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Will Irish Elementary School Teachers be able to Teach Christian Religious Education into the Future?

Abstract

In this paper I draw attention to the place and nature of primary (elementary) school based Catholic religious education in the south of Ireland. I will then look at the changing religious identity of young people in the south of Ireland over the past 30 years through the use of data drawn from the European Values Survey. Having established the uncoupling of many young people for organised religious belief, I then ask if they will be able to teach religious education in Catholic primary schools into the future.

Religious Education in Irish Catholic Primary Schools

All Irish primary school teachers are required to teach religious education for two and a half hours a week. It is one of the seven curricular areas required by the Irish state.¹ However, unlike all the other subject areas, the state does not prescribe the content of religious education, this is left to the patron bodies themselves. The Department of Education and Skills describes the nature of patron bodies in the following terms: “While the State provides for free primary education, schools are established by patron bodies who define the ethos of the school and appoint the board of management to run the school on a day to day basis.”² The table below outlines the number of primary schools in the state and their patron body.

Total number of primary schools by patron body (2010/11)³

Patron Body	No of schools	% of total
Catholic	2,841	89.65
Church of Ireland	174	5.49
Presbyterian	17	0.54
Methodist	1	0.03
Jewish	1	0.03
Islamic	2	0.06
Quaker	1	0.03

¹ Government of Ireland, "Primary School Curriculum: Introduction," (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999), 40.

² Department of Education and Skill, "Diversity of Patronage," <http://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Diversity-of-Patronage/>.

³ John Coolahan, Caroline Hussey, and Fionnuala Kilfeather, "The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum’s Advisory Group " (Dublin: Government Publications, 2012), 36.

John Scottus Educational Trust Ltd	1	0.03
Lifeways Ireland Ltd	2	0.06
An Foras Pátrúnachta na Scoileanna Lán Ghaeileg Teo	57	1.80
Educate Together Ltd	44	1.39
Schools in Educate Together network with their own patron body	14	0.44
Vocational Education Committees	5	0.16
Minister for Education and Skills	9	0.29
Total	3,169	

There were some 3,169 primary schools in Ireland in 2010/2011. Currently 96% of primary schools have denominational patronage, as noted in the table above. Almost 90% of the primary schools in the state have a Catholic patron. This means that the religious education programme in the vast majority of the primary schools in the south of Ireland is rooted in the Catholic Christian tradition and it was written by the Irish Episcopal Commission on Catechetics.⁴

Religious Education in Schools

While the state does not write the religious education curriculum or programme for schools, it does outline some core principles for the subject. It states that the curriculum for religious education in all schools, regardless of patron “takes into account the child’s affective, aesthetic, spiritual, moral and religious needs” and that it ought to specifically enable “the child to develop spiritual and moral values and to come to a knowledge of God.”⁵ It also asks each school to make “alternative organisational arrangements for those who do not wish to avail of the particular religious education it offers.”⁶

These core principles are very much in keeping with the aim of Catholic religious education, which seeks to engage all aspects of the child—their head, hands and heart—and help them come to a knowledge of God. In the Catholic school this knowledge is far more than learning *about* God, rather it aims at helping the children, where appropriate, to become “aware of and respond to the transcendent dimension of their lives.”⁷ The following quote from *Share the Good News, the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland*, describes the aim of religious education in Irish Catholic schools.

In the Catholic school, building on the academic preparation and professional expertise of its religious educators, religious education will never simply be a general study of religions, their history, traditions and customs. A purely phenomenological approach, comparing one religion with another without due regard for the faith life of

⁴ Currently a new religious education curriculum for Catholic schools has been written and is awaiting approval from Rome before a programme can be created for the schools.

⁵ Department of Education, "Introduction to the Primary School Curriculum," ed. Department of Education (Dublin: Government Publications, 1999), 58.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 58.

their students, their families and the faith community to which they belong is inadequate. Rather, religious education, as generally defined in Ireland, encourages Catholic students and others to engage with religious questions from within the context of their own lived religious faith. Their own experience and faith journey is respected by the teachers, and their commitment to the religious tradition of their family is supported.⁸

This aim demands a lot from our teachers. While they need to be good educators, they also—at the very least—need to have some affinity and appreciation for the Catholic faith tradition. They need to believe that it has a wisdom for the life of the children and that it can help them live life to the full (John 10:10). Otherwise, why would they teach it? And this is where we come to the crux of this paper. Given the changing religious identity of young Irish people over the past thirty years, will our new young teachers have the capacity or interest to teach Catholic religious education? Because as Parker Palmer says, we teach who we are.⁹

The religious profile of young people has changed considerably over the past thirty years in Ireland. Today, the cohort from which student teachers emerge is much less religious than previous generations. While the group examined in this paper is not the student teachers themselves, it is the milieu and context from which they are drawn. As such, this paper is a first step in the exploring the interest, capacity and ability of student teachers in Ireland to teach Christian religious education now and into the future.

The Data

Currently 82.6% of young people say they believe in God, while 17.4% say they have no belief in God. The figure of those with no belief in God has jumped considerably over the past 30 years, from 5.3% to 17.4%.

		Yes	No
Wave 1	1981	94.7%	5.3%
Wave 2	1990	93.2%	6.8%
Wave 3	1999	95.3%	4.7%
Wave 4	2008	82.6%	17.4%

In response to the question, 'How important is God in your Life', and on a scale of 1 – 10, with 1 being 'Not at all Important', and 10 being 'Very Important', we can see a decreasing amount of young people finding God 'Very Important' or 'Important' in their lives and an increasing number of people saying that God is 'Not at all Important' or not important.

Table 2: Percentage of people who express belief in the 'Importance of God' (1-10)

⁸ *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), 57-58.

⁹ Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach : Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, 1st ed. (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 2.

		Not at all important	9	8	3	2	Very important
Wave 1	1981	4.9%	2.6%	2.9%	17.3%	13.5%	17%
Wave 2	1990	4%	4%	7.9%	19.2%	8.6%	12.6%
Wave 3	1999	6.8%	2.3%	4.5%	5.7%	5.7%	12.5%
Wave 4	2008	6.4%	9.1%	3.6%	10%	7.3%	10%

There has been a sharp rise in the figure of young people who say they don't belong to any religious denomination (see Table 2). In 1981, 2% said they did not belong to any denomination, whereas, in 2008, that figure had risen to 21.6% of the cohort.

		Yes	No
Wave 1	1981	98%	2%
Wave 2	1990	93.4%	6.6%
Wave 3	1999	90.9%	9.1%
Wave 4	2008	78.4%	21.6%

A similar pattern can also be seen in answer to the question concerning moments of prayer or meditation in the lives of young people. The number of young people who answered 'no' to this question has grown from 28.9% in 1981 to 48.7% in 2008 and the number of those who answered 'yes' has decreased from 71.1% in 1981 to 51.3% in 2008. Today, less young people believe in life after death, heaven, hell and sin than thirty years ago; while the belief in re-incarnation has remained steady at almost a third of the cohort over these years (see Table 3).

		Life after death	Heaven	Hell	Sin
Wave 1	1981	21.1%	19.6%	55.1%	13.5%
Wave 2	1990	26.4%	19.9%	61.1%	19.6%
Wave 3	1999	28.9%	14.6%	56.1%	15%
Wave 4	2008	34.7%	36.9%	61.4%	34.9%

Regarding a young person's own religious identity, the numbers have not fluctuated that much over the years. Those who identify themselves as a religious person has only dropped to 52.2% from 56.2% over the thirty years. The number of people who consider themselves as a convinced atheist has only risen marginally, from 1.8% to 2.6%.

Table 5: Percentage of people who consider themselves ‘A Religious Person’

		A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist
Wave 1	1981	56.2%	42%	1.8%
Wave 2	1990	59.9%	38.8%	1.4%
Wave 3	1999	69%	29.8%	1.2%
Wave 4	2008	52.2%	45.2%	2.6%

While there has not been any significant shift in the figures regarding religious identity, there has been change in the level of importance given to religion in one’s life. For instance, in 1990,¹⁰ 17.9% of young people considered it a very important part of their lives, in 2008, that percentage dropped to 13.7% and the percentage of people who believe that it is not important at all, has grown from 6.6% to 19.7%.

Table 6: Percentage of people who believe religion is important in life

		Very important	Rather important	Not very important	Not at all important
Wave 1	1981				
Wave 2	1990	17.9%	49.7%	25.8%	6.6%
Wave 3	1999	8.1%	45.3%	29.1%	17.4%
Wave 4	2008	13.7%	27.4%	39.3%	19.7%

While weekly attendance at a religious service was very popular thirty years ago at 76.6% of the cohort, it has dropped significantly to 11.7% in 2008. Occasional and intermittent attendance has become the norm.

Table 7: Percentage of how often people attend religious service

		Weekly or more	Once a month and holy days	Once a year	Less than once a year
Wave 1	1981	76.6%	10.6%	1.1%	11.7% ¹¹
Wave 2	1990	70.2%	21.9%	2%	5.9%
Wave 3	1999	26.2%	45.4%	9.1%	19.3%
Wave 4	2008	18.8%	24.8%	17.7%	38.5%

Following a similar pattern, the number of young people who get comfort and strength from religion has also declined over the past thirty years. There has been a drop of over 12%

¹⁰ This was the first year this question was asked, it was not asked in 1981.

among those who got strength and comfort from religion, falling from a figure of 69.3% in 1981 to 58% in 2008.

		No	Yes
Wave 1	1981	30.7%	69.3%
Wave 2	1990	36.1%	63.9%
Wave 3	1999	43.6%	56.4%
Wave 4	2008	42%	58%

While many do not get comfort from religion in general, the numbers are high when it comes to the importance of attending religious services for births, marriages and deaths.

		Birth	Marriage	Death
Wave 1	1981			
Wave 2	1990	91.4%	92%	96.7%
Wave 3	1999	90.7%	95.3%	98.8%
Wave 4	2008	90.2%	86%	96.6%

Finally, while strong importance is given to the role of Churches in providing religious services, there is considerably less given to their ability to provide answers to questions surrounding problems of family life, moral and social issues and even spiritual needs. For instance, 78.3% of young people don't believe that the Churches provide answers to moral problems, 77.1% don't believe Churches give answers to problems of family life, 87% don't believe that the Churches give answers to social problems and 49.5% don't believe the Churches give answers to spiritual needs. The numbers of people holding these views has grown over the years.

		Social problems	Moral problems	Problems of family life	Spiritual needs
Wave 1	1981		63.3%	64%	43%
Wave 2	1990	79.7%	71.4%	74.8%	38.3%
Wave 3	1999	83.3%	78.3%	79.9%	31.6%
Wave 4	2008	87%	78.3%	77.1%	49.5%

It is important to notice the movement and trend over time in the religious identity of these young people. In most of the categories there is a growing separation from organised

religious belief and practice. Rising numbers of young people are moving away from belief in God, fewer count that belief as important, less belong to a religious denomination, many don't believe in life after death, heaven, hell and sin, almost half are unlikely to count themselves a religious person, with religion becoming less important to them, many rarely attend religious services, except for the religious ceremony to mark births, marriages and deaths and large numbers don't believe that the Churches provide answers to social, moral and familial problems and almost half don't believe that the Churches don't provide answers to spiritual needs.

And so the question can be asked, if this is the cohort from which are students are drawn, can we be confident that our emerging young teachers will be able to teach Catholic religious education, one that has formational and sacramental dimensions to it. Since many young people in Ireland are becoming more unsure of their own relationship with the Catholic Christian tradition – how can they be expected to educate others in this tradition?

Reflection on the Data

Belief in God

A significant finding from the research was the fact that number of young people who professed a belief in God from 1981 – 1999 was remarkably high, with figures remaining above 90 per cent. However, these figures fell to 82.6 per cent in 2008, with 17.4% professing no belief in God. We cannot know from these figures, what sort of God people are professing a belief in or not – is it the God as revealed in the Christian tradition, the One who is love (1 John 4:8,16) or some higher force or being, a cosmic therapist or policeman?

Belonging to religious denomination

Just as the numbers of those professing belief in God decreased between 1999 and 2008, the same can be said for those who belong to a religious denomination. Up to 1999, the numbers describing themselves as belonging to one were over 90 per cent, however, in 2008, this number had fallen to 78.4 per cent. While there is a high instance of 'believing and belonging' among this group, significant shifts have happened between 1999 and 2008. On the one hand, there is a large amount of young people who profess a belief in God and belong to a religious denomination, but on the other, the figures ask questions as to the quality and level of belief and involvement. For instance, over half this group only attend religious services once a year or less, with 24.8 per cent attending monthly and holy days. Roughly a third do not believe in life after death, heaven, or sin; with 61.4 per cent not believing in hell. A little over 40 per cent of them say they don't get comfort from religion and between 70 to 80 per cent of them don't believe that the Churches give answers to social, moral or familial problems, with 50 per cent of them not believing that the Churches give answers to one's spiritual needs.

And whereas there has been some change in the level of belief and belonging, those who consider themselves religious has remained reasonably fixed over the past 30 years, with 56.2

per cent identifying themselves as religious in 1981 and 52.2 per cent doing the same in 2008 (see Table 5).

So where are we now? The figures clearly show a significant number of young people only having a marginal connection with their religious tradition. While they state a belief in God, with over 70 per cent belonging to a religious denomination, the expression in terms of participation at religious services and shared beliefs that are in keeping with the tradition is poor. Their religious tradition is not that important to them and appears to have little meaningful impact on their own identity. While there is a very high recognition of the importance of religious services celebrating births, marriages and deaths, many young people have little appreciation for the institutional church or its teachings.

Conclusion

The research data indicates that while the vast majority of young people in Ireland believe in God, they are moving further and further away from any serious engagement with institutionalised religious belief. The Catholic Church is becoming less significant in their lives. For over two thirds of this cohort, it is not a source of help to them regarding social, moral and family problems and only a half believe it is of value in answering their spiritual needs. The nature of their religious identity is changing, it is less important to them today and they have less need for organised religion. This begs the question: how can they teach religious education in a Catholic school in a meaningful and persuasive manner? Such a question must draw our attention to the Colleges of Education, which prepare teachers for all our schools, as to how they might best prepare students to teach religious education in Catholic primary schools. And that is a whole new paper!

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