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**Contributor**

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**A Personal Response to the Consultation Paper on:  
*Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics in the Primary School***

1. The questionnaire that was issued in conjunction with this consultation paper was not such as to elicit objective information from respondents. One was asked to agree or disagree along a continuum with ten statements; to select seven of fourteen values one regarded as important for children to acquire; one question on how one would like to see the ERBE programme contributing to the lives of children (presuming that it would). The responses could be used at a later point to indicate that all those who responded were in favour of the agenda put forward by the NCCA because it is hard to see how anyone could disagree with the questions posed. For example who could disagree with any of these statements? Children should learn to understand more about themselves and how they relate to others; Children should learn about the relationship between rights and responsibilities; The classroom should be a place where children's beliefs and values are respected.

Those who are committed to a faith based system of education and to denominational religious education as part of the core curriculum could not disagree, nor could those who might wish to see comparative religions introduced to schools as a replacement for faith-based religious education.

The questions themselves do not enquire into the experience people have with the current religious education offered in faith-based schools. They are not asked about the strengths or weaknesses of those programmes. Therefore, there is no information being gathered from this survey that could inform policy makers about how best to proceed from the current position.

It is only reasonable to expect that a statutory body would be fair and free of ideological bias when gathering information that will inform its policy-making. It is indeed ironic that on an issue where it is proposing to enhance greater neutrality in society, ensuring various opinions will be respected and honoured, that it should model a certain sleight of hand in its own methodology.

3. Parents have a right to have their children formed in the faith of their choice, where they become familiar with the beliefs, rituals and practices of their religion. This is an activity that takes time and sensitivity. If young children are being introduced to the beliefs and practices of other faiths before they have a proper grasp of the one to which they belong, then the result is likely to confuse the children about their own or any other faith. In the long run, they may have less regard for religion as a dimension of human existence and so become more intolerant of religion rather than appreciative of its centrality to the lives of most people on our planet. Atheistic or irreligious outlooks on life are a minority position in our world. They are not the norm as the underlying assumptions of this consultation paper seem to indicate because the approach being taken here is that of sociology, which may legitimately study religious beliefs and practices in an assumed non-evaluative fashion.
4. This consultation paper does not show any recognition of the work currently being done by faith-based schools to further social inclusion and facilitate those of other faiths and none

whom they accommodate generously and hospitably. This work has been evaluated and it has been shown that these are the schools most effectively advancing inclusivity and diversity in society. It is hard to see how the proposed programme can be advanced without full cognisance being taken of what is already being achieved. It is only when the shortcomings with what is in place have been properly and objectively identified that one should begin to change the system.

5. Those who are most respectful of the faith or culture of other people are those who have a solid grasp of and appreciation for their own. "Authentic pluralism", as mentioned on page 20 of the consultation paper, which is encouraged can only be authentic if those concerned are authentic in their own tradition in the first instance. Sufficient account is not being taken of this by the document.
6. In view of the fact that religious beliefs and practices are very complex issues and take considerable time to absorb and appreciate, it seems incredible to propose that children in a primary school should be encouraged to engage in "inter-belief dialogue". This is a very challenging project for professional theologians in various religious traditions, so why could primary school children be expected to engage in such an exercise when they are only beginning to learn something basic about their own beliefs? What is being proposed reads more like a recipe for confusion and the end result might well be greater religious intolerance rather than less.
7. This discussion document shows no awareness of how complex issues of truth, meaning and values are for contemporary people. There is an assumption that there is some neutral ground onto which children (and adults) can be moved so that conflictual positions can be erased and peace guaranteed. On the surface it looks acceptable to say that children should be educated with regard to justice and human rights. However, when it comes to deciding what constitutes justice and rights in particular situations, who will be deciding what is just and right and on what basis? For example, will it be tolerable only to teach that there are limits to the rights to life – that those who have serious physical deformities do not have the right to life beyond the womb or that those whose medical care is too expensive or burdensome do not have such rights? The superficiality of the assumptions in the paper and the lack of recognition for the complexities of the issues under discussion render it totally unsatisfactory as a basis on which to proceed.
8. Practically all teachers in primary schools are agreed that there is serious curriculum overload at the moment. Nevertheless, while discussing the possible options for the introduction of ERBE, the document seems to favour at least some discreet time being allocated for these topics. This immediately adds to the burden of the timetable and curriculum. If the DES were to insist on ERBE being taught, the existing religious education in faith-based schools would be an inevitable casualty. In view of the fact that religious and moral education are already being offered in these schools, not to mention their inclusive (genuinely catholic) nature, why burden them with adding another religious and moral dimension that is not only extra but, worse still, actually inimical to any faith-based education programme – one that is in its foundations doctrinally atheistic and morally relativistic?

9. The document shows no grounds on which the current faith-based schools are deficient in terms of religious tolerance or moral probity. There is no due recognition for their achievements to date, all of which could be counted to outweigh the achievements of any other government agency in welcoming and accommodating children from ethnically and religiously diverse backgrounds. There is more concern to honour the Toledo Principles than there is to honour the noble achievements of teachers, boards of management and patrons of our own schools who, over the past twenty-five years or more, since significant numbers of emigrants arrived in the country, have been the heroes and heroines of tolerance and inclusiveness.
  
10. Insofar as there are schools where there is no religious education offered then it may be useful to have an element in the curriculum that discusses religions and ethics. This could be sited in the place otherwise allocated to religious education in faith-based or other schools. However, what might be offered needs much more consideration than has yet been given to the topic.

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