

Grammar of Dissent? Theology and the Language of Religious Education

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Abstract

The prosperity of theology at Universities in this country is, for better or worse, linked to the prosperity or otherwise of Religious Education in the nation's schools where pupils first learn the grammar and vocabulary of belief. Yet despite one of the aspirations of recent reforms of the subject being to harmonize student transition from secondary to tertiary level, other voices have been raised which question the validity of that project. This article considers why religious education is currently such a contested pedagogical space, what kind of alternatives are being proposed and why Newman's Idea of a University and an 'inclusive' understanding of Theology might inform a coherent Catholic response.

Keywords

Religious Education, Theology, National Entitlement, Newman, Curriculum Directory, Catholic Schools

Theology in Crisis?

Basking contentedly in the recent canonization of John Henry Newman, a reflection upon the travails of Catholic Theology in this country may appear singularly ill-timed. It is well known that Theology occupies a unique position as a subject at the apex of all disciplines in Newman's *Idea of a University* and he regards a place of learning that excludes the study of religion to be "an intellectual absurdity."¹ Yet in an uncanny echo of Newman's day, which his *Idea* sought to address, a recent British Academy report warns that Theology and Religious Studies disciplines must confront significant

¹ J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Chicago: Loyola, ([1852] 1927), II:1.

challenges or risk “disappearing from our universities” at a time when they have never been more needed.²

The report goes on to say that this decline has “led to the closure or reduction in size of several university theology departments” and explicitly mentions the demise of Heythrop College after 400 years of specialist provision. While Catholic readers are spared details of what has become a painful litany of decline (La Sainte Union 1997, Plater College 2005, St. Joseph’s Mill Hill 2006, Franciscan Studies Centre, Canterbury, 2017, St. Anselm’s Margate, 2017) the closure of significant centres such as Bangor and Sheffield and drastic reductions in provision elsewhere make sobering reading.³

The problem essentially is that there are simply fewer people interested in studying the sacred science at tertiary level and, while it would be simplistic to claim an exact correlation between the numbers of students of Religious Studies in schools with those applying for places on Theology courses at university, the figures do not bode well. Despite being officially on the curriculum for all nine million pupils in England’s schools, provision of the subject is in crisis, with 200,000 fewer pupils taking the subject at GCSE than eight years ago⁴ and A-Level entrants already down by a third on peaks reached in 2016 to just over 16,000.⁵ Small wonder, then, that the Catholic Theological Association has convened meetings of institutional representatives from tertiary providers to address such concerns.⁶ Yet while it is also a major anxiety for the national network of Theology and Religious Studies departments in all universities (TRS UK), it can be claimed that these self-same organizations have exacerbated the crisis.

R.E. – Subject Rigour and the Theological Turn

In the period leading up to the 2016 reform of all public examinations in England and Wales, university academics and religious

² <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/news/theology-and-religious-studies-risk-disappearing-our-universities-says-british-academy>

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6. The report also notes that the University of Lincoln, Middlesex University, Staffordshire University, Glyndwr University and Anglia Ruskin University all had at least 50 students enrolled in undergraduate programmes in 2012/13 but reported no enrolment in 2017/18.

⁴ T. Wyatt in *The Church Times*, 22/8/ 2019. See <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/23-august/news/uk/religious-studies-gcse-continues-to-fall-in-popularity>

⁵ Source *Education Datalab* where tables show entries have decreased slightly, falling from 17,024 last year to 16,214 <https://results.ffteducationdatalab.org.uk/a-level/religious-studies.php?v=20190815>

⁶ The most recent being 27/07/2019 at Notre Dame University’s Global Gateway in London.

stakeholders contributed enthusiastically to a tectonic shift in the way R.E. was taught and examined at both GCSE and A-Level whereby anxieties about the content and credibility of the subject led to the *amount* of theological content in the specifications and the *rigour* of the assessments being vastly increased. Since I and others have detailed how this process unfolded elsewhere,⁷ in this article it may suffice to report on the apparent success of what might be called “the theological turn”. Hitherto, “Religious Studies” has been a blatant misnomer for an A-level dominated by Philosophy and Ethics, but where once Christ had no place in the specification, a Chief Examiner can now report:

Many candidates were well able to demonstrate that there is considerable disagreement in the scholarship about the extent to which Jesus was a political liberator, teacher of wisdom or Son of God (or all three). The best responses demonstrated deep understanding of the hermeneutical issues associated with determining conclusions about Jesus’ status, with the strongest candidates acknowledging that evidence of a human hand in the collation of the New Testament would significantly muddy the waters when trying to nail down Jesus’ nature.⁸

As another example, where once Catholic readings of Genesis had been misleadingly understood even by some Examination Boards as literalist, AQA has recorded that:

There were a number of differing approaches taken by students in answering this question – some discussed creationism versus liberalism, some made contrasts between Genesis 1 and Genesis 2, whilst others focussed on contrasting the Genesis creation accounts with scientific theories. All these approaches were creditworthy as reflected in the mark scheme where possible alternative approaches and responses were indicated. There were many responses which achieved full marks on this question.⁹

This trend has continued and summing up the achievement of their GCSE cohort, Eduqas recently concluded:

In this second year of this qualification’s existence, candidates across the full ability range have really risen to the challenge of this more

⁷ Cf. A. Towey and P. Robinson, ‘Religious Education Reform in the Catholic Schools of England and Wales’ in J. Lydon (ed) *Contemporary Catholic Education* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2018) and with S. Whittle, ‘What is happening to RE in Catholic Schools?’ in *The Pastoral Review* 12:5, 2016, pp. 52-56.

⁸ <https://www.ocr.org.uk/Images/538042-examiners-report.pdf>

⁹ <https://filestore.aqa.org.uk/sample-papers-and-mark-schemes/2018/june/AQA-806212-WRE-JUN18.PDF>

demanding GCSE. The evaluation questions especially are now being answered much better than they were even a year ago.¹⁰

This should be a cause for celebration, but it has altered the ecology of the subject. Designed to furnish pupils with an inventory of “powerful knowledge” the subject has almost immediately acquired more currency in the eyes of school leaders, teachers, pupils and policy makers keen to see R.E. make a contribution to social mobility and community cohesion.¹¹ That the subject requires disciplinary rigour for it to have credibility is beyond doubt.¹² Unfortunately, however, no longer so inclusive because of its vastly increased confessional content and no longer open to the academically less able because argumentation now has to be rooted in sacred sources rather than mere opinion, a number of teachers who had entered large entry cohorts at GCSE and encouraged pupils to proceed to A-level appear less eager or simply less able to do so.¹³

In other words, the search for more rigour and more theological congruence on the part of religious and academic stakeholders seems to be proving at once both a winning and winnowing formula. And since this collaborative effort to increase the amount of religion in the syllabus has come at a time when the amount of religion in the pupils is diminishing, a distinct challenge to the “re-theologizing” of the curriculum has emerged on grounds of both criticality and relevance.

R.E. – Criticality v Catechesis?

It has been a paradoxical feature of the landscape of RE that while confessional allegiance among pupils has been receding, the most popular syllabus used by non-Catholic schools across the country is a distinctly theological programme of Anglican provenance called “Understanding Christianity”. As the title suggests, it has a theological aim, namely ‘to see pupils leave school with a coherent understanding of Christian belief and practice.’¹⁴ *Understanding*

¹⁰ [https://www.eduqas.co.uk/examinersreports/2019/gcse/Eduqas%20GCSE%20Religious%20Studies%20Route%20B%20Examiners%27%20Report%20Summer%202019%20\(1\).pdf?language_id=1](https://www.eduqas.co.uk/examinersreports/2019/gcse/Eduqas%20GCSE%20Religious%20Studies%20Route%20B%20Examiners%27%20Report%20Summer%202019%20(1).pdf?language_id=1)

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

¹² As a member of the recent Commission on Religious Education, I was privy to over a thousand detailed survey responses from teachers regarding RE. The desire for greater academic credibility was unanimous.

¹³ See P. McGrail, A. Towey (2019) *Op. cit.*

¹⁴ <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/>

Christianity has a “big story” at its heart – the meta-narrative of redemption. With admirable pedagogical clarity, it selects a number of core biblical concepts which are revisited in a spiral fashion, showing how they have shaped contemporary Christian communities, while allowing pupils to reflect upon these ideas in relation to their understanding of religion and belief. Since there is often a dearth of religious literacy at local council and school levels, *Understanding Christianity* has proved a ready-made solution for teaching R.E. in schools. Current legislation dictates that R.E. should give prominence to the Christian tradition and by simply appending discrete modules on other religions to the core syllabus, many schools have successfully fulfilled their statutory obligation.

Needless to say, Humanists are not keen on this programme, which they would classify as catechetical and mission driven¹⁵ an *a fortiori* a suspicion held in regard to Catholic religious education.¹⁶ While teachers and R.E. advisors working in English Catholic schools might protest that pupil engagement with their subject is self-evidently *not* catechetical, the Vatican’s 2009 letter on Religious Education seems to want the best of both worlds.¹⁷ On the one hand, “the special character of the Catholic school, the underlying reason for it, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the education of the pupils” (§15). On the other, “the specific nature of this education does not cause it to fall short of its proper nature as a school discipline . . . with the same systematic demands and the same rigour as other disciplines” (§18). Essentially, what Catholic RE is asked to strive for is a synthesis of the two:

Religious education in schools fits into the evangelising mission of the Church. It is different from, and complementary to, parish catechesis. Apart from the different settings in which these are imparted, the aims that they pursue are also different: catechesis aims at fostering personal adherence to Christ and the development of Christian life in its different aspects whereas religious education in schools gives the pupils knowledge about Christianity’s identity and Christian life (§17).

Unfortunately, while there might be a subtle “principle of double-effect” at play here – critical engagement leading to catechetical conviction – this understanding of R.E. allows those opposed to faith

¹⁵ See ‘Critique and counter-critique of *Understanding Christianity*’ http://www.torbay.gov.uk/media/8385/appendix-3-re_today_course_understanding_christianity_humanist_objectionsdh.docx

¹⁶ See for example the stance of the ‘Accord Coalition’ <http://accordcoalition.org.uk/>

¹⁷ Congregation for Catholic Education (05/05/2009) *Circular letter to the presidents of Bishops’ conferences on Religious Education in schools* http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20090505_circ-insegn-relig_en.html

schools in general and Catholic schools in particular to claim that the Government is sponsoring indoctrination. Still worse, the claim is made that this taints the entire subject discipline with the “whiff of confessionalism” with deleterious impact upon its credibility among the population at large.¹⁸ Although this seems to be somewhat presumed rather than evidenced, a degree of traction has been gained by opponents of a theological basis to R.E. on the grounds that it is not relevant in a society that now boasts a net majority of people who no longer believe in God and risks curtailing pupil freedom.¹⁹ On this reading, by increasing the amount of theological content in the curriculum the recent reform provides political and pedagogical cover for faith schools of all stripes to use classroom RE to fulfil missionary rather than educational aims.

RE – Relevance & Objectivity?

In Hegelian fashion then, if the Department for Education/ University/ Faith group alliance that has reformed R.E. constitutes “thesis” then the subsequent reaction of a range of other independent academics and sector stakeholders definitely constitutes its “antithesis”. Rooting their concern in the plight of “nones” (those professing no faith and no religious affiliation), both the pedagogical methodology and aims of the recent changes been challenged and there have been ambitious moves to establish what might be understood as a neutral grammar of religious discourse.

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing example is the work of the Independent Commission convened by the Religious Education Council to engage in a national consultation to review key aspects of R.E. provision. Among its salient conclusions was that the subject be renamed *Religion and Worldviews* and that a “National Entitlement” guaranteeing a baseline of religious literacy be made compulsory in all state funded schools.²⁰ The motives behind the change of name included a desire to remove any hint that the subject was catechetical and to afford non-religious approaches equal billing *ab initio*. The rationale behind what is being proposed as a baseline entitlement is more complicated but exhibits at least two key principles:

¹⁸ A. Brine, 2015 Nov 27. “Wresting Control from the Big Beasts.” RE:Online. <http://www.reonline.org.uk/news/alans-blogwresting-control-from-the-big-beasts-alan-brine/>

¹⁹ See M. Clayton et al., (2018) “How to regulate faith schools,” *Impact: Philosophical Perspectives on Education Policy* 25 (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/2048-416X.2018.12005.x>).

²⁰ Commission on Religious Education (2018) *Final Report: Religion and Worldviews: The Way forward* Available at <https://www.commissiononre.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Final-Report-of-the-Commission-on-RE.pdf>

First, the subject must be *relevant* to “nones”. For this reason the subject should be more akin to self-discovery, formation of a personal *Weltanschauung* readying the individual for the challenge of life rather than any particular examination. Strongly influenced by the work of Barbara Wintersgill and others,²¹ the entire subject sloughs off the traditional curricula of the recent past which have focused on “the Big Six” religions in exchange for a reflective spiral of awareness coalescing around six “Big Ideas”. Quasi-experiential, this approach envisages the subject retaining its relevance to pupils precisely because its critical locus *is* the pupil.²²

Secondly, belief systems should be presented in their complexity rather than in “pure” homogenized/ sanitized schemata which do not conform to the “Real” world.²³ This principle not only protects pupils from theological standpoints, which religious educators have dubiously drained of pathologies for pedagogical purposes, it dignifies syncretistic views and creates more space for minority worldviews such as Mormonism and Rastafarianism.²⁴

Combining this heuristic and “complexity sensitive” approach to the subject led to the following statement of entitlement, which by reason of its ambition (it aspires to structure the grammar of religious discourse for an entire population) and for reasons of critical transparency, might be best quoted in full:

Pupils must be taught:

1. about matters of central importance to the worldviews studied, how these can form coherent accounts for adherents, and how these matters are interpreted in different times, cultures and places
2. about key concepts including ‘religion’, ‘secularity’, ‘spirituality’ and ‘worldview’, and that worldviews are complex, diverse and plural
3. the ways in which patterns of belief, expression and belonging may change across and within worldviews, locally, nationally and globally, both historically and in contemporary times

²¹ B. Wintersgill, *Big Ideas for Religious Education* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 2017).

²² During consultations for the *Commission on Religious Education 2016-18*, when I suggested that *Big Ideas* was pedagogically contrary to the DfE 2016 R.E. Reform, B. Wintersgill replied ‘Hell Yes!’ (31/03/17).

²³ See A. Dinham & M. Shaw, *RE for Real: The Future of Teaching and Learning about Religion and Belief* (London: Goldsmiths, 2015).

²⁴ Commission on Religious Education *Final Report*, 2018, p. 75.

4. the ways in which worldviews develop in interaction with each other, have some shared beliefs and practices as well as differences, and that people may draw upon more than one tradition
5. the role of religious and non-religious ritual and practices, foundational texts, and of the arts, in both the formation and communication of experience, beliefs, values, identities and commitments
6. how worldviews may offer responses to fundamental questions of meaning and purpose raised by human experience, and the different roles that worldviews play in providing people with ways of making sense of their lives
7. the different roles played by worldviews in the lives of individuals and societies, including their influence on moral behaviour and social norms
8. how worldviews have power and influence in societies and cultures, appealing to various sources of authority, including foundational texts
9. the different ways in which religion and worldviews can be understood, interpreted and studied, including through a wide range of academic disciplines and through direct encounter and discussion with individuals and communities who hold these worldviews.

Immediate reactions to the Entitlement have proved slightly difficult to disaggregate from reactions to the Commission report as a whole and the proposed name change.²⁵ While the reader may have his or her own personal response, overall it seems that the *idea* of a National Entitlement has been broadly welcomed but the

²⁵ Cf. NATRE (National Association of Teachers of RE) 'NATRE are pleased to see in this report something that will promote conversation about religions and worldviews and wider society. We hope that the government will consider these recommendations seriously. <https://www.natre.org.uk/news/latest-news/extended-natre-response-to-the-commission-report/> with the Catholic Education Service: "Any attempt to improve the quality of RE in all schools must be applauded and we are committed to working with the RE community to achieve this. However, this report is not so much an attempt to improve RE as to fundamentally change its character. The proposed name change to include 'worldviews' means that the scope of the subject is now so wide and nondescript that it would potentially lose all academic value and integrity. As we have always maintained, the quality of Religious Education is not improved by teaching less religion." <https://www.catholiceducation.org.uk/component/k2/item/1003658-catholic-education-service-response-to-the-commission-on-religious-education-report> - NB Tory government/Welsh Assembly

detail of the proposal has proved less persuasive, with Catholic experts proving no exception.²⁶ Well respected academics associated with the RE Council such as Trevor Cooling have unsurprisingly thrown their weight behind implementation of the report,²⁷ but as a counterpoint, comments from Patricia Hannam and Gert Biesta offer a good example of informed reservations.²⁸ On the one hand they are positive that the National Entitlement is “an interesting way to address the key issues RE is currently facing, particularly with regard to the patchy character of provision” but are less convinced that “respect for others” will be the inevitable outcome.²⁹ Perhaps more pertinently, they alert the reader that the main casualty of the report is the theological component of R.E.:

There is [also] a theological corollary to the point we are making here, because an idea that seems to be completely absent in the conception of the human being presented in the report is that of revelation, that is, that rather than that human beings ‘make sense’ and ‘give meaning’, something is actually given to them that radically breaks through such meaning-making. ‘Decentred’ conceptions of the human being are, to put it differently, not the prerogative of twentieth century philosophy, but are also key to religious and theological traditions.³⁰

Revelation, liberation and theologies of interruption are so inter-woven with Catholic understandings of identity and salvation history that although the cartography of the National Entitlement is theoretically very broad, such concepts are hard to find on this particular map. Hence while it would be churlish not to applaud the scope of what is intended, ultimately, the co-ordinates of this new direction seem to be guided by a predominantly sociological approach to religion. Associated with Ninian Smart *et al*, this line of thinking swamped both R.E. classrooms and university theological

²⁶ E.g. Consulted on 02/09/19, Duncan MacPherson after a lifetime of working at tertiary level in Religious Studies wryly applauded its comprehensive nature – “as a Master’s course”. Professor of Education, John Sullivan, likewise admired the breadth of its horizon but noted that “in trying to distance itself from any particular perspective, it risks being merely distant”.

²⁷ E.g. Prof. Trevor Cooling of Canterbury Christ Church *International Journal of Christian Education*, 2019, Vol. 23(1) 3-9 and <https://blogs.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer/what-future-for-religious-education-in-schools/>

²⁸ P. Hannam, & G. Biesta, ‘Religious education, a matter of understanding? Reflections on the final report of the Commission on Religious Education’ in *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 2019, 40:1, pp. 55-63.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 58: “Indeed, promoting care and respect may also be a laudable aim, but our point is that there is no automatic connection from the one to the other. This is also because enhanced understanding can lead to the opposite: to disrespect, hate, and so on. Terrorists, to make the point one more time, tend to have a very good understanding of other people’s world views; that is to say they have made their own meaning from such world views.”

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59. One is reminded of the definition of theology as interruption.

departments during the latter part of the twentieth-century but has since been convincingly decoded as a form of middle-class Western colonialism.³¹ Courting still further accusations of liberal bias, the National Entitlement not only privileges agnosticism at the expense of “insider positions”, its proposed implementation will imitate other educational jurisdictions by excluding religious stakeholders from the process.³² Acutely observant, Paul Barber, Head of the Catholic Education Service has described this as analogous to excluding native speakers from contributing to the language teaching of their own mother-tongue.

Essentially, the National Entitlement has the construction of meaning rather than search for truth as the *dunamis* of theological endeavour. Predicated on a myth of objectivity, the method seems blind to the reality that the subject horizon of Religious Education includes truth claims and identity whereby the participant always come from a particular vantage point.³³ To boot, the notion that *relevance* to the particularities of students’ *Sitzen im Leben* is essential to education flies in the face of “powerful knowledge” theory that suggests that learning *necessarily takes pupils beyond their own experience* rather than be limited by it.³⁴ Hence, while only the last of the points made by the National Entitlement concerns what might be termed *approaches* to the subject, it is curiously questions of R.E. *methodology* rather than *content* which are becoming most prominent in discussions about reform.

R.E. – A Grammar of Method?

Prioritizing questions of *method* over the subject *content* of RE is predicated on the grounds that metaphorically speaking, unless there is a *grammar*, the *vocabulary* will be of limited use. As Richard Kueh summarizes:

In terms of curriculum theory ... the disciplinary dimension of any subject orders and structures that subject. It offers a pathway towards

³¹ L. Barnes, ‘What is Wrong with the Phenomenological Approach to Religious Education’. *Religious Education*. 2001, 96. Pp. 445–461.

³² As is the case e.g. in Sweden. Cf. for further international comparison *Toledo guiding principles on teaching about religions and beliefs in Public schools*. <https://www.osce.org/odihr/29154?download=true>

³³ L. Boeve, *Theology at the crossroads of university, Church and society: Dialogue, difference and Catholic identity* (T & T Clark, London, 2016) pp. 174–199.

³⁴ Personal feelings of relevance are emphatically not the arbiter of curricula in other subjects. Moreover, it is also worth noting that the risks of pupil ‘cognitive overload’ whereby the worldviews of an individual have an equivalence *vis a vis* a globally significant worldviews with traction for billions of adherents seems an obvious danger in a modern learning environment.

the content. It offers the grounds on which shared discourse takes place about the subject. Without it – or at least without an equivalent, agreed sense of the ‘rules of the game’ – discourse merely dissolves into hyper- individualistic opinion (confirming onlookers’ perceptions that the subject is not academic).³⁵

This point is firmly shared by other protagonists who currently might be said to “make the weather” in Religious Education. Kathryn Wright, who sits at something of an apex for research as Chair of Culham St. Gabriel Trust, has recently helped the Anglican Diocese of Norfolk to re-conceive their RE curriculum along the distinct disciplinary lines of Theology, Philosophy and Social-science. Catholic educationalists might instinctively applaud this for at least two reasons since it not only challenges the marginalization of theology implicit in recent reports and the National Entitlement,³⁶ it mirrors ecclesiastical patterns of tutelage where Philosophy, Theology and the Social Sciences are recommended components in a rounded formation cycle.³⁷

Catholic scholars might be less comfortable, however, to see the way these methodologies are described – theology as “thinking through believing,” philosophy as “thinking through thinking”, social science as “thinking through living”.³⁸ For myself, such codification makes the other two disciplines, grounded *prima facie* in reason and experience, appear more soundly rooted than conceptualizing theology as predicated solely on belief. Especially if beliefs are thought to be synonymous with “worldviews”, it is a rephrasing of the National Entitlement’s post-modern “meaning making” in a different guise. By contrast, the Catholic intellectual adventure, guided characteristically by an assent to the unity of all truth, would tend to see philosophy

³⁵ [https://www.reonline.org.uk/blog/whats-the-next-step-on-the-way-forward-dr-richard-kueh/Kueh R \(2018\) cf, R. Kueh, ‘Religious education and the knowledge problem’](https://www.reonline.org.uk/blog/whats-the-next-step-on-the-way-forward-dr-richard-kueh/Kueh R (2018) cf, R. Kueh, ‘Religious education and the knowledge problem’). In: M. Chater and M. Castelli (eds) *We Need to Talk About Religious Education: Manifestos for the Future of RE*. London: Jessica Kingsley, pp. 53-69.

³⁶ In the list of ancillary disciplines that may assist in the study of worldviews it is perhaps no accident that theology appears last- Commission on RE *Final Report*, p. 38.

³⁷ Cf. John Paul II *Pastores dabo vobis*, 1992, §§52 & 53 available at http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html

³⁸ Theology: We have called this thinking through believing. It is about asking questions that believers would ask. It requires pupils to think like theologians, or to look through a theological lens at concepts. Philosophy: We have called this thinking through thinking. It is about asking questions that thinkers would ask. It requires pupils to think like philosophers, or to look through a philosophical lens at concepts. Human/Social Sciences: We have called this thinking through living. It is about asking questions that people who study lived reality or phenomena would ask. It requires pupils to think like human and social scientists, or to look through a human/social science lens at concepts. <https://www.dioceseofnorwich.org/schools/siams-re-collective-worship/religious-education/age-related-expectations>

and social science as ancillary to the work of theology rather than co-equal ends in themselves.

That said, the difficulty in presenting Catholic RE as critical and non-confessional has attracted the eye of seasoned theorists such as Paddy Walsh and Brendan Carmody. They suggest that the subject at least at secondary level should have an emphatically philosophical component which would at once liberate the subject from accusations of critical deficiency and, at the same time, set religious reflection in the classroom on firm, intellectually robust foundation. In both cases the epistemological becomes a portal for the transcendent. Readers will be well aware that in Rahner's description of the act of knowing, the individual finds herself confronted by an infinite, undefinable horizon that is describable only as "mystery" when we "ask about asking itself, and think about thinking itself" and thus become opened to transcendence.³⁹ This experience of the "supernatural existential" serves to ground all our particular thinking in the context of universality, all our knowing in the context of the unknown and our shallow sense of ourselves in the fathomless depth of the holy.

Grounding R.E. in this way fits perfectly with Walsh's master principle of Catholic education: "A foot firmly in the world of faith, the other as firmly in the secular world – but both feet in God."⁴⁰ Thus emboldened, others have gone on to argue that educating pupils as far as what Rahner describes as the "threshold of becoming a religious person"⁴¹ should be the aim and limit of a "non-confessional" approach to Religious Education which could secure a future for state-funded Catholic schools in contemporary Britain.⁴² The problem with such an approach is that it seems to truncate a reading of Rahner's *Grundkurs* at the end of the first chapter, without seeing it as part of a highly confessional theological exercise, which, via "anonymous Christianity", might be regarded as colonial as any sociological approach to the religious positions of others.

Carmody is alert to such accusations and prefers the critical realism of Lonergan's Transcendental Thomism.⁴³ At first blush things look very similar: the observation that knowing is infinite "stretching towards the intelligible, the unconditioned, the good of value. The reach of his intending is unrestricted. There lies within his horizon a

³⁹ K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York: Crossroad, 1984) p. 22.

⁴⁰ P. Walsh, 'From philosophy to theology of Catholic education, with Bernard Lonergan and Karl Rahner' *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2018, 10:2, p. 142.

⁴¹ Rahner, *Foundations* p. 23.

⁴² S. Whittle, *A Theory of Catholic Education* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

⁴³ B. Carmody, 'The Catholic School: non-Confessional?' in *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 2017, 9:2, pp. 162-175. Cf. B. Carmody, 'Ecclesial to Public Space: Religion in Irish Secondary Schools' in *Religious Education*, 2019, 114:5, pp. 551-564.

region for the divine, a shrine for ultimate holiness.”⁴⁴ With Kantian echoes, the next move is to acknowledge that “reality as known is not just what is seen but what is given in experience, organized and extrapolated by understanding, and posited by judgement.”⁴⁵ Acceptance of this common epistemological bedrock can be understood as a form of intellectual ‘conversion’, which for Lonergan is essential for the individual to take a free and responsible stance regarding the truth claims of religion. This has at least two significant consequences in Carmody’s eyes. First, that we can truly face the religious other in a way that he/she is, not merely a symbol/ reflection of oneself. Secondly, that the religious question is situated within a common, provisional, intellectual context since “determining truth or falsity follows a similar procedure as that of natural science in so far as both forms of knowledge rely on judgement in the face of most convincing reasons.”⁴⁶

This attempt to find a baseline methodology to equip students to make better existential choices and indeed facilitate a “fundamental option” regarding worldviews has valency with both the aspirations of the National Entitlement and approaches to R.E. which would lay greater emphasis on character formation.⁴⁷ That said, the implicit relegation of religious/ theological content to a second tier of objectives has its drawbacks particularly in a Catholic context. Hence from a different hermeneutical perspective, the work of Bob Bowie, Richard Coles, Farid Panjwani and Margaret Carswell is attracting attention. Combining theoretical and pedagogical research, they lament the reduction of hermeneutics to proof texting because of examination pressures.⁴⁸ Instead, they suggest education in the hermeneutics of story and texts affords an accessible avenue into questions of meaning which necessarily involve Philosophy and Theology but can be sequenced in an age-related fashion and are applicable to the sacred texts of different traditions. Interestingly, Philosophy-Theology-Commentary is a pattern discernible in the high scholastic endeavours of Aquinas, but while a case could be made for reversing that sequence in contemporary purview, according priority to either epistemology or hermeneutics risks reducing the “Queen of Sciences” to the role of lady in waiting.

⁴⁴ B. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London: DLT, 1973) p. 103.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁴⁶ B. Carmody, *Catholic School* pp. 165 & 169.

⁴⁷ Cf. The Birmingham Agreed Syllabus https://servicesforeducation.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Birmingham_Agreed_Syllabus_for_Religious_Education_2007.pdf and the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues based at Birmingham University <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/education/jubilee-centre/index.aspx>

⁴⁸ E.g. R. Bowie, & R. Coles, ‘We reap what we sow: perpetuating biblical illiteracy in new English Religious Studies exams and the proof text binary question’ in *British Journal of Religious Education*, 2018, 40:3, pp. 277-287.

Catholic RE – A Liturgical Grammar?

A Catholic response to the current contestations in R.E. is already present in the current layout of the Religious Education Curriculum Directory of the Catholic Church in England and Wales. This document enables schools to map their various schemes of work across all age ranges onto a larger curriculum canvas that has the theological endorsement of the Bishops' Conference. It reminds me of the first essay I was asked to write at the Gregorian University namely, "Is the theological question a community question?" – and one can detect an affirmative answer since it is currently schematized around the four constitutions of Vatican II. The document is periodically revised and in the rounds of consultation, which have included engagement with academics from the Catholic and non-Catholic sector alike, a re-phrasing of that same framework is one of the possibilities:

Divine Revelation – *Dei Verbum* – God's self-communication and the human response of faith – content including Scripture, Beliefs and Teachings

Ecclesiology – *Lumen Gentium* – Church, the Communion of life in Christ – Community

Liturgy and Prayer – *Sacrosanctum Concilium* – Celebration – Living the Christian Mystery – Practices

Faith and Culture – *Gaudium et Spes* – Life – The search for holiness and truth in the modern world – Philosophy and Ethics.

Although the fourfold matrix may appear a little forced and even inward looking, *pace* the Department for Education, it is congruent with the theological pattern of the recent reform (beliefs, sources, practices and forms of expression); *pace* recent methodological critiques, it allows scope for philosophical and "social science" questions to be pursued; *pace* worldviews education it offers the opportunity for engagement with Catholicism in a manner that is critical and complex but rooted in tradition; *pace* "RE for real" it offers the chance to explore Christian life as it has always been lived as a mixture of Martha and Mary, prayer and practicality, sanctuary and service.

That said, the advent of Vatican II was announced over sixty years ago, which is ancient history to most teachers of R.E. never mind their pupils. Moreover, since it can sometimes appear that Vatican II is remembered best by those who dispute it the most, a patterning of the same concerns across the traditions of the liturgical year rather than four contested constitutions might prove more irenic. In this *lex orandi lex credendi* matrix one could find a natural focus for matters of:

Revelation – during Advent (*Dei Verbum*).

Redemption – during Lent and Easter (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*).

Renewal – during Whitsuntide (*Lumen Gentium/ Gaudium et Spes*).

Seasonal and iterative, it might allow an experiential and intellectual “spiral” to scaffold theological grammar in Catholic schools just as the late Michael Hayes was wont to say: “We don’t have Lent every year because we are thick, but so we can go deeper into the mystery.” Yet attractive as this solution might sound, *lex orandi–lex credendi* is a faith-thought space occupied by fewer and fewer pupils. Even in Catholic schools, which in this country now accommodate more souls than attend Mass on Sunday, a substantial percentage of pupils are not Catholic and for a large proportion of the others, the school is their only regular encounter with either the table of the Word or the table of the Eucharist.

It is at this point that Anselm’s traditional definition of Theology as *fides quaerens intellectum* presents contextual difficulties. Within the monastic setting where it was originally conceived it makes sense, but an interwoven adventure of communal prayer and vocation through learning in this country can scarcely be taken for granted in the modern Catholic school classroom. Philip Robinson has argued that “Theology begins with the presumption that God is real and the purpose of the study is to come to some understanding of the nature and significance of this reality”⁴⁹ but it is rare for any adolescent, still less one versed in the rudiments of philosophy to let that presumption go unchallenged. As mentioned above, in the context of R.E., Theology so understood allows those who profess no faith to dismiss it on the grounds that it is both an irrational and exclusivist form of enquiry. To be sure, Catholic thinkers should cavil at such an oversimplification by arguing that Theology from a confessional tradition can be properly critical. But if Theology is presented as esoteric and divisive, Government will inevitably be lobbied not just to review the objectivity of religious education in Catholic schools but their very *raison d’être*.

Grammar of Ascent – Theology as Inclusively Sovereign

Looking for a solution that honours the tradition, in the first instance I would argue that however much one might treasure Anselm’s definition, understanding theology as “God words” “God logic” or “God reasoning” is safer on etymological as well as educational,

⁴⁹ ‘The Case for the Catholic Approach to Religious Education’ in *The Catholic Times* 06/07/19.

political and practical grounds. Likewise aligned, my own preferred definition would be “thoughtful conversation about God”⁵⁰ or as Geoffrey Turner would simply have it – “discourse about God.” Turner argues:

The definition of Theology needs to be broadened to include people who are interested in thinking and talking about God regardless of their faith commitment. Theology feeds off all kinds of other disciplines with Philosophy and History being the obvious ones but it is a very broad umbrella. Pannenberg’s definition of God is ‘the One who unifies the whole of reality’ and in a sense Theologians through investigating God are investigating everything, including of course, Science and Ethics. Theology could be called, adapting Anselm, *homo quaerens intellectum de Deo*.⁵¹

These somewhat simpler definitions of the subject all respect the inclusive reality that non-believers and believers of every stripe engage in this conversation anyway in universities, bars, homes and schools across the world. They permit the paradox that Richard Dawkins has acquired more fame as a theologian than as a scientist, that one of my colleagues identifies as an atheist New Testament scholar and that individuals occupy belief-states of liminality and complexity across the entirety of the religious existential.

Secondly, without making antagonists of two of Christendom’s most celebrated theologians, Newman’s preliminary remarks on Natural Theology in his *Idea of a University* do, I submit, support this broader conception of the sacred science than Anselm’s definition *prima facie* permits. The *Idea* was written at a time uncannily similar to today. A time when *theology was disappearing* from the new *universities* being founded in the nineteenth century. The *credibility* of the subject itself was doubted by those who would prefer to explain religion in *psychological or sociological* terms and consign its *relevance* to the realm of private sentiment and personal choice. And since Newman himself linked the situation being faced in University with that being confronted by the schools of his time,⁵² a reasoned Catholic rationale for R.E. today might legitimately transpose *school* for *university* in his arguments for the centrality of religion in the educational enterprise:

For instance, are we to limit our idea of *school* knowledge by the evidence of our senses? Then we exclude ethics; by intuition? We exclude history; by testimony? We exclude metaphysics; by abstract reasoning? We exclude physics. Is not the being of a God reported

⁵⁰ See A. Towey, (2018) *Introduction to Christian Theology* (2nd Edn.) (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

⁵¹ Interviewed at Conference 05/09/19.

⁵² Newman *Idea* II.5.

to us by testimony, handed down by history, inferred by an inductive process, brought home to us by metaphysical necessity, urged on us by the suggestions of our conscience? It is a truth in the natural order, as well as in the supernatural.⁵³

In a classic Catholic articulation of the unity of knowledge, he then goes on to explain why it can be properly regarded as the “Queen of the Sciences”, the alpha and omega of education.

So much for its origin; and, when obtained, what is it worth? Is it a great truth or a small one? Is it a comprehensive truth? Say that no other religious idea whatever were given but it, and you have enough to fill the mind; you have at once a whole dogmatic system. The word “God” is a Theology in itself, indivisibly one, inexhaustibly various, from the vastness and the simplicity of its meaning. Admit a God, and you introduce among the subjects of your knowledge, a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing, every other fact conceivable. How can we investigate any part of any order of Knowledge, and stop short of that which enters into every order? All true principles run over with it, all phenomena converge to it; it is truly the First and the Last.⁵⁴

Newman is adamant and sums up his discourse on *Theology as a Branch of Knowledge* succinctly. “I end as I began: religious doctrine is knowledge . . . *school* teaching without Theology is simply unphilosophical.”⁵⁵

Concluding Remarks

To summarize and conclude, in the context of a broader consideration of “Words and the Word”, this article has “listened in” to the language of religious education being spoken in English classrooms. Paying particular attention to the theological dimension of the subject advocated by faith schools, it has explained why others are seeking to find an Esperanto of worldviews deracinated from confessional allegiance to solve what they see as problems of relevance and inclusivity for young people professing no theistic belief. Unfortunately but inevitably, the minute such intentions are reified, they betray an implicit doctrinal vantage point, as most recently exemplified by the National Entitlement proposals of the Commission on Religious Education.

There would appear to be merit in resolving such “dissent” by means of accentuating *method* rather than *content*, with Theology

⁵³ Newman, *Idea* II:3

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, II.9.

understood as just one among many disciplines ancillary to the cause of religious literacy. While this has echoes in the Catholic tradition, even in the skilful hands of a Rahner or a Lonergan, a subject such as Philosophy is not co-equal to and cannot replace Theology. Hence it is commendable that the language of Religious Education voiced by the Catholic Education Service is properly theological and has a strongly ecclesio-liturgical accent. Unfortunately, however, this does run the risk of exclusivity, especially if Theology bears a presumption of belief.

Withal, the solution proposed here for the prosperity of Religious Education has a circular polarity, namely, a kenotic non-confessional understanding of the term Theology at one extreme, which, by dint of the same, can claim a sovereign inclusivity with regard to all other disciplines at the other. Predicated on the unity of all knowledge, it is a thoroughly Catholic answer to the charge of intellectual abnegation and underpins faith schooling by holding religion essential to the enterprise of education. Articulated in the language of John Henry Newman, the question of truth makes a welcome reappearance and whether in schools, universities, homes or in the public square, God – “a theology in itself” – is restored to the heart of the religious discourse.

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