficient care to ensure that the Religious Education curriculum was objective, critical and pluralistic and its refusal to allow the parents to withdraw their children from the subject violated their right to an education in conformity with their own convictions (European Court of Human Rights, 2007, para. 102). The responsibility of any state that comes under the jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) is therefore clear: it must either secure that Religious Education is taught objectively, critically and pluralistically, or it must allow parents to opt out of the provision.

It is unclear to what extent this requirement of European human right's law applies to Catholic schools in England. The majority of them are undoubtedly state schools,[9] but they are ones that have certain guaranteed legal freedoms, amongst which is complete

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[7] The phrase first appears in relation to a Danish case (European Court of Human Rights, 1976) concerning the right of Christian parents to withdraw their children from compulsory sex education. The European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) ruled that if the education provided was 'critical, objective and pluralistic' then their human rights were not violated by refusing their request for withdrawal. In this case the court ruled with the state and rejected the parents' claims that this violated their rights under Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention of Human Rights (European Court of Human Rights, 1952).

[8] KRL stands for *Kristendomskunnska med religions og livssynsorientering,* which is usually translated as *Christianity, Religion and Philosophy*. Since 1997 in Norway, this has been the name of the subject which is equivalent to what is currently called Religious Education in the UK (Rasmussen, 2000; Lied, 2009).

[9] As of September 2023, there were 2,169 Catholic schools and colleges in England and Wales, of which 99 (4.6%) were fee-paying independent schools.

autonomy over Religious Education, both in terms of its content and pedagogy. It would therefore seem that the requirement for Religious Education to be 'objective, critical and pluralistic' does not apply to English Catholic schools. This makes sense on the face of it, firstly because parents in England continue to have the right to withdraw from Religious Education and, even in European human rights law, it is only when this right is removed that the state must demonstrate the objectivity, criticality and pluralism of any subject which children are universally compelled to be taught. Equally, it is not immediately clear how an 'objective, critical and pluralistic' Religious Education could be compatible with the Catholic Church's publicly stated aim of Religious Education as personal formation in the Catholic faith. The latest document from the Vatican on Catholic schools reiterates what all documents on education since the Second Vatican Council have stated, which is that Religious Education aims 'to ensure that the baptised, gradually initiated into the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of faith' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022, para. 13).

Despite this lack of clarity, there are good reasons to ask whether Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the 'objective, critical and pluralistic' (OCP) test. The first reason for this is a pragmatic one: there may well come a time when future governments decide to remove the right of withdrawal in England, as the Welsh government already have in Wales (Senedd Cymru, 2020),[10] which would mean all state-subsidised schools would have to be able to pass the OCP test if they wanted to continue as publicly subsidised providers of education. Furthermore, while faith transmission is one of the purposes of Catholic education, it is not the only one. The Church recognises that Catholic schools exist within increasingly secular and plural spaces and that Catholic education 'is not only addressed to her children, but also to all peoples [to promote] the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022, para. 13). Whether or not the OCP test is a bar that Catholic schools will ever be legally compelled to attain, it seems reasonable to ask whether they could vault it nonetheless, since doing so is arguably integral to promoting cohesive societies and providing an education that is respectful of the rights of all. Therefore, my research sought to identify whether it is possible for Religious Education

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[10] The new Religious Education curriculum for Wales has been renamed Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE). It mandates the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in any curriculum and the parental right of withdrawal has been removed (Senedd Cymru, 2021b). Implementation and roll out of the new curriculum began in September 2022 and will be complete by September 2026 (Senedd Cymru, 2022a).

in Catholic schools to remain faithful to the mission and identity of those schools as Catholic schools and at the same time provide Religious Education that is objective, critical and pluralistic.

1.3 Scope of the research

There is considerable research into objectivity, criticality, and plurality, taken separately, in schools in general. None of this research appears to pertain to Catholic schools specifically. Furthermore, the only research that I could find that dealt with the three taken together, as components of a single legal test (Leigh, 2012; Temperman, 2021), were more focused on the legal technicalities of the language than on how it might play out in practice for schools. Therefore, there does not appear to be any research that looks into how, and to what extent, this requirement of European human rights law would impact on Catholic schools in England and Wales. This is one of the research gaps I propose to begin to address through this research.

My research was carried out with 25 Catholic diocesan Religious Education advisers. Most Catholic dioceses have an education department, and some of those officers have the responsibility to provide professional advice to the Religious Education teachers in Catholic schools under their jurisdiction. Historically, they have been a significant influence on both Religious Education and the inspection of Religious Education in both England and Wales, since the second half of the nineteenth century (Ward, 2021). I chose to carry out the research with this group since they are the ones with whom I am most involved through my own work as the Religious Education adviser to the Catholic Education Service (CES). While the advisers work closely with schools, the CES is further removed, working instead with those diocesan officers who actually implement the policies whose production the CES, as the education agency of the Catholic Bishops' conference of England and Wales, organises and oversees. My role is as the advisers' adviser. NBRIA as a body have been hugely influential on Catholic education in England and Wales, but there does not appear to be any empirical research into their activity. The limited amount of research there is appears to be a focus on their history, rather research into their current practice (Ward, 2016, 2021).

Identifying these two lacunae, my research was carried out with the NBRIA advisers since it is this group of professionals with whom I spend most of my working life and it is also these advisers who are actually at the sharp end of the questions I wish to explore. How would the advisers in different parts of the country and working in different phases of education

articulate the purpose of Religious Education? Given these purposes, do these local leaders of Religious Education believe it is possible for Religious Education in Catholic schools to pass the OCP test? Does it, in fact, already pass it? Either way, do they think it desirable that it should? These questions matter for this group, since were it ever to be the case that passing the OCP test became a requirement for Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales, it would be the NBRIA advisers, and those they advise, who would have to navigate fidelity to the Catholic mission while staying on the right side of the law. It is the NBRIA advisers who would be able to shed light on the question: if the successful passing of the OCP test became a legal prerequisite for Religious Education in Catholic schools, how might the structures of Catholic education practically respond?

1.4 Research questions

Therefore, my research consists of two principal questions, the first a theoretical question, the second a practical one:

1. Is it possible for Religious Education in Catholic schools to meet the legal test, demanded by human rights law, to be objective, critical and pluralistic?
2. How would religious advisers, and those they advise, practically respond, if at all, to the demands that passing the OCP test would make on Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales?

Connected to these two questions is a question of whether Catholic schools could remain faithful to their stated evangelising mission to make Christ known to all people (Stock, 2012), while passing the OCP test. This is a version of a question that Catholic schools have been facing ever since pupil populations began to be more diverse than the monolithic Catholic classrooms of the past. The question they now have to address is how to balance the demands of 'fidelity and openness' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997), reconciling the requirement to transmit the Catholic faith to future generations of pupils, while welcoming and serving all those in Catholic schools who are not of that faith. Therefore, in answering the first two questions, I also wanted to explore a third:

3. How, if at all, can Religious Education in Catholic schools maintain fidelity to the Catholic Church's educational mission, while responding to the needs of a plural and diverse pupil population?

Although all three questions are very broad in nature, the research is only focused on Catholic schools in England and Wales and has only been carried out at the adviser level and has not included teachers who work in those Catholic schools. Having said that,

almost all the diocesan advisers have, at some point, been religious educators in Catholic schools.

Chapter 2: Literature review

There is a wide array of literature dealing with different components of the test – that is, of RE that is objective, or critical, or pluralistic. The focus is usually on demonstrating the need for RE to be objective, critical, and pluralistic (see, for example, Kunzman, 2006; Skeie, 2006; Schneider, 2011; Parker, Freathy and Francis, 2012; Wright, 2014), which was not my primary interest with this research. I am not seeking to explore the arguments for the test, or for any of the particular components of it. In fact, in some respects, I am taking the value of an RE that is objective, critical and pluralistic as a given. The focus of my research is not whether there should be such a test, but on whether RE in Catholic schools can pass it. Therefore, the purpose of the literature review is to identify the range of meanings each of the terms can carry and is focused on those authors who provide interpretations that would prove most problematic for a Catholic understanding of the purpose of Religious Education. The authors I have selected represent, in most cases, those who explicitly argue that the Religious Education provided by Catholic schools is educationally indefensible or is equivalent to indoctrination. For each of these readings I then explore literature which provides a counterpoint to these more problematic interpretations. Each of the terms is taken in turn, but the review begins with an exploration of the different understandings of the purpose of Religious Education, which itself will be significant in determining whether RE, as understood by the different authors, is compatible with objectivity, criticality, and pluralism.

2.1 Different articulations of the purpose of Religious Education in schools

At the heart of the question about whether Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test is the identification of the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools. The question of the extent to which Religious Education in Catholic schools is susceptible to the charge of indoctrination arises precisely because there appears to be a presumption that the aims of Religious Education in Catholic schools differ from the aims of religious educators in other kinds of school. This presumption of a difference underpins many of the arguments of those opposed to the very existence of Catholic schools found in the literature. For example, Hand argues for the abolition of schools with a religious character precisely because of these distinctive aims:

> Whatever else may or may not be wrong with them, faith schools, insofar as they succeed in their religious mission, are indoctrinatory. And, since the religious mission of faith schools is precisely what distinguishes them from common schools, this is an argument not for the reform of faith schools, but for their abolition. (Hand, 2003, p. 99)

For Hand, it is inevitable that if schools with a religious character achieve the purposes they avowedly affirm, they will be engaged in the illegitimate indoctrination of their pupils. He is correct to identify that the aims of Religious Education differ in Catholic schools when compared to schools without a religious character. However, the charge that this makes such schools inevitably indoctrinatory remains an open question: indeed, one of the questions my research seeks to address is whether Religious Education in Catholic schools is susceptible to the charge of indoctrination. Exploring the purposes of Religious Education in different settings could constitute a research project it its own right. Nevertheless, it will be helpful to briefly explore this foundational question given how germane it is to answer the question of the extent to which Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test. Therefore, I will begin by briefly exploring the different articulations of the purpose of Religious Education in (i) schools without a religious character and (ii) Catholic schools. Even if the aims of Religious Education in these two different contexts are different, it would not necessarily be problematic in terms of the OCP test, unless the aims in each sort of school were contrary to each other. I will therefore address a third related question: (iii) are the understandings of the purpose of Religious Education in these two different kinds of school compatible or incompatible with each other?

(i) The purpose of Religious Education in schools without a religious character

While there are some institutionalised forms of secularism that would exclude Religious Education from state schools altogether, such as is the case in France (Franken, 2021), this is not the approach of most other European states for whom Religious Education is seen as a beneficial component of a liberal education, one of whose aims is to initiate pupils into full participation in civic life. In these states, learning about religion is viewed as a means of preparing future citizens for living peaceably with their neighbours in a religiously plural state. Thus, in his summary of the significance of the Folgerø judgement, Leigh (2012) asserts that 'some minimum of religious education is necessary to fulfil one commonly stated liberal goal for education – training for citizenship – since religion has played an important historical part in shaping present-day culture and is an important aspect of contemporary society' (Leigh, 2012, p. 197). According to Leigh's (2012) argument, learning about the religious commitments of others is necessary to understand the world in which we live and, in so doing, to counter religious prejudice; understanding the confessional other will contribute to the liberal, civic virtue of tolerance. The key to understanding this justification for the place of Religious Education on the curricula of state schools is the important work that the word 'about' is doing in the definition of the purpose of Religious Education as 'learning about religion.'

This understanding is central to the purpose of Religious Education as articulated in the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching About Religion and Belief in Public Schools* (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007). This document was produced by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR), an institute of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), an inter-governmental organisation with 57 signatories from countries across the Northern hemisphere. The Toledo principles recognise that there is a wide range of ways in which Religious Education is provided in its participating states, but always with the primary purpose of learning *about* the religions and beliefs of the citizens who make up the membership of those participating states. The ODIHR defines the educational intent of Religious Education in the Toledo principles in contradistinction to one whose aims are confessional in character:

> …teaching about religions and beliefs is not devotionally and denominationally oriented. It strives for student awareness of religions and beliefs, but does not press for student acceptance of any of them; it sponsors study about religions and beliefs, not their practice; it may expose students to a diversity of religious and non-religious views, but does not impose any particular view; it educates about religions and beliefs without promoting or denigrating any of them; it informs students about various religions and beliefs, it does not seek to conform or convert students to any particular religion or belief. (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 21)

On this understanding of Religious Education, the overarching purpose is to learn *about* religions and beliefs with the aims of

> …understanding one another in our diverse societies… forming and developing self-understanding, including a deeper appreciation of one's own religion or belief…[opening] students' minds to questions of meaning and purpose and … critical ethical issues addressed by humankind throughout history [and promoting] respectful behaviour and [enhancing] social cohesion. (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 19)

Given that this statement of the purpose of Religious Education is explicitly contrary to what the document describes as one which is 'devotionally and denominationally oriented' (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 19), one would expect a Catholic definition of the purpose of Religious Education to be at odds with this liberal definition. Is it?

(ii) The purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools

At first glance, the Catholic Church's own definitions of the purpose of Catholic schools and of the Religious Education that is provided within them is something other than the 'learning *about* religions and beliefs' definition offered by the ODIHR. In its most authoritative modern

statement about education, *Gravissimum Educationis* (Pope Paul VI, 1965), the Catholic Church teaches that the purpose of an education that is distinctively Christian is threefold:

> A Christian education…has as its principal purpose this goal: that the baptized, while they are gradually introduced to the knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become ever more aware of the gift of Faith they have received, and that they learn in addition how to worship God the Father in spirit and truth especially in liturgical action, and be conformed in their personal lives according to the new man created in justice and holiness of truth. (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para. 2)

In this enunciation of the purpose of Catholic schools, the intention is explicitly the formation in the Catholic faith of pupils who belong to that faith. The school aims to ensure that Catholic pupils understand their faith, are able to participate in its worship, and live according to its moral precepts.

This threefold expression of the purpose of Catholic schools is reiterated in the English and Welsh context by Hanvey (2005), who states that one of the distinctive purposes of Catholic schools is the transmission of the Catholic faith to future generations of Catholics:

> This [transmission] has several aspects: (a) the content of faith, both cognitive and conceptual; (b) the experience of faith – the life of the community lived in liturgy and prayer…(c) acts of faith – these are the deeds of compassion, generosity and sacrifice that nourish faith, incarnate it, build up the community and are a service to others. All three are integral and together they constitute the transmission of faith in a coherent, narrative form. When they are present, they mark the transition of each member to becoming a 'transmitter' of faith, that is, entering the tradition. (Hanvey, 2005, pp. 59–60)

In his summary of what is necessary for the successful transmission of faith, Hanvey repeats the same threefold goals identified in *Gravissimum Educationis*. Faith formation requires that a school form its pupils in the three discreet aspects of transmission: knowledge, worship and life. The role of Religious Education within this matrix is to contribute to the first of these three: to the increase in understanding of the content of the Catholic faith 'both cognitive and conceptual' (Hanvey, 2005, p. 59).

This understanding of the role of Religious Education within Catholic schools has been most recently underlined by the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales in the 2023 edition of the *Directory* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023), the document in which the Catholic bishops exercise their canonical rights in relation to setting the general norms for Religious Education in Catholic schools (Code of Canon Law, can. 804). In this document, the

primary goal of a Catholic school is to participate in the educational mission of the Church 'to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 9). And if a Catholic school is a self-proclaimed faith community, then 'religious education is where that faith seeks understanding' (Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 13).

Such an understanding of the purpose of Catholic schools and the Religious Education they offer, is precisely what is most usually described as a confessional approach to the subject, where the role of Religious Education 'has the official objective of instilling or developing religious beliefs in the pupil' (Leigh, 2012, p. 193). Such an understanding fits the definition of confessional Religious Education as articulated by Franken (2021), who identifies its distinctive character as one which attempts to socialise pupils into a particular faith tradition. Hanvey's language of faith transmission (Hanvey, 2005), and the comprehensive nature of how this transmission occurs, appears to fit neatly with Franken's (2017, 2021) understanding of what it means to socialise pupils into a tradition, which for him, is the defining characteristic of confessional Religious Education.

(iii) Are the liberal and Catholic aims of Religious Education compatible?

If this characterisation of the liberal and Catholic aims of Religious Education is accurate, then it would appear that the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools is at odds with that outlined by the OSCE/ODIHR (2007) as the kind that ought to be promoted in liberal democracies. Indeed, there are those who would argue that any education that has a faith formative intention is not education at all:

> …to attempt to formally educate someone with the explicit goal or intention of them personally adopting religious beliefs, is actually a failure to properly educate someone. It is fundamentally catechesis or nurturing faith rather than a properly educational activity. A defining characteristic of genuine education is that it ought not to seek to make children conform to certain prescribed beliefs, in particular religious ones.
> (Whittle, 2021, pp. 405–406)

If Whittle is correct about this, it would have implications for Catholic education in general and not just for Religious Education. Whittle's position does not appear to accord with the view held by the Catholic Church itself in its articulations of the purpose of Catholic schools and the Religious Education that happens in them. Nevertheless, even if faith transmission is properly educational, it would also appear at odds with what Leigh identifies as the kind of Religious Education that in fact happens across most public schools in European states, which 'have abandoned a confessional approach to religious education in recent decades' (Leigh, 2012, p.

193), and which Franken refers to as 'deconfessionalised' Religious Education (Franken, 2017, p. 419). Is the Religious Education in Catholic schools, the kind Franken describes as redundant and Whittle as objectionable, which has retained this faith formative element, compatible with the liberal aims of education already outlined.

At this point, it will help to expand on a distinction that Whittle (above) relies on when he distinguishes between what he calls 'genuine education' and the kind of activity he calls 'catechesis' which seeks 'to make children conform to certain prescribed beliefs, in particular religious ones' (Whittle, 2021, p. 406), which he rejects as an illegitimate aim of education. Whether it is a legitimate aim is part of the exploration of objectivity that I will take up in the next section of this chapter, but the analysis will be aided by clarifying the meaning of three key terms which the Church frequently uses in its documents on education and schools: education, catechesis and evangelisation. All three, in the Church's understanding are forms of teaching, but each has its own specific domain and purpose.

In the Church's understanding, education is something that Catholic schools offer to all people, and it does not presume that those being educated share the Catholic faith of those providing the education. Education, offered to all, seeks an increase in knowledge, a deepening of understanding, and the formation of character across all areas of the school curriculum. Specifically, in the Church's understanding, Religious Education is 'different from, and complementary to, catechesis, as it is school education that does not require the assent of faith but conveys knowledge on the identity of Christianity and Christian life' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2009, para. 18). Education, specifically Religious Education, is focused on 'learning about' religion, an emphasis that is reinforced in the language shift between the two editions of the Church's directories on catechesis published as the *General Directory for Catechesis* in 1997 (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) and as the *Directory for Catechesis* in 2020 (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020). In both directories the distinction between education and catechesis is made, but in the earlier version of the directory the distinction is between catechesis and 'religious instruction':

> The relationship between religious instruction in schools and catechesis is one of distinction and complementarity: there is an absolute necessity to distinguish clearly between religious instruction and catechesis. (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, p. 73)

The equivalent passage in the latest edition of the directory uses a different language. Here the distinction is between catechesis and 'the study of the Catholic religion':

> The teaching of the Catholic religion has undergone substantial changes over time. Its relationship with catechesis is one of distinction in complementarity. Where the

distinction is not clear, there is the danger that both may lose their identity. Catechesis promotes personal adherence to Christ and maturing of the Christian life, whilst school teaching gives the students knowledge about Christianity's identity and the Christian life. (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020, p. 187)

This shift to referring to the study of the Catholic religion, and its reiteration of the knowledge criterion for an activity to count as educational, referred to in the letter of the Congregation for Catholic Education (2009) cited above, further emphasises the fact that education, for the Church, is learning about the Catholic religion, and it does not presume or require the assent of faith:

The aim of catechesis, or handing on the Gospel message, is maturity: spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic; this happens most especially in a local Church community. The aim of the school however, is knowledge (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69).

Education in the broadest sense defined by the Church then deals only with those aspects of formation that would be common to all educational settings, where the 'task of the teacher is purely educational, oriented to the human maturation of the students' (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020, p. 189). Education, provided for all pupils in pursuit of their human maturation is, nevertheless, an integral part of what the Church means by catechesis.

As is probably already clear from the definition the Church gives of education, catechesis is teaching, but of a very specific sort: it is teaching about the nature and demands of faith for those who are already baptised members of the Church. Catechesis seeks to provide 'growth, at the level of knowledge and in life, to the seed of faith sown by the Holy Spirit with the initial proclamation and effectively transmitted by Baptism'(John Paul II, 1979, para. 20). Therefore, for those who are Catholics, the knowledge acquired through Religious Education will contribute to this growth in the faith, even though the teaching provided does not presume the assent of faith in those being taught:

It is evident, of course, that religious [education] cannot help but strengthen the faith of a believing student, just as catechesis cannot help but increase one's knowledge of the Christian message. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69)

Hence, while education and catechesis are distinct, they are related. The education that leads to an increase in knowledge for all pupils, whether Catholic or not, will contribute to the growth in faith of the Catholic pupils, because this increase in knowledge has deepened their understanding of the faith that constitutes their individual identity. It contributes not only to

their human maturation but also to their 'spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic' maturity. (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 69). This means that for Catholic students, the education provided by Catholic schools aims not only to increase their understanding of Catholicism, but also to help them develop life-long habits of prayer, to prepare them to participate in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, and to motivate them to be faithful disciples of Christ in their everyday lives. Such goals are obviously only appropriate for those pupils whose parents have chosen to send their children to a Catholic school for the purpose of assisting them in their own task of forming their children in the faith, since Catholic schools are the principal means by which the Church assists parents in 'fulfilling the function of education' (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983 can. 796).

Finally, evangelisation is connected to both, since each contributes to the Catholic Church's educational mission of 'bringing the Good News to the whole of humanity, so that all may live by it' (John Paul II, 1979, para. 18). Evangelisation is the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to both non-believer and believer alike, with the aim of inspiring or increasing faith in that Gospel. Popularly, evangelisation is understood to be directed only towards those outside of the faith where the object is to 'convert or seek to convert (someone) to Christianity' (Pearsall and Hanks, 2001, p. 636). However, while not eschewing this aspect of evangelisation, the so-called 'new evangelisation' – a renewal movement within the Catholic Church – extends its scope to two other domains. First, evangelisation is also necessary 'to inflame the hearts of the faithful' and to reconnect with those 'who preserve a deep and sincere faith…but seldom take part in worship' (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 14). Second, it is also aimed at the baptised, but non-practising members of the Catholic Church, for whom baptism was a cultural remnant, but not an authentic embracing of the faith and 'tries to help them experience a conversion which will restore the joy of faith to their hearts and inspire a commitment to the Gospel' (Pope Francis, 2013, para. 14). This threefold definition of evangelisation is one which the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales reiterate in their recent document on Religious Education:

> This imperative to evangelise embraces all: it is to inflame the hearts of those for whom faith is already a living reality; it is to bring about a new conversion of heart for those who are baptised but do not yet live up to the demands of that baptism; and it is an invitation to those who do not yet know Christ, to meet him and, in him, to find rest for their restless hearts. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 9)

In summary, in the Church's own understanding, evangelisation is the proclamation of the Gospel to those outside of the Church (to bring them to Christ), to those who are only nominally

members of the Church (to help them to embrace the identity they received at baptism), and to those actively living their faith (to assist them to live it in greater fidelity).

In the Church's understanding, evangelisation is related to both catechesis and education in different ways. It is related to catechesis, since catechesis, for those who are Catholics, ought to lead to a deepening of the faith which is the object of study. It is related to education because, for those who are not Catholics, education can become evangelisation when the content of the study begins to change a learner's perception of the meaning of their own existence in light of what they have learned, providing them with answers to 'the deepest questions of life', enabling them to articulate 'reasons for the hope which is within them' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2000, para. 4). Education more broadly has 'an evangelising character' when it brings the message of the Gospel into dialogue with those ultimate questions of meaning and purpose that constitute part of the education of the whole person, when Religious Education 'makes present the Gospel in a personal process of cultural, systematic and critical assimilation' (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997, para. 73). Indeed, the Church teaches that Catholic schools are evangelical in their own right since they exist 'to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith… so that by leading an exemplary apostolic life they become, as it were, a saving leaven in the human community' (Second Vatican Council, 1965, para. 8). For the Church, Catholic education always has an evangelical potential since the whole of the curriculum is shaped by a belief in the redemptive power of Christ. This power, in the Church's understanding, is not limited to those who choose the school because they are Catholic but has the potential to transform all those who are not closed to its possibilities. In this way education, as well as catechesis, can contribute to the Church's primary evangelising mission. It is also for this reason that in the last two editions of their policy document on Religious Education the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales have asserted that while the principal activity with which a Religious Education teacher should be engaged is education, neither of the other two modes of teaching are absent when it is done in the context of a Catholic school, where '[f]or those already engaged in the journey of faith, Religious Education will be catechesis, and for some children and young people Religious Education will be evangelisation, the first opportunity to hear the good news of the gospel' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 10). Each of the three categories of teaching, and their relationship to each other, are expressed in the diagram below:
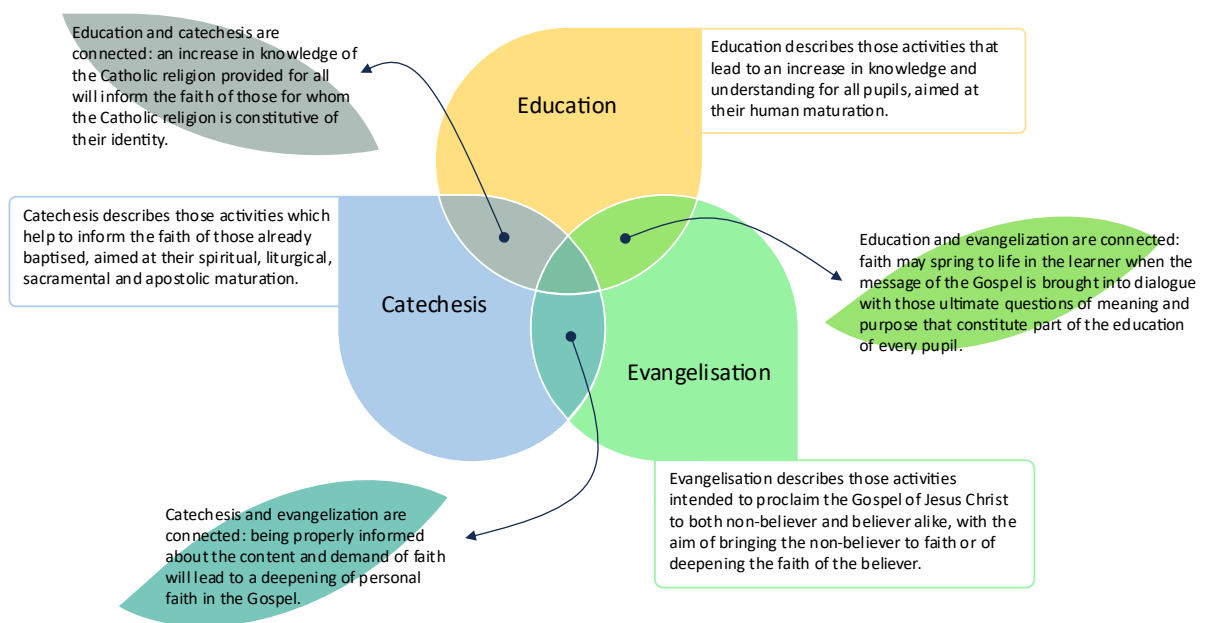
Education and catechesis are connected: an increase in knowledge of the Catholic religion provided for all will inform the faith of those for whom the Catholic religion is constitutive of their identity.

Education describes those activities that lead to an increase in knowledge and understanding for all pupils, aimed at their human maturation.

Catechesis describes those activities which help to inform the faith of those already baptised, aimed at their spiritual, liturgical, sacramental and apostolic maturation.

Education

Education and evangelization are connected: faith may spring to life in the learner when the message of the Gospel is brought into dialogue with those ultimate questions of meaning and purpose that constitute part of the education of every pupil.

Catechesis

Evangelisation

Catechesis and evangelization are connected: being properly informed about the content and demand of faith will lead to a deepening of personal faith in the Gospel.

Evangelisation describes those activities intended to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ to both non-believer and believer alike, with the aim of bringing the non-believer to faith or of deepening the faith of the believer.

Figure 1: The relationship between education, catechesis and evangelisation.

Returning to Whittle's claim that to 'formally educate someone with the explicit goal or intention of them personally adopting religious beliefs… is fundamentally catechesis … rather than a properly educational activity' (Whittle, 2021, pp. 405–406), it should be clear that what Whittle describes as catechesis, the Church would probably describe as evangelisation. Nevertheless, his charge that evangelisation (and catechesis) are illegitimate educational goals loses none of its bite, even with this added clarification. If Whittle is correct, then the liberal aims of education would be incompatible with education as the Church understands it.

However, the Church itself does not appear to accept that the faith formation objectives of Catholic schools are at odds with the civic aims of education. In its teaching documents, the Catholic Church claims that its schools can initiate Catholic pupils into the faith, can proclaim the Gospel in all it does and teaches, and at the same time respect the religious freedom of those in the school who are not of the faith. In *Gravissimum Educationis*, for example, the three-fold aims of a Christian school already outlined are added to, rather than replace, the broad aims the Catholic school has, simply by virtue of being a school:

> …a true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of their ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which they are a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, they will share. Therefore, children and young people must be helped…to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments so that they may gradually acquire a mature sense of responsibility…Moreover, they should be so trained to take their part in social life …[so that] they can become actively

involved in various community organizations, open to discourse with others and willing

to do their best to promote the common good. (Second Vatican Council, 1965, sec. 1)

These aims of a Catholic school appear to resonate in a relatively straightforward way with a Religious Education that intends to increase tolerance and contribute to community cohesion, as outlined in the Toledo principles. Catholic scholars too defend the thesis that Catholic and liberal education can be compatible, such that it is possible for Catholic schools to fulfil the liberal aims of education without compromising their identity, what Bryk, Lee and Holland, (1993, p. 334) describe as 'openness with roots.' In such a context, the Catholic school invites, but does not compel students to 'reflect on a systematic body of thought and to immerse themselves in a communal life that seeks to live out its basic principles' (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993, p. 335). This 'living out' would shape not only the ethos of the school but also its patterns of worship and its Religious Education.

For this reason, it seems that a Religious Education that leaves open the possibility of catechesis and evangelisation would require more than simply learning about the Catholic religion alongside others, but would require at least its privileging in terms of curriculum time. This is, in fact, the way in which the most recent teaching documents of the Church have sought to explain how a school can, at one and the same time, be a place of religious and confessional inclusion and still remain faithful to its confessional identity as a place for the formation of Catholic children. It does so by foregrounding the importance of Catholic schools as places of interreligious and intercultural dialogue (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2022). Catholic schools become places of encounter between those Catholics for whom the study of the Catholic religion is learning about the faith that is constitutive of their identity as believers, and those who do not share those commitments. The study of Catholicism is privileged since Catholics must learn about their own faith in order for those schools to fulfil their mandate, but the preparation for civic life, which is the responsibility of schools of every kind, is achieved in two ways: first by creating dialogical classrooms where the Catholic worldview is able to critically engage with alternatives; second, by requiring that all pupils learn about religions and worldviews other than Catholicism. This pattern is exemplified in the latest iteration of the *Directory* published by the Catholic bishops of England and Wales, whereby the importance of privileging the study of Catholicism is presented first, followed by the requirement to engage dialogically with difference:

In preparing the ground for interreligious dialogue it is obviously first necessary to begin

from a place of confidence in one's own position – confidence both in terms of

understanding and in terms of conviction. Therefore, careful thought must be given, for

the sake of those Catholic pupils for whom the Religious Education may be received as catechesis, to when and to what extent other religious and non-religious perspectives are introduced… Nevertheless, there are a number of good reasons why a Catholic Religious Education curriculum must include the study of other religions and worldviews. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 16)

Amongst the reasons the *Directory* gives are: dialogue is an imperative for Catholics, by virtue of their faith; it prepares Catholic pupils to live in a pluralistic and diverse culture; it is a witness to a 'love for all that is free and open' and a commitment to social cooperation that must be open to 'plurality and differences' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, para. 61); it ensures that all pupils, whatever their confessional standpoints, are included in the classroom community of exchange (see Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2023, pp. 16–18).

The way the Church can reconcile these apparent tensions between the civic and confessional goals of Religious Education Catholic schools is to describe Religious Education as *education* first and foremost, that is, as learning *about* the 'Catholic religion' (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020, para. 313) alongside other religions and worldviews. Such learning can become faith formative for those for whom the 'study of the Catholic religion is a study of the faith that makes them who they are' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 13), but such learning does not presume that it will have a faith formative dimension for every pupil in the classroom, since 'Catechesis presumes the assent of faith; religious education does not' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 14). The easiest way to understand the way in which the Catholic Church rationalises the way in which the liberal aims and the missional aims are compatible is to understand that those aspects of their educational offer that are mandatory (the Religious Education) are educational for all, and only at the service of the school mission because of the weight they give to the study of the Catholic religion. Formation in the other two aspects of the Catholic school's identity (worship and morality) are always invitational in character, and all pupils are, in conscience, free to refuse the offer. This freedom of conscience the Church itself sees as an expression of its mission, since 'to proclaim or to offer is not to impose' because 'the latter suggests a moral violence which is forbidden by the Gospel' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 6).

Therefore, whether Catholic schools can ultimately evade the charge of indoctrination will largely depend on the extent to which the Religious Education curriculum provided for all pupils,

Catholic or otherwise, can be objective, critical and pluralistic within this faith formational context. It is to these three terms that my review will now turn.

2.2 Objective

Of the three components that comprise the OCP test, objectivity is the one that would appear to be the most difficult for Religious Education in Catholic schools to pass, precisely because of the relationship between the curriculum subject and the overarching goal of faith formation, which the Catholic Church presents as one of the purposes of Catholic schools. Indeed, the very existence of Catholic schools suggests a subjectivity which seems at odds with the 'learning about' religions approach as defined in the Toledo principles.

This is difficult for educators in a Catholic setting, first, because Catholic schools, and Catholic education in general, are not indifferent to difference; they are, by definition, partial. In a diverse world or religion and belief, the existence of Catholic schools is evidence of the commitment of the Catholic Church to the truth of the Catholic religion, and by extension the promotion of its beliefs and values through its schools.

Meeting the criterion of objectivity is a challenge in relation to Religious Education in Catholic schools for another reason which has to do with the nature of the teachers the Church expects should work in such schools. While Catholic schools themselves are to be a visible witness to the truth of the Gospel, it is also expected of those that work in them that they will not just teach *about* the faith in Religious Education lessons but will also witness to the truth of what they teach by the lives they lead. In an oft quoted passage, Pope Paul VI asserted that pupils listen 'more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses' (Pope Paul VI, 1975, para. 41).

There would appear therefore to be at least three definitions of objectivity which need to be considered before we can assess, even in principle, whether Religious Education in a Catholic school could pass the objectivity test. The first is to do with the content of an objective study: the study of religious diversity as the study of *facts* about religion is potentially at odds with a Religious Education in Catholic schools which, while not ignoring the importance of understanding, communicates it within a the context of a particular worldview, which brings with it ontological, epistemological and normative presumptions about the kind of world we inhabit, the purpose of that world and the meaning of human existence within it. The second is to do with the presumed value neutrality of education: the presumption that any attempt to communicate beliefs or to instil *values* is somehow not a

legitimate goal of education is potentially at odds with a Catholic philosophy of education which explicitly views the integral formation of the whole person – intellectually, spiritually, and morally – as the very purpose and meaning of education. The third is related to both of these and is concerned with the positionality of teachers: the assertion that teacher objectivity requires the presentation of a range of religions in a way that does not show a preference for any particular one is potentially at odds with a Religious Education in Catholic schools that requires *commitment* from its teachers and hopes that they will, in turn, inspire a similar commitment from their students. That is to say, the objectivity of a curriculum subject can refer to at least three different but related aspects of objectivity: the first is to do with the object of study, the curriculum content itself (what I will call the substantive aspect of objectivity). The second is to do with the extent to which the communication of beliefs and values is a legitimate feature of curriculum content (what I will call the axiological aspect of objectivity). The third is to do with the positionality of the person responsible for the delivery of that curriculum content: the teacher (what I will call the personal aspect of objectivity). In attempting to discern how a Catholic school might pass the objective test, each of these aspects of objectivity needs to be examined.

Substantive Objectivity: objectivity as fidelity to facts

The word itself suggests that the defining feature of objectivity is its focus on objects, rather than subjects, on things in the world as they are in themselves, rather than the things as we (the perceiving subject) take them to be. On this estimation, science becomes the example, par excellence, of a curriculum subject because it is an empirical study of facts. Its pre-eminence derives from the fact that 'science is objective, or at least more objective than other modes of enquiry' (Reiss and Sprenger, 2020, p. 3). The definition of this aspect of 'objectivity' is described as 'faithfulness to reality' (Maul, 2018, p. 2) or 'faithfulness to facts' (Reiss and Sprenger, 2020, p. 3).

The high value accorded to this kind of objectivity is one that appears to be supported by some philosophers of education (Hirst, 1965; Hand, 2004, 2017; Tillson, 2014; Vlieghe, 2019) in relation to Religious Education. Hirst (1965) and Vlieghe (2019), for example, assert that the inclusion of Religious Education as part of a compulsory curriculum is only justified to the extent that it is a study of religions as phenomena within the world of common human experience susceptible to empirical study, of religions as human artefacts about which facts can be learned. Hirst (1965) argues that since religious propositions cannot be known to be true, their inclusion in state-subsidised educational institutions is not legitimate since there is 'no public rational basis for religious claims' (Hirst, 1965, p.

13). All that can be included in a Religious Education that is compelled by the state is 'factual instruction about the beliefs that have played and do play so large a part in our history, literature and way of life.' (Hirst, 1965, p. 13). Vlieghe (2019), similarly asserts that the only legitimate Religious Education is education *about* religion. He does so because he argues that the only authority to which appeal can be made in the classroom is the authority of the subject matter itself, in his promotion of a 'thing-centred pedagogy' (Vlieghe, 2019, p. 243). A teacher is under an obligation when presenting an object for study to illustrate its importance *as* an object of study, and not for any other reason, but to do so requires pedagogical distance – treating that which we study as an object, and one in which we have no personal investment. Hence, religion becomes a legitimate object of study when the curriculum content achieves the distance that comes from the study of the range of religions that are manifest in the world. This 'approach could be called education about religion, as opposed to Religious Education' since it shows 'to the next generation that religion is important, but not *a* particular religion' (Vlieghe, 2019, p. 244). Hence for Vlieghe, objectivity becomes inextricably bound up with another of the OCP test's components: pluralism. For Vlieghe, the extent to which a Religious Education curriculum is pluralistic is the extent to which it can be objective.

The appeal to truthfulness and rationality are also markers of objectivity for Hand (2004, 2017) and Tillson (2014) but their analysis is more subtle than that of Hirst's since the fact that a proposition cannot be known to be true would not be sufficient grounds for labelling it an illegitimate object of study. Truth matters in education because 'as rational beings' human beings 'have a duty...to believe the truth, and to disbelieve falsehoods' (Tillson, 2014, p. 4) but the pursuit of truth has to include the critical evaluation of claims that are plausible but contested, since the real value is rationality itself, rather than truth: believing or disbelieving propositions only on 'rationally adequate grounds' (Tillson, 2014, p. 4). Hand (2004) takes the plausibility of religious claims, i.e., 'that some religious propositions are sufficiently well supported by evidence and argument as to merit serious consideration by reasonable people' (Hand, 2004, p. 162), as the basis of what he calls 'the possibility-of-truth case' (Hand, 2004, p. 162) for the inclusion of Religious Education in a compulsory school curriculum.

In positioning himself here, he also puts himself at a distance from Vlieghe in that he thinks the study of a range of religions is far less important than critically evaluating the basic plausibility of the kinds of claims all religions make, 'on coming to understand the meaning of religious propositions and learning how to make informed, rational judgements on their

truth or falsity.' In which case there 'would be much less attention to the differences between particular religions and much more to the differences between religion and irreligion' (Hand, 2004, p. 163). Hence for Tillson and Hand, objectivity becomes inextricably bound up with the remaining component of the OCP test: criticality. For them, a Religious Education curriculum is objective to the extent that it studies religious claims critically.

Whilst neither of these two articulations are in themselves contrary to the Religious Education taught in Catholic schools, which is comfortable with both pluralism and criticality (as we shall see in the next sections on precisely these two components of the OCP test), there are features of both articulations which, if not addressed, would be in tension with the purposes of Religious Education in Catholic schools outlined above.

First, the pluralistic understanding of objectivity requires an equidistance from the range of religions studied in a way that pulls against the privileging of the Catholic religion which is the first priority of religious educators in Catholic schools. For religious educators in Catholic schools, the study of other religions comes *after* a grounding in the Catholic tradition. This is because the study of other religions and worldviews is an expression of the Catholic Church's own commitment to dialogue, and this dialogical exchange requires an authenticity of identity on either side of that exchange as a prerequisite since 'the commitment to intercultural dialogue cannot be interpreted as a cipher for a weakening of Catholic identity' (Franchi, 2016, p. 118) and 'authentic dialogue requires the partners in that dialogue to have a thorough understanding of their own identity, since all we can present to the other in dialogue is ourselves' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. V).

Second, the critical understanding of objectivity presumes a shared and uncontested rationality that can provide students with an ability to evaluate truth claims from outside of any particular tradition. This is difficult for a religious educator in a Catholic space for two reasons. First, this high estimation of the positivistic, empirical method as the only road to truth is one the Church challenges since it 'collapses all enquiry into the pursuit of only that knowledge which can be empirically demonstrated' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 10). Such a reduction is an impoverished view of truth.

Critical openness is clearly encouraged in the Religious Education classrooms of Catholic schools where as 'an academic subject, it respects the critical space for enquiry which is a hallmark of all genuine academic pursuits' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and

Wales, 2023, p. 14), but set within the context of a community that is already committed to a set of revealed truths that form the basis of its identity as a Catholic community. In Catholic schools, the 'possibility-of-truth' (Hand, 2004, p. 162) comes up against 'the ultimate truth of divine revelation'(Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 25). It is precisely this prevenient commitment to the truths contained in the doctrines of the faith that led Hand (2003) in the first place to presume that wherever Catholic schools are faithful to their stated mission they are by definition indoctrinatory. It would seem, therefore, that in terms of this substantive definition of objectivity that Catholic Religious Education would struggle to pass the objective test. However, there are several challenges that can be brought against the understanding of objectivity so far presented. In what follows I will explore three different critiques of the concept of 'substantive objectivity': (i) the inaccessibility of 'raw facts'; (ii) the risk of unacknowledged subjectivity; (iii) the incompleteness of 'objective' descriptions.

(i) The inaccessibility of 'raw facts'

The first criticism of this definition of objectivity as fidelity to facts challenges the very concept of 'fact' itself, pointing out that we never have direct access to such a thing as 'raw facts'. Thiessen (1993, p. 105) argues that many of the accusations of irrationality aimed at schools with a religious character rely upon outdated epistemological presumptions. In this he is pointing to the naivety inherent in both the version of Religious Education presented by Vlieghe (the study of religions as things in the world) and Hand and Tillson (the study of all those propositions that reasonable people would view as plausible). Both appear to presume that we have access to the world directly, as pure intellects able to indefectibly review the evidence that our senses communicate to us about this objective world. However, this simplistic epistemology has been challenged by, amongst others, Kuhn (1962) who was the first to point out the historical character of scientific progress. He pointed out that positivistic presentations of the superiority of science failed to recognise the contingency of scientific certainties, which are always framed within a given dominant paradigm. A more nuanced view of science he argues would recognise that dominant paradigms in science shift, and do so suddenly, in such a way that former scientific convictions – empirical certainties that were supposedly rooted in objective observations – are suddenly no longer true in the paradigm that supplants its historical rival. Thus, he says, scientists working from within different paradigms do not just look at the same world through different conceptual frames but do, in some sense, 'live in different worlds' (Kuhn, 1962, p. 192). Another way of putting this is to talk about the theory-laden nature of

observations. Vlieghe is naïve, on this view, since he wants to found Religious Education on the authority of a 'thing-based pedagogy' as if things were available to us as themselves outside of an interpretative frame. On the contrary, as Thiessen put it, there 'are no basic facts because all observation is theory-laden' (Thiessen, 1993, p. 109). The best that can be hoped for in terms of the objectivity of things, is transparency (as far as possible) about the presuppositions one brings to the observations made and the conclusions drawn from those observations. This insight from the philosophy of science requires a transparency about the history of the traditions out of which an observer makes claims for others to scrutinise and assess. Any attempt to detach the findings and the observations from a history of interpretation – from a theory – is a pretence to a contextless point of observation that is not available to any human being caught within the contingencies of history.

To put this another way, there is no such thing as plain seeing, what some have dubbed 'immaculate perception' (Leahy, 1990, p. 140). All seeing is, in fact, 'seeing as', or else nothing is seen at all. For example, in order to see an 'elephant', we need more than simply the perceptual impressions on the retina and optic nerve caused by mass, colour and shape. We must have learned to see that particular constellation of mass, colour and shape as an elephant. To see an elephant, we must have been initiated into a linguistic consensus that understands this visual perception, this collection of properties, *as* an elephant. Or as MacIntyre (1981, p. 79), puts it 'perceivers without concepts...are blind.' Language then is always a precursor to seeing in both senses of observing and understanding. In the absence of a recognition of the centrality of the subjective observer, of the complex role of history in the position of that observer, of the necessity to work within a linguistic frame of meaning that provides an interpretation to that subjective observer, the scientific textbook becomes, like the catechism of theology, a dogmatic text: it communicates an ideology while purporting to communicate uncontested truth. Or perhaps, to put it more fairly, the truths they communicate presume a theory, or an interpretative frame, a linguistic precursor, that often goes unacknowledged and therefore, uncritiqued.

Thus, the idea that the study of 'things' as the basis of a curriculum's objectivity, something for which Vlieghe (2019) advocates, appears to ignore the insights of Kuhn, that the world is only ever available to us through a particular interpretative frame and never as a thing in itself. In religious studies, as in history, there is no such thing as pure fact or raw knowledge. Knowledge is always positioned and teaching 'religions as phenomena...with the widespread popular assumption that there could be an absolute existential distance

between the interpreter and the subject matter...fails to account for the complexity of the way in which religion, history and culture are intertwined' (Kueh, 2018, p. 55).

(ii) The risk of unacknowledged subjectivity

There is a potential irony here in that Vlieghe's promotion of a Religious Education as learning about religions, but not of any particular religion, may itself be an expression of a religious particularity of which he is ignorant. This leads us to a second critique of 'substantive objectivity' as an aim for Religious Education; in this critique, the apparent objectivity is in fact a tacit form of well-meaning but misguided subjectivity. Barnes (2009) points out that the prevailing multi-faith 'learning about religions' approach, which characterised the phenomenological post-confessional approach to Religious Education, was itself the fruit of a liberal Christian understanding of the meaning of religions. Underlying it was a theological presumption that religions were simply different cultural expressions of a common human experience of the one transcendent source, that they represented 'different but complementary revelations of the divine' (Barnes, 2009, p. 36). In so doing, advocates of this approach condemned any teaching that implied that one particular religion was true, or truer than any other as guilty of 'religionism'(Hull, 1992, p. 70), a form of prejudice akin to racism.

Barnes points out that this analysis of the meaning of religion is a reflection of liberal Protestantism's own theology of religions. Such an analysis is challenged, however, by Lindbeck (2009) who argues there cannot be primitive human experiences that are the single common source for various different religious and cultural expressions, since experience does not produce religion, but rather religion produces and preconditions the kinds of experience a person is able to have. The theory that gives priority to human experience, out of which religions arise, Lindbeck (1984, p. 16) labels as the 'experiential-expressive model' of religion. He contrasts it with his own cultural-linguistic model, which places language and culture (of which religion is an exemplar) as the pre-condition of all experience. In his analysis religion 'can be viewed as a kind of cultural and or linguistic framework or medium that shapes the entirety of life and thought' (Lindbeck, 1984, p. 20). Without such a framework, experiences of any kind are impossible. In this he echoes Kuhn's (2012) assertion of the foundational nature of paradigms as preconditions of understanding, and Hanson's (1958) insight that all perception is dependent on the prevenient acquisition of a language with which to describe what is apprehended.

As well as this, Barnes rejects the liberal Protestant defence of the pluralistic curriculum because it fails to reflect the actual religious commitments of those it seeks to honour. In an attempt to rule out religious prejudice and show parity of esteem to all the world's religions, it is forced to insist that all religions are equal and all exclusive claims to truth are to be rejected. In so doing, it alienates many religious believers, for whom the recognition of the exclusive truth of their own religion is central to their understanding of it. Ironically then, the attempt to see religions from the outside, objectively, as they are in themselves, ends up meaning they are viewed from a particularly partial position, that of liberal Protestantism. Vlieghe, in the interests of promoting objectivity, perhaps fails to recognise that the impulse itself arises out of a very particular subjective religious perspective.

(iii) The incompleteness of objective descriptions

A final criticism of 'substantive objectivity' as an aspirational feature of Religious Education is that to treat religions as 'things' observed from the outside misses some of the most important aspects of the religions which are the focus of the study. In this critique it is not that the view from the outside is defective, it is just incomplete. An analogy I have found helpful in this regard comes from a short essay by Lewis (1945) where he compares two different kinds of study to two different perspectives a person can have of a beam of light. The analogy begins with Lewis standing inside a toolshed looking at a beam of light as it comes through a crack at the top of the door. In his first position he is looking at the beam of the light, 'seeing the beam, not seeing things by it' (Lewis, 1945, p. 50). He then shifts his position so that he is no longer looking at the beam of light, but along it to the outside world that can be seen through the crack in the top of the door, and he realises that 'looking along the beam, and looking at the beam are two very different experiences' (Lewis, 1945, p. 50) Lewis uses this distinction between 'looking at' and 'looking along' as metaphor for the way in which human beliefs and behaviour (for example, religious beliefs and behaviours) can be perceived and understood. It is possible to stand outside as an observer and describe the meaning of behaviours using, for example, the methods of social scientific enquiry. This would be to 'look at' religion. It is equally possible to stand inside as one who experiences the religious perspective as a believer. This can be done imaginatively, even for one who is not committed to the faith perspective under scrutiny. This would be to 'look along' religion. The point of Lewis' analogy is that neither of these two perspectives is the 'true' way of understanding the phenomenon in question. Furthermore, there isn't truly a view that is ever completely 'outside'. As Lewis points out 'you can step outside one experience only by stepping inside another' (Lewis, 1945, p. 54).

Failure to both look *along* and *at* religions leads to the danger of what Teece (2010) calls 'explanatory reductionism' (Teece, 2010, p. 99). In an instance of explanatory reductionism, the higher order anthropological categories the sociologist of religion employs provide explanations that replace the explanations the religious believer herself would give. For example, it may be the case that the Catholic sacraments of Baptism, Matrimony and the ritual of Requiem Masses can be understood as society's reunifiying response to the disruptive facts of birth, marriage and death (Malinowski, 1948) or that the Sacrament of the Eucharist is the obsessive-compulsive ritual re-enactment of the primal horde's murder and consumption of the tribal chieftain (Freud, 1919) but neither of these explanations are ones I, a Catholic who participates in these sacraments as a believer, would recognise as accurate renderings of my religious motivations and practice. That does not mean that they might nonetheless be good explanations, but they certainly cannot be complete ones since they fail to consider the religionist's own understanding of what he thinks he is doing. They give an unwarranted precedence to the external observer's perspective, failing to appreciate that any phenomenon can be 'looked at' or 'looked along'.

Teece presents another example, taken directly from a Religious Education context, in which pupils learn about *puja*, a ritual that is a feature of the Dharmic pathways in Indian religion. In the example given, the pupils were asked to think about the role of 'rituals' in their own lives by thinking about actions that they habitually or repeatedly performed to mark particular events or emotions. They were then asked to compare these to a video 'showing Hindus doing *puja*' (Teece, 2010, p. 96). The purpose of the lesson was to reflect on the purpose of ritual in human lives in general and to view *puja* as an example of this type. However, Teece argues that in reducing *puja* to a type of generic human activity, the lesson is guilty of explanatory reductionism in failing to consider what *puja* means to those who practice it.

Such an approach to the teaching of religion is an example of what is called the 'phenomenological approach' in religious studies. This approach arose out of the work of Ninian Smart (1973) who proposed several dimensions of religion (ritual, experiential, mythological, doctrinal, ethical, institutional, material) which would provide a second-order explanatory framework that allows for the analysis of religions comparatively, exploring how these dimensions are manifested in different religious (or in the case of this lesson, non-religious or secular) contexts. What the teacher was attempting in the use of *puja* in this lesson was to make a second-order comparison between the role of ritual in the

lives of pupils and the role of *puja* in the devotional lives of committed Hindu believers. Teece, however, questions how effective such a comparison can be because:

> ...in order to achieve this for his pupils, the trainee teacher would have needed to have explored with them in much greater detail the meaning of *puja* for the participants. This would require bringing out the structure and meaning of *puja* without comparing it to anything else. (Teece, 2010, p. 97)

The phrase 'without comparing it to anything else' is the key here. Teece is pointing to something we have already encountered in Lindbeck's analysis of religions as cultural-linguistic phenomena. The reason it is important to understand the meaning of *puja* for those who participate in it as believers without comparing it to anything else, is because it is likely, if Lindbeck is correct, that there will always be a remainder when comparisons are made between two incommensurable religious (or secular) traditions. If religions are like languages, then to really understand the meaning of a religion, one must get as close as possible to the position of a 'native speaker' of that religion and, in so doing, to understanding the untranslatability of some aspects of the particular religious experience.

These kinds of critique of phenomenological approaches to religion can be found also in the writing of those who emerge out of the phenomenological movement itself. Jackson (1997) argues that much of the criticism of the phenomenological approach to the study of religion, such as those I have outlined above from Teece, are misplaced since, in its mature form, the approach does recognise the central importance of hermeneutics in the analysis of religion. This mature form was influenced by the interpretive anthropology of those such as Clifford Geertz, for whom the perspective of the 'insider' was of paramount importance when attempting to understand the culture of others. In the same way a responsible hermeneutics of religion requires '...studying religions in their social, cultural and historical context' and asserts that 'the reconstitution of a religious universe [is] a prerequisite for any understanding of religious meanings' (Jackson, 1997, p. 27). Here Jackson agrees with Geertz about the authoritative status of the religious believer's own interpretation of what they are about:

> As in more familiar exercises in close reading, one can start anywhere in the culture's repertoire of forms and end up anywhere else...But whatever the level at which one operates, and however intricately, the guiding principle is the same: societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them. (Geertz, 2005, p. 29)

And here, we could equally add, that religions also, like lives, contain their own interpretations. Any attempt at objectivity that occludes the subjective perspective runs the risk of providing, at best, incomplete explanations and, at worst, distorting ones.

In summary, rooting objectivity substantively in the way presented in this section runs into three related kinds of difficulty. The first is that defining objectivity substantively requires a commitment to a theory-free read of the world, something which the insights of epistemology would argue is impossible: as human observers we have no access to the 'raw facts' of the world apart from human subjective perspectives. Second, if we presume we do have such access, we are at risk of tacitly presuming that the subjective perspective within which we stand *is* the objective perspective, thereby engaging in a kind of indefensible theoretical chauvinism, completely contrary to the distance and impartiality that was the aim of seeking objectivity in the first place. Finally, even if an objective perspective were possible, it may not be desirable, since the kind of phenomena we are seeking to understand are irreducibly subjective in character.

Objectivity, defined substantively, may be a chimera, but there are other ways of defining objectivity that may yet prove fruitful ways of understanding what the OCP test requires. The second way of defining objectivity is as 'value-neutrality' and it is to this definition of objectivity to which I now turn.

Axiological Objectivity: objectivity as value-neutrality

Another way of describing objectivity is connected to the concept of substantive objectivity already outlined, in that it draws a distinction between objective knowledge and subjective values. Axiological objectivity, as I have labelled it, would differentiate that which can be known to be true on rational, publicly demonstrable grounds from moral, ideological and religious beliefs that are not susceptible to this kind of verification. Setting aside the critiques already offered of a substantive grounding for objectivity, it could still prove defensible to assert that values, beliefs and ideologies are not the appropriate focus for education, and objectivity could be defined as excluding those claims rooted in axiological commitments.. From this perspective, education is objective if it is value-neutral. That does not mean that values would not constitute part of the curriculum, but that they would only constitute part of education if they were either universally held and rationally grounded, or were presented as contested claims, rather than as established knowledge. As with the previous definition of objectivity, science is often held up as the paradigm of a value-neutral academic discipline. In relation to science, axiological objectivity 'means

that scientific theories make no value statements about the world: they are concerned with what there is, not with what there should be'(Reiss and Sprenger, 2020, p. 17).

In Religious Education terms, it would mean 'learning about' the moral commitments of particular religions or religious people and the contested nature of these claims but avoiding any attempt to claim exclusivity for the truth of such claims or initiate pupils into any particular way of life or belief tradition based on those claims. For example, Hirst (1994) makes a distinction between what he calls 'primitive' and 'sophisticated' views of Christian education. If we were primitive Christian educators, we would be 'concerned with passing on to children what we believe, so that they, in their turn come to believe it to be true' (Hirst, 1994, p. 307) while if we were sophisticated Christian educators we would be of the 'view that education should not be determined by what any group simply believes, but by what, on publicly acknowledged rational grounds, we can claim to know and understand' (Hirst, 1994, p. 308). It should be clear that the sophisticated view is not value-free, it is just that what it values – rationality and autonomy – are not the monopoly of Christian educators. It is for this reason that Hirst rejects the idea that there is any such thing as distinctively Christian education.

If something is presented as true, and pupils encouraged to believe its truth simply because the community believes it to be true, this would be primitive and should be rejected. For Hirst, then, objectivity is not understood substantively but axiologically: the problem is not with what is communicated but with how and for what reason it is communicated.

As we saw in chapter one, the ECtHR (2007, para. 84(h)) uses the phrase 'objective, critical and pluralistic' to stand for the kind of education that is free of indoctrination. It is perhaps not surprising then that Hirst, in his distinction between primitive and sophisticated education, is aligned with some definitions of indoctrination which define it precisely as those kinds of activity that are more concerned with the outcome of education, such as confessional commitment, than they are with how such outcomes are achieved. Green (1972, as cited in Thiessen, 1993, p. 89) suggests that 'when in teaching we are concerned simply to lead another person to a correct answer, but are not correspondingly concerned that they arrive at that answer on the basis of good reasons, then we are indoctrinating.' Methods of teaching would thereby lack axiological objectivity and would be indoctrinatory if they are communicated with 'a higher degree of certainty and conviction than the evidence warrants' (Thiessen, 1993, p. 90).

It should be clear, however, from this description that such a view of education is not entirely free of axiological commitment, it is just that the values it espouses are what might be called 'cognitive values' (Reiss and Sprenger, 2020, p. 15) rather than moral, ideological or religious ones. A similar attempt to distinguish between the kinds of value that ought and ought not to play a part in 'objective' education features in the writings of secularists who object to the existence of schools with a religious character, such as Catholic schools. For example, Norman (2012a, 2012b) extends value-neutrality beyond the cognitive values of science, to include moral values, but only those that can be cognitively underpinned, that are genuinely 'shared human values, grounded in our nature as human beings, which are entirely independent of religious belief' (Norman, 2012a, p. 119). Here Norman extends the concept of objectivity, specifically to only rule out religious values, rather than all non-cognitive values. The justification for the new distinction is based on the assertion that certain moral values are common to all rational human beings, and these can be legitimately communicated as part of an objective education, but those rooted in, or emerging from, religious worldviews are to be treated as 'clutter', since they are 'moral injunctions which have no basis other than a religious one' (Norman, 2012a, p. 123).

Norman is joined here by other philosophers of education such as Hand (2018), who makes a distinction between 'moral enquiry' (Hand, 2018, p. 37) and 'moral formation'(Hand, 2018, p. 30). By moral enquiry, Hand means those kinds of educational activity that critically engage with contested moral claims in the classroom. These would be educationally legitimate as long as they are approached in a way that is intent on exploring the competing rational justifications for different and competing moral claims. By moral formation, Hand means the cultivation of some moral attitudes and attendant behaviours through non-rational means. Non-rational does not mean anti-rational, it just refers to the ways in which education is always an affective, as well as a cognitive, enterprise. This kind of moral formation, Hand argues, is legitimate to teach 'directively' (that is in a way intended to bring about a subscription to those moral values by the students) only if moral enquiry can demonstrate that such beliefs are rationally justified and 'beyond serious dispute' (Hand, 2018, p. 69). For Hand this would involve demonstrating that moral values are justified by the particular version of moral contractarianism to which Hand himself subscribes (Hand, 2018, chap. 5). Hand, like Norman, would defend education as objective, in the sense I am here outlining, if the moral values it seeks to promote are those that are rationally justifiable, and recognised as such by all rational beings. It would

exclude the promotion (ie the directive teaching) of any moral values, or indeed any beliefs, if their justification relies on disputed claims, such as those made by religious believers.

This definition of objectivity as value-neutrality, therefore, has both a strong and a weaker form. It is therefore understood to mean either in its stronger form (i) with Hirst (1994), that education only teaches the cognitive values necessary for the proper conduct of the empirical sciences, excluding all moral, religious or ideological values or, in its weaker form (ii) with Norman (2012a, 2012b) and Hand (2018), that education, or state run education at the very least, only teaches those universal moral values that are the product of our shared, rational humanity and are not derived from a particular religious, or otherwise ideologically underpinned, worldview. What others (Bryan and Revell, 2011, p. 414) have oxymoronically described as values that 'are in essence, value-free.'

Both ways of understanding this kind of axiological objectivity are potentially in conflict with the Church's understanding of the purpose of education and of Religious Education in particular. The first understanding may be problematic since the Church's understanding of education is larger than the formation of only the rational aspect of a person. For the Church, education always 'aims at the formation of the whole person: mind, heart and will' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 10). That is, the Church recognises that education requires the formation of good habits, as well as understanding the moral arguments that justify the moral theories that recommend those habits. Obviously, this moral formation is not at the expense of cognitive formation: a Catholic school would want to communicate the cognitive values that underpin the independence of the sciences as disciplinary methods, just as well as secular scholars. Nevertheless, this commitment to the independence of subject disciplines in any liberal arts curriculum, is only part of the Catholic philosophy of education and the presence of such disciplines would be a necessary but not a sufficient condition of any education that would claim to be Catholic. In addition, Catholic education would also always include the moral and religious formation of pupils since while students 'learn many things about the human person by studying science' it has 'nothing to say about mystery' and in particular 'the mystery within the human person' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, para. 76).

This centrality of the person to a Catholic philosophy of education is another potential source of tension with a view of education that insists on axiological objectivity. A Catholic philosophy of education places a (religious) belief in the divine origin and end of human beings as the foundation of all its educational endeavours. The recognition of human

beings as *imago Dei* (made in the image of God) is a foundational belief for Christian anthropology and 'the truth that human beings are created in the image of God is at the heart of Christian revelation' (International Theological Commission, 2004, para. 6). Therefore, the whole Catholic education project is rooted in a religious understanding of the human person and of the meaning of human history. Not only is Catholic education committed to a values education that goes beyond the merely cognitive values of the sciences, it also founded on and therefore bound to communicate a set of moral values that are grounded in the meaning of the human person as made in God's image and of the meaning of human history as the means by which God brings about the salvation of the whole created order.

On the one hand, the Church itself would recognise the universality of morality as rationally discoverable and objectively grounded in our shared humanity, along with Norman, for whom our shared universal morality is a 'matter of common sense' (Norman, 2012a, p. 138), and Hand, for whom it is 'beyond serious dispute' (Hand, 2018, p. 69). This commitment to the rationally discoverable nature of morality, is precisely what the Church means by 'natural law', which is the ethical theory that most often characterises its moral reasoning. For the Church, the 'natural law, present in the heart of each [person], and established by reason, is universal in its precepts, and its authority extends to all [people]. It expresses the dignity of the person and determines the basis for [their] fundamental rights and duties...[and] provides the indispensable moral foundation for building the human community (Catholic Church, 2000, para. 1956,1959).

At the same time, it would assert, contrary to Norman, that while the moral law is rationally discoverable, it is not always so discovered, since human reason is hindered by both wilful and accidental ignorance. Even where it is discovered, knowing the content of the law is not enough to secure a positive response to it, since the human will is corrupted by selfishness and sin. It is for these reasons that the Church teaches that morality, although universal and rational, needs to be informed by the light of revelation, and a life of virtue requires the assistance of grace, and is nourished within a community that strives to exemplify these virtues. For this reason, it is possible that those responsible for Religious Education in Catholic schools may find a tension between those values that are seen to be universal and self-evident to society at large, and those which are taught to be part of the universal, natural moral law by the Church.

If Norman and Hand are right, this would clearly raise difficulties for those who are committed to the Catholic education project. However, there are some good reasons for challenging the axiologically defined notion of objectivity, both in the strong sense of excluding moral values altogether or in the weaker sense of only excluding those that can be demonstrated to lack a universal, rational basis. In what follows I will explore three different critiques of the concept of 'axiological objectivity' as it pertains to Religious Education: (i) the tacit presence of value-judgements in ostensibly value-neutral activities; (ii) the myth of the objective state; (iii) the false distinction between 'rationally justified' and 'ideologically positioned' values.

(i) The tacit presence of value-judgements in ostensibly value-neutral activities

The first critique is of the strong kind of axiological objectivity outlined above, which defines objectivity as pertaining only to those pursuits whose substance and methods are entirely free from moral value-judgements. This view is compatible with a position that permits subscription to certain cognitive values in securing the validity of the empirical method, but which views these as value-neutral since they are independent of the social and moral context in which the scientific enquiry is carried out. They are, therefore, free from what Reiss and Springer (2020) refer to as 'contextual values.' Longino (1996) points out in her critique of this way of defining scientific objectivity that the supposed distinction between cognitive and contextual values is not as well founded as it may first appear and that the cognitive values implicitly affirm contextual value judgements. The traditional cognitive values that are usually presented as virtues of scientific theories vary but are typically close to those presented by Kuhn (1979, pp. 321–322), who asserts that a good scientific theory will be accurate, consistent, broad in scope, simple, and fruitful.

No set of proposed cognitive values for good scientific theories, including the feminist alternative to Kuhn's list Longino proposes, would exclude what she labels as 'empirical adequacy' and Kuhn calls 'accuracy', that is, a commitment to the principle that theories must reflect the data available through observations of the world. However, as I have argued above, there are no raw observations of the world that are independent of theory and, as Longino (1996, p. 39) points out, 'no amount of empirical data can uniquely determine theory choice' and the 'content of a theory outreaches those elements of it...that can be shown to be true', that is those that are 'in agreement with actual observations.' By this she means that while no good scientific theory should contradict the data acquired through observation, this data itself will not help a scientist to decide which of several competing theories should be deployed to interpret the meaning of that data. The

list that Kuhn gives is an attempt to provide just such an objective set of criteria for choosing the best theory to explain the data, but it is precisely the supposed objectivity of this list that Longino challenges.

For example, Kuhn (1979, p. 322) lists simplicity as one reason for preferring one scientific theory to another. Simplicity here is a virtue that applies to those theories that can keep the number of entities under consideration to a minimum, thereby 'bringing order to phenomena that in its absence would be individually isolated and, as a set, confused' (Kuhn, 1979, p. 322). This is achieved by preferring homogeneity or heterogeneity, or by treating supposedly heterogenous outliers in the data either as simply types of a higher-order, simple class, or as defective versions of that abstract class. However, as Longino (1996, pp. 46–47) points out, this preference for homogeneity over heterogeneity is not value-neutral and is often achieved by flattening the data to exclude diversity. Theories committed to simplicity in the form of homogeneity often smuggle in deeply value-laden 'theories of inferiority':

> Theories of inferiority are supported in part by an intolerance of heterogeneity. Difference must be ordered, one type chosen as the standard, and all others seen as failed or incomplete versions. Theories of inferiority which take the white middle-class male (or the free male citizen) as the standard grant ontological priority to that type. (Longino, 1996, p. 47)

In which case, a supposed commitment to the objective standard of simplicity, is not objective at all, but is profoundly implicated in a status quo that has frequently marginalised the voices of those who do not fit the male, white, western, default prototype. Longino points that there are similar difficulties with every single one of the cognitive values proposed by Kuhn.

Cooling (2010, pp. 40–45) gives example of this in the context of another school subject one might suppose to be a value-neutral school subject: modern foreign languages. He cites the work of Smith and Carvill (2000) who describe an encounter they had as MFL teachers on a trip to China. The bus they were on was involved in an unfortunate accident where a Chinese farmer carrying hay bales had attempted to squeeze past the bus and in the process had smashed its windows. The farmer was clearly upset, and the police had asked the MFL teachers – who were all teachers of Chinese – to let the farmer know they had forgiven him. With shock, they realised that they knew how to engage him in commercial transactions but did not have the vocabulary to communicate to him that they forgave him. Despite their many years of expertise and training, they had never considered that the

relationship between a visiting and a native speaker of a language could be anything other than transactional in nature. Cooling (2010, pp. 40–41) relates:

> [Carvill's] Chinese phrasebook did not include an entry for forgiving someone. Had she needed to apologise to him, to complain about the service he offered, to purchase something from him, to ask directions, the appropriate phrase was available. But it apparently had never crossed the compiler's minds that their end user might need to forgive someone.... She realised that the way in which it was taught made certain relationships between the language learner and the native language speaker normative, for example consumer and provider of services, whilst it ignored others, such as wronged and wrongdoer.

Cooling makes the same kind of point in relation to other supposedly value-neutral subjects – including Maths and PE (Cooling, 2010, pp. 44–45) and elsewhere rhetorically challenges the science teachers who rest on the supposed value-neutrality of their own curriculum subject. Cooling (2012, p. 94) asks do science teachers not care if their 'teaching produces concentration camp or refugee camp doctors?' The point is that the way teachers choose to present their subject content inevitably implicates them in some worldview or other. The only kind of objectivity that is possible is to recognise this and to make conscious choices about which of those worldviews they wish to communicate to their students and to make those choices explicit to those they teach.

Similarly, the attempt at objectivity in relation to Religious Education represented by the Toledo guiding principles (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007), locates its objectivity in its mutual distance from all religious confessional standpoints. There is a purported value-neutrality in the principles since they strive 'for student awareness of religions and beliefs' but not 'for student acceptance of any of them', educating students 'about religion and beliefs without promoting...any of them' (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 21). However, this mutual distance is not free from all axiological commitments, but only from ones motivated by religious conviction. The Toledo guiding principles are still rooted in those values which uphold the continued existence of the liberal, democratic states in which the kind of Religious Education the principles promote would be situated. They promote the desirability of preparing 'young people for life in a plural society' and of the mutual respect between religions that enhances community cohesion (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 19). These are relatively uncontroversial aims and ones shared by Catholic educators, who recognise that 'the Catholic school is called, with the Church, to an openness to culture, to share with all people of goodwill in the pursuit of that which leads to human flourishing' (Catholic

Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 17). Similarly, the goal of peaceful relations between neighbours of different confessional positions and an increase in social cohesion is one the Church shares since it is committed to the love of neighbour and 'love for all men and women is necessarily also a love for their culture. Catholic schools are, by their very vocation, intercultural' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 2013, para. 61). Nevertheless, even though these civic goals for Religious Education are ones that the Church shares with the democratic institutions of Europe they are motivated by different sets of fundamental values. For the Church, the commitment to interreligious and intercultural dialogue flows from the recognition of the dignity of every person who is made *imago Dei* and of the imperative to search for the truth together, since 'dialogue is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation' (Pope Francis, 2017). For the authors of the Toledo principles, it is for the sake of 'human rights, religious freedom, democratic societies and mutual respect' (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007, p. 21) and to uphold those democratic institutions that preserve these values. While most readers, and this author, would affirm the basic goodness of all these things, they are not value-neutral and they also present a vision of the benignity of the nation state, which leads to the second critique that can be offered of attempts to define objectivity in terms of value-neutrality.

(ii) The myth of the objective state

This second critique is directed towards the weak sense of axiological objectivity outlined above (p.59) that education is objective if it teaches only those universal moral values that are the product of our shared humanity, or whose validity can be rationally justified independently of any particular religious, or otherwise ideologically underpinned, worldview (values that are 'value-free'). This weaker sense of axiological objectivity often depends upon an assertion of the independence and objectivity of the state. The myth of the objective state, its presumed benignity, and its arbitrating function in a plural society, often lie at the root of contemporary critiques of the public provision of schools with a religious character. For example, in their pamphlet *How to regulate faith schools*, Clayton et al (2018), argue that Religious Education that has faith formation as one of its goals is so potentially harmful to children and to civic life that the right of parents to choose an education for their children that is 'in conformity with their own religious and philosophical convictions' (European Court of Human Rights, 1952, Art. 2) is one that ought to be significantly curtailed by the state. The authors propose that a nationally regulated

curriculum in 'civic, religious, ethical and moral (CREaM) education' (Clayton *et al.*, 2018, p. 6) ought to be imposed on all children in every kind of school and even on those who are schooled at home by their parents since the 'right to educate one's children at home – and to provide a directive Religious Education – does not include the right to raise them in ignorance of other ways of living, or to demand exclusive control over their education in ways that are inimical to their developing tolerant and respectful attitudes to others' (Clayton *et al.*, 2018, p. 39). This policy recommendation, and the significant overreach of the state into the homes of religious families it implies, reflects just such a presumption of the benignity of the state. There is the further implication that raising children in any particular faith is suspect, since it will lead to a fracturing of civic life and their inability to form tolerant and respectful attitudes to those who do not share their confessional commitments. This conviction runs so deep for the authors of this pamphlet that they go beyond merely offering guidelines (as in the Toledo principles) to proposing the imposition of legal restrictions on the liberties of religious people.

In proposing these restrictions, the authors of the pamphlet are uncritically accepting the view that religious commitment is a potential source of social fragmentation and violent conflict, and that the state, as an objective arbiter between different confessional factions, has a role in securing the peace of the plural communities that exist within its borders. The state does so, not by offering a value-neutral education, but by offering an education that promotes liberal principles that are beyond contestation, by offering an education whose values are 'objective', precisely because they lack a confessional position. In this, they are arguably buying into the myth of the modern, nation state as the 'scolding schoolteacher on the playground of doctrinal dispute' whose role it is 'to put fanatical religionists in their proper place' (Cavanaugh, 1995, p. 408). This is a myth in the benign sense of providing the modern, liberal state with a founding narrative. The presentation of liberalism as the historical movement that liberated people from the fictions of faith, and released them into the free realms of reason, is a contrast that allows liberalism to give an account of its origins that clearly place it above the warring impulses of the religions it supplanted.

Cavanaugh (1995) challenges this presentation of this relationship between nations and religions and points towards the ways in which the myth has a far less benign consequence. Cavanaugh argues that contrary to the usual presentation of the liberal state as the pacific mediator between the religious factions in the so-called 'wars of religion', these wars were in fact perpetrated by the emerging nation states of medieval Europe themselves, who were unprincipled in their manipulation of religious sentiment to justify

the absolute authority of the states that were only just beginning to emerge from the fragmented feudal status quo that had preceded them. In fact, Cavanaugh argues, it is only with the emergence of the nation-state that the concept of 'religion' becomes defined at all. Its articulation as an idea is used precisely to domesticate religion, such that the absolute loyalty of the citizen from then on, belongs not to God, but to the sovereign. Furthermore, the absolute loyalty now owed includes the willingness to engage in violent conflict with any peoples who oppose the sovereign will or threaten the borders of the new nation-state. In this way, the modern nation-state takes the place of religion in its demand on the ultimate loyalty of its citizens. This becomes relevant in the context of this research when teaching about the supposedly uncontested values of the modern liberal state becomes a way of attempting to secure the absolute and uncritical loyalty of the citizen to that state.

The role of the British state in the promotion of values through education has been strengthened in recent years through the requirement on all schools to promote 'fundamental British values.' Interestingly, given Cavanaugh's claim that religion as a concept arises because of the need for nation-states to defend themselves, this requirement first appeared in precisely the context of defence of the nation state against terrorist threats. The first use of the phrase 'fundamental British values' was not in an educational context, but in the context of the UK government's counter-terrorism strategy, where extremism was defined as 'vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (Home Office, 2011, p. 107). This list, which in this initial context are given as exemplars, are hardened into a defined list by the time they make their way into the mechanisms that bring about the teaching of fundamental British values as a professional requirement for all teachers and schools. This requirement is codified in two significant places: in the Teacher's Standards (Department for Education, 2011, p. 14) and in the Ofsted inspection framework (Ofsted, 2015, p. 13).

The requirements on both individual teachers, in both their professional and personal lives, and on schools to promote fundamental British values has been problematised by, amongst others, Panjwani (2016) and Revell and Bryan (2018).

The first problem they both raise is with the attribution of 'British' to a list of what might otherwise be seen to be a selection of liberal values, widely shared amongst modern democracies of all national stripes. This attribution is not just problematic because of the

exclusivity of this mislabelling, but also because of the othering effect it has on minority religious groups, specifically and most sharply, on Muslim communities. The first reason for this is historical. Revell and Bryan (2018) point out that the idea of Britishness is historically situated and has a morally compromised character, rooted as it is in the colonial history of the nation and the tacit (and sometimes explicit) racism of that history. Historically Britishness has almost always been defined in exclusionary ways, and 'although there have been many Britons and many versions of Britishness, they have all been constructed against an "other"' (Revell and Bryan, 2018, p. 37). The earliest attempts to define 'Britishness,' claim Revell and Bryan, were straightforwardly racist in character and based upon the biological determination that only fell out of fashion after the consequent horror of such views was revealed in the genocides of the Second World War. Later definitions, which were subtler, defined Britishness in counterpoint to other cultures, rather than other races. These were less overtly racist in character, but still carried some of the overtones of the earlier racial chauvinism, especially when it was combined with anxieties about immigration. The latest definition, enshrined in fundamental British values, is perhaps more insidious since it is dressed in the garb of a liberal commitment to respect for difference. It is insidious because the 'other', against whom Britishness is now defined, is now viewed as culpable for their difference and therefore able to be vilified without compunction. This is because the context in which the newly defined British values arose is that of a strategic response to the threat of terrorism and 'terrorist' or 'extremist' is an identity that is supposedly chosen, not inherited. These values are now used to identify those who stand apart wilfully, as opposed to those who just happen to be different racially or culturally, and teachers are expected to police this as part of their professional duties under the Prevent requirements. Because of the historical contingencies which give rise to the articulation of fundamental British values, they feel alienating to some more than others, even when those who experience this sense of alienation would otherwise have no difficulty in assenting to those values if encountered in other contexts. As one of Panjwani's interviewees noted: 'As a Muslim I am both suspected of extremism by the state and expected to be a guardian against it. This is contradictory' (Panjwani, 2016, p. 337).

The second problem is the contradiction implied by a state's imposition of liberal values: while the values themselves may be liberal, having the state define for citizens what their values ought to be is decidedly illiberal. The problem is sharper still, however, because of the role the teacher now plays in policing discourse. As Revell and Bryan put it:

> The promotion of democracy, tolerance, or the rule of law in the context where extremism and radicalization are defined against liberalism, means these ideas are stripped of their liberality. Teachers are expected to act in new and different ways in relation to Prevent, but in doing so they are compelled to act as representatives of the state in both the public and private realms of their lives. And acting as arbiters of the ideas of pupils, they lose the liberal privilege of exercising the right of expression and political will in their own lives. (Revell and Bryan, 2018, p. 104)

This inquisitorial role now required of teachers also has a chilling effect on the criticality of the classroom. It introduces suspicion into a context that should be marked by free and open enquiry. The closing down of critical spaces in education is one that Panjwani's interviewees also identified as a consequence of the requirement to promote fundamental British values, such that schools 'have been deprived of their role of creating critical minds through a fear of criminalisation' (Panjwani, 2016, p. 338).

The questions that Pajwani and Revell and Bryan raise about fundamental British values stand as an implicit critique of those proposing to impose a monolithic religions and values curriculum on all pupils (at school or at home) such as Clayton et al. (2018) who reference these values uncritically as the basis of their CREaM curriculum (Clayton *et al.*, 2018, p. 9). It also raises the question of whether a distinction can really be made, as Hand (2018) and Norman (2012a) would assert, between those values that are confessionally or ideologically located and therefore contestable (and must be taught as such), and those that are universally held by all right-minded people and can therefore be considered objective (and may be taught directively – such as is the case with fundamental British values). It is to the claim that such a distinction can be made that I will now turn.

(iii) The false distinction between 'rationally justified' and 'ideologically positioned' values
Since the requirement in the UK to teach fundamental British values applies to all schools and does not include the right of parents to withdraw from the teaching of these values, 'objectivity' cannot mean, in the UK at least, that education must be value-neutral. However, for those who support the directive teaching of certain values, the argument is that what makes that teaching objective is either a) that the values taught are only those that are universally held, that is, they are '*shared* human values' (Norman, 2012a, p. 97, emphasis in original) or b) that the values taught can be rationally justified and such justification would not be 'a matter of reasonable disagreement among reasonable people' (Hand, 2018, p. 69). Each would distinguish these rationally justified values from those (such as those taught in Catholic schools) they would view as ideologically positioned and

therefore which lack the indubitable character of values that could legitimately be taught directively. However, there are a number of problems that can be raised in attempting to draw a legitimate distinction between so-called rationally justified and ideologically positioned values.

The problem with the Norman's way of making the distinction between the values that it is acceptable to teach directively and those that it is not, is that it requires an empirical demonstration of the universality of those values, which it would be impossible to achieve (since asking everyone in the world is presumably excluded as a practical possibility). If this is softened to mean only that a *majority* of people share the values, then other sorts of problem arise. Thiessen (1993) points out that those who are critical of schools with a religious character accuse them of indoctrination because they teach 'doctrines' and they define doctrines as those beliefs about which there is public disagreement. Beliefs about which there is no public disagreement would not count as doctrines. There is a difficulty with this however, which is to do with the way that such a definition of a doctrine does not adequately do the work required to distinguish doctrines from other kinds of belief. As Thiessen (1993, p. 71) puts it:

> How is 'public' to be defined in the expression public agreement? ...If public
> agreement is strictly defined as unanimous agreement by all the public, then all
> beliefs are doctrines as there is no belief that is not disputed by someone.

Cooling (2010) similarly raises questions about the use of universality (that is, the 'sharedness' of values) as the distinguisher between those values that may be treated as 'objective' and those that would be considered contestable, ideological or positioned. Cooling (2010, pp. 28–29) asks what exactly those like Norman mean when they speak of 'shared values':

> Do they mean values that people do share as a matter of fact, or values that people
> think others ought to share because they are clearly objective? ...The problem
> comes when there [is] a slide from assuming that shared values are uncontroversial
> *because people do in fact share them* to assuming that shared values are
> uncontroversial so that people ought to share them *because they are obvious
> "common sense"*.

There is a risk that all that 'shared values' ends up meaning is the values that happen to be shared by 'people like us' and that 'objectivity' is nothing more than subjectivity illegitimately elevated to an unwarranted position of authority.

It is perhaps for this reason that others, like Hand (2018), make the distinction between those values it is acceptable to teach directively, and those it is not, by an appeal to the rational justifiability of certain values, in contrast to the ideological grounding of other sorts of value, for instance those promoted by religious people. It is for this reason that Hand makes a distinction between moral enquiry and moral formation (Hand, 2018, pp. 30–40). For Hand, moral formation is permissible (the directive teaching of moral values) only if moral enquiry (a critical examination of the rational justification of values) has demonstrated that they *are* rationally justified. Here he is exemplifying an approach to moral reasoning that MacIntrye (1988, p. 3) has described as typical of a certain kind of academic philosopher within the western, analytic tradition, where it is argued that what rationality requires is:

> that we first divest ourselves of allegiance to any one of the contending theories and also abstract ourselves from all those particularities of social relationship in terms of which we have been accustomed to understand our responsibilities and our interests.

And, for Hand, this sort of moral justification must always precede any attempt at moral formation and should never be wholly separable from it. Moral enquiry is both an important foundation and a buttress to moral formation for Hand since 'the tools of moral formation are blunted if children's justificatory questions go unanswered, and in part because it is harder for moral agents to hold themselves to moral standards if they cannot see the reasons for them' (Hand, 2018, p. 43). The need to provide reasons for belief is a completely reasonable requirement (literally), and not one, presumably, that Catholic educators would disagree with. Where they may find difficulty in going along with Hand, is in his confident assertion that the particular method of moral reasoning he employs (moral contractarianism) would put his own moral convictions, or at least his reasons for holding them, 'beyond dispute' among all 'reasonable people' (Hand, 2018, p. 69).

The problem with making the distinction in the way Hand proposes are highlighted, for example, by Aldridge (2019) who takes issue with Hand's approach for two principal reasons. First, he argues that Hand has wrongly given priority to moral enquiry over moral formation in the task of educating for morality. He argues that moral enquiry can never precede moral formation because reasons are *never* sufficient to persuade people to recognise the demands of morality if they do not already recognise the normativity of morality as a given. If 'why should I be moral?' is a genuine question that needs to be asked, it is unlikely that any answer, no matter how well-grounded in rational justification,

would satisfy the enquirer. Aldridge draws on Standish (1997, p. 51) here, who points out that we do not teach children that murder is wrong, or present the arguments in favour of the wrongness of murder, rather:

> the wrongness is built into our world, and the young child absorbs this as part of the background. If she does not, or if she wants to do (this kind of) wrong, it's not that she doesn't know the rules: something has gone wrong with her world.

It is the initiation into the right kind of world that is most important if we want human beings to recognise the social responsibilities that are the basis of all human community. Therefore, reasons come second to the moral initiation that is required for a child to learn how to live well as a person among persons. This initiation will, to some degree bypass the autonomy of those who are being morally formed, but this is a necessary feature of that formation. Contrary to those who may view this kind of initiation as indoctrinatory, it could be argued that failure to adequately initiate children into the moral community, is not to set them free to make their own rational choices about right and wrong but is straightforward negligence. The kind of moral autonomy Hand desires in terms of moral enquiry depends on moral formation because, as Standish (1997, p. 53) points out, a 'kind of authoritarianism *is* involved, especially when it comes to the upbringing of young children. As we have seen, they do not simply emerge as autonomous beings who judge whether or not they should obey rules. Rather, they reach autonomy after a process of acculturation...Without this, the learner can scarcely be a person.'

This leads to the second reason why Aldridge objects to Hand's attempt to ground a universal morality on reason alone. This second critique is aimed specifically at the kind of moral reasoning he uses to legitimise the principles of morality that can be directively taught. For Hand, the rational basis for morality is the recognition of human beings as social animals and their need to rely on each other to survive and thrive. This is the contractarian nature of Hand's proposal: that we ought to treat others morally since we need them to treat us morally in turn, the aphoristic, 'you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.' However, in a world determined purely by the *quid pro quo* of contractual obligation, there is no reason to serve the needs of those who can offer nothing in return. To put it bluntly, if you are in fact unable to scratch my back, why *should* I scratch yours? The kind of sympathy required to recognise others in need and our responsibility to respond to that need, irrespective of what we receive in return, already requires some deeper social bond that is prerational. It is prerational, as Standish (1997, p. 52) makes clear, because even before we come to full self-awareness as children 'we are confronted by others.

People who look after us, but also look to us in anticipation. From our beginnings, we discover ourselves in the faces of others as they respond to us, and in the response they look for in return...We are responsible before we are anything else.'

This problem with contractarian moral theories is sometimes called the 'free-rider' problem. A pure contract-based morality would never be able to persuade those who are intent on taking advantage of the situation to their own advantage to have sympathy for those who offer them nothing in return. Hand dismisses the 'free-rider' problem by asserting that such people are rare and that most human beings do in fact have a natural sympathy for other human beings. Aldridge, however, points out that while an appeal to sympathy is exactly the right move, it is categorically not an appeal to reason. Hence the need for a prior initiation into the obligations that bind a community, as pointed out above. But it is worse than that for moral contractarians, Aldridge claims, since the social contract would only be suasive if the structures of society were already experienced as equitable. However, far from being an exception, the 'free-rider' is positively extolled in a liberal society shaped by free-market capitalism. Hand, Aldridge (2019, p. 641) argues, 'does not consider the possibility that the free riders actually run the show, and that their unsympathetic qualities are even being held up as models for successful living'.

What is needed, Aldridge, argues, is for students to be initiated into a community that exemplifies human sympathy as one its most basic components, that presents altruism as an intrinsic good, that sees all human beings as possessing of innate dignity. In short, it seems to require a commitment that we love each other, a commitment that lies at the root of all Catholic schools, where education should be experienced not primarily as a means of securing 'material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 56), where pupils experience their dignity as persons before they 'know its definition' (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1977, para. 55).[11] Teaching a child the importance of love is not achieved

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[11] This is not to assert that only Catholic schools promote the importance of love, but it is interesting to note how outsiders frequently view this as something that sets Catholic schools apart from other kinds of school. For example, Lucy Kellaway, a journalist for the Financial Times, decided late in her career to become a teacher. She taught first in London and since 2022 has taught in a Catholic school in the North East of England. Of this school she writes:

> I listened with disbelief in the first staff meeting when we were told it was our job to love all our students — especially the ones who were hardest to love. This was a departure from the successful academy school in east London where I trained, when staff would gather together in the name of no excuses, exam results and value-added scores. This emphasis on love seems to me oddly profound, because from it everything else flows. If you force

primarily (or indeed at all) by presenting arguments in favour of love, but simply by loving them and modelling for them what living in a loving community means.

If Aldridge is right, it does not seem possible to make an adequate distinction between those values that are rationally justifiable and those that are merely reflective of the ideology of the community to which a person belongs. In all communities, the ethos is more basic than the ethics. By holding up contract as the basis for the moral life, Hand is perhaps unconsciously revealing the extent to which his own ethics are already formed by the ethos of the secular, liberal, capitalist culture of which he (and most of us in the UK) are members. It is arguable that the values he extols as universal and rationally justified are no less positioned than those who would ground them in a contrary narrative that places the innate dignity of human beings at its centre, for example. With this acknowledgement of the role of traditions in shaping of values we come to a final critique that can be offered to Hand's and Norman's attempt to make a distinction between values that are rationally grounded and those that are ideologically rooted.

Both Gadamer (1960) in philosophy and Macintrye (1981, 1988) in ethics point to the ineradicable place of traditions as a necessary ground for understanding and for the making of moral judgements. For Gadamer, prerational prejudices, which are an inevitable feature of human historicity and tradition, are not inimical to understanding but are in fact a precondition of it. This is related to the insights I explored above ('The inaccessibility of "raw facts'"), that make clear that understanding is only possible within traditions of interpretation, and that these traditions are inescapably part of what it means to be human. As Gadamer (1960, p. 292,294) says, tradition 'has a justification that lies beyond rational grounding and in large measure determines our institutions and attitudes...We are always situated within traditions,...we do not conceive of what tradition says as something other, something alien. It is always part of us.' Any attempt to find a rational basis for judgement outside of the historicity of the human condition are misguided. The attempt by Norman and Hand to extricate certain moral values from this nexus of traditions as having a special status that grants them greater objectivity is questionable from this perspective, since it relies on a view of human rationality which is itself the product of a particular tradition of thought, that of western, analytic liberalism. An appeal to rationality itself, as Hand

yourself to care deeply for every one of your students, you work harder for them, you want the best for them. All the other stuff I learnt in teacher training after leaving my job as a columnist at the Financial Times — differentiation and assessment for learning — seems a bit by the by. (Kellaway, 2022)

attempts, is only possible from within a post-enlightenment tradition, and rather than liberate a thinker from the prejudices of tradition (one of the purported aims of the enlightenment according to Gadamer) it ties him all the more tightly, since his position as part of a tradition has become invisible to him, and thereby placed his moral certainties beyond critical scrutiny. This allows such thinkers, for example, to justify an illiberal imposition of the values they extol on others because they have fallen under the influence of what Gadamer (1960, p. 282) calls 'the tyranny of hidden prejudices.'

The repudiation of the view that rationality stands apart from the flow of history is one of the central themes of MacIntyre's attempt to redefine the moral project in both *After Virtue* (1981) and *Whose Justice, Which Rationality?* (1988). He outlines the ways in which, since the enlightenment, successive philosophers have tried and failed to ground morality on reason alone, without reference to a coherent vision of the meaning of the human person, as was provided by the previous medieval scheme, and its predecessor, the Aristotelian scheme of classical antiquity. He asserts (1981, p. 50) that the project to provide a rational vindication of morality has 'decisively failed' and in the absence of a shared understanding of the purpose of human existence religion once provided, any currently prevalent understandings of morality lack 'any public shared rationale or justification.' He goes on:

> ...the failure of philosophy to provide what religion could no longer furnish was an important cause of philosophy losing its central cultural role and becoming a marginal, narrowly academic subject.

If this is true, then any attempt to distinguish between moral schemes that are rationally grounded, and those that are ideologically positioned is not possible. In fact, those educators who are aware of the tradition out of which they speak (such as, hopefully, those within Catholic schools) would be better placed than those who do not, to initiate their students into critical moral enquiry. It allows education to become a genuine dialogue, and not just a monologue determined by prevailing cultural norms. Those who are ignorant of their own ideology are the ones most likely to be constrained by it.

This is the kind of view that Thiessen (1993) also affirms. He points out that all education is an initiation into a particular community of practice and this initiation is always non-rational in character. Even liberal education, Thiessen (1993, p. 115) points out 'while it aims at the development of rationality, must begin with non-rational teaching methods.' Learning how to be rational is not something that can be achieved rationally, since this is precisely the faculty that is, as yet, unformed in the pupil:

> Even as the child matures, learning to be rational proceeds largely on an apprenticeship model in which the master passes on the art of being rational to his or her apprentices...Apprenticing to be rational proceeds in all areas by identification with and uncritical imitation of a master of rationality. (Thiessen, 1993, pp. 115–116)

However, even though the process is itself non-rational, successful initiation into a community of practice will be what ultimately allows critical engagement with that community's norms and presuppositions. Indeed, it is a precondition of it, and it is justifiable, Thiessen (1993, p. 94, citing White, 1972) claims, to make a child 'unfree now so as to give him as much autonomy as possible later on.' And it is only '*after* children have been initiated into the public traditions that they can begin to evaluate them critically'(Thiessen, 1993, p. 95). Thus, despite the suspicions of indoctrination that underpin objections to an education that aims at religious formation, it should be clear that such formation is not necessarily at the expense of critical engagement. To put it even more strongly, if Gadamer, MacIntrye and Thiessen are right, such formation, or something equivalent to it in a secular space, is not only not inimical to critical engagement, but is in fact, essential for its flourishing.

In summary, the attempt to define objectivity axiologically as value-neutrality appears to fail. First, even when absolute value-neutrality is attempted, as in the methods of the empirical sciences, it is questionable whether it is ever possible. While science must only theorise on the basis of observation, those observations will not themselves provide sufficient ground for theory selection and in which case other factors – including non-cognitive values – will be determinative. Second, value-neutrality is not, in any case, seen as a desirable feature of education, even if it were possible. Furthermore, any attempt to distinguish between those values it is legitimate to impose universally and those that are ideologically positioned, runs the risk of becoming a disguised kind of authoritarianism. This is especially true if the state believes itself to be an objective arbiter of those values, rather than recognising itself as an agent, with a deep investment in the promotion of those values that support its continued existence. Finally, any attempt to distinguish between rationally justified and ideologically positioned values fails if it presumes it is possible to abstract rationality from history and the traditions of interpretation that populate that history.

Even if it is true that objectivity cannot be defined substantively, nor axiologically, there remains one final way of defining objectivity and it is connected to the final point made

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above by Thiessen about the ultimate purpose of initiation into a tradition: the development of critical thought in students. It is the creation of a dialogical 'safe space' (Jackson, 2014, p. 47) that allows such criticality, which is the motivation for defining objectivity in terms of the position of the educator, rather than in terms of the type of content being taught, or the manner in which it is taught. It is to this idea of personal objectivity to which I now turn.

Personal Objectivity: objectivity as professional distance

This kind of objectivity is defined in terms of the educator themselves, and the extent to which their confessional identity impinges on their role as professional educators. There is a distinction in the literature between what I am terming a 'hard' and a 'soft' variant of this kind of objectivity. One of these would be more problematic for religious educators in Catholic schools than the other, although even the softer variant remains demanding for Religious Education in a Catholic school. This distinction between hard and soft variants of personal objectivity, described in one way or another, is made by most of the researchers who interrogate this phenomenon. Jackson and Everington (2017, p. 10), for example, make a distinction between 'neutrality' (hard objectivity) and 'impartiality' (soft objectivity). Moore (1995), on the other hand refers to hard objectivity sometimes as 'the myth of objectivity' (p.208), and sometimes as 'naïve objectivity' (p.216) and distinguishes it from the softer objectivity with the term 'intersubjectivity' (p.208). Finally, Cooling, like Jackson and Everington, uses the term 'neutrality' to refer to what I am here describing as the hard variant of personal objectivity, and describes the soft variant as 'reflexivity' (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 57). In what follows I will define the difference between the hard and soft variants of personal objectivity and then offer a critical reflection on each.

(i) Personal objectivity: the hard and soft variants

The hard variant of personal objectivity requires teachers to treat their own confessional commitments as irrelevant, or even as impediments, to their professional identities as religious educators. On this view, the faith or otherwise of the teacher of education should be kept as far from the classroom as possible. Teachers of Religious Education should attempt an absolute distance from all religious and ideological positions, including their own, to secure the impartiality and freedom from bias that is seen as the duty of the professional religious educator. Cooling (2002, p. 46) has described it as an expectation on teachers that they 'leave their religious commitment at the school gate. Teachers, and indeed pupils, [are] encouraged to bracket out their own beliefs when studying religion.' This should extend, on this view, to teachers refusing to reveal fundamental commitments that are constitutive of their identity, even when asked directly by students. This form of

personal objectivity, Jackson and Everington (2017, p. 10) label as 'neutrality' and it requires 'concealment of any personal commitment on the teacher's part.' Not only does neutral Religious Education require the teacher to disguise, or ignore, her own personal views but it also extends to the pupils, whose 'personal views are set to one side' (Jackson and Everington, 2017, p. 10).

For Moore (1995), the view that revealing of one's own confessional position represents a subjectivity that has no place in the classroom, requires a dichotomy between objectivity and subjectivity, which itself stands on a more fundamental dichotomy between public discourse and private religion. These dichotomies represent, as Moore describes it, (1995, pp. 207–208) 'the modernist movement to privatise religion and to search for value-neutrality and objectivity in public discourse.' She refers to this as 'naïve objectivity' (p.216) and she claims that in its pursuit, teachers are to 'seek what is assumed to be total objectivity in studying [religious] phenomena, demonstrating how critical their critical reflection on religion can be' (Moore, 1995, p. 209) and 'that religious scholarship can and should be done with a complete reliance on concrete evidence independent of the mind of the scholar'.

Each of the descriptions of the hard form of personal objectivity provided by the writers above are offered in order to critique it. However, there are good reasons for arguing that Religious Education should be objective in this sense of personal objectivity because of anxieties about indoctrination, the need for education that is inclusive, and the fear of misrepresenting those who are the object of the study. The problem with abandoning all attempts to be objective is that it leads to the privileging of the teacher's own worldview at the expense of all others, some of which may be conscientiously held by those being taught, and subsequently 'excluding alternatives, misrepresenting other views and abusing one's authority as a teacher by treating...controversial issue[s] as non-controversial' (Cooling, 2002, p. 50). However, those who critique the hard form of personal objectivity outlined above are alert to these risks but point to a more nuanced understanding of personal objectivity which, they argue, addresses the fears of indoctrination, exclusivity, and misrepresentation more adequately.

The softer variant of personal objectivity is perhaps better described as a transparency of subjectivity, since it does not require that teachers leave their confessional commitments outside of the classroom but does constrain the ways in which these commitments can influence the Religious Education they offer. Rather than allowing their confessional

commitments to tacitly influence classroom activity in ways that could be construed as coercive, they present their worldview to pupils precisely *as* a worldview. They thereby expose it to critical scrutiny and initiate an exchange that invites pupils to engage in a respectful and reflective dialogue, as they discern their own positionality in response. In this way, pupils are being initiated into practising the kind of reflexivity that is one of the markers of responsible scholarship. Jackson and Everington (2017, p. 10) call this kind of objectivity 'impartiality' and describe it as involving 'organising teaching and learning without discrimination as to ethnicity, religion, class or political opinions, with freedom of expression allowed' and so making 'the classroom into a safe space for dialogue and discussion.'

For Moore (1995, p. 221), the softer form of objectivity she refers to as intersubjectivity provides Religious Education with a more respectable epistemological basis since it does not rely on an unsustainable assertion of the possibility of absolute objectivity. Rejecting the disinterestedness that is often presented as the gold standard of the natural sciences, she calls for a more 'honest view of human knowing' which recognises that the object of study in Religious Education is always at the same time an autonomous subject. The intersubjectivity she recommends rather 'requires that teachers and students allow 'the "other" to be a subject and to represent itself to them.' In addition, not only is the object of study a subject, but teachers and their pupils are also 'shapers of knowledge (subjects).' What gives this intersubjective approach its objectivity is precisely the same transparency of subjectivity, I referred to above, that allows both teacher and pupils to become conscious of the worldview out of which they emerge as they engage in dialogue in the classroom. She says if the 'teachers and learners attend to their own traditions and experiences and attend, also, to others – hearing the voices and seeing the perspectives of those whom they study' then each will become 'conscious of their points of view and interpretations' and thereby able to engage more authentically and 'openly in the discovery of knowledge.'

Cooling (2002, 2019; Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020) presents his own version of this intersubjective, soft form of personal objectivity, which he refers to as reflexivity. He first outlines this understanding as part of what he originally describes as a 'meta-narrative' (2002, p. 43) approach to Religious Education and, more recently, as a 'worldviews approach' (Cooling, 2019; Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020). Again, as with Moore's 'intersubjectivity', and Jackson's and Everington's 'impartiality', it requires a transparency of subjectivity and 'involves the honest admission that every teacher comes to RE with a

meta-narrative which defines for them what is the nature and importance of religion' (Cooling, 2002, p. 48). By meta-narrative he means stories that 'express our whole understanding of the world and which help people to make sense of their lives' (Cooling, 2002, p. 43). These meta-narratives are expressive of an individual's most fundamental commitments about the nature of reality, the purpose of human existence, and their place within that scheme. Therefore, to ask anyone to leave these at the classroom door before they embark on a lesson that touches on some of the most fundamental questions of human existence, would seem potentially dishonest, and at least a missed opportunity to deepen the understanding of both teacher and pupil about the diverse and complex world in which they both live. At this point, Cooling draws upon the critical realist paradigm, most fully articulated in relation to Religious Education by Wright (2016, p. 46) who asserts: there is a reality external to us that is given (ontological realism); our ability to comprehend the givenness of this external reality is partial, perspectival and limited (epistemic relativity); as a consequence, we live in a world that contains disputed interpretations of the nature of this external reality, which leads to disagreement, and requires a commitment to dialogue to allow a shared exploration of truth and its implications for our lives (judgmental rationality). For Cooling (2002, p. 49), in the Religious Education classroom, this requires an openness about our starting points, both as teachers and learners, so that the shared search for truth becomes authentic through acknowledging the positioned and partial nature of our knowing. Here Cooling (2019, p. 5) prefers the term 'epistemic humility' to Wright's (2006, p.46) epistemic relativity. Either way such an approach creates a space where everyone in the classroom – including the teacher – can reflect on the adequacy of the meta-narratives that form the foundations of their being in the world. As Cooling (2002, p. 49) puts it:

> Given the fact of the existence in society of many different claims to 'the truth', the educational task is to equip pupils with the skills and knowledge necessary for making judgments themselves as to the nature of that truth.

The reference to 'truth' here aligns with Moore's (1995, p. 221) description of the task of the classroom as the 'discovery of knowledge' and reflects the predominantly cognitive way in which Cooling appears to have thought about meta-narrative at the time. His more recent shift to the language of worldview broadens the concept beyond just the consideration of truth-claims and foregrounds the holism of what he describes as a 'worldviews' approach (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 33).

The shift to a language of worldviews, and away from the language of meta-narratives, appears to indicate two key ways in which Cooling's ideas have developed. The first is to expand the concept of meta-narrative beyond the merely cognitive, and the second is to supplement (or perhaps replace) the former critical realist paradigm position with one more rooted in the hermeneutical approach of Gadamer. Partly in response to critics, such as Hannam and Biesta (2019, 2023), Cooling has made clear that he now recognises, if he was previously guilty of thinking otherwise, that human beings are more than simply 'brains on sticks' (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 38). Here he references the work of Smith (2016, 2019), who likewise critiques the idea that human beings are not 'primarily thinking things, or...believing animals' (Smith, 2019, p. 18), but rather, as Smith (2019, p. 40,75) puts it, 'liturgical animals – embodied, practising creatures...desiring agents with a passional orientation to the ultimate.' Cooling agrees and broadens the definition of worldview beyond that previously given of meta-narrative, to include not only 'deeply-held, unquestioned beliefs' but also 'taken-for-granted ways of behaving' (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 28).

This extension of the idea of meta-narrative to include the ways of being in the world as well as the ways of thinking about that world is compatible with a recognition of the importance of initiation into a tradition of interpretation as a precondition of understanding. This expanded definition of worldview to include not only believing but also behaving and belonging, leads Cooling (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 28) to avoid referring to individuals as having a worldview, preferring to speak instead of them as inhabiting a worldview.

Building on this extended understanding of worldview allows Cooling to make the second shift to a more hermeneutical approach to Religious Education and to refine his understanding of what personal objectivity in the classroom now requires of the teacher. While previously he had referred to Religious Education helping students, in dialogue with others, to discern what is true for themselves (Cooling, 2002, p. 49), he later has cause to critique this overly cognitive explanation as insufficiently hermeneutical and reflexive. It can too easily become, as Cooling (2019, p. 6) puts it, like 'the "spectator's guide to a worldviews approach", where information is king and the teacher presents children with a brochure of options from which they freely choose a personal lifestyle.' Hannam and Biesta (2023, pp. 107–108) too express concerns about the risk of relativism that such an approach can entail, since '...the task of education is [to] allow for children and young people to give their emerging views and values a "reality check," so to speak, in order to

begin to figure out which views, beliefs and preferences are going to help in living a worthwhile life...this challenge needs to be on the educational agenda in order to prevent an 'anything goes' situation.' However, Cooling has always recognised this risk, (see, for example, Cooling, 2002, p. 46; Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 23) and the worldviews approach, for him, requires responsible interpretation of one own's worldview and a reckoning with the implicit challenge made through dialogue with those who do not share such a worldview. It is a caricature of his position to refer to it as an 'anything goes' attitude. On the contrary, Cooling (2019, p. 7) asserts that, for pupils, a worldviews approach is not

> ...about having the information to make personal autonomous decisions. Rather, it is about understanding how we are all shaped by our desires, and of the importance of taking responsibility for the person that makes us.

This shift to the idea of responsible hermeneutics – of interpreting well – is the basis for the kind of objectivity Cooling now sees as required of the teacher of Religious Education, who needs to model for pupils what it means to be 'a reflexive inhabitant' of a worldview.

Given that all teachers – indeed all schools – will inhabit a worldview, the question then becomes, as Cooling (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 76) puts it: 'how can the inevitable worldview influence that all schools and all teachers exert be exercised in a responsible and professional way that promotes both the autonomy and the critical judgement of the pupils?' The first thing that is required is reflexivity. This includes transparency of subjectivity, or as Cooling puts it 'being able to identify one's own pre-understandings' and acknowledging with the pupils the ways in which the teacher's own positionality will affect how she presents what is being taught, and the methods she uses to teach them. It also requires that she create opportunities to explore the hermeneutical insight that this is true of everyone, including the pupils engaged in the Religious Education learning. Second, it requires pluralism: a commitment to ensure that the worldviews of others are a feature of the learning, so that the diversity within and between worldviews can be recognised and accepted as a legitimate and necessary feature of plural communities. Third, it requires authenticity: the teacher must allow those who do not share her worldview, or that of the school, the right to represent themselves as they are, not as they seem when filtered through the lens of her own, or the school's, worldview. Fourth, it requires dialogue: the creation of classrooms, and activities, that open up dialogical spaces, demonstrating that understanding is a hermeneutical activity, which is always relational in character, and includes critical examination of the presumptions that underpin

the worldviews of those engaged in the study. There is a video produced by Theos (Downe, 2021), which accompanied the publication of the CoRE report, and it concludes with a powerful distillation of this whole approach. Addressed to pupils of Religious Education it ends by asking: 'Nobody stands nowhere; do you know where you stand? And why?' In the softer form of personal objectivity, it is the teacher's openness about her own answers to these questions, the invitation to pupils in the class to respond likewise and to engage critically with hers, that guarantee the inclusivity of the classroom and preserves the personal objectivity of the teacher, without requiring her to deny her own self.

Now that the contours of these different understandings of personal objectivity have been outlined, I will critically examine each and consider the issues they could potentially raise for religious educators in Catholic schools.

(ii) Issues with the hard variant: Witness, performativity, and authenticity

One of the first criticisms of the hard variant of personal objectivity arises from a recognition of the fact that many people become teachers of Religious Education *because* they are religious (Cooling, 2002). If denial of confessional commitment is perceived to be a genuine professional requirement of religious educators, we might expect that this contingent fact about the kinds of people who become religious educators would lead to tensions. These tensions would be even more pronounced in Catholic schools where not only does it happen to be the case that teachers of Religious Education are religious, but in addition, the requirement to be a practising Catholic is a condition of employment for at least some Religious Education posts in Catholic schools.[12] This reflects the fact that in the teaching documents of the Catholic Church there is a presumption that teachers (and especially teachers of Religious Education teachers) will be 'witnesses in word and deed to the Divine Teacher, Jesus Christ' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2014, p. 1). This expectation is ubiquitous in the magisterial documents of the Church that speak of the role of teachers in Catholic schools. There is a straightforward incompatibility between the requirement that teachers in Catholic schools be witnesses to the faith and the hard form of personal of objectivity outlined above. Witnessing is the opposite of neutrality, and it would be impossible to share one's personal faith, if prohibited from

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[12] The Catholic bishops of England and Wales have expressed a desire that as far as possible, employers at Catholic schools 'will employ Catholic teachers who combine personal conviction and practice of the faith with the required professional qualifications and experience' and insist that 'as a minimum requirement…the posts of Head Teacher or Principal, Deputy Head Teacher or Deputy Principal and Head or Co-ordinator of Religious Education are to be filled by practising Catholics' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2014, pp. 1–2).

confessing its existence. The expected tensions are indeed revealed in research findings, but alongside them, some good reasons for questioning the coherence and defensibility of the hard form of personal objectivity.

The first critique offered of the hard variant of personal objectivity comes from Cooling (2002), who points to the practical impossibility (if not the outright incoherence) of attempting to meet its demands. The practical impossibility arises in the first instance because of the motivations that appear to be necessary as a precondition of being an effective religious educator in the first place. Cooling contends that all teachers of Religious Education, whether religious or not, have something like a *religious reason* for being a teacher of Religious Education. By *religious reasons* here he means that all religious educators will have, as a matter of fact, convictions about the nature of religions and religious claims (a meta-narrative or a worldview) and will feel a compulsion to propagate those convictions. These motivating factors will inevitably shape the kind of Religious Education the teacher is able to offer. The only real question is about whether these underlying convictions are ones that are made explicit or not. Cooling is pointing to the practical impossibility of a view from nowhere. It does seem odd to describe those whose meta-narrative is secular as holding those worldviews in a 'religious manner' (Cooling, 2002, p. 45) but I think what he is pointing to here is the contention, as Smith (2019, p. 26) puts it that there 'is no neutral, nonformative education; in short, there is no "secular" education.'

Moore (1995) goes further and points not only to the absence of neutrality in practice, but to its impossibility in principle, given the kinds of animal human being are. The central incoherence of neutrality she describes as the 'myth of objectivity'. It is a myth because it 'obscures the fact that the inquirer always does influence the object of study. To think otherwise is false' (Moore, 1995, p. 212). The subjectivity of the enquirer cannot be escaped. Even a flight into 'scientific' approaches to the study of religion is itself reflective of a subjective pre-commitment to a positivist epistemology. Such a commitment is always defensible, but to posture as if such a commitment were beyond contestation, is to illegitimately separate the knower from what is known, in such a way as to ultimately distort the nature of that knowledge. Moore (1995, p. 212) writes, that 'every educational moment is part of a larger sharing and seeking after knowledge and subjectivity is inevitably involved.' The alternative to this kind of intersubjectivity Moore proposes is not absolute objectivity, but merely ignorance of one's own subjectivity.

Such ignorance is identified by both Cooling and Moore as a risk that follows from attempting to instantiate the hard variant of personal objectivity. At the same time, both recognise that there is something important about attempting objectivity of some kind, since it allows the other 'to speak for itself' (Moore, 1995, p. 212) and it prevents the risks of indoctrination that arise from treating contestable claims as if they were incontestable. It is educators who are religious upon whom suspicion most often falls for sliding into these kinds of error, but both Cooling and Moore point to the tendency of those who hold such suspicions to be ignorant of their own subjectivity. Moore (Moore, 1995, p. 212) says:

> The fact that we are not always conscious of our subjectivity is not proof that it is absent. Quite the contrary, unconscious subjectivity in scholarship may be the more insidious kind because it is beyond access to critical reflection and reform.

Research findings appear to back up the claim that conscious attempts to achieve objectivity are often in fact the cause of an inability to identify one's own subjectivity.

Moore (1995, pp. 212–214) herself gives one such example from a well-intentioned attempt at objectivity in a Californian history of religions textbook. The intent of the whole curriculum was to present an objective, social scientific view of the nature of religions and provide an account of their historical emergence. When it came to the section of the course that dealt with the emergence of Christianity as a religion it used the parable of the good Samaritan to introduce it. The motivation for this was to show the centrality of love as a major theme of the teaching of Jesus. The problem with this was that the authors failed to spot the ways in which introducing Christianity in this way risked being supercessionist, and that the story had often been used in a way that reinforced anti-semitic attitudes.[13] The issue arose precisely because the authors had presumed their attempt at objectivity had placed them in a position of neutrality in relation to the religions being studied, but their

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[13] The example Moore (1995, pp. 213–214) provides makes this obvious. The first attempt stated:
> [Jesus] said that people did not always have to follow the laws of the Torah. The feelings and beliefs in a person's heart were more important than merely obeying laws and following rituals, Jesus taught.

The problem with presenting it this way, and the tacit anti-semitism of its expression, is related to the reference to the Torah, which is caricatured as 'laws and following rituals' and presented as inferior to Jesus' teachings about love. It fails to recognise the Jewishness of Jesus' own teaching and the fact that his appeal to love is being made from within the context of Torah fidelity. The final form of the text, after working dialogically with the Jewish community, did not make the same kinds of error:
> [Jesus] stressed that the attitudes and beliefs in a person's heart were more important than actions alone. In this way, Jesus emphasised the aspects of the Torah that stressed the importance of love, such as 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' (Leviticus 19:18)

true position was much more reflective of a post-Christian secularity, than a true neutrality – especially when it came to Judaism. Their presumption of neutrality had made them insufficiently self-critical about their starting points. Happily, the authors recognised this, and the final version of the text was arrived at through a process of dialogue with the Jewish community and represents for Moore how an intersubjective, dialogical approach avoids the objectification that is always a risk with attempts at absolute objectivity.

A more comprehensive research project by Bryan and Revell (2011) revealed similar kinds of insight into the ways in which the perceived pressure to be objective as a religious educator are differently experienced by Christian and non-religious student teachers of Religious Education. This research was conducted to understand better the relationship between religious identity and performativity. By performativity is meant the expectations that are imposed, or felt, by professionals to perform in particular ways that impact upon their identity as professionals. Ball (2003, p. 218) evocatively describes how performativity can lead teachers to use a kind of professional ventriloquism, to present themselves in a way that they perceive will make them more acceptable. This can become so all-consuming that, as Ball (2003, p. 215) puts it, 'it does not simply change what people, as educators, scholars and researchers do, it changes who they are.' The ways in which performativity contributes to inauthenticity is problematic because it removes moral agency from the teacher. Interestingly, as Bryan and Revel point out, there are no stated professional requirements to be neutral, but student teachers of Religious Education who were Christian articulated a felt sense that there was. They suggest that it is the context that gives rise to this phenomenon:

> The pervasiveness of a secular paradigm coupled and interwoven with a performative culture within education, generates a culture where secular norms characterised all mores within teaching. (Bryan and Revell, 2011, p. 407)

Bryan and Revell (2011, pp. 413–414) asked the students in their research cohort whether they would make their confessional position explicit in a classroom setting. Fifty two per cent of respondents said they would not, even if directly asked by students. Of those who said they would not, a large majority of them (84%) identified as Christian. Clearly amongst this cohort was a perceived performativity pressure to attempt to practise objectivity by disguising their true identities. Many of the Christian students defended this effort for noble reasons, such as not wishing to unduly influence pupils, or for fear that revealing their confessional identity would be perceived as an implicit critique of anyone who did not share that identity. In short, they were fearful that revealing their faith in the classroom

could become indoctrinatory. However, interestingly, the student teachers who identified as atheist or agnostic felt far less compunction than their Christian peers in this regard. Of those who said they would be happy to reveal their confessional identity in the classroom (32%) the majority were atheist or agnostic. Again, they justified their willingness to share their confessional position by reference to moral commitments that most teachers would see as commendable: they believed that their openness would encourage openness amongst the students; they believed it would be hypocritical to expect students to share their positions in the class if they were not willing to do the same; they believed that being openly, critical reflective through sharing their doubts and critiques of religion would allow 'pupils the space to consider their own spiritual journeys' (Bryan and Revell, 2011, p. 412). In this they were working with the construct of objectivity as transparency of subjectivity, with the softer form of personal objectivity. They were also defending it for exactly the same kinds of reason that those who propose it (Moore and Cooling, for example) give for presenting it as the only coherent and defensible understanding of personal objectivity.

The analysis provided by Bryan and Revell indicates that while the atheist and agnostic student teachers were not blind to their positionality, the Christian students were experiencing, even if only in a self-imposed way, a sense of the 'the tyranny of hidden prejudices' (Gadamer, 1960, p. 282). In this they were exhibiting what Bryan and Revell (2018, p. 405) identify as some of the ways in which performativity deforms personal identity and undermines moral agency. Through the combination of a culture of performativity in the teaching profession and the secular context in which they were attempting to exercise their own professionalism, the Christian teachers had come to view their confessional commitment as an unacceptable part of their identity as Religious Education teachers, rather than a resource to encourage dialogue, as their atheist and agnostic colleagues viewed theirs. Bryan and Revell (2011, p. 413) also identified, through common patterns of speech and response, that this expectation of confessional concealment was most likely picked up by the student teachers through a common way of presenting this expectation in the courses or programmes they received as part of their teacher training. Whether consciously are not, the student teachers appear to have absorbed a pattern of speech and thought that had distorted their identity to some extent. Even if not always explicit, the Christian teachers had internalised these secular norms unconsciously, conformed to them, and had become complicit in proscribing an essential part of their own identity (Bryan and Revell, 2011, p. 413). In this way the hidden tyranny is revealed, and the Christian teachers were denying in themselves something that is

arguably an essential feature of education. Because they were operating with a 'hard' perception of what personal objectivity demands, they were unable to fully participate in their own profession as religious educators.

Another issue that rises from attempting to instantiate the hard form of objectivity is that it has the tendency to treat religions and religious believers as if their identities were fixed, entirely encompassed by the taxonomies of the classroom, thereby 'othering' the religious believer. This makes them easier to represent in textbooks, but it is distorting in ways that alienate, and potentially oppress, religious people. Attempts to promote objectivity in Religious Education have historically tended to default to the religious studies approach to the subject by some, as the only acceptable one in a secular state (Jensen, 2005, 2008). In most cases this has resulted in working within what its critics call 'the world religions paradigm' (Cooling, 2019; Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020; Benoit, 2021). Although sophisticated practitioners of a religious studies approaches are unlikely to have fallen into this trap, by the time it makes its way into many classrooms, the argument goes, it can lead to a litany of woes: misrepresentation, objectification and reification.

The pursuit of hard objectivism arguably represents an overreaction to a (sometimes) justified fear of indoctrination, but its requirement of a methodological agnosticism inevitably leads to anxieties amongst religious believers that their perspective is at risk of being minimised or even overlooked entirely. This risk should not be minimised given the role Said (1978) demonstrates that othering plays in legitimising hegemony, at least in discourse, if not in practice. A concomitant danger arises from the prevailing world religions paradigm, argues Benoit (2021), whose research shows that it is not only objectification that leads to othering, but also the failure to recognise the real-world complexity of religious identity. She gives examples of pupils who have experiences of what she describes as 'multiple religious belonging' and 'hyphenated religious identities' (Benoit, 2021, p. 317), that is, children who come from homes where different family members belonged to different religious traditions. The families of these children clearly navigate this without any sense of dissonance, but their Religious Education syllabi struggle to mirror that fluidity. Similarly, the failure to reflect the *bricolage* nature of personal religious identity (Casson, 2013, p. 50; Benoit, 2021, p. 217) leads pupils to feeling a sense of alienation from their peers, and at the same time a dislocation from the very religious identity they had formerly understood as constitutive of their identity. Benoit (2021, p. 320) gives the heart-breaking example a Muslim child, who reflects on his own identity in light of his Religious Education lessons:

Mrs Taylor says that Muslims pray five times a day. But in my family...my dad says that, if I pray only once a day, it's ok. So I'm not sure. I'd definitely say I'm a Muslim. But I don't know if that's the right word 'cos I don't pray five times a day...

Perhaps more troubling still is the way in which the world religions paradigm leads pupils to view religious believers as exotic. Benoit (2021, p. 320) argues that the 'reductionist approach to religious traditions' typical of the world religions paradigm leads to the inability of pupils to identify their own place in the discourse of the Religious Education classroom and '[a]s a result, they tend to speak about "Others" and talk about an imagined "them".' Troublingly, it also led to pupils viewing religion as one of the markers of a supposed out-group, who were treated as ethnically, as well as religiously distant. Benoit (2021, p. 321) describes a pupil who, when asked if she was a Christian, replied 'No. I'm normal...I'm just normal – normal British.' As this example shows, the attempt to be objective not only sometimes leads to the tyranny of hidden prejudices but is also sometimes complicit in creating those prejudices in the first place.

As a result, Benoit joins Cooling in calling for a shift from the 'world religions paradigm', to a 'religion and worldviews paradigm', that consciously encourages dialogue between the range of the real subjective positions that will always be part of any Religious Education classroom.

(iii) Issues with the soft variant: Inclusivity, sensitivity and dialogical skill

The softer form of personal objectivity, is not only a more coherent account of objectivity as a construct, but research (Fancourt, 2007) indicates that it is more valued by pupils. They prefer it to either of the two alternatives: the monological imposition of the teacher's own worldview on the one hand, or the pretence by the teacher of neutrality on the other. Fancourt drew on Jackson's (1997; Jackson and Everington, 2017) distinction between neutrality and impartiality and was testing Jackson's (1997, p. 136) claim that 'children appreciate openness in response to questions and that teachers should answer questions about personal faith honestly at a level appropriate to the age and aptitude of the pupils concerned.' Admittedly within a very limited case study, Fancourt found some empirical grounds to support Jackson's claim. The group of year 9 pupils who made up Fancourt's study group expressed a clear preference for the kind of dialogical approach that characterises the soft form of personal objectivity. In doing so, they also identified two kinds of approach that stand in contrast to it. On one side they were apt to grow frustrated with teachers who attempted to be neutral (Fancourt, 2007, p. 61, see also Everington, 2012, p. 348), who were asking something of them they were not willing to exemplify

themselves, namely the willingness to openly share their personal position. If they were expected to do so, why was the teacher not required to do so also? On the other side, pupils were also far less willing to engage in classroom dialogue when they had a sense that the teacher did not appear to be genuinely respectful of their points of view (Fancourt, 2007, p. 62). What they really valued were teachers who were willing to be open about their own positionality, who were willing to listen to other perspectives, and who were not brittle in the face of criticism. Fancourt (2007, p. 63) points out that this requires more than just a teacher who uses a dialogical pedagogy but a teacher whose whole orientation is dialogical, what he calls a 'dialogical teacher': one who is 'within the dialogue or conversation and not above or outside it.'

Proponents of a dialogical approach argue for it as the only approach that has integrity, when set against, on the one hand, an indoctrinatory monological approach or, on the other, an epistemologically barren neutral approach. Several arguments for it are offered in support. First, rather than being an impediment to learning, the confessional position of the teacher becomes a resource for the learners, as a nuanced exemplar of one particular tradition (Jackson and Everington, 2017, p. 11). Second, through revealing themselves to be positioned whilst respectfully engaging with alternative narratives and interpretations, they are able to model the kind of sensitivity required of the dialogical classroom by their attentiveness to the self-presentation of those who inhabit worldviews different to their own (Jackson, 2014, pp. 87–97). Third, a better understanding of the other is possible, since the recognition of both student and studied as subjects, guards against an imposed objectification of the other, ironically providing a more objective understanding than a straightforward attempt at objectivity would be able to render (Moore, 1995, pp. 219–220). Fourth, it allows for greater authenticity from both teacher and pupils and leads to the building of trust in the classroom (Everington, 2012, p. 348). Finally, it makes pupils agents of civic discourse, not just docile recipients of pre-packaged norms. It forms them as responsible interpreters who emerge from traditions but are not bound by them, equipped as they now are to critically engage with those same traditions (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, pp. 54–61).

However, there are some difficulties with this dialogical approach that are highlighted most recently by those (Barnes, 2023) who are critical of the attempted shift in the subject from a world religions approach to a worldviews approach. The critiques they offer are specifically of the worldviews approach being defended by Cooling and the REC, but some of those critiques (Hannam and Biesta, 2023; Moulin-Stozek, 2023) are directly aimed at its

dialogical character. The first critique we have already encountered from Hannam and Biesta (2023, p. 105) who argue that the exploration of personal worldviews, implies an equal an unwarranted validity of all possible personal worldviews and fails to recognise that one of the 'the distinctive characteristic of the religious life' is that t has the quality of coming to us, of not being something we choose, but something that has a kind of 'givenness'. A religious perspective also usually relegates the self and rather than seeing a person as an autonomous self, an independent chooser, who selects from the range of all possible worldviews, it views the self as answerable to demands that come to it from outside. In short, it fails to recognise that religions usually abhor the kinds of relativist epistemologies that are required for a critical engagement with a range of worldviews. Moulin-Stożik (2023, p. 146) makes a similar point:

> From the perspective of many 'insiders', what may be called 'worldviews', are more than a way to view the world. To a believer – of atheism, Islam or any faith – a true tradition gives the world in its fullness, not a merely a view of it.

Nevertheless, while the point about the totalising character of religious belonging is valid (speaking as an 'insider' myself, I recognise this description), it is difficult to see what approach to plurality is possible in the classroom other than a dialogical one. In fact, one could argue that to confront totalising narratives with the reality of the world in which not all people share in it is surely one of the important functions of education in a plural democracy. Through it, believers learn to share the world with others who locate themselves in a different confessional space, and it is only a dialogical approach that gives space for a recognition of those for whom religion does in fact have an absolute claim on their hearts and minds.

Another critique of the dialogical approach that shares some of the same force but approaches from a different direction is that offered by Thompson (2004a, 2004b, 2023) who refers to the educational dangers of 'indifferentism' which she argues is a concomitant of the dialogical approach, especially if it attempts to be procedurally impartial. In doing so, she is defending the so-called confessional position, whereby the teacher would be standing for the truth of one particular tradition. In one sense, this would accurately describe teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools and could be made compatible with the soft version of personal objectivity outlined above. Thompson (2004a, 2004b) argues that such teachers can legitimately teach 'the truth' of one particular tradition and at the same time invite critical engagement by students in the classroom with the presentation of that truth. Otherwise, Thompson (2004b, p. 65) argues, what will follow

is not a sincere search after truth, but rather a tacit communication of indifference as to the outcome of that search, whether a teacher intends it or not. Given her commitment to critical openness – which she does not view as incompatible with the expression of a teacher's personal conviction – the difference between Thompson and, say Cooling, is actually a subtle one, since she *is* arguing for a kind of dialogue, but a kind of dialogue that gives precedence to one of the voices in that exchange. She is arguing that an initiation into critical exchange between religions and worldviews is compatible with teaching 'Christianity as true' (Thompson, 2004b, p. 67). She is right in in one sense, since all claims to truth are merely assertions that we think some of our beliefs are so well warranted as to put them beyond dispute.

However, again, given that there will inevitably be disagreements about which truth claims have this character, it is not clear what approach other than a dialogical one is possible. There also seems to be something educationally dishonest about speaking of something as incontestably true that one would know, as an educator, *is* contested. Furthermore, this strong defence of the right of the teacher to take a stand runs the risk of becoming another form of disguised objectivism, whereby the teacher becomes unable to identify their own positionality. It is interesting for me, for example, as a Catholic reader to see Thompson (2004b, pp. 61, 62) refer to Religious Education as beginning with an assertion of the truths of 'non-denominational Christianity'. From a Catholic perspective, as a minority Christian denomination in England, the idea of a non-denominational Christianity sounds odd. Or, if such an epithet describes anything from my point of view, it describes Catholicism, which is clearly not Thompson's intent. In a similar vein, Thompson (2004b, p. 69) elsewhere asserts:

> To the extent therefore that our institutions, customs and mores derive from the
> Christian faith, it is perfectly legitimate and even necessary for the state to
> preserve, in its educational system, an important place for the teaching of this faith.

These kinds of claim seem to lack self-critical awareness. I presume Thompson does not intend this, but her strong advocacy for the prominence of the state religion, with all of its historical associations for Catholics, does have the whiff of hegemony.

The research carried out by Fancourt (2007), also shows that pupils feel a similar sense of a premature closure of the conversation with teachers who are too assertive in their advocacy of their own position. Dialogue always feels futile when either interlocutor feels that the outcome of the exchange is already pre-determined. It is for this reason that Cooling (2002, p. 51) argues that, without denying their own positionality, teachers need to

exercise 'restraint' in order to preserve the autonomy of the learner. This is not, he points out, 'the same as excluding the personal commitment of the teacher from the classroom...It is, rather, to accept that in some contexts my first and immediate response should not be to lead with a faith-based right hook.' Approaching Religious Education with a dialogical emphasis mitigate the risks of indoctrination that are inherent to approaches that conceptualise objectivity as transparency of subjectivity. This may well be one of the reasons why the Catholic church have placed such emphasis on dialogue in their recent teaching documents pertaining to education.[14] In these documents, we find a set of guidelines for successful dialogue first articulated by Pope Francis in his address to the participants in a Muslim/Christian international peace conference in Cairo in 2017. They have been reiterated since both by the Congregation for Catholic Education in Rome (2022, para. 30) and the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (2023, p. 16). These guidelines address some of the concerns raised about relativism and the potential failure of dialogical approaches to respect the ways in which religions describe themselves. At the same time, they recognise the necessity to courageously engage in dialogue with those who do not share our most fundamental commitments. The text from Pope Francis is worth citing in full. He asserts that dialogue requires:

> the duty to respect one's own identity and that of others, the courage to accept differences, and sincerity of intentions. *The duty to respect one's own identity and that of others*, because true dialogue cannot be built on ambiguity or a willingness to sacrifice some good for the sake of pleasing others. *The courage to accept differences*, because those who are different, either culturally or religiously, should not be seen or treated as enemies, but rather welcomed as fellow-travellers, in the genuine conviction that the good of each resides in the good of all. *Sincerity of intentions*, because dialogue, as an authentic expression of our humanity, is not a strategy for achieving specific goals, but rather a path to truth, one that deserves to be undertaken patiently, in order to transform competition into cooperation.

Therefore, despite anxieties about relativism, the dialogical approach to Religious Education in Catholics schools provides a route for teachers that avoids the indoctrinatory pitfalls that could potentially arise with the requirement to act as a witness, while opening

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[14] The Dicastery for Culture and Education (formerly the Congregation for Catholic Education) has published three documents over the last ten years that take dialogue as a central theme: *Educating to intercultural dialogue in Catholic schools. Living in in harmony for a civilisation of love* (2013); *'Male and female he created them': towards a path of dialogue on the question of gender theory in education* (2019); *The identity of the Catholic school for a culture of dialogue* (2022).

the space for dialogue in the classroom that allows the teacher agency and identity as one partner in that dialogue.

The final critical reflection on this softer form of personal objectivity stems from the empirical research into the effectiveness of dialogical classrooms by several scholars (Ipgrave, 2001, 2003, 2004; Schihalejev, 2009; Everington, 2012; Jackson and Everington, 2017). These final critical reflections do not deny the desirability of the dialogical approach but point to its demanding nature. The first thing to note is that a dialogical approach requires the conscious creation of classrooms that are conducive to dialogue. In such spaces, dialogue is not just an accidental feature of other sorts of classroom conversation but is built into the pedagogical strategy of the teacher. Ipgrave (2003, p. 137) identifies three layers to this strategy. The first layer is the simple presentation to the pupils of the brute fact that they live in a world that is diverse. The second is to develop an 'ethos of openness' to difference, to an acceptance that our perspective will and can be changed by encountering an another. The third is to plan classroom activities to ensure the dialogue allows each participant to feel safe in expressing their positionality. Fancourt (2007, p. 63) adds a fourth layer, of relevance to questions of teacher objectivity, which is the inclusion of the teacher in the classroom dialogue.

However, this final layer needs to be done with care in order not to stifle the dialogue. Fancourt (2007, p. 63) himself points out that it should only be introduced once the other three layers are secure. The risks of truncating the patient establishment of the first three levels is evident in the research of Schihalejev (2009), who found that attempts to introduce dialogue can founder for several different reasons. First, students as well as teachers find dialogue potentially intimidating (Schihalejev, 2009, p. 283), preferring the security of closed-question tasks where the answer is unambiguous. Pupils need to become skilled enough to recognise the value of struggling to discern the answer iteratively in a dialogical exchange, even if the exchange has no final, settled terminus. Second, teachers need to take care in their use of praise (Schihalejev, 2009, p. 287). If pupils are not clear about what exactly is being praised, the dialogue can be prematurely interrupted because the impression has been given that the praised contribution is the final word on the matter, rather than just another perspective offered in a dialogical exchange. Third, teachers also need to take care that their facilitation of dialogue is not overbearing (Schihalejev, 2009, p. 287). Once the teacher involves themselves in the dialogue students tend to default to their teacher's perspective and, again, to presume that the matter is now closed.

Ipgrave (2004, p. 115) gives a revealing example of the ways in which the teacher's perspective can shut down dialogue entirely. Her research includes reference to an exchange where a teacher asks about the significance of the open-hand gesture in Muslim prayer and a child gives the response that it is to allow an angel to sit on each hand. The teacher ignores this perspective and the class instead taught that it represents openness to God. As well as missing a valuable educational opportunity to explore the vivid image, and the cosmology that underpinned it, the teacher's preferred interpretation of the gesture not only risked alienating at least one of the people in the room that the lesson was intended to represent, but also resulted in the boy and his angels offering 'no further contributions to the lesson' (Ipgrave, 2004, p. 115). It is perhaps significant that Ipgrave, who excludes the layer of teacher involvement in dialogue, is carrying out research in Primary schools while Fancourt was working with a group of teenagers in a Secondary school. This may suggest the wisdom of only introducing the teacher as dialogical partner once the pupils are mature enough to discern the difference between the authority of the teacher *qua* teacher, and the status of parity they adopt when they enter the dialogical exchange.

These difficulties are highlighted by researchers who advocate dialogical approaches, but who are raising the risks inherent in their use without the requisite skill or preparation. Jackson and Everington (2017) carried out a meta-analysis of dialogical approaches aimed at supporting impartial, inclusive Religious Education. They argue that the dialogical approach brings many benefits, but that it requires a set of skills and attitudes that are not innate, but need to be cultivated if teachers wish to do it well. Amongst these is a thorough understanding of the 'life-worlds and beliefs' (Jackson and Everington, 2017, p. 14) of the pupils; they need an attitude of openness to the perspectives of pupils that present a patterns of belief or behaviour that differ from their own; they need to be reflexive, guarding against the risk of their own positionality pre-determining how the learning is presented; they need to plan for the inclusion of diversity within and between religions and worldviews; finally, they need to know when and how to include their own voice in the dialogue, to avoid prematurely curtailing it. Once these caveats are acknowledged it leaves open the possibility that at the right time and in the right ways, the Religious Education teacher in a Catholic school can be faithful to their responsibility to act as a witness to the Catholic faith, without compromising personal objectivity.

The latest document from the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales (2023) on Religious Education appears to support this dialogical understanding of personal

objectivity. When the bishops describe what is required for authentic witness in a Catholic classroom, they arrive at a dialogical approach partly because it is the only defensible one in the context of plural classrooms, but also because of a recognition that in the majority of Catholic schools (especially Primary schools) those who are teaching Religious Education will not, in fact, be Catholics.[15] In this context, the bishops (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, pp. 18–19) present three related requirements for authentic witness:

> ...authentic witness requires at least this much: a recognition of the importance of the questions that Religious Education poses, a deep commitment to the inquiries it generates, and a passion for the debates it engenders...This leads to the second kind of authenticity that is required: a genuine expertise in the subject of Religious Education... Finally, in the context of classrooms that are facilitating intercultural dialogue, a third kind of authenticity is necessary. Religious education teachers need to become guardians of dialogue. If Religious Education classrooms are to become safe spaces to discuss difference, then it is Religious Education teachers who create those spaces and guarantee their safety. Ultimately, as well as being competent in subject knowledge, they must be agile conductors of classroom debate, resilient custodians of religious wisdom, and sensitive mentors to enquiring students.

This threefold requirement that teachers of Religious Education in Catholic schools be passionate, erudite, and sensitive to difference provides one way that it might be possible to describe Religious Education in Catholic schools as objective. However, a successful defence of the softer form of personal objectivity relies on the presence of the two other components of the OCP test: criticality and pluralism. It is to each of these that I will now turn.

2.3 Critical

Criticality and pluralism do not pose the same kinds of problem for a religious educator in a Catholic space as objectivity potentially does. For example, a critical engagement with the subject matter is a requirement laid down by the bishops in the most recent iteration of the *Directory*, which includes the following amongst the aims of Religious Education:

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[15] The CES annual Census (Catholic Education Service, 2019, 2022, 2023) shows a steady and consistent decline in the percentage of teaching staff in Catholic schools who are Catholic. See *Appendix 2: Catholicity of teaching staff in Catholic schools in England and Wales*

> To provide pupils with a sure guide for living and the tools to critically engage with contemporary culture and society…To develop the critical faculties of pupils so to bring clarity to the relationship between faith and life, and between faith and culture. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 6)

In this statement of aims it is not immediately obvious that critical engagement extends to the inclusion of critical reflection on the Church and its teaching, but this is made clearer in the essay that introduces the prescribed programme of study:

> As an academic subject, it respects the critical space for enquiry which is a hallmark of all genuine academic pursuits. As such, it is also respectful of the arc of growth from childhood to adulthood which impacts on pupil learning at different stages of maturity. …Developing intellectual autonomy in turn involves critiquing all received wisdom – parental, priestly, pedagogical – wisdom often central to the very subject matter of Religious Education. At this stage, the subject classroom is likely to be a stormy place, where doubts and convictions wrestle, as adolescents chart their journey to adulthood … This means students engaging with the subject must be familiarised with the critical reasoning that characterises the discipline as academic…care should be taken so that every pupil is able to engage with such ultimate concerns with intellectual freedom. Without ever collapsing into a mere exchange of baseless opinions, the Religious Education classroom must be a place of critical, but respectful, dialogue: a safe place to discuss difference. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, pp. 14–15)

I have quoted extensively here since in this one extract from the *Directory* we can see many resonances with what has already been discussed as central features of dialogical classrooms: the gradual initiation of pupils into dialogical engagement, the seeking of an appropriate objectivity through the recognition of intersubjectivity, and the importance of ensuring that the classroom is a safe space for engaging in critical, but respectful dialogue. Similarly, in the section of the *Directory* that deals with the skills that should be developed in Religious Education, a pedagogy is prescribed that comprises three 'ways of knowing': understanding, discerning, and responding. In the last two of these, dialogue is an integral feature and the discern way of knowing has criticality as a central feature. It aims to 'help pupils to be able to judge wisely in response to different interpretations of the meaning, significance, and implications of texts, beliefs, rites, and ways of life so that they can arrive at justified conclusions about what is true, what is good, and what is beautiful' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 36). It also explicitly pluralistic in character when it speaks of pupils developing the skills to think 'creatively and critically,

testing ideas by imagining other possibilities' and comparing 'different interpretations of religious expression, different ways of celebrating rites, and different ways of life, explaining differences within and between religions and worldviews' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 36).

In this presentation of the skills to be developed in Religious Education, in their definition of the subject's aims, and in their essay outlining the context of Religious Education in 21st century Britain, the bishops are unequivocally affirming criticality as an essential component of Religious Education in Catholic schools. Therefore, there ought to be no difficulty for Religious Education in Catholic schools in passing the 'critical' component of the OCP test. Nevertheless, there are some ways in which the concept of criticality has been problematised in the literature that need to be considered.

For example, the *Directory* appears to be using the construct of criticality in the critically realist manner outlined by Wright (1996, 2016). In his advocacy of religious literacy, Wright was rejecting the experiential-expressive definition of Religious Education that was identified by post-liberal thinkers, such as Lindbeck (1984), as problematic (see above p.50-53). He viewed the dominance of experiential approaches to Religious Education, with an emphasis on personal spirituality, such as that championed by Erricker and Erricker (2000), as inadequate in the face of the post-liberal critiques of the anti-realist, constructivist epistemologies that underpin such approaches. Indeed, if Jackson's (2004) summary of Erricker and Erricker is accurate it should be clear why it would also pose difficulties for religious educators in Catholic schools. Jackson (Jackson, 2004, p. 62)says that for Erricker and Erricker:

> Reality is entirely socially/linguistically constructed...Therefore, any curriculum contains within itself the ideological assumptions of whoever constructed that knowledge... Some constructions of knowledge...carrying with them the power of political authority, or the received wisdom of tradition, are especially ideologically loaded and therefore particularly manipulative. They 'imprison' individuals (including children in school) rather than liberate them. These meta-narratives need to be deconstructed and shown to be what they are. This deconstruction is an emancipatory process.

The problem with this position, of course, is that it is itself highly ideologically loaded and gives priority to individual expression above all else. It is radically relativistic, and not neutral in relation to that relativism. It is for this reason that Wright proposes a different approach, one that foregrounds critical engagement with all ideological claims – including

those of constructivism like that of Erricker and Erricker – and sees the role of Religious Education to assist learners to become critical enquirers, while never ruling out the possibility that there is an objective reality to be discovered, even if knowing it beyond doubt is always practically beyond reach. In this, the dialogical approach set out in the *Directory*, seems to share with Wright the critical realist paradigmatic pillars of ontological realism, epistemological modesty, and rational judgement. Consequently, it tends to focus heavily on the competing truth-claims of different confessional traditions (including non-religious ones) and is highly cognitivist in character.

One of the consequences of this is that it can lead to an understanding of religion that skews its nature, such that it presents religions as if they were exhausted by listing the set of propositions and truth-claims that individuate them. Smith (2016, 2019), points to the inadequacy of this 'bobble head' understanding of religion (even as a way of construing Christianity, one of the most credal of worldviews) since it assumes 'a cognitivist anthropology', adopting a 'stunted pedagogy that is fixated on the mind' (Smith, 2019, pp. 42–43). Strhan (2010) is also critical of this way of characterising religion and particularly of the way in which it has led to the dominance of philosophy of religion in Religious Education in the upper years of schooling. The problem with this model, argues Strhan (2010, p. 9), is the reductionist caricatures it presents of religion such that students are left with the impression that 'being religious' means 'believing that certain statements of knowledge are true.' However, as Strhan points out, there is a kind of aridity to the exchanges that this engenders that end up missing the fundamental and holistic character of religious commitment. There is an unreachable quality to the kind of transcendence that religion points to at its heart and the critical realist approaches to religion seduce students into thinking that religion is 'a matter open to straightforward evaluation and justification' when in fact 'religion stands beyond ontology and cannot be grasped by comprehension' (Strhan, 2010, pp. 10, 14).

In making this case, Strhan is not denying the importance of critical thinking, but is objecting to the impoverished view of it dormant in the critical realist approach. What she is calling for is captured for her by Jantzen (1998), whom she quotes, in making an appeal to supplement critical reasoning with 'a wider understanding of reason that includes sensitivity and attentiveness, well-trained intuition and discernment, creative imagination, and lateral as well as linear thinking' (Jantzen, 1998, p. 69). In fact, what Strhan is yearning for, is a more hermeneutical framing of critical thought, an approach that is never content with 'interpretative closure' (Strhan, 2010, p. 11), but instead looks for 'a more literary

approach, where the aim is deep insight into the different levels at which stories can be read and interpreted, rather than an approach focused on mastery and critical points-scoring...with more emphasis given to attentiveness to the subjects of study, rather than just setting every belief or truth up as an object of critique' (Strhan, 2010, pp. 18–19).

Strhan is joined in this call by a chorus of others (Bowie and Coles, 2018; Bowie, Panjwani and Clemmey, 2020; Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020) who recognise the ways that the presentation of the subject matter as a set of false binaries is distortive and often reliant upon hermeneutically illiterate uses of text. Bowie and Coles (2018), for example, present a case from their research that is particularly painful for me to read, given the extent to which I am implicated as the target of their critique.[16] One of the teachers in their research pointed to the ways that reducing Religious Education to a set of opposing propositions often relies on positivist parodies of evidential reasoning, which can often, in practice, mean panning the biblical text for proof-text nuggets that will do the job. One particularly egregious example of this was the use of Luke 1:44, where Elizabeth refers to the child in her womb leaping for joy at her encounter with the pregnant Mary, as a proof-text against abortion. It is a use of the text that caused particular distress to the teacher since what immediately follows it in Luke's Gospel, the Magnificat, a prayer of Mary's that illustrates her own rabbinic scholarship in reinterpreting a prayer of Hannah's from the book of Daniel, is often read as a text that raises the status of women as bearers of prophetic revelation. It was a source of pain since it completely decontextualised the source material and in so doing ignored the more usual reading of that text in favour of a tenuous interpretation that presented it, without irony, as an argument in a contemporary debate 'about women's reproductive rights' (Bowie and Coles, 2018, p. 284). The failure of attentiveness and sensitivity to other ways of interpreting the text, Bowie and Coles (2018,

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[16] One of the tasks I was required to engage in as an officer of the CES at the time of the examination reform of 2016 was to work with the awarding organisations to draft syllabus content that reflected the Catholic Christianity appendix to the DfE subject content document (Department for Education, 2015, pp. 13–15), which itself was something the CES had collaborated with the DfE to produce. An anxiety we had identified among religious educators with the reform of the GCSEs was the loss of areas of the curriculum they had traditionally enjoyed debating in the classroom, such as abortion and euthanasia. These were missing from the subject content, but Professor Anthony Towey and I were working with the AQA exam board to produce a specification and saw an opportunity to use the reference to a particular text about the incarnation to squeeze in questions about abortion. The particular part of the specification Bowie and Coles are referencing here lists the following as part of the subject content: 'The meaning and significance of the influence of *imago dei* on Catholic practice in terms of protection of the unborn, with reference to Luke 1:44' (AQA, 2017, p. 11).

p. 284) argue, indicates the presence of a hermeneutical ignorance, a certain tin-eared quality, that clearly led to 'a palpable sense of injustice' that a 'text that raised the status of women was here being…used for something quite different.' Cooling (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, p. 78) points to a similar scenario in his own research, which included a Christian Religious Education teacher who was used to presenting the arguments for and against euthanasia in the classroom, but through reflection on her practice, came to identify that this approach communicated a view of Christianity to which she did not subscribe. She had allowed the binary evaluative paradigm of the exam board to shape the way she taught but came to recognise that the 'first response in an ethical debate should not then be an attempt to win an argument, but an attempt to understand one's apparent opponent…learning to understand people's positions on very challenging issues and to listen carefully before leaping into adopting a position.'

Bowie, Coles and Cooling are echoing Strhan's call for greater attentiveness, for deeper insights through sensitivity to the integrity of the other. This hermeneutical understanding treats religion in the way that Lindbeck outlines and recognises that otherness, radical illeity, often means that different religious traditions are incommensurable in any case. If Lindbeck is right, it is difficult to conceive of what kinds of argument and evidence would bridge this incommensurability. As linguistic traditions, in Lindbeck's sense, religions not only predetermine the thoughts we think, the sentiments we have, and realities we perceive (Lindbeck, 1984, p. 20), they will also inevitably, as Lopez (2013, p. 24) argues, determine what one would view as legitimate evidence in the first place. It also ignores the fact that for most religious people their confessional identity was not chosen because the arguments for it were better than they were for the alternatives. More than that, in reflecting on my own case, believing does not appear to be a volitional act at all. That doesn't close it to critical reflection, but it does place interpretation of lived experience at the heart of that criticality since, as the Catholic theologian David Tracy (1987, p. 9) puts it:

> To understand at all is to interpret…To be human is to act reflectively, to decide deliberately, to understand intelligently, to experience fully. Whether we know it or not, to be human is to be a skilled interpreter.

Tracy goes on to make a similar point made later by both Strhan (2010) and Benoit (2021), in pointing to the ways in which traditions also constantly reinterpret themselves and individuals within those traditions are negotiating their place within that historical stream of interpretation. This means that religious traditions are porous, complex and variegated, as are individual religious identities. It is sometimes the case that in setting up the pugilistic

oppositions, Religious Education fails to recognise the complexity of precisely who is standing in each corner. Perhaps, to extend the metaphor, the ring does not have corners in any case; rings don't tend to.

The image of the ring returns us then to the hermeneutical circle, to the recognition of the radical 'curvature of intersubjective space' (Strhan, 2010, p. 8) and to raise questions about the extent to which Religious Education in Catholic schools is genuinely committed to criticality in the hermeneutical sense. While the new *Directory* embraces criticality, questions remain about precisely how comfortable the institutional Catholic Church is with a Religious Education that foregrounds internal diversity, the role of interpretation, and the significance of the tradition's reinterpretation of itself over time. To what extent is the religious educator in the Catholic space genuinely comfortable with turning the critical gaze inward? As Fancourt (2007, pp. 56–57) points out there are two different kinds of motivation for a dialogical approach to learning: it can, on the one hand, serve 'to facilitate the pupil's own personal exploration and articulation of their religious or philosophical position' or, on the other, 'to aid the grounding of the pupils in one religious tradition.' If the criticality of the Catholic classroom is not to collapse into apologetics, a proper attention to plurality needs to be paid. In this final part of the chapter, I will consider the place of plurality in Religious Education in Catholic schools.

2.4 Pluralistic

Pluralism can be used to refer to several different kinds of philosophies. First it is possible to make a distinction between 'descriptive' and 'normative' pluralism, as Jackson does (2004, pp. 8–9), between a simple description of the fact of diverse communities and an ideological position in relation to those issues. The first of these, since it makes no claims about what one's attitude to pluralism should be, is straightforwardly compatible with any articulation of the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools. The second may or may not be, depending on the ideological stance that underpins the normative position of the pluralism being promoted. Williams (2012, chap. 10) outlines several possible normative positions. The first is an extreme religious pluralism that rules out in advance any exclusive claims to truth and asserts that 'no particular religious tradition has the full or final truth...This sort of pluralist perspective implies that no faith can or should make claims for itself as the only route to perfection or salvation' (Williams, 2012, p. 126). This would be problematic for Catholic schools which do, by their very existence, point to Christ as the foundation and end of all human longing. Another understanding, however, would be less problematic: a pragmatic political pluralism, whereby the state recognises the right of

religious communities to hold fast to their commitments and convictions, but expects them to recognise the rights of other religions to be defined by their own commitments. Such a state is religiously neutral, but not morally. In the interest of protecting the freedom of religion of all, it is committed to the legal equality of all citizens, their right to freedom of religion and to democratic decision-making. Such a state would be wise, Williams (2012, p. 128) argues, to recognise that an individual's loyalty ultimately rests somewhere above and outside the state, and any 'constructed loyalty' to the state has to be 'nurtured in particular communities.' He suggests that a properly 'pluralist state takes religious belonging seriously and sees itself, as a state, as serving the healthy coexistence and interaction of diverse communities of conviction and loyalty by creating for all of them a 'civic space' where all can find a voice' (Williams, 2012, p. 128). On this understanding a state views 'its remit in relatively modest terms' and 'thinks of itself as a "community of communities" rather than a monopolistic sovereign power' (Williams, 2012, p. 3). Such a view of pluralism would be entirely compatible with Catholic education since one of the voices to be found in that space would be theirs and their loyalty to the state would be a qualified one, a rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. However, it would also imply an obligation to initiate its pupils into a recognition of the religious freedoms of others and the value of a polity that protects those freedoms. It would seem to imply a pluralism which, at the very least, included the study of this religious diversity. The most recent iteration of the *Directory* suggests that this is, or should be, a feature of Religious Education in Catholic schools.

The current *Directory* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023) is the third iteration of a document first published in 1996 (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996), with a second edition following in 2012 (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012). Of the three versions, it has the most explicit commitment to a pluralistic Religious Education and stipulates the extent of the teaching about religions and worldviews other than Catholicism for the first time. It is also the first to include non-religious worldviews[17] as a prescribed part of the curriculum content. A brief exploration of the history of its two precursors is helpful in grasping the extent to which

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[17] It should be noted, however, that there was a much less well-known and under-used supplement to the 1996 directory, published ten years later for the 14-19 age group, that specified the inclusion of non-religious worldviews, 'as appropriate', as part of the curriculum content, referring to it with the phrase 'a secular worldview' (Bishops' Conference Department for Catholic Education and Formation, 2006, pp. 15–16).

Religious Education in Catholic schools could respond to the requirement to offer a curriculum that is able to pass the pluralistic component of the OCP test.

In the 1996 *Directory*, very limited reference is made to religions and worldviews other than Catholicism. Although a statistical analysis is a blunt tool, it is indicative that of the 276 curriculum learning outcomes for key stages one to three, only 16 of them pertain to religions and worldviews other than Catholicism.[18] The references are always generic in character and always use the phrase 'other faiths' to denote religions and worldviews other than Catholicism.[19] For example, it states that by the end of key stage three, pupils will have been given 'opportunities to study, investigate and reflect upon...the practice and significance of prayer in other faith communities' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 47). The phrase 'other faiths' is used throughout and would appear to exclude non-religious worldviews. It is interesting to note the way the learning outcomes are presented, which shows a tacit affirmation of Smart's (1973, 1996) dimensions of religion as an analytical tool, and therefore an uncritical use of the phenomenological paradigm in its approach to the study of other religions.[20] This would also potentially mean the uncritical absorption of a theology that conforms to the experiential-expressivist view of religions that ultimately eradicates religious distinctiveness.

It also means that the treatment of other religions in the 1996 *Directory* groups them under the top-level 'Area of Study' category headers that configure the learning about Catholicism: Revelation, Church, Celebration, Life in Christ (Catholic Bishops' Conference

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[18] In key stage one (ages 3-5), no reference to other religions and worldviews is included in the curriculum content. In key stage two (ages 5-11), 4.1%of the curriculum deals with other religions and worldviews. In key stage three (ages 11-14) it is 7.8%. Overall, 5.8% of the curriculum, ages 3-14, includes the teaching of religions and worldviews other than Catholicism.

[19] The only other religion to be named is Judaism (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, pp. 16, 39, 44, 48, 49,), but often in the context of describing the 'Jewish roots of Christianity' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 48) and not on Judaism's own terms.

[20] It is also interesting to note that one of the most popular GCSE textbooks of the time, called *Dimensions of Christianity* (Burke, 1988), set out the learning about Christianity in broadly Smartian ways: Unit 1 Christian Practice, p.9 (the ritual dimension); Unit 2 Christian belief, p.37 (the doctrinal dimension); Unit 3 Christian values, p.47 (the ethical dimension); Section 2 The Roman Catholic Tradition (the institutional and ritual dimensions); Section 3 Mark's Gospel (the mythological dimension). Therefore, while the learning about other religions is marginal at this point, the impact of the world religions paradigm, and the phenomenological methodology, is significant and appears to have been integrated, seemingly unconsciously, into the study of Catholicism itself, even if not of other religions.

of England and Wales, 1996, p. 12). These were in turn drawn from the four constitutions of the second Vatican council and are therefore deeply rooted in the Catholic Church's self-understanding.[21] Thus, the study of other religions is not dealt with systematically and discretely, but always through the lens of the Catholic categories. For example, the reference in key stage three to the 'traditions and way of life of other faith communities in England and Wales' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 47) comes under the heading 'Life in Christ'. This is odd on the face of it, since 'Life in Christ' is a descriptive category that could only apply to Christians. I suspect it is placed here since respect for other faiths and religions would be understood as a moral imperative, and therefore as part of the duties Catholics owe to their neighbour that would be a constituent of 'Life in Christ'. However, when other faiths are always and only studied under Catholic categories it poses the risk of a religious assimilationism that does not, in fact, respect the integrity of the other and their right to speak for themselves, using their own language, categories, and symbols.

The 2012 *Directory* is more explicit in its inclusion of the study of other religions and worldviews. It still repeats the same pattern as the 1996 *Directory* in placing the study of other religions under the four 'Area of Study' categories and makes explicit that the inclusion of the systematic study of other religions under the heading 'Life in Christ' is because 'love of neighbour involves respect for the religious beliefs of other people' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, p. 42). Comparisons in terms of quantity are more difficult since the 2012 *Directory* does not set out its content as a list of bulleted outcomes in the same way as the 1996 *Directory* did.[22] Nevertheless, it is much fuller in terms of providing the substance for the systematic study of other religions and worldviews. It gives prominence to Judaism and Islam, but in the case of Judaism still largely for the sake of demonstrating the Jewish roots of Christianity and the scriptural

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[21] The second Vatican council took place between 1962 and 1965 and is the most recent of the ecumenical councils of the Catholic Church. It is viewed as defining the nature of Catholicism and its relationship to the world in the modern age. It produced a series of documents, but the four largest were the foundational texts of the council called constitutions which were *Dei Verbum* (dealing with revelation), *Lumen Gentium* (dealing with the Church), *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (dealing with the liturgy), and *Gaudium et Spes* (dealing with the Church and the modern world). The relationship between these four principal documents and the areas of study in the 1996 *Directory* is clear and made explicit in the *Directory* itself.

[22] There is a section of the 2012 *Directory* that does do this, but it is just a reiteration, with some minor amendments, of the equivalent list in the 1996 *Directory*. The substantial revision of this edition comprises a more systematic presentation of the content, but it is not set out as learning outcomes (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, pp. 13–52).

points of commonality. For Islam it gives a summary of doctrinal positions but gives prominence to the points of difference between Islam and Christianity. It also emphasises the aspects of Judaism that constitute '[f]undamental differences with the Catholic Church' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, p. 42). It refers in one place, and in passing, to the fact that there 'are non-Christian religions common in England and Wales, including major world religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, and others such as Sikhs, and Baha'i' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, p. 42). On the face of it, the 2012 *Directory* is more pluralistic and inclusive than its predecessor, but hints of religious assimilationism remain because it still places the study of other religions under the Christian 'Area of Study' category headers that were used in the 1996 directory.

At the same time there is a more confessional tone to the 2012 *Directory* that contrasts with its expanded inclusion of teaching about other religions and worldviews. In analysing the pluralistic content of each *Directory*, I carried out a small analysis using word frequency as a tool. The outcomes of this were illuminating.[23] While the most frequent words in each of the 1996 and 2012 *Directories* are not surprising given their Catholic character (for example, in both lists the top four words in terms of incidence per 1000 words are 'church', 'God', 'life' and 'Jesus/Christ'), the differences between the two lists are arguably revealing. Having initially removed small words from the count ('a', 'the', 'of', etc.), I counted again and realised the significance of two small words that are ubiquitous in the 2012 *Directory* but occur with far less frequency in the 1996 *Directory*. The word 'us' appears six times more often in the 2012 *Directory* than in the 1996 edition (6.6 per 1000 words against 1.2 per 1000 words), the word 'our' and 'we' twice as often (4.2 per 1000 words against 2.0 per 1000 words in the case of 'we' and 4.9 per 1000 words against 2.3 per 1000 words in the case of 'our'). The contrast is even greater when the use of the word 'we' and 'our' is only considered as part of the learning outcomes, excluding its use in the introductory texts. Furthermore, the uses of all three words in the 1996 *Directory* are almost always used in relation to a shared humanity, but in the 2012 edition almost always

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[23] This was actually carried out as part of the background to the revision of the Directory, culminating in the 2023 edition (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023), but it is illuminating here, nonetheless. See *Appendix 4: Word frequency analysis of the 1996 and 2012 Directories*, p.155

in relation to a shared Catholicism.[24] Again, this is a blunt comparison, but it does suggest that there is a much greater confessional presumption of a homogenous Catholic pupil and teaching population in the 2012 *Directory* than in its historical precursor.[25] There appears to be a tension then between the confessional tone and the increased pluralistic content of the 2012 *Directory*.

Another difference between the two *Directories* is worth noting. It is possible to detect that the influence of the Smartian phenomenological pedagogy has receded by 2012, but that other pedagogies from the world religions paradigm have replaced it. For example, it could be argued that the strong presentation of the differences between the truth-claims of Catholicism and both Judaism and Islam, along with the introduction of an 'Apologetics' section in each area of study (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, pp. 20, 30, 39–40, 49), is indicative of the influence of Wright's (1996, 2016) critical realist approach. At the same time, the influence of Grimmit's (1987, 2000) human development pedagogy is more explicit, since in the assessment part of the *Directory* they use a set of attainment target headers that are drawn directly from his human development model: 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, p. 64). The 2012 *Directory's* inclusion of these two pedagogies is interesting considering the way Wright problematises the 'learning about/learning from' dichotomy in proposing his own critical realist approach as an alternative to the experiential approach of previous pedagogies (Jackson, 2004, chap. 5; Hella and Wright, 2009). There appears to be another tension then, found in both the 1996 and the 2012 editions of the *Directory*, between the prescribed content for the study of other religions (which, despite its expansion in 2012, remains minimal and, in each case, filtered through

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[24] For example, in 1996, we find formulations of this kind: 'As human persons <u>we</u> desire the good, yet human nature bears the wound of original sin and is subject to temptation' (p.34) and 'Concern for the common good, that is the well-being of all, not simply of the majority, is an essential part of <u>our</u> search for happiness' (p.34). By contrast, in 2012, while these kinds of uses of 'we', 'our' and 'us' are also present, in addition we find formulations of this kind: 'How do <u>we</u> as Catholics answer questions about the Blessed Virgin Mary and her role in the life and prayer of the Church?' (p.22) and 'Pupils will be taught that the seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of <u>our </u>Christian life.' This is a caricature to some extent, but the differences are real, even if not completely characteristic or consistent.

[25] This is particularly odd given what we know about the decline in the Catholicity of pupil populations. See *Appendix 3: Confessional diversity of pupils in Catholic schools 2016-2023, p.153*

the Catholic lens) and the adopted pedagogies (which are drawn from the world religions paradigm dominant in other sorts of school at the time).

This tension may well reflect another ecclesiological dynamic present in the historical background to each document. This is particularly relevant to this research as it perhaps points to a hidden tension between the Church hierarchy of the day and those actually carrying out the work on the ground: the diocesan Religious Education advisers, as represented by their professional body NBRIA. The two editions of the *Directory* so far considered represent the official position of the institutional Church in England and Wales with regard to Religious Education. Both documents are published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference and carry with them the normative character ascribed to them by canon law (*Code of Canon Law*, 1983, can.804). However, the reference in the 2012 *Directory* to 'learning about' and 'learning from' appear in an Appendix (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2012, p. 63) that was taken from an earlier document published by the DCEF in 2004 entitled *Levels of Attainment in Religious Education in Catholic Schools and Colleges* (Bishops' Conference Department for Catholic Education and Formation, 2004), which was itself a reissued update of a document first published by NBRIA in 2000 (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 2000). The 2004 edition of *Levels* acknowledges its origin with NBRIA (Bishops' Conference Department for Catholic Education and Formation, 2004, p. 5), the 2012 edition of the *Directory* does not.

A similar history stands behind the production of the 1996 *Directory*. The beginnings of the *Directory* go back to a document published by the Catholic Bishops Conference (1994) entitled *What are we to teach?* This document was a response to the newly promulgated *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Catholic Church, 1994) and it was largely didactic in structure, focusing on what the bishops judged ought to be the content of Religious Education curricula, its purpose being to 'guide teachers through the Catechism' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1994, p. 5). In response NBRIA published a separate document entitled *Broad Areas of Attainment in Religious Education* (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 1994). Its stated purpose was to take *What are we to teach?* and break down its content into key stage components appropriate for the classroom (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 1994, p. 6). Although *Broad Areas* is presented as NBRIA's response to a request of the conference (the Preface being written by Bishop Mullins of Menevia, Chair of the Bishops' Committee for Catechetics), there are noticeable differences of presentation between it and *What are we to teach?*. Rather than the Catechism sections that framed the content in the conference

document, *Broad Areas* instead used the Vatican II structure for the high-level categories, which were retained in both the 1996 and 2012 *Directories*. These high-level structuring categories were the eponymous *Broad Areas*, and they were: Revelation, Community, Celebration, and Way of Life.

The 1996 *Directory* was clearly an attempt to synthesise its two immediate precursors. Indeed, the bishops acknowledge this in their introduction, stating that it 'builds on our earlier document *What are We to Teach?* and recognises the work done by the National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers in the *Broad Areas of Attainment in Religious Education* documents' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 6). However, the differences between the documents indicate an internal wrestling with how Religious Education in Catholic schools should be conceived. Anecdotally, those who were involved in the drafting of *Broad Areas,* and who observed the production of the *Directory*, reported to me that it was attempting to effect a compromise between two competing visions of Religious Education in Catholic schools. On the one hand there was the 'anthropological' vision promoted by NBRIA in *Broad Areas*, a vision clearly informed by the wider Religious Education landscape, particularly the human development models advocated by Grimmitt (1987) at the time. Equally, it was also undoubtedly informed by what has been termed 'the anthropological turn' in the post-Vatican II theology influenced by the work of Karl Rahner (Losinger and Dahlstrom, 2000; Xavier, 2010). On the other hand, there was the 'dogmatic' vision promoted by those diocesan advisers and bishops who preferred to begin with the concrete teaching of the Church, rather than with human experience.

Even without the personal insights of those involved at the time, the traces of this debate can be seen in the documents themselves. The shifts in language from the 'broad areas' of the NBRIA document to the 'areas of study' of the 1996 *Directory* point to this difference of emphasis. For example, there is clearly something more universally human in speaking about 'Community' than 'Church', and of 'Way of Life' rather than 'Life in Christ' (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 1994, p. 6; cf. Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 12). Indeed, studying other religions and worldviews under a curriculum header of 'Way of Life' would not have the same assimilationist overtones it has when placing it under the header 'Life in Christ'. The content also reflects the same contrast in approaches. While the 'Revelation' area of study begins with learning about the doctrine of the Trinity (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 14), the 'Revelation' broad area begins with an exploration of 'the importance of story in the

human quest for meaning' (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 1994, p. 14). In fact, NBRIA (1994, pp. 15, 16, 17) begins each of the broad areas with a reflection on the human condition.[26]

These internal strains in relation to Religious Education are reflective of existential questions that have been facing the Catholic Church in England and Wales for some time, precipitated by the decline in the Catholicity of its pupil populations. Here the distinction Jackson (2004, pp. 8–9) makes between 'plurality' and 'pluralism' is helpful. Plurality is a descriptive term, simply acknowledging the presence of different (in this case) religious identities in any given community. Pluralism, on the other hand has a normative force, and can be driven by different underpinning ideologies. Moulin-Stożek describes how these different ideologies impact on Religious Education pedagogies:

> The classic pedagogies take one of three broad strategies to engage with plurality. The first is to circumvent and/or diminish the role of truth claims by presenting an anthropological framework to explore beliefs and practices (the phenomenological, human development and interpretative models). The second is to address head-on the competing truth-claims of religious and non-religious worldviews through processes of comparison and critical judgement of their constituent beliefs and belief-systems (critical realist and concept cracking models). A final approach is to embrace a radical relativism accepting of truth claims as equally valid (as in the deconstruction model of Clive and Jane Erricker. (Moulin-Stożek, 2023, p. 145)

Jackson (2004, p. 165) argues that except for the approach of Erricker and Erricker (2000), the majority of the pedagogies of Religious Education assume a normative pluralism that is not neutral, but rather promotes a critical engagement with difference, in a way that is respectful of distinctiveness. In essence, all of the other approaches assume that the 'truth of particular religious claims cannot be resolved publicly' and they 'affirm the individual's democratic right to freedom of religion or belief... actively promote tolerance of religious and ideological difference...[and] attempt to ensure that the practises and claims of religions are considered with sensitivity, accuracy, intellectual rigour and fairness' (Jackson, 2004, p. 165). With this in mind, the internal tensions of the Catholic Church in England and Wales around what ought to constitute the contents of a Religious Education

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[26] In *Broad Areas* (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 1994) the community broad area begins with a reflection on 'the human experience of belonging' (p.15); the way of life broad area begins with an exploration of 'the values which underpin beliefs and actions in the human family' (p.16); the celebration broad area begins with an exploration of 'the meaning of celebration which marks the growth and development of every human being' (p.17).

curriculum, can be understood as an attempt to identify an appropriate ideological response on behalf of the Church to the descriptive fact of the increasing plurality of Catholic schools.

As Walbank (2012, p. 169) points out, the Catholic schools in England and Wales were originally built to exclusively accommodate the children of Catholic families. However, by the time Walbank is carrying out her own research in 2012, of the 19 schools in the North West (a region which has always had the largest Catholic populations) included in her study, 'not one was 100% Catholic in terms of its admissions'. The focus of her research was to discover how Catholic school leaders were able to reconcile the identity of their schools as Catholic schools, with the fact of the plurality of their staff and pupil populations. These kinds of question arise elsewhere in the literature and arguably began with the public acrimony over the closure of St Philip's Catholic Sixth Form College in Birmingham in 1995 (Murray, 1996) because the trustees (a Catholic religious order) deemed its Catholicity could not be sustained in the face of a fall in the Catholic pupil population.[27] The public opprobrium that surrounded this event did not portray the Catholic Church in England and Wales in a positive light and it is perhaps no accident that within five years the bishops had produced a document articulating their understanding of the relationship between a school's Catholic identity and the presence in the community of those who do not share that identity (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997). *Catholic Schools and Other Faiths* speaks of a tension between 'fidelity' and 'openness' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997, chap. 2) but affirms that the tension must be faced in a way that does not negate either pole of the argument. It cites the Congregation for Catholic Education (1977, para. 57) which affirms that without loss of its identity a Catholic school 'offers itself to all...opens itself to others and respects their way of thinking and living.' Later documents of the Congregation for Catholic Education (2013, chap. 2) point to intercultural dialogue as the key to navigating this tension, and that such an approach represents a path through the two extremes it rejects: relativism and assimilationism.

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[27] The closure of this college was devastating for the college community itself (Murray, 1996) and led to a public outcry from other members of the Catholic community (Hughes, 1992; Walsh, 1992), a series of debates in Parliament (Hansard, 1993), and an enquiry into the governance of the school by the Further Education Funding Council (Caines, 1994). It was a particularly volatile and unedifying clash between groups in the Church who held diametrically opposed visions of what Catholic schools were for.

Even in 1997 the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales (1997, p. 18) had begun to recognise this as the only possible response to the fact of plurality and that Catholic schools have a 'twofold duty: to teach in conformity with the Catholic faith and in accord with the identity of the school on the one hand, and on the other, the duty of respect and authentic dialogue.' The Catholic Education Service (2008) and Catholic Bishops of England and Wales (2010) have published several documents since, that reaffirm this official position and it is possible that had this thinking happened sooner, St Philip's Sixth Form College might still be open today. Certainly, by the time Walbank (2012) carried out her research, the need to hold this tension was not seen to be controversial for Catholic leaders. Indeed, not only was plurality not a threat to their identity but they rather viewed it as an expression of their Catholicity. The only difficulty they faced was 'how to interpret this in terms of practical theology to overcome barriers to proclamation as part of their Christian mission and engage in meaningful dialogue so they can still answer how their school is Catholic' (Walbank, 2012, p. 179).

In some respects, it is a surprise that the 2012 *Directory* does not better reflect a more dialogical approach to Religious Education, given the thinking the Church had already done by then in relation to the plurality of its schools. However, it seems it has taken the Church a lot longer to arrive at an underpinning ideology for Religious Education that mirrors the reality of the plurality that is characteristic of almost all Catholic schools in England and Wales today. However, it does appear to have improved with its latest edition of the *Directory* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023).[28]

While it was only possible to guess about the influence of the wider Religious Education landscape on earlier editions of the *Directory*, as an insider, I can relate that there was a conscious effort to reflect the thinking that was coming out of the REC and its religion and worldviews project in the drafting of this edition. For this reason, this normative curriculum document demonstrates how a dialogical Religious Education can be both Catholic and pluralistic. First, it is the first of the directories to prescribe the study of other religions and worldviews without subsuming them under Catholic category headers (as both 1996 and

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[28] An interest needs to be declared at this point. My colleague Dr Nancy Walbank (whose research I cited above) and I were intimately involved in the drafting of the text of the 2023 Directory. Nevertheless, our drafts were scrutinised, adapted, revised, supplemented, and eventually published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales so it is reasonable to point to the document as an expression of the current understanding of the Catholic Church in England and Wales in relation to Religious Education. The work Nancy and I did on this document was influential but not completely determinative.

2012 did when it placed them under the 'Life in Christ' area of study). The study of other religions is now found under the dialogue and encounter 'knowledge lens'[29] which examines the Church's teaching on interreligious and intercultural dialogue alongside a discrete study of other religions and worldviews. Second, it is the first to recognise the dangers of objectification and the importance of letting the other speak for themselves. While it recommends a layered approach as pupils grow older, it includes a requirement to teach 'Judaism, Islam, Dharmic religions and pathways, and other religions and worldviews, including non-religious worldviews' but, significantly, insists that such teaching be constituted as 'a study of how those who profess that religion or worldview understand it on their own terms' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 35). Third, it has attempted to reflect the complexity of the real religious landscape, and to include the personal worldviews of pupils by reference to 'respond' ways of knowing[30] which requires students to be given the space to 'respond personally and with integrity...to reflect on the meaning of what they have learned for their own lives' and to 'dialogue with others to understand themselves and others better' (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, p. 36).

Having said that, this third edition of the *Directory* may well still be working with 'essentialist' and 'reified' (Benoit, 2021, p. 314) constructions of the religions of others. It could be argued that it does the same in its presentation of Catholicism. However, the shift from the language of 'we', 'us' and 'our', so prevalent in 2012, to a language that introduces the learning about Catholicism with the phrase 'The Church teaches:...' indicates an intent at least to offer a curriculum that is faithful to the Catholic mission of the school but in a context where 'the faith of the children...cannot be presupposed' (Walbank, 2012, p. 180). Indeed, this learning will be happening in contexts where even the faith of those who avow a Catholic identity cannot be presupposed. In any case, it is clear that the European Court of Human Rights is working with a similarly reductive view of pluralism if the cases where it has applied the OCP test are anything to go by (Leigh, 2012, p. 214).

This review has sought to examine objectivity, criticality and pluralism from both a theoretical and practical perspective. What it has revealed, is that it is *possible* for Religious Education in Catholic schools to pass the OCP test, depending on how each

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[29] 'Knowledge lenses' replace the 'Areas of Study' of the previous two editions of the *Directory*.

[30] This is the language the *Directory* uses to refer to the three discrete skills it identifies as constitutive of good Religious Education. The three ways of knowing are: understand, discern, and respond. (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, pp. 35–39)

component of that test is understood and whether the curriculum sufficiently reflects a dialogical approach to learning. My research sought to find out the extent to which the educationalists in the Church were ready and able to articulate how the Church would *in fact* respond, were Religious Education in Catholic schools ever put to the OCP test.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 My own professional identity and location

I am a Catholic, and my faith has always been of fundamental importance to me. It has shaped both my identity and my defining choices. It formed the context for my experience of family life as a child; it was significant in guiding the studies I elected to follow in both further and higher education; it was determinative in my choice of life partner; and it remains the most salient feature of my current professional context. Any research that is an investigation into my own professional identity and location would inevitably have to recognise the significance of this Catholic context.

Equally, my entire professional career has been connected in some form with Religious Education as an academic discipline in its own right (see (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020, para. 315). While the initial impulse to become a religious educator arose from a critical interest in the faith that was already part of my identity, Religious Education itself (distinct from my personal faith) has become the other defining feature of that identity. Therefore, in addition to the importance of Catholicism as one of the defining boundaries of my identity, a commitment to Religious Education would be another. As the Religious Education adviser to the Catholic Education Service of England and Wales (CES), my research sought to illuminate the nature of a subject that, for me at least, must be both authentically Catholic and properly educational.

My professional location is relatively unusual and places me at the intersection of four discrete but related sets of interests. I think of these as having two primary orientations, and within each of these orientations there are secular and sacred variants. To describe these four categories, I will borrow a metaphor from the language of the Catholic liturgy: one orientation is facing those in authority, both secular and sacred (ad orientem); the other is facing those under authority, both secular and sacred (versus populum).[31]

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[31] In the Catholic liturgy, a Mass celebrated with the priest facing East, in the same direction as the people – ie pointing 'towards God' – is referred to as celebrating *ad orientem*, while a Mass celebrated with the priest behind the altar facing the people, is referred to as celebrating *versus populum*. This latter mode is more usual, and the Roman Missal cites it as preferable (Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, 2010, paragraph 299). I too have found my work is impossible unless I regularly turn *versus populum,* notwithstanding the responsibilities I have to those in positions of both state and secular authority.
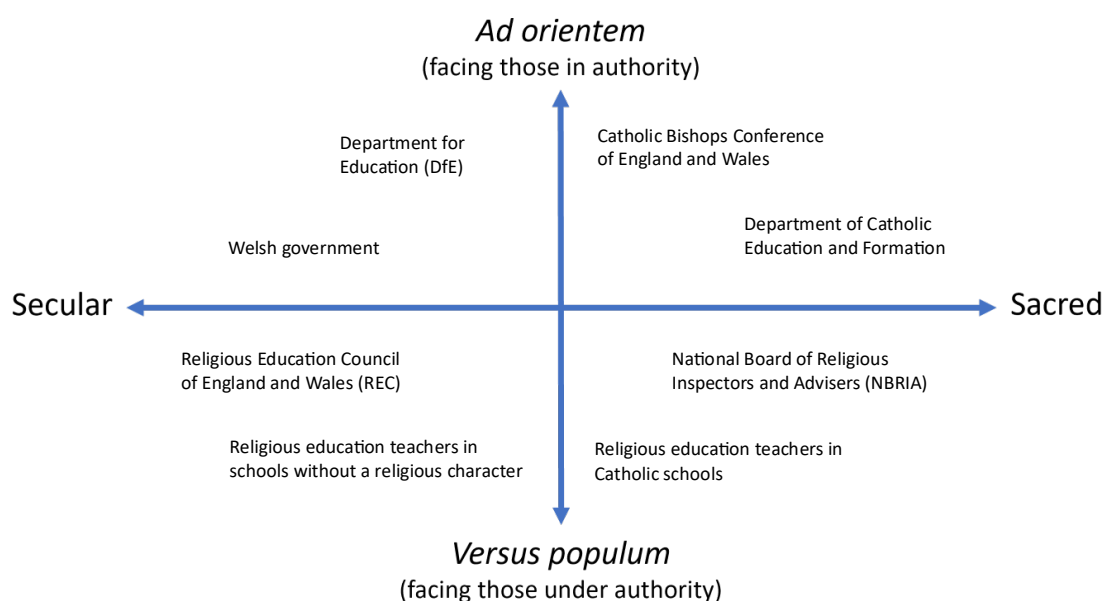
Figure 2: My professional location

Ad orientem: secular

Much of the work of the CES is a negotiation with the governments of England and Wales. While other officers of the CES are regularly in negotiation with both the DfE and the Senedd over numerous other issues, I have been directly involved in a major policy shift by each of these governments. The first was the huge examination reform under Sir Michael Gove, the then Secretary of State for Education. This involved lobbying the DfE to ensure a route through the GCSE that would be compliant with the curriculum requirements of the bishops and then working with the Minister for Schools, Nick Gibb, on populating the Catholic annexe of the DFE's subject content document for Religious Studies GCSE (Department for Education, 2015). The second was the negotiations the CES had with the Welsh Government over its proposed changes to Religious Education in Wales. These changes have now been enacted (Senedd Cymru, 2020), and include a change of the name of the subject to Religion, Values and Ethics (RVE), the formal inclusion of the study of non-religious worldviews, and the removal of the parental right of withdrawal from Religious Education. The removal of the parental right of withdrawal, which persists in England, is significant for my own research since it is integral to the legal requirement for Religious Education in state schools to be 'objective, critical and pluralistic.' The CES's work was largely successful with the DfE around examination reform in England, but largely unsuccessful with the Senedd, whose legislative changes the CES opposed. It is partly because of these failures, and the removal of the right of withdrawal in Wales, that questions about whether Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test

first arose. It was an appeal to this standard that the Welsh Government frequently stated as one of the reasons for its curriculum reform (Senedd Cymru, 2021b) and is now a requirement that anyone designing an RVE curriculum must meet (Senedd Cymru, 2022b).

In both cases, it should be clear that while the Catholic Church insists on its right to autonomy in relation to Religious Education (Code of Canon Law, can 804), in practice this is a negotiated freedom, at least in that majority of Catholic schools in England and Wales that are state-subsidised. It should also be clear that the work in which I am engaged is frequently polemical in character, which did have a bearing on the area I have chosen to research. It is from the secular *ad orientem* direction that the requirement to pass the OCP test chiefly comes.

Ad orientem: sacred

Responding to the demands of civil law constitutes one aspect of my work for the CES, but this is always carried out with an awareness of the other authority to whom I, and all Religious Education professionals in Catholic schools, answer: the Catholic bishops of England and Wales. Canon law provides powers to each bishops' conference to determine the content of Religious Education in their region of jurisdiction (Code of Canon Law, can. 804). The oversight of this provision is assigned to each diocesan bishop, who has the right to inspect the Religious Education provided in the schools within his diocese (Code of Canon Law, canons 804, 806). These provisions in canon law find their complement in the civil law of England (still) and Wales (historically, and up until 2022), which recognises the right of the bishops alone to determine the content of Religious Education (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Schedule 19, para. 4) and the right of each bishop in his own diocese to inspect its quality (Education Act 2005, secs. 48,50). Nevertheless, there is sometimes a tension between the requirements of civil law and those of canon law, as the situation in Wales has demonstrated.

In my own work, the authority of the Catholic bishops is an ever-present reality and was particularly pertinent to me in relation to the two most significant projects with which I have been engaged since joining the CES: the development of the National Framework for Inspection (Catholic Schools Inspectorate, 2023) and the revision of the Religious Education Directory (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023). In seeking to investigate how, if at all, Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test, the authority of the bishops over Religious Education in Catholic schools cannot be overlooked. Some ways of ensuring the objectivity, criticality and pluralism of Religious

Education in Catholic schools could undermine the identity of Catholic schools and potentially challenge their continued existence. There are some opposed to Catholic education for whom this would be the obvious and most desirable outcome (see, for example Hand, 2003, p. 99). However, for those who continue to defend it, the challenge will be to show how Religious Education in Catholic schools is able to pass the OCP test in ways that would satisfy the Catholic bishops of England and Wales. It is worth noting, that for many of the advisers, I suspect I, as an officer of the CES, would be perceived to be a representative of this ecclesial authority.

Versus populum: secular

I now turn in the other direction, towards those who are affected by the policymaking of those in authority, both secular and sacred. I begin first with those who could be called my secular colleagues: those who work in the field of Religious Education outside of the Catholic educational community. These colleagues have no formal relationship to me and my work, yet there is clearly a sense in which Catholic religious educators belong to a larger community of research and practice around Religious Education. As a member of the board of the Religious Education Council (REC),[32] I have frequently been faced with the necessity to clearly articulate the nature of Religious Education in Catholic schools to both critical and sympathetic professionals from outside of the Catholic community. Such dialogues are helpful in at least two ways: first they hopefully enable others to recognise the value of Religious Education in Catholic schools as a legitimate partner in the provision of high-quality Religious Education in every kind of school; second, they enable me, as an employee of the CES and a policymaker for Catholic Religious Education in general, to sharpen my understanding of what exactly constitutes high-quality Religious Education in any kind of school and how that can be applied in a Catholic context.

The most significant recent dialogue with the wider Religious Education community centred around the recommendations of the CoRE (2018) report, which is proposing what has subsequently been described as a paradigm shift (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, pp. 19–29), moving beyond the 'world religions paradigm' to a new 'worldviews paradigm'. This shift is, at least in part, about ensuring that Religious Education is inclusive of the non-

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[32] 'The Religious Education Council of England and Wales' as its website states, 'was established in 1973 to represent the collective interests of a wide variety of professional associations and faith communities in deepening and strengthening provision for Religious Education. It provides a multi-faith forum where national organisations with an interest in supporting and promoting Religious Education and RVE in schools and colleges can share matters of common concern' (Religious Education Council, 2024).

religious perspective which cannot justifiably be called a religious perspective but is arguably included under the larger umbrella concept of 'worldview.' The motivation for this expansion of the religious studies tent was in response to the sense that growing number of pupils in school classrooms self-identify as 'nones' (Towey, 2020, p. 141) and that religious studies needed to include their perspective in the classroom dialogue around the large questions of human existence that religion typically seeks to address. It also, however, appears to be about recognising the complex interplay between institutional worldviews and personal worldviews, and the ways in which what Dinham and Shaw (2015, 2020) call the 'real religious landscape', differs from that presented in textbooks and exam specifications.

This recognition of the importance of the wider Religious Education community provides the background against which an exploration of the extent of the objectivity, criticality and pluralism of Religious Education in Catholic schools will make most sense. This is because it is only in seeking to justify Religious Education in Catholic schools to those who suspect it of infringing their human rights, that the demonstration of its objectivity, criticality and pluralism becomes necessary at all. Any proof that Religious Education in Catholic schools passes the OCP test would have to be, to some extent, a proof that educationalists who are not Catholic would recognise as legitimate.

Versus populum: sacred.

Finally, the group of professionals with whom I work most frequently – my primary orientation – is with diocesan Religious Education advisers and inspection coordinators whose function is to support teachers in Catholic schools, specifically those who teach Religious Education, and to train those who inspect such education. While the CES acts on behalf of the bishops to set policy for Religious Education and inspection in Catholic schools in England and Wales, it is the NBRIA advisers who work with those implementing those policies: the teachers and inspectors. These advisers are hugely influential in the kinds of RE that happen in the Catholic schools in their diocese. In many cases they will direct schools as to which resource they must use (sometimes tying this to the compliance part of inspection). Even in those dioceses where this is not the case, they have historically provided most, if not all, of the continuing professional development for the RE teachers in the Catholic schools in their diocese. This is beginning to change, partly as a consequence of the inability of dioceses to fund full time education departments but also because some of these functions are moving from the diocesan offices into the structures of the larger academy trusts that constitute an increasingly large proportion of the Catholic school

estate in England. Nevertheless, even then, the diocesan adviser will have a role in overseeing the training that the academy trusts provide, to ensure its fidelity to the local educational mission for the schools in that diocese, as articulated by the bishop.

As well as the influential role they play in relation to schools, they are also the network of professionals who inform the work I do for the CES. The newly implemented National Framework for Inspection (Catholic Schools Inspectorate, 2023) and the recently published third edition of the *Directory* (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023) were both products of a working party of NBRIA advisers that I chaired on behalf of the CES. It is also these same advisers who will have to prepare the teachers and inspectors to respond to these two historically large shifts in the educational policy for Catholic schools in England and Wales.

NBRIA advisers collectively occupy a peculiar place in the religious and political landscape of Religious Education in England and Wales. For one thing, despite their historical and ongoing influence, their existence as a body is largely unknown to the teaching professionals they advise. For example, when I first became a Religious Education Adviser for the diocese of Hexham and Newcastle, I was surprised to discover that I was a member of an organisation of which I had never heard. And this despite the fact that I had been using an approach to assessment in RE as a teacher that was entirely the fruit of NBRIA's labours (National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisers, 2000).

Their position as a body is peculiar for other reasons. Despite their relative anonymity they have historically been hugely influential as the professional voice of Catholic education, as has been indicated in the literature review above (pp.91-99). NBRIA in its present incarnation is made up of advisers who, in almost every case, where teachers before they became advisers, and who are qualified to carry out the work as advisers because of this professional experience and expertise. Their task is a difficult one given that they stand on the frontier between faith and culture (as my thesis title acknowledges) and invariably feel different pulls on their loyalties. As *Catholic* education advisers they are aware of the role they occupy as official representatives of the Church to the teachers they serve, and of the importance of a fidelity to the tradition out of which their professional identities have emerged. At the same time, as professionals, they are usually much closer to the developments that are happening in the broader ecology of Religious Education beyond the boundaries of Catholic schools than the Church on whose behalf they act. As a result, they

are particularly alert to the civic importance of RE and the need to defend it as an academic subject in the public sphere.

Because of this kind of dual identity, they can find themselves in the uncomfortable position of, at one and the same time, seeming reactionary to the teachers they advise and waywardly liberal to the bishops who employ them. Their work is most successful when their theological formation is robust enough that the institutional Church has no suspicions about their motives, respects their professional competence, and consequently shapes its Religious Education policies based on their advice. It was clear that this relationship between the institutional and professional wings of the Church was much more evenly balanced in precisely this way in the past. However, the decline in the number (and arguably the theological and professional depth) of Catholic RE advisers has led to a much more centralised approach to policy making by the Church in England and Wales, a tilting of the balance towards the institutional and away from the professional. My research was partly a response to a recognition of the declining influence of NBRIA precisely at a moment when their role may be more crucial than ever.

3.2 The paradigmatic position of the research

From all that has been said so far, it is no doubt clear that this research is a response to several different disputes. It is pertinent to the exchange the CES had with the Welsh government over its changes to Religious Education legislation and the removal of the right of withdrawal (Senedd Cymru, 2021a). It also speaks to the internal tension identified in the previous section between those who view Catholic education as incompatible with pluralism, for whom Religious Education would be monological, and those for whom pluralism is an expression of the Gospel call to welcome the stranger (Mt 25:35), for whom Religious Education would be dialogical.

Consequently, because of the polemical context of this research, I was initially drawn to a normative paradigm, and its illusory promise of providing proofs for one side of the debate. However, it quickly became clear that there was a mismatch between this paradigmatic position and the kinds of question to which I was seeking answers. It was inappropriate as a method for several reasons given the presumptions that underpin the normative paradigm (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 7). First, the realist ontology upon which the normative paradigm rests requires a presumption about the fixed and discoverable nature of the world which I now have reason to question. Such a substantive view of objectivity fails to recognise the ways in which what is real exists in relationship to those who make

the observations of the world (Kuhn, 1962) who themselves exist within language cultures (Lindbeck, 1984) and traditions of interpretation (MacIntyre, 1981, 1988). Because of the difficulties I have already articulated with substantive and axiological understandings of objectivity, both the realist ontology and the positivist epistemology are inappropriate given the inescapably value-laden nature of the questions I was seeking to explore. When we are asking questions about the purpose of education, we are always asking axiological questions – questions whose answers are never straightforwardly discoverable through empirical observation, nor ones that are able to be definitively settled.

The next difficulty is the extent to which the kinds of straightforward causal relationships that are constitutive of 'proof' in the natural sciences, are elusive in the social sciences. Macintyre (1981, chap. 8) points out that the analogue between the natural sciences and the social sciences is false since the latter is not able to produce the kinds of law-like generalisations that are hallmarks of the former. However, he also points out that this is neither surprising, nor a defect, since the social sciences are working with autonomous subjects as their objects of study. Any social scientific laws that do claim to be predictive in the manner of the natural sciences are bound to be questionable, since they have precisely missed out that aspect of the discipline that gives it its social character: it deals with the complex and unpredictable character of human beings, human behaviours, and human communities. Whilst trying to find causal relationships is difficult but not completely impossible for social sciences, it was likely to be beyond me nevertheless, as a completely novice researcher, since, as Spicker (2011, p. 7) points out it is much more difficult than is often assumed and those 'who think they know the causes of social phenomena are usually wrong.' Furthermore, it treats the study of human subjects as comparable to the way that material objects in the natural world can be studied and presumes that the relationship between cause and effect is the same in the social sciences as it is in the natural sciences (that is, it has a deterministic anthropology). However, the relationship between the observer and the observed in natural sciences is that between a (free) subject and a (determined) object, whilst in the social sciences both observer and observed are subjects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 15) or as has been argued above, the only kind of personal objectivity that is actually possible is the intersubjectivity defended by Moore (1995).

In addition, the aspects of Religious Education I was most interested in were not raising the kinds of questions that were conducive to normative testing. For one thing, most of the disagreements within the field of Religious Education end up being centred around what we

think Religious Education is for. That is, they are not really questions about effectiveness, but questions about purpose. Such questions are not susceptible to the kinds of analysis I was proposing. As Biesta (Biesta, 2007, p. 5) points out, the kind of research that seeks to test effectiveness of particular curricula in producing specified outcomes is omitting to ask whether the outcomes aimed for were the ones we should be seeking at all. Such attempts to identify 'what works' severely limit 'the opportunities for educational practitioners to make such judgments in a way that is sensitive to and relevant for their own contextualized settings...[and] makes it difficult if not impossible to ask the questions of what it should work for and who should have a say in determining the latter.' Hence, the most important question is to ask those who are determining and implementing Religious Education policy (the Religious Education advisers) what it is they think they are doing and why they believe it to be valuable in the context in which their work is being carried out. This means asking questions about the nature of Religious Education in Catholic schools which are always balancing the demands of a magisterial Church (which established and runs the schools) with those of a democratic, pluralistic state (which pays for most of them).

Finally, it promotes an approach that requires the researcher to be disinterested and distant to ensure the research can generate universally applicable generalisations that are not context-bound (a nomothetic methodology). However, as I have already outlined, I am deeply invested in the outcome of this research, and I am already an insider, so to speak, and part of the world I am seeking to understand better through this research.

Therefore, the research could only really be positioned within an interpretive paradigm, along with the qualitative approach to research that this entails. In this, I was influenced by the work of Spicker (2011) who disparages attempts by the social sciences to identify precise causal connections or empirical proofs of positions that are legitimately contestable in plural democracies. For him the problem with the deterministic view of social realities is not only that it tends to ignore agency but also that it fails to recognise the sheer complexity of most causal relationships in the social context:

> Social phenomena are typically complex; many issues are multifaceted, and even relatively simple social phenomena are likely to be influenced by a range of different factors. The history of social policy is festooned with examples of questionable claims made about causes.

He suggests that such an approach is trapped in an epistemology that privileges *techne* over *phronesis*. 'Techne' comes from Aristotle's classification of types of knowing and refers to the application of technical knowledge to practical tasks. It is the kind of knowing

that is operative when a person uses a flat pack furniture instruction sheet to assemble a bookcase. Once it is presented in such terms it is obvious that such a characterisation of knowledge would never work in analysing social phenomena: first, because the sheer range and complexity of the things studied precludes the writing of a simple manual; second, because of the radical agency of individuals, human beings rarely behave as expected or ever in entirely predictable ways. He suggests instead another Aristotelian category of knowledge: phronesis. Phronesis is best translated as practical wisdom – a way of knowing that reflects on what needs to be done in concrete situations. It does not deny that there are causal mechanisms at work, but nor does it deny the messy and complex realities that constitute human living, but rather 'develops principles experientially' (Spicker, 2011, p. 1). It therefore requires a return to the "rough ground" of reality (Spicker 2011, p.13), rather than attempting to walk on the 'flawless, frictionless surface' assumed by deterministic anthropologies. For this reason, others (Nixon, Walker and Clough, 2003) suggest that researchers should focus less on 'what works' and instead configure research as a thoughtful reflection on practice by practitioners. Such a process is respectful of both the complexity of social phenomena and the autonomy and agency of practitioners – both of which are denied or obscured by the simple deterministic view of human nature required by a normative paradigm.

In working with the Religious Education advisers as they traverse the 'rough ground' of the inherent tensions between Catholic identity and openness to culture, the most appropriate approach was joining with them in thoughtful reflection on my own practice even as I conversed with them about theirs. In the context of research that foregrounds the importance of dialogue and interpretation, a natural conversation (Tracy, 1987, chap. 1), analysed using a qualitative method, seemed to me the most appropriate way to explore the ways in which, if at all, Religious Education in Catholic schools could be defended as objective, critical and pluralistic.

3.3 Research instrument

My initial attraction to a normative paradigm, with a gradual shift to a recognition of the inevitably qualitative nature of my research, was also reflected in the kind of research instrument I elected to use to gather my data. My research interviews were carried out before I had fully understood my own paradigmatic position and, at the time, semi-structured interviews seemed like a happy compromise, especially when put alongside the initial questionnaires and the word frequency analysis (both of which I anticipated using in a more quantitative manner). On reflection, a more open-ended dialogical instrument, with

accompanying in-depth case studies, may have been a more appropriate match for the kind of research I wanted to carry out. Furthermore, the method of analysis I employed (reflexive thematic analysis) may also have been better suited to a less structured approach to the interviews. However, the method of analysis was one I settled on as the most appropriate only after all the interviews had been completed. This is obviously not ideal, but it is also perhaps an inevitable part of the journey of a novice researcher and the shift of understanding it represents feels now like a valuable part of the research in its own right.

Despite not being the optimal research tool, semi-structured interviews served me relatively well nonetheless not only because interviews are 'one of the most powerful ways we have of understanding others' (Punch and Oancea, 2014, p. 182) but also because, in reviewing the literature, I was persuaded by the repeated claims that dialogue and conversation are the best means of navigating the inevitable tensions of living in a plural world. The interviews were structured around five questions that were the same for all participants but did not foreclose the possibility of exploring ideas that my questions had not anticipated. Hence, they were semi-structured, so that a conversational dynamic could be established that allowed for me and those I interviewed to 'grasp for meaning together' (Forsey, 2012). While entirely unstructured interviews may have facilitated this more effectively, some of the insights I gained may not have been available without the ability to compare the responses of interviewees to the same question. Many of the interviews did in practice range far and wide, with the questions serving as signposts, rather than boundary fences – allowing the conversations to traverse similar terrain but by way of distinctive routes. The questions for the semi-structured interview were:

In the context of Catholic schools in England and Wales:

1. What purpose or purposes does classroom Religious Education have in Catholic schools?
2. What must the shape and contents of a Religious Education curriculum be in order to achieve the purpose/s you have identified?
3. What, if any, are the obstacles to achieving the purpose/s for you have identified?
4. What if anything makes your vision of Religious Education a) objective, b) critical and c) pluralistic?

5. Thinking about your professional journey (past, present and future) as a diocesan adviser, please offer any other reflections (positive and negative) you have about classroom Religious Education.

Interviewees were sent the questions in advance, but without any presumption that they would prepare responses.

I used purposive sampling to identify those advisers I would invite to participate. I wanted to include advisers who represented the range of different diocesan contexts, bearing in mind the different demographics of each. I used data published annually by the DfE (Department for Education, 2021) and cross-referenced it against the CES (Catholic Education Service, 2019) census data for Catholic schools. This allowed me to identify dioceses with distinctive characteristics. The advisers invited to participate in the study were drawn from dioceses that had either the highest or the lowest proportion of schools in each of several categories.[33] Unfortunately, one of the dioceses that frequently stood at one of the extremes in each of these categories did not have any advisers in post at the time the research was carried out.[34] In this case, I identified the diocese with the second lowest or second highest proportion, respectively, to stand instead of this diocese. For each of the other dioceses I invited a primary and secondary adviser to participate in the study. In some dioceses one person is both the primary and secondary adviser. It should also be noted that a single diocese can satisfy more than one of the categories. It was also important to ensure that the dioceses selected covered both England and Wales and the different regions of England. This was achieved naturally as a consequence of the selection mechanism chosen and did not add any additional potential interviews to the schedule. The diocesan selection against each of these criteria is included as an appendix (Appendix 5: Diocesan coverage table for purposive selection of respondents, p.176). There are 22 Catholic dioceses in England and Wales and 15 of them were represented in the cohort of advisers selected. I interviewed 26 advisers in total, but one of these withdrew because they left advisory work and returned to the classroom. Therefore, the total number of

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[33] The categories were: total number of schools in diocese; proportion of pupils on free school meals; proportion of schools where more than 50% of the staff are Catholic; proportion of schools where fewer than 20% of the staff are Catholic; proportion of pupils whose families self-identify as Catholic, as Christian, as Muslim, as non-religious; proportion of pupils whose families self-identify as white, Asian, black, black and minority ethnic; proportion of independent schools; proportion of schools in rural areas.

[34] This is itself pertinent, given that small dioceses, or dioceses where Catholics make up a much smaller proportion of the population, are often the most financially stretched and the ones that struggle most to sustain diocesan education services at full capacity.

respondents included in the research is 25. Each interview lasted approximately an hour. The average length of interview was 52 minutes, the longest interview lasting 73 minutes and the shortest lasting for 31 minutes. The average interview length was 42 minutes for primary advisers, 58 minutes for secondary advisers, and 59 minutes for advisers who covered both primary and secondary.

In addition to the interview, I also asked respondents to fill in a pre-interview questionnaire. This was in anticipation of the possibility that the academic and professional backgrounds of participants may have a bearing on the kinds of response they made (this is included as Appendix 6: Participant pre-interview survey, p.177). The original intention had been to carry out the interviews in person, but the data gathering phase coincided with the second of the pandemic lockdowns. Fortunately, by then, most people had become more than used to conversing online, which is how all the interviews were conducted. This also had the added advantage of making the recording and storage of the interviews much more straightforward than it otherwise might have been.

3.4 Method of analysis

The method I used for the analysis of the coded interviews is called 'reflexive thematic analysis' (RTA) by those who have developed it (Braun and Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2019, 2020). I chose it because it had several advantages for me as a novice researcher, asking the kinds of question I have outlined. First, it is a method that is particularly recommended for those who are new to qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 78, 81), as it allows for an analysis that has validity but without the necessity to develop the high levels of expertise required of methods used by more experienced researchers. Second, it has reflexivity built-in as part of the method, something that I had already identified as a key component of the only kind of personal objectivity that made any sense to me (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020, chap. 4). For example, Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 63) discourage the use of the passive voice in reporting findings, such as describing themes as 'emerging' or 'being discovered', since these presume a 'passive account of the process of analysis' and deny 'the active role the researcher always plays in identifying patterns/themes' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 80). Such an approach is inadequate because 'searching for themes is an *active* process, meaning we generate or construct themes rather than discovering them' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 63). Thus, the method becomes reflexive in the sense that I, as the researcher, am owning the analysis, acknowledging the role that my own worldview has on shaping what is discovered, describing how and why certain themes were constructed, and how the data was analysed in order to generate those themes. The conversational

shape of the original interviews has, in any case, placed me right in the middle of the shared construction of meanings and some of the themes I isolate and eventually describe, I selected because of my own interest in following leads prompted by the responses of the interviewees. For this reason, some of the quoted extracts from the research in the thematic analysis include my own responses to interviewee's comments. I hesitated to do this at first but have come to recognise the way in which the exchanges I have chosen to include often mark a point where I and they are in a process of co-constructing the meanings we are grasping at.

Finally, RTA provided a way of circumventing some of the risks of qualitative research, specifically the suspicions that it lacks rigour and leads to an 'anything goes' approach to analysis and the identification of patterns (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 96). Braun and Clarke recommend an approach to coding the data that gave me confidence that the findings had validity, even while acknowledging my own positionality in relation to the research. They recommend a six-phase structure that is recursive and adaptable (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.87), which has allowed flexibility about which themes I have selected as the main focus of my reporting and has allowed a fluidity to the analysis. For example, following their lead that this is 'a method...rather than a methodology' (Clarke and Braun, 2017, p. 297), I have been able to move between manifest, semantic analysis and an inductive, latent analysis. Coding in a way that recognises the distinction between these two approaches without precluding either has produced coding schemata that has allowed the refinements that ultimately met the criteria for good thematic analysis they identify (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.36).

RTA has the following six-phase structure (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87, 2012, pp. 60–69): (1) familiarising myself with the data; (2) initial coding; (3) looking for themes; (4) reviewing themes; (5) isolating and identifying themes; (6) writing up the findings. In terms of my own research, although I paid for external transcription, the first phase was accomplished by reading through the transcripts several times while watching back the videos. At this point, I corrected any typographical errors in the transcripts and noted additional matters of tone of voice or other non-verbal signals that seemed to me to carry some of the meaning but were not captured in the mere record of what was said. Sometimes how things were said (or even the face an interviewee pulled as they said it) were just as important. The second phase was an exhaustive coding of each of the transcripts. It was a mix of latent and semantic coding. I was of course, looking for how the respondents articulated their own sense of whether and how Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP

test, but I also focused on what else I perceived to be tacitly communicated through the way in which they made their responses. In this, I was also attempting to follow Braun and Clarke's identification of what counts as good practice in reflexive thematic analysis which demands more than simply reporting the interviewees' responses to the questions I asked them. This was my naïve starting presumption and, Braun and Clarke, point out that using 'data collection questions as themes' is a 'common error' but 'themes are better identified across the content of what participants say rather than via the questions they have been asked' (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 69).

The third phase blended with the fourth to some extent as I began to cluster some codes together that appeared to me to have a thematic resemblance and that I thought began to tell a story. Some of these clusters I identified later in the coding process and then revisited earlier codes and placed them underneath the newly isolated thematic cluster headers. For example, in an initial coding of the data, I identified the different ways in which respondents argued that Religious Education in Catholic schools was objective (a descriptive code), and only later realised there was an attitudinal element to this too. That is, as well as having different views on whether it could be objective, they also had different views on whether it should be (an evaluative code). Another example was having identified that many respondents were using a kind of 'received language', and then later interpreting that as evidence of a kind of professional constraint that matched some of the reading I had done on performativity, I then marked those codes as subsets of a new theme: 'confessional ventriloquism' (see Ball, 2003, p. 218). However, once these higher-level themes had been identified, I reviewed the codes again and checked that the theme was internally consistent, that there was sufficient data to support the themes identified, and that the data matched the themes I had assigned them to. Finally, the fifth and sixth stages also had a kind of iterative relationship as writing up the themes also brought into relief things that were only implicit in my own thinking before I began the writing process. Again, this confirms what Braun and Clarke (2012, p. 69) affirm as a feature of qualitative approaches where 'writing and analysis are thoroughly interwoven'. Thus, qualitative research, as Punch and Oancea (2014, p. 369) point out, makes a distinction between 'writing to report', where the write-up only comes at the conclusion of the process, and 'writing to learn', where the process of writing itself becomes analysis - one of the ways I am using to 'work out' what my data means. Hence, the process of reporting the themes identified also became a prompt to revisit the data and reposition some of the codes into a

thematic structure that better reflected the new insights gained from attempting to craft how the data was to be reported.

The final list of codes and themes is given in two Appendices: *Appendix 7: Initial* Codebook, p.179, and *Appendix 8: Thematised codebook*, p.193. There are two versions of the coding. The first is arranged by question and shows an early, relatively unprocessed set of early codes, arranged by question. The second shows how I organised the codes into a structured hierarchy that best exemplified the story I was telling about my data, under the thematic headers I had constructed.

I have chosen to focus on five key themes that I have identified in the research. The first two are themes that I identified using a manifest content analysis of the interviewees' direct responses to the first and fourth questions asked pertaining to the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools and how, if at all it could pass the OCP test. In addition, a combination of manifest and latent content analysis allowed me to make connections between the respondent's articulations of the purpose of Religious Education and the answer they gave to the second question about what they thought the content of Religious Education in Catholic schools should be. This gave me my first two themes: (1) The purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools; and (2) The meanings of objective, critical and pluralistic. Within each of these I identified sub-themes that allowed me to group their responses under categories that seemed to me to provide points of commonality and contrast from which I was able to point to the significance of different kinds of response. In addition, beginning with an analysis of how they answered the question about purpose, allowed me to interrogate whether the kind of answer they gave determined how they would then answer the question about whether Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test.

The third and fourth themes were the result of latent content analysis, largely of the answers to those same three questions. In coding the transcripts, I began to see that what I took to be numerous indicators of the kind of professional ventriloquism identified by Ball (2003), suggesting that the advisers were experiencing some of the kinds of performativity pressures identified by Bryan and Revell (2011). Some of these pressures came from the usual places – the DfE, exam boards, Ofsted – but there were subtle (and occasionally less than subtle) signs that some of this pressure was internal, deriving from their sense of being under ecclesial authority. Given the kinds of inauthenticity that performativity pressures can lead to, and the need for authenticity if teachers in Catholic schools are to

be effective witnesses, this seemed an important area to investigate, and led to my third theme that I named, with a nod to Ball's (2003, p. 218) evocative description: (3) confessional ventriloquism.

The fourth theme I chose arose from both manifest and latent content analysis. In terms of the manifest analysis, I was drawing on the respondent's answer to question 3 about the obstacles to good quality Religious Education. In terms of the latent analysis, I was exploring the depth of the responses and how well informed they seemed to me by theoretical and expert reflection. This theme was a recognition of both the importance of the diocesan adviser role, and of the different ways it has been undermined since the days when NBRIA was exerting much greater influence on the policymaking of the national Church. It seemed to me that an autonomous, professional organisation (like NBRIA), was vital in responding to the different stresses under which Religious Education in Catholic schools is inevitably placed. It was also important in sustaining such an organisation that the confessional performativity pressures were able to be resisted and that a creative dialogue between the institutional and professional Catholic Church be restored. When NBRIA was functioning at its historical optimum it was able to provide resources for the Church that enabled it to participate in wider dialogues about the nature and purpose of Religious Education that benefited both the Church and the diverse range of pupils who were educated by the Church in Catholic schools. However, NBRIA's ability to do this well has diminished over recent years, not least because the shrinking of the Catholic community has led to an under-resourcing of diocesan education services, with a resulting loss of expertise and institutional memory. Following the way in which one of the respondents referred to the inspiring figures from NBRIA's history as 'luminaries', I have called this theme (5) keeping the flame burning – sustaining NBRIA's expertise and influence.

The final theme was connected to the third in that it was also a recognition of the tacit influence of the movements in the wider Religious Education landscape, specifically the way in which the REC's work on the worldviews paradigm had already begun to influence the vocabulary and thinking of the advisers even though, in a sense, there was no reason why it should. This interested me because, through my review of earlier iterations of the *Directory*, I had identified the ways in which NBRIA had historically been influenced by the larger Religious Education community outside of the Catholic communion, and here it appeared to be happening again. There was still a kind of ventriloquism at work as there were times when it was obvious that they were trying out new ways of expressing things

they had articulated differently in the past. However, it seemed more innocuous, and even helpful, than the inauthenticity identified as a risk in theme 3, as it was not obviously connected to performativity, nor did the advisers speak about it negatively. Rather it seemed that the approach was one that was giving them new ways of resolving some of the tensions they identified elsewhere in their responses. This last theme pointed a way forward for the institutional Church and for NBRIA, in re-establishing a research-informed creative dialogue within the Church. The fourth theme I have called (5) a rekindled hope: a new language of worldviews.

Taking all five themes, including the sub-themes, the structure of the next chapter will be as follows:

1. The purposes of Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales
    a. Academic Information
    b. Personal Formation
    c. Civic Participation
2. The meanings of objective, critical and pluralistic
    a. Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be objective?
        i. Objectivity as neutrality
        ii. Objectivity as intersubjectivity
    b. Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be critical?
        i. Simple criticality
        ii. Nuanced criticality
    c. Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be pluralistic?
        i. Simple pluralism
        ii. Nuanced pluralism
        iii. Situated pluralism
3. Confessional ventriloquism
4. Keeping the flame burning – sustaining NBRIA's expertise and influence
5. A rekindled hope: a new language of worldviews

Chapter 4: Research findings

4.1 The purposes of Religious Education in Catholic schools in England and Wales

In asking the advisers how, if at all, education in Catholic schools could be objective, critical, and pluralistic, I was asking them to consider the kinds of Religious Education already offered in Catholic schools and to reflect on it critically. Whether it could pass the OCP test, it seemed to me, hinged on how they understood the purpose of the subject in the Catholic school context in England and Wales. I began each interview by asking them to articulate what they understood to be the purpose of Religious Education in this context. Their responses were detailed and wide-ranging. They were sometimes disjointed and inchoate, at other times highly developed and well-informed. Within these I isolated three different kinds of rationale for Religious Education offered by the advisers. The typology I have coined to label these different kinds does not strike me as original, but it helped me to place responses into taxonomic categories. The advisers themselves usually expressed some version of all three of these different types, but they often led with one of them, which shaped their responses to the other questions. Using the labels I have assigned, the advisers speak of the purpose of Religious Education as (a) academic information, and/or (b) personal formation, and/or (c) civic participation.

a) Academic information

In this first articulation of the subject's purpose are those who view Religious Education in Catholic schools as primarily an academic subject, whose main purpose is the critical and theological analysis of Catholicism, or a critical and sociological analysis of a range of religion and worldviews. All the advisers gave some account of the purpose of Religious Education in terms of the building of knowledge and understanding. For the majority (17 out of the 25), they also referenced the idea that it should be treated as an academic subject. Occasionally this was couched in terms of a story about a journey towards academic respectability. For example, one adviser described how, in the past 'we were almost embarrassed to...be academic' (2S1) but that now, '...its primary purpose is academic; it's a multi-disciplinary study of the Catholic religion' (10B1). Here we can see this adviser using the term 'Catholic religion', which is language the Church itself uses when distinguishing Religious Education as an academic discipline 'with the same demand for rigour...as the other disciplines' (Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation, 2020, para. 315) from the faith formative approach of evangelisation and

catechesis. Sometimes more colourful language was used to distinguish what some perceived as an improvement in the subject's reputation in Catholic schools. For example, it was once seen as a 'bit of a fluffy subject' (4P1). However, there was now an intolerance expressed for this perceived lack of academic seriousness, and that Religious Education should have 'none one of this...namby-pamby let's colour in the picture of Jesus' (6P1). On the contrary there was a repeated assertion of the need for a systematic approach where knowledge and understanding are placed within a disciplinary frame, such that one respondent asserted that the 'purpose of RE is to make theologians' (2P1).

As we can see some advisers gave what I would consider an exclusive account of the academic purpose of Religious Education, only giving theology as its academic location, and Catholicism as its systematic content. For example, when asked what the contents of Religious Education in Catholic schools should be, the most popular responses were: Catholicism (15 out of 25), Jesus (12 out of 25), the scriptures (11 out of 25) and the sacraments (9 out of 25). However, those who expressed an exclusive view at first were in a minority, and they always expanded their initial account when directly asked whether other religions and worldviews should be included. In the end, all advisers agreed that they should be included. Some only recognised this after being prompted by a follow-up question, while for others there was an immediacy to the central importance of the pluralistic nature of the study. Most advisers included the study of other religions and worldviews without being prompted (17 out of 25) and several referenced the importance of multi-disciplinary approaches. For a minority, the learning about other religions and worldviews – or about religion as a category in itself – was the most important purpose of Religious Education and for these advisers it was connected to increasing pupil tolerance and respect for difference. I will come back to this when I outline the civic participation purpose described below.

b) Personal formation

Often the claim to academic status for Religious Education was followed up quickly by a phrase such as this one: 'RE is so much more than just an academic subject' (1P1). For most of the advisers (23 out of 25), there was some sense that there was a 'more than' aspect to Religious Education, and that damage was done to Religious Education if it was viewed merely as an academic subject. As with the academic purpose, there was an exclusive and an inclusive version of the expression of this purpose.

The exclusive version spoke about the 'more than' in terms of faith formation – that is, of the role Religious Education plays in catechesis and evangelisation. For several advisers this was expressed as the role education plays for all pupils in helping them to understand and participate in the wider Catholic life of the school – in its worship and its ways of living out its faith, so that even if they are only 'sat there as an observer' of the Catholic life of the school, 'at last they understand what's going on' (4S1). As one adviser put it:

> '...in terms of actually how you can live out that Catholic faith within your school, the RE lessons underpin everything that you're doing and give the context for the life and the way in which the school lives its life and its work. (7P1)

This formative aspect of the Religious Education is here only exclusive in terms of its focus on the way the Catholic faith impacts on the school, but it is aimed at all pupils, whatever their confessional background. There is also a more exclusive expression of this idea, and advisers here refer to the way they want Religious Education to contribute to the faith formation of the Catholic pupils specifically; they want Religious Education to be part of presenting Catholicism as something worthy enough to give one's life to:

> ...I feel like if we're doing our job properly, they should leave their time at school just aware ... like not aware, that's not a word ... I want them to know stuff, I want them to experience things. Like I know that RE is an academic subject, but I want them to have been taught by teachers that love their faith, and that that's imparted to them. So that not only is it just this academic understanding, but that they've ... in some way that's also linked in with the Catholic life of the school so that they've had an experience of Christ. (1S2)

For those advisers who expressed this kind of view, they often also spoke about the positive influence that their own Religious Education had had on their lives and on their faith development. One of the advisers recognised the ways in which this may be understood to be an exclusive view but defended it as necessary all the same. This adviser argued that the Catholics schools had to be a faith-forming community and, despite the fact that this may be viewed as a 'ghettoised Catholic view of things' Religious Education in a Catholic school has to be a place where 'faith seeks understanding...where we say we love the Lord with all our minds' where 'we begin to find a reason for the hope that is within us' (6S1).

Such descriptions of the purpose of Religious Education usually recognised the obligation Catholic schools had to Catholic parents but were also clearly informed by the deep faith of the advisers themselves, and therefore had an intrinsically personal dimension. This was usually expressed as the importance of Religious Education as the means by which a

personal encounter with Christ became possible. In this respect, the faith formative aspect is only exclusive in the sense of being focused on Christ but is seen as reaching beyond the community of pupils who happen to be Catholic, becoming an invitation to all. For one adviser the subject content inevitably presented this kind of choice to all pupils:

> '...because the Catholic faith is faith in a person, the person of Jesus Christ, therefore it also facilitates an encounter with that person, and it does so regardless of the intentions of those who teach it. It has the capacity by virtue of its content to serve that other purpose as well. And that other purpose immediately has to do with a personal response of one kind of the other – it asks in other words ... the content itself asks the questions that Jesus poses to his disciples – "Who do you say that I am?"' (15B1)

Even though for many this articulation of the purpose of Religious Education would seem indefensibly exclusive for publicly subsidised schools (see, for example, Hand, 2003), it is right at the heart of what gives Catholic schools their identity. For example, in the bishops' document *Christ at the Centre* (Stock, 2012, p. 7), the first reason given for why the Church provides Catholic schools in England and Wales is to assist the Church in its mission 'of making Christ known to all people.' Any account of how Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the OCP test will need to be reconciled with this evangelising imperative, as these advisers recognised.

At the same time, there were versions of this formative purpose for Religious Education expressed by advisers that were broader and spoke of the 'more than' of Religious Education as the task of human formation, rather than (or usually as well as) faith formation. This inclusive version of the personal formation purpose is usually expressed as the 'formation of the human person' (3S1) or of the 'whole person' (1P1) and includes moral, spiritual, cultural, and creative aspects of a person, as well as their intellectual capacities. For many of the advisers this was about moral formation, about giving them 'the foundations...to be able to make moral decisions' (7P1). For these advisers it was clear that teaching required them to take moral positions in relation to the crises of the age (such as climate change), and to give pupils the tools to arrive at their own moral positions with integrity. There was no sense that axiological objectivity is even desirable, let alone achievable. This view of formation recognised the plural world in which the pupils live and the responsibility the school has to form them to live well in such a society. Sometimes this was referred to as helping them learn how to disagree well, as in this response:

[It's] really vital for the modern world...there's that ability to talk to somebody or look at something that maybe you don't agree with but understand why somebody would hold that view and be able to have a discussion with that person about what they believe and what they think, and at the end of the day still be able to engage with that person and not go 'Well you're completely wrong, I'm cutting you out, I'm not talking to you, you're wrong, I'm right' – that's really important. (14B1)

Or in more general terms, it was expressed elegantly by one adviser who described the role of Religious Education as 'nurturing persons for community' (11B1). This articulation of the social dimension of human formation leads neatly to the final version of how the advisers articulated the purpose of Religious Education, that of preparation for the participation of pupils in the religiously diverse societies of contemporary England and Wales.

c) Civic participation

In outlining this purpose of Religious Education, an exchange I had with one of the advisers captures it well. In this extract, my own response is included (I), as well as the advisers (R):

R: You know in my first school...23 years ago, there weren't many Asian communities...[and] I brought my friend in who I worked with ... to come and speak to the kids. And he brought somebody from his mosque, and they walked across the yard, and literally lines of children stared at them, just gawped at them, and then one of them said 'Why has one got jeans on?' and I thought 'What do you mean?' 'I didn't know they wore jeans' – that's what a child said to me 'I didn't know they wore jeans'...

I: I think that jeans comment is profound, isn't it? It reveals so much...

R: Later in the conversation... they were talking about Islam... he was saying about how he knew which way to face when he was praying. So, he asked the kids 'How do you think I know which way I have to face when I'm kneeling and praying?' and they had crazy ideas obviously ... and then the answer was 'Well I look at my satellite dish, so I can tell from the satellite dish the direction'. And one of them said 'Do you have satellite dishes?'

I: (laughs) Yeah, I wear jeans and I've got a telly. (4S1)

This exchange is at once amusing and alarming. It demonstrates the extent to which religious belief is viewed as exotic by pupils and is alarming since this 'othering' of the religious person is exactly the kind of dynamic that provides fuel for prejudicial attitudes and behaviours (see Benoit, 2021). For the adviser in this exchange, the main purpose of Religious Education is to prepare pupils for their civic participation in a religiously diverse

society. This adviser was one of three who strongly expressed the view that Religious Education has a responsibility for tackling ignorance about the religious diversity that is increasingly characteristic of most towns and cities in the UK. From this perspective, the learning in Religious Education must be focused on attitudes just as much as on knowledge because, as another adviser put it, 'it's really important that children...know about the lives of others, know about different belief systems' to tackle 'those sorts of awful ingrained...prejudices' (2P1). These anxieties about prejudices were only expressed by a minority of advisers (5 out of the 25), but their concerns were significant and usually were worries about tackling Islamophobic tropes amongst the pupils and, sometimes, their parents.

Even though only a minority spoke directly about Religious Education's role in tackling prejudice, the vast majority of the respondents (17 out of 25) agreed that Religious Education played an important role in helping students encounter the religious other with respect, and not just the *religious* other. The inclusion of non-religious worldviews in the Religious Education curriculum is one of the aspects of the proposed worldviews paradigm shift that has led to some resistance within the wider Religious Education community.[35] However, for those advisers who advocated for this purpose of Religious Education, a study of non-religious worldviews was seen as a necessary feature of preparation for participation in a diverse society. At the same time, there was clearly something novel about this idea for most of the advisers, since only two out of the 17 who presented some version of this purpose, referred to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews without prompting. For five others the inclusion of non-religious worldviews was acknowledged as important, but only after being directly asked.

These three typologies of the purposes of Religious Education in Catholic schools provide a basis for better understanding the responses the advisers gave to the questions about how Religious Education could meet the demands of the OCP test. Although most advisers gave some version of all three purposes, the priority they gave to one or other of them was often

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[35] For the sake of full transparency here the CES is listed, along with the Board of Deputy of British Jews, as being the principal source of such pushback in the Religious Education community. For example, Freathy and John (2019b, p. 8) in a thorough and effective critique, challenge the CES's claim that the inclusion of non-religious worldviews would be a 'dilution' of the subject. Freathy and John point to a press release on the CES's (2018) website in setting up the position they intend to counter. This press release, and its resistance to the inclusion of non-religious worldviews in Religious Education, is interesting, given my own involvement, as an officer of the CES, in the production of the most recent iteration of the *Directory*, which, *pace* this press release, mandates their inclusion (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2023, pp. 17–18, 35).

a good predictor of how they would respond to the question about objective, critical and pluralistic Religious Education.

4.2 The meanings of objective, critical and pluralistic

The briefest summary of the adviser's responses as to whether Religious Education in Catholic schools can pass the OCP test is, perhaps unsurprisingly, it depends. It depends on how each adviser articulated the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools, but also on what they understood to be the meanings of each of the terms in that legal troika. As I have shown through the literature review, each of the terms has multiple meanings, and only some of them are philosophically coherent. Only one of the advisers interviewed had come across the words in the context in which I was evaluating them and thereby had some understanding of their legal import. For the rest, their responses reflected both their diversity of views about Religious Education's purpose and the different meanings that each of the terms can carry. This is reflected in the analysis of the responses given below.

a) Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be objective?

(i) *Objectivity as neutrality*

For some of the advisers, objectivity was most clearly understood as a kind of academic distance, the kind of neutrality that many scholars have pointed to as both undesirable and probably impossible. Nevertheless, there were some advisers, working with this construct of objectivity, who were able to say that Religious Education in Catholic schools met this standard of objectivity. Five out of the 25 advisers interviewed gave some account like the one articulated by this adviser:

> ...in order to be truly an academic exercise then there has to be objectivity to it that takes you out of your own faith space – whether that's a committed Catholic faith, or a committed other religion faith, or a committed no faith – take stuff out of those shoes for a moment and see what it's like for someone else to think it. So I, as a Catholic, had a responsibility to ensure that the people I was teaching knew where the debates were about and why someone might challenge that belief (5S1).

Nevertheless, even for these five advisers there was some sense that whether Religious Education in Catholic schools could be objective was contingent on the attitude of the teacher and that such objectivity was not a given in all Religious Education classrooms. The same adviser who articulated the view quoted above also referred to a colleague who at the same time, and in the same department, was much more didactic and monological in their approach to Religious Education:

where I have worked and where I have some degree of influence I've always tried to do it that way...I had a colleague who would have preferred to say 'Well here's what the Catholic church says, just accept it everyone because it's right'...And in terms of the critics of faith-based education would fit all the caricatures of what they think faith-based education is. And as head of department, I was able to say well actually no we can't afford to do that because actually educationally it's not fair. (5S1)

This caveated defence of the objectivity of Religious Education in Catholic schools was common, but for others it was an entirely optimistic picture. One of the advisers reported how much better the Religious Education was in the school where he first taught, than the Religious Education he had received as a child. This adviser reported that 'from 1991 to whenever I stopped being head of RE in 2017, all I saw was progress in academic terms of this being critical, being objective and being pluralistic' (13S1).

For others, their assessment was much less optimistic. For those advisers who emphasised the importance of civic participation, they most often articulated the view that Religious Education in Catholic schools *should* be objective, but that it fell short of that standard by some margin. This exchange with one adviser captures the view very well:

> I: We in our response [to the Welsh Government's consultation on RVE], the CES, said we think Catholic RE is critical, objective, and pluralistic ... now if I'm being honest there's some level at which I think that ...
>
> R: Did you say that with a straight face?
>
> I: Yeah, it's sort of a political move, but I think there is a way you can articulate that, but I'm interested – do you think Catholic RE is critical, objective and pluralistic – and if so, in what sense, and if not, why not?
>
> R: No, I don't. (1S1)

It could not be put much more bluntly than that. For these advisers, who were in the minority (2 out of 25), there was a direct incompatibility between fidelity to the Church's faith formative mission and its ability to offer Religious Education that was objective in the sense of academic neutrality.

Most advisers (13 out of 25) agreed with the latter assessment that Religious Education in Catholic schools was not objective but did so by rejecting the idea of objectivity as neutrality in the first place. Many of them used the same kinds of argument outlined above by those who argue that neutrality is unachievable and, in any case, undesirable as an aim

for any kind of education. One adviser, for example, spotted the kinds of hidden prejudices (Cooling, 2002) that can be created in the pursuit of neutrality:

> And I think in terms of objective, I think you can't be neutral in education. If you say all religions are equally valid for example, then that's not a neutral position, that's a stance... there is no such thing as the perfect observer – you can't stand outside of the system that you're part of. You can reject the system that you're part of, but then you'd be in another one, you know. (14B1)

One of the advisers put it even more strongly than that and rejected this kind of objectivity for the reasons alluded to in the exploration I offered of Cavanaugh's (1995) critique of the nation state. In fact, it was the interview with this adviser that led to me seek out the Cavanaugh article and recognise its significance in this context. This adviser rejected the idea of objectivity as neutrality because it rests on an ahistorical ignorance of the actual relationship between states and churches:

> ...you can't be neutral. The thing is it's not about getting a Scandinavian to have some negotiation because they're neutral between two warring parties, ... their whole concept of neutrality is based on [the] enlightenment view of the wars of religion... that faith is bad and only secular reason is good ... [but] that neutrality is a fiction and ... it's parasitic on violence. [N]eutrality is a myth, it's a modern myth ... and I think it needs to be circumvented and it needs to be fought against in that sense, it needs to be disclosed for where it is, what's the origin of it...[T]he usual story of enlightenment is that these naughty religious denominations are fighting each other, and the state has to come in and make peace – because these Protestants were fighting these Catholics. But ... actually the wars of religion were the birth pangs of the authoritarian state. So the state plays as the peacemaker, but actually in order to grow itself, the state and its tentacles, have to get into every area of life, it has to kill religion, it has to kill the status of its authority. (10B1)

This is a passionate rallying cry for the Church to regain its assertiveness in the face of an overweening state. It has some validity given the reservations that other scholars (Panjwani *et al.*, 2018; Revell and Bryan, 2018) have about the impact on minority religious groups of state interventions into education.

Still, there are other ways of framing this resistance that are more conciliatory in the context of plural democracies. The adviser who rightly pointed out above that you can only step out of one frame of reference by stepping into another (see Lewis, 1945), pointed to another way that objectivity might be understood:

> I think what you have to do is accept that you are part of something and look at that in a critical way - and recognising that, engage with others who are part of different systems. (14B1)

Here, this adviser is pointing to an understanding of objectivity that would be compatible with the faith formative aims of Catholic education, to objectivity understood as intersubjectivity.

(ii) Objectivity as intersubjectivity

Despite the passionate call to arms offered by adviser 10B1 in the previous section, they also recognised a more modulated way of critiquing objectivity as neutrality. They point out that objectivity understood as neutrality is

> ... a retreat from the past, from tradition, and it's about standing on your own two feet, being able to decide in a neutral way. But they forget that you're situated, you're thrown into existence...you're not an architect of who you are - you were given a name, you're part of a family, and you know...life begins in the middle of the journey of life...you don't start at the beginning, no one starts at the beginning...[If] you think about the educational aspects of enlightenment thinking, it's all about clean slates and empty vessels being filled – and it's absolute rubbish. But they can only do that by rejecting the past, but if you reject the past, you don't know who you are, because you don't know where you are – but you can't stand nowhere. (10B1)

This is an eloquent articulation of the approach called for in the Theos video (Downe, 2021) promoting a worldviews approach that foregrounds the importance of an intersubjectivity that recognises the positionality of everyone involved in educational dialogues. Like this adviser, the Theos video ends with the assertion that nobody stands nowhere.

The recognition that nobody stands nowhere is a beginning of the kinds of intersubjective exchange – what I above call the soft variant of personal objectivity – that is eminently possible for Religious Education in Catholic schools. It is perhaps no surprise then that in most responses (20 out of 25) I was able to identify numerous ways in which the advisers were pointing to a more nuanced form of objectivity understood as intersubjectivity.

Most often this was expressed in terms of respecting the conscientious freedoms of children to be themselves and to express who they are in the classroom. One adviser spoke about this in terms of a friend who had had a positive experience of Catholic education, but who was not a Catholic:

> She found a wonderful sense of community, she found that she was included... and she felt valued. And she felt also ... the other great thing was she felt recognised, they weren't trying to pretend she was a Catholic, or 'It's okay we're all Christians here' – there was a value put on her own experience. (13S1)

In this, the adviser is reflecting the first stage Ipgrave (2001, 2003, 2004) presents for creating dialogical classrooms: the acknowledgement and affirmation of difference. As well as that, this dialogical approach is one that has deep roots in the Catholic philosophy of education. One of the advisers pointed out that this respect for the freedom of conscience of pupils was founded in the teaching of the Church. A respect for the freedom of pupils, thereby

> obviates the need to... be confessional, because you can put things out there ... you can, as it were, be devil's advocate...and there can be a confidence about letting something float in a classroom situation. This is with a confident expositor that would not war with a student's freedom to think... [T]here's a great line in *Dignitatis Humanae* [Pope Paul VI, 1965] which says this...It talks about the truth entering quietly and with power – and I think that's a really, really good phrase, because I think ... it's that 'quietly and with power' which is something that is in accord with their freedom and dignity...And so I think it can be objective in that sense, but it's in the sense that you don't have to lend yourself, you can let things float and fly. (6S1)

This confidence to 'let things float and fly' is at the heart of this approach. This same adviser elsewhere speaks of it is a lack of 'brittleness' in the face of criticism. Intersubjectivity requires a willingness to let the dialogue happen with a naturalness that sometimes requires, as Cooling (2002) put it, a professional restraint, of 'letting things float and fly' without feeling the need to prematurely tether them down. In this, the adviser is reflecting the second stage in Ipgrave's (2001, 2003, 2004) method for creating dialogical classrooms: the openness to being changed by the dialogical exchange with another.

Respect for the freedom of others to be themselves is one of the key elements of this kind of objectivity. Another is the need for a transparency of subjectivity, something a significant minority (6 out of the 25) included in some form or other in their responses. As one adviser put it, being positioned is 'valid as long as we acknowledge what we're doing' and that 'we need to be genuine in that' (2S1). The hesitancy of another adviser demonstrates them wrestling live with the concept of objectivity, even as they tried to articulate how if at all they could meet its demands:

> The thing I would say, and I say this to people, I say we're very open about the fact that we're not objective. Well, not not-objective, because I think we are to some degree, but like it's not like we're hiding it. (1S2)

At first this adviser seems to think that Catholic religious educators are not objective, but then realises that if they are open about their lack of objectivity, this becomes a different kind of objectivity: the transparency of subjectivity already alluded to. This adviser is recognising that a teacher always brings themselves to the classroom and, especially in a Catholic context they cannot leave their faith at the door (Cooling, 2002; Bryan and Revell, 2011). The necessity for the religious educator in the classroom means they have to be 'invested' as one adviser put it, and that any teacher who attempted to disguise their positionality would be in difficulty:

> I think it's impossible for any educator of whatever faith or none, that they're coming from a somewhere which cannot be inoculated, can't be kind of cordoned off, it's actually … it sounds great in the abstract but in reality I think it's utterly impossible, it would lead to all kinds of distortions and aberrations in any good teacher wherever they're coming out of…And I think there is a difference in tone between someone who feels like they're being shoehorned into a belief and those who feel that there is a genuine dialogue and discourse going on. So, I think that objective thing is really problematic, not just from a Catholic perspective - just generally it's problematic, because people aren't like that. (6S1)

The reference to being 'shoehorned' accords with the insights of Bryan and Revell (2011) that stringent demands of objectivity can be experienced negatively and that the pressures of performativity can distort the professional identity of the teacher. This is too much to ask of any teacher because, as the adviser rightly comments, 'people aren't like that.' What is needed is for a recognition that the classroom is a safe space for everyone, including the teacher, to discuss difference.

Finally, many of the advisers pointed to the importance of reflexivity – of being self-critical – as a mark of the kind of objectivity that might be possible for a religious educator in a Catholic school. For one adviser, the transparency of subjectivity had always to be accompanied by presenting the different options consciously 'without fear or favour':

> …in other words that in giving an account of these things one doesn't try to make the evidence, the rational case, stronger than it is. One doesn't try to immunise it, as you can – you can make a worldview immune to rational critique – but that's not the point. It remains rational and therefore objective in the…'coopetition'…between

> different traditions of rational enquiry [who] would be committed at once to their
> own enquiry, and to making themselves vulnerable if you will to the objections of
> others. (15B1)

The adviser points here to a crucial element that must be true of Religious Education in Catholic schools if it is to avoid the indoctrination charge: openness to criticism and vulnerability as an integral feature of all genuine dialogues. Here we begin to see the intimate relationship between objectivity and criticality since, as one adviser put it 'critical thinking encourages objectivity, you can't have one without the other.' And to return to the adviser who was absolutely convinced that Religious Education in Catholic schools could never be objective, even they acknowledged that criticality might be the wedge that opens the door to it:

> I don't think we're objective at all. [laughs] I don't think you can begin to argue that
> we're objective, I don't know - if we're presenting something as right and true from
> the off, I think it's tricky to say that that's objective – apart from the fact that you let
> kids ... good teachers let kids object and see things from you know a different point
> of view, but it's not presented neutrally. (1S1)

This is a good place to end the analysis of the advisers' responses to the question of the objectivity of Religious Education in Catholic schools since it captures all the nuances and difficulties of striving for objectivity in a Catholic context. First, along with many scholars, this adviser recognises that neutrality is not possible. Second, they recognise that something like objectivity can be achieved if there is critical openness. Finally, even then, there is a caveat: it is only *good* teachers who allow this kind of criticality, leaving us to ponder what would be left of objectivity if criticality was not a concomitant of it. But this adviser should be reassured. Not one of the advisers interviewed was of the view that Religious Education in Catholic schools could be anything other than critical.

b)   Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be critical?

While all advisers gave some account of Religious Education in Catholic schools as critical, there were different constructions of the idea of criticality. Broadly, I have divided the two kinds of understanding into what I have called 'simple criticality' and 'nuanced criticality'.

(i)   Simple criticality

By simple criticality I mean the kind of cognitivist approach advocated by Wright (2016) and criticised by, among others, Strhan (2010), Bowie (Bowie and Coles, 2018) and Cooling (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020), whereby criticality consists in the setting up of binaries to be debated in the classroom, expressed in sets of competing truth claims. There

were many advisers who pointed to this kind of criticality as a feature of Religious Education in Catholic schools and talked about the importance of allowing pupils – especially adolescents – the opportunity of 'raging against the machine' (2S1). Many advisers (14 out of 25) expressed the view that this was perhaps the point of Religious Education, but that it needed to be a well-informed criticality:

> If you're doing it right, then what you're doing is teaching pupils to think. And in order to think they have to be able to critique, and they have to bring that critical vision to the church, to our beliefs and to life. So, I think it is inherently enabling pupils to be critical in that sense, because that should be what you're leading up to, that they can outline their own position, they can critique yours, but they can do so in a meaningful way, not just 'I don't like it' or 'I don't agree' but it has to be a meaningful critique. And in order to do that you have to have knowledge. (14B1)

The value of this criticality was frequently presented as a way in which Catholic education had advanced from a previously less-enlightened position. The following exchange is a particularly vivid example:

> R: I remember talking to a head teacher once who asked the question as a child 'How could Adam and Eve…have started the human race when they had two sons?' And the response from the nun was she had to go and kneel in the corridor and say a decade of the rosary.
>
> I: Instead of saying 'That's a very good question'.
>
> R: Yeah. Well, I think that's where we've moved on … we're not forcing people to take on those beliefs. (9P1)

This simple form of criticality is unreflectively presumed to be a now universal feature of Religious Education in Catholic schools. However, there are some who expressed reservations about whether it was always appropriate.

One of the reasons for reservations was the sense that it may lead to a kind of relativism that would be incompatible with the Church's educational mission. One adviser, while acknowledging that criticality was encouraged, worried about what they called being 'overly critical' because at that point 'everything becomes up for a debate and therefore become relativistic' (7S1). Another reason for the reservations was connected to the requirement to be well-informed, and the fear that not being well-informed might lead to misrepresenting or insulting those whose faith position was being critiqued:

> R: I think you would have to be fairly confident. And I think the problem is … again if you've got non-Catholic teachers teaching it … like if I was teaching

> Hinduism, like I could present the main beliefs but I couldn't really have a proper discussion with you about like the nuances of like ... I don't know, I can't even tell you, that's the problem Philip.
>
> I: I think that's a really wise insight actually – it's harder for non-Catholic teachers to have that critical openness because they're fearful of making a mistake...
>
> R: Well I think it comes from a good place, I don't want to criticise those teachers, but in the same way if someone tried to have a discussion with me about Hinduism I would say like I don't want to engage with this because I feel like I'm doing a disservice to the faith...So I think for me that's what I mean by critical – and that's one of the limiting factors. (1S2)

It is worth noting, that for both advisers, the faith formative aims of Religious Education were more important than either of the other two articulations of purpose. Nevertheless, perhaps it would have helped this adviser to consider that criticality is not identical to criticism, but would include the patient walking alongside a Hindu, and seeing the world as they see it. Because the paradigm is (probably helpfully) Catholic self-criticality, there appears to be an assumption with some advisers that criticality always has this judgmental character. However, the new paradigm being proposed in the worldviews shift, is calling for a more nuanced criticality, one that is expressed in terms of responsible hermeneutics; rather than the futile clashing of heads, a more fruitful meeting of hearts.

(ii) Nuanced criticality

One way of reconfiguring an understanding of what criticality might involve is to think of it as a hermeneutical dialogue, where each agent in the dialogue is called upon to interpret their own experiences, and their own tradition, considering their encounter with the other. While the adviser's anxieties about not understanding the other well enough to offer a critique come from a good place, what it really points to is the responsibility, as Jackson and Everington (2017) point out of becoming well-informed about the worldviews of those who happen to be present in the classroom at any given time. The dialogue of the classroom can help with this process if there is sufficient attention paid to all voices, and to allowing those voices to speak for themselves. There were some advisers who explicitly pointed to this moment of encounter as the point at which genuine understanding becomes possible. One adviser directly used the analogy of scriptural hermeneutics to elucidate their understanding of what criticality requires:

In other words, it's critical in the same way that good biblical scholarship is critical
– not by assuming that one can … assume a kind of superiority to it, but that you
provide for a meeting of rational horizons that allows you to understand something
… all understanding [is] a kind of coming together of horizons … both we and the
text bring their own assumptions about the meaning of something, and
understanding happens when these two meet and merge to some extent. That
doesn't mean one needs to agree with what one understands, but one needs to at
least kind of performatively inhabit the same kind of universe of meaning, or at least
imaginatively, in order to understand anything. (15B1)

This adviser explicitly references Gadamer's (1960) account of the nature of understanding
and if criticality is understood in this sense, then the fear of offending disappears because
what criticality requires is precisely an imaginative attempt to see the world from the
perspective of another. It does not mean an ignorant hurling of rocks from outside of the
tradition the student is being invited to critically engage with.

A second reconfiguring is to highlight the importance of reflexivity, of a critical reflection on
one's own position. In relation to this, one of the advisers points to the rich resource of the
history of the Church itself, which if it understood itself properly, would recognise the
central role that self-criticism has always played:

I think Catholicism has that suppleness and sinew to it which allows for a real … as
long as people are up for it … a great good argument which you know wouldn't be
fruitless. … it can and often does I think lead to goodwill if it's conducted in that
spirit…I've got quite a big interest in mediaeval theology…and it's quite fascinating
… how noisy the seminar of mediaeval theology was. They were all gathered
fractiously round the same gospel as it were, but they had the biggest barnies and
the biggest fights about loads of interesting stuff. Which doesn't … it's not there
anymore – we've become more impoverished in the questions we ask, the lines of
things that we pursue. (6S1)

With that slight twinge of regret, this adviser is highlighting how important it is that the
Religious Education classroom remains a place where Catholicism can make itself
vulnerable and give an account of itself to those who do not share its presuppositions. For
another adviser, it was precisely this quality that distinguished Religious Education from
catechesis:

…catechesis is not critical in the way I would want to understand criticism.
Because catechesis is a presentation of faith which you do not critique, you accept

as a salvific reality. So, in a sense Religious Education for me has got to be more self-critical. Now that can work in different ways I think - so for example it can be against essentialism, so that 'All Catholics are like this' – and so there's different ways of being a Catholic, there's different ways of being a Muslim, there's different ways of being a Hindu – so it's self-critical in that sense. But also, I think we have a duty to be self-critical of ourselves and some of the things that the church says, some of the things that theology wants us to believe. (10B1)

This adviser also introduces another feature of the proposed worldviews paradigm shift: a recognition of the complex and messy reality of the 'real religious landscape' (Dinham and Shaw, 2020) and the dangers of essentialised presentations of religion. I will return to this important insight when I consider the advisers' reflections on pluralism below.

Before leaving the analysis of criticality, it is important to register that at least one of the advisers thought that Religious Education's ability to be critical was seriously compromised by an over concentration on the Catholic tradition:

...if your whole curriculum is an in-depth study of that faith [Catholicism] and nothing else, or very little of anything else, then that's a bit different isn't it? I think what I'm trying to say is that if you fill it with beliefs and you're teaching it as truth, and by sheer volume you're kind of excluding other views, then it's not really those things [objective, critical and pluralistic]. (4S1)

Just as objectivity required criticality, so criticality requires a commitment to pluralism. Again, as with criticality, it is therefore helpful that all advisers agreed that Religious Education in Catholic schools should be pluralistic.

c) Can Religious Education in Catholic schools be pluralistic?

Again, as with criticality, there were different constructions of the idea of pluralism. I have labelled these three different constructions as 'simple pluralism', 'nuanced pluralism' and 'situated pluralism'.

(i) Simple pluralism

By simple pluralism, I mean to indicate what the ECtHR itself seems to indicate (see Leigh, 2012) – simply the presence on the curriculum of a balanced range of religions and worldviews, including non-religious perpectives. While all advisers thought that Religious Education in Catholic schools should be pluralistic – and was already to some extent – they almost always meant this simple checklist of curriculum coverage.

With this construct in mind, a minority of them expressed some concerns that, while the curriculum in Catholic schools had improved, there was still not enough space given in the curriculum to the study of other religions and worldviews. One adviser described the content of the curriculum as 'hugely Catholic' (1S1), while another said:

> I think it's something we pay lip service to in Catholic education, you know we talk about 'Oh but we study other world faiths' – but do we? – I don't think we … we don't do it well, we don't do it well. (2S1)

Even the hugely increased attention to the inclusion of other religions and worldviews in the latest edition of the *Directory* was not enough to satisfy this adviser:

> I'm pleased you know you keep on going 'RECD' – okay great, I think it's a good thing and it's what we do … but where did it come? – it was an afterthought wasn't it, you know where do we put it? And that kind of upsets me, and I think if the bishops were serious and they looked back at all of those kind of church documents and the example say of Pope Francis in terms of what he's done with you know outreach to Islam and you know building on the work of John Paul II – all of that kind of stuff – I think we need to be a bit more … yeah we need to put that much more front and centre … and we didn't, and we don't.

Resisting the impulse to defend the inclusion of religions and worldviews as more than an afterthought, this feeling that we are not doing it well enough is significant since it is consistently expressed by the advisers. At the same time, there is a recognition that there is difficulty in finding space to cover the range of religions and to study Catholicism in sufficient depth. However, in terms of fidelity and openness it would be fair to say that, for many advisers, the balance has not been correctly struck.

All advisers expressed the view that Religious Education in Catholic schools should be pluralistic, and many argued for it on the grounds that it improved community cohesion and increased respect between people of different beliefs. However, in working with this simpler construct of pluralism, whose success is measured merely in terms of amount of coverage and curriculum percentages, advisers arguably run the risk of treating religions as reified monoliths thereby failing to appreciate the ways in which this can contribute to the very prejudices they wish to confront through pluralistic curricula. One adviser reported what seemed to them to be an amusing incident, but which perhaps revealed more troubling undertones:

> Funny story – when [redacted] was a Year 5 teacher and they started doing the tiny bit of Islam that they do in that year in her school, one of the children said 'Miss,

when are we going to learn about our own religion?' (laughs) 'You've been doing that non-stop since you got here!' (1S1)

At the time of the interview, I had not read Benoit's (2021) insightful article about the way the world religions paradigm tends to 'other' everyone, but this adviser has amply demonstrated that even when the children are learning about a religion that is supposedly their own (Catholicism in this case) they don't recognise that the study is about them. The reified version of the religions that can be quantified as curriculum units in this simple view of pluralism, makes all religions seem distant and alien, even the one that purportedly gives the individual pupils their identity. Perhaps if there were a more nuanced understanding of pluralism the calculation of curriculum percentages would not have to be a zero-sum game.

(ii) Nuanced pluralism

The nuanced pluralism that I am alluding to here is that which is now being described as a paradigm shift by those promoting the worldviews approach to Religious Education. It has at least two elements. The first is a recognition of the porous and labile nature of what are often described as institutional religions (Freathy and John, 2019a), amongst which Catholicism would usually be included. The second is an associated recognition of the complex and bricolage nature of individual religious identities (Freathy and John, 2019b). This nuanced pluralism combats the 'othering' that is a risk of the world religions paradigm and allows flexibility to explore the actual worldviews of those present in the classroom – including the teacher – without the need to overfill the curriculum with conceptual constructions that are not representative of the real religious landscape in any case. This view is a radical departure from the world religions paradigm, and would perhaps be difficult given the magisterial, top-down nature of much of the Religious Education in Catholic schools, but it offers some resources to the religious educator in such a context that may help them in reconciling the requirements of fidelity and openness. Fidelity would require a presentation of what the Church teaches (the formulation that the latest iteration of the *Directory* in fact uses), but which could serve as the beginning, in the spirit of openness, of a dialogue about the actual religious identities of those who would label themselves as Catholic, amongst whom will often be the religious educator themselves. The features of this more nuanced pluralism that I have identified above are much less prevalent in the responses of the advisers but are not entirely absent.

For example, if we consider the first element, a recognition of the bricolage character of much of Catholic belonging (Casson, 2013), this is reflected in some of the adviser

responses. Six out of the 25 advisers referenced the internal diversity of Catholicism in one form or another. One adviser expressed it well:

> ...amongst my friends for example we've been doing a sort of Sunday morning gather since the first lockdown which we've carried on and we'll read the liturgy of the word and take it in turns to do a reflection on the Gospel. It's Corpus Christi on Sunday ... and clearly there are reservations about Corpus Christi as a feast [laughs] amongst my little friend group...they go 'Sorry I'm not interested in that, that's not for me, that's not my Catholic faith, that's not my Catholic tradition, that's not what I believe...so there's a nuanced pluralism within our Catholic tradition, there's a pluralism within our Christian faith, and there's a pluralism in our personal sort of world views depending on the definition we have of world view. I did like that clip, that made sense. (11B1)

In that last sentence the adviser is making a reference to the worldview video from Theos (Downe, 2021), so the reflection on the complex nature of personal worldviews is explicitly connected here to the richer understanding of pluralism that the worldviews project promotes. Other advisers also move towards some recognition of the internal diversity of Catholicism, but this is the clearest expression of it. The second element – a recognition of the complexity of individual worldviews – is also present to some extent in the responses of the advisers, though much less obviously so. The same adviser quoted above also gives the best expression of this insight into the diverse nature of individual worldviews:

> ...you know people get in the mix and then it gets complicated and messy, because we're complicated and messy. And you've got to be able to engage and dialogue with people where they're at – and that goes for the people that you're teaching, and you're encouraging them to do the same. (11B1)

A recognition that individual worldviews are 'complicated and messy' is a neat summary of this element of nuanced pluralism and recognises, as another adviser put it, that 'no two children are the same' (3P1). Any religious educator who wants to ensure that all pupils have a stake in the classroom dialogue, must leave room for the complicated and messy.

(iii) Situated pluralism

A final construction of pluralism I wish to consider is what I have called situated pluralism, and it is a reflection of some of the anxieties advisers have about relativism in relation to criticality. In coining the phrase situated pluralism, I have attempted to identify a kind of pluralism that is comfortable with what Rescher (1993) calls 'dissensus', by which he means that even the sincerest attempts to reconcile differences through dialogue may still

not lead to agreement in any meaningful sense. Furthermore, he points to the fact that this is often because of, not despite, the commitment of each partner to a genuine dialogue. 'Ironically,' Rescher (1993, p. 42) points out 'it is not an indifference to the truth but the seriousness of their dedication to it that impels differently situated inquirers into dissensus.' A situated pluralism would allow a dialogical approach to Religious Education in Catholics schools, while still recognising the validity of a fidelity to the proclamation of the Gospel that the context of the dialogue implies. Such a situated pluralism would also be compatible with the distinction Williams (2012, chap. 10) makes between procedural and programmatic secularism, in his defence of a pluralism that does not overlook the importance of particularity to the believer.

This kind of situated pluralism was expressed by almost half of the advisers in some form or other. It was interesting also how often they used a consumerist metaphor to articulate the idea. One adviser expressed it by saying that pupils are 'not in a pick and mix sweet shop' (9P1), or referred to pluralism, disparagingly, as some sort of presentation of options using the metaphor of bookstores (2S1), types of cereal (15B1), or restaurants:

R: It's not café Catholicism, it's not 'Here's the menu of beliefs, which one would you like to pick' but it's saying look ... I'm going to break this metaphor ... it's being in the café with your menu of appropriate things which are appropriate to Catholicism, but being aware that there are other restaurants.

I: [laughs]

R: Have I broken that metaphor now?

I: I like it. I thought you were going to go in a direction, but I like that one. I thought you were going to say 'You've got a full choice, but chef recommends ...' [laughs] (13S1)

While situated pluralism might in some senses be in tension with a recognition of the bricolage character of religious identity, there is a legitimacy to its resistance to a relativistic construction of plurality as the presentation of options. I think it is not insignificant that many of the advisers use the same kinds of consumerist metaphors in their rejection of this kind of relativism. What they are rejecting is a utilitarian, transactional anthropology that privileges choice over belonging. Like Smith and Carvill (2000) they are resisting the tacit communication of a capitalist worldview that is inimical to their sense of the innate dignity of human beings. Such a situated pluralism takes religious commitment seriously, and because it does, rejects the trivialising of it by treating is as one consumerist

option among many. In any case, such a neo-liberal view of religion implies the possibility of a neutral vantage point from which to make a choice, something that Gadamer's and MacIntyre's accounts of human understanding would rule out.

This construction of pluralism as situated gives a means by which Religious Education in Catholic schools can be committed to pluralism without loss of their identity. It must be comfortable with complex patterns of identity formation, not only among the students, but among the teachers and the Religious Education advisers too. One adviser expressed this sense of situatedness by referring to the importance of building confidence prior to engaging in dialogue:

> And I think again in lessons it's getting this balancing act of, yeah we want to open up for discussion, we want to open it up for exploration, but there does still need to be an element of teaching within that, and I think that's the objective part of it, and it's about setting out our stall in that sense. Then once that's done and we've got that secure base then we take that confidence and that knowledge, and then we move into the critical and the pluralistic sense of doing that... what you don't want the children going away from is the idea that they've all got equal weight – because that's not what we're about. It is about saying this is our faith, this is our knowledge of our faith, our understanding of our faith – and it means something deep, we feel it deeply, it means a lot to us. I don't think we then lose that if that's done well by opening up the discussion and moving towards the critical and the pluralistic parts of it - I think as long as all three are done well and appropriately you can have all three [objectivity, criticality, and pluralism].' 5P1

This adviser's voicing of the idea of the depth of commitment, and a sense of the weight of meaning it holds for some of those who teach it, is what I am aiming to describe when pointing to a situated pluralism.

I have called this situated pluralism since it is not closed to the other, but it does frame an expectation that those who arrive at the dialogue will be rooted somewhere – they will be situated. In this it reflects the first of Pope Francis's (2017) guidelines for dialogue about the importance of respecting one's own identity and the identity of others. As Franchi (2016, p. 118) put it, dialogue cannot function as 'a cipher for a weakening of Catholic identity' but nor can it expect that from the dialogical partner either. Loss of identity cannot be the price paid for entering dialogue. What is required is 'openness with roots' (Bryk, Lee and Holland, 1993, p. 334), a vision that is eloquently expressed by King (1985), who, in

attempting to answer the question of 'how to be committed, yet open', uses the example of Ghandhi:

> ...who spoke of opening the windows of his own house to the winds from the outside world without being swept of his feet. Every individual needs to be deeply rooted in his or her own tradition but also has to learn to grow upwards and outwards like the many branches of a large tree. (King, 1985, p. 97)

I find this image of the tree a helpful one in considering the nature of what I intend to describe by situated pluralism. Like a tree, one knows where one stands, is able to bend to the other, but is not uprooted by the encounter.

As can be seen from the responses of the advisers, there are ways of articulating the meaning of objectivity, criticality and plurality that would allow for a demonstration that Religious Education in Catholic schools can pass the OCP test. Some of these articulations by the advisers are sophisticated and require a certain intellectual agility, grounded in both philosophical hermeneutics and a robust theology of Catholic education. They also require a good grounding in the wider field of educational research with an accompanying professional flexibility to allow them to learn from and implement that research. NBRIA once clearly played this role in the life of the Church. The iterative exchanges between the professional religious educators and the bishops' conference in the early nineties, which led to the 1996 *Directory* and the 2000 *Levels of Attainment*, were evidence of a fruitful balance between the institutional and the professional branches of the Church in its provision of Catholic education in England and Wales. Earlier than that too, we have a record of the conference affirming the importance of the relationship between the institutional and the professional representatives of Catholic education. A study group, consisting of bishops, clerics, lay advisers, academic experts, and actual educators, both lay and religious, was set up in the 1980s by the bishops' conference. In the report on its findings, it begins by recognising the danger of 'building a theoretical construction based on perfectly valid ideas but far removed from the world and inescapable realities with which educators have to live' (Bishops' Conference Study Group on Catholic Education, 1981, p. 8). The advisers are best able to fulfil their function when they are philosophically, theologically and empirically well-informed, when their expertise is consequently respected by those (the bishops) who have the ultimate authority for setting the norms for Religious Education, and when their professional autonomy is sufficiently secure to enable them to critique that authority without dissenting from it. This seems to have been the role advisers have historically served, but through my research, I also identified at least two

reasons which make it more difficult for advisers to carry out that role now than it once was. The first difficulty is to do with constraints on their professional autonomy and the second is to do with a decline in the ability of the advisers to speak as experts in the ways they once did.

In the next section of this chapter, I deal with the first of these difficulties: the threat to professional autonomy. My research indicated that advisers were less able to adopt the agility necessary to articulate a creative response to the demands of plurality because they were themselves constrained by their position as representatives of the institutional Church in a way that undermines their professional autonomy. I explore in the next theme the ways in which the advisers voice the kinds of 'professional ventriloquism' identified by Ball (2003), but this time the performativity pressures are coming not from without, but from within, from the expectations that come with being a *Catholic* Religious Education adviser. For the advisers I interviewed it was not so much professional, as *confessional* ventriloquism.

4.3 Confessional ventriloquism

Through my analysis of the advisers' responses to the question of whether Religious Education in Catholic schools can be 'objective, critical and pluralistic', I have identified the necessity for a certain intellectual and conceptual agility in framing a response that respects both fidelity and openness. This would also entail the necessity of a professional freedom to explore novel approaches to Religious Education, like the newly emerging worldviews paradigm. However, there were indications in the responses of the advisers that I interpreted as indications they were operating within institutional constraints that would militate against this freedom. Advisers alluded to this situation obliquely and most of my analysis identified it through a latent content analysis. Nevertheless, I think it a clearly identifiable, if often hidden, thread within the data.

One indication that such a dynamic is at work is that in many of the responses given, advisers were directly using language that was drawn from earlier discussions or documents in the history of the debates about Religious Education in the Catholic church in England and Wales. Like Bryan and Revell's (2011) identification of the influence of ITT resources and programmes on the language trainee teachers used, I could see the ways in which advisers were sometimes using a borrowed, authorised way of speaking about Religious Education in Catholic schools. More than a third of the advisers (9 out of 25), for example, either referenced the *Directories* directly or used their language in defining what

they took to be the purpose of Religious Education in Catholic schools. The most frequent reference was to the definition of the outcome of good Religious Education that points to religious literacy (a term itself borrowed from Wright (2016)) and to the relationship between Religious Education, catechesis and evangelisation (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1996, p. 10, 2012, p. 6, 2023, p. 6). Other documents referenced directly or cited without recognition of the source of the language, were *Christ at the Centre* (Stock, 2012), the bishops' conference statement on Religious Education (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 2000), and *Levels of Attainment* (Bishops' Conference Department for Catholic Education and Formation, 2004). In one sense this language adoption is perfectly natural and innocuous, but at least some advisers pointed to ways in which the documents were conversation-stoppers, rather than contributions to an ongoing dialogue. In answer to a question about what they thought the contents of Religious Education should be, one adviser said that:

> ... as a loyal servant of the bishop, what must be the shape and content of Religious Education curriculum in order to achieve the purpose of the Bishops Conference 2000 statement? – well it's the curriculum directory, and I don't have to say anything else – conversation's ended. (8S1)

If this were the only indication of the curtailment of professional autonomy, it may perhaps have been an illegitimate inference to draw from the data, but there were other more compelling pointers to the same conclusion.

Using a latent content analysis, I detected another indicator of a tension between professional autonomy and a felt obligation to toe the party line. Sometimes advisers would imply in their couching of their answer that it was something they had received, rather than something they completely assented to. For example, one adviser began their answer to the question about purpose by referring to their 'buy-in with all of the spiel' (2S1). Another, prefaced even the modest amount of disagreement they were about to voice with the phrase 'I might be shot down for this, but...' (6P1). Others used language to signify that they perceived their view might be unacceptable to the Church, with phrases like 'don't repeat that' (4S1) or 'I'm really speaking off the record' (4P1). Sometimes, not unreasonably, I think I was included amongst those who were seen to be imposing expectations. One adviser introduced a response to the question about purpose with the phrase, 'I know the bit you want me to get onto...' (4S1). This same adviser was also much more forthright on another occasion, with the perceived unacceptability of what they had said communicated with the familiar 'speak no evil' hand gesture:

R: '...controversially I also think you need to know something about what a religion is before you can understand any of it.

I: Mm, ... like as a social scientific category you mean – a concept of religion itself?

R: Yeah. I think actually it's not ... it's really complicated, and if you start with ... which we don't, and I'm not suggesting we do, but ... I always used to start with what's RE about with Year 7, literally just to mind map it on the board, and I would get it's about Jesus, it's about God, it's about Mary, it's about – and just basically a lot of stuff like that that they've remembered from primary school, lists of things really. And then if you say what is religion about – from some you just get the same thing, because...that's their only experience. And if you come away after being in a Catholic school for all those years with just knowing a few things like Jesus, God, Mary, then we haven't – we've done something wrong. [Respondent pulls a face and then covers their face with their hands as if they have said something shameful]

It was often in relation to the question of the inclusion of other religions and worldviews, or, as here, the use of a disciplinary methodology other than theology, where this sense of tension was most often expressed.

On some occasions, these expressions of a tension were embedded in the research relationship itself. As an employee of an agency of the bishops' conference, I sensed that I was perceived by some as a figure of authority, before whom they needed to be on their 'best behaviour'. I attempted to mitigate this in my introductions to the research conversations, and in the initial invitations to participate in the research, by reminding them that I was participating in the conversation as an equal and I was not speaking to them on behalf of the CES or the bishops, but as an independent researcher. Nevertheless, it was clear in several of the interviews that the interview itself had become a microcosm of the tensions some advisers were feeling between the institutional and the professional Church and of the ambivalence they felt about the constraints the institutional placed on the professional. In one such interview (3S1), it was clear that the adviser had prepared extensively, as if for a job interview, and the answers were rehearsed and carefully constructed. I tried to reassure them that I was not making any judgements, but it was not possible for me to persuade them to move away from a conversational register that felt more like that between an employee and a manager, than between two colleagues. This is

surprising, since in other contexts, our conversations have been frank when we have met in the social settings that frequently accompany national professional gatherings at which I regularly meet members of NBRIA. In the case of this interview, I felt as if I never heard the actual views of this adviser, but only those that they perceived were professionally safe to give. This seemed to me evidence, in its own right, of a felt sense of a lack of professional freedom.

Another instance stands out in my memory. One of the advisers (3P1) had been a member of the working party the CES convened to revise the directory and had clearly felt some frustration with the move towards a greater alignment with the Catechism in the construction of content. This came out in the interview itself:

> ...sometimes I get quite frustrated, as you know, because I know how difficult it can be with children that are not of the faith, or the parents are not very interested. So, I think that there has to be room for it to be adaptable, and I think people should listen to those that have been on the ground with it. (3P1)

Here, their frustration with the lack of regard for their professional experience is clear, and when I asked what obstacles there were to achieving high quality RE in Catholic schools, they introduced their reply with a provocative: 'Are you ready?' By this, it was clearly implied that I was not going to like the answer:

> I think there's ... maybe too many theologian voices sometimes? I think it helps if you experience, if you've been with those children and you've actually really tried to teach that on the ground... I think we've got the obstacles of ... if you're not adaptable enough. Say for example if we are producing an RECD [a curriculum directory] or a new Come and See [an historical Primary RE resource] or whatever that like they ... we have to be able to move and change with editing. And if we don't move and change to suit audience, to suit teachers, to suit parents, to suit the social climate – how are we ever going to be relevant? (3P1)

There is a certain irony here for me since I would argue that a lack of theological formation is one of the things that has led to the decline of NBRIA's influence. Nevertheless, for this respondent, that attitude was precisely the source of the problem. It would be disingenuous of me not to recognise here that I was seen, by this interviewee at least, as a representative of the institutional Church in this exchange, and therefore part of the problem, not the solution.

Other advisers were similarly direct in expressing their frustration with the lack of leadership from the institutional Church in relation to widening the field of study beyond Catholicism. One adviser speaks of their joy at hearing the inclusive language used in Pope Benedict's (2010) homily on his visit to England:

> What resonates with me there is Pope Benedict's homily at St Mary's in 2010 when...he addresses directly pupils in Catholic schools who are not Catholic, and he uses the word 'welcome' and he uses the word 'classmates'. And he affirms that everyone, not just the Catholic ones, are being called to be saints, and that everyone is being called to live in community together and be happy together and to accept each other. That was a really defining moment for me because I was actually there listening to it. I then got it on a repeated rewind thinking yeah actually I get Catholic education a lot better even having experienced it as a pupil and then being in it even as a head of RE – that defined it for me a little bit more. A little bit of a Damascus moment when the Pope said it, I thought yeah well this is what I've been thinking, this is what we've been practising, but how far does this go up the food chain? (13S1)

The reference to the 'food chain' I take to be a reference to the bishops' conference. That is, they are saying that on the ground Catholic schools are inclusive places, but as an adviser, they lack the confidence that this is affirmed from above. Another adviser reported that sometimes frustrations with the narrowness of the curriculum are not just expressed in words. They relate how when they were in a school in a diocese where the teaching of other religions was not introduced until the end of key stage two, they flatly ignored that instruction, and would teach other religions and worldviews from the beginning of primary school but would not keep a record of it in the Religious Education books of the pupils, to avoid being reprimanded during inspection.

A final example is much more personal than that and deals with the conscientious struggles one adviser voiced when there were tensions between their own convictions and the content of what they were required to teach. The way this adviser resolved this is telling:

> ...if I was teaching something I believed in I could do it with gusto and I would say 'we' and 'I' and 'it's really important' – you know any Catholic social teaching, anything about the treatment of asylum seekers, which we always came up against … So you know I could say that personally … you know 'we must' and 'we mustn't' and 'you must' and 'Catholics …' But when it came to things I found harder to justify morally, I would go to a certain point and then the kids would raise what I

would think would be a very valid point, and then I would say 'Yes, well the church says ...' and I would present something that I couldn't necessarily get behind with gusto. Things like what if a woman has been beaten in her marriage and she leaves her husband and she wants to remarry and she did nothing wrong, and she can remarry and receive communion etc, and I go 'Mm, well the church would say that's she's still married sacramentally to ...' and they go 'Oh okay' and that's how I differentiate, which is not a good way to use 'We say' 'The church say' I'm sure – but that's what happened. (1S1)

Here the 'confessional ventriloquism' is made explicit. The adviser is showing how their language shifts when they move between teaching those parts of the Church teaching they believe deeply, when they speak as themselves, and those they find more difficult to swallow, where they borrow a sanitised, distancing mode of speech. It seems to me, in both this case and in the case where the adviser had gone against the wishes of their individual diocese in relation to the teaching of other faiths, there is a confused integrity at work. It does, however, point to the ways confessional ventriloquism is blunting the ability of advisers to play their role as the professional half of the exchange between the classroom and the curia. It also inhibits their ability to participate as authentic witnesses in the dialogues of the classroom. Another impediment to this function is the waning in genuine expertise amongst the advisers as a collective body, which would perhaps have given them greater confidence in finding solutions to their tensions that would not feel so much like compromises. I will explore this decline in professional expertise in the next section of the chapter.

4.4 Keeping the flame burning – sustaining NBRIA's expertise and influence

This is a difficult section of the research to write up, since on one level, it feels treacherous to point to a waning of expertise amongst a group of people for whom I have enormous respect, and to whom I am indebted for allowing me to carry out this research in the first place. However, I report it not only because I believe it is evident in the data, but also because it points to the responsibility others have for assisting NBRIA in sustaining its expertise and influence. If this research is identifying a genuine loss, it does not seem to be a loss for which the members of NBRIA themselves are entirely culpable. It is hoped that in highlighting it, there may be a response from the Church to reinvest in this crucial layer of the Church's educational mission. I have called this section keeping the flame burning, as it evokes the idea of a continuity of presence, as with Olympic torches or eternal flames, but also because NBRIA uses the flame of Pentecost as their brand logo.

My sense of guilt in reporting this loss is attenuated by the fact that some of the advisers themselves identified it as an issue. One of them astutely predicted that they were likely to be the only interviewee who understood the legal context and significance of the questions I was asking. This was an accurate assessment. In all other interviews apart from this one, the origins of the phrase 'objective, critical and pluralistic' had to be explained, despite its significance for the change to statutory Religious Education in Wales, which was in motion as these interviews were being carried out. In response to my question about how Religious Education in Catholic schools might be able to be presented as objective, critical and pluralistic this adviser responded:

> ...now of course we know why we're looking at that, we're looking at that because of Folgerø... in 2007. And my first observation is that I don't think the majority of Catholic teachers, schools, advisors, bishops have got a clue about this – I really don't think they have a clue. And I think that's really important, because if they haven't a clue there has been no attempt, and there is no ongoing attempt to even reflect on this – other than yourself and the situation that's arisen in Wales – so it's not where we're coming from. What I noticed was that following Folgerø, which was a January 2007 announcement, the bishops in England and Wales produced a letter in 2007 which didn't seem to have any reference to it at all, it didn't seem to have impinged on them at all. (8S1)

This sober assessment of the situation comes from an adviser who is amongst some of the longest serving in NBRIA and has connections that significantly predate my own involvement. Another similarly long-serving adviser lamented the loss of advisers of real quality, the likes of which used to sit round the NBRIA table, the 'luminaries' as they referred to them. This adviser worried that some of the current advisers were 'brilliant at teaching and learning or managing a department' but lacked theological and philosophical (and even political) heft. These views were only expressed directly by two out of the 25 advisers interviewed, but they were two advisers who, because of their longevity, had the firmest grasp on NBRIA's institutional memory.

Another way of reading the evidence points to this same lacuna in adviser expertise and experience: the inability of some advisers to even understand the nature of the question being asked. It was not just, as the adviser above (8S1) pointed out, that they did not understand the legal context and significance of the question about 'objective, critical and pluralistic' Religious Education, but they sometimes appeared not to understand the meaning of the words themselves in this context. Two different advisers, for example, had

taken the word 'critical' to mean important or vital, and connected it to the idea that Religious Education should be a core curriculum subject in Catholic schools. Another interpreted the question about criticality to be asking them how they would defend Religious Education as a subject from criticism, rather than addressing the question of criticality as a feature of Religious Education itself. Yet another confused 'objectivity' with the importance of being clear about lesson objectives in the classroom. While these misunderstandings were not common, they did strike me as troubling. However, as I am sure can be seen from other direct quotes from advisers above, there were other advisers whose erudition was impressive and who were able to answer the question in sophisticated and convincing ways. At the same time, it is significant that those who were best able to craft a compelling response, who were most nimble in navigating the complexities of balancing fidelity and openness, were those who held graduate and post-graduate qualifications in theology, philosophy or religious studies, as identified by the pre-inspection survey carried out with the advisers. It is also interesting that advisers with this depth also seemed the least troubled in offering critiques of the institutional Church's position on Religious Education. Their expertise had given them a sangfroid in offering critiques others dared not utter.

As I said, I do not think the advisers themselves are culpable for these gaps in their own experience or expertise, but rather it seems a failure on behalf of the Church as a whole in England and Wales to invest in the formation of those professionals who have been tasked with the work of sustaining Religious Education in Catholic schools. In conducting the research, one of the questions I asked was what the obstacles were to providing good quality Religious Education in Catholic schools. The most common response was the poor formation of teachers, or the simple lack of appropriately qualified teachers to work in the Religious Education departments of Catholic schools. Not far behind this, however, was a complaint about how undervalued and under-resourced the advisory work in dioceses now was. As one advisor put it: 'It's an interesting notion that I'm an adviser to schools. There's an expectation that I know all the answers but… Who advises me?' (11B1). That seems to me a completely reasonable question and supports my own conviction that the inability of NBRIA to carry out the kind of professional 'holding to account' of the hierarchy that was historically so enriching for the Church, is not entirely their fault. One adviser offered this analogy:

> And I think the problem is, as ever, that any practice like education, like carpentry, like shoe making – anything – any practice requires institutions to maintain it. Once

> you have the institutions the danger is that the secondary aim of maintaining them can overtake the primary aim of the practice which they were set up to serve. It's a version of the problem ... I think it's in Aristotle somewhere about if a society is structured in a way that a good shoemaker can't afford to make good shoes, good quality shoes, ... and therefore makes bad quality stuff which sells ... it's an indictment of the society not of the person who makes the shoes. (15B1)

The most important thing that many advisers identified for the sustaining of their role was the importance of having time to read and to think about the meaning of the work in which they were engaged. However, they also pointed to how overstretched diocesan education services were and how often they were now configured around a performance management culture with an emphasis on outcomes that inevitably truncates the time for fruitful reflection.

I would argue, on the strength of this research, that if the Church wants to be in a strong position to resist some of the secularist arguments against faith schools that are increasingly voiced in our own time, then it must invest in those professionals who can provide the expertise to give convincing accounts in answering questions such as how Religious Education in Catholic schools can be objective, critical and pluralistic. I am saddened to report that since this research was carried out several of these advisers are no longer employed by the Church, and one diocese has dispensed with its advisory team entirely. I appreciate that dioceses themselves are under financial pressure, but as soon as balancing the books becomes more important than fulfilling the mission, then the money saved has nothing left of worth on which to be spent. If NBRIA's flame is extinguished entirely this will be an enormous loss and will impact detrimentally on the Church's ability to defend its schools and the Religious Education that happens in them. It is much easier to fan sparks into flames than it is to have to rekindle the ashes of a cold, dead grate.

I do not want to leave my report in this place of despondency and there is no reason to do so, since my research also shows, that despite these challenges, the advisers who remain are as alert as ever to the opportunities that perpetually arise for Religious Education in Catholic schools when it is open to learning from the best Religious Education in other sorts of setting. I will conclude by looking at the indications that the new language of 'religion and worldviews', and the reframing of the subject that language signifies, is a source of excitement and inspiration for many advisers and may allow them to play a

reinvigorated role in defining what Religious Education in Catholic schools could look like in the 21st century.

4.5 Sparks of hope: a new language of worldviews

As I identified earlier, there was a time when NBRIA was clearly leading the way in defining what Religious Education in Catholic schools entailed. It was doing this by reflecting some of the thinking and research that was happening in Religious Education in general and incorporating some of those pedagogies into its curriculum documents (pedagogies such as the phenomenological model of Smart, and the human development model of Grimmitt). While some of those pedagogies were questionable in terms of their compatibility with the Catholic educational mission, the worldviews approach as outlined by Cooling *et al* (Cooling, Bowie and Panjwani, 2020) offers some promising ways of resolving the tension between fidelity and openness. First, it does not require the elusive neutrality of other models of Religious Education, which would prove problematic for religious educators in Catholic schools. Second, in its promotion of dialogue as the fundamental dynamic of its pedagogy, it provides a legitimation for an unapologetic presentation of the Catholic worldview because such a presentation is one half of a dialogical exchange. Third, it moves the idea of criticality beyond the fatuous oppositionism of some versions of critical realism and invites a hermeneutical engagement with both the texts of the Catholic tradition, but also with that tradition itself. Fourth, it allows for an exploration of the real religious landscape and an exploration of the diversity within Catholicism and the complex and variegated nature of individual confessional identity. It can thereby provide opportunities for all pupils in Catholic schools, whether Catholic or otherwise, an opportunity to answer the questions: 'do you know where you stand? And why?'(Downe, 2021).

Given its potential, it is exactly the kind of movement that NBRIA would have historically kept abreast of and whose usefulness for Religious Education in Catholic schools would have been discerned. It was encouraging, therefore, to see that despite the depletion in NBRIA's capacity, and arguably in its expertise, there were clear indications that many advisers were keeping themselves informed about the progress of the project. The two indications of this I identified in my research were the frequent use of the language of 'religion and worldviews' and the beginnings of an appreciation of a hermeneutical approach to Religious Education.

This research was taking place shortly after the publication of the worldviews project discussion papers (Tharani, 2020), and shortly before the draft resource (Pett, 2022) was released. Therefore, there would be no reason to expect the project to have had much influence on Religious Education in Catholic schools, especially given the official and public rejection (Catholic Education Service, 2018) of the CoRE report that initiated the project. However, it was remarkable how completely the language of 'religion and worldviews', a recently coined neologism, had become the way by which the advisers referred to the inclusion of beliefs other than Catholicism. One adviser even acknowledged the novelty of the formula:

> Our classrooms won't have just Catholic children in them. I know we do quite
> limited other religions and world views – as I'm now calling it – in primary school,
> but I still think it's important to ensure children know something about other faiths.
> (2P1)

Apart from this one adviser, who recognised what they were doing in using the new language, the other 11 used the phrase 'religion and worldviews' seemingly instinctively, without any awareness that this was new language.

Of course, while a new language can transform the way the world is experienced (see Lindbeck, 1984), it is rarely enough by itself to bring about wholesale changes to practice, especially when it is adopted piecemeal and uncritically, which appears to be the case for diocesan advisers at the moment. However, there are other indications that the pedagogy that the language avers is influencing the way some advisers are thinking about criticality. As I have already shown above (see 5.2.b.(ii) above) conceiving of criticality as giving a 'rational account of presuppositions' or of the 'meeting of rational horizons' (15B1), is a sophisticated expression of what a hermeneutical approach requires. Similarly, there is a recognition amongst the advisers of the importance of a dialogical approach that is comfortable with complex, personal confessional identities. This adviser puts it rather beautifully:

> I think that [criticality] is in the opportunity for dialogue... with other religions, world
> views. But also recognising that even within the classroom in front of you you're
> going to have 30 children who come from so many different backgrounds and have
> different understandings, approaches, beliefs, ... you know we can't say that we're
> being inclusive if we're dismissing who they are. You know if we are inclusive ...
> which we are ... then we are inclusive of whoever they are, wherever they come
> from, and you know even if you're seeing it as that sort of faith journey, even if

they're nowhere near the starting block because they didn't even know there was one, you're still there with them, walking with them, opening that door...(11B1)

The opening of windows and doors is an evocative image, and it directly speaks to the 'openness' that is one half of the fidelity-openness dichotomy. Equally, it is ultimately appropriate to resolve this dichotomy since fidelity to the tradition itself *requires* openness, because as one adviser put it, the Church's commitment to dialogue is 'not an idle thing...it's part and parcel of the Catholic Church's concern for the common good...therefore [Catholic] schools and universities ...must be pluralistic' (6S1).

Of course, there are only hints here of an engagement with this new approach to Religious Education, but then the new approach itself is very new in the wider Religious Education world itself. Nevertheless, in their engagement with this new approach, these advisers are showing exactly the kind of well-informed professional agility that will help the Church to demonstrate that, properly understood, Religious Education in Catholic schools could not only pass the OCP test but could do so with distinction. And with a properly resourced and theologically informed professional body of Religious Education advisers it would be able to do so without ever compromising its primary educative mission of making Christ know to all people. As I have discovered through this research, those who are best able to articulate what it means to be open to a diverse and pluralistic word are those most grounded in the tradition. Those most useful in a dialogue are those with something to say. The confidence that comes from a depth of philosophical, theological and professional expertise, and an understanding of the tradition out of which one is working, brings with it a courage to innovate and to find ways that the voice of tradition can speak with fidelity in new contexts. Those whose arms can extend the widest in welcome are those whose feet are most firmly planted on solid ground.

4.6 Conclusion and recommendations.

Through this research I sought to answer three connected questions. First, if it were ever necessary for it to do so, is it possible for the Catholic Church in England and Wales convincingly demonstrate to that satisfaction of others, both sympathetic and hostile, that the Religious Education in Catholic schools could pass the legal test to be objective, critical, and pluralistic? In many respects this was a theoretical question. The second question was its practical consequent: how well would those professionals who are actually tasked with shaping that education, in classrooms across the dioceses of England and Wales, be able to defend an objective, critical and pluralistic Religious Education that was still faithful to its role in the educational mission of the Catholic Church? Both

questions are expressions – in a theoretical and pragmatic form – of a more fundamental question the Catholic Church has been asking itself in England and Wales since at least 1997 (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997), and probably for some considerable time[36] before that: how can Catholic schools remain faithful to their mandate to be guardians of the educational mission of the Catholic Church, and at the same time be open to the plural and diverse world that was increasingly reflected in the classrooms of Catholic schools throughout England and Wales. In short, how could Catholic schools, in the Religious Education they provided, embody the virtues of both fidelity and openness?

The answer I have found to this first question is that it depends. Religious education in Catholic schools can be objective, critical and pluralistic: as long as objectivity is understood as reflexivity, not as neutrality; as long as criticality avoids both relativism and assimilationism and is understood fundamentally not as argument, but as dialogue; and as long as pluralism does not flatten difference and is respectful of complex individual identities and diversity within institutional worldviews. The answer to the second question depends on two things. First it depends on how willing the Church is to invest in the professional expertise of its advisers, both lay and clerical. Second, it depends on the Church liberating those advisers to discern, as professionals, what research suggests can be learned from the innovations of the wider Religious Education community of practice and research.

Consequently, I conclude this research with five related recommendations:

1. The Catholic Church in England and Wales should find new ways, given the financial constraints dioceses are under, to support the continued existence of a body of professional Religious Education advisers and for the sustenance and development of their theological, philosophical, and professional expertise. The newly emerging landscape of large Catholic multi-academy trusts provides an opportunity of exploring new ways in which this might be done.
2. The bishops, their educational agency (the Catholic Education Service), and I (as one of its officers), must recommit to the importance of the creative dialogue

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[36] The 1997 consultation paper *Catholic Schools and Other Faiths* was a response to a resolution passed by the Bishops Conference in 1991 (Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, 1997, pp. 4–5), in which a consultative commission was established to support Catholic schools in responding to the increasing presence of those of other faiths and none in the classrooms of Catholic schools. I suspect that the public scandal around the closure of St Philip's Sixth Form College in 1995 may have given fresh impetus to the commission in eventually publishing its report in 1997.

between the normative and professional parts of the Church involved with the provision of education. This requires the CES always to collaborate closely with NBRIA whenever it is forming policy that will have normative force for schools in every diocese, and to be open to the critiques that the profession offers through them in response to those policies.

3. For its own part, NBRIA should hold its membership to a high standard of theological, philosophical, and professional expertise and ensure they work closely with the wider Religious Education community of practice and research in offering their members the highest calibre professional development opportunities. There is a wisdom in requiring a minimum level of qualification for serving as a NBRIA adviser, which NBRIA itself should be courageous enough to articulate, and in the requirement that members regularly demonstrate that their skills and knowledge have been sustained.

4. The Church as a whole – the bishops, the CES, and NBRIA – should be more involved, both directly and by commission, with research into the Religious Education that is offered in Catholic schools. The wealth of research into Religious Education in other contexts reveals the size of the research gap for Religious Education in Catholic schools. The relatively recently established charity *Formatio* (Formatio, 2019) whose steering group consists of representatives from the CES, the four Catholic universities (including the one to which this thesis is to be submitted), diocesan education services, and the largest Catholic multi-academy trusts, provides a forum where the means of filling this research gap could be addressed.

5. The Church collectively should continue to scrutinise the 'signs of the times' and be open to learning from the wider community of Religious Education and practice. In particular, the Church should discern what gifts the newly emerging paradigm of 'religion and worldviews' might have to offer Religious Education in Catholic schools. Any research carried out by or on behalf of the Church, should seek to test the ways the new paradigm can assist Catholic schools to respond to the demands of fidelity and openness.

In this last recommendation, I hope to echo Pope Francis's own recognition of the dynamic nature of tradition, and of the ways in which fidelity and openness are two expressions of the same mission. Tradition is, he argues, 'the living faith of the dead, not the dead faith of the living', and 'if you conceive tradition as closed, this is not the Christian tradition. It is

always the juice of the roots that carries you forward' (Allen, 2022). Tradition is not 'a museum piece'; it is not ultimately about the past at all but is rather the 'guarantee of the future' (Pope Francis, 2022). Rather than preserving the ashes of the past, tradition transforms them into fertile soil for the tree that has always opened its branches widely and which has ever been the place, like the tree in the parable (Mt 13:31-32), where birds of every feather can make their home.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: GCSE RS entry rates for Catholic schools

% Entry

Legend: ▲ % ENTRIES (all) — ● % ENTRIES (Catholic) — ◆ PROPORTION OF TOTAL ENTRIES THAT ARE CATHOLIC

% ENTRIES (Catholic): 91.7%, 91.9%, 96.9%, 95.6%, 95.9%, 96.8%, 94.1%, 95.2%, 95.6%

% ENTRIES (all): 34.9%, 37.3%, 42.4%, 45.0%, 45.6%, 46.3%, 37.6%, 38.2%, 34.9%

PROPORTION OF TOTAL ENTRIES THAT ARE CATHOLIC: 24.9%, 23.2%, 21.3%, 20.4%, 20.2%, 20.2%, 24.2%, 23.69%, 25.59%

Years: 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022
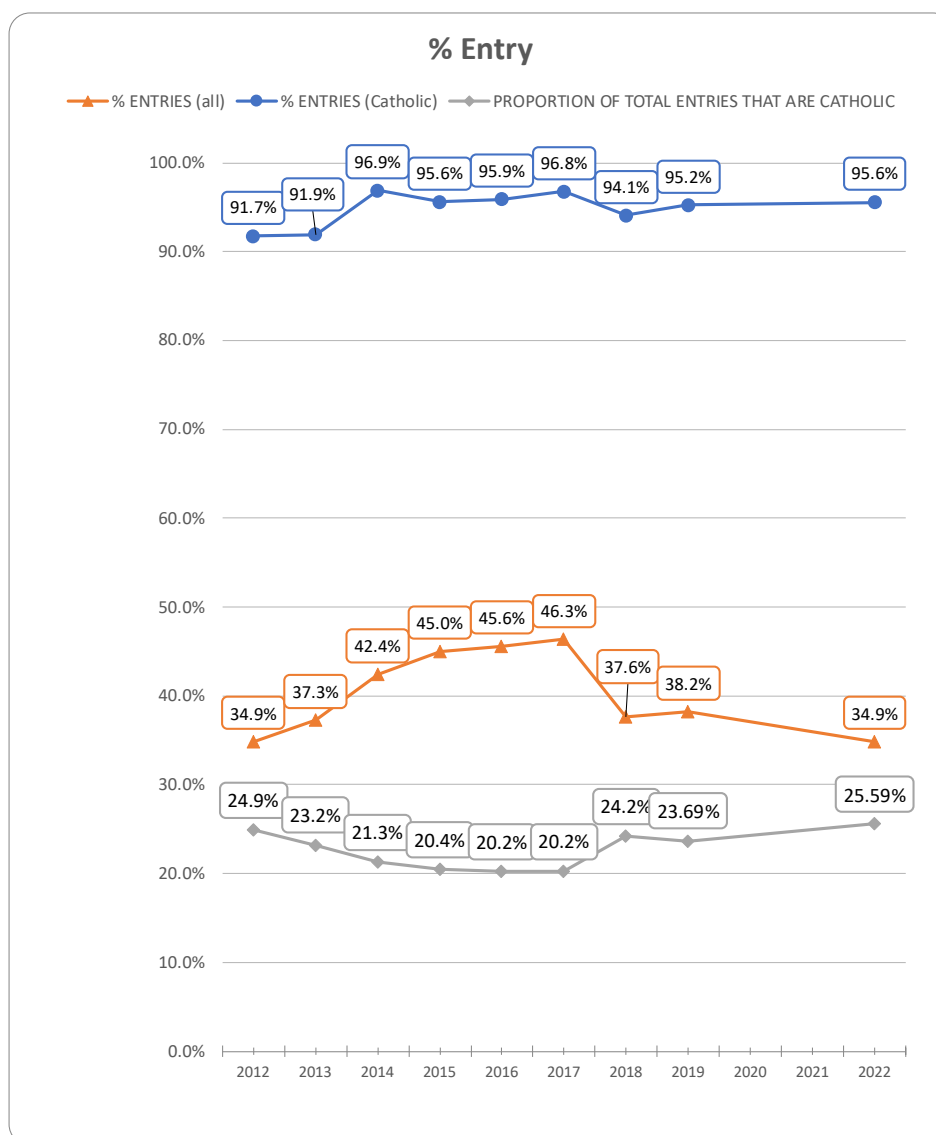
Figure 1: GCSE Religious Studies entry rates in Catholic Schools, 2012-2022

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Appendix 2: Catholicity of teaching staff in Catholic schools in England and Wales 2012-2023
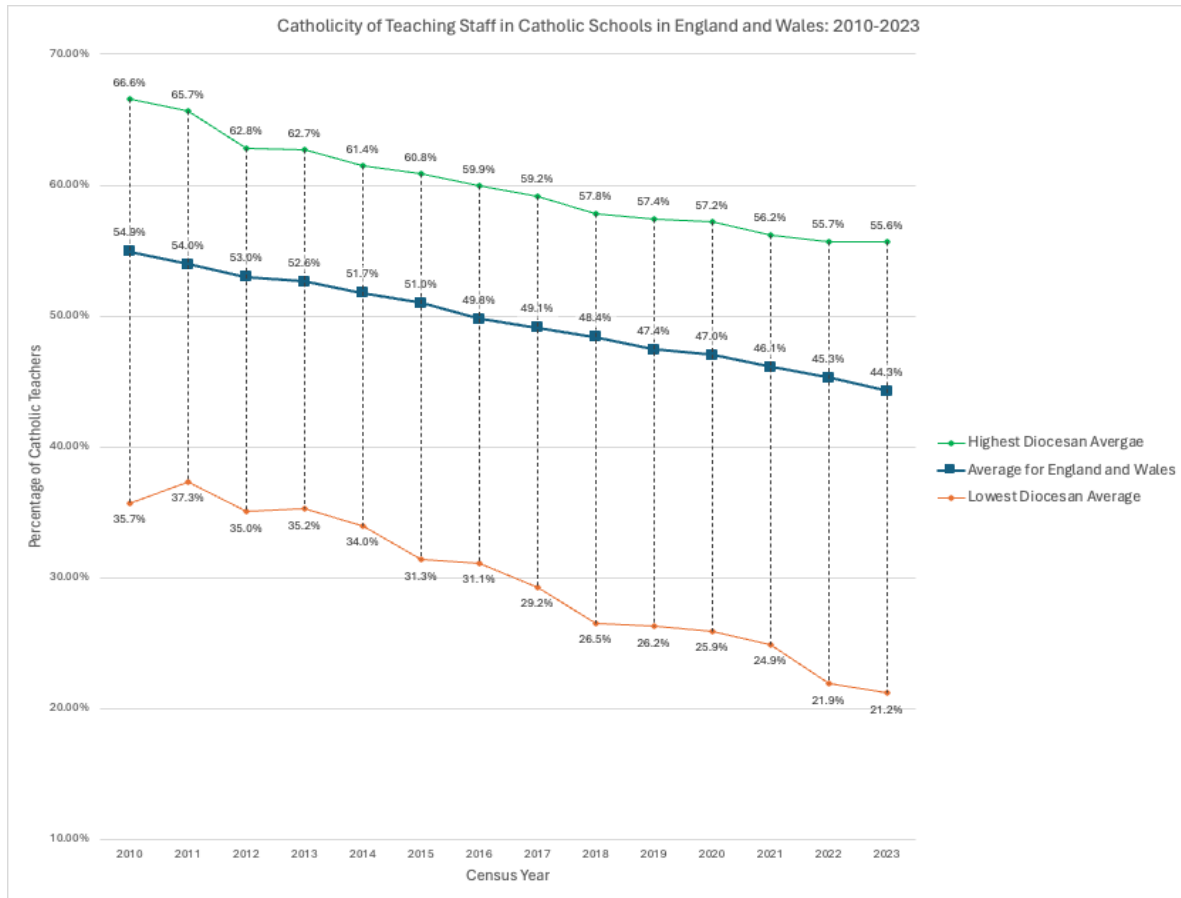
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
Highest Diocesan Average	66.57%	65.65%	62.84%	62.70%	61.44%	60.82%	59.91%
Average for England and Wales	54.94%	53.95%	52.96%	52.63%	51.74%	50.99%	49.80%
Lowest Diocesan Average	35.69%	37.32%	35.03%	35.22%	33.96%	31.34%	31.11%
Diocese with highest average	Liverpool	Liverpool	Salford	Salford	Salford	Salford	Salford
Diocese with lowest average	East Anglia	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	East Anglia	Plymouth

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Highest Diocesan Average	59.17%	57.84%	57.41%	57.16%	56.20%	55.70%	55.64%
Average for England and Wales	49.10%	48.39%	47.40%	47.04%	46.09%	45.29%	44.26%
Lowest Diocesan Average	29.25%	26.52%	26.24%	25.92%	24.86%	21.87%	21.16%
Diocese with highest average	Salford	Salford	Liverpool	Liverpool	Liverpool	Liverpool	Liverpool
Diocese with lowest average	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth	Plymouth

Figure 2: Catholicity of Teaching Staff in Catholic Schools in England and Wales 2010-2023

Appendix 3: Confessional diversity of pupils in Catholic schools 2016-2023

Since 2016, the CES has collected data on the confessional identity of pupils' families. The pie charts below show the data as it was in 2016 (Catholic Education Service, 2016) and, by contrast, as it was in 2023 (Catholic Education Service, 2023).

National - 2016

Other Christian 17.36%
Non-religious 7.36%
Refused 0.28%
Not known 2.86%
Other 6.24%
Catholic pupils 65.90%
Sikh 0.41%
Other 1.91%
Buddhist 0.14%
Hindu 0.68%
Jewish 0.03%
Muslim 3.07%

- Catholic pupils   - Other Christian   - Non-religious   - Refused
- Not known   - Buddhist   - Hindu   - Jewish
- Muslim   - Sikh   - Other

National - 2023

Other Christian 20.26%
Non-religious 12.28%
Refused 1.17%
Not known 1.36%
Other 8.85%
Catholic pupils 56.08%
Sikh 0.48%
Other 2.48%
Buddhist 0.20%
Hindu 1.16%
Jewish 0.04%
Muslim 4.49%

- Catholic pupils   - Other Christian   - Non-religious   - Refused
- Not known   - Buddhist   - Hindu   - Jewish
- Muslim   - Sikh   - Other

Appendix 4: Word frequency analysis of the 1996 and 2012 *Directories*

1996 Highest frequency words, including declensions, conjugations and cognates	Incidence per 1000 words
church/es/'s	36.69
God/'s	33.53
life/ve/ved/ves/ving	24.61
Jesus/s'	22.39
love/s/d/ing	19.60
human/ity	11.33
community/ies	11.05
holy/iness	10.68
people/'s/s	10.31
about	10.22
pray/ed/er/ers/ing	9.85
teach/es/ing/taught	9.47
celebrate/s/d/ing/ion/ions	9.20
faith	8.36
hear/d	7.90
other/s	7.71
christian/s/ity	7.52
spirit	7.52
pupils	7.25
eucharist/ic/Mass/es	7.06

2012 Highest frequency words, including declensions, conjugations and cognates	Incidence per 1000 words
church/es/'s	21.38
God/'s	20.55
life/ve/ved/ves/ving	13.12
Christ/'s	11.45
Jesus/s'	10.88
teach/es/ing/taught	7.42
holy/iness	7.27
us	6.95
other/s	6.80
love/s/d/ing	6.17
pray/ed/er/ers/ing/ful	6.17
human/ity	6.12
Catholic/s	5.96
faith	5.33
his	5.33
spirit	4.97
our	4.86
people/'s/s	4.81
scripture	4.34
we	4.24

Appendix 5: Diocesan coverage table for purposive selection of respondents

Diocese	No of schools	% Independent Schools	% of schools in rural areas	% Pupils on FSM	% Schools >50% Catholic staff	% Schools <20% Catholic staff	% Catholic pupils	% Christian	% Muslim	% Non-religious	% Religion - Other	%White	% Indian sub-continent	%Black	%Total BAME	Region	No of advisers interviewed	Coverage: Primary (P), Secondary (S), Both (B)	Codes for respondents
Diocese 1	208	5.8%	2.0%	12.8%	73.1%	1.0%	78.90%	90.1%	3.40%	2.40%	3.20%	50.6%	5.11%	21.28%	42.40%	SE	3 P,S,S		1P1, 1S1, 1S2
Diocese 2	156	0.0%	14.1%	16.6%	79.5%	0.0%	59.80%	82.9%	3.00%	10.40%	1.80%	87.9%	3.34%	3.42%	11.70%	NE	2 P,S		2P1, 2S1
Diocese 3	224	1.8%	5.4%	20.9%	86.2%	3.1%	70.20%	83.8%	1.80%	10.60%	2.30%	88.8%	1.09%	3.27%	9.25%	NW	2 P,S		3P1, 3S1
Diocese 4	206	2.4%	7.9%	19.6%	81.6%	1.0%	64.50%	77.0%	7.40%	7.90%	6.80%	71.4%	6.17%	12.37%	25.03%	NW	2 P,S		4P1, 4S1
Diocese 5	167	4.2%	2.4%	13.5%	56.9%	3.6%	65.40%	86.5%	2.80%	5.70%	3.80%	46.3%	3.36%	31.63%	49.36%	SE	2 P,S		5P1, 5S1
Diocese 6	43	7.0%	9.3%	10.0%	46.5%	2.3%	61.20%	83.3%	3.90%	5.90%	5.70%	53.8%	8.44%	21.72%	41.01%	SE	2 P,S		6P1, 6S1
Diocese 7	72	22.2%	6.2%	8.1%	36.6%	5.6%	56.20%	84.0%	2.70%	8.50%	3.40%	61.0%	5.76%	7.82%	22.80%	SE	2 P,S		7P1, 7S1
Diocese 8	82	19.5%	17.3%	5.7%	33.3%	9.9%	65.00%	87.2%	1.20%	6.70%	3.90%	64.1%	3.11%	4.78%	17.54%	SE	2 P,S		8P1, 8S1
Diocese 9	247	4.0%	7.8%	18.3%	59.3%	2.4%	56.10%	74.5%	7.00%	11.60%	4.50%	63.2%	9.93%	14.28%	32.68%	SW	2 P,S		9P1, 9S1
Diocese 10	93	0.0%	6.5%	15.3%	72.0%	1.1%	63.50%	76.4%	7.90%	9.10%	2.10%	71.7%	8.58%	11.36%	27.30%	NE	1 B		10B1
Diocese 11	112	5.4%	2.7%	16.3%	67.0%	4.5%	64.70%	82.4%	1.10%	12.80%	1.80%	84.9%	2.56%	4.21%	11.65%	NW	1 B		11B1
Diocese 12	84	2.4%	25.3%	19.3%	66.7%	2.4%	46.60%	73.1%	6.10%	14.60%	2.70%	86.2%	3.75%	2.13%	10.49%	NW	1 P		12P1
Diocese 13	91	6.6%	2.2%	10.6%	65.9%	2.2%	67.60%	86.8%	3.80%	4.70%	3.70%	44.7%	6.87%	29.09%	48.49%	SE	1 S		13S1
Diocese 14	70	8.6%	15.9%	11.3%	16.9%	14.1%	53.80%	76.4%	1.80%	16.00%	2.20%	64.9%	9.26%	7.73%	24.41%	SW	1 B		14B1
Diocese 15	54	0.0%	ND	ND	25.0%	25.0%	55.00%	78.8%	2.90%	12.20%	5.20%	ND	ND	ND	ND	W	1 B		15B1
Diocese 16	50	6.0%	8.0%	14.8%	52.0%	4.0%	50.80%	80.3%	2.40%	11.30%	3.40%	75.2%	3.56%	11.00%	20.01%	NE			
Diocese 17	56	3.6%	21.4%	17.7%	51.8%	5.4%	56.30%	78.1%	1.50%	13.60%	3.70%	85.8%	2.02%	3.85%	10.89%	NE			
Diocese 18	87	3.4%	6.9%	12.3%	48.3%	8.0%	56.50%	78.8%	1.80%	11.90%	5.20%	68.8%	6.24%	11.64%	25.78%	NE			
Diocese 19	28	14.3%	3.7%	9.8%	28.6%	21.4%	58.90%	82.7%	3.50%	7.10%	3.00%	63.9%	7.56%	6.60%	25.97%	SE			
Diocese 20	40	7.5%	17.5%	16.2%	15.4%	28.2%	30.00%	67.3%	1.06%	24.40%	1.60%	79.8%	1.81%	2.46%	9.20%	SW			
Diocese 21	19	0.0%	ND	ND	ND	ND	49.30%	70.2%	1.40%	23.50%	2.60%	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND W			
Diocese 22	18	0.0%	ND	ND	ND	ND	52.10%	78.4%	2.10%	16.50%	1.90%	ND	ND	ND	ND	ND W			
TOTAL	2207	4.9%	7.9%	15.1%	63.0%	3.5%	62.8%	81.6%	3.7%	9.2%	3.6%	67.4%	5.2%	12.9%	27.0%		25		

Figure 3: Diocesan coverage table

Appendix 6: Participant pre-interview survey

Name:

Current professional job title:

Please briefly list the main professional responsibilities you have in your current role.

Do you have a degree or equivalent?

What was the title and subject of your degree?

Do you hold any post-graduate qualifications?

Please list the titles and subjects of all post-graduate qualifications below.

Please give a brief outline of the different professional roles you have held in the course of your career. Please list each role on a new line in chronological order.

Appendix 7: Initial Codebook

Name	Files	References
1. Purpose	**25**	**486**
Latent	25	108
Catholicism poorly understood	1	2
DIfferent diocesan expectations	2	2
Gap between teacher expectation and student experience	1	1
Givenness-Compliance +	23	85
Influence of previous discourse	4	8
Bishops 2000 statement	2	2
Christ at the Centre	4	4
JPII 'core of the core'	1	1
Levels of Attainment	2	2
RECDs 96 and 2012	8	12
Religious literacy	2	3
RECD significant as context.	4	12
Identity rather than purpose	1	1
Moral issues as defining of Catholicism	3	4
Primary RE and Secondary RE are different	2	2
Primary advisers not specialist	2	3
Primary more docile than secondary	1	1
Primary RE not academic	1	2
Secondary too focused on exams	1	1
Tension between fidelity and openness	6	11
Problem of 'we' language	3	3
Semantic	25	378
Balance between Catholic and RE	1	1
Developing K,U and S	9	12
Developing literacy	0	0
Religious literacy	4	9
Theological literacy and oracy - language	3	5
Dialogue and debate	6	11
Counter-cultural critique	2	2
Criticality - disagreeing well	5	6
Dialogue with culture	1	1
Engaging in religious debate	1	2

Name	Files	References
Faith seeking understanding	7	8
Fidelity and Openness	3	5
Formation of the whole person	11	40
Discovering self	3	6
Discovering self and one's purpose in life	3	3
Human quest for meaning	7	7
Moral formation	7	9
Nurturing persons for community	3	5
Spiritual formation	4	5
Vocational formation	1	2
Worth and value as an individual	1	1
Learning about and learning from	4	5
Learning about Catholicism, the Catholic religion	16	27
As a coherent whole	1	1
As a lived faith experience	1	1
Authentically Catholic	1	1
Church's self-understanding	1	2
Help to articulate why they are Catholic	2	2
Not enough in itself	2	3
WIthin the contect of GB history	1	1
Learning about impact of faith	8	13
On self	6	6
On society	6	7
Learning for its own sake	1	2
Part of the CLM of the school	10	15
Preparation for life, making a difference	6	11
Preparation for next steps academically and career wise	1	1
Preparation for pluralist culture	17	43
Attitude to other	13	18
Defending faith in the face of secular challenges	2	3
Knowledge of other	12	13
Nurturing persons for community	3	5
Purposes differ in different contexts	3	3
RE as academic discipline	17	26
RE as Core	7	9
RE as faith formative	23	105

Name	Files	References
Assisting parents in faith formation	6	6
Caught not taught	1	1
Christ	9	15
Christ-centred	1	1
Encounter with Christ	5	7
K&U of Jesus Christ	3	4
Relationship with Christ	2	3
For all pupils - not just Catholics	1	2
For the salvation of souls	1	2
God	6	9
Common human quest for God	2	2
Deepening relationship with	1	1
God loves them	2	3
K&U of God	2	3
Grow in holiness	1	1
Human happiness	1	1
Personal transformation	3	4
RE as Catechesis	17	23
RE as evangelisation	14	25
Support the Church's educational mission	1	1
To know the way, the truth and the life	1	2
Transmission of faith	7	10
RE as more than academic	10	19
RE as multi-disicplinary	2	4
Relationship to purpose of education in general	5	6
Religion as a conceptual category	1	4
Significance of context	4	4
Systematic - structured and logical	2	3
Transformation of society	1	1
2. Shape and contents	**25**	**371**
Latent	14	26
'Worldviews' as a given already	11	21
Givenness-Obvious	2	2
RE has emphasised the nice bits - fluffy	3	3

Name	Files	References
Semantic	25	345
2.1 Content	25	204
Apparitions	1	1
Big questions	6	6
Catholic religion, faith, teachings	14	16
Four constitutional docs	2	3
Catholic Social Teaching	1	1
Church	4	5
Church history	3	3
Covenant	1	1
Creation	1	1
Doctrine and creeds	2	2
Faith and culture, society	1	1
Faith and life	2	4
God	5	7
Holy Spirit	2	3
Humans	2	2
Incarnation	3	3
Jesus - Christ	12	15
Movements and popular piety within the Church	1	1
Mystery and transcendence	1	1
Other Christian traditions	1	1
Philosophy and Ethics	8	11
Morality and Ethics	6	8
Prayer and Liturgy	4	4
Religions and worldviews	19	71
Abrahamic	3	3
Authenticity - 'outsider' 'insider'	2	6
Depth v breadth	2	5
Dharmic	2	3
Enjoyable and relevant	1	1
Extremist forms of religion	1	2
Importance of the experiential	1	2
Increasing as pupils mature	1	1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1	1
Mormonism	1	1

Name	Files	References
Not comparative	1	2
Danger of superficiality	2	2
Not good enough	7	13
Rastafarianism	1	1
Scientology	1	2
Worldviews	7	8
Non-religious Worldviews	6	7
Negative	2	2
Positive	4	5
Revelation	2	2
RSHE	1	1
Sacraments	9	11
Eucharist	3	3
Too much emphaiss on these in the past	1	1
Saints	2	2
Salvation history narrative	7	8
Scripture as required content	11	15
Hermeneutics	1	2
Sources of revelation	1	2
Tradition	3	3
2.2 Approach	25	141
Assessed properly	3	3
Awe and wonder	1	2
Comprehensive - Difficult bits included	2	2
Concept led	1	2
Creative	2	3
Critical	3	6
Dialogue	7	14
Necessity of depth for dialogue	2	5
Engaging for students	14	29
Accessibility of content	2	3
Allow space for student questions and challenge	2	2
Relevance of content	11	17
Applicable to current context	7	9
Journeying with students	3	4
Focus on skill development	2	2

Name	Files	References
Formation more than information	1	1
Hermeneutical	1	1
Importance of RED being 'usable'	2	2
Knowledge rich curriculum	10	20
Negative	5	9
Not enough in itself - needs application	2	2
Opposed	2	3
Skills over or aswell as content	4	4
Positive	8	11
Not sociological	2	2
Opportunity for reflection	6	6
Pedagogy	3	3
Approriate pedagogy	1	1
Different pedagogical approaches	1	1
Rigour	3	4
Structured and sequenced	11	18
Liturgical year sequence	3	3
Progressive and age appropriate	7	10
Theology	6	6
Useful to teachers	3	7
Curriculum freedom for schools	1	2
Flexible and adapatable	2	3
Varied and unbounded	2	3
Variety and representativeness	3	5
3. Obstacles	**25**	**427**
Absence of guidance on assessment	2	2
Adviser issues	9	20
Adviser capacity	3	4
Adviser differences on perception of pupil attitudes	1	1
Adviser formation gap	3	6
Advisers disagree on the purpose of RE	1	1
Advisers far from classroom reality	3	5
Advisers losing expertise and historical depth	3	3
Catholic RE as follower not leader	1	1
CCRS	2	2
Not attractive enough to teachers	1	1

Name	Files	References
Not prioritised in Secondary - supported by Primary	1	1
Church hierarchy	2	8
Abuse crisis	1	1
Failure of Church leaders and impact on popular perception	1	1
Tension between hierarchy and schools	1	6
Confusion over purpose of subject	6	10
Extension of PSHE or too issues-based	1	1
Not knowing why we're teaching what we're teaching	1	1
Not recognising it as an academic subject	4	5
Objecting to assessment	1	2
Too fluffy	1	1
Treating it as catechesis	1	3
Curriculum	3	3
Dip at KS3	2	2
Disconnect between learning and lived experience	3	6
External pressures	14	29
Exams and assessment	11	18
Exam reform impacting on uptake	1	1
Exams assessing the wrong thing	1	1
Too success oriented exam and assessment driven	8	13
Government and legislation	3	6
Incompatibility between Catholicism and statutory requirements	1	1
Not funded appropriately	1	1
Ofsted & CSI	4	5
Focused on the institution not on pupil needs	2	2
Gap between the academy and the classroom	1	2
Greater need for adaptability and flexibility	2	2
Historically poor RE	9	16
Hostility from society and lobbyists	6	12
Binary debates that lack nuance	1	1
Perception of the Church as exclusionary	1	1
Worldviews pushing out religion	1	1
Lack of Catholic leadership in school	3	3
Lack of clarity about what is expected	1	1
Lack of coherent overarching narrative	1	1
Lack of consistency between school and parish	1	1

Name	Files	References
Lack of creativity	3	3
Lack of opportunity for critical engagement	1	2
Lack of reinforcement in the home	7	8
Loss of Catholic teacher training colleges	5	5
None - it's achievable	1	1
Not prioritised or valued	18	58
By government and OFSTED	4	4
By other staff members	2	2
By parents	7	7
By pupils	7	13
Instrumentalist attitude	4	5
By school leaders	13	16
By society	8	11
Societal change - decline of religion	3	3
By system leaders (DSCs, CES etc)	3	5
Over-reliance on historical clerical expertise	1	1
Pupils	9	23
Failure to engage and challenge	3	7
Little prior knowledge or experience	5	9
Pupils find it challenging	1	1
Pupils retention of previous learning	1	1
Religion isn't 'cool'	1	1
Transitions - addition of pupils without prior knowledge	4	4
Resources	10	14
Not knowing which resources are okay to use	1	1
Not scaffolded for inexperienced teachers	1	1
Over-reliance on resources	1	1
Paucity of exemplars and resources	1	1
Poor resources	8	9
System overstretch	9	17
Teachers	25	154
Brittleness - not comfortable with criticality	4	4
Fear of getting it wrong, lack of confidence	6	10
Inability to witness	1	3
Instrumentalist atitude	1	1
Lack of ambition	1	2

Name	Files	References
Lack of appropriate teachers	16	21
Lack of breadth of life experience	1	1
Lack of experience of faith	6	6
Lack of faith, personal realtionship with Christ	9	12
Lack of love and care	1	1
Lack of passion and commitment	6	8
Lack of pedagogical skill or creativity	6	10
Lack of religious literacy	1	1
Lack of subject knowledge	17	26
Loss of sense of vocation	1	1
Need for teacher formation	11	19
Not willing to accept help - don't know they need help	2	3
Personal problems with Church teaching	2	5
Recruitment difficulties - Catholic	14	18
Rise of the 'career Catholic'	1	1
Shift from religious to lay	1	1
Time lost to Covid	1	1
Time pressures	9	12
No time just to think	4	6
Too few female voices in positions of authority	1	1
Too focused on engagement and not on validity of content	1	1
Too focused on institutional survival rather than mission	1	1
Too many 'theologians'	1	1
Under-valuing skill development	1	1
4. Objective-Critical-Pluralistic	**25**	**395**
Latent	10	12
Misunderstood or struggle with the question	7	8
Pluralism as relativism	2	3
Presumption of the primacy of experience	2	1
Semantic	25	383
4.0 Background	2	6
2009 circular letter a response to Folgero	1	2
Lack of awareness of issue in Catholic circles	1	2
Word meanings - The legal senses and Catholic senses will be different	1	2

Name	Files	References
4.1 Objective	25	90
Catholic RE is not objective	15	38
Should be and isn't	2	5
Shouldn't be and isn't (impossible)	14	33
Incompatible with Catholic identity	7	10
Neutrality as a form of violent coercion	2	3
Objectivity not a good thing	1	2
Parents can choose to send elsewhere	1	1
Subjectivity essential for dialogue	3	4
Understanding requires involvement	2	2
Catholic RE is objective	22	52
As academic distance	2	4
As accountability	1	1
As freedom, non-imposition, non-confessional	14	17
As internal coherence	3	4
As object of study is a given	1	1
As stepping outside of own perspective	1	1
As transparency of subjectivity	6	8
Objectivity as listening to others	2	2
Objectivity as openness to critique - 'coopetition'	7	7
Pupil's invited to articulate their own stance	4	5
4.2 Critical	25	120
Catholic RE is critical	25	103
As a critique of culture	3	3
As a sign of cohrence and confidence	2	5
As accountable to external review and assessment	3	4
As it includes literary criticism	3	3
As meeting point of different rational horizons	3	4
As rational account of presuppositions	4	5
As rationale for subject	1	1
As self-reflective practice	3	5
As ultimate purpose of subject	2	2
Because it is distinct from Catechesis	1	1
Careful judgements	2	2
Catholic RE already critical	7	8
CHurch has always been internally self-critical	2	3

Name	Files	References
Criticality as essential component of faith formation	6	11
Importance of criticality	7	8
Inclusion of negative manifestations of religion	1	1
It is academic	7	9
Knowledge necessary for proper criticality	6	8
RE as place to dissent, to ask questions	14	17
Catholic RE is not critical	7	17
Concentration on Catholicism makes criticality difficult	1	3
Don't know enough to engage critically	1	1
Lack of criticality in the past	1	2
Tension between identity and criticality	4	8
Tension between respect and criticality	2	2
4.3 Pluralistic	25	167
Catholic RE is not pluralistic	11	23
Should be and isn't	8	18
Concentration on on Catholicism makes pluralism difficult	4	7
Fear from parents regarding the teaching of other faiths	3	3
Not enough time on other religions and worldviews	2	3
Shouldn't be and isn't	5	5
Cannot be presentation of options	4	4
Catholic RE is pluralistic	25	144
A nuanced pluralism - each person's worldview is unique	1	4
As dialogue - understanding the other	9	14
As respect for the presence of difference in th classroom	12	21
Bit students like best	1	1
But not relativist	8	11
But only after security in Catholicism	4	5
Catholic schools an expression of pluralism	4	4
Catholicism as internally diverse	4	7
Challenge to prejudice	2	2
Compatible with critique	3	3
Conflates religious and racial pluralism	2	3
Imaginative entry into other perspectives	4	6
In the different ways it is received	2	2
Inclusion of other religions and worldviews	18	26
Pluralism as presentation of options	7	8

Name	Files	References
Pluralistic because of common human questions	3	3
Reflects the way society is	11	12
Understanding other aids self-understanding	4	10
5. Anything else	**25**	**248**
Advisors	5	19
As a transmitter of faith	1	1
As advocate for subject leads with school leads	3	4
Hidden importance of NBRIA	1	2
Importance of good relationship with school leaders	1	1
Importance of NBRIA as a network	2	2
Increasingly important in current context	1	1
Need for advisor formation too	1	1
Reduced capacity	1	1
Support and challenge diocesan leaders	1	1
Support and challenge teachers	3	5
Emotional expressions	15	37
Negative	13	28
Constant pressure	1	1
Doubt and hesitancy	3	5
Failing in mission	2	2
Fear for the future	8	11
Anticipation of future clashes with a secular state	3	3
Future funding and diocesan capacity	1	2
Worry about forthcoming RED	1	1
Frustration with unrealistic expectations	1	1
Need for greater confidence in our offer	2	2
RE departments not what they once were	1	1
Worry about teacher formation	4	5
Positive	8	9
A privilege to work as an adviser	5	6
Can only do our best	1	1
Looking forward to curriculum change	1	1
Historical and cultural context	23	66
Competing with the world and losing	1	1
Exam reform	0	0
Positive impact	1	2

Name	Files	References
Experience of demographic shift	6	6
Great names in Catholic RE past	2	3
Hostility to Catholicism	5	5
Low proportion of Catholic teachers	7	10
No personal memory of RE lessons	1	1
Parish, home and school	9	19
Disconnect between parish and school	2	2
Loss of Catholicism in the home	6	8
School the only encounter with faith	7	9
Post-covid	9	14
Prejudice and discrimination against religion	3	4
RSE	1	2
Social media negative impact on dialogue	1	1
Importance of working beyond the Catholic bubble	3	6
In the future	3	3
Importance of working at a national level.	2	2
Pedagogy	8	14
Have to find hooks	1	1
Importance of imagination, creativity and drawing on experience	5	8
Narrative based	1	2
Need for authenticity and engagement	1	1
Need good RE resources	1	1
Progressive	1	1
Pupils	3	4
Enjoy RE	1	1
Natural curiosity in RE	2	2
Spiritual thirst	1	1
RE is getting better	5	7
School leaders	2	6
Importance of support from the top for RE	1	1
Lack of attention to spiritual formation	1	1
Negative impact of poor leadership	2	4
Schools	12	19
Catholicity of schools is precarious	3	3
Decline in Catholic population	2	2
Diverse and inclusive	7	11

Name	Files	References
Valued for their fruits not their roots	3	3
Teachers	16	47
Anxious to get it right	2	2
Catholic teachers feel isolated.	1	1
Catholicity of	7	11
Difficulty in retaining teachers	1	1
Importance of	10	21
responding to vocational call	1	2
Single-handedly upholding Catholic identity of school	1	1
Teacher as witness	4	5
Passionate and creative	2	2
RE department as pastoral heart of school	2	3
Relevance of their perspective	0	0
Negative	1	1
Positive	3	4
Resentful of imposition of bishops	1	5
Would like more issues-based RE	1	1
Using stories or examples to convey meaning	12	20

Appendix 8: Thematised codebook

Name	Files	References
THEME ONE: Different articulations of Purpose (Semantic)	**25**	**162**
1. Information	25	324
a. Inclusive	25	153
Content	23	91
Faith and culture, society	1	1
Faith and life	2	4
Humans	2	2
Other Christian traditions	1	1
Philosophy and Ethics	8	11
Morality and Ethics	6	8
Religions and worldviews	19	71
Abrahamic	3	3
Authenticity - 'outsider' 'insider'	2	6
Depth v breadth	2	5
Dharmic	2	3
Enjoyable and relevant	1	1
Extremist forms of religion	1	2
Importance of the experiential	1	2
Increasing as pupils mature	1	1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1	1
Mormonism	1	1
Not comparative	1	2
Danger of superficiality	2	2
Not good enough	7	13
Rastafarianism	1	1
Scientology	1	2
Worldviews	7	8
Non-religious Worldviews	6	7
Negative	2	2
Positive	4	5
RSHE	1	1
Developing K,U and S	9	12

Name	Files	References
Learning for its own sake	1	2
RE as academic discipline	17	26
RE as multi-disicplinary	2	4
Religion as a conceptual category	1	4
Religious literacy	5	10
Systematic - structured and logical	2	3
b. Exclusive	25	171
Content	25	126
Biblical concepts	12	17
Covenant	1	1
Creation	1	1
Scripture as required content	11	15
Hermeneutics	1	2
Doctrinal concepts	24	83
Apparitions	1	1
Catholic religion, faith, teachings	15	19
Four constitutional docs	2	3
Catholic Social Teaching	1	1
Church	4	5
Church history	3	3
Doctrine and creeds	2	2
God	5	7
Holy Spirit	2	3
Incarnation	3	3
Jesus - Christ	12	15
Prayer and Liturgy	4	4
Revelation	2	2
Sacraments	9	11
Eucharist	3	3
Too much emphaiss on these in the past	1	1
Saints	2	2
Sources of revelation	1	2
Tradition	3	3
Faith and Life	13	26
Big questions	6	6
Faith and culture, society	1	1

Name	Files	References
Faith and life	2	4
Humans	2	2
Movements and popular piety within the Church	1	1
Philosophy and Ethics	8	11
Morality and Ethics	6	8
RSHE	1	1
Developing K,U and S	20	38
Learning about Catholicism, the Catholic religion	19	31
As a coherent whole	1	1
As a lived faith experience	1	1
Authentically Catholic	1	1
Church's self-understanding	1	2
Help to articulate why they are Catholic	2	2
Not enough in itself	2	3
WIthin the contect of GB history	1	1
Theological literacy and oracy - language	2	4
2. Formation	25	234
a. Inclusive	23	86
Criticality - disagreeing well	5	6
Engaging in religious debate	1	2
Discovering self	3	6
Discovering self and one's purpose in life	3	3
Fidelity and Openness	3	5
Formation of the whole person	5	5
Human quest for meaning	7	7
Learning about impact of faith	8	13
On self	6	6
On society	6	7
Moral formation	7	9
Nurturing persons for community	3	5
Preparation for next steps academically and career wise	1	1
Purposes differ in different contexts	3	3
RE as more than academic	10	19
Relationship to purpose of education in general	5	6
Worth and value as an individual	1	1

Name	Files	References
b. Exclusive	**25**	**148**
Faith seeking understanding	7	8
Part of the CLM of the school	10	15
RE as Core	7	9
RE as faith formative	23	105
Assisting parents in faith formation	6	6
Caught not taught	1	1
Christ	9	15
Christ-centred	1	1
Encounter with Christ	5	7
K&U of Jesus Christ	3	4
Relationship with Christ	2	3
For all pupils - not just Catholics	1	2
For the salvation of souls	1	2
God	6	9
Common human quest for God	2	2
Deepening relationship with	1	1
God loves them	2	3
K&U of God	2	3
Grow in holiness	1	1
Human happiness	1	1
Personal transformation	3	4
RE as Catechesis	17	23
RE as evangelisation	14	25
Support the Church's educational mission	1	1
To know the way, the truth and the life	1	2
Transmission of faith	7	10
Significance of context	4	4
Spiritual formation	4	5
Vocational formation	1	2
3. Participation	**21**	**70**
Counter-cultural critique	2	2
Criticality - disagreeing well	5	6
Dialogue with culture	1	1
Learning about and learning from	4	5

Name	Files	References
Preparation for life, making a difference	6	11
Preparation for pluralist culture	17	44
Attitude to other	13	18
Defending faith in the face of secular challenges	2	3
Knowledge of other	12	13
Nurturing persons for community	3	5
Transformation of society	1	1
THEME TWO - meanings of OCP (Semantic)	25	295
2.0 Background	2	6
2009 circular letter a response to Folgero	1	2
Lack of awareness of issue in Catholic circles	1	2
Word meanings - The legal senses and Catholic senses will be different	1	2
2.1 Objective	17	40
a. Objectivity as neutrality	17	40
Is objective	5	8
As academic distance	4	7
As object of study is a given	1	1
Isn't objective	13	32
Should be and isn't	2	5
Shouldn't be and isn't (impossible)	12	27
Incompatible with Catholic identity	7	10
Neutrality as a form of violent coercion	2	3
Objectivity not a good thing	1	2
Parents can choose to send elsewhere	1	1
b. Objectivity as intersubjectivity	20	51
As freedom, non-imposition, non-confessional	14	17
As internal coherence	3	4
As transparency of subjectivity	6	9
Objectivity as listening to others	2	2
Objectivity as openness to critique - 'coopetition'	7	7
Pupil's invited to articulate their own stance	4	5
Subjectivity essential for dialogue	3	4
Understanding requires involvement	3	3

Name	Files	References
2.2 Critical	**25**	**84**
a. Simple criticality - binary arguments	24	83
Catholic RE is critical	22	62
As accountable to external review and assessment	3	4
As rationale for subject	1	1
As ultimate purpose of subject	2	2
Careful judgements	2	2
Catholic RE already critical	7	8
Importance of criticality	7	8
It is academic	7	9
Knowledge necessary for proper criticality	6	8
RE as place to dissent, to ask questions	14	17
Catholic RE is not critical	7	17
Concentration on Catholicism makes criticality difficult	1	3
Don't know enough to engage critically	1	1
Lack of criticality in the past	1	2
Tension between identity and criticality	4	8
Tension between respect and criticality	2	2
b. Nuanced criticality - hermeneutical dialogues	15	43
i. As hermeneutical dialogue	15	41
As a critique of culture	3	3
As dialogue - understanding the other	11	16
As it includes literary criticism	3	3
As meeting point of different rational horizons	3	4
As rational account of presuppositions	4	5
Understanding other aids self-understnading	4	10
ii. As reflexivity	10	23
As a sign of coherence and confidence	2	5
As self-reflective practice	3	5
Because it is distinct from Catechesis	1	1
Church has always been internally self-critical	2	3
Criticality as essential component of faith formation	6	11
Inclusion of negative manifestations of religion	1	1
2.3 Pluralistic	**25**	**171**
a. Simple pluralism - range of religions	25	135

Name	Files	References
Catholic RE is not pluralistic	12	41
Should be and isn't	12	41
Assimilationist	2	3
Concentration on Catholicism makes pluralism difficult	5	8
Danger of superficiality	2	2
Not good enough	7	13
Not enough time on other religions and worldviews	3	5
Racist rejection by families	5	5
Shouldn't be and isn't	1	1
Catholic RE is pluralistic	25	90
i. Inclusion of other religions and worldviews	18	27
ii. As respect for the presence of difference in th classroom	12	21
iii. Reflects the way society is	11	12
iv. Pluralism as presentation of options	7	8
b. Nuanced pluralism - internal diversity	6	14
i. A nuanced pluralism - each person's worldview is unique	1	5
ii. Catholicism as internally diverse	6	9
c. Situated pluralism - openness with roots	12	22
i. But not relativist	8	11
Cannot be presentation of options	4	4
Consumerist metaphors	6	6
ii. But only after security in Catholicism	5	7
iii. Catholic schools an expression of pluralism	4	4
THEME THREE: Professional ventriloquism (Latent)	23	103
Balance between Catholic and RE	1	1
Gap between teacher expectation and student experience	1	1
Influence of previous discourse	14	34
Bishops 2000 statement	2	2
Christ at the Centre	4	4
JPII 'core of the core'	1	1
Levels of Attainment	2	2
RECDs 96 and 2012	9	14
Religious literacy	2	3

Name	Files	References
Moral issues as defining of Catholicism	3	4
RECD significant as context.	4	12
Tension between fidelity and openness	6	11
Problem of 'we' language	3	3
Too many 'theologians'	1	1
5. THEME FOUR: Depth of adviser expertise (Semantic and Latent)	**20**	**70**
Adviser issues	9	20
Adviser capacity	3	4
Adviser differences on perception of pupil attitudes	1	1
Adviser formation gap	3	6
Advisers disagree on the purpose of RE	1	1
Advisers far from classroom reality	3	5
Advisers losing expertise and historical depth	3	3
By system leaders (DSCs, CES etc)	3	5
Hostility from society and lobbyists	6	12
Binary debates that lack nuance	1	1
Perception of the Church as exclusionary	1	1
Worldviews pushing out religion	1	1
Loss of Catholic teacher training colleges	5	5
Misunderstood or struggle with the question	7	8
Over-reliance on historical clerical expertise	1	1
System overstretch	9	17
Too few female voices in positions of authority	1	1
Too focused on institutional survival rather than mission	1	1
THEME FIVE: The worldviews project (Latent)	**21**	**98**
'Worldviews' as a given already	11	21
Givenness-Obvious	2	2
RE has emphasised the nice bits - fluffy	3	3
Religions and worldviews	19	71
Abrahamic	3	3
Authenticity - 'outsider' 'insider'	2	6
Depth v breadth	2	5

Name	Files	References
Dharmic	2	3
Enjoyable and relevant	1	1
Extremist forms of religion	1	2
Importance of the experiential	1	2
Increasing as pupils mature	1	1
Jehovah's Witnesses	1	1
Mormonism	1	1
Not comparative	1	2
Danger of superficiality	2	2
Not good enough	7	13
Rastafarianism	1	1
Scientology	1	2
Worldviews	7	8
Non-religious Worldviews	6	7
Negative	2	2
Positive	4	5

12 February 2021

Dear Philip

I am writing to confirm that your application for ethical approval of your research enquiry has been approved at Level 1.

Researcher's name:
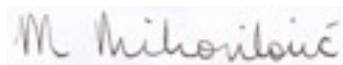
Philip Robinson

Regnum
167009

Title of project:
Objective, Critical, Pluralistic and Catholic Religious Education? An investigation into the views of Catholic Religious Education advisers at the intersection of faith and culture.

Supervisor

Dr David Fincham
Should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

M. Mihovilović

Dr Mary Mihovilović

Institute of Education Ethics Sub-Committee Representative