

Protecting Denominational Education

Paper to the Iona Institute

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Introduction

I am very grateful to David Quinn for the invitation to speak here this afternoon.

Our topic is the protection of denominational education and this arises from the Government's acceptance of the report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism last year and its initial steps to seek the Report's implementation.

I am taking as a given the right to state-funded denominational schools in Irish and international law, which is already well-argued in a briefing note of the Iona Institute and need not concern us here.

I want to begin by making a few remarks about the process underway, by mutual agreement between the Government and Church bodies, which is aimed at bringing about the divesting of denominational patronage by a small number of primary schools. I will then turn to the main focus of this paper: the safeguarding of the ethos of schools that will not be divested. It is clear that 'stand alone schools' as they are called, will need to continue to be accommodating towards some pupils of other religious beliefs and of none. The issue is how to respond to the continuing need to be inclusive and respect diversity, while at the same time fully embracing and reflecting their characteristic spirit as denominational schools.

Divesting schools of denominational patronage

The issue of divesting a small number of schools of their denominational patronage is not particularly contentious and is relatively straightforward, at least from a Catholic Church perspective. The Catholic Church is in favour of divesting schools for two main reasons.

First of all, it recognises that demographics have changed, and also religious commitment and practice, leading not so much to an over-provision of Catholic schools but an under-provision

of alternatives. The Church welcomes and wishes to facilitate the legitimate rights of the minority of parents who wish to send their children to non-denominational or multi-denominational schools. Its whole approach to this matter seeks to underpin and support the rights and wishes of parents.

The Catholic Church welcomes greater provision of alternative school patronage for another reason: it hopes that this will enable the schools that remain Catholic to get on with being so, without any expectation that their ethos will be diminished or diluted by the need to accommodate those of other faiths or none. More on this later.

Minister Ruairi Quinn has recently re-iterated his wish that “diversity of choice can become a reality across the country”. The divesting of Catholic schools is proving to be somewhat of a problem, however. If the pilot survey is indicative, then the demand is not as great as the Minister anticipated.

The Government’s press release (Dec 12, 2012), following the publication of the results of the pilot survey in five areas, put a brave face on the figures, and claimed that “there is parental demand for a greater choice of patron in each town”. But the reality is that a very large number of the parents who responded indicated that they wished to have their children educated in Catholic schools. In fact, the pilot survey proved to be a surprising endorsement of denominational education.

The actual number of parents who expressed an opinion in favour of change in each of the five areas polled in the pilot survey amounted to between five and eight per cent, evidence of parental demand, certainly, but hardly of a “strong” or “clear” demand or “clear need” for greater choice, as the findings were reported in the press.

Moreover, a large majority of parents did not participate in the survey at all. It is of course speculation to conclude that the majority of those who did not participate were quite happy with the *status quo*, but this would seem to be what a ‘vox pop’ of parents in the surveyed areas conducted by RTE News suggested.

The Minister has now asked each of the patrons to consult with their local school communities on the implementation of the survey’s findings. Minister Quinn said: “I will now ask the main patron in each area, the Catholic Bishop or Archbishop, to consider the re-configuration options open to him which would allow sufficient school accommodation to be made available to facilitate this choice”. However, having considered the actual findings of

the survey as well as the poor participation rates, it is questionable whether or not a Catholic patron has a reliable basis on which to initiate a process of change of patron, as has been requested by the Minister.

In any event, the signs are that far fewer schools will end up being divested than originally anticipated.

I have said enough here on this issue. We will have to await the outcome of the more substantial survey underway before commenting further. We will now move to the matter of protecting the ethos of the schools that will not be divested.

The Forum Report's understanding of education

I would like for a few moments to speak somewhat personally. In addressing the topic of denominational education, two of the most important aspects of my life come together: teaching, and the handing-on of the Christian faith.

My mother was a teacher, a science teacher in secondary-school, and I grew up watching her preparing class at the kitchen table, working out how to make biology and science experiments interesting and understandable to her pupils. She was a very fine teacher, as indeed those she taught told me many years after her death. At home, I remember her showing me how everyday household chemicals worked when combined, and how, for instance, to make a battery using salt and water. I also recall gathering tadpoles for her to bring in to school, and occasionally, my father shooting a rabbit for her to dissect in class. These were the exciting lessons. She also taught maths and calculus, which was not at all as interesting!

This meant that from as far back as I can remember I have been preoccupied with knowledge, and with how to absorb and communicate it. All of my professional life I have been involved in education, whether working in a youth organisation or more formally in teaching.

Both my upbringing and my experience in the classroom have taught me that I can really only teach what I am passionate about; what I really believe in; and, that this is what I **actually** teach, regardless of the curriculum (well, almost). What I hold dearly is what I communicate to others, whether I wish to or not, or whether I am explicitly aware of it or not.

I am sure if you think back to your own schooling experience, the teachers that did most for you in any real or lasting sense are those that, through their own passionate commitment and love of their subject, evoked in you a love of learning and of knowledge and taught you how this could make a difference in your life. It wasn't so much about agreeing with them, or blindly accepting what they taught, but more about learning the value of knowledge and the process of learning in and for itself. Of course we all had to learn things "off" to get through exams and get points, but that wasn't really education in any meaningful sense of the word.

The best of educational pedagogy supports what we know from common sense: there is a strong correlation between teachers' own beliefs and the influences, emphases and intuitions they bring to bear both in the class-room and the school corridor. This is why, for instance, Section 37 of the Equality Employment Act is an important pillar in the protection of denominational education.

This brings me to my main concern about the Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism. I am concerned that its findings and recommendations are based upon an inadequate and somewhat reductionist understanding of what education is about.

The Deletion of Rule 68

Among the recommendations the Forum makes in order that denominational schools be more inclusive and respect diversity is the displaying of non-Christian symbols and the celebration of non-Christian festivals, as well as the adaptation of hymns and prayers so that they would be "respectful of the beliefs and cultures of all children". This latter recommendation is somewhat curious when you realise that hymns and prayers are very specific formulae of worship within particular faith traditions. I am not sure how one could make them inclusive of the beliefs and cultures of all children without rendering them either meaningless or disrespectful to the tradition from which they have come.

In addition, the Forum Report recommended the deletion of Rule 68. This Rule states:

"Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject-matter, God's honour and service, includes the proper use of all man's faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. Religious Instruction is, therefore, a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school."

Rule 68 protects the denominational character of a school in two key respects. The first is that it allows for a religious spirit to *inform and vivify the whole work of the school*. If this is deleted there will be no underpinning to the legal right and responsibility of patrons to uphold and foster a characteristic spirit or ethos in accordance with the school's patronage.

The second important aspect of Rule 68 is in regard to *Religious Instruction*, which, recognising the distinctive nature of religious education, is privileged in the day-to-day life of the school.

The Forum Report recognises that generally subjects in the primary school are to be taught in an integrated manner. Ironically, however, religious education, which, by its very nature underpins and integrates the whole of human life and learning, is singled out by the Forum Report to be taught as a discrete subject apart from all other subjects.

But so far we have only looked at one half of Rule 68. Although the Forum Report recommends the deletion of the entire Rule, it only refers to the first paragraph. The second paragraph states:

The teacher should constantly inculcate the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the other moral virtues. In this way he will fulfil the primary duty of an educator, the moulding to perfect form of his pupils' character, habituating them to observe, in their relations with God and with their neighbour, the laws which God, both directly through the dictates of natural reason and through Revelation, and indirectly through the ordinance of lawful authority, imposes on mankind."

One would have thought that a Rule concerning the inculcation of *the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the other moral virtues* might have been considered for modification rather than straightforward deletion.

The language here is admittedly archaic but the content and sentiment are not, and Rule 68 summarises very well what education, and not just denominational education, is really about. If a Catholic school cannot fulfil what is described here as *the primary duty of an educator* then it would cease to be a Catholic school, and arguably, a school at all in any meaningful sense.

The recommendation, in line with what it claims was "the general view expressed at the Forum", to delete, rather than just update or explicate Rule 68, in my view leaves the Forum Report open to an accusation of possible ideological bias.

Rule 68 protects against the secular/liberal view of education that the nature of the human person and the meaning and goal of life are merely matters of arbitrary opinion and these are at best ignored or at least left unexplored in a school context while we get on with the business of addressing standards in numeracy and literacy and the provision of a better “pupil product”.

So what is Catholic Education really about?

Perhaps the best way to understand what is at stake here is to remind ourselves of what Catholic Education is really about. Of course, we have to acknowledge fully, and sadly, that some Catholic educators did not live up to what they professed, with devastating consequences in our recent history.

“Catholic Education begins with the conviction that the human person is not a series of unconnected compartments”¹ This is why any attempt to confine religious education to a discrete component within a denominational school is to strike at the very heart of denominational education.

Catholic education proceeds from a particular truth claim. It claims that Jesus Christ reveals to us what it is to be fully human, and that in Him we learn, in an otherwise undiscoverable way, the full dignity and divine destiny to which human beings are called. In light of this, and enlightened by it, Catholic education sets out to communicate all that is proper to the human person.

The quest for knowledge inevitably leads to a quest for truth and wisdom unless it is deliberately curtailed.² Christian faith holds that the search for ultimate truth is at the heart of what it is to be human and sets out, in an intellectually responsible and rigorous manner to engage people in that search with all the resources of its rich tradition.

A catholic school will be tolerant, inclusive, and respectful of difference and otherness. It will also promote academic freedom and religious freedom, understanding all of these as proper to the human person and fundamental to human dignity. It will do so, not despite its unique

¹ Donal Murray, “The Catholic Church’s current thinking on educational provision”, 58. In: E. Duffy, *Catholic Primary Education*, Dublin, Columba, 2012.

² See Vivian Boland, “St Thomas Aquinas: what is his relevance to Catholic education today”, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, Oct 2012, 124

insight into the truth proper to the human person revealed in Jesus Christ, but because of it and based upon it.

Far from frustrating or undermining human reason, Christian faith informs and enlarges it. In contrast, reason uncoupled from faith tends to shrink into a kind of empty rationalism, and, having little life-giving to contribute, it is easily replaced, as I believe we currently see in the impoverished nature of much of public discourse in this country, by a crude kind of emotivism.

It might be argued that the State should not pay for an educational system based on religious truth claims. However, that perspective is itself a truth claim, as is the claim, erroneous in my view, that there can be an educational system that is, in fact, not based on truth claims.

The claim that religion should be a private matter and of no concern to education, and that education can proceed “neutrally”, so to speak, without taking up or reflecting a position on ultimate questions is an appropriate claim upon which to found a secularist or non-denominational school. However, it has no place in the ethos of a denominational school. A denominational school is entitled to proceed from a religious starting point, which from the State’s point of view must be viewed as being equally as valid as that of the secularist. Otherwise, the State has already adopted and is in fact proceeding on the basis of a secularist truth-claim.

The Problem with Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB), and Ethics

It is difficult to conclude from the Forum Report that the many fine submissions that were made to it regarding the nature of Catholic education received a sufficient hearing. In contrast, those made from bodies such as Atheist Ireland and the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) would seem to have been more influential in the formulation of the Forum’s recommendations. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the thrust of the report is that everything genuinely formative in education is a problem to be managed in the interests of political correctness, rather than the very core of what education is really about.

A case in point is the recommendation that in all state-funded schools, including denominational schools, there is to be a mandatory 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 requested by the IHRC as well as Atheist Ireland. Versions of it already exist in non-denominational schools and the Forum claims that all students, including those in denominational schools, have a right to such a programme.

The proposed programme is to be based upon the “Toledo Guiding Principles On Teaching About Religions And Beliefs In Public Schools” and the provenance of these principles is significant, as I have already detailed elsewhere.³ 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.”

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”. Yet arguably the thrust of the Forum’s recommendations would weaken a denominational school’s ability to contribute to faith practice.

In favour of ERB people will argue that more information about faiths and greater religious literacy among young people can only be a good thing. I realise that many in Catholic education see it that way, provided that it does not displace a catechetical approach to religious education but is taught alongside it. Pragmatically, however, it is hard to see how time will be found on the timetable for two programmes in this area and no doubt there would be objections to so much time in the curriculum being spent on religion.

Personally, and I realise that some will see this as a somewhat extreme view, I think there are a number of problems with such a programme being offered in a denominational school at all.

³ Eamonn Conway, “The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism: a cultural marker, and wake-up call”, *The Furrow*, June 2012. In what follows I am drawing upon material already published there.

In my view, what is appropriate to be taught at primary level regarding other beliefs can be dealt with adequately from a catechetical perspective.

The first issue I have with ERB 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 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.

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”.

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 really neutral. In fact, the notion that religious knowledge can be communicated neutrally is itself a secular belief. No education programme can bracket its formative dimension. Thus, the proposed ERB programme unavoidably forms students in a secularist understanding of religion.

Apart from religious objections, the view that a teacher can really practise a kind of non-directive facilitative neutrality in the classroom when discussing religious issues are naïve about the power dynamics that are inevitably at work in the pupil-teacher relationship. 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 disembods 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.

There is yet another difficulty. 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.⁴

This is a kind of consumerist approach to religion, and sadly, it reflects a consumerist approach to education generally. Increasingly, students in all subjects are exposed to smatterings of knowledge rather than full academic disciplines in an effort to make education “relevant”.

In my view, the introduction of ERB and Ethics as a mandatory programme in denominational schools could schools pupil in a secularist view of religion and thus undermine the school’s characteristic spirit.

Significantly, Irish Colleges of Education, including denominational colleges such as Mary Immaculate where I work, have already introduced a mandatory module preparing teachers to teach ERB and Ethics, at the Teaching Council’s insistence. Despite our Catholic ethos we have not being able to make mandatory the offering of even an introductory module on Christian anthropology or the Christian vision of the human person.

Conclusion

In terms of protecting denominational education there are many other points which I could have made. For instance, I have focused on the threats to denominational education from “without”. I have not detailed those from “within”, including, for instance, that in some Catholic schools religious formation and the school’s characteristic spirit are not taken seriously enough, and the results are sadly self-evident. At the same time, there is

⁴ See Eamonn Conway, “The future of Catholic higher education in Ireland”, *International Studies in Catholic Education*, Vol 3, No 2, Oct 2011, 158 – 169.

extraordinary good work being done by Catholic teachers and principals and this needs greater acknowledgment. I know that many teachers in Catholic schools have been annoyed that their current efforts to be inclusive and to respect diversity are not sufficiently recognised. In some parishes, the reality is that the Catholic school is the only really effective agent of integration of minorities and stands in the frontline in this regard.

In the long run, the protection of denominational education will also require greater investment in developing the relationship and co-operation between parents, parish and school. Much good work has been done in this regard by the Catholic Schools Partnership which, in a relatively short time, has produced excellent resources for parents, patrons, principals and teachers. In particular, there is a need for much closer work with parents to ensure that they value not only the high academic standards for which Catholic schools are generally renowned, but that they also value the school's characteristic spirit and the religious formation it provides.

While I have focused on the threats, there are also opportunities. As one Catholic educator has noted: "The conflict is not between religion and the secular but between the searchers for deeper meaning and those who believe that human life has no meaning beyond what can be measured, analysed and scientifically proved."⁵ Increasingly we find secular educators recognising that the empirical approach to education is deeply impoverishing, and we need to forge alliances with such people into the future.

In conclusion, speaking in the Seanad early last year, 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."

Frankly, I would hope that this is the case; that is, that agreement on the divesting of schools will be dependent upon guarantees regarding the protection of the characteristic spirit of the stand-alone schools that will not be divested. Only in this way will our schools not merely be the products of a past evangelisation but agents of evangelisation into the future.⁶

⁵ Donal Murray, "Religion and the Secular in Contemporary Ireland". In: *Tracking the Tiger*, Dublin: Veritas, 2008, 61.

⁶ See Synod of Bishops, 2012, Proposition 27

Thank you.

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