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Educating Children of All Faiths Together: the Irish Experience in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

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There has been a strong link between education and the Church in Ireland since the advent of Christianity in the fifth century. The early monastic schools were an important influence for both clergy and laity up to the 12th Century. In medieval times many educational establishments were under church auspices, and monasteries and convents played an important role in providing education. Following the Reformation it was government policy that schools should be used to spread Protestantism in Ireland. During the Tudor era the government promoted education, envisaging that there should be parish schools, diocesan schools and a university, all three categories being intended to make Ireland English and Protestant. Under the rule of Elizabeth I in 1570 an Act of Parliament "for the erection of free schools" laid down that "there shall be from henceforth a free school within every diocese of this realm of Ireland, and the school master shall be an Englishman or of the English birth". A similar policy was continued during the time of the Stuarts.

Schools set up by royal charter or with government aid in the 17th and 18th centuries were proselytising schools, their aim being to convert the Irish people to the Protestant faith. However the schools made a very limited contribution to this objective despite the strong control that the Crown and the established church (Church of Ireland) had over the appointment of masters in these schools.

Roman Catholic children who received elementary education mostly attended schools run by Catholic teachers, and these existed in considerable numbers throughout the country despite laws which were passed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century to proscribe such schools. Many Catholic families sent their

children abroad to be educated. By the seventeenth century and in particular following the so called penal laws of William and Anne at the end of that century the number of Irish students leaving the country to seek higher education had grown to such an extent that there were Irish colleges in Spain, France, Netherlands, Italy and elsewhere.

Throughout the eighteenth century Catholics were forbidden to run a school or to teach in a school. Catholic families were also forbidden to send their children abroad for an education. It was not until 1782 that the Catholic Relief Acts removed the restrictions on education for Catholics. However in spite of their apparent severity the penal laws had not been effective in preventing the education of Catholics in Ireland in the eighteenth century, large numbers of whom had attended the so called Hedge Schools. This widespread and unofficial educational system had come into being in response to the penal laws. Contrary to popular belief the schools were not universally held in hedge rows, more often than not they were held in a simple house or dwelling either of the master or if he were an itinerant teacher of a local family.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century it was estimated that almost half a million Irish children were in receipt of elementary education, the vast majority in Hedge Schools or Pay Schools. Once the penal laws were repealed at the end of that century an increasing number of schools under the auspices of religious orders and congregations were set up. These included schools under the auspices of the newly founded Irish Christian Brothers, Mercy Sisters, Presentation Sisters etc. all of whom had a specific mission of providing education for the poor.

It is not the intention of this paper to go into detail about the different attempts which were made to provide aid for the education of the poor of Ireland in the early decades of the nineteenth Century. Suffice it to mention a significant intervention by government in 1811 to financially support the work of the Society for Promoting the Education of the Poor in Ireland - the Kildare Place Society - a voluntary society which had as its aim "to afford the same facilities for education to

every denomination of Christians, without interfering with the peculiar religious opinions of any". In spite of the considerable efforts of the society to avoid even a suspicion of proselytism, in time their schools lost the trust of the Catholic community and ultimately lost the financial support of government.

A key date for historians of Irish education is 1831, the year the government decided to provide state aid for the setting up of a national system of education in Ireland. This initiative was taken largely on the recommendation of a Commission of Irish education inquiry which in 1827 had recommended that the government discontinue the practice of channelling state aid to education through voluntary agencies and that a government board be established to superintend a national and state aided system of education. In October 1831 the government acted on this recommendation and decided "to constitute a board for the superintendence of a system of national education in Ireland". One of the main objects of the board would be to "unite in one system children of different creeds". The basis on which the system would be funded was laid down in a seminal document - a letter from the Chief Secretary for Ireland to the Duke of Lenister, commonly known as the Stanley Letter. Under the terms of this letter, a Board of Commissioners would be set up composing "men of high personal character including individuals of exalted station in the church". The Board would exercise "a complete control over the various schools which may be erected under its auspices". Applications for grant aid would be invited from "Christians of all denominations" but preference would be given to joint applications from Protestants and Roman Catholics.

Financial aid would be provided for schools accepted into the new national school system. However a significant local contribution would also be required. For example the school patron would have to provide a site for the new school entirely at local expense. In addition he would be required to provide one third of the cost of building the new school - the remaining two thirds of the cost of building and furnishing would be provided by the commissioners. A contribution was also expected locally towards the teachers' salary, but as this amount was never set down, in practice it was rarely provided.

Under the terms of the Stanley Letter all children would be educated together for literary and moral instruction and they would separate into their religious groups for religious instruction. The curriculum for moral and literary instruction was set down by the commissioners in the form of a graded set of text books which were made available to pupils at half price. Religious instruction was to be provided by the different churches for pupils of their respective religions. The rules in relations to religious instruction were clearly set out. The Stanley Letter had stated that combined literary and moral instruction should take place on four or five days a week for a minimum of four hours a day. During these hours anything that might be in any way controversial from a religious/denominational point of view was strictly excluded. For example Bible reading during these hours was not permitted. Denominational acts of piety, such as making the Sign of the Cross or praying before the beginning of a lesson were not permitted. Neither was it permissible to display religious emblems or symbols nor were schools or classrooms permitted to be named after saints who were specific to any one denomination. Shortly after the system was set up, the Commissioners agreed that it would be permissible to teach religion either at the beginning or the end of the school day but schools were required to ensure that both pupils and parents were aware of the timetabling of religious instruction. So that there should be no confusion a placard was hung outside each classroom door indicating whether secular instruction or religious instruction was taking place therein.

In spite of the care that had been taken in setting up the system to provide schooling which would be scrupulously respectful of all Christians whatever their denomination, none of the churches was particularly happy with the system. The first Church to object was the Presbyterian Church which lobbied relentlessly during the 1830s to have changes introduced which would effectively allow it to run its own schools. The Anglican Church (Church of Ireland) which was the established Church also objected to the system and since in the 1830s this Church was relatively wealthy it could afford to withdraw its schools from the system and it set up its own schooling system under a society called the Church Education Society. Views

within the Catholic Church varied; some bishops were strenuously opposed to the new national school system; others felt it was the best outcome which could be expected at this time. In the words of one of the latter bishops, the terms of the Stanley Letter "are not perhaps the very best that could be devised but they are well suited to the especial circumstances of this distracted country". He encouraged his clergy to apply "without unnecessary delay for aid for their schools".

In the time available to me today it would not be possible to go into details of the controversies which developed in relation to the system of national education between 1831 and 1850. Suffice it to say that because of various concessions which were made by government and by successive Commissioners, and because of the demographic reality of Ireland both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the proportion of schools which were religiously mixed was never very high. Even defining as mixed a school in which one pupil was of a religious denomination other than that of the school management only about half of the schools were religiously mixed by the 1860s as the following table shows:

Percentage of mixed schools in Ireland 1862-1990	
1862	53.6
1870	58.8
1880	55.6
1890	46.7
1900	35.6

If one defines mixed schools as those which were under mixed management (i.e. under joint Roman Catholic and Protestant management) we find that by mid-century less than four per cent of all schools satisfied this definition. And so by the turn of the century Irish national education although theoretically a mixed or undenominational system had become in practice a denominational system.

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, the churches and in particular the Roman Catholic Church made many efforts to persuade the government to change the national school rules to recognise the de facto denominational nature of the system. Following the Synod of Thurles in 1850 (where the Roman Catholic Bishops met to discuss this and other issues) the Bishops stated "we deem it to be part of our duty to declare that the separate education of Catholic youth is in every way to be preferred." In October 1867 the Bishops again passed a resolution reiterating that mixed education was intrinsically unsound and at variance with the Catholic religion and a danger to Catholic population. Pressure was mounting during the 1860s on the government to change the national school rules to take account of the Bishops' concern and in 1868 a parliamentary circular was sent to each of the Irish Bishops asking their opinion of the national school system and what modifications they desired. The same year the government appointed a Royal Commission to investigate the national school system and to make recommendations for reform.

The Powis Commission of 1870 recommended a new set of rules for areas in which there were at least two schools, one Protestant the other Catholic. If the schools in such an area had been established for three years and if each had an average attendance of at least 25 children then each of the schools should be allowed to become a denominational school. However Prime Minister Gladstone was under considerable pressure at that time from the non-conformists in England not to cave in under Catholic pressure and he decided not to implement the recommendations of the Powis Commission in this regard. In England and Wales, Board Schools had been set up under the 1870 Act and these schools which existed side by side with denominational schools were undenominational schools. No such Board Schools existed in Ireland where the school age population was seen to be adequately provided for by denominational schools. Throughout many parts of the southern region of the country where the population was almost entirely Catholic the only schools available were Catholic Schools. In such a scenario a small number of non-Catholics could legitimately demand that government make appropriate provision for them if these Catholic schools were recognised legally as Catholic schools. An

uneasy compromise therefore existed; schools were denominational in reality but the National School Rules continued to uphold the original fundamental principles of a religiously mixed system. This continued to be the situation until the country was partitioned in 1921.

Meanwhile, a number of efforts had been made to place Irish Education on a legislative base and to set up a Local Education Authority structure similar to that which had been set up in England and Wales under the 1902 Education Act. The most notable of these efforts was in 1919 when an Education Bill was proposed for Ireland. This bill provided for the setting up of a central Department of Education to supersede the Boards of National and Intermediate Education, the Technical Instruction Branch of the Department of Agriculture and Technical Instruction and the Teachers' Pension Office. The bill also provided for local education committees in each county and county borough which would have powers to provide local contribution towards building and improving schools, provide for maintenance and repair, provide school meals, books, etc.

The Catholic Church was strongly opposed to the bill as the bishops were convinced:

> "That the enactment of the measure would deprive the bishops and clergy of such control of the schools as is necessary for that religious training of the young which Leo XIII decided to be a chief part in the care of souls."

The Central Council of the Catholic Clerical School Managers issued a statement stating:

> "We offer our firm and united protest against the new Education Bill ..... we consider it necessary at the present juncture to declare as a fundamental principle that the only satisfactory education system for Catholics is that wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools, by Catholic teachers, under Catholic control."

The Church was successful in its opposition. The Education Bill was gradually forgotten and it never received a second reading in Parliament.

Following the partition of the country and the granting of independence to the southern twenty-six counties in 1921, the commissioners of national education

were disbanded and responsibility for education, north and south, was transferred to the newly appointed Ministers for Education of the Northern Ireland government and the Irish Free State respectively. In 1923 the northern government attempted to revive mixed education under the auspices of newly appointed local education authorities but this was opposed by the Catholic Church. The de facto situation in Northern Ireland for the next fifty years was one of religiously segregated schooling. Unlike the North, the Irish Free State Government made no effort to interfere with what had effectively become a denominational system of schooling. If anything, subtle changes in the rules for National Schools between 1922 and 1970 strengthened the control of the churches over primary schooling in the south.

The Constitution of the Irish Free State further established the subsidiary role of the state in the provision of education. The 1937 Constitution in particular enshrined the primary role of parents in the education of their children. It was however assumed that the voice of parents was adequately and satisfactorily mediated through the churches and negotiations which took place in relation to the development of schooling took place between the state and the churches. By the 1960s, the system of education which existed in the south was a denominational one; less than 5% of primary school were attended by children of a denomination other than that which controlled the school.

New rules published in 1965 gave explicit recognition to the denominational character of primary schools and many of the safeguards relating to children of minority religions or of no religion were removed. In 1971 a further complication was added to the situation. A new primary school curriculum was introduced and this new curriculum encouraged the integration of subjects, both religious and secular. The Teacher's Handbook was quite specific in this regard:

> "The decision to construct an integrated curriculum is based on the following theses .... That the separation of religious and secular instruction into differentiated subject compartments serves only to throw the whole educational function out of focus. The integration of the curriculum may be seen ... in the religious and civic spirit which animates all its parts.

Taken together, the rules of 1965 and the provisions of the 1971 curriculum created a new situation. The state now formally recognised the denominational character of the national school system and made no provision for children whose parents did not wish them to attend exclusively denominational schools or to attend religious instruction within such schools. The rule requiring teachers to be sensitive to the religious beliefs of those of different religious persuasions were removed. According to the curriculum guidelines, all schools were expected to offer an integrated curriculum where religious and secular instruction would be integrated. While the rule under which parents were allowed to opt their children out of religious instruction still remained, this rule became effectively inoperable since religious and secular instruction would now be integrated. Even if religious instruction were separately timetabled, it could be assumed that a specifically denominational ethos would "permeate the school day".

It was ironic that the national school system's denominational reality had been formally recognised at a time when parents were beginning to assert their rights in relation to the education of their children.

There was growing interest in education in Ireland in the 1960s and early 70's. In 1967 free secondary education had been introduced and there was considerable public debate about educational issues generally during this period. Vatican Two had encouraged involvement by the Catholic laity in what had traditionally been a clerically dominated church. The troubles in Northern Ireland had erupted and after the outbreak of violence in 1969 many Irish people were anxious to break down barriers between Protestant and Catholic on the island of Ireland. The country was booming economically and this resulted in an unprecedented situation where some of its earlier emigrants were now returning to Ireland to take up employment. These people had become familiar with the more liberal regime of other countries and were prepared to question the status quo in Ireland. The advent of television and increased discussion in the media contributed to the overall climate of change.

Parents who first tried to reintroduce mixed or multi-denominational education into Ireland both north and south encountered many difficulties. Initially, efforts were made to interest the two main churches, i.e. Roman Catholic and Church of Ireland in coming together and setting up joint/integrated schools but such efforts failed. Parents in a new housing area on the suburbs of Dublin (Marley Grange) in the early 1970s attempted to bring about such a development but they were not successful. In view of this failure a group of parents in another suburb of south Dublin (Dalkey) decided to take a different route and to incorporate themselves as a limited company to act as a patron of a new national school - the first religiously mixed or multi-denominational school to be set up in the Republic of Ireland since the foundation of the state in 1922. It was not an easy task. The National School System had been undisturbed for over 100 years. The then partners i.e. Church, State and teachers had difficulty in comprehending why such a change in the system was being sought by parents. It would also be an expensive undertaking. The National School System in Ireland continues to this day to be state aided and not state funded and while the relative proportion of cost provided by the local promoters is not high nevertheless it can come to a considerable amount of money for a small group of parents. As was the case in the nineteenth century, school patrons are still required to provide a site for a new school building in addition to a local contribution towards the cost of the building. They are also required to contribute to the running costs of a school. In the case of the first group in Dalkey, Co. Dublin the local contribution towards the new school building came to £150,000, a very large amount of money to be raised through voluntary effort.

Political support for the option of multi-denominational schools was essential and fortunately at a number of levels such support was forthcoming. This support gradually built up in all the main political parties although within parties there remained conservative members who had difficulty in accepting the rights of parents to multi-denominational education. Political lobbying was necessary and this lobbying led to counter attacks from conservative groups who saw the move towards multi-denominational education as a threat to the established order. One

such group distributed thousands of pamphlets before the 1977 general election in which they stated:

> "Atheistic interest in the Dalkey School Project is clear. Ireland's system of education is denominational by constitutional guarantee...We submit that there is no need for such a school as this which can only be divisive. It can only be hostile to religion in an age when it was never more needed....Dalkey could be a precedent for major trouble in other areas".

In spite of efforts to block the new initiative, the government (under Fianna Fail Minister John Wilson in 1978) approved the opening of the Dalkey School Project. Today this school has at least three times as many pupils seeking places as it can accommodate. The initiative taken in Dalkey was soon followed in other parts of the country. Initially the new multi-denominational schools were in the greater Dublin area, but in 1987 a breakthrough came with the opening of three schools outside the Dublin area in Cork, Kilkenny and Sligo. It was not easy for any of these groups. The demands placed on new groups continued to be difficult; temporary premises had to be provided, viability had to be proved and even when permanent recognition was given to the school, major fundraising had to be undertaken to provide the site and the local contribution for a new building. In 1987 an additional burden was placed on the promoters of multi-denominational schools. No capital grants were given to them in their early years until they had proved viability. This meant that at a stage at which the schools were at their most vulnerable and when the demand for accommodation was at its greatest, the cost of providing such accommodation falls entirely on the promoters. These conditions were not imposed on Catholic or Protestant schools and may well be unconstitutional.

Today there are fourteen multi-denominational schools in the Republic of Ireland. They are all primary schools and the demand continues to grow. It is expected that by September 1997 this number will have increased to sixteen. These schools are affiliated to a national body *Educate Together* the charter of which sets out the key principles under which the schools operate.

In Northern Ireland, as in the south, the move to set up integrated schools (as they are called there) was a bottom up one initiated and implemented by parents despite obstacles and difficulties. Unlike the schools in the south which were primary schools, the early schools in Northern Ireland were second level schools. The first integrated school was Lagan College, established in Belfast in 1981 by the campaigning parent group All Children Together. The obstacles were at least as great for parents in the North as they were in the south, in some ways greater. In the violent society which existed in Northern Ireland in the 1980s it took considerable courage to pursue the option of integrated education. Financially the difficulties were even greater for Northern Ireland parents. To begin with, government was not prepared to provide any financial support or encouragement. Eventually this policy was changed to one of ensuring that where enrolments were considered viable recurrent funds for teacher salaries and school equipment were paid by the Department of Education when the school opened. During the first three years no capital funds for building were available and this remains the case. All integrated schools in Northern Ireland are still required to borrow or raise from private sources the monies to purchase sites and establish school buildings in their early years. After three years where integrated schools have demonstrated a steady enrolment, the Department of Education (N.I.) will vest the school and pay the capital costs of buildings if and when they have the money available. In spite of these difficulties there are currently 32 integrated schools in Northern Ireland catering for more 7,000 pupils. Many of the integrated primary schools have developed nursery and playgroup units although these have as yet been unsuccessful in obtaining government grant aid. While this is a great achievement in a very difficult situation it nevertheless means that only two percent of Northern Ireland children are being educated together. In the south the proportion is less than one per cent.

What is the likely future for integrated (multi-denominational education on the island of Ireland? There is a growing demand, both north and south, for this type of schooling. Both governments are aware of this demand and are not unsympathetic. However, they are concerned at the cost implications of setting up a

network of such schools, particularly at a time when the school-going population is declining. This point was spelt out in the White Paper on Education, published by the Dublin government in 1995. Referring to the demand from parents for a wider choice of schools, the White Paper stated:

> "While this development is in line with the growing plurality of Irish society, it poses an additional challenge to the financing of the system by the State, particularly outside the larger centres of population, to provide the choice of schools reflecting different ethical or cultural traditions to match the choices and preferences of all parents.

Suggestions that Church schools should broaden their management structure and become more inclusive have not been welcomed by the Churches. Earlier this year (1997) an Education Bill which contained measures whereby parents, teachers and Church interests (i.e. Patrons) would be equally represented on school boards of management were resisted by the Churches. In a historic press conference in March, representatives of all the main Churches which control education in Ireland - the Roman Catholic Church, the Church of Ireland, the Methodists, Presbyterians and Muslims - came together and unanimously opposed the Bill. One speaker referred to "the great fear" they all shared that the Education Bill would start "opening doors" until eventually the churches' running of schools would be totally undermined. He said that the Bill undermined the ability of school Patrons to effectively maintain the ethos and traditions of their schools. The subsequent parliamentary debate on the bill was contentious with opposition deputies accusing the (Labour) Minister for Education, Niamh Breathnach, of introducing a Bill which "would prevent a religious order or other body from setting up and running a school in accordance with its beliefs and values" - an accusation which she refuted. The opposition spokesperson on Education alleged that the bill "was a clear attempt to take the churches out of education" and that what was being attempted was "a state takeover of education". This, he said, was "a disgrace and a scandal".

Since then, there has been a change of government and the then opposition spokesperson, Micheál Martin, is now the Minister for Education. He has committed himself to revising the Bill before bringing it back to Parliament and to removing the provisions which were unacceptable to the Churches.

In the meantime, a Commission on School Accommodation Needs set up by pervious Minister is preparing a report which will recommend criteria for recognising new schools, bearing in mind the need for diversity of school provision. It is hoped that this report will provide some way forward to the vexed and difficult question of choice of schooling for parents in the south.

In Northern Ireland similar problems are being debated. Despite the (Northern Ireland) Education Reform Order of 1989 which declared that "It would be the intention to give the highest priority within the capital programme to integrated school projects involving the provision of necessary additional pupil places", the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education maintains that this has not happened. The Council argues that on the contrary the backlog of inadequately housed integrated schools is growing and that it is becoming more difficult to gain recognition for new integrated schools. It remains to be seen whether the new Labour government will ease these conditions and provide the resources necessary to help the integrated school section to grow.

The Churches in Ireland fought a hard battle in the nineteenth century to transform a system of education which was intended to be religiously mixed into a denominational one. They are determined to ensure that this system will remain intact into the twenty-first century. The funding structures of education, north and south, are such that it is difficult for non-corporate bodies, such as groups of parents, to set up their own schools, and so far the State itself either north or south is not willing to take the lead in providing integrated/multi-denominational education. This may appear strange to observers from outside Ireland who are aware of the considerable efforts being made in other areas of society to break down the barriers between Catholics and Protestants and to move forward the so-called Peace Process. While nobody maintains that integrated education is the solution to the northern problem, it is not unreasonable to suggest that where parents clearly indicate a preference for such schools and where there is a viable demand, this demand should be met.

I will conclude with a quotation which is often repeated by proponents of integrated education in Ireland - a sentence uttered by the Roman Catholic Bishop of Kildare and Leighin in 1826:

> "I do not know of any measure which would prepare the way for a better feeling in Ireland than to unite children at an early age, bringing them up in the same school, leading them to commune with one another and to form these little friendships which often subsist through life."