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A Subject
Like Others?

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INTRODUCTION

Religious Education has long been central to the Irish school curriculum reflecting the largely religious nature of Irish society where the population was preponderantly Catholic. Schools at primary and secondary levels were closely intertwined mainly with the Catholic Church.¹ Progressively this changed as the population became more ethnically and religiously diverse.² Largely because of this, the Education department introduced Religious Education as examinable like other subjects in the curriculum in 2003 for junior and 2005 for senior levels. As examinable, it remains optional, multi-denominational and interfaith.³

This development in the study of religion as an examinable subject in the Irish curriculum has been seen to be significant. After fifteen or so years, it would seem to be worthwhile to review it.

What follows is a critique of these examinable syllabi as they operated over the years. This will be done through what has been written about them as this is supplemented with observations drawn from interviews, surveys, and correspondence.⁴ It begins with a critical evaluation of what has been achieved, drawing for its significance on the experience of Religious Education more widely. A way ahead is proposed and concludes with implications for current practice.

- 1 G. Condon, "Religious Education in Second Level Schools," *The Furrow* 65,11 (2014):225-232.
- 2 P. Share, M.P. Corcoran & B. Conway, *Sociology of Ireland* (Dublin: Gill, 2012), 330-339; M. McGrail & F. Rhatigan, *The Challenge of Indifference: A Need for Religious Renewal in Ireland* (Maynooth: Maynooth University Press, 2009), viii, 4, 26.
- 3 The syllabuses are: *Religious Education: Leaving Certificate* (Dublin: NCCA, n.d.) *Religious Education: Junior Certificate* (Dublin: NCCA, n.d.).
- 4 In an attempt to gain a range of viewpoints, the interviews, using a qualitative approach and lasting approximately one hour, included bishops, teachers, administrators, bishops' advisors, lecturers in colleges, covering much of the country. The surveys came from randomly selected secondary schools spread throughout the country that responded while the same was true of the emails, which sometimes focused on specific issues. All this was done by the author between March and December 2017.

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THE FURROW

WHAT HAS BEEN ACHIEVED?

Since the examinable syllabuses were introduced, reaction to them has been varied but positive.⁵ A long-serving teacher noted: “The junior program provided guidelines in a situation where previously there was no inspection, teachers were not qualified... it was a kind of saving grace.”⁶ Similarly, many of those surveyed spoke of the time before the Introduction of the syllabuses when Religious Education tended to be, in their terms, “a doss subject” or a “timetable filler.”⁷

A review of the syllabi was conducted in 2017 within the context of a more general overview of the school curriculum.⁸ This confirms that the syllabuses were well accepted and, among other things, it affirms that they provide learners with an acceptable level of religious literacy. What received brief comment was that their uptake could be seen to be weak.

One might however argue that having close to 50 percent take it at the junior level for examination is high, seeing that few other optional subjects have such numbers. This of course is true but, unlike other subjects, non-examinable Religious Education is compulsory. One might therefore have expected that those taking it for examination would be higher. Nonetheless, many schools that do not take it as an examinable subject ‘shadow it.’ They use its framework and resources and learn from its structure.

A reason given by teachers and administrators for not offering Religious Education as an examination subject is that it makes it too much like others. One teacher noted: “We took the decision not to include religion as an academic examinable subject. This gives students the chance to discuss issues freely without the pressures of exams.” More widely, it has been argued that viewing Religious Education like other subjects may entail what Hyde calls a category mistake meaning that it fails to properly distinguish between different kinds of knowledge.⁹ At the senior level, the uptake is lower, ranging at less than three percent though it remains a non-examinable compulsory subject even at this level. A frequently stated reason given for not offering it as an examination subject,

5 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) *Background Paper and Brief for the review of Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2017, 4, 16, 21). This is confirmed widely in interviews and surveys where almost everybody felt it was a positive development for Religious Education. The fact that it is also a national programme may merit commendation. See: C. Clarke & L. Woodland, *A New Settlement: Religion and Beliefs in Schools* (Westminster Faith Debates, n.d.), 36-39.

6 This is a slight overstatement as the Bishops had inspections.

7 Condon, “Religious Education in Second Level Schools,” 225-226.

8 *Background Paper*, already identified in note 5.

9 B. Hyde, “A Category Mistake: why contemporary Australian Religious Education in Catholic schools may be doomed to failure,” *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 34, 2 (2013): 36-45.

even in denominational schools, is that the curriculum is already overloaded. Heads usually added that there has been little demand for the subject from parents or students as publicly examinable at this level.¹⁰

By comparison with other academic subjects, the status of the study of religion is said to be low in the eyes of both students and parents. One teacher commented: “Out of their list of subjects, Religious Education wouldn’t be placed high; as to them (students) it’s not academic.” Failure to view it as academic may be understandable in the context of a tradition where it was largely catechetical and not publicly examined.¹¹ Besides, the school’s location within a modernization paradigm of development needs to be considered where academic achievement (high grades in conventionally academic subjects) has overarching exchange value as the school is seen to give access to upward social mobility.¹²

Despite ambiguity surrounding the level of uptake, paradoxically religion in the curriculum is, we are reminded, viewed by parents and pupils to be important.¹³ This makes sense in the context of a long-standing interweave of religion and culture.¹⁴ Although such location of religion merits support in terms of appreciating it as constitutive of national identity, it may not automatically assure it a continued integral place in the school curriculum as evidenced when the Catholic Bishops felt a need to state that it should remain as a subject in its own right on the curriculum.¹⁵

- 10 This can be compared with what is taking place in Northern Ireland where Religious Education is compulsory throughout schooling and is a popular choice for examination accreditation at GCSE level. It is also taken by between 10 and 20 percent at A level. Moreover, prerequisites to take religion at degree level are very high (See: Clarke & Woodland, *A New Settlement*, 39).
- 11 This could be contrasted with England where the academic study of religion is long established. See: S. Whittle, “Testing Times for Religious Education in Catholic Schools in England and Wales.” In S. Whittle, (ed.), *Researching Catholic Education* (Singapore: Springer, 2018), 231-244. It was suggested that a change of name for the subject Religious Education might help. ‘Philosophy of Religion’ was seen to be a possibility.
- 12 Share et al, *Sociology of Ireland*, 38-48; K. Fisher, *Schools and the Politics of Religion and Diversity in the Republic of Ireland: separate but equal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 58.
- 13 *Background Paper*, 29; See also: J O’ Flaherty, J. O’Connell, J. Gleeson, & P. Kenny, “Developing the characteristic spirit of publicly managed schools in a more secular and pluralist Ireland,” *Cambridge Journal of Education* 48, 3 (2018), 317-333.
- 14 K. Williams, *Faith and the Nation: Religion, Culture and Schooling in Ireland* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2005).
- 15 *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle* (Dublin: Veritas, 2017) 8. There is evidence of a weak level of trust on the part of the Bishops’ advisors and teachers because the Department of Education and Skills (DES) appears to have little interest in religion. There is also fear that in the new framework “well-being” might absorb Religious Education. See also: Circular Letter 0013/2018.

THE FURROW

Recognizing schooling's predominantly economic agenda and religion's setting within it, the 2017 review focuses upon the need for a "formative" approach to Religious Education.¹⁶ This concurs with many survey and interview responses when they related that they have difficulty adopting examinable Religious Education because of its tendency to marginalize "faith formation."¹⁷ For them, such Religious Education is overly informative and exam focused, thereby eclipsing, in their view, religion's formative aspect. This underwrites a teacher's comment, when referring to Religious Education: "There is an awful lot of learning that takes away from students finding themselves and their faith."

While in general the examinable Religious Education syllabuses could be seen to be satisfactory on the level of being open to all students in the Religious Education classroom, ambiguity remains for many who ask: how suitable are they as instruments of personal formation.¹⁸

A NEW CONTEXT

Before attending to this concern, a brief review of what is taking place more widely in the Irish secondary school may help because Religious Education does not stand alone. Aware of school learning's tendency to be abstract and remote, in 2015 the Department of Education and Skills (DES) initiated a review, indicated earlier, of the curriculum in the interest of learner enhancement.¹⁹ It aims to provide schooling which will be less informational and outlines a framework which attends to what the student wants in order that he/she will no longer be forced to follow a standard 'one size fits all' examination-framed curriculum. This perhaps has potential for a more equitable education system.²⁰

Flexibility of approach is central to this framework where in a range of 24 subjects to be offered, there are eight key principles, eight basic skills, and 24 statements that point to what should constitute the person's education.²¹ It is intended to allow a high

¹⁶ *Background Paper*, 10.

¹⁷ Underlying this concept as it was used in the interviews is a tendency to equate catechesis with education in faith. Yet, the syllabi are explicitly non-confessional.

There appears to be a hankering back to what might be termed re-confessionalism (See: D. Pollefeyt & J. Bouwens, *Assessing and enhancing Catholic school identity* (Berlin: LIT, 2014).

¹⁸ *Background Paper*, 4, 6.

¹⁹ *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* (Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, n.d.).

²⁰ K. Williams, "Education Matters but not all learning takes place in the school." *Irish Independent* (March 8, 2017); B. Flannery, "Reflections from an Ignatian Educational Perspective," *Working Notes* 79 (December 2016), 24-25; N. Noddings, "Must we Motivate?" in N.C. Burbules & D. T. Hansen, eds. *Teaching and Its Predicaments* (Boulder CO: Westview Press, 1997), 37.

²¹ *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, 10-14.

level of choice. In addition to the various elements outlined, DES plans to enhance it with ‘well-being’ as a discrete subject.²² As such, ‘well-being’ is said to be a principle underpinning a capacity for decision-making and the promotion of values, leading to a sense of personal worth.²³

The subject “well-being” thus aims to aid personal formation and is intended to supplement what currently characterizes the schools’ learning which is seen to be overly informative. Such a personal emphasis fits with what the 2017 review, when it explores students’ proposals for a revised curriculum; they are reported to be seeking greater depth linked to such philosophical questions as: why am I here? What is the purpose of life? Is there anything beyond death?²⁴ Though the framework provides for the study of religion which might ordinarily be seen to include responses to questions of this nature, as one of the options, it does not include it when treating the notion of ‘wellbeing.’ Nonetheless, it has been argued that the place of Religious Education within the framework is clear while its relationship to ‘well-being’ is illustrated.²⁵

THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

In light of the DES perspective of an overarching personal development agenda, if Religious Education is to be a source of enhancement, it would need to address the student more deeply than currently. Religious Studies or Sociology of Religion which probably best describes what is now on offer, though in line with Toledo principles, while useful and necessary, would be overly academic.²⁶ By accepting a modernization agenda, Irish secondary schools, like schools more widely tend to deliver, as already noted, an education that is progressively less personal.²⁷ Subjects assume significance in the measure that they conform to the procedures of natural science.²⁸ While appreciating the role of natural science, its

22 *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, 22-23.

23 *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015*, 22); *Religious Education and the Framework for Junior Cycle*, 8

24 *Background Paper*, 21-22.

25 G. Byrne, “Religious Education in Catholic Schools in Ireland: Drawing on Our Heritage, Living in the Present, Anticipating New Directions.” In Whittle, (ed.), *Researching Catholic Education*, 210.

26 *Toledo Guiding Principles in teaching about religions and beliefs in public schools* (Warsaw: Office for Democratic Institutions, 2007); *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 20; D. Lane, *Religion and Education* (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), 24-26.

27 B. Walsh, ed. *Degrees of Nonsense: The Demise of the University in Ireland* (Dublin: Glasnevin Publishing 2012); N. Noddings, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: an alternative approach to education* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005).

28 B. Lonergan *Method in Theology* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1973), 3-4; J. Dewey, *How we think* (Lexington MA: Heath, 1933), v; E. Wright & A. Wright 2017, “Thinking Skills.” In L. P. Barnes, ed. *Debates in Religious Education* (Abingdon: Oxon: Routledge, 2012), 719.

colonizing potential for all forms of learning is the concern because it has been argued that when academic inquiry is increasingly overtaken by natural science frameworks, personal knowledge is sidelined, opening the way to nihilism and atheism.²⁹

Religious Education thus faces a major challenge if, as the DES discourse implies, a scientific mode of learning may increasingly be the default.³⁰ Undoubtedly, from this standpoint, it has been valuable to make Religious Education examinable like other subjects. This has given it status and credibility, as many interviewees stressed, but is this sufficient? In a Religious Education class, while learning what is preponderantly factual about religion has a place, as Michael Grimmitt among many others argue, there is need for more. He speaks of a 'learn from' religion dimension by which he meant enabling pupils to become critically conscious of their own cultural and religious histories and autobiographies.³¹

The dilemma of having Religious Education that is highly abstract which does not entirely fit the school's faith or learner's personal agendas has been articulated by theologian, Thomas Groome. Focusing on the history of this divergence between the academic and the personal, he speaks of integration and contends that the academic dimension ought to enhance faith formation.³² To achieve this, in his eyes, calls for the kind of pedagogy embryonically in the works of Paulo Freire and Bernard Lonergan, developed and named *shared praxis*.³³ This approach engages the learner existentially but is careful to avoid being overly subjective and so advocates engagement with tradition.³⁴

Though Groome shows how his approach is in line with that of Lonergan, he does not explicitly address Lonergan's major epistemological concern of how the subject or in this case the learner relates objectively to a religious tradition.³⁵ Yet, this is

29 M. J. Buckley, *Denying and disclosing God: the ambiguous process of modern atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

30 G. O'Hanlon, *Theology in the Irish Public Square* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2010), 40.

31 M. Grimmitt, *Religious education and human development* (Great Wakering: McCrimmon, 1987), 141, 213-214, 225-226. M. Grimmitt, ed. *Pedagogies of Religious Education* (Great Wakering: McCrimmon Publishing Co., 2000), 17-18.

32 T. H. Groome, "Religious Education and Catechesis: No divorce for children's sake," *The Furrow* 53 (2012):587-596.

33 T. H. Groome, "A Shared Praxis Approach to Religious Education." In M deSouza, R. Jackson, A. McGrady, eds. *International Handbook of Religious, Moral and Spiritual Dimensions in Education Part I* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), 763-777.

34 M. Bonnett & S. Cuypers, "Autonomy and authenticity in education." In N. Blake, P. Smeyers, R. Smith & P. Standish, eds. *The Blackwell Guide to the Philosophy of Education* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 326-340.

35 B. Lonergan, "The Subject." In W. Ryan & B. Tyrell, eds. *A Second Collection* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974), 69-86; P. Giddy, "Why Theology can and should be taught at secular universities: Lonergan and intellectual conversion," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 45, 3 (2011), 536.

significant if one is to provide a Religious Education which does not risk reducing religion to the learner's experience. Lonergan identifies critical awareness, which emerges from what he called intellectual conversion, to be foundational where one is enabled to take up an attitude to one's life as a whole, not being immersed in each segment of it.³⁶

For the Religious Education student, acquiring such critical awareness means that he/she locates within him/herself what constitutes reality. This entails reflecting on what he/she is doing when he/she comes to know something. This process has been likened by Lonergan to what takes place in psychotherapy.³⁷ It requires paying attention to one's self in coming to understand what one means by truth. Without this, the danger of being overly subjective remains, even within a shared-praxis framework, when interpreting tradition, religious or other.³⁸ Addressing the issue of how truth is affirmed entails a self-reflective process which locates within oneself a basic pattern of how one comes to know and decide.

What is being proposed for current Religious Education is a greater emphasis on Grimmitt's 'learning from' religion perhaps, but not necessarily, along the lines of a shared practice approach, thereby evaluating the understanding of religion in personal terms and evaluating understanding of self in religious terms.³⁹ However, to do this satisfactorily, to be enabled to learn what the voices of religious traditions truly have to say, the student needs the kind of tools which Lonergan's intellectual conversion promises.

IS THIS REALISTIC?

One obvious objection is that having the learner move towards such intellectual conversion is unrealistic for Religious Education students at senior much less at junior levels. At first sight, this seems true. However, this approach is not an all or nothing task because, as Patrick Giddy points out, we start from the individual's self-awareness and point out what knowing is. As he says, it is not like studying some distant planet of which we have no direct experience. Rather, it is a matter of fuller appropriation of a capacity we already have but do not exercise to the full extent.⁴⁰

36 Lonergan *Method in Theology*, 84.

37 B. Lonergan, "Insight Revisited." In W. Ryan & B. Tyrell, eds. *A Second Collection*, 269; See also: T. Walker, "Science and Religion in Catholic Education". In Whittle, (ed.), *Researching Catholic Education*, 247-248.

38 J. P'Anson, "RE – after neutrality," *British Journal of Religious Education* 32, 2 (2010): 105-118.

39 Grimmitt, *Religious education and human development*, 213.

40 P. Giddy, "Why Theology can and should be taught at secular universities: Lonergan and intellectual conversion," *Journal of the Philosophy of Education* 45,3 (2011),531.

THE FURROW

Though Giddy admits that the starting point is easily accessible, gaining the kind of horizon of intellectual conversion is high achievement, entailing degrees of self-knowledge. This does not necessarily put it beyond the reach of second level students but it is likely to be a long-term assimilative process and might be compared to what is involved in becoming competent in any discipline. Though long-term and challenging, does such induction to the acquisition of greater levels of religious literacy not merit such investment especially if we are educating for life, beyond job competence, in a world which on a global and potentially terrifying scale offers contrasting and conflicting accounts of the ultimate order of things?⁴¹

IMPLICATIONS AND CURRENT PRACTICE

Grimmitt's "learning about" and "learning from" religion, perhaps extended to include a shared praxis approach, underpinned by Lonergan's method of self-reflection, should, it is argued, occur contemporaneously as one struggles to deal with truth claims. In this way, one gradually acquires the capacity to enter genuine dialogue with oneself and with the other.⁴² It primarily addresses the person's spiritual dimension from which he/she is enabled to move to a fundamental option on what worldview, religious or other, to adopt.⁴³

Choice of a life-stance at this stage demands a high degree of freedom. This needs to be developed so that the person is empowered to choose what he/she has reason to value.⁴⁴ To ensure an acceptable degree of freedom, the range of options in terms of forms of religion or non-religion presented to the learner needs to be reasonable since all options would be impossible. Here, a particular school's embodied faith perspective in a denominational school, Catholic or other, could, perhaps should, be clearly presented, even prioritized, not as the only option but as one,

41 A. Wright, "The justification of compulsory religious education: a response to Professor White," *British Journal of Religious Education* 26,2 (2004), 173.

42 *Background Paper*, 29,31

43 Spiritual has a range of meanings but here it is taken to mean something more fundamental than 'religious' something akin to "the eternal quest for meaning that helps us to make sense of our finitude." (R. Nash "A Letter to Secondary School Teachers: Teaching about Religious Pluralism in Public Schools." In N. Noddings, ed. *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness* (New York: Teachers' College Press 2005), 98). See also: N. Noddings, "Spirituality and Religion in Public Schooling," in D. L. Coulter, J.R. Wiens, eds. *Why do we educate? Renewing the Conversation* (Malden MS: Blackwell, 2008), 186-195; U. King, *The Search for Spirituality* (London: Canterbury Press, 2009), 2,38; *Background Paper*, 2017, 30.

44 A. Sen, *Development as Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 285; M. J. Buckley "The Structure of the rules for discernment of spirits," *The Way Supplement* 20 (Autumn 1973): 19-37.

among others.⁴⁵ For current syllabi, what is being proposed builds on the search for meaning which they attempt to promote.⁴⁶ The challenge of how to spark interest in this remains, drawing on the teacher's use of resources from areas such as life, philosophy, science, literature, art, and history including a capacity to stretch subjects like science or history from within. This appears to be greatly helped, as was often noted in interviews, through projects of various kinds including those of transition year "work outside the school."⁴⁷ As currently delivered, however, it was repeatedly emphasized that they need major review in terms of the range of choice, level of age appropriateness, and assessment.

Starting with one's own religious or non-religious tradition makes sense in an effort to engage. However, Christianity and Catholicism may have for students, as many of the interviews and surveys pointed out, a note of staleness, "déjà vu," of being overworked, "simply a repetition of what was done in primary school." Surely, to be avoided, as students noted, is being overloaded with Christianity.⁴⁸ This concurs with the widely heard call from teachers that the syllabi need to be radically pruned in terms of (mainly Christian) content. Because of such sense of 'jadedness,' some teachers indicated that they found that it was more effective to start with religions other than Christianity.

Movement beyond what might arguably be termed 'learning about' to 'learning from' religion remains a major challenge.⁴⁹ It entails leading the learner artfully in the first place towards an appreciation of his/her sense of ultimacy wherever this might be found, perhaps in such things as sport, dance or music. Other forms of this might include gazing at a star filled sky, watching a beautiful sunset, in the excitement of watching a stormy restless ocean, or realizing the limits of one's life.⁵⁰ This shift to "learning from" needs, as already intimated, to take into consideration students' increasing disconnection from institutional religion because

45 B. Carmody, "The Catholic School: non-confessional?" *International Studies in Catholic Education* 9,2 (2017):162-175.

46 *Background Paper*, 10,20. See also on this: J. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981).

47 Here included were retreats especially those of Alpha, Credo, and Kairos with such projects as those related to the John Paul II awards, school trips or placements in Africa and Asia as well as pilgrimages to Lourdes and Knock.

48 *Background Paper*; 2017, 6,9,22; Fisher, *Schools and the Politics of Religion*, 102.

49 R. Pring, *The Future of Publicly Funded Faith Schools: A Critical Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2018), 92.

50 K. Broderick, E. Costello and B. O' Regan, with A. Travers (ed.), *Seek & Find* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), 36; S. Whittle, *A Theory of Catholic Education* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 117-131; G O'Hanlon, "Justice in the Global Economy: a theological reflection." In *Working Notes* 79 (December 2016), 17; Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 101-124.

THE FURROW

traditional religious imagery may have poor capacity to inspire.⁵¹ In the transition to “learning from” religion in terms of primarily exploring one’s own spirituality as is being proposed, the learner needs to be assisted in becoming aware of his/her subjectivity in appreciating his/her mystery-evoking dimension of life which, as Giddy points out, at the outset, is straightforward. Yet, for learners highly intent on gaining good grades in key subjects and dedicated to the so-called ‘god of points’ as their primary objective, encouraging this self-reflective dimension, counter cultural as it probably is, may be a major challenge for the teacher.

What has been discussed has significant implications for teacher education, particularly if it is increasingly becoming a job rather than as something more personally engaging. This was a recurring issue in the interviews. As a teacher educator put it: “We have an increasing number of teachers who have chosen religion because it is a useful subject, low entry points, who themselves have no faith interest whatever.” It was also pointed out that Irish Religious Education teacher-training is increasingly happening at university side by side with other branches of learning. This could provide the opportunity to educate future teachers to be more religiously critical, even if it carries with it the danger of approaching the subject in an overly depersonalized way.⁵²

CONCLUSION

The current situation of examinable Religious Education has been viewed in the light of various voices of criticism. Much has been achieved. The subject has acquired an improved academic status on the school curriculum. What is being proposed, in order to make it more educational, is to expand its methodological base. This can build on the student-centred approach already operating. However, while this way of teaching has merit, it needs to be repositioned by prioritizing Lonergan’s focus on self-awareness so that the student will be enabled to appreciate the nature and implications of self-knowledge as a means to choosing his/her worldview, religious or non-religious, responsibly and wisely.

51 R. Byrne, “In the cracks in the walls and foundations: a study of the perceived distinctiveness of Catholic voluntary second level schools in the archdiocese of Dublin.” (University College, Dublin: Ph. D thesis, 2015), 117,194, 210, 265.

52 Byrne, “Religious Education in Catholic Second-Level Schools,” 214-216.