

Religious Education in Multi-Cultural Context: Report of the key informant interviews

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Introduction

Across European countries, the education system plays a role in the transmission of religious or secular beliefs and values, with consequent implications for social cohesion between religious and cultural groups. The influence of schooling can occur through the explicit teaching of religious doctrine and values within schools, the formal preparation of children for religious rites of passage (such as Confirmation), informal socialisation in relation to particular norms and values, specific rules about dress and behaviour, and the socio-cultural networks to which young people are exposed (or from which they are excluded). The relative importance of the education system in religious socialisation varies across European countries, with religious authorities playing a significant role in school management in some countries while, in other cases, there is a deliberate separation between church and school structures. This report explores the specific role of primary schools in Scotland in transmitting religious beliefs and values, as reported by key informants.

Patterns of religious identification in Scotland

The provision of religious and moral education in Scotland, as in other European countries, is shaped by the country's culture and history (see project working papers: Scotland country notes and literature review for further details). It is evident that the religious affiliation of Scotland's population has been changing. In the 2001 Census, where a question on religion was asked for the first time, 42% of the Scottish population identified themselves as members of the Church of Scotland, and 16% reported that they were members of the Roman Catholic Church. Seven per cent of the population identified themselves as Other Christian, and about 1% belonged to other faiths. Over a quarter said that they had no religion. It is evident that all of the Christian churches have experienced a decline in membership, with older people much more likely to report a religious affiliation than those in younger age groups. The decline has been particularly steep for the Church of Scotland, whose members tend to be older than those of the other churches. The proportion of those with no religion has been growing rapidly.

Religion, belief and equality

Religion and belief have relatively recently been recognised as one of the six equality strands covered by legislation of the EU and its member states. Within Great Britain, a discrimination law review was undertaken in 2006/2007 to explore the possibility of harmonising equalities legislation to cover the six equality strands (gender, race, disability, age, sexual orientation and religion/belief) recognised by the EU and covered by the new Commission for Equality and Human Rights (CEHR). By 2007, the duty on public sector bodies to positively promote equality applied to race, disability and gender (but not age, sexual orientation and religion/belief). In Scotland, equality policy has a wider ambit than the six strands covered by the GB Equality Act 2006. The Scotland Act 1998 defines equal opportunities in terms of 'the prevention, elimination or regulation of discrimination between persons on grounds of sex or marital status, on racial grounds, or on grounds of disability, age, sexual orientation, language or social origin, or of other personal attributes, including beliefs or opinions, such as religious beliefs or political opinions'. This has led the Scottish Executive to be pro-active in encouraging the mainstreaming of equal opportunities, with the Equalities Unit in the Scottish Executive charged with ensuring that all policy and legislation is 'equality-proofed'.

Faith schools in Scotland

In Scotland there are 395 state-funded faith schools. Three hundred and ninety one of these are Catholic (62 Catholic secondary and 329 Catholic primary schools, 1 Jewish primary school and 3 Episcopalian primary schools). In addition, the Scottish Government has recently agreed that a Glasgow primary school with a high proportion of Muslim pupils should be designated as an Islamic school. Faith schools in Scotland are all managed by the local authority 'in the interests of' the particular religious group. In the case of Catholic Schools, the shift into local authority management took place as a result of the Education (Scotland) Act 1918. From the sixteenth century Reformation until 1872, the Church of Scotland was responsible for the provision of elementary education in Scotland. Church of Scotland schools were transferred to local authority control under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1872 and from this time became non-denominational. This has led to the situation where the largest faith group in Scotland does not have any affiliated faith schools.

There was a total of 375,946 primary pupils in Scotland in 2007, of whom 66,622 (18%) are in Catholic schools. Eighty-two percent of pupils attend non-denominational schools and 0.1% to other faith schools. Although secondary schools are outwith the remit of this study it is worth noting that almost the same percentage of secondary pupils attend Catholic schools as do primary pupils. There is a difference of 1 % with 17% of all secondary pupils attending Catholic schools. Whilst the numbers of pupils attending Catholic schools are published, there are no official statistics giving the religion of the pupils attending these schools. Most of the Roman Catholic schools are in the west of Scotland and mainly in the lowlands. In terms of pupil numbers, just over 15,000 pupils out of just under 38,000 in Glasgow city are educated in Catholic schools. This represents 40% of the primary school population in the city.

Research methods

Telephone interviews were conducted with eleven key informants selected to reflect a range of positions in relation to religious and moral education in Scotland. The sample was purposive, in that interviewees occupied key positions in religious, educational and parent organisations in Scotland, but the sample should not be regarded as representative. Interviewees were members or employees of the following organisations: the Church of Scotland; the Scottish Catholic Education Service; the Scottish Inter-Faith Council; the Humanist Society of Scotland; Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education; Learning and Teaching Scotland; the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education; the Scottish Parent Councils Association; the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies; North Lanarkshire Council; the Muslim Council of Scotland. The interviews lasted about an hour and were transcribed. Interviewees generally pointed out when they were expressing their own views and when they were reflecting the views of their organisation. The purpose of the interviews was to sensitise the research team to the issues which needed to be addressed further in the parent and pupil interviews taking place in the next phase of the research. Below, we summarise the central themes emerging from the interviews under specific headings.

Approaches to religious and moral education

Under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980, children must spend a minimum of 10% of their time on religious and moral education, from which they may be withdrawn by their parents. Both Catholic and non-denominational schools observe the 5-14 guidelines, soon to be replaced by the Curriculum for Excellence

(see below). The present guidelines state that the curriculum for religious education 'is firmly based on the experience of Christianity' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2000). In Catholic schools, the content of the syllabus is approved by the Catholic bishops, and generally about 15% of class time.

Key informants were aware of distinctively different approaches being adopted in Catholic and non-denominational schools. Respondents from the Church of Scotland (CoS), Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) and HMle believed that the emphasis of religious and moral education in non-denominational schools was on Christianity, but attention was also paid to other world religions, along with secular approaches to ethical systems. They also emphasised the 'personal search' dimensions of the curriculum, so that children and young people were encouraged to explore their own value position. The Church of Scotland interviewee explained:

Q So what approach do primary schools in Scotland take to RME?

A Well, there's a, there's a couple of aspects. There is ... the provision of information, in other words, letting children know that there are a variety of faiths, that we are a predominantly Christian country, but that there are a variety of views about faith, including those who say that they have no faith, so the humanist and secular perspective is shown as well. But there is also the aspect of understanding that somebody of faith is somebody who's on a spiritual journey, a spiritual search, and that that is a key part of understanding faith. In other words, it's not just simply an intellectual exercise or an adherence to a set of rules, it is something that is more deep rooted than that. (Church of Scotland respondent)

The LTS respondent placed particular emphasis on the personal search element, commenting that unless children were encouraged to engage in debate and discussion on the merits of the different positions from their particular perspective, religious and moral education might adopt a 'supermarket approach', simply describing the five pillars of Islam or the key elements of Judaism or Christianity.

A number of comments were made about the relative emphasis placed on Christianity compared with other world religions and secular positions. One respondent commented:

Q: To what extent is one particular faith prioritised in non-denominational schools?

A: I have the distinct feeling ...that Christianity is still supreme ...in that there's more attention paid to Christianity than other faiths. I think you probably would expect that given the culture of this country at the moment, but having said that, there is much more comparative religion now than in the primary sector than ever there was, I mean there's no doubt about that.

Q: And within your own school you would say as an example?

A: Yes within our own school we study Christian themes but also Islamic themes and Judaism and we make forays into Hinduism. It's really difficult to cover every religion. We focus on those three or four because they seem to be the main ones in Scotland and Britain at the moment. By main ones I mean the numbers of people. (Respondent, Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland)

The humanist respondent also believed that Christianity was accorded privileged status, but felt that this was a problem given the high and growing proportion of people in Scotland (almost 40% of younger people, according to the Scottish census, 2001) who were not affiliated to any religious group. This respondent believed that non-religious parents would be happy for their children to learn about world religions, as long as secular belief systems were given equal weight. However, he felt that there was frequently a slippage between educating children about world religions and indoctrinating them into particular religious beliefs:

I suspect most parents in Scotland who are not religious would be reassured if they thought that RME was intellectually rigorous, diverse, comprehensive and was not presenting any position as a preferred position, I think most parents would be comfortable. I think it would be better, I must be honest, if we had a topic called philosophy, rather than religious and moral education, or if we had a topic called 'ethical behaviour' or something, and most schools operate on that. I think the big problem, and this is very, very particular to primary schools, is the dangerous elision between religious and moral education and religious observance. (Humanist respondent)

He provided an example of a primary-school aged child coming home from school singing a hymn, which he regarded as evidence of schools encouraging children to adopt a particular religious position, rather than simply educating children about different religious and non-religious belief systems.

Interestingly, the trade union representative on the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education, an organisation representing teachers of religious and moral education¹, believed strongly that religious and moral education should be taught in the same way as maths or English as an academic subject with a specified curriculum, which should not be influenced by an individual teacher's value systems or preferences:

RME is different (from religious observance and faith formation) because RME is a curriculum subject. You know, it's set down.. the syllabus, it's like maths, English, any of these other subjects that are taught. It is an actual curriculum subject and it's laid down by, you know, really by the Scottish Government, the Education Department of the Scottish Government, and elements of it are geared towards the examination procedures as well. So the subjects.. the elements of it that'll be examined are laid down as well. So it's a curriculum subject like any other curriculum subject. It's set down. (EIS representative, Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education)

In Catholic schools, there is a distinctively different approach to religious education compared with that of non-denominational schools. The syllabus is approved by the Catholic bishops and, according to the respondent from the Scottish Catholic Education Service (SCES), 'the core of what's on offer is an understanding of Catholic Christianity'. The role of the teacher is to accompany students on 'a journey of faith' and to help 'young people to mature in their response to faith'. In a non-denominational setting, on the other hand, 'the school doesn't have a responsibility for development in faith, as it were. They've a responsibility about educating about

¹ It was explained by a member of the project advisory committee that the Committee originally dealt with Religious Education and included teachers from denominational and non-denominational schools. However, Roman Catholic teachers withdrew from the committee once Moral Education was added to its remit, on the grounds that moral education could only exist in the context of religious education.

religion and, I think, that's quite a significant difference' (Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent)

In Catholic primary schools, children learn about two world religions, typically Islam and Judaism. In relation to education on secular traditions, a distinction was drawn between what might happen at primary and secondary stages:

Children would know that not all people have a particular religious affiliation, but there wouldn't be study of different secular beliefs. In the secondary school, as the students mature more, in the philosophical debate about truths and understandings and beliefs and values and so on, there's more opportunity to grapple with what people who don't have a religious affiliation believe, how they can still be people of values, there are still value systems etc. Again, it's not a systematic study of different belief systems, but there's certainly a reference to an understanding of the fact that non-religious belief systems exist. (Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent)

A significant part of the religious education in Catholic schools consists of preparation for the sacraments. Normally, the Catholic respondent explained, parents of children who are not Catholic are happy for them to participate in these classes:

They know, and the child knows, that they're not going to actually receive the sacraments, but often they are content for the child to understand what the other children are receiving, and to be involved in that process, as far as they can be. But they obviously have the right to withdraw from that. (Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent)

It was recognised that the proportion of children from Catholic backgrounds attending Catholic schools varies greatly, ranging from about 40 - 90% of the school population. Whilst teachers were likely to take account of children's backgrounds in deciding on the amount of emphasis placed on Catholic doctrinal education, the broad content of the syllabus would remain unchanged. Whilst parents had the legal right to withdraw their child from any part of the religious education syllabus, it was understood that, in opting for a Catholic school, they had 'signed up' for a particular approach and therefore requests for withdrawal were rare.

The Curriculum for Excellence

The Curriculum for Excellence is currently being developed in Scotland as a replacement for the twenty-year-old 5-14 programme. The over-riding principles of the Curriculum for Excellence include challenge and enjoyment and personalisation and choice. Some commentators have suggested that the new curriculum, with its emphasis on choice, should be seen as a move away from the values of the Scottish democratic tradition, which reflected the belief that all children should have access to a common academically-orientated curriculum through the comprehensive school (see, for example, Paterson, 2008). The sections of the Learning and Teaching Scotland web-site dealing with Religious and Moral Education in the context of Curriculum for Excellence suggest an attempt to achieve some degree of balance in the emphasis to be placed on Christianity, other world religions and secular belief systems. The diversity of belief systems within Scotland's population is recognised, although Christianity continues to be emphasised as the dominant tradition:

Scotland is now a nation which reflects a wide range of beliefs, values and traditions. Religious and moral education enables children and young people to explore the world's major religions and approaches to living which are independent of religious belief, and be challenged by these different beliefs

and values. It supports children and young people in developing responsible attitudes to other people, their values and their capacity for moral judgement. The study of Christianity, which has shaped the history and traditions of Scotland, and continues to exert an influence on national life, is an essential feature of religious and moral education for all children and young people. (www.ltscotland.org.uk/curriculumforexcellence/publications/Buildingthe curriculum)

Many of our respondents had been involved in the development of the Curriculum for Excellence, and there was general agreement that lesson content would be very similar to that of the 5-14 curriculum. The main difference, it was felt, was one of methodology. The SCES respondent believed that there would be a stronger emphasis on the development of children's 'journey of faith', whereas the Learning and Teaching Scotland interviewee described this in terms of 'personal search', which would include moral, but not necessarily religious, development. The EIS representative believed that there would be a new emphasis on critical engagement with the approaches adopted by different world religions. However, he felt that there was some uncertainty about the extent to which children should be encouraged to take an analytical approach to world religions, and there was some degree of sensitivity around the use of the word 'critical' in connection with the new Religious, Moral and Philosophical Education curriculum. In the view of this respondent, some of those involved in the Curriculum for Excellence consultation had sensitivities around the word 'critical', failing to understand that this referred to the encouragement of an analytical, rather than a negative, stance.

Religious observance and the role of assemblies

As reported in our country notes, religious observance as well as religious education is a legal requirement under the terms of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980. The aims of religious observance, as set out in the 5-14 Guidelines, were:

- To promote pupils' spiritual development
- To increase their understanding of religious practices such as prayer and meditation and the religious experience which underlies them
- To promote the ethos of the school through expression and celebration of shared values
- To provide opportunity for individual reflection on spiritual and moral concerns.

The Guidelines suggested that:

In non-denominational schools, religious observance should be of a broadly Christian character: that is, should reflect the broad consensus of Christian beliefs and values without being specific to any one denomination...This does not exclude the possibility of drawing on other religious traditions at times. (Scottish Office, 1992, p. 56)

Concerns were increasingly raised by head teachers, particularly in non-denominational schools, that the religious observance requirements were difficult to meet in the context of an increasingly diverse student body. As a result, the Scottish Government commissioned a Religious Observance Review Group, which made a number of important recommendations in relation to religious observance. The membership of the group included members of churches, inter-faith groups and

parent teacher organisations, but did not include a representative of the humanist position. A key recommendation of the review group was that, whilst religious observance might take the form of acts of worship in faith schools, in non-denominational schools religious observance should not take the form of an act of worship, but should rather be used:

- To promote the spiritual development of all members of the school community
- To express and celebrate the shared values of all members of the school community

It was also recognised that:

In non-denominational as well as denominational schools, the response of some members of the community may at times be in the form of worship, but for others it will be a period of meditation and reflection on what it means to be human or on the significant values of the school and wider community. (Scottish Executive, 2004)

Key informants reflected these distinctions in their account of the forms of religious observance in different settings. The Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent, for example, was very clear that:

...they're not secular celebrations, they're quite overtly religious celebrations and, the whole point, help children experience that their daily lives are closely connected to their faith lives, and these are not separate things. (Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent)

It was expected that children in Catholic schools who were not Catholic would also participate in these acts of worship. Indeed, one head teacher explained that at enrolment parents were asked about their faith and, if they were not practicing Catholics, whether they would have any problem with their child participating in Catholic religious practices.

In non-denominational schools, the form of religious observance appeared to vary greatly according to the head teacher's perceptions of the local community. The representative of the Scottish Parent Councils said that he did not believe that:

Assemblies in the normal run of the mill school deal with religious education that much, I think it's taught mostly in class, a set amount of time per week is spent on religion, that's my understanding of it. (Scottish Parent Councils' representative).

The Church of Scotland representative felt that where the head teacher believed that the local community was predominantly Church of Scotland, then an ongoing relationship would be retained with the local minister and children would be taken for a service in the local Church of Scotland at the end of term. However, where there was more of a mixed population, the religious element would be less and observance would focus on moral and ethical, rather than religious perspectives.

The humanist representative felt that there was a severe problem with religious observance, because there was 'no recognition of the parity of esteem of alternative views'. He was concerned when religious views were conveyed to children as if they were facts, and referred to a particular example of a six year old child coming home from school and telling her parents that the minister had told her she was sinful but that Jesus' love could save her. He also noted that the RME guidelines state that the

school must provide appropriate and alternative activity for children who are withdrawn from religious education or observance. One family had requested that their children not attend the Harvest Festival at the local church, and the suitable alternative provision had been a request to write an essay on why God was important to them. The parents were extremely annoyed with the school, not least because the children had been asked to stand up and read their essays to the class. He acknowledged that urban schools with mixed populations were more likely to recognise diverse positions, but this was more likely to include a sensitivity to other religions, rather than a recognition of the equal validity of non-religious views.

Religious and other forms of celebration

Key informants noted the centrality of traditional Christian celebrations in the primary school year, particularly Easter and Christmas. In Catholic schools, there was also a focus on other periods of the Christian calendar such as Advent and lent. The parent council interviewee believed that in city schools with more diverse populations, there was a greater focus on celebrations of other world religions such as Eid, Diwali and Hanukkah, whereas these were unlikely to be celebrated in more remote rural schools. Attention was also increasingly being paid to celebrations associated with Scottish national identity, such as Burns Night and St Andrews Day, the latter clearly having Christian origins but being associated with secular practices such as parades, Scottish music and dancing. Hallowe'en appeared to be attracting more attention, and tended to be treated as a secular celebration of ghosts and ghouls.

Faith formation in Scottish primary schools

Key informants made a clear distinction between practice in denominational and non-denominational schools. The interviewee from the Scottish Catholic Education Service emphasised that the faith formation of Catholic children lay at the heart of educational practice within this sector, and infused all areas of the curriculum, not just religious education (see above). By way of contrast, other respondents emphasised that faith formation was not part of the purpose or ethos of non-denominational schools:

Well, the only place that would happen would be in a Catholic school where, those who choose to do so will be part of confirmation classes. Within a non-denominational school, there wouldn't be anybody who would be prepared in that fashion [i.e. confirmation]. What would happen is that they would have the opportunity to learn about it, to discuss it, and to, perhaps, experience one or more of the faith communities. But any decision or choice to go and participate and be a member of that, to become a convert, or to join something that you'd already converted to, would be a personal decision, not one that would be delivered as part of the mainstream curriculum. (Church of Scotland respondent)

The respondent from the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland also emphasised that the aim of religious education was not to convert children to a particular religious position, but to educate them about the cultural and social underpinnings of Scottish society:

Q: What sort of advice would you give to other primary principals or head teachers in dealing with parents who question the school curriculum on grounds of religion particularly?

A: I would certainly take it from the angle that look this is a part of the curriculum, it's part of receiving a rounded education, there isn't any question that we're trying to convert your child or proselytise or force them into churches, we're simply examining different religions and we're forcing nothing on children other than ascertainable facts which we then talk about and debate. I would advise people to reassure parents that there is no question of forcing children down a religious path for instance, but there is a question about knowing about the world, about knowing about Scotland's place in it, and how it's more and more a multicultural society here and understanding your neighbour is really important. (Respondent, Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland)

However, despite this rejection of 'proselytising', the humanist respondent expressed concerns about the possible elision between religious and moral education on the one hand, which he regarded as perfectly acceptable, and faith formation on the other, which he regarded as lying outwith the domain of non-denominational schools. According to this interviewee, practices such as taking children to a particular church and teaching them hymns could be seen as indoctrination rather than education about different religious and secular beliefs.

Roles of religious personnel in schools

As noted above, respondents stressed that religious and moral education in non-denominational schools focused primarily on education about a range of religious and secular belief systems, although the importance of personal search was also emphasised. At the same time, most non-denominational primary schools in Scotland had a close relationship with a minister, generally from the Church of Scotland. The Learning and Teaching Scotland respondent explained:

Well all primary schools will have a school chaplain and again it varies from school to school in terms of frequency with which chaplains are invited. Schools sometimes make quite sensible decisions. If a chaplain is not particularly effective in communicating with young children, then the head teacher will usually make a decision that the chaplain will be used sparingly. On the other hand, there are some chaplains that are very good and they're very good at relating with children so they'll come in, so a varied picture. There is probably less use of chaplains to come into classes. The main thing would be that chaplains would not be expected to take religious education classes for example, they would come to assemblies, they might be invited in though specifically to talk about a particular element of Christian belief or Christian practice at the upper end or indeed schools might take a class to a church because many children will not have been inside a church and just looking at the religious building and some of the symbolism. (Respondent, Learning and Teaching Scotland)

The interviewee from the Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland confirmed the likelihood of a close relationship with the Church of Scotland in non-denominational primary schools, but said that many secondary schools worked with a team of chaplains, sometimes including the local imam. According to the humanist interviewee, the involvement of clergy in state schools was problematic, since their privileged status made it difficult to achieve parity of esteem between religious and non-religious positions.

Within Catholic primary schools, it was clear that the local priest was closely involved in a range of religious celebrations throughout the school year:

There would, on certain occasions, be the involvement of the local priest, either for a service or for the celebration of Mass, in some instances. That might take place within the school. On occasions, it might take place in the local church, because it's a particular celebration. But each, or all, of these celebrations are linked with what's happening in the school, what's happening in the lives of children and their families. But they are not, they're not secular celebrations, they're quite overtly religious celebrations and the whole point is to help children experience that ...their daily lives ...are closely connected to their faith lives, and these are not separate things. (Respondent, Scottish Catholic Education Service)

Recognising cultural diversity

In non-denominational schools, as illustrated below, respondents believed that more attention was now paid to other world religions and secular systems, but that Christianity was prioritised with regard to its influence on Scottish cultural and intellectual traditions.

Q: To what extent would you say that in non-denominational schools one particular faith is prioritized?

A: Do you know I think that's changing, although I have the distinct feeling, I don't think I'm wrong in this, that Christianity is still supreme in that sense in that there's perhaps more attention paid to Christianity than other faiths, I think you probably would expect that given the culture of this country at the moment, but having said that, there is much more comparative religion now in the primary sector than ever there was, I mean there's no doubt about that. (Respondent, Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland)

The respondent from the Inter-Faith Council commented that non-denominational schools tended to be more even-handed in their approach to world religions, in that they were less likely to represent any one religion as having a monopoly on 'the truth'. Having said that, she worried that Christianity might be critiqued more extensively than other religions, which might be disturbing for children who were used to being presented with one version of the truth:

I felt that Christianity was possibly critiqued a bit more than other faiths. I mean ... everyone wants to be politically correct and not offend anybody. So therefore it's a possibility that they may be teaching other faiths, other than Christianity with ... kid gloves as it were. You know, a very kind of respectful kind of way, whereas Christianity might be treated in a more, in a more kind of critical way as you might have at University. I am a little bit concerned also that religions are maybe critiqued possibly a little bit too early. (Respondent, Inter-Faith Council).

The Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent noted the primacy attached to the teaching of Catholic Christianity in RC schools:

At the core of Christian thinking and Christian teaching ...is that each person is made in God's image and likeness and therefore deserves respect and affirmation and so on. So children would be taught from a very early stage that we respect all people, irrespective of whatever culture, whatever religion, whatever background...So recognition of religious and cultural diversity and absolute respect for the people themselves..., recognising differences. We

wouldn't necessarily be saying, 'Well, you know, all beliefs are the same', or 'all views are equally valid', but we would be, certainly, saying that all people are deserving of the same respect. (Respondent, Scottish Catholic Education Service).

Freedom of expression in relation to religion and belief

Parents' rights in relation to religious and moral education

In law, parents have the right to request that their child be withdrawn from religious and moral education and religious observance. Our respondents made clear that it was quite rare for requests for withdrawal to be made, although different explanations were given for this. The Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent explained that at the point of enrolment, the focus of Catholic schools was explained to all parents, so that parents who were uncomfortable with this approach would be encouraged to enrol their children in a non-denominational school. The EIS representative on the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education questioned whether parents should actually have this right, since, in his view, RME was no different as a curriculum subject from English or Maths, from which there was no possibility of withdrawal. The humanist respondent suggested that, rather than inviting parents to opt out, which might result in the child being identified as different, there should be an opting in process:

I think the starting point is to have an honest understanding of the community and the parents, and also to proactively, rather than reactively, find out what parents' views are and what their wishes are.I think, secondly, they have to proactively prepare a model whereby parents' rights are respected by the way in which the school is organised. And, therefore, parents would give an indication of what they were opting *into*, rather than having a standardised stereotypical 'this is it and, if you don't like it, you opt out'. Because that leads to all sorts of problems of alienation even bullying, separation etc., and that's not what learning's about, learning is about promoting the collective and the collegiate and all the rest of it. (Humanist respondent)

Children's rights in relation to religious and moral education

Whereas there was general, but not unanimous, approval for the parental opt-out right, the possibility of children opting out of religious and moral education was regarded as far more contentious. As noted above, the EIS representative on the Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education, who disapproved of parental opt-out, was even less willing to countenance an opt-out clause for children. The LTS and HMIe respondents both felt that children should be asked for their views on how religious and moral education was taught, although they would not have the appropriate knowledge and understanding to determine curriculum content. On the other hand, she was opposed to the idea of children being able to withdraw themselves:

I don't think children should be opting out of *anything* in school without their parents being informed, and without some discussion with their parents while they're in school. If religious education is being taught in a way that is encouraging children from all backgrounds, and children of faith and children of no faith to share their views, to discuss, to explore each others' beliefs and values, then I would see no reason for any child to be opting out or be withdrawn from RME. But, of course, the statute is still there and so, if parents

decide to withdraw their children, then that's up to them.. You know, then we have to respect that. (HMIE respondent)

A different view, however, was put forward by a local authority respondent, who felt that children should be encouraged to exercise choice in such matters, even if this was troubling for adults:

Q: To what extent do you think it would be fair for children to be allowed to opt out of RME either with parental consent or without it?

A: If you're asking me as a person it wouldn't bother me in the slightest. I would imagine that would trouble some head teachers mightily. I see the logic because I see that as decision-making, I see that as quite powerful in its own way, I have a son who declared himself an atheist at 8 which I found a bit scary, refused to go to church as of 12, which I found quite difficult but you know he's 16 now....a clever boy in many ways ... (Local authority respondent)

The Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent believed that it was unusual for children or young people to reject parental beliefs categorically at a relatively young age, although at times the Catholic school was able to act as mediator between the child and the parents where disagreements about fundamental issues arose. The humanist respondent was most adamant about the importance of allowing both parents and children the ability to exercise autonomy in this area:

. So, I think, in a sense, to answer your question, I think we would have to start with an awareness raising. But I also think there are fundamental intellectual educational issues arising. What do we think learning is about? Do we believe that young people have rights? And if we believe that young people have rights, how is that manifest? And there's no point in telling me, when I am 12, that I have the right to be consulted, if you've indoctrinated me for the seven years prior. So, therefore, we need to begin to look at the Scandinavian model of consulting with young people much earlier. I mean, I was once in a nursery in Denmark, and the head teacher showed me a video of four year olds being consulted. We don't even consult 16 year olds! So there is a whole cultural thing. I think, also, there needs to be a recognition that the notion, really born of the 19th Century in Scotland, of a predominant religion having greater legitimacy, greater moral position, is no longer applicable. Society is not like that. And the notion that there is some sort of hierarchical order is really an untenable proposition. So, not only do we owe it to young people, from an educational perspective, that learning is formed by a sound pedagogy, we also need to recognise that the parents in the communities are not an obedient Christian bedrock. That is not how the world is. (Humanist respondent)

Pros and cons of faith schools

Respondents were asked their opinion with regard to the upsides and downsides of faith schools, and this again elicited wide diversity in responses. The HMIE respondent recognised the strengths of many faith schools as effective places for learning, as were many non-denominational schools. She also stressed that views on faith schools were a matter of personal opinion)

Q: What upsides or downsides are there of having faith schools in Scotland?

A: I'm not sure I can answer that question, to be honest. It's a more personal question ... Certainly, the denominational schools that we have in Scotland are, on the whole, very successful schools that, you know, are vibrant communities for learning. You see children that are engaging with their faith community, but also very much learning about respect for others and citizenship and, you know, putting all of those, if you like, Christian values into action within their community. Some people might say that the downside would be that the faith schools encourage sectarianism and, you know, encourage more difference within our society but, I have to say, that that's not my experience being in denominational schools. Some of the best anti-sectarian work that I've seen has come from the denominational schools themselves. It's quite a difficult question.

Q What would be the upsides or downsides of having a totally secular school system?

A I guess, the downside would be that there would be a large aspect of human experience that might not be explored within schools, and that we may then create a society that would be very anti-religion, and that, in itself, could cause problems for society as a whole.

The Scottish Catholic Education Service respondent was of the view that there were only advantages to faith schools:

Q: What do you see as the upsides and downsides of having faith schools in society?

A: Well, not surprisingly, I don't see any downsides at all! I think the upsides are that faith schools contribute massively to the educational provision from Scotland and, indeed, in the UK. Without doubt, state-funded education would be significantly worse off if you had to close all faith schools tomorrow, and all the evidence indicates that. I think that they bring an understanding of life and faith that is integrated, and that is positive, and I think that's reflected in the fact that, in Scotland anyway, we have about 20% of the school population *opting* to go to a Catholic school when, in fact, Catholics themselves, only account for about 14 or 15% of the nation's population. For me, there are only positives and, indeed, I would say, in an age where the place of religion is being marginalised, you know, across various areas of social policy, they're all the more significant because it's important that young people have a kind of, have the opportunity, at least, to have a more accurate understanding of the part religion can play in their lives, and might be the case if they were to listen to certain kind of representation of religious faiths.

Q: Do you think there should be more faith schools, of different denominations and religions?

A: Well, in England, of course, there are all these variations. In Scotland, with the exception of a Jewish school, effectively, you're really only talking about Catholic schools. Well, we've been there, and there were indeed a whole variety of different denominational schools or, indeed, the law of the land would allow for that now. So, I think, any parents who would wish their children to be educated within a faith context, reflecting their own traditions, should have the right to do that. Indeed, they *do* have the right to do that in Scots law, it's just that the other churches have kind of given up that active interest. There were over 200 Episcopalian schools, not so long ago in Scotland, and all the public schools were originally established as Church of Scotland schools. But they've just become non-denominational and, you know, in most recent years, certainly, non-Christian, I suppose, you know.

The advantages of faith primary schools was strongly endorsed by the respondent from the Muslim Council of Scotland:

I think the upside of having a faith school ..is that, within the school, there is some kind of thread throughout the school, which is a continuous reminder of that particular faith...

For example, prayers would be given space within the school day, and teachers would be praying with the children. However, she also emphasised that, in addition to an emphasis on Islam, Muslim parents would also expect 'the highest possible education there as well'.

The Church of Scotland respondent believed that the creation of Catholic state schools was a response to particular circumstances in the early years of the twentieth century, and that it was important to operate pragmatically with the current system, but the creation of new faith schools, as in England, was likely to be problematic:

Q: So what would you say are the upsides and downsides of having faith schools in Scotland?

A: Faith schools are a political consequence of the Catholic community feeling very.. very vulnerable in the earlier part of the 20th century. And Catholic schools were created as a consequence of the state realising that they needed to protect this vulnerable community. If we were starting from scratch, we would not have faith schools, because you deliver diversity by people being together and experiencing each other in all aspects of life. The fact is, we do have faith schools, and so we need to manage that, and, getting rid of or banning faith schools may get us back to the place where we were before, with one community feeling vulnerable, even though other communities feel that they've now got a head start. And it's not the best place to be, but it is where we are, and I, frankly, don't think that it is politically or socially a productive process to say we're going to stop faith schools. However, I would not want new faith schools. (Church of Scotland respondent).

This respondent explained that he did not support the recent decision of the Scottish government to establish a Muslim school in Glasgow, on the grounds that this would divide people on race as well as religion.

Other interviewees were even firmer in their criticisms:

I think there are no benefits at all, none, I'm quite categorical on that. If I had power which is just as well I have none, it's as well I have no power whatsoever, but if I had power, tomorrow I would close them all, every one of them. If we're serious about one Scotland, then let's be one Scotland, we don't need that, we don't need in our education system, I find myself utterly opposed to it, certainly within the state system, if people withdraw their children and go to some sort of private system well I suppose we have a limited power over that but within the state system I would have schools and you go to the school, that's essentially the French system isn't it. (Respondent, Association of Head Teachers and Deputies in Scotland)

One respondent also drew attention to the opposition of many teacher unions to faith schools on the grounds that they discriminated in favour of members of a particular faith group in terms of employment practices:

I think there's quite a strong divide there. There's a very very significant number of teachers and members of teaching unions that are opposed to faith schools, that's clear, that's been going on for years, sometimes they've got agendas so sometimes they've had a bad experience or rejected their particular church or whatever but there are quite a number. (Local authority respondent)

Conclusion

On the basis of the analysis presented above, it might be argued that religious education in Scotland, and the existence of faith schools, is not an enormously contentious issue in modern Scotland. This view would be endorsed by the Parent Council representative, who reported that relatively few parents contact them to express concerns on this topic and few choose to withdraw their children from religious education and observance. A counter view was presented by the humanist respondent, who believed that parents did not object because they had only a vague understanding of school practices, and there were many examples of the elision of education about and indoctrination into religion. Opting out of religious education and observance was discouraged because schools did not offer educationally worthwhile alternatives, and most parents did not want their child to be singled out as a special case. Despite the existence of equality legislation in relation to religion and belief, and the decline in religious identification, Christianity was still treated as the predominant belief system in Scotland from which individuals had to opt out rather than opt into. By the same token, there was often a failure to accord parity of esteem to secular belief systems.

There appears to be consensus with regard to the value of teaching children about world religions and secular belief systems, and a widely held view that the study of Christianity may help children to understand Scottish culture, intellectual traditions and literature. A significant number of our key informants, on the other hand, disagreed about the privileged position accorded to Christianity in non-denominational schools, and argued that education about religion had the tendency to slip into indoctrination into a particular religious tradition. There were also disagreements about the merits of faith schools, with some respondents believing that Catholic schools were essential to counter the growth of 'aggressive secular views' and the perceived tendency of religion to be squeezed out of non-denominational schools. Others, on the other hand, including the Church of Scotland respondent, believed that Catholic schools should not be abolished, but that new faith schools were undesirable because of their tendency to promote social divisions. Trade union opposition on employment equality grounds was also mentioned.

It is interesting to note that current debates in England on covert social selection practices by faith schools are not very evident in Scotland, partly because most Catholic primary schools are located in Glasgow and the west coast, where social deprivation levels are higher and children tend to have lower levels of educational attainment. Educational research (albeit somewhat dated) is used to argue that, when social class is controlled for, Catholic schools in Scotland tend to be more effective than non-denominational schools. Clearly, religious education is not currently a red hot topic in Scotland, but nonetheless beneath the surface there are many areas of disagreement and debate.