

Religious Education in Scotland



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The Scottish Education Act 1872 created a national system of compulsory elementary schools. Prior to this the churches had financed the Scottish parish school system. However, the churches could no longer support the burgeoning school populations of the late 19th century and the state intervened. This legislation effectively sanctioned the creation of a secular school curriculum with religious instruction as an appendix. However, the 1872 Act also furnished schools with a statement of support for Religious Instruction and Religious Observance. It also provides the first mention of a conscience clause for parents giving them the right to withdraw their child from Religious Instruction. To this day, the 1872 act provides the legislative framework for RE in Scottish schools.

As far as Roman Catholic schools are concerned, these were first founded in the early 19th century to meet the needs principally of immigrating Irish Catholics, mainly in the areas of the industrial west of Scotland. The numbers of voluntary catholic schools increased towards the end of the 19th century. However the catholic schools rejected the 1872 Act's attempt to create centralised control of policy out of fear that the denominational nature of their schools would be eroded. In 1918, however, the catholic schools came under state control, mainly as a result of financial need, but also reassured that they would maintain theological autonomy (McKinney 2008a, Kenneth 1972). At present approximately 15% of schools in Scotland are catholic, although many of their pupils may be from non-catholic backgrounds.

The 1872 Education Act thereby laid down the statutory conditions for Religious Instruction in state schools. Bruce describes the significance of the 1872 Act thus:

When the Church of Scotland handed control of its schools to the state in 1872, it did not insist on legal safeguards for their religious ethos and settled for an assurance that religious education would continue on the basis of locally determined "want and usage". The minority Catholic Church refused to accept that settlement and did not accept state funding until the 1918 Education Act gave it a framework that ensured Church control over staff appointments and school management. The majority Presbyterians did not demand such safeguards because they assumed that their schools would continue to reflect the religious ethos of their surrounding environments. Unfortunately, they did: as the general climate became more and more secular, so did the schools." (2002 p142)

Potts and Rodger (1990a) suggest that the protestant churches would have entered this new partnership with the state satisfied that a state system of denominational schooling had been created and safeguarded. They cite the HMI report of 1878 which supported the identity between public and denominational schools

It could be argued that this is what has persisted until very recently. The Review of Religious Observance (Scottish Executive 2005) is perhaps the first step towards truly non-denominational schools in Scotland, in that it acknowledges that acts of worship are no longer appropriate in schools where the pupil population is not continuous with the faith community in question, a situation likely in almost all 'non-denominational' schools in Scotland.

The provisions of the 1872 Act on Religious Instruction were upheld on various occasions throughout the 20th century, from the 1929 Parliamentary provision right through to 1991 (SOED Circular 6/91). In 1943 the Secretary of State for Scotland supported the freedom of conscience for parents; the freedom of curricular planning for teachers, and the withdrawal of state control in such matters.

In the post war period (from 1945-1968) the Scottish Joint Committee for Religious Education (SJCRE) published a series of 'experimental' syllabi for RE, as well as guidance on the use of graces and hymns in schools. The SJCRE, as a Church of Scotland affiliated body sought to ground RE entirely in Christianity, making no distinction between learning about Christianity, and the administration of acts of worship. Both were seen to be the proper role of RE, and both were sanctioned by these documents. It is noticeable, however, that these documents increasingly become concerned with a more objective treatment of the content. There is, for example, a move away from 1954's 'Graces for Use at School Meals' (SJRE 1954) which

expected pupils to participate in grace as a matter of course, to the material in the 1968 'Second Experimental Syllabus' (SJRE 1968) which, while inviting pupils to consider the purpose and nature of Christian prayer, does not invite them to pray.

A number of events and trends led to a perceived crisis in Scottish Religious Instruction in the 1960's. Until this point Religious Instruction was carried out by non-specialist teachers and was firmly centred on Bible reading (SED 1972).

In 1965 the Scottish Office, triggered by petitions made by the Scottish Joint Committee for Religious Education, published a memorandum that stated that a special committee, chaired by Professor Malcolm Millar, be formed to look at Religious Instruction. The Millar report was commissioned to look at issues of delivery, inspection, teacher training and certification in Religious Education.

The incongruity of Religious Instruction provision, as it existed at the time, came to a head for 4 main reasons (as identified in the Millar Report 1972):

1. Educational insight into the appropriateness of Bible lessons for children as young as five
2. The rise of secularisation to unarguable levels in teachers, pupils and society at large
3. The emergence of a multifaith society
4. 20th century Biblical scholarship and theology

The report of Millar's Committee questioned the situation where RE remained mandatory but where there was no inspection and no teaching qualification or certification for pupils. Millar thought this contributed to the "malaise of religious education" (ibid. p6). That is, RE had not been able to keep pace with developments elsewhere in the curriculum and "in the attitude of our society to religious belief." (ibid. p6) Later on the Report concedes that we are now in a secular, pluralistic society "where the irrelevance of formal religious beliefs is widely assumed" (ibid. p76).

The Millar Report can be summarised as recommending educational, non-confessional, inspected RE delivered by specialist staff. It also acknowledges that in advocating non-confessional RE, on the grounds of respect for freedom of thought and because of the multi-faith society, that there is a tension between this and the continuation of acts of worship in schools. Given the statutory restrictions placed on Millar Committee (1972) this is understandable. However, the uneasy relationship between RE and Religious Observance continues to be problematic. In some schools to this day the two are conflated and in other schools Religious Education staff continue to feel undermined by the persistence of acts of worship (Scottish Executive 2005a).

A number of things happened as a result of the Millar Report. In 1974 the Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education (SCCORE) was formed with the intention to advise teachers, authorities and probationers. SCCORE also sought to offer advice about approaches to the curriculum. That same year almost all major authorities had RE advisors and the first Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) qualified teachers were graduating from Scotland's colleges of education.

The main achievements of SCCORE's lay in the publication of two Bulletins:

1. A Curricular Approach to Religious Education (1978)
2. Curriculum Guidelines for the Curriculum (1981)

The composition of SCCORE was notably different from the Millar Committee, particularly as the membership began to reflect a newly existing group of specialist advisors and teachers in Religious Education, especially by the time Bulletin 2 was published in 1981 (SED 1978, 1981). This divergence of personnel may be reflected in the tone and places of emphases in the 2 bulletins compared to the Millar Report.

Both Bulletins start with a restatement of the statutory position and both share the following four aims, though Bulletin 2 confined itself to the secondary sector.

1. To evaluate existing material
2. To be sensitive to diversity of practice
3. To reach a consensus on RE and prepare guidelines
4. To plan broad content

In Bulletin 1 it is recognised, as it was by Millar's Committee that "Schools today reflect a society in which people are no longer largely of one mind." (1978 p1) Bulletin 1 goes on to state that RE must be grounded in sound educational principles.

Both Bulletins acknowledge that RE must adopt the approach of other subjects in the 'modern age'. Bulletin 1 states that in the primary RE must begin with an experience of the child and should contain the study of world religions. It also suggests that the curriculum should include not only discussion of fundamental questions but also secular philosophy.

Bulletin 2 also recommends that...

"There should also be some study of other stances for living which are seriously engaged on the same search." (1981 p2)

According to Bulletin 2 the aim of RE is "to enable pupils to develop a consistent set of beliefs" and "to test them in the light of reason and experience and the evidence of the great traditions." (ibid. p3)

In Bulletin 2 certain skills and strategies for Religious Education are proposed. These would go beyond simple knowledge and understanding. For example, pupils should be able to 'evaluate' a belief/belief system in terms of its "internal coherence", "adequacy as an exploratory system", "self consistency", "consistency with other knowledge, beliefs and convictions" and "ability to meet objections". (ibid. p12)

The emphasis on these skills represents an evolution from Millar's call for 'consistent' and 'thorough' thinking in pupils. Arguably they also represent a more developed philosophical approach to Religious Education (see chapter 2.6).

At the same time as the relatively new RE community was creating Bulletins 1 and 2 another document, the Munn Report (SED 1977) was to have a bearing on the future place and establishment of RE, particularly in the secondary school. Munn's report justifies the place of RE as it satisfies the three design criteria for the curriculum as a whole (Hannah 2007):

1. The demands of knowledge
2. The psychological needs of the pupil.
3. The requirements of society.

The Munn Report was the first non-RE national document in Scotland to speak of the subject in purely educational terms.

In 1982 Ordinary Grade Religious Studies was introduced for third and fourth year pupils in the secondary school. The content would provide a rough template for RE qualifications to come in that it posited 4 areas of study (in addition to a personal investigation by pupils):

1. Christianity
2. Another World Religion
3. Issues of Morality
4. Issues of Belief

In the same year the bar on the inspection of RE was repealed. Two years later the HMIE returned a report on the subject (HMSO 1986). The inspectors' report of 1986 was critical of the

lack of awareness of the Millar Report and enactment of its recommendations.

Meanwhile the drive for certification and parity with other subjects continued. In 1985 Higher Religious Studies was introduced (and subsequently revised in 1992), and in 1989 Standard Grade Religious Studies was unveiled. In 1990 the Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (CSYS) was created.

In addition to this in 1990 the Scottish Examination Board began to devise six Short Courses in RE that were tailored to provide RE certification during core provision. They were:

1. A World of Values
2. Living in a Plural Society
3. Moral Issues in Technology
4. Christianity Today
5. Investigating a Religion
6. Issues of Belief

In 1991 six Scottish Vocational and Education Council (SCOTVEC) Philosophy modules were introduced. A number of RE teachers were using them in their departments. At the same time there was interest in the place of philosophy in schools. For example, at the University of Aberdeen the Centre for Research into the teaching of Philosophy and reasoning in schools was established. Between 1986 and 1989 the centre published articles on philosophy in schools both within RE and as separate inputs for pupils (University of Aberdeen 1986-9)

In the Scottish Office publication on curriculum design (1977) RE was recognised as one of 7 'modes' in the curriculum. In 1987, as with other subjects, a committee was formed to create a new national curriculum for Religious and Moral Education. This was to become the Review and Development Group for 5-14 Curricular Guidelines for RME.

The publication of the 5-14 Guidelines for Religious and Moral Education (Religious Education for Catholic schools) (SOED 1992) represented the move to a national curricular model for the subject and the formal recognition of firstly a 'Personal Search' approach, and secondly, within non-catholic schools, Moral Education within the subject.

The 5-14 non-faith Guidelines have several guiding principles. The threefold structure of Christianity, Other World Religions and Personal Search aims to:

- Recognise the importance and influence of Christianity in Scotland whilst acknowledging that other faith traditions should be studied;
- Allow pupils, through Personal Search, to develop their own beliefs vis-à-vis religious traditions and their own life experiences;
- Acknowledge the lack of consensus on religious views and life that exists in modern Scotland.

These Guidelines also allow for the study of other world views, philosophies and stances for living:

"pupils should also be encouraged to develop understanding of and respect for people who adopt a non-religious stance for living." (1992 p1)

Throughout the 1990's a variety of support materials for 5-14 RE were published. In 2001 Learning and Teaching Scotland published 'Effective Teaching of Religious and Moral Education: Personal Search'. This publication was an attempt to address the fact that in the late 1990's HMIe had identified weaknesses in delivering the Personal Search aspect of the subject (this document is further discussed in 2.3).

In 1994 'Higher Still – An Opportunity for All' was launched (Scottish Office 1994). This offered a suite of qualifications that would work at five levels. RE was identified by the Higher Still Development Unit (HSDU) as one of 11 subjects that would have to undergo more than 15% change in the new structure.

All of this inevitably fed into the consultations commissioned by the HSDU. Other notable figures, for example certain RE teachers, which may have been influential in developing the new qualifications, were seconded to HSDU. What emerged from these developments was the formal recognition, at National Qualification (NQ) level, of philosophy in RE (henceforth the subject would be called Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies – RMPS at National Qualification level). This was also evident in new units and content within RE. For example, in the creation of units such as Language, Philosophy and Religion, and Metaphysics.

In the 'Draft Framework' (HSDU 1995) the HSDU indicated that the new qualifications in RMPS would be the result of the amalgamation of the Scottish Examination Board (SEB) and SCOTVEC material. It also acknowledges and seeks to act on the Howie Report's recommendation for the inclusion of Philosophy. This is evident in the Draft Framework where we see Units adapted from SCOTVEC (for example Philosophy and Knowledge) alongside new philosophy units (Metaphysics), as well as pre-existing materials from Higher and CSYS Religious Studies. In Advanced Higher RMPS the mandatory unit would be 'Philosophy of Religion'; further evidence that philosophy was now an explicitly established component of the subject. Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) statistics (2010) reveal an ongoing increase in presentation for RMPS courses (5,188 presentations in 2004 compared to 6,695 in 2010).

Higher Still was created as a post 16 framework of qualifications. However, many RE departments, quickly after its introduction, began to offer RMPS single units from the SQA national qualifications suite, rather than courses, down the school at secondary third and fourth year (SQA 2008). In 2010 across Scotland 35,595 RMPS units were offered discretely in Scottish schools, predominantly in third and fourth year core RE time, rather than as an elective (SQA 2010). The majority (25,503) of these concern morality and values. Only 4,820 of the total units concerned the study of a selected world religion. The remaining units (5,272) cover material such as the relationship between religion and science, the nature of belief and the existence of God (all issues which can be described as philosophical in character). This increase in certificated provision in RE may be part of a drive to enhance the credibility of RE in schools. The prevalence of units dealing with moral philosophy, philosophy of religion and philosophy of science (30,775 out of 35,595) is evident here and is further supported in the national survey of RE provision (see chapter 6 of this thesis).

The subsequent history of RE and philosophy has been one of ongoing change. In 2003 the SQA published a report on the new RMPS qualifications. The content and structure of RMPS would have to change:

- There were too many options for candidates and therefore, as the exam had no agreed or mandatory core, it was invalid. Core elements would have to be identified, studied and assessed for all candidates;
- The Extended Essay (an independent research exercise conducted by pupils which was internally assessed in schools) would have to go as it artificially buoyed up marks and could not be moderated adequately;
- The subject would have to make explicit which aspects of its provision were 'Philosophical' to merit the title 'RMPS'.

As a result of this review, one of the units, 'Morality in the Modern World', would have to be prefaced by a section on moral philosophy, thus philosophising the course enough to deserve the title RMPS. Other proposed developments, which were rejected, included a study of the relationship of Science with religions other than Christianity. Beyond the certification of RE there are other issues currently affecting the subject. One of these is the move towards a faculty management model in secondary schools. Typically RE is grouped under social subjects, though in some authorities the faculties have a much more arbitrary composition (Anderson and Nixon 2008, 2010). Some academics are concerned about possible marginalisation of subjects as well as the justification for such a development (Nixon 2008). Further justification for the retention of subject specialist Principal Teachers comes from HMIE. In the Standards and Qualities Report on RME (2000) it states:

"However, 65% of the departments without a principal teacher, showed important weaknesses, often associated with lack of experience or lack of subject qualification." (p18)

The other national initiative is the Curriculum Review (A Curriculum for Excellence 2005 - present). RE has one of several subject review committees currently looking at the national curriculum. 'RME' has been acknowledged as one of 8 'Curriculum Areas' that should inform curricular planning (LTS 2006c p14)). Curricular 'experiences and outcomes' were created for Catholic and non-faith RE in 2008, though it should be noted that, despite this separation of provision at core level, children from Catholic and non-faith schools are presented for the same national qualifications and that this has been the case since the creation of RE certificates in the 1980's.

The 'Progress and Proposals' document also suggests that "Personal Search could become a permeating element within RE" (ibid. p28). This aim here, perhaps, is to better integrate the RE

curriculum than 5-14 did and put Personal Search at the heart of RE. If this does happen then this will represent another part in the Scottish RE story that has seen the increasing importance (from Millar onwards) of grounding the subject in the experience and beliefs of the child.

During the SQA exam diet for session 2009-2010 3,203 pupils underwent Higher RMPS; 813 sat Higher Philosophy (SQA 2010). Across Scotland, thousands more have been awarded Intermediate units. Although these numbers are not yet close to those in comparable social subjects (Modern Studies had 6,768 candidates in 2004) they do represent a year by year increase in uptake. For example there has been an increase of 1,097 pupils taking RMPS Higher since session 2007-2008. This represents a 52% increase in uptake over a period of three years.



Graeme **Nixon**
University of Aberdeen



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