

# *Religious studies as moral and civic education: a brief review of its past development, future opportunities and challenges*

## 以宗教科目推行道德與公民教育：回顧、機 遇及挑戰

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### **Abstract**

By reviewing the development of the public examination syllabuses of two religious subjects in Hong Kong, the author traces an increasing emphasis on the study of personal and social issues, which reaches a new level of development in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Ethics and Religious Studies. With reference to moral and civic education, the author also discusses the possible advancements and challenges that might merge with the implementation of the HKDSE subject.

### **Keywords**

religious studies, moral and civic education, personal and social issues, study of ethics

### **摘要**

作者回顧兩個宗教科目在香港的公開考試課程上的發展，指出課程愈來愈重視研習個人及社會問題，而且在香港中學文憑的倫理與宗教科中發展至新一個層次。就道德與公民教育方面，作者亦討論了香港中學文憑倫理與宗教科的實施可能會有的機遇及挑戰。

### **關鍵詞**

宗教科目，道德與公民教育，個人及社會問題，倫理學

## Introduction

This article makes references to the development and implementation of the examination syllabuses of two religious traditions in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education (HKCE) Examination, Hong Kong Advanced Level (HKAL) Examination and the newly developed Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) Examination<sup>1</sup> to show an increasing emphasis on the study of personal and social issues in religious education. Hence, in connection with moral and civic education, the author will discuss the possible opportunities and challenges that are forthcoming with the implementation of the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies, which has an element of school-based assessment (SBA)<sup>2</sup>.

## Religious education as moral and civic education in Hong Kong — a changing conception

The practices and perspectives concerning moral and civic education in Hong Kong manifest a diversified phenomenon<sup>3</sup> in which a sector of schools seems to maintain certain characteristics in moral and civic education. A considerable number of schools in Hong Kong have a religious background and one of the ways that moral and civic education is believed to be partially, or even largely, carried out in these schools is by implementation of religious education.

The elements related to moral and civic education in the above mentioned curricula can be seen through examining the content and structure of the syllabuses and how these elements have evolved over the last three decades in which we can see an increasing emphasis on as well as a changing notion of the approach to the study of personal and

social issues.

For Christian schools, in the HKCE examination before 1982, the subject was termed Biblical Knowledge where the focus was the Bible and emphasis was given to the transmission of religious knowledge. For Buddhist Studies, a similar observation can be made as the curriculum focused on history of the development of Buddhism, the life of Buddha, a selection of Buddhist texts and basic Buddhist doctrines<sup>4</sup>. The Bible and Buddhist texts were treated as sources of important knowledge and understanding of doctrine, the scriptures and traditions were regarded as important ends of education<sup>5</sup>.

From a religious perspective, moral and civic education was considered to have been achieved when students learned and internalized certain religious values through the studies of the religious texts, traditions and stories. One major weakness of this approach to moral and civic education is that the success of cultivation of moral values is related to a certain degree of understanding, appreciation of or even commitment to the religious traditions in the students. However, it is not so difficult to find cases at schools where students may not be keen on religion while being very much concerned with real life issues that are clearly in the domain of moral and civic education. When moral and civic education is treated as a sub-category of religious studies, such a problem seems inevitable.

The development of the syllabuses of both Christian studies and Buddhist studies in the 80s and 90s followed a similar trend but at a different pace. There was a general awareness among policy planners, scholars and teachers in the field of religious education that the focus of religious education should no longer be the study of religious texts and traditions. One of the new emphases was

that religious studies should cover, more explicitly and directly, issues related to students' daily lives. Also, in view of the fact that many school students are not religious believers and with the increasing emphasis on a student centred approach in education, introducing religion to students without showing explicitly its relevance to students' lives was perceived to be a low engagement approach that should be improved. In this regard, without co-ordinated planning, both Christian and Buddhist syllabuses introduced a section about the study of ethical issues (termed as personal and social issues in Religious Studies and application of Buddhist principles in Buddhist Studies) in their HKCE syllabuses with a view to building an explicit link between religious belief and real-life issues.

A life-related and contextually relevant approach to religious education has received considerable support to judge by the figures showing the participants in the specific sections of the related examinations. Starting from 1982, the HKCE examination syllabus for Religious Studies consisted of four sections: Section A consisting of topics related to the Old Testament, Section B consisting of topics related to the New Testament, Section C consisting of topics related to the Early Church and Section D consisting of personal and social issues. Schools were required to choose any two sections and therefore it was not necessary for the candidates to study for Section D. However, after a period of time, there was a significant growth in the candidature of Section D from 782 in 1989 to 7693 in 1999 (Hong Kong Examination Authority, 1989 and 1999). Buddhist Studies at the HKCE level, after a prolonged period of syllabus revision, adopted a part concerning application of Buddhist principles in daily life for the 2005 examination. This section remains as an elective part and has remained highly popular.

The importance placed on studying life issues as part of religious studies can be further illustrated by the next step in curriculum development in Religious Studies at HKCE level. Starting from 2000, the examination of the HKCE Religious Studies syllabus was reduced to Sections A and B only, where Section A is mainly about the Gospels and Section B is actually the former Section D (Personal and Social Issues). Both sections are compulsory and the syllabus will not change until the end of the implementation of the HKCE examinations.

The current HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus marks another important change in the design of the examination syllabus for the subject. The subject constitutes two papers; the study of personal and social issues is no longer an elective but the common core for all religious traditions, which are electives. Both papers will be compulsory. Another significant element of the subject is the introduction of school-based assessment (SBA), which is called "Faiths in Action" in this subject. The SBA requires students to participate in real life situations; either in a religious practice or in a social service setting. The main rationale behind the SBA in this subject is that, through participation, students should relate what they learn in school to real life situations. 2012 will mark the first examination of the HKDSE syllabus while in 2014 this syllabus will be fully implemented and become the only publicly examined religious syllabus in Hong Kong<sup>6</sup>.

To further support our discussion, Table 1 extracts and summarizes the topics and the sub-topics in the HKCE Religious Studies syllabus and the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus in the section/paper concerning the study of personal and social issues. The entirely new topics included in the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus are in italics, and the first two topics are detailed here for the purpose of illustration.

**Table 1. A comparison of syllabus contents.**

HKCE Religious Studies		HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies	
Topics	Sub-topics	Topics	Sub-topics
<b>Family and Marriage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Human Sexuality</li> <li>- Family life in the mind of God</li> <li>- Loyalty to the wider family of God</li> <li>- Christ's view of marriage and divorce</li> <li>- Paul's view of marriage and divorce</li> </ul>	<b>Sex, companionship and Family</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Heterosexual and homosexual relationships</li> <li>- The single life</li> <li>- Premarital and extra-marital sex</li> <li>- Marriage and divorce</li> <li>- Pornography</li> <li>- Prostitution</li> <li>- The family</li> <li>- Right to raise a family</li> </ul>
<b>Stewardship of Life and Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meaning and purpose of life</li> <li>- Be God's responsible steward in His image</li> <li>- Be a responsible person to the world, others and self</li> <li>- Glorify God</li> <li>- Everlasting life in Christ</li> <li>.....</li> <li>Courage to be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- To die is man's common destiny</li> <li>- seek to live rather than to die</li> <li>- Life is most precious</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<b>Life and Death</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Birth control</li> <li>- Abortion</li> <li>- Ageing</li> <li>- Suffering</li> <li>- Suicide</li> <li>- Euthanasia</li> <li>- Capital punishment</li> </ul>
Care of Old		<i>Human rights</i>	
Work		<i>Bioethics</i>	
Stewardship of Money and Material Possessions			
Stewardship of the Environment		Environmental Ethics	
Service and Responsibility		Business and Economic Ethics	
Class distinction and racial prejudice			
Social Problems			
The Mass Media		<i>Media Ethics</i>	

Sources: Curriculum Development Council, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2007). And Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (2010)

Three major characteristics should be noted in the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies.

First, in terms of syllabus content concerning the study of personal and social issues, the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus has incorporated a significant number of topics and sub-topics that are not touched upon in the HKCE Religious Studies syllabus. Besides the three entirely new topics (i.e. Human Rights, Bioethics and Business and Economic Ethics), topics that look similar (e.g. as detailed in the first two topics) actually involve fairly different materials in their sub-topics. The content in the HKCE syllabus tends to reflect more concerns from a religious point of view while the content in the HKDSE syllabus tends to reflect more concerns from the general perspective of the study of ethics<sup>7</sup>.

Second, in relation to the first point, one important but subtle difference between the HKCE syllabus and the HKDSE syllabus is that the approach to the study of personal and social issues for the HKCE religious subjects is different from that of the HKDSE subjects. In the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies, the study of personal and social issues is not based entirely on religious perspectives on ethical issues, it is more about tackling ethical issues from the general perspective of ethics that has its own set of concerns (like: what constitutes a moral principle), and methodology (like: the use of critical thinking that does not presume the superiority of specific religious standpoints). On the other hand, for the existing HKCE religious subjects, the study of personal and social issues (called the application of Buddhist principles in CE Buddhist Studies) primarily means viewing ethical issues from a religious perspective. For example, when discussing issues related to environmental protection, the perspective offered and discussed

would be basically religious (Christian or Buddhist), and points like viewing the world as God's creation, emphasizing harmony between humans and nature as well as equality between humans and nature will be the main content for discussion. However, if the same issue is discussed at the HKDSE level, a major portion of the discussion would involve evaluations and discussions on ethical points like eco-centrism versus anthropo-centrism, consumerism versus conservation, instrumental values versus intrinsic values of nature and sustainable development versus exploitation.

Third, the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus has a formal requirement in its SBA that students have to experience the reality; one of the options requires the students to participate in real life events concerning social service. Based on this experience they are encouraged to perform meaningful reflection in the contexts of morality and religion. For a very long time the public examinations of the religious subjects have been basically paper and pen exercises, which is not a satisfactory arrangement, especially for these subjects because they emphasize strongly the cultivation of values and behaviour in their objectives. On the other hand, service-learning in religious studies is a relatively mature practice at a higher level of education. It is believed to be a useful means in helping students to understand the course content and to cultivate civic responsibility. It is also a way to become connected to a community (Devine, Favazza, and McLain, 2002). For some others, it is a means to transformation, both for the participants and for the society (Strain 2002). The SBA arrangement of the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies is a leap in religious education at the public examination level in Hong Kong. It seeks to encourage students to find a way to bridge the gap between the classroom and reality.

With the implementation of HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies programme in 2009 the current scenario that the majority of students are taught to view ethical issues primarily from a religious perspective will gradually be changed and those who participate in the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies examination will be expected to be equipped with the ability to discuss moral issues not just by putting forward the concerns of religious traditions, but also from the perspective of the general study of ethics. Students will also have the opportunity to experience and reflect on the subject content in real life situations.

## **Opportunities and Challenges**

From the above sketch of the development of the subjects, it can be noted that an increasing emphasis on the importance of the study of life related issues has reached a new level in the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies examination, in which the study of ethics becomes the core paper and has equal weighting when compared to the religious papers in the examination. Furthermore, the design of its curriculum reflects a view that religious education and the study of ethics can be put side by side in a harmonious arrangement.

The good intention behind this arrangement is that religious studies and the study of ethics will become important resources for students in whom learning integration of both disciplines can occur. Consequently, one of the potential benefits of this arrangement is that, by keeping students abreast of different views and perspectives, it will promote the broadness, integrity and maturity of moral thinking in students because, instead of referring merely to a religious tradition, they are also encouraged to consult and reflect upon related domains of

ethical studies. For issues related to homosexuality, euthanasia and cloning students will be encouraged to examine the issues from the viewpoints of religious traditions and other related concepts and such concepts as human rights, the notion of autonomy and the instrumental values of technology that promote the public good. The co-existence of religious traditions and a general ethical perspective creates a possibility for more in-depth study of the subject matter.

The SBA component of the HKDSE provides another opportunity to enhance the function of moral and civic education in the subject. Although some of the objectives for adopting service-learning, such as transforming the community, may sound too high flown for the subject at the moment, I think the general benefits of service-learning are still valid for this subject. Wogaman (1993) identifies six pairs of tension points in Christian ethics, which will continue to be important concerns for ethical discussions towards the third millennium. Two of the pairs are worth noting in connection to the SBA in this subject. First, Christian ethics will continue to face the tension between materialism and spirituality, i.e. is faith about spirituality only or it is only about this world? Second, the tension between universalism and group identity, i.e. is the meaning of a person's existence defined by his/her relationship to God or by his/her relationship to a community? Wogaman suggests that taking such discussions to extremes is not beneficial to moral maturity and sensible, mature moral discussion always falls somewhere between these extremes. I think the requirement of participation in service and systematic reflection on the experience echoes what Wogaman identifies and suggests. The SBA of the subject requires students to participate in the real world and reflect upon the related experience from the perspectives of faith and

morality. This process allows students to move back and forth between spirituality and the material world; their relationships with ultimate concerns and their own communities. In the light of real-life experience, what has been learned in the classroom will form the basis for critical evaluation and enable sublimation; also, what have been experienced outside of the classroom will provide a chance for deeper learning through further theorizing and conceptualization. The re-iteration of such processes is concomitant to the maturity of a person's moral thinking.

The arrangement of putting the study of ethics and religious studies in a complimentary relationship brings new opportunities in teaching and learning; however, such an arrangement also poses major challenges. It is a fact that both disciplines share some similar features: they are all related to making moral judgments; they both require critical and rational thinking; they all refer to important values; they are about the concepts of right and wrong; they are also related to judging moral and immoral behaviour; however, they are not necessarily the same in their assumptions, logical processes involved in making judgments or core values. Due to this basic difference, high demands are made of teachers, schools and students in order to ensure the benefits of putting these two disciplines side by side in a senior secondary curriculum.

Let me further illustrate the complexity of this point with an example that was once widely publicized. In 2009 there was a demonstration initiated and organized by a group of people whose objective was to attack the so-called “hegemony of the religious right” ( 宗教右翼霸權 ) with particular reference to legislation aimed at protecting people from family violence. The wording of some of the related legal clauses had elicited some Christian leaders' concern that homosexual relationships were

implicitly regarded as a kind of family relationship. Voices of concern from some of the leaders were raised in the mass media as well as in the legislative council. On the other hand, among the organizers of the demonstration, there were different groups from the general public including theologians and Christians. One of the points raised in the demonstration was that, besides the traditional Christian perspective on what constitutes a family, some other essential Christian values, such as humility, love and tolerance were also important, if not more important, values that should be considered in the case. ( 香港網絡大典 )

This incident highlighted two points that are relevant to our discussion. First, both parties involved Christians and the main issue in their differences was the up-holding and prioritization of values. It shows that religious values, when critically reflected upon and prioritized with reference to specific contexts, may be adopted to support very different standpoints held by different individuals, even though the individuals are of the same religion. With the introduction of the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies syllabus, various views towards prioritization and up-holding of values are likely to become a common phenomenon in the classroom, examination answer scripts and the process of teaching and learning. This is because, more than any of its predecessor subjects, the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies curriculum emphasizes the importance of personal reflection and critical evaluation, which paves way to the emergence of diversified conclusions in ethical discussions. Issues like homosexual rights, genetic engineering versus playing the role of God, individual autonomy and euthanasia, etc will continue to provoke expression of diverse conclusions and standpoints. The situation of having diverse or conflicting views might become

a challenge to the success of implementation of the curriculum when the diversity is pre-maturely handled through authority, not reasons or tolerance.

According to the Curriculum and Assessment Guide of the subject the above phenomenon should be matched with a successful cultivation of some important values/attitudes, including tolerance and respect for those who hold different values/perspective/standpoints (Curriculum Development Council, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority, 2007). I would suggest the successful cultivation of such attitudes requires a supportive environment that includes an open and tolerant atmosphere created and maintained by students, teachers and schools. Such an environment must be created and maintained so that the expression and upholding of different opinions and standpoints is allowed even though some of these views may not sound orthodox at the beginning. The failure in maintaining such environment will pose interruptions to the process of moral discussions and bring premature endings.

To maintain an open and tolerant environment may be assumed too easily. It requires, of course, students' motivation to participate and express their views, but more, it also requires the conscious efforts from those who are in authoritative positions to restrain their ability to 'talk down' their students and allow the reflective process to develop naturally. Furthermore, an open learning environment also implies that participants should be encouraged to reach as much relevant information as possible. In

order to bring in relevant information which is less stressed in traditional religious perspectives, teachers and students should try to reach beyond the religious perspective and explore other important domains in the study of ethics like: biological and psychological aspects of human development, cultural values and various related social phenomena. Then systematic exploration, reasonable dialogues and in-depth discussion will become possible and the benefits of such activities can be realized. When the debate is heated, from time to time the complimentary view on religious studies and the study of ethics will be re-evaluated and a deep-rooted conception of religious studies as the prioritized discipline will be frequently touched upon. I hope such reviews will only strengthen the commitment of the participants in maintaining such an open and tolerant environment. Father Tsui Kam-yiu's discussion on the role of Catholicism in education meaningfully describes the role of religion in education. According to Tsui, moral education through catholic schools in a pluralistic society can no longer be Bible centred but must be student/life centred. Moral education should treat the lives of students as the focus in which the role of the Bible is a witness to life (徐錦堯, 1996). In other words, the role of religious codes/values serves as a source for reflection, a way to talk about life and as a reference for students. I feel that is an important insight which will help the stakeholders of the HKDSE Ethics and Religious Studies to enjoy its educational benefits to a full extent.

## Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> The subjects are chosen because they represent all the religious subjects that have public examinations in Hong Kong currently. The related subjects in the Higher Level Examination ceased to exist after 1992. The two HKCE subjects represent most of the participants while the HKDSE subject will be the only religious subject in the new senior secondary curriculum in which both Buddhism and Christianity are included as electives.
  
- <sup>2</sup> Religious education in schools of Hong Kong, of course, covers many more elements than merely public examinations. For example, some religious schools do not participate in the above mentioned public examinations and religious education does not start at secondary 4 but at a much earlier stage. Also, some religious traditions like: Islam, Taoism and Confucianism have been inactive in the domain of public examination. Thus, to be precise, religious education in this article refers to the senior secondary curricula and their examinations. It is not a complete picture of religious education but nevertheless an important piece of the picture. The existing HKCE and the HKAL examinations include three subjects of two religious traditions namely: Buddhist Studies, Religious Studies (in the HKCEE) and Ethics and Religious Studies (in the HKALE). Though not all Christian schools and Buddhist schools participate in the examinations, the examinations at the HKCE level involve considerable number of students annually. Based on the examination statistics, over the past ten years the two CE subjects involved about 13-20% of the total population of the day school first attempters. (Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority) Though the AL subject involve very few students each year, the persistence of about 20 schools over the past 20 years represents a committed group of educators that should not be overlooked.  
  
Furthermore, it must also be noted that religious education is not identical to moral and civic education. For example, cultivation of national identity, knowledge about the Basic Law and one country two systems, etc are normally not the core concerns in religious education. The author is of the view that religious education can contribute significantly to the promotion of moral and civic education in particular areas; like: moral growth, moral thinking and social participation in various services.
  
- <sup>3</sup> The practice of moral and civic education in Hong Kong is basically school-based that is characterized by diversified theoretical approaches and practices. The Education Bureau provides a curriculum framework that includes a rich collection of related materials, guidelines and examples taken from daily life and schools can refer to the information and references to organize their own moral and civic education according to a conceptual framework that covers individual, family and society (教育局). In practice, moral and civic education in many schools of Hong Kong exhibits a phenomenon that I call “a convenient arrangement” in which moral and civic education is usually considered done simultaneously with any free combination of sex education, religious education value education and life education through any designs of events, programs or specific teaching and learning activities as observed by Lee (李榮安, 2004).

- <sup>4</sup> Before 1992 there were two examination syllabuses for the HKCE Buddhist Studies. And after 1993 there has been one only. These syllabuses bore the same characteristics of focusing on the historical development, doctrines, and religious traditions.
- <sup>5</sup> For a more comprehensive sketch of the development, see 吳梓明 (1996).
- <sup>6</sup> The conduction of the HKAL examinations will continue in 2013. Also, the SBA marks for the subject will not be incorporated in the result of its public examination in 2012 and 2013. In 2014, the SBA results will be counted in the public examination of the subject. However, the SBA is regarded as an integrated part of the whole curriculum and schools are expected to carry out the SBA even though the marks will be counted in the public examination from 2014 onwards.
- <sup>7</sup> The HKCE Buddhist Studies does not have specific social and personal topics listed out in its syllabus it only has a section that require application of Buddhist principles. Thus, the comparison here does not include this subject.

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