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The Catholic School and Secularization in Ireland

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The secularization of society, renewed thinking on Catholic education since Vatican II and liberation theology are at the origin of a questioning of the traditional Catholic school model in Ireland. The outcome of the confrontation will have very significant consequences for the future development of Irish society.

The rise of the Catholic school in Ireland cannot but be seen in the context of the colonisation of the country by the English. A key element of the English strategy was cultural colonialism which meant the anglicisation of Ireland. From the Reformation period on, this came to mean not only the adoption of the English language and the English way of life but also of the reformed religion. The rejection of the conquest and of its necessary corollary, confiscation, also meant the rejection of the reformed or Protestant religion and the defence of the 'old' or Catholic religion. The Catholic school was also an answer to the sporadic but nevertheless intense efforts at proselytism by the Anglican Church in Ireland, that is the Church of Ireland. The result of such a situation was that the Catholic school came to represent, from the end of the eighteenth century on, a powerful alliance between education and religion and between society and Church.

The historic link between Church and education which, in continental Europe, through a network of episcopal, monastic and parish schools, meant that the Church had had a quasi-monopoly on literacy and education throughout the centuries, added to the strength of that alliance. A further element is that because of the Reformation, schools took on new life, becoming creative forces in the forging of a new denominational group-identity. But at the same time, the Reformation was, in the long run, at the origin of enhancing the position of the state to the detriment of the church in matters of education.[1] The long-term consequence of that development was the contest between the sacred and the secular in the context of the school system. With the extension of its powers and its role the state began to claim the right to define what constitutes formal education.

State intervention in Ireland goes back to the time of Henry VIII who, in 1537, created the Parish school.[2] As has been indicated, this was part of a cultural colonial project and also soon became associated with proselytism. In

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1 R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 22.

2 *First Report of the Commissioners of Irish Education Inquiry*, 1825, vol XII (London: House of Commons), p. 89.

the eighteenth century, the Charter schools and the Church Society schools, with state financial help through direct grants and duty revenues, continued in that tradition. The nineteenth century was to witness however a fundamentally new approach, with the state accepting two principles: that of education for all and that of non-sectarian education. The fact that such an approach was adopted for Ireland some forty years before an equivalent measure was applied to England can be explained, among other reasons, by the sturdy growth of educational establishments run by nuns and brothers. Early in the nineteenth century a network of Catholic schools was being set up by the newly-founded teaching congregations, principally the Presentation Sisters (1791), the Mercy Sisters (1828) and the Irish Christian Brothers (1802).

There was initial Catholic episcopal hostility to the proposals advanced by the state. Two sets of principles clashed. On one hand the system was defended because, in the eyes of its defenders, that is essentially the state itself, but also initially the Presbyterian church, its aim was to advance the general interest of all the children of the island of Ireland. On the other hand the Catholic church put forward the rights of parents and of their pastors to be the guardians of a school system which would transmit Catholic values in religious as well as in secular subjects.[3] The issue was to come to a head after the introduction in 1831 of a new state primary system inspired by the Irish Chief-Secretary, Stanley.[4] The new system was secularist in its inspiration. It was meant to bring together different persuasions, to instruct them in general subjects of moral and literary knowledge and to provide facilities for religious instruction separately. The combined moral and literary education was to ensure secular learning for all, irrespective of religious affiliation. There was separate religious education. The latter was set aside from the combined studies and it was also separate because of its denominational reference, needing the approval of the clergy of the respective denominations. However within twenty years this system, which was undenominational in theory, had become denominational in practice. Catholic children were taught in Catholic schools and Protestant children in Protestant schools. The failure of Stanley's secularist project can be explained by quite a number of factors, the most important of which was the opposition of the three main Churches and principally that of the Catholic Church. Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, the latter, one is inclined to forget, had none of the power nor the wealth of the Established state church.

Spearheading the Catholic cause was Archbishop Cullen of Dublin who was appointed by Rome with a mandate to unify the Catholic church in Ireland and to bring it into line with Roman discipline. He quickly imposed himself and in 1850 called the first Synod of the Irish church since the twelfth century. This synod was held in Thurles and it dealt predominantly with educational issues such as separate education for Catholic young people. Archbishop Cullen, using the centralized church organization which he did so

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3 *Idem*, vol. IV, p. 3.

4 *Powis Report*, vol. XXVIII, Part 1 (Dublin: Alexander Thom, 1870), pp. 22–26.

much to build, was to leave a permanent stamp on education in Ireland.[5] In total opposition to the Stanley project he advanced the cause of denominational education in teacher training colleges. He also set the scene for minimal state involvement in secondary education and for the equality of treatment of Catholics at University. His long-term achievement was the Intermediate Education Act of 1924 which sealed the choice by the new Irish state of the denominational system. Henceforth the basic principle would be government aid without government control. Control, in matters of education, was clearly placed in the hands of the Churches, and given the fact that nearly 95% of the population were Catholic in the Irish Free State, this meant Catholic control.

The period between 1850 and 1924 was marked by a coherent attempt on the part of the Catholic Church in Ireland to move into a position of total control of Catholic education. The initial success of Cullen and his followers meant that, by the end of the nineteenth century, nearly a million children were attending Catholic primary schools, and Catholic secondary schools were attracting a growing minority. The attempt was all the more credible that the Catholic Church had forged for itself a solid reputation as a provider and manager of education. At the same time, to judge from two Bishop's Pastorals, the turn of the century witnessed the sealing of ecclesiastical control of education. In the first of those pastorals, that of 1898, the control of Bishops over parochial managers, who in turn, had rights of appointment and dismissal of teachers, was affirmed. In the second one, in 1900, any attempts by primary teachers to seek redress against dismissal were dubbed as anti-clerical.[6]

But the affirmation of episcopal control did meet resistance. P. Pearse, for instance, came out in favour of giving the people of Ireland virtual control over their own education.[7] The London government also attempted to introduce reforms which would limit the powers of the bishops which were extending into the area of control of property and control of school funds. Assuming responsibility for acting in *loco parentis* the hierarchy worked out for itself a powerful role as owners and as representatives of the parents. The attempts at reform failed because they were all met with strenuous opposition from the bishops, the Catholic press and school managers.[8] The new Irish state, even before it assumed an official existence in 1922, declared that the Dail — as the Parliament of the new state called itself — would support the bishops in setting up and maintaining a national system of education.[9] It is not surprising therefore that when the state came into existence the following statement from the Catholic Primary Managers' Association met with approval: "the only satisfactory system of education for Catholics is one wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers

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5 Seamus O'Buachaille, *Education in Twentieth Century Ireland* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1988), p. 36.

6 *Irish National Teachers' Organization Circular* (1900).

7 *An Claidheamh Solais* (May 1907).

8 Such was the case with the 1904 Wyndham reform, the Irish Council Bill of 1907 and the McPherson Bill in 1919.

9 *The Times Educational Supplement*, 29 (October 1921).

under Catholic control".[10] Thus the scene was set for the development of schools at first, second and third levels in Ireland. What was elaborated was therefore an authoritarian model of Catholic schooling which, in its workings, was examination based. The fundamental policy of the Catholic church was further strengthened by the existence of a docile teaching force in Ireland and the full theoretical backing of the Vatican, contained in the papal encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* of Pius XI in 1929 on the Catholic school.

According to this document the role of the Catholic church in education is derived from a supernatural title conferred by God on her alone, transcending in authority and validity any title of the natural order. It therefore follows that education is eminently the function of the Church and her rights are independent of any earthly power. Family rights also take their origin in God and are prior to those of the state. They are also inviolate. The duty of the state is therefore to protect the prior rights of the parents and the Church. It must also be added that the encyclical criticises such developments as co-education, new theories on the autonomy of the child and mixed, neutral or secular schools. The end result was that the Catholic church constituted what Seamus O'Buachalla calls "the greatest proprietorial and managerial presence" in the education system, and, indeed, he could have added ideological.[11]

It could be argued that in practice Catholic church strategy produced a situation in which control took priority over principle. It was because there existed a danger for this control that the bishops, in the 1930s, rejected the attempts on the part of the state to give concrete expression to its constitutional aim of treating all of the children of the nation equally by introducing free education. The priority given to control also resulted in the refusal to permit an autonomous development of Catholic lay teachers. Catholic parents, in spite of their God-given rights, were excluded from any position of authority within the education structure. Such an authoritarian model, more adapted to the closed, rural and conservative Ireland of the first forty years of independence began to reveal its limitations in the context of the secularisation of Irish society.

The Catholic school in a changing Ireland

The policy of industrialization adopted in the late 1950s and the inevitable opening up of the country which such a policy entailed were at the origin of profound change in Irish society. The move to a more secular society had begun. It was not until the 1970s, with the introduction of contraception, and the 1990s with the successful referendum permitting divorce, that the movement became a force. The Catholic church in Ireland was naturally influenced by those changes. At the same time it was undergoing changes itself, largely inspired by the conclusions of Vatican II. The necessity to modernize its educational system to meet the challenges of an industrialized European country, led the state to rethink its educational policy, while the Catholic church, due to external and internal changes also began to reexamine the concept of the Catholic school. The very sharp decline in

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[10] *Idem.*

[11] Seamus O'Buachalla, *Education in Twentieth Century Ireland, op. cit.*

vocations to the religious life, male and female, and the significant number of departures of those who abandoned their former state, certainly played an important part in that reexamination. No longer in a position to exercise practical control due to the decline of religious personnel the Church found itself in the position of having to wage a battle of ideas if it was to remain in a position of influence in an institution which was slowly being transformed by secularization.

In the 1980s, one can say that the state took a number of initiatives which were to continue into the 1990s and which resulted in the Catholic church finding itself in a position of defensive reaction in the educational field. An effort to introduce partnership in planning is clear with the establishment by the state of the National Parents' Council which was set up in 1985 and was symbolic of a more central place for parents in education. It was also clear with the setting up of a number of representative committees which reported on education-related issues.[12] Many of the changes proposed then and later were to be found in the Green Paper, published in June 1992 and in the policy measures proposed in the government's White Paper on education: *Charting our Educational Future*, 1995.[13]

Catholic response to State initiative

The Conference of Major Religious Superiors (CMRS) published its *Response to The Green Paper on Education* in 1993.[14] It is critical of the way the *Green Paper* only refers implicitly to the nature of the social change which has affected Ireland in recent times and to the ideological assumptions which it suggests. To remedy this weakness the Response sets out to present what it believes to be the theoretical basis of the *Green Paper* and its basic assumptions about national development. The influence of human capital theory plays an important part here. Situated against the background of Parsons' more global theory on modernization which stresses the key role of urbanization, industrialization, universal suffrage and the existence of a rational bureaucracy and the crucial need of an entrepreneurial elite, this theory, proposed by T. W. Schulz, insists on the necessity of the availability of an efficient and effective vocational and training system to form a qualified personnel with the necessary vocational skills and competences.[15]

A further theory which is relevant to the debate on education for the future is that of the need for achievement proposed by D. C. McClelland who argues that it is the task of the school to develop the need for achievement among pupils with the aim of preparing them for

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12 Educational Broadcasting, Adult Education, In-Service Education for Teachers, School Discipline are some examples.

13 *Charting our Education Future* (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1995).

14 Education Commission of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors, *Considered Response to The Green Paper on Education* (Dublin: CMRS, 1993).

15 See: T. W. Schulz, "Investment in human capital," *American Economic Review*, 51 (1961), 1–7; and "Nobel Lecture: The economics of being poor," *Journal of Political Economy*, 88, 4 (1980) 639–652.

entrepreneurship.[16] Underpinning such theories is the understanding of development as an evolutionary process which traces the movement from traditional to modern society. The key to movement is the contention that economic growth lies in the individual and not in the social structures. Development is therefore promoted principally by the individual and not through structural change. We are here obviously confronted with the liberal model which views progress as movement away from factors which inhibit individual freedom and sees society as composed of a collection of atomised individuals and conflicting interest groups. In this type of society the economy is seen as best left to private interest and the notion of common good is seriously weakened.

The CMRS criticises those theoretical assumptions on several grounds. In questioning the idea that economic growth creates national development it underlines the increase in inequality of direct incomes which has resulted from the performance of the Irish economy and it also questions the sustainability of the actual growth. In questioning the idea that the availability of increased numbers of young people with entreprise and technological skills will contribute to economic growth, it underlines the dangers of a high level of structural unemployment which can lead to high levels of emigration among that section of the population in which the state has heavily invested. In questioning the idea that the possession of entreprise and technological skills enables young people to find employment, the CMRS alludes to several studies in various countries, the results of which give priority to a broad general education in preference to the acquisition of specific skills. Finally, in questioning the basic statement that the principal function of the education system is to supply the economy with young people possessing entreprise and technological skills it underlines the existence of needs other than economic which are necessary and which must be catered for through education.[17]

The criticism of the CMRS is based on its reading of the Green Paper which puts a heavy emphasis on the necessity for the education system to prepare for the emergence of an entreprise culture.[18] The Green Paper does, it must be said, attach importance to the achievement of equity in education, as it does to the fostering of self-reliance, critical thinking, political awareness and the promotion of an environment conducive to physical and emotional well-being.[19] It remains vague however when it comes to the application of such aims whereas it is quite concrete when it refers to the world of work. While change and improvement are proposed in the latter area, no reform is suggested in relation to "the affective, aesthetic or spiritual development of the young person."[20] The end result is that the Green Paper is judged to be excessively individualistic and competitive and that its definition of work is limited to that of the paid labour market, thus excluding other forms of work such as work in the home and voluntary work.

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16 See: D. C. McClelland, *The Achieving Society* (NewYork: The Free Press, 1961).

17 *Considered Response*, op. cit. pp. 9–11.

18 See *Green Paper*, pp. 3, 5, 11, 13.

19 *Idem*, pp. 33–34.

20 *Considered Response*, p. 6.

The Catholic alternative model

The alternative model proposed by the CMRS is interesting to the extent that not only does it constitute a counter model in relation to the one contained in the Green Paper, but it also situates itself largely in opposition to its own previous model. The fundamental principle on which the alternative model is built is the necessity to share more equitably power, wealth and work opportunities in society. This amounts to a rejection of the liberal model of development.[21] It also amounts to a rejection of the previous authoritarian model. This new model posits a society "where there is a constant effort to move towards greater justice and equality."[22] It takes society as a whole in which the individual units are interdependent and in which change in one part of society has repercussions on the other parts, and on the whole. This implies a new form of pluralism which will emphasise communal rather than individualistic values and integration rather than fragmentation. The greatest emphasis is therefore placed on such values as solidarity and participation, on the common good. In the field of education this means that priority must be given to issues of equality, to the development of citizenship, to the capacity to synthesize and to recognize interconnections in order to plan the future of society, and of the emancipatory possibilities of teaching and learning to achieve a democratic public life.[23]

The expression of the principles underlining the alternative model need to be completed by some considerations on the Catholic school in this context. What future do Catholic educationalists see for Catholic schools in Ireland? The initial preoccupation would seem to be to affirm that nowadays Christian education is founded on the conviction that religion is of absolute significance to the well-being of individuals and the transformation of society.[24] It draws its source from the gospel, which explains its particular concern for issues of justice, liberation and a critical awareness of global and environmental issues.[25] In fact it is primarily an adult activity. The Christian school, nevertheless, plays a particular role in the promotion of a Christian education, its overall goal being the integration of faith, life and culture. In other words it is a school which makes core Christian values explicit. It tries to bring together "all the different pieces of the school programme into a higher synthesis that influences the social and spiritual formation of pupils at the levels of theory and practice."[26] This school, through its religious education programme, strives to foster an understanding and appreciation of the symbolic, the sacramental, the mystical and the justice dimensions of the Christian identity.[27]

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[21] *Idem*, p. 11.

[22] *Idem*, p. 12.

[23] *Idem*, p. 14.

[24] Dermot Lane, "Catholic Education and the School: some theological Reflections," *CMRS, The Catholic School in Contemporary Society* (Dublin: CMRS) pp. 82–83.

[25] John McDonald, "Catholic Education and Evaluation," *idem*, p. 49.

[26] Dermot Lane, *idem*, p. 92.

[27] Teresa McCormack, *idem*, p. 125.

The Catholic school in a secular society

It is clear however that the reality of the Catholic school in Ireland, both yesterday and today, deviates from the aspirations put forward by those in the Catholic church in Ireland who are reflecting on a new model for Christian education. Preparation for life and work is still secondary to the task of perpetuating the Catholic church. The Catholic school in Ireland still continues to see its social role as one of selecting young people for jobs, or for the absence of jobs. However, recently, several factors have emerged which will necessitate important decisions in relation to Catholic schools: declining vocations, a decreasing school population, financial restraints, renewal of curriculum and all that against a background of secularisation in Irish society and growing state intervention in the area of education. The Catholic school will, in the near future, have to face up to a certain number of contradictions which are the result of such change. Will it continue in its historical ambition to try to control Irish society in the name of the Catholic church or will it assume a new mandate of taking a critical distance from society so that it can challenge and contest it from its own Christian perspective? This could result in the Christian school adopting a critical attitude to the demands made by the state in matters of schooling when it insists on a highly competitive and individualistic ethos. Will it continue to insist, in the light of the teachings of Rome, on retaining its quasi-monoply, or will it accept as a necessity a multiplicity of school types, including non-denominational schools? The advantage of a plurality of types of schools is that the Catholic one could better assert its own identity. Will it opt for such a formula which would certainly mean a decrease in its power of control? The debate which has been going on for some time in Ireland on the future of Catholic schooling is of great importance. Its outcome will certainly influence the nature of the pluralism that the processus of secularisation is now imposing and which has, up to now, been strenuously opposed by the Catholic church.

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