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NATIONAL COUNCIL FOR CURRICULUM AND ASSESSMENT

COURSE COMMITTEE FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

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CONFIDENTIAL

PREAMBLE

The Provision of a National Syllabus for Religious Education at Post Primary level.

Over the years, several attempts have been made to draw up a syllabus for Religious education in second level schools. At senior cycle, for example, two syllabuses (1977 and 1982) were prepared with a view to the inclusion of Religious Education in the range of subjects examined in the Leaving Certificate programme. These syllabus reflected the contexts out of which they emerged. To a large degree they reflected the then provision made by the Christian churches for Religious education at second level. Neither syllabus was adopted. Legal difficulties, and a series of changes in Government, prevented their implementation but it is also true to say that there was little popular support for the notion of the formal assessment of Religious Education for national certification purposes at that time. Numbers of qualified teachers in the area were low and in Catholic schools, the impact of the catechetical movement had created an atmosphere in schools, unsympathetic to formal assessment and certification. The leaders of the Christian churches had, however, established a working party which prepared the 1982 syllabus. They concluded that the introduction of Religious Education as a subject for the Leaving Certificate was not merely desirable but feasible.

The Changing Context.

Much has changed in Ireland since the early 1980's. In the absence of a state syllabus, Christian churches have continued to implement their own syllabuses at second level. The number of teachers with qualifications in the area of Religious Education has increased. A 1991 survey noted that just over half (54%) of the respondents had formal qualifications in Religious Education and 82% of respondents had some qualification in the area.¹ It can be assumed that the upward trend in the number of qualified teachers has continued.

This increase in of the cohort of religion teachers reflects new developments in the provision of theology and philosophy as academic disciplines at third level. An increasing number of third level institutions now offer courses in these areas. The study of these subjects is no longer the preserve of the churches but is of interest to society in general, an interest reflected in the increasing numbers of lay people enrolled in these courses.

Alongside this growing interest in the study of theology and philosophy is a changing pattern in the religious practice and affiliation of the population as a whole. The 1991 census figures show increases in the numbers of people who declared themselves to be of no religion or members of minority religious groups. Surveys done by the churches as well as national and European studies of values and attitudes all point to the fact that in the Ireland of the 1990's, religion and religious belief has quite a different place from the position it held in the 70's and 80's. While there may be a drop in stated affiliation to the traditional religions Ireland is experiencing something of the European resurgence of interest in religious and the spiritual. The traditional polarisation between the worlds of science and religion is disappearing in a renewed interest in the origins and nature of life.

As a result of these changes and with the emergence of the secular interpretation of life, and also the growing number of non-traditional religious groups, as well as the communications revolution in Irish society, citizens are now likely to encounter not only the Christian traditions but a plurality of religious and non religious interpretations of life.

Within the Christian traditions there is a new emphasis on the need for dialogue and mutual understanding. This concern for dialogue is shared by the state.

¹ *Whither Religious Education*, Weafer & Hanley, Columba Press 1991, p.23

The Framework Document expresses this concern:

"Both Governments envisage that this new framework should serve to help heal the divisions among the communities on the island of Ireland; provide a forum for acknowledging the respective identities and requirements of the two major traditions; express and enlarge the mutual acceptance of the validity of those traditions; and promote understanding and agreement among the people and institutions in both parts of the island.²

It is worth noting that Religious Education is examined at G.C.S.E. and Advanced Levels in Northern Ireland and that the Christian churches have an agreed syllabus which meets the requirements of the core syllabus drawn up by the state.

The Legal Position of Religious Education.

National schools. The Stanley Letter (1831) provides for religious education in the national school system. It orders that it should be clearly separated from the rest of the school day and should be subject to the approval of the clergy concerned. However the Board of Commissioners claimed the right to control books used in religious education and required that a register of attendance be taken not just at religious education classes but "at Divine Worship on Sundays." The special provision was to ensure that children did not attend religious education of which their parents disapproved, but it is clear that the Board considered religious education to be of considerable importance. This acceptance of the importance of religion in the national school curriculum is reflected in the Rules For National Schools which states that "of all parts of the school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter, God's honour and service, includes the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use." The rules reflect the Stanley Letter's concern for the wishes of the parents and parental approval for religious instruction must be sought.

Secondary Schools. The Intermediate Education Act (1878) states that "no examination shall be held in any subject of religious instruction, nor any payment made in respect thereof". This examination bar was designed to exclude funding for the subject as funding was made by the intermediate board on the basis of examinations. By 1878, as well as a number of Protestant secondary schools, there was a large number of thriving Catholic schools and diocesan colleges all privately financed. The Government of the day had no desire to actively fund religious education in these schools. Therefore the Intermediate Act says does not re state the importance of religion on the curriculum but does echo its concern that no child was to attend religious instruction of which its parents disapproved. Interestingly, the "Rules and Programme for Secondary Schools" (1987/88-1994/95) contain one reference to "religious studies" in the section pertaining to the Junior Cert. Civics programme.

"During his religious studies especially, the pupil will have instilled into him the virtues of charity, honesty, self-sacrifice, purity and temperance and will acquire a complete moral code which will serve as the chief guide of his conduct and the mainspring of his actions and thinking". (P.79)

The Rules therefore assume that religious education does have a place on the curriculum and assigns it a central role in the moral and ethical development of the students.

². *A New Framework For Agreement.* A shared understanding between British and Irish Governments to assist discussion and negotiation involving the Northern Ireland Parties. para. 38.

Vocational Schools. The 1942 Memorandum v.40 dealing with the vocational sector of education is more specific about the requirement to provide religious education and accords it a central place on the curriculum:

"The bulk of the time must be allotted to practical subjects because of the urgency of the economic end for the young persons for whom the courses are designed, but this makes it all the more necessary to safeguard the general purpose of education which is to develop, with the assistance of God's grace, the whole man with all his faculties, natural and supernatural, so that he may realise his duties and responsibilities as a member of society, that he may contribute effectively to the welfare of his fellow man and by so doing attain the end destined for him by his Creator."

In contrast with the 1930 legislation, the memorandum goes on to emphasise the place of religion in the whole school and makes provision for the appointment and payment of teachers in cooperation with the local ecclesiastical authorities.

In summary, the legal basis for the Irish education system at primary and second level has always acknowledged the place of religious education in the curriculum.

The Constitution.

The constitution underlines the rights and duties of parents in the provision of education for the nation's children. Schools are to assist the parents in their role as the primary and natural educators of their children. Providing a syllabus for religious education, based on educational principles and assessed according to those same principles state is would support support this right of the parents in this regard. A Religious Education syllabus, based on the educational principles which govern other subject areas, has a legitimate place on the school curriculum. Mindful of the rights of parents however, such a syllabus would be **optional**. The *educational* basis for any syllabus ensures that concerns about article 44.2.4 of the constitution on issues of endowment and discrimination can be overcome.

Conclusion

Given the social and religious context in which Ireland now finds itself, the stated commitment of the Government to promote dialogue and mutual understanding, and the tradition of legislative emphasis on the place of religious education in schools it would now appear appropriate that the state take steps to offer a syllabus and to provide for its assessment and certification.

EDUCATIONAL RATIONALE

The N.C.C.A. works from the following aim of education which has been accepted by successive Ministers for Education.

"The general aim of education is to contribute towards the development of all aspects of the individual, including aesthetic, creative, critical, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual development for personal and family life, for working life, for living in the community and for leisure."

It follows that the curriculum of the school should reflect and make provision for the realisation of these aims.

In the context of this definition, human development is the development of the awareness of self as separate and unique with the capacity for reflection, imagination and creativity; open to ideas of truth, goodness, and beauty. From earliest times, the experience of the spiritual and the human search for meaning have frequently found expression in a religious interpretation of life. The history of humanity has been indelibly marked by the contributions of religious traditions. In Ireland, Christianity is part of our rich cultural heritage and has played a significant role in shaping our vision of ourselves, our world and our relationships with others. However, effective functioning in an increasingly complex culture demands that individuals have an understanding of a variety of religious traditions and an appreciation of the richness of the major religious traditions encountered not just in Ireland, but in Europe and in the wider global context. The secular response to experience, increasingly a part of modern culture must also be engaged with.

While it is the concern of the whole curriculum to promote personal growth and to facilitate the spiritual development of students, Religious Education is well placed to provide students with opportunities for reflection on and understanding and interpretation of human experience and participation in their own conscious and critical development.

Religious Education ensures that students are exposed to a broad range of religious traditions and to the non-religious interpretation of life. It has a particular role to play in the curriculum in the promotion of tolerance and mutual understanding. It seeks to develop in students the skills needed to engage in meaningful dialogue with those of other or of no religious traditions.

Religious Education, in offering opportunities to develop an informed and critical understanding of the Christian tradition in its historical origins and cultural and social expressions, should be part of a curriculum which seeks to promote the critical and cultural development of the individual in his or her social and personal contexts.

Religious Education makes a significant contribution to a curriculum which seeks to provide for the moral development of students. It introduces a variety of ethical codes and norms for behaviour. Students are encouraged to engage critically with these moral systems in an effort to arrive at a thought-through moral stance which will serve as a foundation for the decisions they will face as adults and for the patterns of behaviour and commitment which will mark how they will relate to their local communities and to the world in general.

In summary, Religious Education can justly claim an integral part of any curriculum which aims to promote the holistic development of the individual for personal and social life.

A RELIGIOUS EDUCATION SYLLABUS FOR
LEAVING CERTIFICATE

AIMS.

1. To foster an awareness that the human search for meaning is common to all peoples of all ages and at all times.
2. To explore how this search for meaning has found and continues to find expression in religion.
3. To identify how religious traditions have contributed to the culture in which we live and continue to have an impact on personal lifestyle, inter-personal relationships and relationships between individuals and their communities and contexts.
4. To appreciate the richness of religious traditions and to acknowledge the non-religious interpretation of life.
5. To contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the student.

COURSE OUTLINE

The course is divided into two parts as follows: