Religion, education and conflict in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract

The place of religion in education in the Republic of Ireland generates significant conflict between groups promoting different agendas. Such conflict, however, is not peculiar to Ireland and it is also to be found in most countries. Contexts vary enormously and in Ireland the issue takes a very particular shape. This is because the vast majority of schools in the primary sector are under denominational patronage, that is, they are sponsored by Churches or religious bodies. This article examines two documents where conflicting demands regarding the relationship between education and religion are given especially explicit, pronounced and elaborated expression.

Keywords: religion, schooling, education, the State, secularism

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Introduction

The place of religion in education in the Republic of Ireland generates significant conflict between groups promoting different agendas. Such conflict, however, is not peculiar to Ireland and it is also to be found in most countries. Contexts vary enormously and in Ireland the issue takes a very particular shape. This is because the vast majority of schools in the primary sector are under denominational patronage, that is, they are sponsored by Churches or religious bodies. This is a matter of history rather than of a conspiracy on the part of the Catholic Church that sponsors over 90% of the schools. As Renehan explains, the "situa-

tion pertaining to education in religion in this country did not materialise out of a vacuum" (Renehan, 2014, pp. 1-3). Accordingly the current context cannot be fully understood without reference to history.

Whether state support for religiously-affiliated schools is desirable from civic and educational perspectives and whether this support will prove financially realistic in the future are large questions. Changes are certainly afoot and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is seeking to curtail the dominance of religious patronage. Over the years there has been increasing demand for Educate Together schools (these are non-denominational) and the opening of multi-denominational Community National schools under the sponsorship of Education and Training Boards (formerly Vocational Education Committees) and religious bodies. Two major reports that draw on submissions from different interests' groups have also been published. These are the reports of the Irish Human Rights Commission, *Religion & Education: A Human Rights Perspective* (IHRC Report, 2011) and *The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector: Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (Forum Report, 2012). In the first of these, conflicting demands are given especially explicit, pronounced and elaborated expression. The submissions to the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) illustrate the strongly conflicting views in Ireland regarding the relationship between education and religion. The second report is an attempt to take serious account of the variety of religious and non-religious values in Irish education. Its proposal is not at all coercive and is likely eventually to lead to a wider choice of school type thereby diffusing at least some of the conflict that exists currently in the education system.

Religion, Education and Human Rights

Without doubt the greatest area of conflict relating to education and religion in the Republic of Ireland is the Catholic Church's control of over 90% of the country's primary schools. It should be noted at the outset, however, that such schools are state funded and they are inclusive of all children regardless of the religious or non-religious values of their parents or guardians. They also follow the state curriculum and they are subject to the inspection by the Department of Education and Skills. The Church's historical control and management of these schools is often referred to as patronage. Given the significant influence that the Church has had in Irish life and the increasingly diverse nature of Irish society, the Irish Human Rights Commission (IHRC) set about examining the situation from a human rights perspective. It is important to note that the IHRC is a statutory body and it undertook to conduct research on questions relating to freedom of religion and

equality before the law. As part of the discharge of its responsibilities under the terms of the Irish Human Rights Commission Act (2000), the IHRC submitted its findings and recommendations in a report to the Minister for Education and Skills, Ruairi Quinn (IHRC Report, 2013) The report also drew on the results of a questionnaire that provided responses from more than sixty respondents, including parents, former pupils, national and international academics, primary school teachers, members of the Campaign to separate Church and State and unaffiliated members of the public (IHRC Report, p. 39). The narratives contained in the responses reflect the complexity of education and religion in Ireland and the conflictual situation at the heart of Irish society, although according to the latest Census figures, the great majority of people continue to record their religion Roman Catholic (Central Statistics Office, 2011).

Although the IHRC Report considered a number of issues relating to religion and education, the main concern was to find out if the system of patronage in primary schools, "allows for the protection of human rights or whether a different structure is required" (IHRC Report, p. 41). In this article, it is possible only to provide a synopsis of a selection of the respondents' views in order to provide the reader with an insight into the on-going debate. The question of patronage and in this case denominational patronage does not stand in isolation from the place of religion as it is expressed (i) in the ethos of the school and (ii) and in religious education as a subject in its own right on the curriculum. Given this background, we now outline briefly, in bulleted format, the divergence of some of the respondents' viewpoints as follows:

a) *Responses in Favour of and Against Retention of Denominational Patronage*

Responses in Favour of Retention	Responses Against Retention
• Denominational schools are an expression of a pluralist society • Great efforts are made to accommodate minority or non-faith children in Catholic Schools • It is illogical or unreasonable to expect Catholic patrons to provide a non-denominational ethos in schools	• Where free education is provided by the State, the patronage system is a clear breach of human rights • Basing schools on religious beliefs is morally wrong as it segregates children • The Catholic religion is more or less forced upon children and teachers

b)   *Responses in Favour of and Against Retention of Religious Ethos*

Responses in Favour of Retention	Responses Against Retention
• A religious ethos that is confined to religious instruction alone is of no value • Religious instruction in isolation and without wider integration into school life is no more than a history lesson • The spiritual dimension of children is a basic human right - a necessary element for the education of young people.	• Religion has no place in the classroom as it removes the child from important learning in science and the arts • Instruction in religion should not take place on state owned property • Religion in schools is unfairly biased against the non-religious outlook in life

c)   *Responses in Favour of and Against Retention of Religious Education in Classroom*

Responses in Favour of Retention	Responses Against Retention
• The Religious Education syllabi (second level) engages with pupils of any faith and none • As religion is part of culture and history all can benefit from Religious Education. • Information and knowledge in the education curriculum are conveyed in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner in Catholic primary schools in so far as is humanly possibly	• The Religious Education syllabi (second level) do not respect the non-religious outlook in life. Changing the emphasis to a history of religion would be less discriminating towards non-religious pupils • Throughout the IHRC submissions of non-religious parents, there is a significant sense of grievance in having to send their children to denominational or inter-denominational schools • Some parents became involved in disputes with the school as to how religion was being imparted. Others avoided conflict – but it left the children feeling isolated and excluded

Irish Human Rights Commission: Recommendations

It is important to point out that the selection of bullet point phrases, outlined above, consists only of a relatively small number of opinions expressed in the IHRC Report and that the research was of a qualitative rather than of a quantitative nature. It should also be noted that the authors of this article have attempted to do justice to those voices in order to lend expression to the diversity of views contained in the document. One of the main reasons for writing this article is to ensure that the reader gets a sense of the conflict that exists in Irish society regarding education and religion particularly within the Irish education (primary) school system.

Consistent with its statutory remit, the Irish Human Rights Commission, having considered its findings, proposed a set of recommendations to the Minister for Education (IHRC Report, pp. 104-106). It is timely to turn to some of those recommendations (numbering thirteen in total). The IHRC Report details its overarching recommendation regarding the State's responsibility to cater for religious, non-religious and minority views of life advocating that the State should provide for a diversity of school types to cater for such needs. To this end, the document recommends that the experience gained from the introduction of the Community national schools under the Education and Training Boards and the development of the Educate Together and *Gaelscoileanna* (Irish speaking) schools should be taken into account (p. 104). These schools are as yet relatively small in total and not under denominational management. There is the strong possibility, if not probability, that the State will continue to retain the current denominational patronage model particularly where the vast majority of parents wish it. In that case, the IHRC Report recommends that significant modifications should take place in denominational schools (p. 104). Among those, the State should set up an inspectorate to ensure that, "indoctrination and proselytism" do not happen in any State funded school (p. 105). If or where indoctrination or proselytism is present, the State should act with immediate effect. The IHRC Report, does however, recommend that terms such as "denominational", "multi-denominational", "inter-denominational" and "non-denominational" should be defined clearly in legislation. It also advises that the State should pay specific attention to children of minority faiths or of no faith by ensuring that modifications are made to the integrated curriculum. The integrated curriculum is one which promotes an indivisible relationship between religion as a subject and the practice of it in a faith-based context (see Williams, 2005, p. 48). Furthermore, one of the recommendations advocates that Section 15 of the Education Act (1998) be amended to provide for such modification (IHRC Report, p. 106).

The Irish Human Rights Commission, then, holds that religion in schools should be viewed through a human rights prism. In recognition of the importance of human rights considerations in any politically contested area, we have briefly identified the IHRC Report as one which attempts to address the debate concerning the role of religion in schools. The document is particularly relevant and enlightening because it not only acknowledges the various viewpoints of stakeholders and individuals who responded to the IHRC survey questionnaire but it also reveals some important areas of conflict in respect of education and religion in the primary school sector. In particular, that conflict centres on the retention of denominational patronage, religious ethos and religious education as a subject in the school curriculum. Under each of these headings, contention was evident from the responses as to why religious bodies should be involved in education or even if religion should be taught in school in any way from any perspective. One of the most significant concerns was that of school ethos and one that is not easily resolvable in schools where a given ethos is expected to be upheld. Others were in favour of retaining religion in schools through its role in religious education whether that is from a denominational or a phenomenological perspective.

In summary, much of the difficulty relating to scrutiny of the responses to the IHRC Report showed that terminology employed pertaining to school types such as denominational, multi-denominational, inter-denominational and non-denominational was open to interpretation sometimes depending on the various view points of the respondents. It was somewhat disconcerting although understandable, to discover that terminology employed by the respondents to denote 'religious education' was so diverse and lacking in understanding that it has the potential to cause serious confusion for any current or subsequent debates taking place on the matter in the country today. In relation to the IHRC Report's recommendations to the Minister for Education and Skills, it is evident that there is more to the debate than can be addressed by human rights considerations alone. Reference to human rights, although necessary, does not provide straight-forward solutions to the contentious and multi-faceted issue of schooling in a democratic society. Such is the reality of religion in schools. The next section, therefore, continues the debate focusing on another more comprehensive and important document produced by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector in response to a directive from the Minister for Education and Skills.

The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism: Rationale

The need for appropriate forms of primary school patronage to cater for the country's increasingly diverse society was the reason behind the establishment of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Forum). The Forum, consisting of a wide and inclusive range of stakeholders, was asked to consider (i) the exceptionally large number of primary schools per head of the population in relation to other developed countries (ii) areas of static or declining population, with a concentration of denominational schools where there is a parental demand for diversity (iii) the so-called denominational "Stand Alone Schools". These latter schools generally serve a local community wherein it is deemed not realistic to set up a second school under a different kind of managerial control. A major concern here was to ensure that such schools be as inclusive as possible in accommodating the various belief systems of minority pupils. Although it is incumbent on the management of "Stand Alone Schools" to ensure that the rights and needs of minority pupils are not infringed, management also has the responsibility to respond to the rights and needs of children of the majority denomination attending the schools (Forum Report, 2012, pp. 1-3). More importantly, it is not difficult to see where the potential for conflict arises if these opposing demands are not addressed. Greater attention will be given to the "Stand Alone Schools" in a later section of this article.

Acutely aware of the need to act at national level, the Minister for Education and Skills appointed an Advisory Group of three experts charging them with overseeing the work of the Forum. Under the Government Programme for National Recovery, the Advisory Group was to sit for a maximum period of twelve months and it was given precise terms of reference. Among these terms was one that might lead to conflict on the part of parents. This was the directive from the Minister in relation to the divestment of Catholic denominational schools to other managerial bodies. It includes the following considerations:

1. How best to ensure that the education system provide a sufficiently diverse number and range of primary schools to cater for all religions and none.
2. The practicalities of how transfer/divesting of patronage should operate for individual primary schools in communities where it is appropriate and necessary.
3. How such transfer/divesting can be advanced to ensure that demand for diversity of patronage is identified and met nationally on as widespread a basis as possible (p. 3).

The Advisory Group (hereafter, the Forum authors) were also to include two more important factors. Firstly, it was intended that they should keep in mind the "expressed willingness of the Roman Catholic Church to consider divesting patronage of primary schools". Secondly, they were to take account of the, "current financial constraints within which the State is operating, the need for continued restraint into the future and the requirement in this context to make maximum use of existing school infrastructure in catering for future demands" (p. 4). A multi-dimensional approach was employed consisting of (i) a consultation/enquiry phase (ii) an interpretation and analysis phase and (iii) the preparation and submission phase of the required Forum Report by the end of 2011. Two hundred and fifteen submissions were received from the consultation process and after a three-day open working session of the Forum, the final report was presented to the Minister for Education including a comprehensive set of recommendations for his consideration (pp. 5, 105-114).

At the time of writing the Minister outlined his action plan in response to the Forum's recommendations and intends to draw up a White Paper for consideration by Government (Government of Ireland, 2012). Yet the Minister was concerned that his initiative would lead to hostility particularly in relation to the divestment of denominational schools. He directed that a pilot survey of parents take place in areas where there appeared to be an oversupply of Catholic primary schools (see final section). Although the Catholic hierarchy had called for agreement with the State on the matter, the Minister's concern appeared to be more focused on possible reaction from the parents of the schools targeted for divestment. In this context, the Minister is quoted in the national press as saying that "no public meetings will be allowed" (Flynn, 2012, p. 5). It seems rather strange for an elected representative not to allow public meetings in a democratic society.

The rationale behind the setting up of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism was primarily to achieve "patronage change" affecting a relatively significant cohort of schools under denominational patronage. Subsequent to the recommendations of the Forum Report, the Department of Education and Skills published survey findings on the level of parental demand for a wider choice of school patronage particularly where it was thought that change might be required. A detailed but complex analysis took place indicating that out of a selected number of 38 areas surveyed, parental preferences in 23 of those areas expressed "sufficient" demand in support of immediate change in school patronage. The survey, however, also revealed that although there was a cohort of parents who would welcome some change in each of the remaining 15 areas, the support was not strong enough to ensure a viable school at this point in time. The findings of the survey also suggest that such consideration "may be of value when the detailed examina-

tion of the reorganisation of the schools and their possible reconfiguration is being undertaken by Patrons in the relevant survey" … (DES, 2013). In this regard, it is proposed that the main patron (Catholic Bishop / Archbishop) in the identified areas should now be asked to consider re-configuration options that would free up accommodation for at least one full stream for provision by the first choice alternative Patron (DES, 2013).

The real issue, it may be argued, however, related more to the suggestions, comments and recommendations contained in the one hundred and sixty-four page Forum Report and how that these are likely to impact on the place and role of education in religion in the primary school. As Lane puts it:

> It is important that the debates taking place in society about religion in the public square should be reflected to some degree in the classroom. There is, as seen, an increased visibility of religion in public discourse and a growing awareness of the need for some kind of dialogue between religion and society. (Lane, 2013, p. 31)

Although it may not be difficult to agree with Lane that an increased visibility of religion in public discourse will lead to an awareness of the need for some kind of dialogue between religion and society, reflecting public square debates in the classroom (and particularly in the primary classroom) may be more complex than one might initially imagine. The outcome of the Forum Report on religion and its relationship to education is uncertain since it will take a number of years before any impact will be evident. Nonetheless, the Forum Report reveals the potential of Religious Education as an agent of stability and of peace rather than of conflict. To that end we shall focus on the deliberations of the Forum Report relating to the teaching of religion in schools and how the authors of the document attempt to contribute to the debate in as fair and open a manner as possible.

Religious Language: Potential for Conflict

The primary focus of the Forum Report was the divestment of schools from Catholic managerial bodies to other forms of managerial control. The authors of the Forum Report were also aware, however, of the centrality of the teaching of religion in denominational schools and of the various terms employed in the language of the teaching of religion. In order to eliminate, as far as is possible, any avenues for conflict through misuse or misunderstanding of terminology, the authors of the Report set out clearly a workable language that would be accessible in the public forum. Aware of the various usages also of the meaning of the term religious education, the authors recognised that "a certain fluidity exists in the use of

terms in relation to religious education [where some] of the terms found in older documents [such as religious instruction] are no longer in general current usage" (p. v). Given the potential for conflict, particularly where children come from backgrounds with a range of beliefs, a protocol for diversity (detailed below) was generally agreed by the Forum (p. 74). In reporting to the Minister for Education and Skills, the authors therefore offered their own interim terminology under two different categories (i) Denominational Religious Education (DRE) (ii) Education about Religion and Beliefs and also Ethics (ERB) (p. 88). McGrady is helpful here when he explains that, "The particular balance that emerges in the Irish Context between 'teaching for (into) religion and belief' (denominational religious education), on the one hand, and 'teaching about religions and beliefs' (ERB), on the other hand will be of interest to the wider European debate … It is acknowledged in the Irish context that both approaches are needed and that the precise balance which emerges will depend upon the patronage structure of the school and the actual diversity present at a particular moment in time within an individual school. (McGrady, 2014, p. 141).

In their account of Denominational Religious Education, the Forum Report authors explain that this is the cultivation in individuals of a belief system where they are involved in living out their lives according to the religious values, moral actions and modes of thinking in light of those beliefs. They also claim that the term has the added advantage of being inclusive rather than exclusive of the broader terminology "religious education". Their use of the term DRE in this respect gives due recognition to the "critical thinking" dimension of faith formation while at the same time avoiding the charge that either "religious instruction" or "indoctrination" should play any part in children's education in religion today. In addition and specifically in relation to the Republic of Ireland, they note that DRE incorporates the constitutional and legal term "religious instruction" – although used in the past, the connotations of the term are now regarded as pedagogically limiting (Forum Report, 2012, p. v).

Furthermore, the authors distinguish between Denominational Religious Education and Education *about* Religion and Beliefs (ERB). Borrowing the latter term from the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (2007), they explain that ERB helps pupils to learn and understand the various rich cultural heritages of forms of religion and beliefs embraced by humankind throughout the ages. The focus of ERB is not based on the nurturing or belief or practice of any particular religion, rather its aim is to offer children the possibility of an informed awareness of the main theist and non-theist beliefs and of the main aspects of their cultural manifestations (Forum Report, 2012, p. v). In short, ERB may refer only to the phenomenon of religion and , although it recognises the role that dif-

ferent religious denominations play in the public square but ERB does not espouse any one religion, faith tradition, or belief system.

Denominational Religious Education

The Forum authors recognise the value of a religious belief system where people live out their lives according to the values, moral actions and modes of thinking in light of their beliefs. Furthermore, they reveal that they are readily aware of the academic environment within which DRE functions in the curriculum (p. v). Sometimes, in current debate, denominational religious education is referred to as confessional religious education. The Forum Report accepts international scholarship in this respect. Jackson, for example, claims that "it is possible to have a confessional approach in which religious education is taught from within a faith-based setting, and yet grants autonomy and agency to pupils" (Jackson, 2007, p. 6). He goes on to say that before students can understand, have knowledge and interpret those of other traditions they need to deepen the understanding of their own background traditions (p. 6). Jackson's is not an isolated position. As Williams (2014, p. 132) explains confessionally - specific religious formation involves initiating children into a particular religion (or their continued education in this religion) rather than on the study of religion as a phenomenon. Indeed it is hard to see how we teach religion in a strong sense without initiating young people into one tradition of faith. The endeavour to teach "religion" in a general sense is like trying to teach sport without actually teaching children to play a specific game or activity, or to teach languages without teaching a particular language.

The report recognises that a belief system embraces the whole person and especially where it is part of school life. It explains that often there is a narrow interpretation of the meaning of school ethos as being a religious ethos only. The Forum Report, therefore, points to the broader meaning of ethos as something that should be experienced by children in the everyday life of the school through dignity and respect for their rights. The document is clear in its understanding of the legal responsibilities of all schools to uphold a school ethos or characteristic spirit (pp. 16-21). That the Forum authors are appreciative of the Catholic Church's role in its commitment to the upholding of a characteristic spirit in their schools is noted in the Forum Report (p. 76). Denominational Religious Education, in this context, is also considered by the Forum authors as one that should be protected specifically through a school's right to legislate concerning its particular ethos provided, of course, it does not discriminate against "religious/belief, socio-economic, language, cultural, special needs or other grounds" (p. 77). This latter requirement

refs to all schools concerning their respective policies and practices but in particular emphasis is placed on the so-called denominational "Stand Alone School" referred to above. This issue, perhaps more than any other is a challenge to the pillar of the Irish primary school system. The significance of the status of the "Stand Alone School" and its upholding of denominational religious education in the context of its religious ethos is not lost on the Forum authors. Some brief reference to it is worthy of note at this point.

The "Stand Alone School"

A "Stand Alone School" is a denominational school serving local communities where it is not realistic to provide a second school. Of the approximately 3,169 primary schools in the Irish Republic, approximately 2,841 of these are Catholic of which 1,700 are referred to as Stand Alone Schools. They are located, by and large, in rural areas and are between three to five kilometres of travelling distance for pupils (Forum Report, 2012, pp. 2, 73). A problem arises when it comes to accommodating pupils who need to attend school but whose parents object to the confessional ethos of the school. If due to geographical or other relevant constraints, parents have little choice but to send their children to a "Stand Alone School", the authors of the Report are rightly concerned that this may contravene the first objective of the Department of Education and Skills to provide a place for every child (pp. 73). The Forum authors endeavour to resolve this dilemma by appealing to what appears to be two mutually exclusive claims.

Firstly, the Forum Report states that the "Stand Alone School" must strive to be as inclusive as possible in accommodating pupils of varied beliefs' systems as well as the pupils of the majority faith (p. 2). This latter point clearly recognises the difficulty for the "Stand Alone School" and is an indication that the schools under religious patronage should have their denominational status respected should the majority of parents so wish. The document also states that the "wishes of parents as individuals need to be balanced against the common good" (p. 73). This seems to suggest that parents of the majority faith may have to sacrifice these wishes for this "common good". It is interesting to note that the authors of the Forum Report appeal to one of the Second Vatican Council documents (*Dignitatis humanae* written in 1965 relating to the common good) as a supportive resource (Forum Report, 2012, p. 73). The Vatican document states that "… in exercising their rights, individual men and social groups are bound by the moral law to have regard for the rights of others, their own duties to others and the common good of all" (Second Vatican Council, 1975, p. 805).

The insertion of the above quotation referring to the Catholic Church's teaching on the common good at this point in the Forum Report confirms the authors belief that the Church in Ireland is willing to be as inclusive as possible in respect of the "Stand Alone School" situation. In addition, although the Forum authors are very concerned as to how best to develop and promote diversity for all school-going children, the willingness to support denominational religious education and religious practice is evident from one of its key recommendations. The recommendation advises the Department of Education and Skills to, "issue a protocol which will give clarity to schools on their responsibility to protect the rights of the children enrolled in the [inclusive] school, with regard to denominational religious education and religious practice. Exemplars of good practice should accompany the protocol" (Forum Report, 2012, p. 74). It is clear, therefore, that the Forum authors are satisfied with the practices of the "Stand Alone School" *per se*. Nonetheless, managers of the "Stand Alone School" have a responsibility to take account of parents who do not wish to send their children to a denominationally managed school. Regardless of the fact that these parents are very much in the minority, the State has an obligation under the Irish Constitution (1937) to cater for the educational needs of all children as follows: "The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children" (Government of Ireland, 1937).

The Conflict

Therein dwells the potential for considerable conflict. If schools are divested, denominational religious education moves out of what may be referred to as the protective shelter of both ecclesial control and attendant ecclesial support. In this case, greater emphasis will be placed on diversity and difference as defining characteristics rather than engagement with given faith (or values) tradition. This is not to suggest that a focus on diversity is not an integral part of a denominational school's educational remit. Equally it is not to suggest that a pupil undertaking a programme focusing on diversity and difference is devoid of commitment to a belief or set of values. Looney makes a succinct point in this regard when she writes:

> Passionate, engaged religious education for a globalised world is just one of the possibilities for religious education as a catalyst in the public space. Others are emerging. All will be contested. That the contestation will continue in the ecclesial

and religious space is certain. The spaces are not mutually exclusive. That the contestation will also be public is beyond question. (Looney, 2006, p. 965)

There has been trenchant criticism of the Forum Report in this respect. Some commentators have argued that the Forum's recommendations on the divesting of schools and in particular its proposals about education in religion in the "Stand Alone School" will mean the marginalisation of denominational religious education (Conway, 2012; Meehan & O'Connell, 2012). Writing in the national press on the same matter O'Brien warns that "Faith communities need to make their voices heard … [and] … the proposed changes, if implemented clumsily, could reduce Irish education to a one-size-fits-all, secular model" (O'Brien, 2012, p. 16).

Given the emerging tension between those who wish for denominational religious education in schools with its attendant ethos and those who do not, the Forum authors were confronted with the task of advising the Minister for Education and Skills on conflicting demands. The historical difficulties and legacy regarding these rights are outlined by Williams as (i) the integrated curriculum (ii) the entitlement to opt-out of religious education (iii) the exposure to an ethos-based environment against the wishes of parents or older children (see Williams, 2005, p. 56). Parents have the right to withdraw their children from religious education in the formative sense and this applies even where the ethos of the school is based on religion as an integrating principle. Yet Rule 68 of the *Rules for National Schools* requires the maintenance of religious ethos in all primary schools (Government of Ireland, 1965, p. 55). The document states that "Religious Instruction is … a fundamental part of the school course, and a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school"(ibid.). This imposes an obligatory integration between religious education and other subjects in the primary school curriculum. It means, therefore, that if religion is the integrating principle of the entire curriculum, it is difficult to envisage a satisfactory system of withdrawal for children from the faith ethos of the school (see Williams, 2005, p. 56).

The authors of the Forum Report draw attention to this dilemma. This is clear, for example, from recommendations concerning sacramental preparation, denominational religious education and the question of school ethos "vivifying" the entire school day. These recommendations have prompted one commentator, critiquing the Forum Report, to refer to it as a, "wake-up call for the Catholic Church and its role in the educational system" (Conway, 2012, p. 270). One of the recommendations eliciting this reaction states "The Advisory Group [i.e. the Forum authors] recommends that sacramental preparation, or education for religious rites of other belief systems, should not encroach on the time allocated for the general curriculum and recommends on-going discussion with parents and clergy with regard to the parish role in sacramental preparation" (Forum Report, 2012,

pp. 88, 111). Conway claims that this recommendation inhibits the denominational school's capacity to contribute to the practice of faith (Conway, 2012, p. 274). Furthermore, he criticises another of the Forum authors' recommendations to remove *Rule 68* as a first step in the review and updating of the *Rules for National Schools (1965)* (Forum Report, 2012, p. 110). If this rule is deleted, Conway warns that, "there will be no underpinning to the patron's legal responsibility and right to uphold and foster a denominational school ethos" (Conway, 2012, p. 270). Tuohy for his part notes of the tensions that may arise if patrons are coerced into making decisions which are at odds with their ethos. He states that one "set of rights does not 'trump' another by making them inoperative or redundant. One of the surprising aspects of the Forum Report is the lack of treatment of the right of the patron" (Tuohy, 2013, p. 270). It is doubtful, however, that the removal of Rule 68 would lead to the death knell of the denominational system given that the Education Act (1998) safeguards school ethos, education in religion and non-religious beliefs alike (see Glendenning, 2007, p. 100).

Nonetheless, Conway's concerns relating to the place of the sacraments and the legal implications of the recommendations outlined above are shared by others. Meehan and O'Connell make explicit certain aspects of theology pertaining to the importance of the sacraments as part of the Catholic school culture. They refer to what is sometimes termed the "sacramental imagination" that understands the world as sacred not just secular. This sacramental imagination, they claim, needs to be nurtured and practised. The Catholic school does this through reference to God, the service of others, the education of children where everybody in it is worthy of justice and respect. To remove the sacramental preparation, its prayer and emblems of the sacred, they reiterate, is to remove what is, "fundamental to the daily rhythm of a Catholic school" (Meehan & O'Connell, 2012, p. 292). It must be stated, however, on reading the Forum Report in respect of the sacraments, it does not appear to suggest that sacramental preparation should be removed from the school day but rather that such preparation should take place only within the hours allocated to religion on the timetable. Certainly this makes some sense given the diversity of pupils in Catholic primary schools. Moreover, it is the responsibility of individual schools' management systems to see to it that no one subject, religion or otherwise, be permitted to encroach on any other syllabus to the detriment of the overall curriculum. That is not to say that all subjects on the timetable should be forced into their prescribed slots without the possibility of some flexibility as may be required. Indeed this happens at regular intervals anyway where flexibility may be called for such as the extra time taken for school plays or dramas, historical and geographical field trips and other projects. Such educational practices encroach on all subjects and in these instances lessons in religion are also

thereby affected – a point which the Forum authors imply in Protocol 7 (see below Forum Report, 2012, p. 74).

A further question is raised by Meehan and O'Connell who again criticise the Forum for apparently working, "from a limited, even misguided understanding of Catholic education" (Meehan & O'Connell, 2012, p. 293). Although they commend the valuable contribution of the Forum on the issue of patronage in the primary sector, they claim that the Forum Report conveys a level of anxiety in respect of denominational religious education and its corresponding ethos. They even go so far as to, "wonder if the Forum slipped its moorings [particularly] when dealing with Stand Alone Schools (p. 293). Furthermore, they argue that in its recommendations, the Forum authors have "moved far from divestiture into the waters of dilution" (p. 293). If this is the case, it has implications for the future of denominational religious education and ethos in denominationally managed schools. Mindful of such concerns the Forum authors sought a set of alternative options in order to accommodate the needs of denominational religious education, ethos, timetabling and students of minority and non-religious beliefs. The Forum authors suggested a number of options, admitting that they may not altogether be ideal. These options are outlined in a "Proposed Framework of a Protocol for an Inclusive School" (p. 74). These include among other recommendations (i) flexible timetabling for religion classes (ii) two and half-hours per week as opposed to the current one half-hour per day (iii) denominational religious education to take place at the beginning or end of the school day although from the Catholic hierarchy advises that it should not be at the end lest it undermines the importance of the subject (iv) schools with minority belief pupils should explore with their parents and leaders "opt-out" provision (v) greater involvement of parents in consultation with the principal in the operation of the school (vi) a blend of e- and live learning participation for minorities particularly where their communities are dispersed (pp. 83-84). These recommendations relate not just to the "Stand Alone School" but also to all schools under denominational management.

Hope in Conflict

The authors of the Forum Report deserve credit not only for the work they undertook to appease a potentially conflictual situation but also their recognition of the good will voiced by stakeholders and individuals holding profoundly differing belief systems such as the Catholic Church, the Humanist Association of Ireland and Atheist Ireland. These views sit side by side in the Forum document where the Catholic Church is described as favouring education about other faiths

and beliefs while at the same time seeking a good knowledge of the Catholic faith and its traditions (Irish Episcopal Conference, 2011). Significantly, the Humanist members agreed that they would accept a, "discussion-based subject concentrating on citizenship, religions, ethics and so forth …" (Forum Report, p. 89). In the same context, representatives from Atheist Ireland pointed out that they did not, "have any problem with our children being taught about religion and beliefs if it is done consistently with the Toledo Guiding Principles" (p. 89). It might be claimed therefore that there is room for a spectrum of possibilities particularly as representatives of the various denominational Church bodies informed the Forum on Patronage that as well as faith formation and doctrinal issues in their own specific programmes, they also incorporate knowledge of, and respect for, other religions (p. 92).

The primary aim of this article was an attempt to examine some of the exceptionally complex issues raised by the Forum Report concerning school patronage and education in religion specifically in the primary school sector. In that context, it set out to consider briefly the rationale behind the setting up of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism and its attempt to address potentially conflictual situations. The intention was to examine the possible challenges to its work relating to Denominational Religious Education and Education about Religions and Beliefs. The Forum Report is now all the more significant since the Minister for Education and Skills has considered its findings to be a positive success and he is "pleased that its work has been completed and we can now move on to the next phase of implementation" (Department of Education and Skills, 2012). As part of that implementation, the Minister announced that surveys of parental preferences in forty-four areas were to be undertaken. To this end, the Department of Education and Skills prepared a report by means of a pilot survey in five areas nationally in order to calculate the preferences for diversity of patronage among the parents/guardians of pre-school and primary school-going children. All five areas were surveyed as per the following synopsis:

- Survey ONLINE = 98.9: Survey PAPER = 1.1%
- Total Population between 5,000 – 20,000
- Total number of valid survey responses of 1,788 represents the preferences of the parents/guardians of almost 3,500 children across the five areas.
- Almost 73.5% of the overall numbers of children concerned are primary school pupils while the remaining 26.5% of the cohort are preschool children.

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As the Minister's action plan is on-going and may take some considerable time before the outcome is reached, it is not possible to analyse the pilot survey at the time of writing. In the meantime, it might be noted that one commentator Drumm, Chairperson of the Catholic Schools Partnership, claims that only about 30 per cent of the parents who completed the survey indicated they were in favour of more school diversity. According to Drumm, this number constitutes around 4 per cent to 8 per cent of the total number of relevant parents. He goes on to say that, "the Church was now closely analysing the report of the pilot survey with a view to submitting a response to Minister Quinn in the coming months" (Drumm, 2013, pp. 1-2).

In September 2013, the Department of Education and Skills sought responses from the public on "promoting greater inclusiveness in schools, particularly in 'Stand Alone Schools', that is, the approximately 1,700 schools which are located at least 3km away from another primary school and so are obliged to accommodate for the entire community they serve" (Department of Education and Skills, 2013). The status of such schools is particularly sensitive in respect of current conflict in education. It is our view that such schools can achieve the desired inclusiveness by observing the following vital condition.

These schools must be hospitable to the development of autonomy in young people both in general and in respect of religious belief in particular. Here it is possible to draw a distinction between open and closed confessional schools. Open confessional schools are hospitable to the promotion of such autonomy, whereas certain confessional schools (arguably, all fundamentalist schools whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim or Hindu) do not aspire to the cultivation of intellectual autonomy at all. These are best described as closed confessional schools. Note, however, that closed secular or non-confessional schools which exclude any encounter with religious belief from the school can also be said to set limits to the autonomous development of children in as far as this approach is inhospitable to the possibility of coming to embrace religious commitment. In Ireland, the "Stand Alone" primary schools must be open in the above sense and seek to cultivate the autonomy all children of all parents whether they be Catholic, non-believers or with beliefs different from those of the school. Although their beliefs about worldviews are conflicted, most citizens in liberal democracies can accept the value of autonomy as an educational goal.

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