

The liberal case for religious schools



By John Murray

Foreword by Bishop Leo O'Reilly

**Including a contribution by
Michael McGrath**

Director of the Scottish Catholic education office

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John Murray's paper outlining the philosophical underpinnings of faith-based education is a tightly argued piece in which the author clearly outlines the basic principles on which denominational education is based. He makes clear throughout that, while there are cogent theological arguments that support faith-based schooling, there are equally compelling philosophical and public policy arguments in its favour that are accessible beyond the realms of faith commitment. The justification for denominational schools makes sense, not only to those who profess a religious faith, but to all who are open to rational analysis.

The cornerstone of the rationale in favour of denominational education is the nature of person and society. This point is often missed by social commentators. Irish society is pluralist in make-up and accordingly the Irish education system must reflect this pluralism in its provision. To propose a one-size-fits-all education system would clearly be inadequate to the needs of Irish society. It is for this reason that the Catholic Bishops of Ireland have consistently called for a pluralistic education system, 'one that includes several types of schools including denominational schools'. Such provision will honour the common good as 'a pluralistic system fits a pluralistic population'. The Church has no desire to be the sole provider of education and, where the wishes of parents dictate, she will play her part to assure the type of school that most appropriately meets the needs of parents and children.

Parents are the primary educators of children. The State supports parents in this role and rightly provides for education. While remaining faithful to the principle of subsidiarity insofar as practicable the State makes available schools according to parental wishes. It should be added at this point that it is extremely unfair to claim that the choices parents make about the education of their children result in 'segregation' much less 'educational apartheid'. These are highly emotive terms, which are insulting to parents, and should have no place in Irish public debate.

John Murray's paper is also timely as the subject of faith-based education receives more and more analysis at home and abroad. For example, in July the United Nations Human Rights Committee expressed concern that most primary schools were denominational and urged that alternative non-denominational primary education be available. In addressing such a concern account needs to be taken of the wishes of parents as expressed in recent surveys carried out by both Red C (March 2008) on behalf of The Iona Institute, and the Bishops' Council for Research and Development report, *Factors Determining School Choice* (April 2008), both of which found that for most parents faith in education retains its importance and that there is overwhelming support for the principle of parental choice. (See appendix).

The objections to the State supporting denominational education are based on the concept of religion as a private matter, and thus of concern to the person as an individual rather than as a member of society and the state. It is untenable to support this view of religion when one considers that the human person is social by nature and the search for truth, including religious truth, cannot be furthered purely as individuals.

The history of Catholic schools in Ireland has been a history of inclusion and welcome. From the beginning of the state, and before, Catholic schools have provided education for all, especially for the poor and vulnerable. The ethos of our schools has been one where the dignity and rights of the individual are respected and promoted. The schools are guided by the view that all of life's experience is a window to the goodness and love of God. It is in developing right and respectful relationships with each other that young people grow as members of the local community and of society. Catholic schools encourage pupils to recognise and appropriate their own history and the tradition of the school. The schools view the pursuit of knowledge and the development of the all the talents of the young as core to their formation and growth.

As part of the greater public discourse on the important matter of faith-based education, the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference has recently published a number of documents which contribute to the debate: *Catholic Primary Schools – A Policy for Provision into the Future* in October 2007 and the *Pastoral Letter Vision 08 – A Vision for Catholic Education in Ireland* in May 2008. These publications set forth the theological and philosophical reasons, together with policy considerations, for the Church's involvement in education, and both are available on www.catholiccommunications.ie.

The Church is committed to Catholic Education and wishes to institute a vibrant dialogue on faith-based education and its critical role in contemporary society. This paper is a welcome articulation of the rightful place of denominational education in the pluralistic system that is modern Ireland. It is a most valuable and thoughtful contribution to an ongoing and indispensable debate on the future of education in Ireland.

Bishop Leo O'Reilly, July 2008

Bishop O'Reilly is Chairman of the Irish Episcopal Commission, Primary and Post-Primary Education, and Bishop of the diocese of Kilmore.

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Denominational education has a rightful place in a pluralistic education system in modern Ireland

John Murray

This is revised and expanded version of a talk given at a conference entitled “In Defence of Denominational Schools” organised by the Iona Institute and the Word magazine in the Tara Towers Hotel, 4th April 2008. John Murray is a lecturer at the Mater Dei Institute.

The central issue: a pluralistic system of education

Denominational education has been under attack recently. It has been accused of being divisive and exclusive. It has even been described, using emotive and shocking language, as a kind of “educational apartheid”. One wonders if the value of denominational education is really appreciated by society, even by religious people. It seems denominational education is no longer something that we can simply take for granted: it is something we need to think and talk about.

This paper is a contribution to public debate and discussion on denominational education in Ireland today. It argues that there is a rightful place for denominational schools in the Irish education system, as part of a pluralistic system, and that the rationale for this can be understood and accepted in good faith by all members of Irish society, not just religious believers.

This paper rejects and refutes any accusation that denominational schools are inherently divisive or unfair. It utterly repudiates the charge that their existence constitutes a kind of educational apartheid. Denominational education is valuable for those who work in denominational schools and those who are students there. Not only that, denominational schools are valuable for society as a whole. They are not something to be done down, or done away with. They are not something to be merely tolerated as relics of a past or passing generation. They have a place in modern Ireland.

The argument presented here, however, is not that our education system should be a completely denominational one. Rather, the argument is for a “pluralistic system”, namely, a system in which there are faith-based schools as well as other types of schools, all receiving state support. Only such a pluralistic education system is suitable for a pluralistic society such as ours.

A theological approach is one way to defend faith-schools

The approach taken here is not a theological one, but it begins by clearly acknowledging that a theological approach could compliment the one taken here. And it distinguishes itself from such a theological approach. A theological approach is an approach to defending denominational schooling that begins from a position of religious faith. It is an approach that accepts the truth of a set of religious beliefs as a foundation for its understanding of education and schooling. Here we take the Catholic faith as an example, as it is the majority religious faith in Ireland, and it is the faith this author knows best. However, what is said here could be applied with some adaptation to other religious faiths.

This paper is a contribution to public debate and discussion on denominational education in Ireland today.

It is natural for a Catholic to consider schooling from within Catholic religious belief and practice. The Catholic school is an expression of Catholic faith. One aspect of this is the teaching of religious education from within the Catholic faith, with the foundational rational assumption that this faith is true. However, the Catholic faith does not just support denominational “religious education”: it supports all aspects of education as an expression of faith.

This expression of Catholic faith and its support of all aspects of education need not be always fully explicit: it can often be implicit. A Catholic sees God as the Creator of all reality. Everything studied in school is part of God’s creation in some way; his creation is not studied only in RE class. The human desire to know and understand is itself a gift from God. God wants us to develop our abilities to think, to reason, to know and to understand. In fact, all our gifts and talents are from God and he wishes us to develop them and use them for our good and the good of all.

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God calls us to appreciate the goodness of creation. He wants us also to appreciate and respect the value of all people. Each and every human person is made in God’s image and likeness. Catholic faith supports our respecting everyone’s human dignity. Finally, Catholic faith sees education as part of our relationship with Jesus Christ. He is the great teacher whose example and teaching we follow. He is Lord. And all we do, including teaching and learning, is to be freely and joyfully done for his glory and honour.

The Irish Episcopal Conference recently published a pastoral letter on a Catholic understanding of education: (*Vision 08*), which mentioned such important elements of a Catholic understanding of education. These elements form parts of a theological justification of Catholic education. People might think “A theological defence of Catholic education is fine for those who are Catholics, but what about the rest of us? Why should non-Catholics be expected to support Catholic schools with public money? Why should non-religious people be expected or required to pay with their taxes for religious schools? We do not accept the theological justification of such schools.”

If a theological defence of denominational education were the only defence of it, then such objections might have some force. If religious belief is necessary for seeing any value in denominational schooling (as part of a pluralistic system) then people might think that such schooling is justifiable only to religious people and groups as part of their own private good. In such a frame of mind, religious schooling cannot be understood as part of the common good, the good of all members of society. It is thought to be good for only some members of society.

However, even though a theological justification of denominational schooling is valuable and essential for people of faith, such justification is not the only justification for denominational schools. A strictly philosophical case can be made. And needs to be made.

Objections to the state supporting denominational schools

Even though denominational education has been a large part of our educational experience in Ireland for so long, and is valued by many, there are arguments that can be levelled against it. Some people think that religion is a purely private matter, so publicly funded schools should not be religious. One reason given for this position is that denominational schools are divisive in society, privileging in their admission policies those who belong to the religious faith of the school, which in Ireland is usually the Catholic faith.

This issue was highlighted by the controversy in Balbriggan last September, when the number of children looking for school places outstripped the number of places in the local national school. Some people thought these children were being excluded from school because of their religion. The problem was caused by poor political planning of schooling, but it was seen by some people as a problem with denominational schooling. Some people look upon religious schools as inherently divisive because religion, especially denominational religion, is seen by them to be itself inherently divisive. Catholic schools in particular have been accused of being socially divisive and even sectarian.

The word “some” is used here repeatedly to emphasise that it is only some people, and not all people, who object to religious schools. We should not over-emphasise the nature of the challenge to denominational education in Ireland. Nevertheless, it is good to listen to the objections raised by some, and show that they can be answered by reason. This is not just for the sake of those who want non-denominational and/or multi-denominational schools to be the only kind of schools in Ireland receiving public financial support. It will also help those who are involved in denominational schooling too.

People who are already involved in denominational schooling might harbour worries about denominational education, and might be less than fully committed to it, if they consider it to be lacking any philosophical justification. This is especially the case when denominational schooling tends to be spoken of in public discussion, what little there is, in mainly or exclusively negative terms. (The address of the General Secretary of the INTO, John Carr, to the INTO conference in Sligo November 2007 is one example of a rather negative approach to denominational education.)

The arguments presented here will be of some help to religious people in showing them that denominational education is fully acceptable as an aspect of the common good of Irish society, and that this can be supported by both theological and philosophical arguments. Knowing this will help people involved in denominational education not to “dumb down” the characteristic religious ethos of their schools in an effort to be seen to be modern and inclusive and non-judgemental.

If denominational schools have a rightful place in a pluralistic education system, then society ought to allow and support denominational schools being denominational.

It will also help society in general to realise that, if denominational schools have a rightful place in a pluralistic education system, then society ought to allow and support denominational schools being denominational. This would mean, for example, that denominational schools should not be attacked for taking account of the religious faith of teachers who teach religion in those schools.

Clarifying terms: state and society

It is helpful to clarify some important terms often used in debates about a “state-supported education system”. When speaking of how denominational schools are supported “by the state”, we often assume that teachers in these schools are “paid by the state”. However, we need to bear in mind that “the state” is a function of society; it is the way that society organises itself politically. So we would be better off considering the issue as one that concerns why society should support denominational education as part of a pluralistic system, not why the state should do so.

People tend to think of “the state” as necessarily non-religious, and so might tend to think of state-supported schools as necessarily non-religious. People will not so easily assume that society is necessarily non-religious. Society is religious just insofar as the people making up that society are

religious. Irish society is not completely religious; it is pluralistic with regard to religion. Still, overall, Irish society is very religious and it is hardly surprising if its education system reflects this.

If we think of our education system as “society-supported” rather than “state-supported”, then we will more easily accept the rightful place of religious schools in that system. We will also acknowledge that non-religious schools and multi-denominational schools might have a rightful place in this society-supported education system too, just insofar as our society includes people who want non-religious and multi-denominational schools.

If we think of our education system as ‘society-supported’ rather than ‘state-supported’, then we will more easily accept the rightful place of religious schools in that system.

Switching from the state to society also helps us to avoid a kind of “statist” approach, which assumes that the state is always to do everything. Using the term society helps us to remember that we are talking about an educational context that includes individual citizens and the organs of the state, but also other elements of society, such as families, local communities (such as parishes), and various other groups that go to make up civil society. We should avoid any kind of extreme individualism, in which all that is recognised is the individual citizen and the state.

Clarifying terms: the tax payer

Another term to clarify is “the tax payer”. We sometimes hear the complaint made: why should the tax payer pay for denominational schools? It is as well to remind ourselves of why any tax payer pays tax. Taxes are not paid to further the merely private interests of a citizen or group of citizens. A tax payer pays taxes to support the common good of his or her society.

Supporting the common good: can a Catholic support a pluralistic system of education?

The issue for us here is, therefore, whether a pluralistic system of education can be an aspect of the common good of Irish society, one that all members of society can happily support by their taxes, their votes, their political policies, and so on. The answer here is yes: a pluralistic education system, one that includes several types of schools, including denominational schools, is an aspect of the common good of Irish society.

One way of illustrating my point is to ask: May a Catholic support a pluralistic system that includes non-religious schools? If it is possible for Catholics to happily and rightly support non-religious schooling as part of a pluralistic system, without feeling that they are short-changing or denying their faith and their integrity in so doing, then this would suggest that non-Catholics or non-religious people can support denominational schooling as part of a pluralistic education system, without feeling that they are short-changing their integrity, values and beliefs.

So how is it that a Catholic can happily support a pluralistic system of education even if it includes non-denominational schools or multi-denominational schools? The answer is built upon a number of principles of social life, beginning with the rights and responsibilities of parents and the needs of their children.

The rights and responsibilities of parents

Parents are the primary educators of their children. The state is not the primary educator. This is not to say that education is the exclusive right or responsibility of parents, and that neither the state nor society has a role to play. In fact, education is a task carried out ideally by several social partners. The state has an important role in all this as the overall coordinator of education (on behalf of society as a whole). Still, the state is not the primary educator of children: parents are.

It is important to recognise that parents have a special relationship with their children. This relationship is part of the common good of society, and not just a private matter between parents and children. Children benefit when their parents appreciate their special relationship with them and carry out their specific responsibilities to look after them and bring them up well. The whole of society benefits when fathers and mothers carry out their roles as the primary educators of their children. This is one reason why parents have a special right with regard to their children's education.

This right of fathers and mothers includes the liberty to educate their own children themselves and also to choose the best education for their children by others. Professional teachers and schools help parents in carrying out their responsibilities in the area of education. The right of parents in this area is not a privilege granted by the state. Instead, this right is an innate entitlement and freedom enabling parents to carry out their natural duty to care for their children, based on their natural link with their children and their being best placed to care for them. Parents can rightly expect support from society in meeting their responsibilities as primary educators of their children.

The right of parents and religion

It is important to recognise that this right and responsibility of parents to provide the best education for their children also includes a religious or philosophical element. Parents have a duty not only to pass on information to their children, but also to form their children. (As children grow, of course, they themselves become more and more involved in forming themselves.) This involves passing on values, customs, beliefs, practices, traditions.

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Religion is an essential part of this for many parents. Indeed a philosophy of life, or a “world-view” as it is sometimes called, is something that all parents will pass on to their children, and will want their children's teachers and schools to pass on too. Therefore, many Irish parents, in our pluralistic society, would be unhappy if society-supported schools were all of one type. (This was made clear in the poll of parents conducted by Red C in March 2008 on behalf of the Iona Institute, which showed that 49% of parents favoured Catholic schools for their children and 78% of parents wanted to have a choice in the type of school available.)

The imposition of one type of school on all would be seen as contradicting or even undermining the world-view and deepest values of many parents. Just as it could be said to be unfair for society to expect substantial numbers of non-religious parents to pay by their taxes for a completely religious education system, it would be unfair of society to force substantial numbers of religious parents to pay to support a single type of education system, a non-religious one. A “one-type-fits-all” education system, forced on a pluralistic population, would not reduce divisiveness; rather it would embody and promote divisiveness. A pluralistic system fits a pluralistic population.

The phrase “substantial numbers” is used here deliberately. Obviously, the state (on behalf of society) cannot be expected to cater unquestioningly for the desires of individuals as individuals, or for every group no matter how small. For one thing, the state could not afford to cater for every tiny subsection of society that wanted a school of its own. That is why it is important to realise and acknowledge that denominational schools are desired by substantial numbers of Irish parents, not by a tiny minority. It is also important to acknowledge that denominational schools are not wanted by only religious leaders, but by large numbers of religious believers who are parents seeking the best education for their children.

The principle of subsidiarity

The importance of parents as the primary educators is a fairly well-accepted principle of social life, one found in the Irish Constitution, the Education Act of 1998, and the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It is a reasonable idea. No reasonable person wants the state to fully take over the responsibilities and tasks of parents and families. That way lies injustice and divisiveness. We all know that the state would not be efficient and effective in education without the contributions of parents and communities to the task.

Another important, and related, principle of flourishing social life is subsidiarity. What it means in simple terms is that those “on top” in society or a social grouping should not submerge those

Education is one of the tasks that the state should not take over completely.

“below”, but instead they should help them to flourish and participate in society as individuals and groups. Those in positions of power and authority should help those they serve to meet their own responsibilities and carry out their own tasks at their own appropriate level. Subsidiarity entails that those who have power and

authority should not interfere with those “below” them, but allow them the space and freedom to develop and grow, and provide help for this when necessary.

Teachers follow the principle of subsidiarity when they refrain from giving their students all the answers, but teach them the necessary knowledge and skills, and set up conditions, so that each student has the space and ability to work it out for himself or herself.

Another example of subsidiarity involves the EU. In the referendum on the Lisbon Treaty, one issue that engaged Irish society was whether this treaty would have taken away or enhanced the freedom and ability of Ireland to exercise national sovereignty. This was an issue of subsidiarity.

The Irish state in its turn also is bound by the principle of subsidiarity: it is not reasonable for it to intervene or dominate in every practical matter concerning Irish individuals and society. To do so would be to violate the dignity of the individuals and groups making up society, who have the responsibility and ability to carry out their own roles at their own level, with help from above as necessary certainly, but only as necessary. Education is one of the tasks that the state should not take over completely.

Reasonable people do not want a society that is rigidly authoritarian, totally centralized or overly bureaucratic. Such a society would not only be immoral, violating the dignity of the individuals and groups making up society, it would also be inefficient and ineffective in meeting the needs of society and its members. Reasonable people want a state and society that operates according to the principle of subsidiarity. Authorities at higher levels of the community have a responsibility to help (to subsidize, so to speak) those at the lower level, but they are not to substitute for them or render them totally passive or dependent.

A Catholic can support non-denominational education

The right of fathers and mothers with regard to their own children is one reason why Catholics may support a pluralistic system of education, one that includes non-Catholic schools. A Catholic may support the right and responsibility of all parents to choose the kind of education they think best for their children. This right and this responsibility are part of the common good of our society. If there are parents who seriously decide on a non-religious education for their children, or a religious education in a tradition different from my own, I am bound, within reasonable limits, to respect this, even if I disagree with their convictions.

To support a pluralistic education system is to support the freedom and right of parents to choose schools other than denominational schools for their children as part of a social structure that also recognises and supports parents who choose denominational education for their children.

A pluralistic system is one that respects the views, rights, and responsibilities of all the parties involved. A single-type system (in a pluralistic context such as ours) imposes on some people for the sake of others, and thus fails to respect the common good of all. It is reasonable, therefore, to think that non-religious people can support denominational schools as part of a pluralistic system, just as religious people can support non-religious schools as part of such a system.

A further principle: religious freedom

We can go further than this in our argument by looking at religion itself as part of the common good. This is done here by looking briefly at a short but very important document of the Second Vatican Council. The document made use of philosophical concepts and arguments as well as theological ones, and it is the philosophical principles that concern us here.

The document is 'The Declaration on Religious Freedom' (*Dignitatis Humanae* is its official title). This document explains why religious freedom should be recognised as a civil right. Its argument is not just that freedom is valuable in itself, but that the particular character of religious freedom should be taken into consideration.

The human person is morally bound to search for knowledge, including religious knowledge.

The right to religious freedom is based on the dignity of the human person, who is able to think and know, and to choose and make commitments. The human person is morally bound to search for knowledge, including religious knowledge. As all of us know, ignorance is not bliss, but a deprivation!

Each of us, precisely as a human being, has a natural need and responsibility to search for the answers to such questions as: Where have I come from? Where am I going? How are we to make sense of suffering and evil and guilt? These are philosophical and religious questions. People, by reason of their natural human dignity, ought to be free to pursue the answers to these questions. People have a personal responsibility to pursue such answers. The unexamined life is not worth living, as the famous saying goes. No-one ought to interfere with people's freedom to pursue religious truth and, what's more, to live by it once they have found it.

To interfere with a person's religion freedom is to violate his or her dignity. This dignity is found in people even when they use their religious freedom to come to inadequate or wrong answers. The right to religious freedom does not depend on a person or group believing in the correct religion, or indeed in believing in any religion.

Still, the Vatican Council's Declaration does not promote the idea that it does not matter what answers people come to, that one can be rightly indifferent to whether this or that religion is true or adequate. Religious freedom is valuable precisely because it does matter what answers one finds to one's religious questions, and so one ought to be free to search in as honest, conscientious and effective a way as possible. Religious freedom is not based on agnosticism or indifferentism.

Religious freedom and education in Ireland

Although the Declaration was not about education, we can apply its insights to the topic of a pluralist system of education in Ireland. We could say that the religious freedom of Irish citizens is respected best when their search for religious truth is not inhibited or interfered with by the state or any other group or individual in society. It could be argued that for the Irish state (on behalf of Irish society) to move away now from publicly-supported denominational education would be for it to inhibit and to interfere with the religious searching of the many religious citizens who find denominational schools a great help in their search.

Denominational schooling can respect and support both the individual and social aspects of the religious search.

If the state were to promote only one type of school whenever a new school was to be built, for example, and that type of school was always non- or multi-denominational, and never denominational, then this could be taken as a serious rejection and denial of the value of denominational schooling and the religious searching that such schools have facilitated over the years – and can continue to facilitate in the future.

The social dimension of religion and the religious search

Of course, some will counter: religion is a private and individual matter, and so ought not to be a concern of schools, which are public and social. The Vatican II 'Declaration on Religious Freedom' also helps to answer this objection. It reminds us of an obvious fact, but one that we can overlook if we are too narrowly individualistic: the human person is social by nature.

We do not search for religious truth and live by it purely as individuals. Certainly, there is an inherent personal and individual aspect to the human "search for meaning and value" (to use a term from the new Irish Religious Education Syllabus for Senior Cycle), but it is a search that has an inherent social aspect too. Denominational schooling can respect and support both the individual and social aspects of the religious search.

Religion is something of great value

Religion is valued by many individuals in Irish society. But it is not just a private good for these individuals. Religion itself is something of value to society too. This is why the Declaration says that the state should not only avoid religious coercion or unjust discrimination, but it should also "show favour" to the religious life of society [see paragraph 3]. Understandably, no details are given in this short document as to what this might mean in concrete circumstances, which can vary from country to country and from time to time. It clearly does not mean that the state should unjustly discriminate against a particular religion or religions, as this would contradict the central point of the Declaration about the right of all to religious freedom.

Religious freedom entails that the state should not favour only one religion or world view to the detriment of others. It would seem that the right to religious freedom is considered by the Vatican II Declaration to be compatible with, and even to be strengthened by, the state (on behalf of society) offering support to religion in a non-discriminatory fashion.

In Ireland, it has long been considered socially acceptable for the Irish state (on behalf of Irish society) to favour the religious life of our society by supporting denominational education. It is philosophically acceptable too: it is completely reasonable for the Irish state (on behalf of Irish society) to interest itself in, and help support in a fair and appropriate manner, the religious life of Irish society. This includes supporting by educational means the religious searching of the members of society. This involves helping people to search, but also to find, and to live by the convictions and truths that they have found. It would be very odd if society were to support people with regard to religious and philosophical questions, but not with regard to religious and philosophical answers.

The principle of solidarity

This is not the favouring of some purely private good, but the favouring of a good that all can appreciate to some extent, and share as a common good. It is not unreasonable to think that someone who does not belong to any specific religion can appreciate that many others do belong to specific religious communities and do consider religion to be a significant, if not the most significant, part of their lives. Part of what it means to be a community, to be a unified and healthy society, is to care about the deepest convictions and beliefs of others, perhaps most especially when they differ from your own. This is an aspect of another principle of flourishing social life: the principle of solidarity.

To relegate religion to the purely private sphere would be to fail to respect the many Irish people who honestly and conscientiously consider religion in general, and particularly their own religion, to be reasonable in itself, and publicly and socially significant. To exclude denominational schools from the public education system would surely send out a strong signal to Irish society and all its members that religion is not reasonable, not social, not a significant and valuable part of Irish life and culture and history, but something to be restricted to the purely private and personal sphere. It might even send out a strong signal that religion is something to be weakened and, ideally, eliminated. (Or at least allowed to weaken and die.) To send out such signals would certainly not promote solidarity in Irish society.

Denominational schools in Ireland have been very dedicated to teaching their students to have a spirit of solidarity that respects others in our society and in other societies.

Denominational schools in Ireland have been very dedicated to teaching their students to have a spirit of solidarity that respects others in our society and in other societies. Denominational schools have not taught (and do not teach) their students to respect only those who believe exactly what the students believe or behave in exactly the same way that the students behave. This author's own experience bears this out completely. In my own schooling, which was all denominational, I was always taught by word and example to be generous, sensitive to the needs of others, compassionate, empathetic, tolerant and patient. I know that not everyone has had the fully positive experience I had, but I think it is a fair assumption that a majority of Irish citizens who have experienced denominational education will share my assessment of it as very supportive of solidarity and social cohesion and peace.

Solidarity and non-religious education

It is important to reiterate that if Catholics expect non-religious people to support a pluralistic system's inclusion of Catholic schools, they should also support such a system's inclusion of non-Catholic schools. One reason for this, as already said above, is that we should support the right of parents to choose their children's education. Another reason can now be added to this: I support the value of people's search for meaning and value even if they come to different answers than I do, and I want society to support people in their search for religious truth and their commitment to live by the answers they consider true. A pluralistic system of education facilitates this kind of respect for the religious search much more

If Catholics expect non-religious people to support a pluralistic system's inclusion of Catholic schools, they should also support such a system's inclusion of non-Catholic schools.

definitely and consistently than a single-type system would. A pluralistic system operates by subsidiarity and promotes solidarity.

Potential dangers of religion can be recognised and tackled

It is only right to acknowledge that although religion and the search for meaning and value is a social good worthy of social support (including supporting denominational education) there are conditions for that support.

In the 'Declaration on Religious Freedom' it is stated that religious freedom, which is a human and civil right, has its "due limits" [paragraph 2]. In most cases, society must not interfere with people's search for religious truth and their living by such truth, but it could be right for society to intervene if the common good was in danger. That is, society could rightfully intervene in religious matters if public morality, people's rights, and/or public peace were threatened by some person's or group's exercise of their religious freedom. We might apply this to our topic by saying "terms and conditions apply" to society's support for denominational education as part of a pluralistic system. Society is not bound by the principle of religious freedom to tolerate or support a religion that promotes in its education and/or practices human sacrifice or racism, for example.

Denominational education needs to be transparent and fair; it must be intellectually rigorous and socially conscientious. And it needs to be seen to be these things too, if it is to ask for and expect society's support. Denominational education must be truly public education. One reason for this is that society, including religious believers, must be concerned with the religious life of society being a healthy and peaceful life. Denominational education must be concerned with public morality, human rights, and social peace. It must be concerned with helping religious belief and commitment to promote the common good of all.

In fact, much of denominational education in Ireland has been good concerning these matters. Very few people want an education system that supports or promotes fanaticism or sectarianism or divisiveness. It is unfair to accuse denominational education in Ireland of promoting such evils. It is completely unacceptable to suggest a parallel between denominational education and apartheid. Also, it would be naïve to think that a single-type multi-denominational or non-denominational system would avoid such evils simply by virtue of being multi- or non-denominational. Any good educational system should be concerned with promoting a healthy approach to religion and to social cohesion and peace, and a pluralistic system can and should do just this.

Is denominational education truly tolerant?

But some might argue: “Religious schools are by nature intolerant. If people think they have the truth, they will automatically be intolerant of others who lack the truth or who are in error. Religious people often think they have the truth. Therefore, religion is intolerant and religious schooling is too. So society and the state ought not to support religious schools.”

This is a simple argument and perhaps a common assumption, even for some religious people. It seems to be backed up by history. Think of the Crusades and the Inquisition. Examples from more recent Irish history, though somewhat less extreme than the previous two examples, can also be called to mind. The very concept of a denominational school in itself seems to necessitate exclusion, and thus promote intolerance and divisiveness. How can we reply to this argument?

Firstly, one has to recognise that religion and religious people can be, and have been, intolerant. Sometimes they have been very intolerant. One recognises also that this is in some way linked with the fact that religious beliefs are deeply held and considered very important, and so differences in religious belief can be seen as very significant and even threatening in certain contexts.

Such differences are particularly difficult when specific religious belief and membership of a religious group is closely associated with political allegiance and social stability. It is not true, however, that such intolerance and dogmatism is exclusively a matter of religion. The most intolerant and violent behaviour in the 20th century was not motivated by religion but by non-religious, sometimes atheistic and anti-religious, ideologies. People are capable of being intolerant and violent about any deeply held beliefs and interests, not just religious ones. Perhaps we could avoid intolerance and violence (at least of some sorts) if no-one had any deeply held beliefs about anything – but this is hardly what most people really want! Do we want a system of schooling that teaches our students not to believe anything deeply and confidently?

It is abundantly clear that denominational schools in Ireland want to promote the positive and healthy aspects of religion and to eradicate the negative aspects. Denominational schools can play a distinctive and essential role in dealing with the negative aspects of religion.

Secondly, one should recognise that religion is not necessarily intolerant or violent. “Religion” is an umbrella term, including within its bounds a huge variety of beliefs, practices, groups, histories. Some aspects of religion can be negative; but some aspects are positive. It is abundantly clear that denominational schools in Ireland want to promote the positive and healthy aspects of religion and to eradicate the negative aspects. Denominational schools can play a distinctive and essential role in dealing with the negative aspects of religion. One aspect that is negative is unreasonable intolerance.

Why “unreasonable intolerance”? Even though people often assume that all intolerance is wrong, this is not true. Some things ought not to be tolerated. Rape, child abuse, bullying, murder – these are a few obvious examples. No-one actually tolerates everything. In order to understand correctly the very concept of “tolerance”, you need to keep in mind that tolerance as a virtue cannot stand by itself. To know what you ought to tolerate and what you ought not to tolerate, you must have other virtues, other convictions. In other words, to be a reasonably tolerant person, you must be a person of deeply held convictions and beliefs. You must believe in social peace, for example, so that you are prepared to tolerate certain things for the sake of social peace – but not so much that you are prepared to tolerate things that threaten or destroy social peace. Tolerance is an important virtue, but only one of several.

Denominational education in Ireland is clearly supportive of promoting tolerance and peace. It is important for Irish society that it should acknowledge and celebrate this fact. If Irish society were to lose faith with denominational schools, so to speak, and accede to the view that denominational education is inherently intolerant, then this could demoralise and perhaps even marginalise religious people in Ireland who are committed to promoting tolerance and peace precisely through denominational education. This would not be good for anyone.

Denominational schools need to make it clear to society that they do promote tolerance and that they do so in line with, not in spite of, their religious faith tradition.

Obviously, denominational schools need to make it clear to society that they do promote tolerance and that they do so in line with, not in spite of, their religious faith tradition. One aspect of this is that denominational schools need to make it clear to their own religious communities and to society as a whole how committed they are to standards of public morality based on reason, or at least compatible with reason.

Take the Catholic tradition as an example. The set of objective standards of behaviour based on complete reasonableness is called “the natural law” in the Catholic tradition. The Catholic tradition is committed to the notion that being fully reasonable is sufficient for a person or group (or society) to know what is right and wrong. This includes knowing by reason what the standards are for tolerance.

Although God is the author of the natural law, a person does not have to believe in God and in God’s revelation to know basic standards of right and wrong. Catholics, therefore, are able as Catholics to respect the reasonable moral convictions of non-Catholics. Also, even when people differ from them, and Catholics think their convictions are erroneous, they are able to respect their goodwill and sincerity. Catholics, in other words, are able precisely as Catholics to respectfully and peacefully disagree with others, even in matters of religion. This is not true of only Catholics; it is found in many other religious traditions too. Religious disagreement does not necessarily lead to intolerance or violence.

Denominational traditions also need to let society as a whole know that their theological convictions, including the theological convictions underlying their educational endeavours, are compatible with the basic standards of behaviour operative in society. Society needs to know that denominational schools are not engaging in indoctrination, for example, passing on religious beliefs in a way that ignores or bypasses the critical faculties of their students.

Denominational schools must make it clear to society that the education that they provide is one that respects the intellectual abilities and needs of their students. However, once denominational schools have done this, they can rightfully expect society to acknowledge that denominational schools are truly educational institutions and should as such be supported by society. Isn’t this how a pluralistic society should work?

Religion in a non-denominational system: good enough?

Some people might wonder if it would be sufficient to recognise religion as a subject to be studied academically, but not from a denominational perspective. Such an approach would enable all schools to study religion and religions, including religion’s contribution to Irish history, culture, and life – but without commitment to the truth of any one religion. Certainly, such a system would be far better than a totally secular or atheistic one, in that it would acknowledge the reality and importance of religion and religions to some extent.

However, a single-type school system, whether denominational or non- or inter-denominational, would fail to be fully adequate or fair. For one thing, it would not fully respect the wishes of the many parents who would like a faith-based school for their child or children, and who have had such schools made available by Irish society for many decades. For another thing, it would not fully respect the lived experience of religion that most people have.

Religion is not totally private and abstract

Religion is not experienced by the majority of Irish people as an academic subject of study. It is a lived reality for hundreds of thousands of Irish citizens (and, indeed, for billions of people worldwide). Religion involves belonging to a distinctive community, holding and passing on distinctive beliefs, engaging in distinctive practices, living by a distinctive way of life. Religion is usually experienced as “denominational”. Denominational schools offer a distinct benefit in the way that they can treat religion as a living concrete social reality.

The issue of truth

One advantage that a denominational school has with regard to religion is that it can take the issue of religious truth seriously and deal with it straightforwardly. A faith-based school lives out of the conviction that its religious beliefs are true. Such a school can be a community in the deepest sense, sharing and celebrating a specific world-view that inspires and guides its staff, pupils, parents and local community.

It is important that people who send their children to such schools should do so by choice, ideally out of a shared conviction and faith, but at least with a willingness to support the school’s ethos. Denominational schools are open to all people who are willing to accept the kind of education offered by that school.

It is worth mentioning here that we all want our schools to pass on to our children, to the young citizens of Ireland, not only information and technical skills, but also values and ideals. One rich source of values and ideals that are socially essential is religion. Religious faith, taught as true and accepted as true, can motivate pupils to be good citizens.

Many teachers of CSPE in denominational schools, for example, are also religion teachers and they see no incompatibility between their being teachers of both. In fact, they see the religious faith taught in RE as fully supportive of good citizenship. It is important that society should recognise this fact and support the continuance of denominational schooling, because it is important that society should support religious education that promotes good citizenship.

Religious faith, taught as true and accepted as true, can motivate pupils to be good citizens.

It would not do for society to swallow the falsehood that only a non-religious approach, or only a purely academic approach to religion (confining it to RE classes to be studied in a “neutral” fashion), is suitable for Irish schools because a denominational approach is inherently antagonistic towards good citizenship. If society really believes this, then, logically, it should call for denominational schools to be banned! Of course, some people might be prepared to tolerate the existing denominational schools, as it would be troublesome to just get rid of them – but such an attitude

would overlook the many good aspects of denominational education, and would be highly disrespectful towards the sincere convictions and natural rights of religious parents who choose denominational education for their children.

Denominational education supports education

Education is a daunting task. Religious faith and community is one source of strength in facing this daunting task. Religious believers consider God to be the source of our human dignity. This dignity is enhanced and clarified when we learn to use our God-given talents and opportunities. One of our talents is to learn. Denominational schools support the teaching of all kinds of knowledge and skills. Religious faith supports handing on the very best of our historical and cultural capital to our children. It also supports our encouraging and facilitating creative endeavour by our pupils. God is seen as a creative God!

Denominational schools support the teaching of all kinds of knowledge and skills. Religious faith supports handing on the very best of our historical and cultural capital to our children.

Further, religious faith promotes giving the poor and the marginalised the attention and help they need to flourish. Being a religious believer helps you never to give up on difficult pupils and never to lose heart or burn out. This is not to say that denominational schools are perfect in all these matters or that other types of schools lack sources of inspiration, but simply to acknowledge the fact that denominational schools have rich religious sources of inspiration. And society should be happy that this is so, and should continue to support such schools as part of a pluralistic system of education.

Moral education

Religious faith also supports moral education, which society values and needs. This is not to claim that only religious faith can support moral education. The claim here is much more modest: religious faith can support, and for many people it has supported, moral education. Everyone can recognise that religious faith has contributed to Irish society in this regard.

What about a “common moral education”? Some have suggested that publicly-supported schools would be better teaching a common moral code, rather than one based on a religious faith. This is to think in terms of a false dichotomy. We do not have to choose between two exclusive approaches: a religious code of morality or a common code of morality. A denominational school can teach morality in such a manner that the religious approach to morality supports and clarifies the common (philosophical) approach to morality. Denominational schools can teach morality with added motivation and clarity, so to speak, not less motivation or less clarity.

Of course, some people might think that some elements of religious moral codes are wrong. Think of certain sexual issues, for example, or issues such as abortion. It is important, however, to recognise that a “common morality” code that ignored or contradicted teachings on moral issues of specific religious traditions would not be “common”. Such a code would exclude all religious believers who believe the contrary.

It is a mistake to think that there is some neutral ground on morality that a “common school” can assume, whereas all denominational schools are necessarily controversial and sectarian. We must not

assume, for example, that the more permissive moral views of liberal elements of Irish society are the views of Irish society as a whole. Nor should we assume that permissive or liberal moral views are neutral or non-controversial.

In a pluralistic society such as ours, in some areas of morality, though not all, a position taken by a school cannot fail to be controversial and biased. Indeed, the idea that certain religious and moral views are matters entirely of personal choice and guesswork is itself a highly controversial and questionable view. If we promote an education system based on agnosticism – whether about religious beliefs and/or moral beliefs – we should not fool ourselves that we are promoting a common system or a non-controversial system! Agnosticism contradicts the deeply held beliefs and convictions of many people in Irish society who are committed to their religion. Only an Irish education system that supports denominational schools as part of a pluralistic system can avoid promoting agnosticism.

Conclusion

It is important, of course, that denominational schools should live their faith and carry out their educational tasks always in a way that is reasonably tolerant of difference, peaceful towards all, accurate and fair in its knowledge of others' beliefs, and healthily self-critical and committed to excellence. It is very important that we stand against any viewpoint that would hold that religious schools are incapable of this just because they are religious or denominational.

Denominational schools in Ireland are happy to teach their pupils about other religions and worldviews. Of course, being a denominational school, these other religions and worldviews cannot be taught as if they were completely true. (Nor are they taught as being completely untrue!)

*Denominational schools in Ireland
are happy to teach their pupils about
other religions and worldviews.*

A denominational school cannot even teach that such other religions might be completely true. Denominational schools are not agnostic schools. One can certainly teach that these other religions and worldviews can be partially true, and one can recognise and respect the fact that believers in other religions are people following their consciences, as should we all. People sometimes forget that. But a denominational school can teach that its religious tradition is true without threatening social peace and tolerance. In fact, it can teach that its religious tradition is true in a way that fully supports tolerance and peace. To say otherwise, and to organise an education system on grounds that assume otherwise, is to say that religion is the enemy of Irish society. This would be to acquiesce to the views of a small number of people in Ireland who are anti-religious. It would not be truly pluralistic, respecting the views of all.

It will not help the cause of peace and integration in Ireland, and indeed in the modern world, if we condone or support any viewpoint that dismisses all religion as socially valueless or dangerous. We can recognise the fact that religious schools have not always been perfect in the past, and that religious schools face the constant challenge of being good educational institutions, as do all types of schools, without succumbing to the false notion that religion is inherently intolerant, divisive and even violent. Such a notion is not only false, but also divisive and dangerous in itself. Instead, we ought to clearly acknowledge the value of denominational schools within a pluralistic system. And we ought to set up the education system in such a way that publicly supported denominational schools are allowed to be distinctively denominational because they are part of the common good of society.

CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN SCOTLAND

Michael McGrath

Director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service

Michael McGrath describes the culture of criticism in which Catholic schools in Scotland have historically had to operate and the various policies the Scottish political establishment has adopted towards them today.

Catholicism in Scotland has for long been a minority interest. Census figures from 2001 indicated that, while 66% of the population regarded themselves as Christian, only 16% were Catholic.

While there were small pockets of Catholic communities which sustained themselves – mainly in the Highlands of Scotland during and after the Reformation – undoubtedly the current existence of the Catholic community as a significant minority in Scotland is mainly due to the significant patterns of immigration from Ireland in the late 19th century.

This led firstly to the establishment of hundreds of Catholic parishes in the West of Scotland and across the central belt towards the East, and then to the establishment of Catholic schools on parish properties. By the early 20th century it was clear to both Church and State authorities that Catholic children were losing out by being educated in cramped conditions with poor resources and underpaid teachers.

After extensive negotiations, the 1918 Education (Scotland) Act brought about the transfer of Catholic schools into state control. Today, all Catholic schools in Scotland – with the exception of the three Independent (ie fee-paying) Catholic schools – are owned and managed by local education authorities. Altogether, 394 Catholic schools educate 124,000 young people – about 21% of the school population. Catholic education in Scotland is a minority interest, but a very significant one.

In effect, to talk of ‘faith schools’ in Scotland is to refer only to Catholic schools. There is one Jewish school, no Muslim schools and three schools “with historical links to” the Epsicopalian Church, which managed over 200 schools.

Attitudes to Catholic schools in Scotland are significantly determined by a legacy of institutionalised anti-Catholic bigotry. Claims continue to be made that the existence of Catholic schools encourages divisiveness and a lack of social cohesion in society. Some go as far as to suggest that Catholic schools indoctrinate children into attitudes of intolerance. Others claim that Catholics are receiving privileged treatment by being allowed to have their own schools when so other faith group is allowed to do so. (This ignores the legal arrangement which allows any denomination or faith group to establish schools, if these are supported by parents, and then to ask the State to take over responsibility for these schools.)

Such claims are unsupported by any evidence. Indeed, all evidence of school evaluation by independent school inspectors shows that Catholic schools perform very well in promoting tolerance and respect for other faiths and cultures and in promoting community harmony. However, the lack of evidence does not hinder the media from splashing on stories which suggest that some ‘celebrity’ or politician is opposed to separate Catholic schools.

The current attitudes of the main political parties are fascinating. While the Labour Party has for long depended on the vote of the Catholic community to sustain them in power in local and national government, recent reports are suggesting that many Catholics have lost faith in Labour. Official Labour Party policy in Scotland is opposed to Catholic schools, but successive Education Ministers

have stated a policy of grudging tolerance: an acceptance of Catholic schools “as long as parents want them”.

Scottish Tories are broadly in favour of faith schools, but have little political support in Scotland. Since the Scottish Nationalists have formed the Scottish Government in May 2007, they have sought to reassure the Catholic community about their own views which – historically – were not well disposed. In February 2008, First Minister Alex Salmond accepted an invitation to deliver the Cardinal Winning Education Lecture, in which he claimed that Catholic schools contributed significantly to the welfare of Scottish society, and that it was “time to celebrate Catholic education”.

Catholic schools have played a significant part in the development of Scotland’s international reputation for an excellent system of education. Research indicates the extent to which Catholic schools have enabled an impoverished immigrant Catholic community to climb out of the ghetto and establish itself among the educated and professional classes.

By remaining within the State education system, Catholic schools have had to deliver the mainstream education agenda, while attempting to do so in a distinctive way which is faithful to their tradition. Parents frequently cite the particular ‘ethos’ of the Catholic school, and its explicit moral character, as the main reason for enrolling children, even when they are themselves not Catholic.

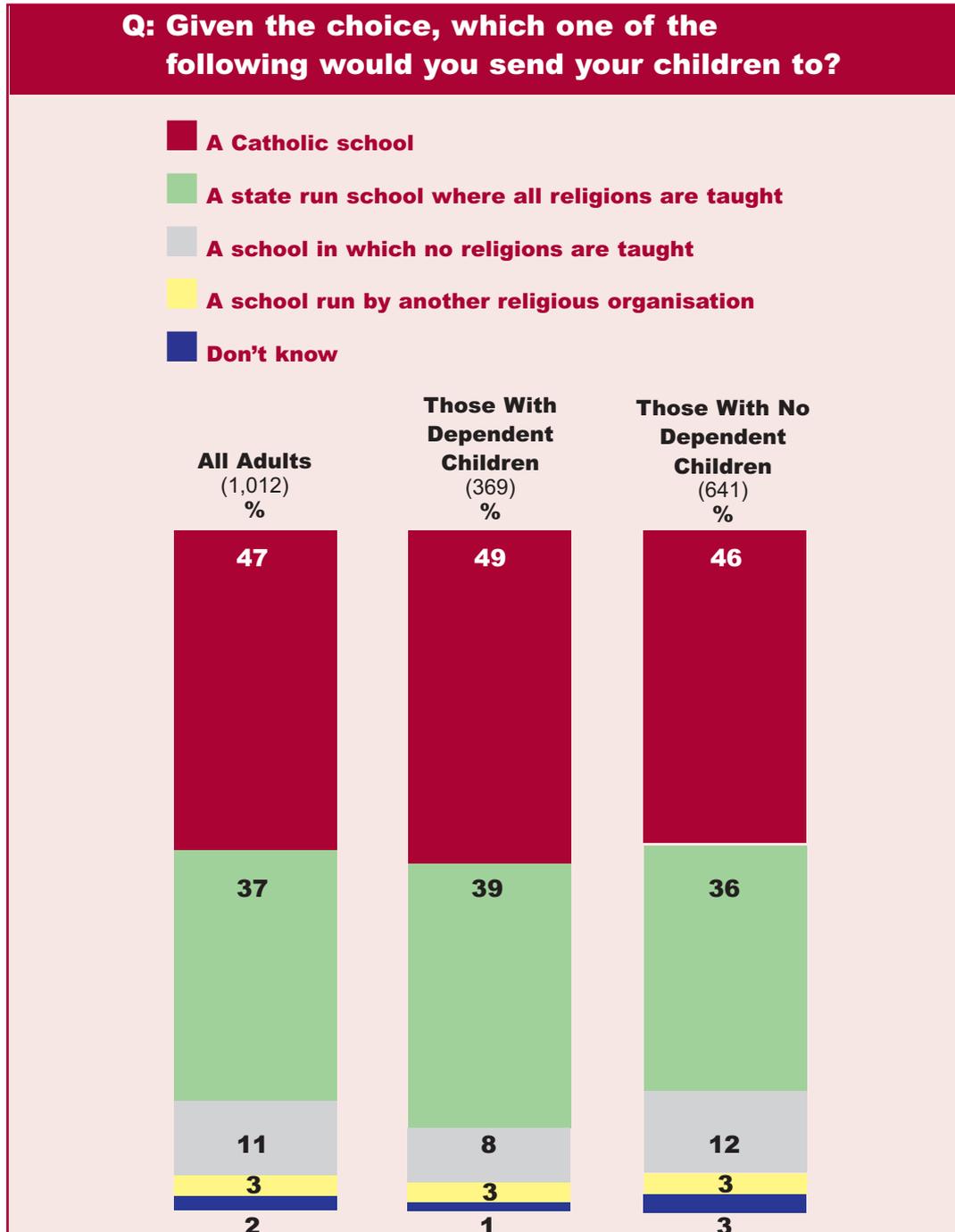
As Scottish society becomes increasingly secularised, the voice of the Catholic education community is still regarded as significant in extolling the central place of values in the school curriculum, in resisting the prevailing sexual health strategies advocated by Health bodies and in promoting the centrality of the religious and moral formation of all young people.

While it continues on this course of critical engagement with social policy, it also seeks to develop Catholic schools as centres of excellence which are recognised and valued by Scottish citizens of all faiths and none.

This is a shortened version of a talk delivered by Mr McGrath at a conference on denominational schools held on April 3, 2008 in the Tara Towers, Dublin, and organised by The Iona Institute and The Word magazine.

Appendix
Attitudes to parental choice and school provision

**Results of Red C opinion poll carried out in March 2008
on behalf of The Iona Institute**



Q. There are currently many different types of schools available in Ireland, from Public, Private, non-denominational, religious, single sex and mixed sex etc. These two statements reflect two different views about the future of publicly funded schools in Ireland. Which ONE is closer to your point of view?

- In order to promote social integration all children should go to the same kind of schools
- Parents should have the right to choose from a variety of schools for their children
- Don't know

