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Education in Post-Christian Ireland

ÁINE HYLAND

A Post-Christian Ireland?

My first reaction when I was invited to submit an article on 'Education in Post-Christian Ireland' was to ask – why assume that we are living in, or about to live in a post-Christian society? Is Ireland today any less Christian than it was a generation ago, or a century ago, or a millennium ago? How does one define a Christian society, or, for that matter, a post-Christian society? Is it adherence to organized, denominational religion? Or is it a Christian attitude towards our fellow men and women? If the fundamental message of Christianity is love, is there evidence that Irish society today is less loving and caring than it was in the past? It is in this spirit of scepticism about the concept of post-Christianity, that I reflect on this theme.

In a recent sermon the Church of Ireland Bishop of Cork, Dr Colton, referred to post-denominational Ireland – a concept which he embraced rather than distrusted. I find myself quite comfortable with this phrase and, like Bishop Colton, I welcome the emergence of a society which is less concerned with the boundaries of denominationalism than it is with fundamental Christian concepts. I look to a society which focuses on issues of justice and respect for all, a society which welcomes and celebrates diversity, in short I look forward to a pluralist society, where pluralism is regarded as a positive characteristic.

A Note of Scepticism about Educational Aspirations

One would like to believe that education in Ireland has played and will continue to play an important part in ensuring that the citizens of

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tomorrow will carve out and contribute to such a society and that the values which underpin our school system have significance in this regard. However, it is sobering to look to the past and to see that schooling in Ireland has been remarkably unsuccessful in realizing aspirational values, whether they be the values of Church or of State.

The national school system which was set up in 1831 with one unambiguous objective, i.e. 'to unite in one system children of different creeds', failed spectacularly to achieve this objective. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish national school system had already become fragmented and was rapidly moving towards a system of separate denominational schools. By the end of the century, the vast majority of national schools were under the control of individual churches and applications for new schools under joint religious management had petered out. By the mid-twentieth century it was estimated that less than 5 per cent of national schools in Ireland were mixed in even the most minimal sense of that word, i.e. attended by at least one pupil of a religious denomination other than that of the school management. By the 1970s, the state was no longer prepared to even consider applications for recognition of national schools unless they were under the control of a Church.[1] The recognition of the first multi-denominational school of the twentieth century in 1978, the Dalkey School Project N.S., was achieved only after considerable angst and controversy.[2]

The Scriptural 'General Lesson', which all national schools were required to display in a prominent position throughout the nineteenth century, appeared to have little or no effect on the attitudes and behaviour of the young people of Ireland, if we are to judge by their subsequent behaviour. The Lesson was based on the letters of St Paul and exhorted national school pupils 'to live peacably with all men even with those of a different religious persuasion'. It reminded them that Christ taught his disciples to love even their enemies, 'to bless those that curse them, and to pray for those that persecuted them'. It stated that Jesus Christ did not intend his religion to be forced on men by violent means and that He and His Apostles taught us not to return evil for evil. It concluded by reminding young people to show themselves as followers of Christ 'who when He was reviled, reviled not again', by behaving gently and kindly to everyone.[3] The bloodshed which accompanied the fight for independence and the atrocities of the subsequent Civil War, did not suggest that the lessons of tolerance and understanding had been well learned by the pupils of the national school system.

Similarly, the aspirations of the leaders of the Irish Free State to revive the Irish language through the school system, failed to be achieved. On 1 February 1922, the Free State government issued a public notice stating that, 'It is the intention of the new government to work with all its might

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for the strengthening of the national fibre by giving the language, history, music and tradition of Ireland, their natural place in the life of Irish schools.'[4] This and subsequent curriculum edicts, which aspired to "restore" the Irish language as the first language of the people, failed dismally. Some eighty years later, the Irish government is no closer to restoring Irish as the language of the people, than the British government was in 1921 to achieving peace and reconciliation on the island of Ireland.

These examples from nineteenth- and twentieth-century Ireland show that neither school culture and ethos, nor the behaviour of a country's youth, can be legislated for by state edicts or by aspirational statements. As the 1995 White Paper on Education points out: 'The ethos of a school is an organic element, arising, first and foremost, from the actual practices which are carried out in that school.'[5]

Religion in Irish Education

Religion has always had a central role in Irish education. From the monastic schools of the first millennium to the hedge schools of the penal days and the charter schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Irish schools played a major role in cultivating and disseminating religious values. Despite an espousal of republicanism in the early twentieth century, Ireland did not experience the questioning of the role of religion in schools that occurred in earlier centuries in countries such as the United States, France, Portugal or Mexico.

The emphasis on a religious ethos in Irish schools continued to be evident throughout the twentieth century. From the mid-1920s to the 1970s, the curriculum and the Rules for National Schools recognized that, 'Of all the parts of a school curriculum, Religious Instruction is by far the most important,' and that, 'A religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school.' Teachers were exhorted to 'constantly inculcate, in connection with secular subjects, the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the other moral virtues'.[6] Tolerance, respect and understanding – the central tenets of the school curriculum during the period of British administration – were no longer on the agenda after Independence, although teachers were required to be 'careful, in presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on matters of controversy'. The teacher's role in the first fifty years of the Free State was to avoid ideological and religious differences rather than to recognize and respect them. However, even this minimal recognition of religious difference was removed from the Primary Teachers' Curriculum Handbook in 1971.[7]

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The 1971 curriculum, which in so many other admirable ways recognized and made provision for individual difference, made no mention at all of religious difference, and did not include the exhortation to teachers to avoid controversial issues in presence of children of different religious beliefs, which had been a feature of earlier curriculum documents.

The recently published revised Primary School Curriculum (1999) is a major breakthrough in this respect. For the first time in the history of Irish education, 'the right of the individual to choose the particular form of religious expression he or she seeks' is formally recognized in an official educational document.[8] The curriculum acknowledges 'the importance of tolerance towards the practice, culture and life-style of a range of religious convictions and expressions, and aspires to develop in children a tolerance and understanding towards the belief of others'. At the same time, it recognizes that in seeking to develop the full potential of the individual, the curriculum must take into account the child's affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs. It states that:

> the spiritual dimension is a fundamental aspect of individual experience, and its religious and cultural expression is an inextricable part of Irish culture and history. Religious education specifically enables the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God.

At a formal level, then, there is no reason to anticipate that religion will play any less significant a role in Irish education in the future than it has done in the past. However, given the increasing diversity of the population and the fall in the number of active church-goers of different religious denominations, the expectations and requirements of parents and the emphasis of teachers in relation to religious education, are changing. Religious education programmes developed by most churches include a comparative element where children are introduced to other religions. There is less emphasis on a catechetical approach than was the case in the past but it is of note that the curriculum, both overt and hidden, of the vast majority of Irish schools at all levels is based on Christian values. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

Pluralism

With the increasing secularization and pluralization of Irish society in the past two decades, there has been a questioning of the dominance of the church and of religion in Irish education. During the educational debates of the 1990s, control and governance of schools was a key issue.[9] Many parents

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were surprised to learn that over 99 per cent of primary schools were owned and controlled by the churches while almost entirely funded by the state. Some parents made it clear that they would prefer their children to attend religiously mixed schools and that they expected the state to provide funding for such schools. The debate culminated at the end of the 1990s in the passing of the Education Act of 1998. The act explicitly states that the Irish education system will in future 'respect the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society' and 'operate in a spirit of partnership between schools, patrons, students, parents, teachers and other school staff, the community served by the school and the State'[10]. As we move into the twenty-first century, a commitment to respecting diversity and pluralism in education has been formally enshrined in educational legislation in this country.

Pluralism can be considered under a number of headings, for example race, ethnicity, culture, language, religion, ideology, philosophy, etc. Countries vary in their interpretation of religious pluralism and in how to respond to it within the education system. For example, in the United States, the public school system encompasses children of all religions and none, and religion does not form part of the school curriculum nor are religious activities (such as prayers, worship etc.), permitted in public schools. A similar approach is taken in European countries such as France and Italy. In Germany, state primary schools are attended by children of all religions and none, and separate religious education is provided within the schools for pupils of different religions. In Ireland, State recognition is given on equal terms to a diversity of schools, whether under Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim or multi-denominational control. (Of the 3,000 or so primary schools in the country, 2,780 are Catholic schools; 189 are Church of Ireland; 17 are Presbyterian and one is Methodist; there is one Jewish school; one Muslim school and 19 multi-denominational schools).[11]

As indicated earlier, the legislative right to have children educated in a school consonant with their religious belief is echoed in the Revised Primary Curriculum (1999):

> Education generally, seeks to reflect and cater for a variety of religious conviction and acknowledges the right of parents to arrange for their children's education *in a school whose religious ethos coincides with their own religious belief.* It is the responsibility of the school to provide a religious education that is consonant with its ethos and at the same time to be flexible in making alternative organisational arrangements for those who do not wish to avail of the particular religious education it offers. It is equally important that the beliefs and sensibilities of every child are respected. [my italics]

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The Irish interpretation of providing separate schools for diverse groups could become problematic if one considers elements of diversity other than religion, for example language, culture, ethnicity, educational philosophy, intellectual ability, etc. It is scarcely realistic to expect that the state could or should respond to the growing number of ethnic and racial groups who have immigrated to Ireland in recent years by supporting them to set up their own ethnically, racially and linguistically separate schools. Indeed it is doubtful whether such an approach would be acceptable in the context of the recently enacted Equal Status Act.[12] How, for example, could one distinguish between respect for diversity and the practice of ghettoization or segregation? In Ireland until fairly recently, children with special educational needs and children of the Travelling community were segregated in special schools – a policy which would now be regarded as segregationist in the worst sense and no more acceptable than racially segregated schools. But how does this policy differ from a policy of pluralism as interpreted above?

The Irish primary curriculum recognizes the role which schools must play in countering prejudice and discrimination, as is evidenced by the following quotation from the Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme of the Revised Primary Curriculum:

> Children live in a diverse society, and this diversity requires the development of mutual understanding and a sense of respect for the dignity of every human being. The SPHE programme provides a context in which children can learn about various ethnic, social and cultural groups and can recognise and appreciate the contributions of these groups to society. As they acquire a deeper understanding of their own traditions and heritage, they are encouraged to act in ways that foster inclusiveness and to have regard for the heritage and perspectives of others. Through SPHE, children can discover the role each person has to play in counteracting prejudice, discrimination and inequality as they may experience it in their own lives.

A recent survey of attitudes of Irish teenagers, carried out by Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge,[13] would suggest that the concepts of mutual understanding and tolerance are not strongly in evidence among that age group. Preliminary findings indicate that there are deep-rooted prejudices held against a significant number of minority groups in our society and a profound ignorance about certain cultural and social differences. In relation to Travellers, for example, over half of all the students surveyed (54 per cent) believed that if they made friends with a Traveller, other non-Traveller children might not go around with them anymore. Similar views were expressed about students who were gay or lesbian. Almost a quarter of students expressed the view that Travellers should go to special schools of their

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own. While attitudes to people with disabilities were more accepting, the most commonly held view about people with disabilities was that they were people who deserved sympathy. They were regarded as objects of charity, rather than as persons whose differences could be recognized as part of the normal pattern of human life.

Attitudes to religious differences, while not hostile in the way that attitudes to differences in sexuality or ethnicity were, indicated that students felt profound discomfort with religious differences. A number of students said that they would not know what to say to people who did not share their religious views. The results of this survey raise questions about how schools can contribute to the development of tolerance and understanding among young people, particularly when there still remains a high degree of segregation by gender, religion, language and academic ability within the Irish education system. The contradiction between school practices and their philosophy or mission statements comes into sharp relief in this regard.

Institutional Responses to Differences in Ability and Intelligences

The practice of segregating children into different types of schools at the age of twelve or thirteen on the basis of an academic achievement had been a feature of Irish schooling until the 1960s. Such segregation was also widespread in Western Europe and still occurs in Holland, Germany and Northern Ireland. It was gradually discontinued in the Republic of Ireland from the late 1960s onwards when a policy of comprehensive education was adopted by government. However, in many parts of Ireland, particularly in the larger cities ands towns, an element of selectivity at second level still remains – selectivity based on socio-economic background as well as on academic ability. The social and economic implications of such segregation for both the individual and for society should not be underestimated. New theories of intelligence raise fundamental questions, not just about policies of segregation, but also about the educational validity of many of the tests which have been used and continue to be used to determine a person's aptitude for different types of schooling.

These theories, the best known and perhaps most controversial of which is Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligences,[14] challenge the traditional view of intelligence as a fixed, measurable entity. They postulate that intelligence is multi-faceted, and can be developed by environmental factors and learning opportunities, in early life particularly, but also throughout schooling. There is also increasing evidence that student attitudes and motivation are related to achievement.[15]

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While most education systems propound a philosophy of recognition and respect for the multiple and different intelligences of different pupils, there is and continues to be in most countries, a hierarchy of values, whereby linguistic and logical–mathematical intelligences are more highly rewarded within the educational system than other intelligences.[16] Such reward is implicit in the modes and techniques of assessment which are practised in most Western education systems. Yet society, for its ongoing survival, requires a diversity of talents, abilities and intelligences. It ill behoves education systems to ignore or disregard the multiplicity of intelligences of the human race; these must be regarded as a resource which will enrich and enhance our society, economically as well as socially. One of the major educational challenges for schools of the future will be to develop ways in which the diversity of pupils' intelligences can be tapped, developed and assessed.

Equality

The notion of equality is a relatively recent one in education. The writings of the great Greek educational philosophers – Plato, Socrates and Aristotle – influenced Western educational thought for over two thousand years and contributed to the selectionist practices which permeated educational provision during that period. For most of the past two millennia, formal education was restricted to the ruling classes, however chosen.

It was only in the past two hundred years that mass primary schooling became the norm in Western Europe and only in our own lifetime that access to second-level education became the rule rather than the exception. In spite of the so-called 'massification' of third-level education, the gap between participation of the privileged and of the less advantaged groups of society in both second- and third-level education remains considerable. In Ireland, despite improvements in the past two decades, young people whose parents are members of the professions (doctors, lawyers, engineers, etc.), are at least four times more likely to attend third-level education than the children of unskilled workers or of the unemployed. The rate of early school leaving and non-completion of second- and third-level education is considerably higher among those from less advantaged backgrounds than among those from more privileged backgrounds.

One of the major challenges for society in the coming years will be to redress the imbalance in the educational outcomes of young people from different socio-economic backgrounds. The situation where almost one quarter of school leavers have inadequate or no formal school qualifications (a disproportionate number of whom are from lower socio-economic

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backgrounds) will have to be vigorously addressed in the decades ahead. The 1998 Education Act reflects the government's commitment to addressing the issue of social and educational inequality and the recent National Development Plan[17] (2000) sets out a series of proposed actions to address the matter.

Various initiatives have been put in place in the past decade to support children at risk of early school leaving,[18] but these have met with only limited success. An ironic side-effect of the Celtic Tiger is the increasing availability of reasonably well-paid work for young people without formal qualifications. As a result, it can be difficult to convince young people of the long-term advantages of staying on at school. Schools cannot easily compete with the lure of ready cash, especially if the menu on offer in schools appears irrelevant, unattractive and unappealing to students. Schooling will have to become more flexible and less rigid in what it offers and how. Part-time schooling and a recognition of different learning environments will have to become part of the educational landscape for teenagers of the future. New Information and Communications Technologies, including web-based learning, are beginning to impact on the educational scene and have the potential to provide a range of new learning opportunities for coming generations. These technologies will force us to address the many artificial boundaries which schooling systems have introduced in the past, including geographical, time and age boundaries. The emphasis will increasingly move from teaching to learning, from the teacher to the learner, and the school desk will no longer be the dominant seat of learning.

Lifelong Learning

The concept of lifelong learning is more likely to become a reality for the next generation than it has ever been before. Most Western governments have declared their commitment to lifelong learning in recent years. In Ireland a White Paper on Lifelong Learning was published earlier this year.[19]

In this regard, an Irish commentator has written:

> One way or the other, the concept of lifelong learning poses a significant challenge to the system. It demands new modes of access, the recognition of experience and prior learning and of alternative ways of learning. Those who have left school with inadequate qualifications are a particular challenge: we want them to return to learning, to equip themselves for independence in the adult world and (hopefully) in working life, and to develop the ability to learn throughout life. To do this, their present position must be our starting point.[20]

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Finally, whatever developments occur in Irish education in the coming decades, it is important for all involved – policy-makers, school owners, teachers and parents – to recognize that education is what we make it and make of it. It can be the key to a society where wealth will be shared and where true Christian values of love and caring will be all-pervasive; or to a society where the gap between rich and poor will continue to widen and where greed, ambition and competitiveness will take over. To quote from a publication on education for adolescents:

> Our future is very much an open book. It can be one of triumphant innovation; of diverse and self-fulfilling yet environmentally sustainable lifestyles; of people living and working together in communities of difference. Or it can be a future of division and despair where the successful are seduced into a technologically glitzy world of superficial consumerism and lifestyle choices, while the unsuccessful are condemned to unemployment, underemployment or undemanding employment that offers them few real choices. The nature of our future depends, in part, on how we prepare the next generation who will live and make it.[21]

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