



Will

MODERN
IRELAND
tolerate
CATHOLIC
SCHOOLS?

John Murray, Ph.D. [Theology]

FOREWORD

Catholic and faith schools in Ireland are under growing pressure to justify their existence. As the country becomes more pluralist and secular, some people question whether any public money should go to faith schools.

The Iona Institute has consistently argued that there must be heavy divestment of Catholic schools to other patron bodies in order for the school system to better reflect the new realities of Irish society. Divestment has been happening far too slowly. Parents have a right to send their children to a school that reflects their beliefs.

But it should also be acknowledged that Catholic and other denominational schools are already good examples of diversity in practice. The appendix to this paper shows, Catholic schools are more likely than other schools to have children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In addition, while almost 90 percent of primary schools remain Catholic (although the strength of ethos will vary from school to school), just half are Catholic at secondary level, something that is often forgotten.

But some argue that even if we have significant divestment at primary level, faith schools must still be limited in what they can teach, and do, in the interests of 'inclusion'.

For example, the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism recommended that faith schools should have prayers that are 'inclusive' (does this exclude the 'Our Father' and 'Hail Mary?') and put on display the symbols of the religious faiths of all the children in the school. In addition, RE should be taught either at the start or end of the school day to make it accommodate for parents who do not want their children taught RE. Finally, it rerecommended that the ethos of the school should not be allowed to permeate the whole day.

One wonders what the point of denominational education would be after all those changes?

This paper by Dr John Murray, the Chairman of The Iona Institute, argues that denominational schools must be allowed to be fully true to their ethos. He focuses in particular on Catholic schools.

He argues that Catholic and other faith schools should be permitted to teach what they believe is true, including such claims as Jesus is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', or that abortion is morally wrong.

He says that Catholic schools already do a good job at making themselves welcoming to pupils of all faiths and none and that they can be inclusive and fully Catholic at the same time.

However, he draws attention to the danger that Catholic schools can end up adopting a relativistic approach to the faith, sometimes without meaning to, in order to be 'inclusive'. This, Dr Murray says, must be avoided because the cost is the ethos and identity of those schools, which violates the rights of parents who want their children taught in a Catholic setting.

A genuinely pluralist Ireland must have a place for publicly-funded denominational education so long as demand exists among parents for such education. We hope this paper will be a useful contribution to the debate about the future of authentically denominational schools in Ireland.

David Quinn

Director, The Iona Institute



What may a Catholic School teach? A strange question?

Isn't it obvious what a Catholic school may teach regarding religion? Catholicism! Indeed, a Catholic school has a responsibility to teach Catholicism. Isn't that a 'no-brainer'? But some argue, or just simply assume and assert, that all schools should teach a multi-religious curriculum.¹ This paper offers a critical response to such arguments, assumptions, and assertions.

CATHOLIC TRUTH CLAIMS

Let us begin by considering the following claims about Jesus Christ:

Jesus is Lord.

He is God incarnate.

Or consider two claims about the Church:

The Church is the People of God.

She is the Mystical Body of Christ.

Teaching about beliefs

These examples of important doctrines² (see panel) about Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church draw from the Bible, the Creed, and the Second Vatican Council. May a Catholic school teach these and similar doctrines? An easy answer says that (a) a Catholic school may teach *about* these doctrines, and others like them. For example, it may teach that these statements are Catholic beliefs.³ It might be said in addition that (b) schools should teach about other religions too, and not just about Catholicism. (This paper agrees that Catholic schools should teach about the beliefs of other religions.) Furthermore, a 'teaching about religions' approach need not be a bland presentation of facts and figures that only superficially or 'academically' studies the phenomenon of religion. It might be said to include (c) exploring the emotional and personal side of 'religion' as a feature of people's lives, including the lives of one's pupils. The 'teaching about religions' approach has much to recommend it. Nevertheless, there is something missing from it, and this matters for Catholic RE.

Teaching about beliefs vs teaching truth

What is missing? Let us distinguish between teaching about x and teaching that x is true. Notice the difference between, on the one hand, teaching about the claim that Jesus is Lord and, on the other hand, teaching this claim about Jesus as true.

May a Catholic school teach not only about Jesus Christ (and that Church is his Mystical Body), but also it is actually true objectively (and that there are good reasons for believing that it is true, reasons that can and should be explored and investigated)?

Catholic schools contested

Again, one might say that surely there is no difficulty here. A Catholic school must be entitled to teach that Jesus is Lord, and that the Catholic Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, as these are Catholic beliefs and the school is a Catholic school.⁴ This has been the assumption for quite some time in Ireland. But over the last few years in Ireland, there has been a persistent attack on Catholic schooling.⁵ Ostensibly, the discussion has been mainly focused on the overly high proportion of publicly-funded Catholic schools at primary level. The Catholic Church in Ireland accepts that there is a problem here (as does the Iona Institute and this paper) and supports greater school choice including divestment to other patron body. But in the debates about this, it has been noticeable that often the very idea of Catholic schooling itself is implicitly or even explicitly questioned, especially publicly funded Catholic schooling.

Catholic schools have made and continue to make a huge and valuable contribution to Irish individuals, families, society and the state."

Catholic schools are a legitimate part of our pluralist system

As I have argued in an earlier paper published by the Iona Institute in 2008⁶ private and publicly funded Catholic schools are completely legal and constitutional in Ireland. They are part of an Irish pluralistic educational system. They are not incompatible with a 'modern republic' or with the modern world or with a 'changing Ireland', as some claim. Publicly-funded denominational education is a commonplace throughout the Western world.

Catholic schools have made and continue to make a huge and valuable contribution to Irish individuals, families, society and the state. The main justification for religious schools is the principle that parents are the primary educators of their children, and thus they have a right and a responsibility to raise their children with what they consider to be sound values and true beliefs about life, humankind, ethics, and the transcendent dimension of existence. Schools should work in harmony, in partnership, with parents in this regard, and not exclude them.

Catholic or multi-denominational/non-denominational schools?

It seems evident that Catholic schools are under increasing pressure to operate in a manner that is de facto multi-denominational or even non-denominational, to make themselves acceptable politically and socially. It is considered allowable only to teach about Catholic beliefs and values and practices, and always within certain politically correct constraints. One must be 'inclusive'. The term 'inclusive' and related terms are bandied about a lot, but rarely given any critical attention. What exactly does 'inclusive' mean and entail? How for example may one teach 'Jesus is Lord' in an appropriate manner in a Catholic school that is required by public policy and social expectation to be 'inclusive'?

'Teaching about religions' leads to Relativist Catholic RE

One answer is the 'teaching about religion' approach already outlined above.⁷ Teachers teach about 'Jesus is Lord' as a belief but do not teach it as an objective truth. We might call this a Relativist approach to RE, that aims to be socially and politically acceptable as 'inclusive' education. One may teach 'Jesus is Lord' as a belief that some people happen to have, including some of one's pupils, and even that this belief is 'true' for those who happen to believe it. You then teach about other religions in the same way.

In an RE lesson taking this kind of approach, which in Catholic schools we might call 'Relativist Catholic RE', there are no wrong answers. Everyone is right. Everyone is happy. I'm OK and you're OK.⁸

The attraction of this approach is that it seems to be tolerant towards everyone. But critically, it implicitly teaches that no religious belief is objectively true, and therefore is not as respectful towards religious claims as it appears.



Problems with the relativist approach

There are serious problems with the relativist approach. One is that if RE, even with noble intentions, presents all religions as (only) relatively 'true', this misrepresents all those religions that understand their beliefs to be objectively true. With regard to Catholicism, our focus in this paper, such relativism presents only a 'counterfeit Catholicism'. But misrepresenting religions is not acceptable in any school.

Even more foundational than Jesus Christ or the Church for Catholicism, is the truth about God, basic theism. This is often overlooked, downplayed, or misrepresented.⁹ When Catholics say that they believe in God's existence, this phrase has a particular meaning for us. We don't mean that 'God' exists for us insofar as we believe in 'God'. We are not referring only to an idea in our heads. We are referring to an objective reality, one that exists entirely independently of our believing in it. The God-idea in my head grasps a God-reality outside my head, so to speak.¹⁰ God is not a mere human idea or concept. And so, if the RE teacher presents Catholic belief in God as essentially and only a personal and subjective matter or concept, and even if the teacher expands this to a socially constructed idea believed by many people, this is not what Catholicism holds it to be.



This kind of RE would therefore distort the reality of what Catholicism truly holds regarding God. And the same would be true regarding any other theistic religions, for example, orthodox Judaism or Islam, that hold God's existence to be an objective truth and not a merely made-up notion, however inspiring or imaginative or powerfully affecting or culturally influential that made-up notion might be. To teach about such religions in a way that relativises them is to distort them and, thus, mislead pupils. But any good education should avoid distorting its content and misleading students.



Relativist RE is Reductionist RE

Another way of analysing the relativist problem above is to note how it reduces religious truths/beliefs to personal psychology or sociology. When a Catholic says 'I believe that God exists', it is not intended as a statement essentially about that Catholic's psychology. When a Catholic RE teacher says that 'Catholics believe that God exists', this is not a statement primarily about the sociology of Catholicism regarding a set of beliefs that happen to be held by a particular group. The statement 'God exists' is a statement about God. The statement 'Jesus is Lord' is a statement about Jesus. These statements are not primarily about the person or persons making them.¹¹ Is RE as practiced in Catholic schools an RE focused exclusively on religious psychology and sociology (and history and geography and anthropology and so on); or is it an RE that also includes a focus on God himself and specifically religious and theological truths about God and his dealings with us and the world? An authentic Catholic education has to do all of these things.

Relativist Catholic RE teaches that Catholicism is false

Relativistic-reductionistic Catholic RE not only waters down and distorts Catholicism but it also teaches pupils, even if inadvertently and innocently, that Catholicism is not true (or at least its supernatural aspect is not). Authentic Catholicism teaches that God exists and has made his existence known to us through reason and faith, and has communicated to us through divine revelation, especially in Jesus Christ. Relativist-reductionist 'Catholic' RE presents this as entirely a matter of human psychology or sociology, giving the firm impression that there is no objectively knowable natural or supernatural truth to these matters of Catholic belief. This contradicts Catholic belief and effectively denies it by reducing it to only ideas in a person's mind or in the shared ideas of a group. Surely this is a supremely odd thing for a Catholic school to do. And it is an unacceptable thing to require a Catholic school to do.

Commitment to reason and faith, not indoctrination

But how can a Catholic school believe Catholic beliefs to be objectively true, and teach accordingly, in a manner that is 'inclusive' and respectful, and accepting of diversity and difference, and open-minded and committed to critical thinking, and welcoming of all, and properly educational? Some think such belief and teaching simply cannot and should not exist. Any catechetical approach to RE, namely one that speaks the language of faith to promote faith, is to be rejected as nothing better than narrow 'religious instruction', or even worse, 'religious indoctrination'. This 'religious instruction' is a thing of the past, so it is supposed, and has now been replaced by a more adequate 'Religious Education' ['RE'] that avoids catechesis by teaching in a supposedly more 'objective' and 'neutral' and 'critical' manner. (This lies behind the relativist-reductionist Catholic RE outlined above.)

But who is to judge what is objective, neutral and critical? May Catholic parents and Catholic schools do so? Catholicism places a huge emphasis on reason and faith being closely interrelated, fully compatible and mutually supportive. John Paul II wrote about this in his important encyclical *Fides et Ratio* [Faith and Reason] in 1998.



Theologically committed to reason and genuine education

Because Catholic RE is committed to a view of faith and reason being mutually supportive, it does not consider genuinely Catholic RE to be indoctrination. A Catholic school should be totally committed to educating students to use their intellects, to question and to search for answers, and to develop critical thinking skills. Catholics believe that God is supremely wise and intelligent and that he has imbued the cosmos with order and intelligibility. Also, he has made humankind in his image (see Genesis 1:26), creating us with intellect and free will, able to know and understand the true and to choose the good and appreciate the beautiful. There is thus no problem with a scholarly and academic approach to RE that is also a faith-based approach; and there is no incompatibility with a Catholic school being totally devoted to scientific study, historical study, and other kinds of 'secular' disciplines of study, as well as being totally devoted to God. Catholic faith supports scholarly study throughout the curriculum. Scholarly study belongs in the RE class. It would seem opportune to consider reintroducing some element of apologetics into Theology and RE, which would help Catholics to appreciate the reasonableness of their faith and enable them to reply to objections with reasons.¹²

Catholic RE should include education about other religions

Catholic RE should include teaching about other religions. It should teach about non-religious views of life too. Of course, it makes excellent pedagogical and theological sense that, especially in the early years, Catholic pupils should be well grounded in their own Catholic faith first. But later, and gradually, they should be introduced to other traditions and philosophies appropriately and respectfully, and in a pedagogically sound manner.¹³ One reason for teaching about other religions in Catholic RE is that we live in a country and world with people of various beliefs and it is good for us to know about this. It is important to learn about belief systems (and believers) in a manner that emphasises the promotion of respect for others, even those we disagree with on important matters of belief and values. One way of trying to do this is the relativistic-reductionist 'Catholic' RE, criticised above. But there is a different way of teaching about religions, from within the religious tradition of Catholicism, not diluting or distorting this tradition, but being inspired and guided by it. The foundations of this approach was set out in the Second Vatican Council documents, especially those on the Church, ecumenism, world religions, and religious freedom. These documents teach Catholics that there is goodness and truth to be found in other religions, and that people in other religions, and even non-believers, can ultimately be saved through Christ.

Inclusive Ethics teaching?

What of ethics? What may Catholic schools teach regarding morality, about right and wrong actions, virtues and vices, good and bad character? There has been an attempt recently in Ireland to introduce into all schools an ethics programme ('Education about Religious Beliefs and Ethics') that is quite separate from any Catholic religion programme. It is assumed that this should be no problem for Catholic schools, but this is questionable. The new approach seems to draw some of its justification from the fact that Catholic schools do not have only Catholic pupils but also pupils of other Christian traditions, other religions, and pupils of no religion. Perhaps it is also being assumed that a school is obligated by the Constitution and the recent Education Act to provide for the moral education of all its pupils. A Catholic school, it is supposed, cannot do so by providing a Catholic ethics programme, as not all its pupils are Catholic. Therefore, an alternative ethics programme for all must be provided.¹⁴

Diversity is no excuse to water down RE and ethics

But how can it be right to take advantage of the inclusiveness of Catholic schools, which typically welcome pupils of all sorts of backgrounds, as a basis for effectively preventing those schools from providing a distinctively Catholic RE and ethics programme? Obviously, the presence of non-Catholic pupils in a Catholic school presents challenges when it comes to RE and ethics programmes. Schools will have to work out solutions to these problems, such as allowing and facilitating withdrawal of pupils from class when necessary. (The same applies when RSE is being taught). Catholicism is not to be imposed on any pupil, and, even regarding Catholic pupils, it should always be a matter in Catholic schools of proposing the faith rather than imposing it. Therefore, it is not necessary to water down the RE and ethics programmes, never mind presenting explicit or even implicit anti-Catholic messages, in order to be 'inclusive' of all pupils.



Just let the pupils decide for themselves?



What about just letting the pupils choose for themselves what ethics they will live by? This seems democratic and fair; and it seems unfair and oppressive to 'shove Catholic ethics down their throats'. Authentic Catholic RE does not do this because Catholic beliefs are fully harmonious with reason and with human needs and free will, and our true and lasting fulfilment. Being a morally good person is being a fully reasonable person. The objective principles and norms of morality are not unfairly imposed on people: they are not mere external and arbitrary demands made by a tyrant God or Church (or State!). Because ethics is a matter of being fully reasonable, and human beings have a natural gift of reason (it is not exclusively a matter of grace or faith), then it makes sound theological, as well as good pedagogical, sense for pupils to be involved as active participants in moral education in Catholic schools. They are not mere passive recipients. No sound ethics course would ever treat its pupils as totally passive anyway. Pupils should be involved in questioning, exploring, discussing, analysing case studies, reflecting, and so on.

May Catholic schools teach absolute moral norms?

It is a distinctive part of Catholic ethics to hold that some moral norms are absolute: they do not admit of exceptions.¹⁵ Not all moral norms are absolute. It is important to acknowledge this, and to thus avoid a caricature of ethics, a straw man version of 'absolute morality' that is easy to dismiss. Some norms, though certainly not all, are absolute and we need to know which are the absolute norms. May Catholic schools teach that there are moral absolutes and which specific norms are absolute? Surely the answer must be yes. But what about people who disagree with the existence of moral absolutes, holding that all norms are only relative, and they all admit of exceptions, perhaps in hard cases or extreme circumstances? Or what about others who accept moral absolutes as possible, but disagree with some that the Catholic school teaches?

The problem is that although there are many aspects of morality that we share in society, there isn't a consensus on morality. Switching from a Catholic RE teaching of ethics to a multi- or non-denominational ethics programme will not solve this problem. The fact is that neither all Christians nor all philosophers are in full agreement about the nature of ethics, its justification, and its content. We have to accept the fact that moral pluralism is real, albeit not total. The common ground that is shared (such as general exhortations to be fair, to be honest, to not discriminate unfairly, to care about the poor, to look after the planet, and so on) is no problem in terms of consensus, albeit at a very general level. And, as noted above concerning teaching about religions, a good school should emphasise the common ground. But what about the contested ground?

Abortion; what may a Catholic school teach?

Consider abortion as one example on 'contested ground'.¹⁶ What may a Catholic school teach about it? Should schools ignore the matter completely, as too sensitive and controversial? Doing so would leave out an important part of ethics, and an important application of a central element of the Gospel: to love our neighbour as ourselves. One should teach in a manner that is pedagogically sound and aware of context and sensitivities.¹⁷ But this doesn't mean never teaching challenging material. Pupils aren't entitled to never be challenged. Good education will often challenge us. The Gospel is itself a challenging message, and at its heart is a challenging person: the Lord Jesus Christ. True, the challenging aspect of the teaching should always be communicated in a way that is constructive and respectful and hopeful and positive. Catholicism is not just about high moral standards; it is also about God's mercy, and our own calling to reflect God's mercy. Good Catholic RE and ethical education should be as comprehensive as possible, leaving out nothing of the full Gospel.

No wrong answers? – Majority rule? – Consensus is sufficient?

One could try to make all pupils feel welcome in ethics education by assuring them that 'there are no wrong answers.' But is this genuine ethics? Or is it actually destructive of ethics? There really is no point in having class discussions about abortion, to focus on our specific example here, if every position on it is to be judged fully acceptable and true just because it is held sincerely. Nor is it good enough to go with whatever the class group come to as the majority opinion, or even the consensus opinion (noting that a majority is not necessarily a consensus, whether in a classroom or in a national referendum). A majority, and even a consensus, could be mistaken. What is needed is moral truth, and the truth is not necessarily a function of majority or consensus opinion.¹⁸ Objective facts and objective moral principles are needed for good moral discussion and judgement that leads to truth.



Pro-life facts and moral principles are necessary elements of a good class discussion/lesson

Consider the following, for example.

All human organisms begin to develop and grow at conception. All human beings (organisms) should be treated as persons. Although killing a human person may be morally allowed in proportionate self-defence, deliberately taking the life of an innocent human person is always a serious injustice, a sin that is deeply offensive to God the giver of life, and utterly incompatible with following Christ.



A Catholic teacher will consider knowledge of these truths to be essential if one is to come to the correct answer to the question of the objective wrongness of abortion.¹⁹ It is not enough to just discuss the moral issue, look at examples/case studies, examine the various elements of the cases, share our feelings and opinions about the issues, and then count up the pupils on each side of the debate at the end. Nor is it enough to reduce the matter to psychology or sociology, asking pupils to merely focus on the various factors that can influence their thinking, such as parents, friends, society, religion and so on (which seems to be a typical approach in much RE recently). Discussion is very important, but moral education cannot be reduced to following a discussion procedure, with no attention to soundly evaluating the content of the discussion. Psychology and sociology are important, but genuine ethics is not a matter of mere genetics, neuroscience, upbringing, or social convention, especially when one finds conflicting 'voices' trying to influence one's judgement and one has to adjudicate between these voices. We need to teach our pupils how to do this adjudicating soundly.

What has been said above about abortion can equally be said about other areas of Catholic teaching, for example, marriage.



'Just follow your conscience'?

Should we just say: 'Follow your conscience.' This approach has been popular in much Catholic moral theology and RE in the past few decades, but it fails to answer the real questions being asked. When someone asks, for example, if abortion is always wrong, he or she is not asking if a sincere conscience should be followed. (The answer to that question is yes – from the point of view of the person whose conscience it is.) The question about abortion is about abortion, so the answer should first be about abortion, not about conscience. Good Catholic RE will always place great emphasis on conscience and following one's conscience – and teach the importance of this. But it will not reduce ethics to following conscience. Personal consistency and integrity are essential goods, necessary components of being a morally good person, of being conscientious, of being of good character. But other values matter too. And in the case of abortion, the good of respecting human life matters as well as the good of acting consistently with one's conscience. In a conscience correctly informed about abortion, the goods of respecting human life and of acting consistently with one's conscience combine in a seamless whole, in personal integrity. Conscience must take into account more than just conscience itself. Conscience, to be true to itself, always seeks the objective truth.

In various ways Catholic ethics teaches moral truth

Exactly how Catholic RE is to teach the truths set out in the indented paragraph above about abortion, and similarly appropriate facts, practical principles, moral norms and virtues related to other ethical matters, has to be worked out in a manner that suits each pedagogical situation and respects one's pupils and their context. There isn't only one way to do it. Direct teaching is one method that shouldn't be neglected. A more exploratory approach can be good too and can be combined with the direct method. It can be appropriate to present various positions as hypotheses to be discussed, with attention to counter positions, and to help pupils to work towards understanding the full truth.²⁰ But in any case, the method and attitude adopted by genuine Catholic RE is not going to teach pupils that morality is merely a matter of guesswork, or emotions, or arbitrary choice, or following the crowd or convention.



Catholic ethics education teaches pupils how to think critically. Catholic RE teaches pupils that there is ethical truth to be found, and how to find it. This will include not only philosophical work, but also learning from divine revelation, which illuminates the work of human practical reason. This provides another reason why it is not good enough to simply let Catholic pupils work it all out by themselves, and simply choose by themselves. To take that approach is to deny that the message of Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition, and the teaching of the Church (magisterium) (not to mention objective moral reasoning) has any role to play in a Catholic's ethical thinking.²¹ And to do that is to teach that Catholicism is wrong and to deny God's wise and loving revelation. No Catholic school should do that – or be required to do that. Catholic schools should adopt a transparent and confident approach to teaching Catholic ethics, respecting the vital role of personal freedom but not reducing ethics to an empty, relativistic position.



What may a Catholic school teach?

This paper has outlined a number of inadequate answers to the question of what a Catholic school in Ireland may be publicly permitted, and even supported, to teach in RE. These approaches sometimes merge into each other, and they include:

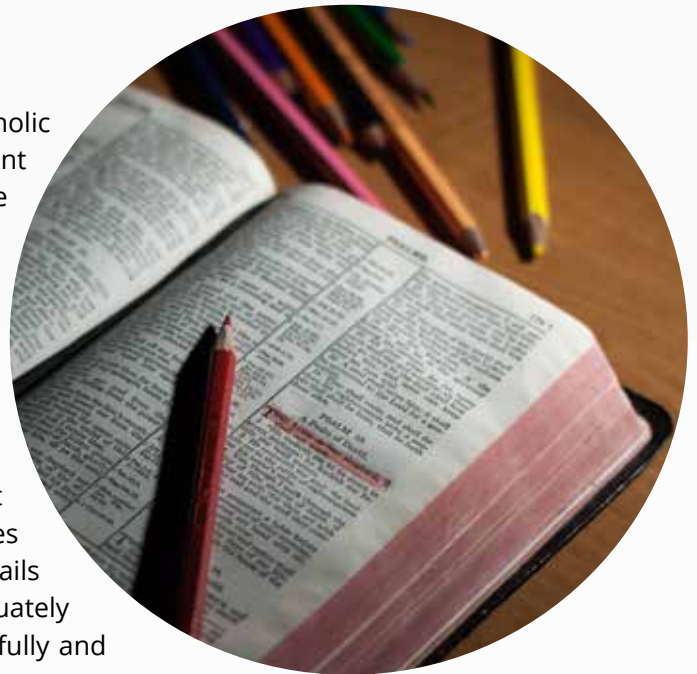
- **teaching no religion in school at all**
- **teaching only the bare facts and figures about religions**
- **a Relativistic 'Catholic' RE that treats all religious beliefs, including Catholic beliefs, as true for only the believer[s]**
- **a Reductionist 'Catholic' RE that treats Catholic beliefs as nothing but matters of personal psychology or social construction or historical and cultural fact**
- **a World Religions course that treats Catholicism/Christianity as one of many religions that are all equally (but only relatively) 'true' and potentially meaningful.**

This paper has also examined ethics teaching and noted some inadequate types of ethics teaching that are being proposed for Irish Catholic schools. Again, these approaches sometimes merge into one another. They include:

- **a relativistic ethics that sees moral 'truth' as a matter of personal belief and choice or of mere social construction**
- **a moral education that aims at finding a majority or consensus view in the classroom, no matter what the content of the conclusion**
- **a moral education that reduces to following a procedure and does not base itself on knowledge of moral truth[s]**
- **an ethics that denies moral absolutes, or that misidentifies them**
- **an ethics that reduces to merely following one's sincere conscience**
- **an ethics teaching for Catholic pupils that is exclusively secular and ignores or denies the important roles of Christ, Christian faith, and the church community in the moral education of a Catholic's conscience.**



Following any of these approaches to Catholic RE or Catholic moral education would be a failure to practise coherent and honest Catholic education, and would be an injustice to one's Catholic and other pupils, to one's school patrons and religious/local communities, and to society generally. It would present a counterfeit Catholicism and a counterfeit Ethics. Counterfeit Catholicism does not present pupils with sound and true beliefs, rooted in the reality of the Sacred and Transcendent dimension of reality, to inspire them and give them the truly valuable gift of a reason for living. Counterfeit Ethics does not provide pupils with solid and reliable norms and virtues to empower them to live rightly. Settling for these fakes fails our pupils, but it also fails our society. It fails to adequately address how we are all to live together honestly, peacefully and respectfully in a situation of religious and ethical pluralism.



Catholic schools must be allowed to be true to their ethos. They are already proving that such a goal is compatible with the growing pluralism of a changing Ireland. Despite the increasing diversity of Irish society, there are actually very few complaints in practice that Catholic schools are not being respectful of all pupils. The complaints normally come from small advocacy groups that are opposed to publicly-funded denominational schools in principle, or at a minimum, want no RE taught in schools. But these groups do not appear to be reflective of Irish parents in general. There is little evidence of a real, grassroots move against denominational schools. If Catholic and other faith-based schools were not being respectful of their pupils, we would hear far more about it than we do.

The strength of the Catholic ethos and identity of a given Catholic school will often depend on the example set by the principal and the commitment of teachers and parents. This can vary from school to school, but even when the Catholic ethos is very strong, there are still few complaints in practice that such schools are disrespectful of non-Catholic pupils.

Those who attack denominational schooling as incompatible with a modern, pluralist society are, in fact, setting up a straw man, and denominational schools themselves should not surrender to the pressure to give up their ethos.

In fact, Ireland cannot be truly inclusive and respectful of diversity and our need for mutual respect in society if we force Catholic schools to be Catholic in name only.

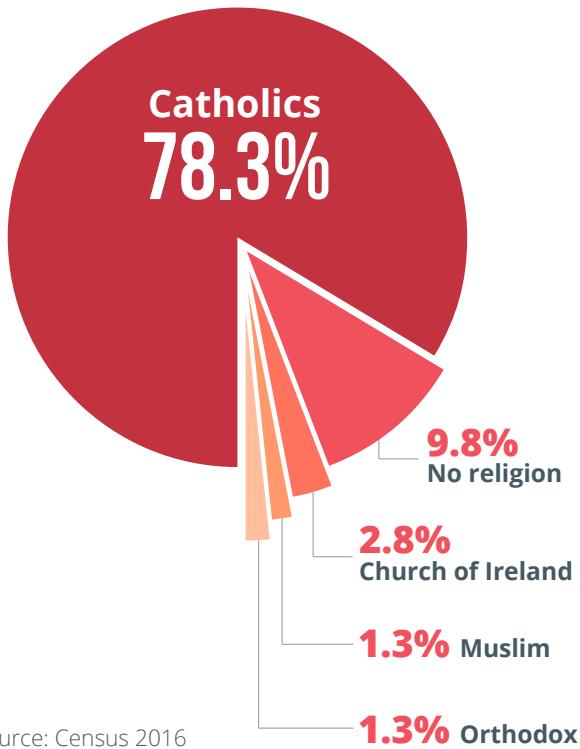
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Murray taught Religion and English in secondary schools for 17 years. He is a lecturer in moral theology at Dublin City University and Chairman of the Board of The Iona Institute.

APPENDIX:

Facts and figures concerning denominational schools in Ireland

Religion of Irish residents



Source: Census 2016

Ethos of schools and percentage of pupils attending them

	Primary schools	Primary-level students
Catholic	88.7%	89.6%
Church of Ireland	5.5%	2.9%
Inter and Multi-denominational	5%	7.2%
Other faiths	0.7%	0.3%

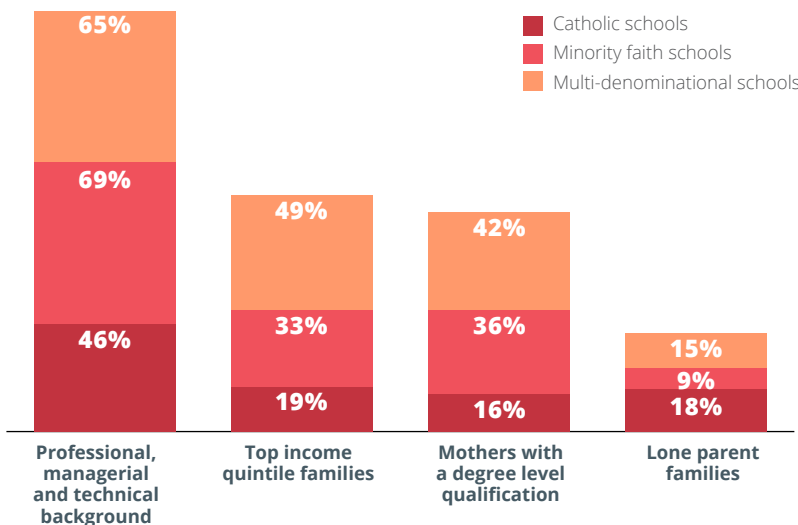
	Second-level schools	Second-level students
Catholic	47.1%	50.1%
Church of Ireland	3%	3.1%
Inter and Multi-denominational	49.1%	46%
Other faiths	0.8%	0.7%

Source: 2021 statistics

All 25 new primary schools opened in the last five years have been multi-denominational.

Multi-denominational second-level schools have increased by 11.8pc in the last 10 years, while Catholic schools have decreased by 4.4pc.

Social class of parents



Source: *Sector Variation among Primary Schools in Ireland*, ESRI and Educate Together (2012)

Compared to Catholic schools, multi-denominational and minority faith schools are more likely to have pupils from middle-class backgrounds. Multidenominational schools are more likely to have a higher proportion of migrant pupils as a significant number of them are in urban areas.

Most multi-denominational schools do not have any Traveller pupils. Catholic schools are more likely to have greater numbers of Traveller pupils compared to minority faith schools. More Catholic schools than any other school reported that over 20pc of the pupils had learning difficulties.

ENDNOTES

- 1 See the Programme for Government 2020 for the latest example of this. It commits the Coalition Government of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, and the Green Party to: 'Ensure a curriculum of multiple religious beliefs and ethics is taught as a national curriculum of tolerance and values in all primary schools.' A Citizens' Assembly on Education is also mooted. The agenda here surely goes further than simply avoiding a narrow focus on only one religion, such as Catholicism, in Religious Education classes, which no-one wants anyway.
- 2 I realise that Catholic RE involves more than focusing on doctrine. But, for simplicity, I'm focusing on doctrine here. And even when Catholic RE involves other aspects of religion, such as narrative or spirituality, doctrine will always be important too. For example, teaching on Jesus will involve exploring the accounts of his life, teaching, and death, but will also involve his resurrection. And, importantly, the gospels will be approached not only as narratives, but also as totally reliable accounts of what Jesus really said and did (see Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, par. 19.)
- 3 Many of these claims are also believed in by other Christians too, but for purposes of clarity and simplicity of style, as well as some theological reasons, this paper focuses on Catholicism. Much of what is written here may be applied to Church of Ireland schools too. 'Jesus is Lord' is one of the very first creedal statements of Christianity.
- 4 Of course, my reference to Jesus as Lord and the Church as His Body are examples of two teachings and not meant to set out the full range of Catholic doctrine.
- 5 See the following articles on the Iona Institute website for some examples:
<https://ionainstitute.ie/forum-recommendations-would-seriously-undermine-identity-of-denominational-schools-says-iona-institute/> [10th April 2012]
<https://ionainstitute.ie/new-report-on-inclusion-in-schools-a-step-in-the-right-direction/> [2nd July 2014]
<https://ionainstitute.ie/bruton-speech-latest-in-a-series-of-moves-against-faith-schools-2/> [16th January 2017]
 The most recent example is the harsh criticisms made of the *Flourish* resources for RSE, provided by the CPSMA: see <https://www.cpsma.ie/rse-primary-programme-flourish/> and, for an RTE report on criticism of it, see <https://www.rte.ie/news/education/2021/0513/1221396-relationship-sexuality-education/> [both from 2021].
- 6 My paper, *The Liberal Argument for Religious Schools*, is available on the Iona Institute website in the 'Topics and Resources' section, under the 'Schools and Education' subsection (the link is 'The denominational schools debate'). Also to be found in this subsection is a detailed Iona paper, *Religious Education and Human Rights*, 2nd edition 2011, which is well worth studying (the link is 'Religious Education and Human Rights submission'). Another resource is a recent book by Mark Hamilton, who was involved in Iona for many years. See his website sowhat.ie for details of this book, *Our School is Catholic: So What? And for details of other books by him on topics related to matters dealt with in this paper*.
- 7 This paper makes no factual claims that certain kinds of teaching are prevalent in Catholic schools, which would be an empirical matter that needs further research. This paper is more concerned with the ideas and principles that shape behaviours, practices, and policies.
- 8 It is not unusual in the RE classroom, as far as I've seen anyway, to hear a teacher 'reassure' pupils that there are no wrong answers (at least not where matters of deep belief and ethics are concerned).
- 9 I have explored this point in a chapter in *Irish and British Reflections on Catholic Education* (Springer, 2021), edited by Seán Whittle: 'A De Fide Case Against "Faith Development"?' (at pp. 261-268).
- 10 It is true that 'God' refers to a rather unique 'object' in that God is not one object alongside other created objects. So, it is true that God is 'objective' in a manner that is somewhat special, given God's mysterious nature (which we can know only to some extent by analogy and negation, as it relates to us).
- 11 Although this is only anecdotal, I have noticed a strong tendency amongst the trainee RE teachers that I deal with in DCU to see the aim of RE as learning about the beliefs of others, but not about God, as such.
- 12 There are many good authors in the area of apologetics that individuals can study. Such authors include, in no particular order, Edward Feser, Trent Horn, Scott Hahn, Peter Kreeft, Peter S. Williams, Matt Fradd, Brandon Vogt, Alister McGrath, Paul Copan and other contemporary Christian authors. Classical authors include St Thomas Aquinas, St. John Henry Newman, G.K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox, and C.S. Lewis.
- 13 See Anne Hession, *Catholic Primary Religious Education in a Pluralist Environment* (Veritas, 2015), pp. 160-161. Hession is the key author of the new Catholic primary RE programme, *Grow in Love*.
- 14 A similar argument is often presumed for presenting the relativist and reductionist type of RE programme that has been critiqued above: only that kind of RE is supposedly appropriate for all the pupils, who all have a right to RE. What is said in this section of the paper in commenting on the proposed new ethics programme may be adapted and applied to the revisionist approach to the Catholic RE programme too.
- 15 This is not to claim that only Catholicism knows moral absolutes. In my opinion, everyone, even those who decry 'absolutism', affirm some moral absolutes. We all know that there are some things that one should simply never do to others. For a defence of moral absolutes, see John Finnis, *Moral Absolutes* (Catholic University of American Press, 1991).
- 16 It would be easier to focus on something that we agree on, such as environmental ethics, drawing on Pope Francis's powerful encyclical, *Laudato Si'*, (2015). But no-one challenges the Church's influence on such topics as protecting the planet and working for justice for the poor, etc. So, these aspects of Catholic RE don't need to be defended and encouraged as much as the more 'neuralgic' topics do.
- 17 It should be noted that parents are Constitutionally entitled to have their child or children exempted from attending religion or ethics lessons.
- 18 The very question of whether moral truth is entirely a function of majority or consensus opinion is one of the matters that a good ethics education can critically examine in the light of objectively sound standards.
- 19 Important note: We are not dealing here with the subjective culpability of an act, which is a different and more complex matter than an act's wrongness. Catholic RE should teach pupils to know and understand the distinction between the objective moral quality of acts and the subjective culpability of moral agents.
- 20 The example of St. Thomas Aquinas is a classic one in this regard.
- 21 Therefore, it would be unthinkable if a Catholic school were to teach about abortion, for example, without attending to the authoritative teaching of the Church about it in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes*, 27, and John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 57 and 62. Or to teach about marriage whilst ignoring the teaching of Jesus Christ about it in Mark chapters 7 and 10.

About the Iona Institute

The Iona Institute promotes the place of marriage and religion in society. We defend the continued existence of publicly-funded denominational schools. We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.



The Iona Institute
23 Merrion Square, Dublin 2. Tel 01 6619 204
Email: info@ionainstitute.ie Web: www.ionainstitute.ie