

## **Scottish Religious and Moral Education**

A Response to:

Mismatches Between Legislative Policy and School Practice in Religious Education: The Scottish Case Yonah H. Matemba a University of the West of Scotland, Ayr, Scotland, UK Published online: 17 Feb 2015.

### **Overview**

As a Scottish academic specialising in training teachers in the subject Religious and Moral Education (RME) I was interested to see that there was an article on the Scottish context in the February edition of Religious Education (Matemba 2015). Such articles on the Scottish jurisdiction, with its unique flavours and points for comparison with approaches elsewhere, are rare and welcome.

However, I was disappointed to find out that the article misrepresents the Scottish situation and would like to contest a number of claims made by Matemba. The broad aims of Matemba's article are to discuss the nature of Scottish Religious Education (RE); investigate the teaching of Christianity 'vis-à-vis' the teaching of 'other' world religions, and offer an account of RE provision in Scotland. In this response to Matemba I intend to offer alternative views.

## **The Scottish context and trajectories of Religious Education**

Jackson (2008) offers a review of the international guidance and provision of RE, referencing UN, UNESCO and European framings supportive of multi-religious, and non-confessional interpretative approaches to RE. Vermeer (2012) contends that “As a result of the ongoing process of secularisation in most west-European countries, the aim of socialising pupils in one specific religious tradition is no longer considered feasible or realistic”. (p333). Schreiner (2005) whilst acknowledging the unique biographies of national RE programmes also, like Jackson identifies a consonance of RE with non-prescriptive approaches to education:

“Nowadays RE as a subject in schools is taught chiefly in line with the criteria of general education. It is understood as learning about religion (knowledge based) and learning from religion (based on the experience and existential questions of the students)” (p3).

Schreiner’s view is that, in an increasingly complex multi-perspectived social situation, there is a need for a subject (RE) that maps this complexity, and allows pupils to develop navigational tools to negotiate it. He reflects on the situation within France where there is a growing desire to relax laïcité in order for pupils to understand the phenomena of religion and its influence on current events. In the USA, which has a similar separation of

religion and education to France, there is a growing call for education that encourages 'religious literacy' (Prothero 2008). For these academics RE has become, or aspires to be, an unobjectionable area of the curriculum, essential for fostering understanding in a multi-cultural milieu.

In the rest of this article it is my intention to demonstrate how the direction of travel of RE in Scotland is in accordance with the views of these writers, using Matemba's article as a foil by which to do so.

The move to non-confessional RE and RO began in 1872. Scotland (1972) writing about the centenary of the 1872 Act, describes how the provisions for the preservation of RE and Christian worship really represented the beginning of a marginalisation of the influence of the Church of Scotland from educational matters. This is a theme also taken up by Bruce:

"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 "wont 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).

The 19th century view, stated by Loudon (2004, p274) that “education without religion was considered incomplete... the schools were founded by the churches and expected to inculcate religious beliefs” was being challenged. RE was now an appendix within educational provision and evolved thereafter to reflect the complex social conditions of the 20th and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries (Nixon 2013).

### **The Issue of Nomenclature**

This evolution is further reflected in the changing titles of RE in Scotland. Matemba’s article concerns non-denominational Religious Education (85% of Scottish schools), which, since the 5-14 national curricular guidance (SOED 1992) has been titled Religious *and Moral* Education (RME). RME is also the title advocated by the latest curricular guidance in Scotland (the Curriculum for Excellence) and is how I will refer to the subject henceforth in this article. I also acknowledge that, in its certificate form, which is taught in both core and elective classes, the subject title is Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies (RMPS).

The inclusion of the term 'moral' in subject guidance actually goes back to the pivotal 'Millar Report' of 1972 (SED 1972). The Millar Report was a watershed piece of Scottish policy guidance in that it delineated the confessional approach to RE, from a non-confessional approach in non-denominational schools (the report discusses how RME must be educational rather than evangelical). The Millar report also countenanced that RME should allow pupils to embark on a personal quest for meaning and that discussions in the RME classroom could centre on non-religious, philosophical approaches to life. We may be 43 years removed from the Millar Report, but the point is that, in the context of Scottish non-denominational approaches, Millar's aims remain in place and are evident in the latest curricular guidance.

It is therefore confusing for Matemba to refer to the non-denominational curricular area as 'RE', particularly when the 15% denominational (Catholic) sector titles it thus. It is even more worrying that Matemba argues that Scottish RME is manifested in two forms of 'neo-confessionalism' (2015 p73) and talks of non-denominational RME as following a 'Christian Protestant RME curriculum' (ibid.). This represents a worrying and inaccurate understanding of RME in Scotland, and an ignorance of the trajectory of Scottish RME since the Millar report.

## **Christianity and the Scottish Curriculum**

Whilst it is the case that in the current guidance (Curriculum for Excellence, Education Scotland 2009a) Christianity is described as a mandatory area of the curriculum, justification is given for this in the guidance in terms of cultural influence (historic and current) and the need for pupils to develop religious literacy about the dominant tradition (to date) that has shaped Scottish society.

The Principles and Practice paper for non-denominational RME (Education Scotland 2009a) describes a non-confessional, exploratory approach to the study of religious, moral and philosophical views. Apart from Christianity, no other religious or philosophical positions are specifically mentioned. Matemba's claim that teachers are misinterpreting curriculum guidance in teaching about ancient forms of spirituality, the new age or minority religions, is entirely misplaced. His repeated reference to 'proper' religion in this part of the discussion is perhaps telling?

The central claim of Matemba's article is that there is a policy-practice dissonance in Scottish RME; that RME teachers have gone off-piste from 'proper' RE and 'proper' religion, in pursuing areas of study such as philosophy, new age spirituality or minority religions. The tone of this

discussion is assumptive, the implication is that Christianity merits a privileged theological and philosophical place in the RME curriculum.

Indeed, a number of times in the article one gets the sense that Matemba favours a confessional approach. For example, he discusses how RME flourishes in schools where the head teacher is Christian with no exploration of why this may be the case or what form of RME is being sanctioned. Matemba also seems impervious to the connotations around the word 'other' when discussing non-Christian religions. The debate about the 'othering' of other traditions in the creation of the Curriculum for Excellence RME guidance document led to the abandonment of the phrase 'other religions'. Matemba's lack of sensitivity to the policy development or the implications of using this word in this context is marked. His repeated use of the phrase "primus inter pares" to describe Christianity's place in the RME curriculum reveals Matemba's cognitive bias. Such language seems, to those of us who have fought to establish RME as a non-confessional, objective educational enterprise, unhelpful.

The Scottish Curriculum for Excellence has, as one of its design principles the concept of personalisation and choice for both teachers and students. While Matemba interprets the failure to study 'proper' religion (presumably he is referring to the usual 5 'world' religions in addition to

Christianity here?) as an act of curricular sabotage by RME teachers, others, like myself see this as wholly in line with the aforementioned design principle.

Matemba refers to the approach to RME in Scotland called the Personal Search, which is an evolution from the 'personal quest' advocated by the Millar report. The Personal Search approach invites pupils to develop their own beliefs and values vis-à-vis the stimuli of whatever tradition, situation of issue they are presented with in the RME classroom. Obviously this is similar to other non-confessional approaches in Europe (e.g. Schreiner's aforementioned 'learning about and from').

### **Proxies and Philosophy**

Matemba's confessionalism also emerges in the discussion which is critical of RME teachers delivering the curriculum via certain proxies (such as citizenship or philosophy). His aspiration that RME should "focus on the development and values based on Christianity and other principal religions" (Matemba 2015, p83) is at odds with what happens in many RME lessons (Nixon 2013). Research into 126 Scottish secondary schools revealed that whilst in the first 2 years of secondary school RME typically was a smorgasbord of units on world religions, that, from year 3 on, the



vast majority of departments taught units (usually from the RMPS suite of qualifications) that focused on moral and philosophical issues.

Matemba's attempt to caricature philosophy within RME as lacking existential value for pupils is misplaced. He even suggests that philosophy is not about questions such as 'who am I?' or about the meaning of life?! For many teachers philosophy offers pupils alternatives to religious approaches; a framework for understanding moral decision making; a means of conducting a community of enquiry, and a presentation of theories for existence that allow them to contextualise themselves and traditions being studied (including the philosophies of different religions). To cite Hannah's 2006 claim that including philosophy in RE is a 'passing fashion' is simply to reprise Hannah's philistinism (Matemba, 2015, p85).

On the inclusion of philosophy within RME Matemba focuses only on the Curriculum for Excellence outcomes levels 1-4, ignoring the major contribution philosophy makes within the senior phase where, in years 3 to 6 of the secondary schools pupils can undergo nationally certificated classes, the subject is titled Religious, Moral and *Philosophical* Studies. He is right that there is only one specific mention in the levels 1-4 Experiences and Outcomes document, though only those with an impoverished view of philosophy would not imagine it to be part of the following aim for the

subject which describes the aim of the 'developing beliefs and values' line of development for pupils:

"These experiences and outcomes should be addressed through the context of the experiences and outcomes for Christianity and world religions selected for study. They should not be seen as a separate area to plan for but should be intertwined with the experiences and outcomes for Christianity and the world religions selected for study. They should also enable consideration of a range of spiritual traditions and viewpoints which are independent of religious belief". (Education Scotland 2009a)

The one explicit mention of philosophy in the levels 1-4 guidance undermines Matemba's claim that philosophy is peripheral to proper RME:

"Philosophical enquiry as a pedagogical technique involves exploring beliefs, values, practices and traditions through critical thinking, reflection and analysis. It also allows learners to explore these issues in relation to their existential meaning and therefore avoids a simple content-based approach. The skills of philosophical enquiry can be developed prior to the fourth level". (ibid)

Not only therefore can philosophy be an effective way to fulfil the stated aims of RME to "develop my beliefs, attitudes, values and practices

through reflection, discovery and critical evaluation, and develop the skills of reflection, discernment, critical thinking and deciding how to act when making moral decisions” (ibid) but it is countenanced as a way of doing so from ages 3-18. Matemba’s caricature is therefore somewhat disingenuous.

Elsewhere in the article Matemba makes the following claim which seems to suggest that those in favour of the recognition of philosophy within RME are fighting a losing battle:

“It is also gratifying to note that both the government and General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) have resisted the pressure from sections of the profession renaming RE to something related to philosophy for teacher certification and registration” (Matemba, 2015, p86).

I suggest that Matemba look at the current memorandum on entry to teaching at secondary level in the subject where it states “Applicants must have coverage of both Religious Studies and Philosophy within the 80 credit points” (GTCS 2013, p10).

### **The Limitations of Matemba's Paper**

There is a greater dissonance between Matemba and the reality of RME, particularly in the secondary sector, than broadly between policy and practice as he tries to suggest. As far as the empirical work which underpins his views, of the 26 interviews which were conducted (some at some time removed from the article's publication) fourteen are specialists in RME. Furthermore, much is extrapolated from a 'survey' of school websites, many of which may be out of date or authored by school management rather than subject specialists. A little circumspection around key claims of Matemba's paper about, for example, approaches to RME adopted in schools is absolutely necessary, even if to acknowledge that a survey founded on school websites has significant ethical and inferential limitations, and may be blind to the approaches adopted by schools.

At times Matemba's arguments are undone by inaccurate citation or at least generous interpretation of some of his sources. For example, he claims that, in one article on the impact of secularisation on RE (Nixon 2009), that Nixon posits that 'some teachers inhabit philosophical objections to organised religion' (Matemba 2015, p72). Though the paper argued that wider social change, in particular the decline in adherence to

religion in some countries, may have impacted on RE, nowhere in Nixon's paper is it claimed that teachers have philosophical objections to religion.

Further, the UK and Scottish situation is conflated and confused in the article. Literature is used to support claims made for the Scottish situation which was written for the English context. There may well be a degree of homogeneity between the evolution of RE within Britain, but also important differences of emphases and development that are not articulated well in the article. For example, Matemba discusses the primacy that should be given to Christianity in RE, but the literature he uses for this is based on RE policy in England. Similarly he describes how the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills report for RE in England, which is critical of the quality of teaching about Christianity will have been 'read with interest in Scotland'. This is an overgenerous claim; a culling of literature unrelated to the Scottish situation. Similarly, at one point it is not clear whether Matemba is referring to the primary of secondary sectors (p84, paragraph 1).

## **Conclusions**

Overall, Matemba's article presents a view of RME which is worryingly at odds with the dominant trajectory of the subject in non-denominational

schools in Scotland (which represents 85% of the school population) and out of touch with wider developments in RE. His article is a misreading of current practice in non-denominational schools in Scotland, particularly in the secondary sector. The real mismatch is perhaps between Matemba's view of what should be the case in RME (i.e. re-christianised and sticking rigidly to certain established terrain), and the reality, which is much more open, exploratory and exciting. Matemba seems to have failed to notice that the burgeoning popularity of RME in Scotland, particularly since 1999, coincides with the adoption of explicitly non-confessional approaches and the inclusion of non-religious approaches to life.

More broadly, Matemba should look at wider framings and developments in approaches to RE. Council of Europe research (Jackson et al 2008) suggested that adolescents throughout Europe felt it important that there was dialogue with and between apparently conflicting views, and knowledge and understanding of religions and other views was essential. Moreover, this research revealed that, in those young people surveyed, there was no fear of relativism or dilution of conviction as a result of exposure to multiple perspectives. Matemba's article, in arguing for a return to a privileged presentation of Christianity, is out of step with international and national framings for non-denominational RE. More importantly, it is out of step with the social reality of young people and the

ways in which Religious Education in Scotland and elsewhere has evolved successfully to speak to it.

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