

THE DISENCHANTED ASSEMBLY: THE CONSULTATION ON RELIGIOUS OBSERVANCE IN SCOTTISH SCHOOLS

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But now at least he understood his religion: its essence was the relation
between man and his fellows.

Isaac Bashevis Singer **The Slave**

INTRODUCTION

This article explores issues of social inclusion, social cohesion, culture and identity in education. The medium through which these themes are addressed is a critical analysis of the consultation on religious observance in Scottish schools. The consultation took place between November 2002 and March 2003, under the aegis of the Religious Observance Review Group (RORG). The written and oral submissions to the consultation were analysed by a research team based in The SCRE Centre in the Faculty of Education at the University of Glasgow. The consultation exercise generated a large number of responses — over 1,400. This is considerably in excess of the number of responses to other recent consultations, and is a measure of the level of public interest generated by the consultation. For example, the consultation exercise launched in the autumn of 2002 by the Expert Panel on School Meals generated a total of 208 responses (Lowden and Pirrie 2002).

The RORG was established in August 2001 by the then Minister for Education, Europe and External Affairs, Jack McConnell. The group

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comprised representatives from religious and educational groups, parents and teachers.¹ Its remit was to review current guidance on arrangements for religious observance in schools, taking account of the views of interested bodies and individuals including religious organisations, parents, teachers and pupils; and to make recommendations to Ministers on any changes required to ensure that revised guidance to schools was relevant and appropriate.

It is significant that neither the legislation, nor the continued use of the term religious observance, were under discussion. As we shall see below, this imposed significant constraints on the conduct of the consultation exercise. The assumption underlying the entire undertaking was that the provision of *practical* advice on religious observance would enable schools to comply with the requirements of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. However, for a variety of reasons that I shall explore below, this narrow instrumental approach is unlikely to bear fruit. In the present context, it is surely no small irony that we need look no further than the Parable of the Sower for an explanation of why this is the case:

For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken away even that which he hath.
Mark 4:25

For it is only by promoting in-depth discussion aimed at deepening public understanding of the origins, role, function and potential of particular practices — such as religious observance in schools — that a meaningful contribution to public policy making is likely to occur.

IN THE BEGINNING ...

We begin by tracing the origins of the current practice of religious observance in Scottish schools. Under the 1980 Act, education authorities have a statutory requirement to provide religious observance and Religious and Moral Education (RME) in Scottish schools. Parents have the right to withdraw their children from both religious observance and RME ‘without

¹ *The full list of members and the organisations they represent is available at http://www.ltsotland.org.uk/religious_observance/background_who.asp.*

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forfeiting any of the other advantages of the schools' (Section 8 (1)). The legislation dates back to the 1872 Act, which transferred responsibility for education to the state.

In some respects, the 1872 Act marked the beginning of the development of education as a social subsystem independent of ecclesiastical authority. Catholic schools, which had not been transferred in 1872, became part of the state system under the terms of the Education Act (1918). This marked the establishment of a system of denominational schools that continues to be state funded today. (See Paterson (2000) and Conroy (2001, 2002) for detailed analyses of the role and status of Catholic education in Scotland.)

The initial impetus for the establishment of the RORG was a report from Her Majesty's Inspectorate entitled **Standards and Quality in Secondary Schools: Religious and Moral Education 1995-2000**. HM Inspectors reported that many non-denominational secondary schools in Scotland were failing to provide time for religious observance as outlined in the guidance issued in **Provision of Religious Education and Religious Observance in Primary and Secondary Schools, Circular 6/91**. Circular 6/91 stipulated that non-denominational secondary schools should provide at least monthly opportunities for religious observance, and that all primary pupils 'should take part in religious observance not less than once a week'. The Circular expressed the view that religious observance was 'a valid and important educational experience', and that it could 'have a *subsidiary* role in promoting the ethos of the school by bringing pupils together and creating a feeling of corporate identity'. It also stated that in non-denominational schools religious observance should be of a '*broadly* Christian character' [my emphasis].

The review group developed a consultation paper (RORG 2002) which was published on a dedicated website, hosted and maintained by Learning and Teaching Scotland. The site provided information on the background to the review and the consultation procedures that had been developed. These comprised a short questionnaire available in electronic and paper versions; and a series of public meetings held in various locations throughout Scotland: Dundee, Glasgow, Inverness, Edinburgh and Dumfries. These meetings were attended by a total of 400 people.

The consultation paper was a document of approximately 2,000 words in length in which the word 'religion' appeared just once, and the notion of the

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‘school community’ was invoked thirteen times. We shall return to the implications of this later. Suffice it to say that the primary purpose of the consultation document was to provide a stimulus for discussion and debate.

In so far as it is appropriate to nail my thesis to the door, then it is as follows. I believe that despite all its good intentions — or indeed precisely because of them — the review group has engaged in a collective act of self-deception or ‘bad faith’ (*mauvaise foi*), in that it has refused to take responsibility for its choices. Sartre’s famous example of bad faith serves to illustrate the point. In **L’être et le Néant**, he conjures up an image of a girl sitting with a man whom she knows very well would like to seduce her. But when he makes the first move and takes her hand, she pretends not to notice, and leaves her hand in his. This is her way of trying to avoid the painful necessity of deciding whether to accept or reject him. She pretends to herself that she is a passive object, a thing, rather than what she really is, a conscious being who is free to make choices, and even — heaven forbid — to make mistakes.

This playful image of a failed seduction might at first reading appear somewhat incongruous in the context of a review of religious observance. Nevertheless, there are parallels with the way in which the RORG evidently felt constrained to conduct its business. It appears that for the best possible motives — an earnest desire to work effectively together, not wishing to cause offence or to alienate certain social groups — the RORG hedged its bets throughout the consultation process. For neither did it fully endorse Circular 6/91, which states that ‘in non-denominational schools religious observance should be of a broadly Christian character’, nor did it take the opportunity to engage critically with secularization theory by examining how religious institutions can creatively adapt to the conditions that prevail in modern functionally-differentiated societies (Wilson 2002; Sober and Wilson 1998). This is the tale of the RORG that refused to roar, of a truly disenchanting assembly.

As to the reasons for this apparent display of pusillanimousness, we need look no further than a ritual sacrifice on the altar of political correctness. The consultation on religious observance was designed to be as inclusive as possible. References to institutionalised forms of religion were avoided for fear of causing offence to those of different faiths — or of none — and in order to promote collaboration within the group. This led to the RORG’s emphasis on ‘personal religion’ over ‘institutional religion’ in what is described as a ‘multifaith’ environment. I shall argue that an emphasis on the

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individual rather than the collective is counter-productive, and, somewhat ironically, ultimately detrimental to the very form of ‘institutional religion’ that the review group was seeking to preserve or to promote — religious observance.

The tenor of its consultation paper on the future of religious observance in schools echoes a distinction between ‘institutional’ and ‘personal’ religion first posited by William James over 100 years ago (James 1982).² The consultation reflects the emphasis on the personal that pervades so much contemporary educational discourse. This, I believe, is fundamentally at odds with the aim of promoting social cohesion and developing a tolerant and open society.

It is possible to argue that the development of the individual — in the educational context at least — is inextricably linked to the development of the collective, and that the latter can be achieved in many different ways. The very existence of Personal and Social Education (PSE) as a discrete domain of study in Scottish schools is testament to that.

Proponents of evidence-based policy and practice may be dismayed to hear that it is not my intention here to give a detailed report of the empirical findings. My aim is to point out the limitations of the consultation process as a means of policy development, and to explore notions such as ‘spiritual development’, ‘shared values’, authenticity and personal integrity from a lay perspective. I do this as an agnostic, from the perspective of an outsider. Despite the reference to ritual sacrifices on the altar of political correctness, I can assure the reader that I have no axe to grind — on this occasion at least. I play, but I am not a player. I write, but I am not an academic philosopher, a sociologist of religion, a journalist — nor indeed a disciple. I lack both the bedrock of a discipline and the bedrock of faith. I write as an outsider. This, I have discovered, is an exposed position. However, I make no apologies for floating like a butterfly and stinging like a bee.

² *William James's The Varieties of Religious Experience originated in a series of Gifford lectures that he delivered in Edinburgh in 1901-02.*

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD ...

I begin by outlining the conceptual limitations of the consultation paper itself, and exploring the various meanings ascribed to the term 'religious observance'. I then attempt to demonstrate how these reflect a gradual shift from collective, institutionalised practice towards a form of revisionist individualism, which is evidenced by the conduct of the review. My starting point is a comparative critical exegesis of Section 6 of the **National Guidelines on Religious and Moral Education 5-14** and the consultation paper drawn up by the RORG.

As we saw above, religious observance is a statutory requirement under the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, and is considered to have 'a significant part to play in transcending the informative role of religious education' (HMI 1989). It is also described as making 'an important contribution to pupils' spiritual development' (SOED 1992).

Section 6 of the **National Guidelines on Religious and Moral Education 5-14** (SOED 1992) offers the following definition of religious observance:

The term is usually taken to refer to assemblies, of the whole school or part of it, during which something akin to worship takes place. But 'something akin' covers a wide variety of practice, from the traditional hymn or religious song, Bible reading and prayer, to short 'thought for the day' addresses or multi-media presentations on a moral or spiritual theme.

The Guidelines go on state that

Of course, in Roman Catholic schools religious observance additionally covers school Masses, classroom prayers and sacramental preparation. In schools serving multi-faith areas it is increasingly common to celebrate major festivals of different religions, such as Christmas, Diwali and Eid.

It is illuminating to compare the definition put forward in the consultation paper drawn up by the review group:

The Review Group defines the term [religious observance] for use in schools in Scotland as community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and

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express and celebrate the shared values of the school community.
(p 2)

The main differences between the definition of religious observance in the National Guidelines and in the consultation paper can be summarised as follows: an assembly has metamorphosed into a 'community act'; and the nebulous 'something akin to worship' has given way to the promotion of 'the spiritual development of all members of the school community'. It is curious that although the word 'act' is not used in the National Guidelines, the acts themselves are exemplified — hymns or religious songs, bible reading and prayers, short addresses on a moral or religious theme, etc. This is not the case in the consultation paper. Here the emphasis is on 'expressing and celebrating the shared values of the school community.' However, no definition of these 'shared values' is provided. Neither is there any attempt to address the question of how these values are enacted. I offer the following hypothesis as to why this was the case. The considered view of the RORG was that the expression 'engaging in something akin to worship' was possibly too robust for those of a secular persuasion, in that it might be perceived to exclude those who are of a different faith, or those who have no religious conviction. Indeed, there was a strong consensus in the submissions that this was the case. On the other hand, in the denominational context, it may be frustratingly vague. And once again, there was a strong current in the responses that supported this view. As we saw above, in Roman Catholic Schools, school masses and classroom prayers are an integral part of religious observance.

The first point I would like to make is this. The issue that the consultation paper singularly fails to address is that you have to *do* something, to engage in some form of ritual, in order to express or celebrate anything. This can take various forms — from marking someone's birthday by putting candles on a cake and singing a song at the secular end of the continuum to praying, singing a hymn or listening to a community elder expound on a topic of ethical or moral importance at the other end of the spectrum. Whether you *believe* in what you are doing or not is another matter. And, believe it or not, ultimately beside the point. We will return to the question of authenticity below.

Almost by definition, celebration implies some sort of public performance. The anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) analysed religious ritual in terms of the following two elements: *communitas* and *structure*. He used the term

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structure to describe the roles that people in a community occupy in relation to their age, sex and status. The purpose of structure is to implement *communitas*, which is a conception of the community as an egalitarian unit, in which everybody (in the present case pupil, teacher, headteacher or school chaplain) has a moral claim. Ritual is the mechanism for binding together structure and *communitas*.

The key is the interplay between structure and *communitas*. Religious observance *can* provide a creative opportunity to reverse the roles that people in the school community normally occupy in relation to their age and status, and in so doing to forge a community within an established moral framework. If this opportunity is not realised, then the whole thing risks becoming, in the words of one respondent to the consultation, ‘a one-way information exchange with a watered-down God slot, and little or no time for real reflection and participation.’ The same respondent remarked that religious observance appears to be ‘more about reinforcing hierarchy’ than ‘promoting worship’, or developing tolerance and understanding. If, however, the interplay between structure and *communitas* is sensitively orchestrated, the net result is not necessarily developing conformity and compliance, but encouraging children and young people to engage critically with competing value systems; to explore questions of morality (and mortality)³; and to face up to dilemmas of doubt and belief. To promote such activity is surely one of the fundamental purposes of education.

The second point is that surely the main purpose of public consultations such as the one reported here is to promote honest and open debate in order to inform the future direction of public policy. The issue is thus not so much where we have come from (although this is certainly of some relevance), but where we are going. And, somewhat paradoxically, this can only come about if there is an open acknowledgement of the *status quo*. The revisionist approach adopted by the RORG in the consultation paper is, I believe, doomed to failure. Incidentally, it is surely no accident that the paper is entitled **A Review of Religious Observance in Scottish Schools**.

³ *The journalist Hugo Young recalled the late Basil Hume in the following terms: ‘As a dying man, I can imagine, he was well prepared. This really was the moment to which his life was but the prelude. A headmaster at the monastic school where I first met him, when asked by an anxious parent to say what Ampleforth prepared its boys for, replied heavily: “We prepare them for death.”’ H Young (2003) ‘It is as an outsider that I write ...’ **The Guardian**, Wednesday 24 September, 2003.*

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Let us return to the notion of ‘shared values’ invoked in the consultation paper. As I indicated above, these are in part constituted by the very fact of their celebration. To suggest otherwise would be presumptuous in the extreme. For I may not be quite like you. Nor you like me. The values we bring with us from home may vary just as much as the contents of our lunchboxes. (However — and this is perhaps the most important point — we are likely to find ourselves in agreement with the statement ‘thou shalt not kill’.) Few would dispute that one of the fundamental purposes of education is to teach us to accept diversity — cultural, social and religious — and indeed to celebrate it. But what are we to make of the concept of ‘shared values’ or ‘spiritual development’ without any reference to an overarching moral or religious framework? It is to this issue that we now turn.

AND THE WORD WAS GOD...

Given our theme, it is no small irony that we resort once again to exegesis. Nevertheless, it is very instructive to compare the aims of religious observance as set down in the National Guidelines with the somewhat pared-down version that appears in the consultation paper. According to Version 1 (**The National Guidelines on Religious and Moral Education 5-14**), the aims of religious observance are

- to promote pupils’ spiritual development;
- to increase their understanding of religious practices such as prayer and meditation and the religious experience which underlies them;
- to promote the ethos of the school through the expression and celebration of shared values;
- to provide opportunity for individual reflection on spiritual and moral concerns.

In contrast, the aims as set out in Version 2 (the consultation paper) are as follows:

- to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community;
- to express and celebrate the shared values of the school community.

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The differences between the aims as set down in Version 1 and Version 2 above are significant. The most important of these is the abandonment in Version 2 of the references to developing understanding through practice and to 'school ethos'. These changes reflect a significant shift in emphasis towards individual experience in an inclusive setting. This, incidentally, is a tendency that is even more pronounced in the Final Report of the RORG (Scottish Executive 2003), in which the 'spiritual dimension' 'is seen and expressed by sensing mystery; sensing values; sensing meaningfulness; sensing a changed quality in awareness; sensing "otherness"; sensing challenge.' (p 13).

In Version 1, the promotion of 'pupils' spiritual development' is contextualised, in that there is an explicit reference to increasing 'their understanding of religious practices such as prayer and meditation and the religious experience which underlies them'. Religious observance is thus construed as the practical component of RME, although this is not expressed in such terms — nor indeed would such a definition find favour among specialists in religious education. In Version 1, the distinction between religious experience and religious life (*pace* James) is elided, as the former is implicitly defined in terms of the latter (Haldane 1986). As we shall see, the concept of religious observance in schools implicitly invokes both, for it is viewed as contributing to the 'spiritual development' of the individual by bringing together the members of the school community.

It is particularly instructive to explore the notion of 'shared values', as this is a concept that appears in both versions. In Version 1, the values that are invoked are, by implication at least, those of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The Guidelines (SOED 1992) state that

In non-denominational schools religious observance should be of a broadly Christian character: that is, it should reflect the broad consensus of Christian beliefs and values without being specific to any one denomination. This does not exclude the possibility of drawing on other religious traditions at times. As far as possible, religious observance should be inclusive, not exclusive, allowing pupils from various religious backgrounds, or none, to take part with integrity and gain something from the experience.

In Version 2, on the other hand, the reference to 'shared values' tends to elicit a rather nonplussed response: what shared values? For without

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reference to any defining cultural framework, the notion is indeed fairly meaningless. At the very most it amounts to no more than the fact that I am a vegetarian; that you let your kids go to bed when they feel like it; and that your neighbour believes that mothers should stay at home when their children are young; and so on. Paradoxically, the notion of 'shared values' is more likely to elicit a negative response in readers of Version 2 (the consultation paper) than in those of Version 1 (The National Guidelines), where there is an explicit reference to a particular moral framework and the 'broad consensus of Christian beliefs and values' and a recognition that not everyone shares all of these beliefs and values.

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At the risk of provoking the ire of those who are professionally involved in Religious and Moral Education, let us construe religious observance as a practical component of RME and Personal and Social Education. The problem of authenticity — or rather the lack of it — all but disappears. But what do we mean by the problem of authenticity? One of the main criticisms expressed by the substantial minority of respondents who responded from an atheist or agnostic perspective and expressed reservations about the current practice of religious observance was that it was inauthentic. In their responses, many displayed the same disdain for institutionalised forms of religion as William James, who noted that

... when we hear the word 'religion' nowadays, we think inevitably of some 'church' or other; and to some persons the word 'church' suggests so much hypocrisy and tyranny and meanness and tenacity of superstition that in a wholesale undiscerning way they glory in saying that they are 'down' on religion altogether.
(James 1982, pp. 334-335)

However, the point I wish to make is not merely that many secularists would find James' perspective an adequate summary of why they were 'down' on religion. It is rather to challenge the assumption that pervaded many of the responses to the consultation, namely that if individuals cannot bring to the act of religious observance — however constituted — a high degree of devotional commitment, then the whole enterprise is not worth the candle. You get mass fidgeting at best, and at worst insubordination and indiscipline. The net result of this neo-Jamesian emphasis on the personal that was evident

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in so many responses is a polarization between believer and non-believer. And yet we recall that one of the original purposes of religious observance as set out in **The National Guidelines on Religious and Moral Education 5-14** is to ‘increase [pupils’] understanding of religious practices such as prayer and meditation and the religious experience which underlies them.’ The distinction between fully committed believers and less devoted ones or non-believers is elided. *Participative* forms of religious observance — in the form of an imaginative assembly or gathering — have the potential to enable members of the school community to develop tolerance and understanding. This is achieved not merely by learning about it (as in classroom-based RME and PSE), but by living it, by enacting it. (This has its analogue in the current movement away from a knowledge-based towards a competence-based curriculum.) And if living as opposed to learning tolerance entails ‘eavesdropping’ on another person’s act of worship, then well and good. If, however, schools are unable to explore the creative potential of religious observance, then the whole enterprise is doomed to failure, and is, in the words of one respondent to the consultation, ‘restricted to a lowest common denominator of moral exhortation.’

BEING THERE ...

To what extent does collective ritual have any meaning in an environment in which so much emphasis is put on individual achievement? In this context it is instructive to consider the first of five aims relating to education contained in the **Introduction** to the work of the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED), namely ‘to ensure that every child or young person is able to develop to their fullest potential’. The other four aims implicitly relate to a collection of individuals rather than to a collective state or quality.⁴ A second question relates to the issue of authenticity.

The analogy of school sport may serve as a vehicle for exploring both of these questions. I readily admit that the first XI might appear a somewhat

⁴ See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk>. The other aims are as follows: to ensure all children have access to early learning and quality care; to promote social justice for children and young people; to raise standards and broaden achievement in education; to modernise Scottish schools, strengthen leadership in schools and reward professionalism in teaching.

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unexpected source of enlightenment. However, there are some lessons to be learned from taking a closer look at one of the few other communal acts (albeit it in a small group context) that take place in school.

The essential point is that an average school sports team will encompass a fairly wide spectrum of self-belief as well as belief in the common cause. There will be those for whom winning the next match, and perhaps ultimately the tournament, will be a matter of intense personal pride. It will also require a considerable degree of personal commitment, such as attending training regularly and perhaps forgoing other leisure opportunities. There will also be those who aspire to play in the A team rather than languishing in the B team. But there will also be some talented all-round athletes whose particular interests and aptitudes lie elsewhere — in the 800 metres, for example. Nevertheless, they may turn out to be an asset to the football or hockey team in their off-season, or at a particular stage in their development as athletes. These may be the ones who just take it in their stride, as it were, and for whom the outcome matters less than it does to their more committed, single-minded team-mates. What matters, however, is simply that they are there, that there is an inside-left or an outside-right on the pitch. For what is at issue here is observance in the strict sense of the term. Taking part means playing by the rules and keeping a prescribed ritual, wearing the team colours — playing up and playing the game. The degree of personal commitment brought to the task in hand will, of course, have some effect on the outcome. However, it is unlikely to be the be-all and end-all. For it is not necessary to understand or to believe in the rules of the game in order to take part. All that the players need to do is to abide by the said rules — they can even infringe them within certain given limits, as evidenced by the notion of the ‘professional foul’. The only reason the rules mean anything is that elsewhere there are other people observing the same ones. That, quite simply, is what football or hockey or any other team sport is about.

Yet there is another dimension to our analogy — the match as opposed to the game.

It is hard to conceive of a football match without taking the fans into account. For a match is about far more than the players observing the rules of the game. It is also about their reciprocal engagement with the crowd. And paradoxically, there are sometimes more frequent displays of passion and emotion — anger, fear, pain, disappointment, relief, joy — on the terraces than there are on the pitch. The crowd are witnesses: they know the rules of

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the game, but they do not have to abide by them. In this respect, football is perhaps the ultimate ‘spectator sport’. But nothing is lost by virtue of its being ‘second-hand’, to use James’s term (or even ‘third-hand’ if you bring those watching the game on television into the equation). In fact, everything is to be gained. Far from being a ‘dull habit’ rendered banal by frequent repetition, it is a particularly vibrant form of communal life — that is, if we can overlook the sectarianism that remains part of the Scottish football scene. It is also a vivid illustration of the fact that there are some individual experiences that are all the better for being shared.

But what has all this to do with religious observance or school assemblies? After all, they are at best fairly lacklustre affairs compared to a cup final. The point, however, is simply this: being there — even if it means merely standing on the sidelines or just singing along (an activity, incidentally, that may be considered intrinsically beneficial) — is a legitimate form of peripheral participation that does not necessarily involve an act of bad faith.

There will, no doubt, be those who find this analogy flippant, mildly distasteful or misleading. After all, young people who take part in team sport in school are doing so through choice. Physical Education may be part of the school curriculum, but staying on after school for training, or turning up for a match on Saturday are not. However, it should also be borne in mind that parents have the right to withdraw their children from religious observance. The fact is, however, that for a variety of reasons — not the least of which is, perhaps, indifference — relatively few parents choose to exercise this right. On the other hand, it might possibly be the case that they see some merit in their children’s involvement in a collective exploration of ‘moral values such as honesty, liberty, justice, fairness and concern for others’⁵, and in ‘investigating and understanding the meaning and purpose of life, with the guidance of the Scriptures and the tradition of the Catholic Church’.⁶

⁵ *Aims of Religious and Moral Education: 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines. Aims of Religious and Moral Education: non-denominational context.*

⁶ *Aims of Religious and Moral Education: 5-14 Curriculum Guidelines. Aims of Catholic Religious Education.*

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