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# **A Comparative Study of Religious Education in Scotland and Malawi with Special Reference to Developments in the Secondary School Sector, 1970-2010**

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**Cert. Ed. (Solusi, Zimbabwe), BA+QTS (Andrews, USA), MA (Botswana), MTh (Malawi)**

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**(Subject: Religious Education)**

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College of Social Sciences  
The University of Glasgow**

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## Abstract

This thesis provided a systematic comparison of Religious Education (RE) as it has evolved in the secondary school curriculum of Scotland and Malawi, between 1970 and the present day (2010). It sought to draw analogies and, where valid, to indicate significant points of difference regarding key issues that underpin this development between two countries that also have a historical relationship dating back to 1859. This was a qualitative study which used the phenomenological research method. In both countries data was collected through field-based research using key informant interviews (n60), relevant documents and school surveys.

The conceptual framework of the thesis was based on concepts and issues in the discourse of contemporary RE. The constant comparison strategy of data analysis was implemented in exploring issues that emerged in the research. To facilitate the analysis of secondary school RE in Scotland and Malawi a thematic approach was adopted in which six key issues were identified and investigated. The first explored the historical problem of underdevelopment in RE. The second examined motives that engendered reforms in the RE curriculum. The third described the various curriculum changes in RE during the period under study. The fourth discussed contested spaces related to the micro-politics of RE. The fifth surveyed the level of provision in RE in different school contexts. The sixth and last assessed the current state of RE.

The findings of this study suggested that despite some points of difference, there was greater similarity on salient issues that underpinned the nature of secondary school RE in the two countries, in areas such as the need for curriculum reform, micro-politics of reform, provision in schools and status of the subject. Given the challenges the subject faces in both Scotland and Malawi, the study concluded that without government intervention and support from other key stakeholders RE will continue to be regarded as a marginal curriculum subject.

**Keywords:** *Religious Education, secondary school curriculum, antecedents and change, micro-politics of reform, different school contexts, opportunities and constraints, Scotland and Malawi.*

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late father, Mr Hisbon David Matemba (1944-1993), who did not live long enough to celebrate his son's achievement as the first PhD holder in the Matemba and Baluti clans of Phalombe and Thyolo, respectively.

*And also to*

Ronnia (*Anathunga*), my wife of many years, and to our lovely three children:  
Michelle Muthoni, Nathan Tamando and David Hisbon.

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**Yonah Hisbon Matemba**

Glasgow and Ayr, Scotland, UK

April 2011

## **Author's declaration**

I hereby declare that the doctoral thesis entitled, *A Comparative Study of Religious Education in Scotland and Malawi with Special Reference to Developments in the Secondary School Sector, 1970-2010*, is the result of my original and independent research, and that all sources used have been duly acknowledged. I further declare that this thesis has not been submitted to this or other university for the same or similar award and nor is it being concurrently submitted for any other award.

**Yonah Hisbon Matemba**

**Date**

## Acronyms and abbreviations

ACEM	Association of Christian Educators in Malawi
AMECEA	Association for Membership of the Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa
ATQ	Additional Teaching Qualification
ATR	African Traditional Religion
BK	Bible Knowledge
CCAP	Church of Central African Presbyterian
CCC	Consultative Committee on the Curriculum
CDP	Christian Democratic Party
CEAS	Christian Evangelical Alliance for Scotland
CEC	Catholic Education Commission
CfE	Curriculum for Excellence
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRG	Curriculum Review Group
CSEC	Church of Scotland Education Committee
DCE	Dundee College of Education
DEMs	District Education Managers
ECS	Established Church of Scotland
EDP	Education Development Plan
EIPF	Education Investment Policy Framework
EIS	Educational Institute of Scotland
FCS	Free Church of Scotland

GTCS	General Teaching Council for Scotland
GTZ	<i>Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit</i>
HMle	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
JCE	Junior Certificate Examination
LTS	Learning and Teaching Scotland
MAM	Muslim Association of Malawi
MCP	Malawi Congress Party
ME	Moral Education
MME	Malawi Ministry of Education
MSCE	Malawi School Certificate of Education
NCC	National Consultative Committee
OBE	Outcome Based Education
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
ORAC	Office of the Religious Affairs Coordinator
OWR	Other World Religions
PSHE	Personal Search and Health Education
PTNSS	Principal Teacher at a Non-Denominational School in Scotland
PTs	Principal Teachers
QIO	Quality Improvement Officers
RE	Religious Education
RME	Religious and Moral Education
RMPE	Religious, Moral and Philosophical Education

RMPS	Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies
RMS	Religious and Moral Studies
RPCM	Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi
SAARE	Scottish Association of Advisors in Religious Education
SADC	Southern Africa Development Community
SCAR	Secondary Curriculum Assessment Reform
SCCB	Scottish Conference of Catholic Bishops
SCCORE	Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education
SCE	Scottish Certificate of Education
SCJC	Scottish Council of Jewish Communities
SCQF	Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework
SJCRME	Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education
SMPA	Scottish Muslim Parents Association
SOCC	Scottish Office Catholic Commission
SQA	Scottish Qualifications Authority
SSRE	Secondary School Religious Education
TPSM	Teacher at a Public School in Malawi
TRS	Theology and Religious Studies
UDF	United Democratic Front
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme

UNIMA	University of Malawi
USA	United States of America

# Chapter 1

## Introduction to the Study

### 1.1. Statement of the problem

Religious Education (RE) in Scotland and Malawi—as in other liberal-democratic societies such as Germany (Weisse 2007), England (Jackson 2004b), Botswana (Matemba 2005) and South Africa (Chidester 2006)—has undergone curriculum reform during the past four decades (1970-2010). This, it seems, has been done not only to improve teaching and learning but also to attune the subject's content and pedagogy to the contemporary setting underscored by trends in society such as liberalism, democratisation and greater recognition of cultural and religious heterogeneity. But given the fact that historically, RE in Scotland and Malawi has been synonymous with Christian education—with confessionalism as its *raison d'être*—these reforms have engendered controversy around issues such as cultural heritage, ideology and 'secularised' educational policy.

And yet despite the public interest in RE generated by these developments, generally the subject remains a less understood aspect of modern education in both Scotland and Malawi. Therefore, this study is an attempt to deepen understanding of this contested area of the school curriculum. As a chosen curriculum area for in-depth investigation, this study compares key issues in the development of secondary school RE (hereinafter, SSRE) in both Scotland and Malawi. Owing to the fact that naturally the two countries have different socio-cultural and religious realities, this study is topical because it provides a systematic study of the progression of a contested school subject in different national contexts. Given the fact that previous comparative studies in RE have tended to examine developments in similar national<sup>1</sup> or regional<sup>2</sup> contexts, the

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<sup>1</sup> For example, 'Does RE Work' project (2007-2010) carried out by scholars across the UK and led by Professor James Conroy of Glasgow University investigated the experiences of RE across all regions of the UK. See Lundie, D. 2010. 'Does RE work?' An analysis of the aims, practices and models of effectiveness of religious education in the UK. *British Journal of Religious Education*, 32, 163-170.

<sup>2</sup> For example, 'European REDCo' project (2006-2009) carried out by scholars across Europe and led by Professor Wolfram Weisse of Hamburg University, Germany, investigated RE in several European countries. See Weisse, W. 2007. The European Research Project on Religion and Education (REDCo): An Introduction. In: JACKON, R., MIEDENA, S., WEISSE, W. W. & WILLAIME, J. (eds.) *Religious Education in Europe: Developments, Contexts and Debates*. New York & Berlin:



contribution of this study to the wider discourse on contemporary RE is that it ascertains whether, if at all, there are major points of difference on salient issues that underpin the nature of RE in two radically different contexts, one African (non-Western) and the other European (Western).

## 1.2. Objectives of the study

The main objective of this study was to compare how SSRE in Scotland and Malawi has evolved during past four decades (1970-2010). The specific objectives were:

1. To examine factors that engendered reform in SSRE in Scotland and Malawi.
2. To analyse the nature and extent of curriculum changes in SSRE in Scotland and Malawi.
3. To explore spaces of contest related to reform in SSRE in Scotland and Malawi.
4. To survey the level of provision in SSRE in Scottish and Malawian schools.
5. To assess the state of SSRE in Scotland and Malawi.

## 1.3. Research questions

The overarching research question that guided the study is: *To what extent has SSRE in Scotland and Malawi evolved in its pursuit for modernisation during the past four decades?* From the main question, a number of sub-questions in relation to the research problem and objectives of the study stated above were explored. The sub-questions were as follows:

1. Why has SSRE in Scotland and Malawi undergone reform?
2. What is the nature of curriculum reform in SSRE in the two countries?

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Waxman Muster. There is also a recent Warwick University PhD thesis that investigated RE between England and Norway. See Oddrum, B. 2009. *Comparative Study of Religious Education between England and Norway*. PhD, Warwick. As far as it can be ascertained, there is one small unpublished study that investigated RE between Scotland and Sweden. See Rylner, J. 1995. *Comparative Study of Religious Education between Scotland and Sweden*. Glasgow.

3. How do stakeholders engage with SSRE reform in Scotland and Malawi?
4. What is the level of provision in SSRE in Scottish and Malawian schools?
5. How can the current state of SSRE in Scotland and Malawi be judged?

#### **1.4. Scope of the study**

As noted above, the object of this thesis was to compare important changes that have occurred in SSRE in Scotland and Malawi, from 1970 to the present day (2010). This period of the study was determined by that fact that in Malawi, SSRE first received curriculum attention in 1970 following the first ever regional attempt to reform the subject for schools in East and Central Africa. In Scotland, curriculum reforms began after the publication of the Millar Report in 1972, a document widely credited for charting a new direction for Scottish RE. The period of the study extended to the present-day (2010) to coincide with current developments: in Malawi to factor in the 2006 revised RE curriculum that, however, is awaiting implementation and in Scotland to include the new SSRE programme as part of a new national curriculum called *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE), piloted in a few secondaries in 2008-2009 and rolled in the 2010-2011 school year.

#### **1.5. Scotland and Malawi in comparative perspectives**

The purpose of this section is to situate the research in its appropriate context, first, by providing comparative background issues about Scotland and Malawi and, secondly, by noting some historical and current aspects of the long-standing Scotland-Malawi relationship.

##### **1.5.1. Background cross-country comparison**

Geographically, Scotland's total land mass of 30,878 sq. miles is smaller by about 15,000 sq. miles to that of Malawi, and yet Scotland only has a population slightly above five million compared with Malawi which is nearly reaching the fifteen million mark (compare MME 2008a; Scottish Government 2001). Economically, the two countries are worlds apart. Malawi is one of the world's poorest countries which according to the United Nations (UN), ranks 160th out of

182 countries on the economic index (UNDP 2009). Compared to Scotland, for instance, the overall strength of Malawi's economy can be equated to the economy of the small Scottish town of Falkirk with just 33,000 people. Politically, Scotland—as part of the United Kingdom (UK) *albeit* with devolved status—is a constitutional monarchy operating under the banner of parliamentary democracy. On its part, Malawi is a multi-party democracy, though this is a fairly recent development which came about in 1994 as a replacement of the one-party authoritarian regime that had been in power since independence from the UK in 1964.

On the matter of religion, Christianity is the dominant faith in both countries. Based on Scotland's last census (2001), 65.09% of the people are (at least nominally) Christian, 0.13% Buddhist, 0.11% Hindu, 0.13% Jewish, 0.84% Muslim and 0.13% Sikh. Notably, 27.55% of Scots say that they have 'no religion' (Scottish Executive 2005). In Malawi, the latest census (2008) indicates that 82.7% of the people are Christian, 13.0% Muslim and 1.9% others (Baha'i, Hindu, Sikh, Rastafarian, Jewish, Buddhist and African Traditional Religion (ATR)). Notably, 2.5% of Malawians say that they have 'no religion', which is actually a decline from 4.3% in the previous census (1998) (MME 2008a). It is necessary then to make the observation that while in Scotland the 'tension' that usually has ramifications for RE is mainly between Christianity (major religion) and secularism (i.e. influential force in society), in Malawi the parallel encounter is between Christianity (i.e. major religion) and Islam (i.e. second largest religion).

On education, Scotland and Malawi follow different systems. In Scotland children spend seven years in primary, six years in secondary and (for those who proceed to it) four years in university (i.e. 7+6+4 system). In Malawi children spend eight years in primary, four years in secondary and (for those who go on to it) four years in university (i.e. 8+4+4 system). Another noticeable difference is that in Scotland progression of children from one class to another and even from one stage of the education system to another (i.e. primary to secondary) is determined by the child's age (Mitchell 1996). By contrast, educational progression in Malawi is determined only by examination. In other words, in Malawi a child must pass a competitive school or national examination in order to proceed to the next class or to move on from one stage of the education system to another. As often happens, after several repeats many children—especially girls who for cultural reasons marry at an early age—simply leave

formal education altogether, some without even having ever been in secondary education at all (see Chimombo 2009).

Regarding secondary education, which is the main concern of this study, it should be noted that in 2010 Scotland had 431 secondaries, which included 55 independent, 320 state non-denominational and 56 state supported Catholic schools (LTS 2010). During the same period, Malawi had 1,049 secondaries which included 289 private (owned by individual entrepreneurs and faith groups), 96 conventional (full government controlled schools), 575 community day (partly government-funded schools), 45 grant-aided (Church owned but receive government subsidy) and 44 open/night (no government subsidy or funding and offer distance education mode of teaching and learning) (MME 2008a).

### **1.5.2. Scotland and Malawi in historical context**

The Scotland-Malawi link can be traced to 1859 when David Livingstone, a Scottish missionary and explorer, set foot on the shores of Lake Malawi. This visit set in motion a chain of events that led up to the planting of Christianity in Malawi in the mid-1870s through the dedicated work of Scottish Presbyterian missionaries. After his visit to Central Africa, of which Malawi is part, Livingstone was convinced that the only practical way to end the East Africa Arab slave trade, which he personally witnessed in this part of Africa, was for the 'civilised' world to introduce the three 'Cs' (Commerce, Christianity and Civilisation) into the country (Nkomazana 1998).

Taking up Livingstone's 'call', Scottish Presbyterian missionaries became the first Europeans to set up permanent bases in the country. The first to arrive were missionaries of the Free Church of Scotland (FCS) in 1875, to be followed a year later by the missionaries of the 'established' Church of Scotland (ECS) (Ross 1996).<sup>3</sup> The two Churches built schools, which introduced Malawians to western education for the first time. As would be expected, these schools taught a typical Scottish curriculum such that in 1903 a Standard Five examination question at Livingstonia Mission (FCS) school asked candidates to 'describe the shortest sea route from Glasgow to Inverness, taking in the capes and lochs along the way' (McCracken 1994, p. 6). Besides Presbyterian missionaries, over the

---

<sup>3</sup> Each of the two Presbyterian missions was named after an issue with Livingstone: Livingstonia after Livingstone's name and Blantyre after Livingstone's birth-place in South Lanarkshire.

decades Scottish farmers, estate owners, academicians, and many others went to work or settle in Malawi (McCracken 1977).

Of the many Scottish teachers and other academicians who have been associated with Malawi during the period under study in this thesis, two stand out because of their direct involvement with RE, particularly the training of Malawian RE teachers. David Bone (one time Principal Teacher of RE at Bellahouston Academy, Glasgow) went to Malawi in 1978 under the sponsorship of the Church of Scotland where he joined the University of Malawi (UNIMA) as lecturer in the then newly (1976) created department of Religious Studies. This department had been set up initially to train SSRE teachers (at diploma level) (Ross 1995). Notably, before going to Malawi, Bone had been an active member of the Scottish Central Committee on Religious Education (SCCORE) and it was while Bone was a member of SCCORE that the all-important report: *Bulletin 1: A Curricular Approach to Religious Education* (hereinafter: *Bulletin 1*) was produced. The contribution of *Bulletin 1* in the evolution of Scottish RE is noted in chapter 5 of this thesis. While it is difficult to ascertain the overall influence of Bone's Scottish experience in RE on wider pedagogical developments in Malawi, the teacher education that Bone and his Malawian colleagues offered included not only the study of Christianity (as the main religion) but also other religions such as Islam and ATR (Chitsime 2009).

Bone's replacement at UNIMA, also under the sponsorship from the Church of Scotland, was the Reverend Dr Kenneth Ross (now professor). Ross worked at UNIMA from 1988 to 1998 and during that time attained the rank of full professor of theology. Like Bone before him, Ross was also involved in the training of RE teachers which included this writer. However, after 1991 the department of Religious Studies changed to the department of Theology and Religious Studies (TRS) to offer full degree programmes in theology. For this reason, the new TRS department became less and less involved with the training RE teachers, a responsibility that had now been given to the department of curriculum and teaching studies.

Returning to aspects of the Scotland-Malawi relationship, we should note that Scotland's affinity with Malawi has always been strong, as we have already noted, owing to the dedicated work of Presbyterian missionaries. In fact, some commentators like Peter Forster have postulated that if Scotland had an African

colony, Malawi could have been surely her first (Forster 2003). History tells us that during the scramble for Africa in the 1880s, Presbyterian missionaries actively campaigned for British takeover of Malawi as its colony which eventually materialised in 1891 (Shepperson and Price 1958). I must observe here that the Scottish fervent campaign to make Malawi part of the British empire was an effort perhaps to preserve Presbyterian interests because during the scramble for Africa, Portugal—a Catholic country—was threatening to annexe part of southern Malawi, an area where Presbyterians had been first to plant Christian Protestant roots (see Pachai 1972).

However, it is imperative to stress that compared with other European missionaries, the presence of Scottish missionaries in Malawi was generally a positive one (Mufuka 1977). Thus, even when the general accusation is made that like most Europeans in colonial Africa, Scots too, were *children of their time* (Fiedler 1998), their attitude was surprisingly pro-African (Sindima 1992). It is noted that in league with Malawians, Scottish missionaries opposed many British colonial practices such as the cruel treatment of Africans in the aftermath of the John Chilembwe native uprising of 1915 (Shepperson and Price 1958). It is further observed that Scottish missionaries opposed certain aspects of British colonial policy, for example, that they supported Africans in their opposition to the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (a controversial colonial policy which briefly amalgamated the colonial states of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe from 1953 to 1963) (McCracken 1977). Much is also said about the pro-Malawi lobby in Scotland, which played a minor but significant role in the anti-British colonial politics by prominent Malawians particularly from the mid-1940s to independence in 1964 (Ross 1996).

What then about Malawians in Scotland? From the sources available, it can be surmised that on their part Malawians have also had a first-hand connection with Scotland. Over the decades many Malawians have gone to Scotland as visitors, students and, since the early 1970s, as workers and permanent residents as well (see Ross 2009b). However, of all Malawians who have had a direct connection to Scotland, Dr Hastings Banda (c.1898-1997) who became Malawi's first president in 1964, is perhaps the most well-known (Lwanda 1993). Banda, who had been baptised (1905) as a child in the Church of Scotland in his home village of Kasungu in Malawi—and between 1925 and 1937 studied in various American institutions where he graduated in a number of academic areas including

medicine at Meharry Medical College in Tennessee. However, at a time when American medical degrees were not fully recognised in British territories and wishing to practice medicine in his home country of Malawi (then a British protectorate), Banda came to Scotland in 1937 where he enrolled for a second medical degree at Edinburgh University and graduated in 1941 (Brody no date) .

While in Scotland, Banda was befriended by many returning missionaries from Malawi and through this connection it is said that the Kirk (i.e. Church of Scotland) partly funded his studies. And it was in Scotland where Banda was ordained (1940) an elder of the Church of Scotland's Guthrie Memorial congregation in Edinburgh (Lwanda 1993), a fact that—when he became president in 1964 and despite the brutality of his despotic rule which ended in 1992 as we shall see—he used to bolster his moral authority by constantly reminding people that he was still a Church 'elder' (Zezeza 1995).

It was also in Scotland where Banda became politically active. During the mid-1940s he joined other African political activists (both in Scotland and the rest of the UK) who were calling for an end to British rule in their countries. In Scotland, many retired Scottish missionaries from Malawi also shared passionately Banda's feelings of despair about the continued existence of British colonial rule over Malawi. In short, Banda had the full support of Presbyterian Churches, in both Scotland and Malawi, in his political activities towards independence for Malawi.<sup>4</sup> Small wonder therefore that when Banda formed his first government in 1962 (under the self-rule provision in preparation for formal independence in 1964) he included Colin Cameron—a Scottish lawyer who had worked in private practice in Malawi—as Minister of Works and Transport (Schoffeleers 1999). However, it is necessary to point out that Cameron and other cabinet ministers resigned shortly afterwards in protest against Banda's autocratic style of leadership (Cameron Collection 1952/1969), in particular over Banda's desire to introduce a Preventative Detention Bill (Ross 2009a, pp. 182ff).

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<sup>4</sup> Since 1924 the Presbyterian Church in Malawi has been known as Church of Central Africa Presbyterian (CCAP), born out of the amalgamated Presbyterian synods of Blantyre (ECS) and Livingstonia (FCS). In 1926 the Dutch Reformed Church of South African Boers (at Nkhoma mission in Central Malawi) joined the new Church arrangement. See Rimmington, G. 1966. Education for Independence. A Study of Changing Educational Administration in Malawi. *Comparative Education*, 2, 217-223.

Thus, to the chagrin of his Scottish supporters Banda proceeded to rule Malawi as a despot. Banda effectively turned the country into a police state where dissenting political views were unwelcome and those deemed to be the 'enemy' of the one party state, real or imagined, suffered tremendously through torture, imprisonment and even death (Zezeza 1995). While at first the Presbyterian Church in both countries was reluctant to criticise Banda whom it considered its own (Thompson 2005), the excesses of his rule (especially after 1970 when he declared himself president for life) eventually became too much for the Presbyterian Church to ignore. Subsequently, the Presbyterian Church withdrew its public support of Banda and his government (Schoffeleers 1999). By implication, this also signalled the fact that the relationship between Scots and Malawians was no longer a politically positive one it once had been.

It was therefore with great relief that Banda's regime finally collapsed in 1994 because this allowed the two countries to reconnect once again. The revival of this friendship, at the official level at least, took place in 2005 when Scottish and Malawian governments signed a cooperation agreement. The emphasis of this agreement is on a reciprocal partnership that puts greater emphasis on mutual respect for the benefit of people in the two countries. It is a bilateral relationship based not on 'recipients' and 'donors' but on long-standing, mutually beneficial community to community and people to people links (Scottish Government 2005).

The cooperation agreement has sparked perhaps one of the most intriguing post-colonial relationships between a Western and an African country, yet to be fully researched. Writing in the *Scotsman* recently, Susan Dalgety observes that 'Scots young and old, expert and amateur, rich and poor, have embraced Malawi's development challenges as their own' (Dalgety 2010, p. 30). The various projects being undertaken by Scottish groups and individuals in Malawi—thanks in part to a £3 million annual Scottish government fund set aside for Malawi—are a welcome complement to the efforts being made by the leadership of the African country as it struggles to deal with low levels of economic development associated with issues such as extreme poverty, poor health and lack of educational opportunities (Enslin and Hedge 2010).



## 1.6. Structure of the thesis

The thesis has ten chapters, including this introduction. The second chapter provides the conceptual frameworks for the study. It is based on issues that have emerged in the wider discourse on contemporary RE. First, it notes changes in society that have affected RE. Secondly, it examines the role of critical scholarship in the development of RE. Next, it outlines some of the pedagogical approaches that have emerged in RE. This then is followed by a discussion on the politicisation of RE, on to the examination of pedagogical criticisms that have been levelled against contemporary RE. Finally, it discusses some of the philosophical issues in RE.

The third chapter describes the research methodology for the study. It outlines the research design, covering issues such as the paradigm adopted and research method chosen; data collection tools used; how the study was piloted; procedures used for data analysis; how bias was minimized and controlled; techniques for identifying themes; the research location; how access was gained for the research; the research collaboration and consultation undertaken; transferability and dependability issues; ethical compliance and finally, the researcher's experience and competence to undertake the research.

The fourth chapter in the study examines the historical state of RE in Scotland and Malawi. Covered in that chapter are the statutory implications for RE in Scotland and issues related to why historically, RE was undervalued in schools and the society generally.

Chapter five identifies and explores various motives that engendered reform in RE in Scotland and Malawi. The issues covered include: impact of new trends in society, political intervention and pressure, impact of scholarship, role of professional committees, contribution of the advisorate and influence of global trends on national strategies for RE.

Chapter six discusses curriculum changes in RE in Scotland and Malawi. It notes some of the early attempts made to reform the subject and also examines current reforms. Stakeholders' reception of the new curriculum is discussed, on to an examination of some of the micro-politics of curriculum reform in RE. Finally, a critical assessment of the new RE programmes in the two countries is made.

In chapter seven issues that underpin the spaces of contest for RE in Scotland and Malawi are subjected to critical reflection. The issues discussed include: ideological clash, the vexed issue of identity, intractability of consultation and insensitivity of new policy.

Chapter eight examines the level of RE provision in Scottish and Malawian schools. It assesses how far schools are adhering to the various legislation and policies governing the subject. In Malawi it also explores and challenges the widely held perception that schools located in areas with preponderantly larger numbers of Muslims prefer RME and not BK because RME has an Islamic component.

Chapter nine evaluates the current state of RE in Scotland and Malawi. While acknowledging possible areas which if utilised might bring the much needed renewal in the subject, this chapter identifies the constraints for RE to which three issues are discussed namely, the struggle for credibility, shortage of teachers and negative publicity.

The final chapter (chapter 10) is the conclusion and addresses several issues. First, it re-states the research questions against a summary of the main findings to determine if the aims of the study have been fulfilled. Secondly, it describes the implications of the study in the two countries. Third, the limitations of the study are noted and areas for further study suggested. Finally, concluding remarks about the study are made.

## Chapter 2

### Conceptual Frameworks

#### 2.1. Introduction

In contemporary society RE remains a school subject in a state of flux (Gearon 2008). This is mainly due to the fact that RE is a subject imbricated in cultural history, ideological battles, pedagogical wranglings and intense philosophical debates (Hackett 2007). Located firmly within the discourse on contemporary RE, the main purpose of the present chapter is to provide the conceptual and analytical basis for the study as a whole. The conceptualisation of RE in this chapter provides a means of shedding light on issues that underpin modern-day understandings of the history, nature, role and design of RE. First, the chapter explores changes in society that have affected RE. Secondly, it explains the contribution of critical scholarship in the development of RE, and, third, it moves on to a discussion of pedagogical shifts in the subject. This is then followed by an exposition of the micro-politics of RE, a curriculum subject felt by many to be sitting perilously in the secular-liberal setting of contemporary education. Next, some of the pedagogical criticisms levelled against RE are examined and, finally, philosophical issues related to contemporary RE are also discussed.

#### 2.2. Trends in society affecting Religious Education

In this section some trends in society that affect RE are discussed. The issues are: secularisation, migration, Egalitarianism and educational access, and finally, democratisation and pluralisation.

##### 2.2.1. Secularisation

In contemporary Western European societies *secularisation* has been a major factor that has tremendously influenced people's perceptions of religion. The consequence of this has been that traditional approaches of RE, such as confessionalism, are no longer seen as sufficiently able to address the needs of

children living in a contemporary secular-liberal setting (see Templeton 1999). By definition, secularisation is the process in which explicit religious thinking, practice and institutions lose their social significance in public life (Brennan 2005). Secularisation of European societies, for example, can be traced to the impact of modernity on organised religion (Coulby 1996). But first, in order to provide the necessary context to this issue some introductory comments should be made about Western Europe before the emergence of its modern society. In pre-modern or traditional Western societies most people adhered to the teachings of the Church as the absolute truth (Brennan 2005). People also generally lived in homogeneous communities in which morals were strictly enforced by religious officials. Such officials were thought to have a divine right as intermediaries between man and God because the prevailing thinking was that on his own man was unable to have direct access to God. Generally, in pre-modern society religion galvanised communities and that it also served as a guide for people's understanding of reality (Tester 1993).

The emergence of modern society roughly between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries—triggered by major events such as the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution—brought cataclysmic changes to much of Western civilization. Significantly, due to these developments the primacy of religious institutions was eclipsed by economic and political ones and religious values replaced by secular values (Lyotard 1999). In extreme cases, such as in France after the Revolution (1798-1799), the country adopted a secular constitution such that to this day the teaching of religion in French public schools is outlawed (Nipkow 2009). Similarly, in the United States of America (USA) religion in public education is also banned in line with the secular nature of the country's constitution (Moran 2010).

Recent commentators stress the role that post-modernity has played in the acceleration of secularisation in Western values and thought. Post-modernity is generally understood as the state of society proceeding from modernity (from mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century) and characterised by the decentring of cultural, economic, social, political and philosophical assumptions (Tester 1993). In some sense, post-modernity is a reaction to the perceived discredited *grand narratives* of the post-enlightenment perception of the world (Brennan 2005). According to the Wittgenstein school of thought, post-modernity draws our attention to the *limits* of human reason and the security it purports to provide (Hustwit 1997). As

the philosopher of RE, Andrew Wright, also explains, post-modernity is a period during which the more people think they have mastered the ability to understand the reality of the world, the more they have actually become aware of the provisionality of human knowledge (Wright 1993).

In essence, post-modernity has become popularly synonymous with the rejection of the notion of *objective truth*. By implication this means that religious truth-claims are subjected to critical reflection. The issue of religious ‘truth-claims’—that is whether, if at all, ‘truth’ is an ‘objective’ manifestation of reality—has been widely debated by philosophers and thus need not be repeated here (see Evans 1976; Friedman 2008; No author 1971). What can be said, though, is that the post-modern assault on the canons of rationality and the established institutions of knowledge-production has made people more critical of religious authority, with the consequence that society has opened up to an unprecedented plurality of views, whether these are religious or not, regarding how individuals and communities want to live their lives and the authority structures that then guide their chosen lifestyle paths (Wright 2004b).

### 2.2.2. Migration

The flow of immigrants into Western countries, particularly after the Second World War, has had a profound effect on RE. For example, Germany received mainly Muslim immigrants from Turkey (Henkel 2006), while the UK received Asian immigrants from the Indian sub-continent (among them Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) (Jackson 2004b) and also Asians and Blacks from the Caribbean (Rich 1987). Thus, by the 1970s many British cities were no longer monolithically Christian or indigenously White-British. As such, there grew greater awareness in the UK that traditional RE based on the Bible was no longer relevant to the experiences of *all children* (Templeton 1999). In recent decades, educational policy even in many sub-Saharan African countries has also given greater recognition to their ethnic and religious pluralities. Noticeably, the ‘new’ immigrants to these societies have been Asians from the Indian sub-continent, with the result that ‘immigrant’ religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism have now become part of study in RE in several African countries (Matemba 2005).

### 2.2.3. Egalitarianism and educational access

In England and Wales what might be termed increased ‘educational egalitarianism’ has been identified as a factor that has impacted RE (Hughes 2003). The 1944 Education Act (which set in motion a chain of educational developments that also directly affected RE) had created three types of state supported schools (i.e. grammar, technical and secondary) as a deliberate means of increasing equal opportunities and social mobility for all British children. Despite this intervention it was noted by many subsequent post-war commentators that elitism had endured in the way British education was accessed. As a response to this, in 1965 the Labour Government in power at the time rolled out in England and Wales a comprehensive school system as replacement of the previous three school-system of education (Gillard 2007). A parallel development took place in Scotland in the same period. By implication, comprehensive education necessitated that a common curriculum and educational experience should be provided to *all* children regardless of their abilities and socio-cultural background. In turn, this had an impact on RE because its curriculum was required to cater for the educational experiences of children from a variety of social, cultural and religious backgrounds now sharing the same secondary school (Hughes 2003).

One of the ways that RE was made to respond to this challenge was for the curriculum to adhere to the *agreed syllabus system* as provided in the 1944 Act. In essence, the ‘agreed system’ (a concept which first emerged in English schools in 1923 to deal with denominationalism in RE) is a curriculum approach which helps schools—in collaboration with their local authorities—to design religiously and culturally sensitive RE syllabi. One of the basic tenets of an ‘agreed’ syllabus is that neither content nor length is entirely specified, to allow for local input (Moran 1989). The ‘agreed syllabus’ system has become part of the larger issue of the micro-politics of RE reform, owing to the fact that the design of such syllabi becomes a protracted process of negotiation and compromise among the various stakeholders in the local community, such as education officials, religious leaders, parents, teachers and so on (Alberts 2007).

### 2.2.4. Democratisation and pluralisation

In some regions of the world, particularly sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Europe, political developments leading to democratic governance have had a direct impact on RE as well in order to align the subject with international

Human Rights legislation such as the right to choose one's own world view and bring up children in accordance with parents' religious beliefs (Aleksov 2004). In Eastern Europe the context to this development is that between the end of the Second World War (1945) and collapse of the Soviet Union (1989) the region as a political bloc was under Communism. In the Communist states religion was repressed because the Marxist-Leninist ideology that underpinned its secular state considered religion a root cause of man's economic and social servitude, which could end only if religion were abolished in society (Valk 2007). Thus the fall of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s ushered in new political freedoms which included greater recognition of religion as an aspect of public life (Stan and Turcescu 2005). Consequently, in many of the former communist countries the process of democratisation was also related to the renewal of religion as a curriculum subject for study in schools (Filispone 2005).

On their part most countries in sub-Saharan Africa have lived under government dictatorships of one stripe or another since independence in the early 1960s. This political *status quo* dramatically changed beginning in the early 1990s when most of the autocratic governments collapsed and in its place emerged democratically elected governments and leaders. There are many factors that contributed to these political changes among them, (a) the collapse of communism, (b) pressure for reform from the international community which placed heavy economic sanctions on the countries and (c) internal pressure for political reform (Wiseman 1995). These political developments also engendered educational reforms undertaken to align the curriculum with the ethos of the new political dispensation (Roux 2000). For instance, in Namibia (Chidester 2002) and South Africa (van Deventer 2009), the educational reforms impacted RE directly because the historical Bible based syllabi were replaced with largely non-confessional multi-faith ones.

However, in a region such as sub-Saharan Africa where historically RE has been based on Christianity, the pedagogical reforms in RE have caused consternation in some sections of society. On the one hand, Christian conservatives have been critical of the rising non-confessional pedagogies, arguing that confessional RE remains relevant to the spiritual needs of children (Kudadjie 1996), while on the other hand, stakeholders such as government officials insist that the subject must be approached from an inclusive perspective because society is no longer politically, culturally or religiously homogenous (Dinama 2010). As this study

will demonstrate in subsequent chapters, in both Scotland and Malawi it was politics as well which was a key factor that not only necessitated reform in RE but also influenced the direction of the curriculum changes that were made in the subject.

## 2.3. Impact of critical scholarship

### 2.3.1. Radical theology

In the 1960s a number of books emerged that expressed critical views on Christian theology and thus set a new tone for radical thinking on the engagement between theology, education and an increasingly liberal and secular society. In this section a brief comment will be made on the works of three theologians namely, John Robinson, Harvey Cox and Thomas Altizer.

First, Robinson's 1963 bestseller (printed eight times in 1963), *Honest To God*, argued that since the idea of God being *up there* was being rejected by most educated people, contemporary and secular man had to recognise that the idea of God being *out there* was becoming an out-dated simplification of the nature of divinity and religious experience (Robinson 1963). While Robinson's thoughts were perceived by religious conservatives as challenging orthodoxy, they were welcomed by liberal thinkers who felt that they breathed fresh air on the debate about the relevance of religion at a time people 'are not only casually turning from the Church, but openly rejecting its faith' (Mitton 1963, p. 276).

Secondly, on his part, Harvey Cox in his 1966 book, *The Secular City: Secularisation and Urbanisation in Theological Perspective*, expounded the radical idea that God can be present in both *secular* and as well as *religious* realms of life. Cox argued that man had mistakenly confined his understanding of the divine only to spiritual or ecclesiastical space. He pointed out that people of faith were part of the secular world as were non-religious people, and as such there was no need to 'flee' from the supposedly godless contemporary world (Cox 1966b).

Last, Thomas Altizer's 1967 book, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*, whose views were partly influenced by the atheistic ideas of Friedrich Nietzsche and his famous insistence on the 'death of God' (see also Heidegger 1977), argued that



the modern world needed a radical theology if any meaningful Christian transformation was to take place. Rather paradoxically, Altizer noted that the proclamation that God was *dead* was actually a Christian confession of faith for the unprecedented conditions of the modern world (Altizer 1967).

While compelling in themselves as religious and theological thinkers, Robinson, Cox and Altizer are equally significant as representatives of a major shift in the intellectual, moral and spiritual climate with profound consequences for the study of faith and religion within the traditional institutions of Western education. Thus, taken together the views of these three influential theologians of their time had a startling influence on the perception people reading these books began to have on the role of religion, particularly Christianity, on British life. Crucially, also, these views had a greater impact on people's attitudes towards traditional RE because it was a time of wider reform in education emanating from the 1944 Education Act as noted above.

### 2.3.2. Liberal-secular ideas in education

During the 1960s and 1970s secular theories of education emerged which also had reverberations for RE. In his book, *Teenage Religion: an Inquiry into the Attitudes and Possibilities among British Teenagers*, Harold Loukes suggested an exploratory approach in the study of religion in a liberal and secularised context (Loukes 1961). He reported that young people found RE boring, confusing and that they were tired of constant repetition of Bible stories. Interestingly, he found that young people didn't want to do away of RE *per se*. Rather what they yearned for was the opportunity to discuss life issues than being dictated on Biblical facts by the teacher (Loukes 1965). In a lot of ways, Loukes' findings were a major departure in the perception of RE which signalled a radical shift in the way the subject was to be designed and taught. Such a shift was meant to refocus teaching and learning in RE on the educational needs of the child by adopting approaches that allowed children to *learn from* religion as opposed to *learn about* religion (see Grimmitt 1973), an issue which I will return to later in this thesis (see chapter 5).

Edwin Cox is another early scholar to add his view on the issue of liberal-secular education particularly related to RE. In the book, *Changing Aims in Religious Education*, Cox called for a new educational agenda for RE (Cox 1966a). Although Cox was generally sympathetic towards the legitimacy of (Christian)

religious truth claims as an aim for RE; he was realistic in his views. For example, he conceded that in an era of religious uncertainty and rethinking it was becoming difficult for RE to be used solely as a tool for the transmission of 'an accepted body of doctrine, known by the teacher and to be learned by the pupils' (Cox 1966a, p. 96). He thus pointed out that even if Bible study might remain part of RE in Britain, by itself this would not be a sufficient aim for a subject existing in an increasingly secularised contemporary society (Cox 1966a).

In an article that appeared in 1964 in *Learning for Living* entitled, 'A Humanist view of Religious Education,' H. J. Blackman also critiqued the pre-eminence of Christian RE in an increasingly secularised society and called for an *open* and *educational* approach to the subject (Blackman 1964). The idea of an open educational RE can also be found in the works of one of the most influential philosophers in British education, Paul Hirst, professor of education at Cambridge from 1971 to 1988. In an influential book, *The Logic of Education*, which Hirst co-authored with another influential British philosopher in education, Richard S. Peters, the traditional forms of education was criticised for failing to encourage critical thought, creativity and autonomy. Echoing the sentiments of the time, Hirst and Peters also lamented the fact that education had paid scant attention to the needs and interests of children (Hirst and Peters 1970).

Hirst's own views on RE in liberal-contemporary society requires separate treatment. In a series of publications that he authored between 1965 and 1981 he expounded some of his critical ideas against traditional RE (i.e. Christian RE). Writing in 1965 in the *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Hirst noted that while there remained a place for RE in public education, it was not for the theologian to contribute the definition of what the nature of that RE should be (Hirst 1965). Two years later, in a contribution to the book, *Religion and Public Education*, Hirst pointed out that the logic of education compels the teacher to approach and present the subject matter of RE based on its *logical* merit. He argued that for this reason RE ought to be judged based purely its logical merit and that matters of 'pure conjecture' as well as those of debate should be presented just as such. He stressed that a teacher should be governed by *objectivity* and *reason* and not his/her religious beliefs and values (Hirst 1967).

During much of the 1970s Hirst's views on traditional RE became even more radical and controversial. For example, he asserted that RE in the common state school should be secular and that worship at school assemblies in those schools should be cancelled because worship at assemblies presupposed religious commitment (Hirst 1970). Hirst went on to argue that religion was not a form of knowledge and, as such, RE in the secular school could not be justified *educationally* on logical basis. He suggested that the teaching of RE in the secular schools could be justified in another way, *inter alia*, if it adopted the *teaching about* religion approach (i.e. studying religion directly and allowing children to immerse themselves fully in the religion being studied with the hope that they can begin to understand what religious adherents claim to be true) (Hirst 1973, 1974).

To conclude this section, it can be surmised that the critical views on traditional forms of RE made by the various leading academicians cited in this section gave weight to the liberal-secular movement in education. It was a development that by the end of the 1960s and early 1970s had ramifications for RE. And taken together with other developments such as radical theology and new research in RE (as we shall see in the next section), a new direction with a liberal tone was being charted for the subject.

### 2.3.3. Research in Religious Education

Radical theology and secular theories of education of the kind noted above inevitably engendered a pedagogical shift in the practice of RE itself. Ronald Goldman's two highly influential books—*Religious Education from Childhood to Adolescence* (1964) and *Readiness for Religion* (1965)—revealed pedagogical difficulties faced by younger children in understanding religious concepts, in response to which Goldman suggested that the more abstract concepts be delayed until secondary school (Goldman 1965, 1968). This was another challenge to previously dominant modes of Religious Instruction, because it clearly pointed out that relevant RE was one which should help pupils to engage with everyday issues rather than require them to learn Bible concepts which children found confusing and, it seems, also irrelevant to their everyday situation.

In her book, *Teaching Religion in School: A Practical Approach*, Jean Holm also joined the chorus of many eminent scholars around this time who were pressing

the argument that a relevant curriculum for RE in modern society should support a *sympathetic but critical* understanding of religion in schools. In particular, Holm noted two issues of concern about RE, namely, (a) integrity in teaching the subject to ensure that teachers were not distorting or trivializing what they were teaching; and (b) how far teachers considered the interests, abilities, emotional and intellectual stages of development of the children studying religion. Her analysis put into perspective the emerging thinking in the late 1960s and early 1970s around the issue of educational RE that young people should study religion ‘objectively’ because this would free them ‘from the constraints which made them resent the subject’ (Holm 1975, p. 6).

But perhaps it was the renowned work of Professor Ninian Smart which gave a clear pedagogical direction for RE for more than a generation. In his book, *Secular Education and Logic of Religion*, Smart insisted that an *open-minded* study of religion other than BK or Christian indoctrination was appropriate for schools (Smart 1968). Smart’s major contribution to RE was the creation of the phenomenological approach, which he argued, offered a relevant approach in the study of religion in a secular, modern and multicultural school setting (Smart 1973). The nature of the Smartian approach (as the phenomenological approach is sometimes popularly known) to RE is discussed in some detail below.

The discussion in this chapter so far has demonstrated the fact that in all probability, by the 1970s Bible teaching in schools in England and Wales, for example, had entered into a difficult time indeed. Let us now review some of the pedagogical movements that emerged in RE as a direct result of the changes that were being called for in the subject.

## **2.4. Pedagogical ferment in Religious Education**

During the past four decades or so, a number of nascent pedagogical approaches in RE have emerged as societies have devised approaches they consider to be relevant in their particular political, cultural and religious contexts. From relevant literature some of the more common approaches that have emerged in RE around the world will now be discussed.

### **2.4.1. Confessional/multi-confessional approach**

The confessional (based on one religion) (Thompson 2004) or multi-confessional (based on several syllabi of the same religion) (Walters 2010) approach is an explicitly evangelical method of RE. Confessional RE predates the pedagogical movement that has characterised the subject during the last four decades or so as described in this section below. The main aim of confessional RE is to help children in their journey to faith in one ‘true’ religion, say Christianity, whose doctrines are taught as the absolute reality (Rudge 1998). However, as we have seen the confessional approach to RE came under criticism by scholars from the mid-1960s. The major criticism against confessional RE has been its apparent lack of an educational rationale (Jackson and O’Grady 2007). Critics have also said that it is unsuitable for children in an increasingly secular and plural society where ‘only a minority acknowledge that religion is an important part of their lives’ (Watson and Thompson 2007, pp. 39-40).

While noting such critical views about confessional RE, it is perhaps important to record the views of those who argue that while admittedly the primary intention of this form of RE is to help children into faith, it has educational value as well (Nipkow 1985). The argument made in support of this view is that different from evangelical approaches of the past, the form of confessional RE offered in schools today is in line with the principles of children’s cognitive development (see Conroy 2003). I will return to this issue in chapter 7 when discussing the theme of contested spaces in RE. However, it is sufficient at this point to observe that while I agree with the principle that RE in faith based education can, too, be educational, my view is that confessional RE (in the traditional sense of the term) in such schools may cater only for the specific needs of a select group of children, usually those who belong to the religion being studied. It is for this reason that I am not in favour generally of a confessional approach to and for RE.

### **2.4.2. Phenomenological Approach**

The phenomenological approach in RE arose as a reaction to the failure of confessional RE. Phenomenological RE is associated with the teaching of world faiths in the common school. As a concept, phenomenology has a long history although our present understanding of it is generally associated with the German philosopher, Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Ricoeur 2007). Although Husserl’s influence on religion is indirect, his thinking planted the seed from which future

philosophers and scholars in education connected his ideas in the study of religion (Jackson 1997). In brief, Husserl was generally interested with the classification and interpretation of 'phenomena'. In his study of the structure of consciousness he aimed to distinguish between the act of consciousness and the phenomena with which it was directed. He then proposed that our knowledge of the 'phenomena' or 'essences' would be possible if we 'bracket out' our presuppositions of the external world, a process he called *epoche* (Ricoeur 2007).

Most scholars agree that it was in England where a clear connection between Husserl's ideas and RE was made when Ninian Smart directed a team of researchers at the University of Lancaster on a project that focused on RE in secondary schools. Based on this project, the idea of phenomenological RE as a distinct pedagogy for RE in the context of religious plurality in the common school, emerged (Smart 1975). Phenomenological RE is premised on the fact that in contemporary society children should be exposed to a wide range of religious views and not just about Christianity as had been the case before (Smart 1973). At its core is the view that religion can be studied 'objectively by focusing learning on the essential elements of religion (the 'essence' or 'phenomena')'. Smart identified these elements as doctrinal, mythological, ethical, ritual, experiential, social and material (see Smart 1998). Perhaps controversially, a key distinguishing feature of the Smartian approach is its claim that it provides a *value-free* of study of religion. In other words, phenomenological RE requires learners and teachers to *bracket out* their religious assumptions so that learning and teaching can focus on the 'logical' description of the religious phenomena under study (Smart 1984).

Evidently, the phenomenological approach has received its fair share of criticism. Dissenters see it as offering a kind of RE that is overly descriptive and lacking in critical analysis of religion (Arthur 1995). Some point out that the dimensions of religions, which are its hallmark, are not universally applicable to all faiths (Matemba 2005). James Conroy and Robert Davis doubt the possibility of teachers and pupils *bracketing out* their priori assumptions about religion, arguing that if this is at all possible then it exists at a *superficial* and not the *deeper* level of those religious assumptions (Conroy and Davis 2009). Emeka Ekeke asserts that the phenomenological approach treats 'phenomena in isolation of history as if history is not necessary in determining how relevant a

particular phenomenon is for religious practitioners’ and adding that ‘most times phenomenology lacks the ability to contextualise various religious phenomena so studied’ (Ekeke 2010, p. 273). Philip Barnes has gone as far as suggesting that the phenomenological approach is so flawed that it should be discarded because it ‘falsifies the character of religion by the imposition of an alien schema of interpretation whereby religious experience is first divorced from religious doctrines and then accorded priority over the latter’ (Barnes 2001, p. 572).

However, notwithstanding this level of criticism it is widely acknowledged that phenomenology remains one of the most influential approaches to emerge in the study of religion in the contemporary common school. Several issues can be suggested why I think phenomenological RE has made an important contribution to the development of RE. First, it has promoted a multi-faith approach to RE. This is an important aspect to emphasise because contemporary society is no longer a homogenous entity and as such, including a variety of religions for study is in tandem with the heterogeneous nature of modern society. Second, because phenomenological RE is non-confessional it has allowed children who may want to study religion for its own sake or as a purely academic pursuit to do so. Third and last, phenomenological RE or rather as a reaction to it, has engendered the development of nascent approaches to and of RE (Buchanan 2005), a development that brought renewed interest in the subject as societies strive to find ways of improving teaching and learning in RE. Some of the new approaches that have emerged as a direct consequence of the phenomenological debate in RE are noted below in this section.

#### **2.4.3. Neo-confessional approach**

The neo-confessional approach to RE is known by various names such as ‘renewed confessionalism’, ‘liberal-theological’ or ‘implicit’. It is a form of confessional RE which (while propagating the truth-claims of one dominant religion that is nurturing children to a particular faith position) includes other religions for study. However, it must be clarified that in neo-confessional RE other religions are studied merely as the ‘extras’ (see Cox 1983). Therefore, while teaching in RE is approached from the pupil’s own perspectives, issues such as moral questions, uncertainties, existential questions and so on are based on the theological underpinnings of the dominant religion in a country or community (say Christianity), while other religions are seen as offering an

alternative but not the *main* theological view on religious issues under study (Gooderham 1980).

As in Scotland (Riddell et al. 2009, p. 6), the neo-confessional approach remains the pedagogical approach for RE in England and Wales because Christianity is promoted above other religions in educational policy (Watson and Thompson 2007, p. 73ff). For example, the latest (2010) report by Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) has lamented the fact schools are not providing children with a deeper understanding of Christianity (Ofsted 2010, pp. 12, 33). It seems that the basis of this concern is to do with the fact that as the law currently stands (on the account of history and tradition) in England and Wales indeed as in the rest of the UK, Christianity remains a compulsory religion for study at each key stage within the Agreed Syllabus System framework (see Torfaen Country Borough 2008, p. 2).

I think that the special treatment Christianity continues to receive in RE policy in the UK is an interesting state of affairs. This indicates to me that despite leading the debate on post-confessional approaches to and of RE as early as the late 1960s (i.e. in England and Wales), RE has retained its confessional past in the UK. What this demonstrates is that a 'value-free' approach is perhaps difficult to achieve in RE because in every society educational policy tries to inculcate in children certain *core ideals* and *religious values* (as contentious as what should constitute these ideals and values may be). Thus despite the fact that in practical terms schools (in the main state non-denominational schools) in the UK do not ascribe greater legitimacy to confessional or neo-confessional approaches (see Francis et al. 1999, pp. 173-175), educational policy still insist that Christianity should be the religion upon which much of these core ideals and religious values are to be based (Ofsted 2010, p. 32).

#### 2.4.4. Spiritual approach

The spiritual approach emerged as a reaction to what was seen as *badly* taught phenomenological RE, which reduced learning to descriptions of phenomena without any attention given to the *spiritual* needs of the learner (Wright 2001). David Hay, an earlier exponent of this approach, argued that the logical-positivist inclination inherent in phenomenological RE was deficient because the spiritual side of religion was being neglected. For Hay, the spiritual approach



allowed RE to penetrate *mere* description of religion in order to provide children with the opportunity to *experience* religion as well (Hay 1998).

My view is that given the fact that post-confessional approaches (in the main phenomenological RE) pays scant attention to the spiritual aspect of self, the spiritual approach to RE can help to fill the pedagogical gap for those children in search of a spiritual meaning to issues of life. On this point I concur with Brendan Carmody's view that in an era when increasingly people, particularly in Western Europe, are becoming 'spiritual' (i.e. having personal or inner convictions about matters of belief) rather than 'religious' (i.e. organised and outward expression of belief such as going to Church), it is important for RE to consider also an approach that addresses not only religious issues but spiritual matters as well (Carmody 2010).

#### **2.4.5. Life themes approach**

This approach has strong roots to Christian RE. Essentially, it examines the life issues of children and encourages them to reflect on them against the explanations given in religious texts. This was the approach that was used in a regional RE curriculum for East and Central African schools for much of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s (Onsongo 2002). A similar approach was also popular in Germany in the 1960s and 1970s (Nipkow et al. 1996). I think that the life-themes approach has been useful for RE because it deals with 'real' issues (i.e. themes) that affect young people and the world in which they live. However, the limitation I see with this approach is that it tends to be aligned with one religion (in this case Christianity). My view is that if extended to other religions, the life-themes approach can be of benefit to children who come from a wide spectrum of religious experience other than Christianity.

#### **2.4.6. Critical realist approach**

The critical realist approach can be traced to the work of Andrew Wright. The essence of this approach is that the study of religion in schools should begin by accepting that the human knowledge of the world has gaps and ambiguities. Wright claims that this helps RE to escape the anti-realist excesses of post-modernity which has dogged the subject for a long time (Wright 2004b). He points out four areas he claims are the strengths of this approach. First, he says that it ensures children's freedom of belief is respected. Second, he says that tolerance of other people's beliefs is encouraged. Third, he says that children

are able to have informed debates. Four, he says that children are helped in their pursuit of truth and truthful living (Wright 2007). However, despite these claims it seems to me that in reality the critical realist approach pays scant attention to the complexity of religion. Similar to what Anna Strhan says (Strhan 2010), my view is that the critical realist approach alone may be inadequate to address fully the debate about the demanding nature of religious traditions to children in an RE classroom.

#### **2.4.7. Open approach**

In most cases, open RE is often understood to mean phenomenological RE. Therefore the assumption that open RE is synonymous with phenomenological RE has remained one of the misconceptions people have about the open approach to RE (Riddell et al. 2009). Although open RE, as indeed most post-confessional approaches, has roots to phenomenological RE, it is actually a distinct approach. Open RE emphasises the fact that religious matters are controversial and as such learners should draw their own conclusions on the religious and theological issues with which they come into contact with in RE. It is important to emphasise that this is the approach humanists promote for schools (Hughes 2000). The problem I see with the open approach is that it assumes that children will have the *necessary* knowledge (religious or otherwise) to be able to make reasoned conclusions on such issues. The reality is that matters of religion and even un-belief are complex and as such for children to be able to make the necessary judgement they may require a much more guided approach. Thus, if my argument can be accepted, one wonders how much of children's 'own' judgement on religious issues under debate in class can truly be the children's own.

#### **2.4.8. Interpretive approach**

The interpretive approach, sometimes known as the conversational approach, is linked to the ground-breaking work of Robert Jackson and his RE project team at the University of Warwick. The approach is grounded in ethnography. It considers the 'lived' religious experience of individual children and their wider engagement with religious traditions as the basis for learning in RE (Jackson 1997). To ensure a critical engagement with religion, it compares and contrasts the language and experience of children between those in class (outsiders) and

those depicted in texts (insiders) to look ‘for areas of overlap that can be used as a basis for discussing similarity and difference’ (Jackson 1997, p. 111).

The interpretive approach involves the process of *translation* to help children understand and empathise with the religious experiences of others. It also involves the process of *reflection* by allowing children to make distanced critique of others’ beliefs with the hope that inevitably they will subject their own religious assumptions to critical reflection (Jackson 2000). The charge of relativism and reductionism have been levelled against the interpretive approach (Jackson 1997). Owing to the fact these issues also make up some of the criticisms that are levelled against multi-faith RE in general, I will discuss them fully in section 2.7 of this chapter.

#### **2.4.9. Particularist approach**

This is more of an *accommodationist* arrangement rather than a specific pedagogy for RE. A particularist approach is used in situations where confessional/multi-confessional and multi-faith/phenomenological syllabi are sometimes offered simultaneously in one national curriculum of RE. This usually happens when the profession of a single national curriculum for RE is under dispute. In Kenya, for example, three separate confessional syllabi for Hindu, Christian and Muslim children are offered alongside each other in schools (Svensson 2007). In Uganda there exist two separate RE syllabi for Christian and Muslim children (Mwesigwa 2003). This is true also for Nigeria, where Christian RE is popular in the ‘Christian’ south and Islamic RE is popular in the ‘Muslim’ north (Lemu 2002). Austria also offers a dual syllabus arrangement for RE, one Christian RE and the other Islamic RE, the latter taught only by *imams* (Islamic teacher/scholar) (Balic 1993). In the case of Post-Soviet Latvia, the particularist approach adopted has produced four different RE syllabi namely, ‘confessional’, ‘ecumenical Christian’, ‘Christian ethics’, and ‘world religions’ (Filispone 2005).

The general limitation of the particularist approach is that only a limited number of syllabi can be accommodated in a single national curriculum, lest it become overloaded and unmanageable. Inevitably, religions that are not given their own curriculum see such arrangements to be discriminatory. This is what happened in Kenya recently when Jewish students demanded their own syllabus. They threatened to sue the government if such a provision was not made arguing that

the absence of a separate Jewish RE curriculum forces them to choose a syllabus which is not of their faith (Kiplagat 2008).

#### 2.4.10. Dialogical approach

There are a number of related dialogical approaches to RE that have emerged independently in different European countries such as Germany, Britain and Norway. In essence, dialogical RE is typically child-centred because while recognising the contextual influences of social groupings (i.e. family, peer, religion and so on), it is the relative autonomy of children's knowledge that takes centre stage in studying religion (Jackson 2004a). Putting it another way, children's personal knowledge and experience in the classroom are important starting points for effective RE. Its proponents claim that it helps children to reflect on their religious knowledge and also helps them to communicate that knowledge among the children themselves (Knauth 2008).

There are three 'dialogical strategies' for effective RE—namely, primary, secondary and tertiary. In *primary dialogue* learning involves children accepting the fact that there is religious difference and diversity. In *secondary dialogue* children are taught to be open to and positive about religious diversity and encouraged to be willing to engage positively with difference and learning from the religious experiences of others. Finally, *tertiary dialogue* involves the use of a variety of methods and stimuli (e.g. pictures, films, videos, case studies, stories, teachings from different traditions and so on) to facilitate actual verbal interchange between the children and the teacher and among the children themselves (See Grelle 2006; Hull 2005). Although there is the danger that this approach can be seen as yet another regime for managing troublesome knowledge, I find this approach useful because it encompasses a variety of learning strategies towards effective RE.

To conclude this section, I must observe that as a school teacher and teacher-educator for two decades, how teachers actually plan (schemes of work) and teach (classroom practice) post-confessional forms of RE indicates that there is much pedagogy 'borrowing' (Buchanan 2005). Similar to the findings of a recent major study of secondary RE in Botswana (Dinama 2010), I find that it is increasingly common that although one dominant approach, say phenomenology, is adopted in a particular national curriculum, usually teachers use aspects of

other approaches to enrich their lessons and maximise students' experience of contemporary RE.

## 2.5. Politics of Religious Education

### 2.5.1. Politics of religion

In contemporary society RE is strongly influenced by the politics of religion. This is rooted in the fact that throughout history, religion and politics have shared an *intimate* and often *complex* relationship. For better or worse this relationship has had a powerful effect on people's perception of reality, particularly how this impacts the manner in which people of faith make decisions. Geir Skeie explains that a religious group's internal politics may involve others within the religion with contrasting perspectives regarding state policies. He also notes that this becomes even more problematic when religious people take an active interest in external or worldly politics. He continues to argue that matters can be further complicated when such people try to promote their version of reality (values, ethos and so on) because those who adhere to different faiths, and indeed those with none at all, often become critical of the version of reality created by the dominant religion in the country (see Skeie 1995).

A related issue to the religion-politics nexus is that sometimes political activities in the general population are at odds with some of the views religious people hold. Today, the association that is made between religion, terrorism and world politics illustrates the complexity of the problem. As a political issue, the spate of recent high profile terrorist incidents such as 9/11 (New York) and 7/7 (London) and the consequences of these incidents such as the so-called war on terror have made Western societies, in particular, pay closer attention to issues of cultural identity, political Islam and the danger that religious confrontation and *instrumentalisation* of religion for political purposes can engender (Jackson 2004b; Weisse 2007).

Another consequence of the religion-politics nexus has been the politicisation of religion existing within a formal national framework. This usually happens when a particular religion is promoted above others by the nation-state. Zambia is a case in point here. At independence in 1964 the country adopted humanism as a national ideology, but in 1991 the constitution was changed, making Christianity

a state religion (Phiri 2003). As happened in Zambia, in such a situation a general sense of conflict on *pro et contra* basis between the state and people belonging to ‘marginalised’ religions was created because the laws governing the country were seen as religiously insensitive and even discriminatory (Carmody 2008).

Sometimes contrary situations to the one that developed in Zambia can be observed. This happens when a politically-induced ideological war erupts between the modern nation-state and traditional elements within the society. On the one hand a problem arises when the nation-state desires to push forward the liberal democratic values (such as respect for others, objectivity, freedom of opinion, the rule of law, tolerance and so on) of its political framework into education (Banks 1979). Thus, in the attempt to attune RE to these ideals of common citizenship, non-confessional RE tends to be preferred over historical approaches such as confessionalism (Barnes 2006). On the other hand, conservative elements in society who naturally prefer the *status quo*, view the ‘liberalisation’ of RE with disdain because for them such a development is seen as a real challenge to the historical and traditional ways of holding their beliefs and other values. Inevitably, tensions arise when the nation-state tries to impose its substantive values over the more traditional or cultural values such as those of religion in the formulation of curriculum policy for RE (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

Reiterating the point, while the modern nation-state may embrace a liberal stance for its heterogeneous population, certain sections of society may view this as arbitrary and even as political harassment against their particular values and cultural way of life (Nussbaum 1997). In such situations—as recent developments in Serbia (Aleksov 2004) and Latvia (Filispona 2005) illustrate—any attempt to reform or ‘touch’ RE becomes embroiled in the micro-politics of educational reform among the various contending stakeholders. For this reason, the protracted nature that characterises the negotiations and compromises that are made sometimes produces unpredictable outcomes such the creation of dual or multiple parallel syllabi in a single national curriculum framework for RE (Thobani 2010).

### 2.5.2. Politicised debates

Debates related to the theory or practice of RE have in recent decades become volatile issues of public discussion, sometimes occurring in highly politicised arenas such as government offices, Houses of Parliament and the media (Rudge 1998). In the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act in England and Wales, for example, RE generated intense and protracted political debate in the House of Commons (Alves 1991). In the end, the Reform Act did not recommend any substantial changes to RE beyond reaffirming the tenets of the 1944 Act, such as the provision of the 'agreed syllabus system' and primacy of Christianity in the subject as recognition of the UK's Christian tradition (British Government 1988). The significance of this in England and Wales is that Christianity has kept its privileged status in RE. Therefore, despite the rhetoric of treating all religion equally in post-confessional educational policy, the reality is that in all parts of the UK Christianity remains the first among equals of religions that are studied even in state non-denominational schools.

As a response to curriculum reform in RE, the subject also frequently becomes a 'hot topic' of public debate in the media. However, it seems that although television and radio broadcasts carry reports on such issues, it is usually the print and internet media where such debates stay on for much longer. In Post-Soviet Estonia, for example, the debate over a new direction for RE attracted media attention for 10 weeks in the summer of 2003 and thus became the most vividly discussed educational question in newspapers and the internet during that time (Valk 2007). As I shall point out later (see chapter 6), a negative media buzz greeted the introduction of a new RE programme in Malawi in 2000. My overall view is that the downside of media reporting is that it tends to be superficial, focusing only on those elements of the story that are seen as politically controversial or those that make tabloid news. In some instances, media reporting on religious issues is fraught with bias in an attempt to preserve the *status quo* against a particular curriculum change to RE (see Religious Education 1963).

### 2.5.3. Politics of multiculturalism

RE in contemporary society is further related to general political issues regarding 'multicultural questions and aims of education' (Skeie 2001, p. 237). In a lot of ways multicultural education exists as an extension of the negotiated power relations between various cultural groups and the nation-state. However, these

negotiations take place in an environment where the understanding of what *national identity* means is increasingly becoming elusive as cultural or religious groups within the same nation-state are becoming more assertive and even aggressive in promoting their distinct identities against shifting movements of global geopolitical power and identity (Skeie 2001).

In many European countries today the growth of immigrant communities, in particular, has become a focus in political discourse. Perhaps not since after the Second World War has attention in European countries sharply focused on the whole notion of citizenship, integration, public knowledge of minority religions, and how RE as a supposed sub-entity of Citizenship Education can help to inculcate common values (although debate continues as to what these values actually entail) (Wright 2004a). For instance, at a political level, the Council of Europe considers education for democratic citizenship a priority so that European countries can strengthen pluralistic democracy, human rights, the rule of law and so on (Jackson et al. 2007).

How such an ambitious political proposition can be achieved remains a challenging prospect owing to the fact that, across Europe, integration of minorities into mainstream society has usually been slow, unpredictable and difficult (Münch 2009). It appears that governments in most European countries had easily assumed that immigrants would by themselves easily integrate into their adopted societies. This has proven not to be the case and that many immigrants in Europe have remained the ‘outsiders’ from within. It seems to me that Europe is only waking up to the realisation that it has not had effective policies to deal with the whole question of immigrant communities within their borders. My view is that merely shouting out from the political podium that multiculturalism has failed, as the leaders of Germany and UK have recently done (see Cassidy 2010), only complicates the issue of immigrant integration into mainstream European society. Clearly there is need for Europe’s political leaders to map out effective policies that can deal adequately with this controversial issue.



## 2.6. Pedagogical criticism of Religious Education

### 2.6.1. Decline of literacy and growth of illiteracy in religion

In a persuasive argument, James Conroy and Robert Davis have claimed that contemporary forms of RE can lead to a decline in religious literacy and a growth of religious illiteracy (Conroy and Davis 2008). Citing the shortcomings of phenomenological RE as an example, they note that contemporary RE has ‘shorn religion of its power to manifest a response to the enduring and perfectly proper educational questions arising from the mystery of being’ (p. 192). They also persuasively argue that Smart’s phenomenology strips ‘away the comforting familiarity of language and common perceptions that serve to mask our understanding of the world...’ (p. 193). Going further, they posit that phenomenological RE ‘as an exercise in the observation of the other breeds a parallel form of minimalist religious literacy focused on everything except the central objects of religious consciousness’ (p. 195).

For Conroy and Davis, another serious shortcoming of contemporary RE is that dominant styles of learning in the area have reduced religious literacy to a form of *functionality* that is devoid of any actual serious engagement with religion. They note, for instance, that in order to make RE fit the *politically sensitive* modern dispensation, issues regarded inappropriate to the (reductionist) aims of secular education are either marginalised or left out altogether. They suggest that one way to overcome this problem is to revitalise RE so that the subject can be able to interrogate the liberal settlement which constrains *authentic* religious literacy, particularly regarding the necessity of Enlightenment rationality and critical theory. They thus assert that this has led to the philosophical abandonment of religion to such an extent that human existence is frequently left bereft of the meaning which religion can provide.

Conroy and Davis’ critical views of contemporary RE reemphasise the comments other scholars such as Andrew Wright (Wright 1993) have also said that for ‘authentic’ RE to be achieved, religious illiteracy that is endemic in phenomenological RE must be rejected. But a question remains regarding what to do with the issue of religious ambiguity which contemporary RE inevitably engenders? In assessing Conroy and Davis’ radical claims, I think they are right in their assertion that contemporary RE needs ‘radical’ religious literacy for the fact that studying religion(s) exposes the child to some uncomfortable realities

such as contradictions, cruelties, taboos and even ambiguities arising from truth claims. I also think that these are issues which should be addressed in building up children that are ‘free from the outmoded rationalisations of the past’ (Conroy and Davis 2008, p. 200).

### 2.6.2. Religious Education and religious confusion

Another criticism commonly levelled against contemporary RE is the charge that it is a ‘mishmash’. The term ‘mishmash’ is seen as a pejorative description of the unstable, haphazard synthesis of multi-faith or phenomenological RE. According to John Hull, the term first appeared in the political debates in the UK’s House of Lords in the wake of the 1988 Education Reform Act for England and Wales (Hull 1991). Using evidence from the 1988 House of Lords’ debate, Roger Homan and Lorraine King have outlined several issues why contemporary RE is a ‘mishmash’ (Homan and King 1993).

First, is the accusation that by jumbling aspects of different religions, ‘mishmash’ RE can lead to *confusion*. Homan and King say that consequently this can render religious knowledge worthless. In other words, by adopting the ‘hall of mirrors’ approach to questions such as ‘who am I?’ and ‘how ought I to live?’ mishmash RE serves to ‘fragment and confuse the child’s sense of identity instead of helping him/her to develop and cohere’ (p. 9). Secondly, Homan and King say that ‘mishmash’ RE is seen as a ‘menu of watered down spiritual values’ which leads to the *dilution* of a traditional religion such as Christianity to ‘... a multi-faith relativism or ... submerged to a multi-faith mishmash’ (p. 9). Third, Homan and King say that ‘mishmash’ RE leads to the *corruption* of religious values. This, they claim, could make children unable to tell the difference between right and wrong and thus leading to moral anarchy. Fourth, Homan and King say that ‘mishmash’ RE can lead to the *trivialisation* of religion due to ‘the loss of coherence, depth and dignity which is inevitable when religions are broken into bits for the sake of comparison’ (p. 9). Fifth and last Homan and King say that ‘mishmash’ RE can *deprive* children of their cultural heritage such as the loss of Christian heritage in Britain (Homan and King 1993).

In my view, these criticisms of contemporary RE are valid, an issue I have examined in some detail in chapter 6 in my assessment of the new (2001) multi-faith RE programme in Malawi and in Scotland the soon to be replaced (in 2009/10 school session) 5-14 RE programme and also the new CfE RE programme

that will replace it. However, at this point let me conclude by noting that in Scotland one of the ambitions of the new CfE RE programme is an attempt to deal with the very problem of ‘mishmash’ RE.

### 2.6.3. ‘Misrepresentation’ of religion

Closely related to the charge of being a ‘mishmash’, is the serious criticism that contemporary RE leads to the misrepresentation of religion. It is a view strongly promulgated by the scholar, Philip Barnes. In his persuasive article entitled “The Misrepresentation of Religion in Modern British (Religious) Education,” in the *British Journal of Educational Studies* (54:4), Barnes is on record arguing that contemporary RE, as it has developed in Britain, is ill-equipped to contribute to a multicultural society essentially because it pursues inaccurate representations of religion. He traces this problem to the aims of contemporary RE, particularly the premises of phenomenology, which deconstruct aims concerned with religious truths, while teaching children the idea that different religions are equal and provide a complementary path to religious fulfilment. Barnes points out that contemporary RE is thus *deluded* by this appearance of non-judgemental inclusivity into believing that religious intolerance will dissipate (Barnes 2006).

The point Barnes makes in this article is that members of different religions do not in fact regard other religions as complementary and equally authentic, precisely because religions endorse often contrasting doctrines and adhere to different and often contradictory systems of belief (Barnes 2006). Barnes contends that in England and Wales, for example, the situation is aggravated by the fact that some critics have called for the reintroduction of Christian nurture in public schools (see for example, Thompson 2004). Barnes thinks that it is misguided and even inappropriate for those who are supportive of the reintroduction of Christian nurture in public schools to link Christianity with British citizenship. Another matter that concerns Barnes is the strategy that he sees emerging in England and Wales where religion is deliberately being misrepresented in schools to provide what he calls ‘a service of social harmony’ (Barnes 2006, p. 407).

Although Barnes is in support of contemporary forms of RE such as multi-faith education for public schools, he suggests that to eliminate the problem of

misrepresentation there is need for a ‘more ideologically critical form of religious education that facilitates both dialogue and respect between people with different commitments and from different communities ...’ (Barnes 2006, p. 409). As other critics such as Haldane (Haldane 1986) have also said, Barnes is probably right in suggesting that contemporary RE ‘has failed to engage fully with the complex web of inter-relationships between beliefs, attitudes and feelings that combine on occasions to encourage religious intolerance and discrimination’ (Barnes 2006, p. 408).

The kind of RE that Barnes champions would benefit countries such as Scotland and Malawi where, if not effectively addressed, religious intolerance can easily threaten social cohesion. As I shall point out later, in Scotland sectarianism has religious undertones largely complicated by a historical rivalry between mainly the supporters of Celtic (Catholic) and Rangers (Protestant) football clubs (see chapter 4) while in Malawi the tension between Christians and Muslims remains a worrying trend (see chapters 4 and 8). All these are issues which a critical form of RE can best be placed to address owing to the fact that it encourages dialogue and respect, as Barnes also suggests.

#### **2.6.4. Is Religious Education possible?**

One of the more recent critical perspectives on contemporary RE is the view that logically, non-confessional RE is not possible. This is a view promulgated by Michael Hand in his thought-provoking book entitled: *Is Religious Education Possible?* Hand’s central argument is that, *logically*, non-confessional RE as currently offered in public schools in the UK is *not* possible principally because ‘one of its key premises that religion is a unique form of knowledge is false’ (Hand 2006, p. 119). Hand subjects to critical reflection epistemological questions about the nature of religious propositions, which to him do not constitute an *irreducible* or *distinctive* form of knowledge. Hand is not so much concerned about whether RE should be taught or even how it should be taught in schools. Rather, his interest lies in the epistemic nature of non-confessional RE, and whether there is a sufficiently logical argument justifying it.

Hand challenges the well-rehearsed epistemological view that religious knowledge constitutes a distinctive kind of understanding. Hand points out that it does not make sense to teach non-confessional RE in schools minus the claims to belief or commitment that religions make. He is critical of the common thesis

that non-confessional RE is logically capable of teaching religious understanding without inculcating religious beliefs or commitment. Hand claims that it is *impossible* to gain religious understanding without holding some presupposition about religion. Putting it another way, Hand argues that RE is only possible for those who hold a religious proposition because then a distinct class of proposition can be *logically* possible. Hand clarifies this point by noting that to understand a religious proposition is essentially to understand the propositions about God (Hand 2006).

While accepting the merit of Hand's argument, critics such as Philip Barnes are uncomfortable with the implied assertion that since religious understanding requires religious belief, those who reject religion *do not* understand what they are rejecting. Barnes accuses Hand of ignoring the role of religious language in religious understanding. For Barnes, attention to the language of religion gives a much richer and varied understanding of religion, something which Hand is accused of ignoring (Barnes 2008).

## 2.7. Philosophical issues in Religious Education

In this section the following philosophical issues related to contemporary RE are examined: scepticism, exclusivism, inclusivism, relativism, reductionism and pluralism.

### 2.7.1. Scepticism

As a philosophical argument, *scepticism* claims that religious beliefs do not at all occupy a legitimate domain of knowledge. Sceptics make the point that religion *cannot* offer an adequate basis for an educationally valid curriculum area because religious propositions rest on *unproven* assumptions that cannot be empirically verified, falsified or rationally defended. Sceptics thus argue that religious diversity is particularly a problematic area because of the difficulties that multiple competing truth claims pose for RE. It is asserted that the prime objective for pursuing religious knowledge in a formal school setting is to seek truth and avoid error. However, owing to conflicting truth claims great difficulty arises in choosing the *right* claim over the *false* ones (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

Sceptics go on to point out that one way of avoiding falling into error is to refrain from making any decision at all – that is, by being *sceptical* about *all* the competing truth claims presented by the different religious traditions. Sceptics also argue that sometimes the natural scepticism that arises in response to competing and incompatible religious truth claims can be the perspective of the community but not of the individual. This may mean that while society can entertain sceptical arguments, say towards religious plurality, the individual may have a different view. The point here is that while the overall influence of society is acknowledged, individuals always make personal decisions on whether to affirm a religious belief or be sceptical on such matters (Rescher 1995). Again, sceptics argue that the natural scepticism that arises in response to competing and incompatible religious truth claims invalidates any attempt to impose, educationally, a community's worldview on the autonomous individual. The point is that individuals ought to make personal decisions about which worldviews they want to follow as a standard guide for their lives free of communal coercion.

Concerning RE, scholars argue that while the subject 'should remain open to a range of worldviews, ultimately the individual student will need to make a choice between these for himself or herself' (Hobson and Edwards 1999, p. 27). They also note that 'to refuse to discriminate' either 'by accepting everything or by accepting nothing' is to avoid entering into a useful, *albeit*, controversial discussion about religious matters (Rescher 1995, p. 95).

### 2.7.2 Exclusivism

*Exclusivism* takes the view that while one religion is exclusively *true* others are largely or completely *false* and thus not worth teaching. The less extreme view of exclusivism takes the position that while the beliefs of others are 'false' their adherents should be given the right to teach their religion to the children of their members (similar to what happened in Malawi when Imams were allowed, albeit briefly, to teach the Islamic component of the new RME syllabus to Muslim children (see chapter 6)). Peter Gardner argues that those who reject the view that the religious beliefs of others are not false live in a 'fallacy of tolerance'. Such a fallacy, he argues, emerges when teachers refrain from concluding that the beliefs held by others are 'wrong' (Gardner 1988, p. 93). In relation to RE, the exclusivist position tends to be related to the confessional approach.

### 2.7.3. Inclusivism

As a philosophical position, *inclusivism* is more open to the idea that while one's beliefs are non-negotiable, these may not have the *absolute* truth and for this reason there is something to learn from the religious beliefs of others (Hobson and Edwards 1999). People who take a liberal view of religion have come to accept that no one religion possesses *all* the truth and that other religions may be offering something from which other religions can learn (McLaughlin 1990). This does not necessarily mean that those who support the inclusivist position want to abandon the view that their own beliefs are supreme, but rather that they are merely open to the idea that other people should be given the space to express their religious views in education as well.

The inclusivist position therefore demands that, *professionally*, teachers must teach religion without so much emphasis on their confessional position. Critics of the inclusivist position such as Peter Gardner argue that RE teachers will undoubtedly have a commitment to a religious belief or other views and yet their professional commitment places them in the awkward position of teaching something they view to be false or that which they find philosophically objectionable (Gardner 1988). In relation to RE, the inclusivist position has a natural link to neo-confessional or theological liberal approaches.

### 2.7.3. Relativism

*Relativism* posits that human experiences and cultures are relative to or dependent on other contextual perspectives. Relativism assumes causality between various issues and the inter-dependent relationships that this engenders. Another dimension to this approach is the idea that all points of view on an issue, be it religious or cultural, are equally valid and that no framework or standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others. Relativism also brings in the idea that every religion is as good any other and that none has objective truth because all constructions of knowledge or understanding of reality are the fruits of a subjective experience (Erricker and Erricker 2000; Kelly 1970).

Critics of this view such as the philosopher, Paul Boghossian, are of the view that relativists are misguided in their view that there is no objective truth or knowledge but only truth or knowledge from a particular perspective. Boghossian argues that it is possible to create a body of knowledge that is independent of social or cultural perspectives because *objectivity* in knowledge

construction of religion is possible (Boghossian 2007). Related to RE, it is worth noting that relativism usually emerges in debates over non-confessional RE such as phenomenological or multi-faith RE. From a relativist perspective, the phenomenological approach, for example, is criticised because it tends to gloss over incompatible aspects of religions. It is against this relativist view of religion that the phenomenological approach has come under even harsher criticism (some which we have already noted above). Robert Jackson claims that the interpretive approach he offers can act as a cushion against the *relativist* position inherent in pedagogical approaches such as phenomenology (Jackson 1997).

#### 2.7.4. Reductionism

*Reductionism* expresses the view that everything in this world is really something else, either its parts or something that is more basic, and that the something else, is always in the end unedifying (Brown and Smith 2002). Reductionism is a way of explaining complex phenomena by taking the whole apart to reveal its more elementary parts but without considering the relationships that exists between the parts (Harth 2004). Reductionism interprets religious propositions (that is their cognitive and ontological content) as merely the manifestation of the mind which can be easily explained in terms of psychology, sociology or other realms of philosophy and science, such as the fashionable tenets of Neo-Darwinism.

Andrew Wright is critical of this philosophical position because for him it reinforces people's scepticism towards religion. By redefining religion into something that can be acceptable to contemporary society, Wright argues that reductionism misrepresents the reality of religion particularly the ambiguity caused by trans-religious and intra-religious tensions (Wright 1993). Others posit that reductionist arguments are invalid because they do not adequately represent religious discourse, arguing that 'there is considerable epistemological disvalue in rejecting the ontological claims of religious propositions' (Hobson and Edwards 1999, p. 41). As with relativism, reductionism emerges in debates over non-confessional approaches to RE such as phenomenology which are accused of promoting '*de facto* reductionism in the mind of students that religious propositions are somehow fully explained through sociological, psychological and other concepts' [and in the process ignore] 'the ontological claims that all religions make' (Hobson and Edwards 1999, pp. 41-42).



### 2.7.5. Pluralism

*Pluralism* is a contested concept in RE essentially because in plural societies this can be seen as an *ideological* position and not merely as a *description* of the state of pluralism (Grimmitt 1994). By definition, pluralism is the condition of society in which numerous distinct ethnic, religious, or cultural groups coexist within one nation or civil polity. Geir Skeie suggests that scholars use the term *pluralism* when evaluating a kind of plurality that is usually positive. He contends that, for this reason, while pluralists may like *plurality* they may have strong reservations about *pluralism* (Skeie 2002). Pluralism is also the condition in society that creates the space for people to celebrate diversity through dialogue, mutual respect and empathy without requiring that groups abandon or weaken their beliefs or positions in the process (Skeie 2006).

In their book, *Religious Education in a Pluralist Society: The Key Philosophical Issues*, Hobson and Edwards point out four methodological positions associated with pluralism (Hobson and Edwards 1999). The first position is what they call *equality of religion*. This position expounds the view that there is equality of religion because all world religions are *equally* valid since they all respond to similar *big* questions people have about the purposes of life (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

The second position, known as *revisionist pluralism*, calls for a radical revision of those aspects of religious tradition that are seen not to be compatible with post-Enlightenment modernist critical thinking and liberal-democratic living. In doing so, religion is moved to a more *universal* phase in which analogous insights are chosen from many traditions. In essence, revisionist pluralism celebrates the most commonly shared beliefs of religions without emphasising the differences that exist among them (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

The third position, called *extended pluralism*, considers the idea that both religious and non-religious beliefs attempt to answer the issues of ultimate concern. In extended pluralism, beliefs or issues are accepted or rejected only on the basis of how well they are argued or supported and in this way religious views are presented impartially. Extended pluralism is also considered to be in tune with contemporary and secular liberalism (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

The fourth position is *radical pluralism*, which expresses the idea that even if postmodern society employs some kind of unconditionality, there still remain

core beliefs and worldviews in every religion of such salience that it is not possible for society to achieve the ‘desired’ monolithic *unity*. In other words, radical pluralists are critical of perspectives that advocate some form of *transcendent unity* because transcendent unity takes away religion’s richness and uniqueness (Hobson and Edwards 1999). As Barnes also contends, the attempt to uncover *unifying* factors merely ends up misrepresenting religions under study (Barnes 2006).

In this study, I take the view that pluralism provides the relevant philosophical conceptualisation for RE in Scotland and Malawi because both countries are culturally, ethnically and religiously heterogeneous.

## 2.8. Conclusion

The conceptual frameworks for RE described in this chapter demonstrate the fact that this is a controversial subject principally because it deals with religion, itself a highly emotional and at times political domain. While in my view the recent pedagogical movements are proof of progress for RE because confessionism has given way to neutrality, nurture to professionalism and indoctrination to education (Barnes 2006), the prevailing discourse clearly illustrates the fact that the process of this journey has been ‘... more controversial, convoluted, and ideological ... resulting in educational gains and educational losses’ (Barnes and Wright 2006, p. 66). As the study develops in subsequent chapters, we will come across familiar themes of educational gains and educational losses owing to the contested nature of RE as a curriculum subject in both Scotland and Malawi.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **3.1. Introduction**

This chapter describes several methodological issues in the conduct of the study. First, it gives a detailed explanation of the research design, noting several related issues such as its research paradigm, method, strategy and sources of data which included interviews, surveys and documents. Concerning interviews, it explains who the participants for study were, how they were selected and also the associated issues of anonymity and confidentiality. Further, to the issue about research design, it explains the process of piloting the study, how data was analysed focusing on areas such as analytic procedures and audit trail. It also describes how the study minimised bias, on to a discussion dealing with methods used in identifying research themes, the research location and how access for the research was gained. Secondly, how collaboration and consultation related to the research was conducted is noted. Third, transferability and dependability issues of the research are then noted, on to a discussion of how the study complied with the necessary ethical issues. Fifth and finally, the researchers' competence to undertake this study is noted.

#### **3.2. Research design**

##### **3.2.1. Qualitative research**

Traditionally, there two types of research paradigms namely, qualitative and quantitative. However, increasingly today triangulation of research paradigms or research complementarity by another term has become popular in research as well. This is when quantitative and qualitative approaches complement each other in some ways producing a third research paradigm sometimes referred to as mixed-methods research. It should be noted that triangulation also applies to situations where two or more research methods, tools, strategies or data are used to look at the same phenomenon (Scott and Morrison 2006).

There are fundamental differences between quantitative and qualitative paradigms that should be noted. Quantitative approaches are generally associated with *positivism* - the idea that 'objective truth' can be known with a higher degree of certainty through the use of experimental/quasi-experimental approaches because such methods are replicable, generalisable, cumulative, causal and random (Gall et al. 2003). On the other hand, qualitative approaches are more interested with the 'why' and 'how' of human behaviour. Another major difference is that quantitative research usually involves larger samples and uses replicable statistical methods to analyse data while qualitative research usually involves smaller samples which can be subjected to different interpretations of 'reality' (Ary et al. 2006).

The present study adopted the qualitative paradigm because of its relevance to nature of inquiry under investigation (Creswell 2003). Three reasons can be suggested for this choice. First, qualitative research is *interpretivist* because it is concerned with the interpretation of the social world, in which religion taught in schools is constructed, understood and experienced. This is relevant to the present study because it seeks to investigate different perceptions concerning the development of a subject associated with the teaching of religion. Secondly, unlike quantitative research that follow standardized forms of experimental inquiry, qualitative research adopts flexible methods that are sensitive to the social context in which data is produced. This paradigm is relevant to the present study because any investigation of an issue related to religion ought to be flexible enough to accommodate negotiated knowledge of reality being a subject that is multifaceted, contentious and admittedly *difficult* to research (Wragg 1978). Third, a qualitative paradigm was chosen because it offers a richer explanation in our understanding of complex human experience. In other words, it offers *holistic* forms of analysis and explanation to produce rounded understandings on contextual and detailed data such as that which any investigation of a religious nature can generate (Mason 1997).

As opposed to being an 'expert' who passes judgment on the participants, using a qualitative framework for this research has enabled me to construct a *holistic* picture of developments in Scottish and Malawian RE by capturing detailed views from documentary evidence and crucially from participants' (i.e. key stakeholders) own perspectives (Marshall and Rossman 1995).

### 3.2.2. Phenomenological research method

For the fact that ‘qualitative research is a complex, changing and contested field’ owing to ‘multiple methodologies and research practices’ (Punch 2005, p. 134), the researcher has the difficult task of choosing a ‘suitable’ research method from among the many available. After examining a number of research methods this study settled for the phenomenological research method. This method is popular in studies that ‘investigate various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon [to help the researcher] gain some insight into the world of his or her participants and to describe their perceptions and reactions’ (Fraenkel and Wallen 2006, p. 436). This method is suitable for the present study because it captures data from the perspective of people (i.e. parents, religious leaders, teachers, government officials, headteachers and leaders of professional organisations) with keen interest on how religion is offered in public education in the two countries. In a study such as the present, the *perspectivism* of these key informants provided useful insight regarding the evolution of RE as a distinct area (phenomenon) for study (Shiner 1969).

The phenomenological method was also selected owing to the fact as a concept, phenomenology seeks to identify and describe common perceptions regarding how people interpret a similar experience (Johnson and Christensen 2008). As a study that investigated a cultural phenomenon (as religion is sometimes understood to be), the phenomenological method facilitated the capturing of personal and collective lived experiences which, in this case, concerned how various stakeholders perceived various issues related to the development of RE (see Biklen and Bilken 1992).

A further advantage of using the phenomenological method for a study dealing with religion is that it allows the researcher to ‘bracket out’ his/her assumptions about the phenomenon under study (Moustakas 1994). This was a helpful quality owing to the fact the present study investigated a contested area of the school curriculum where a high level of impartiality on the part of the researcher was needed to produce a balanced and somewhat holistic picture of pertinent issues underpinning the nature of RE in Scotland and Malawi. The fact that the phenomenological research method allows one to ‘bracket out’ one’s prior assumptions was also helpful in my personal situation as a researcher because I have some level of insider knowledge about RE in Scotland and Malawi. This owes to the fact I am a professionally trained RE teacher who has taught in

secondary schools and teacher education in both countries. Further, without ‘bracketing out’ my own personal religious views (as a practising Protestant Christian) could have affected my analytical judgment on some of the issues investigated in the research.

However, in my case the downside of using the phenomenology research method was that it generated a large amount of data that required more time than planned to process. Relevant literature points out that one of the difficulties in using phenomenological research method—and indeed as with most qualitative methods—is the demand for time required for the researcher to analyse the large amounts of data that is generated as the researcher tries to grasp the *central issues* (i.e. in search of something ‘relevant’ and ‘universal’) in the data (Bogdan and Biklen 1997). Further, the researcher spends even more time clustering the relevant statements into coherent themes so that he/she can begin to describe the phenomenon captured with some certainty (Fraenkel and Wallen 2006).

### **3.2.3. Research tools**

Data for the study was collected through the use of three research tools, namely, interviews, documents and surveys.

#### **3.2.3.1. Interviews**

The main source of data for the study came from in-depth interviews (n60) given by key stakeholders as a response to a number of questions (see appendix 3) put to them by this researcher. The interviews offered special insights in the understanding of the development of RE in Scotland and Malawi as a *phenomenon of investigation* (Creswell 2005). Notwithstanding the fact that interviews are labour intensive and that sometimes responses can be open to bias, there are a number advantages to consider. First, interviews are *adaptable* and therefore they allow interviewers to follow up respondents’ answers to obtain more information and clarify vague statements (Gall et al. 2003). Secondly, they allow for a variety of question formats including closed and open-ended questions and lengthy questions with multiple responses as well (Drew et al. 2008). Third, if properly done, interviews can build trust and establish rapport with respondents making it possible for the interviewer to obtain

information which the interviewee probably would not have revealed by other data collection methods (Walliman 2005).

For the interviews in this study, I was the only interviewer involved in the research. English was the language used in the Scottish interviews while in Malawi the language used for all the interviews was Chichewa (the country's local 'official' language). The interviews were based on semi-structured questions - that is questions were formulated but the order in which these were presented was at my discretion. Gall and others have pointed out that using partially structured interviews is advantageous because it enables the researcher to add questions or modify them as would be necessary (Gall et al. 2003).

All interviews were tape recorded. This was done with the interviewees' permission. Each interview lasted one hour on average. Relevant literature suggests that tape recording is better than other data capturing devices such as note-taking (which can be slow and open to charges of selective recording) (Creswell 2005). The use of a voice-recorder allowed me to concentrate on what the interviewees were saying without the constant disturbance of feverish writing if I had used the note-taking method, for example. Using the voice-recorder also gave me the frame of mind to raise appropriate follow up questions as necessary because my attention was undivided. One disadvantage I found with using a voice recorder was the length of time it took to transcribe the audio data captured. Arksey and Knight have warned that transcription can take up to 10 hours per one hour of taped interview (Arksey and Knight 1999). In the case of the present study, the transcription of the Malawian audio interviews (n35) was compounded by the fact the transcripts had to be translated from Chichewa into English, a process that took four months (November 2009 to February 2010) to complete. Helpfully, all the Scottish interviews (n25) were transcribed by a paid research assistant.

### **3.2.3.1.1. Sampling procedures**

The study targeted 80 key respondents (40 in Scotland and 40 in Malawi) to take part in the research. The overall response rate from both the Scottish and Malawian respondents was satisfactory at 75% (n60/80). However, comparing the two countries, there was a higher response rate in Malawi (87.5% or n35/40) compared to Scotland (62.5% or n25/40). In Scotland, the comparative low return was compensated by the availability of an abundance of documentary

materials. In addition, the reliability of the conclusions that is being drawn from the Scottish research cannot be brought into question because having 25 participants is more than the figure of 20 participants Irving Seidman suggests to be *enough* in qualitative research (Seidman 1998). I must make a note however that in Malawi the higher response rate in the interview also compensated the lack of 'adequate' documentary material.

The interviews (including the pilot study noted below) were carried out in Scotland between September 2008 and May 2009 and in Malawi between June and September 2009. It is perhaps interesting to note that in both countries the two politicians targeted for the interview in each country (n4) declined to take part. One of the reasons they gave was that they were 'unqualified' to comment on a subject which they said is sensitive and contentious.

The non-probability quota sampling strategy, commonly associated with qualitative research, was employed in the selection of participants for this study. Non-probability sampling involves a process of case selection that is not random but purposefully selected as 'representative' or 'typical' of the population (Marshall and Rossman 1995). For its part, quota sampling is a form of purposive sampling in which certain groups or individuals are selected within the general population on an assigned quota (Patton 2002). The criteria set for the selection of the sample also makes quota sampling non-random because it is used when the proportions of particular sub-groups within a population are known and the study wants to ensure that each group is proportionately represented (Mason 1997).

Despite some limitations—such as the inevitability of investigator bias in the selection of participants and the inappropriateness of generalising findings from such samples—non-probability sampling was appropriate for the present study because it involved 'key' informants. The term 'key' is used in this study to denote individuals considered 'influential, prominent and well informed in their respective groups, communities, jobs and organizations whose activities, roles in decision-making processes and the relationships they have with the rank and file have a huge bearing on society' (Arksey and Knight 1999, p. 122). As with quota sampling which deals with small purposive samples based on some predetermined criterion of importance (Singleton et al. 1993), through in-depth interviews the present study explored the opinions, experiences and preferences



of ‘key’ informants involved or concerned with RE. Relevant literature also suggests that the researcher must use his/her experience and prior knowledge to identify criteria for selecting participants (Gall et al. 2003). As already noted and also as shall be pointed in section 3.6 below, my professional experience and residential advantage (being a Malawian trained RE teacher but now resident and teaching RE in Scotland) gave me the necessary insights to identify who I considered to be ‘key’ informants to take part in this research.

### **3.2.3.1.2. Participants for the study**

Based on the criteria discussed above, the following ‘key’ informants were involved in the research.

- 1) *Ministry of Education officials*: Six government officials (three in Scotland and three in Malawi) took part in the research. These provided official views of their respective governments on RE.
- 2) *Religious leaders*: Seven leaders of faith groups (three in Scotland and four in Malawi) took part. Their views were representative of the position of their various religious groups on RE.
- 3) *Parents*: Four parents (two in Scotland and two in Malawi) who served as chairpersons of parent councils took part in the research. These gave an informed perspective of the voice of parents on the matter of RE. In Scotland the codes ‘chairperson of a parent council in Scotland’ 1 and 2 represented the views of parents in non-denominational and denominational (Catholic schools), respectively.
- 4) *Leaders of professional groups*: Two leaders of professional groups (one in Scotland and one in Malawi) took part in the research. In Scotland, the representative came from the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education (SJCRME) and in Malawi the representative came from the Association of Christian Educators in Malawi (ACEM).
- 5) *University lecturers*: Nine heads of RE departments involved in teacher education (six Scottish universities and four Malawian universities) took part in the research. These gave their perspectives on the impact of teacher education on school RE.
- 6) *Teachers*: In Scotland six Principal Teachers (PTs) of RE (three from non-denominational and three from denominational sectors) and in Malawi 13 RE

teachers (four from private schools and nine from public schools) took part in the research. These gave a teachers' professional perspective on RE.

- 7) *Headteachers*: 13 headteachers took part in the research as follows: four from Scotland (one from an independent school, one from a state Catholic school and two from state non-denominational schools) and nine from Malawi (six from public schools and three from private schools). The headteachers' views illuminated issues such as provision and management of RE in schools.

Relevant literature points out some of the drawbacks of using 'key' stakeholders in research. First, key stakeholders usually have little time to spare and in many cases do not consider talking to researchers a priority (Arksey and Knight 1999) - both experiences I personally encountered especially with headteachers in both the Scottish and Malawian research. Secondly, sometimes challenges emerge during the interviews themselves because some 'key' stakeholders want to assume control of the interview due to the fact that they are accustomed to be in-charge. As Seidman suggests sometimes key stakeholders merely become savvy and easily irked about narrow or ill-phrased questions (Seidman 1998). Fortunately, for the present research this problem did not arise. But notwithstanding these potential challenges the present study was enriched by opinions and perspectives of people in positions of authority and influence because they had expert insight on the issues they described.

### **3.2.3.1.3. Anonymity and confidentiality**

Anonymity and confidentiality of the participants and institutions involved in the study were strictly maintained. This was also in line with the ethical compliance of the study (see section 3.5. below). In *verbatim* excerpts anonymous codes such as 'lecturer at a Scottish university 1', 'Principal teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 2', 'teacher at a public school in Malawi 3', 'Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2', 'Ministry of education in Malawi 1' and so on were used to protect the identity of those who participated in study. Institutions such as universities that were investigated as part of this study we given anonymous codes as well such as university in Malawi 2 or university in Scotland 5. To avoid the ambiguity that can arise with being overly anonymous (Marshall and Rossman 1995), in some cases names of specific institutions as they have been mentioned by respondents in the anonymous excerpts have been

retained. However, for ethical reasons the names of the individual and two institutions mentioned by the respondent in the first excerpt that appears on page 192 of this thesis have been replaced with anonymous codes.

### **3.2.3.2. Documents**

Data for the study also came from documentary materials most of which were primary sources. The documents in question were in the form of official government materials (letters, minutes, circulars and Parliamentary proceedings); newspaper and magazine cuttings; educational documents (inspectorate reports, syllabi and other curriculum documents); documents produced by Church and professional organisations; and in some cases official materials placed on the internet. Documentary materials were helpful in a number ways. First, they provided the starting point in the early stages of the research such as helping the researcher to understand the research problem better. Secondly, they aided the development of key concepts and issues which were followed up with the interview method. Third, as a *bona fide* source of information in their own right (Best 1981), they provided the means of comparing and crossing checking data obtained either from interviews or other secondary materials. Fourth, in conjunction with data from interviews and surveys, it assisted in the evaluation and analysis of 'new' data obtained in the research (Scott and Morrison 2006; Singleton et al. 1993).

### **3.2.3.3. Surveys**

The third form of research tool used in the study was school survey. Two surveys, one in Scotland and Malawi, were carried out. The surveys were designed to be analysed qualitatively and as such did not in any way lend themselves to quantitative methods in the way data generated from them was analysed and reported. No computer programmes were used to code the responses either. Instead data was presented using frequencies and percentages where applicable. The main purpose of the surveys was to capture general trends and levels of RE provision in various schools.

In Scotland a simple survey questionnaire instrument was sent by post and email to all the 376 state secondary schools (see appendix 4). It asked schools to indicate things such as how many staff for RE (whether qualified or non-

specialist), pupil numbers in RE, name given to RE in the school and list of common topics taught in the various levels of the curriculum. The initial return rate from schools was slightly disappointing at 37.2% (n140/376). However, I found out that all Scottish schools are on a government website which when accessed directs one to individual school-based websites (see <http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishschoolsonline/index.asp>). Schools that did not respond to the email and postal survey but were found to have useful data (that is covering issues raised in the survey instrument) on their websites made up an additional 39.1% (n147/376) response rate to the overall school survey. Therefore, the combined survey data returned by schools and obtained from school websites was 76.3% (n287/376).

In Malawi because of logistical limitations such as unavailability of internet resources, slow postal system and unreliability of transport system in general it was not possible to conduct a 'full-scale' survey of schools. This was compensated by the fact that in total the researcher visited 21 schools (where many of the interviews with teachers, headteachers and parents were conducted as well). 10 of the schools visited were in the Muslim heartland of Mangochi district purposively selected to test out what has turned out to be an 'erroneous' perception that schools in Muslim dominated areas such as Mangochi district, offer RME syllabus and not BK syllabus (on the junior secondary curriculum where the 'dual-syllabus' system exists) against the national trend in favour of BK.

#### **3.2.4. Pilot study**

A pilot study was conducted in order to assess the *appropriateness* of research methodology, particularly the questioning techniques and the general conduct of the interviewing method. Singleton and others say that pre-testing involves only a small number of persons who have similar characteristics to those of the target group of respondents (Singleton et al. 1993). For this study, a pre-test run was carried out involving interviews with six 'key' respondents (three in Scotland and three in Malawi). In Scotland the interviews involved one headteacher of a Catholic school, one Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school and one chairperson of a parent council. In Malawi, the interview for the pilot study involved one headteacher at a state school, one teacher at public secondary school and one representative of the Muslim community.

One advantage of piloting a study of this kind is that it gives the researcher some indication of the tenability of the research and its methods. In many ways pre-testing suggests what further refinements are needed before the research is rolled out (Wragg 1978). In both the Scottish and Malawi pilots, the instrument *faced value* and more importantly the data obtained was of rich and good quality that it was included in the main study. Glastonbury and McKean point out that while using data from pilot study in the main research is uncommon, there are occasions when this is possible ‘if no substantive changes are made to the main research as a result of the pilot and the time-span between the pilot and full study is short’ (Glastonbury and McKean 1991, p. 242).

### 3.2.5. Analysis of data

#### 3.2.5.1. Analytic procedures

In line with the phenomenological research method, this study followed closely Paul Colaizzi’s procedure of phenomenological data analysis (Colaizzi 1978). First, after the interviews were collected and transcribed, I *read repeatedly* the participants’ descriptions and returned time and gain to the audio recordings to become familiar with the informants’ words and the tone of their explanations. Through this process, I was able to gain insight into the participants’ meanings and in addition I was able to perform minor editing necessary to make the field notes retrievable. This also helped to ‘clean up’ what otherwise would have been overwhelmingly unmanageable data due to its ‘thickness’ (Colaizzi 1978).

Secondly, in a process called *extracting significant statements* I turned to the participants’ descriptions and focused on those aspects I judged to be most important for the phenomenon under study. Next, in a process called *formulating meanings* I took each significant statement identified and tried to uncover any hidden meanings in their descriptions. Fourth, in a process called *theme clustering* I collated meanings, statements and other common issues into identifiable themes. I also referred back to the data (including data emerging from documents and surveys) to confirm and validate the emerging patterns. Fifth, the data was then passed through a process called *exhaustive description* which involved a detailed analytic description of the participants’ feelings and ideas contained in the themes. Finally, through a process called *fundamental*

*structuring*, I formulated an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study and identified its fundamental structure (Colaizzi 1978).

From this analytical procedure, a number of pertinent issues (see appendix 5) emerged which informed the research regarding the nature of RE in Scotland and Malawi. However, I must say that owing to time constraints, logistical difficulties and the fact the study involved a large number of participants (n60) located in two different countries it was not possible to return the completed scripts to the participants for vetting as Colaizzi suggests.

#### **3.2.5.2. *Audit trail***

Further to the procedures involving in data analysis, an audit trail was also established for the study. In qualitative research audit trails provide a mechanism by which others can determine how decisions were made and uniqueness of the situation (Arksey and Knight 1999). Audit trial also helps to document how the study was conducted, detailing what was done (field notes, tape recordings and other descriptive materials that can be independently reviewed), when and why (Ary et al. 2006). For this study, an audit trail involved how the raw data was obtained in interviews and documentary materials; observations made; the researcher's decisions regarding whom to interview, what to observe and why, and finally how the themes were developed from the raw data (including how these were refined and tested) and how these influenced the overall findings of the study (see Ary et al. 2006).

#### **3.2.6. Minimising and controlling bias**

##### **3.2.6.1. *Dealing with researcher bias***

In qualitative research, researcher bias can be caused by a number of factors such as: (a) selective observation (ignoring what you don't want to 'hear') and (b) personal attitudes, prejudices and feelings that affect the interpretation of data (Bogdan and Biklen 1997). Therefore, any research worth its salt ensures that bias is minimised otherwise this can potentially invalidate the research findings (Holloway 1997). In qualitative research bias is sometimes inevitable because data goes through the researcher's mind before results are presented (Gall et al. 2003). Particularly topics with characteristically emotional 'baggage' such as religion, bias becomes even more difficult to control because religion is

lived experience which colours one's view of the world even for researchers (Johnson and Christensen 2008).

To strengthen the transferability of qualitative data, it is advised that the researcher should strive to minimise bias whether declared or not. *Reflexivity* and *negative case sampling* have been identified as the most two most common ways of minimizing researcher bias (Johnson and Christensen 2008). Reflexivity is the use of self-reflection to recognize one's own biases. It has been suggested that one way of dealing with personal bias is for the researcher to keep a reflective journal in which three types of information should be recorded: a daily schedule with the logistics of the study; a methods log detailing decisions made and the rationale for them and a reflections log where the researcher's feelings, ideas, frustrations, concerns, problems and so on are detailed (Ary et al. 2006). It is suggested that during analysis of data the researcher should refer to the reflective journal. In negative sampling the researcher should try to minimize bias by intentionally seeking examples that disconfirm one's expectations. Patton says that by seeking data that is opposite to what the researcher expects makes it the more difficult to ignore certain data. Thus, like a good detective, this process allows the researcher to examine each and every clue to rule out alternative explanations until a high level of certainty is reached in the interpretations and conclusions that can be made (Patton 2002).

For this study I kept a field notebook where I recorded my observations regarding the interview and documentary research carried out and during the coding of the data I made reference to the field notebook. I also made sure that all information related to the investigation of RE in Scotland and Malawi that came my way was recorded and analysed.

It is perhaps important for a researcher dealing with RE (which has its own emotional baggage) to clearly outline one's position between the two polarized positions: confessional/catechetical RE and multi-faith/non-confessional RE. My declared position is that while I belong to a conservative Protestant Church, my professional position for RE is 'biased' towards the 'liberal-inclusivist' approach. This is an approach I have coined myself to describe the fact I am in support of the idea that in public education RE should be taught from an *educational* and *multi-religious* perspective. However, I am also cognisant of the fact that faith schools *must* be given the liberty to offer a particularist form of RE if they so

wish, provided that the curriculum offered has educational not merely evangelical intentions. Therefore, the interpretation and presentation of this thesis is biased towards multi-faith/non-confessional RE for schools.

### **3.2.6.2. Dealing with biased sample**

A sample can be said to be biased (i.e. findings not considered valid) if it is not representative to the general population regarding what the study aims to investigate (Ary et al. 2006). In this study, bias in the sample was minimized because the 'key' respondents targeted for interviews were a fair representation of the population spectrum with invested interest in RE such as education officials, parents, religious groups, teachers and headteachers.

### **3.2.7. Methods used to identify research themes**

Based on a critical examination of the data collected from interviews, documents and surveys, and on my own prior theoretical understanding of the nature and history of RE in the two countries under study (Straus and Corbin 1998), a number of key themes and sub-themes were identified upon which the chapters that reported the main findings of this research were based (i.e. chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9). The process of identifying the six key themes in question followed several techniques developed by Gerry Ryan and Russell Bernard in their article entitled "Techniques to Identify Themes" (*Field Methods*, Volume 15, Number 1, 2003, pp. 85-109). Three of Ryan and Bernard's techniques were particularly useful for this study, namely: (a) 'indigenous typologies', (b) 'theory-related materials' and (c) 'compare and contrast'.

First, the technique described as 'indigenous typologies' (also known as *vivo coding* by grounded theorists or *classification schemes* by ethnographers) critically examines the data for terms and issues that are common, sound new or used in unfamiliar ways (Ryan and Bernard 2003, pp. 89-90). Using this technique I read and reread the interview transcripts and documentary texts and through this process I was able to identify a number of common terms, statements and issues. I then grouped these under several of key themes I had identified earlier owing to my prior theoretical understanding of RE in the two countries (see in this chapter section 3.2.2 above). In this way, I was able to identify the following key themes: (a) antecedents for reform, (b) curriculum changes, (c)



provision of RE in schools and (d) impact of teacher education on school RE (see appendices 5.1, 5.2, 5.4 and 5.5).

Secondly, the technique called ‘theory-related materials’ involves understanding how data illuminates questions or issues of importance, social conflict, cultural contractions including how people solve problems, impersonal relationships and so on (Ryan and Bernard 2003, pp. 93-94). Following this technique, I systematically examined and re-examined the data and through this process I was able to identify several significant issues such as contested and sensitive issues, resolved and unresolved issues and negotiations and compromises (i.e. gains and losses). These issues were then further analysed and then grouped around two key themes, namely, (a) micro-politics of RE and (b) possibilities and challenges (see appendices 5.3 and 5.6).

Third and last, the technique known as ‘compare and contrast’ involves a method in which a researcher takes several expressions from the same or different sources, compare them and then critically examine how similar or different the data under scrutiny can be compared with the researcher’s own experience (Ryan and Bernard 2003, pp. 91-92). For this study, a comparative analysis of the data was useful because by design it is comparative. Through the process of *constant comparison* data was carefully examined to reveal a number of comparable issues and other bits of information about RE in the two countries under study. This meant that ‘sections of data, incidents or cases’ emerging in the Scottish and Malawian research—as indeed data emerging from different sources within the same country (i.e. in-country comparison)—was continuously compared throughout the analysis of the findings in this study (Holloway 1997, p. 33). A comparative strategy was also relevant because it helped not only to solidify or confirm key themes identified in the research but also to draw some explanatory significance from specified set of comparisons from two countries with contrasting geographies, histories, politics, culture, levels of development, educational systems and yet having some common experiences regarding the nature of RE as curriculum subject.

### **3.2.8. Research location and gaining access**

The study was conducted in both Scotland and Malawi where interviews were done and relevant documents sought. With a few exceptions, most of interviews were conducted in the participants’ chosen environment such as offices and

schools. Parents who took part in the research preferred to be interviewed at the schools of their affiliation. In Scotland a number of interviews preferred to come to my university where a room was provided for the interview. These included: representative of the Muslim community in Scotland, chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1, Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 and lecturer at a Scottish university 1 and 3.

On the matter of access, two official letters, one to the Scottish Education Department and another to the Malawi Ministry of Education were sent. This was followed up by letters to targeted education departments in the local authorities in Scotland and to targeted educational regions in Malawi. The aim of the letters was to introduce the research and to gain 'official' permission or endorsement. Letters explaining the research were sent or presented in person to all persons taking part in the study as well (see Singleton et al. 1993).

### **3.3. Research collaboration and consultation**

The study benefited from feedback I received from staff and fellow students in the school of Education at The University of Glasgow during scheduled seminars and graduate mini-conferences. During the course of the research the study also benefited from informal discussions with staff and fellow research students in the university. At every opportunity I talked about the research to professional groups such as Association of Teachers of Religious Education (ATRES) during their annual conferences in 2007 and 2008.

The study also benefited from feedback out-with Scotland such as Botswana, Malawi and Zambia where former colleagues and acquaintances at the Universities of Botswana, Malawi and Zambia showed keen interest in the research. The exchange of ideas and opinions of others on the study offered a much needed critical and independent view of the research, and hopefully in the process helped to strengthen the reliability of the study.

### 3.4. Transferability and dependability of the research

#### 3.4.1. Transferability

In qualitative inquiry, researchers talk about transferability and dependability rather than validity and reliability of research and its findings. While quantitative research aims at external validity as proof of the *generalisability* of the findings to the general population, in qualitative research the aims are different. The main goal of qualitative research is to provide adequately rich, detailed and complete descriptions of the context and the participants involved to enable potential readers to make the necessary comparisons and judgments about similarities that may be drawn with their own situations. This is the essence of transferability. Transferability was applied in this study through: (a) detailed description of methods, (b) description of the limitations of the study (see chapter 10, section 10:4), (c) cross-case and in-country comparisons that were made and (d) descriptive adequacy of the study (that is thick and complete descriptions of the context and issues investigated) (Ary et al. 2006).

#### 3.4.2. Dependability

Unlike quantitative research where strict controls enhance replicability, in qualitative studies (as this study is) researchers expect variability because the context of the research is *fluid*. For this reason, in qualitative research consistency is measured by looking at the extent to which variation can be tracked or explained. It is the dependability or trustworthiness of this process that validates qualitative studies (Ary et al. 2006). For the present study, dependability was achieved because of the following reasons: (a) appropriateness of the research method used, (a) audit trail (how the study was conducted - what was done, when and why), (c) triangulation of data collection methods and sources of data, (d) large sample used for interviews, (e) type of sample used (i.e. representative sample of people with vested interest in RE), (f) the reliability of the people providing data (i.e. 'key' informants), (g) the comparative nature of the study, (h) analytic and coding procedures followed, (i) procedures undertaken to minimise and control bias, (j) collaboration and consultation (i.e. peer-review and debriefing) and (k) the researcher's experience and ability to undertake the research (see Ary et al. 2006).

### 3.5. Ethical compliance

The study complied with all imperative ethical requirements and procedures. First, in line with The University of Glasgow's strict ethical code for research, a comprehensive application was submitted to the ethics committee for approval (see appendix 1). Among other things, the university's ethics approval process involved the researcher observing data protection (Data Protection Act 1998) and privacy laws regarding how data was managed and stored (see Arksey and Knight 1999; Walliman 2005).

Secondly, informed consent was sought to protect participants against vulnerability (see appendix 2). This was necessary because interviews involved participants sharing their personal and at times private views, which if misused, could leave them vulnerable or even threaten their jobs considering the high positions most of the participants targeted for this study held in their respective organisations. Informed consent was also sought so that participants could protect themselves against misunderstanding. The process of giving consent gave these participants a clear understanding of the general issues the research covered. Importantly, informed consent enabled participants to decide whether to be involved in the research or not (Marshall and Rossman 1995; Seidman 1998).

A consent form was provided to all participants to be read and signed before the start of the interviews (all these are kept in a locked drawer and will be destroyed when the thesis is completed and defended). The consent form covered the following points: (1) who is doing the research, for whom (affiliation of the researcher), and to what end (whom to contact for information if they have problems with the research process), (b) risks and vulnerability, (c) right to participate or not, (d) rights of review and withdrawal from the process, (e) anonymity (i.e. whether participants' names or pseudonyms will be used) and (f) dissemination (i.e. an indication how the results of the study will be disseminated and what benefits, if any, participants will have in being involved in the study).

### 3.6. Researcher's competence

My personal experiences have benefited the research in a number of ways. First, I have adequate knowledge of both Scottish and Malawi RE because I have taught the subject in the two countries at secondary school as well at higher education levels (i.e. teacher education) for a combined period of twenty years. Secondly, I belong to several professional organizations such as ATRES, General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS) and Botswana Research Association. During my doctoral study at The University of Glasgow I completed two compulsory research courses besides attending numerous research seminars and conferences. Between 2008 and 2010 I was a blind-reviewer for Glasgow's University's award-winning student journal, *eSharp*. In 2010 I was a blind-reviewer for the *Journal of Moral Education*.

I have presented papers in RE at academic conferences and seminars in the UK and elsewhere. Some of my papers have been published as book chapters, for example, Matemba, Y. 2011. "Continuity and change in the development of moral education Botswana," in Swartz, S. and Taylor, M. (eds.) *Moral Education in sub-Saharan Africa: Culture, Economics, Conflict and AIDS*, London: Routledge, pp. 63-77. Notably, a number of my articles have appeared in peer-reviewed international journals such as: *British Journal of Religious Education* (Volume 31, Number 1, pp. 41-51), *Religious Education* (USA) (Volume 100, Number 4, pp. 404-424), *Journal of Moral Education* (Volume 39, Number 3, pp. 329-343) and *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education* (Volume 10, Number 3, pp. 329-347). I am confident that the research training I have undergone, the numerous research seminars and conferences I have attended, and my professional experience in research and publication give me the requisite competence to undertake this study.

## Chapter 4

### Historical State of Religious Education

#### 4.1. Introduction

This chapter examines the historical state of RE in Scotland and Malawi. The aim is to provide a somewhat coherent picture of the context under which RE was generally perceived and offered in schools. The findings in this chapter confirm the widely held perception that for a long time—probably since compulsory education was introduced in Scotland (1872) and western education began in Malawi (1875)—RE was in a serious state of *underdevelopment*. It was in this context that concerned stakeholders began to call for drastic measures to rescue the subject if it had any chance of claiming its rightful place on the school curriculum and more generally, in the minds of people.

#### 4.2. Statutory ambiguities in Scotland

Different from many countries, one of the unique features of Scottish RE is that the subject has been determined by law. In a country where religion in public education has always been a contentious issue—since the introduction of compulsory education in 1872, and, more critically, the formation of a double system of education in 1918 to accommodate the particularity of denominational (i.e. Catholic and Episcopalian) schooling (Education Scotland Act, 1918)—there has always been a need to legislate the subject. Historically, the use of statute has been necessary to ensure not only a degree of security about the continued teaching of RE in schools, but crucially to prevent the government from having undue influence on the subject (British parliament 1968).

In the first instance, this study attempted to explore how far respondents in the Scottish study were knowledgeable about the statutory laws governing RE, taking account of the historical uniqueness of Scotland in this regard. More than half of the Scottish respondents (n14/25) in the study made constant references to the perversity of the law governing RE as the key contributory factor to the underdevelopment in the subject. Respondents noted the 1872 Education

(Scotland) Act, as well as other Acts such as 1918 Act, 1929 Act and 1981 Act, as key statutory laws which had a corrosive impact on RE.

While in general the respondents were knowledgeable about the existence of various legislation governing RE, they nevertheless gave conflicting information on the specificity of some of the legislation, for example, regarding what exactly the various statutory laws over the century actually addressed in RE. On one key point, some respondents said that the 1872 Act made ‘every Scottish child do RE’ while others pointed to the 1929 Act as the legislation that covered this. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 noted that:

... The only subject which had to be taught in Scottish schools was RE and yet it was not examined. Every child in a Scottish school must do RE according to the 1872 Act.

A representative of the Church of Scotland said:

... Oh yes, it all began with the 1929 Act and then the 1981 Act where the education Act said that the only thing schools had to teach by law were RE and Religious Observance.

In addition to this ambiguity, respondents gave cursory facts about legislation governing RE and its impact on the area. In spite of this limitation, respondents emphasised that in their view the law governing RE was in many ways the underlying obstacle to a naturally progression of RE as a curriculum subject. The findings from documentary research clarified some of the anomalies which emerged in the interview and gave a somewhat more coherent perspective regarding the extent to which legislation was a contributory factor to underdevelopment in Scottish RE.

Parliamentary reports (Hansard) covering debates on bills and laws governing Scottish RE, as well as books and other published sources, were examined. From this data, a generally coherent picture emerged regarding not only the various laws governing RE but also some of the critical statutory changes emergent over time as lawmakers made various attempts to respond to the challenges facing the subject. Until 1981, when an important amendment to the law was made, RE was the *only* subject in Scotland with which by law the state could not *interfere*, or in which it could not be involved for the purposes of determining

how the subject was to be designed and taught (although it should be noted that the Secretary of State did have powers to enforce the provision of RE in schools). Such prerogative was given to Churches and schools because of the sensitivity surrounding religion (i.e. Christianity) since the Scottish Reformation, an issue made more intense with Catholic Irish immigration during the second half of the nineteenth century (Conroy 2001).

In short, by the turn of the twentieth century Catholic, Presbyterian and a host of Evangelical Churches owned schools around which their particular brand of Christianity was communicated. When Scottish education was made compulsory for the first time and brought under state control (Education Scotland Act, 1872), and later when Catholic and Episcopal Churches finally agreed with necessary safeguards to be part of Scottish state education (Education Scotland Act, 1918), the government was keenly aware of the influence of the different Christian denominations in the schools under their control (Moore 1927). The safeguards for Catholic and Episcopalian schools (which remain more or less intact to this day) centred around three issues: the right of the Church to hire teachers for its schools, the right of the Church to determine the content of RE and the right of the Church to determine how that content was to be taught (Wishart 1941).

The implications of the 1872 Education Act were far-reaching for RE. To avoid having any influence on how religion was taught in the various schools, no parliamentary grant was to be made towards RE. Although the 1872 Act allowed schools to continue instruction in religion, it did not give curricular guidance as to the nature of this 'instruction' - that is, whether by means of the Bible or Catechism. In effect, by this Act, the state was absolving itself from any dealings with such a contentious subject, to the extent that the 1872 Act did not make RE mandatory in schools. Representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland offered this explanation:

So they must have been thinking even in 1872 about the problem of RE and their failure to be specific was deliberately to avoid being embroiled in further controversy about the place of RE in Scottish curriculum, more so that the Catholic Church had refused to join the state education at time.



Returning to documentary evidence, the 1872 Act also included a ‘conscience clause’ to allow parents to *opt out* if they felt that the RE offered to their children conflicted with their conscience or stance of living (Robertson 1937). Until it was removed in the Education (Scotland) Act, 1969, the original 1872 Act had also stipulated that schools were obliged to submit their timetables to the Secretary of State for approval or disapproval (British Parliament 1969a). What seemed to have compounded the situation for RE was an aspect of the legislation which exempted the subject from inspection by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Education (HMIe). By implication this meant that if RE could not be inspected then it could not be examined as well (Black 1964). The Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1929 attempted to address this anomaly by adding a clause making it ‘unlawful for any education committee to discontinue Religious Instruction’ (MacKenzie 1999, p. 250). While respecting the *conscience clause* it was the 1929 Act that made RE in Scotland compulsory for the first time.

However, it seems that in spite of the mandatory law, which was in practice not enforced for fear of ‘interfering’ with RE in schools, the downward spiral in RE continued. This situation was compounded by the ‘use’ and ‘wont’ clause in the law, which effectively had left schools with the latitude to determine the amount of time they set for the subject. As a consequence, in many schools (except Catholic controlled schools) the amount of time devoted to the teaching of RE had been reduced to almost negligible proportions. In an effort to safeguard the continuance of RE in Scottish schools, the Education (Scotland) Act, 1962, *inter alia*, made three important additions. First, a clause was added requiring each local authority to seek the consent of local electors, through a referendum, if a school wanted Religious Instruction removed from its curriculum. Secondly, schools in every education authority were required to provide facilities for the holding of religious examinations. Third, each education authority was advised to appoint a supervisor of Religious Instruction with power to enter schools at all times to monitor the efficiency of the Religious Instruction and Religious Observance and report this directly to the local authority (British Parliament 1962).

It seems to me that the appointment of these supervisors hardly changed the poor status of RE at that time. Two reasons can be suggested as to why the supervisors hardly made any impact on RE. Firstly, the supervisors worked on a voluntary basis without remuneration and thus were unable to devote

themselves wholeheartedly to the task at hand. Secondly, supervisors were appointed on the basis of their denominational affiliation (a Catholic in Catholic schools and so on), a fact that made them less inclined to offer a critical evaluation of the status of RE in the schools of their 'Church' (see SED 1972b). On the matter concerning examinations, it is my contention that although the Education (Scotland) Act, 1962 had made a provision for its introduction, there is no record anywhere that this was actually implemented. The main stumbling block, it seems, was that there was no change in the law regarding inspection and as the educational practice remained, no inspection equated to no examination. I shall return later to the issues of inspection and examination to assess how these were addressed in the mid-1980s (see chapter 5).

Back to the discussion on statutory ambiguities, we should note that by the 1970s—as had been the situation in the previous century of compulsory education—the reality was that government's hands were essentially tied, leaving it in effect unable to do anything lest under the law any such action be construed as 'interference' in RE. It was a disheartening situation for the subject, expressed well during a 1969 debate in the House of Commons. Comparing the situations in England and Scotland, one member of the House lamented that,

The position in Scotland is quite different. We have no inspection whatever [sic]. We are prevented by our law, for historical reasons which are important and, I think, correct, from having any inspection of religious instruction. Our teacher training [sic] regulations make no provision for training in religious instruction. We have no examinations under the old law, and the new Scottish Examination Board has not approved an examination in religious instruction (British Government 1969, p. 1368).

It is clear that the law governing RE in Scotland had produced a baffling situation for the subject. While by intention the law was meant to safeguard RE in Scottish education, in practice it had unintentionally created a situation which did not allow the state to intervene even when an intervention was what was required to help redress the serious state of underdevelopment in the subject (Darling 1980). Thus, as long as the law governing the subject remained like this—or at least as it was being interpreted in practice—very little could be done to save Scottish RE from a downward spiral (Knox 1953).

However, from the discussion in this sub-section an irony emerges regarding the law governing RE in Scotland. It seems that while the law unwittingly contributed to underdevelopment as we have seen, without the law the subject would have definitely ceased to exist in most non-denominational schools. Representative of the Church of Scotland in this study echoed this view:

... There is no doubt that without legally protecting it [RE] would wither away in Scotland because it's hard to marry together the secularist and faith agenda. The secularists because they don't like the idea of faith would take on board that idea that faith is not a positive thing and the faith community resents having to argue that case all the time ...

So in a case of double irony the very existence of RE in Scottish schools depended on the very law responsible for its stunted growth.

#### **4.3. A subject ignored and undervalued**

Another issue the study identified and which exacerbated the misfortune for the subject, not only in Scotland but this time in Malawi as well, was that RE had a low status in schools. In both countries this was precipitated by a set of interlocking factors. In Scotland, RE was the only school subject that was not given professional recognition by the GTCS. The consequences of this were that RE was not offered for training in teacher education colleges and schools did not have established posts in the subject. RE became a school subject, which by law had to be taught, but the very same law had not made any provision for the training of teacher specialists in the subject. Recalling his experience as an RE teacher during that time, lecturer at a university in Scotland 1 said:

When I went to Jordanhill College to train as a teacher and I think this was 1967 there was no teaching qualification in RE. It was not a recognised national teaching subject. So those who wanted to become RE teachers had to train in another subject. If they wanted to teach RE they could take what was called either a diploma or a higher diploma in RE which was in effect a teaching subject but was not recognised as a main qualification. Although I became a secondary teacher my official qualification was in Modern Studies but I never taught Modern Studies. I always taught RE... After RE was recognised as a normal teaching subject those of us who had a diploma didn't have to retrain. All we did was to send in a letter to explain that we

had our qualification and it was ratified by the General Teaching Council...

It seems that even when some recognition began to come through for RE in the mid-1970s, few teachers had received training because by 1976 reports indicate that there were only 149 RE teachers in a secondary school population of 400,000 pupils (SED 1978). And even when a trickle of teachers began to come through the training colleges in the late 1970s and early 1980s, many headteachers were reluctant to hire them unless they were also qualified in another 'useful' subject such as Modern Studies or History. This attitude of headteachers seemed to have continued into the late 1980s because a 1987 report on secondary RE highlighted it as an issue to be addressed (CCC 1987). This problem added damage to the profile of the subject in schools such that unlike other subjects, for a long time RE did not have a progression structure for teachers. The consequence of this was that a number of the few specialist teachers available were put off seeking an appointment in RE. Instead, they sought a teaching appointment in their second specialist subject because of the promise of a professional teaching future in the other subject (Darling 1980).

Thus, for the most part, RE in Scotland was taught by those whose professional specialism lay elsewhere. The common trend in schools was that RE was something that was given to the teacher as an 'add on' to their other more 'important' subjects in which they held a professional qualification. Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 2 said:

... There were no specialist teachers appointed when I started teaching. I got a job as a History and French teacher and since I was in a Catholic school, on the first day of my job the headteacher said here is RE...

In many instances headteachers, particularly in non-denominational schools, had difficulties finding teachers willing to 'add on' RE. At a time when there was no shortage of teachers in such schools harbouring philosophical objections to religion, finding willing 'volunteers' became a tall order indeed for many headteachers. The government's advice on this did not make things any easier

for headteachers. For example, a 1947 government report on education advised that,

Headmasters be left free to assign Religious Instruction to such of their colleagues as are willing and able to take it; and that neither on forms of application nor at interview should any candidate for a secondary school post (other than that of Scripture specialist) be asked whether he is willing to undertake such teaching (SED 1947, p. 169).

As a consequence, most often than not, committed Christians were those who were willing to offer RE. In other cases teachers with an additional academic (not professional) qualification in theology or divinity, and school chaplains as well, became *de facto* RE teachers. In time, the teaching of RE was dominated by ministers, theologians and committed Christians. This merely pushed the subject further to the margins of professional education because evangelisation and not education became the central aim of what was being emphasised in Scottish RE (Knox 1953). The evidence I have gathered, however, suggests that in Scotland the system of appointing chaplains as the sole teacher of RE was more commonly applied in non-denominational rather than in denominational (Catholic) schools. The reason is that in Catholic schools every teacher was, by vocation, considered a teacher of RE employed by the Church on the basis of their strong commitment to the Catholic faith. As a committed community of believers, the school, as it is today, served as a link between the Church and the faith community (British Parliament 1969b).

The study also found that in Malawi, RE was taught by non-specialists as evidenced by the fact that during the early years of secondary education in the 1940s, the subject was taught mainly by missionaries and priests. Later, when secondary schools began to increase in number in the 1950s and 1960s, teachers of other subjects but with a firm commitment to the Christian faith dominated the teaching of RE. But unlike in Scotland where examination in RE began only in the early 1980s, in Malawi the national curriculum was from its outset examination based (as it remains to this day). Thus, if a further difference can be drawn between RE in Scotland and Malawi, it is that in the latter the subject was given some attention because children had to be prepared for examination. Being an examination based curriculum, schools were always eager to attain

good results not only in RE but in other subjects as well, so as to maintain a good standing on the league tables.

As a subject, however, the status of RE in Malawian schools remained poor principally because the subject lacked trained teachers. Lecturer at a private university in Malawi 1 explained:

... Although there was need for trained BK [i.e. RE] teachers few were trained because BK was considered to be a low priority area in government schools. In fact, in many schools those who taught BK were teachers trained in other subjects and per their dedication as good Christians were given or volunteered the additional load of teaching BK.

Given the lack of specialists in both Scotland and Malawi, poor and uninspiring teaching was endemic in RE. Bible stories and mnemonics of selected biblical texts dominated teaching and learning. It seems that rarely were inquiry, discussion and reflective methods used. In most cases children were not even encouraged to challenge and probe further on what they were being taught. From the respondents' narratives in both countries it was clear that if any good teaching happened at all, it was down to the dynamism of individual teachers and not to the vibrancy of the subject or the general enthusiasm shown to it by the general body of teachers who offered it. Commenting on the Scottish situation, Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 3 noted:

During that time you may be fortunate to get a good teacher who did more than teach you the Bible basics, someone who explained and developed things better.

Thus, starved of professional input, RE in many Scottish non-denominational schools had become time for children to do anything else but learn RE. A 1978 professional report (Bulletin 1) on RE found that,

In too many schools the Bible period dwindled into useful time for daily administrative tasks or at best a perfunctory gabble through the Gospels (SED 1978, p. 24).

Recounting his experience as a pupil in a Scottish non-denominational school in the 1970s, Principal Teacher at a non-denominational in Scotland 1 stated,

.... RE had a low sort of place in pupils' esteem to a point that the school I attended itself had a teacher of RE but had no desks in his classroom. He had snooker tables. What he did was to supervise pupils as they played snooker during RE lessons. Occasionally he came around with a few pithy comments about life and stuff. He was a very learned man but he had given up more so that the school had permitted him to use the time for more interesting things to do such as play snooker than teach RE which pupils had no interest in whatsoever...

Other Scottish respondents in the research said that they had no recollection of ever having RE in school and were unsure whether the school they attended offered the subject or not. Recalling her secondary school days in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 said:

... I cannot remember having any RE. We used to be sent to do homework in the class. Probably it was on my timetable but I cannot remember a teacher offering us RE. What I remember was that it was time for doing other things not RE. I have no memory of having RE and probably most of my contemporaries would say the same because traditionally it was a subject which was almost a free period because teachers of the other subjects who were given to teach it hardly ever taught it.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s evidence gathered suggests that the status of Scottish RE, particularly in non-denominational schools, had indeed deteriorated. For example, a government report revealed that 9% and 23 % of schools did not even allot an RE period on their school curriculum for 12-13 year olds and 16-17 year olds, respectively (SED 1972a). It is no coincidence therefore to note that during the same period people had begun openly to express serious doubts as to whether RE was a necessary subject at all on the national curriculum - to the point that others were calling for its abolition in schools. This view was raised in the House of Commons during the June 1969 parliamentary debate by Peter Jackson, the honourable member of High Peak. In support of the motion, William Hamilton, honourable Member of Parliament for Fife (West) argued:

I was brought up in a very religious home. I was given and I myself gave religious instruction in school and I would deprecate failure to give religious instruction to children of school age and above. But I doubt whether school is the right place to do it. There is strong case for regarding this duty as that of parents and the churches... Often people giving religious instruction or presumed to be giving it were in

fact simply teaching moral standards, teaching the children how to behave as decent human citizens without reference to biblical connotations of any kind. We should be very careful not to seek to brain-wash children at this or any age without their being in a position to challenge what is being taught (British Parliament 1969b, p. 1370).

As would be expected, it was an issue that caused a great deal of consternation among proponents of RE. In reply to this, and more generally to the issue of whether to amend section 9(2) of Education (Scotland) Act, 1962 (which required schools to submit their RE timetables to the Secretary of State for approval or disapproval as safeguard)<sup>5</sup>, concerned members in the House began talking along the lines that it was time for those concerned with RE to ‘man the barricades’. T.G. Galbraith, the honourable Member of Parliament for Glasgow (Hillhead), perhaps echoed the sentiments of those concerned by this rhetoric when he said:

The right honourable gentleman must be aware that [this] has caused a great deal of concern. I have had many letters from constituents on the subject. I do not know whether they are Roman Catholics. It is impossible to tell. But they have expressed concern and they are right to do so. There may be nothing *sinister* about this provision but it looks as though perhaps it is something sinister at a time when there is so much *humanist talk* about and also when everyone is aware of the dangers of the permissive society. Surely, that sort of talk is the very last thing to be said because it will *undermine* religious instruction in schools (British Parliament 1969b, p. 1371, my emphasis).

The evidence presented above has sought to show the extent of the disdain which existed towards RE in some sections of Scottish society. It is my contention that in such a climate, the strongest pillar of support for the subject was the Church, particularly the Catholic Church which argued for greater support for RE in schools. In 1969, His Grace, Cardinal Thomas Joseph Winning, the Archbishop of Glasgow, wrote to the government expressing the Church’s feelings about the statutory changes that were being suggested at that time, wondering whether safeguards would be maintained for the continuation of RE. Perhaps the effect of the Archbishop’s intervention was such that during the House of Commons debate on the matter, one parliamentarian cautioned that

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<sup>5</sup> Further evidence suggests that in practice section 9(2) was never enforced and that in living memory no schools ever submitted its time-table to the government for approval. The amendment of this section was easily carried through in the Education (Scotland) Act, 1969.



‘we should pay attention to people when they feel as strongly as they do in this connection’ (British Parliament 1969b, p. 1371).

What seemed to have heightened the Churches’ concern during the June 1969 House of Commons debate was the intention to repeal Section 9(2) of Education (Scotland) Act, 1962. Conscious of the sensitivity of the issue, the government met representatives of the Church of Scotland and Catholic Church privately and assured them that the repeal of section 9(2) would not in any way infringe upon Section 8 of the Act Education (Scotland), 1962 (i.e. statutory guarantee for the continuance of Religious Observance and Religious Instruction in Scottish schools).

#### **4.4. A subject lacking an educational rationale**

The third issue this study found as a contributory factor to the poor state of RE in the two countries was that it lacked a robust educational rationale. The issue was that the subject placed too much emphasis on *evangelism* rather than on *education*. In a country such as Malawi where for a long time secondary schools were in the hands of Churches, ‘evangelism’ was the primary focus of the type of education offered (see Salanjira 2009). For example, the constitution of the first secondary school called Blantyre (established in 1941 by a board of Protestant Churches but dominated by the Presbyterian Church) made it clear that RE was to be based on the Old and New Testament and the Nicene Creed (Nyasaland Government 1946). Similarly, the second secondary school called Zomba (established by the Catholic Church in 1942) emphasised that religious teaching in its school would be in accordance with Catholic principles (Nyasaland Government 1952). As such RE in these Malawian schools included the teaching through particular Church instruments, such as the *Catechism* at Zomba Catholic Secondary School and the *Apostles Creed* at Blantyre Secondary School. In all, the aim of RE in these schools was unequivocally to bring children to Christ. Rimmington has noted that,

All mission schools in Malawi had something in common. Their main interest was in a type of education that would serve mission purposes, that is, to make people more proficient in the study of the Bible and catechism (Rimmington 1966, p. 217).

The general expectation in these schools was that teachers were also required to practise their Christian faith and to help students to do the same. Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi in the study made clear the purpose of Christian education:

The first task of the Church school was to help children develop a life of evangelism such that after their education they could read the Bible and preach to others about the good news. Church schools were also set up to help inculcate in children a godly moral way of living so that they would become good Christians.

During much of the colonial period, and to some extent for a couple of decades afterwards, most schools in Malawi demanded conversion before enrolment (Bone 2000). In fact, it has been noted that the Presbyterian Church in Malawi as other Churches as well operated a policy that can be described as ‘Christianity before literacy’ (Heyneman 1972). It was a policy that also made Christian RE to be offered as a mandatory school subject in Church owned or Church controlled schools (Lamba 1999). The response of the Muslim community was to shun western education altogether with the consequence that historically, illiteracy among Muslims has been higher than in other Malawian communities (Matiki 1991).

It was a fact that forced the colonial government to take over the control of education in the country in 1929 ending the practice of Churches determining the curriculum of schools under their control (Nyasaland Government 1946). And as part of the colonial government’s new policy on education a ‘conscience clause’ meant to safe-guard the right of parents to ‘opt out’ their children if they felt that what was taught was in conflict with their particular religious convictions, was also introduced (Rimington 1966). In chapter 8 I will suggest reasons why although the ‘conscience clause’ remains as part of educational policy in Malawi many parents hardly exercise that right.

On the issue of the absence of an educational rationale for RE, in Malawi, historically, the subject was given priority in Church controlled schools. Representative of ACEM explained why he thought RE had an elevated status in Malawian schools:

The first intention of mission schools was to preach to the people. ... In mission schools the teaching of RE was again at the very top. It was

really one of the most important subjects offered to the extent that some missionaries without saying it forced students that came to their schools to join as Christians .... In many ways conversion was the requisite of enrolment if they [students] wanted to receive an education. Such that with time if one went to a Catholic school, Presbyterian school etc. one naturally converted to that church... Again the argument was that since pupils didn't have a religion of theirs to speak of, this was their redemption after all.

The bottom line seems to be that RE taught in Malawian secondary schools lacked an educational rationale because the aim of the subject was primarily to achieve Christian evangelical objectives. Although clearly the 'Bible-based' model of RE offered in schools was a concern particularly to Muslim parents in Malawi, and in some cases prevented their children from 'doing RE', in general there is no evidence to suggest that there was a movement agitating for radical reform in RE. It is evident that Malawian society had for a long time succumbed to a mistaken perception of national religious and cultural homogeneity - that is what is good for the majority of the Christian population is meant to be good for all others. It was this mistaken belief that made society at large numb to the fact that a single faith model of RE might be unsatisfactory to others, particularly Muslims, who while they had no means of showing their displeasure owing to historical reasons as a politically and socially marginalised group in mainstream Malawian life, nonetheless were strongly displeased with the Christian form of RE (see Matiki 1999).

Views expressed by some of the Malawian respondents in this study regarding Muslim children in schools exemplify this mistaken belief. These respondents suggested that Muslim children actually 'liked' to study the Christian form of RE (i.e. BK). Teacher at public school in Malawi 3 said that,

... I do have Muslim children in my class but they don't *stand out* in any way. When I teach BK I use the historical methodology and not the confessional way so in this way BK is *okay* even for Muslim children. We don't teach to convert children but we just teach it as any subject [my emphasis].

Other respondents suggested a more sinister reason why Muslims might 'like' BK. Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi expressed a view along the lines that,

I think they [Muslim children] are taught that if they want to defeat Christianity in future they must study BK ... and it is a subject that many Muslim children pass well in the terminal examinations. This is an area Muslims are clever unlike Christians who are uneducated about Islam and the Quran. Christians are dull about Muslims and the Quran. In future I think that their aim is to defeat Christianity. So many Muslim children take BK without any problem...

The research here has also established that, in Scotland, RE was premised on a confessional rather than an educational rationale. In his submission to the bill debating RE in the sitting of the House of Commons in June 1969, one member of the House explained what he saw as the intention of RE:

... I cannot think of many other subjects which are not so nearly important as the subject of believing in the Almighty and understanding His ways. I am not evangelising, but I say when on a Sunday I am coming home from my Church and I see people who never move out of the door on a Sunday and who never send their kiddies to church, I am so convinced that if these children had to depend on religious instruction in churches, many of them would never even hear of the Word God. I often say that but for the evangelist on a Sunday, in my own part of the country some of the children would not know that God exists (British Parliament 1969b, p. 1372).

However, it seems that such overt expectation of what RE was meant to achieve had begun to cause concern in some parts of Scottish society. Scottish respondents explained that in non-denominational schools most children were finding the Bible-based instruction largely unattractive. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 commented:

So the experience of RE may have been of dread and horror. This is the Bible and these are the Ten Commandments and so on.

The overall picture we get for RE in Scotland at that time is that although by intention the Education Act of 1872 made non-denominational schools secular, schools continued to offer a mono-faith (Christian) syllabus the aims of which had remained implicitly confessional. In a 1947 report, the Advisory Council on Scottish Education re-confirmed the fact that RE would emphasise,

The systematic and informed teaching of the Bible, as a condition of transmitting our moral and spiritual heritage (SED 1947, p. 154).

Respondents were quick however, to point out the particularity of denominational Catholic schools in Scotland. They noted that the confessional agenda of Catholic schools was welcomed in Catholic schools themselves because the schools were set up primarily for children of Catholic citizens, confirmed in the fact that the law allowed Catholic schools to offer RE in the manner the Church saw fit for its schools. Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 2 observed:

... The Catholic Church quite rightly said to the state that you have the responsibility to the schools in terms of resources, staffing and so it's up to you the state in partnership with us to say this is our *content*, you resource it [my emphasis].

It can be surmised that while in non-denominational schools the Bible-based curriculum in RE was in disfavour, Catholic schools were reaffirming a Christocentric curriculum for their schools. For example, as the government was pointing towards an open approach for RE in the 1970s, the Catholic Church was re-affirming the confessional aims of RE for its schools. A 1974 report produced by a committee of Catholic teachers and sanctioned by the Scottish Conference of Bishops said that RE in Catholic schools would remain,

A service undertaken by the Christian in virtue of his baptism and confirmation by which he is commissioned to hand to others... (SCCB 1974, p. 3).

This study has also established that in both countries Church doctrine was taught as part of RE. In Scotland, respondents noted that non-denominational schools (most of them formerly Presbyterian Church schools) had adopted a Presbyterian model of RE, while denominational schools of course adopted a Catholic model of RE. Owing to the fact that RE and evangelism were inextricably linked, much teaching in the subject was at the level of *indoctrinating* children to particular doctrinal views. Besides the Bible, the commonly used texts in schools were two little books: the Scottish Prayer Book ('Blue Book' in reference to its colour) in non-denominational schools and the 'Penny Catechism' (due to its original cost of one penny) in denominational Catholic schools (see Kenneth, 1972). Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 1 recalled:

So when I was at school from primary 1 to S6 I learnt the Catechism. You went through it once and went through it again until you knew

the catechism by heart because the Catechism was often question and answer.

A factor which further impinged upon RE in Scotland was that it was the only curricular subject without a nationally prescribed syllabus. This was due to the statutory restrictions imposed on the subject as already noted. In the absence of a syllabus, teachers therefore tended to teach pretty much what they wanted as long the Bible was the focus in the classroom.

It should be noted, however, that as early as 1929 some interest groups such as the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious Education (SJCRE) (a non-statutory voluntary body comprising representatives from the Churches except Roman Catholics, the education department, local authorities and the Educational Institute of Scotland) had produced RE syllabi which were widely used in primary and secondary schools (Wishart 1941). In 1964 SJCRE produced a new experimental syllabus for non-denominational secondary schools. This syllabus was revised in 1968 (SJCRE 1968). In 1970 SJCRE produced new thematic RE syllabi for primary schools (SJCRE 1970). However, it is necessary to emphasise that these SJCRE syllabi were not compulsory and as such schools used them on 'as and when needed' basis. In short, many schools continued to teach their own school-based syllabi as before. From the evidence gathered it seems also that in areas where the Free Church of Scotland had influence on the local school boards, in such schools SJCRE syllabi were hardly used because Free Church representatives had reservations 'with regard to certain portions of this syllabus' (SJCRE 1970, p. iv).

While the SJCRE syllabi was an attempt to open RE to the world outside the school and help pupils 'to understand what goes on out there' (SJCRE 1970, p. vii), these were, in every way, confessional syllabi whose primary intention was to bring Christ and the Church closer to children by, among other things, ensuring that as part of RE children be taken to attend services in the different Churches (SJCRE 1970). Therefore, it can be said that despite acknowledging the fact that SJCRE syllabi were 'being issued at a time when RE was 'passing through a period of controversy and change' (SJCRE 1970, p. vii), the pedagogy in the SJCRE syllabus had remained firmly Bible-based. Even the RE teacher's forum regularly convened by Dundee College of Education in the late 1970s and much of the 1980s produced Christocentric curricular guides for teachers (DCE

1979). Writing on Scottish RE in the early 1980s, Iain Stiven was quick to reiterate that the aim of RE in schools was to help children to know about Christianity and to inculcate in them shared values and beliefs as an extension of the country's Christian heritage (Stiven 1982).

It thus seems to me that until the 1980s RE in Scotland, both in Catholic and non-denominational schools, lacked fundamentally educational objectives. It is my contention that even when an 'educational' RE could be feasible within the faith-based Catholic curriculum or within the new SJCRE syllabi, teaching in the subject hardly emphasised educational possibilities. For instance, SJCRE syllabi continued to offer Christocentric RE because collectively Christian groups were a predominant religious group in the environment (SJCRE 1975). On their part, Catholic schools, too, continued to offer catechetical RE as approved by the Council of Scottish Bishops. In the first ever (1991) HMle report on RE in Catholic Schools (following the amendment Education Act, 1981) the absence of educational RE was pointed out. For instance, it was noted that although Catholic education did promote ecumenical and inter-faith attitudes through the *Veritas* programme, in practice its syllabus,

Eschews a general multi-faith approach because the first priority of Catholic education is to establish a secure foundation in Catholic Christianity for pupils (SED 1991b, p. 6).

It further noted that assessment was hardly ever done and that of all Catholic secondaries inspected none offered examinations in RE except one school which offered a Higher Scottish Certificate Examination course and four schools which offered National Certificate modules in S5-S6. The report ended by suggesting that RE in Catholic schools should have,

... A flexible approach to curriculum to match the national syllabus to pupils' real concerns and to their lives in 'an ecumenical, multi-faith and most of all secularised society'... (SED 1991b, p. 21, in text quotation in the original).

Reacting against the absence of an *educational* RE, professional teacher committees (which emerged in the mid-1970s) in Scotland began to advise schools to have a broader interpretation of RE. These committees pointed out that because the law did not go into detail about the amount of provision or

content of RE, this provided a window of opportunity for schools to develop school policies that would bring about an educational rationale for RE. In their 1987 report entitled *Management Issues in Religious Education in Secondary Schools*, the Scottish Central Committee on RE noted:

Therefore a school policy, while it may refer to statute, needs to look elsewhere for an educational rationale for Religious Education and for guidance on the organisation of provision (CCC 1987, p. 2).

The findings in this section have captured some of the concerns various stakeholders had about the lack of an educational rationale in RE. The use of RE as an evangelical tool, while favoured in the early days in the history of education in the two countries, was no longer seen as relevant to the needs of a modern child whose experiences were more secular, cosmopolitan, multicultural and critical. Clearly, from these findings it can be surmised that a new direction for RE was inevitable if the subject was to be valued in most schools.

#### **4.5. Conclusion**

The findings in this chapter give the picture that historically RE in Scotland was a subject under ‘siege’ ironically entrapped by very law that was meant to safeguard the subject, and in a curious way guaranteed its very survival particularly in non-denominational schools. The issue of statute governing RE was not found in the Malawi experience. The only bits about RE close to ‘statutory’ arrangements were about the ‘opt out’ provision that has existed in the educational policy since 1929.

The chapter also demonstrates that RE was a subject which was ignored and severely undervalued in schools. Its lack of an educational aim did very little to improve its image and standing on most school curricula. However, while the debate continues in the RE discourse about what constitutes an ‘educational’ aim in RE—with Church schools maintaining that RE offered in faith education is in their view ‘educational’, and the non-denominational sector expressing opposite views that non-dogmatic RE is what is ‘educational’ (Copley 2008)—from the findings in this chapter it can be suggested that ‘purely’ confessional RE would hardly make the subject ‘educational’ in public education.



Finally, it remains to be seen in the final chapters of the study (see chapter 9) whether the curriculum changes of the last two decades or so have improved the Cinderella image which historically has characterised the subject and whether issues such as shortage of specialists and the value of the subject in schools and in the community more generally, has improved. But first, the study turns to the next chapter to examine fully the motives that engendered curriculum reforms in RE in Scotland and Malawi.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Motives for Reforming Religious Education**

#### **5.1. Introduction**

The present chapter analyses various motives that helped to bring about reforms in RE in the two countries under investigation. First, the chapter discusses the impact of new trends in society on RE. Secondly, it explores the role of politics in the development of RE. Third, the contribution of RE scholarship in Scotland is noted. Next, the work of professional teacher-committees in Scotland is described. Fifth, the contribution of the RE advisorate—also a uniquely Scottish issue in the research—is discussed. Sixth and finally, the influence of global reform trends on national strategies for RE in both Scotland and Malawi is explored. The findings in this chapter have highlighted nascent issues—some common and others different in each of the two countries—which engendered not only a rethink of the future of the subject but in many respects actually suggested how this could be done.

#### **5.2. Changing trends in society**

Beginning with Scotland, relevant literature informs us that the emergence of modern Scottish society is tied to the eighteenth century Enlightenment movement, however, characterised to a large degree by a deeper estrangement of Church and State, scepticism, rationality and ambivalence of ‘professional elites towards the influence of Church and religion in the education and instruction of the Scottish people’ (O’Hagan and Davis 2007, p. 76). By the time of the Presbyterian ‘disruption’ in the 1830s (i.e. major split in the Church of Scotland) and Irish Catholic immigration in the mid-1840s, modernity in Scotland was already at its peak if not then already superseded by post-modernity (Brown 1991). In any case, it is evident that by this time the secularisation of Scottish society was already underway. For instance, in the 1820s Robert Owen (the famous social reformer at New Lanark) preferred the teaching of science to

Religious Instruction at his school to the obvious displeasure of the local Presbytery (See Davis and O'Hagan 2010).

From the Scottish research, respondents pointed out that one major issue which helped the movement for RE reform in Scotland was the Church of Scotland's increasingly liberal attitude towards how children were taught religion in schools. Representative of the Church of Scotland in the study made clear the position of his Church on this matter when he said that,

The position of the Church of Scotland is that there should be RE but that the issue of religion should be broader and that the child should be on a journey. It is not our task to tell pupils that this is what you should believe but that since everyone believes in something you should work out that which you believe and what the consequences are for that for you as a person...

The liberal attitude within Presbyterian Christianity in Scotland is actually in tune with the 'liberatory praxis' of the Protestant tradition (see Stoddart 2006, p. 70). This tradition sees 'different religions as complementary and independently valid revelations of the divine acting to save mankind' (Barnes 2009b, p. 69). Scottish respondents in the research noted that the liberal attitude to religion in public education which the Presbyterian Churches subscribe to has helped to open the way for a liberal approach to RE. Respondents also noted that, beginning in the 1950s and much of the 1960s, Presbyterian Churches earnestly pushed for a review of RE so that it was equipped to respond to emerging trends in society such as multiculturalism and religious pluralism. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 commented that:

Really I think that historically what happened was that the Church of Scotland education committee pushed ... with government backing ... asking for a review of RE and the Church of Scotland took on board the fact that society was changing and that something had to be done about RE. So the impetus started with the Presbyterian Church.

Respondents also observed that over the decades the Church of Scotland had been pushing for a more 'open' approach to RE. Lecturer at a Scottish university 1 reiterated that:

... It [Church of Scotland] has always been supportive of an open RE and [although] it felt that the Church's job was a confessional one ... the Church could also support non-confessional approach with

education. Now there are many people within the Church including ministers who take a different approach and they would like to take a confessional approach. But as far as the Church as an institution is concerned, and as far as I can remember 40 years ago, the Church has always had this open approach to RE.

Another major issue respondents noted was the impact of cultural, social and religious changes in Scottish society. Scottish respondents traced these changes to the 1960s and early 1970s. First, they noted the prevalence of secularism which they said was a long-term consequence of the 18th Century Scottish Enlightenment. To that end, they also noted that Scottish society had been moving away from religious conservatism for several generations. For example, they noted the sharp fall in Church attendance in Presbyterian Churches in the 1960s as an indicator that for many people Christianity was no longer the central factor in their lives, summarised in the now common educational phrase ‘a growth of secularisation and the development of a pluralistic society’ (CCC 1987, p. 3).

This finding is consistent with relevant literature which shows that by the 1950s there was wholesale de-Christianisation process taking place particularly on the visible Church signalled by a sharp fall in Church attendance in Scotland (Field 2001). For example, during this period of the 57.8% adult Christian population only 26% actually attended Sunday Church service (Piggott 1980). The only Christian group whose Church roll was constant or improved slightly were Roman Catholics, but that these only accounted for 14.5% of the Christian population (Highet 1953). In his sociological analysis of modern Scotland, McCrone notes that, with the exception of the Catholic Church (whose Church attendance had grown by one-fifth since 1914), since the 1950s Church attendance has been in sharp decline in Scotland. Further McCrone states that ‘by the early 1960s membership in the Church of Scotland had fallen to its lowest since the twentieth century began and, was still falling ... and as a result it ceased to be a mass church’ (McCrone 2001, p. 19).

Small wonder that by the early 1970s, most non-Catholic Christians and others in Scotland began to question the relevance of having a confessional Bible-based RE in the non-denominational school. Graeme Nixon has noted that although previously taught by well-meaning non-specialists this form of RE ‘was failing to meet the needs of an increasingly secular, globally aware and multi-cultural

pupil population' (Nixon 2009, p. 167). Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 makes a similar observation:

For very good reasons, some people philosophically thought that RE had got to be more than Religious Instruction; some of them feeling that Bible study was just not efficient.

Respondents also noted that Scotland as a country witnessed an influx of immigrants (asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants) particularly in the 1960s and 1970s. Respondents said that the newcomers brought with them their diverse religious and cultural distinctiveness. Of particular mention in the study were Pakistani Muslims who had come to Scotland following their expulsion from Uganda and confiscation of their property by President Idi Amin in 1972 (see Patel 1972). What was different about the 'Ugandan' Pakistanis was that they were politically astute and wealthy. Thus unlike the economic immigrants who in general did not want to draw attention to themselves, the 'Ugandan' Pakistanis who came as political refugees and already politicised by their Ugandan experience were inclined to be assertive in promoting their distinctive Islamic beliefs and culture. These demographic changes and associated issues influenced educational policy as well. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 3 noted:

The entire UK was becoming more multi-faith and more multicultural. The global village had descended upon the country. Even at that time we were aware that RE should be inclusive to a wide range of religions.

The statement given by the Scottish respondent above is perhaps indicative of the welcoming nature of Scottish society as whole in giving space for personal and group expression of the new immigrants into the country. It was this positive attitude that not only allowed the new communities to flourish but also made it easier for their religious traditions, albeit with the restrictions of the curriculum, to be included in RE.

Turning to Malawi it should be noted on the outset that the country's modern society is a post-colonial development which emerged only after the country gained her independence from Britain in 1964. Markers of this modern society have been issues such as political sovereignty, expansion of public education through the building of schools, increase in food production and general

infrastructural development (Williams 1978). Perhaps more importantly as a comparable case with Scotland is the fact that the on-set of modernity in Malawi did not signal the beginning of decline of the influence of religion (i.e. Christianity) in society and in people's lives. In fact quite the opposite has been the case. Since the mid-1870s Church attendance in Malawi has been on the increase owing to the activities of missionaries and the positive reception of Christianity by the local people (Doctor 2005). However, having a single dominant religion, as Christianity is in Malawi, has direct effect on the type of RE schools and society in general prefer. As I shall explore in some detail later in the study, Christian faith communities (as the major stakeholders in educational provision controlling more than 33% of secondaries), prefer an *exclusive* Christian approach to RE (Matemba 2009; Sookrajh and Salanjira 2009).

On the issue of addressing religious and cultural diversity as a motive for reform, two contrasting views emerged in Malawi. One view was of those who felt that the claim of addressing plurality was not a sufficient reason to warrant a major shift of policy in the subject. These pointed out that, after all, Malawi has never experienced any ethnic or religious strife. They added that this suggested that the existing social and political models have been generally effective in a country where Christianity has been a dominant force in the social and political life of the majority of the people. All the representatives of Churches in the study (i.e. Catholic, Presbyterian and Seventh-day Adventist) unsurprisingly expressed particularly strong views on this question. They reiterated that those who desired to reform RE, on the pretext of balancing the diversity conundrum, might have been having other 'hidden' agendas. These respondents further claimed that even if the argument for recognising diversity was made persuasive, it was not clear how the RE curriculum could be able to accommodate so many disparate and nascent religions in the country, nor what form such a curriculum would take.

Commenting on the new secondary school multi-faith RE introduced in 2000 (an issue I will discuss in detail in chapter 6), the representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi, in particular, was adamant that Christianity cannot be taught together with other religions. He noted:

So in this curriculum they put a picture of a Mosque and a Church side by side to be taught together. Christians wondered how this can be because we say that Christianity is not Islam and Islam is not Christianity and we wondered how these two religions can be compared ...

Details of the new multi-faith curriculum in Malawi and the controversy it engendered will be made in the next chapter (chapter 6). However, for the purposes of the present chapter, it is sufficient to point out that most Malawian respondents in the study were of the view that the motive for reform in RE was a political ploy by the country's leadership (headed by a Muslim president when reforms in RE were being proposed) to help bolster the image of Islam at the expense of Christianity. The state visit to Malawi of Libya's President Colonel Muammar Gaddafi in 2003, where he toured projects and mosques financed by his government, was further cited by the respondents from the Churches as additional evidence of the intention of the government of President Muluzi to 'Islamise' Malawi. Since the issue of 'politics' as a likely motive emerged as one of the significant factors for reform, I shall treat it more fully in the next section of this chapter.

The other view was a more positive one. Respondents who fell into this category acknowledged that diversity, in all its forms, is a reality in Malawi and cannot be ignored. They noted for instance, that in Malawi there are Muslims and pockets of Hindus, Sikhs, Baha'is, Rastafarians, Jews, Atheists and practitioners of African Religion, all of whom desire to be included in the educational policy for RE. Those in support of this view noted that it was urgent that the imbalances of having only a Christian based RE should be corrected. Respondents representing the Muslim community felt strongly that recognition of religious diversity on the curriculum was important because Muslim children had been unjustly excluded for a long period and that it was only proper that the subject be changed to include them. While not necessarily supporting the Muslim goals for reform *per se*, the official line from the government was that Malawi is a pluralistic country and as such RE had to reform itself properly to address this. Representatives of the Muslim community were upbeat on the reforms noting that after a long time finally their religion had space in public education. Representative of the Muslim association in Malawi 1 noted:

... You remember that in the past there was BK and in that syllabus Muslim children were taught *untruths* about Islam. So when the new subject came we felt that it was good because the truth about Islam would be taught. In other words people would now learn Islam the *right way* [my emphasis].

To Muslims, it seems that the introduction of multi-faith RE was a demonstration of the freedom of religion which is enshrined in the country's constitution. Generally teachers also were in support of the view that Malawi is part of a global society with a diverse ethnic and religious population and for that fact alone RE needed to change to reflect reality. Teacher in a public school in Malawi 2 noted:

You will see here that education in Malawi with regards to teaching RE that government felt that well, RE is not only BK but it is all religions. So therefore, when we talk about RE it is encompassing other denominations but at the same time we have Hindus, Muslims, Atheists and traditional religion.

Views of most teachers converged on the point that it was important to teach children holistically so that they are able to see what the other side of society does. They felt that since most children already were familiar with the Christian side, perhaps if they knew or had knowledge about other religions in the country they would be able to make informed decisions about other religions rather than merely demonising them. Representative of the parent community felt that the new curriculum was a *step-forward* for the country because not only would Muslim children feel that they are accepted but also that the inclusion of ATR was a demonstration that the curriculum had recognised the importance of traditional culture which predates both Islam and Christianity in the country.

### 5.3. Politics as push factor

#### 5.3.1. Political intervention in Scotland

The study has established that in light of the limitations which the law placed on Scottish RE, political resolve was the only way left if tangible changes were ever to be made to improve the subject. It should be remembered that by the late 1960s, the situation for RE in Scottish non-denominational schools was generally



bleak and that for the first time the government could no longer stand by and watch the subject slowly descend into oblivion. The study identified three distinct cases of political intervention. The first case of intervention was the setting up of the Millar Report committee in 1968. At the risk of a political backlash against the 1872 prohibition on state ‘intervention’, the Secretary of State at the time, William Ross (1964-1970), appointed Dr Malcolm Millar, a professor of Psychiatry at Aberdeen University, to head up a committee that was charged with the task of looking into what exactly was happening in RE in non-denominational schools with a view to making recommendations for its improvement (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992).

The Millar Report was published in 1972 to an eagerly waiting public. Importantly, it gave the first documented ‘health check’ of the state of RE in Scotland and reiterated four things that stood in the way of progress: (a) little or no educational rationale for RE, (b) lack of professional recognition by both the GTCS and Scottish Education Department, (c) absence of inspection and (d) lack of assessment (i.e. national examination). It criticised the Bible-centred approach and called for a child-centred or experience-centred or problem-centred approach in RE. It thus doubted the educational value of RE that ‘sets out to coerce or convert young people to a particular point of view’. It suggested that relevant RE should follow ‘trends in modern education in which learning exists in situations where information is assimilated and judgment made after careful assessment of different points of view’. It wanted RE to be ‘made relevant to the aims and problems of contemporary society and to the personal lives of pupils’. It strongly recommended that the nature of moral and RE must be determined on educational considerations (SED 1972a, pp. 37, 44-53).

The report also considered the possibility of assessment, examining whether RE would be made more effective by the introduction of an examination (i.e. SCE) in Religious Studies on the Ordinary (‘O’) and Higher (‘H’) Grade schedule. Rather disappointingly perhaps, in the end the Millar Report did not recommend an examination in RE at the ‘O’ and ‘H’ grades, although it suggested that a pilot project could be undertaken to introduce examination targeting mature students (SED 1972a).

The significance of the Millar Report was that it established RE and not *Religious Instruction* as educationally respectable. It made practical proposals for reform

which were implemented fairly quickly. The report's recommendation that oversight of the RE curriculum should be undertaken by a group of voluntary professionals in RE, such as teachers and lecturers, rather than by SJCRE led to the birth of the 'Consultative Committee on the Curriculum' (CCC), which in turn established SCCORE in 1974. SCCORE had representatives from both denominational and non-denominational schools, a probable first. Its recommendation that professional training of pre-service teachers in RE should commence was also implemented in teacher education immediately. Following another of its recommendations, at the beginning of 1975 local authorities began to appoint advisors to oversee RE (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992).

The second case of political intervention occurred in the 1980s, when government amended some of the restrictive aspects of the law governing the provision of RE in Scotland. This was necessary because in spite of some attention that had been given to RE, little substantial practical changes could be undertaken owing to statutory restrictions that still remained in place in relation to the subject. Having considered the situation, and at the risk of political confrontation, George Younger, new Secretary of State for Scotland (1979-1986), gave serious attention to the statutory position governing the subject, with the view to revising the prohibitive aspects governing RE in all sectors of Scottish school system (that is denominational and non-denominational school sectors).

One issue noted as standing in the way of progress in Scottish education was the absence of examination in RE. This issue had also earlier received serious attention in the 1977 Mann Report (named after Sir James Mann who chaired its committee) which focused on the secondary school curriculum entitled: *The Structure of the Curriculum in the Third and Fourth Years of the Scottish Secondary School*. The Mann Report had suggested that if RE were to improve its image in the eyes of the teaching profession, examinations in the subject would have to be introduced like any other curriculum subject at 'Ordinary' and 'Higher' Levels (SED 1977). With this mind, alongside other factors we have so far considered (for example some of the recommendations of the Millar Report), a general view in Scotland developed that RE could no longer be treated as a subject set apart from other subjects in the curriculum. In order for this to happen, many felt that introducing examinations remained the main progressive action to be undertaken. But as prelude to this innovation, there was the sober realisation that inspection into RE had to be introduced, something that would

be acting against the law and the national tradition. Realising that the law in Scotland since 1872, reiterated in the Education (Scotland) Act, 1980—particularly Section 66(2) which barred HMle from inquiring into instruction in religious subjects or from examining any pupil in religious knowledge or in any religious subject or book—the Secretary of State decided, at last, to have Section 66(2) repealed to allow progress to come to RE (see Rodger 2003).

First, the Secretary of State consulted with Churches (including the Catholic Church), local authorities and other interested groups about the state of RE in Scottish schools. What he found surprised him because when he asked the various groups why RE had been excluded from inspection nobody could give a clear answer as to why this was the case. He thus concluded that while the reasons RE was originally excluded from inspection should be acknowledged, there were clearly no contemporary reasons for the continuation of the exclusion (Hannah 2007). In his final decision on the matter after the consultations were completed, the Secretary of State made his position quite clear:

I have reached the conclusion that the long-standing bar on the inspection of religious subjects is no longer appropriate and that the opportunity of the Education (Scotland) Bill, currently being considered in another place should be taken to repeal Section 66(2) of the 1980 Act, so that religious subjects may in future be treated on the same footing as other subjects on the curriculum and may be open to review by Her Majesty's inspectors on my behalf as necessary (British Government 1981a, p. 403).

The bill was passed on for debate, first to the House of Commons in July 1981 and later to the House of Lords in October of the same year. In spite of the intense debate the issue attracted in parliament (and I am sure in ordinary Scottish homes and other places as well) the general outcome in the both Houses of Parliament was supportive of the repeal of the Section 66(2) (British Government 1981b). It seems that in anticipation of this statutory change to RE, teacher working groups around the country produced helpful reports that informed the RE profession about anticipated changes. Here I am thinking of reports in the early 1980s such as (a) *Religious Education Forum on the Curriculum, Examinations and Inspection* produced by the then Dundee College of Education (DCE 1981) and (b) *Strathclyde Regional Council on Religious*

*Education and Religious Observance* produced by the then Strathclyde Council (SRC 1981).

Back to events concerning the statutory amendment, we should note that as part of the process to repeal Education (Scotland) Act, 1980, an 'Order in Council' was issued in 1982 to pave the way for the statutory amendment (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992). An elated George Younger made this eagerly anticipated announcement on the repeal of Education (Scotland) Act, 1980:

... The framework for inspection proposed by Her Majesty's Inspectorate has been generally welcomed and I am satisfied that there are no practical issues which stand in the way of its introduction. I intend therefore to make a commencement order shortly to bring into effect on 1 January 1983 section 16 of the Education (Scotland) Act 1981, which repeals the statutory bar on inspection of religious subjects in schools contained in section 66(2) of the Education (Scotland) Act 1980....(British Government 1982, p. 490)

Having prepared the way for inspection, RE in secondary schools was inspected for the first time in January 1983 in time for the first 'O' Level in Religious Studies the following year (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992). The policy to inspect RE in 1983 also changed the subject officially from Religious Instruction to RE. According to William Hannah inspection and examination in RE hastened the *educationalisation* process of Scottish RE that had begun following the publication of the Millar Report in 1972 (Hannah 2007). However, it should be noted the Education (Scotland) Act, 1981 did not repeal the 1872 Scotland Education Act or the 1918 Scotland Education Act. Rather, it merely touched on those elements to do with inspection in RE so that assessment could be possible in the subject. In fact, statutory provisions such as parental 'conscience clause' and the Catholic Church's authority over content and approach remained unchanged. In practical terms, the amendment meant that inspection and examinations could be introduced in all schools while still guaranteeing the Catholic Church's exceptionality on the matter. Commenting on inspection in Catholic schools when this became possible, Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 said:

When I went into a Catholic school as inspector I could inspect learning and teaching but I couldn't say that there was something wrong with the curriculum. I couldn't say that the context was wrong. So in my report, even if I had seen something I questioned personally, I could not reflect that in my report because the content was outside

my remit as it is for the Catholic Church to decide. However, I could go in and say that pupils weren't learning properly and that this had a reflection in the content but I would not mention content *per se* because that was all enshrined in the Act that the Church would decide what the content for RE would be.

The third case of political intervention in Scotland concerned the influence of Michael Forsyth (now Lord Forsyth) a controversial Conservative Party politician. Respondents in this study were unanimous on the point that although Sir Malcolm Rifkind and Ian Lang were the relevant Secretaries of State during the periods 1986-1990 and 1990-1995, respectively it was their Minister of Education, Michael Forsyth (later himself Secretary of State from 1995 to 1997) who was the major influence behind the major changes in Scottish education. For example, Forsyth is constantly noted as the person behind the introduction of the '5-14 Curriculum' in 1992, which will remain in use until the CfE is fully implemented in schools during the scheduled 2010-2011 school academic year). Scottish respondents commented that Forsyth was indeed able to achieve some success regarding reforms to Scottish education because he was a 'keen Thatcherite'. By this epithet respondents explained that Lord Forsyth supported the Conservative government's policies of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990) underpinned by a new right ideology of a prosperous 'Christian' Britain to be achieved through self-reliant economic and social thinking.<sup>6</sup>

Following up on relevant literature, we should note that 'Thatcherism' (as this new kind of politics is now called) attempted to restore traditional values in education based on Christian principles. It is said that under Thatcher, the Conservative government was willing to reform education, including RE, as a way to consolidate Christian values in the country (Smith 2007). Some people have postulated that in her address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988, she attempted to make the connection between the 'relevance of Christianity and public policy' (Tamney 1994, p. 198). Others have noted that in her speech she quoted out of context Paul's injunction 'if a man will not work he shall not eat' (to which said received in return copies of two Kirk reports: *Housing Scotland's People* and *Just Sharing*) (Keating 1996, pp. 236-237). It is

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<sup>6</sup> It is widely believed that Lord Forsyth was keen to introduce a new curriculum in Scotland to align it with developments taking place elsewhere in the union particularly England. Critics argue that the Thatcher government was meant to break the grip of progressive Scottish education. See Smith, G. 2007. Margaret Thatcher's Christian Faith: a Case Study in Political Theology *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 35, 233-257.

highly likely therefore that Lord Forsyth was able to introduce pro-Christian reforms in education including in RE because that was in line with Conservative party policies at the time. One of the intentions of which was to reform education so that an acceptable form of traditional Christian values could reclaim its place in public education in the UK.

On the issue of political intervention in Scotland under discussion, we should note that while the more restrictive aspects of the law governing RE had been amended, certain issues had remained unresolved. For example, there was lack of clarity regarding how RE in non-denominational schools was to be taught, how it was to be resourced, how teacher education was to respond regarding staffing in RE, how much time schools were to spend on RE and even whether Religious Observance was to continue in schools (and if so what form it should take and how often it should be done). In an attempt to address these concerns the government again intervened. So the fourth case of political intervention was the introduction of *Circular 6/91* in 1991.

This brief document spelt out perhaps some of the most important specific guidelines regarding RE since the statutory amendment of 1981. It reiterated that RE school syllabi should be based on Christianity as the main tradition of Scotland. However, it advised that as far as necessary schools could add other religions depending on the religious mix of children in the particular school. It noted that as far as the government was concerned Religious Observance (to be held at least once a month though greater frequency would be the ideal) was important because it complemented RE in the child's spiritual development. It noted, for example, that Religious Observance 'could have a subsidiary role of promoting the ethos of a school by bringing pupils together and creating a feeling of corporate identity' (Lonie 1991, p. 2).

In light of this circular, local authorities were advised to help their schools revise policy guidelines governing the provision and content of RE. The circular also suggested how much time RE was to be given, with primaries to use 5% and secondaries (S1 and S2) 10% as a notional minimum time for the entire school curriculum to be spent on RE. In senior secondary and other certificated courses, it suggested 80 hours over two years to be spent on RE. The role of chaplains in schools was given recognition, particularly their involvement with Religious Observance, pastoral duties and on occasions, their contributions to the school's

RE programme. More importantly perhaps, in order to increase the out-put of RE teachers specific funding for their training was made available from 1 April 1991 (Lonie 1991).

While most Scottish respondents in the research agreed that there was political *intervention*, they did not think that there was any political *pressure* to reform RE because no politicians could risk taking on such a controversial subject. Although they noted that RE will always have political undertones because of its nature (i.e. dealing with religion which in itself is an emotive subject for many) respondents clarified that there was never an overt political agenda to reform the subject in line with a particular political direction in Scotland. What respondents pointed out however, was that there have always been political trends which could be construed as *political pressure* when dealing with specific issues such as the Catholic Church, multiculturalism and Christianity.

First, respondents said that in Scotland the Catholic Church was listened to more when it came to matters of RE. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 1 noted:

Again you got the question of the denominational schools as well and whether we can call it political or not certainly the Church in that case has had a strong voice and got listened to a lot by politicians in Scotland. So I certainly know that anything that is introduced in RE across the country would have to be okayed [sic] or approved by the Catholic Church which also has an influence on the ballot boxes. Therefore, they have much political influence for sure when it comes to RE as subject which is dear to their heart.

Couching the argument in the present context, the representative of the Church of Scotland explained:

Some people really object to the fact that there are denominational schools because they are saying why one group or one part of faith community has its own schools. I think that's a consequence of history although some people argue that this perpetuates sectarianism. The Catholic community says it doesn't. So we are in a battle there. Quite frankly if we were to start again we would not have denominational schools. But that we have denominational schools because the Catholic community was oppressed and suffered greatly at the turn of the century and that this is one way of putting this wrong right. We might not like the consequences but where it is now we have to understand where it came from. However, this is where people get very angry that one faith community has control of its own schools

Catholic schooling in Scotland and issues that surround it have been widely debated in the academic discourse (see Conroy 2001; Bruce 2003). McKinney's recent article on Catholic schools and divisiveness found, for example, that people perceive Catholic schools to be privileged and offering unfair employment opportunities for faith teachers (McKinney 2008). He notes however, that 'to close faith schools would be divisive ...' (p. 182) and claims that divisiveness does not promote separate identities because children are '... able to cope with diverse forms in schooling as diversity rather than divisiveness' (p. 179).

Secondly, respondents noted that in attempting to address multicultural issues in education the government was pushing forward a generally progressive political agenda of consensual democracy and in particular the recognition of the 'marginalised others' typical of the welfare democracy of the post-war period. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 1 noted:

I am quite sure there was a political agenda in the 1970s in particular the awareness of the fact that as a multicultural society we really needed to recognise those valuable members of our community who perhaps did not enjoy equal status ...

Respondents added that by reforming RE to address, *inter alia*, issues of common citizenship, the government was attempting to imbue children with a certain sense of religious liberalism - a matter which they said was not apolitical at all. Principal teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 2 noted:

I think we had to accept that a non-denominational school was exactly that. There were those pupils with no belief but there were also Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus as part of society. And I think there were, I suppose a political motive to try and harmonise society - to recognise how we taught the subject.

Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 added:

From a multicultural point of view the very fact we are living in multicultural Scotland and that from a political perspective we believe that a cultural based education is very important then, it is clear to see that the 5-14 curriculum document was politically motivated.



Examining the relevant literature, it can be noted that while much has been said lauding the benefits of multi-faith RE for a publicly funded school system of education (for example, its benefits to citizenship and cultural diversity (see Jackson 2003; Karamouzis 2009)) as we noted in chapter 2, the matter can be easily polarised between confessional and non-confessional forms of RE, or between those desiring an exclusive and those seeking an inclusive theology for the subject in state education (Barnes 2006). There are those who feel that multiculturalism has robbed them of their particular identity and therefore would like the reintroduction of Christian nurture in state education (Thompson 2004) but there are also others who see it as the future of post-modern society and its educational values (Banks 1979).

The reaction against multicultural education, as evidenced when it was first introduced in England in the 1980s, illustrates the challenges that face multicultural programmes elsewhere. In England anti-racist groups initially opposed it because of the fear that it would privilege cultural groups superficially, which in turn would reinforce platitudes and stereotypes about ethnic minorities. They also feared that this might perpetuate the misguided perception that cultural and religious groups were somewhat holistic and unified communities (Jackson 1995). In many ways, such a reaction informs us of the intricacies and challenges of multiculturalism, and even of multicultural education itself. The issue is not only the potential for cultural or ethnic misrepresentation but also the mistaken notion that when merely brought together children of different faiths and ethnicities will *instantaneously* ‘accept and enjoy each other’s difference’ (Walford 1995, p. 121)..

My thinking aligns with Ina ter Avest’s assertion that the lines that symbolise paths of difference in public education should not be linear and converging but rather it should allow the articulation of differences that mark ‘the discernable parts’ (ter Avest 2010, p. 222) because such boundaries are exciting and creative in themselves. I agree with scholars such as Bader (Bader 2001) on the point that cultural, religious and ethnic differences are intrinsically contentious and polarising facets of life for any multicultural community in the modern dispensation. As such even with the best of intentions to make education inclusive, it should be accepted some critics will always sneer at such attempts.

Finally, respondents commented on the fact that Christianity in Scotland has been treated as a political issue for some considerable time. They pointed out that in all curricular reforms since the 1970s Christianity has had a ‘first among equals’ status in RE. Some respondents felt that ensuring that Christianity was predominant in RE was a political matter because the government or some ‘secret hand’ always makes sure that Christianity has a privileged position in RE. Commenting on the CfE currently underway, for example, lecturer at a university in Scotland 4 queried:

... We should be trying to find out who the people making that decision [to keep RE in a privileged position] are and why ... we are having Christianity again as a separate religion for study when it is part of religion which is taught on the curriculum. Okay historical literacy ... but really if we are committed to the Personal Search approach this continued apartheid of religions undermines the subject fundamentally.

In his contribution on the issue, the representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland noted that there was some sort of pressure during the reform process of the CfE. He explained:

I began to detect at this stage in the CfE some signs of pressure to introduce secular approaches. In other words, to give the same amount of attention to secular as well as to religious views. We obviously *resisted* that and I think that in non-denominational schools there have been some resistance too. I think the pressure will continue though and I am sure that some non-religious belief groups would be particularly *aggressive* in their approach to ensuring that their views are given equal account to a Christian view... (my emphasis)

But a question now should be posed: why was political intervention necessary in Scotland? In a country that is ‘religiously wounded’ (Chater 1995, p. 122), this question cannot have an easy answer. Historically, with a large Protestant population, religion has always been a sensitive issue in Scotland particularly since the arrival of Irish Catholics during the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus, for a long time, sectarianism expressed historically as ‘rivalry’ between mostly Catholic supporters of Celtic football club (founded in 1887) and mostly

Protestant supporters of Rangers football club (founded in 1873) has been a worrying trend in Scottish society (Bradley 2006). Given also the fact that Scottish education remains sharply divided between non-denominational and Catholic denominational schools, how education is governed in Scotland is always destined to be controversial. To compound the challenge on the one hand, there are schools which until recently cared very little about RE (i.e. non-denominational schools) and on the other hand schools that cared very much about the subject (denominational schools) but in highly partisan terms. Graham Walker has noted that,

... There is little doubt that this [issue of separate education] remains a source of controversy and of potential sectarian tension in the political arena of the new Scottish parliament. There has for some time been trenchant criticism of the Catholic Church's insistence on separate schools and much made of the possibility of integrated schools removing religious bitterness in society (Walker 2001, p. 45).

A final point to be made on this issue is that it is plausible to suggest that political intervention has historically been necessary in Scotland not merely to free the subject from statutory strangulation, but to assure interested groups that even in the midst of unprecedented curriculum reforms, the historical guarantees given to RE can be maintained.

### **5.3.2. Political pressure in Malawi**

Turning to the situation in Malawi regarding how political pressure was a factor in RE reform, some context is necessary. First, I should reiterate what we noted in chapter 2 that the demise of communism in the late 1980s triggered a wave of democratic change in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s whose reverberations were strongly felt in Malawi as well. The point I want to emphasise is that while previously the West had cast a blind eye to undemocratic systems in sub-Saharan Africa as long as they supported pro-Western policies in the face of communism, the demise of Russian communist state left many African despots including Hastings Banda (then Malawian president) vulnerable as the West began to demand political accountability as prerequisite to continued aid and political support. Isolated by the West which imposed economic sanctions until meaningful political changes were made, Banda's old age (he was about 96 years old in 1994), and pressure from internal movements for democracy, forced him to call the first democratic elections in 1994 which saw his mighty Malawi

Congress Party (MCP) lose to a new party called United Democratic Front (UDF) led by Bakili Muluzi, a Muslim (van Doepp 1998).

However, I argue that the above factors considered the main factor which led to the collapse of Banda's political establishment was the Pastoral Letter of Catholic Bishops (titled: *Living Our Faith*). Read to over 1000 congregations on 8th March 1992, the Pastoral Letter publicly condemned Banda's authoritarianism and the abuses of his government. Although at first the government frantically tried to arrest Catholic clergy and anyone possessing the document, the regime was crumbling amidst unprecedented civil unrest and intensified international pressure for regime change. The critical involvement of the Catholic Church in these events becomes even more profound if one considers that during pre-independence politics in the 1960s, the Catholic Church was the only Church which did not support Hastings Banda, in protest against a likely future of despotism arising out of Banda's own 'life presidency' ambitions which were fully realised in 1970. Instead, the Catholic Church endorsed the Christian Democratic Party (CDP) founded by Catholic laymen under the leadership of John Chester Katsonga, although some say that the real influence behind this party was the Most Reverend Dr J.B. Theunissen, the Dutch Archbishop of Blantyre (Schoffeleers 1999; Ross 2009a).

Given this chequered political history and the pivotal role played by the Church in helping to usher in a new political dispensation in Malawi, it is perhaps easy to see why the majority of Christian stakeholders were angered by a new curriculum which sought to decentre Christianity from mainstream education overseen by a government the Churches had helped into power. Most of the respondents in the present study expressed the view that the motive to reform RE was a political move by the new Muslim political elite to side-line Christianity in the social, political and religious life of the people in the country. Representatives of Churches in the research wondered why government took steps to reform the subject when nobody asked for this, considering the fact that the majority of the population was (and remains) happy with BK. Respondents repeatedly expressed the view that changes to RE were a ploy by the new government of Bakili Muluzi to Islamise the country. A representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi made this point clear when he said:

The coming of democracy in 1994 began to upset things bit by bit. I think because at that time the president was a Muslim when before it

was a Christian, the government began to say that Malawi is not only composed of Christians but other religions as well. Following this they began to change the curriculum and called it moral education [sic].

Respondents also noted rather emphatically that in spite of a general lack of resources, the government made sure that the new subject called RME was supplied with textbooks so that it could gain ground in schools. Representative of the Catholic Church in Malawi also noted:

During all the years we were under one party rule, the leader was a Christian. When Muluzi came in as president and being a Muslim, Muslims saw this as their chance to gain political ground and to make Islam more mainstream in the country. In fact, although resources were scarce, schools received new textbooks in RME which had an Islamic component...

Most of the Malawian respondents emphasised that changes in RE was a political tactic by country's new leaders to Islamise Malawi. From their perspective, making Malawi Islamic was a strategy that had been hatched between president Muluzi and the Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar Gaddafi. This they said was confirmed by the fact that President Gaddafi gave the Muluzi administration money to build Mosques and Islamic centres, many which sprang up in various parts of the country. According to the respondents' narrative, which also confirms my published account of this development (see Matemba 2009), the coming of President Gaddafi into the country in 2003 solidified the perception that Malawi, a 'Christian' country, was being sold out to Muslims.

While representatives from government did admit that the impetus for change had political origins, they explained that this was done to deal with the country's new political reality and not to benefit one religion over another. For example, in the preface of the new RE syllabus, the government has noted that,

The advent of political pluralism in Malawi ... has created a lot of challenges to the nation in general and to the youth in particular. To successfully address these challenges the Religious and Moral Education syllabus covers multi-faith instructions, cutting across three major religions of Malawi, namely, Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religions (MME 1998, p. iv).

In addition, although most respondents admitted that Primary RE had undergone similar curricular changes during the previous pro-Christian government in the mid-1990s, representatives of the various Churches in the research felt that the Muluzi government had *hijacked* RE for its own gain. It was this fact that changed people's mind-set about what was going on in RE and why, according to its opponents in this study, the government was keen to reform the subject by replacing BK with a multi-faith form of RE. Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi noted:

Oh yes, politics was a huge factor because these changes took place during the time of President Muluzi and it seems he favoured Muslims and listened to Muslim needs. He listened more to Muslims who do not like Christian issues. Muslims felt that they needed to have a new subject that addressed their needs...

The representative of the Catholic Church in Malawi in this study did not mince words when he said:

It was a strategy to Islamise the country. We all know that. Again it was to please Libya, a country that had funded much of the Islamisation process in Malawi under President Muluzi. The mastermind behind the actual ways in which this was to be done in Malawi was Dr Cassim Chilumpha [then the vice president] an intellectual and a staunch Muslim more than Muluzi himself. In fact, it is widely known that Chilumpha was the chairman of Islamisation program in Central Africa.

Although President Muluzi vehemently denied the accusation that he intended to Islamise Malawi (Posner 1995), examining pro-Islamic developments in the country between 1994 and 2004 when he was president it is easy to see why such a perception existed in the country because things did seem to be titling towards Islam. It has been noted for example that,

During Muluzi's tenure, diplomatic ties with Islamic countries such as Libya, Iran, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia were made and the government began receiving aid from Muslim countries. Mosques sprang up in many parts of the country and Muluzi introduced Eid-ul-Fitr on the national calendar as a public holiday. Many Muslims (both men and women) could be seen *proudly* wearing Islamic clothing such as hijabs in public. The Koran was translated into Chichewa, the country's lingua franca and in 2003 President Gaddafi of Libya made an official visit to the country where he toured many projects funded by his government (Matemba 2009, pp. 44-45, my emphasis).

However, it should be clarified that some of these developments were not due to the fact that the president was a Muslim but that the democratic era had allowed *all* people, including Muslims, to express themselves far much better than previously. It must also be remembered that although there was so much hype about President Muluzi visiting Arab or Muslim countries he had also visited the Vatican, the first Malawian president to do so (See Chakanza 2008). When the issue of 'Islamisation' was put to the representatives of the Muslim community in Malawi, they rejected this outright and considered such a suggestion preposterous. The representative of the Muslim community in Malawi<sup>1</sup> explained:

In other countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda and Zanzibar [sic] there is a good mixture of Christians and Muslims and yet in these countries the issue of RE is handled well. Not here in Malawi ... In other countries people choose what they want....and governments in those countries make provision for Islamic education to Muslim children in state schools which are taught by qualified Imams. But here in Malawi the government only favours Christian studies. This is where the issue impacts politics as well...

However, it must be said that similar to the position of some Muslim groups in Uganda under Idi Amin, the first Muslim president in sub-Saharan Africa (1972-1979) (see Patel 1972; Pirouet 1980), the position of Muslims in Malawi critical of President Muluzi was precarious as well. Thus, although President Muluzi was pro-Islam in his domestic and diplomatic policies, Muslims who became critical of his leadership, such as those belonging to the rival Sunni (*Qadiriya*) faction, suffered in many ways through intimidation and beatings at the hands of the secret police. Among other things, President Muluzi had been irked by members of this faction because of their refusal to support his unsuccessful bid to unconstitutionally change the country's laws so that he could run for a third term of office (Sunni Council of Malawi 2001).

It might not be presumptions to suggest that the initial popularity of the new Malawian president (from 2004 to present)—Bingu wa Mutharika, a Presbyterian recently converted to Catholicism—has to do with the fact the majority of Catholic voters preferred a Christian as president. In fact, one of the things Bingu wa Mutharika did when he took office (and I am not making any suggestions that the Church had any influence on this) was to sever the

diplomatic ties with Libya. Although the Malawi government explained that this was a planned phase-out strategy to close down non-essential overseas embassies, the fact that the Libyan government responded by stopping funding for all of their on-going projects—such as the multi-million dollar Gaddafi Hospital (which has since been abandoned and lies in ruins) in the city of Blantyre—is evidence of this break in a relationship which president Muluzi had forged with the Libyan leader (*Panapress* 2008). However, the current government in Malawi has continued to have diplomatic ties with other Islamic countries as the recent strengthening of diplomatic links with the Islamic Republic of Iran illustrates (*Nyasa Times* 2010b).

#### 5.4. Scholarship in Religious Education

In this study, the contribution of RE scholarship as a distinct factor which helped to steer the subject in a new direction only featured in the Scottish research. Respondents in Scotland noted a number of influential academicians whose work, they said, had been pivotal in shaping a new direction for Scottish RE. Those identified included Ronald Goldman, Michael Grimmitt, Ninian Smart, John Hull and J.W.D. Smith. First, in this regard, they noted of course the work of Goldman (stages of religious development theories) in the 1960s as being particularly important. Respondents said that Scottish education learnt a great deal from Goldman's research which suggested that the teaching of Bible stories in RE was counterproductive, not only because children learnt very little from these stories but because the concepts taught were too abstract for younger children to understand.

Secondly, the work of Grimmitt was also noted as being influential on the future direction of Scottish RE. Among his many academic attainments, Grimmitt is perhaps best known for two contributions in the field of RE. First, drawing on the ideas of Piaget (cognitive development theories) and Goldman, Grimmitt proposed approaching RE through exploration of *themes* that were in keeping with the cognitive developmental stage of the growing child. This is reflected in his seminal book, *What Can I do in RE* (Grimmitt 1973), which since its publication has become a standard work for intending teachers of RE (Greer 1988). Grimmitt is also known for drawing a distinction between the terms 'learning about religion' and 'learning from religion'. He explained that



‘learning from religion’ is an approach governed by wider principles of secular education and favoured by phenomenologists because they prefer an *objective* approach to RE. By contrast, ‘learning about religion’ is an approach to RE that allows children to make value-judgments about the ontological religious beliefs they encounter (Grimmitt 1987). Overall, Grimmitt’s work extended Ninian Smart’s ideas on the use of the phenomenological method in RE in secular education (Grimmitt 1987). In other words, Grimmitt’s work brought out more clearly the explicit relevance of religious phenomena to the life-worlds of children and adolescents (Kalve 1996).

Next, about the work of Smart (born in Cambridge of Scottish parents), Scottish respondents’ views converged with published accounts (some which have already been noted in chapter 2) in recognising the impact of Smart on modern RE - an impact which had reverberated in Scottish educational circles from the late 1960s to the 1980s (Cox and Sutcliffe 2006). Following on the published account noted earlier, respondents in this study also noted the impact of Smart’s open/critical/objective approach to RE for challenging traditional approaches such as confessionalism (Smart 1968). Respondents noted that the Smartian approach resonated well with the thinking in certain sections of society, where a Bible based approach was felt to be inappropriate in a post-modern Scotland.

Fourth, the work of Hull was also affirmed in the study as being at the vanguard in pushing forward modern approaches to RE, which had an impact on Scottish RE as well. Although his legacy has come under close scrutiny (Barnes 2009a), as long-time editor of the eminent *British Journal of Religious Education* (from 1971 to 1996), Hull was interested for the journal to include a wide range of topics that touched on a new post-confessional thinking in RE. Under his editorship the journal tended to publish papers that covered themes such as *educationalisation* of RE and the inevitability of the *multicultural* impulse in education - themes that were meant to generate scholarly debate on the future of RE in the school system. In the introduction of the book, *New Directions in Religious Education*, of which he was editor, Hull explains:

The task of selecting some of the most significant articles which appeared in the journal ... has not been easy, and no doubt many readers of the journal, to say nothing of the authors of some of the many good articles which have not been included, will disagree with my choice. I hope that what has been selected will be sufficient to

illustrate at least some of the many new directions which religious education is taking today (Hull 1982, p. xvi).

Last and perhaps more surprisingly, respondents noted the influential works of the Reverend J.W.D Smith (1899-1987) on Scottish RE, a long-time academic at Jordanhill College of Education (today the school of education at Strathclyde University). Of his many academic works, *Religious Education in a Secular Setting* (1969), which he wrote in retirement, is regarded by many as one of the books that set the tone for the direction of RE in Scotland (Bates 1992). In this book, Smith pointed out three issues of significance in his analysis of the relation of society to education (i.e. RE). First, he critiqued much of the contemporary RE theory and concluded that there was need for a rethink of the purpose of RE in secular schools. Secondly, he argued that Christian education was no longer possible in secular schools existing in what he called 'post-Christian' communities and pointed out that society had become secularised such that only a minority of the population still interpreted life in Christian terms. Except possibly in Church schools, Smith was adamant that education with a Christian aim and intention was no longer possible. Finally, he argued that education could still be *religious* but this could only be possible if Christian and non-Christian educators could together develop a common policy for RE in state education. In order for this to happen he called for a *radical* change of approach. Such an approach, he said, had to be open to the idea of including personal development and non-religious issues in RE (Smith 1969).

The overall picture that emerges from the contribution of scholarship is that without doubt a confessional approach was being criticised and a non-confessional one actively being promoted for RE. The new development was educational because for the first time it was the use of *educational* and not *theological* criteria in relation to RE that was now the justification for the subject. In his study of how Scottish secondary RE has become 'educational', William Hannah explains what 'educational RE' entails:

Educationalisation of RE implies the full incorporation of that subject into the educational world, the curriculum, educational thinking and the philosophy of education... By *full incorporation* is that the curricular element of RE be accorded the same treatment as any other curricular component and that therefore, only curricular principles and criteria be used in deciding on the appropriate treatment... (Hannah 2007, p. 21, emphasis in the original).

To reiterate, *educationalisation* as a unique development of Scottish RE has meant that the subject has been moving away from a mono-faith to a multi-faith emphasis, from a confessional approach to a non-confessional approach and a religious nurture to an educational nature. By all accounts, this has been a development which surely can be described as *radical* for a subject that since formal education was introduced in 1872 had been based on an exclusive Christian mono-faith model.

### 5.5. Professional committees

Another relevant finding which featured only in the Scottish research and not in Malawian research was the contribution of professional committees (comprising teachers and others professional with interest in the subject). From relevant literature this was actually a UK wide development in the subject which began in England and Wales (see Templeton 1999). However, while in England and Wales these committees appeared in the early 1970s in Scotland its beginning can be traced to the mid-1970s. Respondents in the study pointed out that the professional committees in Scotland were pivotal not only in shaping the way forward for the subject but in suggesting practical changes which teachers in schools found invaluable in their work. Respondents also noted that the beginning of teacher professional committees in RE was a time of great excitement because for the first time the direction of the subject was being led by professional teachers.

With funding from government to run most of their activities, the professional committees produced a number of important reports which are highly regarded to this day. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 3 noted:

They [reports the committees produced] provided practical directions as well as for the fact that the changes being suggested for RE came about as much from bottom up as top down.

The study examined documentary materials related to three pivotal professional reports which appeared between 1978 and 1987. The first of these reports was *Bulletin 1* which, as we noted earlier, was produced by SCCORE in 1978. *Bulletin*

1 was a significant document because it clarified the educational aims and objectives for RE in an emerging post-modern Scotland so that within the span of a child's school life, he/she should be able to explore religion in a way that would include other faiths. While acknowledging that it was within their rights for denominational schools to offer RE that had a particular focus on faith, the report advised:

Whatever the type of school, teachers must always respect the dignity and freedom of the pupils and refrain from exerting pressure to conform to specific beliefs and practices (SED 1978, p. 3).

While *Bulletin 1* recommended the continued use of a Christocentric syllabus, it avoided suggesting a uniform curriculum, in order to promote situational variation and local issues. For primary schools, *Bulletin 1* reported that there was a mismatch between what was being taught and the experience of pupils and suggested that teachers take into account children's developmental stages of understanding as had been advanced by the works of Benjamin Bloom (i.e. Blooms taxonomy), Ronald Goldman and Michael Grimmit. It strongly recommended a more integrated approach in RE with other curriculum subjects. *Bulletin 1* was comprehensive and covered many essential areas where improvements in RE could be made. In spite of this, however, there were certain matters that were left unresolved such as a lack of clarity regarding what weight was to be given to Christianity and whether Christianity was to be taught in an ecumenical, universal and holistic way (Whaling 1980).

In 1979 SCCORE was reorganised to concentrate only on secondary RE while those responsible for primary RE went on to form the 'Committee on Primary Education' (COPE). Two years later (1981), the new SCCORE on behalf of CCC, produced a second report entitled *Curriculum Guidelines for Religious Education: Bulletin 2* (hereinafter, *Bulletin 2*) which also has influenced the way RE (particularly in non-denominational secondary schools) is designed and taught down to this today (SED 1981). *Bulletin 2* provided a working consensus as to the educational aims of RE in Scotland. It noted that in this kind of RE 'the pupil is not simply learning about religion [but also] he is learning from it' (p.1). Importantly, it observed that 'RE cannot proceed on the assumption that all pupils will or should have positive religious convictions or commitment' (p. 1). It stated that the objectives of learning RE should be based on knowledge, understanding and evaluation. *Bulletin 2* also differed from its predecessor on

the moral dimension in religion. While *Bulletin 1* did not want RE to deal with moral issues, *Bulletin 2* suggested that issues of morality such as rights, responsibilities, ethics and so on should be included (SED 1981, p. 8).

In 1987 the joint SCCORE and CCC committee produced another report entitled: *Management Issues in Religious Education in Secondary Schools*. Among other things, this report urged teachers to give RE a voice so that schools could accord it due attention in the curriculum. The report was optimistic that the new style of RE with its aims of informing pupils and encouraging them to seek their own understanding and response to the religious dimension of life would help make it less necessary for parents to exercise their statutory right to withdraw their children from RE. It did reiterate, however, that in designing a school policy Christian education must take centre stage while being balanced with multi-faith aspects of world religions (CCC 1987).

The impact of these professional reports on the development of Scottish RE was unprecedented. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 1 stated:

The reports brought revolutionary changes to RE because it moved Religious Instruction to education, to inspectorate, teacher education and national guidelines - all in the space of 10 years or so. So these were cataclysmic which were highly anticipated and welcomed. I don't think this has ever been repeated not least in the acceleration of changes that took place... These were special times I think not just being nostalgic about it but these were pivotal times in the development of RE.

Overall, the importance of the teacher committees signalled the fact that RE was now coming of age. With a steady trickle of specialist teachers coming out of teacher education colleges taking on the subject professionally in schools, and many joining the professional committees, the future began to appear bright for the subject. The appeal of the professional reports was that they were working documents which offered practical help to schools and teachers on how to go about offering a subject that had been neglected for many decades. On reflection, the *professional committees* tell us more about the rise of the *professional teacher* who was keen to bring quality, recognition and professional pride to the subject. Now increasingly taught by an expert teacher who was actually interested in the subject as his bread and butter (with many of them

quickly promoted to the newly created posts of Principal Teacher) the momentum for reform in Scottish RE had gathered seemingly irresistible pace.

## 5.6. Religious Education advisorate

Another Scottish feature of curriculum reform with no comparable parallels with Malawi was the role of RE Advisorate in the late 1970s and much of 1980s. Respondents in Scotland explained that following the recommendations of the Millar Report every local authority had appointed an RE Advisor. This is confirmed by the Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 in the research who said:

Another thing that happened which is important for developing RE at that time was the establishment of RE advisors. The government put money side for the appointment of these advisors. Every local authority had an advisor of RE. These were appointed to develop the subject. To this day teachers appraise the work of these RE advisors because these were leaders in the subject and that their work helped in the development of the subject.

Respondents noted that Dumbartonshire was the first local authority to appoint an Advisor in RE in the person of William Hannah (now Dr. Hannah), who took upon himself the task of organising working parties after school to work on improving both primary and secondary RE. The Dumbartonshire experiment was then replicated all over Scotland. In all, the respondents claimed that the RE Advisorate was important because it *advised* teachers and schools on curricular matters – such as how to draw up syllabi for primary and secondary, paying attention to the various learning stages. It also advised on material content, focusing on how different schools could adopt the syllabus to cater for the particular religious context of pupils, just as had been recommended in the Millar Report.

Through the work of the RE Advisors, in time every local authority had produced its own RE syllabi guidelines. The government also set aside money to fund working committees. These committees were also important because they began to produce teaching resources for schools. As often happened by mutual agreement, local councils could share guidelines and thus ideas were disseminated. For example, the Dumbartonshire primary school guidelines called

‘All Together’ were shared with Lanarkshire and Glasgow local authorities. Respondents also stressed the point that RE Advisors were at the forefront in raising the profile of the subject because for the first time, a professional approach was being adopted in dealing with various matters concerning the improvement of RE.

## 5.7. Global and regional trends

Increasingly, all over the world education reform has taken on an international and comparative dimension. This has meant that in our ‘globalised’ world there has been a ‘trade’ in educational approaches as countries increasingly share experiences and expertise on successful policies in education (Philips 2005). This is called ‘Policy borrowing’ explained as the process of ‘importing educational practices from other countries deemed in some ways to be more successful than those of the home nation’ (Menter et al. 2010, p. 395). This practice has its limitations because due to contextual differences an initiative which is successful in one country may not yield the same result in another (Halpin and Troyna 1995). Over the last four decades or so perhaps more than most curricular subjects, RE has been susceptible to global trends in the subject. For example, as noted in chapter 2, the British experience through the work of Ninian Smart in the late 1960s, has had a global impact regarding the way RE in a multicultural context is now being approached in other countries. From the findings of this study, developments in RE in Scotland and Malawi were not immune to global influences as we shall see.

The findings in this study suggest that in Malawi curriculum developments from the mid-1990s were influenced to some degree by educational reforms taking place in other African countries within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) co-operation framework. Under the protocol on education and training signed by heads of state and government in Blantyre, Malawi in 1997, member countries acknowledged that education and training held a unique capacity to equip member states for the 21st century and beyond. Under this protocol, Malawi together with the other SADC member countries of this regional bloc (viz. Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Lesotho, Madagascar, Swaziland, Mauritius, Mozambique, Seychelles, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe and Zambia) agreed to share experiences and

expertise on education and other related matters such as curriculum reform (Kamwendo 2009).

This fact was acknowledged by some of the Malawian respondents in the study, who identified the influence of regional developments as another impetus for change in RE. They said that Malawi was encouraged by the experiences of other countries in sub-Saharan African which had reformed or were in the processes of reforming their RE curricula. Lecturer at a public university in Malawi 1 noted:

Some of the ideas come from learning what was happening in our neighbouring countries which had introduced multi-faith syllabi. So we felt that we could learn a thing or two from the experiences of Botswana and South Africa.

Government officials in the research noted that curriculum experts from the Ministry of Education involved with RE reform went on educational tours in the late 1990s and early 2000s to several neighbouring countries in the SADC region to learn how other countries had gone about reforming their national curriculum in general and RE in particular (Nyirenda 2005). In South Africa and Botswana, for example, Ministry of Education officials from Malawi learnt how each of the two countries had gone about reforming their RE curriculum and some of the challenges they faced in doing this. In South Africa, they noted that the RE curriculum had been under reform since 1998 as part of the post-Apartheid Outcomes Based Education (OBE) (van Deventer 2009). They also learnt that as part of that OBE reform, RE was in the process of being restructured from a single-faith Christian curriculum to a multi-faith and plural one. However, they also observed that there was resistance from some sections of the Christian fraternity against these reforms (Abrahams 2000). In Botswana, the Malawi officials found a positive experience because in that country a multi-faith/phenomenological syllabus which replaced Christian RE in 1996 was already being taught in schools (Matemba 2005).

Besides the regional influence of these experiences, it should also be noted that developments in Malawi, as indeed in the SADC regional bloc as whole, were influenced by the new thinking in RE emanating from England. The University of Lancaster, where Ninian Smart (we have already noted) and his colleagues had pioneered the phenomenological approach as model for multi-faith RE in the late 1960s and early 1970s, enrolled many African lecturers for Masters courses



in RE, and upon return spearheaded curriculum post-confessional reforms in their countries (see Matemba 2005). In Malawi the first post-graduate trained specialist in RE, Dr Isabel Phiri (after a doctorate in Theology in 1992), completed a Master of Arts in 1983 at Lancaster University in RE where she wrote her masters dissertation entitled: *Aims of Religious Education in Malawi Secondary Schools in the 1980s*. As the only properly trained Malawian RE teacher education specialist at UNIMA where she worked from 1983 to 1995, Dr. Phiri was not only involved in ITE in RE but was also a valuable member in various government committees set up to formulate new guidelines for RE in Malawi. Isabel Phiri was also part of the Malawi contingent of scholars, education officials and Church officials who together with other regional colleagues helped to draft the new RE curriculum for countries in East-central Africa, a matter to be covered in the next chapter (chapter 6).

In Scotland, UK-wide educational reforms significantly influenced developments of its RE curriculum as well (Nixon 2009). For instance, the 1944 Education Act (later modified by the 1988 Education Act) is widely recognised as the catalyst that engendered a new climate for RE in the UK as a whole, and one of the main consequences of which has been the blossoming of critical professional inquiry into how children actually learn RE (see Templeton 1999; Hughes 2003). It should be observed that although the educational system in Scotland has always retained a measure of independence from that offered in England and Wales (and that as part of this difference Scottish education has always been locally determined and managed), clearly Scotland has not at all been immune from the influences of educational changes in England and Wales. This fact was acknowledged by most of the Scottish respondents in the study who pointed out, in particular, the influence of two English documents on Scottish RE namely, *Working Paper 36* and *the Birmingham Syllabus* (see also Kincaid 1985). Ministry of Education official in Scotland 3 noted:

... [Reforms in Scotland] tie with the research that was going on at that time such as the Schools Working Council Paper 36. This was an English publication that had an influence on Scottish education. The Birmingham syllabus was also coming out which had influenced developments in Scottish RE in mid-1970s or maybe 1975. It was a forward looking multicultural syllabus...

Relevant literature points out that *The Schools Working Council Paper 36* (1971) was vital because it marked the inauguration of a new paradigm in English RE. Philip Barnes, for example, notes that,

[The] basic axiom of the phenomenology of religion, and through the influence of *Working Paper 36: Religious Education in Secondary Schools* ... written under the direction of Smart, became a fundamental tenet of modern British Religious Education' (Barnes 2009b, p. 69).

On its part, the Birmingham syllabus (1975) was the first post-confessional syllabus to emerge in the UK and provided a litmus test for the practicality of the theoretical suggestions and discussions that had been going on in the subject since the mid-1960s. Modelled on the 'agreed syllabus' system as noted in chapter 2, the Birmingham syllabus had two basic aims: (a) help children learn to live and work together in a pluralist situation and (b) enable them to develop the skills involved in coming to a mature understanding of religion. In a lot of ways, it was a forward-looking syllabus because it was based on the premise that RE could be taught to any child regardless of their faith and that it could be taught by any teacher regardless of their individual beliefs, as long as they were professionally qualified and well informed (Cox 1976).

The findings in this chapter suggest that (and despite sometimes exaggerated claims for national difference), Scottish RE was undoubtedly influenced by developments south of the border and by other UK-wide developments in education. As we have seen, these developments were critical of traditional methods of doing RE. And with a section of the Scottish population already receptive to post-confessional ideas for the subject, it is no wonder that by the early 1990s, Scottish RE was ready for radical reform. But while the RE bandwagon seemed to going in one direction, the other part of Scottish society saw this development with trepidation, and perhaps for justifiable reasons because faith communities in Scotland—of which the Catholic community is the most well-known—continue to lay high importance on faith in education for their schools. In Malawi as well, RE faces a similar challenge between two polarising positions: those who desire a radical approach so that RE does not cater only for one religion and Christian conservatives who see value in Christian RE because of its centrality to their faith position. This seems to be the residual challenge still

facing RE in both Scotland and Malawi, an issue I will touch on briefly in chapter 6 but explore in more detail in chapter 7.

## 5.8. Conclusion

The findings in this chapter reveal a number of parallel developments and some differences as well, related to motives for reform in RE in Scotland and Malawi. First, the two countries were impacted by modernity or post-modernity to varying degrees and with different outcomes. For instance, in Scotland, post-modernity engendered scepticism which in turn made society permissive to secular ideas. The result was that some sections of society began to question the relevance of religion in their lives. Inevitably, this had a direct impact on RE. In Malawi however, and by contrast, modernity actually strengthened Christian hegemony on the country with the result that although RE had low status in schools, nationally it was a subject which was considered important to the country's national identity. Thus, in relation to the impact of modernity on religion in Scotland and Malawi a further point should be made. While in Scotland the onset of modernity led to a slow but active disengagement between society and its Christian past (with the some exceptions of Catholic Christians as noted) in Malawi, the situation has been that its modern society has remained closely aligned to the country's Christian past which traces to the work of Christian missionaries of a century and half ago.

Secondly, politics as push factor for RE reform was applied in different ways in the two countries. In Scotland, political intervention was welcomed because this was the only course left to amend the law governing the subject so that meaningful reforms could be undertaken. In Malawi on other hand, it seems that it was political pressure by the new Islamic ruling elite who desired Islam to be part of a subject that historically had only centred on Christianity.

Third, while both countries learnt a thing or two from curriculum developments taking place in other countries, there are three other factors which were only found in the Scottish research with no parallel developments in Malawi. The first one was the impact of scholarship, the second the role of professional committees and third one the contribution of the RE advisorate on the development of the subject.

My view is that this difference can perhaps be explained recognising the unmatched levels of development and education that exists between the two countries. It would seem to me that Malawi had not reached the level of sophistication to engage with critical scholarship, established professional committees and have an advisorate to boot. Even at the current time (i.e. 2010), the Malawi government still lacks resources, political will and the sophistication to introduce the kind of schemes that can take RE to a higher level of development. In the next chapter, the study will examine the impact which the various motives for curriculum reform explored in the present chapter have had on the overall development of RE in the two countries.

## Chapter 6

### Change and Innovation in the Curriculum

#### 6.1. Introduction

The various factors noted in chapters 4 and 5 necessitated curriculum changes in RE in both Scotland and Malawi. It is therefore the theme of ‘curriculum reform’ in both countries which the present chapter analyses. First, it notes some early attempts to improve the subject in the 1970s and 1980s. It then examines the two phases of reforms that took place in RE curriculum between 1992 and 2009. Third, it describes how stakeholders have engaged with the new curriculum and notes some of the positive and negative views expressed by stakeholders towards the new curriculum. This is then followed by an examination of the attempt by the two governments to deal with the concerns expressed by these stakeholders particularly regarding their challenge to the single curriculum policy initially imposed by government on RE. Last, the new RE programmes in both countries are subjected to critical reflection.

#### 6.2. Early movements in the curriculum, 1970-1983

Documentary evidence suggests that between the early 1970s to the mid-1980s, RE in Scotland and Malawi received some attention for improvement. Although by and large very little in terms of actual curriculum reform was undertaken, it would seem that many of those concerned with the poor state of RE were attempting to do something *albeit* within the confines of the existing curriculum structures. In Malawi in the early 1970s the Catholic Church under the umbrella of the Association for Membership of the Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) proposed the idea of curriculum collaboration among the East and Central African countries of which Malawi was part (Phiri 1986). In 1970 this came to fruition when a standing committee of Catholics, Protestants and representatives of the Ministries of Education from Kenya, Malawi, Tanzania, Uganda and Zambia was formed. At its first meeting at Rubanga in Uganda delegates agreed to work out the modalities of formulating a common RE curriculum for secondary schools (Fareilly 1975). In particular, the regional

committee was tasked to come up with a relevant inter-denominational syllabus which would take cognisance of the post-colonial experience of African youth, particular in addressing youth crime and general moral decadence (Awino et al. 2004).

After several meetings the regional RE committee produced two new SSRE syllabi in the mid-1970s (Onsongo 2002). The junior secondary syllabus was called *Developing in Christ* and was completed in 1973 while the senior secondary was called *Christian Living Today* and completed in 1975 (Simuchimba 2001). Both syllabi adopted a thematic approach to explore various moral and religious (Christian) issues. Their material content, although dominated by Bible teaching, also included aspects of African tradition which was a first in any RE curriculum in sub-Saharan Africa, perhaps with the exception of parallel developments in Ghana, West Africa (Asare-Danso 2011). The East-Central Africa syllabi were later adopted (in some instances adapted) by countries outside this regional zone such as Zimbabwe (prior to independence in 1980), Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland.

However, while the other countries were quick to adopt these syllabi on their curriculum, in Malawi the government was cautious. It would appear that while the Catholic Church in Malawi was satisfied with the regional syllabi the government was somewhat unconvinced of their suitability to the Malawian situation. As such, the government decided to trial-test the syllabi before deciding whether to adopt them or not. In the end government resolved not to roll out the new programme in the country altogether (Phiri 1988). It was a disappointing development particularly felt by the Catholic Church Malawi which had taken part in the development of the new syllabi. In the meantime, schools in Malawi continued to teach the BK syllabus which had not been revised since the beginnings of secondary education in the early 1940s.

In 1982 the government slightly revised the Bible-based syllabi in the secondary curriculum. An important change was that revised syllabi were inter-denominational in approach and their content based on general Christian theology. This was a noteworthy departure from earlier syllabi which on the whole had been based on the theological teachings of one denomination or another. Again, while previously BK was compulsory for schools, the curriculum amendments in RE made the subject elective. The content of the revised BK

junior secondary school programme was based on stories, incidents, personalities and anecdotes in the Old and New Testaments. In addition, maps showing the location of events, journeys and trade routes connected with the world in which biblical figures lived were part of the course (MME 1982a). In the senior secondary phase the curriculum was based on extensive study of entire books of Luke, Acts of Apostles and Isaiah (MME 1982b).

Documentary evidence indicates that in their response to the revised syllabi the Catholic Church expressed the view that it was not satisfied with a syllabus which to them merely emphasized *basic* knowledge of Christianity (Phiri 1983, 1986; Salanjira 2003). The evidence further records that a catechetical movement within the Catholic Church in Malawi had emerged which began to demand a Catholic curriculum in RE for its schools (Phiri 1986). In my view it is also likely that the response of the Catholic Church on this occasion was reactionary to its unhappiness regarding how the government had dismissed the East African syllabi which the Church, as one of the main architects, had worked so hard to produce. It seems that in the end the Catholic Church decided not to raise the matter anymore considering the authoritarian government in power at the time which viewed the Catholic Church with some suspicion after the independence debacle I noted in chapter 5.

In Scotland the early curriculum movements in RE the research has detected stem from the call made in the Millar Report in 1972 that one of the ways to make the subject relevant was to ensure it mirrored the country's multi-cultural setting. Thus, although the curriculum framework had not changed, a number of non-denominational schools had begun to adopt approaches that aimed to *enlighten* rather than to *convert* the child (SED 1972a). In this response many Scottish schools began to incorporate materials from other religions in their lessons, a development that set the tone for the future direction of the subject. As the Millar Report had suggested, the content of many school syllabi were now being determined by the school's local circumstances. This meant that as desired by the Millar Report, schools in overwhelmingly multicultural communities became inclined to offer children more than the teaching of the Bible by including factual bits about other religions.

If the national curriculum had not changed as earlier noted, how then was it possible that schools in Scotland could be able to include new materials not

originally designed into the curriculum? The answer can be found on the *flexible* nature of the Scottish curriculum, even historically. Since compulsory education was introduced in 1872, the curriculum in Scotland has always been at various levels of flexibility to allow local input in what individual schools can teach. This means that unlike in Malawi where schools follow a prescribed syllabus, in Scotland there has never been a nationally ‘prescribed’ syllabus. Rather, it has always had a suggested curriculum which schools are at liberty to follow or not. This is actually in keeping with the fact that Scotland does not have a national curriculum *per se* (Hayward 2007). The one exception to be made is of the curriculum of those students sitting national examinations who then follow the examination tailored syllabus of that subject. Thus, it was this curriculum flexibility in Scotland that enabled RE teachers to incorporate multi-faith materials into their lessons although the curriculum national framework had not been changed.

I should hasten to add that from the available information gathered it would seem that Catholic schools (which have always had a separate RE curriculum) were on the whole less inclined to join the bandwagon of those schools experimenting with new multi-religious materials. This mainly had to do with the fact that while in theory the content of RE in Catholic schools could have a diocesan variation, in reality it is determined *centrally* by the Bishops’ conference of Scotland. This means that the content of RE in Catholic schools has consistency throughout the Catholic school sector. While curriculum movements in RE in non-denominational schools were to a greater extent guided by the Millar Report, Catholic schools followed the guidance of a curriculum document commissioned by the Bishops’ conference of Scotland entitled: *The Approach to Religious Education in the Catholic Secondary School*. Among other things, the guidance given to Catholic schools in that document talked about God’s search for man, and about man’s search for God and that the Catholic teachers’ role was ‘to preach the Gospel to them [children]’ (SCCB 1974, pp. 2, 6).

By the mid-1980s many non-denominational schools in Scotland now could report that they were teaching not only Christianity (which was remains a compulsory religion in RE) but also had their lessons based on other religions such as Islam and Hinduism. For example, in 1983 a government report found that some primary and junior secondary schools had lessons on issues such as Mosque



(Islamic place of worship), *Mandir* (Hindu temple), *Eid-ul-Fitr* (Islamic festival) and so on (SED 1983). Notably, in a number of denominational Catholic schools (despite the catechetical approach used) lessons on *Diwali* (festival in Hinduism), *Eid-Ul-Fitr*, *Mandir* and Mosque as ‘additional’ to the schools’ usual lessons on Christian stories, Jesus, saints, Cathedral, the Bible and so on could also be found (SED 1986).

In the senior secondary phase of the curriculum a study of Christianity and then either Hinduism or Islam—particularly for school preparing students to sit the Scottish Certificate of Education examinations (SCE) in Religious Studies—was becoming common. It should be remembered that examinations in Scottish RE had been in preparation for some time but owing to statutory restrictions examinations could not be introduced in the subject (see chapter 4). The lifting of these restrictions in 1983 (see also chapter 5) to allow HMle inspection of the subject paved the way for examinations in RE for the first time in 1984 (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992).

However, as a general point it should be noted that despite these movements towards embracing other religions in RE, the tendency was merely to add materials of other religions to the existing Bible-based syllabus rather than a genuine attempt to include the new materials as an integral part of RE (Holm 1975). Therefore, radical curriculum reforms were needed if Scottish RE was to fully realise the ambition of the Millar Report.

### **6.3. Radical curriculum reforms, 1992-2009**

The phrase ‘radical curriculum reforms’ as used here denotes fundamental shifts in approach towards RE that were introduced in Scotland and Malawi in November 1992 and January 2000, respectively. These new programmes were radical in the sense that pedagogically, the attempt was to replace the confessional Bible curriculum with largely non-dogmatic and non-confessional approaches (Barnes 2001). But as we shall see the paradigm shift was not without its critics.

### 6.3.1. First wave of radical reforms, 1992-2000

In Scotland, the origin of the new RE curriculum was tied to a new nationally based curriculum called '5-14' which was introduced in schools in 1992. The beginnings of this curriculum trace back to 1987 when the Scottish government published a consultation report entitled: *Curriculum and Assessment in Scotland: A Policy for the 90s* (Scottish Office 1987). Among other things, the report explored a range of opinions regarding what children should be learning in primary and the first two years of secondary school. A year after its publication the government announced the introduction of the 5-14 Curriculum (Adams 2003). One of the five broad curricular areas considered was a new subject called RME. A number of *ad hoc* Review Development Groups (RDGs) for the various curricular areas were set up of which the committee for RE was named 'RDG 5'. After the draft was completed it was sent to various stakeholders such as Church of Scotland Education Committee (CSEC), Catholic Education Commission (CEC) and representatives of Chinese, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh and Humanist Society merely for comment.

In May 1991 the draft report was published under the title: *Working Paper No 7: Religious and Moral Education 5-14* (hereinafter Working Paper No. 7). The report underscored three general aims in the teaching of RME in schools namely, *tradition*, *locality* and *school policy*. It also suggested three outcomes for RME to be based on Christianity, World Religions and moral values. Overall, the report emphasised the need for coherence and progression guided by carefully drafted school policies for RE (SED 1991b). Working Paper No. 7 was distributed widely for public comment to schools, religious groups, local authorities, interested individuals and other groups such as Scottish Association of Advisers in Religious Education (SAARE), Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) and the Humanist Society. Having satisfied itself with the feedback it received, the government published a single curriculum document for *all* schools in November 1992 (SED 1992). In the preamble to the document the government proudly noted:

The Secretary of State believes the guidance now issued provides a sound basis for a coherent and progressive approach to Religious and Moral Education in primary and early secondary education ... (Munro 1992, p. 1).

In connection with the introduction of a single curriculum framework for RE, the Scottish government was confident that this had 'something to offer all publicly

funded schools in Scotland’ and added that while it is was within their right for pupils in those schools to develop an understanding of their own faith, it was incumbent upon them to also develop ‘respect for those who adhere to different faiths’ (SED 1992, p. x). But perhaps mindful of the implication of this shift in policy, the government reiterated that the national guidelines were not ‘intended to replace syllabi or programmes of study devised by denominational authorities’ and went further to suggest that in accordance with parents’ wishes, denominational schools and indeed non-denominational ones as well could emphasise ‘faith development in the content of a personal and community relationship with God’ (SED 1992, p. x). The single curriculum approach was a model the Catholic Church would reject in its entirety.

As we have earlier noted, it is important to remember that although the new curriculum became *de facto* national syllabus, legally Scotland does not have a statutory curriculum. Rather it has what is called *approved guidelines* which schools can adapt to their individual circumstances (Adams 2003). As such although the government had produced the new RE curriculum, legally schools were not bound to offer it. What the guidelines offered was advice to schools that in drawing out specific school syllabi the three main principles of *tradition*, *locality* and *school policy* should be considered. The government *Circular No. 12/91* justified the ‘approved guidelines’ policy stating that,

... Through the use of these guidelines, schools should be able to *design, plan* and *implement* policies and programmes which will give *all pupils* a balanced and worthwhile experience in this area of the curriculum (Munro 1992, p. 1, my emphasis)

To ensure successful implementation of the new RE guidelines, funding was made available to train additional specialist RE teachers. Colleges of Education throughout Scotland expanded their intake of pre-service SSRE teachers to meet the increasing demand. In addition, universities introduced Additional Teaching Qualification (ATQ) courses to encourage existing teachers of other subjects to retrain in RE. To help serving teachers with skills to deal with the new curriculum, in-service training in RE was given a special grant from April 1991 (SED 1991a). The content of the new 5-14 Curriculum was based three areas of study: Christianity, Other World Religion (OWR) and Personal Search. Within these outcomes a number of strands (related to phenomenological RE) were outlined such as celebrations, festivals, ceremonies and customs, sacred

writings, stories and key figures, beliefs, sacred places, worship and symbols and moral values and attitudes (SED 1992).

A note regarding certificated courses (i.e. those based on post-compulsory curriculum) in RE in the Scottish system of education should be made. After examinations in the subject were introduced in 1984 the certificated courses in RE bore the nomenclature 'Religious Studies' because in the main, these national examinations were based on the Religious Studies model (Taylor 1982). The coming of the 5-14 Curriculum in 1992 did not immediately change this set up either. It was the creation of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) (a non-governmental public body with all responsibility in the management of national examinations) which brought changes to the content and structure of the certificated RE courses offered in Scotland. Under SQA management, RE national qualifications courses (which continue unchanged in the new CfE arrangements) were re-organised following the creation of several different types of courses on which examinations in any curriculum subject could be taken namely, Access (Levels 1, 2, and 3), Intermediate (Levels 1 and 2), Higher and Advanced Higher. Under this arrangement and number of courses that are examined by the SQA, RE is known by the nomenclature 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies' (RMPS) except courses that follow the Standard Grade format, an issue I will return to shortly (SQA 2000).

Overall, RMPS courses cover materials in areas such as morality, belief (Christianity), world religions and philosophy. The difference between the various levels in the courses offered is the increased level of academic demand and material variation from the elementary courses (even within individual courses themselves) to the more advanced ones (that is from Access, Intermediate to Highers and so on). As a response to recent curriculum reforms (i.e. CfE), Humanism has been added to give students 'views independent of religious belief' in their study of ethical issues (Hainey 2010, p. 4). On its part, the Standard Grade format can be offered at three levels namely, Foundation, General and Credit courses. Examinations in RE on the Standard Grade format take the nomenclature 'Religious Studies', a term SQA sometimes uses to refer to all certificated RE courses.<sup>7</sup> The Standard Grade courses in RE are based on four units of study: (a) Christianity, (b) a study of a second religion chosen from

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<sup>7</sup> There is talk that once CfE is fully implemented Standard Grade format will be phased out and replaced with a new examination format.

either Hinduism or Islam, (c) issues of belief and (d) issues of morality (SQA 2000).

In Malawi, developments towards a new RE programme began in 1986 when the government appointed a syllabus committee to look into the development of new RE curricula for primary, junior secondary and senior secondary. In 1987 the committee proposed that BK should be replaced with multi-faith RE. In that proposal, three religions namely, Christianity, Islam and ATR were identified for study (Phiri 1988). This development was in fact part of the wider Second Education Development Plan (EDP II) (1985-1995) instituted to reform the national curriculum. The purpose of EDP II was to improve access, quality and provide relevant curricula - issues which the First Education Development Plan (EDP I) (1973-1980) had failed to address (Chimombo 2009).

The process of this curriculum reform in RE in Malawi began in the primary school curriculum when in 1991 BK syllabus was replaced with RME, a syllabus with a multi-faith element (Jarhall 2001). It is worth observing that RME in the primary curriculum was introduced without any public contestation (Salanjira 2009). However, before similar changes moved on to the secondary school sector the country's political system had changed, allowing a new political and egalitarian order to emerge. The ramifications of political change to the country's social and religious outlook has already been noted (see chapter 5) except to add that these changes had an impact on education. One noteworthy development for RE in Malawi's new democratic dispensation under a Muslim president was that, as in Austria (see chapter 2), the Muslim Association of Malawi (MAM) applied to the ministry of education for permission to allow *mualims* (Muslim priests) to instruct Muslim children in primary schools during RME lessons. Such a request was granted and for the first time in the country's history, mualims became *de facto* teachers of RE for Muslim children in primary schools. Interestingly, mualims who were teaching in the schools began receiving *honorarium* from the government for their services (Matiki 1991).

It would seem that the new government had also set its eyes to readjust the secondary school curriculum in light of the new political and social order that had emerged. In order to do this, a new policy for curriculum reform and implementation known as 'Education Investment Policy Framework' (EIPF) was introduced to guide this process. The policy also allowed the government to

amend and extend EDP II. From these policy changes, a new educational framework known as ‘Third EDP’ (EDP III) covering the years from 1995 to 2005 came into existence (Maluwa-Banda 2004). Among its goals, EDP III aimed to ‘promote national goals such as unity and elimination of political, religious, racial and ethnic intolerance’ (MME 2004, p. 10). It was within the period of EDP III which saw radical reforms emerging in RE.

As EDP III got underway the government realised that to be able to effect radical changes to the secondary curriculum some amendments were needed to be made to the EDP III framework. In 1997 EDP III was revised to allow the incorporation of relevant issues in light of the new democratic dispensation that emerged in 1994 (MME 2004). One of the areas the government gave focus to within EDP III was how to make the new secondary school curriculum more responsive to issues such as religious and ethnic plurality to which RE was seen as the curriculum area well positioned to address such matters. In 1995 a national symposium on education was organised where a multi-faith syllabus for the secondary school curriculum was endorsed. The symposium also proposed that the new syllabus deal with three ‘main’ religions in Malawi namely, Christianity, Islam and ATR. In addition, the symposium also reminded that the new syllabus should address what was seen as the moral decay among the youth by including topics on moral issues (Salanjira 2003).

Following on from the symposium an *ad hoc* committee was appointed to develop a new RE syllabus. In 1998 the committee produced a multi-faith syllabus which took the nomenclature ‘RME’ to reflect its emphasis in dealing with religious and moral issues (MME 2000). In January 2000 a new *prescribed* RME syllabus was introduced in the junior secondary curriculum as replacement of BK. While previously BK was elective RME curriculum was made a compulsory subject (Matemba 2009). The new RME programme covered topics such as values, ethics, contemporary moral issues (sexually transmitted diseases, gender, equality and so on) and the response of religions to these issues. Material content of the new syllabus was based on Christianity, Islam and ATR. Issues covered in the syllabus dealt mainly with religious concepts and themes in areas such as the meaning of religion, exploring religious founders, describing sacred communication and explaining worship, festivals, symbols, rituals, life after death and so on (MME 1998). As I shall point out in detail below, RME was heavily contested in Malawi to the extent that the government was forced to

introduce a dual curriculum policy for RE. This arrangement allowed both RME and BK to be offered simultaneously on the secondary school curriculum. But first, let me deal with the second wave of reform before I address the public reception of the new curriculum not only in Malawi but in Scotland too.

### **6.3.2. Second wave of radical reforms, 2006-2009**

Since the curriculum reforms of 1992 and 2000 in Scotland and Malawi, respectively there have been new developments in SSRE. In Malawi the latest reforms are about proposals made in 2006 to reform BK syllabi owing to the fact the BK curriculum has remained unchanged since the 1985 revision of those syllabi as we noted above in this chapter. The syllabi of the recently developed BK programme remain Christian confessionalism with objectives such as ‘to appreciate the authority of the Bible’ and ‘to gain an understanding of the scriptural basis of the Christian faith’ (MME 2006a, p. ix). The content cover themes such as the Bible, God in the Old Testament and New Testament, Christian beliefs, Christian values, Christian practices, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and Christian approaches to contemporary issues (MME 2006b). What would be a noticeable addition if the new programme is implemented would be contemporary moral issues and how Christianity deals with these moral issues.

However, although the new BK syllabi were completed in 2006 they have not been introduced on the national curriculum as yet. Education officials in the research gave a number of explanations as to why the new BK programmes remain shelved. It was mentioned that the government lacked the financial resources to implement the new syllabi. This meant that the education department was unable to print copies of the syllabi for schools, offer the necessary in-service training and purchase appropriate teaching materials such as textbooks for schools. Ministry of Education official in Malawi 1 noted:

After finishing developing the syllabi we struggled with our friends in the Ministry of Education [at the headquarters] to provide funds to pilot test the syllabi and develop training manuals but there is dead silence about the whole project...

When pressed further, Ministry of Education official in Malawi 1 revealed other pertinent issues. He said that the government is quiet about the new programmes because top government officials are fatigued by the whole

‘problem’ of RE especially the intractability of stakeholder contestation every time the subject is ‘touched’. Ministry of Education official in Malawi 3 postulated that since the country no longer had a Muslim president but a Christian one, the current leadership did not want to spend money pursuing to implement a new BK syllabus when the majority of stakeholders seemed to prefer BK in its existing form. For example, this education official stated that,

... Right now the government is saying there is no money to implement these reforms. This citing of no money is perhaps symptomatic of the fact that the government is hiding behind financial problems so that they leave the market to dictate for itself which syllabus is needed which in this case is the old BK syllabus.

Ministry of Education official in Malawi 1 expressed the view that government does not want to implement the new BK curriculum because a new outcomes based secondary school curriculum called ‘Secondary Curriculum and Assessment Reform’ (SCAR) is on its way, a development which might necessitate a further review of the BK curriculum.

Turning to Scotland, it is necessary to observe that during the time of writing this thesis (2007-2010) Scottish education was undergoing another major educational reform since 5-14 called CfE. Developments leading to CfE stem from the recommendations of a 2003 Curriculum Review Group (CRG) which proposed a transformation of Scottish education by replacing the ‘5-14’ with a ‘3-18’ Curriculum. This curriculum shift means that for the first time ever CfE (to be introduced in primary and secondary schools in the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic years, respectively) will provide a single curriculum framework with effective structure of assessment and qualifications for children from ages 3 to 18 (Scottish Executive 2004). What is also different from the previous arrangement is that CfE has a cross-curricular approach in teaching key themes across several subject areas. Uniquely, it only provides approved ‘experiences and outcomes’ so that teachers can feed into the final version of what exactly to teach (LTS 2006).

Examining the draft CfE guidelines for RE it can be observed that these have retained much of the material content and structure of the 5-14 Curriculum. However, while connections with curricular areas such as enterprise, international education, sustainable development and creativity have been



firmed in RE, it seems that a stronger connection has been made between RE and values/citizenship education (LTS 2006). Recognising this connection, the Catholic commission has already published values education resource books for teachers to use in its schools (CEC 2007). Examining the draft guidelines, how then does RE fit into CfE considering the fact that in this curriculum, subjects have merely been *refreshed* and *re-focused*? (see Scottish Executive 2006).

Looking at the four curricular capacities underpinning learning and teaching in CfE several things can be pointed out. First, to develop *successful learners* RE in CfE is encouraging pupils to reflect on their own experience and that of the religions of the world as they develop individual beliefs, values and spirituality. Debates, research, discussions, use of multi-media materials and engaging with visiting speakers have been listed as ways that may help pupils to become successful learners in RE.

Secondly, to make *confident individuals* a strong emphasis has been placed on the planned progression of thinking skills and critical analysis. This will enable pupils to discuss and reflect on the questions which society asks and the answers which religions give. Through this process it is hoped that pupils will be given the confidence to express their views on sensitive religious and moral issues that may create doubt and uncertainty about their own beliefs and values. To enable this to happen, teachers are encouraged to create an environment in which pupils' creative thinking and views are valued and not suppressed (LTS 2006, 2008b).

Third, to make *responsible citizens* a sense of citizenship is inculcated in RE to enable pupils to respect self, treat others with dignity and behave responsibly towards the environment. It is also hoped that this will help pupils to understand the nature and value of diversity and social justice. Some of the ways this may be achieved is encouraging active participation in the life of their school and local community. This is also meant to enable pupils to have a practical experience of their roles to society as its responsible citizens.

Fourth and last, to make *effective contributors* RE hopes to create opportunities for pupils to contribute in class, school, local community to experience the difference their contributions can make. This, it is hoped, will be achieved through joining voluntary groups, involvement in religious celebrations and

taking part in organized campaigns against issues such as sectarianism (LTS 2006, 2008b).

As with the 5-14 Curriculum arrangement, two sets of draft experiences and outcomes documents—one for non-denominational and other for Catholic schools—have been produced as well in CfE. In the CfE emphasis has been placed on two areas of study namely, Christianity and world religions. In the non-denominational document each of the two strands are to be taught following three areas of study namely, beliefs, values/issues and practices/traditions. The strands in the Catholic curriculum are to be based on Catholic Christianity and include topics such as ‘The Mystery of God’, ‘In the Image of God’, ‘Revealed Truth of God’, ‘Son of God’, ‘Signs of God’, Word of God’, ‘Hours of God’ and ‘Reign of God’ (LTS 2008a).

## **6.4. Stakeholders’ reception of new curriculum**

### **6.4.1. Supportive views**

In both Scotland and Malawi, the new RME programmes (in Scotland the 5-14 Curriculum in this case) had a mixed reaction from stakeholders. From both documentary evidence and interview data the study found that in Scotland, Catholics more than the others expressed strong views on this development. In Malawi it noted that although the Catholic Church stood out, on the whole it was the Christian fraternity in general that had strong views regarding changes to RE. However, in both countries the findings in this study show that ‘small’ the voice might have been, there were some stakeholders who expressed support for the changes and the new RE programmes that were introduced. In both countries those in support of the changes said that the new programmes gave children the opportunity to explore religions previously outside their cultural experience. Some Scottish respondents for example, pointed out that the new curriculum had added value to the wider religious experience of their children. Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 explained that that the new RME programme:

... Contributes to religious tolerance and makes children more aware about the beliefs of others rather than rely on myths and misinformation about what others believe so that if they meet someone who is Muslim, Jewish, Catholic or Protestant they will know what their frame of reference is and what their cultural beliefs are.

In Malawi respondents supportive of RME said that this was a good syllabus because it allows RE as a subject to tackle more areas of the life experience of students and teachers alike unlike what was achieved with BK. Teacher at a public school in Malawi 3 expressed the view that,

... When we teach BK we just impose the matter to students while in RME there are some choices to students. I think that RME helps children to come up with their own ideas on how to live peacefully in society with others.

In both countries, those with favourable views on the new development in RE also noted that an inclusive RE course was suited to the modern society because it gave the necessary recognition not only of one tradition but of others as well. Respondents particularly from the so called 'minority' religions were appreciative of the fact that aspects of their religion were now part of mainstream public education. In Scotland, respondents from the Muslim and Jewish communities and in Malawi respondents mainly from the Muslim community expressed this appreciation.

#### **6.4.2. Critical views**

In Scotland, the Catholic Church rejected the new 5-14 RE programme in its entirety. The position of the Church in rejecting RME coalesced on a number of issues. The Church was bitter that the government had left it out in the discussion of such a grossly important subject for Catholic schools (Coll 1999). The Church also wondered why the government had not respected the statutory arrangements which historically had allowed the Church to determine the content of RE curriculum for its schools. In a letter to the government over the issue, the Church explained that the idea to produce a scheme for *all schools* was unrealistic and unacceptable (appendix in Coll 1999).

The other point made was that the document had concerned itself more with non-denominational schools and in doing so, had failed to address the denominational needs of Catholic schools. For example, the Church felt that the Christian component did not embody the essential elements of Catholic theology. The Church explained that Catholic schools are *Christocentric* and *Trinitarian* and for this reason RME was unacceptable because it lacked a *faith*

*dimension* for both pupils and teachers (Coll and Davis 2007). It seems that the Church was also irked when it noted that in the RME document Moral Education (ME) was distinct from RE. This was unacceptable because as far as the Church was concerned ME is a subject matter that is embedded in RE (SED 1992). Finally, the Church was concerned that the document had given too much credence to world religions. While in principle the Church did accept the teaching of other religions, it nevertheless felt that this should only be tackled at the later stages in the primary school (Coll 1999).

In Malawi, key stakeholders in the study, particularly Churches with vested interest in education, reacted strongly to the cancellation of BK in favour of RME. It would appear that Churches had been taken almost by surprise by this change in policy towards RE. In a country with a large Christian population and where over 30% of secondary schools are still under Church control, the reaction of Churches was a serious blow to any chance of a successful outcome for RME. While initially it seems that Churches had been satisfied with changes in primary RE, this time around the mood had completely changed. Relevant literature suggests that in general religious groups are more sensitive with secondary school education because it deals with young people when they are at a critical and impressionable stage in their development, and as such there is greater potential for religion to have a more lasting impact on their lives (White 2010). This point also resonated with the views of some of the respondents in Malawi. Teacher at a public school in Malawi 6 said:

... In secondary school we deal with older children capable of making some important decisions and because of that people think that if we teach, say Islam, to children who are mature they might decide to leave Christianity and join Islam...

Chairperson of a parent council in Malawi 2 echoed a similar view:

You know that primary children are like chicks. Their eyes are not open while secondary students are aware of what is going on because they have matured and thus are bound to react to changes.

With the mood now having changed, Churches demanded for the reintroduction of BK on the primary school curriculum as well. In their strongest protest yet,

the Catholic Church sent a memorandum of protest against the reform to the Ministry of Education. The memorandum denounced the unilateral manner in which the syllabi were imposed on schools and in particular, the fact that BK had been removed from the curriculum with little consultation. Other Churches joined in the protest when the implications of the new syllabi were carefully scrutinised. What appeared anathema to Churches was the idea of the Quran being taught in their schools and in particular the provision that *mualims* would be employed to teach the Islamic component as had been the case with the primary school syllabus noted above (see also Schaeffler 2000). It is necessary to point out that despite the multiplicity of denominations in Malawi when it comes to the issue of BK in school Churches speak in a collective tone as ‘we’ the Churches. This indicates to me that the Christian fraternity—as fragmented as it is along denominational and theological lines—tends to huddle together in their fight against a common *enemy* in this case Islam which they see as being promoted through the new RME programme.

Churches in Malawi were further irked by the assertion made in the preamble of the syllabi, which said that the three faiths chosen were ‘major’ religions in the country. In their response, Churches made it clear that Christianity was the only major religion in the country and thus could not be treated in the same way as the other two religions. Churches said that they would not be put at par with a religion (i.e. Islam) that openly disputed the teachings of Christianity nor were they prepared to weaken their values for the sake of religious freedom (Matemba 2009). Finally, a delegation of leaders from the different Churches led by Catholic bishops took audience with the president. They reminded the president of the Church’s role in protesting against the previous autocratic regime (see chapter 5) - a development which the Churches claimed led to the multi-party dispensation of which Bakili Muluzi as president was a beneficiary (Matemba 2009). The delegation asked the president to rescind his decision to introduce RME (Gama 2000).

The highly charged situation was widely reported in the local press, particularly in newspapers. However, in my view the reportage in the newspapers merely heightened the fragility of the situation. Thus, newspapers with headlines such as ‘Christian Schools in Malawi may have to teach the Koran’ (*Daily Times*, 29th February 2000) or ‘Islamisation of Malawian culture’ (*Malawi News*, 13th February 2000) did little to ameliorate the situation. In many ways the print

media had unwittingly become the message and not the messenger regarding the charges that were made against the new RE curriculum. Putting it in another way, the newspaper coverage was fraught with bias usually against the new RME syllabus. It would seem that the media outlet had not carefully analysed what the new programme was really about rather, it was merely reporting Christian sentiments over the issue. As noted in the conceptual framework (chapter 2), in Malawi as well, the media had heightened rather than calmed the politicised debates that ensued over RE reform.

Examining the situation more closely it can be surmised that some of the *fears* the Churches had over RME were either unfounded or exaggerated. In fact, some of the things that were said about Islam and RME were untrue. However, in the charged atmosphere of the moment fact and error were mixed up and as the stories were being repeated, it became impossible to discern between the two. For example, Churches repeated the accusation that the new syllabus had been designed to convert children to Islam. Christian groups went as far as suggesting, erroneously in my view, that Bible teaching was better because it was always conducted in a purely academic manner while Islam had an element of *conversion* (Bvumbwe 2000). The common phrase repeated by most Christian groups was that RME promoted Islam over Christianity and that RME had more Islamic content than the moral issues it covered. Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi was categorical on this:

To be frank with you Churches in Malawi see the aim of RME to convert children to the Islamic faith.

However, the irony of the situation was that while Muslims were being accused of desiring RME so that they could proselytise through it, Christians and Churches preferred BK essentially for a similar reason - to use BK as proselytising tool. Representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi made clear this fact:

We do not accept Islam being taught in our schools essentially because we Christians desire to convert Muslims to our religion and thus it defeats logic on our part to teach a religion we want children to convert out of.

In his study on Catholic schooling in Malawi, Fr. Martin Mtumbuka (now founding bishop of Karonga Diocese) made a similar point that Churches opposed the

teaching of other religions included in the new programme because ‘these were the very religions they wanted people to convert from’ (Mtumbuka 2007, p. 589). In a country where one religion has been dominant on the school curriculum for such a long time, the findings of the present study also suggest that perhaps the strong reaction against the new RE curriculum was symptomatic of a country psychologically unprepared to have a competing religions as part of RE. Teacher in a public school in Malawi 5 made this point quite clear:

The problem is that the government was introducing such a subject [RME] when people were not psychologically ready to have a competing religion being taught in schools. The society was also not sensitised about the new subject. It was like introducing solid food to a newly born baby...

Examining the RME syllabus more closely, proselytisation could not be possible because the syllabus is designed following a phenomenological model which only enables the teacher to present religious themes/concepts in an ‘objective’ way. Again, the syllabus is not only made up of Islamic materials but also Christian and ATR materials as well. Another point repeated by those opposing RME was that Islam was dominant in that syllabus. Again, this point has no basis because material content of the syllabus is evenly distributed among the three religions as follows: Christianity 28%, Islam 27.9% and ATR 28%. The remaining 19.1% covers moral issues (MME 2000).

To summarise this section, it can be surmised that the tension that came with the introduction of RME in Malawi was because Christianity was no longer the only religion of study. This was an unprecedented shift in policy considering the fact that since the emergence of western education by missionaries in the second half of the nineteenth century, RE had been based only on the study of the Bible. Again, unlike the new Scottish RME which remained preponderantly Christian despite the changes, the new Malawi programme had gone completely multi-faith in the sense that no religion was given preferential status (i.e. precluding a personal religious commitment to a religious faith as part of RE).

## 6.5. Towards a negotiated curriculum

From the intensity of the contestation and other related points of dispute over the new RE programmes, it was clear that a single policy for the subject, as originally envisioned by the governments of Scotland and Malawi, was unworkable. To help end the impasse and ensure that the various needs of stakeholders were met, governments in both countries introduced a dual policy for RE. In my view the creation of a dual arrangement for RE should be seen as a positive development because it creates 'safe spaces which allow diverse groups to pursue their vision RE without interference or pressure from one another' (Weeren 1993, p. 147). While in Malawi the idea of a parallel arrangement for RE was a new phenomenon, in Scotland it was a return to the pre-1992 dual arrangements in educational matters between non-denominational and denominational school systems which has been in place since the 1918 concordat (O'Hagan and Davis 2007).

We should now turn to the developments that led to compromise over the new RE curriculum in the two countries, focusing first on Scotland. Having listened to the issues raised by the Catholic Church and following intense behind the scenes discussions between Church and government officials on the matter, there was a breakthrough when it was announced that the Church would be allowed to develop its own separate RE curriculum. A committee appointed by the Church including a government inspector of schools, as observer, worked on a draft Catholic document which was produced in December 1993. It was entitled *Religious and Moral Education 5-14: Catholic Schools* and was sent for comment to the whole of Catholic community in Scotland - that is Church hierarchy, clergy, laity and schools. Alongside the document was a comprehensive questionnaire that had six sections and 37 questions.

The response was highly charged and the proposed document was heavily criticised. The general consensus was that Catholics could not accept it unless radical changes were made. Several points can be made as to why Catholics rejected the draft document that had been generated within the Church itself. There were those who felt that this document was just the work of a few individuals with little insight into what should *constitute* a Catholic curriculum. Others felt that relying too much on the responses of Catholics to the original document had been a mistake because such responses were based on a



document that had no intention of being Catholic. Many said that it was too familiar with the original government consultation document (Working Paper No. 7) that had been accepted for non-denominational schools. Many Catholics said that the amount of time devoted to OWR was considerably too much. In fact, a small number of these even suggested that OWR was completely inappropriate (Coll 1999).

There were also those who felt that assessment was ambiguous and that the document treated the assessment of RE like any other curriculum subject. The issue of RE and ME also attracted criticism. Many felt that ME was being accorded too much attention at the expense of RE and that in any case Catholics did not want RME but RE. The perception of many Catholics was that the document was hiding the true nature of a Catholic curriculum. There were those who expressed the view that they did not have to apologise for being Catholic adding that they were being forced to fit into a secular humanist 'strait-jacket' for the sake of political correctness (Coll 1999).

After the concerns and comments had been collated, the committee went back to the drawing board with a clear vision and perspective of what Catholics wanted. It is necessary to note that before the final document was released the Church hierarchy had gone over it and pointed out several things that had to be changed as well. For example, the hierarchy was not happy with the wording of some items in the document which to them masked the true nature of Catholic education. The hierarchy also wanted the document to give the Church's Trinitarian belief more prominence (SOCC 1994b). In October 1994 the much anticipated document was released and accepted by Catholic stakeholders. In the preface to the document it was stated that,

These guidelines provide a coherent and progressive approach to religious education in Roman Catholic schools. Archbishop Winning, president of the Catholic Education Commission, and the Secretary of State commend the document and invite schools to use it in the implementation of the Religious Education programme (SOCC 1994a, p. ii).

Notably, the very title of the document revealed how far the new guidelines now reflected the changes that Catholics needed. While the previous curriculum document was entitled: *Religious and Moral Education 5-14 (Catholic Schools)*, the new one bore the title *Religious Education 5-14: Roman Catholic Schools*.

This was an important distinction Catholics wanted their guidelines to reflect compared to the one that had already been accepted in non-denominational schools. The aims for Catholic RE were also carefully crafted in that curriculum document to reflect the *faith dimension* of Catholic education. The new curriculum guidelines for Catholic RE adopted the three broad national attainment targets of Christianity, OWR and Personal Search already in use in non-denominational schools as per government recommendation. However, the Christian component in the guidelines focused on Catholicism and covered strands such as sacraments, liturgical cycle (celebrations, festivals, ceremonies and customs and Community. It also had general themes such as worship, sacred places and symbols, sacred writings, stories and key figures and moral values upon which materials from other religions were used (SOCC 1993).

The new Catholic curriculum therefore replaced the *Veritas* programme that had been central to RE in Catholic schools for many years. Based on these guidelines, the Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (SCCC) produced exemplars for Catholic schools. The exemplars covered issues such as Jesus as a baby (Christianity); Sikh naming ceremony (OWR); growth and change (Personal Search); Church (Christianity); fasting during Ramadan (OWR); Pentecost (Christianity); Jesus heals Bartimaeus (Christianity); and choices (Personal Search) (SCCC 1997).

Reflecting on this development, it is my informed view that a separate Catholic curriculum in Scotland became possible because both the Catholic Church and government desired an amicable resolve to a sensitive and potentially explosive issue. It seems also that *compromise* was a key ingredient which helped to bring about a successful outcome. On one hand the Church accepted the government's structure of RE based on the study of Christianity, OWR and Personal Search while on the other hand, the Catholic Church was allowed not only to design its own curriculum but also to determine the composition of the Christian component in that curriculum which was based on nurturing children into the Catholic faith.

In Malawi, compromise or at least capitulation by the government to return RE to its original arrangement seemed to have been the only way out. With pressure coming mainly from the powerful Christian fraternity, the president ordered the Ministry of Education to suspend the new RME syllabi until fresh consultations

were made with all relevant stakeholders. Other respondents in this study saw the suspension of the new curriculum as a reflection of the fear that the government had of the Christian fraternity whose strength also lay in the fact that it was (and remains) a powerful voting bloc. However, while the Christian fraternity was happy that the government had capitulated to their demands, Muslims were outraged. In fact, Muslim association officials requested an audience with the president where they gave him an ultimatum to reverse the decision within three days. They threatened that there would be chaos in the country if the president did not rescind his decision to put on hold the new syllabi. Muslims through their association stated that they were disappointed that the president, a Muslim, could cater to the wishes of Christians on this issue (Matemba 2009).

In an effort to deal with such a highly charged issue, the president set up the Office of Religious Affairs Coordinator (ORAC) which was charged with the responsibility of overseeing all issues relating to religion including the matter of RME. An *ad hoc* National Consultative Committee (NCC) made up of representative from Churches, the Muslim association and ATR (i.e. chiefs), was set up. In its final submission the consultative committee reported that RME in its form would not be acceptable to the majority of stakeholders (Salanjira 2009). In the meantime, a slightly revised RME syllabus which included other religions such as Hinduism, Sikhism and so on was introduced. The government also removed RME from senior the secondary curriculum and reintroduced BK in its place. For junior secondary curriculum it was decided to introduce a parallel syllabus system where both BK and RME were now offered with the choice of which syllabus to teach left at the discretion of individual schools. This parallel system remains the policy for RE in the Malawi junior secondary curriculum (Sookrajh and Salanjira 2009). In a communiqué to all stakeholders, the secretary for education stated:

I am pleased to inform you that the consultative committee finally resolved that a revised Religious and Moral Education and a revised Bible Knowledge be offered as optional subjects in government, grant-aided and private schools and that all schools shall observe the right of the student/learner and/or indeed of his parent to choose the religious instruction subject of his/her choice as provided by the constitution of the Republic of Malawi and the Education Act (O'Dala 2001).

An important point to note is that during the time discussions related to the controversy caused by the introduction of RME was going on, RE as a curriculum subject in secondary schools was temporarily suspended. This means between 2000 and 2002 there were no examinations in RE (i.e. BK) at both the junior and secondary sectors. The absence of a course in BK had serious implications for pre-service teacher education because since no candidates sat BK at the Malawi School Certificate in Education (MSCE) level (equivalent to current British GCSEs) meant that for two years (2001 and 2002) some of the country's teacher education institutions did not have in-take of RE teacher trainees because no students had taken the required RE (i.e. BK) examinations for admission in those years.

Returning to the issue of the parallel syllabus-system, the Catholic Church in Malawi perhaps realising the difficulties the dual syllabus system would have for its schools and teachers decided to make things clearer for its schools. It advised all its schools to choose the BK and not the RME syllabus. The Catholic Church representative in Malawi in the study noted:

To make our point clear Blantyre archdiocese was the first to write a letter to its diocesan schools instructing them that they should all teach BK and not RME. Therefore our schools are not in doubt as to which syllabus type of RE the church wants to be taught in our schools  
...

It seems that this was the first time that a Church had issued instructions about the problems in RE to its schools. This was followed by the Presbyterian Church which also issued a similar instruction to its schools. Later, ACEM issued a similar statement to all its member schools, advising them to teach BK and not RME. What made this action particularly noticeable was the fact that although such schools were under the control of Churches, in reality because of the grant-in-aid system in which most Church schools operate, these schools are public institutions and run on government subsidy.

The Muslim association seemed to have agonised over the pronouncements the Christian fraternity was making in urging its schools to teach BK and RME. In the end the Muslim association reacted. The Catholic Church representative in Malawi noted that,

... We learnt that when the Muslim association got wind of our letter they took a copy of the letter—which had been circulated widely in the country and from which other dioceses also copied and issued the similar instruction to their schools—to their lawyers and threatened to sue the government over the fact that policy had originally dictated that the teaching of RME is to be legally bound. However, we have not heard anything from this threat and I think Muslims have simply accepted the fact that in our schools we will always teach BK.

Examining the attitude of the representatives of the Muslim community in this study, it became clear that they seem to have resigned to the fact that there is very little they can do to impact the current *status quo* of RE in which schools seem to prefer BK over RME. My view is that the departure of Bakili Muluzi—the Muslim president (at the expiry of his two mandated presidential terms in office which he wanted to extend by attempting to change the constitution but failed) from the seat of power in 2004—has left the Muslim community vulnerable once again to the dictates of the Christian majority on the matter of RE.

To summarize this section, the policy of *accommodating* different programs of RE on the same national curriculum is an experience Scotland and Malawi share and also an arrangement I support. Here I differ sharply with the conclusions Maccloud Salanjira makes in his recent doctoral thesis (2009) that the Malawi RE curriculum should not ‘accommodate contradictory spaces’ to address the ambiguity the ‘dual-syllabus’ system has created for the subject (Salanjira 2009, p. 305). My argument is that we have to accept the fact that there are different ontological views and constructions of reality. Therefore, while there may be occasions when a number of faith groups may agree to support a certain general position of RE, the curriculum should be *accommodating* to allow those with specific religious needs to have a kind of RE curriculum they are comfortable with. For me the Scottish situation described above in this chapter has lessons for Malawi in this regard. Despite the challenges that a ‘dual-syllabus’ system creates for schools and curriculum planners in Malawi (see in particular chapter 8), I think that offering RE through different curriculum spaces is the most prudent strategy to adopt considering the country’s religious sensitivity mainly between Christians and Muslims as noted in chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8.

Looking at developments in other countries, it is evident that the experience of having dual curriculum for RE is fairly widespread. As the conceptual chapter (chapter 2) indicated, some European countries such as Latvia have several

different RE syllabi to accommodate the various competing stakeholders to which a particular school is attached. A similar situation of having multiple syllabi for RE can also be found in several sub-Saharan African countries such as Kenya (Svensson 2007), Uganda (Mwesigwa 2003), Nigeria (Watson 1993) and Zambia (Carmody 2003).

## 6.6. Assessment of the new curriculum

While there are individual approaches that have been adopted for the various RE programmes in Scotland and Malawi<sup>8</sup>, the pedagogical arrangement for RE in both countries is underscored by a ‘particularist framework’. It is particularist because two parallel-syllabi—all with different ideological emphases—are offered for use in schools in a single national curriculum (Menninger 2007). In Scotland and Malawi the adoption of a particularist model was an attempt at a permanent compromise - that is to cater for the particular needs of those with *conservative* (i.e. those who prefer BK or traditional Christian approaches) and *disruptive* (i.e. those who desire multi-faith and non-confessional RE) tendencies for RE (Conroy 2003). The adoption of dual policies for RE as the situation remains in Scotland and Malawi just goes to illustrate the point that this is a contested subject which more often than not creates policy ambiguities not originally envisaged by policy makers (Sookrajh and Salanjira 2009).

In attempting to find a fitting pedagogical approach for the Scottish RME programme (for purposes of this study this includes both 5-14 and draft CfE programmes), one can say that the country adopted a neo-confessional approach. As noted in chapter 2, neo-confessionalism is a theological-liberal approach for RE. It denotes a kind of approach which, although it possesses a multi-faith or phenomenological element, it is nevertheless the beliefs and values of a dominant religion in society that are given prominence in RE (Cox 1983). For example, in Scottish RE Christianity continues to be a mandatory subject for study while largely other religions are studied merely as

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in Malawi BK is confessional in approach while on the same national curriculum RME is phenomenological in approach. In Scotland while in general both the RE guidelines (i.e. denominational and non-denominational) are intrinsically neo-confessional in approach, the guidelines for Catholic schools takes on a more conservative tone due to the fact it is has a ‘faith in education’ dimension to it based only on Catholic Christianity.

‘additional’. The preference of a neo-confessional approach for Scottish RE came out clearly in a 1986 HMle report:

In a country, which has been influenced by Christianity more than any other religions and where its denominations are readily available for study, it is difficult to conceive of a satisfactory Religious Education syllabus which does not include Christianity (SED 1986, p. 16).

In Malawi, the new RME programme is strictly in line with the Smartian phenomenological approach. Content in the syllabus is presented thematically by first expressing a general concept say, beliefs or worship, and then under each of the themes specific content from particular religions used to contextualise and explore the various issues. There is some attempt also at using a comparative approach in the presentation of the various topics. Finally, the main purpose of the new course is not confessional but rather designed to help children develop an understanding of religious issues and concepts from different religious positions.

Subjecting the new RE curricula in both countries to further analysis, a number of critical issues emerge. Turning to Scotland first, the research noted that the 5-14 programme (both Catholic and non-denominational) was content saturated. It was thus cluttered with religious issues and that its design was more of teacher-centred rather than pupil-centred. Focusing on the non-denominational curriculum (i.e. RME) for critical comment one notices that it merely expected pupils to identify a number of strands (which the Smartian approach identifies as dimensions of religion which should be studied ‘objectively’) such as celebrations, festivals, ceremonies, customs, sacred writings, stories, key figures, beliefs, sacred places, worship and symbols. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 3 observed that,

What happened was that in the 5-14 there was a lot of bullets identifying what you might do and unfortunately it was not meant to be prescriptive but quite a lot of teachers reckoned that they had to do all the issues identified. So every bullet on every page was impossible for the teacher to cover all that.

Scottish respondents in the study were also critical of the ‘supermarket’ (i.e. ‘pick and choose’) approach endemic in the 5-14 RME programme. They noted that this potentially trivialised religion due to the fact that religious issues were

being handled as if they had little relevance to the real life situations of many of the children. Following up on relevant literature, Alex Rodger has taken a swipe at the modern Scottish teacher offering RME (i.e. in reference to the 5-14 programme) noting that without teachers having a generous view of the potentiality of its contribution to pupils' human development, RME as a subject would be poorer. He notes further that,

To have a firm grasp of the approved framework for the subject is not the same thing as to have a coherent philosophy of the subject, or a clearer and generous view of its potential contribution to the human development of the learner (Rodger 2003, p. 603).

Scottish respondents also explained that in their view, over time RME had degenerated into a 'straight jacket' model of teaching the various components using a single model of explanation - i.e. the 'one fits all' situation. Being 'too prescriptive' was another area of criticism made against Scottish RME by the respondents in the study. As a general point, respondents noted that many teachers regarded the guidelines as being *prescribed* rather than *indicative* and as such said that many teachers tended to follow slavishly the attainment targets which were bulleted in the guidelines. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 1 noted that the 5-14 RME programme,

Has been really quite prescriptive perhaps not in absolute detail but has been prescriptive. I think that the more prescription you have the more rigidity you have, the more conformity you have, the more uniformity you have and the less imaginative and creative experience the teacher has ...

Respondents also took issue with the way content was presented noting that it was dry and with little prospect for innovation, reflection and critique. Examining the content of the 5-14 RME Curriculum more critically it can be said that one of the shortcomings of that programme was that it did not emphasise reflective learning skills. These skills can be achieved by learning objectives which help children to engage more meaningfully with the material content through the use of high order learning competence terms such as evaluate, criticise, judge, create, apply and so on in learning a given content area. Rather, the RME programme only required teachers to emphasise the knowledge and understanding types of learning competencies. Using Bloom's taxonomy as a



guide, I surmise that the learning competence skills employed in the 5-14 RME programme were at the base or low competence level seeking merely for learners to recall, know, recognise, tell and so on (see Ormell 1974). Commenting on the blandness of the 5-14 RME Curriculum, lecturer at a university in Scotland 4 pointed out that,

... It is disheartening to see ... a teacher teaching a lesson on the 5 Ks in Sikhism for example, which purely involves naming the 5 Ks, drawing the 5 Ks and there is no evaluation of what this means to the life of the child, how this may apply to a child's life, mark of identity, say his uniform etc...

Based on the content analysis I made on the Scottish 5-14 RME curriculum (i.e. the one for non-denominational schools), I found out that low order learning competence objectives were slightly dominant at 54.3% with high order ones remaining at 45.7%. However, when I subjected this to further analysis, I noticed that out of the three main programmes of study (Christianity, OWR and Personal Search) a slightly higher rate of high order learning objectives came from the 'Personal Search' strand at 35.6% compared with Christianity and OWR which between them shared 64.4%. Why Personal Search contained slightly more high order competence learning objectives can perhaps be explained looking at the fact it was based on a philosophical approach to learning religion. In other words, these strands deal with issues such as 'ultimate questions' and 'ethical principles' which naturally are areas prone to philosophical positioning. For example, one *ultimate question* wanted children to 'listen to the views of others and express their own with growing articulateness' while on *relationships and moral values* it wanted children to 'reflect on 'people who help us' and 'people we can help' (SED 1992, p. 12).

Scottish respondents in the study were quick to note that Personal Search was the only aspect of the new curriculum that attempted to counteract the 'supermarket approach'. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 noted that,

... The importance of Personal Search became more and more important because if you don't have the reflective dimension the danger is that RE adopts a supermarket approach. Here is what Muslims do, here is what Christian do, Jews do and so what? Big deal. The important thing as part of the Personal Search should have been but, what does this mean for me? What do you think about this? I think this is nonsense because I don't believe in God - okay fair enough ...

The problem was that most often than not, the Personal Search did not permeate what was being taught. Rather teachers were presenting this as a separate issue.

As pointed out in the conceptual framework (chapter 2), what the Scottish respondents were articulating was actually the general weakness of the Smartian phenomenological approach which the Scottish curriculum had also inherited on issues such as *relativism* (glossing over incompatible elements that did not fit the ‘straight jacket’), *trivialisation* of religious issues and *pedagogical incoherence* as teachers tried to pull the various religious bits and issues into a single multi-faith melting pot (see also Hardy 1976). It is thus somewhat pleasing—and despite the misgivings of some stakeholders as noted below—to observe that the soon to be introduced CfE will breathe fresh air into Scottish RE. Although it retains the content structure of the 5-14 Curriculum, the new RE curriculum seems will offer extended opportunities that are relevant to the study of religion in a post-modernist dispensation. In my judgment a major contribution of CfE will lie on the fact that learning in RE will now be based on *exploring key questions* about religion rather than merely on learning *religious concepts*. In this way, learners will acquire a deeper knowledge about the religious experiences and attitudes as manifested in the minds and hearts of adherents. Another important difference I see is that evaluation of learning in CfE will be based on ‘outcomes’ (i.e. how learners demonstrate what they have learnt) rather than mere recall of knowledge learnt as was the case in the 5-14 Curriculum.

There are other positive points that can be made about CfE. Examining the draft programme, it is edifying to note that the manner in which the themes are approached is invigorating, active and pupil centred. For example, structurally, RE in the CfE is less cluttered because the content has been placed under only three broad themes namely, (a) beliefs, (b) values and issues and (c) practices and traditions to be contextualised with content from Christianity and world religions. In the non-denominational guidelines, Personal Search (i.e. establishing personal views, stances, beliefs and so on) offered as a third strand in the previous 5-14 curriculum in non-denominational document is no longer taught separately but permeates throughout the other two areas as the case has been in the Catholic guidelines (i.e. both 5-14 and CfE). Generally, the CfE differs from 5-14 on the point that CfE is carefully designed to put the child at

the centre of teaching and learning. Subjecting the draft CfE to content analysis, for example, one notices that in the guidelines (both non-denominational and denominational) it is the pupil's learning that is being targeted through the deliberate use of phrases such as 'I can explore this', 'I can investigate that', 'I can reflect on that', 'I can research this' and so on.

Several differences can be detected between the draft denominational and non-denominational CfE curricular documents. Under the sub-topic 'ecumenism' the CfE Catholic document recognises the theological contribution of other Christian Churches to Jesus' Kingdom. In the non-denominational 5-14 guidelines the phrase 'OWR' had been replaced with the phrase 'world religions selected for study' in the CfE guidelines. However, I should be quick to point out that the same has not been applied to the denominational (Catholic) guidelines which have retained the use of the phrase 'OWR' because this is what the Catholic Church desires to be reflected on its guidelines. Another difference has been that for the first time, non-denominational guidelines include discrete learning outcomes on *non-religious* beliefs and *philosophical* inquiry. This is absent in the Catholic guidelines. Asked why the Catholic Church did not prefer a philosophy component as part of RE for its schools, the Catholic Church representative in Scotland explained:

We do not give *any credence* at all to philosophy as a discrete entity of RE. Our broader approach is that RE is *philosophical in itself* in the sense of inquiry, rationalistic and so on but nonetheless we don't see philosophy as a discrete feature of RE ... [my emphasis].

For the fact by the time this thesis had been completed (2010) final CfE guidelines had just been released but the programme not fully implemented in schools, it is yet difficult to tell at the moment how teachers will actually go about implementing many of these learning capacities in RE. Some of the concerns regarding the implementation of CfE were expressed by participants in the research. For example, some respondents were sceptical about the claims CfE is making. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 3 said:

I am slightly sceptical about CfE particularly its claims to ground children in the four capacities. Instead of putting content at the centre it is putting the child at the centre. We have always been interested in producing successful learners. What this means is that a successful learner isn't someone who knows all but someone who

appreciates the ambiguity of knowledge and the provisionality of knowledge ... So these could be slogans unless you start teasing them out.

Other respondents were worried about the lack of professional capacity in schools to effectively implement CfE. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 noted:

Teachers in schools are struggling to come up with syllabi tailored to the CfE. I feel that there is not enough support for teachers from schools and councils. In addition to this, there are serious staffing issues in RE with many departments having 1 or 1.5 members of staff...

Further, in the absence of the RE advisorate, as was the case when 5-14 was introduced in 1992, respondents in the study noted that many teachers will struggle with CfE because of the lack of guidance regarding what exactly teachers will be expected to cover, which methods would be appropriate and how individual teachers can 'fill in' their content into open guidelines. With the demise of the advisorate which was instrumental in the development of teacher capacity when the 5-14 Curriculum was first introduced, it seems that teachers will face serious teething problems with CfE. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 admitted that,

It is a big problem at the moment for teachers because there is nowhere to turn when they have issues. However, every local authority although they don't have an RE advisor they have Quality Improvement Officers (QIOs) some whose remit covers RE. The problem is that such a person might not have been a trained RE teacher and as a result may not know much about the subject.

Being 'flexible', as Scottish curriculum always is, might be particularly challenging to recently qualified teachers who might struggle to make sense of some of the experiences and outcomes of the new curriculum. My considered view is that because the experiences and outcomes are broadly defined there could be a serious lack of specific subject knowledge necessary to maintain consistency and coherence in what teachers will actually be teaching. Clearly, teachers will need extra help in the design of new school syllabi in RE, something policymakers might find hard to swallow. Thus, care would have to be taken when helping teachers to develop syllabi that are consistent and coherent

lest this may be seen as a contradiction of the purpose of CfE which is to see the teacher as academically competent and professionally astute to draw his/her own syllabi and develop his/her teaching materials. In reality however, such an expectation might be too high for many teachers to reach even for those with many years of experience. In the end, schools and teachers may need much more professional help than otherwise anticipated if the new curriculum is to have the success envisioned by curriculum planners.

Focusing on the new RME syllabus in Malawi critical issues emerge as well. The first point is that this syllabus is crammed with content and cluttered with concepts, terms and issues. The reader might be surprised to note that the RME syllabus has 238 teaching objectives that must be covered in a space of only two years. The objectives range from expecting children ‘to understand the nature of religion’, ‘develop a spirit of national unity and loyalty’, ‘respect people whose beliefs differ from their own’ to helping them ‘acquire positive attitudes on gender issues’ and so on. These 238 objectives are the teaching elements based on 20 broad themes that cover anything from worship, sacred communication, rituals and to religious leaders or founders (MME 1998).

Secondly, it is too prescriptive with hardly any space for teacher in-input or situational variance. For instance, a particular theme say ‘religious symbols’ is followed by specific objectives on how to teach that, then followed by the content of that theme right up to the last concept to be covered. It is then followed by suggested teaching and learning activities and finally mode of assessment. In other words, the new syllabus is not only too prescriptive but also content led, teacher centred and has little room for reflection, critique and engagement with the materials being presented. In my critical analysis of multi-faith RE in Botswana, I argued that a syllabus that is content led encourages transmission rather than transformative learning because teachers using such syllabus merely transmit facts about religious issues (Matemba 2005). In the case of Malawi, the RME syllabus seems to have been designed to teach facts which children should know for examination purposes but fails to give children an in-depth understanding of what exactly the religions they are studying are all about.

Third, by selecting only three religions, the new syllabus had *effectively shut out* other religions in the country for study. As we noted in chapter 1 besides the

three religions already noted Malawi has religions such as Rastafarianism, Hinduism, Baha'ism, Sikhism and others. Although the new syllabus has considered other religions, there are other issues where it falls short. One area is that it has not included secular worldviews. In a country that has some people expressing secular views, a radical curriculum such as this one should have given some attention to it. As in Botswana (Matemba 2005), the assumption that all learners would have a religious view in Malawi is a limited one more so given the recent formation of the 'Association of Secular Humanism' in a country which is supposedly to be conservatively Christian in the majority (Thindwa 2010). Therefore, the existence of an association of Secular Humanism and growing numbers of people describing themselves not have a 'religion' (2.5%) as in the latest 2008 census, goes to show that there are people, small their numbers might be, who do not have a religious basis for their beliefs in Malawi (*Nyasa Times* 2010a). An exploration of such views could have been necessary for a national syllabus which, among other things, desires to teach children 'to tolerate other people's views and beliefs and cooperate in their everyday life' (MME 1998, p. iv).

Another problem facing the new syllabus is that no textbooks for pupils and teachers have been developed. In fact, for teachers the recommended reference materials are the *Good News Bible* and an English translation of the *Qur'an* (by Yusuf Ali) and *Hadith* (by Imam Bulcharis). As scanty as the resources for teachers are, at least they have something for Christianity and Islam but not for ATR which does not have any suggested reference materials. The ministry of education explained that 'there is no standard reference ... for African Traditional Religions in Malawi, because they have been handed down orally' (MME 1998, p. ix). This begs the question: why did the government include a religion for study when admittedly such a religion does not have written materials for learners in the first place? For the few schools that offer RME, this has created the problem of regional and ethnic interpretation and variation regarding the various issues the syllabus has identified for learning in ATR.

Similar to the shortcomings of Scottish RME noted above, content analysis of Malawi RME shows that it has a higher percentage of low order content objectives (identify, locate and outline) as opposed to high order ones (analyse, investigate and compare). Content analysis shows that in statistical terms the syllabus has 96.3% low order content learning objectives as opposed to only 3.7%

high order content learning objectives. What this can tell us is that the phenomenological model adopted in Malawi has offered a less critical approach to studying religion because it is more concerned with children learning basic and uncritical aspects of religion. As in Scotland, some of the shortcomings of the new Malawi RME programme mirror the limitations inherent in the phenomenological approach we noted in chapter 2, particularly related to the problem of teaching to the ‘middle’. What this means is that irrespective of attainment levels of children, by design the learning outcomes in a phenomenological type of RE merely emphasises low level competence objectives such as defining, sketching, identifying, watching instead of critiquing, appreciating, challenging and applying (see Arthur 1995).

## 6.7. Conclusion

The picture that has emerged in this chapter is that overall there are shared experiences that can be found regarding curriculum reforms in RE in the two countries. Evidence was provided that in both countries there were some early developments geared to improve the lot of a subject that was in a state of underdevelopment for a long time. However, the chapter noted that there were moments of caution in both countries over these early efforts. We noted for example, the reluctance of the Malawi government at the time to adopt regional syllabi which the country’s Catholic Church and education officials had at some point been involved in designing. At a time when the reign of the country’s autocratic leader and a self-confessed ‘elder’ in the Presbyterian Church was at its zenith, it is less surprising that the government would have accepted anything less than the evangelical type of BK as RE. We also noted why on the whole Catholic schools in Scotland hardly incorporated new multi-faith materials.

The chapter has also found that in both countries and at around the same period, radical curriculum reforms were introduced in RE—all named ‘RME’—because of the incorporation of moral issues (this is not a hint that there was collaboration regarding RE between curriculum experts in the two countries). Stakeholders’ reception to these curriculum reforms threw up interesting parallels between developments in Scotland and Malawi. In both countries the new curriculum was rejected by key stakeholders - that is those with a

substantial stake in education through control of schools. In both countries the governments capitulated to the demands of Churches with the result that the governments were forced to introduce a dual policy framework for RE - the only subject on the school curriculum governed by that arrangement.

From the assessment made of the new programmes in the two countries, a number of structural and pedagogical flaws were noted (as were improvements that RE in the CfE in Scotland, for example, might make) while at the same time, noting some significant differences in areas such as pedagogical approach and material content. In chapter 7 that follows next, the study picks up on the matter of stakeholder contestation with the view to understand specific areas of contest underpinning not only curriculum reform in RE but also the nature of the subject itself in the two countries.



## Chapter 7

### Contested Spaces in Religious Education

#### 7.1. Introduction

From the examination of relevant literature, it is evidently clear that RE is a shocking business (Cox 1982), prone to high levels of conflict (Richardson 2007) and can even incite violence (as exemplified by some situations in Malawian schools (see chapter 8)). Considered as one of the darkest regions in education, it is little wonder that terms such as ‘collaboration,’ ‘compromise’ and ‘containment’ frequently come up in any evaluation of RE reform (Crozier 1989). Part of the problem is that RE is about the study of *religion*, a subject that is not universally accepted. In the words of Andrew Wright, RE is a subject that ‘leads us paradoxically into the realm of ... uncertainty and truth... cynicism and apathy, faith and commitment’ (Wright 1993, p. 10). Given that glimpses of the complexity of RE in Scotland and Malawi has been offered in previous chapters, the aim of the present chapter is to explain pertinent issues which underpin the spaces of contest for curriculum reform in Scotland and Malawi. The expression ‘spaces of contest’ highlights issues which underscore areas of disagreement and tension regarding RE particularly as it has undergone curriculum reform in recent decades in the two countries.

#### 7.2. Ideological clash

In contemporary society RE is underpinned by three contrasting ideological positions—namely, *pluralism*, *inclusivism* and *exclusivism*—each of which are at times set against each other in any attempt to implement or evaluate the subject in public education. First, the pluralist position sees that all religious and non-religious beliefs alike are in some sense potentially valid. It is a radical position that intends to move different beliefs, which are compatible with post-Enlightenment critical thinking, to a more central and universal phase. As it was noted in the conceptual framework (chapter 2), this position hardly appeals to orthodox religious adherents because it leaves out the distinctiveness of

individual beliefs (Hobson and Edwards 1999). Secondly, the inclusivist position posits that while one dominant religion, say Christianity, is seen as the perfect means of attaining salvation (as such is elevated in status in relation to other religions) the other religions, too, can provide the means of gaining the *right* relationship with God and possibly even guaranteeing salvation (see also D' Costa 1986). Third, the exclusivist position on its part assumes a conservative position on religious matters. Proponents of this ideological position argue for 'education in *faith*' (i.e. commitment to a particular faith) as opposed to 'education in *religion*' (i.e. knowledge and understanding about various religious traditions). For instance, the Christian *exclusive* model posits that there is no salvation outside the Church and that the saving acts and workings of God cannot be found in other religions (Hick and Hebblethwaite 1980).

From the findings in this research it was apparent that the ideological 'war' for RE in Scotland and Malawi was sharply between a combined *pluralist/inclusivist* position (hereinafter the 'liberal' position) which pitted against the *exclusivist* position (hereinafter the 'orthodox/conservative' position). Thus, Christian conservatives expressed support for the continuation of the traditional confessional approach for RE while those holding liberal views were in favour of inclusive approaches to RE which are non-dogmatic and multi-faith in approach. In this research, it was found that among those in support of the latter position were government officials and some educationalists. This is also the position that underscores the fundamental argument being made in this study that in a 21<sup>st</sup> century dispensation, RE should be *accommodative* and *inclusive* of various religious views.

To a large degree, it seems that RE reform in the two countries was underscored by liberal theories of education which call, in general, for the infusion of diverse perspectives in the curriculum. The main aim of this approach is to make *citizens of the world* by providing children with the ability and disposition to be able to reach agreements on matters of fact and actions through rational discussions with others from diverse ways of life and forms of culture (Boran 2003). Liberal education also entails subjecting others cultures and perceptions of reality to critical reflection (Nussbaum 1997). As we noted in chapter 5, it seems that in Scotland liberal theories on education were able to find fertile ground owing to a number of factors, such as the Enlightenment movement of the 18th century, the general fall in Church attendance throughout the modern

period and the more widespread rise of secular ideas in various areas of culture and society. The impact of this, as we have seen, is that from the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, most sections of Scottish society began to question the relevance of the ‘evangelical’ approach to RE.

In Malawi the ‘evangelical’ approach to RE also began to be questioned when the country entered a new dispensation of political liberalism in the light of which the national curriculum was revised to reflect the new post-colonial reality. However, unlike in Scotland where in a lot of ways the liberal agenda for RE was precipitated by the onslaught of post-Enlightenment secularism, in Malawi religious fervour (associated in the main with Christianity) has always been high. This leads me to conclude that the adoption of non-confessional approach for RE was an official decision which was destined to have little resonance with what stakeholders really wanted for Malawi, an issue I will explore more fully in chapter 8.

As earlier pointed out in the conceptual framework of this study, there is a correlation that exists between democratic citizenship and a country’s bent towards liberal education (see chapter 2). While the government push for a liberal-inclusivist framework in the political system and in education generally is welcomed, in both Scotland and Malawi applying this framework to RE has always been contentious. This situation is exemplified by developments in both countries over several decades where clearly *conservative* and *liberal* impulses have been at odds with each other when it comes to RE reform. In both countries the state has desired expressly to make RE more ‘democratic’ and accessible to the various cultural and religious groups which make up society. For this reason the two governments were more receptive to the theories of liberal education (multiculturalism, plurality, cosmopolitanism and so on) such that they were willing to allow such thinking to determine a new direction for RE.

One of the key elements of this development was that ideologically the new format of RE in the two countries was premised on an *educational* and not *confessional* agenda for the subject. At this point it should be noted that one of the outstanding issues in Scottish RE has centred on a disagreement over what the various sectors consider *educational* RE. Supporters of non-denominational education argue that they offer educational RE because they approach the

subject developmentally, to bring about understanding and not commitment. On the other hand, proponents of denominational schooling assert that if well planned confessional RE can also meet the basic educational needs of children in the open society. In defence of this position, Ernst Nipkow argues that,

Whoever would deny this from a philosophical point of view would be wrong, and one must assume that his/her image of Christian theology is merely following an understanding of it as something dogmatic in an irrational and narrow-minded sense (Nipkow 1985, p. 34).

In his support of the debate that RE in faith based education is educational, Thomas Groome argues that in his view it is quite ‘inappropriate to separate education from faith formation in a religious education program’ (LTS 2009/10a, p. 194). In Scotland those that support this view—in the main proponents of Catholic education—insist that the ‘faith in education’ approach although consistent with catechetical principles, is developmental as well (Conroy 2003).

Commenting further on the liberal-conservative debate in RE, many scholars have pointed out that neither liberalism nor multiculturalism ever occupy a secure ground of absolute impartiality owing to the impossibility of adjudicating any educational philosophy entirely without bias (Anderson 2002). However, by introducing non-dogmatic RE the state in both Scotland and Malawi sincerely attempted to address the general question around issues of citizenship and the recognition of minority rights within RE from an essentially liberal-democratic perspective. As we have seen, while the state desired RE to adopt a ‘scientific’ approach capable of fulfilling the democratic agenda, Catholics in Scotland and Christians in Malawi were intractable in their respective preferences for a typically Catholic and typically Christian model, respectively, for RE in their schools.

My view is that by attempting to make RE ‘educational’ the state in the two countries had helped RE to complete its metamorphosis from Biblical Studies (i.e. Christian theology) to Religious Studies (i.e. comparative religions) and then finally to ‘Religious Education’ (i.e. ‘proper’ education in religions in the classic-liberal sense). In her article entitled ‘The Relationships between Religious Studies, Religious Education and Theology,’ Denise Cush explores the relational link which can be seen to follow the ideological sequence that

‘theology begot Religious Studies’ and ‘Religious Studies begot RE’. In this developmental link, RE certainly more than its predecessor, is offered with children’s academic experience of religion in mind. Cush has further noted:

RE is not just about religions, it is also about the interaction between the religious materials and the concerns of the child - as much about the latter as the former (Cush 1999).

However, while Cush’s statement seems to point to the fact that in this relational link RE is about the *education* of the child, there is an inherent admission that there is ambiguity about how she perceives this relationship. For instance, what does she mean when she says that RE ‘is also about the interaction between the religious materials and the concerns of the child - as much about the latter as the former?’ My argument is that if RE is about the interaction between ‘religious materials’ and the ‘concerns of the child’ and vice-versa, it means that even in its modern construction, RE can be about the ‘education of the child in religion’ as much as her ‘search for spiritual comfort’. Clearly, there are no easy answers to the pedagogical ambiguity that modern education presents for RE. Perhaps it might as well be that the *educationalisation* of RE will remain a problematic area in the school curriculum.

Mirroring the developments in Scotland and Malawi against relevant literature beyond even Cush’s terms of reference, it is evident that the evolution of RE in Scotland emerged within the ‘holistic paradigm of education’ framework proposed by Hobson and Edwards (see chapter 2). The holistic paradigm of education is underpinned by three critical elements: critical rationality, personal transcendence and epistemological coherence. Critical rationality is important because it expounds the idea that religious issues can be subjected to reflection by evaluating available evidence so that a person can have the justification to draw some *rationally* acceptable conclusions. It touches on personal transcendence because it aims to *liberate* people from their pre-existing religious constraints so that they can begin to explore the foundations of their own philosophy to life. And it is epistemologically *coherent* because it deals with the consistency of religious knowledge between different propositions within a subject (*internal coherence*) as well as the consistency between different subjects (*external coherence*) (Hobson and Edwards 1999).

Critics of the liberal and ‘holistic’ settlement for RE defended by thinkers such as Conroy and Davis argue that it has robbed the subject of any serious engagement with religion. Conroy and Davis, for example, point out that in their rush to modernise RE western elites have failed to respond adequately to the contemporary rebirth of religious belief at the heart of seemingly secular politics. As noted previously, for contemporary RE to overcome this conundrum Conroy and Davis suggest the idea (drawn from Stanley Fish) of ‘super-liberalism’ - that is accommodating both religion and rationalism in a common neutral space for RE (see chapter 2). In my view, while super-liberalism appears to an ideal compromise it cannot be accepted in Scotland and Malawi because stakeholders’ positions of what they want RE for their schools to be are in fact too deeply entrenched to allow a common framework of even a super-liberal kind. A *dual* arrangement may therefore so far be the best and most workable option for RE in the two countries, at least until the various key stakeholders come to some common understanding regarding the direction that RE should take in a common curricular space.

The findings in the Scottish research echoed some of the concerns expressed in the relevant literature above regarding the prospects for ‘liberal’ RE. Representatives of the various Churches explained that the new developments in RE were ideologically problematic for Christian conservatives because in many ways liberalism was seen as a threat to the established Christian hegemony over the subject. They noted also that Christian conservatives were uncomfortable with the liberal settlement for RE because of the suspicion that this was an ideological imposition by secularists and humanists the consequence of which would be the trivialisation of religion. They further pointed out their fear that that such a development would ultimately render RE irrelevant as a subject of study. They also pointed out that liberalism is not value free, and as such if religion (i.e. Christianity) were to be ‘decentred’ to create space for non-religious views, then it meant that liberal form of RE was actively promoting not neutrality but an alternative belief system. They further explained, for example, that when secularists argue that there should not be any ‘theologising’ in public education they meant that schools should teach what secularists believe (see also Watson and Thompson 2007).

It would seem that this apprehension about the consequence of secular ideas on RE is not entirely unfounded. Chairperson of parent council in Scotland 1 and a declared atheist, explained that,

Personally, because I have come to my own decisions about religion I am not happy about a particular religion or a set of religions being imposed, taught or whatsoever in schools. I am certainly on the lines that religion is a question of personal belief and faith doesn't actually have a place in wider public life schools. That's to say that I don't think that there should be RE in terms we have been talking about. Rather, teaching people about what the different faiths are and how they work and the broader sense which I think is perhaps important if you think about things like secular society, humanism and things of that nature which considers the larger moral issues within a classroom framework.

For Christian conservatives, of course, the views expressed by the respondent in the excerpt above, and generally typical of the wider secular agenda which traditionalists closely associate with the new liberal settlement for RE, are utterly unacceptable. From the responses gathered, it would seem that for most Christian conservatives the idea of Christianity being trivialised or replaced by non-religious beliefs is unwelcome and a cause of great anxiety. Even the Representative of the Church of Scotland (a Protestant confession generally noted for its theologically inclusive character) noted that,

... because secularists don't like the idea of faith they would take on board that faith is not a *positive* thing and faith communities *resent* having to argue the case all the time. This is the reason faith communities would end up creating Christian schools or private schools and this would not be a healthy situation ... [my emphasis].

Further, Christian respondents in Scotland explained that Churches were less keen on the new RE programme because they felt that teaching of other religious traditions would in turn *water-down* the Christian influence in the lives of children. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school 1 said:

If you just ask the faith communities that we are presenting your faith, what do you want pupils to know? I mean, I remember speaking to a group of ministers from Glasgow Presbytery and the elders from Glasgow. I asked them that question and they said: Jesus, the centre of our faith is Jesus. Christ must be known to the children first because pupils are now made to learn other religions and yet they do not have an understanding of who He [Jesus] is in respect to our religion and denomination [i.e. Church of Scotland] ...

Some Christian parents in the study also expressed the concern that the ideological assumptions of the liberal settlement were unsettling for them. Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 2 was of the view that,

... Why should I allow my child to be in a school that will teach that whether explicitly or implicitly there is no God? I want children to be taught that there are people who believe there is God ...

The view expressed by the Christian respondent above is in some agreement with relevant literature. It has been noted, for example, that,

RE based on the 'phenomenological' approach has been accused of implicitly indoctrinating pupils into a Western, rationalist, individualist liberalism which is at odds with the understanding of traditional believers... Teachers have no more right to indoctrinate pupils into a universalism that sees all paths as leading to the same goal, than confessional Christianity (Cush 1999, p. 144).

Examining the epistemological arguments for and against the different methodological positions for RE and the RE programmes associated with them, an interesting outcome can be observed in both Scotland and Malawi. The findings in this study have led me to conclude that Christian conservatives in both countries have actually 'won' the ideological war because neither secularism nor liberalism, as initially feared, has overrun RE. It would seem that Christian conservatives have successfully 'manned the gates' in ensuring that the secular encroachment in RE has been kept at bay. Especially in the Scottish situation what this demonstrates is that while the liberal agenda of successive governments has been accommodated, by and large Christianity has remained *primus inter pares* in RE.

How can we explain this development? The answer lies on the political (with a small 'p') nature of RE. In Scotland it seems that to avoid potential fallout with the powerful Christian bloc the government has been extra cautious in reforming RE to the extent that a fully liberalised form of RE, as perhaps originally intended by some interest groups, has not in fact been implemented. This is evidenced by the fact that while the old approach to RE was thoroughly confessional across all schools, the new one became *neo-confessional* in both sectors (i.e. denominational and non-denominational schools) because RE in



Catholic schools has retained a strongly confessional tone and although less strongly in tone even in the superficially neutral non-denominational sector as well. In the latter case, the difference between the two ways of pursuing RE policy lay more in the nuance rather than in a radical uprooting of the old system. This means that RE has remained largely 'Christian' in its focus even in non-denominational schools, with the new curriculum (both 5-14 and CfE) only allowing the teaching of other religions essentially as the 'extras'.

In the foreword to Working Paper No. 7, Michael Forsyth, the Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland who presided over the introduction of the 5-14 Curriculum, noted that knowledge of Christianity and other religions provided an understanding that underpinned people's 'moral consciousness and moral authority' (SED 1991b, p. 1). He went on to reiterate that the changes in RE would continue to give pupils 'a good grounding in Christianity' to help children recognise its past and present role 'as the main religion of Scotland' (SED 1991b, p. 1). In the same vein, in this study, Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 stated that:

In Scotland the RE curriculum is designed for pupils to have a knowledge of Christianity. This is sacrosanct. You cannot understand Scottish society without understanding Christianity because our laws, education and history are tied to it. So the big argument is that Christianity is to be the first religion to be taught.

Other respondents in the study noted that much of the time in Scottish RE is actually spent on Christianity. Principal Teacher in non-denominational school in Scotland 1 noted thus:

The one thing I would say about RE in Scotland is that the vast majority of teachers still teach two thirds of the curriculum based on Christianity... So two thirds of an RE class is allotted to Christianity. May be you should underline that...

The continued privileging of Christianity in Scotland even in the latest reform (i.e. CfE) is actually the outcome of successful 'hand twisting' of government's plans for RE by the powerful Christian fraternity, even if it employs 'heritage' as its primary justification. In this research, Scottish respondents spoke, in fact, of Christian hegemony in RE as the work of the 'secret hand', the success of a 'force field' around Christianity and the 'nature of the beast'. For instance, it

was noted by some respondents who sat on the CfE curriculum panel that although they had proposed to push RE in a certain liberal direction they found out that when the proposed document was submitted to government certain parts were amended, particularly those parts dealing with Christianity. Respondents pointed out that the retaining of Christianity as the main religion of study against what the panel of ‘experts’ had suggested goes to show that the influence of Christian interests over RE in Scotland remains pronounced. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 4 noted:

... None of the concerns such as privileging Christianity in the new curriculum has been listened to. I think the writers have tweaked what they can but I think that up the food chain there is a level at which they have been told of what they can’t change and one of the things has been the place of Christianity in RE. So the writers have been frustrated you know because of this - I have a strong impression about this...

Responding to the issue of Christian privilege, some participants noted that when it comes to Christianity in Scotland there is some sort of a ‘force field’ that ensures its dominance in schools. Teacher in a non-denominational school 2 expressed that,

... The *nature of the beast* is certainly one where there appears that there is this feel around it - a kind of *force field* around the whole thing. That’s the nature of the beast and we can’t seem to get over that level of thinking... [my emphasis].

In Malawi orthodox Christians have also successfully helped in ‘manning the gates’ in RE. For example, despite the parallel syllabus arrangement it is BK and not RME that schools continue to teach. This has been as a result of Christian campaigning through radio, leaflets, newspapers and direct lobbying with government setting out the ‘unsuitability’ of RME for a ‘Christian’ country such as Malawi. With the advantage of Churches having schools, and the threat of Churches pulling their schools out of grant-aid arrangements if government tries to ‘tamper’ with RE—compounded by education officials keeping quiet about the continued marginalisation of RME as a syllabus choice for schools—the Malawi pattern appears to give what amounts to unfair promotion of BK over RME. In chapter 8 I will examine how schools have engaged with these developments and show the desperate situation in which RME now finds itself in schools.

The picture that emerged in the Malawi research was that orthodox Christians argued that BK had been on the national curriculum for a long time and as such there was no reason to change the *status quo*. They pointed out that since most Christian stakeholders, for example, were happy with BK for their schools there was no justification for reforming the subject, even more so given that no one had asked for the subject to be changed. In most cases, Christian parents also expressed conservative views on this development. Headteacher of a private Christian school in Malawi reported that:

When parents heard that BK was to be replaced with RME they sent a delegation to the school. The delegation told us in no uncertain terms that parents objected to RME and implored the school to continue teaching BK to their children.

Respondents representing faith schools such as Catholic, Presbyterian and Seventh-day Adventist in the research noted that they favoured BK because it taught Christian beliefs central to their faith. They noted that the liberal approach to RE was unsuitable for them because teaching other religions would force them to teach religions which are in opposition to Christianity. The representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi was forthright in stating:

RE should help a child in his spiritual journey, knowing God and His goodness... Teaching different religious traditions in our schools cannot be supported because we cannot teach religions that oppose what we teach...

From the above discussion and in addition to the fact the Church in Malawi sees religious pluralism more of a challenge than an opportunity (Tengatenga 1997), evidently orthodox Christians opposed the liberal framework for RE because the new programme was not in tune with their religious teaching. However, I did not find any evidence supporting the Christian respondents' view that teaching other religions in RE would work against Christianity. I found evidence contradictory to their assertion because in some Church controlled schools overzealous BK teachers had begun to say unkind things about Islam. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 2 noted:

... Concerned Muslims came to tell me that that their children were being forced to learn BK. While Muslims accept the Bible the way Islam is spoken about concerns us. For example, concerning our Prophet Muhammad saying that he was a liar ...

Evidence was also found which suggested that some Church controlled schools, even in areas with an overwhelmingly Muslim population, refused to offer the new RME programme because it had an Islamic component. It seems to me that not only were Christian conservatives insistent to have BK taught in their schools, but in most cases they had a less sympathetic view of other religions. In such a situation it becomes very difficult to find common ground between the contending parties regarding RE reform.

Despite ideological differences between the various RE systems that have emerged in Scotland and Malawi, there is evidence that there has been *trafficking* of ideas. In Scotland, the denominational sector has learnt much from the professional management of RE from the non-denominational sector, while the non-denominational sector has rediscovered the place of inner life and narrative in the study of religion which is at the heart of RE in denominational (i.e. Catholic) schools (Conroy 2003). The representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland made a similar comment and noted that:

There has been cross-fertilisation I think. There are signs that some of our views have influenced the non-denominational curriculum. In fact during the writing of the outcomes for non-denominational and Catholic RE in the CfE there was exchange of helpful information although I must say that the outcomes produced two different models for these sectors.

Secondly, it seems that in the recent development (i.e. CfE) the non-denominational sector has accepted what the Catholic sector has been saying all along, that the Personal Search component (covering the natural world, spirituality, philosophical questions and moral values etc.) should not be taught as a discrete part as was the case with the 5-14. Rather, it 'should be intertwined within the experiences and outcomes for Christianity and world religions selected for study' (LTS no year, p. 8). The Catholic Church representative in Scotland made this point clear:

... The personal search is not a separate element for Catholic RE because it is at the heart of it. It has always been like that. It has been there... I am not sure how much of impact the Personal Search actually had. Interestingly in the CfE it is at the heart of the proposals for non-denominational schools as well...

The government effectively admitted that the concept of Personal Search was presented poorly in the 5-14 Curriculum. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 noted that,

Most teachers interpreted this as we do Christianity, Personal Search and OWR. It was not meant to be approached like that ... So in CfE we made sure that we corrected this so that Personal Search is embedded into what is taught not as an add on as Catholic schools had been doing all along. The issue is that to avoid end-users being confused again we have decided to integrate Personal Search with RE.

In Malawi, there was also clear evidence of trafficking of ideas between the new curriculum being developed for BK and the RME syllabus. RME was the first syllabus to include contemporary moral issues which are now being suggested in the new BK under development, where similar issues are included under the theme 'Christian response to contemporary moral issues' (MME 2006a, p. 2).

### **7.3. Vexed issue of identity**

The issue of *religious identity* and its implication for RE, featured prominently in this research as well. As noted in the previous section, it would seem that the post-modern era has produced two *irreconcilable* epistemological stances for RE pedagogy namely, confessionalism and liberalism. As noted in chapter 2, confessionalism is wary of liberalism and thus sees religious pluralism as an issue to deal with. On the other hand, liberalism sees confessionalism as a step backward to a time that has long passed its relevance and thus sees religious diversity as something to be wholly welcomed and embraced. Clearly, there is tension here, more so given the fact that the modern RE curriculum has to carefully negotiate between these 'antagonistic' positions. It is perhaps for this reason that modern RE has remained a contested curricular area.

One of the reasons that can be suggested for this is that religious groups see the subject as a way of promoting their particular identity while those with a liberal view of education perhaps have little religious feeling for the subject. As a counter-measure, denominational schools (which prefer confessional RE) often see themselves as a site of resistance to the onslaught of post-modern secular forces against religion. In Scotland, a recent study has re-confirmed that

Catholic schools were reluctant to be part of the 'secular' educational school system as far back as the 1872 Education Act, because at that time the Catholic Church was not sure if its religious identity would be safeguarded in the Church-state cordiale that was being proposed (McKinney 2007).

A number of studies, for example, Grant (1997) and Wardekker and Miedema (2001) have explored the connection between religious identity, cultural change and RE. In these studies, religious identity is identified as an important marker which allows religious communities to draw on elements of their tradition and theology as a means of self-understanding and self-expression (Cohen-Zada 2006). Other studies see denominational schools as another significant marker of identity for those parents who wish to preserve the religious identity of their children (Bertram-Troost et al. 2009). In the attempt to explain the relationship between epistemology and social identity of RE as a form of school knowledge, we should perhaps also consider some of the key theories in the sociology of the curriculum such as *symbolic control* and *pedagogic discourse* expounded by Pierre Bourdieu and Basil Bernstein, respectively.

Bernstein postulates that every curriculum is guided by a *code* which he defines as a general principle regulating the different communication modes that influence both curriculum and pedagogy (Bernstein 1990; Bernstein and Solomon 1999). My understanding is that for a subject such as RE, the *code* could be the ideological messages (i.e. *theological*, *liberal* or *educational*) that may overlay any curriculum that deals with education in religion, a subject that more than others acts as an agent of cultural transmission in schools (Bourdieu 1989). According to Bourdieu, it is the *habitus* (a 'system of durable, transposable dispositions which functions as the generative basis for structured, objectively unified practices') which alters the contextual situation in which a school curriculum exists and what children are taught (Bourdieu 1979, p. vii). By implication, this means that if the school *habitus* is a negative one, the curriculum can function as an agent of social inequality (Bourdieu 1989). From the points made in the relevant literature above it is perhaps easy to see how a *firm* relationship can exist between epistemology and religious identity for a *culturally sensitive* subject such as RE. It also shows how easily this can *rupture* if there is imbalance in the relationship. It is for this reason that any attempt to reform RE engenders passionate debates around the issue of religious or cultural identity (Laplante 1990).

The findings in this study revealed interesting facts regarding the ‘spaces of contestation’ related to issues of identity in RE in areas such as religious expression, schooling, Presbyterian ‘loss’ and Catholic ‘gain’ (in Scotland) and in general Christian dominance. In Scotland, respondents sympathetic to Presbyterian Churches felt that while RE reform guaranteed Catholics their religious expression by granting them control of their own schools and allowing such schools to govern a separate RE curriculum, the Church of Scotland was not afforded the same privilege. They pointed out that by attempting to address historical inequalities which existed against the Catholic community; the government had unwittingly privileged the Catholic Church above other Churches. The views expressed by some respondents in this research were that changes in RE have not recognised the significant contribution and continued importance of Presbyterian Christianity within Scotland. Those in support of this position feel that their particular identity within Scottish education has been lost.

They seemed to blame this not only on recent educational reforms but also historically. For instance, they expressed the view that the Presbyterian community gave in too much to the educational reforms that created the state system of education in 1872. They felt that the Church of Scotland, for example, should have demanded to be visibly recognised, as the Catholic Church is, as a pre-condition for entering into the pact that produced the present state system of education (see also O'Hagan and Davis 2007). Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 1 and self-confessed member of the Kirk, queried:

.... Can something be written about what we do, to recognise our place in Scottish society and our pre-eminence amongst the population? I mean it does lead to a bizarre situation where I teach about Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, general Christianity but I do not teach specifically about what the traditions of the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian traditions within Scotland are. I feel that this is wrong...

Further to this point, respondents expressed the view that the current framework of RE is unbalanced because Presbyterianism has been left out (see also Riddell et al. 2009). However, respondents expressed the concern that raising this issue in a national debate is usually seen as ‘fuelling sectarianism’. However, they felt that there are positive and objective ways that this can be

done so that it is not seen negatively. They wondered that if teaching Catholicism in denominational schools is not being seen as fuelling sectarianism, then teaching Presbyterianism should also not be construed as such. The representative of the Scottish Joint Committee on Religious and Moral Education (SJCRME) and a declared Presbyterian noted:

... The teaching of Catholicism in denominational school is not being seen as fuelling sectarianism so why should the teaching of Presbyterianism be considered as such. What is needed is teaching objectively to Muslim, Hindu and non-religious pupils the significant role the Presbyterian Church has made as the biggest reform tradition and biggest group of Christians in the country ... Whether you like it or not Presbyterianism has had an important part to play in the legal system of Scotland and its moral life ...

However, when the issue of Presbyterian loss was put to the official representative of the Church of Scotland, a slightly different view emerged. While recognising the views of his fellow members of the Kirk, the official noted that Presbyterians should not be too concerned because in spite of all these changes, Christianity has maintained its strong presence in RE. He pointed out that RE cannot be a point of proselytisation because state education in Scotland is paid by all taxpayers and therefore one group of taxpayers should not have greater influence above others.

A related issue of identity is the perceived privileging of Christianity generally over other religions in RE in Scotland. Owing to the strength of the Christian movement (and in spite of the government's desire for a much more liberal approach for RE), as we have already noted Christianity has remained a central religion of study. During the latest reform (i.e. CfE) the issue of Christian privilege was hotly contested by those who felt that Christian expression has been unfairly dominant in RE, especially in a period when Church membership has contracted dramatically. Others argued that despite the much talked about historical significance of Christianity in Scotland's history and culture, in the present time Christianity was actually a new experience for children in the classroom owing to the fact that many of these children did not have a home experience of Christianity at all. Those supporting this view argued that for this reason Christianity should be offered in the same way as other religions, for after all by definition it is one of the world religions.



During the process of CfE, representatives of other religious groups such as Jewish and Muslim groups argued that by describing them as ‘other’ their particular identity was marginalised to the periphery of the ‘more’ important Christian identity - an outcome they deeply resented. In its response to the draft experiences and outcomes, the Jewish community made clear the fact that the expression ‘other world religions’ in relation to Christianity only made sense for Christian children. It argued that the phrase communicates *bias* to both the teacher and learner and estranges children from their own heritage and identity (SCJC 2008). Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 explained that,

... The faith community put a strong argument that we are not ‘other’ because for our members we are mainstream. They also expressed concern that the other religions are always compared to Christianity.

The response of the Catholic Church while acknowledging the concerns of the other faiths on the matter, was clear that the core function of RE in Catholic schools is to help young people encounter Jesus, to help them know what the teachings of Christianity are and importantly what the teachings of the Catholic Church are. The representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland in the study noted:

While we respect and honour the pursuit of traditions, our job is not to introduce people to these other religions. We are not competent to do that... We recognise as well that there might be a particular group of children from other faith traditions in our schools and that reference to their religions should be made but we are all reminded that our schools are Catholic and that the teaching of Catholic values and faith are paramount.

In the end, government removed the term ‘other’ in describing faith groups that are not Christian and replaced it with the phrase ‘world religions selected for study’ in the CfE guidelines. However, it should be noted that the denominational (Catholic) document has maintained the term ‘OWR’.

In Malawi the rejection of RME was in many ways underpinned by the need of the Churches to maintain Christian identity in their schools. One of the issues representatives of the Churches in the research were heard repeating was that Malawi was a ‘Christian’ nation and that for this reason in their view the teaching of other religions was contradictory to the wishes of the more than 80%

Christian adherents in the country. Besides the critical role Churches played in the emergence of a new democratic dispensation (see chapter 5), in Malawi the Christian faith is firmly intertwined with the country's national identity (Ross 1998). Given this background, it is easy to see why most respondents felt that it was anathema for Church schools to teach Islam or *Gule Wamkulu* (occultist performances associated with Malawi's ATR). They pointed out that the only way Churches could make sure that these other religions were prevented from 'corrupting' the religious identity of children of their members was not to have the new RME in the first place.

It seems that Churches in Malawi have been successful in rejecting RME and able to impose their identity in the educational system because they own schools. This, in my view, is the crucial issue in Malawi. In other words, Churches in Malawi have used schools as a bargaining chip and to great effect. Representatives of the various Churches in the study explained that Churches were able to swing the balance of influence in their favour during the delicate discussions with government over the new RME programme because they control schools. Even government officials represented in this study admitted that stakeholders with schools have been carrying a bigger stick, which historically has helped to determine the outcomes of educational disputes. The representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi commented:

We told the government that if you don't reintroduce BK in the national curriculum we will take back our schools. After intense negotiations the government gave in and then said that the subject would be optional between BK and RME and that the latter would not be imposed as what the government had done when it first replaced BK with RME.

On their part, Muslims criticised the government's capitulation to the demands of the Christian fraternity arguing that grant-aided schools were in effect government schools which should not be allowed to determine the teaching of BK only. Clearly, the Muslim fraternity saw the potential threat to its new-found identity if schools in the country were to be allowed to revert to the teaching of BK. There is no doubt that RME was the only hope Muslims had to exert their identity, which was at its political peak during the presidency of Bakili Muluzi. The Churches' response to Muslim concerns was that if the Muslims wanted to teach their children Islam then they were free to build their own schools. The

representative of the Catholic Church in Malawi was unapologetic about this when he said:

... If Muslims want Islam to be taught to their children let them open their schools. Historically, these schools have been our schools and there is no way we can allow Islam to be taught. We are not opposed to Muslims opening their own schools if they wanted. But for our schools it is Christianity we want.

The issue about RE in schools in Malawi has had serious implications for the grant-aid arrangement which has worked seamlessly since independence. The issue now is that Churches, particularly Presbyterian and Catholic, that had this sort of arrangement want to sever it by demanding their schools from government control. In an interview with the representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi (RPCM), one discussion went on as follows:

*Researcher:* There is talk that you are demanding your schools such as HHI secondary school back from the government. Is this true?

*RPCM:* Oh yes, although at the moment HHI is not completely in our hands. It is on transit. Forms 1 and 2 now belong to the Church while Forms 3 and 4 are government. The idea is that in the next two years the government will be out of this school completely. In fact, at the moment the government has stopped selecting students to this school.

*Researcher:* Is what is happening to HHI anything to do with developments in RE?

*RPCM:* In 2011 there will be an official function to hand over the school back to us. There is a provision in government policy in which Churches can ask their schools back to them. What has been most influential has been the continued low quality education in Malawi. After 1994 educational standards became worrisome and so Churches wanted to capture its glory in providing quality education which puts emphasis on Christian moral values by operating their own schools. One of the policies we use is Christian values which a BK programme provides because we believe that the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom. Under the grant-aid system the Church could not impose on children its values which a Bible-based syllabus provides.

When the issue of schools was put to the representatives of the Muslim community they explained that unfortunately there are no Muslim controlled public schools. They did mention though that there are a number of private schools owned by Muslims or Muslim organisations that are operating in the country. They expressed happiness that at least in these schools Islam is given

the attention it deserves. For example, they noted that after normal school lessons, Sheikhs come into the schools and offer the children Islamic teachings. They said that this is done to ensure that Islam remains strong in the life of their children.

Muslim anger and frustration over the issue of RE was also easily noticeable during the study and perhaps understandably so, given the fact Muslims feel that their identity in the country is under threat. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 1 said:

Muslims have the freedom to enjoy the fruits of democracy like anyone else. We are treated as if we are strangers in this country or as if they are expecting us to leave one day soon. This is not a good thing. However, as Muslim leaders we tell our youth to be calm because this is our country and we must help develop it.

From the findings in this study, it is evidently clear that the Muslim community has failed to have any leverage on the teaching of RME in Malawian schools because there are no Muslim grant-aided public schools in the country. Thus, between the two religious communities it is the Christian community that has emerged 'victorious' because it is able to demand that in its schools BK be taught largely as a way of retaining the Churches' identity on children who attend these schools. The more troubling view that Muslims are denied the chance to express themselves religiously in the country was also expressed in the research. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 2 noted:

In other countries people are free to express themselves religiously without any coercion or impediment. In those countries people do not fear religion or religious issues. Here in Malawi once Muslims try to do something the government turns around and say that Muslims want to Islamise the country. This is where the problems arise. People from other religions have fear of Islam that maybe this country will be turned into an Islamic state. This makes Muslims wonder why people have this perception about Islam.

The study established that to maintain Islamic influence in the lives of their children, Muslim parents in Malawi have taken the only option left: sending their children to the *Madrasah* (Islamic school) after school. This is also being encouraged by the Muslim Association, which urges parents to send their children to *Madrasahs* where the Islamic identity can be reinforced under the

guidance of the Imams. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 2 stated:

... We have special programmes for our children at the Madrasah because we realise that the state system has failed to cater for their needs. So after school many parents hire sheikhs to teach their children the truth about their religion because the state system has failed them. So now, Muslim organisations, such as ourselves, are encouraging parents to send their children to the Madrasah.

Deducing from the views expressed by Muslim respondents, it would seem that Muslim parents are sending their children to the *Madrasah* because of the complete failure of government policy to ensure that RME is taught in schools. As I will explore fully in chapter 8, the irony in the Malawi situation is that although in principle multi-faith RE exists on the national curriculum it has been largely ignored by schools. In an era of growing religious extremism, which Madrasahs are sometimes accused of fanning (Park and Niyozov 2008), it might not be prudent for the educational system in Malawi to allow Muslim children to obtain their RE lessons at the Madrasah. My view is that Madrasah education has the same effect of engendering religious parochialism as Sunday school education because what each of the two types of schools teaches is too sacred for critical evaluation. In other words, indoctrination and *not* education characterises what is taught in the *Madrasah* or Sunday Schools. In the words of Jonan Sturm,

In cases of indoctrination, educators are wilfully seeking to suppress the full development of intellectual virtues (objectivity, veracity, scrutiny, ability to admit being wrong, critical attitude) and rational emotions (truthfulness, dedication to rationality, courage to think independently) (Sturm 1993, p. 41).

Left with little choice, however, it seems that Muslim parents in Malawi have taken the *radical* decision to enrol their children in the *Madrasah* system of education for their religious instruction because the state system of education has essentially ignored their needs. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 2 noted:

... The research you are doing, asking me all these questions should have be the government or educational officials asking us these questions and trying to solve the problem for us. They should be trying to see what the needs of Muslims are, whether there is need to train

Muslim teachers in RE ... We feel completely marginalised and ignored on this matter.

Examining the feelings of Muslims in Malawi more critically, it seems that they are particularly worried about the continued dominance of Christianity in public life which has a direct effect on the expression of their identity. This feeling among Muslims seems so strong to the extent that they have rejected the results of latest (2008) population census. The disputation is over what Muslims see as the manipulation of the census figures to make the Muslim population appear stagnant while making the Christian population appear to be growing. From the figures released there are over one and half million Muslims compared to more ten million Christians. To give these figures some context this means that in the latest census the Muslim population has slightly increased from 12.8% to 13.0% while the Christian population has grown from 79.9% to 82.7% (Malawi Government 2008b).

Whether the Muslim community has a point in disputing the national census report is difficult to say, and in any case it is an issue that cannot be resolved here as it is beyond the scope of this study. What can be commented on, however, is the fact that Muslims see in these numbers what they perceive as a deliberate move by the government to make their numbers appear unimpressive and therefore of less educational significance. The Muslim Association is so serious about this that it is planning to commission its own census of Muslims in the country towards the end of 2010, apparently to challenge the figures presented by the national statistical office (*Nyasa Times* 2009). It is worth noting however, that by the time this thesis was finalised in April 2011, the Muslim commissioned census had not taken place.

From the findings in this chapter it can also be surmised that Christian dominance in education in Malawi perpetuates historical inequalities for Muslims and the educational privilege for Christians. In a world of competing cultural, historical and religious loyalties, it is my view that RE is well placed to make a lasting and positive difference in the lives of people. The situation in Malawi over religious identity is indicative of the fact the country needs a new framework for RE that is *sensitive* and *inclusive* to enable children from the different and often polarised religious communities to begin the small but important task of conversing with each other. After all, a fundamental purpose

of education should be *socialisation* and not *alienation* (Wardekker and Miedema 2001).

#### 7.4. Intractability of consultation

The issue of consultation has been one of the hotly contested areas regarding RE reform in Scotland and Malawi. The issue revolves around several points of disagreement. The study found that government respondents in the research were quick to say that consultation was done with all relevant stakeholders during the process of reform in RE. For example, Ministry of Education official in Malawi 2 said:

Oh yes, the development of new syllabi was done with the full consultation mostly of faith groups so that in future they should not say we don't want this because we were not consulted...

In Scotland, respondents representing the government gave a similar positive response to the effect that consultation was properly done with key stakeholders. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 said:

In terms of consultation there is a list of groups that are always consulted. The Churches, parent bodies and also that the drafts of the curriculum are always circulated to all schools for comment... So, full consultation with the profession has been key to the development of RE...

However, non-government key stakeholders who responded to this study in both countries rejected the governments' optimistic view and stated that consultation was either absent or wholly ineffective. Starting with Malawi, most of the respondents said that the government reformed RE without consulting them and then imposed the new syllabus on schools to teach it. Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 2 noted that,

Consultation on the ground was not done. That is why there was conflict between religious groups because RE touched on religion. Muslims spoke and Christians spoke. Adequate consultation did not take place to find out whether people wanted that change. They government just unilaterally changed the syllabus.

Parents involved in the research also expressed a similar view of not being consulted on the reforms. Chairperson of a parent council in Malawi 1 explained that,

Yes, we heard about this issue on the radio and newspapers but we as parents in the villages were never, never consulted. Perhaps the issue started with the president and did not bother to consult people in the villages. We were outside the circle of interest of the government over this issue, I guess.

Worryingly perhaps, major Churches in Malawi such as Catholic and Presbyterian were left out in the initial but crucial stages of the consultation process. This led some of the respondents in the study to allege (a charge that was repeated by a number of respondents) that Church officials were left out in these reform meetings because money had been available to facilitate the reform process and that the government officials involved only wanted their friends and acquaintances to sit on the RE panels so that they could benefit from *honorarium* given from being involved. While corruption may appear to be a less regarded issue, in a country where salaries are low many people desire to attend meetings where an *honorarium* is paid to supplement their income (Kishindo 1995).

The sore point for Churches seemed to have been the fact that the government merely handpicked people in their *personal capacity* and then later claimed that because they belonged to a variety of denominations, then those Churches were consulted. For example, representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi said:

Oh no, not at all. The government lies about this. No consultation takes place with us. What happens is that the government asks Christians who work in the Ministry of Education and not the Church office... However, when they write they say that they *consulted* all the Churches when in fact they did not. If you look at the names of the people on the panel you would not see any official Church representative... If you look at the names we expected to see the names of the general secretary, the synod moderator of the CCAP [Presbyterian Church] or the bishop [Catholic Church] but if the names that appear are only those of education officials who happen to be our members how can that be consultation? The government *did not* come to our offices. We just found that the syllabus had changed [my emphasis].



Representatives of the various Malawian Churches in this research also pointed out that their Churches were left out in the initial stages of the reform process. This exacerbated the Churches' apathetic attitude towards the reforms and of course the new subject upon which these reforms were based. It must be pointed out that while Churches were genuinely left out; representatives of the Muslim community in Malawi were heavily involved throughout the consultation process. For example, Muslims sat on subject review panels, syllabus drafting committees and so on. It was this fact that appears to have solidified the perception in the minds of Christian stakeholders that these reforms were being undertaken principally for the benefit of Muslims. Christian stakeholders wondered why at a time when the country had a president who was a Muslim the government ensured that Muslims were represented in all the stages of the reform when Churches were considered as an afterthought (see MME 2000).

Another sentiment expressed by some respondents in the Malawi research was that by pre-selecting certain individuals of its choosing, the government was perhaps in some way signalling that it was apprehensive that the changes it wanted to make to RE would be unpopular. For this reason, the government was seeking to consult with like-minded people. Putting it in another way, it sought only the opinions of those people who would offer little objection to the manner in which government wanted the direction of these reforms to go. Other respondents noted that the government could have saved itself all the embarrassment of having its curriculum rejected had it invited the Churches to be part of reform process through their own appointed representatives. The issue of curriculum technocrats choosing 'like-minded' people when it comes to educational reform also surfaces in relevant literature. Kant and Kay have suggested that this is why, in general, curriculum change fails because subconsciously curriculum officials surround themselves with people who provide a buffer against alternative views (Kent and Kay 2010). On their part, Colwill and Gallagher suggest that often curriculum initiatives fail because they are introduced in rush before adequate policy preparations are made (Colwill and Gallagher 2007)

Research in Scotland revealed that while generally Scottish stakeholders were in agreement that consultation in one form or another *did* take place with stakeholders (both in the 5-14 and CfE) they offered subtle perspectives on the issue. We noted earlier that when 5-14 RE guidelines were proposed the

government did not initially involve the Catholic Church hierarchy regarding consultation. Rather the government went ahead to produce a single curriculum framework for RE which the Church rejected. We now know that official contact between the Catholic Church and the government over changes in RE in the 5-14 Curriculum happened only on two occasions: on 15th September 1989 when the government informed the Church of the plans to create a draft document on changes in RE and then days prior to the production of Working Paper No. 7 in 1991 when the government merely requested the Church to respond (Coll 1999).

It was only when the Church rejected the 5-14 Curriculum in its entirety that the government perhaps realised the extent of its error in failing to consult the Church on the important subject of RE, considering the fact the Church is the second largest proprietor of schools in the country. In addition to this, the Church was angered over the issue of 'representation' during the initial stages of the reform process. As in Malawi, what happened in Scotland was that the government initially hand-picked people who happened to be Catholics to be part of RDG 5. Reacting to this, the Catholic Church pointed out that the views of Catholics who sat on RDG 5 did not in any way represent those of the official voice of the Catholic Church. And because these individuals had not been appointed by the Church they had no mandate to speak on its behalf (Conroy 2003).

Regarding more recent CfE reforms, while religious communities such as Judaism, the Catholic Church and Church of Scotland said that they were consulted, the Muslim community categorically said that it was not consulted. Representative of the Muslim community in the study explained that the Muslim community first came to know about this quite by chance when some of its members stumbled upon the draft document on the internet. It was only when the Muslim community responded to the draft documents that the government got in touch with the Muslim community for further consultation. In its response to the draft document, the Muslim community pointed out its strong disappointment that it was not included in the development of the outcome codes, and that it was merely making a response (see also SMPA 2008).

A number of respondents in the study expressed the view that consultation with key stakeholders in CfE was in most respects patchy. They pointed out that the draft guidelines upon which CfE is now based are the work of a few

commissioned writers. Respondents noted that government through its agency Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS) merely put up the draft outcomes on their website with the assumption that interested stakeholders would find them and respond to them. Lecturer at a University in Scotland 1 noted:

... My impression is that there has been a lot of confusion amongst RE teachers about what is happening. I think that there were different people employed by the agency LTS that drafted the outcomes. It was very difficult at one stage to find out what was happening. I know that although LTS invited people to become critical friends on the CfE documents many of us who made the offer were not consulted.

Respondents representing the teaching profession, schools and universities in this study also noted that by hiring a few 'experts' the government allowed the ideas of an *elite* group of people to have undue influence on RE. Respondents' view was that the new curriculum could have greatly benefited from a range of ideas had the drafting process been opened to include as many interested parties as possible. Parents who took part in this study also expressed misgivings about the government's desire to consult relevant stakeholders adequately. Chairperson of parent council in Scotland 2 remarked:

Few parents are aware of the changes taking place in RE. The government always says it has consulted the parents but in reality it never does. I know this because I was a chairperson of parent council forum. Government sometimes say that we have given you this document to respond and given a week to do it. This is not consultation.

Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 also agreed:

Oh no, absolutely not. I am not pleased and I have been on the school board for many years. We were just merely told that CfE was coming. It was all after the fact. It was to inform us rather than consult with us and that is not consultation... The so called consultation is done through the backdoor because I don't think that the government is really interested to hear what we have to say on these matters... No one listens to us.

It was clear from the findings that most of the respondents in this study see the new RE curriculum as a top-down imposition of the ideas of a select few and the product of a government which effectively said to schools that this is what we think you should do rather than the other way round. For this reason others felt

that stakeholders were not given equal chance to shape the outcome of the consultation process. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 5 noted that,

No, there has not been adequate consultation. There are many of us who don't feel that. I would say to you that in the past year when CfE came out I spoke to many teachers who believed that they did not get the opportunity to have an in-put with CfE. They believed strongly that they were no regular meetings where people could make a structured input. So yes I do believe strongly and I think there are a number of us who believe that consultation took place in a board room...

Relevant literature seems also critical of the Scottish educational policy-making suggesting that a veneer of democratic consensus disguises control by elites (Humes and Bryce 2001). From the findings in the present study, even those respondents who pointed out that there has been a sincere attempt to consult the various stakeholders regarding CfE reforms admitted that the government could have done more. Principal Teacher at non-denominational school in Scotland 1 was of the view that,

... I really think that there could have been an awful lot more consultation. And I think that there should be more consultation about how we are taking the subject forward, what our aims are in the 21st century, what we should be including and taking on board not only teachers but also politicians, the Church of Scotland, the major denominations and world religions ...

Thus, many respondents felt that by failing to involve teachers more widely in the drafting of the new curriculum the government has missed a great opportunity to make RE more effective. It can therefore be surmised that in the initial stages governments in both Scotland and Malawi did not think it necessary (to their peril as it turned out) to consult non-government key stakeholders. It seems that the governments in the two countries erroneously assumed that as curriculum reform was an educational matter, the government could go ahead and reform RE as it saw fit. While this could be the case with other curriculum subjects, RE is and will always be a different 'kettle of fish' as the two governments found out to their cost. It was only after significant stakeholders such as Churches had rejected the reforms that governments realised the damage that had been caused. Although the governments then tried to bring the Churches on board it seems that by that time it was already too late to change

the mind-set of the Church leaders. For example, in Scotland the Catholic Church had already made up its mind to reject the one policy framework for RE in the 5-14 Curriculum of 1991 and in Malawi Churches had already made up their minds to reject the new RME programme introduced in 2000 as well.

### 7.5. Insensitivity of new policy

In both Scotland and Malawi there was also contestation around the new policy for RE. The feeling was that the new policies were by and large insensitive to the particular needs of Churches in relation to RE. Perhaps with the benefit of hindsight on my part, it is incomprehensible to think that in both countries governments actually went ahead to formulate new policies for RE with little or no consultation with Churches. In some ways it would seem that the governments in the respective countries made the critical error of treating RE as if it were any other curricular subject (which clearly it is not). A subject aided by legislation (as in Scotland), a subject favoured by stakeholders with schools, and a subject performing an *architectonic* role—that is a ‘faith to live by or an understanding of the meaning of life’ (Mitchell 1980, p. 134)—surely should not have been treated like any other subject.

In Scotland, the most obvious issue over the new 1990s policy had to do with the introduction of a single policy for RE when previously there had been a dual policy for RE for the two main types of state schools (i.e. non-denominational and denominational). The attempted introduction of a single policy for all types of schools that came with the 5-14 Curriculum was an unprecedented development considering the fact that since 1918 Scotland had always had a dual RE policy for the two types of state schools. Judging from the reaction of the Catholic Church as noted earlier (see chapter 6), it is evident that the integrated policy was ill-advised.

It seems to me that the government was too optimistic to think that the Catholic Church would accept a single policy for RE that was designed without input from the Church. Reflecting on the relationship between the Catholic Church and Scottish government over the matter of education in general and RE in particular, the representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland noted that,

... It is a partnership that has not been easy. Probably overall it has been more comfortable than it might have been. There have been one of two occasions where pressure was coming typically by some people who said, well, let us just make these outcomes the same for RE in Catholic education as for non-Catholic schools... Now the problem with that is that they misunderstood what the purposes of Catholic RE are. In our case, it is *catechetical* and it is also *evangelical*... In the non-denominational sector it's not faith at all... It's much more a *phenomenological* study of religion and other faith positions... In our view the two are *incompatible* really within one policy framework ... [my emphasis].

The Catholic Church rejected the one policy framework for 5-14 RE because it did not have space for a curriculum that 'reflect[s] the spirit and aims of Religious Education in Catholics schools' (SOCC 1993, p. i). It appears that this experience of the early 1990s has made the Church more proactive in its dealings with the government over the matter of RE, as exemplified in the recent reforms (i.e. CfE). Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 noted that,

The Catholic Church in Scotland tended to be reactive and not proactive. It's interesting that this time around the Church has become a little bit more pro-active regarding RE reform.

The representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland agreed:

... Now the difference this time around is that at the start of the reform process [i.e. of CfE] we went to the government and said: let us not make the same mistake and wait until the draft guidelines are published and then say we have a problem. We said let us build on our needs from the very start. So from the very start there was need to have a particular provision for RE in Catholic schools...

In Malawi, the parallel controversy centred on the introduction of a new subject (i.e. RME) to replace BK without first considering the option of a dual policy arrangement for those with ideological reservations towards the new syllabus that was now being offered as compulsory. The new policy was imposed when RME was introduced in 2000. This caused great concern for many stakeholders, particularly Churches, because to many orthodox Christians, it seemed that the compulsory policy for RME was meant to decentre the BK curriculum which had existed in education during the previous century and half. In its effort to reform RE, the government seemed to have failed to take into account the statutory

position of the subject. Edgar Almen of Linköping University, who spoke to Ministry of Education officials in 2001 about the matter of RE, noted:

Religious Education and moral [sic] was proposed to be one of the compulsory courses. The Malawi Education Act says that Religious Instruction must not be compulsory in the schools. Ministry of Education had thought that the new subject was not Religious Instruction but had to change its proposal and make the subject eligible (Almen 2001b).

Churches in Malawi reacted strongly to the single compulsory policy and it would seem that by the time the government acknowledged its oversight on the matter, Churches had by then already hardened their opposition against the new policy and the new subject that came along with it. The suspension of RE in 2000, to allow time for delicate negotiations with Churches to take place over the matter, was in my view a desperate move by a government which found itself at the receiving end of a disruptive policy it had created. It should be revealed that in its desperation to ‘fix’ the problem, as protests by the Christian fraternity over the subject mounted, ‘technical people’ in the Ministry of Education headquarters went as far as suggesting three subjects to be offered in RE—namely, BK, RME and Islamic Studies. This proposal was rejected by the Churches but accepted by leaders of the Muslim community. However, it would seem that in the end the ‘three syllabi’ solution was abandoned because of the cost implications of providing human and materials resources if three different RE subjects were to be offered. In the end, the government introduced a ‘two subject’ policy for RE which offered both the ‘old’ BK and RME on the national curriculum. The two subjects were also made elective on the curriculum (Almen 2001a).

## 7.6. Conclusion

The findings in this chapter have outlined some common areas of contestation for RE in Scotland and Malawi. It has demonstrated that for a successful outcome in RE curriculum reform, ideological ‘spaces’ must be guaranteed so that the various competing groups can be able to express their distinctiveness without the danger of any of them crashing into each other’s spaces. In short, what were the main issues that emerged from the findings in this chapter? First,

it was found that the new policies introduced without consultation with key stakeholders were not only unworkable but divisive as well. This was the case because those who felt marginalised by the new policies routinely adopted a defensive position against the new curricular initiatives.

Secondly, it also seems that adopting multiple policies in RE based upon diversity though seemingly ideal has its challenges, for example, in requiring heavy human and material resources and bringing the difficulties of managing a number of disparate syllabi in a single curriculum subject. As the situation in Scotland and Malawi has demonstrated, and indeed as experiences from other countries such as Kenya would illustrate (Svensson 2007), RE will perhaps remain a unique subject and a difficult one as well, hard to fit into a single curriculum model comparable to other curricular subjects.

Third, consultation was another grey area of contest for Scottish and Malawian RE. This was a surprising finding considering the fact that governments in both countries must have been acutely aware of the contentious nature of RE and yet repeatedly seemed to allow a haphazard and selective consultation process to develop which key stakeholders unsurprisingly find unacceptable.

Finally, the findings in this chapter suggest that treating RE as if it were like any other curriculum subject is a mistake. RE is a unique and challenging subject which requires diplomatic skills to deal with its delicate nature and complex relationships to society. It is a subject which for most stakeholders epitomises their religious identity and, as such, it is my view that to guarantee a successful outcome for any curriculum reform in this area, there is a need to create a positive 'space' for dialogue to be achieved only through careful negotiation, collaboration and compromise.



## Chapter 8

### Religious Education in Different School Contexts

#### 8.1. Introduction

The complexity of RE as a school subject has made it perhaps one of the most legislated curriculum subjects anywhere in the world. While in other countries such as the USA and France legislation (and its impact on educational policy) is about *restricting* the teaching of RE in public education, in most liberal countries legislation and educational policy exist to provide guidance to schools regarding how they should deal with what amounts to a *difficult* curriculum subject (Brickman 1972; Jackson 2009). Since the 1944 Education Act in England, for instance, various laws have been passed to govern specific policies for RE. Perhaps the best known of these policies is the ‘agreed syllabus’ policy which directs schools to seek community input in the kind of RE that a community may desire for its children (Jackson and O’Grady 2007). In Northern Ireland where religion is *notoriously* a central public issue of concern, education policy in state schools dictates that a compulsory ecumenical RE should be offered but with a clause allowing Catholic schools to prepare children for sacraments (Armstrong 2009).

It is in this context that the present chapter examined not only the general trend regarding how Scottish and Malawian schools engage with RE in light of various legislation and policies governing the subject, but more generally the level of RE provision in schools as well. To reiterate, the main curriculum policy issues for RE in Scotland were contained in Circular No. 6/91 (which were in force at the time writing of this thesis in 2010) and revolve around several issues: (a) RE as a compulsory subject by law, (b) the ‘opt out’ option for parents (i.e. ‘conscience clause’), (c) allocated time for teaching, (d) how to deal with ‘other’ world religions, (e) the issue of Christianity as *primus inter pares*, (f) separate guidelines for ‘RE’ in Catholic schools and ‘RME’ in non-denominational schools and finally, (g) the professionalisation of RE teachers (See Fairweather and MacDonald 1992; Lonie 1991). In Malawi, the present chapter looked at two main policy areas for RE in schools: (a) the ‘opt out’

provision for parents (i.e. ‘conscience clause’) and (b) the ‘dual-mode’ policy for RE on the junior secondary curriculum (See Nyirenda 2005; O’Dala 2001).

The study found that in Scotland there was greater mismatch (with some exception regarding Catholic schools) between policy and practice in terms of the level of provision in RE. It was noted that while there were instances of commonality of practice in provision among schools on some issues, on the whole there was dissimilarity regarding how different schools went about implementing the various policies governing RE. In contrast, the study found greater uniformity of practice among the Malawi schools studied. On the issue of a ‘dual-policy’ in RE, the study did not find evidence to support the perception that schools in so-called Muslim areas offer RME (because it has Islamic material) as opposed to BK. Regarding the provision of RME vis-à-vis BK in schools, the study found that BK is the most favoured syllabus in Malawian schools. It thus concludes that RME is in a state of crisis in Malawi and that without government intervention it might disappear altogether from the curriculum, reasons for which are suggested in this chapter.

## **8.2. Variance and ambiguity in Scottish schools**

Based on analysis of interview data, relevant documents and survey of Scottish state secondary schools (both non-denominational and Catholic) (n287/376 or 76.3%), a range of issues emerged which informed the research regarding the level of provision in RE and issues that underpin that provision in Scottish schools. Regarding what schools were actually teaching on the compulsory part of the curriculum (i.e. from ages 5 to 14 in the 5-14 Curriculum and for schools that were piloting the new CfE from ages 3 to 18), it was found that the ‘guidelines’ policy system or rather the flexibility of its nature has provided opportunity for schools to input a range of different content materials into their individual school syllabi.

As we also noted in chapter 6, this curriculum ‘flexibility’ is largely to do with the fact that although legislation dating back to 1872 imposes a statutory duty on local authorities to provide RE, the Act does not detail the *form* that RE should take. The Scottish Government only issues *advice* to education authorities on how to meet the statutory obligations. This means that schools and local

authorities determine what form of RE to offer based on local needs and circumstances (see also McKechnie 2009). It is important to note that while policy recognises school context and the historical significance of Christianity in Scottish education, the general policy advice is that since Scotland is increasingly a multi-cultural country, credence should be given to the teaching of other major religions in RE as well.

The study also found that although this was found only in a few cases (n5/287), there were schools that taught only Christianity and thus did not include aspects of other religions in their curriculum. In such schools it was found that the syllabi consisted of topics such as 'Bible and creation', 'life of Jesus Christ', 'worship and the Church' and 'faith in action'. What was perhaps intriguing about some of these cases was that there were also non-denominational schools (n2/287) adopting the practice of offering only Christianity in RE. In a Scottish context, where the Catholic Church operates its own schools in partnership with the state, it is not at all unexpected that Catholic schools would be the ones leaning markedly towards a Christocentric syllabus. But this is unexpected in non-denominational schools, where the general perception is that the secular agenda has taken hold. Thus, to find instances in which Scottish non-denominational schools also had leanings towards a faith position for RE in this way reflects perhaps less on how individual Scottish schools respond to religious issues and more on the complexity of religious belief and its impact on school managers and teachers responsible for managing the RE curriculum in line with the needs and contexts of their communities. How can this situation be explained?

Part of the answer to this probably rests on the fact the personal beliefs and worldviews of headteachers (Davies 2001) and teachers have a huge bearing on school policy and practice (Maslovaty 2002; Hollaway 1991). As in Zambia (Chizelu 2006) and South Africa (Rodger 1982), it seems that notwithstanding their professional commitments, RE teachers sometimes find it personally difficult to embrace the secular views of education and join the multi-faith movement because this conflicts with their religious consciousness. While there is very little discussion of this tension in current discourse, it seems that headteachers' personal or religious views can have a detrimental effect on RE as well. This can be complicated given the fact that in some countries such as

England the ‘right to withdraw’ can apply not only to pupils and teachers but to headteachers as well (SOTBC 2008).

It thus can be surmised here that in cases where the headteacher in Scotland is ‘religious’, RE can have a prominent place in the school curriculum and in cases where he/she is not the opposite can be sometimes be the case. Literature on curriculum improvement in Scotland is clear on the importance of headteachers as forces of change which by implication means that they can also be obstacles to change on those areas of the curriculum they are less enthusiastic about (see Malcom 1997). My view is that if headteachers are unsympathetic to the subject they can easily close the gate on RE with the implication that without their support teachers can do very little to improve the well-being of the subject. In the present cultural context of Scotland where secular influences are strong, a subject such as RE will always need constant support of headteachers to ensure not only adequate provision but that teachers are also well supported for them to be able to make the necessary improvements in the subject.

Evidence gathered from some headteachers in Scotland—one at an ‘evangelical’ private Christian school and the other one at a state non-denominational school—suggested that besides Catholic schools where RE is central to the *raison d’être*, there are instances where headteachers in non-denominational schools who are professing Christians can adopt favourable school policies for RE. These policies include making sure that the subject has all the required specialist staff and that it is given the maximum allowed teaching time on the timetable and so on. From the conversations with these headteachers, it also became apparent that the ‘Christian Evangelical Alliance for Scotland’ (CEAS), of which some of these headteachers are members, has this kind of influence. The alliance sometimes runs conferences on themes such as ‘role of faith in Scotland’s educational system’. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 explained that,

Personal values of the headteacher and leadership team are fundamental to what happens to RE in most schools. There are headteachers who just want to tick the box that because it is a compulsory subject they have done this and that. I mean that there are headteachers who are minimalist when it comes to RE because they are not enthusiastic about the subject. However, there are others like myself who are committed to the Christian faith. The problem in Scotland is that only staff in Catholic schools can declare

their faith position while staff in the other school sector cannot. I know Christian headteachers like myself who are beginning to promote the Christian faith through CfE because the new curriculum gives headteachers that scope.

What this evidence suggests is that despite the veneer of 'secular' education in the state non-denominational schools in Scotland, the reality is much more complex. What the findings in this study suggest is that there is a small but active Christian group of headteachers in non-denominational schools in Scotland pushing for a far greater recognition of Christianity in RE taught in their schools.

The study found that while the majority of non-denominational schools surveyed (n81/287 or 28.2%) were still calling the subject by the standard term 'RME', in a number of cases schools called the subject by different names such as: 'Religious Studies', 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical Education' (RMPE), 'Religion and Philosophy', 'Faith and Philosophy', 'Religious and Moral Studies' (RMS), 'Philosophy' and 'Religious, Moral, Philosophical Studies' (RMPS). In fact, there was one school where the nomenclature of the subject was 'Religious Instruction' (a historical term denoting RE and no longer in common use) and not the officially acceptable term 'RME' for the subject in non-denominational school or 'RE' for denominational Catholic schools. A small survey of Scottish schools carried out in 2006 by Graeme Nixon of Aberdeen University found that there was uncertainty about the name of the subject and, worryingly, a lack of consensus on what to call RE (Nixon 2006). While one may wonder what is in a name, the point here is that in a subject such as RE, with prescribed rules and agreed protocols, the expectation is that those mandated to offer it would be clear about what 'name' policy suggests or recommends which, as we have noted, is 'RME' for non-denominational schools and 'RE' for denominational Catholic schools.

Examining the various names being used to describe RE in Scottish schools the attraction of 'philosophy' is glaringly obvious. The study found that a large number of Scottish schools (n93/287 or 32.4%), all in the non-denominational sector in this case, have given their departments a name related to philosophy for example choice of names such as 'RMPS', 'RMPE' or just 'Philosophy'. Respondents explained that the preference in the nomenclature related to philosophy is an attempt to reflect what the subject is actually about, with the hope that the name change will inject a new 'positive' image for RE. Principal

Teacher at a non-denominational in Scotland 1 explained how this came about in his school:

When I came to this school I changed it [RME] to RMPS because it is what the Highers and Intermediate courses are called. I felt that it better reflects what we do in the subject. We study religion, we study moral issues and I think this gives a better description of what we are trying to do. But in particular, it is to try and get rid of old stigmas about RE which can come from colleagues and parents in particular. That is you still have some pupils trying to see if this is vibrant, modern and a good subject. So the name change is trying to reflect what we do.

Relevant literature suggests that the ‘philosophication’ of RE is increasingly becoming common in Scottish schools. One of the reasons for this is that teachers feel that it makes the teaching of religion more ‘credible’ or even ‘sexy’. Others have postulated that teachers are in favour of philosophy because it ‘develops critical thinking and a more understanding and respectful attitude towards reflection on personal belief and behaviour’ (McCracken 2008, p. 11). Graeme Nixon, perhaps one of the fiercest proponents for the ‘philosophication’ of Scottish RE, suggests that more schools in Scotland are in favour of philosophy or philosophical approaches because society has become more secular, liberal and that for most people religion (that is Church attendance) is no longer the basis of their moral and spiritual life (Nixon 2008)<sup>9</sup>. For Nixon, this fundamental shift in pedagogy reflects the notion that most Scots who still prefer RE in the curriculum would like to see the subject far removed from confessionalism (Nixon 2009). However, as we noted in chapter 6, the Catholic Church in general and Catholic schools in particular, do not give much credence to the ‘philosophication’ of RE. Similarly, other Christian groups concerned about the apparent diminishing of the influence of Christianity in British life also do not take kindly to this pedagogical shift (see McCracken 2008).

The influence of teacher education to the ‘philosophication’ of Scottish RE should also be considered. Briefly, SSRE teachers in Scotland currently receive their initial training at five universities—namely in this study: Scottish university 1, Scottish University 2, Scottish university 4, Scottish university 5 and Scottish

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<sup>9</sup> Graeme Nixon, who is a lecturer in RE in the School of Education at Aberdeen University, is completing a doctoral study at the same university under the title: *What Factors Have Influenced the Emergence of Philosophy in Scottish Secondary Religious Education?*

university 6. The study found that each of these universities emphasise particular pedagogies of RE for their teacher education. For instance, at Scottish university 6 it is 'comparative religions'; at Scottish university 1 it is 'phenomenology/comparative religions'; at Scottish university 4 it is 'philosophy'; at Scottish university 5 it is 'philosophy' and at Scottish university 2 (currently the largest provider of RE teachers in Scotland and one that is also better equipped to carry out substantial research into the subject) it is both 'confessional' for those preparing to teach in the Catholic sector and 'phenomenology' for those preparing to teach in the non-denominational sector.

For this reason one finds that in Scotland RE teachers have a distinctive professional outlook on RE, partly because of the university that provided their initial teacher education where they are exposed to different pedagogical approaches characteristic to the different universities concerned. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 1 explained:

You will find that there is variance across Scotland regarding the training of RE teachers. If you go to [Scottish University 5] for example, [the RE Course Leader] might talk about philosophy which he advocates. This is something that is now being done at this university as well [i.e. Scottish University 4].

The professional biographies of teachers also indicate the extent of this variance. Principal Teacher at non-denominational school in Scotland 1 noted:

At Jordanhill College [now Strathclyde University] where I trained, I did comparative religions and developed expertise in the phenomenological approach. I mean that I also learnt about the Ninian Smart approach to world religions such as his dimensions of religions.

Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 1 also noted:

After a teaching degree in History from Stirling University, I enrolled on a part-time certificate course in 1982 at St. Andrews' College [now part of Glasgow University]. The course covered some aspects of World Religions but the concentration was on Catholic education, catechesis and so on because the training was for teachers in Catholic schools.

The point to be noted here is that the promotion of philosophical approaches for RE in teacher education at some Scottish universities has contributed to a rise in

interest of schools (mainly non-denominational) joining the philosophical movement in terms of the type of RE they are offering to pupils. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 4 noted:

Basically in line with the Personal Search approach we advocate for *open* and *exploratory* approach learning about and learning from religion. In my training of teachers I use philosophy as a *tool* for clarification and thinking and *not* a set of beliefs or doctrines to be learnt. In fact, I am an advocate of the subject title being called RMPS throughout the curriculum because that is how I would like my teacher trainees to understand as the *future* direction of the subject [my emphasis].

In an example from another university, lecturer at a university in Scotland 5 said:

We have in Scotland what is called the Personal Search approach which is an approach that attempts to focus on what is central about teaching religion to the child. Now the task of teacher training [sic] in my view is to find a way of teaching teachers to focus on what is *essential* for children in RE without turning them into *diluted* priests and nuns. The philosophical approach is the ideal model that helps to fit religion to the child and not the other way around... I tell my students that if what they teach can't be related to the *world of the child* then they should not teach it. In a curriculum situation even in RE where there is a lot to be covered, I tell my students to *focus* on Personal Search through the use of the philosophical approach [my emphasis].

It would seem therefore that the shift in focus of many RE programmes in Scottish schools to philosophy has regenerated pupils' interest in the subject (see *The Independent* 2006). This, in some ways philosophy has managed to 'market' RE, something which the subject has failed to do for a long time. Commenting on the historical problem of a lack of 'marketing' in RE, Suzanne Horne and Alison Logie have observed that the low status children in Scotland give RE is due to fact that the subject does not adequately market itself. They also point out that Scottish RE should communicate effectively its relevance to the various 'customers' such as pupils, parents, staff, governors and the local community. For example, that RE should inform end users that the knowledge and skills RE provides are relevant to the world of work (Horne and Logie 1999). Commenting on the rise of interest towards RE because of the 'pull' of philosophy, lecturer at a university in Scotland 4 explained that



What we have discovered is that RE in Scotland has taken off in a big way. Some of my former students have the biggest RE classes. I am sure that the appeal of philosophy has a lot to do with this rise in interest for the subject in schools.

It seems that the government is also satisfied with what philosophy is doing for RE. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 said:

Philosophy has done a lot to improve the pessimistic image RE has had. Philosophy appears now as this *sexy* subject which pupils have no problems in publically ascribing to as a subject. They seem *happier* to talk about philosophy than say RE itself [my emphasis].

Evidence gathered in this study indicates that there has been a small but steady rise of interest in the number of pupils taking certificated examinations in RE perhaps because of the fact most of these courses have philosophy embedded in them.

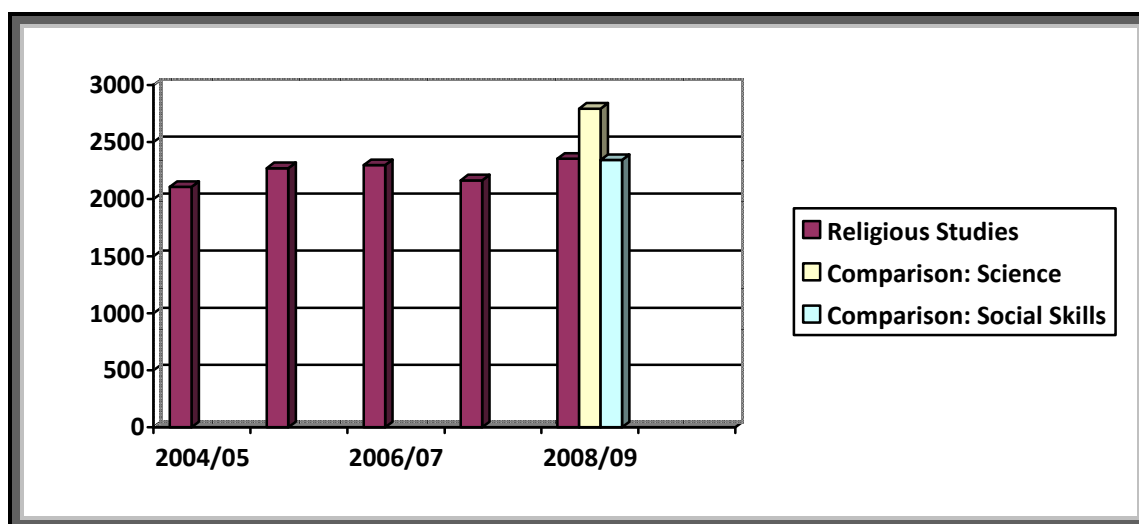


Figure 1: SCQF Levels 3-5 Religious Studies (i.e. RE) Candidates (2004 and 2009)  
(Source: *Scottish Statistical Bulletin Reports - Education Series*)

As represented in the graph above (Figure 1) statistics obtained from the Scottish government statistical bulletin reports show that between 2004/05 and 2008/09<sup>10</sup> academic years there was a small but steady rise in the numbers of

<sup>10</sup> Note that by the time the fieldwork research of this study was completed in 2010, the 2009/2010 educational statistics were not available.

candidates who attained the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) Levels 3-5 in Religious Studies (i.e. RE).<sup>11</sup> For example, there were 2,107 (3.7%), 2,271 (3.9%), 2,298 (4.0%), 2,169 (3.7%) and 2,354 (4.3%) successful candidates in Religious Studies examination at SCQF Levels 3-5 during the 2004/05, 2005/06, 2006/07, 2007/08 and 2008/09 academic years, respectively (Scottish Government 2009a, 2006). As indicated in the graph above, it is also important to note that in the latest statistics of 2008/09 the numbers of candidates who obtained a qualification in Religious Studies were somewhat comparable with those in Science at 2,793 (5.1%) and Social and Vocational Skills at 2,343 (4.3%) (see further details in appendix 6:1).

Subjecting the issue related to a rise in the numbers of candidates taking examinations in Religious Studies to closer scrutiny, there could be other variables contributing to this development other than simply the turn to philosophy. A careful analysis of the evidence suggests that the numbers could be helped by the fact that increasingly, independent Christian schools in Scotland are requiring *all their pupils* to take certificated examinations as part of school policy. It could also be attributed to other underlying factors in the general area of Scottish education. In recent years, educational policy in Scotland (through a number of incentives such as payment of student allowance for those staying on in schools) has encouraged pupil retention in post-compulsory education. This development has benefited RE as headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 explained:

More young people have in recent years been staying on until the sixth year. This has given them more opportunities to a wider choice of subjects as they move further up the school. So you are likely to see a situation that maybe they have got all the Highers they need for university by the end of fifth year and in sixth year and this allows them to stretch a little by doing some Advanced Highers but in the process take one or two subjects they are rather interested in one of which could be RE.

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<sup>11</sup> SCQF Levels 3-5 includes attainment in examinations at Access 3 cluster/Standard Grade at 5-6, Intermediate 1 at A-C/Standard Grade at 3-4 and Intermediate 2 at A-C/Standard Grade at 1-2. It that this does not include examinations at level 6 (Higher at A-C) and level 7 (Advanced Higher). Note also that one limitation of these statistics is that they only give the numbers of those who attained a qualification. This means that in these statistics I do not know the exact numbers of all candidates who attempted the examinations due to the lack of data on those who failed these examinations as well for me to be able to come up with a figure of all students who attempted the various examinations in the years under examination.

However, in Scotland where it is no secret that religion in public education has been largely unattractive to children for a long period, the recent 'interest' in the subject has come at a great cost to 'traditional' RE. It seems that on the whole most schools have chosen what Andrew Wright sees as the 'broad straight road' form of RE, which only 'offers the certainty of immediate gratification and safety' as opposed to choosing a 'narrow winding lane' form of RE, which has the 'possibility of long term fulfilment, but at the risk of confusion and consternation' (Wright 1993, p. 11). Wright continues:

Given the ambiguity of religion, the most effective way of justifying the place of the subject in the curriculum is to redefine religion into something that can be acceptable to modern society. Religion is thus pre-packaged, its rough edges shorn off and smoothed over, its contradictions and obscurities hidden away. It is turned into an entity defined in such a way as to be safe, secure, [and] neutral. This is essentially a policy of appeasement, of swimming with the tide, producing a subject for all seasons (Wright 1993, p. 11).

Perhaps what this demonstrates is that increasingly 'meaningful' RE in schools (the kind which ought to help children understand 'who am I?' and 'what am I doing here?') has been replaced by topics in philosophy such as metaphysics that touch on ontological arguments for and against the existence of God. Some of the respondents in the Scottish study were in fact critical of the apparent philosophy 'take over' in RE. For instance, there were those who expressed the view that philosophy is a distraction to the teaching of 'proper' RE. Lecturer of a university in Scotland 3 noted:

I don't find the argument for the philosophication of RE compelling. I understand that philosophy is a key fact in RE and that it promotes critical thinking... However, I feel that by adding this extra focus on philosophy there is the danger of *diluting* RE. Maybe it is a sign that people are not satisfied with the religious part of RE... I think this indicates a loss of confidence with RE which to me is a bit worrying [my emphasis].

It seems to me that although RE in Scotland (as in other parts of the UK for that matter) is beginning to claim some success, the ambiguity that has surrounded the subject for so long remains. The recent (2010) Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) report for England (entitled: *Transforming Religious Education: Religious Education in schools 2006-09*), while pointing out that examination entries in RE have been rising since 2006, at the

same time noted that the quality of RE in secondary schools has not been impressive (Ofsted 2010). The findings in the Scottish research being reported in this study similarly suggest that RE is struggling to deal with a comparable ambiguity. While evidently philosophy has given the subject a much needed jolt, I think that this has been more to do with improving the image of the subject rather any sort of permanent remedy to sort out what is really eating at the heart of RE in schools. As one of the respondents in the study admitted, philosophy has merely enabled pupils not to feel ashamed, or not to be laughed at by their friends, because they like RE [Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1]. In chapter 9, I will attempt to show that despite recent attempts to improve the subject, not only in Scotland but in Malawi as well, RE still has some way to go if it is to be able to shake off its historical Cinderella image.

Another finding in this chapter concerned what Scottish schools are actually teaching as part of the 'other' religions in RE. It was found for example, that in a number of non-denominational schools (n18/287 or 6.3%) what schools are teaching as 'other' religions includes an array of 'non-traditional' religions or beliefs systems such as the Celts, the Druids, animism, atheism and Wicca (neo pagan). It was also found increasingly (and particularly in the S1-S2 levels) that syllabi in non-denominational schools were characterised by 'non-religious' themes such as 'the Simpsons and morality', 'festivals of the dead', 'Native Americans', 'Australian Aborigines', 'Humanism', 'ancient Egypt', 'persecution' (i.e. Holocaust and Anne Frank) and so on.

In fact, in one of the schools where non-religious topics were dominant, the study found that Christianity was offered as an 'optional' topic. This clearly is at odds with both the legislative framework and policy in Scotland, which categorically states that Christianity is a mandatory religion to teach in RE. As a comparative case within the UK, it seems however that practices in RE of individual schools in England under the 'agreed syllabus' system throw up similar issues about the treatment of Christianity. While most syllabi in England do adhere to the legal framework in giving Christianity a distinctive place in RE, in some schools this is ignored completely (Netto 1989). In fact, the current Ofsted report already cited in this chapter has noted that RE in British schools is failing to pay 'sufficient attention to the progressive and systematic investigation of core beliefs of Christianity', a religion which educational policy is mandated by statute to be given priority (Ofsted 2010, p. 6).

On the point that some schools in Scotland are emphasising ‘peripheral’ beliefs and worldviews in RE, my view is that while teaching diverse religions (in the main Christianity) falls within RE policy, some schools appear unsure about which ‘OWR’ to teach and thus tend to fall back on populist or ‘New Age’ perceptions of religious experience in an effort to ‘connect’ with young people. Examining the national guidelines for both Catholic and non-denominational schools in Scotland, the following ‘other’ world religions (although not exclusively) are mentioned as the ones schools may select for study (besides Christianity which is mandatory): Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism (SED 1992). However, it is unclear how these major faiths are to be distinguished from New Age fashions.

The study also identified teacher education as having influence on the reasons some schools in general and some teachers in particular prefer non-religious topics or philosophy. Lecturer at a university in Scotland 5 explained:

As an advocate of a philosophical approach to RE, I teach my students to choose existential topics to teach and not to choose religious ceremonies, foods, festivals, buildings and so on. I tell them to choose topics that start with what is of concern to the child such as existential problems like evil, prejudice, racism, suffering and so on.

While it is within the spirit of the national guidelines that teachers have a degree of freedom to offer RE according to the context of the school (and even teachers preference for that matter), my argument is that the absence of ‘conventional’ religions and the preponderance of ‘peripheral’ religions and non-religious beliefs and issues in RE in a number of non-denominational schools in Scotland ought to be a cause for concern. My point is that RE should first and foremost be about ‘religion’, and while pedagogy should develop interesting new ways of presenting this, if the subject is allowed to side-line the teaching of ‘core’ religions themselves, then on which ground would RE as a curriculum subject in the *teaching of religion* actually stand?

There were further issues that were picked up in the research regarding how schools are engaging with RE policy in Scotland. How much time schools allocate to RE was another area where mismatch between policy and practice was noted. It is perhaps necessary to note that at the time of completing this thesis in 2010, in Scotland the policy on time allocation for RE as one of the five ‘core’

curriculum subjects had not changed.<sup>12</sup> This means that the advice contained in Circular No. 6/91 of a notional minimum of 5% of curriculum time in S1/S2 and a minimum of 80 hours over two years in S3/S4 and beyond, remained in force (Lonie 1991). But how were schools appropriating time for RE in practice? The study found that in Catholic schools this had been implemented as two hours a week or two periods a week of RE offered in S1 through to S6. An important related finding was that in Catholic schools the study did not find significant variation between schools regarding how much time was allocated to RE. In other words, it seems that Catholic schools follow the standard more than one hour a week teaching time for RE as stipulated in Circular No. 6/91 (Scottish Executive 2000). This finding also supports Alex Rodger's contention that 'at each stage, Roman Catholic schools [in Scotland] consistently provide at least the minimum recommended allocation of time' (Rodger 2003, p. 553).

In non-denominational schools, however, the situation was found to be different from school to school. Thus, while in a number of schools RE was allotted the 'mandated' two hours a week, as a general practice most schools only had one hour a week (i.e. one period a week) of RE. What I found worrisome from the interview data is that teachers in non-denominational schools kept on referring to the 'one hour a week' time given to RE as if this were its standard allocated time. It seems to me that the variance in time allocation for RE (not only between Catholic and non-denominational schools, but between non-denominational schools themselves as well) had to do with the fact that non-denominational schools interpreted '5%' of the total teaching time to be spent on RE as being one hour a week. While for some non-denominational schools the 5% total teaching time might have meant one hour a week, the fact that most schools gave only one hour a week to RE was perhaps indicative of the fact that non-denominational schools had erroneously construed 5% of teaching time to mean one hour a week, which clearly could not have been the 'standard' time for every school.

What the findings in this study suggest is that especially in non-denominational schools, there was a decline in the amount of time given to RE, an issue of which

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<sup>12</sup> Other 'core' curriculum subjects in the Scottish curriculum include: English, Mathematics, Environmental Studies and Expressive Arts. See Thurston, A., Topping, K., 2005 (edition). Secondary School and Curriculum in Scotland. In: CAPEL, S., LEASK, M., TURNER, T. (ed.) *Learning to Teach in the Secondary School: A Companion to School Experience*. New York: Routledge.

the government was aware. For example, Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 noted:

In non-denominational schools inspectors have, for a long time, been talking of inadequate time being given to RE. In fact, in too many occasions the time given to RE in these schools does not even meet regulatory requirements.

The findings in this study are similar to those of William Hannah's 2007 doctoral study on the 'educationalisation' of Scottish RE. Hannah noted that the minimum time allocation advocated for RE was no longer a priority in most schools. Hannah also observed that in some of the schools he investigated, the norm time for RE had dropped to 4.5% of curricular time. Hannah thus concluded that perhaps time allocation was a contributory factor in the absence of quality in teaching and learning in RE (Hannah 2007), a view I am inclined to support. The decline of time allocated to RE in Scotland would suggest that in many Scottish schools RE was being accorded less and less attention on their curriculum. Examining relevant literature, it would seem that this is not a trend unique to Scotland but is present in other countries as well. For example, in their study of teaching timetables in RE throughout the world, Jean Rivard and Massimo Amadio found that there has been a marked decline of average proportion time for RE from 5.2% in the 1945-1969 period to 4.2% in the 1970-1986 period (Rivard and Amadio 2003).

Another finding in the schools' survey in Scotland was that school practices in RE were to some extent influenced by the type of school in which the subject was being offered. In other words, there was greater uniformity and consistency of practice in Catholic schools (as already noted) mainly due to the fact these schools strictly align their practices with a common Church protocol. The representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland explained:

... I don't think that schools can be free to *do whatever they want when they want*. Frankly I think that can be a road to insanity. In fact this is beginning to become apparent to schools as they are trying to plan for CfE. If every individual teacher has freedom to do whatever they want and when they want it, then we *don't* have a curriculum at all. We will just have a set of individual lessons. In RE nonetheless it is particularly important that it is *not* the teacher's course on RE that is being delivered but rather the Church's RE course that is being

delivered. It is the vision of the Catholic Church that an appropriate curriculum is being delivered and that the role of the teacher - that is their skills and their understanding - is vital and that they are comfortable, skilled *but* nonetheless it is not for them to determine what a child would learn about Jesus and when they would learn it. That's for the Church to *decide* because based on our Church's teaching over a thousand of years there is a whole *doctrinal body of faith that has to be communicated* and teachers are comfortable with that [my emphasis].

By contrast, it was found that there was greater diversity of practice in non-denominational schools. The reason for this could be that in these schools practices were largely dependent on individual school policies (of course notwithstanding occasional local authority influence on RE curriculum offered in a number of schools). In other words, several schools in one local authority tended to reflect similarity of syllabus content and school policy in RE (e.g. perhaps because of the use of the same pool of Quality Improvement Officers (QIO)).

Perhaps a surprising finding was that 1.7% (n5/287) of non-denominational schools surveyed offered RE only up to S2 level. Some schools cited insufficient pupil numbers and lack of teachers as reasons they did not offer RE in S3 and beyond. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 1 noted:

RME beyond S2 level is offered in response to need. Every child from S1 to S2 is given a period of RME on the timetable. We present RME Standard Grade on the options choice programme for the middle school every single year. But so far it has not generated interest to make a class. If it did generate a class then I would need to make sure that I have sufficient staffing to deliver the curriculum ... The opportunity to study RME is placed upon the children and they vote with their options sheet. They do receive the statutory one period a week and there is a degree of interest in RME but over the last five or six years there has been insufficient interest.

The findings of this study suggest that there were schools in Scotland which did not offer Standard Grade Religious Studies.<sup>13</sup> In my view it is a matter of some concern that such situations existed in schools and it is reasonable to suggest

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<sup>13</sup> Standard Grade is *de facto* compulsory examination taken by Scottish pupils in year S3/S4 or before their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday when legally children can leave compulsory education. See Robertson, C. 1993. Participation in Post-Compulsory Education in Scotland. *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society. Series A (Statistics in Society)*, 156, 423-442.



that a solution should be found to mitigate the proliferation of such situations in schools in Scotland.

The study also found evidence which indicated that parents in Scotland exercised their 'right to withdraw'. In the two cases noted in the research, the non-denominational school example concerned a parent belonging to Jehovah's Witness Church who invoked the 'conscience clause' by withdrawing her son from attending RE. In another non-denominational school, a boy belonging to the Jewish faith was also allowed to 'opt out' of RE. The schools concerned respected such requests and made arrangements for the pupils to read or do other curriculum tasks in the school library during the period of RE.<sup>14</sup> Interestingly, the study also found that in some areas with no Catholic schools, such as in the Borders, arrangements were made between the local authority, parents and non-denominational schools concerned to invite a Catholic specialist to teach the Catholic children Catholic RE.

A more worrying finding in the Scottish school survey was that there were schools (all in the non-denominational sector) that did not offer RE at all on their curriculum (6.2% or n18/287) or that they offered it through proxies (4.1% or n12/287) such as 'Social Education', 'Personal Search Education', 'Citizenship Education', 'Personal, Social and Health Education' and so on. In one school which had no discrete RE elements, the subject was offered through Citizenship Education by the use of a 'conference' or 'seminar' system. This involved pupils being taken off from the 'regular' timetable to attend a purposively organised 'conference' in the school where youth workers, Church ministers and others would talk about their work and their faith. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 explained why his school was offering RE through Citizenship Education:

Our approach to RE is permeative to the whole area of pupil support. In the classroom, RE *per se* is no big deal to us. We are much more interested in the values base of the school and how that impacts all aspects of relationships and activities within the school. In the big scheme of things I do not get terribly excited about the teaching of

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that in Scotland, the 'Parental Right to Withdraw' is only applicable in non-denominational schools. This means that parents who send their children to Catholic schools cannot demand to exercise the right to withdraw. See McCluskey, G., Weedon, E., Riddell, S. & Ahlgren, L. 2009. *Country Notes Scotland Working Paper: Religious Education*. Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity: Edinburgh University.

RE. I think that legitimately we can shape the values of our children not in an hour a week of RE but rather in what we can teach them as part of whole school ethos. The good thing is that the curriculum advises that outcomes which are labelled in the same way such as RE and Citizenship can be delivered anywhere in the curriculum. For a couple of years now we have not had designated periods of RE in S3 and S4 but instead we have Citizenship periods.

Some respondents in the study worried that the use of proxies was doing untold damage to the development of RE as curriculum subject. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 noted that,

It has always been the temptation to want to align it [RE] with something else such as Citizenship or Personal and Social Development. It is as if RE is not good enough and so we have to boost it by combining it with other subjects. This is being done to the detriment of the subject.

One of the more popular trajectories for RE that emerged in many Scottish schools in the research was 'Charity Work' Education. In a number of schools (many which were piloting CfE), it was found that 'charity work' programmes had become a central feature of RE apparently because this was something that was of relevance to the wider experience of pupils. In such schools pupils were engaged in various 'in school' and 'out of school' activities to raise money which was then donated to charities involved in development work in developing countries. Examining this issue further, I noticed that the charity work programme in RE was actually in line with one of the experiences and outcomes of the draft CfE RME guidelines (i.e. for non-denominational schools). Under the strand of Christianity the following outcome was expressed:

I can demonstrate my developing understanding of moral values through participating in events and projects which make a positive difference to others (LTS no year, p. 3).

Perhaps an invaluable experience of the 'charity work' programme will be the vital exposure of children to the experience of human compassion and caring for others. A recent study has argued that since children are not 'genetically charitable', early exposure to pro-social behaviour or situational canalisation of moral behaviour has the potential to teach children the values of being charitable to those less fortunate (van IJzendoorn et al. 2010, p. 1). In some of

the Scottish schools where charity work as part of RE was being promoted, this was taken seriously indeed. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 2 explained:

We had for many years charity programmes which are led by teachers and pupils in RE. Pupils are involved with raising money for charity and sometimes they can raise £10,000. As a school we have very ambitious projects for example, we are raising money to build a school in rural Tanzania in conjunction with World Vision International which as you know is a Christian organisation. What we are doing in terms of the charity is that we are teaching beliefs and values.

Subjecting the various trajectories for RE to critical reflection, it must be said that while by all means such programmes are important, schools should not lose sight as to what ‘core’ RE is all about. First and foremost, in the main RE is about the teaching of religion and how religious beliefs inform present ways of life, not only in the historical and theological sense but spiritually as well. Thus, if less caution is exercised and no proper balance maintained, there is a high likelihood that some Scottish schools will be so focused on ‘charity work’ that they may lose sight of what, in the classic sense, RE as a curriculum subject should be all about.

### **8.3. Uniformity and crisis in Malawian schools**

Due to logistical difficulties a general schools’ survey similar to the one carried out in Scotland was not possible in Malawi. For this chapter, the Malawi data relied (but not exclusively) on interviews, personal visits to 21 randomly selected schools, document analysis, analysis of data of students who sat national examinations between 2006 and 2008 and a general survey of schools in Mangochi district to assess the level of provision regarding the dual-policy RE syllabus system as explained in the methodology chapter (see chapter 3).

A major finding in Malawian schools was that RE (i.e. wholly BK in senior secondary and BK or RME in junior secondary) was offered in almost all the schools investigated, both private and public, with one notable exception in the case study below. A related finding was that RE was also noted to be well attended by students. What the findings suggest is that despite being an ‘optional’ subject on the national curriculum, RE was not only a subject of

choice for most Malawian schools but one which students prefer to study for their national examinations as well. In a country where religion was polarised between Christians and Muslims this was a surprising finding. The question is why?

Part of the answer lies on the fact in Malawi parents hardly exercised the 'opt out' provision. In the schools that were visited no evidence was found that suggested that parents had ever exercised the right to withdraw their children from 'religious instruction of his/her choice as provided by the Constitution of the Republic of Malawi and the Education Act' (O'Dala 2001, p. 2). From the research, one plausible explanation is that in a country with high levels of adult illiteracy (37.3% in 2003) (UNEP 2003) perhaps most parents were not even aware that this provision existed. Drawing on from relevant literature, the effects of parent's illiteracy on the education of their children are evident. An empirical study on the attitudes of Malawian and Kenyan parents towards the education of girls found that when it came to educational matters, parents' own literacy levels affected their understanding of and support for their children's learning (Davison 1993). A South African study found that in situations where parents' literacy levels were an issue, schools tended to be arbitrary in making crucial decisions regarding the education of pupils (Mncube 2009).

Reporting further on the findings of the Malawian research, it was found that in the absence of effective parental input in education, Malawian pupils relied on teachers' advice regarding which subjects to take for examination. Teachers informed this study that in most cases pupils were advised to choose RE (i.e. BK) because the subject provided a much higher chance of them getting better grades in the examination due to the fact that this was a subject with which teachers had a long experience and which thus produces good examination results.

Another factor to consider why RE was well attended in Malawian schools has to do with the fact that in practical sense, the national curriculum had a limited number of subjects from which pupils could choose the required subjects for certification.<sup>15</sup> Looking at the range of subjects the Ministry of Education

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<sup>15</sup> Unlike in the Scottish system where individual certification is awarded for every single examination passed, in Malawi pupils are required to pass (at one sitting) a minimum of six subjects which should include English to qualify for an awarded of the national examination certificate. See Chakwera, E., Khembo, D. & Sireci, S. 2004. High-Stakes Testing in the Warm

introduced on the new national curriculum during the 2000 educational reform, one would be inclined to think that there were sufficient subjects for pupils to choose. In reality this was not the case because of logistical, material and human resource constraints that impact on the number and types of subjects schools can actually offer (MME 2004). For example, the senior secondary curriculum has 14 registered subjects but the reality was that two of these were non-examinable (Life skills and Physical Education) and that a further three subjects (Computer Skills, Music and Expressive Arts) had never seen the light of day in schools because of the financial implications of offering these subjects. As a developing country, Malawi did not have the financial capacity to implement many educational programs it develops. In the case of the 2000 revised national curriculum which added new subjects for study, the government did not have the finances to purchase computers, musical equipment, materials for expressive arts, nor did it have trained teachers for these new subjects (See Tembo 2002).

Given this scenario, it is less surprising to find that a subject such as BK was well attended because it had the teachers (despite the limitations (see chapter 9)) and well developed learning materials. Hence the absence of real subject choice had also encouraged Muslim pupils to take BK so that they could have the required subjects for certification. Teacher at a public school in Malawi 9 noted:

At this school we know that Muslim students take BK just to pass the examination because if they leave it, they would be limited in the required number of subjects to choose for the national examinations. Interestingly, many of these students pass BK very well in the examination.

Gauging from the numbers of students that have taken national examinations in RE (in the main BK) in the past, it can be confirmed that most Malawian students indeed study RE. Available official data shows that in 2006 there were 78,524 students who took the senior secondary national examinations (locally known as MSCE) and that out of this figure 35,748 (46%) of them sat BK. In 2007 there were 86,652 candidates 35,947 (42%) of who sat BK while in the year that followed there were 92,871 candidates and that 32,224 (35%) of them sat BK (see appendix 7.2). The numbers of candidates taking junior secondary school

national examination (JCE) was found to be high as well. However, since the issue of the 'dual-syllabus' system in terms of which syllabus between BK and RME students and schools prefer was one of the major issues to report in this chapter, a separate account will be made below. Before we turn to the 'dual-syllabus' issue, however, we should perhaps consider one other general finding in the Malawi research.

Owing to the fact that in Malawi the RE curriculum in both senior and junior secondary was preponderantly BK, some schools had begun to use the school assembly as platform to recognise the multi-faith composition of the student population, particularly concerning Muslim pupils. Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 7 explained:

We somehow accommodate Muslim children in terms of allowing them to take prayers or present at assembly. While our assemblies on the whole are Christian based because we read the Bible, when it comes to the time Muslim children are presenting at assembly, they sing their own Muslim songs and say Muslim prayers although the reading of the Bible remains mandatory. We think that this helps greater understanding between Muslim and Christian students in the school.

One cannot help but notice the Christian paternalism and even tokenism in some of these 'multi-faith' school assemblies. However, given the Malawian context, particularly the polarised positions between Christian and Muslims, it should be appreciated that at least some schools have given a thought to the idea that, in some way, Muslim children—like the children of Christian parents—deserve to be given space to express themselves in schools.

One of the substantive issues in this study was to investigate how various schools in Malawi were engaging with the 'dual-policy' that was introduced in the junior secondary RE curriculum in 2001. The study found that there was strong resistance by schools against the dual curriculum policy, particularly the RME syllabus which came with this policy. By implication, this meant that most schools in Malawi preferred the *status quo* of having BK as the only subject in RE. Therefore, in terms of syllabus choice the study found a negligible number of pupils studying RME. Available statistics indicated that of the 180,000 or so students in the junior secondary (that is both Forms 1 and 2) sector, less than 2% studied RME compared to more than 70% who took BK. Examining the numbers

of pupils who sat JCE between 2006 and 2008 the study found that only 1,436 (1.7%), 807 (0.83%) and 1,265 (1.23%) sat RME examinations in 2006, 2007 and 2008, respectively. This was against 63,759 (73.9%), 70,333 (72.3%) and 73,735 (72%) who sat BK during the same three-year period, respectively (see appendix 7:1).

From these figures it is evidently clear that schools in Malawi continued to teach BK as they have been doing since missionary times. The study uncovered a number of factors that attempted to explain this situation in Malawian schools, in terms of the preference for RME vis-à-vis BK. It was found that most schools preferred BK over RME because Churches, which had more than 33% stake in state education, desired that their schools offer BK and not RME (see Matemba 2009). Representative of the Catholic Church in Malawi bluntly said:

We do not oppose other religions desiring their children to be taught their religion but we want BK to be taught in our schools...

The representative of the Presbyterian Church in Malawi expressed a similar view:

We told government that in the schools where we are the proprietor we prefer BK and not RME. We then declared that in our schools we will teach BK. Shortly after ACEM to which we belong announced that all its members' schools should teach BK.

The study also found incidences where schools which initially offered RME when this was first introduced in 2000 had since abandoned it due to lack of support. Teacher at a public school in Malawi 3 noted:

Three years back we taught RME but we have since abandoned it and reverted to BK... We received letters from parents saying that RME was teaching Islam and that they did not want their children to have any part of this.

Although the new 'dual-policy' was open for schools to offer both BK and RME (if they so desire), the study did not find any school offering both syllabi. The study however, found that in the past some schools had attempted to offer both syllabi but with little success. In one school where offering both syllabi was once tried, the teacher explained that:

We took the class register and divided the children into two, one to be taught BK and other RME. Since we had 40 pupils I took 20 of them and other teacher took the other 20 for RME. However, after a few weeks only 10 pupils had remained in my RME class because parents had protested and told their children to leave RME and take BK [Teacher at a public school in Malawi 7].

There were indications by several schools in the study that, if parents demanded it, the schools were willing to offer both syllabi. However, the schools pointed out that even if such a request was made, the difficulty would be to find the teachers to offer two syllabi. Perhaps a surprising finding was that two state schools in the study neither of the two syllabi was offered. Headteacher of one of the school explained that,

If parents demand one of the syllabi to be taught we will listen but we will not teach RE here if only one syllabus is offered. If parents demand both syllabi and teachers are available we will offer them. For us here it is the problem of manpower and not unwillingness that has made the school to make this decision [Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 5].

The fact that there were schools in Malawi, *albeit* only two found in the research, not offering RE at all was rather unexpected finding. Given the general impression that, while schools might be apprehensive to offer RME they would automatically offer BK, it was somewhat inconceivable that there could be a school (let alone a state school) in Malawi that cannot offer RE at all. It should be noted that while RE was no longer a ‘core’ subject—the expectation based on the historical precedent of not long ago when BK was indeed a core subject—the general assumption would be that all schools (as most do) would offer RE. What this study found illustrated the mismatch between policy expectations and practical realities in schools, something that existed of course not only in Malawian schools but as we noted comparatively in Scotland as well.

Another equally surprising finding was that there were schools which indicated that they were not aware of the existence of dual-syllabus system even to the extent that some did not know of the existence of RME as an alternative subject to BK on the RE curriculum in junior secondary education. Headteacher at a private school in Malawi 3 said:



Oh, I didn't know this at all [on being told of the existence of RME]. This is a surprising thing to learn that there is a subject which teaches other religions other than Christianity on the national curriculum... I am hearing from you that there is RME as a subject ... we know BK and not RME.

Teacher at a public school in Malawi 8 also noted:

No, I have never seen that syllabus [RME] and do not know what it contains. No one has ever seen this syllabus. Teachers wish they had been exposed to the new syllabus to allow them to make up their own minds about it but this is not the case.

When it was inquired from education officials regarding their views on the problems facing RME and indeed what the government was doing to address the marginalisation of RME vis-à-vis BK in schools, Ministry of Education official in Malawi 2 explained:

There could be a problem we don't know. What we know as a Ministry of Education is that the policy is clear on this matter that neither schools nor children will be forced to choose a type of RE. As government we don't want to get involved in what is going on in schools when it comes to which syllabus schools should teach.

However, schools expressed concern regarding the government's apparent apathy regarding RME. Headteachers in the study, for example, noted that District Education Managers (DEMs) were only concerned with issues such as sanitation of the premises when they inspected schools but never with curriculum matters such as the issue of BK vis-à-vis RME. Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 2 observed that,

Government is not inquiring whether schools are teaching RME or not. When school inspectors come they don't ask about RME at all... It seems government doesn't want to ruffle feathers once again with Churches by being seen to support Islam if they come to schools and make critical inquiries about RME. So if government is not talking about it we schools are also idle about it.

A number of teachers worried that if government did not intervene the future of RME would be in serious jeopardy. One teacher said:

I think that RME can only be saved with government intervention. I am sure that without intervention it will die, definitely [Teacher at a private school in Malawi 2].

Another teacher was equally pessimistic:

It is already dead because no one who matters has taken an interest to see that RME has a fighting chance. The numbers of students RME has for examinations is so small that I do not see how the subject can be sustained [Teacher at a public school in Malawi 4].

It would seem that in a situation presented in this thesis the government did not have any concrete strategies to address the problem. While government was probably right that it could not force or interfere with schools' choice of which RE syllabus to be offered, the fact that less than 2% of pupils were studying RME should be a cause for concern. After all, it was the government that spent resources to create the new syllabus and thus it would not make any economic sense to allow RME to wither away. Again, Malawi is culturally and religiously a plural country and while most schools prefer BK, the Christian syllabus only caters for the needs of Christian children. For this reason, an argument can be advanced that RME which is inherently multi-faith, should be promoted so that the needs of children from a diverse religious or cultural background can be catered for as well.

The attitude of some RE teachers was also found to be a factor adding to the marginalisation of RME in Malawian schools. In fact, of the 13 teachers interviewed for this study, nine indicated that their Christian faith made them feel uncomfortable teaching other religions. One teacher, a Catholic, said:

I am a Christian and I want pupils to learn about Christianity. I want the Christian message to pass on to my pupils and not have them learn Buddhism, for example. Most Christians don't want their children learning these other religions [Teacher at a public school in Malawi 7].

Another RE teacher, a Protestant, also said:

On the issue of personal influence, you see I cannot go to class and teach them Islam or ATR which teaches witchcraft [sic]. So if I am a born again Christian and patron of the Student Christian Movement in my school I cannot stand in front of the children and tell them about the merits of ancestral spirits, for example [Teacher at a public Malawian school 5].

Clearly, these teachers were unequivocal in their stand that they would *not* teach RME because teaching other religions would be contrary to their Christian beliefs. This finding also supports Kimberley White's assertion that teachers' 'personal experience and professional practice are interwoven and cannot be separated, as the metaphorical separation of Church and state might suggest' adding that for many teachers, their professional practice and thinking is tied to their religious identification. She argues, and rightly so, that this awareness about RE teachers is important if teachers are to be helped 'to promote positive interactions and learning in students rather than promoting stereotypes and misconceptions among students' (White 2010, pp. 41-42).

The other reason most teachers in Malawi said they preferred BK to RME was that BK was easier to teach because teaching resources were readily available. Teacher at a public school in Malawi 4 noted that:

When I taught RME I struggled to find teaching materials particularly on topics covering ATR and Islam. This is therefore the more reason I don't want to offer it anymore at my school because I don't want to travel all the time to different places looking for resources while in BK I have the necessary teaching resources I have acquired over many years.

Another factor to consider was the impact of teacher education, which essentially had not moved on with the curriculum changes that have taken place in school RE. At the time the field research for this thesis was conducted (in 2009), there were seven universities in Malawi where teachers could train (three public and four private/Church owned). However, regardless of the type of university (that is whether public or private) this study found that they all used the theological/Bible model in the training of RE teachers. For this study, four universities were investigated. It was found that at Malawian university 1 (public), which also is the oldest and largest in the country, the training framework was based on the 'Theology and Religious Studies' model. At Malawian University 2 (public), it was also the 'Theology and Religious Studies' model that was used for its teacher education. At Malawian university 3 (private/Church owned) RE teachers were trained using a 'Biblical and Religious Studies' framework. At Malawian university 4 (public) it was the 'Theology and Religious Studies' model that was used.

In all the four universities examined, the study also found that what was emphasised in the training of teachers was for teachers to have mastery in teaching BK (i.e. the Bible). In other words, content and pedagogical issues in the training of SSRE at these universities were based on the actual secondary school BK syllabi themselves. It should be noted that in these universities no evidence was found to suggest that RME (a parallel syllabus on the junior secondary curriculum) was given the same emphasis. On this matter, lecturer at a university in Malawi 1 said noted:

The students we teach here graduate with a B.Ed. degree majoring in Theology and Religious Studies and not RE... Here we emphasise BK because Malawian schools are mostly teaching BK and not RME.

Teachers' testimonies regarding their training were also consistent with the fact that teacher education prepared them to be able to offer BK and not RME. One teacher said that,

I was trained at Mzuzu University for a BED majoring in RE although the course leaned heavily to Theology and Religious Studies. In fact, the lead department was Theology and Religious Studies and not education [Teacher at a public school in Malawi 9].

Teacher at a public school in Malawi 8 also revealed that,

I went to the University of Malawi and read English and Religious Studies for a Diploma in Education. I graduated in 1983. I found that it was called Religious Studies not RE and we studied New Testament and Old Testament and then a bit of Islam and ATR...

It seems to me that teacher education in Malawi is reactive rather proactive in relation to wider curriculum developments in RE. It is my informed conclusion that instead of leading the debate teacher education is merely following it. Consequently, it is teacher education in Malawi which has not developed appropriate expertise in the general area of teacher preparation for the 21st century.

A perception expressed by teachers and headteachers in the pilot study, and also noted in my earlier published report (see Matemba 2009), was that RME was more popular in schools located in so-called Muslim dominated areas, essentially

because Islam was included for study in that syllabus. It was a perception this study subsequently investigated to check its validity. Furthermore, although Salanjira's doctoral study investigated stakeholders' perceptions on the dual-policy RE syllabus in Malawi, it failed to address adequately the fundamental issue of syllabus choice between RME and BK in schools (Salanjira 2009). Therefore, hopefully, the importance of this study in helping us to have a deeper understanding of the issue of RME vis-à-vis BK in Malawian schools is established.

Briefly, Islam in Malawi (which came via Arab Muslims from the East Coast of Africa) predates Christianity by about three decades. Islam emerged in the early 1840s and quickly established firm roots among the Yao people who have lived in areas along Lake Malawi (Sicard 2000). Today, what are called Muslim 'areas' include Liwonde, Machinga, Mangochi and parts of Zomba and Monkey Bay. To examine whether the perception is justified that in these areas RME was promoted in schools above BK, the study surveyed schools in Mangochi district (one of the 28 districts in the country). Mangochi district was chosen because it is considered to be the official 'headquarters' of indigenous Malawian Muslim community owing to the fact it is where the majority of Malawian Muslims originate, even historically. Mangochi district has a current population of 803,602 people (Malawi Government 2008a) and Islam in that district is the major religion at 69.8%, followed by Christianity at 28.7% (Catholics 17.9%) (Malawi Government 1998).

It is perhaps instructive to note that more than any other district in the country Mangochi is the most competitively evangelised district between the two religions of Christianity and Islam. For instance, throughout the 77 kilometre stretch of the single tarred road from Balaka-Lilongwe turn-off to Mangochi district *boma* (headquarters), the road is literally dotted side by side with Churches, Mosques, Islamic educational establishments, Church schools and so on. In all, the study found that there were over 25 various Christian institutions (i.e. Churches, schools etc.) against over 40 various Islamic institutions on this stretch of road alone. Of all the Churches that have a presence in that district, the Catholic Church is the most visible, complete with its own diocese (*Mangochiensis*), a major seminary and radio station (the only Catholic Radio Station in the country). The Catholic Church in the district has invested heavily in the fields of education and other social services such as clinics. According to the latest (2008) official report, 75% of the 241 primaries and 43 secondaries in

Mangochi district were either owned or controlled by the Catholic Church (Malawi Government 2007).

It is necessary to note that inter-religious relations between Christians and Muslims in Mangochi have at various times been frosty. In the wake of the September 11th atrocities in 2001 five Muslim men (all foreigners working for Muslims organisations) were arrested in June 2003 and handed over to US agents for onward transfer to Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba. In reaction, local Muslims in Mangochi became violent. They burnt down five Churches, destroyed several vehicles belonging to Christians and beat up, randomly, any Christian priest in sight (see Umar et al. 2008). In October 2010 there were reports that Muslim parents in the district publically tore Bibles given to their children at school by the missionary group, Gideon International (*Nyasa Times* 2010c). In this incident, Muslim parents were protesting against what they said was the continued attempt by Christians to convert their children. One Muslim parent explained:

There have been attempts by Christians to dominate us, they first came and planted their radio [in reference to the Catholic Radio Maria] and they are now insulting us by distributing their so called holy book to non-Christians (Mponda 2010, p. 1).

Evidently tension between Muslims and Christians in Mangochi district remains a major cause of concern. The study found that in some cases the tension between Muslims and Christians in the district arise over the matter of RE itself. In one school I found evidence that Muslim pupils once tore the Bible in class because the RE teacher had said something they construed as disrespectful to Islam. In another school I found evidence that the RE teacher had gone to the police station to report that parents and villagers were baying for his blood over what pupils had told their parents the teacher allegedly said about Islam in class, which had upset the children. Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 1 explained what causes such problems:

The Muslim community takes offense when Christian teachers use provocative approaches about Islam or say things that are offensive to Muslims and Islam. For example, there are those teachers who use selected Biblical texts to criticize Islam or say insensitive things about our prophet. Since children cannot challenge the teacher they go to their parents and report and then problems start.

Interfaith initiatives sponsored by the government and other organizations such as German's *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (GTZ) and the Roman Catholic's 'Centre for Social Concern' are actively going on in the district to facilitate effective dialogue with the aim to help improve relations between the two faith communities (Umar et al. 2008). Representative of the Muslim community in Malawi 2 explained that:

The interfaith projects run by GTZ are necessary because in this district problems sometimes do occur and that this programme is trying to help people to live peaceably together especially between Muslims and Christians. It is trying to encourage people that if an issue arises, the solution should come from a joint effort of the inter-faith group.

Let us turn to the substantive issue of whether schools in Mangochi generally offer RME more than they do BK. From examining documents at the district education office, personal visits to 10 schools, interviews with five teachers (n5), three headteachers (n3) and one education official (n1), it was established that of the 43 secondaries in the district, only six schools (6/43) offered RME, one school (public) (n1/43) did not offer RE at all (the second case identified in this study) and the rest of the schools offered BK (n36/43). Of the six schools that offered RME two were privately owned by entrepreneurs in the district who are Muslim, one was a public school and three were owned by Muslim organisations. Based on this research, it can be concluded that most secondaries (n36 or 83.7%) in Mangochi district offered BK and not RME. In the public school where RE was not offered, the headteacher (i.e. headteacher at a public school in Malawi 7) gave this explanation:

You know Mangochi is a religiously sensitive district and thus we reckoned that if we were to continue teaching BK then RME was also to be taught at the same time. Although I am a Christian I am aware that Muslim parents would like to have an aspect of their religion taught in school which RME covers. I then asked the Ministry of Education for more teachers so that we could teach both syllabi and upon being told that we could not be provided with another teacher we decided not offer the subject altogether on our curriculum....

When asked for official comment on the RME vis-à-vis BK issue Ministry of Education official in Malawi 2 (based at the Mangochi district assembly) merely repeated the government position that 'schools are free to choose the syllabus

they want’ [Ministry of Education official in Malawi 2]. He elaborated that schools had the freedom to offer a type of RE they want based on their individual circumstances and that the government does not interfere with that. On the question of a public school that was not offering RE at all, the Ministry of Education official in question appeared uncomfortable with the issue. Although he admitted that he was aware of the issue, he repeated the point that the government could not ‘interfere’ with the professional decision of the school on this matter.

How can these findings be explained given the fact that most schools in Mangochi district (being the Muslim ‘headquarters’ in the country) were offering BK and not RME contrary to the wider perception? The answer seems to be that in Malawi even in the so-called Muslim populated areas, most schools are owned by Churches which prefer BK and not RME. For instance, we have already noted that in Mangochi district 75% of schools are either Catholic owned or Catholic controlled. We have also established that generally in Malawi Church controlled schools prefer BK to RME. Again, we should also not underestimate the impact of Christianity on so-called Muslim areas. From published literature we learn that while it is true that Mangochi and other similar areas in Malawi are Muslim-populated and that Islam flourishes in those areas, we need to recognise the impact of Christian evangelism in those areas. Evidence has been provided in the work of Joseph Chakanza showing that for a long time many people in these areas have been responding to Christianity. It is noted, for example, that the ‘Lord’s Prayer’ was inscribed in one of the Presbyterian Churches in *Chiyao* (local language of most indigenous Muslims) over a hundred years ago (Chakanza 2008).

The findings in this study have shown factors militating against RME in the ‘dual-policy’ arrangement for RE in Malawian schools. From the findings in this study, it is evident that BK has remained the *de facto* subject in RE because schools have simply ignored RME. Based on the findings in this study, it can be surmised that the dual curriculum policy in Malawi has probably failed. By failing to intervene in the situation, the attitude of the government is lending credence to the view that, after all, RME is perhaps not as educationally important as BK. The mismatch between policy and what schools are actually doing in Malawi cannot be overemphasised. From what has emerged in this study regarding BK



versus RME, if no drastic action is taken to address the predicament facing RME, it is highly likely that it will soon cease to exist in schools.

## 8.4. Comparison

The findings in this chapter suggest that there are areas of commonality and also difference regarding the provision of RE in Scotland and Malawi, including the ways in which schools in the two countries actually engage with the subject of RE more generally. In Scotland, it was found that the guidelines system allowed teachers the flexibility to design individual school-based syllabi. The implication was that in some cases schools actually abandoned the ‘core’ purpose of RE by, among other things, leaving out ‘religious topics’ altogether. By contrast, in Malawi the curriculum was so rigid and heavily prescriptive that the subject failed to benefit from the contextual richness that some comparable form of flexibility might have brought to the subject. The difference between the situation in Scotland and Malawi should be understood within the particular context that in Scotland pupils do not sit formal or national examinations in the junior secondary phase, while in Malawi the curriculum is examination-oriented throughout the secondary phase.

Given the context above, it was less surprising to see that in Scottish schools there was greater mismatch in terms of policy vis-à-vis practice—mainly in areas such as time allocation, the ‘opt-out’ policy and the place of Christianity in RE. By contrast, the study found that in Malawi there was greater uniformity between policy and practice. Owing to the fact that schools follow a given teaching syllabus, it was easy to find uniformity of practice among schools. One area where there was some similarity was in the rise in the numbers of pupils taking RE examinations—although in both countries this was caused by different factors. It was noted that in Scotland the switching of RE to philosophy was the catalyst for new interest in the subject. In Malawi the increase largely had to do with the fact that the curriculum does not have a wider choice of subjects, thus ‘forcing’ many to choose RE out of a need to find the required subjects for school certification.

The influence of teacher education, teachers’ or headteachers’ beliefs and worldviews, and even the type of school, were seen to have a similar impact on

how schools engaged with RE in the two countries. It was also found that for a variety of different reasons some schools in Scotland and Malawi do not offer RE at all. While in Malawi this can be understood because RE is now an optional subject, in Scotland it seems to represent a flouting of legislation and of curriculum policy, because RE remains formally and officially a compulsory subject in schools.

Finally, one pertinent issue which emerged in the Malawi research concerned the impact of the 'dual-syllabus' system on the junior secondary curriculum. Two main issues emerged. First, that in Malawi most schools prefer BK to RME. The worrying thing about this is that the numbers of pupils taking RME were as a result found to be so low that it is difficult to see how the subject can be sustained much longer on the curriculum. Secondly, the study has challenged the widely held perception that in Malawi RME is popular in areas where Muslims are in greater numbers, reasons for which were given.

## 8.5. Conclusion

In this chapter the comparison of provision and curriculum policy vis-à-vis school practices in RE in Scotland and Malawi identified common trends as well contextual peculiarities. The overall picture that emerged was that in both countries RE is a permanently complex subject principally because stakeholders have different ideas about what it should achieve. The difficulty for schools is that on the whole their task is to implement legislative and curriculum policies which sometimes are made in noisy boardrooms as various groups pull in different directions regarding how the subject should be governed.

The trouble for schools is that somehow these policies, some of which conflict sharply with the beliefs and worldviews of the very teachers and headteachers charged to implement them, must still strive to be realised. For instance, some schools in Scotland seem to be struggling with the principle that Christianity is supposed to remain *primus inter pares* in RE owing to the fact that in some instances Christianity is actually not being offered at all. In Malawi, the findings clearly show that the 'dual-policy' system has failed because schools have simply ignored it and continue to teach BK as they have done previously before the new policy came into being. In the next chapter, the study will examine the current

status of RE in the two countries given the volatile political, cultural and religious influences that underpin the subject.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Current State of Religious Education**

#### **9.1. Introduction**

In chapter 4 I described historical challenges that confronted RE in Scotland and Malawi. In that part of the analysis, it was evident that RE was a ‘Cinderella subject’ and therefore in serious need of makeover if it was to claim any sort of legitimacy on the school curriculum. In chapter 5 it was demonstrated how a coalescence of various factors provided the impetus needed to move RE in a different direction. Given the changes and the efforts that have been brought to bear on the improvement of RE, we might reasonably want to know if the subject, finally, has achieved everything hoped for by the process of reform. Based on the findings reported in this chapter, the phrase ‘a subject in search of its soul’ (Wright 1993, p. 5), perhaps aptly describes its present situation. In this phrase the apparent paradox is that if RE is not dead, it is nevertheless definitely in need of transformation. It is thus the purpose of this chapter to discern whether, if at all, there are possible sources which if utilised might bring the much needed renewal in RE, and then chart some of the key challenges that remain for RE in both Scotland and Malawi.

#### **9.2. Opportunities**

It is perhaps bold to talk about prospects for RE given the sobering reality facing the subject in the two countries and documented in this thesis. However, careful analysis of the data in the study points to possible areas which, if better exploited, might produce some positive changes to RE. In Scotland, for example, the fact that RE remains compulsory can still be used to the advantage of the subject, because advocates can legally demand RE, and, by association, demand adequate resourcing of the subject.

Stretching this further, a legal challenge might theoretically be mounted against government plans to downgrade RE in terms of funding (see section 9.3.2. below in this chapter). The legality of RE described at length in chapter 4 has, in the

midst of secular assault on religion, been key to sustaining the subject. Thus, for proponents of religion in education this is a reality to be reflected upon: that without its various legal protections RE could have faced collapse (in non-denominational schools at least), a fact fully acknowledged by the representative of Church of Scotland in the study:

There is no doubt that without legal protection for RE the subject could have withered away in Scotland because it's hard to marry together the secularist and faith agenda in public education.

However, while proponents of religion in education celebrate the fact that there is legal protection for the subject, they should make RE attractive and also make the case for its need in education persuasive in public discourse. In other words, they should be mindful of the limits of relying on legal protection because laws can change as society's priorities change.

There is another angle that should be considered in Scotland. While there is no disputing the fact that secularisation is now a part of Scottish life (and the multiple implications of this for RE), however—the Catholic Church excepted—there remain pockets of vibrant Christian communities across the nation with fervent support for the continued place of religion in public education. In his autobiographical remarks lecturer at a Scottish university 3 said:

... In my life time Christianity in Scotland has changed in structure and expression. I belong to a [Protestant] Church which is very traditional but we have a membership of 1400 and we have two services on Sunday morning and probably 300 communion of 500 or 600 people attend and that is not counting children but adults. So in different parts of the country there is life in the Church that is flourishing.

The generally excellent teacher education provided by the universities in Scotland is another source of vitality for the subject because this ensures that the profession is staffed by highly qualified personnel. For me this represents a great opportunity for the potential to sustain the professionalisation of the subject and its educational agenda for children. But given the level of criticism that is sometimes mounted against the subject (see chapter 4 above and chapter 9: 3 below), teachers need to be much more fully equipped from out of their

professional training to defend the position of the discipline in contemporary educational culture. Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 said:

I think that RE staff should not be feeling under threat that their position might become vulnerable. I will challenge them and say to them to treat this as an opportunity not as a challenge. They should show why what they do [i.e. teaching RE] is important in a modern Scotland that is multicultural. They should say that this is really an important subject that our children need to be taught. Let them make sure that RE does not disappear and I say this as an atheist because this is just my own personal belief. My husband doesn't believe that and for my children the jury is out there...

One should also not miss the point that the uptake for RE has been increasing. While this could be caused by institutional variables that can be controlled or even manipulated, it has been an undoubted blessing for RE in Scotland. In other words, the subject's academic currency is appreciating and this opens up new areas for development. While, as we have noted previously, the philosophy 'take-over' of RE has its critics (including the present researcher), it should be acknowledged that one effect of this has been that RE now focuses on some of the less explored areas. Such a move also potentially opens up the subject to other possibilities for a subject that deals with religious themes many young people are naturally interested in and on which successful pedagogies can build. Principal Teacher at non-denominational school in Scotland 3 noted:

Our young people are desperately interested in what we believe, why we believe and therefore we should really take that one on board and grasping it by the neck and say: go on with it!

Scottish respondents were generally of the view that as long as teacher education continued to produce quality teachers who are attuned to the new curricular opportunities, the future could remain bright for RE in Scotland. However, given the salience of religion in contemporary society (Conroy and Davis 2008) and events in the world since the 9/11 tragedy (such as the war on terror and prominence of Islam as an issue of public discourse), RE in Western liberal democracies has become an issue of public interest. Robert Jackson asserts that it is for this reason that Western governments will ensure that RE endures in public education (Jackson 2004b). Thus, similar to the aims of RE elsewhere in Western liberal societies, in Scotland public discourse of RE has been around the whole notion of common citizenship geared to foster social

cohesion (Pirrie 2005). The three year (2007/08-2009/10) major funded research project in RE being undertaken by scholars across the UK led by staff at Glasgow University, is one example that goes to show the continued public interest in the subject (LTS 2009/10b).

Finally, although I am not overly convinced (i.e. given the nature of the challenges outlined in the next section of this chapter) as William Hannah is that RE in Scotland has now ‘breached the wall’ (i.e. it has achieved its intended educational status) (Hannah 2007, p. 324), I take his point that as a subject which until recently had been separated from the rest of the curriculum, RE has made some strides in the modern Scottish curriculum. My assertion is that while the subject faces challenges, the curriculum development during the past four decades has enabled it to acquire a measure of academic and intellectual status on the curriculum. It is for this reason that despite the hurdles on its way, RE in Scotland can be said to have achieved some milestones as a result of the process of curriculum reform. Some of these milestones—such as *educationalisation* of the subject for pupils and its *professionalisation* for teachers—are crucial areas from which Malawi can learn.

In Malawi, it should be acknowledged that the situation for RE is, frankly, desperate and there are few areas where positive messages for the subject can be noted. However, the data does point out instances of ‘hope’, that if properly cultivated might blossom to the advantage of the subject. Regarding the troublesome issue of RME, closer explanation of the data revealed that while BK is what most people in the study said they wanted, it seems to me that if the government had explained properly what the new RME syllabus entailed, a different and positive view of the new subject could have been fostered. Chairperson of a parent council in Malawi 1 said that,

If the issue of curriculum change was made open to us we could have asked the government to explain to us the reason why the old BK syllabus was being replaced by RME. It is like me in the village telling people to gather and collect bricks, take them to a certain area and yet without explaining the purpose of all this. The government lost a chance.

The point that the ‘government lost a chance’ suggests to me a window of opportunity for the subject. My point is that all is not lost because government can reconnect with parents and other interest groups to forge a new way forward for RME. Surely, the government cannot ‘leave alone’ a subject it spent time and money to develop to its fate, as seems currently to be happening with RME. The government needs to provide leadership and direction, not only for the teaching of RME but more generally for how RE as a whole is perceived. In other words, there is greater need for government to make clear the educational argument for the subject because at the moment its rationale continues to be seen in religious rather than educational terms.

While many teachers in this study did not hide their religious convictions, and the implications this might have on their teaching RE, they also indicated positively that given the necessary training and support, as professionals, they would teach multi-faith RE (i.e. educational RE). Teachers in the study noted that most of their fellow professionals were sticking to BK only because they were not aware of RME or equipped to teach it. They noted that many teachers would not object professionally to teaching RME if the government could fully explain its educational merit and offer schools and teachers the necessary support. One teacher in the study (i.e. teacher at a public school in Malawi 3) went as far as suggesting that RME can have a future if the country’s new president—recently converted to Catholicism—intervenes, noting:

If the president was to intervene in the issue being a Christian, things can change because the charge that RME is a ploy to Islamise the country would not arise. Otherwise how can a Christian president sell the country to Muslims as the charge is always as such when the issue of RME is discussed?

Another positive indication for the subject also came from headteachers, who said that they would offer the subject (i.e. RME) if there was demand for it by the end users. On the general issue of RE (i.e. whether BK or RME) and given its many woes, respondents remained hopeful that perhaps a study such as this could for the first time inform the policy community that all was not well and that something drastic was needed to change for the better the current status of the subject.



### 9.3. Constraints

#### 9.3.1. Problem of credibility

In Scotland, respondents repeated the view that RE continues to experience a *credibility* problem. They noted that in an effort to make the subject credible teachers are increasingly grounding RE in ethics or philosophy rather than in religion *per se*. They observed that in most Scottish schools RE has declined into something pupils have to do because it is a compulsory until they turn 16 years of age. This, they noted, has made many children develop apathetic attitudes towards the subject, as evidenced by the repetition of the question ‘why do we have to do this?’ Respondents noted that in situations such as the one just noted, it becomes difficult to motivate children who are already resigned to the fact that RE is unimportant to them or to their future careers.

Similar to the findings of a recent South African study (Scottish Government 2009a), Scottish respondents in the present study also noted that one of the contributory factors to the way children perceived RE was the endurance of parents’ stereotyped perceptions of the subject, which are then passed on to their children. For instance, some parents in the study felt RE had not proven itself as a *bona fide* subject that they would recommend their children to study. Chairperson of a parent council in Scotland 1 said:

It’s up to RE to prove its worth as to why it should be taught and why children should be bothered with it. Let it be as *competitive* like any other subject. It is not anyone else to determine that for RE - it is for those teaching the subject to show why it is *important* [my emphasis].

Admittedly, teachers in the study noted that sometimes the way RE is designed and taught in school puts children off. They also said that in most cases schools fail to explain the immediate benefits of doing RE, a fact that leaves the impression that it is irrelevant or unimportant. In addition, they noted that teaching in RE assumes too much that children will understand the concepts that are explored in the subject when clearly many of these concepts are too advanced for their comprehension. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 noted that,

One of the other bigger problems I feel we have with RE is that ... many of the concepts and ideas we talk about in the subject pupils are not quite developed yet to understand them. Pupils are not sometimes attuned to concepts such as transcendence. I think that there are many concepts we teach which the young mind only becomes receptive later and I think for some they never do to a certain extent...

Insufficient time allocation (which is more common in non-denominational schools than in Catholic ones, for reasons already noted in chapter 8) was also pointed out as an issue of concern for RE in Scotland. The study found that in most schools particularly in the non-denominational sector in Scotland, RE is not being given sufficient time in clear violation of the mandated time for a *core* subject. Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 gave this typical scenario:

In S1 and S2 I see them on average once a week that is 55 minutes but now they come to class in blocks. This is much more useful because they come for two periods a week to RE in their blocks. This does help to get the momentum of learning. One period a week was always a difficult thing.

From the views expressed above there is little doubt that the reduced teaching time is having a detrimental effect on the quality of teaching and learning in RE. Pressure from secularists was also cited as a real threat for RE in Scottish education. Representative of the Church of Scotland noted:

I think that there will be pressure from secularists who will argue that there is no connection between science and religion and so on. And it has not helped by small group of Christians who want to argue that creationism is a science and yet we know that this is a theological statement and that it should be taught in RE and not science. Sometimes you get caught in being tainted with the extremes. So I think in secular schools that will be a reason to get rid of RE and that we need to be careful that this does not happen.

The threat of secularism to religion is of course being felt as widely in Scotland as in many other liberal democracies. Some of the educational issues related to it have already been highlighted in previous chapters (see in particular chapter 5). For stakeholders who continue to see the value of RE the secular onslaught on religion in general and on RE in particular, remains a worrying trend given the

fact that politically-influential secularists do not hide their disdain for organised religion and, as such, they would not be terribly disappointed if RE were to disappear from schools. I do not agree with these secular perspectives on religion. My own personal view is that religion is an important element in human understanding of the world. For this reason I think that RE is a vital and useful subject, worth supporting in schools because it helps our young people to appreciate how religion shapes their way of life, the lives of others, and their understanding of the world, whether they are in fact personally religious or not.

In Malawi, despite the fact there have been curriculum changes with the introduction of RME, people still conceive RE in confessional terms. While it is true that BK has endured, and that it is a favourite syllabus in most schools (see chapter 8), there is little recognition of RME, a syllabus that is non-confessional. So strong is the mind-set in Malawi that RE must always equate to some style of confessionalism, that critics of RME say that the new syllabus is in fact ‘Islamic confessionalism’ or ‘Islamic evangelism’ by another name. In other words, the common view of RE in Malawi is not that of a subject that has intrinsic educational value, but rather as a discipline intrinsically designed for proselytisation. Headteacher at a public school in Malawi 5 echoed this ingrained understanding of RE:

Maybe someone doing well in BK can become a priest so if we do not offer it we might deny that child the future prospects of becoming a priest.

This perception indicates that in a lot ways in Malawi RE continues to be seen not in *educational* but in *evangelical* terms. Examining the aims of the BK syllabi which are favoured in schools, it is easy to see the basis of this perception. The junior secondary BK syllabus uses selected texts from the Old and New Testaments and has these aims: (a) provide a basis for non-denominational teaching of BK, (b) present the essence of Christian faith through familiarity with the Old and New Testaments and (c) develop in pupils an appreciation of its relevance to life and thought (MME 1982a). The senior secondary syllabus, which also uses selected texts from the Old and New Testaments, has the following aims: (a) give an understanding of the scriptural basis of the Christian faith, (b) help pupils to develop skills in studying, interpreting and understanding scriptural passages and (c) encourage an appreciation of the Bible’s relevance to

life and thought today (MME 1982b). Even the proposed 2006 revised syllabi for both junior and senior sectors, designed to replace BK, contain little promise for ‘educational’ RE. In both syllabi the following ‘subject objectives’ are repeated viz.: (a) appreciate the authority of the Bible, (b) gain an understanding of the scriptural basis of the Christian faith, (c) examine practices and teachings of Christianity, (d) give a coherent account of the main characters and events recorded in the Old and New Testaments, (e) demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the key elements and (f) develop an understanding of the relevance of the Bible to contemporary issues (MME 2006a).

Perhaps if the new RME were widely accepted, a step forward towards the teaching of relevant RE could have been taken. By ‘relevant’ RE I mean learning that focuses more on the concerns and challenges of the child rather than merely on what adults want them to learn. Despite its own limitations—such as lack of focus on what the child already believes or what his/her home belief is as well as an oversaturation on what pupils are expected to learn—the RME syllabus has aims which in many ways focus on the *educational* and not *confessional* aims of RE. The RME syllabus has 19 ‘educational’ aims covering issues such as: (a) understand the nature of religions, (b) respect of the beliefs of others, (c) reflect on religious and moral values, (d) develop a spirit of national unity and loyalty, (e) develop an attitude of positive response to the demands of a pluralistic society, (f) acquire a positive attitude on gender issues and so on (MME 1998).

The argument being made in this thesis is that, in Malawi, the continued preference for BK over educational forms of RE has not helped to improve the image of the subject and its standing on the school curriculum. What is disappointing about this for proponents of educational RE is that despite some attempts at curriculum reform, the subject has in fact moved very little towards the long-desired improvements it urgently needs. As we noted in chapter 8, the new RME curriculum which has the potential to change some of the negative experiences children have had with the old model of doing RE has not been allowed to flourish in schools. This has happened largely because RME has been too politicised to the extent that the voices of those who see its value for children’s educational experiences have been drowned out by the politically-inflected voices of those who oppose it. Unless RME gets the necessary support in the pervasive battle of wills that characterises RE debate in contemporary

Malawi, *confessional* RE will always triumph at the expense of *educational* RE, largely because the government has failed to explain the merits of RME for a culturally sensitive and religiously plural country such as Malawi.

Another challenge noted by the respondents in the Malawi research was that making RE optional (at the junior secondary level) has presented new challenges for the subject. While previously it was guaranteed to be taught in schools, today RE has to compete with other ‘popular’ subjects such as Agriculture, History and so on. As in Scotland—and despite all the popular support it gets particularly in Church controlled schools—RE in Malawi also has a credibility problem. Respondents did not hide the fact that RE has a *low status* in schools. Headteacher at a public school 7 in Malawi observed that,

... Putting RE and Agriculture in the same options pot has meant that naturally students choose Agriculture because BK is thought of as a *soft subject* for people without academic merit [my emphasis].

The findings in this study indicate that RE in Malawi is more and more looking backwards to a time of little promise for the subject of almost four decades ago and beyond.

Another noteworthy finding was that while most parents said publicly that they were Christian, and thus supported BK in schools, when it came to their own children they tended to take on a more pragmatic attitude concerning RE and thus did not encourage their children to choose BK for examination purposes. Similar to the situation in Ghana (Kudadjie 1996), this study found that despite generally the popularity of RE as a school subject in Malawi (see chapter 8), it is necessary to note incidents where some Malawian parents were not keen to see their children study religion. It should be noted however, that this was not done to disparage faith but rather to ensure that their children chose subjects that were perceived to have more *potential* for jobs and future careers. In other words, some Malawian parents also succumbed to the misguided belief that RE held little employment prospects for their children. Chairperson of a school in Malawi 2 conceded that,

Well as a parent one has to consider the fact that the subjects your child has chosen will help him to find employment later in life. Our experience also tells us that jobs for those with theological degrees are scarce.

Here, the onus lies with teachers and schools to ‘sell’ and explain the merits of the subject. It seems, however, that this would be difficult in the Malawian context because the BK option favoured by most of the population has, in fact, little educational standing even with its public advocates. In my judgement this reality ought to provide a potent justification for ensuring that the educational form of RE (i.e. RME) should be given the attention it deserves, so that teachers and schools can confidently sell the subject to the general public. Currently, it seems that there is very little that schools or teachers are able to sell about the experiences of BK.

Another reason given for the low status of RE in Malawi is the perception that those who choose RE are people with weak academic merit and thus incapable of pursuing, for example, core science subjects. There is also in this connection an unwantedly patriarchal reproach attached to doing RE in many schools as a subject mostly fitted for girls because they ‘cannot do’ sciences. Thus, many boys will not opt for RE for fear of being laughed at by their peers. Teachers in the study also noted that the examination system itself does not bring RE any benefits. For example, it was observed that the arrangement of examination times does not favour RE because it is always placed at the end of the examination period when candidates are tired. Respondents noted that this gives the added impression that RE is not a priority subject. In some cases it was noted that because RE is always timetabled to be written at the end of the examination period, owing to fatigue, even those candidates registered to sit the subject sometimes abandon it after completing the other seemingly ‘important’ subjects.

The political context under which RME was received in Malawi has been well established (chapters 5 and 6) and will not be repeated here, except to add that the politicisation of RME has done untold damage to this new subject. The reason is that every time the issue has been brought up, unsettling comments have emerged even long after the main protagonist in the controversy, the former president, Bakili Muluzi (a Muslim), left office in 2004. What the politicisation of RE reform has done in Malawi is to guarantee that every time RE is touched upon, old ‘rivalries’ about the subject seem to reappear. This became more salient during the drafting of the revised RME syllabus in 2001. Ministry of Education official in Malawi 2 noted one particular incident:

During the deliberations and seeing that the Christian camp was becoming dominant in the discussions the Muslim representative stood up and said that this could not go on. He then went as far as suggesting that if this was allowed to go on perhaps RE should be cancelled from the school altogether.

In my view, if key stakeholders continue to exhibit a combative attitude, as they did when discussions about RE reform were first introduced in schools in 2000, the subject will continue to walk the *ragged* path. One of the most serious unintended consequences of this state of affairs has been that, officially, the government has avoided making any public statements about RE, a factor we noted in chapter 8. Keeping quiet on a subject where clearly intervention is needed further damages the potential the subject might have in making an effective contribution to the education of children in religion. Upon careful reflection on the matter regarding the issue of BK and RME in schools, some parents involved in the study made an interesting suggestion. They said that government should formulate a single curriculum for RE, where Christian and Islamic materials can be taught without bias. They noted that it is cumbersome to have several syllabi in the same subject. Chairperson of a parent council in Malawi 2 explained that a single policy for RE would be helpful because:

First, this will be important because by *learning together* children will be able to develop respect and empathy towards others' beliefs although they do not have to share those beliefs. Secondly, learners will not have to struggle to choose between the two syllabi [i.e. BK or RME] because the two subjects will just become one [my emphasis].

However, my personal view is that given the nature of Malawian society in particular the tension that exists between Christians and Muslims a single curriculum policy for RE would not be ideal.

As a general point, it is clear that RE in Malawi is one of those subjects that will always require active government involvement because of the nature of Malawian society. Failing which there is a grave risk of rendering the subject effectively moribund, especially if the experiences of Scottish RE noted previously in this study (see chapter 4) are to stand as a lesson or comparison. The point being made in this study is that the Malawi government should not offload its responsibilities for what happens to RE to individual schools. In truth, most schools do not have sufficient insight themselves regarding the dynamics in

RE in recent decades to be able to make the tough but necessary decisions about a subject that admittedly is more than it first appears to be. However, at the moment, RE in Malawi remains in the lull of suspended educational animation, with little sense of the direction in which it is headed.

### 9.3.2. Shortage of specialist teachers

Perhaps one of the major issues respondents noted as standing in the way of progress in RE concerned the shortage of specialists and the continued use of non-specialist teachers. In Scotland the research noted that this shortage was a problem in both denominational *and* non-denominational schools. Drawing on data obtained from the schools survey, the study found numerous cases of RE departments staffed by a single RE specialist. From the interview data the issue of numbers of schools employing non-specialists in RE also emerged very sharply. In a dialogue between the researcher and a Principal Teacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 (PTNSS 3), the following point was noted:

*Researcher:* What future do you see for RE in Scotland?

*PTNSS 3:* I hope it has a future.

*Researcher:* Why do you seem hesitant and concerned?

*PTNSS 3:* It is the issue of schools failing to provide adequate teachers when so many are being trained that worries me. Well it may be the decision of the headteacher. It's not always only in RE, there could be another subject like Music that is affected but that in the case of Music they get a specialist to do the job while in RE anyone seems qualified to teach it. This is what worries me.

*Researcher:* Are you suggesting that the perception of being a 'good Christian' continues to be seen as a qualification for one to teach RE?

*PTNSS 3:* Yes, I think that maybe such perceptions still persists even after 30 years of development.

It seems therefore that even after three decades or so of change towards improving RE in Scottish non-denominational schools, the attitude persists that teachers who also happen to be religious as well can be considered to be as 'good' as those professionally qualified to teach the subject. This is truly an incredible situation RE in Scotland finds itself even after so many decades of 'non-confessional' RE in non-denominational state schools.



Available statistics at the time of writing the thesis (2010) confirm the fact that RE in Scotland continues to experience shortage of qualified specialist teachers. Official figures indicate that, overall, in 2009 Scotland's 376 state secondary schools were staffed by some 25,371 teachers against a pupil population of 302,921. The figures also indicate that although there has been a noticeable increase in the numbers of RE specialists over the years—from 323 in 1992 (see Fairweather and MacDonald 1992) to over 600 a decade or so later (see Scottish Government 2009b)—compared with other 'core' subjects such as Art and English (see appendix 6:2), teacher numbers in SSRE remain woefully inadequate. Official government reports reveal that there were 684 RE specialists in 2007, 676 in 2008 and 676 in 2009 (see Scottish Government 2009b,a).

If we compare these figures to staffing in another 'core' subject on the nationally recognised curriculum it becomes evident that RE is understaffed. Art, one of the 'core' subjects, had double the number of RE teachers. For example, in 2007 there were 1,235 Art teachers, the following year there were 1,192 and in 2009 there were 1,155 Art teachers in Scottish education (see appendix 6:2). For RE, what these figures tell us is that currently there are more than 448 secondary school pupils per one RE specialist teacher in Scotland. My view is that this ratio could even be wider. My argument is that the official figures given in these statistics are of *all* registered SSRE teachers (that is including headteachers, depute headteachers, part-timers and those recently retired) and for this reason, the number of classroom SSRE teachers might be actually lower than the figures cited in these official statistics.

Returning to the general issue of teacher shortage, what is equally disappointing is the fact that the state of affairs for RE in Scotland has scarcely improved from the situation of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Writing in 1992, Fairweather and MacDonald pointed out that if RE in Scotland was to improve,

More trained secondary staff and resourcing are required. There are some 323 Religious Education specialists in Scottish secondary schools but these are unequally spread throughout the country (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992, p. 104).

The shortage of RE teachers in schools seems to be an acknowledged problem in Scotland today and the present research highlights the fact that the use of non-

specialist teachers has become a common trend again. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 acknowledged that:

When I go into schools, I still find non-specialist RE teachers in the non-denominational sector. The denominational sector is different because every teacher is a teacher of RE, potentially. In non-denominational schools I still get letters from Principal Teachers that they have not been given another member of staff.

For many Scottish readers, the use of non-specialists is a reality they would find hard to believe because of its echo of a time thought to be long in the past for the discipline of RE in schools. Non-specialists or ‘generalists’ (as Catholic schools prefer to call them) are teachers whose specialist subject knowledge and GTCS registration lie elsewhere, but who are sometimes asked to teach RE. It is of course a common arrangement in the Catholic sector—due to the sector’s catechetical rationale for RE and its corresponding view—that all Catholic teachers (whether a trained specialist in RE or not) on the school staff ought to be able and willing to contribute to the faith and doctrinal formation of pupils, among other ways, through teaching RE. Even here, however, the Catholic Bishops Conference in Scotland insists that generalist RE teachers possess a basic Initial Teacher Education (ITE) qualification in the teaching of the subject (see McGrath 2010). And yet, as we shall see in this section below, even in Catholic schools, Principal teachers reported that the use of non-specialists was a hindrance to the effective teaching of RE.

Commenting further on the ‘generalist’ problem, respondents also worried that not only were insufficient numbers of staff being recruited but also that in some cases those employed were of insufficient specialist quality. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 2 noted:

I have concerns about teaching and learning in RE. I don’t think that we are employing sufficient numbers of teachers with quality.

One of the questions that arise from this is what might be considered an adequate number of RE teachers to be able to offer the recommended core RE in schools at the quality thresholds implied by the observation. Of course there are no easy answers because schools are different in their priorities, circumstances, pupil-numbers and so on. However, there might be a rule of thumb as a rough

guide emerging from some of the literature. William Hannah, for example, has suggested that,

You need one teacher specialist per every 400 pupils if you are going to provide core RE at the recommended levels and make some provision for examination studies for those who opt for that (Hannah 2007, p. 238).

However, my considered view is that the pupil-teacher ratio in RE Hannah suggests as 'recommended' appears too high. If we compare with the pupil-teacher ratio in the other two compulsory subjects in Scottish education (i.e. English and Mathematics), it becomes evidently clear that RE does not have sufficient specialist teachers. For example, the present teacher-pupil ratio in English and Mathematics is 103 and 111, respectively against the ratio of more than 400 pupils to one RE teacher as is currently the case (Scottish Government 2009b). Thus, in my view Hannah's 'rough' guide of the pupil-teacher ratio in RE is inadequate for any effective teaching and learning in a subject which is core on the nationally recognised curriculum.

From the present study it was found that Catholic schools were perhaps those who used generalist teachers most, principally for the reasons cited above but also because *all* pupils in Catholic schools study RE from S1 to S6 and thus the schools are always in need of more teachers. In one Catholic school it was found that there were 16 generalists against two specialists and in another school there were 12 generalists against three specialists. Despite the seemingly convincing philosophical and pastoral justification for their use within their own faith community, Catholic RE Principal Teachers in the study openly expressed their concerns regarding the widespread use of generalist teachers.

They argued, for example, that this was impacting adversely on the overall quality of teaching in the subject. They noted that while many generalists were strong in their faith some of them, quite rightly, indicated that they were uncomfortable teaching RE because they did not have the requisite subject knowledge. They further noted that while some generalists were comfortable teaching first year pupils, many had difficulties teaching senior classes that tended to deal with complex magisterial, doctrinal and ethical questions (e.g. sex education). It was also put plainly that many of these generalists lacked the interest to teach RE. To improve the situation for RE, Catholic Principal

Teachers in the study suggested that schools should recruit adequate specialist staff. Principal Teacher at a Catholic school in Scotland 1 noted:

You get the argument that in Catholic schools RE should permeate the whole school and therefore everyone should teach it. I don't accept that argument because it is not RE that permeates the school but Catholic education that has nothing to do with the core teaching of the subject. The problem is that the Church says this is a Catholic school and RE is important but in truth they don't put their money where their mouth is in terms of hiring specialists ... The point I am making is that the rhetoric that RE is an important subject in Catholic school is a veneer because once you scratch the surface the reality is different from the veneer. I still maintain that it is impossible to make it [RE] work in terms of any quality of learning and teaching when you have 16 non-specialists most, if not all, of who would like to do anything else other than teach RE.

When asked to comment on the issue of generalist teachers at a more formal, national and policy level, the Catholic Church representative in the study gave a measured response, saying that 'it is good for Catholic schools to have a balance between specialists and non-specialist RE teachers' [Representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland]. But as we have noted from the views of Catholic Principal Teachers above, more RE teachers are needed not only in Catholic schools but in the non-denominational sector as well if schools are to be able to offer effective, high quality RE to all children.

However, with budget cuts looming in the public sector and recently confirmed by the new UK Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, it seems that more challenges lie ahead for teacher numbers in the UK. If these cuts cascade to Scotland, as such fiscally-driven policies inevitably do, then serious problems for teacher numbers in RE in Scotland should be expected. For example, the UK Secretary of State for Education has recently identified RE—together with Personal Search and Health Education (PSHE) and Citizenship—for reductions in resource allocation, because these subjects are considered to be of lower priority on the curriculum (Gove 2010).

But it seems that even this might not be the only woe that could confront Scottish RE in terms of teacher numbers. Respondents noted that as schools have been doing their curriculum mapping, as part of the roll-out of the new CfE, they will discover that in the senior secondary phase the maximum number of certificate subjects a pupil can take, in S4 for example, has gone down from

eight to six. Respondents noted that, as a consequence, this will lead young people to prioritise their courses and take on a much more pragmatic view of their subject choice. Headteacher at a non-denominational school in Scotland 3 noted:

With eight subjects you choose subjects that you really need for your career and then choose a couple more on subjects you find interesting one of which for example, could be Standard Grade RE. If you are only allowed six of them, then subjects like RE gets dropped.

On a more general point, headteachers in the study were less optimistic about the future of RE as a teaching subject. There were suggestions that those currently at university intending to become RE teachers should be advised to be *dually* qualified so that they can teach another subject, owing to the more limited chances of employment in RE in the years ahead. The views of headteachers on this point deserve some comment. It has already been demonstrated that there is actually a shortage of RE teachers in the country. The worry for me is that since headteachers are acquiring enhanced administrative and financial powers in relation to elements such as subject choice and the hiring of teachers, those less sympathetic to RE will naturally give the subject less attention in terms of basic infrastructural choices such as how much time to be given, teacher numbers for the subject and, in some cases (as we already seen) whether RE should in fact be offered at all on the timetable. Thus for me it is the attitude of the headteacher towards RE rather than the fact that there is a genuine fear that jobs in the subject will soon dry up that is the immediate challenge facing RE in Scotland.

In the Malawian research several issues around staffing were also identified as major challenges for RE. First, it was noted that there was serious understaffing almost to crisis point in RE. It is necessary briefly to point out that in Malawi teaching is perhaps the least attractive of all public sector careers. Research in Malawi has noted a number of reasons why teaching as a career choice is less attractive. These include poor pay, unsatisfactory employment conditions and the low status given to teaching in general (Kadzamira 2006). As a consequence of this, few people train as teachers and of those who train 6% leave the profession within the first three years of entry. Added to the HIV/AIDS pandemic (combined urban and rural prevalence rates of 38% in the country has also taken a heavy toll on teachers), the overall attrition rate due to resignations, illness,

death, early retirement and so on, has been put conservatively at 25% per annum (MME 2008a).

Further, to be able to satisfy demand, the teaching profession in Malawi as whole would require about 25,000 extra secondary school teachers. Currently it has not more than 3,400 qualified teachers in the entire secondary school sector. An important point to make is that the figure of 10,258 current teachers in state education reported in the latest government report (2008) masks the fact that 67% of these teachers are not qualified to teach in secondary schools. Such teachers are mostly trained primary school teachers educated only up to certificate level but due to the acute shortage of teachers are transferred to teach in secondary schools. The situation of teacher shortage in the secondary school sector is made worse by the fact that from all seven universities combined (that is three public and four private universities), the annual output of teachers in the whole country has remained at less than 450 (compare MME 2004, 2008a).<sup>16</sup>

In a context such as the one noted above where there is very low teacher output, the situation gets even bleaker for a subject like RE, which is considered to be of *low* priority, ironically despite the popularity of BK syllabi in Malawian schools as suggested in chapter 8 above. Given the fact that the Ministry of Education in Malawi does not have published figures of the numbers of teachers per subject, the study was not able to estimate the numbers of RE teachers currently in schools. However, to ascertain how bleak the situation is in terms of teacher numbers, the study examined figures of those teachers who enrolled to train as RE teachers during the 2008/09 academic year at Malawian universities 1, 2 and 3. Generally, what the study found was disappointing because of the low intake of RE trainees in these institutions. At Malawian university 1 (public), the intake was a paltry two students for that year. At Malawian university 2 (public) it was relatively commendable at 25. At Malawian university 3 (private/Church owned) it was another paltry three students who enrolled to train as RE teachers during that period.

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<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that in 2008 the total student enrolment from all the seven Malawian universities was a mere 9,082 or 0.3% of student eligible age. This makes Malawi one of the countries with the lowest university enrolment in sub-Saharan African countries (i.e. 51% per 100,000 inhabitants), See World Bank 2010. *The Education System in Malawi: World Bank Working Paper No. 182*, Washington: World Bank.

The fact that Malawian university 2 had a higher than usual intake, prompted further investigation of why this was the case. It was found that by design this institution mainly accepts primary school teachers, previously qualified to certificate level, for upgrading so that they can train up to diploma level to qualify them to teach in secondary school where the scarcity of teachers is being heavily felt. Many of these students are accepted on a mature entry basis because they lack the requisite academic grades for normal university admission. It is also for this reason that many of these teachers consider this a 'golden opportunity' for professional and career advancement because now they can qualify to teach in secondary schools. The fact that the 'up-graded' teachers from the diploma programme are academically weak and only train up to diploma level, it is difficult to see how these can contribute effectively to quality of teaching or even pedagogical thoroughness on a difficult and politically sensitive subject as RE has become. It is my contention that RE in Malawi needs teachers with academic merit to push forward the necessary pedagogical and professional improvements the subject desperately needs in the country.

However, a more fundamental question should be posed as to why RE in Malawi does not attract academically strong ITE students. Lecturer at a Malawian university 3 gave this explanation as to why there was such disappointing numbers of students enrolling as RE teachers at his institution:

As a nation we need religious educators and yet parents don't think of advising their children to specialise in the subject [RE]. Funny enough in colleges we have in the University of Malawi a full department where teachers can be trained for BK and RME but then very few parents encourage their children to study the subject. Even here at this university we have a department that offers certification in BK but very few students opt to study the subject.

What is puzzling to observe in the Malawian situation, however, is the fact that while university students are happy to read theology or religious studies (as many do) for their degrees, they are less interested in combining their degrees with a teaching certification because they do not want to be teachers (Matemba 2011, p. 336). For example, the research found that at Malawian university 1 there were 83 students who joined the department of TRS during the 2008/2009 academic year. And yet, only two from that group opted to train as RE teachers

with their theology degrees. Lecturer at a Malawian university 1 gave this comment:

There are huge numbers of students majoring purely in TRS. They are doing TRS not to become RE teachers. They just want to major with a BA degree. In their opinion a BA degree is better than majoring in BED with RE as a teaching option because they find RE not *attractive* and *marketable*. So in TRS we have large numbers but in RE few students and sometimes none. Let me show you the list I have of students currently taking TRS. You see the numbers are up to 83 students but out of these those who are coming to education we have only this girl and that boy. In other words there are *two students* out of 83 TRS students in 2008/09 desiring to become RE teachers [my emphasis].

The impact of this development on RE as a subject in schools is devastatingly obvious. When teacher at a public school in Malawi 5 (TPSM 5) was asked about the challenges she faced at her school regarding RE, the dialogue went on as follows:

*Researcher:* Could you tell me if there are any challenges you face regarding RE at your school?

*TPSM 5:* At this school even teachers who come here, five years can pass without receiving an RE teacher.

*Researcher:* Why is that so?

*TPSM 5:* It is not easy to find RE teachers in this country. Right now there are three teachers on teaching practice from Mzuzu University, Domasi College and Chancellor College of the University of Malawi and this year one of them is offering RE. This is after a very long time because in most years we do not get any teacher-trainee in RE.

*Researcher:* Does this mean that fewer people are taking up RE as a teaching subject?

*TPSM 5:* Yes, there is a serious scarcity of RE teachers at this school and I think throughout the country.

Given this scenario, a question arises: who then is teaching RE in Malawian schools? The answer to this is that RE, which remains at the end of the food chain in the curriculum, is mostly being taught by untrained and undertrained teachers, among who are primary teachers (qualified only to certificate level) and diploma graduates from theological schools (Matemba 2011). Occasionally those with degrees in TRS, but with no teaching qualification, also do teach RE.



There are a few occasions, also, of those with a minor qualification in RE teaching the subject in schools. One of the primary teachers now teaching secondary RE without any further training said:

I did not qualify as an RE secondary teacher but qualified as a primary teacher. However, my interest in BK began during my secondary school days. I was doing well in BK. Later I was transferred from primary school to this community secondary school to teach BK.

However, despite the fact RE is largely being taught by unqualified and under-qualified teachers, and notwithstanding the recent curriculum changes that brought in RME, those teaching RE have never been offered any Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training. While the lack of CPD for teachers remains one of the major educational challenges in the country (MME 2008b), it seems that the problem is more pronounced for RE owing to the fact that it is considered a marginal curriculum subject. On the issue of CPD in RE most of the participants in this study indicated that this was an area they felt the government had failed the subject. For example, they wondered why some CPD support is given to English, Sciences and Mathematics but not to RE. In a dialogue between the researcher and teacher in public school in Malawi 4 (TPSM 4) this was recorded:

*Researcher:* Have you ever had in-service training since you have been a teacher of RE?

*TPSM 4:* No, never, I have never attended any in-service training since I started teaching RE and that is some ten years ago. There are in-service workshops in the Sciences but not in RE. I have never heard of an in-service workshop for RE. Teachers in the Sciences go for in-service and are confident while BK or RME as a subject remains dormant.

*Researcher:* In your opinion do you think that if such training was provided teachers would welcome it?

*TPSM 4:* Oh yes defiantly teachers would welcome this because it will refresh their professional competence especially for RME which is new and generally misunderstood.

The lack of in-service training for RE teachers confirms the findings of Salanjira's doctoral study, particularly on the point that the absence of teacher

preparation especially for the new RME syllabus has contributed to the poor reception of RME in schools (Salanjira 2009).

On the issue of teacher shortage, a further comment comparing the situation between Scotland and Malawi should be made. In Scotland the situation has arisen due to the reluctance of schools to hire more specialist teachers for RE and not due to shortage of trained specialists in the country *per se*. In fact, if research findings on teacher retention in RE in England can be taken as yardstick, it can be surmised that Scottish RE teachers too stay in the job for ‘love of subject, belief in value of the subject for pupils [and] a sense of vocation’ (Dadley and Edwards 2007). However, while in Malawi schools need more RE specialists only very few are being trained and that those that are trained, hardly stay in the profession. For this reason RE in Malawi seriously lacks the professional capacity to impact effective teaching and pedagogical development of the subject.

The evidence in this chapter clearly points to the fact that RE in Malawi is in a state of crisis. There is an apparent paradox here: How can a subject that has caused so much controversy (and where in the case of BK interest groups have on numerous occasions come out in the open to declare their support for the subject) face the sort of potentially catastrophic challenges identified in this chapter? It seems to me that there are no easy answers to this and that a more comprehensive analysis is needed to get to the bottom of the matter.

### 9.3.3. Negative publicity

Another challenge facing RE in both countries noted in this study was negative media publicity about the subject. Related literature suggests that sometimes the media is ‘blind’ to the importance of religion in modern society. In the book, *Blind Spot: When Journalists Don’t Get Religion*, Paul Marshall and others posit that the media usually portrays religion in a bad light because some journalists hold non-religious and even anti-religion worldviews (Marshall et al. 2009). In this study, the views of respondents from both countries coalesced on the point that religion is a soft target for the media. Representative of the Catholic Church in Scotland noted:

I think it is easier for the media to latch on into the way of looking at religion, to ridicule it and to criticise it. To some extent possibly

religious people, traditions and groups have brought some of that on themselves: that we have not done enough to explain ourselves. To explain what we actually do, why we believe and why we do certain things.

In Malawi it has already been noted how negative media reporting regarding curriculum reform was also responsible for making people have doubts about the new RME syllabus (see chapter 6). Respondents in both countries considered negative media reporting as one of the main challenges facing RE. In both countries, respondents noted that while the media has the freedom to report what they want, its tendency to concentrate on negative stories about religion does damage to RE. They noted that in cases where RE was doing well, the media tended not find such stories ‘worth’ reporting. Ministry of Education official in Scotland 1 noted:

There are many good changes that have been introduced in the subject but you won’t see very much of this in the papers about how good RE sometimes is. Last summer the *Glasgow Herald* ran an article about the rise in numbers of children opting for RMPS at examination level. That was a positive message about the subject because usually when the media picks a story on religion it is negative.

In Scotland, some respondents were convinced that the media was dominated by secularists which for them was the reason reports about religion were perceived to be negative. Such anti-religious reporting, they claimed, was doing damage to the credibility of the subject in the minds of young people. In particular the respondents took issue with the negative influence the secular movement was having on the vibrancy of RE. They also worried that the secular movement was getting stronger and better organised in Scotland. Referring to the draft CfE guidelines for RE which now gives space for viewpoints that are independent of religious beliefs (see LTS 2008b,a), these respondents further worried that schools were being asked to do more things formally to accommodate the secular interests and that some of this had no obvious or particular connection to core RE. In fact, Scottish respondents confirmed what we noted in chapter 8 that in some non-denominational schools, the secular influence has gone so far that in a number of cases some of these schools have either marginalised RE or got rid of the subject altogether.

## 9.4. Conclusion

The findings in this chapter have identified pockets of hope for further development in RE although it must be said that for Malawi such pockets were very shallow indeed. If there is one lesson that RE in Malawi can learn from the Scottish experience (and despite its own imperfections), it could lie in making teacher education in RE attractive so that many more genuinely excellent teachers can be recruited and trained for RE. Clearly, the findings indicate that RE in Scotland and Malawi still retains some of the classical challenges that have plagued the subject for a very long time, for example, on the substantive issues of credibility, negative media and scarcity of teachers. Examining the findings more closely, one gets the sense that for every two steps taken forward, there have been three steps backwards for RE in both countries. However, the findings strongly suggest that while RE in Scotland has challenges that need to be addressed, the situation in Malawi is much *bleaker*. The sheer lack of teachers for the subject in Malawi, for instance, was a revelation for the research and I am sure would be for anyone reading this report.

# Chapter 10

## Conclusion

### 10.1. Introduction

This is the concluding chapter of the thesis and it addresses several issues. In line with the research questions underpinning the research it provides a summary of the study's main findings. Secondly, it notes the implications of some of the study's findings. Next, it outlines the study's limitations and makes some suggestions for further research. Lastly, final remarks about the study are made.

### 10.2. Summary of the main findings

This section presents a summary of the main results of the study against the five research questions that have guided the research (see chapter 1).

#### 10.2.1. Chapters 4 and 5: Impetus for reform

The first research question in the study was related to the factors that gave rise to the need for reform in Scottish and Malawian RE. The findings showed that RE reform was engendered by five interrelated factors. First, the state of underdevelopment in the subject was of great concern to many stakeholders who wanted the subject to be improved in order to remain meaningful to the needs and experiences of modern children. Secondly, there was a growing need to align RE with changing trends in society such as religious pluralism, multiculturalism and political liberalism. Third, political intervention in Scotland and political pressure in Malawi played a huge part in directing reforms in the respective countries. Fourth, critical scholarship, fifth the work of professional committees and sixth the RE advisorate—which only emerged convincingly in the Scottish research—played a huge part in challenging the 'old' model of RE and in suggesting possible ways to move the subject forward. Seventh and finally, curriculum practices and developments in neighbouring countries, and countries

further afield, impacted significantly on the thinking about RE in both Scotland and Malawi.

### 10.2.2. Chapter 6: Changes in the curriculum

The second research question was concerned with how the RE curriculum in the two countries responded to the calls for its reform. The study found that since 1970 there have been a series of curriculum reforms that can fit into three loose categories. The first category describes some early attempts (1970-1983) that were intended to realign the curriculum with major social and cultural trends in the society of the time. In Malawi this was done as part of a sub-regional (East and Central Africa) response to general patterns of change in the curriculum so that it was more appropriately aligned with the needs of children emerging from a colonial dispensation. Unfortunately, although Malawi contributed to that initiative, at the last possible moment the government decided not to implement the regional curriculum, the reasons for which were suggested in the study (chapter 6 section 6.2.). In Scotland, the early curricular movements were a response to the indelible Millar Report, which remains the most comprehensive assessment of the state of RE in Scotland.

The second category was of reforms that took place in the two countries between 1992 and 2000. What was significant about these reforms was the need to produce an *educational* form of RE in the new curriculum. For this reason, *confessional* RE was replaced with largely non-confessional approaches, of course not without the forms of contestation documented in the study (chapter 6 section 6.4.2).

The third category was about the fairly recent curriculum reforms. In Malawi, owing to mounting opposition against the curriculum introduced in 2000 (Chapter 6 sections 6.4.2. and 6.5) new confessional BK-based syllabi were designed in 2006 which have not been implemented for reasons noted in the study (Chapter 6 section 6.3.2). In Scotland, a new and largely non-confessional RE curriculum (with some notable expectations for the curriculum in Catholic schools) would come into secondary schools as part of the general and radical CfE reform movement in 2010/11 school session.

### 10.2.3. Chapter 7: Spaces of contest

Owing to the fact that in both Scotland and Malawi RE has been a contentious curriculum subject, the third research question was linked to the issue of how curriculum changes were received in the two countries. In an attempt to answer this question a number of issues were explored. First, it seems that it was precipitated by a fundamental ‘clash’ of ideology between liberals who wanted a paradigm shift in the subject on the one hand, and fundamentalist or traditional Christians who wanted to maintain the *status quo* on the other. Although in the end negotiation and compromise were useful strategies that helped to resolve the impasse, the turn of events afterwards still indicated that Christian conservatives had an upper hand in the debates.

For example, in Scotland the privileging of Christianity in RE—albeit within a neo-confessional model—continued, while in Malawi BK was returned to the curriculum and in the junior secondary curriculum offered alongside the non-confessional new RME syllabus. In many respects, given the widespread secularisation of education and society in modern Scotland, this is an unexpected finding. However, it seems to me that Catholics and to a large extent Evangelicals and traditionalists have in some way helped to counteract the secular influence by ensuring that religion (i.e. Christianity) continued to have some space in Scottish public life. While it must be said that it was confessional RE that these groups particularly preferred, it was their support for religion in public education that should be noted as a positive contribution to the continued support for RE.

The second facet of response to changes in RE acknowledged the important and educationally unsettling fact that people saw the subject as a means they could use to preserve or express their religious identity. As such, RE reform in Scotland and Malawi, as has been historically, was embroiled in the seemingly permanent identity crisis associated with religious change. The crisis centred on whose identity (religious or not) the new curricula were designed to promote or preserve. In both countries, conservative elements within the Christian groups particularly were unified in expressing the point that these changes would rob them of their Christian identity. In Malawi, Muslims also felt that it was within their rights to demand a curriculum that addressed their needs. In Scotland within the small but unexpectedly unified voice of Christian confessionalism for RE, there were differing views on how this was to be achieved. Catholics were

anxious about the preservation of Catholic identity within a state-funded confessional system while some Presbyterians were anxious about Presbyterian identity in a national RE curriculum increasingly weighted against confessionalism. This suggests that in Scotland confessional RE remains a preferred pedagogy not only in the Catholic schools but in some non-denominational schools as well. This has implications for current policy because it is evidently clear that non-confessional RE is by no means the only preferred pedagogy by stakeholders in non-denominational schools.

The third important dimension of reception and reaction was seen in the despondency felt by key stakeholders in both countries at the fact that government (despite its claims to the contrary) did not properly consult them over RE reforms. What the government had done in the two countries, to the frequent chagrin of these key stakeholders (i.e. parents and Church leaders), strongly suggested that they already had a pre-determined vision of what they wanted reformed RE to become and thus merely ‘consulted’ other stakeholders as a tokenistic afterthought. It was an oversight that governments in both countries soon regretted, because the diversity of opinions and the scale of opposition to the curriculum reforms meant that governments’ plans either failed to take off the ground (in Malawi) or at least did not unfold as originally envisaged (in Scotland). Once again, the Scottish dimension of this experience is in many respects unexpected and in almost all respects hitherto poorly documented. Yet this study provides significant evidence of subtle, understated but pervasive scepticism towards the reforming agenda of government in RE. This suggests that proponents of religion in education were still sceptical about these reforms because of their perceived fear of the potential loss of ‘authentic’ religiosity in RE.

The last aspect of reception expressed itself as a reaction to what was seen as the insensitivity of new curriculum policy. In Scotland, where historically RE always had a dual policy arrangement—one for non-denominational and other for Catholic schools—the declaration that there would be a single unitary policy for RE in 1992 was strongly resented by the Catholic Church, to such an extent that the policy was reversed. In Malawi, where historically there has been a single curriculum policy for RE, the introduction of RME as replacement of BK and its subsequent opposition from stakeholders, also forced the government to adopt a dual policy for RE.



#### 10.2.4. Chapter 8: Situation in schools

The fourth research question was concerned with investigating the level and nature of provision in RE in schools. In Scotland, the study established that there was greater variation regarding the provision of RE and more generally in how different schools implemented the various policies governing RE. Given the guidelines, the curriculum policy environment and the degree of freedom schools had within the suggested but ultimately not imposed national curriculum, it seems that there was very little that the government could do to regulate fully the ways in which schools provided RE. While RE was seen to thriving in some schools owing in part to the attractiveness of philosophy, some issues of general educational concern emerged in the study.

In some schools, religious issues (which are core to RE ‘proper’) were being sidelined in favour of issues that frankly should not be the concern of RE at all. For instance, what did a study of ancient Egypt, Australian Aborigines or Native Americans have to do with RE? Again, by emphasising ‘peripheral’ beliefs such as Druidery, Wicca, Animism, and so on, schools risked endangering the ‘proper’, systematic study of religion as formulated in key curricular and theoretical literature. My argument is that while young people should perhaps be acquainted with these peripheral belief systems, it is by no means clear that schools should concentrate on them within an RE curriculum.

It was also established that many non-denominational schools in Scotland were not meeting the required 5% curriculum time that policy in force at that time dictated should be given to RE. The worrying thing was that many of these schools were only offering one period per week of RE in the compulsory stages of the curriculum. In some cases, RE was not being offered at all, clearly at variance with curriculum policy. This trend goes to show that more and more schools were giving less and less attention to RE even while formally recognising that it was a compulsory subject. The preference for using ‘proxies’ and substitutes for RE in a number of non-denominational schools in Scotland confirmed the point that some schools continued to see RE as a subject with little relevance to the overall education of children.

Unlike in Scotland, in Malawi greater uniformity of school provision and practice in RE was found. Essentially this was attributed to the fact that schools in Malawi follow a prescribed and examination-oriented curriculum. What was worth

noting in the Malawi situation was that despite the fact that RE had become an optional subject, it was well subscribed, the reasons for which were suggested in chapter 8. However, when it came to the issue of BK vis-à-vis RME, a serious problem was noted for RE in Malawi. First, it was clear that most schools favoured BK and not RME. The justifications behind some of the reasons were worrying. In many cases schools were unaware of the existence of RME itself. Interestingly, this was also the case in schools located in the so-called Muslim ‘dominated’ areas. In other cases, it was ideological reasons that made schools choose BK and not RME. In still other cases it was for more practical reasons, such as lack of trained teachers to offer RME and lack of materials for RME.

From the study, it was evident that the merits of RME had not been fully explored in Malawi. Sadly, the Ministry of Education which should take the lead in making sure that all curriculum subjects receive the maximum possible attention, had not taken up the cause for RME. It seems to me that by keeping quiet on a matter that surely requires intervention the Ministry of Education had unwittingly become part of the problem and not part of the solution for RME. The situation for RME was so bleak, indeed, that without intervention the subject could face uncertain future indeed on the national curriculum. Otherwise, how will RME survive when student in-take of the subject is a mere less 2% of the total student enrolment? It may be that an economic argument for the sustainability of the subject might eventually be made on the grounds that it is sheer waste of curriculum space and government money in terms of processing examinations, marking and inspection of a subject serving only a handful of students.

#### **10.2.5. Chapter 9: Possibilities and challenges**

The fifth and final research question addressed the current status of RE as a curriculum subject. The findings in this study suggested that notwithstanding the challenges facing the subject in both Scotland and Malawi there were windows of opportunities, which if well utilised, could help the subject overcome some of its shortcomings. In Scotland, RE could count on its excellent teacher education programmes. It also has a somewhat ‘captive’ audience because RE remains a compulsory subject. The support RE receives in Catholic schools can also be interpreted as a great window of opportunity for RE. Finally, the increased uptake in RE in the certificated courses could also be the more reason RE could remain hopeful to have a long-term future in Scotland. In Malawi, while

admittedly hopeful signs were few and far between for RE overall, there were one or two positive things that were noted. First, if government could give RE (particularly RME) the support it needs it may begin to make some in-roads largely because parents were willing to support it. Secondly, teachers indicated that professionally they can teach RME if they were given the necessary support. Third, headteachers were optimistic that if there was demand they were prepared to offer RME in their schools as well.

The general view that emerged in this chapter for RE in both Scotland and Malawi was that despite some improvements (mainly in Scotland) the provision of RE in schools was inadequate and its status in public discourse largely low. The study identified three main challenges facing RE in both Scotland and Malawi. Despite some improvements in recent decades, it seems that the classic credibility problem for RE has remained and that the tag of being a marginal subject on the curriculum has continued almost unabated. For instance, the association still being made that doing RE equates to being 'religious', casts doubt on whether RE is relevant in modern society and even if it is beneficial to children at all. These are issues that are not doing the subject any good. Reading the full list of problems which still plague RE is like reading a script written for the subject almost four decades ago. Admittedly, RE may also need to consider seriously self-promotion to inform people about the tremendous work that has gone on already towards improving teaching and learning in RE.

One important contrast that can be made between Scotland and Malawi on this issue is that despite inherent problems, Scottish RE has embraced the educational argument for the subject while in Malawi this has been largely resisted. It should be clarified that in Malawi the resistance has not been for the fact that educational RE is seen as unsuitable *per se*, but that by rejecting RME (which has the educational element but perceived to promote Islam) and preferring BK (largely unchanged since missionary times), RE in Malawi has lost a unique chance to become a central curriculum subject which can help to inculcate in children the values and ideals necessary for common citizenship in a post-dictatorship, liberal and democratic dispensation.

Two further issues were found to be compounding the problem of credibility for RE. The first was the continued shortage of specialist teachers in schools. In Malawi the shortage was to do with the fact that very few teachers were being

trained largely because few people want to train as RE teachers. The full reasons for this were explored in chapter 9 but it is sufficient to say that without teachers it is hard to see how the subject can even begin to lift its head in Malawi. In Scotland, the cause of the problem was not that teacher education was failing to produce the required teachers but rather that schools were not recruiting adequate staff in RE because in many schools the subject has continued to be considered a marginal subject. The second issue to consider was negative publicity. By constantly focusing on what was ‘wrong’ with RE rather than on what could be done to improve the subject (see Marshall et al. 2009), the media had become not only the messenger but perhaps the message of doom itself for the subject.

### 10.3. Implications of the study’s findings

#### 10.3.1. For Scotland

Owing to the contested nature of RE in Scotland, a dual curriculum system was necessary to cater for the needs of children in Catholic and non-denominational schools. However, what was less clear was what, for the example, the philosophification of RE may do to the teaching of core RE in all schools. It is my contention that if this trend is left unchecked or unbalanced, it is highly likely that in future religious issues might be overrun by philosophy. And if that happens, RE as we currently understand it may lose its ‘legitimate’ claim as a subject that teaches *religion*. Also for the fact that there is a growing mismatch between policy and practice in schools, the inspectorate may need to monitor closely how schools are actually interpreting the various legislative areas that govern the subject. This of course will require a careful balancing act lest schools construe this as government ‘interference’ in an education system in which the curriculum is suggested and *not* prescribed. However, there are several policy issues on which the inspectorate may make sure schools are compliant.

First, there is need for some clarification about what 5% (which in some non-denominational schools has dropped to 4.5%) overall curriculum time in a school actually means. Does it mean one or two periods (of 55 minutes each) a week? The fact that most non-denominational schools understand this to mean one

period of RE a week and Catholic schools see this as two periods a week is the more reason for greater clarity for this policy. Secondly, the inspectorate may need to assess whether schools are adhering to the policy that by statute RE is compulsory and as such schools *must* offer it to all children. The fact that there are some schools not offering RE at all or choosing to offer it through proxies is a worrying trend requiring the highest level of attention.

Finally, the continued use of non-specialists in both Catholic and non-denominational schools in Scotland indicates that there is need for more staff recruitment in the subject. In a modern 21st century Scottish education, there is no reason to find non-specialists teaching RE because, as the research has demonstrated, it is a myth that *everyone* can teach RE. The point to emphasise here is that RE is a specialised curriculum subject which should be handled by trained specialist teachers.

### 10.3.2. For Malawi

Turning to Malawi, clearly there is a definite need for government to take responsibility in ensuring that both RME and BK receive the same amount of attention and support. It is surprising to note that a decade after the RE curriculum changed, schools are still not clear what these changes actually mean. Worse, is the fact that there are schools which do not even know that the RE curriculum has two syllabi. In Malawi there are teachers who are ready to teach not only BK but also RME, provided the latter can be supported. Malawi is a multi-cultural country and while BK remains relevant in light of the religious composition of the country, the inclusive and plural democratic dispensation now being enjoyed at the political level really ought also to extend to RE. Sadly, at the moment there is very little public knowledge of what is unfolding in RE and even less on how schools should respond.

The absence of any form of in-service training in RE in Malawi is a serious cause of concern which should be addressed urgently. While it is accepted that the country's purse is thin, one wonders why other subjects do occasionally offer in-service training when a new approach is introduced or when the curriculum changes. In the case of RME, there are many teachers ready to teach the new subject but they are frustrated by the lack of any professional support. The present study suggests that a specific funded in-service project to provide

Malawian teachers with new skills in dealing with RE will be both appropriate and popular.

There is much to be said about the lack of expertise or willingness in using contemporary methods in teacher education in RE in Malawi. It is worrying that in all the teacher education institutions in the country, the Bible model continues to dominate in the training of teachers. Clearly, there is need for a paradigm shift regarding the way RE teachers in Malawi are currently being trained in order to ensure that teacher education is aligned with new and innovative pedagogical approaches and techniques in RE at its best. The critical shortage of RE teachers is another serious concern for the future of the subject in the country. Government may have to intervene if the subject is to have a fighting chance in a competitive curriculum. One of the ways of addressing this would be to provide incentives such as targeted bursaries for pre-service training in RE (similar to what happened in Scotland as response to the recommendation of the 1972 Millar Report) expressly to encourage the interest of new teachers in training as specialists in the subject. But for this to happen the government may need to single out RE as special case needing attention in educational policy-making. Without such ambitious thinking, staffing in Malawian RE is likely to remain in a state of paralysis.

#### **10.4. Limitations of the study and areas for further research**

Owing to the fact that the scope of study for this research was quite wide, some fine-grained issues have only been given limited attention or even at times set aside altogether because they fell outside the study's precise remit. First, the study did not consider at all the curricular aims of the modern forms of RE in the two countries. Thus issues such as the claim that effective RE brings social harmony and enables children to be tolerant towards the religions and stances of living of others was not considered at any length. Studies in other countries have looked at how RE is able to create 'good' citizens of the world as important cases based in Singapore (Tan 2008), England (Jackson 2007), Northern Ireland (Donnelly 2004) and Indonesia (Baidhaw 2007) would seem to illustrate. These findings have a bearing on themes raised in this investigation and might be the subject of fruitful comparative work in the future.

Secondly, an important issue which the study touched upon but did not explore in depth was *quality of provision* in RE. The question of quality is important because one would like to know how quality of teaching, resources and student experience—in a subject that has received greater curriculum attention in the quest for improvement in recent decades—has actually impacted on learning and teaching. Again, there are important points of convergence with the present study that might be promising nodes for future fieldwork.

Another equally important theme which was not addressed in detail here is teacher education. In both countries there is need to examine critically how RE specialists are being prepared and what impact, if any, teacher education overall has on the experience of school RE. The fact that in both Scotland and Malawi RE is again in ‘transition’—including especially the proposed changes to the BK curriculum in Malawi and to RE in the CfE in Scotland—means that the whole practice of teacher education in an era of educational change and modernisation is likely to remain a fertile area for research.

A fourth and final zone for further enquiry in both countries is Religious Observance (as it is called in Scotland) or School Assembly (as it is called in Malawi). Although, admittedly, the issue of Religious Observance has received some scholarly attention in Scotland (see Gray 1999; Pirrie 2005),<sup>17</sup> it continues to be one of the most contested and least understood dimensions of school life in Scotland, whilst remaining almost entirely unresearched in Malawi. The fact that many Scottish non-denominational schools continue to provide less time for Religious Observance (against policy given in Circular 6/91, (see for example, Pirrie 2005)), is indicative of the fact that schools are experiencing difficulties in implementing Religious Observance. In Malawi the fact that some schools are using school assemblies as a context for inclusive Religious Observance is indicative of the need to research further into this neglected and controversial topic.

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<sup>17</sup> In addition, for instance, Glasgow University has recently introduced a course on the Masters level specialising in Religious Observance. The course is being delivered by a partnership of Glasgow University, Scripture Union Scotland and the Church of Scotland.

## 10.5. Final remarks

Since the early 1970s, RE in Scotland and Malawi has been trying to adjust to changing social, cultural and educational realities with varying styles of approach and varying degrees of progress. In both countries the underlying push factor for RE reform was a sincere desire to bring RE into creative alignment with modern trends in areas of pedagogy, content and objective-setting. In the early 1990s in Scotland (with necessary changes to the law having been made) a new form of RE with an educational rather than a confessional aim was introduced in schools. In Malawi a similar paradigm shift in 2000 was also an attempt to modernise RE so that it could fit in with the aspirations of a new democratic dispensation, including, critical recognition of religious heterogeneity in the design and teaching of RE.

However, in both countries RE proved to be as slippery and as contentious as it had always been (see Dinama 2010, pp. 7ff), largely because of the continuing influence of historical forces from a conflicted religious past, the persistence of unresolved and fundamental policy disputes, and, most serious of all, educational neglect. These have all been factors which have frustrated the move towards the modernisation of RE or which have at least frustrated full realisation of the ambitious ideals of the various curriculum reforms in both societies. Moreover, even where the necessary negotiations and compromises have been made at the policy level, wide differences in the ways in which schools actually engage with RE in real time has underlined the fact that there remain key unresolved issues in the delivery of the subject requiring urgent attention. In general terms, it would seem that in both countries schools *do not* receive adequate central democratic guidance around the governance and development of RE, otherwise Scottish schools in particular would not have the degree of variation they experience in the provision of the subject.

One other issue which emerged in the study and has implications on policy vis-à-vis school practice in RE in both countries is the disparity of opinion between hierarchies of influence (i.e. religious and educational officials) and practitioners or implementers of policy (i.e. headteachers and teachers). First, the study found that in both countries government officials (i.e. representing the 'official' voice) expressed views which either reaffirmed the basic axiom of the policy or in some cases expressed a less than definitive but defensive view of the



policy. On their part, officials from the various religions (with the exception of the official representing the Presbyterian Church in Scotland whose opinions on the whole were liberal) expressed conservative views that challenged aspects of RE policy and in some cases indicated their dissatisfaction with how practitioners in schools were implementing aspects of the policy guidelines.

Secondly, in both countries while practitioners were forthright in pointing out certain areas which they felt made RE vulnerable in schools—for example, in Malawi the issue of RME vis-à-vis BK and in Scotland the continued use of non-specialist teachers—the line taken by education officials, while acknowledging the problems, tended to minimise the gravity of the situation by inferring that problems in the subject had not reached a *critical stage* as others, particularly practitioners, were making them to be. Again in both countries the common position expressed by government officials was that, as per the policy of *localism* for RE, many of the issues identified in the research could be easily resolved at school or local government levels.

Third, another significant but related point to make here is that respondents from one educational sector (i.e. teachers and Church officials in denominational or Church controlled education) expressed different views on certain aspects of RE. For example, in Scotland teachers in Catholic schools stressed the problem of specialist teacher shortage in RE and yet the Church official in the research, while acknowledging the problem, expressed views indicating that this was not a critical issue because every teacher in a Catholic school is by vocation an RE teacher as well. Similarly, in Malawi, officials from the various Churches (in this case Catholic and Presbyterian Churches) strongly indicated that it is BK and not RME which they wanted for their schools and yet, upon reflection some practitioners in Church-controlled schools indicated that if given the necessary support and training they were willing to teach RME as well.

Clearly, the lack of a consensus in some of the views expressed about RE by the different respondents reinforces the fact that this is a contested and sensitive curriculum subject, and as such a difficult one to research. In the case of the present study, deliberate efforts were made to present—as far as it was possible based on available evidence—a somewhat balanced view by considering different points of view including opposing arguments in the analysis and presentation of the research findings.

Finally, it seems to me that the sobering reality in both countries is that RE largely remains smothered in the same ‘toxic’ fumes that have been choking it since before the present attempts to modernise it began. As this study has demonstrated, the situation for RE in Malawi is particularly bleak. Not that attempts have not been made to improve the subject, but that such attempts have been rejected by key stakeholders, reasons of which have suggested elsewhere in the thesis. But even in Scotland, where the winds of change are said to have set fair for the subject since the Millar Report and where it has a higher profile (Fairweather and MacDonald 1992), as this thesis has demonstrated some problems have lingered. Thus, in Scotland we still see RE having problems such as staffing shortages, lingering doubt of its efficacy, ambivalence regarding provision in schools, mismatch between policy and practice and so on.

Clearly, in both countries RE requires constant support and where necessary some intervention lest it easily slip back to the doldrums of the past where it stuck ‘out on the timetable like a sore thumb’ (Horder 1975, p. 175). Of course this should not be allowed to happen because the scenario of the past for RE in both countries is too depressing to contemplate upon. The fundamental question to be asked then is: why should the two countries ensure that RE is vibrant and distinctive on its contemporary school curriculum? The answer to this question is complex and thus would require a separate treatment. However, for the purposes of this study it is sufficient to point out that RE is perhaps the only school subject that is uniquely placed to contribute fruitfully to the formation of character, values and ideals that are geared to promote and nurture children towards a shared sense of community.

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## **Appendix 1: Plain language statement**



### **Plain Language Statement**

#### **To Whom It May Concern**

Described below is a plain language statement regarding a research I am undertaking for a postgraduate degree at The University of Glasgow.

#### **1. Study title and Researcher Details**

##### ***a. Title of Project***

Comparative Study of Secondary School Religious Education (RE) in Scotland and Malawi

##### ***b. Name and Details of Researcher***

Yonah Hisbon Matemba, The University of Glasgow, Faculty of Education, St. Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, Scotland, UK, G3 6NH.  
Tel: +44 (0) 7515750488. Email: [y.matemba.1@research.gla.ac.uk](mailto:y.matemba.1@research.gla.ac.uk).

##### ***c. Research Supervisors***

Professor Robert Davis, Department of Religious Education, The University of Glasgow. Email: [R.Davis@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:R.Davis@educ.gla.ac.uk).

Professor James Conroy, Dean, Faculty of Education, The University of Glasgow. Email: [J.Conroy@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:J.Conroy@educ.gla.ac.uk)

##### ***d. Degree Being Sought***

I am undertaking this research as a requirement for the degree of doctor of philosophy.

#### **2. Invitation to participate in the research**

I would like to invite you to take part in this research. The research will be based on a semi structured interview. Before you decide whether to take part or not it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me or my supervisors if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Also take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

#### **3. What is the purpose of the Study?**

During the past three decades SSRE in Scotland and Malawi has undergone curriculum reform. In Scotland the reforms have largely been successful because a new curriculum is being used in schools albeit after overcoming some hurdles when the Catholic Church rejected an earlier draft. In Malawi however, similar reforms caused so much consternation among the Christianity fraternity such that the new curriculum was rejected by stakeholders when it was introduced in 2000. Even after some amendments and a directive from government instructing

schools to teach the new curriculum only few schools have implemented the new syllabus with the rest continuing to teach the popular Bible Knowledge that has been in use since missionary times of a century ago. The study will analyse issues related to developments of SSRE in the two countries with the view to understand how Scotland has been able to make the reforms acceptable while Malawi has not been so successful. It will also aim to propose a way forward for RE in Malawi in light of the Scottish experience. The duration of the study is six months.

#### **4. Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are a key stakeholder or interested party regarding curricular reforms that have been introduced in RE. Through examining official documents pertaining to RE reform in the secondary school and also speaking to others about the study, your name came up as someone who might be have expert opinion or experience to comment on this matter. You are among 41 other participants that have asked to participate in the research in both countries.

#### **5. Do I have to take part?**

Taking part in the research is entirely voluntary. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign an accompanying consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

#### **6. What will happen to me if I take part?**

I will kindly ask that we meet for a forty minute interview at a venue we will agree on. The interview will be audio-taped. I estimate the entire research to take six months to complete with time divided between Scotland and Malawi.

#### **7. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All information, which is collected, about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

#### **8. What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of the study will be used for the purposes of examination for the ward of a doctoral degree. At a future time parts of the completed research might be presented at a conference or submitted for publication in academic journals. In the case of the results being published I will notify you with details on how to obtain a copy. Please note that in all future presentations or publications you will not be identified in anyway.

#### **9. Who is organising and funding the research?**

The research is part of a general fulfilment for the award of a postgraduate degree at the University of Glasgow which is also funding the study.

#### **10. Who has reviewed the study?**

The project has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Education Ethics Committee.

#### **11. Contact for Further Information**

Please feel free to contact the university's ethics officer and my research supervisors if you would like to raise any issues regarding the conduct of the research. These can be contacted as follows:

*Research Main Supervisor:*

- a. Professor Robert Davis, Department of Religious Education, The University of Glasgow, St. Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH. Tel: +44 (0) 141 330 3016. Email: [R.Davis@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:R.Davis@educ.gla.ac.uk)

*University's Ethics Officer:*

- b. Dr George Head, Ethics Officer, Faculty of Education, University of Glasgow, Room 425b, Level Four, St Andrew's Building, 11 Eldon Street, Glasgow, G3 6NH. E-mail: [G.Head@educ.gla.ac.uk](mailto:G.Head@educ.gla.ac.uk).

**Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in this study**

## Appendix 2: Consent form



## CONSENT FORM

**Title of Project: A Comparative Study of Secondary School Religious Education in Scotland and Malawi**

**Name of Researcher: Yonah Hisbon Matemba**

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I have been assured that throughout the research my anonymity will be guaranteed through the use of a pseudonym. In cases where such anonymity will be difficult to maintain, the researcher has made clear that he will seek my permission for limited anonymity.
4. I am aware that the interview will be tape-recorded and then transcribed. I have also been assured that a copy of the transcript will be made available to me for further comment and verification.
5. I have been made aware that the final report will be submitted for examination for the award, if successful, of a doctoral degree to the researcher.
6. I have been notified that at a future time the research materials may be used in an academic publication.
7. I have been assured that if I so desire a copy of the finished report will be made available to me.
8. I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant	Date	Signature
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Researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix 3: Interview schedule



Title of Project: A Comparative Study of Secondary School Religious Education (RE) in Scotland and Malawi

#### Interview Schedule

	Questions
<b>Phases of reform</b>	
<b>Conception</b>	<p><b>Questions for policy instigators</b></p> <p><i>For Education Officials and politicians during the time changes were proposed</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Could you tell me why the government decided to reform RE?</li> <li>2. What challenges has the government or ministry of education faced during the processes of reforming RE?</li> <li>3. What sort of challenges did the government or ministry of education have to deal with during the implementation phase of the new syllabi?</li> </ol>
<b>Consultation</b>	<p><b>Questions for individuals invited and involved in the consultation phase</b></p> <p><i>For Religious groups, professional bodies and parents</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why do you think you or your organization was consulted in the process of reforming RE and tell me how this involvement came about?</li> <li>2. Reflecting on that experience what specific things were you or your organization consulted on?</li> <li>3. During the consultation process what sort of issues did you find objectionable in the proposed structure for RE and which ones did you particularly like and why?</li> <li>4. Did you or your organization also take part in the drafting new guidelines and syllabi for RE as well?</li> <li>5. If you were involved in drafting the syllabi what sort of issues and challenges did you have to contend with at the time?</li> <li>6. In the consultation group did you feel pressured in any way to adopt certain positions in the decisions that were being made?</li> </ol>

	<p><b>Questions for individuals not invited and involved in the consultation phase but whose views are necessary to consider</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tell me why you think your organization was not invited or involved in the consultation process for RE?</li> <li>2. Looking back at that time what are your feelings about this?</li> <li>3. If you had been consulted what sort suggestions could you have made concerning the reforms that were being proposed for RE?</li> </ol>
<i>Implementation</i>	<p><b>Questions for those involved in implementing the new curriculum framework for RE such as schools, training institutions and teachers</b></p> <p><i>For heads of training institutions</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. As a training institution how have you adapted your courses in line with the curriculum changes introduced in Religious Education?</li> <li>2. What in-service courses does your institution provide to teachers trained before changes were made to RE?</li> <li>3. Why have you introduced such provision?</li> </ol> <p><i>For headteachers</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. What sort of challenges does your school face regarding the new provision RE?</li> <li>5. As head of this school or teacher what is your opinion regarding the new RE? For example, do you think it relevant for schools, pupils or society?</li> </ol> <p><i>For teachers</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Tell me about your professional training to become an RE teacher.</li> <li>7. As a teacher of RE what do you see as the problems or limitations of multi-faith RE?</li> <li>8. As a teacher of RE what do you see as the strengths or relevance of multi-faith RE?</li> <li>9. If you were to choose to teach between the Bible-based and multi-faith RE which syllabus would prefer and why?</li> </ol>
<i>Reflection</i>	<p><b>Questions for all participants</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Do you think that there were political motives to reform RE? If so, could you elaborate?</li> <li>2. In your opinion was there adequate consultation with relevant stakeholders regarding RE reforms?</li> <li>3. Which format of RE between confessional/Bible based and multi-faith do you think is relevant to the Scottish/Malawian society and why?</li> <li>4. What challenges generally do you see for RE?</li> </ol>

## Appendix 4: School survey results in Scotland

### Outcomes of Scottish School survey

	Variables	Outcome
1.	<i>Type of school</i>	Both Catholic and non-denominational state secondaries were surveyed.  Combined response (from website search and survey returns) rate of 76.3% (i.e. 287/376 Scottish secondaries was obtained).
2.	<i>Staff compliment</i>	Most non-denominational schools reported having on average a single specialist RE teacher  Most Catholic schools reported having on average two specialist RE teachers.  Both types of schools reported the use of non-specialist teachers.
3.	<i>Schools not offering RE</i>	6.2% (n18/287) of schools surveyed--all in the non-denominational sector--did not offer RE at all clearly against the law which stipulates that RE is a compulsory subject in Scottish education.
5.	<i>Schools using proxies/trajectories for RE</i>	The survey revealed that in a number of non-denominational schools (n12/287 or 4.1. %) did not offer discrete RE. Rather they offered the subject through proxies and trajectories such as 'citizenship Education', 'Social Education', 'Social and Health Education' and 'Charities/Development Work Education'.
6.	<i>Nomenclature used for RE by schools</i>	Survey revealed a variety of names given to RE in schools such as 'Religious Studies', 'Religious, Moral and Philosophical Education', 'Religion and Philosophy', 'Religious and Moral Studies', 'Religious Instruction', 'Religious and Moral Education', 'Religious Education' and 'Religious, Moral, Philosophical Studies'. The survey found that in most non-denominational schools (n93/287 or 32.4%) the new popular nomenclature was related to 'philosophy'.
7.	<i>Pedagogical approaches</i>	The survey found that both Catholic and non-denominational schools offered neo-confessional RE.  However, the difference was what the two schools emphasised: Catholic schools emphasised a spiritual/faith form of neo-confessional RE while non-denominational schools emphasised a multi-faith form neo-confessional RE.
8.	<i>'Unusual' topics</i>	A number of non-denominational schools taught

	<i>offered in schools</i>	unusual topics such as ‘festivals of the dead’, ‘ancient Egypt’, ‘Australian aborigines’, ‘Wicca’, ‘animism’, ‘Druids’ and ‘Celts’.
9.	<i>Time allocation</i>	On average non-denominational schools had one period of RE per week. On average Catholic schools had two periods of RE per week.
10.	<i>Policy guidelines on religions offered in RE</i>	Most schools surveyed followed the policy of offering Christianity as a mandatory religion while at the same time teaching aspects of other religions.  Surprisingly, the survey revealed that five schools (n5/287) (including both Catholic and non-denominational) offered only Christianity and in one case involving a non-denominational school Christianity was offered as an ‘optional’ subject - clearly against the national policy.
11.	<i>Right to withdraw</i>	The survey revealed that Scottish parents exercised their statutory right to withdraw their children from RE if what is being offered is in conflict with their religious and personal convictions.



## ***Appendix 5: Thematic map tables of data collected***

### **Appendix 5:1 - Antecedents for reform**

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. State of RE in Scotland               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low priority in schools</li> <li>- Poor teaching in the classroom</li> <li>- Taught by non-specialist teachers</li> <li>- Professionally unrecognised.</li> <li>- Lacked an educational focus</li> <li>- Statutory limitations and change</li> </ul> </li> <li>b. Impact of developments in England - 1944 Education Act</li> <li>c. Changes in society               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Secularisation of society</li> <li>- Immigration and multiculturalism</li> </ul> </li> <li>d. Contribution of scholarship and professional reports               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Critique of traditional RE</li> <li>- impact of Miller report</li> <li>- impact of subsequent professional reports on RE</li> </ul> </li> <li>e. Presbyterian influence of and contribution to developments in RE</li> <li>f. Teacher committees and RE advisorate</li> <li>g. Influence of political developments in the 1980s-1990s due to changes in UK government</li> <li>h. Aligning RE with general educational reforms</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Status of RE in Malawi               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Low priority in schools</li> <li>- Poor teaching in the classroom</li> <li>- Taught by untrained teachers</li> <li>- Confessional nature of RE a turn off to non-Christian children forcing many to 'opt-out' of the subject</li> </ul> </li> <li>b. Influence of international and regional development in RE</li> <li>c. Impact of political democratisation in the 1990s               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- make RE fulfil aims of sensual democracy</li> </ul> </li> <li>d. Address the multicultural nature of the society</li> <li>e. Islamic pressure for reform and               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Reform RE so that it caters for all since schools under 'grant-aid' system are public and thus funded by the taxpayer including Muslims</li> </ul> </li> <li>f. Aligning RE with general educational reforms</li> </ul>

## Appendix 5:2 - New Curriculum in Religious Education

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<p>a. Content, ideology and pedagogy before the Miller report, 1872-1960s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Non- denominational schools</li> <li>- Denominational schools</li> <li>- Statutory provision</li> </ul> <p>b. Content, ideology and pedagogy from the Miller report in the early 1970s to the 1980s</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Non- denominational schools</li> <li>- Denominational schools</li> <li>- Assessment</li> <li>- Statutory changes and Inspection</li> </ul> <p>c. 5-14 Curriculum and beyond: radical changes in content, ideology, pedagogy since 1992</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Non- denominational schools</li> <li>- Denominational schools</li> <li>- National examinations</li> </ul> <p>d. Delving into uncharted waters: Curriculum for Excellence and RE: proposed changes in content and pedagogy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- For non- denominational schools</li> <li>- For Denominational schools</li> <li>- Criticism and comments</li> </ul>	<p>a. RE curriculum at the beginning of secondary education, 1940-1964: from Religious Instruction to Religious Knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Content</li> <li>- pedagogy</li> </ul> <p>b. From Religious Knowledge to Bible Knowledge, 1964-1980</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- constitutional provision</li> <li>- content</li> <li>- Pedagogy</li> </ul> <p>c. Towards multi-faith RE - 1980-1990</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- content</li> <li>- Pedagogy</li> </ul> <p>d. Radical curricular reform - introducing RME since 2000</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Content</li> <li>- pedagogy</li> </ul> <p>e. Proposed new Bible Knowledge syllabus (2006)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- content</li> <li>- pedagogy</li> <li>- criticism and comments</li> </ul> <p>f. Unfinished business: searching a way out in the syllabus quagmire in RE? Further changes might be possible.</p>

### Appendix 5:3 - Micro-politics of curriculum reform

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Religious experience in a liberal framework (and the contradictions it engenders) and its implication for RE</li> <li>b. Philosophical conceptions of RE - whose agenda and for whose benefit? What shapes RE - ideological, political or religiously fixed positions?</li> <li>c. Perceived Presbyterian loss and Catholic gain</li> <li>d. Christian exclusivism as an issue in RE - there is no statutory basis for this</li> <li>e. Minority religions, the liberal framework and RE</li> <li>f. What sort of RE parents want for their children - it's a question of religious identity</li> <li>g. What RE should and should not be (faith development, spirituality, secular or neutral?)</li> <li>h. Politics of consultation</li> <li>i. Negotiation and compromise - the Scottish solution for RE: Parable syllabus system for non-denominational and denominational Catholic schools</li> <li>j. Dealing with religious 'otherness' within the school curriculum through RME</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Religious experience in a 'Christian' country, the challenge of Islam in a liberal dispensation (and the contradictions it engenders) and implications for RE</li> <li>b. Philosophical conceptions of RE - whose agenda and for whose benefit? What shapes RE - ideological, political or religiously fixed positions?</li> <li>c. Perceived Catholic and Presbyterian loss and Islamic gain in RE - counting the cost Islamic 'intrusion' in education?</li> <li>d. Churches for BK and Muslims for RME an identity clash or a measure of religious polarisation in the country</li> <li>e. Muslim parents' frustration with current RE provision and the <i>madrassah</i> alternative</li> <li>f. What sort of RE parents want for their children - it's a question of religious identity.</li> <li>g. What RE should be and not be in Malawi</li> <li>h. Politics of consultation</li> <li>i. Not compromise but giving in - a Malawian dilemma for RE: Parallel syllabus system and brief suspension of RE in public education</li> <li>j. Dealing with religious 'otherness' outside the classroom: the Malawian challenge - interfaith initiatives a solution for the malaise in RE?</li> </ul>

### Appendix 5:4 - Situations in different schools

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. RE in Catholic schools: a guaranteed provision?</li> <li>b. RE in non-denominational schools: determinants not to offer RE beyond the statutory requirement in some schools - use of non-specialists continues, though</li> <li>c. Pedagogical divide between east and north-west schools and common approaches adopted in most schools</li> <li>d. Trajectory of RE: low status and few students on the traditional courses such as Standard Grade but becoming popular when it carries the 'philosophy' name tag at Highers and certificate courses.</li> <li>e. Why the philosophical approach is having a strong hold in RE - an alternative explanation?</li> <li>f. Teachers' professionalism</li> <li>g. Proxies for RE in some schools: values education, charity work, religious observance/school assemblies</li> <li>h. Professional support for teachers through CPD and other on-going teacher professional activities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How schools are dealing with the parallel- syllabus conundrum and which syllabus they are choosing to teach and why: BK popular but RME as good as dead - few people aware of the existence of RME and very small number taking it.</li> <li>b. Complete lack of qualified RE teachers</li> <li>c. Trajectory of RE: weak and insignificant subject, parents unsupportive of the subject.</li> <li>d. Challenging the perception that school in the so-called 'Muslim' areas prefer RME and not BK.</li> <li>e. Why some school are choosing not to offer RE altogether</li> <li>f. Teachers' professionalism</li> <li>g. School assemblies as proxy for inclusiveness in dealing with multi-faith issues in schools</li> <li>h. Emerging issues for teachers in dealing with Islam</li> <li>i. No professional support for teachers either through CPD or any on-going teacher professional support</li> </ul>

### Appendix 5:5 - Impact of teacher education

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teacher education: what's in the terminology</li> <li>b. Proactive: how teachers are being trained in light of curricular changes in school RE</li> <li>c. Preparation and qualification of RE teachers</li> <li>d. Catholic teachers at non-Catholic awarding teacher education institution.</li> <li>e. Pedagogical emphasises in teacher-trainees: phenomenological, neo-confessional and philosophical models.</li> <li>f. Popularity of RE in teacher education: why?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Teacher education: what's in the terminology?</li> <li>b. Reactive: how teachers are being trained in light of curricular changes in school RE</li> <li>c. Preparation and qualification of RE teachers</li> <li>d. Pedagogical emphasises in teacher-trainees and its impact on schools: stuck to the theology and religious studies model.</li> <li>e. Unpopularity of RE in teacher education: why and the extent of the problem.</li> </ul>

### Appendix 5:6 - Possibilities and challenges

<i>Scotland</i>	<i>Malawi</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Trajectory of RE - how do stakeholders in Scotland see RE? Is it still seen as the Cinderella subject? Has there been an improvement from the antecedents above and if yes, how?</li> <li>b. Concerns for RE - what general concerns do stakeholders in Scotland have for RE?</li> <li>c. Challenges for RE - what challenges and problems still lay ahead for RE in Scotland?</li> <li>d. Possibilities for RE - areas of 'hope' for RE.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Trajectory of RE - how do stakeholders in Malawi see RE? Does it still have the Cinderella subject image? Has there been an improvement from the antecedents above and if not, why?</li> <li>b. Concerns for RE - what general concerns do stakeholders in Malawi have for RE?</li> <li>c. Challenges for RE - what challenges and problems still lay ahead for RE in Scotland?</li> <li>d. Possibilities for RE - areas of 'hope' for RE.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 6: Attainment in SSRE and teacher numbers in Scotland

### Appendix 6:1 School leaver qualification in Religious Studies - SCQF Levels 3-5 (2004-2009)

Year	All Candidates (SCQF Levels: 3-5)	Religious Studies	Comparison with Other Subjects
2004/5	53,477	2,107 (3.7%)	
2005/6	54,477	2,271 (3.9%)	
2006/7	53,933	2,298 (4.0%)	
2007/8	54,768	2,165 (3.7%)	
2008/9	51,808	2,354 (4.3%)	<b>Science:</b> 2,793 (5.1%) <b>Social &amp; Vocational Skills:</b> 2,343 (4.3%)

Source: Scottish Statistical Bulletin Reports - Education Series, 2005-2009

### Appendix 6:2 Numbers of SSRE teachers (2006-2008)

Year	All SSRE Teachers	Religious Education	Other 'Core' Subjects		
			<i>Mathematics</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>Art</i>
2007	26,573	684 (2.57%)	2760 (10.38%)	2963 (11.15%)	1235 (4.64%)
2008	26,067	676 (2.59%)	2787 (10.69%)	2992 (11.47%)	1192 (4.57%)
2009	25,371	676 (2.66%)	2718 (10.71%)	2915 (11.48%)	1155 (4.55%)

Source: Scottish Statistical Bulletin Reports - Education Series, 2007-2009

## ***Appendix 7: Candidates taking SSRE examination in Malawi***

### **Appendix 7:1 Junior Certificate (JCE) - dual syllabus model (2006-2008)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>All Candidates</b>	<b>Religious and Moral Education</b>	<b>Bible Knowledge</b>
2006	86,266	1,436 (1.7%)	63,759 (73.9%)
2007	97,178	807 (0.83%)	70,333 (72.3%)
2008	102,296	1,265 (1.23%)	73,735 (72%)

**Source:** Report: Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB), 2009

### **Appendix 7:2 Senior Certificate (MSCE) - Bible Knowledge (2006-2008)**

<b>Year</b>	<b>All Candidates</b>	<b>Bible Knowledge</b>
2006	78,524	35,748 (46%)
2007	86,652	35,947 (42%)
2008	92,871	32,224 (35%)

**Source:** Report: Malawi National Examinations Board (MANEB), 2009