

The Future of Catholic Schools — The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism: a cultural marker and wake-up call

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The Future of Catholic Schools

– *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism:*
a cultural marker and wake-up call.

Eamonn Conway

INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of the Report from the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, the Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn TD, has moved to dampen expectations with regard to the number of primary schools that are likely to be divested by religious patrons. The issue of reassigning patronage is proving to be much more problematic than originally envisaged, not only in rural areas but also in towns and cities. Faced with possible handover of their school to a secular patron such as the VEC or Educate Together, many local communities are coming to realize just how important their school's Catholic identity is to them and they are not anxious to let go of it.

In advance of the Government's formal response, Mr. Quinn has also been anxious to allay fears that schools remaining under religious patronage will be forced to compromise on their ethos, despite the worrying recommendations of the Forum. Speaking in the Seanad, Minister Quinn stated:

I do not believe we will get agreement from the Catholic community on the divesting of schools if it believes it is to be curtailed in terms of how it celebrates and teaches Catholicism to its own community.

It would seem that the message reaching Government parties from backbenchers is to proceed with caution; that it is enough 'on the ground' to have to deal with the harsh economic realities without picking a messy and possibly unwinnable fight at local level over school patronage.

This might all seem like good news from a Church point of

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view and we could well decide to sit back, in the expectation that little of any real practical difference is going to happen. This would be a mistake. The Forum's report is a wake-up call for the Catholic Church and its role in the Irish educational system. The content but also the whole approach and tone of the Forum's report is an important 'cultural marker'.¹ Moreover, there is more to some of the recommendations, such as the implementation of curricular reform, than is at first evident. Here I want to consider the report from these perspectives and identify some implications.

THE FORUM'S RECOMMENDATIONS

By now we are familiar with the main recommendations of the report. It calls for an end to Rule 68 for National Schools, which recognises religious instruction as a fundamental part of the school course and permits a religious spirit to 'inform and vivify the whole work of the school.' If it is deleted, there will be no underpinning to the patron's legal responsibility and right to uphold and foster a denominational school ethos.

The report also recommends that religion should be taught as a discrete subject apart from the rest of the curriculum although all other subjects are to be taught in an integrated manner.

Hymns and prayers are to be inclusive of the religious beliefs of all children. In addition, it is recommended that Catholic schools would display the emblems of various religions and celebrate their feasts.

The Forum recognized that for the present no amount of divesting of patronage would do away with the need for non-Catholics to be accommodated in Catholic schools. It then became preoccupied with the rights of a small minority. In fact, it is startling how often 'rights' language is used in the report, predominantly regarding the '10% of the population who declare themselves as having "no religion."' ²

Adopting uncritically the input of the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) to the Forum, the report recommends that denominational schools become 'as inclusive as possible'. The whole thrust of the IHRC's input was to underscore the right to freedom from religious influence, which was implicitly seen as negative, while underplaying the right to freedom of religious expression. The report acknowledges only in passing that the needs and rights of the majority of pupils attending a denominational school should be responded to; the emphasis in the report is

1. A 'cultural marker' is an event or aspect of society that highlights or discloses certain shifts in cultural norms.

2. The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group, April 2012 (hereafter, 'Report', p.1).

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on accommodating pupils of minority belief systems and ensuring that their rights are not infringed.

The report welcomes the fact that where new schools are being built, these will 'provide for greater diversity of school type linked to new requirements regarding patronage'; in other words: no new schools under denominational patronage.³ It is difficult to read the report without concluding that 'the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage' is considered to have no place in a modern society, an impression underlined by the detailed account given of the origins and history of the patronage system that portrays it as belonging to a different era. The operative principle seems to be that enlightened Catholic parents will want their children educated in a multid denominational setting and increasingly, future citizens will belong to the 'no religion' category.

THE BIGGER PICTURE: MANAGING RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

The 9/11 terrorist attack has become iconic in recognising that the zero sum theory of secularisation – the more modernization, the less religion – had run its course.⁴ Governments around the world woke up to the fact that religion had not gone away and, in fact, had the potential to be quite a destructive force.

European Union member states were recommended to make provision for the training of Imams within their own countries in an effort to prevent radicalized Islamic leaders being trained overseas. In Germany, for instance, the growing need for professional expertise in the area of religion, especially Islam, led to their higher education authority calling for enhanced resources to enable the expansion and development of faculties of theology and religious science throughout the country.⁵

In 2009, I was invited to participate in a conference in Seoul on interreligious dialogue sponsored by the Asian European Foundation (ASEF).⁶ This organization is mainly about promoting economic co-operation between Europe and Asia but it also sponsors intercultural and interreligious events. The concept paper for the conference set the scene:

3. Report, p.2

4. On the demise of the secularisation theory see, for example, Peter L Berger (Ed), *The desecularisation of the world: resurgent religion and world politics*, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1999.

5. *Wissenschaftsrat: Empfehlungen zur Weiterentwicklung von Theologien und religionsbezogenen Wissenschaften an deutschen Hochschulen*. Berlin, 29 January 2010.

6. The Fifth ASEM Interfaith Dialogue, Seoul, Republic of Korea, September 2009. See <http://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/economy/asem/interfaith/dialogue0909.pdf>. Accessed 7 May 2012.

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Religion is, and will continue to be, a powerful element in the tensions and polarisation between and within societies with differing cultural and religious values. Tensions where religion is invoked, either in its own right or as a proxy for political battles, arise not simply between adherents of different religious practices and beliefs, but also between religious and secular groups. It is therefore essential to include both religious and non-religious actors in dialogue efforts to bring about mutual understanding towards the mitigation or reconciliation of conflict.

This statement summarises the secular state's interest in matters religious. The view is that because religion remains a potent force even in modern societies, education to mitigate its negative effects is essential. The emphasis in religious education from the state's perspective must be upon fostering tolerance, dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation. These values are to be foregrounded in educational programmes along with the promotion of responsible citizenship and the proper functioning of democracy. These concepts occur frequently in the Forum report.

There is little recognition in this discourse that religions play a significant role in promoting responsible citizenship and social cohesion, although there is ample research to back this up. A key study at Boston College, for example, found that religion played a formative role in social commitment for the majority of people studied.⁷ However, humanists and atheists get upset when it is pointed out that there is a strong correlation between religious faith and an enhanced sense of social responsibility and voluntarism.

In an important recent work entitled *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, William T Cavanaugh shows how in the West the category of religion has been constructed in order to support the view that religion causes violence.⁸ What counts as religious or secular can in fact be quite arbitrary, a function of particular politics and power configurations; we have seen this ourselves in Northern Ireland. It is a foundational myth of our culture, he argues, that religion is essentially non-rational and prone to violence.

THE TOLEDO GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND EDUCATION 'ABOUT' RELIGION AND BELIEFS

The Forum stops short of the IHRC's tacit identification of

7. Laurent A Parks Daloz et al, *Common fire: lives of commitment in a complex world*, Beacon Press: Boston, 1996, 141.

8. William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, OUP: Oxford, 2009.

denominational religious education with indoctrination and proselytization, but overall it considers denominational religious education as a problem to be overcome rather than a key resource in the formation of responsible citizens.

The Forum requests the introduction of a programme entitled 'Education about Religions and Beliefs' (ERB). The key word here is *about*. Education *about* religion is distinguished from education *from* a faith perspective and education *in* a particular faith. The introduction of this programme was demanded by the IHRC as well as Atheist Ireland. Versions of it already exist in non-denominational schools and the Forum proposes that it be provided to *all* students in denominational schools, not just to non-believers as an alternative to RE.⁹

The proposed programme is to be based upon the 'Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools'.¹⁰ This document was produced by the Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief at the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODHRE) in 2007.

The Forum report notes that Atheist Ireland welcomes their children being taught 'about' religion and beliefs 'if it is done consistently with the Toledo Guiding Principles'.¹¹ Accordingly, just after it recommends that sacramental preparation 'should not encroach on the time allocated for the general curriculum' the Forum 'requests that the NCCA (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) ... should develop curriculum and teacher guidelines for ERB and ethics, in line with the Toledo Principles ...'.¹² It underscores the value it places on the Toledo Guiding Principles by appending them as Appendix 6 to the report.

The provenance of these principles is telling. The body that produced them is under the auspices of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Foreword makes clear that their context and purpose is to 'address the root causes of intolerance and discrimination by encouraging the development of comprehensive domestic education policies and strategies'.

The Foreword acknowledges that 'a deeper understanding of religions will not automatically lead to greater tolerance and respect' but adds that 'ignorance increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, stereotyping, and conflict.'

9. 'The Advisory Group is of the view that all children have the right to receive education in ERB and Ethics and the State has the responsibility to ensure that it is provided', Report, p.92.

10. See www.osce.org/odihr/29154 accessed May 10 2012

11. Report, p.89

12. Report, p.111

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We could counter-argue that genuine religious formation and conversion is the surest path to tolerance and respect. Indeed, the Forum itself cites research that 'inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where the Catholic students and parents are most committed to their own practice'.¹³ Yet the thrust of the Forum's recommendations is to inhibit a denominational school's ability to contribute to faith practice.

Irish Colleges of Education, at the Teaching Council's insistence, have already introduced a mandatory module preparing teachers to teach ERB and Ethics.

THE APPEAL OF THE TOLEDO PRINCIPLES

A religious education programme based on the Toledo Principles will appeal to educators and parents alike for several reasons. First of all, it is true that distorted understandings of religion have led to violence, persecution and intolerance, and, in some regions of the world, still do. Even though knowledge of itself is not necessarily transformative, better understanding of religions by young people can only be a good thing. In any case, young people seem to lack even a basic religious literacy; the ERB will help overcome this, it will be argued.

Some parents will have memories of what they themselves experienced in school as an oppressive form of religious education and will be pleased that the ERB programme will simply present the facts and allow children to make up their own minds.

Teachers who are uncomfortable with Christian faith will have no personal difficulty teaching ERB as it does not presume or require any religious commitment. There will be no reason to expect teacher's lifestyles to be consistent with their religious beliefs as these are purely a private matter. Finally, the ERB is inclusive, which means no one will have to step outside the classroom or be catered for separately.

So what harm can such a programme do?

PROBLEMS WITH THE ERB PROGRAMME

From the point of initiation into a faith community, the ERB programme can do a lot of harm.

There are a number of issues. The first has to do with its methodology, which is allegedly 'procedural neutrality'. This means that the faith perspectives of pupils and teachers alike are supposedly bracketed. Teachers are not to disclose to pupils their own views or allow such views to influence their teaching. What is required of the teacher is not religious commitment but rather a

13. Report, p.93

positive attitude towards difference and the ability not to impose their views upon others. A development of this approach views the teacher as a facilitator and the pupils as co-learners who are to be enabled to interpret information about religions in light of their expanding personal experience.¹⁴

There is no place in this approach for the concept of doctrine understood as normative teaching or indeed for anything claiming authority other than the students' own experience. Commenting about this approach as a general trend in pedagogy, Frank Furedi has observed 'the current project of confining the education of children to learning from experiences that are directly relevant to them disinherits the younger generation from their rightful intellectual legacy'.¹⁵

This valorization of pupils' own experiences leads pupils inevitably to the (secularist) belief that religious truth claims are merely relative. Therefore, the content and pedagogy of such a module is not neutral. In fact, the notion that religious knowledge can be communicated neutrally is also a secular belief. No education programme can bracket its formative dimension; the ERB unavoidably forms students in a secularist understanding of religion.

Apart from religious objections, this methodology is also open to criticism on pedagogical grounds. The work of Annemie Dillen and others shows that there is a correlation between teachers' own beliefs and the objectives they have for their teaching.¹⁶ Claims regarding a kind of non-directive facilitative neutrality are naïve about the power dynamics that inevitably operate in the classroom. Teachers always exercise some power over their pupils and their own beliefs are always influential. There is a further problem with ERB. It attempts to present religious beliefs, rituals, images and artifacts 'objectively' and 'factually'. By so doing it disembeds them from their rootedness in a shared living tradition and community. Without the living faith of the community providing their context and horizon of interpretation, beliefs and rituals can at best be understood superficially. For Christians, relationship with God and one another in Christ is not an optional extra alongside our beliefs and sacraments, which we can take or leave. It is everything. It is in and from this relationship that we come to know what our beliefs and rituals are really about.

14. A proponent of this approach is Robert Jackson, Warwick University. See <http://www.rpforum.dk/pdf/Robert%20Jackson.pdf>. Accessed May 10 2012.

15. Frank Furedi, *Wasted: why education is not educating*, London: Continuum, 2010, p.41.

16. See Annemie Dillen, 'Empowering children in religious education: rethinking power dynamics', *Journal of Religious Education* 59 (3) 2011, pp.4-13.

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ERB AND CONSUMING RELIGION

The Leuven theologian, Lieven Boeve describes our cultural context as one of detraditionalisation because religious traditions no longer steer the process of constructing people's personal or religious identity.¹⁷ Instead, the cultural context in which we live provides what Boeve calls 'an all inclusive consumer culture that presents itself as the intermediary par excellence between us and our cultural context'. According to Zygmunt Bauman, even 'bonds and partnerships are viewed as things to be consumed'.

What Boeve, and, in the USA, Vince Miller, author of *Consuming Religion: Religious Belief and Practice in a Consumer Culture*, demonstrate, is that increasingly people see religious beliefs and rituals, symbols and icons, as commodities to be assimilated into their lives and lifestyle, divorced from or devoid of the meaning and impact that they are meant to have in the context of the tradition in which they originate. Faced with a plurality of life views and options such a 'pick and mix' approach seems sensible and normal. There is no felt need or desire for a coherent 'package' of religious beliefs that would guide and at times challenge one's life rather than merely offer moments of consolation and reassurance. There is no real encounter with the transcendent.¹⁸

The consumerist approach described here impacts not only on religious education but also upon education generally. Increasingly, students at all levels are exposed to smatterings of knowledge rather than full academic disciplines in an effort to make education relevant to the economy. Thus, an approach to religious education that demands coherence and consistency with a living community and its tradition could well be incongruous in the school of the future where academic disciplines will have disappeared.¹⁹

CONCLUSION

Can Catholic schools provide a programme that instils in students a secularist understanding of religion without at the same time undermining their mission to educate pupils *from* and *in* the

17. Lieven Boeve, *God interrupts history: theology in a time of upheaval*. London: Continuum, 2007, p 22 ff.

18. See Eamonn Conway, 'The Commodification of Religion and the Challenges for Theology: Reflections from the Irish Experience', *Bulletin ET* Volume 17 (1) 2006. Special Issue, 'Consuming Religion in Europe? Christian Faith Challenged by Consumer Culture', edited by Lieven Boeve & Kristien Justaert, Peeters: Leuven, 142-163.

19. See Eamonn Conway, 'The future of Catholic higher education in Ireland', *International Studies in Catholic Education*, 3:2, 2011, 158-169.

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Catholic faith? They cannot, and any state attempt to impose such a programme on Catholic schools must be viewed as a form of secularist social engineering, and resisted accordingly.

The Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism deserves careful consideration as a cultural marker, and wake-up call. The implications of what it proposes, as well as what it reveals about our culture and the educational system in general, demand thorough assessment by parents, teachers and bishops. Concrete proposals for dealing with diversity and inclusion in denominational schools need to take into account fully the impact such proposals will have on the school's Catholic identity and the religious formation of pupils. Otherwise our schools will, however, unwittingly, become agents of secularisation.

The response will also have to include greater attentiveness to the initial and continuing education of Catholic teachers as well as members of boards of management, and to the criteria for the appointment of teachers and principals in Catholic schools. At the end of the day, personnel are key, and while there is still a surprisingly high level of goodwill among teachers in Catholic schools towards Christian faith, we need to act soon.

Roots. At this hour of disconnection from the natural world, our Christian festivals need to recover their earthly roots. These great feasts make plain the dove-tailing of Eucharist and creation. An Easter Mass at dawn, celebrated outside, can speak more profoundly than fine words. The Easter fire on a hill lights up the darkness and registers as primitive praise. In this respect, the proposal by the Irish bishops that we join with other Churches to celebrate a Season of Creation, from 1 September to the Sunday following the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi, is particularly welcome.

– HUGH O'DONNELL SDB, *Eucharist and the Living Earth*, (Dublin: Columba Press) p.69.