

Introduction

When considering the place of religious education in the sixth form, I would like to us to begin by considering two broad issues: firstly the way we fulfil our obligation to deliver rigorous catholic religious education and secondly, what is the relationship between what religious education in Catholic schools look like at KS3 and 4 (especially KS4), as well as at KS5.

The first issue we can see through the prism of the Curriculum Directory – how are the goals and the content of RE as specified in the current Directory fulfilled in the sixth form? The second issue, that of transition from KS4 to KS5 is, in my opinion, intrinsically related to the previous question. If we think of the goals and content of RE as specified in the Directory as something that develops over the progressive stages of education – in what way does the KS5 provision is a continuation of the very rigorous new GCSE provision in Catholic Christianity? Now that I specified those two issues, allow me to break the above order and start from the second issue.

Moving from GCSE to A level: The issue of transition

One of the primary goals of the GCSE reform, as far as religious education is concern anyway, was the idea of making our GCSE significantly more rigorous and academically demanding. After the last few years of delivering new GCSE, I think it is fair to say that it offers a significant improvement both in terms of the expected rigour of academic skills as well as in terms of the depth and breadth of theological content expected from our students. This increase in the academic rigour resulted in more explicit fulfilment of the content expectation of Curriculum Directory. For example, here is the Directory content expectation as far as the topic of the Scripture is concerned:

- the Church's teaching on inspiration and the formation of the canon of Scripture;
- the variety of biblical translations and aspects of the history and practice of the Church's use of Scripture;
- the literary forms which influence teaching and learning about faith;

And the specification of one of the exam boards (in this case Edexcel) on the same topic:

- The Bible: the development and structure of the Bible as the revealed Word of God: the origins, structure and different literary forms of the Bible: Old Testament: law, history, prophets, writings; and New Testament: gospels, letters; including divergent Christian understandings about which books should be within the Bible with reference to the Council of Trent.
- Interpretation of the Bible: Catholic interpretation of the Bible and understanding of the meaning of inspiration; divergent interpretations of the authority of the Bible within Christianity: the literal Word of God, the revealed Word of God and as source of

guidance and teaching, including 2 Timothy 3:16 and Catechism of the Catholic Church 105–108; the implications of this for Catholics today.

Here we can see that not only is the GCSE specification directly responding to the content expectation of the Directory, but it does so by specifying what can be seen as pretty advanced theological and academic content, in terms of the key concepts to study as well as the quality of sources. Now, let us look at the same topic of the Bible and what does specification say about it in what is the most popular A level exam board:

- Christian moral principles: The diversity of Christian moral reasoning and practices and sources of ethics, including: (1) the Bible as the only authority for Christian ethical practices (2) Bible, Church and reason as the sources of Christian ethical practices (3) love (agape) as the only Christian ethical principle which governs Christian practices.

The first thing that we can see here is that this A level topic is only partially related to the issue of the Bible as a Christian source of wisdom and authority. There are other topics in the same exam board that - when put together with the above part of specification - do give a more sophisticated account of the nature of the Bible in the Christian tradition. Secondly, it is essential to note that the exam specification forms are only the basis of what content teachers deliver as part of the A level course. And while this may also be true of the GCSE course, I do think it is especially vital while evaluating an A level specification that in the majority of cases it forms a bare minimum of what is delivered by practitioners in classrooms across the country.

Nevertheless, I do think it is relatively clear that the specified GCSE content in Catholic Christianity is so advanced that the KS5 specification seems to at best narrow down the already studied material and possibly offer a particular evaluative discussion point rather than expecting students to develop their theological knowledge in more depth. This discrepancy between GCSE and A level should of course not be surprising as the current A-level was not tailored for students that completed the new GCSE in Catholic Christianity. The A level exam board cannot expect students to have the level of knowledge that would be the result of completing the new GCSE in Catholic thought.

Now, it is worth noticing that the current curriculum directory does not separate the expected content of KS4 and KS5 and instead present them as a single age block of 14-19. We could conclude from this that Directory does not see A level as a further development of the knowledge acquired as part of the GCSE. Instead, A-level is part of the same stage in the theological development of our students.

We can now move to the first issue: how are the goals and the content of RE as specified in the current Directory fulfilled in the sixth form? I would like to suggest that the best way to answer this question is by rephrasing it into the essential question at the heart of my presentation:

Fundamental Question: If you were to teach A-level RS in a non-Catholic school, would there be any difference?

One obvious answer to this question is: no, because A-level in RS is not an extension of the Catholic character of schools and its commitments to Catholic education. In this view, A-level qualification in religious studies is no different than any other A-level offered in any catholic Sixth Form. The insufficiency of this answer seems to be to mostly self-evident - we cannot pretend that Religious Studies is just another subject among many in the context of Catholic education. Furthermore, even if we could make this argument, it would still fail to adequately appreciate that all subjects taught in the context of catholic school should in one way or another reflect the catholic character of the institution that delivers them.

A second possible answer is also negative, but this time because we could argue that A level in religious studies already includes a sufficient level of Catholic content. Not only are Catholic thinkers integral to the majority of critical topics in philosophy of religion and ethics, but it is also almost impossible to engage with Christianity without engaging with the beliefs and practices of the largest Christian denomination in the world. As such, all exam boards include references to Catholic positions of many of the issues selected to be part of the study of Christianity. As such, according to this answer, the Catholic content already explicitly or implicitly present in the specification is enough to fulfil our commitment to the Catholic Directory. I take this answer to be in some way a default norm among Catholic schools currently. The fundamental issue with this approach is that it suggests that there is no difference in content, methods or goals of the religious studies at A-level between Catholic schools and any other educational centres. That to me suggests not only the same problem as I outlined in response to the previous possible answer, but makes the problem even starker. On this view, Religious Studies which should generally play the cornerstone role in Catholic education is for all purposes identical to Religious Studies in every other setting. This response suggests that either all schools are significantly more theologically and pedagogically Catholic then we may think, or that there is some work to be done on rethinking the Catholicity of the A-level courses we deliver.

What I would like to suggest at this point then is for us to think about what are the possible options for positively answering the critical question above. In what way could the content, methods and goals of the current A-Level Religious Studies be made uniquely different in the Catholic setting. Although I do not think there is a single way of approaching this issue, for the sake of time I will focus on suggesting that we should think about the content of the A-level in the light of the content requirements of the current Curriculum Directory and, together, look towards the future of what we would like the new Directory to look like to address the critical question of A-Level RS.

It is impossible for me in such a short time to give a comprehensive account of changes or additions to the current A-Level content in such a short presentation. Still, I would like to present a few suggestions of the kind of consideration I have in mind, and hopefully, we can use the discussion that will follow after this presentation for further ideas from others. Let me start by

narrowing down the issue by looking at only one exam board - namely OCR. This choice is not random - firstly OCR is by far the most popular and supported RS exam board, including among Catholic schools. Currently, OCR holds half of the entire market share, leaving Edexcel, AQA and Eduqas to share the remaining fifty per cent between them. Secondly, out of all the exam boards, OCR seems to me to be the clearest case of the gap between the current Directory and the exam content. It may be somehow controversial, but I would argue that at least in terms of the topic choices, OCR's approach towards the study of Christianity is the least aligned with the theology at heart of the Catholic Directory - whether it would be systematic, sacramental or ecclesiastical. Furthermore, although there is definite scope for the discussion of A-level in terms of a philosophy of religion and ethics, I will limit myself to the analysis of the study of Christianity.

My starting point is a juxtaposition of discussion points of each topic in the OCR specification for the development of Christian thought with content outline from the Curriculum Directory, which seems most appropriate for that topic. What became clear from this exercise is the vast discrepancy in the alignment between the two for some elements of the specification. Some parts of the OCR specification don't have any direct counterpart in the current Directory - so topics like Gender and Theology, Gender and Society, Challenge of Secularisation are not explicitly mentioned as required content for the Directory. Nevertheless, it seems to me that it is relatively easy to see that there is plenty in the Directory that can be used as a bridge between the two - offering a uniquely Catholic approach to the discussion topics suggested by the exam board. Let us look at one example to underline the kind of approach I had in mind:

The Challenge of Secularism

Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to the challenge of secularism, including:

- whether or not spiritual values are just human values
- whether or not there is evidence that Christianity is a major cause of personal and social problems
- whether secularism and secularisation are opportunities for Christianity to develop new ways of thinking and acting
- whether Christianity is, or should be, a significant contributor to society's culture and values

Curriculum Directory offers currently few content suggestions that can form a basis for a Catholic response to the above discussion points:

- signs of the influence of Christian values in social situations;
- ways in which Christian values might influence situations of conflict and injustice;
- the role of law in human society;
- unity and disunity among people;
- the Church's understanding of its role as the sign and source of reconciliation and unity;

- the application of individual commandments for personal, Church, social and global living;
- social and moral implications of loving neighbours as oneself.

Given the basis of the Directory on the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we are implicitly offered a precious resource that can form a base of the uniquely Catholic response to the problem of secularisation, a resource which provides in it further references to the documents of the Church. Furthermore, the topic of secularisation is an excellent opportunity for the transition between GCSE and A-Level if we take it as an opportunity for the discussion of Vatican II. As part of the Catholic GCSE we have to look at the impact of the council on the life of Catholics, and the council can be seen as a Catholic response to the discussion point asking: whether secularism and secularisation are opportunities for Christianity to develop new ways of thinking and acting. A more advanced and unique approach to the question of secularisation can be offered by engaging with the fascinating series of articles published at the Church Life Journal of the University of Notre Dame which discusses different approaches to politics within the Catholic system: a discussion between the broadly speaking liberal and integralist parts of the theological approach to politics.

In contrast, other topics outlined in the OCR specification have a significant overlap with the Curriculum directory, and as such offer a fertile ground for distinctively Catholic way of delivering the subject, both in terms of content and methods:

The person of Jesus Christ

Learners should have the opportunity to discuss issues related to Christian ideas regarding:

- whether or not Jesus was only a teacher of wisdom
- whether or not Jesus was more than a political liberator
- whether or not Jesus' relationship with God was very special or truly unique
- whether or not Jesus thought he was divine

Curriculum Directory:

- the Church's teaching and faith in Jesus Christ: as the fulfilment of the Old Testament; as proclaimed and witnessed to in the New Testament; as proclaimed and witnessed to in the life of the Church which looks forward to and prepares for his coming in glory;
- the names and titles given to and used by Jesus of himself;
- Jesus' ministry as a prophetic sign, especially evidence of struggle and conflict;
- the Gospel portrayal of Jesus as Messiah;
- the Church's teaching about God as One and Trinity: its biblical roots, the formation of creedal statements and their implications for the Christian life;
- the Gospel portrayal of Jesus as law-giver and judge;

Firstly, with the topic like this, it is worth considering the consequences for the transition from the GCSE to A-Level - at GCSE we already discuss the concepts of the Trinity, Incarnation and

Atonement, we have an opportunity to look at some of the key historical developments in the understanding the nature and role of Jesus like the Council of Chalcedon. It seems natural that this foundational knowledge should play a part in our approach to the delivery of a topic like the Person of Jesus Christ at A-Level. The GCSE study of the Incarnation forms an excellent starting point to the Catholic response to all discussion points outlined in the OCR specification, but the real question is about how can we move further, and use this topic as an opportunity to elevate students understanding of the Church view of Christ in line with the Directory.

Each discussion point offers unique opportunity here: "whether or not Jesus was more than a political liberator" gives us a chance to discuss the Catholic understanding of the concept of the Messiah and his relationship with the early authority as mentioned in the following point of the Directory: "Jesus' ministry as a prophetic sign, especially evidence of struggle and conflict". Furthermore, Bishop R. Barron, in his online ministry, has a fantastic video that offers a rebuttal of Reza Aslan book "The Zealot" from the Catholic perspective.

Question of: "whether or not Jesus thought he was divine" can be an opportunity to look at "the names and titles given to and used by Jesus of himself." Also, the issue of Jesus self-knowledge can be explored by looking at the Church document titled: "The Consciousness of Christ concerning Himself and His Mission." Most interestingly, I would argue, the question of the relationship between Christ and God can allow addressing the most significant gap in the OCR specification: that is the lack of sacramental theology. When we consider the relationship between the Son and the Father, in addition to discussing the issues like Trinity and Incarnation, we can also look at the Eucharist as the embodiment and celebration of that relationship, and think about the Body of Christ as the life-giving body.

Fundamentally, what I am suggesting is that in planning our scheme of works and individual lessons for the A-Level specification, in addition to looking at the content prescribed by the exam board, we should use Curriculum Directory to inform our approach and selection of material. This method would allow us to enrich the course and help us in fulfilling our obligation as Catholic educators. Ultimately, the answer to the essential question of whether there is any difference in what we teach and how we teach in A-Level RS between Catholic schools and non-Catholic schools should be affirmative. Although the exam may be the same, there is no reason why the lessons and resources selected should be identical between faith and non-faith settings.

Lastly, I would argue that the issue of A-Level RS should be at the forefront of our mind in the near future when we are looking at the development of new curriculum directory. I believe that we should seriously consider dividing the age category between the Directory and separate KS4 from KS5 in a way that will make clear the expected progression from GCSE to A-Level. And finally, and that maybe my hope for the future, perhaps we should revisit the possibility of Catholic theology as a separate part of the exam in a way similar to Catholic Christianity being a distinct part of the GCSE examination.

CORE RE:

Although my focus today was the discussion of the A-Level RS in the Catholic context, no consideration of the sixth form RE in Catholic schools can ignore the issue of the CORE RE. Although there is no doubt that some schools seem to deliver accessible, successful and popular programs, that both engage pupils and deliver rigorous theological content in line with the Directory, it seems that for many school CORE RE remains a considerable challenge. I want to finish my presentation by outlining one possible approach that I started to test in my practice: the use of EPQ qualification as a way to examine and reward students participating in the CORE RE lessons. Let me mention firstly, that I am aware that this suggestion was made in the past, some of you may have attempted it, with varying success rate and that some glaring issues need to be addressed. My suggestion is to base the delivery of CORE RE on an already existing project that was tested and proved a success: a past project of using EPQ to deliver philosophical education at sixth form. In that project, a robust scheme of work was formed to provide lessons on philosophy over two years which was then examined through the use of a semi-independent project. I would argue that addressing Catholic theology in this way would require minimal changes to the already existing approach. CORE RE would provide a series of SOWs in the critical areas of Catholic theology as specified by the Directory, which then would result in students picking one of those Schemes of work and completing an extended project on the topic of their choice in the frame of the SOW they decided on. This examination could be differentiated for students, and those pupils who would not be able to complete EPQ realistically can achieve HPQ level 1 or 2 instead.