**What May a Catholic School Teach?**

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*A strange question?*

Isn’t it obvious what a Catholic school may teach regarding religion? Catholicism! Indeed, a Catholic school has a responsibility to teach Catholicism. Isn’t that a ‘no-brainer’? But some argue, or just simply assume and assert, that all schools should teach a multi-religious curriculum.[[1]](#endnote-1) This paper offers a critical response to such arguments, assumptions, and assertions.

*Catholic truth claims*

Let us begin by considering the following claims about Jesus Christ: Jesus is Lord. He is God incarnate. Or consider some claims about the Church: The Church is the People of God. She is the Mystical Body of Christ.

*Teaching about beliefs*

These examples of important doctrines[[2]](#endnote-2) about Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church draw from the Bible, the Creed, and the Second Vatican Council. May a Catholic school teach these and similar doctrines? An easy answer says that (a) a Catholic school may teach *about* these doctrines, and others like them. For example, it may teach that these statements are Catholic beliefs.[[3]](#endnote-3) It might be said in addition that (b) schools should teach about other religions too, and not just about Catholicism. (This paper agrees that Catholic schools should teach about the beliefs of other religions.) Furthermore, a ‘teaching about religions’ approach need not be a bland presentation of facts and figures that only superficially or ‘academically’ studies the phenomenon of religion. It might usefully include (c) exploring the emotional and personal side of ‘religion’ as a feature of people’s lives, including the lives of one’s pupils. The ‘teaching about religions’ approach has much to recommend it. Nevertheless, there is something missing from it, and this matters for Catholic RE.

*Teaching about beliefs vs teaching truth*

What is missing? Let us distinguish between teaching *about* x and teaching *that* x is true. Notice the difference between, on the one hand, teaching *about* the claims that Jesus is Lord and the Catholic Church is his Mystical Body, and, on the other hand, teaching *that* these claims about Jesus and the Church *are true*. The latter type of teaching comes not from mere theoretical assent, but also includes a commitment to the truth and significance of the teachings in how we go about living our lives, and, more specifically, our activity of running a school, allowing these truths to shape our attitudes and practices and overall worldview as Catholic educators and pupils – our ‘ethos’. These teachings are not mere dry facts or pieces of information, but dynamic truths that can inspire, affect, and shape one’s whole life and one’s community. May a Catholic school teach not only *about* Jesus Christ and the Church and what this religious language might mean, but also *that* the teachings about Christ and the Church are actually true objectively (and that there are good reasons for believing that they are true, reasons that can and should be explored and investigated)?

*Catholic schools contested*

Again, one might say that surely there is no difficulty here. A Catholic school is surely entitled to teach that Jesus is Lord, and that the Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, as these are Catholic beliefs and the school is a Catholic school.[[4]](#endnote-4) This has been the assumption for quite some time in Ireland. But over the last few years in Ireland, there has been a persistent attack on Catholic schooling.[[5]](#endnote-5) Ostensibly, the public discussion in Ireland has been mainly focused on the overly high proportion of publicly-funded Catholic schools at primary level. The Catholic Church in Ireland accepts that there is a problem here (as does the Iona Institute and this paper) and supports generally the need for change. But in the debates about this, it has been noticeable that often the very idea of Catholic schooling itself is implicitly or even explicitly questioned, especially publicly-funded Catholic schooling.

*Catholic schools are a legitimate part of our pluralist system*

I have already addressed this matter in an earlier paper published by the Iona Institute in 2008.[[6]](#endnote-6) Private and publicly funded Catholic schools are completely legal and constitutional in Ireland. They are part of an Irish pluralistic educational system. They are not incompatible with a ‘modern republic’ or with the modern world or with a ‘changing Ireland’, as some claim. Catholic schools have made and continue to make a huge and valuable contribution to Irish individuals, families, society and the state. A key justification for Catholic schools is the principle that parents are the primary educators of their children, and thus they have a right and a responsibility to raise their children with what they consider to be sound values and true beliefs about life, humankind, ethics, and the transcendent dimension of existence. Schools should work in harmony, in partnership, with parents in this regard, and not exclude them. This is not a demand or requirement that *all* schools should be Catholic in Ireland; but *some* should, given the real demand for this kind of patronage and ethos. It is the main argument of this paper that those schools that are Catholic within a proportionate and pluralistic system of schools *should be allowed and supported by society and the state to be distinctively Catholic*.

*Catholic or multi-denominational/non-denominational schools?*

It seems evident that Catholic schools are under increasing pressure to operate in a manner that is *de facto* multi-denominational or even non-denominational, to make themselves acceptable politically and socially. It is considered acceptable only to teach *about* Catholic beliefs and values and practices, and always within certain politically correct constraints. One must be ‘inclusive’. The term ‘inclusive’ and related terms are bandied about a lot, but rarely given any critical attention. What exactly does ‘inclusive’ mean and require? How for example may one teach ‘Jesus is Lord’ in an appropriate manner in a Catholic school that is required by public policy and social expectation to be ‘inclusive’?

*‘Teaching about religions’ to be inclusive leads to Relativist Catholic RE*

One answer is the ‘teaching about religion’ approach already outlined above.[[7]](#endnote-7) Teachers teach *about* ‘Jesus is Lord’ as a belief but do not teach it as an objective truth. We might call this *a relativist approach to RE*, including Catholic RE, that aims to be socially and politically acceptable as ‘inclusive’ education. One may teach ‘Jesus is Lord’ as a belief that some people happen to have, including some of one’s pupils, and even that this belief is ‘true’ for those who happen to believe it. But it is not objectively true, or at least one cannot know if it is objectively true. It is ‘true’ only relative to the believer. Perhaps the belief is not about objective reality at all but only concerns the believer’s religious attitude or emotions, acting for the believer as an inspirational myth. Perhaps its truth is unknowable and therefore held only as a personal religious opinion (or, in other words, a guess).

Teachers should acknowledge that belief is not merely personal but has a social dimension too. People may share the same beliefs. However, relativist ‘believing’ is essentially a personal choice to believe, even if it is socially influenced.[[8]](#endnote-8) Religious belief is seen here as a kind of wishful thinking, not knowledge. A religious belief is considered to be a kind of ‘useful fiction’ that one holds because it is attractive relative to the desires one happens to have. Perhaps one finds the belief consoling or inspiring, or interesting and imaginative, or one merely wishes to respect one’s upbringing. But, in any case, one is not claiming that the belief *is true*.

Also, importantly, the relativist teacher does not treat beliefs that oppose theirs as false. For instance, the Catholic relativist RE teacher does not see a religion such as Islam that considers Jesus Christ to be merely a prophet and not ‘Lord’ (divine) as mistaken in that belief. Muslims’ belief in Jesus as a prophet are genuine ‘beliefs’ that are ‘true’ for them, true relative to their believing sincerely in them. *It’s as if the relativist teacher is replacing the concept of ‘objective truth’ with ‘personal truth’ and/or ‘communal truth’.* What matters is only that the believer chooses to believe freely and sincerely – and also with a completely ‘inclusive’ acceptance of, and respect for, others’ beliefs, even apparently opposite beliefs. In an RE lesson taking this kind of approach, which in Catholic schools we might call Relativist Catholic RE, there are no wrong answers. Everyone is right. Everyone is happy. I’m ok and you’re ok.[[9]](#endnote-9)

*The attractions of Relativist RE for liberalism*

Even relatively ‘true’ religious beliefs can have an objective personal and social meaning and value worth acknowledging, and exploring, and even celebrating in school. But Relativist RE does this in a relativist manner. The approach of a school promoting critical thinking by taking a relativist and pluralist approach to religion[s] thus works to counter a perceived narrowness of religious parents and religious communities who hold religious beliefs as objectively true. Only thus, it may be supposed, can schools, as instruments of the state and of society, ensure an ‘inclusive’ society. Such a society is free from religious bigotry, fanaticism, fundamentalism, oppression, sectarianism, and violence. Relativist Catholic RE would therefore be acceptable to the ‘liberal establishment’ in Ireland, aiming to avoid social divisions and religious oppression and violence. It is plausible and attractive insofar as it appears fair and peaceful and open-minded and accepting of difference and diversity. To speak more cynically, it ticks all the politically correct boxes. However, even if one avoids a cynical approach and admires people’s noble motivations, one needs to ask: Is Relativist Catholic RE coherent as an approach? And will it authentically and effectively contribute to the peace and unity and justice we all want?

*Relativist RE presents a ‘counterfeit Catholicism’*

There are serious problems with the approach. One problem is that if RE, even with noble intentions, presents all religions as (only) relatively ‘true’, this misrepresents those religions that understand their beliefs to be objectively true. With regard to Catholicism, our focus in this paper, such relativism presents only a ‘fake Catholicism’. But misrepresenting religions is not acceptable in any school.

Even more foundational than Jesus Christ or Church for Catholicism, is the truth about God, basic theism. This is often overlooked, downplayed, or misrepresented.[[10]](#endnote-10) When Catholics say that they believe in God’s existence, this phrase has a particular meaning for us. We don’t mean that ‘God’ exists for us insofar as we believe in ‘God’. We are not referring only to an idea in our heads. We are referring to an objective reality, one that exists entirely independently of our believing in it. The God-idea in my head grasps a God-reality outside my head, so to speak.[[11]](#endnote-11) God is not a mere human idea or concept. And so, if the RE teacher presents Catholic belief in God as essentially and only a personal and subjective matter or concept, and even if the teacher expands this to a socially constructed idea believed by many people, *this is not what Catholicism holds it to be*.

This kind of RE would therefore distort the reality of what Catholicism truly holds regarding God. And the same would be true regarding any other theistic religions, for example, orthodox Judaism or Islam, which hold God’s existence to be an objective truth and not a merely made-up notion, however inspiring or imaginative or powerfully affecting or culturally influential that made-up notion might be. To teach about such religions in a way that relativises them is to distort them and, thus, mislead pupils. But *any* good education should avoid distorting its content and misleading students.

*Relativist RE is Reductionist RE*

So the relativist problem *reduces* religious truths/beliefs to personal psychology or sociology. When a Catholic says ‘I believe that God exists’, it is not intended as a statement essentially about that Catholic’s psychology. When a Catholic RE teacher says that ‘Catholics believe that God exists’, this is not a statement primarily about the sociology of Catholicism. The statement ‘God exists’ is a statement *about God*. The statement ‘Jesus is Lord’ is a statement *about Jesus*. These statements are not primarily about the person or persons making them.[[12]](#endnote-12) Is Catholic RE an RE focused exclusively on religious psychology and sociology (and history and geography and anthropology and so on); or is it an RE that also includes a focus on God himself and specifically religious and theological *truths about God and his dealings with us* and the world? I suggest we should be concerned if it is relativist and reductionist RE that predominates in Catholic classrooms. This kind of RE emphasises the natural rather than the supernatural. It tends to reduce supernatural truths about God (and Christ and the Church) to natural truths about believers. This is not to deny in any way the importance of religious psychology, history, sociology, and anthropology in any adequate Catholic RE. It is simply to insist that it is never acceptable to reduce *Catholic* RE exclusively to these disciplines. If it is to avoid presenting to pupils a fake Catholicism, Catholic RE has to operate within the context of a free and firm acceptance of the supernatural truths proposed in divine revelation and shared with us in various ways, most especially through the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ.[[13]](#endnote-13)

*Relativist Catholic RE teaches that Catholicism is false*

Relativistic-reductionistic Catholic RE not only waters down and distorts Catholicism but it also teaches pupils, even if inadvertently, that Catholicism is not true (or at least its supernatural aspect is not). Authentic Catholicism teaches that God exists and has made his existence known to us through reason and faith, and has communicated to us through divine revelation, especially in Jesus Christ. Relativist-reductionist ‘Catholic’ RE presents this as entirely a matter of human psychology or sociology, giving the firm impression that there is no objectively knowable natural or supernatural truth to these matters of Catholic belief. This contradicts Catholic belief and effectively denies it by reducing it to *only* ideas in a person’s mind or in the shared ideas of a group. Surely this is a very odd thing for a Catholic school to do. And it is an unacceptable thing to require a Catholic school to do. However, it seems that Catholic schools are under pressure to downplay the supernatural aspects and the truth-dimension of Catholicism, in order to fit in to modern society and its expectations and politically correct views.

*Commitment to reason and faith, not indoctrination*

But how can a Catholic school believe Catholic beliefs to be objectively true, and teach accordingly, in a manner that is ‘inclusive’ and respectful, and accepting of diversity and difference, and open-minded and committed to critical thinking, and welcoming of all, and properly educational? Some think such belief and teaching simply cannot be a realistic option. They assume that any catechetical approach to RE, namely one that speaks the language of faith to promote faith, is to be rejected as nothing better than narrow ‘religious instruction’, or even worse, ‘religious indoctrination’. This ‘religious instruction’ is a thing of the past, so it is supposed, and has now been replaced by a more adequate ‘Religious Education’ [‘RE’] that avoids catechesis by teaching in a supposedly more ‘objective’ and ‘neutral’ and ‘critical’ manner. (These ideas underlie the relativist-reductionist Catholic RE outlined above.)

But who is to judge what is objective, neutral and critical? May Catholic parents and Catholic schools do so? Catholicism places a huge emphasis on reason and faith being closely interrelated, fully compatible and mutually supportive. John Paul II wrote about this in his important encyclical *Fides et Ratio [Faith and Reason]* in 1998. Pope Benedict XVI addressed it often, as in his famous 2006 Regensburg address. Catholicism does not accept rationalism; it also rejects fideism. Divine revelation accepted in faith can certainly take us beyond what unaided human reason can know (e.g. to the truth that Jesus is Lord); but faith is not against reason. Philosophical reasoning and historical reasoning can lead us to the threshold of faith. It is not accurate to define (Catholic) faith as believing something without reason[s], without evidence – but unfortunately this seems to be how many see it, including, most surprisingly, some Catholics.

*Theologically committed to reason and genuine education*

Because Catholic RE is committed to a view of faith and reason being mutually supportive, it does not consider genuinely Catholic RE to be indoctrination. A Catholic school should be totally committed to educating students to use their intellects, to question and to search for answers, and to develop critical thinking skills. Catholics believe that God is supremely wise and intelligent and that he has imbued the cosmos with order and intelligibility. Also, he has made humankind in his image (see Genesis 1:26), creating us with intellect and free will, able to know and understand the true and to choose the good and appreciate the beautiful. There is thus no problem with a scholarly and academic approach to RE that is also a faith-based approach; and there is no incompatibility with a Catholic school being totally devoted to scientific study, historical study, and other kinds of ‘secular’ disciplines of study, as well as being totally devoted to God. Catholic faith supports scholarly study throughout the curriculum. Scholarly study belongs in the RE class. It would seem opportune *to consider reintroducing some element of apologetics into Theology and RE*, which would help Catholics to appreciate the reasonableness of their faith and enable them to reply to objections.[[14]](#endnote-14) It is important that Catholics learn that whilst their Catholic faith cannot be reduced to rationalism, neither is it a form of fideism. The Church needs to make available whatever resources and guidance and support are necessary for Catholic teachers to be willing and able to teach Catholicism confidently and accurately, and without being tempted to reduce Catholic RE to any form of relativistic or reductionist RE.

*Catholic RE can and should include education about other religions and traditions*

Catholic RE should include teaching about other religions. It should teach about non-religious views of life too. Of course, it makes excellent pedagogical and theological sense that, especially in the early years, Catholic pupils should be well grounded in their own Catholic faith first. But later, and gradually, they should be introduced to other traditions and philosophies appropriately and respectfully, and in a pedagogically sound manner.[[15]](#endnote-15) One reason for teaching about other religions in Catholic RE is that we live in a country and world with people of various beliefs and it is good for us to know about this. It is important to learn about belief systems (and believers) in a manner that emphasises the promotion of respect for others, even those we disagree with on important matters of belief and values. One way of trying to do this is the relativistic-reductionist ‘Catholic’ RE, criticised above. *But there is a different way of teaching about religions, from within the religious tradition of Catholicism, not diluting or distorting this tradition, but being inspired and guided by it­.* The foundations of this approach are set out in the Second Vatican Council documents, especially those on the Church, ecumenism, world religions, and religious freedom. These documents teach Catholics that there is goodness and truth to be found in other religions, and that people in other religions, and even non-believers, can ultimately be saved through Christ. Rays of God’s light and love can be found to some extent outside the visible borders, so to speak, of the Bible and Sacred Tradition and the Church. This is not to deny that there are serious differences between religions and that there are religious errors. Religions are not equally objectively true and good, because they cannot be, logically speaking, given that many of their beliefs are mutually contradictory. Catholicism holds the Catholic religion to be the true religion.[[16]](#endnote-16) But religions are not totally exclusive of each other. There is some important common ground shared between faiths and worldviews, and it is important not to focus only on differences, however important, but also on that common ground. It is only on the common ground of shared beliefs and values that a unified and peaceful society can be built and maintained, and healthy diversity can flourish. Interreligious dialogue and good education can contribute to this. As Catholicism believes in a God who is the Creator of all, and who reveals himself and his truth to some extent in nature, Catholics can study other religions and philosophies with a view not only to learning about cultures and history and people, but *also about religion and God, including their own religion of Catholicism*. For example, I’ve seen Catholic pupils learn from the impressive example of five-times-daily prayer in Islam not only to appreciate the religious sincerity and commitment of Muslims but also the importance of daily and frequent prayer for themselves as Catholics. It is not that the importance of prayer cannot be learned from Catholicism itself, as it can and should, but sometimes seeing a truth in a new context can make it easier to grasp. Even though Catholics, and Christians generally, consider praying to the Triune God to be the fullness of religious truth, we can respect the seriousness of Muslim prayer to the one God, even though Muslims don’t accept the doctrine of the Trinity. One could say something similar about the value of learning judiciously from the ascetic practices found in Eastern religions. Inter-religious teaching and learning can and should be part of genuine Catholic RE.

There is always something to respect in any person’s conscientiousness and seriousness, even if one strongly disagrees with the conclusions that that person reaches. And, happily, we find many examples of moral and religious seriousness in other religions and worldviews. Again, it should be emphasised that if one follows the teaching of Vatican II closely and accurately, and avoids the all-too-common simplistic version of it that reduces to mere relativism, one can teach a real respect for other religions and world views that is compatible with Catholic faith. And this respect, which can be embraced *because of one’s Catholic faith and not in spite of it*, makes a genuine contribution to building a united and peaceful community. It makes good sense for the Irish state and society to support this in Catholic schools.

*Inclusive Ethics teaching?*

What of ethics? What may Catholic schools teach regarding morality, about right and wrong actions, virtues and vices, good and bad character? There has been an attempt recently in Ireland to introduce into all schools an ethics programme that is quite separate from any Catholic religion programme. It is assumed that this should be no problem for Catholic schools, but this is very questionable. The new approach seems to draw some of its justification from the fact that Catholic schools do not have only Catholic pupils but also pupils of other Christian traditions, other religions, and pupils of no religion. Perhaps it is also being assumed that a school is obligated by the Irish Constitution and the recent Education Act to provide for the moral education of all its pupils. A Catholic school, it is supposed, cannot do so by providing a Catholic ethics programme, as not all its pupils are Catholic. Therefore, an alternative ethics programme for all must be provided.[[17]](#endnote-17)

*Diversity is no excuse to water down RE and ethics*

But how can it be right to take advantage of the inclusiveness of Catholic schools, which typically welcome pupils of all sorts of backgrounds, as a basis for effectively preventing those schools from providing a distinctively Catholic RE and ethics programme? Obviously, the presence of non-Catholic pupils in a Catholic school presents major logistical and practical challenges when it comes to RE and ethics programmes. Schools will have to work out solutions to these challenges, such as allowing and facilitating withdrawal of pupils from class when necessary. Catholicism is not to be imposed on any pupil, and, even regarding Catholic pupils, it should always be a matter in Catholic schools of *proposing* the faith rather than imposing it. Therefore, it is not necessary to water down the RE and ethics programmes, never mind presenting explicit or even implicit anti-Catholic messages, in order to be ‘inclusive’ of all pupils. (In any case, as argued above, a relativist and reductionist RE and ethics programme will not be genuinely inclusive of Catholicism and, therefore, will effectively exclude Catholics *as Catholic*.)

*Just let the pupils decide for themselves?*

What about just letting the pupils choose for themselves what ethics they will live by? This seems democratic and fair; and it seems unfair and oppressive to ‘shove Catholic ethics down their throats’. Authentic Catholic RE and ethics does not involve shoving anything down throats, however, as Catholicism holds its religious and ethical beliefs as being fully harmonious with reason and with human needs and free will, and our true and lasting fulfilment. Being a morally good person is being a fully reasonable person. The objective principles and norms of morality are not unfairly imposed on people: they are not mere external and arbitrary demands made by a tyrant God or church (or state!). Because ethics is a matter of being fully reasonable, and human beings have a natural gift of reason (it is not exclusively a matter of grace or faith), then it makes sound theological, as well as good pedagogical, sense for pupils to be involved as active participants in moral education in Catholic schools. They are not mere passive recipients. No sound ethics course would ever treat its pupils as totally passive anyway. Pupils should be involved in questioning, exploring, discussing, analysing case studies, reflecting, and so on.

*Pupil participation does not equate to relativistic ethics*

But we have to be careful here. There is a huge difference between, on the one hand, having pupils fully and actively involved in their ethical education, and, on the other, teaching ethics as something that the individual can just choose for him or herself. Just as there is a relativistic approach to RE, criticised above, there is a relativistic approach to ethics too, which holds that moral truths are subjectively true but not objectively true. Therefore, a moral norm can be ‘true for me’ whilst a seemingly opposite norm can be ‘true for you’. All that matters in ethics is that each one of us follow our own individual conscience and act deliberately and freely. But rather than being democratic and fair, this approach actually dissolves ethics and fairness and democracy. Rather than avoiding conflict and argument, it makes real discussion and real achievement of conflict resolution and peace impossible. How can ethical principles and norms be authoritative and guide us in discussions and living rightly, and help us to form just and flourishing communities, if they are simply made up by each individual? Even if we go further than this mere subjectivism, and teach our pupils that moral ‘truths’ are *socially* constructed, the question still arises: How can any person be obliged as a free person by a norm that is (merely) made up by a group of people? If one seeks to build ethics and ethics education on relativism, one is building on sand. ‘Everything is relative’ is a nice-sounding phrase, but it simply isn’t true. Some things in ethics must be solidly true and thus provide reliable foundations for one’s ethical decisions and actions, (including one’s facilitating, and participating in, truly valuable and ethically guided discussion in the classroom).

*Some aspects of ethics are legitimately relativistic, but all ethics isn’t*

This does not mean that ethics is never ‘relativistic’ to some extent, in the sense of being context-dependent. Catholic ethics holds that there is a legitimate element of contextualising in ethics, as there are some norms that apply to a person in a particular situation in a particular manner given that situation. Affirmative norms are always context-dependent (though never totally so). As a father, for example, I have ethical responsibility to raise my own children in a manner that is fair and sound and loving; other people (except my wife) do not have exactly those specific obligations. But my obligations to my children are not merely made up by me, or by others; they do not become real simply because I choose them to be real, or because others say they are real and enforce them on me. They are objectively real. They would apply to anyone in my position, so they are universal (even though just how they will apply may vary according to circumstances). Some of my fatherly obligations are absolute: there are some things a father should never do to his children. And although other people do not have my specific responsibilities as a father to my children, they do have related specific, objective responsibilities of their own, for example, not to unreasonably impede me in carrying out my fatherly duties, and, in some cases, they have the responsibility to support me in these duties. (The state’s provision of a variety of school types, including Catholic schools, is one example of respecting such objective ethical responsibilities of parents.)[[18]](#endnote-18)

*May Catholic schools teach absolute moral norms?*

It is a distinctive part of Catholic ethics to hold that some moral norms are absolute: they do not admit of exceptions.[[19]](#endnote-19) Not all moral norms are absolute, and it is important to acknowledge this, and to thus avoid a caricature of ethics, a straw man version of ‘absolute morality’ that is easy to dismiss. Some norms *are* absolute and we need to know which are the absolute norms. May Catholic schools teach that there are moral absolutes and which specific norms are absolute? Surely the answer must be yes. But what about people who disagree with the existence of moral absolutes, holding that all norms are only relative, and they all admit of exceptions, especially in hard cases or extreme circumstances? Or what about others who accept moral absolutes as possible, but disagree with some that the Catholic school teach? The problem is that although there are many aspects of morality that we share in society, there isn’t a consensus on all of morality. Switching from a Catholic RE teaching of ethics to a multi- or non-denominational ethics programme will not solve this problem. The fact is that neither all Christians nor all philosophers are in full agreement about the nature of ethics, its justification, and its content. We have to accept the fact that moral pluralism is real, albeit not total. The common ground that is shared (such as general exhortations to be fair, to be honest, to not discriminate unfairly, to care about the poor, to look after the planet, and so on) is no problem in terms of consensus, albeit at a very general level. And, as noted above concerning teaching about religions, a good school should emphasise the common ground. But what about the contested ground?

*Abortion*

Consider abortion as one example on ‘contested ground’.[[20]](#endnote-20) What may a Catholic school teach about it? Should schools ignore the matter completely, as too sensitive and controversial? Doing so would leave out an important part of ethics, and an important application of a central element of the Gospel: to love our neighbour as ourselves. One should teach in a manner that is pedagogically sound and aware of context and sensitivities.[[21]](#endnote-21) But this doesn’t mean never teaching challenging material. Pupils aren’t entitled to never be challenged. Good education will often challenge us. The Gospel is itself a challenging message, and at its heart is a challenging Person: The Lord Jesus Christ. True, the challenging aspect of the teaching should always be communicated in a way that is constructive and respectful and hopeful and positive. Catholicism is not just about high moral standards; it is also about God’s mercy, and our own calling to reflect God’s mercy. Good Catholic RE and ethical education should be as comprehensive as possible, leaving out nothing of the full Gospel.

*No wrong answers? – Majority rule? – Consensus is sufficient?*

One could try to make all pupils feel welcome in ethics education by assuring them that ‘there are no wrong answers.’ But is this genuine ethics? Or is it actually destructive of ethics? There really is no point in having class discussions about abortion, to focus on our specific example here, if every position on it is to be judged fully acceptable and true just because it is held sincerely. Nor is it good enough to go with whatever the class group come to as the majority opinion, or even the consensus opinion (noting that a majority is not necessarily a consensus, whether in a classroom or in a national referendum). A majority, and even a consensus, could be mistaken. What is needed is moral truth, and the truth is not necessarily a function of majority or consensus opinion.[[22]](#endnote-22) Objective facts and objective moral principles are needed for good moral discussion and judgement that leads to truth.

*Pro-life facts and moral principles are necessary elements of a good class discussion/lesson*

Consider the following, for example.

All human organisms begin to develop and grow at conception. All human beings (organisms) should be treated as persons. Although causing the death of a human person may be morally allowed in proportionate self-defence, deliberately taking the life of an innocent human person is always a serious injustice, a sin that is deeply offensive to God the giver of life, and utterly incompatible with following Christ.

A Catholic teacher will consider knowledge of these truths to be essential if one is to come to the correct answer to the question of the objective wrongness of abortion.[[23]](#endnote-23) It is not enough to just discuss the moral issue, look at examples/case studies, examine the various elements of the cases, share our feelings and opinions about the issues, and then count up the pupils on each side of the debate at the end. Nor is it enough to reduce the matter to psychology or sociology, asking pupils to merely focus on the various factors that can influence their thinking, such as parents, friends, society, religion and so on (which seems to be a typical approach in much RE recently). Discussion is very important, but moral education cannot be reduced to following a discussion procedure, with no attention to soundly evaluating the content of the discussion. Psychology and sociology are important, but genuine ethics is not a matter of mere genetics, neuroscience, upbringing, or social convention, especially when one finds conflicting ‘voices’ trying to influence one’s judgement and one has to adjudicate between these voices. We need to teach our pupils how to do this adjudicating soundly.

*‘Just follow your conscience’?*

Nor is it sufficient to fall back on: ‘Just follow your conscience.’ This approach has been popular in much Catholic moral theology and RE in the past few decades, but it fails to answer the real questions being asked. When someone asks, for example, if abortion is always wrong, he or she is not asking if a sincere conscience should be followed. (The answer to that question is yes – from the point of view of the person whose conscience it is.) The question about abortion is about abortion, so the answer should first be about abortion, not about conscience. Good Catholic RE will always place great emphasis on conscience and following one’s conscience – and teach the importance of this. But it will not reduce ethics to following conscience. Personal consistency and integrity are essential goods, necessary components of being a morally good person, of being conscientious, of being of good character. But other values matter too. And in the case of abortion, the good of respecting human life matters as well as the good of acting consistently with one’s conscience. In a conscience correctly informed about abortion, the goods of respecting human life and of acting consistently with one’s conscience combine in a seamless whole, in personal integrity. Conscience must take into account more than just conscience itself. Conscience, to be true to itself, always seeks the objective truth.

*Wider applications*

What has been said above about abortion can be applied more widely, of course, to many more elements of a good moral education that seeks to inform conscience correctly with the truth. Many of these matters will be relatively uncontroversial, but perhaps difficult to consistently practice and will require virtue. Fairness, honesty, generosity, forgiveness, diligence, empathy, respect for creation, and so on – there are many important values and virtues to teach and explore and develop in the classroom. But some things that were uncontroversial up to just the other day, have become rather contested now. It would be tempting to avoid these issues and to focus on only the more ‘eirenic’ and popular issues. But, although this might seem a rather harsh thing to say, this kind of approach seems to me to be a cop-out, displaying a lack of responsibility on the part of Catholic schools and Catholic teachers. Certainly, one should not focus on *only* the difficult issues, nor teach them in a heavy-handed fashion. But one needs to cover even the complex and difficult topics (which are often very interesting to pupils too). Abortion has already been discussed briefly above. Another example found in Catholicism, along with other traditions of Christianity (and some other religions), holds a distinctive understanding of the nature and significance of marriage, and the sexual ethics that follows from this and serves to protect it. May Catholic schools teach these understandings? Yes, they should be allowed to teach appropriately and with sensitivity the Gospel vision of marriage and sexual ethics in a manner that can serve to accurately and honestly inform the consciences of their Catholic pupils. And they should offer appropriate help in developing the virtues needed to act always in a way that respects other people and the gift of human sexuality. And so too with the full range of Christian ethical matters: The Catholic school must be allowed to teach pupils to grow in love in a manner harmonious with the natural law and the Gospel. Attacking the ethos of Catholic schools regarding such controversial matters is incompatible both with Catholic parents’ right to choice of school ethos and with a genuinely pluralistic education system that respects that right.

*In various ways Catholic ethics teaches moral truth*

Exactly *how* Catholic RE is to teach the truths set out in the indented paragraph above about abortion, and similarly appropriate facts, practical principles, moral norms and virtues related to other ethical matters, has to be worked out in a manner that suits each pedagogical situation and respects one’s pupils and their context. There isn’t only one way to do it. Direct teaching is one method that shouldn’t be neglected. A more exploratory approach can be good too, and can be combined with the direct method. It can be appropriate to present various positions as hypotheses to be discussed, with attention to counter positions, and to help pupils to work towards understanding the full truth.[[24]](#endnote-24) But in any case, the method and attitude adopted by genuine Catholic RE is not going to teach pupils that morality is merely a matter of guesswork, or emotions, or arbitrary choice, or following the crowd or convention. Catholic ethics education teaches pupils how to think critically. Catholic RE teaches pupils that there is ethical truth to be found, and how to find it. This will include not only philosophical work, but also learning from divine revelation, which illuminates the work of human practical reason. This provides another reason why it is not good enough to simply let the pupils work it all out by themselves, and simply choose for themselves.[[25]](#endnote-25) To take that approach is to deny that the message of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the teaching of the Church (magisterium) (not to mention objective moral reasoning) has any role to play in a Catholic’s ethical thinking.[[26]](#endnote-26) And to do that is to teach that Catholicism is wrong and to deny God’s wise and loving revelation. No Catholic school should do that – or be required to do that. Catholic schools should adopt a transparent and confident approach to teaching Catholic ethics, respecting the vital role of personal freedom but not reducing ethics to an empty, relativistic ‘pro-choice’ position.

*Catholic ethics is distinctively but not exclusively Catholic*

‘Catholic ethics’ is a possibly misleading phrase. There is a distinctively Catholic approach to ethics; but the approach is not an exclusively Catholic one, at least not in its basic principles and norms. Catholicism holds morality to be a matter in principle of being fully practically reasonable, of being fully in harmony with the objective set of true moral principles and norms, the ‘natural law’. Therefore, it is true in principle that people who are not Catholic, or not Christian or even religious as such, can know moral truths and live by them. Moral truths are not matters *exclusively* of faith.[[27]](#endnote-27) It is possible for an atheist to recognise the moral rightness of respecting human life and the wrongness of deliberately killing the innocent – and even of seeing how this applies to the immorality of abortion and euthanasia, as well as to murder and war more generally. It is possible for many people, from various religious backgrounds, to acknowledge the importance of being fair, of respecting people’s human rights, of not unjustly discriminating, of not stealing, of not bullying, of helping those who are poor, of respecting other people, of co-operating in pursuit of the common good of all, of caring for one’s own genuine needs and having a proper and firm self-respect. This suggests that there is, or can be, some common ethical ground between pupils of different faiths and none, and that this common ground could form the basis for a shared ethics programme in Catholic schools. This common ground would be the natural law. A Catholic school can commit to teaching ethics as reason, with a firm confidence in philosophical ethics, as this can explore and discover the natural law. But at the same time, it needs to be acknowledged that ethics is not understood in Catholicism as a stand-alone discipline that is separated from Catholic faith and life. If Catholic schools present it as such, they will be presenting a fake-Catholicism and a fake-ethics. Catholicism holds that the Gospel of Jesus Christ illuminates ethics, clarifying the natural law’s principles and norms, and also giving ethics a deeper meaning and a higher supernatural motivation building on the natural. Faith and ethics are mutually supportive. Moral education is an integral part of any good Catholic RE. So, even though Catholicism, with its commitment to reason, and to belief in a wise and loving Creator who has made us in his image, fully accepts philosophy as a discipline, it would be unacceptable for a Catholic school to present a philosophical ethics programme that treats ethics as fully separable from Catholicism.[[28]](#endnote-28)

*Avoid the false answers to our question: What may a Catholic school teach?*

This paper has outlined a number of inadequate answers to the question of what a Catholic school in Ireland may be publicly permitted, and even supported, to teach in RE. These approaches sometimes merge into each other, and they include:

* teaching no religion in school at all
* teaching only the bare facts and figures about religions
* a Relativistic ‘Catholic’ RE that treats all religious beliefs, including Catholic beliefs, as true for only the believer[s]
* a Reductionist ‘Catholic’ RE that treats Catholic beliefs as nothing but matters of personal psychology or social construction or historical and cultural fact
* a World Religions course that treats Catholicism/Christianity as one of many religions that are all equally (but only relatively) ‘true’ and potentially meaningful.

This paper has also examined ethics teaching and noted some inadequate types of ethics teaching that are being proposed for Irish schools, including Catholic schools. Again, these approaches sometimes merge into one another. They include:

* a relativistic ethics that sees moral ‘truth’ as a matter of personal belief and choice or of mere social construction
* a moral education that aims at finding a majority or consensus view in the classroom, no matter what the content of the conclusion
* a moral education that reduces to following a procedure and does not base itself on knowledge of moral truth[s]
* an ethics that denies moral absolutes, or that misidentifies them
* an ethics that reduces to merely following one’s sincere conscience
* an ethics teaching that is exclusively secular, or narrowly philosophical, and that ignores the role of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the Church’s magisterium in the moral education of the Catholic conscience – and the centrality of Christ
* an ethics teaching that treats ‘Catholic ethics’ as exclusively a matter of faith divorced from reason, and thus inferior to genuine ethics and ethics education based on reason.

To follow any of these approaches to Catholic RE or Catholic moral education would be to do an injustice to coherent and honest Catholic education, to one’s Catholic and other pupils, to one’s school patrons and religious/local communities, and to society generally. It would be to present a Fake Catholicism and a Fake Ethics. Counterfeit Catholicism does not present pupils with sound and true beliefs, rooted in the reality of the Sacred and Transcendent dimension of reality, to inspire them and give them the truly valuable gift of a reason for living. Counterfeit Ethics does not provide pupils with solid and reliable norms and virtues to empower them to live rightly. Settling for these Fakes fails our pupils, but it also fails society. It is to fail to adequately address how we are to live together honestly, peacefully and respectfully in a situation of religious and ethical pluralism. It cannot be truly inclusive and respectful of diversity and our need for mutual respect in society to force Catholic schools to be Catholic in name only.

1. See Programme for Government 2020 for the latest example of this. It commits the Coalition Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party to: 'Ensure a curriculum of multiple religious beliefs and ethics is taught as a national curriculum of tolerance and values in all primary schools.' A Citizens’ Assembly on Education is also mooted. The agenda here surely goes further than simply avoiding a narrow focus on only one religion, such as Catholicism, in Religious Education classes, which no-one wants anyway. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. I realise that Catholic RE involves more than focusing on doctrine. But, for simplicity, I’m focusing on doctrine here. And even when Catholic RE involves other aspects of religion, such as narrative or spirituality, doctrine will always be important too. For example, teaching on Jesus will involve exploring the accounts of his life, teaching, and death, but will also involve his resurrection. And, importantly, the gospels will be approached not only as narratives, but also as totally reliable accounts of what Jesus really said and did (see Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, par. 19.) [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Many of these claims are also believed in by other Christians too, but for purposes of clarity and simplicity of style, as well as some theological reasons, this paper focuses on Catholicism. Much of what is written here may be applied to Church of Ireland schools too. ‘Jesus is Lord’ is one of the very first creedal statements of Christianity. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Of course, my reference to Jesus as Lord and the Church as His Body are examples of two teachings and not meant to set out the full range of Catholic doctrine. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See the following articles on the Iona Institute website for some examples:

   <https://ionainstitute.ie/forum-recommendations-would-seriously-undermine-identity-of-denominational-schools-says-iona-institute/> [10th April 2012]  
     
   <https://ionainstitute.ie/new-report-on-inclusion-in-schools-a-step-in-the-right-direction/> [2nd July 2014]  
     
   <https://ionainstitute.ie/bruton-speech-latest-in-a-series-of-moves-against-faith-schools-2/> [16th January 2017]

   A recent example is the harsh criticisms made of the *Flourish* resources for RSE, provided by the CPSMA: see <https://www.cpsma.ie/rse-primary-programme-flourish/> and, for an RTE report on criticism of it, see <https://www.rte.ie/news/education/2021/0513/1221396-relationship-sexuality-education/> [both from 2021]. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. My paper, *The Liberal Argument for Religious Schools,* is available on the Iona Institute website in the ‘Topics and Resources’ section, under the ‘Schools and Education’ subsection (the link is ‘The denominational schools debate’’). Also to be found in this subsection is a detailed Iona paper, *Religious Education and Human Rights*, 2nd edition 2011, which is well worth study (the link is ‘Religious Education and Human Rights submission’). Another resource is a recent book by Mark Hamilton, who was involved in Iona for many years. See his website sowhat.ie for details of this book, *Our School is* *Catholic: So What?* And for details of other books by him on topics related to matters dealt with in this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This paper makes no factual claims that certain kinds of teaching are prevalent in Catholic schools, which would be an empirical matter that needs further research. This paper is more concerned with the ideas and principles that shape behaviours, practices, and policies. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Some approaches to understanding religious belief would put the main emphasis on social influence and not on the individual at all. This is still a relativism approach. So too would be an approach that understands religious belief in entirely or mainly biological or evolutionary terms. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. It is not unusual in the RE classroom, as far as I’ve seen anyway, to hear a teacher ‘reassure’ pupils that there are no wrong answers (at least not where matters of deep belief and ethics are concerned). Even when well-intentioned, to encourage pupils to engage and share their opinions and ‘answers’, this approach tends to reinforce the relativist doctrine that there are no true doctrines. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. I have explored this point in a chapter in *Irish and British Reflections on Catholic Education* (Springer, 2021), edited by Seán Whittle: ‘A *De Fide* Case Against “Faith Development”?’ (at pp. 261-268). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. It is true that ‘God’ refers to a rather unique ‘object’ in that God is not one object alongside other created objects. So, it is true that God is ‘objective’ in a manner that it somewhat special, given God’s mysterious nature (which we can know only to some extent by analogy and negation). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Although this is only anecdotal, I have noticed a strong tendency amongst the trainee RE teachers that I deal with in DCU to see the aim of RE as learning about the beliefs of others, but not about God, as such. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. It might be objected that many pupils in Catholic schools are not Catholic, (and this includes nominally Catholic pupils too). Therefore, a Catholic approach to RE is not suitable or practicable. Certainly, a teacher and school need to take into account ‘where the pupils are at’, and this is a sensitive, complicated and challenging task, which I cannot deal with adequately in a short paper. However, even granted the need to adapt RE to suit one’s pupils, surely it is wrong to allow the diversity of pupils in the classroom to effectively ban distinctively *Catholic* RE. Even if all the pupils are not Catholic, it is still possible and, as this paper argues, only right for the teacher to teach from a Catholic faith (and ‘Catholic reason’) perspective, albeit always in a manner that respects the intellectual development and needs of the pupils. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. There is an impressive new programme for use in Irish schools, presenting a detailed examination of Catholicism in a manner that respects faith and reason, and is somewhat ‘apologetic’ in its approach, called ‘Credible Catholic’: see <https://www.catholicschools.ie/crediblecatholic/> [accessed 4th May 2023]. I might mention also the excellent distance-learning MA programme in Applied Catholic Theology in Maryvale Institute in Birmingham, UK, that focuses in one of its pathways on Apologetics. There are many good authors in the area of apologetics that individuals can study. Such authors include, in no particular order, Edward Feser, Trent Horn, Scott Hahn, Peter Kreeft, Peter S. Williams, Matt Fradd, Brandon Vogt, Alister McGrath, Paul Copan and other contemporary Christian authors. Classical authors include St Thomas Aquinas, St. John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, and C.S. Lewis. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See Anne Hession, *Catholic Primary Religious Education in a Pluralist Environment* (Veritas, 2015), pp. 160-161. Hession is the key author of the new Catholic primary RE programme, *Grow in Love*. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This is a truth not often heard today, presumably because it comes across as proud and judgemental. However, to acknowledge that Catholicism sees itself as the true religion is necessary if one is to present the Catholic faith accurately. Also, to hold the view is not to consider Catholicism as knowing everything, nor to consider Catholics as always perfect or wise, nor to deny the goodness and truth can be found, to some extent and sometimes very impressively, in other religions, and that we can learn inter-religiously. It should be noted that Vatican II spoke of the true religion *subsisting* in the Catholic Church, in order to affirm Catholicism whilst also reminding us that significant truths and values may be found elsewhere (see *Dignitatis Humanae [Declaration on Religious Liberty]*, par. 1). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. A similar argument is often presumed for presenting the relativist and reductionist type of RE programme that has been critiqued above: only that kind of RE is supposedly appropriate for all the pupils, who all have a right to RE. What is said in this section of the paper in commenting on the proposed new ethics programme may be adapted and applied to the revisionist approach to the Catholic RE programme too. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. For a very good treatment of matters raised in this paragraph, albeit focused on the situation in the USA rather than Ireland, see Melissa Moschella, *To Whom Do Children Belong? Parental Rights, Civic Education, and Children’s Autonomy* (Cambridge University Press, 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This is not to claim that only Catholicism acknowledges moral absolutes. In my opinion, everyone, even those who decry ‘absolutism’, affirm some moral absolutes. We all know that there are some things that one should simply never do to others, for example rape. For a defence of moral absolutes, see John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes* (Catholic University of American Press, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. It would be easier to focus on something that we agree on, such as environmental ethics, drawing on Pope Francis’s powerful encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, (2015). But virtually no-one challenges the Church’s influence on such topics as protecting the planet and working for justice for the poor, etc. So, these aspects of Catholic RE don’t need to be defended and encouraged as much as the more ‘neuralgic’ topics do. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. It should be noted that parents are Constitutionally entitled to have their child or children exempted from attending religion or ethics lessons. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. The very question of whether moral truth is entirely a function of majority or consensus opinion is one of the matters that a good ethics education can critically examine in the light of objectively sound standards. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Important note: We are not dealing here with the subjective culpability of an act, which is a different and more complex matter than an act’s wrongness. Catholic RE should teach pupils to know and understand the distinction between the objective moral quality of acts and the subjective culpability of moral agents. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The example of St. Thomas Aquinas is a classic one in this regard. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. It might be better here to talk of pupils choosing *by* themselves: it is an essential element of good ethics education to teach students to choose responsibly, but not in a manner that is narrowly individualistic. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Therefore, it would be unthinkable if a Catholic school were to teach about abortion, for example, without attending to the authoritative teaching of the Church about it in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes,* 27, and John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae,* 57 and 62. Or to teach about marriage whilst ignoring the teaching of Jesus Christ about it in Mark chapters 7 and 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. The assumption that Catholicism is a ‘faith’, understood as exclusively ‘faith’ (i.e. nothing to do with reason), is a common mistake. It leads many to overlook the fact that Catholicism is not constituted entirely by beliefs, but is also constituted by truths held by reason. (Sometimes, of course, truths are held by a complex combination of both faith and reason.) So it may be somewhat misleading to speak of ‘faith-based’ schools or RE, given that faith works along with reason, and that such schools and RE are also, to a large degree, reason-based too. (See note 10 above.) [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. It might be possible for a Catholic school to teach philosophical ethics to all its pupils, and then to teach a follow-on programme for Catholic pupils, and any others who wish to attend, where the faith dimension is integrated with the philosophical one. Something similar might be possible for a ‘teaching about religions’ approach for all pupils, complemented by a faith-based RE programme for those who opt into it. But this is a highly complex matter, especially given the close interweaving of reason and faith. One would not want to teach separate programmes in a way that gives the false impression that reason and faith are completely separate. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)