

THE MINISTER FOR EDUCATION'S INITIATIVE – JOHN BRUTON

Earlier this week, the new Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn TD, is reported in the “ Irish Independent “ of 3 April, to have said he would “prefer schools spent time improving reading and maths skills rather than preparing pupils for sacraments such as First Communion and Confirmation”.

He reportedly said that faith formation carried out during the day took up time that could be used in other ways, and referred in this context to the severe decline in performance by Irish pupils in the international OECD/PISA league table on literacy, dropping from 5th to 17th place, and he remarked that performance in Maths had also disimproved.

Primary school students spend 30 minutes per day on religion, which, in the case of Catholic schools, includes preparation for the sacraments.

He said that while no person should enter the world without clear knowledge and understanding of the history of religion, faith formation was a different thing, He said that faith formation “takes up a lot of time” and that “some people might suggest it might be done by parents or parish but outside school teaching hours.” He remarked that “quite frankly, we have overloaded the curriculum”.

I believe it would be impossible for anyone to talk about religion and politics in Ireland in the week that remarks of this significance were made without addressing them in a serious and studied way. I would like to contribute to the debate that the Minister, to his credit, has launched.

It is an important debate, and one that should be characterised by reasoned dialogue not name calling. It is a debate about the proper content of education, of the content of preparation for citizenship. In that sense it is a debate about who we think we are, or should be, as Irish people in the twenty first century and beyond.

That is why, in many ways, the Education portfolio is the most important one in any Government, in the sense that the decisions its holder makes have effects over a longer time frame than those of the holder of any other office of Government.

Seventy years on, the impacts, for good or ill, of citizens' experiences in education will still be being felt in society. The impacts of the work of a Minister for Finance, a Minister for Health, or a Minister for Social Protection may have greater immediate effect, and attract greater public notice for that reason, but these effects are both more transient, and more reversible, than educational decisions, because people usually go through the educational system once in their lives.

It is thus, I suggest, even more important that we get educational policy decisions right than almost any other category of political decision.

HOW ARE SCHOOLS TO BE RUN? A 200 YEAR OLD DEBATE

The Minister has set up a Forum to examine the patronage, or ownership, of schools by religious bodies. The Forum is going to hear from a long list of established organisations, with established views and historic positions and interests to defend. Educational policy making in Ireland in the past 150 years has been dominated by the interplay between these same interests. There was very limited democratic political involvement in these debates in the past. As Seamus O Buachalla said in his book "Education Policy in the Twentieth Century" in 1988

"Parents, political parties and representatives of the socio economic system have not figured as active participants in the policy process, the low level of involvement of the major parties is self imposed"

That was true in 1988. It is still true today. Dail debates on education consisted, and still consist, of demands for more money for schooling, rather than discussions of what the schooling should be about, or for that matter of discussion of where the extra resources sought might be found.

Well, it is good that that is all changed now, by Ruairi Quinn's intervention last week. Before joining the welcome debate the Minister has started, it is no harm to set it all in its historic context.

The present structure of control of patronage or ownership of schools long predates the state itself. It has roots in the movement that had led to Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the reaction against the century long religious settlement that had followed the end of the Williamite wars.

The present system of National Schools was launched in 1831, based on a proposal by a parliamentary Committee chaired by Thomas Wyse MP, one of the first Catholics elected to the House of Commons, a Waterford man who was elected to represent Tipperary. The first Board of Education was chaired by the Duke of Leinster, with clerical and lay representatives of different denominations.

The idea put forward by Thomas Wyse was to provide combined literary, but separate religious, education. In other words, Protestant and Catholic children would go to the same schools, attend most classes together, but separate for religious instruction.

But the National schools system did not remain multi denominational for long.

According to Seamus O Buachalla, the first objections came from the Church of Ireland. In 1832 a petition was lodged in Parliament by seventeen of the Church of Ireland bishops protesting that the system deprived their clergy of their legal trust of superintending schools. This is not all that surprising in that, at that time, the Church of Ireland was still the state church.

Initially the Irish Catholic bishops supported the National school system as proposed. Archbishop Murray of Dublin actually became a member of the Board of Education, but his stance was opposed by the Archbishop of Tuam, Dr McHale, who has enjoyed perhaps unjustifiably, a much better press from subsequent nationalist

historians than has Dr Murray. But Archbishop Murrays stand was also opposed by the Vatican.

By 1841, Pope Gregory recognised that the operation of National Schools on a multidenominational basis in the preceding ten years in Ireland had not, in fact, injured the Catholic religion but ruled that participation by Catholics in multidenominational National schools should in future be decided without controversy by each local Catholic bishop.

In practice this meant that the argument among Catholics went against multi denominationalism. By 1852, only 175 out of 4795 National schools were managed on a joint basis. Separating religious education from other aspects of the curriculum proved to be difficult in practice, especially as many of the teachers were themselves members of religious orders. Nationalist opinion did not give much support to multidenominational education either. In fact separate educations seems to have been what the people wanted at the time, and for more than a century thereafter. With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps if Thomas Wyse's original idea had been adhered to, there might be fewer so called peace walls keeping neighbours apart in Belfast today.

SHOULD RELIGIOUS FORMATION BE REMOVED FROM THE SCHOOL DAY?

Now I would like to come to the present Minister for Educations views. He is not just going back to Thomas Wyse's original model, of common teaching of all subjects except religion. He is going further and is questioning whether religious formation should take place during the school day at all. I would like to respond to what he said on that point.

First the poor results in OECD/PISA tests. I agree with him that disimprovements in Ireland's performance in these tests is profoundly discouraging.

But where is the evidence that the 30 minutes per day spent on religion is responsible for this?

As far as I know that 30 minutes per day has not increased over the period since the earlier tests in which Ireland obtained a creditable 5th place. So why single out religious formation? Why does the Minister not, for example, refer to the teaching of second language, Irish in most cases, on which I believe 120 minutes per day is spent? Perhaps because that has not increased either in the period since we got the good result in an earlier test.

Another possibility could be that the school year is too short. Irish second level (but not primary) school children spend slightly fewer hours per year in school than do their equivalents in the OECD as a whole. But that was also so when we got the earlier good result in the international comparison

Of course, reducing the time spent on Irish would be very unpopular with some people. Increasing the length of the school year would be unpopular with others. So why single out the 30 minutes per day spent on religious formation, when there are so many other ways to find time to improve out scores in reading and mathematics?

It is also important not to enthrone results in OECD/PISA comparisons as the be all and end all of educational policy. Education seeks to prepare children not just for working life, but for life as a whole. Education that focussed narrowly on work available today would soon be obsolescent. The purpose of education is to develop the whole person, aesthetic, artistic, physical, moral, and spiritual.

How about the Ministers suggestion that religious formation take place outside school hours?

There are two possibilities here, that this be done in the evening, or at the weekend.

First how about doing it during the school week but outside school hours? At home? Or in the school building but outside the normal school day?

While it is true that, in theory under the Irish constitution, the primary educator of the child is the family, as the Minister knows only too well, in most households today both parents are also working in paid employment outside the home.

Their working day usually ends later than does that of their children. To expect parents to make up at home, for the 30 minutes that might be lost to religious education during the school day, would be quite demanding. A tired parent arrives home, prepares an evening meal, supervises homework for all non religious subjects, and is then expected to give 30 minutes religious instruction after all that is done. How realistic is that? How well qualified are most parents do this? They may be observant in their own religious practice, but how prepared are they to become teachers?

Another possibility is to provide religious education in school but not as part of the school day. Those who want religious education would either have to arrive at school half an hour early, or leave half an hour late. That would severely disrupt the school transport system, and would involve making significant demands on young children.

The other possibility would be that religious education be provided at the weekend, on a Saturday for example. To make up for the 30 minutes per day now provided would require two and a half hours work. That would essentially mean that the children whose parents wanted them to have a religious education would have a five and half day week, while other children would have a five day week. That would be a good way to kill off religious education altogether, which I am confident is not the Ministers intention.

It is important to say that many other matters, as well as reading mathematics and religion are dealt with during the school day. Education in road safety, sport, positive health, nature study, and civics are all part of the school week. Nobody argues against that. Indeed there are frequent calls for a new topic to be added whenever a new social problem is identified that parents have no time to adequately cover.

If one argues that religion should be dealt with "outside school hours" , but that all these other non core matters should continue to be dealt with at school., one is saying that religion is less important than road safety, sport, positive health etc.

Given that, for most people, religion concerns itself with eternal life that would be a pretty radical claim to make.

SHOULD WE FOLLOW THE AMERICAN MODEL?

The argument may be made, although it is not made by Ruairi Quinn to date, that, in the United States, religious education does not take place in public schools. And, despite that, there is a religiosity about American public life that is missing here. Could such a system work here?

I do not believe it would. The United States is an immigrant society and one where people move house far more often than they do in Europe. Churches provide a way of meeting people and integrating into a community, a role for churches that is less salient in European society.

There is also much more lively competition between churches in the United States. Half of all Americans change their religious affiliation, during their lives.

The exclusion of religion from public schools has not helped the US get good grades in the OECD/PISA comparisons to which the Minister referred. US performance is much worse than Ireland's and many American parents are prepared to pay very high fees to put their children into religiously run, or other private, schools in order to get them a decent education. As a result, the United States, originally a more egalitarian and meritocratic society than Europe, is rapidly becoming more socially stratified than Ireland is.

I would also add that the absence of religious education in schools in the United States may have contributed to an "anything goes" approach to religious belief there, which focusses on what feels good, rather than on what is true, and which allows people, who call themselves pastors, to think it is a religious thing to do burn the sacred books of other faiths.

An absence of religious formation in US public schools may also have contributed to a form of relativism which says "believe what you like, it is of no interest to me", rather than a true pluralism which would say "I respect you and your convictions, because, like me, you too are seeking to find truth, to find out the meaning of our lives".

IS FAITH FORMATION A VALID PART OF EDUCATION?

But now I would like to turn to the wider question, underlying what the Minister is saying, should there be faith formation at all? Is faith formation important for a society? Is it just a private matter?

I believe a religious sense is inherent in every human being. As GK Chesterton supposedly remarked, once men stop believing in God, they do not believe in nothing. They start to believe in anything. Secular religions take the place of transcendental ones.

Communism, with its belief in iron laws of history and the ultimate utopia of a classless society, was a secular religion. Nazism, with its enthronement of race and

its elaborate ritual, was another secular religion. Once people ceased to believe, as Christians do, that each human person was individually created by God, and thus had an inherent value that no other person had a right to take away, it became all too easy to accept concentration camps, gulags, ethnic cleansing and the elimination of class enemies. Other human lives just become objects, to be disposed of for the greater good, or the greater convenience of chosen life styles

If there is no God, is there any basis for saying that there are any absolute values laid down by any agency greater than the consensus of the human beings who happen to be around at a given time? In the absence of a sense of the Absolute, what is a "human right" in one generation, could be quite properly deemed to be a luxury in another generation, and vice versa.

If we replace religion, what criterion will we use to determine what is "good" and what is "evil"? What will guide our educational system in making value judgements? If society is not to descend into chaos it needs to develop a common sense of right and wrong. That is not something that will happen spontaneously. It has to be created through education, and through reasoning together. Rabbi Jonathan Sachs described our modern dilemma thus

"The idea of reasoning together was dealt a fateful blow in the twentieth century by the collapse of moral language, the disappearance of "I ought" and its replacement by "I want", "I choose", "I feel". Obligations can be debated. Wants, choices, and feelings can only be satisfied or frustrated" he said.

He went on to identify the importance of religion in providing a basis for the development of a shared civic sense of obligation, for each of our countries, and for our world.

He said

"Reverence, restraint, humility, a sense of limits, the ability to listen and respond to human distress- these are not virtues produced by the market, yet they are attributes we will need if our global civilization is to survive and they are an essential part of the religious imagination"

Those who would banish religious formation from our schools should reflect on those words of the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain.

ARE THERE ADEQUATE ALTERNATIVES TO RELIGION AS A SOURCE FOR A SOCIAL ETHIC?

Of course, people who believe religious formation does not belong in schools may argue that there are other sources available to draw upon in shaping the ethics of children.

Could not science, material progress, freedom, a secular ethic, or human rights perform that role?

Could a combination of these provide us with a sufficient sense of what is good and what is evil, so that we could safely banish religious belief to the private sphere, as something unnecessary to the formation of future citizens?

Science?

Science, as we know, is a search for truth but, on its own, it has no inherent ethical boundaries. The application of science has given us marvellous medical advances, improved sanitation, and wonderful new means of communication. But it has also given us the atom bomb, the depletion of scarce water resources, and climate change.

Material progress and rising living standards? Should they be our goal and our guide?

Material progress has not been cost free. Beyond a certain point, which we in Ireland passed about 30 years ago, there seems to be no correlation between improvement in average material living standards and improved wellbeing. This is a finding of economists who have been studying the “economics of happiness”.

The same economic studies suggest that, when it comes to links between material wealth and a sense of wellbeing, everything is relative. If we can afford a better car than our brother in law, we feel well off. If we can only afford a cheaper one, we feel badly off. Thus it becomes an endless and unsatisfying struggle. A religious sense, if it is allowed to develop, would put all these things back into proportion.

Freedom?

Should that be the goal? Should we just leave it to people to decide for themselves how to use their freedom, without any collective communal guidance?

The trouble with “freedom” as a goal for society is that it is a purely individualistic concept. It says nothing about how we should treat other people. It would, for example, validate the pursuit of private profit regardless of the effect that has on other people, or on the environment.

Freedom can only exist in the framework of law, otherwise it becomes chaos. And law making involves value judgements, and the values underlying law have to come from a source above and beyond the law itself. Otherwise law is just a malleable thing based on popular consensus and majority opinion, which as we know is highly fickle and contingent on emotional waves. Majorities can be both blind and unjust, at times.

Ethics, separate from religion? Is that a possibility?

I think it is difficult to come up with a complete set of ethical principles, without having a view about the purpose of human life, why we are here, and thus who we are as humans. Some would argue that we can have a concept of human rights that is entirely separate from our concept of how each human being came into existence and from our sense of the value of that human life, and whether that life exists in any continuing form after death. I am not sure that this is possible. I believe Christians could reach a wide level of agreement on a lot of human rights topics who believed this, but not complete agreement, I suggest. Why do I say that?

Genomics, the science of genes, brings us up against the limits of such an approach. Is it okay to “create” a new, better, man, with fewer diseases, in a test tube, to experiment with human beings, to discard some and retain others?

I believe these are questions that go beyond any possibility of absolute determination by some system of secular, religion free, ethics

When do we become sufficiently “human” to have “human rights”? Are human rights inherent from the beginning of life, or are they contingent on whether we can live independently, as some might argue? These issues cannot be decided for us by science on its own. And in the absence of a scientific answer the question is left to politics. And, as we know from the debate about abortion in other countries, the best politics can come up with is some arbitrary rule, determined by a temporary political compromise of some kind. That shows the limits of the human rights model on its own, if it is separated from a deeper consensus on the nature and meaning of human life.

A similar problem of agreeing on common assumptions arises in a dialogue on human rights with countries like China, whose Marxist materialist ideology and Confucian ethic give it a different view on the value of individual lives. Islamic societies would also have different priorities than western societies, whose “secular” notions of human rights have roots in, often unremembered and unacknowledged, diluted Christian assumptions.

I believe the cultivation of a religious sense, through religious education is a vital part of education. Education is about more than a lot of facts. It is about learning how to live, and how to make judgements. Anyone who sets out to educate children and prepare them for life, and for making judgements, has to start with their own belief of what constitutes a good life and good judgement. I think that is self evident. So I think it follows that teachers need to believe what they are teaching and schools do need to have a shared belief system

FAITH AND REASON ARE COMPATIBLE

Of course this does not mean that religion should have free rein, without critical rational challenge. Without a constant questioning, faith can become a form of oppression, fanaticism that distorts our humanity. As Pope Benedict said in his famous Regensburg address there is a proper dialogue that must always go on between faith and reason. They should influence one another constantly. Religion must check the hubris of faith, and faith that of reason.

As he said, before he became Pope, in a speech in Saint Etienne in June 2004
“I would say that there can be no peace in the world without genuine peace between reason and faith, because without peace between reason and religion, the sources of morality and law dry up”

So I would suggest respectfully to Ruairi Quinn that faith formation does have a place in our schools, a place that it should share peacefully with science, literacy, mathematics and all those other good things.

Speech by John Bruton, former Taoiseach, in the series of “Lenten Lectures” on faith and public, policy organised jointly by the Catholic, Church of Ireland and Presbyterian parishes, in the Radisson Hotel, Dublin, at 8 pm on the 7 April 2011

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