



Why it is time to embrace non-confessional RE in Catholic schools: some reflections from the English context

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Accepted: 16 September 2022 / Published online: 27 October 2022
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Abstract

This article presents an analysis of why advocates of RE in English Catholic schools have managed to avoid seriously engaging with confessional Religious Education. The arguments presented here are set against the context of curriculum change in RE with the impending introduction of the *Religious Education Directory* in England and Wales (in September 2025). In this time of curriculum change and innovation, an argument is developed in favour of embracing a non-confessional account of RE in Catholic schools.

Keywords Confession RE · Religious Education Directory (RED)

In England's Catholic schools there is a tangible sense of impending change to Religious Education (RE) that is rapidly advancing on the horizon. Throughout 2023 a newly developed curriculum guidance document will be introduced, to frame, guide and underpin the content of RE in Catholic schools. This will be known as the *Religious Education Directory* (RED). It is hoped that from September 2025 the guidance in the RED will be fully implemented in English Catholic schools. The planning process for these changes has stretched over five years, largely because of the Covid-19 pandemic. Given the unprecedented strains on school life during the pandemic, having a long lead-in time has been an understandable strategy. After many years of being trailed and discussed, it is likely that most RE teachers in English Catholic schools will engage with the new guidance and make the changes to their Schemes of Work and where necessary, their lesson plans. With a greater emphasis on religions other than Catholic Christianity, there might be a need for many brand new lessons and resources. There will, inevitably, be a flurry of CPD opportunities, creative discussion and perhaps even excitement at finding innovative ways of implementing the revised framework and vision for RE. However, amidst all this positive development, there remains a number of rumbling conceptual reservations with RE in England's Catholic schools. In

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this article, attention will be given to teasing out one of these conceptual issues, in order to cast a spotlight on it at this time of impending major curriculum change and innovation. The focus will be on the traditional confessional stance towards RE that is adopted by advocates of Catholic education. It will be explained that despite the detailed planning, discussion and consultation, the revisions to the RE curriculum in Catholic schools in England do not challenge this traditional stance. It will be argued that this reflects an ongoing failure to appreciate that there is actually a problem here to be engaged with. It will be argued that this is ultimately a conceptual issue, about how RE in a Catholic school ought to be framed in relation to the aims and goals of Catholic education as a whole.

1 The relatively benign state of RE in English Catholic schools

It is important at outset to appreciate that in England's Catholic schools, RE has many positive characteristics. In the majority of these schools a hefty 10% of curriculum time is devoted to RE lessons. In English Catholic secondary schools, the older students are routinely entered for the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) qualifications in Religious Studies (RS), making it an integral part of the qualification process at secondary school. Moreover, the specifications for these courses allow for students to be examined on overtly Catholic Christian content, in terms of knowledge and understanding of key beliefs and practices. There is even provision for 'core' RE for students in the Sixth Form.

This means that RE in Catholic schools is given both sufficient curriculum time and importance (as part of the qualifications system). In addition to these positive features, RE also has an enhanced status within the wider life of these schools. This is because in Catholic schools the place of religion, the daily expressions of faith and acts of religious devotion are woven into the life of school life, from the frequent assemblies to opportunities for prayer and charity fundraising, all of which are entwined into the ethos of the school. The status of RE is further reinforced by a school inspection regime, in which representatives of the local bishop conduct what, in Ofsted terms is now known as a *deep dive* inspection, of all aspects of the school's RE provision. The outcome of the inspection determines whether or not the school is judged as adequate or not in terms of being 'Catholic'. Thus, every five years RE, by virtue of this diocesan inspection, takes on an enhanced status within the school's life.

Against this positive context, the decision to renew and develop the 2012 *Religious Education Curriculum Directory* (RECD) might, on first impressions, appear puzzling. It could reasonably be assumed that 'if it's not broken, it does not need to be fixed'. However, when it comes to education matters, the pace of change and shifts in policy directions are frequently rapid and profound. With reforms to GCSE qualifications (back in 2016) and shifts in assessing *levels of progress*, important aspects of the 2012 RECD quickly stood in need of significant updating and development. This is because the RECD did not include either the stipulation that a second religion had to be studied by older students, nor the increased content that came as part of the 2016 reform of the RS GCSE examination. In addition, the RECD had structured measuring student progress around 'levels of attainment', however shifts in government education policy led to a move away from levels across the rest of the curriculum¹. Rather than simply amend parts of the existing guidance, the decision was made to complete a more wide-ranging reform of the framing document for RE in Catholic

¹ For fuller discussion of the issues here see Whittle 2018 (Testing Times for RE Catholic schools).

schools. This made it possible to draw on insights in relation to ‘powerful knowledge’ and incorporate the advantages of embedding subjects of the curriculum in the broader subject disciplines. This opens up the possibility of grounding RE in the Catholic school as in a broad relationship with the sort of theology studied at university. Presumably, it is hoped that aligning RE in Catholic schools with those who advocate powerful knowledge and a knowledge-rich RE curriculum will help to safeguard or even bolster the place of RE in the years ahead.

Despite the anticipation and possible excitement at implementing the RED, there are some conceptual anxieties that deserve to have the spotlight cast on them again. These are not over the specific details about either the content or pedagogical assumptions of the RED. Although numerous draft versions of different sections of the directory have been shared in order to consult with RE teachers throughout 2022, the final texts have yet to be formally agreed by the Catholic bishops of England and Wales. Given this, at this juncture it is not appropriate to launch into a critical assessment of the specifics of the RED. However, the issue at stake here is the failure to engage with the challenges, and perhaps concerns, provoked by maintaining the confessional or overtly catechetical character of RE in Catholic schools. Outside of Catholic education, over the past five decades there has been a widespread movement firmly away from confessional RE (see Hannam’s helpful survey, 2019). Using formal education settings (and RE lessons in particular) to nurture, grow and develop religious faith within one specific tradition has come to be regarded as falling well below a genuine education, and in particular be seen as a dubious form of RE. There is a danger that in promoting one particular ‘confession’ or religious belief system there could be either explicit, implicit or tacit indoctrination, and this is normally taken to be educationally unacceptable. In contrast within Catholic education in England there has over the same time period been little serious engagement with the concerns over confessional RE. In fact, some critical voices align themselves with the stance advocated by Arthur (1995) in ‘The Ebbing Tide’, which asserted that the Catholic bishops in England and Wales have allowed ‘Catholicity’ to seep away from Catholic schools. What Arthur describes as a ‘holistic approach’ has slipped away from these schools, and if his reading of the situation is correct, Catholic schools are now ‘Catholic in name only’ and doing little if anything to nurture a Catholic faith amongst the students. This sort of stance is asserting that Catholic education is in difficulty because it has, in effect already become non-confessional. Arthur’s analysis is based on his conviction that Catholic education is primarily aimed at handing on the Catholic identity and faith to children of Catholic parents, as they receive their formal education.

Although Arthur’s analysis remains attractive to some (e.g. Carmody 2017), there have also been challenges to the coherence of his position (Sullivan, 1999; Grace, 2002; Whittle, 2014), as well as appeals to empirical evidence from Inspections Reports from Catholic schools (Morris, 2008). It is clear from these reports that Catholic schools are very concerned with their Catholic identity and actively seek opportunities to foster the faith. More importantly, perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Arthur’s stance is that it reflects a broader Catholic education position amongst most advocates of Catholic education, in which there has been little serious engagement with the educational dangers of a confessional education and with confessional RE in particular. Although many leading critics of faith schools (such as Hand 2003) have raised cogent concerns, there has been little serious engagement with the conceptual and educational concerns of framing RE in Catholic schools as confessional. It is important to identify some of the reasons for this lack of engagement.

2 Why have English Catholic schools been able to avoid accepting the dangers of confessional RE?

It is possible to identify at least four main reasons why advocates of Catholic education have managed to avoid seriously engaging with the dangers of confessional RE. The first two are integrally connected, but based on two distinct arguments.

The first reason is grounded on the very particular historical narrative of Catholic Christians in England and Wales. In a nutshell, the Reformation has profoundly shaped Catholic identity in these countries and did so precisely at the same point that mass education became an aspiration across society. The force of the upheavals and trauma of the Reformation took many years after Henry VIII's reign to take their full affect in England. With the anti-Catholic legislation under Elizabeth I and the effects of English Civil war, it meant the Roman Catholic community became a tiny minority of the population, and they were often subjected to harsh prejudice and very unfair treatment (see for example Haydon 1993). In the post-Reformation period to be a Catholic Christian in England was often very difficult. In the centuries after the Reformation the small number of recusant Catholics were slowly joined by others who fled to England for safety from various parts of Europe. Eventually this included large numbers of poor Irish people, who were forced to leave Ireland because of land reform and the potato famines. By the eighteenth century the growing liberal politics in England promoted religious tolerance and there was a willingness to allow for religious diversity, and in 1850 the Catholic hierarchy was restored in England. The experiences of the post-Reformation Catholic community deeply shaped their attitudes to schools. A key function of Catholic schools was to provide a safe space in an overwhelmingly 'protestant' country.

Supporting Catholic identity quickly became an important priority for the growing number Catholic schools that opened up in the nineteenth century. Although today the socio-political context has radically changed for England's Catholic Christians (see Hornsby-Smith 1999), there has been a strong historical awareness that Catholic schools in England exist in order to support and protect Catholic Christian children as they grow up in a Protestant country, but also in a country which has become increasingly more secular. Catholic schools have served as a way of keeping the collective memories aware of the past threats and challenges². Thus reinforcing Catholic identity has been an important priority, and this has in effect trumped any concerns over confessional education and indoctrination in RE. This is to argue from the historical narrative of Catholic Christians living in England to justify the down playing any concerns over confessional RE.

This historical narrative neatly coheres with a second argument, one that draws out the links between parental rights and Catholic education. Both the Papal Encyclical by Pope Pius XI *Divini Illius Magistri* (1929) and Vatican II's *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) emphasise that there is a fundamental parental right to bring up your children in accordance with your religious beliefs and values. The Church, as a service to these parents, operates Catholic schools in order to support those who want to bring up their children within the

² One way of achieving this has been through the choice of school name, such as naming the school after one of the 40 Martyrs of England and Wales, or leading members of the re-established hierarchy, such as Cardinal Wiseman. The newest Catholic secondary school in Westminster diocese, opened in 2013, was named after the Catholic reformation martyr Richard Reynolds. This is subtle but effective way of perpetuating the wounds of the Reformation period.

Catholic faith. The relationship between parental rights and Catholic education has been at the heart of the standard justification for Catholic education. Catholic schools exist to support parents who want to bring up their children within the Catholic faith. This argument is grounded in Natural Law theory and chimes well with aspects of human rights legislation. In asserting the rights of parents over their child's religious formation and school education it becomes possible to side step or just not engage with worries over indoctrination. If the priority is given to the rights of the parents, then the Catholic school can view itself as being justified in actively fostering the religious faith of the children firmly within the Catholic tradition. They are serving the parents in doing this.

When the historical context of Catholic Christians in England is combined with the argument for parental rights, a strong precedent is established for setting aside concerns over confessional education and indoctrination. In effect, the custom and practice of Catholic education in England has been to prioritise parental rights, over the rights of the child. Inevitably, the ways in which Catholic parents choose to exercise their rights is shaped by factors such as their historical awareness. The issues at stake here are ones which hinge on the aims and purposes of education. If schooling is primarily about upbringing, the emphasis will be on socialisation and social identity. Parental rights and desires will trump concerns over indoctrination and confessional approaches. Here it is useful to reiterate concerns I have raised before (see Whittle 2021c) in relation to educational theorist Hirst (1972). He would describe this as a 'tribal account of education'. According to Hirst, a primitive approach to education seeks the survival and continuation of the tribe. The educational priority is to ensure successive generations grow up with all the roles and skills needed for the tribe to continue. Given this, tribal education serves and reinforces (tribal) identity, embodying it in the educational process of being brought up, or schooled. In contrast, if the aims of education go beyond the tribal level, to a more sophisticated account, in which intrinsic goods are pursued, then parental rights will not automatically trump concerns over confessional education.

A third main reason why advocates of Catholic education have managed to avoid seriously engaging with the dangers of confessional RE is because of a widely perceived disconnection between attending a Catholic school and regular involvement in Catholic practice on a Sunday. For some years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, census data from the *Catholic Education Service* indicated that each week slightly more people attend Catholic schools in England than those attending a service in Catholic parishes over the average weekend. This disconnection between school and formal faith practice frequently triggers an argument that seeks to dismiss any dangers by arguing that Catholic education is not confessional because it is ineffective at getting students to be confessing members of the Catholic Church. Thus if any indoctrination is taking place, it is highly ineffective and given the poor success rate it ought not be regarded as a significant issue. Although this argument is intuitively appealing, it does raise some concerns. Ultimately, these pivot on the intentions of RE in Catholic schools. Whilst it might well be true that currently most or almost all RE teachers in Catholic schools are ineffective at indoctrination or ensuring students sincerely confess their Catholic faith, this practical inability does not mitigate their desire or intention to actively hand on genuine faith commitment through RE lessons. It is an argument not about any incompatibility between RE in Catholic schools and confessional education, but rather it is about the inability of the subject matter as it is currently construed and the failure of the current cohort of teachers to be any good at indoctrination and handing on the faith within

RE lessons. But ultimately, the intention or desire to be confessional is firmly present, and this is because of an ill-conceived perception.

The fourth reason stems from a couple of theological assumptions, which when taken together tend to downplay the educational dangers posed by confessional approaches to RE. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the long standing acceptance of infant baptism. Even before the 'Peace of Constantine' and the resulting widespread acceptance of Christianity across much of the Roman Empire, it was not uncommon for whole households (which included children) to convert to Christianity as a group. It follows from infant baptism that it is acceptable to nurture children in the Christian faith into which they have been initiated. The movement over the early centuries of Church history was a growing acceptance that infant baptism is the ordinary or normal way of becoming a Christian. In the wake of the Reformation, the practice of infant baptism amongst Roman Catholics was endorsed through the decrees of the Council of Trent (1543-63). This means infant baptism was taken as normal practice and as an appropriate thing to do, and thus it is acceptable to grow up from childhood as a Christian. This practice reinforced a link between being baptised as a baby and then being schooled or educated in what it means to be a Christian. In more recent times, Vatican II's *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965) explained that Christian education is in effect a right that flows from being baptised. It follows that if someone has been baptised, they should be educated and nurtured within this faith. This neatly dovetails with the provision of Catholic schools in order to support parents who want to exercise their rights to bring up their children within their religious beliefs. In providing overtly confessional RE, it may well be assumed that the formal intention of Catholic schools is to support parents and ensure the baptised child receives the sort of post baptismal education or formation she has right to.

A second theological assumption is that any attempt to evangelise and hand on faith, including to children, is done so in terms of being offered as a gift. It is in terms of invitation and freely offered gift, rather than being imposed or forced upon the child who attends a Catholic school. This way of framing overtly confessional RE acts as a way of counterbalancing or mitigating the concerns of confessional education. Typically, confessional education is depicted as an unfair attempt to compel or force children in a school setting to hold certain beliefs. However, the theological assumption here is that RE which overtly offers the gift of faith within RE lessons is doing so without compulsion or unfairly forcing children to believe. To frame evangelisation and catechesis as a gift, a freely given generous offer, is of course a deeply positive way of depicting what is going on in RE in Catholic schools. Presumably key advocates of Catholic education, such as bishops and many Catholic parents would be anxious to characterise RE in these terms. There are of course shadow aspects to even the most positive of framing metaphors, including depicting the gift-like nature of RE in Catholic schools. Some gifts are unwanted and there is also a sense in which gifts have a coercive aspect in that it is very difficult to refuse to accept a gift. In the context of a school setting, the compulsory nature of timetabled lessons would tend to negate the sense in which RE in a Catholic school is a freely given gift.

When taken together, these four arguments offer an interrelated set of reasons why most advocates of Catholic education in English Catholic schools have avoided not seriously engaging with the dangers of confessional education. Indeed it is interesting to note that for many advocates of Catholic education there is a tendency to not even use the concepts of 'confessional and non-confessional' when discussing RE in Catholic schools. Although

in part this is because this terminology is now a bit outmoded and it has also been used in a pejorative way by opponents of faith schools. This has encouraged advocates to avoid the terminology. However, there remains a sense that the wider debates in RE have largely bypassed English Catholic schools.

3 Why it is time to more formally embrace the non-confessional approach to RE in English Catholic schools.

Having explained the various reasons why RE in English Catholic schools have not engaged with the dangers of confessional education, the remainder of this article will make the case for why the time is at hand for firmly embracing non-confessional RE even in Catholic schools. The opening part of this case involves making an important qualification about the need to be consistent between 'Catholic education as a whole' and the specifics of RE within a Catholic education. It will be taken as a given that it is incompatible to simultaneously frame RE in a Catholic school as confessional whilst at the same time maintain or argue that the Catholic school as a whole is non-confessional.

Whilst I have argued elsewhere in support of a non-confessional theory of Catholic education (Whittle, 2014, 2016) some challenges and objections have been raised, and as such it would be helpful to respond to these here, in order to strengthen the argument in support of non-confessional Catholic education (and by implication non-confessional RE).

4 In defence of a non-confessional account of Catholic education

To briefly reiterate, my central contention is that in countries where a Catholic education is fully integrated into the state's provision of compulsory mass education (such as in the UK) there are limits to just how much, if any, of this education can be specifically geared to formally fostering the Catholic faith of the children and young people who attend them. Failure to adhere to these limits presents a significant risk of indoctrination and curbing the autonomy of the students, and this would fall below the threshold of an acceptable education. It would in Hirst's (1972) terms be akin to the primitive or tribal account of education. It is of course important to distinguish between the way Catholic Christian faith might inspire and underpin the desire to offer Catholic schools as a service to parents (both Catholic and non-Catholic) and actually seeking to hand on this faith to the children who attend Catholic schools. In arguing in support of non-confessional Catholic education I seek to provide intrinsic theological reasons for this stance. To do this I draw on the theology of Karl Rahner, in particular his theology of mystery (Whittle, 2014, 2016). One notable critic of this argument has come from Professor Carmody (2017), who questioned the concept of 'non-confessional Catholic education'. A major part of Carmody's analysis is around championing the use of Lonergan's theology over that of Karl Rahner's. However, my ultimate goal is to propose the coherence of non-confessional Catholic education, and more importantly give it a solid theological justification. Whilst I applaud the insights of Rahner's rich and multifaceted theology, it is important to explain that I am not arguing that the only suitable theologian for this has to be Rahner. In responding to Carmody's critique, I will leave aside the debate as to which theologian is better able to underpin the theology of Catholic

education (be that Lonergan or Rahner), not least because there might be other contenders, such as Schillebeeckx or even Segundo³.

Rather, the focus will be on Carmody's stance against the non-confessional Catholic education. As part of this an intriguing question is raised over 'whether confessional education necessarily entails indoctrination' (Carmody, 2017 p. 162). This question is a central one. It is suggested by Carmody's analysis that there is a way of uncoupling an education which formally seeks to foster and nurture a specific set of religious beliefs from the broader vision of Catholic education. This is to depict a Catholic education as involving or offering a distinctive vision of education that is recognisably 'Catholic'. The problem with being 'non-confessional', according to Carmody, is that it undermines what is taken to be distinctive about Catholic education. He claims that 'The Church desires that Catholic schools should present a Christian vision of existence because Catholic schools participate in the evangelising mission of the Church' (Carmody, 2017). Presumably this is an attempt at summarising education documents from the *Congregation for Catholic Education*, that typically couch Catholic educational endeavours as somehow integrally bound up with the proclamation of the gospel.

The problem here is that Carmody does not even begin to clarify what might be the meanings of the phrase 'participate in the evangelising mission of the Church'. One overt meaning would be using Catholic schools as a tool or means of evangelising and seeking out new converts for the Church. This is obviously a deeply confessional stance. However, the phrase 'participates in' is suggestive of more nuanced meanings⁴. For example, the Church might establish and maintain schools as a service to the common good or aimed at the poor and do this as a practical expression of the gospel message (to serve rather than be served), and the sense in which this is confessional is much harder to discern. Ultimately, Carmody wants to make a distinction between being a Catholic school which is 'confessional' and at the same time 'being non-colonising' (p. 166). This allows him to depict the school as confessing its Catholic identity whilst at the same not seeking to colonise (or in more basic terms, aim to convert non-believers to the Catholic faith). It is probably Carmody's fairly precise distinction here which is giving the appearance of sharp difference between his position and my argument to adopt an overtly non-confessional theory of Catholic education. On a closer inspection there is a broadly similar line of argument. What Carmody describes as Catholic but non-colonising, I depict as of course a Catholic theory but one which is not and cannot be confessional. Any sense in which a Catholic school imposes or forces faith onto a student is unacceptable in either the non-colonising or non-confessional Catholic school. In effect the differences at stake are at the semantic, rather than at the more substantive, level. Perhaps it is a difference in emphasis, where Carmody wants to prioritise the Catholic identity of schools, which to him means that they must 'confess' or declare their Catholicity. However, there is an important distinction between this institutional identity of the school as Catholic and the intention or goal of making all students who belong to it 'confessing members of the Church'⁵.

³ Moreover Walsh has provided a sophisticated analysis drawing on the strengths of both Rahner and Lonergan to frame and underpin the theology of Catholic Education. See Walsh (2018)

⁴ The issues here are to do with the use of vague phrases, for a fuller discussion see Whittle 2021a.

⁵ I would, however, add that pinning down 'Catholicity' is actually harder than Carmody appears to be implying. In our post-Vatican II context, there are different ways of being 'Catholic', and this would impact on what it means to be 'confessing' it.

5 Engaging with non-confessional RE in English Catholic schools

Having drawn a qualification between ‘Catholic education as a whole’ and the specifics of RE within a Catholic education, attention can shift to making the case for non-confessional RE in Catholic schools. There are two strands to this case, first are a set of historical observations and the second are insights drawn from the theology of the modern magisterium of the Catholic Church. Both these strands take as their starting point the educational setting of RE, a compulsory subject as part of the school curriculum.

It is a truism that historical contexts change. Thus the concerns of one generation might easily morph into a very different set of issues for later ones. This is certainly the case for Catholic education in England. A fleeting reference has already been made to the changing context of the Catholic population in England. At the same time universal state-provided education has become a well established part of society. This means that whilst just a hundred years ago, Catholic schools were safe havens for poorer immigrant Catholic children, things have significantly changed. In fact, these schools proved to be highly effective at promoting assimilation and overcoming socio-economic disadvantage (Hornsby-Smith, 1999). The New Labour government from 1997 onwards adopted a positive stance towards Catholic schools and other schools of Religious Character. The Education Secretary David Blunkett spoke of wanting to ‘bottle’ what these schools do, so that others in society could benefit from them. At the same time the religious tolerance that had begun unfolding in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has deepened much further. Overt anti-Catholic prejudice waned significantly after the Second World War, and there was far less of a need for a tribal form of Catholic education. In a society which is tolerant or largely accepting of Catholic Christians, there is little need to reinforce (tribal) identity through the school system.

These historical observations resonate in an intriguing way with theological insights of the modern magisterium. The updating or *aggiornamento* of Vatican II meant that the Catholic magisterium warmly embraced the ecumenical movement. The antipathy and distrust of the Counter-Reformation period gave way to a desire for collaboration and working together with other Christians. The pejorative naming of ‘Protestants’ was replaced with reference to ‘sister’ churches, and the dissipation of the hostility that marked the Counter-Reformation period. In the wake of this ecumenical turn it has become no longer appropriate to depict Catholic schools as safe spaces in a hostile Protestant culture. It is not unreasonable to assume that through embracing ecumenism, the modern magisterium has implicitly taken a stance which eschews or calls into question a confessional education that would seek to continue or reinforce denominational differences.

The priority in ecumenism is to emphasise, wherever possible, unity and collaboration between different denominations of Christians. Since the days of Paul VI (who became Pope during Vatican II) the symbolic gesture of the Bishop of Rome praying with the leaders of other Christian churches has become a routine event. It has served as a powerful (and ongoing) expression of ecumenism now being normative. In the years that followed Vatican II in England a number of joint Catholic and Anglican secondary schools were opened, reflecting this ecumenical stance.

Another noteworthy issue is the changing nature of the population of Catholic schools in England. Any assumption that Catholic schools are populated by just baptised children is one which has little basis in reality. The downward trend in numbers of Catholics attending Catholic schools revealed in the annual census of the *Catholic Education Service* contin-

ues (2021). It would appear that Catholic parents are not automatically choosing Catholic schools, and at the same time other parents are choosing a Catholic school for their children despite them not being baptised. This changing nature of Catholic school population triggers three issues. First, it weakens the importance of anchoring the justification of Catholic schools on parental rights. If an increasing number of Catholic parents are not exercising their rights in this matter it might suggest that this is not an important right after all. We tend to only invoke our rights in contexts where they are threatened or in danger. At the same time non-Catholic parents are seeking out the services offered by Catholic schools. This suggestive of an alternative way of justifying Catholic education, is not about supporting the rights of Catholic parents but rather about offering, as a service to wider society, a Catholic approach or vision to being educated. RE is an integral part of this Catholic educational vision or worldview. Second, the presence of non-Catholic children in the school challenges theological assumption discussed above, about RE being a post-baptismal right. This is to raise a question about what is the purpose of RE in a Catholic school? In response to this question, it could be argued that there are two alternative or rival aims for RE, one for baptised students and another for those who are not. The Vatican document on the *Religious Dimension of Catholic Education* (1988) asserts that this is what may well happen in RE in Catholic schools, with some students receiving it as catechesis and others as religious education. Although this assertion looks initially plausible, there are some difficulties, particularly around the intentions at play (for a fuller discussion of these difficulties, see Whittle 2021b). Third, it triggers questions about how a Catholic school in general, and in RE in particular, is able support both those who have ‘no faith’ and those who belong to other faiths, such as Hinduism and Islam. How does the RE in a Catholic school help these students to become better Hindus, Muslims or people of no faith? When taken together, all three of these issues would suggest that that a confessional approach to RE in Catholic schools raises problematic issues. An obvious way of overcoming these problems is to reframe RE in Catholic schools along non-confessional lines. The irony is that at a time of imminent and significant curriculum change for RE, triggered by the RED, no serious attempt has been made to engage with, let alone challenge confessional RE in English Catholic schools.

6 Concluding observations

The argument presented above has drawn attention to the notable lack of engagement with the risks and challenges of confessional RE in English Catholic schools. Although it is possible to explain the reasons why advocates of Catholic education have been able to avoid accepting the dangers of confessional RE, the impending introduction of the guidance in the RED would have been a highly opportune time to finally engage with these issues.

Funding The author did not receive support from any organisation for the submitted work.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that he has no conflict of interest. The author has no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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