

Choosing Your Textbook for Religious Education in the Junior Cycle



Council for
Catechetics of the
Irish Episcopal Conference

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This short document might be of help as you decide what textbook might best meet your and your students' needs as you teach the *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification*. In line with Department of Education circulars regarding implementation of the *Framework for Junior Cycle* (2015), teachers choose textbooks that attend to the learning needs and interests of their students, and the characteristic spirit of their school. This document is of particular relevance to schools with a Catholic characteristic spirit but teachers in other schools might also find it useful.

Drawing from both the *Framework for Junior Cycle* and the Specification, the following markers might indicate a good RE textbook for your students:

- 1) A good RE textbook clearly illustrates how the junior cycle's **Eight Principles**, **Twenty-four Statements of Learning (SOLs)** and **Eight Key Skills** are attended to.
- 2) A good textbook adopts the approach highlighted in the **rationale** and **aim** of the *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (JCRE, 2018, pp. 6–7):
 - Religious Education promotes the holistic development of the person. A good textbook speaks to that holistic development.
 - Religious Education provides a particular space to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships, including with God. A good textbook allows space for these as ongoing questions. It also allows for students' own questions, and how



religious and non-religious traditions, especially the Christian tradition, have attempted, over time, to answer such questions. While answers to questions asked are also important, students should have space in RE to engage with their own questions as well.

- Religious Education encourages students to engage critically with belief systems and moral principles which serve as a foundation for decision-making. A good textbook reflects this engagement.
- Religious Education seeks to facilitate dialogue and reflection on the diversity of beliefs and values that inform responsible decision-making and ways of living. A good textbook encourages dialogue based on good and accurate information respectfully presented. It respects students' experiences and promotes respect for the experiences of others.

- 3) Specifically, in terms of the NCCA's *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification*, the approach taken in RE textbooks should address the **learning outcomes** indicated there, based around the three interconnected strands (Expressing Beliefs, Exploring Questions, Living our Values) and incorporating, in an ongoing manner, the three cross-cutting elements (Enquiry, Exploration, and Reflection and Action). Some learning outcomes seek to develop understanding across two major world religions; in a Catholic school, one of these should be Christianity. Other learning outcomes focus more particularly on one major world religion. Where this is the case, in a Catholic school, that focus should be on Christianity. Arguably, because of our history and heritage, students in all schools should have particular access to learning about Christianity (*Religious Education Specification*, p.4, NCCA).

- 4) The **three interconnected strands** are best treated in a spiral rather than a linear manner. This means going forwards and backwards between strands, creating links and providing an integrating approach over the three-year period. In line with the Specification, the following points are of note:

STRAND 1: Expressing Beliefs

It is not enough to offer students facts and knowledge about religion. A good textbook seeks to develop students' ability to understand, respect and appreciate how people's beliefs have been expressed in the past and continue to be expressed today through lifestyle, culture, rites and rituals, community building, social action and ways of life.

STRAND 2: Exploring Questions

It is not enough simply to pose the questions or even to provide space for the students to ask their own questions. A good textbook enables students to explore some of the questions but also to discover how people have sought to answer the questions. It also focuses on students developing a set of knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes and values that allows them to question, probe, interpret, analyse and reflect on these big questions, in dialogue with each other. It offers opportunities for students to attend to the questions of mystery at the heart of life. In this type of exploring, knowing is not limited to only seeing; it also includes experiencing, understanding, judging, and for people of faith, believing.

STRAND 3: Living Our Values

It is not enough to provide examples of how others (be they people of faith or people who do not believe in



God) have lived their values. A good textbook enables students to understand and reflect on the beliefs and values that underlie actions and to recognise how moral decision-making works in their own lives and in the lives of others. It also enables students to engage in informed discussion about moral issues and respectfully communicate and explain opinions, values and beliefs.

- 5) In line with the *Framework for Junior Cycle*, a good textbook attends to the variety of learning styles and abilities in your school; it welcomes and nurtures a diversity of learners.
- 6) A good textbook offers possibilities of formative and summative assessment practices in line with the *Framework for Junior Cycle*.
- 7) Support for ecumenism, inter-religious dialogue, intercultural dialogue, and care for our common home emerge strongly in and through a good RE textbook. There are many opportunities in the Specification by which to encourage respect, inclusion and learning to live as a committed person within a pluralist society. Good textbooks seek to engage richly with these opportunities.
- 8) When addressing all five major world religions designated in the Specification, the approach of a good textbook is always appropriate and respectful. Other world views and a non-religious engagement with the world are treated respectfully and with care. A good textbook communicates that people who do not espouse a religious way of life can live moral lives within their own parameters. Textbooks should attend to this with due respect and care.

- 9) A good textbook deals with Christianity and Catholicism with theological, spiritual and pastoral depth. It encourages the engagement of people of faith as they seek answers to questions and to live out their faith in their own lives. A good textbook presents the religious viewpoint as valid and of value – as a legitimate way of reading and responding to the world – standing against both religious fundamentalism and any unhelpful forms of extreme secularism. In this way, a good textbook promotes ‘religious literacy’ as an essential part of Religious Education.



This document was developed by a working group of the Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference.