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Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (April 2014), pp. 203-211

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24635849>

Accessed: 14-12-2018 11:26 UTC

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Religion and the Primary Schools

Patrick Connolly

In the current debates about religion and schooling in the Republic of Ireland, the primary sector has become the lightning rod of discontent with the current system, as we saw during the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector and the subsequent Report of the Forum's Advisory Group published in April 2012.¹ The recommendations in this Report have become a sort of bible for some policy makers involved in this area, though even in wider educational circles and at school level the actual detail of these recommendations still remain largely unknown and undiscussed.

The recent decision by the European Court of Human Rights in the Louise O'Keefe case has again highlighted, in a wider European perspective, the fact that in 2014 the Irish primary school system still remains largely under the patronage and management of the Christian Churches. And as Minister Quinn has discovered, changing the system has proved very difficult indeed. Only one national school in the entire country has yet been divested from a Church body, and that was an empty building in Dublin. However it would be naïve to see this slow progress thus far in implementing Mr Quinn's policy as due simply to effective well-organised resistance by faith-based groups and to a widespread attachment by the populace to denominational education. Part of it is the very local devolved nature of Irish school management, combined with inertia. While the opinion polls show much solid support for a more secular school system, people are much more cautious about changing their local school. It seems a lot of Irish people in principle favour secular

1. *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (hereafter *Report*), Dublin: DES, 2012. <http://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Conferences/Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector/The-Forum-on-Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector-Report-of-the-Forums-Advisory-Group.pdf>

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primary education almost on the French model, but paradoxically don't especially look for or want it for their own children.

Leaving aside for a moment the practical difficulties and often huge local resistance, there is nonetheless now broad agreement that the current system is unbalanced and that a number of Catholic schools should be divested, thereby ending the situation whereby too many schools are under Catholic patronage and bringing more diversity of patronage into the system. This consensus is shared by the Churches, the Government, other patron bodies, and the other stakeholders in the system. So whatever about how this divestment is to take place in practice locally and the numerical extent of it required, there is in principle agreement that some such transfers are a good idea. The real argument has now moved onto the situation of those schools which will remain under Catholic patronage, and it is these schools and the pressures increasingly being placed upon them that are my focus in this article. These pressures are both implicit and explicit.

THE CONTEXT OF THE CURRENT DISCUSSION ABOUT PRIMARY EDUCATION

There has arisen an implicit presumption in the current public discourse that Catholic primary schools are not inclusive enough and not sufficiently respectful of other perspectives on religion. This is a misleading presumption. It is because of their very character and ethos that Catholic schools have actively promoted the inclusion and integration of pupils of other faiths both in school and in the local community. As Dermot Lane says, 'the introduction to, and appreciation of, other religions is not some kind of add-on in Catholic education. Rather, respect for and dialogue with other religious faiths is a fundamental ingredient of the Catholic cake. [...] It is important that children from an early age have a respect for, and an appreciation of, other religions, especially in the first instance the monotheistic faiths'.² The latter point is being explicitly taken into account in the preparation of the new Catholic religious education programme.³ On a practical level, many Catholic schools have for instance Muslim pupils who wear very distinctive clothing, and these pupils are very much integrated into the life of the school. And in their day-to-day activities, schools do try to be respectful to pupils coming from homes where there are very different standpoints on religion.

2. Dermot A. Lane, *Religion and Education: Re-Imagining the Relationship*, Dublin: Veritas, 2013, p. 51.

3. See Cathal Barry, "The Future of Religious Education", *The Irish Catholic*, 20 February 2014, p. 9.

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There is also a worrying implication in some Department of Education and Science (DES) literature that Catholic boards of management don't reflect the diversity of the local community.⁴ Again there is little evidence of this. Of eight members, the board has only two nominees of the Patron (the Chair and one other member). Along with the principal, there is a teachers' representative democratically elected. The election of the two parental members is also carried out in an open democratic process mandated in detail by the DES, and indeed there are no religious conditions at all required to stand for election. Likewise there are in fact no religious criteria required of the two community representatives co-opted by the board. On a practical level, the finding of competent community representatives is no easy task, which is not surprising given that the time commitment involved grows yearly, as the DES places more and more responsibilities on boards made up of volunteers. In regard to diversity, Catholic boards sometimes have non-Catholic members.

EDUCATION ABOUT RELIGIONS AND BELIEFS (ERB) AND ETHICS

A new primary school subject is being introduced, to teach children secular ethics and *about* the various religions and beliefs.⁵ It is unclear as to whether this subject *Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics* is to be mandatory for all pupils in Catholic schools or only for those who opt out of Catholic religious education. Moreover, we have no idea yet of what exactly will be in this new programme, though one is being devised at the moment. Without yet knowing the content or the outlook of the programme, it is difficult to be definitive.

Nonetheless, there seems to be an assumption in the Advisory Group's Report that *ERB* will be 'neutral' compared to confessional religious education, and thus can be made mandatory for all pupils. It is not so simple. First, there is no such thing as a completely neutral approach to religion, and second, some parents may be unhappy for their children to attend this programme, especially if some of them believe that it treats all religions being of equal value. The Irish Constitution explicitly protects the right of parents to opt out of 'religious instruction' (not out of 'religious education' *per se*), and it might be argued that *ERB* is indeed a form of religious instruction in the broad sense. Little thought seems to have been given to the latter possibility and thus to the

4. See the DES information leaflet prepared specifically for parents *How can primary schools make all children feel included and involved?*, published on 23 September 2013 and launching a public consultation by the Minister on inclusiveness in primary schools in response to the Report's recommendations.
5. See *Report*, pp. 85-92.

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legal rights of those parents who won't want their children to attend *ERB* and who will want to opt out of the subject. For example, some committed Christians (both Catholic and Protestant) and Muslims will regard this subject as a secularist or syncretistic approach to religious belief, even if that stance in the subject is subtle or implicit. They will not be satisfied with a merely phenomenological approach to religious education. Other parents will regard *ERB* as thoroughly anaemic, encouraging an approach to religion and spirituality which is without real challenge or commitment. On the other hand, some atheists or agnostics may regard it as subjecting their children to a formal education about religious beliefs which they simply don't want. So 'opt-out' arrangements for *ERB* may have to be added to the existing arrangements for those pupils who opt out of confessional religious education. This will impose yet another burden on principals and boards of management.

Given that it will apparently be obligatory to make available *ERB and Ethics*, together with the ongoing reduction in public expenditure on education and especially the pressure on time in the curriculum, its introduction in Catholic schools will inevitably adversely affect the time available for faith formation for Catholic pupils. As Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has noted, 'there is a growing danger that, due to curricular pressures, catechesis will be limited to two events, First Communion and Confirmation and stop there.'⁶

Finally, whatever the merits or otherwise of this new subject, there is a well-founded suspicion among many committed Catholics that *ERB and Ethics* is really a 'Trojan horse', designed in the longer term to push sacramental preparation and eventually all confessional religious education out of the schools. This would obviously not happen overnight, but gradually over the years, as the issue of the overall time available for religion in the curriculum would lead to the elimination of everything else besides *ERB and Ethics*. It would be reassuring if this suspicion could be allayed by the Government with definitive guarantees about denominational religious education in the forthcoming promised White Paper.

ENROLMENT POLICIES

The current enrolment policies of the great majority of Catholic primary schools do not select entrants on religious grounds. However, while schools may wish and plan that such policies

6. Diarmuid Martin, "Catholic Ireland: Past, Present and Future", *The Furrow*, 64 (2013), p. 331.

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continue, we cannot preclude the possibility that a situation can unfortunately arise where the Equal Status Act, 2000, Section 7 (3)(c) needs to be employed, which enables schools to admit pupils of a particular religious denomination in preference to others. Thus, the suggestion by the Forum Report that this derogation be reviewed is not a good one.⁷ If a denominational primary school, faced with being very oversubscribed and in a dilemma as what to do, cannot at least have the option of giving preference to its own denomination, then one wonders what if any autonomy is being left to the school and what is the point of Churches or other voluntary bodies being involved in primary education at all – such schools would then be entirely creatures of the State. This would amount to the complete triumph of the ideology of ‘Statism’, whereby all schools are treated effectively as State schools.

THE TIMING OF RELIGION CLASS

The place of a subject in the timetable tells you a lot about how an educational institution regards the subject. Scheduling often tells you far more about the real priorities of an organisation than visionary mission statements or written policies. So the suggestion that religion class in primary schools be now moved to the beginning or end of the school day is flawed, because it will send the implicit message that in a Catholic or Protestant school religion class no longer holds a central place and effectively is being deliberately marginalised, especially if it is moved to the very end of the day. Moreover, it also sends another message that this demotion of religious education is being acquiesced to at the direction of external political forces. For Catholic or other Christian schools to be conveying such messages is at odds with the very reasons for which they exist.

PREPARATION TIME FOR THE SACRAMENTS

There is a legitimate concern expressed about the amount of time spent in some schools on sacramental preparation.⁸ This can happen especially in the weeks leading up to the day of the celebration of a sacrament, e.g. First Holy Communion. When it comes to the actual ceremony, there is often a form of ‘school branding’ going on, whereby schools put themselves on public display for the wider community, and catechesis is by no means the only factor driving the amount of time given over to preparing for the event. It is an issue upon which a careful eye needs to be kept in schools. That concern acknowledged, the DES will be

7. See *Report*, pp. 77-78.

8. See *Report*, pp. 87-88.

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aware that similar problems can arise in regard to, for instance, the amount of school time devoted to the Christmas Concert and similar events. There need to be equity and balance in the public discussion about how time in the school day is expended, i.e. it is not just religion which occasionally may be the disproportionate focus time-wise of school activity. And no public or media attention at all has been given to those schools where the mandated half hour of religion per day (or two and half hours per week) is not taught for some or a lot of the school year. It is a not a secret that such schools do exist.

RELIGIOUS HOLIDAYS, STATUES AND SYMBOLS, ASSEMBLIES AND PRAYERS

The celebration of religious holidays, statues and symbols, prayers and assemblies, in a school must be reflective and supportive of the Catholic identity or characteristic spirit of that school in the first instance. Otherwise we would have the bizarre phenomenon of a school which is legally under the patronage of a Catholic bishop but which in practice looks like and operates like a multi-denominational school.

The Report wants all schools to have policies covering religious holidays and celebrations, religious artefacts, etc, and such policies are to be developed by way of Department guidelines.⁹ However the Advisory Group continually emphasises 'inclusion' and 'balance' to the extent that in their outline of these policies there is no discussion of any commitment to the school's fundamental identity. For example, they give the impression that school religious displays and celebrations should simply reflect the various beliefs in the school, and this would be mandated in Department-inspired policies. In this section of the Report, it is hard to see what the difference is between a multi-denominational school and, for instance, a Church of Ireland or Catholic school. Apparently, in the mind of the Advisory Group, they might at least in particular cases look the same.

If, in a Catholic school, it is mandated by the State that the rites of all the various religions are to be celebrated, and the prayers are to be somehow inclusive of all beliefs and none in the school, the nurturing of any real commitment to the Catholic faith will become impossible to sustain in the school. Moreover, forcing schools to have non-denominational inclusive prayer could be seen as a form of 'religious instruction', from which the Constitution allows parents to withdraw their children. While being respectful of other religions, a Catholic school cannot be

9. See *Report*, pp. 92-94.

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expected by the State to promote them *de facto*, or place them on the same level as the Catholic faith, in the day-to-day activities of the school. Likewise, while being respectful to those who have no religious faith, the Catholic school as an organisation cannot be expected to present that agnostic or atheistic world-view as having the same cogency or life-giving sustenance as Christian faith. Pope Francis has recently pointed to the multicultural environment of many Catholic schools, where numerous students may not be Christian or do not believe, and that these schools offer an education directed at the development of the whole person, but nevertheless ‘they are equally called to offer to all the Christian message – respecting fully the freedom of all and the proper methods of each specific scholastic environment – namely that Jesus Christ is the meaning of life, of the cosmos and of history’.¹⁰

As to religious artefacts and symbols, they too must be supportive of the Catholic identity of the school in the first instance. It is entirely reasonable for a Catholic school, especially a primary one, to have largely Christian iconography, and to be free of direction from the Government in this regard. Otherwise, to use a very imperfect analogy, it is a bit like the State telling Lidl that it must carry some advertisement for Aldi in its stores.

None of the points made above implies that Catholic schools shouldn’t mark and respect religious diversity, e.g. children of other faiths being encouraged to share knowledge of their religion, teachers noting when Ramadan is being celebrated, etc. Catholic schools should always be places of welcome and inclusion. However, what is being proposed in the Forum Report goes much further and could *de facto* make a Catholic school virtually undistinguishable in terms of religious celebrations and displays from a multi-denominational school.

COMPLAINTS AND APPEALS ABOUT RELIGIOUS ISSUES

The Advisory Group’s Report wants a complaints and appeals procedure for parents so that dissatisfied parents can appeal to the board of management, including about religious issues, and also a statutory appeals system for parents who are not happy with the board’s response.¹¹ Aside from yet another time-consuming general responsibility being placed by the Government on the

10. See Pope Francis, Address to Participants in the Plenary Session of the Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, 13 February 2014. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/francesco/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140213_congregazione-educazione-cattolica_en.html

11. See *Report*, pp. 95-97.

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volunteer board of management, one can foresee that such a procedure may actually encourage all sorts of local disputes (e.g. a parent who is unhappy with the prominent placement of a large religious statue in the school hallway, whereas other parents are adamant that it remain in that position). A major problem in the current public discourse is that inclusion and involvement in school are often presented as subjective *feelings*: the stress is on what pupils and parents 'feel'.¹² This methodology is problematic. If a pupil does not feel included, or a parent does not feel that her/his child is involved sufficiently, does this mean that despite its best efforts a school has failed in its responsibility to be inclusive? Any complaints and appeals mechanisms will have to bear in mind the growing burden of responsibility being placed on volunteer unpaid boards, and avoid the encouragement of vexatious time-consuming complaints which eventually may have to go to the Courts anyway.

CONCLUSION – THE INFORMAL AGREEMENT IN PRIMARY EDUCATION BETWEEN THE STATE AND RELIGIOUS BODIES

Historically, the primary system in Ireland developed as a sort of informal agreement between the Churches and the State. The area of religion was left to the various religious bodies, whereas on the other hand the administration of the schools by Church managers and now by volunteer boards saved and continues to save the State considerable money. In the early 19th century, the Churches became involved in primary schools because of their interest in the transmission of the Christian faith and in the promotion of the common good of society through education. Now in 2014, in practice the State directs every single detail of primary education bar the teaching and role of religion in the school, and as yet has little or no direct legal responsibility for anything in the system. Or at least it has argued it didn't have such a legal responsibility all the way to the European Court of Human Rights. For instance, the Department pays and determines all the hiring and working conditions of the teachers and yet curiously is not their legal employer, thereby leaving all employment and human resource issues to school boards made up of volunteers. From the point of view of public administration and expenditure, it is difficult to envisage a cheaper system.

There is a sense that the historical informal agreement is now under pressure, with even the area of religion to be slowly brought

12. See for instance the DES leaflet *How can primary schools make all children feel included and involved?*, and also the way in which the Report cites the views of children.

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under the direction of the Department, while at the same time the time-consuming, burdensome, administrative legal and other responsibilities still remain with the school boards and the Patrons. In fact, new responsibilities are created by the DES for boards year by year. If the State is now effectively going to direct Catholic and Protestant school boards even about the way religion is taught and displayed in school, then the various Churches will have to give thought to their commitment to the system by way of volunteer labour, and decide if their continued involvement is now worthwhile. From a Catholic perspective, there would seem little point in continuing to put unpaid time and effort into schools which would in fact not be significantly distinct from existing non-Catholic providers of primary education. Catholic schools exist in the first instance to support Catholic parents in a meaningful way, not as a cost-saving substitute for State schools.¹³

Finally, the current system of primary education arose out of a particular historical context which no longer exists. It has been pointed out that approximately 45% of second level Catholic pupils now attend non-Catholic schools wherein provision is made for denominational religious education.¹⁴ The Church ultimately isn't attached to the current system of primary school ownership and governance, but rather to its wider mission of evangelisation which includes trying to make sure that Catholic children are able to be educated in their own faith. So, for example, a system of 'community' national schools which ensured the availability of a distinctly Catholic religious education provision could be better than a nominally Catholic primary school system whose Catholicity would be entirely hollowed out by detailed Government directives governing the content of religious education and the displays of religion in the school.

13. This is not to say that Catholic schools are mostly or indeed only about catering for Catholics.

14. See David Touhy, *Denominational Education and Politics: Ireland in a European Context* Dublin: Veritas, 2013, p. 339.