

# *Foundations of Catholic Religious Education in an intercultural Europe*

## *Introduction*

*Patricia Kjeran and Anne Hession*

The author and former French politician, André Malraux (1901-1976), suggested that the twenty-first century would be the century of religion.<sup>1</sup> If the first decade of the new millennium is anything to go by he might have been right. In Europe one can discern a slight shift of focus, a change of mood, a hint of renewed interest in the role played by religion in social institutions. Tony Blair recently suggested that ‘Religious faith will be of the same significance to the 21st century as political ideology was to the 20th century. In an era of globalisation, there is nothing more important than getting people of different faiths and cultures to understand each other better and live in peace and mutual respect, and to give faith itself its proper place in the future.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed part of the recent emphasis on religion in Europe involves the perception that religion is no longer a private issue. The marriage of religious and political extremism which gave rise to 9/11, the Madrid (2004) and London bombings (2005), as well as other atrocities, has placed religion centre stage, unfortunately for all the wrong reasons. These horrific acts resulted in the rise of Islamophobia allied to the perception of religion as being inextricably linked to violence, intolerance and hatred. Many concluded that religion contributes to social conflict and potentially inhibits adherents from integrating into society.<sup>2</sup> Indeed it is estimated that religion was ‘a contributory cause in more than half of the 115 armed conflicts which occurred between 1989 and 2001’.<sup>3</sup>

In such a climate European governments began to appreciate that at a political and legislative level they had to take religion seriously. That said a greater appreciation of religion’s role in Europe is not simply a knee-jerk reaction to unprecedented acts of violence. Just as a mixture of religious and

---

<sup>1</sup> Irish Times, Monday 10 March, 2008.

political fundamentalism has the potential to motivate believers to engage in horrendous evil and unspeakable violence, religious faith is also capable of promoting the values of respect, justice and compassion. Within Europe one can see the beginnings of an appreciation of religion as a powerful, social, cultural and indeed political force for good. Inter-faith co-operation and inter-religious dialogue have huge potential to contribute to conflict resolution within Europe. Furthermore shared conversation between secular and religious groups can lead to open-mindedness and respect. For religious traditions, with their emphasis on shared values, social responsibility and the common good, have something very positive to offer Europe.

Many countries have begun to debate the role of religious and secular worldviews in shaping their societies. For instance religious freedom is one of the fundamental principles underlying the Italian Government's *Charter of Values for Citizenship* (2007). In France, President Sarkozy has shocked many secularists with his repeated emphasis on religion as a significant factor in shaping a society's morals and attitudes. In 2007, in an open letter to all those involved in education, he questioned and some would say undermined, France's ancient secular tradition by suggesting that it was inappropriate to leave religion at the door of the school.<sup>4</sup> In 2008, Tony Blair a recent convert to Catholicism, launched a Faith Foundation with the aim of promoting inter-religious collaboration and the advancement of faith as an alternative to conflict, in the modern world.<sup>5</sup> The former prime minister currently designs courses at Yale University which seek to promote religion as a force of good as opposed to conflict in the world. Speaking on the eve of the launch of his Foundation Blair stated 'In the end, this will be what I dedicate a very large part of my life to'. It must be remembered that not all current or ex-European leaders have placed such emphasis on religion although countries such as Norway, England, Ireland and Switzerland, have engaged in recent debates about the role of religion in society and in particular in their educational systems.

Significant developments indicate that religion and Religious Education are not marginal to social, legislative and educational endeavours at a European level. Indeed new initiatives place Religious Education firmly at the heart of Europe. In 2002 the Council of Europe focused on the religious dimension of Intercultural Education (ICE) and posited that inter-religious education might help to contribute a solution to intercultural problems. In 2003 European Education Ministers made ICE, including its religious dimension, a priority for further work. At a conference of the Coordinating Group for Religion in Education in Europe (CoGREE) in November 2005, the EU Commission for Education, Culture and Multilingualism, Jan Figel', spoke of the 'close relationship between education and religious and moral values' as being crucial for the future of Europe. In 2007, the Council of Europe published a reference book for teachers on religious diversity in Europe.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, in a historic move, the European Commission supported research into religion in education.<sup>2</sup> This emphasis on religion and education at a European level has resulted in an increased number of conferences, publications, networks and research activities focusing on the area of Religious Education. Significant networks such as Teaching Religion in a Multicultural European Society (TRES), the European Community project on Religious Education, Dialogue and Conflict, and The European Network for Religious Education through Contextual Approaches (ENRECA), have initiated large scale research into documenting and improving the teaching of religion across Europe.<sup>7</sup> A further indicator of the increasing profile of Religious Education can be seen in the recently established inaugural chair in Religious Education, in Oxford University.<sup>8</sup>

These are interesting times for religion and by implication for everyone involved in education in, for and about religion. This book arises out of an attempt to read ‘the signs of the times’, as they impact on Catholic Religious Education and as it, in turn, shapes them. With great change comes great challenge. Religious Education is contextual in the sense that it is shaped by a specific history and context. One of the major challenges facing European citizens is the challenge of living in an intercultural and inter-religious situation. Bert Roebben observes that ‘dialogue with other beliefs takes place, not only in the depth of time (intergenerational), but also in the breath of space (intercultural) and in the perspective of hope for the world (global)’.<sup>9</sup> This book attempts to examine the contours of a contextual Catholic Religious Education that takes this historical time, this specific intercultural European context and these particular challenges seriously. For there is no doubt that the role of religion is being transformed in a society that is characterised by a plurality of religious and non-religious worldviews.

Within the world of Catholic Religious Education there is a renewed sense of the need to return to basics, to classical sources and foundational themes, in order to address the new challenges posed by a plural and intercultural society. In itself, this is unsurprising. A situation of radical religious pluralism, of competing secular and religious worldviews, challenges people to reposition themselves within their new frame of reference. In such a climate individuals search for a new direction and are often sustained by the classical sources and texts of their own faith tradition, which are meaningful for every generation of believers. This involves neither a disengagement and retreat from the contemporary intercultural context nor a reactionary rejection of new voices and perspectives. It simply means that new horizons offering challenging new questions result in the need to return to

---

<sup>2</sup> EU’s Sixth Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development, Priority 7: Citizens and governance in a knowledge based society.

one's own faith tradition as a source of guidance and nourishment for inter-cultural and inter-religious living and learning. This is part of a dialectical process of engagement with the intercultural world and involves a renewal of self which enables respectful, inclusive dialogue to occur.

This book attempts to respond to the pressing need for discernment on how Catholic Religious Education has developed a discourse around inclusion and respect for otherness while simultaneously recognising the distinctive challenges and identity of the Catholic faith tradition. Scripture, tradition and Church teaching are foundations to which Catholics return as they re-source their relationships and self-understanding in a world of pluralism. Classical texts and themes in Religious Education, not all of them dealt with in this book, sustain and nourish the religious educator who struggles with issues of identity, direction and method in an exciting new intercultural environment. Texts such as the *General Directory of Catechesis* (1997), *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), National Catechetical Directories, key Vatican II constitutions as well as official Church documents on Religious Education, to mention but a few, offer support and guidance.<sup>10</sup> It is beyond the remit of this book to deal with all of these texts however Section Two presents selected foundational documents and texts which offer assistance.

New directions in Catholic Religious Education are manifest in a variety of ways. For example, in Ireland, in the last decade, Catholic Religious Education has witnessed a burst of energy and injection of activity surrounding the definition of what is specifically Catholic about the ethos of a school; the role of all those involved in the school community (the Patron, Trustees, Boards of Management, Teachers, Parents, Children); the generation of a new syllabus for primary schools and guidelines on post-primary syllabi; the establishment of a National Catechetical Office and designated Catechetical Sunday; as well as the generation of a draft national directory for Catechesis.<sup>11</sup> Such a flurry of activity raises the question whether Ireland's new intercultural and plural context has prompted Catholics into desiring redefinition, reconfiguration and renewal. There is a realisation that Catholic education in general and Religious Education in particular, is not something that happens automatically and that it can not be taken for granted.

In Catholic schools the encounter with the religious and secular other not only invites recognition and respect for the distinctiveness of the (non-)religious other, it also forces us to re-evaluate and re-appreciate our own religious tradition. Section One of the book acknowledges that issues of origin, tradition and identity are deeply relevant for contemporary Catholic Religious Education in an intercultural context. Indeed a post-modern emphasis on plurality and competing world-views raises

issues of identity and belonging in a striking manner. For Catholic religious educators the plurality of religious and non-religious world views should not be perceived as threats to be avoided, an unknown to be ignored or a context from which one must retreat. On the contrary, the reality of intercultural and interreligious life in contemporary Europe provides an exciting new context within which Catholic religious educators are invited to engage with this diverse community, to reclaim the Catholic faith heritage, to witness to the Catholic faith tradition and to relate and translate it anew in this new era. This is a challenging task, as those who are engaged in teaching and learning testify. If Catholic religious educators are unclear about who they are, where they have come from and what their task is, then they are vulnerable to being confused, ineffective and overwhelmed.

The four chapters in Section One of the book outline key issues involved in understanding Catholic education. Chapter One explores a Catholic philosophy of education while chapter two locates Catholic education as life-long learning in home, school and other learning environments. Chapter three explores the Catechumenate as a paradigm for all catechesis and in chapter four a distinctive Ignatian spirituality of teaching and learning is outlined. Section Two explores key sources of Catholic theology and Religious Education (scripture, tradition and Church teaching), which provide real insight and help in discerning a pathway through the complicated maze of post-modern life. The first chapter in this section focuses on using the Bible, as a normative and foundational source of Christian faith, in teaching Religious Education (chapter five). Furthermore chapters on *The General Directory for Catechesis* (chapter six), *Nostra Aetate* (chapter seven) and Junior and Leaving Certificate Syllabi (chapter eight) help provide direction for contemporary Catholic Education.

The book raises questions about how particular contexts shape and challenge Catholic Religious Education and about how it translates its tradition in ever changing environments. How can Catholic religious educators educate in a manner which is true to the Catholic tradition while being open to other religious perspectives? There is a tension between continuity and transformation within contemporary Catholic Religious Education which questions the relationship between the Catholic religious tradition, seen as normative and experienced as life-giving for believers, and the many other competing religious and non-religious worldviews. A contextual approach acknowledges that the universal themes and concerns of Catholic Religious Education are shaped, but not entirely defined, by particular contexts. Section three, *Catholic Education as Inclusive Education in the Heart of Europe*, focuses on issues of inter-religious learning and inter-faith dialogue in State and Catholic European schools. It outlines different types of inter-religious learning as well as factors which impede its occurrence in the classroom (chapter nine). Chapter ten examines the perspective of six world religions on Religious Education (Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Judaism, Islam and

Christianity) while chapter eleven explores the treatment of the 'religious other' in the classroom as well as the banning of religious symbols and clothing in many European state schools. Chapter twelve presents an overview of the situation of Religious Education in Europe and focuses in particular on three countries (England/Wales, Norway and Switzerland). Chapters thirteen to sixteen explore the issues and challenges confronting Religious Educators in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland. Undoubtedly while this book attempts to profile a broader European situation much focus is placed on the Irish and British context for Catholic Religious Education.

The book attempts to integrate theoretical frameworks, which underlie different approaches to Catholic Religious Education, with the lived experience of practitioners. Religious educators are faced with the very specific and challenging task of engaging in cradle to grave faith formation in an intercultural world. Section four of the book attempts to profile some practical situations which educators encounter in homes and parishes as well as primary and post-primary schools, by focusing on key selected themes. While many approaches are grounded in similar theological and epistemological assumptions (chapter seventeen), this book takes a closer look at the areas of early childhood (chapter eighteen), creative prayer (chapter nineteen), sacramental preparation (chapter twenty), and the act of judgement in Religious Education (chapter twenty one). The challenge of nurturing faith in a climate of dissent (chapter twenty two) and ongoing debates about the kind of assessment desirable in Religious Education complete this section (chapter twenty three). The focus here is on presenting best practice for Catholic religious educators.

It is hoped that this book will not just contribute to conversations about Religious Education in an intercultural society but that it will capture something of the energy, commitment and initiatives which characterise Catholic Religious Education in contemporary Europe. The book raises questions about how particular contexts shape and challenge Catholic Religious Education and how it enables its participants to meaningfully communicate and live out the Catholic faith with integrity in ever changing environments. The final section recognises that Religious Education is a vital aspect of a Catholic school both in terms of curricular content and its role within the curriculum (chapter twenty four). The last chapters explore the important issue of the management of Catholic schools (chapter twenty five) by locating it in the overall context of the call to faith formation, sacramental initiation (chapter twenty six) and service to the world.

June 20, 2008.

---

<sup>1</sup> *The Times*, May 29, 2008.

---

<sup>2</sup> A study of discrimination and racism post-9/11 concluded that ‘religion may sometimes be a stronger motivator for discriminatory sentiment and behavior than race or ethnicity’. L Sheridan, ‘Discrimination and Racism, Post-September 11’, University of Leicester, 2002, <http://www.le.ac.uk/ua/pr/press/discriminationandr racism.html> (accessed June 22, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> See Oliver Mc Tiernan, *Violence in God’s Name*, New York: Orbis, 2003, p.xiii.

<sup>4</sup> A Letter to Educators, President Sarkozy, September 4, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> *The Times*, May 30, 2008. These words are taken from an interview with Tony Blair at the launch of his Faith Foundation in New York, May 30, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> *Religious Diversity and Intercultural Education: a reference book for schools*, Council of Europe, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> TRES is a trans-national cooperation project in the form of a thematic network funded by the Socrates Programme which started in the autumn of 2005. The TRES launching conference took place in Uppsala, Sweden, in 2006. For further examples of research groups and networks see the Oslo Coalition's project on education for freedom of religion or belief; the European Community Framework 6 project on Religious Education, Dialogue and Conflict involving ten Universities (REDco); The European Network for Religious Education through Contextual Approaches and the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values (ISREV); Co-ordinating Group for Religious Education in Europe (CoGREE); European Association for the Study of Religions (EASR)

<sup>8</sup> Professor Terence Copley has been appointed Professor of Educational Studies in Religious Education.

<sup>9</sup> Chapter 9.

<sup>10</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1992); Documents of Vatican II (1965) including *Dei Verbum*: The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation; *Gaudium et spes*: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World ; *Lumen Gentium*: The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church; *Unitatis Redintegratio*: The Decree on Ecumenism; *Gravissimum Educationis* Declaration on Christian Education; *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on Religious Freedom. See also the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) which was officially declared normative for catechesis in 1972 and *The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School* (1988). For a general text see John Redford (ed.), *Hear, O Islands! Theology and Catechesis in the New Millennium*, Dublin: Veritas, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> For example a collaborative trustee body CEIST (Catholic Education - an Irish Schools Trust) came into operation in 2007. The *Catholic School – Imagining the Future* (2002) project gave rise to a national conference and a renewed role for Catholic schools and the *Wellsprings* (2007) project concerns the ethos of Catholic schools. Conference of Irish Catholic Bishops. *Draft National Directory for Catechesis*, Maynooth: St. Patrick’s College, 2005. A state syllabus for Religious Education was introduced into the Junior Certificate cycle in 2000 (first examined in 2003) and the Leaving Certificate Cycle in 2003 (first examined in 2005). An advisory committee to the Irish Bishops on their role as patrons of primary schools produced a report in September, 2007 entitled *Catholic Ethos in Primary Schools and the Changing Role of the Patron*. This unpublished report engages in an overview of important issues in Catholic primary schools such as governance, leadership, boards of management, principals, classroom, initial teacher training and diocesan support structures. For a recent account of Catholic schools in Ireland see G. Grace, & J. O’Keefe, eds, *International Handbook of Catholic Education Challenges for School Systems in the 21st Century*, Vol. 2, New York: Springer, 2007.