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Religion, Education, and Religious Education in Irish Schools

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Abstract. *This essay is part of a collection of short essays solicited from authors around the globe who teach religion courses at the college level (not for professional religious training). They are published together with an introduction in Teaching Theology and Religion 18:3 (July 2015). The authors were asked to provide a brief overview of the curriculum, student learning goals, and pedagogical techniques employed in their courses.*

Introduction

In this article we look at Religious Education (RE) in Ireland at a systemic level before describing some of the key features of the “Religions and Global Diversity” undergraduate program at our own institution, University College Cork, which since 2008 has been equipping prospective RE teachers with the subject knowledge and cross-cultural awareness to deliver a truly multicultural and multireligious curriculum.¹ In Ireland this is something radically new and arguably long overdue. We focus initially on the national systemic level for two main reasons. One is that the very specific context and character of RE as it generally exists in Ireland is hardly appreciated outside the country. The type of RE found in Ireland is, for example, utterly unlike that of the U.K., where a multireligious curriculum is well entrenched. Ireland received only a passing mention (as is so often the case) in Gregory Alles’s *Religious Studies: A Global View* (2007) although it receives slightly better coverage in the volume *Religious Education in a Global-Local World* following the international “RE21” conference held at University College Cork in 2013 (Berglund et al. 2015). We hope that the present brief account will help to stimulate further research on RE in the Irish classroom. The other reason for focusing on the systemic level is that RE in Ireland is in a process of erratic and unpredictable transition. The predominantly faith-based training of primary and RE teachers, coupled with private, mainly Catholic church control of the overwhelming majority of schools, is seemingly clashing head-on with the demands of an increasingly multi- and non-religious civil society, with new national RE curricula, and with the human rights of parents, children, and indeed teachers. Two years on from the “RE21” conference held in Cork to debate the future of RE across Europe, including in Ireland, the dynamism of the then Education and Skills minister in reducing church patronage and promoting pluralism in the Irish school system has given way to seeming inaction (Humphreys 2015a).

¹ A slightly adapted version of this article forms a chapter in Berglund et al. (2015), by kind permission of both publishers.

Background

Ireland² has been an independent country since 1922 and a member of the European Union since 1973. The population of the Republic in 2011 was 4,588,252 with over 20 percent under the age of fifteen. In the 2011 census, 84 percent of the population declared themselves Roman Catholic, 5 percent Protestant (including Anglican, Presbyterian, and Methodist); 1 percent Orthodox (Greek, Coptic, or Russian) and 1 percent Muslim. Six percent declared “No Religion” and 1.5 percent did not declare any religion. The remaining 1.5 percent included self-declared Hindus, Buddhists, Jews, Pantheists, Quakers, and Mormons (Central Statistics Office 2012).

Despite the apparently high level of religious affiliation, a recent international survey found that those in Ireland who considered themselves religious had fallen from 69 percent in 2005 to 47 percent in 2011 – the second greatest drop (after Vietnam) in the fifty-seven countries surveyed (McGarry 2012).

The Irish Education System

In Ireland, eight years of primary schooling (age five to twelve) are followed by five or six years of second level or post-primary schooling (age thirteen to eighteen). Primary schools and most second-level schools are privately owned (overwhelmingly by religious bodies, principally the Catholic Church), but publicly-funded. The funding by taxpayers of privately-owned schools is a very significant and distinctive feature of the Irish educational landscape. Today, with three thousand primary schools in Ireland, 90 percent of pupils attend primary schools owned and controlled by the Roman Catholic Church and 6 percent attend schools controlled by Protestant churches. Two schools are operated by the Irish Islamic community and one by the Jewish community. There are now seventy-four multi-denominational primary schools, relatively recently established by parents, attended by about 2 percent of the school-going population and co-ordinated by a national body called “Educate Together.”

Concern about the lack of choice of schools has grown in recent years and the Minister for Education between 2011–2014, Ruairi Quinn, set up a *Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* to address this issue. The Forum’s report, published in April 2012, observed that there was a “mismatch between the inherited pattern of denominational school patronage and the rights of citizens in the much more culturally and religiously diverse contemporary Irish society” (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012). Outsiders to Ireland may find it quite hard to grasp that the Irish State funds all these schools, yet exercises only very limited control over what goes on in them.³

² In this article, “Ireland” refers to the twenty-six counties of the Republic of Ireland. It does not include the six counties of Northern Ireland which are part of the “United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland” (comprising England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland).

³ The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) in Ireland has limited powers to determine what happens in the classroom, since schools are controlled by their patrons: As the NCCA website diplomatically explains: “While Ireland has a centrally devised curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on school and classroom planning. At school level, the particular character of the school makes a vital contribution to shaping the curriculum in classrooms. *Adaptation of the curriculum to suit the individual school* is achieved through the preparation and continuous updating of a school plan. The selection of text books and classroom resources to support the implementation of the curriculum is made by schools, rather than by the Department of Education and Science or the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment” (NCCA 2015; our italics).

At second level, until around 1970, schools were either secondary schools mostly owned by Church bodies and offering a traditional academic curriculum leading to higher education and general public service employment or they were vocational or technical schools, offering a practical or technical curriculum under local public authority control. In 1968 free second level education became available and a common curriculum was introduced for all pupils, regardless of type of school.

As the demand for second level education grew, new types of schools – comprehensive and community schools – were established. Today, there are 729 second-level schools in Ireland of which 52 percent are private (mostly church-owned) secondary schools, 35 percent are vocational schools or community colleges, and 13 percent are community or comprehensive schools. The churches are represented on the Boards of Management of community and comprehensive schools. “Faith formation” classes are timetabled within school hours for Catholic pupils in these schools, Vocational Schools, and Community Colleges, as well as in Catholic secondary schools. Although parents have the legal right to withdraw their children from such classes, alternative provision is seldom made and in most cases “opted out” children are left at the back of the classroom, reading a book or similar (see Shanneik 2015). Difficulties around the pervasiveness of religious activities such as prayers throughout the school day, the practicalities of implementing the right to opt-out, schools’ lack of awareness of their legal obligations, and the ineffectual complaints process, figure significantly in the submissions made to the 2011 Irish Human Rights Commission report on religion and education discussed further below (Irish Human Rights Commission 2011, esp. 47–62)

Religious Education in Irish Primary Schools

Since the foundation of the primary school system 180 years ago, religious education has played a central role in primary schooling in Ireland. The still-current (1965 edition) *Rules for National Schools* state (Rule 68):

Of all parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important. . . . Religious instruction is . . . a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school.”
(Department of Education 1965)⁴

Although the Rules require that all schools provide a program of religious instruction, the Department of Education and Skills does not prescribe the RE curriculum, which is the responsibility of the school Patron (usually the Catholic Bishop). Government guidelines suggest that thirty minutes a day, or two and a half hours per week, should be spent on RE.

In the 90 percent of schools under Roman Catholic patronage, RE includes Catholic faith formation and preparation for the sacraments of First Communion and Confirmation. This takes place within school hours and is taught by the classroom teacher. The Catholic RE curriculum is called the *Alive-O* program, with a series of textbooks and workbooks for each year, a handbook for teachers, and resource materials.

⁴ The 2012 *Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism* recommended that the Rules for National Schools should be reviewed and updated and that as a first step, Rule 68 should be deleted as soon as possible (80).

In schools under Protestant patronage, a general Christian-based RE syllabus is taught and faith formation is provided in Sunday schools organised by the different Protestant denominations. The RE program for Protestant schools is called *Follow Me* and includes a full color pupil's text and workbook, a detailed teacher's book for each class, and other resource materials.

In Educate Together schools, a common Ethical Curriculum called *Learn Together*, intended for children of all religions and none, is taught by classroom teachers within schools hours. The program has four strands – moral and spiritual, equality and justice, belief systems, and ethics and environment. In Educate Together schools, “faith formation” is regarded as a matter for parents. Groups of parents who wish to arrange for such classes, outside school hours, are facilitated to do so by the school's Board of Management.

In the two schools under Islamic patronage, fifty minutes per day are timetabled for teaching Arabic, the Qur'an, and RE to all classes. In addition, pupils from third to sixth classes attend daily prayer in the Mosque and senior pupils also attend Friday Jumah prayer (Department of Education and Skills 2010).⁵

In the past five years, in response to the increase in child population in some areas, the State has set up a new type of primary school known as a Community National School. Nine such schools have opened in the country since 2008, under the direct patronage of the Department of Education and Skills. It is intended that these schools will eventually fall under the patronage of local educational authorities. The RE curriculum currently being developed on a pilot basis in these schools is called *Goodness Me, Goodness You*. The Catholic Bishops insisted that separate faith formation classes be made available for Catholic children in these new schools and in 2008 a previous Minister for Education committed the government to this policy against the private advice of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA); the NCCA was subsequently dropped from the project (RTÉ 2012). In spite of concerns expressed by some groups that separating Catholic children for RE dilutes the inclusive ethos of the schools and in particular might be seen as “the segregation of native white Catholic children from non-white newcomers” (O'Kelly 2012), the policy still remains. Under the current pilot program for the Community National Schools, in order to provide separate faith formation classes for Catholic children within the school day pupils are divided for some of the school year into four separate RE groups: (1) Catholics, (2) Other Christians, (3) Muslims, (4) Hindus, Buddhists, Humanists, Atheists and Others. Unsurprisingly, this proposed RE program aroused public controversy once the details became widely known⁶ and the discussion on the form of RE to be provided in these new schools continues.

As the overwhelming majority of Irish schools are under Catholic control and there is usually only one local primary school within reach, many parents, Catholic or not, have no choice but to send their children to Catholic schools. While in theory children may

⁵ Sakaranaho points out that due to lack of suitable English-language textbooks drawing their examples from Islamic culture (for all subjects), “Muslim schools use the standard Irish textbooks which are often informed by the Catholic ethos” (2009, 213).

⁶ O'Kelly (2012) includes links to numerous government files released to RTÉ, the national broadcaster, in response to a Freedom of Information request submitted two years earlier. See also RTÉ (2012).

opt out of RE classes at their parents' request, schools can be unwilling or unable to accommodate such requests (see Shanneik 2015). Recent reports of the Irish Human Rights Commission (2011) and the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism have called for the Rules for National Schools and school policies and practices to be amended to ensure that schools comply with "the human rights requirements of national and international law," in relation to freedom of conscience (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012). They have also called for state action to provide a greater diversity of schooling options at primary level. Since parents seldom have a choice about where to send their child for primary schooling, the Forum also concluded that a program for all primary schools on Education about Religion and Beliefs (ERB) as well as Ethics be developed to ensure that children can receive education "about religions" as opposed to faith formation in primary schools. Responsibility for developing this program has been delegated to the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and an Education Officer was appointed in summer 2013 to undertake this work. According to the NCCA website (2015), consultation on the content of the program is due to begin "shortly" but the program development process has been slow to date and it is difficult to predict when a national ERB program will be available.

Religious Education in Irish Second-Level Schools

The provision of RE at secondary level is less controversial – possibly because Catholic children will normally have received the Sacraments of Holy Communion, Confession, and Confirmation at primary level and preparation for these sacraments is no longer on the agenda. While the Catholic Church continues to provide denominational RE within second-level schools, a non-denominational RE syllabus, drawn up from 2000 onwards by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and acceptable to all the main religions in Ireland, is now offered to a greater or lesser extent (according to the school's own preference) in the majority of second-level schools. This RE syllabus calls for "the exploration of issues such as meaning and value, the nature of morality, the development and diversity of belief, the principles of a just society, and the implications of scientific progress" (NCCA 2012). It is examined by the State Examinations Commission at both Junior Certificate (age sixteen) and Leaving Certificate (age eighteen) levels. In 2014, 28,600 candidates sat the Junior Certificate examination – about 50 percent of all candidates (a proportion that has not changed for several years). At Leaving Certificate level, where the subject is relatively new, only 1221 candidates sat the RE examination in 2014; this is fewer than 3 percent. This number may rise in future years, but only if schools recruit sufficient teachers with relevant expertise in the study of religions, and in fact the proportion has not risen in recent years.

Teacher Education

Initial teacher education programs for primary teachers are provided by five publicly-funded colleges of education – all of which are owned and controlled by the churches. Four are controlled by various Catholic authorities, and one small college is controlled by the Church of Ireland. Initial primary teacher education is also provided by a private online provider – Hibernia College, which in 2012 attracted considerable press attention and a question in the Dail (Irish parliament) over the overt anti-atheist content in its RE curriculum (Cussen 2012, Donnelly 2012).

The BED program in all these colleges includes a module on RE and the Catholic colleges provide a separate Certificate course in RE. Since this Certificate in RE is

required for employment in Catholic schools, virtually all students enroll in this optional course. Concern has been expressed that the programs currently available in these colleges do not adequately prepare student-teachers to teach the Ethical Curriculum in Educate Together Schools. There is disquiet also at the time spent on RE in some Teacher Education colleges. A recent review panel from The Teaching Council (the statutory professional standards body) expressed concern that subjects such as science, geography, and history are currently given only twelve hours in the BEd program, while RE has forty-eight hours – and this in addition to the time spent on the optional Certificate in (Catholic) RE. One explanation for this is that in order to be recognised by the Catholic Bishops (patrons of 90 percent of Irish primary schools) to teach in a Catholic school, student teachers must have 120 contact hours in RE during their initial teacher education program, “to include an exploration of Catechesis and Catholic Religious Education (hours of Religious or Theological subjects in the BEd or other degree) and of Religious or Theological Studies (taken in an additional Certificate)” (Council for Catechetics of the Irish Episcopal Conference 2011).

At second level, most intending RE teachers complete a four year program at Mater Dei Institute of Education, Dublin, whose degrees are validated by Dublin City University. Graduates of Teaching Council-approved three to four year undergraduate programs in the Study of Religions (for example, at University College Cork) or of Theology/Religion in other major Irish Universities, can go on to the postgraduate diploma in Education (RE) or increasingly the 2-year Professional Master’s in Education (PME) provided by the universities, and thus qualify to teach RE. Such an accredited university-level qualification will reportedly be required of all RE teachers in the future, but at present many teachers in second-level schools who have studied neither religions nor theology at university level may nevertheless find themselves assigned to teach RE.

Undergraduate Education towards RE: The “Religions and Global Diversity” Program at University College Cork (UCC)

A new undergraduate program offered at UCC since 2007 aims to equip students with knowledge and understanding of a wide range of contemporary religions as well as a reliable grasp of theoretical and methodological issues in the academic study of religions. A proportion of these students expect to go on to become primary and post-primary (High School) RE teachers in Ireland and elsewhere. The “Religions and Global Diversity” program offered by UCC’s Study of Religions department remains the only one of its kind in the Republic. Approximately 120 students in year 1 take an introductory module covering the study of religions worldwide and methods, concepts, and theories in the academic study of religions. Around fifty students continue to the second and third years of the program, normally graduating with a BA degree which combines Religions and Global Diversity with one other Arts/Social Sciences subject. Year 2/3 students choose modules from a list which includes:

- Authority and Community in Contemporary Christianities*
- Buddhism in Practice
- Christianities in a Global Age*
- Hinduism and Indian Religions
- Indigenous Religions
- Islam: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives
- Religions of East Asia
- Sufism: Charisma and Devotion in Islam

- Texts, Theories, Approaches in the Study of Religions
- Topics in Christian Theology*
- Research Project in Religious Education
- Dissertation in the Study of Religions

Intending RE teachers were required by the Irish teacher accreditation body, The Teaching Council, to take the three modules marked * in the list above (those explicitly relating to Christianity) in order to qualify for RE teaching in Ireland but otherwise the choice of modules is unrestricted. The broad curriculum offered to UCC students, which reflects the extensive linguistic and regional research expertise of academic staff in the Study of Religions Department, goes well beyond the minimum curricular requirements specified by the Teaching Council. The Teaching Council until 2014 required only that students wishing to qualify for RE teaching in Ireland should have studied:

Moral Theology, Scripture or Biblical Studies, Systematic Theology and Christology/Origins of Christianity with either Philosophy of Religion or World Religions (*sic*). (The Teaching Council 2013, 27)

These criteria have very recently (2014) been revised, with the Teaching Council now looking retrospectively at what a student has studied, rather than accepting completion of a “recognised” degree program as a qualification. The latest iteration of the subject requirements suggests a little more emphasis on religious diversity, for an intending teacher is required to have studied in their degree at least the following:

- (a) Sacred Texts including the Bible
- (b) Christianity – Origins and Contemporary Experience
- (c) World Religions⁷
- (d) Secular Belief Systems
- (e) Ethics
- (f) Systematic Theology and Philosophy of Religion.⁸

Details of modules in the UCC Religions and Global Diversity program can be found via the UCC Study of Religions Department’s website at <http://www.ucc.ie/en/studyofreligions/>. Here, we draw attention to just two modules in the program taken by intending RE teachers. “Authority and Community in Contemporary Christianities” is a fieldwork-based module which has students going out into the local community to research first-hand – using ethnographic methods of observation, interviews and audio, photo and video documentation – diverse expressions of local Christianity, ranging from the lives of members of traditional Catholic religious orders to charismatic house churches, LGBT Christian groups, and the activities of street evangelists. The module “Research Project in Religious Education” similarly involves fieldwork; in this case interviews with parents and teachers of RE in a primary or post-primary school.

⁷ This listing makes it clear that the Teaching Council regards World Religions and Christianity as quite separate categories. In our experience, Irish policymakers still use discriminatory categories such as “other religions,” “non-Christians,” and so forth in public discourse about RE.

⁸ See the Teaching Council’s PME Declaration Form (used by applicants) at <http://www.teachingcouncil.ie/fileupload/Subject%20Declaration%20Forms%20Updated%20December/Religious%20Ed%20-%20Form%20%28REVISED%29.pdf>.

Students taking these modules are carrying out first-hand research among real religious and educational communities. We find that this hands-on approach to learning, which holds some challenges for undergraduates more used to studying passive written and visual materials relating to religions, typically generates excellent results and fosters a high level of enthusiasm and engagement which we can confidently expect students to carry with them into their future careers as RE teachers.

Conclusion

An in-depth, nationwide study of classroom practice in RE in today's Ireland has yet to be conducted and there are undoubtedly some well-informed, gifted, innovative, and inspirational teachers involved in RE, but many pupils and some teachers will describe RE as a "doss" subject (not one requiring their time or attention) and experienced observers agree that there is a need for very significant improvement at all levels across the subject. A significant increase in the number of pupils taking the new NCCA RE curriculum to Leaving Certificate level may provide an effective driver for change, but while total numbers of Junior and Leaving Certificate students have risen in recent years, the proportions taking RE as an examination subject remain unchanged at 50 percent and under 3 percent respectively. The question of church control of primary education and most secondary education in an increasingly religiously diverse republic is a highly sensitive political issue. Although change seems to be afoot, church-controlled teaching of RE and of education in general largely holds sway. Former Education and Skills Minister Ruairi Quinn aimed initially to have up to half of Ireland's 3,100 primary schools divested (handed over from religious to secular control) within a few years. However, as of January 2015 not a single Catholic primary school had been handed over to another patron. As the *Irish Times* reported early in 2015, "UN human rights monitors have criticised 'the slow progress in increasing access to secular education' in Ireland and are warning the Government it faces fresh censure in the absence of reform" (Humphreys 2015b).

In this increasingly fluid and unpredictable context, a pupil's experience of Religious Education in Ireland depends on which school s/he attends, who within that school is teaching the subject, and how and where that particular teacher acquired her or his knowledge and understanding of religions.

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