

From RE to RMPS: The case for the Philosophication of Religious Education in Scotland

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Abstract

This article looks at the emergence of Philosophy within the subject variously described as Religious Education, Religious and Moral Education and Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies. The particular context for this is provided by the proposals and guidelines published by the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) review (March, November 2006, May 2008). The article analyses references to Philosophy in the Scottish curricular review and seeks to place these against a wider background of increasing philosophical content and approaches in RME documents since 1972. The documentary traces of the 'philosophication' of the subject are also mapped against definitions of Philosophy provided by academic philosophers.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to look at the evolution of Religious and Moral Education (henceforth RME, unless discussing Scottish Higher Still Qualifications in which case the acronym RMPS will be used) with reference to 'A Curriculum for Excellence' (CfE) review, with a particular focus on the increasing emergence of philosophy or philosophical methods within the subject. This allows us to take stock of developments in this subject area and assess the vision of RME outlined in the Curriculum Review against the reality of what has been stated in curricular guidelines and key documents in the development of RME. At the time of writing (June 2008) the teaching profession is being asked to evaluate the newly published draft outcomes for RME with a view to the creation of a final document for use in schools in 2009. It is therefore with this in mind that this article seeks to raise awareness that RME in Scotland is a subject that has undergone profound change over the last 38 years, both in terms of methodology and content. Central to these changes has been the move away from confessional religious instruction towards a faith neutral philosophical approach.

Key documents in the history and development of RME are considered and cross referenced for philosophical content and methods with definitions of Philosophy from

Scottish Universities and other literature. Relevant documents in the RME story include the landmark Millar Report which was foundational to non-confessional approaches to the subject, subsequent reports and curricular guidelines, and current course descriptors.

Documentary Analysis

Three documents from the CfE are central: Progress and Proposals (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2006a), Building the Curriculum 1 (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2006b), and the RME CfE outcomes (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2008). In the first document it is stated that 'Philosophy might be included with Religious and Moral Education.' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006a, p 15) In the second document, Building the Curriculum 1 (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2006b) there is an acknowledgement of philosophical approaches and concepts within RME, though, at this stage (June 2008), there is little guidance about how these may inform RME practice. During the consultation period which led to these outcomes it was also the case that pupils were initially encouraged to participate in 'philosophical' discussions and critically consider religious and ethical stances for living. Interestingly, in their present form these draft outcomes do not use such terminology. Nevertheless the draft outcomes do highlight the place of encouraging criticality with regards to the analysis of world views. For example, in the outcomes for Christianity and World Religions, pupils are expected to evaluate the ethical and metaphysical claims of these traditions, as well as develop their own beliefs through methods such as reasoned debate. The same methods are also applied to non-religious views.

There is no doubt that Thinking Skills (of which Philosophy is a cognate area) have a deal of educational currency at the present time and this is mirrored in the Progress and Proposals document where 'thinking skills' are placed alongside numeracy and literacy (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006a, p 9). This can be contextualised within a broader movement towards a more democratic and participatory approach to learning across all areas of the curriculum and is summarised by Matthew Lipman (1991) when he describes a paradigm shift towards a more 'reflective' pedagogy (see Table 1).

[Table 1 about here]

Lipman's analysis resonates with many current views of effective pedagogy that range from the need for knowledge integration, problem based curricula, and constructivist approaches to learning. In the context of RME this move away from heteronomous to autonomous classrooms has been evident in the movement away from confessional and authoritarian approaches to an increasing emphasis on the 'Personal Quest' or 'Search'.

The watershed document within the RME story is the 'Millar Report' (Scottish Education Department, 1972). The report recognised the failures of confessional and non-specialist Religious Instruction, both from an educational and a philosophical perspective, given the increasing knowledge of child development and the increasing secularisation and plural nature of Scottish society. Thus Millar set the stage for specialist and inspected RME. The subsequent desire of these newly qualified specialist RME teachers to achieve credibility and status for their subject is evident throughout the next four decades and is most obvious in the drive for certification. It may also, to an extent, explain the appearance of Philosophy. Indeed, those sceptical about the emergence of Philosophy within RME would argue that this is a misguided drive for credibility on the part of many in the RME profession; that they have, working often in marginalised and under-valued departments, grabbed at the "P" in an attempt to gain academic status and perhaps distance themselves from the accusation of confessionalism.

However, within the 36-year-old Millar Report we have the seeds of a Philosophical approach with the emphasis on the 'Personal Quest' (p 80) of pupils and the vision of the teacher as someone who has enthusiasm for ultimate questions rather than commitment to a particular set of answers:

The fundamental quality which is sought in a teacher of RE is a conviction that the questions to which religious and moral beliefs are a response are of crucial importance and that children must be given help to reach their own conclusions and make their own commitments with as much insight and responsibility as possible. (Scottish Education Department, 1972, p 69)

This echoes the approach of Socrates who imagined himself as midwife, facilitating the birth of the pupils' own ideas through relentlessly enthusiastic questioning. Socratic questioning and irony on the part of teachers is increasingly apparent, particularly in Philosophy for Children (P4C) lessons. Millar's report also places emphasis on 'rigour' and 'consistency' in pupil thinking, both goals of philosophical approach and evident in definitions of Philosophy.

The celebration and exploration of universal questions about reality as an approach to RME which emerges in Millar and is evident in every RME curricular document since resonates with academic Philosophy's vision of itself. As part of the research for this article all Scottish University Philosophy departmental definitions of Philosophy were consulted. The identity with the emerging rationale and focus for RME is clear.

For example, at Aberdeen University, Philosophy is described as an attempt ...

to find answers to some of the deepest questions about ourselves as human beings and the world that we live in - questions which most thinking people have always asked. (website)

The resonance with, for example, the Personal Search Strand in 5-14 RME (Scottish Office Education Department, 1992a) is clear, as is the claim in the website of the University of Dundee's Department that Philosophy is 'Using reasoned argument to straighten out your own world view.' Again, there is an identity of purpose with RME guidelines. For example, in the CfE RME outcomes (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2008) where one third of the document is given to the development of beliefs and values (using amongst other strategies, 'reasoned debate'.)

Similarly in the website of the University of St Andrews:

Philosophy seeks to answer fundamental questions that other disciplines take for granted: Do we really know anything or is life just a massive delusion? Is there just one truth about the world, or are there different truths for different people? Are we genuinely free, or just puppets programmed by impersonal forces?

Finally in this regard we can see this unity of vision with regards to approaching universal metaphysical and moral questions between RME and Philosophy in the University of Stirling's vision of Philosophy whereby....

it is the approach to these questions as much the questions themselves that characterises philosophical inquiry. Whatever answer is proposed, it must be backed up by careful argument.

These definitions correlate with an emphasis on skills such as evaluation and analysis, which are at the heart of a 'Personal Quest/Search' approach to RME. However, they also accurately describe the aims and content of many RME lessons from the time of Millar to the present day and resonate with the Personal Search outcomes as described in the 5-14 Guidelines for RME (see Table 2 below).

The Millar Report also advocated the study of other philosophies and stances for living, albeit in upper years of the secondary school. The need to explore non-religious stances is evidenced in RME policy from Millar onwards and begs questions about how the subject is taught and what it is called. The recently published outcomes within CfE acknowledge the need to represent non-religious philosophies and stances for living in a diverse and global society, though supporters of the need for non-religious representation may be disappointed that such views are to be considered largely in the context of studying religious answers to the 'big questions'. In National Qualifications, however, non-religious, philosophical stances are well represented. Humanist ethical stances, atheism, agnosticism, Marxism, logical positivism and existentialism have been and continue to be part of the landscape of at all levels of certificate RME from the time of the first Ordinary grade presentation (1982) through to Advanced Higher in the present day.

Beyond the Millar Report the guidelines for RE contained within the three bulletins of the Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education (Scottish Education Department 1978, 81 & 82 – Bulletin 3 unpublished) can again appear to advocate an approach that is Philosophical. This can be seen in the recognition that non-religious views should be studied, but more importantly with regard to the skills outlined. For

example, Bulletin 2 advocates that pupils evaluate belief systems in terms on their 'internal coherence, self-consistency and ability to meet objections'.

(Scottish Education Department, 1981, p 12)

This could be lifted from any outline of the place of logic in Philosophy and echoes Wittgenstein's vision of Philosophy as:

the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a body of doctrine but an activity. (Wittgenstein, 2001, p 29)

By the time a national curriculum for 5-14 RME (as it was now recognised) was published in 1992 these ideas had been further developed and it is possible within the Personal Search strand to map the various areas of Philosophy (see Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

Around the same time RME was becoming increasing philosophical, particularly in the development of certification, and again we can see all the main areas of Philosophy within Ordinary Grade, Standard Grade, Higher, Higher Still, Short Courses and Certificate of Sixth Year Studies (Table 3).

[Table 3 about here]

Some examples may serve to further make this point. At Standard and Ordinary Grade pupils were studying Issues of Belief; a unit which can be accurately described as Philosophy of Religion. Pupil answers would include names such as Aquinas, Hume, Paley and Russell. Within the Higher Grade, in its various incarnations within the unit concerned with the relationship between Science and Religion, students have been studying Aristotle, Kuhn, Popper, Davies, Dawkins, Russell, Tillich, Bultmann and others. This unit is essentially Philosophy of Science.

Into the 1990's the increasing 'philosophication' of RME is evident in the creation of Scotvec modules in Philosophy which were often delivered within RME departments. The currency of Philosophy was also evident in the Howie Report (Scottish Office

Education Department, 1992b) where it recommends 'a core subject on Philosophy, with a theory of knowledge and ethical emphasis'. (p 77, 8.29) It goes on to state in a prescient fashion that....

One could envisage a programme of in-service training which might in time lead to the award of a teaching qualification in Philosophy. (p 77, 8.29)

In 2005 the vision of the Howie Report was realised in the creation of a Professional Registration for Philosophy by the GTC(S). Interestingly inquiries to the GTC(S) (May 2007) revealed that of the 19 teachers seeking professional registration to be officially teachers of Philosophy 16 were RME teachers.

When the National Qualification framework (Higher Still) was launched in 1999, in light of the increasingly philosophical content of RME and consultation with RME staff, the subject would become RMPS at certificate level. Many of the units that were subsequently created were overtly Philosophical (for example Intermediate 2 'Metaphysics' and 'Language, Philosophy and Religion'). Within Ethics units there was a formal recognition that Philosophical stances should be used to explore moral issues and questions of value. Thus, pupils were now studying Utilitarianism and Ethical Egoism alongside Religious authority. Indeed, the conflation of Religiously founded ethics with heteronomy juxtaposed alongside philosophical autonomous ethical stances is telling -- perhaps mirroring social change and the emergence of secular grounds for moral decision making. Roger Sutcliffe, founding member of Society for the Advancement of Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education declared that 'you can't do ethics without philosophy; you just can't' (Sutcliffe, 2006). Perhaps now pupils were being given the philosophical tools to 'do ethics', a vocabulary that enables a rigorous exploration of moral issues.

It is important to stress that these units with philosophical content were quickly adopted by RME/RMPS staff down to S3 level, not just in the post-16 context as envisioned by the Higher Still Development Unit. In effect therefore the vast majority of third and fourth year pupils study RMPS. Typically therefore, in Scottish secondary schools in first and second years, pupils study from a menu of world religions and

moral and philosophical issues. In third year and beyond they study essentially Moral Philosophy and/or Philosophy of Religion.

It is also with the launch of Higher Still that we see a separate subject, Philosophy. Uptake for Higher Philosophy has grown year by year (792 in 2006) and a number of RME departments have switched from Higher RMPS to Higher Philosophy. At a conference hosted by Aberdeenshire Council's RMPS Curriculum Support Group in November 2004, one principal teacher explained (in summary form) why he had moved away from RMPS Higher to Philosophy. The teacher in question described the virtues of Philosophy (objectivity; clarity; one of the great intellectual achievements of mankind; 'cool' in the eyes of pupils, teaches metacognitive and evaluative skills). He contrasted this with RMPS which he felt is still compromised by confessional and political interests and which still largely ignores the views of the secular majority of people. Interestingly he also contrasted the 'coolness' of Philosophy with the 'wetness' of RMPS (his words, not mine), which may offer some explanation for the popularity of Philosophy Higher. In RME departments where pupils have been able to choose between RMPS and Philosophy, he concluded that the majority have opted for Philosophy.

When, in 2003, the Scottish Qualifications Authority reviewed national qualifications in RMPS because of assessment anomalies, it was also to look at the inclusion of Philosophy in the subject. Consultation revealed that the majority of RME teachers were not only in favour of its inclusion but that many described their approach to RME/RMPS as 'philosophical' from S1 to S6:

A clear majority of questionnaire responses indicated that Philosophy was a legitimate part of the Course title and that either philosophical processes or issues were embedded in most of the Units currently on offer.

This finding was reinforced during the Subject Advisory Group meeting and in all individual meetings with stakeholders.

(Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2003, p 4)

The Review also revealed that many RME teachers felt that it was already a requirement at all levels and that 'philosophical processes permeated all aspects of the

curriculum from S1 onwards', and that 57 per cent of RME teachers surveyed felt it should be mandatory and represented in the subject's title, one teacher commenting that 'The nature of the subject necessitates philosophical enquiry at all levels from S1-S6'. (Scottish Qualifications Authority, 2003, p 10) The Review concluded:

The inclusion of 'Philosophy' within RMPS is not really an issue - a clear majority of practitioners who responded to the questionnaire agree that it is an integral part of the subject and should remain as part of the title. (p 11)

In light of the National Qualification Review units were subsequently revised to make the Philosophical content more apparent. This is evident, for example, in the section which prefaces the unit 'Morality in the Modern World', on Aristotle, virtue ethics and the Euthyphro dilemma.

All this highlights that the subject variously described as RE, RME and RMPS already includes a great deal of Philosophy. In an online survey of Scottish Secondary schools (Nixon, 2006 - unpublished) 18 per cent of departments for which data was available now formally describe their subject as Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies.

There are others within the RME profession who may be more cautionary about the increase in Philosophical content within RME. This has become apparent in ongoing research into RME provision conducted by the author, principally in an unpublished national survey (January 2008) of Secondary schools which elicited 122 responses, but also in a number of interviews (also unpublished) with key informants (2006-2008) comprising those involved in developing the curriculum as well as policy writers. Data collected in the course of this research revealed concerns that the drive for Philosophy is part of the drive for kudos and credibility and that a Philosophical approach can be too dry or devoid of empathy and spirituality, as opposed, they contend, to RME. Others think that Philosophy further diminishes the prominence of Christianity in the RME curriculum. There are yet others who have more pragmatic concerns regarding their own lack of expertise in Philosophy.

Concerns about the increasingly philosophical nature of RME are perhaps threefold:

Philosophy doesn't elicit the empathy or tolerance that RME does.

It diminishes the place of Religion in the curriculum.

It begs questions of the training of RME teachers.

These concerns, particularly number 2 above, are perhaps responded to in the guidance contained in 'Building the Curriculum' (November 2006) where it outlines a two-fold structure to RME as:

Christianity – to mirror the influence and prominence of Christianity in

Scotland;

Other World Religions.

In other words RME will continue to privilege religion, particularly Christianity.

There are those who question how helpful such a continued emphasis on Christianity is in the Scotland of 2008. There are also those RME teachers who question the nomenclature of the strands within the subject, alleging that the titles 'Christianity' and 'Other World Religions' implicitly identifies Christianity with the educational provider and has connotations about the worth of these 'other' views.

In the Curricular Review (CfE) the Personal Search target is now imagined to infuse or permeate the study of these two areas. The aim is to integrate a Personal Search approach with the study of religions and avoid a fragmented approach to the subject, which arguably the 5-14 guidelines had inadvertently encouraged.

Interestingly 'Philosophical enquiry' and 'Philosophical concepts' are included in the vision for an RME curriculum (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2006b: Building the Curriculum 1). It is promised that themes and starting point for RME lessons will be published in due course. How philosophical they will be remains to be seen. 'Building the Curriculum 1' clearly attempts both to satisfy the desire for Philosophy in RME and to assuage the concerns highlighted above.

Conclusion

The RME 5-14 guidelines (1992a) were the product of a realisation that in the absence of consensus young people have the right to choose freely. They also recognised that the world's religions are the traditional, though not exclusive, attempts to understand

the human condition. Critics of the 5-14 and proposed CfE structure say that these considerations are undermined by according Christianity, more curricular space and, by implication, more importance. The guidelines sanction an RME curriculum that is dominated by Christianity and in some schools (particularly primaries) this has meant that the traditional heteronymous models of delivery and the conflation of Religious Education and (confessional) Observance has been allowed to persist.

Though these views appear overly strident it is perhaps surprising, given the extent of Philosophical content in secondary RME (as outlined above); the acknowledgement that other 'philosophies' and stances for living should be studied (in Millar; Bulletins 1-3; within SEB, SCOTVEC and SQA qualifications; 5-14 Guidelines, and repeated in CfE 2006), and the recognition that philosophical methods and concepts have a place in RME (CfE, 2006), that the subject has not been renamed Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies.

However, as mentioned above, there are those who regard Philosophy as threat to RME. One School Inspector, when asked about possible formal recognition of Philosophy in RME replied:

I think we have to be careful to call things what they are, and that we don't try to re-invent subjects with different names and supposedly different missions in order to try to meet some passing fashion. (Hannah, 2007, p 383)

Of the three 'objections' to the emergence of Philosophy, number 3 (regarding the training of RME/RMPS teachers) clearly presents issues for Initial Teaching Education institutions and the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTC(S)). There are many RME teachers delivering overtly philosophical content with little philosophical training. This is perhaps now being addressed by the GTC(S)'s framework for professional registration. It will be interesting to see in the next years how many RME teachers opt for Philosophy CPD (now being offered at Scottish universities) and how many apply for registration as Philosophy teachers proper.

One of the most powerful admissions of the extent of Philosophical content within RME is the GTC(S) concession (May 2006) that there is enough Philosophy in RME

National Qualification units to count as evidence in the portfolio of those applying for Professional Registration to teach Philosophy. This is, however, despite the fact that at entry level for the PGDE(S) the GTC(S) still persists in calling the subject 'Religious education.'

RME teachers may contest that the acknowledgment of Philosophy gives the subject more status, academic credibility, impartiality and intellectual rigour and restraint. If it does 'sex' up RME to call it RMPS, then many would argue that is a further reason to do so. To include Philosophy in the subject's title and content does raise issues about the nature of the subject and the training of its teachers but these are important questions that need to be asked.

With regard to the possible response to this article that all subjects have become more philosophical in recent times, being forced to consider their rationale and place in the curriculum, and to use methods of discussion, reflexivity and analysis that could be described as 'philosophical', the response is that no other curricular area has increasingly referenced explicitly philosophical stances and methods as has been the case within RME.

The intention here has been to audit RME in terms of Philosophical content as contained in key documentary evidence. At the outset reference was made to the statement made in the Curriculum for Excellence's Progress and Proposals document that 'Philosophy might be included with Religious and Moral Education'. In light of what this paper has outlined it is clear that this is not a vision of what might be the case, but conversely what has been the case for a number of years. The view expressed above by one of the inspectorate, that Philosophy within RME is a 'passing fashion', is out of touch with the realities of what is happening in Scottish RME as unearthed by the documentary analysis within this article.

At the time of writing (June 2008) teachers are being asked to respond to the Curriculum for Excellence draft outcomes for RME. It will be interesting to see if there will emerge further recognition that Philosophical content and methods have become integral to the subject. Perhaps, as a result, there will be increasing numbers of teachers asking for recognition of this, even if only in the subject's title.

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Standard Paradigm	Reflective Paradigm (education as inquiry)
<p>Education = transmission of knowledge to those who don't know from those who do.</p> <p>Our knowledge of the world is unambiguous, unmysterious and unequivocal.</p> <p>Knowledge is spread over non-overlapping subjects.</p> <p>The teacher has an authoritative role.</p> <p>An educated mind is a well-stocked mind.</p>	<p>Education = outcome of participation in a teacher guided community of enquiry.</p> <p>The goal is good judgement.</p> <p>Students are stirred to think about the world when it is revealed that our knowledge of it is ambiguous and mysterious.</p> <p>Subjects/disciplines overlap and are not exhaustive.</p> <p>The teacher is fallible.</p> <p>The goal is not acquisition of information but to grasp the relationships between subjects.</p>

Table 1. The move from Standard to Reflective Paradigm

5-14 RME Strand and Targets	Congruence with Philosophy?*
<p>Ultimate Questions: Develop confidence and ability to express their own (ultimate) questions (Level A);</p> <p>recognise that religion is essentially about ultimate questions and that there are different points of view (Level C);</p> <p>be able to listen to the views of others and express their own with growing articulateness (Level D);</p> <p>understand that ultimate questions can only be answered by statements of belief (Level E).</p>	<p>METAPHYSICS – 'having to do with the features of ultimate reality'</p> <p>PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION – 'analyses of certain concepts or tenets central to monotheistic religions'</p> <p>EPISTEMOLOGY – 'concerned with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope and general basis'</p>
<p>Relationships and Moral Values: Recognise situations involving moral conflict, show awareness of alternative viewpoints and be able to offer a personal opinion, backed by reasons (Level E).</p>	<p>MORAL PHILOSOPHY – 'critical questions about the very idea of moral conduct, about what morality is and why it should exist'</p>
<p>The Natural World: Understand that religious stories have a different function from scientific explanations, in relation to the mystery and purpose of existence (Level E)</p>	<p>PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE – 'justification and objectivity of scientific knowledge'</p> <p>AESTHETICS – 'discussion of beauty and allied notions'</p>

Table 2. Mapping the Philosophical Content within 5-14 RME

*definitions from The Oxford Companion to Philosophy (Honerich 1995)

Level	Date	Philosophical content
'O' Grade	1982	'Issues of Belief' = Philosophy of Religion and Epistemology 'Issues of Morality' = Moral Philosophy
Higher	1985 & 1992	'Christianity: Critiques and Challenges' = Philosophy of Science, the Marxist and Humanist 'critiques' of Christianity
'S' Grade	1989	'Issues of Belief' = Philosophy of Religion and Epistemology 'Issues of Morality' = Moral Philosophy
SCOTVECS	1990	Six Philosophy Short Courses ranging from Introductory to Moral Philosophy
Short Courses	1990	'Issues of Belief' and three courses on Values/Ethics = Philosophy of Religion, Epistemology and Moral Philosophy
CSYS	1990	'Religion and Reason' = Epistemology, Philosophy of Religion
Higher Still (RMPS)	1999 & 2004	'Morality in the Modern World' (include four optional moral issues = Moral Philosophy, Aristotle, Virtue Ethics 'Language, Philosophy and Religion' = Epistemology Christianity: Belief and Science = Philosophy of Science, Epistemology
Intermediates	1999	'Metaphysics' 'Issues of Belief' = Philosophy of Religion, Metaphysics 'Morality in the Modern World' = Moral Philosophy
Adv Higher	1999	'Philosophy of Religion' 'Bioethics'
Philosophy	1999	Intermediate 2, Higher and Advanced Higher (792 candidates 2006)

Table 3. Mapping Philosophical Content within RME certificates