

Religion, Pluralism and Education¹

A 2020 Vision

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It would indeed be a significant indication of a changed society if the many associations between religion and education in Northern Ireland were in the future to become marked by listening, openness, generosity and sharing – which at least some people would regard as a more authentic religious or even Christian spirit than that to which we have become accustomed. One might wonder, however, if twenty years is long enough to replace the wary territoriality which so often seems to characterize the involvement of the Christian churches in education.

A 'Dark Region' in education?

At a conference on cultural traditions held in 1989 a group considering the place of religion in education observed that:

Lack of knowledge led to fear ... [which] led to suspicion and mistrust. **The group accepted that religion was one of the darkest regions in education.** (Crozier, 1989 - present writer's emphasis)

There is little doubt that many people see religion as a kind of final bulwark against pluralism in Northern Ireland and in education in particular! For some it is a highly undesirable bulwark. They see a defensive, often exclusive religious establishment as a malign influence in society and on its schools; a significant source of sectarianism. The labelling of people into tribal camps, according to this view, is in no small way due to the religious separation of children and to their narrow and limited religious education in those separate schools. It is little wonder, then, that schools have become one of the symbolic targets for arson attacks during the quasi-religious marching season and at other times of sectarian tension. For others, however, religious education is a desirable barrier – a means towards protecting society from the encroaching evils of a secularism fed by liberal ideas which declare everything as 'relative'. Religion in schools, they propose, can carry that message to an otherwise 'un-churched' multitude and help to turn back the tide.

Historically and in the present the involvement of the Christian churches in education is substantial. The Catholic Church in Ireland has retained and forthrightly guarded its own schools and their right to teach confessionally (i.e. in relation to the religious teachings of their own tradition), albeit with considerable state support. While retaining significant rights in management and religious teaching, the Protestant churches mostly transferred their schools into state control in the 1930s, although it is not too unusual to detect faintly envious glances over at the position of the Catholic schools. Some fundamentalist Protestants have even set up their own 'Christian schools', usually to protect their children from what is perceived as the encroachment of liberalism in religious education and schooling in general (though one is sometimes tempted to wonder where such liberal approaches are to be found). Despite the support of many individual Protestants and Catholics the official attitude towards integrated schools among the various Church hierarchies varies from cool to hostile!

What will be the verdict of the next twenty years on the role of religion in education? It often seems that the battle lines are closely drawn between those who wish to banish religion altogether from the public educational sphere and those who suggest that without it civilization as we know it would

¹ In Gardner, J. and Leitch, R. (Eds) (2000) *Education 2020: A Millennium Vision: Issues and Ideas for the Future of Education in Northern Ireland*, pp79-86, Belfast: Blackstaff Press

cease to exist! Yet while it may suit these extremes to suggest that these are the only possible positions, there are more subtle and sensitive approaches to the place of religion in schools. This is a vision of a more mature society which will recognize more appropriate alternatives, and take steps towards their realization.

A present concern

In a recent television discussion the UK Chief Rabbi, Dr Jonathan Sacks, suggested that there were two areas in which religion should move with great care. First, religion should not take power, although it was acceptable to seek to influence. Secondly, religion must always leave a space for the one who is different. If religion transgresses these, he proposed, it makes for very bad religion indeed! It certainly seems to many that in relation to education (and not that alone) the religious authorities have moved far beyond the role of influencers and have become significant agents of power, both directly and indirectly. In doing so even less space has been left for those who are different.

This is by no means unique to Ireland, but it has particular resonances in a society where a very large sector of education is separated out along perceived religious lines. This, however, is not simply an argument about religiously separate schools, although it is hard to avoid the questions which this raises. While it is true that the phenomenon of separate, divided schools is a symptom of a separate, divided society, it is no less true that the symptom has become closely intertwined with the cause.

Beyond the issues of separation, the concern which gives rise to this vision is about other inter-related issues. It is about an approach to religious education (RE) which is seen as the preserve of the Christian churches. A major obstacle is the Core Syllabus for RE, agreed by the four largest Christian denominations in 1992, which is exclusively Christian and gives extremely limited and only grudging recognition to other faiths. Closely related to this is the concern that teachers and schools seem largely unaware of the needs of pupils from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds. It is also about the abuse of education for the purpose of promoting faith, sometimes through direct proselytization but more often by the exclusion of consideration even of the beliefs and practices of other Christians, let alone of other faiths. It is about the narrowness with which some choose to teach religion, whether in schools or in the churches, attempting to point children towards their own mind-set and to mould their thinking towards a received orthodoxy. It is about the failure to challenge prejudice, sectarianism and racism out of a misguided sense that it is not the role of schools to do so. It is about the self-righteous or naïve declaration that: "We don't have any problems here!" which rejects the need for education in mutual understanding and cultural awareness. It is from this position that some oppose any attempts to introduce a broader approach to the teaching of religion, arguing that children 'don't need it', or that they need to learn about 'their own faith' first.

Is there any difference between this and the culture of avoidance which has been too familiar a feature of the years of political conflict and violence? There is a real irony in one small piece of research in the 1990s which showed how some teachers preferred to consider visiting a synagogue or a Hindu temple with their class rather than contemplate taking them to churches 'of the other persuasion!' (Curran, 1995). The Northern Ireland conflict is not in any simplistic sense a religious dispute, but we should not discount or minimize the significance of exclusive approaches to religion, and religious education in particular, in shaping the mentality of sectarian conflict.

These concerns are not new and nor, indeed, are the proposed alternatives. Some educators have long held a vision of a more educational and holistic approach to religion in schools. Some, like John Greer and his colleagues in the University of Ulster, worked hard during even more depressing times to provide teachers with the necessary skills and resources, and schools with the confidence for this task (see, for instance, Greer and McElhinney, 1985; McElhinney, Harris and Greer, 1988). Their pioneering was sometimes acknowledged with polite lip-service, sometimes attacked as 'ecumenical' or 'relativist', but occasionally it served to inspire others to share the vision and take it forward.

A future vision

Is there any possibility of real change in the inter-relationship between religion and education over the coming twenty years? Is a positive approach to building a culturally plural society in Northern Ireland more than just a pious liberal dream?

The vision which continues to motivate the present writer is of an educational system which recognizes the importance of religious education. This, however, can no longer be argued on the grounds of religious privilege or imperative. If there is to be a viable future for religious education in the public education system it can only be justified if it is educationally sound and respectful of diversity. This will be a particularly difficult challenge for those schools with an overtly religious identity and for those teachers who have a deep personal faith commitment, but it is a challenge that must be faced.

The task is one of encouraging and building an approach to religious teaching in schools which is open, enquiring and challenging, but at the same time respectful of diversity and sensitive to the needs of a range of faith groups and of those who belong to no faith. It is, as often expressed to student teachers, the need to teach religion in a way which respects the integrity of the pupil, the subject and the teacher. In Britain and many other parts of the world this approach has largely been taken on board and has been found to be broadly acceptable to most groups. Indeed, it has to be asked if there is any other way of dealing with religion in education in a plural society apart from the too-simplistic and defeatist option of banning religion from schools altogether.

This, then, is a vision of an educational system 20 years from now which still holds a place for teaching religion, but on a very different basis than is usual at present. In such schools there will be a greater religious and ethnic diversity. The notion of the school as a place for one particular community, religiously-defined or otherwise, will have been abandoned as inimical to the development of a healthy society. The notion of the school as a neutral place will have been recognized as cold and unsympathetic and set aside in favour of the open acknowledgement and celebration of diversity. Schools will be seen as **shared space**, and the sharing will be valued and nurtured. The cultural and religious needs and concerns of this range of pupils will be known, understood, cared for and celebrated by teachers and the whole school community. It will be an expected and accepted part of the teacher's job to do so.

Within a school where this ethos prevails, religious education will be seen not as learning how to be religious or how to feel guilty about not being religious, but rather as an exploration of the ways in which religion has influenced people's thinking and behaviour, and society past and present. It will be an encounter with living religious traditions of all kinds, in order to learn about them and from them. It will be an opportunity to reflect on issues which have inspired religious questions and answers, but also an opportunity to think, question and challenge. It will be an opportunity to examine moral and ethical issues, both individual and global, and to clarify personal values. Teachers in this context will not present themselves as authority figures but as co-learners and seekers after truth. Christianity, in whatever form, will have ceased to be the sole religious tradition to be explored in religious education classes, though inasmuch as it may remain a significant influence in the lives of people living in the Northern Ireland community it may quite reasonably occupy a space in keeping with its place as the religion of the majority. School assemblies, officially required by government in the 1990s to be 'wholly or mainly Christian in nature', will have ceased to be a daily 'God-slot' but will be valued as an occasional opportunity for the breadth of the school community to take part in, reflect on and celebrate their shared and diverse values and ways of life.

Churches at an official level will probably find this a very difficult vision to share. It will require them to acknowledge, respect and work as partners with members of other faith communities. Some members of minority faiths may indeed find this equally unfamiliar territory and no less uncomfortable. If they need reassurance they should all look across to the British 'solution' in the establishment of Standing Advisory Conferences on Religious Education (SACREs), where local partnership in the planning of religious education syllabuses takes place.

How will we get there?

If we are to embark on this long road we will need to develop a new attitude towards each other. First of all there must be a genuine listening to the concerns of the various parties as a means towards proper communication. In the well-known rabbinical saying, we were given two ears and one mouth, so we should listen twice as much as we speak! Listening has not always been a quality associated with the relationships between the Christian churches, let alone between Christians and members of other faiths, or between religious believers and those who have no religion. Such listening will probably begin on a small, individual scale, as characterized in the work of the Council for Christians and Jews or the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum, but it will soon have to take on a broader community dimension.

Those involved in teaching religion in schools will have to make very clear the open purposes of religious education. An increasingly sceptical public will not tolerate forever the use of schools to promote particular forms of religion. Those who have already adopted an open and plural approach to RE must make their case ever more strongly, because the public has simply not heard it yet. Schools which have already developed partnerships across the cultural and religious divisions of Northern Ireland (for instance, through education for mutual understanding or the Schools' Community Relations Programme) must not be seen to be studiously avoiding the religious dimensions of their sharing, as some have done, or religion will continue to be that 'dark region' in education. They must also broaden their horizons to take account of the greater local and global plurality beyond Catholics and Protestants.

This building of a balanced pluralism in the education system will require much in the way of professional development. Teachers will have to become much more aware of the range of Christian denominations and their emphases and concerns, and of the various other faith communities. They themselves will have to be engaged in personal and group encounter to this end. Being told by others about the beliefs and practices of particular groups is no substitute for person-to-person meeting and conversation. But as well as increasing the knowledge level of teachers we must also be providing them with the skills to manage an open approach and to deal with questioning, with challenging, with controversial issues, with conflict. Such inter-personal and inter-group skills are the stuff of good quality cross-community programmes, and they need to be disseminated much more widely among educational professionals.

The most difficult dimension of this way forward will be the extent to which we are able to move from separateness in education to sharing. There are few signs that those who manage the church schools, most notably the Catholic Church authorities, are ready for this as yet. A more confident and politically mature society may be able to move in this direction, but it will need broader consent than presently seems to be possible. The necessary confidence-building process may lie in setting in motion the vision of a more open approach to religion in schools – attempting to shed light on the 'dark region'.

An early glimmer of that light was sparked by a brief phrase in an official preview of Curriculum Review proposals in 1999. It argued for:

... a shift in the emphasis of Religious Education towards understanding major world religions, in particular Islam, as well as other Christian denominations within Northern Ireland. (CCEA, 1999)

It is unusual for curriculum bodies in Northern Ireland to address themselves to religious education issues and so it will be very interesting to see how keenly this is pursued.

This vision will not sit easily with those who prefer the status quo in either religion or education. For the present writer, however, both religion and education will only flourish if they are concerned with exploration, movement, risk and the challenging of boundaries. Notwithstanding all the obstacles and frustrations, this is a road worth travelling.