

The Nature and Purpose of Religious Education in Contemporary Ireland

The landscape for Diocesan Advisors is changing in Ireland. There are a variety of worldviews present in any Catholic school. There are children whose worldview is shaped by secular atheism, for whom there is no transcendent dimension to life, there are children not sure if they believe in God or not and other children, who believe in God as revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. There are different religious traditions present in the classroom and within Catholicism, there is a wide spectrum of belief and belonging. And that is just to mention the children, never mind the teachers and parents! Then there are public commentators who perceive Religious Education to be equivalent to indoctrination and fundamentally anti-reason. Things are changing, shared understandings have disappeared and we no longer all speak the same language. And so the challenge for Diocesan Advisors is that they need to be always prepared “to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15). But Diocesan Advisors need to give the reason in a way that others can understand or as Aquinas puts it, always communicate according to the mode of the receiver, easier said than done.

In an article on educating for citizenship and discipleship,¹ Walter Brueggemann stresses the importance for people of faith to engage the world around them. They must be able to enter into dialogue with those outside and within their own faith tradition. For this to happen, people of faith must be bilingual. In making this point, Brueggemann draws on the experience of the Israelites at the time when King Hezekiah reigned in Judah and King Hoshea reigned in the northern kingdom of Israel (see 2 Kings 18-19). The Israelites, while under attack from the Assyrians, were able to go out to meet them at the wall of the fortress. It was here that negotiations were carried on between the two nations. The common language was Aramaic. To engage in critical conversation at the wall, people must be able to speak to and understand one another. The language behind the wall is concerned with that of the communities’ own identity and faith tradition. It is a language of dreaming and visioning, being immersed in the stories and rituals, values and beliefs of one’s faith community.

Diocesan Advisors need to translate this language and make sense of it to a new and changing landscape within the Catholic school. They need to bring it to the wall, speak about it in an intelligible and persuasive manner. Some of this role is one of apologetics. In his book, *Mere Apologetics*,² Alister E. McGrath, outlines the reasonableness of Christian faith and some pointers to faith. These sorts of things can help Christians do the necessary translation of bringing the wisdom and insight of the Christian tradition into conversation with the questions, insights and lived experience of others. He takes eight clues or pointers to faith and weaves them together. They are: Clue 1) Creation – The Origins of the Universe. Here he argues from the insight that the universe had an origin and that whatever begins to exist has a cause and if the universe began to exist, what was its cause? Clue 2) Fine Tuning – A Universe Designed for Life? Here he makes the point that the chances of our universe being

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic: 2 Kings 18-19," in *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, ed. Mary C Boys (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989).

² Alister E. McGrath, *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Sceptics Find Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

designed for life are unbelievably rare but yet it is. Clue 3) Order – The Structure of the Physical World. McGrath believes that there is an ordered cosmos, it is intelligible to us and while this proves nothing, it suggests the possibility that Christian faith can make sense of the world. Clue 4) Morality – A Longing for Justice. McGrath asks about the origin of the deep human instinct and intuition that objective moral values exist. Such a longing can point towards God. Clue 5) Desire – A Homing Instinct for God. There is a profound restlessness within us all, we long for something of ultimate significance. Clue 6) Beauty – The Splendor of the Natural World. Perhaps the world is a signpost towards God? He suggests that nature is meant to disclose the beauty of God. Clue 7) Relationality – God as a Person. Christianity is fundamentally a relational faith and we desire a God who is a person, not an anonymous force. Clue 8) Eternity- The Intuition of Hope. We have a hunch that we are made for more than just this life. Augustine of Hippo refers to the haunting memory of paradise, which we can never shake off. McGrath goes on to weave these together. The point being, Diocesan Advisors need to find clues to faith that can resonate with the experience of whosoever they speak to today.

Religious Education is concerned with bringing the life experience of people into a sustained, critical conversation with Faith. There must be a back and forth movement between these dimensions: Life to Faith to Life. It will provide people with good information about religious traditions, it will help people to learn from a particular religious tradition, irrespective if they are a part of that tradition or not, and it will seek to form people in a particular religious tradition, where appropriate. It is no longer good enough to rely on the fact that Religious Education is on the timetable or that the Department of Education and Skills require it to be taught daily. They are legal requirements and will not stir the imagination. Today we need to articulate persuasively and imaginatively the importance of Religious Education, in all that we do. We need to give “the reason for the hope that we have” (1 Peter 3:15).

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Brueggemann, Walter. "The Legitimacy of a Sectarian Hermeneutic: 2 Kings 18-19." In *Education for Citizenship and Discipleship*, edited by Mary C Boys, 3-34. New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1989.

McGrath, Alister E. *Mere Apologetics: How to Help Seekers and Skeptics Find Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.