Robert Bowie talks about OCR’s new
A Level Religious Studies specification
and his new textbook

Robert Bowie has been publishing A Level textbooks for over 10 years and has taught in schools all over the world. As a secondary RE teacher, he taught religious ethics in Kent. He currently works with RE teachers from schools across Kent and the Southeast of England.

How does OCR’s new specification differ from the old specification?
The biggest difference is, of course, the arrival of the study of religion alongside ethics and philosophy. This raises questions about how to fit everything in as it seems like there is more content squeezed in. It is therefore important to focus on what is needed under each topic heading of the specification, because that’s a helpful steer towards what you do (and don’t) need to cover.

If you are not used to teaching religion at this level then some sustained preparation is strongly advised. Pay attention to the contextual references and also the steer from the suggested scholarly views for guidance about the direction to take. There are some really good general sources listed, which will help you avoid getting lost in stuff that is no more than an interesting distraction.

What’s new/most challenging about the new specification?
Many of the ethics and philosophy topics have existed in previous specifications in some form but there are some striking new areas in the religion section. The study of Bonhoeffer is a good example, and you will need to come to terms with theological ideas like Grace. However, I don’t think there is a need to be unduly worried. There are plenty of resources online and Bonhoeffer’s own work is quite accessible. He’s a really exciting person to focus on, because he is a theologian who played a key role in Germany during the Second World War. I think he could really capture the imagination of sixth form students, and is perhaps a good person to focus on when presenting the new specification at options evening.

One thing that you will need to think carefully about is how biblical texts are used in the wider theological context in which they are understood. The kind of proof-text processes that are sometimes used at GCSE need to be set aside. How Christians differently interpret sacred texts comes into many of the topics so some awareness of basic theological hermeneutics and basic theology will really help and there are some good guides available for this (see below).

How would you recommend I structure the new course?
I would recommend teachers really think through the religion section before deciding how to structure things as there are some really helpful connections between topics. ‘The Person of Jesus Christ’, ‘Christian moral principles’ and ‘Christian moral action’ connect to ‘Natural Law’ and ‘Situation Ethics’. Bonhoeffer (‘Christian moral action’) influenced Joseph Fletcher’s thinking (‘Situation Ethics’). The applied ethical topic of ‘Euthanasia’ might benefit from all of the sections I have just mentioned being taught before it is tackled.
Different schools have different challenges, in terms of number and availability of teachers but I would recommend thinking flexibly about topic ordering.

How will your textbook help me meet the challenges of the new specification and ensure my students get the best possible grades?

We have shaped the content of each chapter to match the specification and created activities and discussions that will facilitate the kind of deeper understanding students need to fully appreciate the areas being studied. The chapters are detailed, far more so than in many previous textbooks, and there are numerous links to other chapters and links to references, especially biblical references. This will bring students to where they need to be to successfully answer exam questions.

Because the specification was accredited so late, your Year 1 textbook is going to be published at the very beginning of November. What can I do to plug the gap between teaching starting and the book coming out?

Every course should begin with a basic introduction to ethical language and philosophical language. Spending some time at the beginning introducing students to the big ideas and the language of these ideas will be very valuable. For example in ethics this might include:

- absolute and relative notions of right and wrong
- action-focussed and end-focussed ideas about ethics
- other elements involved in making a moral decision such as intention, will, authority and autonomy.

These could be explored through short dilemmas.

The most challenging thing for many people will be teaching Christianity. There are many, many guides to Christianity but there is a well-known lack of confidence in teaching the Bible, which the following resources should help to address. Ford and Thiselton are Protestants, the weblink is to a Catholic document.

- David Ford, *A very short introduction to theology*, 1999
- ‘The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church’: www.bible-researcher.com/catholic-interpretation.html

It is worth expressly introducing students to the study of theological thought, drawing on ideas from these resources for example, and also introducing students to the philosophy of religion.

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