

Response to Consultation on Inclusion - Forum on Patronage and Pluralism

The Department of Education and Skills has issued a call for responses to the *Report of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector* in a leaflet, entitled “How can primary schools make all children feel included and involved?”

It is a consultation specifically in regard to Catholic primary schools. As the *Leaflet* makes clear, the intended target for the policy that will be developed are schools owned and operated by the Catholic Church as part of its mission and service both to the Church and to Irish society, **and that are to remain so**, not schools that will be divested of their patronage by the Catholic Church or those already under other patronage.

Because we are professionally involved in Catholic education we wish to offer the following observations and comments.

1. The prejudicial nature of the consultation process

The title and structure of the *Leaflet* is problematic in three respects.

First, it frames its enquiry by conveying the impression that currently in Catholic schools inclusion is the exception, rather than already the norm. Yet there is no evidence presented, either here or in the Forum’s *Report* upon which the *Leaflet* is based, to support the view that there is a major problem here that needs fixing. If this were the case, if Catholic schools were not already to the fore in terms of being inclusive, then, as we explain below, they would be failing on their own terms, because to be Catholic, by definition and in practice, is to be inclusive and respectful in regard to other views and perspectives.

Contrary to the impression conveyed by this consultation process, however, it is our experience that Catholic schools already play a pivotal role in regard to integration and inclusion, and this not only within the school but also in the local community. Catholic schools, through skilled and dedicated teachers, are already, in fact, the primary agents of inclusion in many local communities. They do this because of their Catholic identity, not despite it or separate from it.

The leaflet conveys the impression that Catholic patrons were only historically involved in the provision of schools and the necessary land for their building. This is still the case. Catholic patrons are actively involved in the provision of schools for children in local communities and the sites on which these are built. These schools are welcoming of children from all faiths and backgrounds.

Second, the *Leaflet* presents inclusiveness and involvement as subjective ‘feelings’: the emphasis is on what pupils and parents ‘feel’. This approach is problematic. If a pupil does not *feel* included, or a parent does not *feel* that her/his child is involved sufficiently (whatever this means) does this mean that a school has failed in its responsibility to be inclusive?

Third, the *Leaflet* is prejudicial in the manner in which it raises a number of questions and then implies the appropriate answers. For instance, in relation to “Preparation for religious sacraments” it states:

Already in some areas, parents and the parish are taking on a greater role in preparing children for First Holy Communion which means less time needs to be spent on this during the school day and the Expert Group suggest this should be built on in discussions with parents and clergy.

Or again, the leaflet “helpfully” suggests that religious education would take place at the beginning or end of the school day. Similarly, it reiterates the Forum’s “recommendations” regarding prayers, school boards of management, celebrating religious holidays, statues and symbols, etc. However, in no instance is the possible or likely impact on the characteristic spirit of the school proposed for consideration. This would have been required for balance.

It is a fundamental tenet of Catholic education that: “parents who have the primary and inalienable right and duty to educate their children must enjoy true liberty in their choice of schools” (*Gravissimum educationis*, n. 6), a position that is consistent with the Irish Constitution on this issue. It follows that Catholic patrons are as concerned as Government agencies are, to ensure that parental wishes are accurately discerned and acted upon. In future, we believe that it is in everyone’s interest that consultations of stakeholders be conducted in a fair and balanced manner, as for example, one finds in the work of the Referendum Commission. The intention should be to explain the subject matter, promote public awareness of the importance of the issue, and highlight the importance of participating in the consultation process.

2. Questioning the extent and nature of the perceived demand for change

We support and welcome divesting patronage from Catholic schools where there is sufficient and convincing evidence of parental demand for it, and, on the basis that schools remaining under Catholic patronage will be allowed to function in accordance with their characteristic spirit. However, we do not accept that the findings of the consultation thus far conducted by the Department of Education and Skills have produced such evidence of parental demand except in a few instances. In fact, support for divesting of schools was surprisingly lacking.¹ The Expert Group states: “We all know that Irish society has changed a lot in recent years...” (p. 7). But, as the Department of Education and Skills already knows from its earlier consultation process, it cannot be simply assumed that such change translates into a demand for greater diversity in the provision of school patronage.

Undoubtedly, during the last three decades, there has been strong immigration in to Ireland. Most of the new immigrants, however, hail from countries in which traditional Christian values are strong. In comparison to other countries, the percentage, for instance, of Muslims in Ireland, remains relatively small. And where there are Muslim communities they seem to be more willing to send their children to a faith-based school rather than a non-faith based school when such an option is open to them.

In addition, Ireland does not have a particularly strong atheist or atheistic humanist tradition. In the four waves of the European Values Survey (1981 – 2008) the following question was asked: “Do you think of yourself as a religious person, not a religious person, or a convinced atheist?” There has been an increase in the numbers describing themselves as “not a religious person”. However, as the figures below demonstrate, the number of convinced atheists in Ireland, if anything, is in decline, in fact, dramatically so between 1999 and 2008 among the cohort (30 – 44 years) most likely currently to be parents of primary school children.

% Convinced Atheist	18-29	30-44	45-60	60+	Total
1981	1.90%	1.20%	0.90%	0.40%	1.30%
1990	0.80%	1.40%			0.60%
1999	0.60%	3.60%	0.40%		1.30%
2008	1.30%	1.90%	0.80%	0.50%	1.10%

In the latest census, almost 3.8 million people self-described as Roman Catholic. With Protestant and Orthodox this amounts to almost 4 million. In comparison, only 270,000

¹ Although the response rate was very low, the findings of the survey were revealing (p.6): “The number of preferences expressed that stated they would avail of a wider choice of primary school patronage, if it were available, ranged from 25.4 pc to 35.2 pc of the overall responses.” Given the low response rate overall, this probably constitutes around 4 to 8 pc of the total number of parents.

indicated they had no religion. (Moreover, not all those self-describing as “non-religious” are secular or atheistic humanist – indeed, according to the last census, in real terms there are only 3,900 self-professed atheists in Ireland.)

In short, the sociological and demographic data available at the very least renders assumptions both in regard to the nature and extent of the demand for change questionable. While every single school child, and his/her parents or guardians, should be respected and cared for to every possible extent in the sensitive area of religious and personal beliefs, this must be done in such a way that the needs of others, and in this case the overwhelming majority, are not neglected or denied.

Our concern, as we shall explain below, is that the proposals contained in the *Forum Report* and suggested for endorsement by the *Leaflet*, would damage or even destroy the characteristic spirit of Catholic schools, thus, denying the needs and rights of the majority of children and parents. Further, as we shall show below, the proposals reveal not only an inadequate understanding of religious formation and ethos, but, more worryingly, also of education, and in particular of its formative dimensions.

3. The proposals would form Catholic pupils in Catholic Schools in a secularist understanding of their own faith

The key problem with the Expert Group’s recommendations, which are promoted by this *Leaflet*, is that they reflect a naïve understanding of “pluralism”.

There are two kinds of pluralism. The first kind, *material pluralism*, refers to the notion that communities, while rooted in and nurturing their own distinctive traditions and identities, are committed to respecting and learning from other traditions and worldviews, and are willing to be challenged and enriched by them. Catholic schools, precisely because they are Catholic and are rooted in their Catholic faith, are called to be pluralist in this important sense. As John Sullivan (*Catholic Education: Distinctive and Inclusive*) states: “It is part of the very nature of the Church that it is pluralist, ecumenical, open to life and to new discernment of truth... because the Holy Spirit continues to call all its members into the fullness of truth”. This also applies to Catholic schools, which are part of the Church’s mission.

Significantly, the Expert Group tacitly acknowledged that inclusion is a dimension of a Catholic characteristic spirit when it stated:

... inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where the **Catholic** students and parents are **most committed to their own practice** (p. 93, our emphasis).

Yet if, in Catholic schools, the rituals of various religions are to be celebrated, and prayers are to be (somehow) inclusive of all beliefs (and, presumably, none), the nurturing of such commitment to Catholic practice would become difficult if not impossible to sustain.

Catholic schools, by virtue of being Catholic, are already committed to genuine pluralism and inclusion, but in a way that is respectful both of the beliefs of all their pupils, **and** of the characteristic spirit of the school.

The Expert Group’s report, however, and the *Leaflet*, are working out of and proposing a different kind of pluralism, one that is incompatible with a Catholic characteristic spirit. The kinds of practices the *Forum Report* and *Leaflet* propose for parents to consider, such as a programme of religious education that is not integrated into the curriculum as a whole, and the “celebration” of the rituals and artefacts of various beliefs systems, presuppose, and in fact require, no specific commitment to any particular tradition, identity, characteristic spirit or ethos.

This kind of pluralism, which is known as *formal pluralism*, claims to be “neutral” and therefore more “inclusive” than worldviews which have a more explicit understanding of their own identity and tradition.

However, *formal pluralism*, is not neutral at all. Instead it becomes a surrogate characteristic spirit. While purporting to welcome all worldviews equally, in fact, it claims an absolutist perspective, from which it sits in judgement over competing worldviews, and often disparages them as “intolerant” or “lacking in inclusivity.” In the words of Terrence Merrigan (who, in turn refers to Peter Donovan):

to be ‘pluralist’ [in this *formal* sense] is “to pursue an ideological project that has, as its ultimate goal, the neutralisation of all heterogeneity by the imposition of a totalitarian understanding of truth. In this scenario, there is only one truth, namely, the truth of pluralism”.

In our view, the Expert Group, however inadvertently, effectively espouses this kind of *formal pluralism*, which is inherently secularist.

The Forum’s recommendations foster a pluralist-secularist stance in which pupils are to learn *about* all religions (the pluralist perspective), without necessarily being formed in any of them (the secularist agenda, in which religion is excluded from the public sphere). This is to be realised in particular through the introduction of a new programme, Education about Religious and Beliefs, and Ethics (mentioned in the *Leaflet*), to be mandatory even in faith-based schools.² This programme, which was proposed to the Forum by Atheist Ireland in its submission, is already being designed and student teachers are already being prepared to teach this programme.

The suggestion that religion be considered a “discrete” subject – the only one in the whole curriculum – also reveals a secularist bias, apart from the fact that it also reveals a profound misunderstanding of the nature of religious formation.

Consistent with its proposal for a new programme *about* religions and beliefs the Forum’s recommendations essentially reduce religious symbols, celebrations, prayers and rituals to being interesting cultural artefacts about which all pupils can/should be informed. For instance, the *Report* (and the *Leaflet*) suggest that prayers should be “inclusive (...) of the differing traditions” (*Report*, p. 93), and it recommends that schools be required to display symbols of all religions, and to celebrate the “religious holidays and festivals from different world cultures as well as the more traditional Irish holidays [*sic*] like St Patrick’s Day, Easter and Christmas” (*Leaflet*, p. 8), without any acknowledgement or critical consideration as to how this may affect the integrity of the ethos of a Catholic school.

This approach to religion is inherently secularist and, if implemented, would “school” pupils in a secularist understanding of the very faith that is meant to be the school’s characteristic spirit. In other words, it would not be a Catholic understanding of their faith that pupils would receive.

Curiously, it is hard to see how, if these recommendations were implemented, Catholic schools would in fact be distinct from existing non-Catholic providers of primary education. This is ironic when one considers that the changes being proposed are meant to foster greater plurality in the provision of primary education.

4. More confusion: the appeal to the Toledo principles

There is a further problem with what is being proposed. The Expert Group appeals to the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religion and Beliefs in Public Schools*. These principles inform the language and the ideas of the Forum’s *Report*, and the *Guiding Principles* are duly listed in Appendix 6 of the *Report*. The problematic nature of these

² It is unclear from the *Report* and the *Leaflet* as to whether *ERB and Ethics* is to be mandatory for all pupils in Catholic schools or only for those who opt out of denominational Religious Education. However, given that it will be mandatory to make available ERB and Ethics, together with the reality of limited teaching resources, and time on the curriculum, its introduction in Catholic schools will adversely affect faith formation for Catholic pupils, and the school’s characteristic spirit.

Principles has already been detailed elsewhere.³ It is enough to note here that they emerged out of concern, following fundamentalist terrorist atrocities, for the potential negative impact of religion on society and the economy, and this very much frames their recommendations regarding religious education.

Here, we only want to note that the Expert Group would seem to have misinterpreted the meaning of “Public Schools” in the Toledo document. Here is the relevant quotation:

Teaching about religions and beliefs may occur in schools and programmes that are under the exclusive responsibility of the state or other public bodies, in private schools (whether or not they have a particular religious or ideological orientation), or in public schools that have a particular religious or ideological orientation. The Toledo Guiding Principles *may be* relevant in all of these settings, *but in the case of private schools or other schools in which teaching about religion is not the exclusive responsibility of the state, religious autonomy rights should be respected.* [italics ours].⁴

In a footnote on p. 20, the Toledo document clarifies how it understands “public schools”. The term ‘public school’ as used in this document refers to a school whose organization, financing and management are primarily the responsibility of, or under the primary oversight of, a public body (state, regional, municipal, etc.). A ‘private school’, as defined by the Toledo document, is a school in which:

... irrespective of whether it may receive degrees of support (including financial support) from public sources, matters of organization, financing and management are primarily the responsibility of the school itself, or of a non-public sponsoring body.

It would seem that the Toledo principles, by admission of the document itself, are not being proposed by its authors for application to schools which are under the patronage of religious bodies. Yet, already, as we know from the Forum Report, it is intended in Ireland to impose a programme about religions and beliefs, based upon the Toledo Principles, and which we have already argued is inherently secularist, on all Irish schools without any assurance to date that “religious autonomy rights” (the term used above) will be respected here.

Hence, the appeal to the Toledo principles would seem to be further evidence of an inability on the part of the Expert Group to understand, accept and cherish the distinctive nature of Catholic schools. In other countries, such as, for example, Belgium, the State has its own State schools which accommodate children from non-Christian worldviews. However, religious schools (i.e., Catholic, Muslim, Protestant...) also receive state-funding, and are entitled to protect and nurture their own ethos.

5. Practical suggestions

In practical terms, we suggest that the Department of Education and Skills should:

- a) Support fully the development of non-Catholic and non-religious schools where there is a properly documented demographic and sociological demand for same.

³ For more detailed discussions, see Eamonn Conway, “The Future of Catholic Schools” (p. 269-277) and Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “The End of Catholic Education in Ireland?” (p. 278-285) from *The Furrow* 63 (2012).

⁴ See: <http://www.osce.org/odihr/29154>

- b) Work with patrons of Catholic schools and support bodies, e.g the CPSMA, to support the full, authentic and effective implementation of the characteristic spirit of Catholic schools, which includes the distinctively Catholic understanding of inclusion and respect for the richness and diversity of other beliefs and cultures. This includes co-operating with the Church in providing continuing professional development for parents, teachers, principals and members of Boards of Management of Catholic schools.
- c) Co-operate with appropriate bodies in the development of curricular and other resources that support and encourage inclusion and the acknowledgment of diversity in a manner fostered by, consistent with and founded upon the distinctiveness of Catholic education. Useful here are the principles for dialogue, and for respect for inclusion and diversity developed in the context of the “Courtyard of the Gentiles” project of the Pontifical Council for Culture, and the emergence of the concept of a “culture of encounter” in the ministry of Pope Francis.
- d) Accept and acknowledge the reality that “neutrality is never neutral”, and that the ethos of a school, whether religious or secular, is never a private matter.
- e) Retain sacramental preparation as an integral part of the programme in Catholic schools, including in “stand-alone” schools.
- f) Encourage Catholic and other faith-based schools in their continuing excellent work in the service of inclusion and involvement of all pupils in the life of the school and community. This means encouraging them to continue to display their religious symbols and artefacts in an authentic and integral manner, while providing proper pedagogy in regard to such symbols and artefacts to pupils of other faiths. At the same time, support schools in continuing to provide opportunities for those who hold other beliefs to respect them and deepen their own faith commitment.
- g) Acknowledge and support fully in Catholic schools the appropriately privileged position of Christian holy days, feasts, and sacraments, by showing due respect for these, and ensure that Catholic children will learn respect for the festivals of other religions, and non-Catholics will learn to cherish their own.
- h) Retain and support Catholic Religious Education as an integral dimension of the curriculum of Catholic schools. There is no need to introduce a secular Education about Religion and Beliefs, and Ethics module because Catholic RE will include engagement with other worldviews (both religious and non-religious) from a Catholic perspective; this can also involve knowledge of, and occasional exposure to, the practices and symbols of other religions. But it should not end up in an indifferent, relativist “super-market style” display throughout the school of the religious symbols of all denominations, as if they are all equally valid from a Catholic point of view.

6. Conclusion

- It would seem that what is being proposed is to require Catholic schools to fulfil the State’s duty of catering for children of non-Christian parents.

- Bizarrely, Catholic schools are to be given the impossible task of supporting all faiths and none, regardless of the impact this will have on their own characteristic spirit.
- If these proposals are implemented, a legitimate concern to safeguard the rights of a minority will effectively vitiate the rights of the majority.

We find this particularly worrying, as understandably it gives rise to concerns that a secularist bias and agenda may be at work. In fact, when one steps back from the particularities and considers the overall picture, taking into account the issues and questions proposed for consideration and the prejudicial nature of the consultation process, it is difficult not to ask if there is an attempt underway to engineer change rather than simply respond to a gradually changing social landscape.

Genuine inclusion and pluralism does not mean diluting difference in an effort to find a bland 'lowest common denominator'. Rather, it means respectful engagement with and learning from others, and the mutual enrichment this brings, from the perspective of being steeped in one's own tradition. This obviously presupposes a good knowledge of one's own tradition. It is similar to learning a language: it is important to learn other languages, but we will never learn any language unless we first master our own mother tongue. The same applies to worldviews: children can only be meaningfully exposed to other worldviews from a clear understanding of their own. Again, each worldview, like every language, has its own distinctive character, and there is no meta-language which all people speak. Similarly, there is no such thing as a "neutral stance" when it comes to worldviews.

The Irish State has the obligation to facilitate the provision of education of people with non-Christian worldviews. However, it cannot reasonably expect Christian schools (Catholic and Church of Ireland) to diminish their own identity and renege on their mission to provide a formation in the Christian faith for the children in their care.

Unfortunately, in our view, the consultation leaflet reflects the confusion in the *Forum Report* in regard to the nature of pluralism and inclusion. It also invites endorsement by the public of suggestions which, if adopted, would make it impossible for a Catholic school to fulfil its responsibilities in regard to upholding its characteristic spirit.

Submitted (in a personal capacity):

Prof Eamonn Conway, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Dr Eugene Duffy, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

Dr Rik Van Nieuwenhove, Department of Theology & Religious Studies, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick

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