

## **Report into provision of Religious Education and Observance in Scotland.**

*N.B. This report will use the term RME (Religious & Moral Education) in relation to 'religious instruction' (RI) as required by the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. There are many other terms used, such as Religious Instruction (RI), RE (Religious Education), RMPS (Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies) and RERC (Religious Education in Roman Catholic schools). This report will use RME for two main reasons, firstly it provides clarity from other various terms used, and secondly the report is about RME provision in state run non-denominational schools. The report does not seek to give credence to one term in particular over another; it uses RME for simplicity as this is the term most widely used by the Scottish Government and Curriculum for Excellence.*

### **A (very) brief history of the Scottish education system**

No one can be in any doubt of the important role played by religious groups in the formation of the education system. In Scotland one of the first schools established was the High School of Glasgow (still operating), founded around 1124 as a choir school by the Roman Catholic Church. The Education Act 1496 required that "all barons and substantial freeholders shall out their eldest sons and heirs into school...". This resulted in a marked increase in literacy among young wealthy men in Scotland. The reformation in Scotland saw the establishment of the Church of Scotland as the official Church. John Knox was integral in reorganising the supervision and centralisation in Scotland of Education. The impetus behind this came from the common held belief at the time that knowledge of the scripture was the only path to eternal salvation.

The Education Act 1633 saw the introduction of a local tax to support Education provision in local church parishes. This situation continued, and more Acts of parliament were passed with the aim of establishing a school in every parish in Scotland. It is widely believed that the influence of Knox and the Church of Scotland led to a surge in literacy rates in Scotland, together with increased social mobility and increased standards of living; unfortunately the evidence for such a boom is scant at best. In 1872 with the Union of the Parliaments and the rise of industrialisation, the school system in Scotland moved to a state-funded model of free provision, as was the system in England at the time, also at this time Education also became compulsory for children aged 5 until thirteen.

Towards the end of the C19th, administration of the school system was in the hands of the 'Scotch' (later Scottish) Education Department in London. In 1918 the Ministry for Education moved some of its administration north of the border in order to focus more attention on Scotland, and in 1939 the Ministry was headquartered in Edinburgh. The Education (Scotland) Act 1980 made it a legal requirement for children to receive "religious instruction" (RME) and "religious observance" (RO), the act also set out the need for the Local Authority to appoint a "supervisor of religious instruction" who should be "a person approved as regards religious belief and character" and "shall be entitled to enter the school at all times set apart for religious instruction or observance". This Act blurs the distinction between RME (referred to in the

act as RE) and RO, it not only implies, but requires the two to be provided in a 'linked' way. After devolution in 1999 the Scottish Executive (later Government) set up the Education Department, which is now a devolved matter for the Scottish Government.

### **The situation at the moment**

Peppered throughout this report is various 'incarnations' of RME. In an attempt to appear more progressive and forward looking, RME has been re-branded as Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies. It appears that educators in this field want to (quite rightly) separate themselves from the idea of 'religious instruction' as it is no longer acceptable to the general public that their tax payer funded schools can be used a place for the proselytisation of eager young minds. The current thinking around RME as a progressive exploration of philosophy, with education **about** religion sounds very appealing, however this should be scrutinised seriously and publicly.

It is obvious, of course, given the fact that the education system has been under administrative control of the Church of Scotland for most of its existence, that RO would imply Protestant prayers to a Christian God. It can be argued that there is no specific mention of a particular religion in any parliamentary Acts or Circulars, and this is true. The supremacy of the Church of Scotland in educational circles can be seen in other evidence, such as the automatic right for Church of Scotland representatives and other religious leaders to sit on Education Authority Committees (Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973), and the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious & Moral Education (SJCRME) (previously the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious Education) which is a joint committee between Education Scotland and the Church of Scotland. The Scottish Government's new Curriculum for Excellence outlines a number of 'Experiences and Outcomes' for children and young people, these 'Es & Os' rely almost entirely on Christianity, with fleeting reference made to "...other organised belief and faith systems..." in an appendix. The Church of Scotland also appoints local ministers to state run, tax payer funded, and non-denominational schools. Given that the education system can be easily seen to promote Protestant Christianity as the main religion, one of the main reasons this assumption can be made is that there has never been a serious discontinuation of Christianity as the main focus of RME & RO. A gradual evolution in terminology over the years can be witnessed in legal and professional documents; these reflect a change in trends about what ideas are publicly acceptable. However the basic fundamentals of RME & RO have remained and the supremacy of Protestant Christianity through the Church of Scotland cannot be questioned seriously.

In contemporary education circles it is often said that RME and RO are different, some educators see RME as an academic pursuit based in broad knowledge of faith systems and philosophy through the example of religion (mostly Protestant Christian though), whereas RO is a separate time for prayer or 'religious confessional-ism'. However in a Circular in 2005 that Scottish Government officially acknowledged RO to mean "community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community". This is a very serious change to the meaning of RO, it is wrong to simply say that RO can be described in that way, can it really be said that

the Church of Scotland, in 1872, wanted anything other than traditional Protestant prayers promoted when they spoke of RO. Over recent years we have seen an attempt to shoe-horn very old, but very clear ideas and practices into a modern curriculum. This is not helped when members of the SJCRME (Scottish Joint Committee on RME), at a recent Humanist Society of Scotland meeting on 12/03/12, talk about the “dangers of secularisation” and the very worrying “Christian view of the scientific method”.

So given that RME and RO working within the legal framework and current RME curriculum show an obvious bias towards Protestant Christianity through the Church of Scotland, in what way can school really be said to be ‘non-denominational’. The 1872 Act and 1980 Act all enshrine the right of parents to withdraw their children from RME and/or RO if they so wish. This raised the strange paradox that a concerned parent must withdraw their child from state run, tax payer funded ‘non-denominational’ education system if they do not wish their child to be party to the Protestant Christian favouring National Curriculum which seeks to explore issues of morality using a Christian framework. This is compounded when the Scottish Government, as recently as 2011, said that removing a child from RME means; “Without this aspect of their education, learners will not enjoy the full benefits of Curriculum for Excellence.” This related only to RME, not RO, meaning that the in order for Scottish children to “...enjoy the full benefits of Curriculum for Excellence” they must forgo their centuries old right of withdrawal under the conscience clause and attend RME which shows a clear Protestant Christian bias. This is a very strange situation indeed, and as such the use of the term “non-denominational” should be seriously reconsidered.

Until as recently as the 1960’s in state run, tax payer funded ‘non denominational’ schools promoted Bible reading or Scripture classes as the normal method of ensuring RME (RI at the time) provision. These Scripture classes would be provided by either an unqualified teacher or another school teacher acting in an extra-curricular manner. This also lends credence to the idea that RME and RO are, by their nature, predisposed to Protestant Christianity. Due to social pressures RME became seen more as a ‘subject’ and professionally qualified teachers were therefore required to teach this. Despite this welcome change the teaching of this ‘subject’ is still afforded the rare privilege of being specifically required by law, and schools are still restricted to a centuries old interpretation of these laws, less we enact new legislation.

It has been mentioned previously in this report that RME relies entirely on a Protestant version of Christianity through the Church of Scotland. This is certainly the case based on legal and institutional frameworks which have existed for centuries. However it is often argued that in current practice RME gives children and young people a valuable experience and helps to arm them in world which “offers many different truth claims” (SJCRME). Putting aside the requirement for the Local Authority to, well, follow the law, the current institutional (with the Church of Scotland) and curricular arrangements still mean that a teacher is forced to rely on a Curriculum which is based almost entirely on Christianity and therefore shows an inherit bias. The SJCRME says that the curriculum was drawn up jointly with the Church of Scotland, and the decision to focus on Protestant Christianity was a contentious one, however that decision was indeed taken. It seems strange to have a National

Curriculum which clearly shows a bias in favour of one faith system over another, or none.

The Scottish Joint Committee on RME has been cited several times in this report. The SJCRME exists to disseminate relevant information and legislation to schools and further education establishments. It also helps to develop national curriculum in the subject area. The SJCRME clearly sees the role of RME as a broad exploration of philosophy, and education **about** religion. The SJCRME has also expressed clear concerns about the “secularist agenda” and “vehement atheism”, they say that Christianity played an important and fundamental role in the development of the Scottish Education system, and as such it should be afforded special privilege in the curriculum. The SJCRME also makes a clear distinction between RME and RO, saying that RME should be the non-confessional exploration of faith issues, through the auspices of Christianity. This all sounds very positive, however when pressed as to how they ensure RME provision is kept separate from RO and is done in a professional non-confessional approach, this is when cracks begin to appear. The SJCRME has no statutory powers, it is an advisory body run jointly with the Church of Scotland. Many teachers are unaware of its existence. When the Humanist Society of Scotland approached the SJCRME to ask for equal representation on the committee, it was told that this would be ‘looked at’ (at the time of writing there had been no further action). The SJCRME did, at one point, have representation from the Roman Catholic Church in the form of a non-speaking observer member. The SJCRME is clearly not representative of the broad range of Scots children in attendance at schools. The SJCRME also lacks the ability to promote its own particular view of RME among the centuries old customs and traditions of RME in schools, and the clear legal and curricular frameworks. It seems that the SJCRME is a defensive committee designed to put a professional face on the Church of Scotland as it continues to try and exert its influence over the Scottish Education system. The SJCRME also makes some very concerning statements about the conscience clause, they believe that the conscience clause discriminates unfairly against RME and RO and that a universal conscience clause should be in place for all subjects, perhaps they would like parents to be able to withdraw their children from science lessons if they do not believe in evolution? This brings up another strange stance the SJCRME has adopted. They make several references to the ‘personal journey’ approach to learning, that children should come to their own beliefs, as long as they had reasons. In a moment of mischievousness I asked a member of the SJCRME if they would be happy for a child to assert that holy water cures cancer if they were taught such a belief by scripture or a religious leader, to my absolute horror I was told, well yes, its not our job to tell children what to believe. That is of course true, but to abandon reason and evidence is certainly not in the job description either. This ‘equity of opinion’ that the SJCRME talk about is dangerous, assertions without evidence of any kind should be challenged, especially in places of learning.

The SJCRME’s clear distinction between RME & RO is commendable; however the separation is not as clear as they might say. As mentioned above, the Education (Scotland) Act 1980 blurs the lines between RME and RO, and this is a line often blurred by educational establishments. In the original intentions it is clear that over lap was necessary, between Scripture class (RME) and worship (RO). In recent years however, social pressures has

meant that educators have adopted a more subtle approach to RO. Again, as mentioned above, without consultation or debate within wider society (other than the Church of Scotland) RO has been redefined as a “community acts which aim to promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community and express and celebrate the shared values of the school community”, again this does not reflect the intent of the original term of RO, and the Government, the SJCRME or even the Church of Scotland has no powers to implement their particular view of what RO should entail on the Scottish education system as a whole. The SJCRME’s position on the matter becomes less clear under the new definition of RO, they believe that RO is an appropriate part of education and that it should be fully normalised and practiced in a corporate setting such as an assembly hall. This view directly contradicts the Scottish Office Circular number 6 (1991) which says that separate areas within schools should be identified for RO. There is a certain amount of wishful thinking in the SJCRME’s position here, if RO is to be, as it was intended, a form of Protestant Christian prayer, then it has nothing to do with RME, on the other hand, if you talk about other religions and maybe Buddhist meditation, well that is entirely appropriate to do in the assembly hall with your RME teacher. The Scottish Government has muddied the water even further by suggesting that RO should be re-branded as the harmless “Time for reflection”. Will “Time for Reflection” meet the schools legal requirement for RO, or is this something different, and as such will we still need RO as well? Given the SJCRME’s reluctance to look out with the Church of Scotland, can we be assured that “Time for Reflection” will be as inclusive as the title suggests.

## **Conclusion**

This report has shown that RME and RO are based almost entirely on the Protestant version of Christianity through the Church of Scotland. It has also shown the large and influential part played by the Church of Scotland over the education of young Scots. This report has evaluated the SJCRME’s claims that RME is an interfaith exploration of philosophy and shown that given the legal and curricular confines, this is certainly not true. Even if it were true, the SJCRME would have no place to assert that their particular view of RME is the “official” one, as they have no legal powers to do so. The SJCRME’s concerns about “radical secularisation” and view that children should learn about Christianity show that the SJCRME upholds the current Christian bias in RME provision. Provision of RO also depends entirely on centuries old legislation and various subsequent additions, often contradictory. This report has also detailed how the use of the term “non-denominational” is misleading and does not take into account the inbuilt Christian bias in the Scottish education system. The report again details how the Church of Scotland is still given supremacy over other Churches and faith groups, and given privileged access to the education system not afforded by any other group.