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Power, Privilege And Sex Education in Irish Schools, 1922-67: An Overview

Le pouvoir, le privilège et l'éducation sexuelle dans les écoles secondaires irlandaises, 1922–1967 : un aperçu

Poder, privilegios y educación sexual en las escuelas secundarias de irlanda, 1922-67: una visión general

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Article abstract

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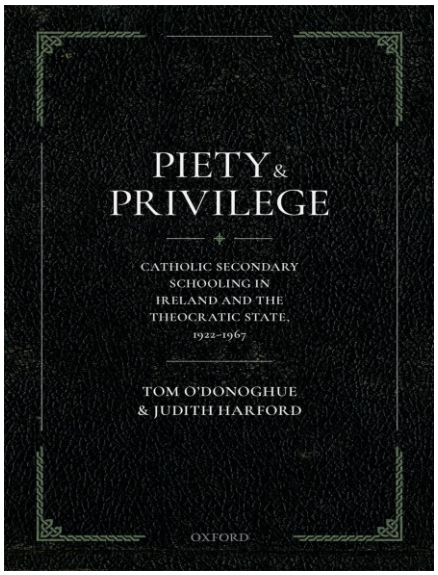

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Abstract

An overview of the thinking that led us to write our most recent book, *Piety and Privilege. Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922-67,* constitutes the substance of this paper. Our central argument is that during the period 1922-1967, the Church, unhindered by the State, promoted within secondary schools, practices aimed at "the salvation of souls" and at the reproduction of a loyal middle class and clerics. The State supported that arrangement with the Church also acting on its behalf in aiming to produce a literate and numerate citizenry, in pursuing nation building, and in ensuring the preparation of an adequate number of secondary school graduates to address the needs of the public service and the professions. This situation proved attractive to successive governments, partly because the great majority of the

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Keywords: Ireland, secondary schooling. piety, privilege, sex education

Le pouvoir, le privilège et l'éducation sexuelle dans les écoles secondaires irlandaises, 1922 –1967 : un aperçu

Résumé

Cet article offre un aperçu de la réflexion qui nous a conduit à écrire notre dernier livre, *Piety and Privilege. Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922–67*. Notre argument central est que durant la période 1922–67, l'Église, sans entrave de l'État, a promu au sein des lycées des pratiques visant le « salut des âmes » et à la reproduction d'une bourgeoisie et de clercs fidèles. L'État a soutenu cet arrangement avec l'Église agissant également en son nom en visant à former une population alphabétisée et sachant compter, en poursuivant la construction de la nation et en assurant la préparation d'un nombre de diplômés du secondaire suffisant pour répondre aux besoins de la fonction publique et les métiers. Cette situation s'est avérée attrayante pour les gouvernements successifs, en partie parce que la grande majorité des politiciens et des fonctionnaires du pays étaient eux-mêmes de fidèles catholiques de classe moyenne. En outre, l'enseignant religieux a joué un rôle décisif dans le projet de l'État, à savoir l'intégration des écoles dans le cadre de la construction de la nation gaélique. Cet article étudie ce que nous jugeons être trois aspects distinctifs de notre travail. Premièrement, nous détaillons comment il s'agit d'une contribution non seulement à l'histoire de l'éducation en Irlande, mais aussi au domaine plus large de l'histoire des relations entre l'Église catholique et l'État vis-à-vis l'éducation dans le monde anglophone durant la période en question. Deuxièmement, nous délibérons sur la démarche de recherche que nous avons adoptée pour développer notre travail. Troisièmement, nous élaborons sur trois aspects du processus d'éducation dans les écoles catholiques qui ont été négligés à date dans de nombreux comptes rendus, à savoir la manière dont le privilège, la piété et l'éducation sexuelle ont été abordés.

Mots-clés : Irlande, enseignement secondaire, piété, privilège, éducation sexuelle

Poder, privilegios y educación sexual en las escuelas secundarias de irlanda, 1922-67: una visión general

Resumen

El contenido de este artículo constituye visión general de las ideas que nos llevaron a escribir nuestro libro más reciente, *Piety and Privilege. Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922-67*. Nuestro argumento central es que durante el período 1922-1967, la Iglesia, sin trabas del Estado, promovió en las escuelas secundarias prácticas dirigidas a "la salvación de las almas" y a la reproducción de una clase media y clérigos leales. El Estado apoyó ese acuerdo con la Iglesia con el objetivo de producir una ciudadanía alfabetizada y aritmética, buscando la construcción de la nación y asegurando la preparación de un número adecuado de graduados de la escuela secundaria para abordar las necesidades del servicio público y Las profesiones. Esta situación resultó atractiva para los sucesivos gobiernos, en parte porque la gran mayoría de los políticos y servidores públicos de la nación eran fieles católicos de clase media. Además, la enseñanza religiosa desempeñó un papel crucial en el proyecto del Estado al aprovechar las escuelas como parte de su proyecto de construcción de la nación gaélica. Es posible destacar tres aspectos distintivos de nuestro trabajo. Primero, detallamos cómo fueno solo a la historia de la educación en Irlanda, sino también al campo más amplio de la historia de la Iglesia Católica y las relaciones del Estado en la educación en el mundo de habla inglesa en el período examinado. En segundo lugar, deliberamos sobre el enfoque de investigación que adoptamos al generar nuestra exposición. En tercer lugar, esbozamos nuestra consideración de tres aspectos del proceso de educación en las escuelas católicas que han sido descuidados en muchos relatos hasta la fecha, a saber, la manera en que se abordaron el privilegio, la piedad y la educación sexual.

Palabras clave: Irlanda, educación secundaria. piedad, privilegio, educación sexual

Introduction

Being able to draw together one's various specialized works in a substantive exposition spanning a range of connected topics and issues over a definite and significant period is a major challenge. We consider ourselves lucky to have been able to do so recently and to have had the product published by Oxford University Press. The title of the work is *Piety and Privilege. Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and the Theocratic State, 1922-67*. In it, we address the politics of the Catholic Church and State in relation to secondary school education in Ireland, with reference to the period 1922-1967. An

overview of the thinking that led us to write this work constitutes the substance of this paper.

The context is that in the twenty-six county Irish State that has existed as a distinct political entity since 1922, following exit from the United Kingdom, the majority of both primary and secondary schools were Catholic schools whose management the State left in the hands of priests, religious teaching brothers, and female teaching religious, while simultaneously accepting financial responsibility for maintenance and for the payment of teachers' salaries (Walsh, 2009; Walsh, 2012). The schools' authorities, in return, were obliged to teach a State-prescribed national curriculum and allow government officials to inspect teachers, buildings, and facilities. During this period, only a small number of males and females who left primary school in Ireland went on to second-level education. The minority who did typically attended one of two types of schools, namely, vocational schools and secondary schools. The larger proportion attended the latter, the great majority of which were run by the Church. The remainder attended nondenominational vocational schools run by vocational education committees where they engaged in a two-year course that was essentially practical and oriented towards the world of work. That broad pattern obtained until 1967, a key date in the history of education in Ireland, when free second-level education was introduced (Harford, 2018).

Our central argument is that prior to the period of major change mentioned above, the Catholic Church in Ireland successfully resisted the involvement of lay people, including parents, in the exercise of what it claimed was its right and responsibility to provide secondary schooling. The State acquiesced willingly, thus allowing male and female teaching religious to promote unhindered sets of pedagogical, administrative, and leadership practices aimed at the salvation of souls and the reproduction of fellow clerics and a loyal middle class. That situation, in turn, led to the promotion of piety and the upholding of class privilege as core characteristics of secondary schooling.

This situation proved attractive to successive governments, partly because the great majority of the nation's politicians and public servants were themselves loyal middle-class Catholics. Equally pleasing to them was the fact that the Church met much of the cost of funding secondary school education (Coolahan, 2019; Tussing, 1978) and in so doing was prepared to meet the needs of the mercantile class, the public service, and the professions for educated individuals in their late teenage years. In addition, the teaching religious played a crucial role in the State's project of harnessing schools as part of its Gaelic nation-building project.

The remainder of this paper considers what we deem to be three distinctive aspects of our work. First, we detail how it is a contribution not just to the history of education in Ireland but also to the broader field of the history of Catholic Church and State relations in education in the English-speaking world for the period examined. Secondly, we deliberate on the research approach we adopted in generating our exposition. Thirdly, we outline our consideration of three aspects of the process of education in Catholic schools that have been neglected in many accounts to date, namely, the manner in which privilege, piety, and sex education were approached.

International And Comparative Context

The background to our work is that for centuries, the Catholic Church (the Church) wherever it was involved in education around the world, insisted it had a right to provide and organize its own schools, staff them as it wished and teach denominational doctrine within them (Callahan and Higgs, 1979). It was equally adamant in various decrees it issued that while nation-states could lay down standards for secular curricula, pedagogy, and accommodation in all schools within their geographical jurisdictions, Catholic parents should send their children to Catholic schools and should be able to do so without suffering undue financial disadvantage. Thus, from the Pope down, the Church expressed deep opposition to increasing state intervention in schooling especially during the nineteenth century (Hunt, Joseph and Nuzzi, 2004). Associated action it took, however, primarily through its bishops and senior clergy, was often to no avail. As a result, by the end of the 1920s it was satisfied with the school system in only a small number of constituencies that included Scotland, the Netherlands, Quebec, and Ireland (Whyte, 1971).

A variety of education traditions developed in Ireland throughout the course of history. In the sixteenth century, for example, when there was a significant Protestant minority in the country, schooling became an instrument of the Tudor conquest (Ellis, 1998; Magin and Ellis, 2015). Catholicism, nevertheless, continued to be the religion of the great majority and remained so throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when a series of "Penal Laws" was passed aimed at depriving the "native" Irish landholders of all rights to property, religion, and education (Connolly, 1985; English, 2007). The response of many among the Catholic gentry was to go into exile, while some who remained and were able to hold onto their properties sent their children to Catholic schools in Europe. Within Ireland, itinerant teachers provided some elementary education throughout the country for poorer Catholics who could afford it. That often took place in "hedge school" buildings that were usually private houses or barns (McManus, 2004). A variety of voluntary groups also established schools to educate Protestant children (Steven, 2015).

In 1829 the Penal Laws were abolished. Another watershed moment was in 1831 when the State established a primary (national) school system, sponsored it, and instituted a national board of commissioners to oversee it (Akenson, 1970; Inglis, 2020; O' Donoghue and Harford, 2011; O' Donovan, 2017). Intended initially to be multi-denominational with strict delimitation between religious and non-religious education, it had developed into an almost totally religious-managed system by the late 1870s, due largely to the sustained agitation undertaken by the Catholic Church, the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, and the Presbyterian Church. An outcome was that while the State paid the bulk of the capital costs of running primary schools, parish clergy, both Catholic and Protestant, administered the great majority of them. Furthermore, the buildings in most cases were the property of the Church bodies.

Protestant children in the main attended schools under the ownership and management of the various Protestant denominations. Because, however, the majority

in the population was Catholic, the lion's share of the primary schools throughout the country were under Catholic Church patronage and, with lay Catholics as teachers were, *de facto*, Catholic schools. In addition, religious teaching orders managed and staffed primary schools especially in the larger towns and the cities, while trustees, who included the local bishop in each Catholic diocese, had ownership in most cases vested in them.

Parish priests and religious orders oversaw appointments to teaching positions and promotion to principal teacher in schools for Catholics. In addition, with the education of primary schoolteachers being almost entirely a Church-run affair, and with intake to the primary school teacher training colleges being on a denominational basis, the clergy rarely had to worry about the religious convictions of employees (O' Donoghue, Harford and O'Doherty, 2017). At the same time, the Church ensured that teachers followed the State-prescribed timetables and curricula for secular subjects. Equally, it succeeded in obtaining and maintaining a degree of control in secondary or intermediate schooling; from the passing of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Act of 1878 through to Independence in 1922 (McElligott, 1981), an outcome of which was that direct government influence in the sector was at a minimum. In addition, receiving an education at that level for both Catholics and Protestants was almost totally a middle-class preserve.

After 1922, the new political administration did not interfere with the existing system of ownership and management of schools. Since the great majority of the Protestant population on the island was located in the new Northern Ireland State, most of the primary schools in the newly independent southern State were Catholic schools, as were most secondary schools. While the latter remained in private hands, they did receive government financial assistance. Diocesan priests and members of religious orders ran the great majority of them (Akenson, 1975; Harford, 2018; O' Neill, 2014), while clergymen and devoted female members of their churches headed up the small number of Protestant schools.[1] The State, for its part, made clear it wanted no controversy with any of the churches. To impress that point, the national Department of Education stated in its first annual report that while it inspected secondary schools and exercised a certain degree of supervision, the State had assumed no responsibility for the appointment of school principals, teachers, and managers (Department of Education, 1927).

How the dominant hegemony came to exist and how the Catholic Church was able to maintain it has been a neglected area of research in the historiography of education and schooling in Ireland. To make that point is not to ignore the *corpus* of scholarship which has developed from the middle of the 1970s, in particular, along with those noted already, through the publication of several seminal books on education policy in the nation (Duffy, 1967; Jones, 2006; O' Connor, 2010; O' Donoghue, 1999), on the history

[1] Here we use the term Protestant to include the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, while recognizing that for doctrinal reasons some of its adherents then as now were not comfortable with that classification (preferring to be called Catholics but not Roman Catholics) even though its use was common practice.

and structure of the education system (Coolahan, 1984; Harford, 2008) and on the history of the schools' inspectorate (Coolahan and O' Donovan, 2009) and the teachers' unions (Coolahan, 1984; Logan, 1999; O' Connell, 1968). Nevertheless, how the Church promoted piety and privilege through the nation's secondary schools has received minimal attention from scholars, including in relation to the international context in which it did so.

Regarding the international context more broadly, for decades scholars engaged globally in research on various aspects of Christian-run schools, including Catholic schools. By the 1960s, however, the world was, to quote Bruce, in the grip of an irreversible process of secularization (Bruce, 2003), hence enthusiasm for that research waned, influenced in part by the suggestion that the state in many countries would soon have a monopoly of education institutions. Within another five decades, however, religion was very much back within the public sphere (Jackson et al, 2007), including in relation to the growth in "faith-based schools," education institutions that reflect "a particular religious world view in the way they are organized, in what they teach, and in the integration of faith and learning" (Sullivan, 2006, p. 937).

We hold that the specific case of Ireland indicates how the insights of historians on past social, economic, and cultural relations can illuminate the knowledge base on Catholic education around the world, it being the oldest tradition within Christian schooling, having withstood contestation during different historical periods, including that of the Protestant reformation.

. Notwithstanding its longevity, though, the influence of the Church progressively weakened up until the First Vatican Council in 1869. A "decline in vocations, tension between popular piety and the religion taught by the ecclesiastical elite, the dominance of a wealthy urban Church over an impoverished rural one, [and] the difficult relationship between Papal and national authority" were major contributing factors (Callahan and Higgs, 1979, pp. 11-12). Another was the aggressive manner adopted by the Church in expressing its opposition to an increasingly pluralistic and rationalistic society.

The loss of the Papal States in the nineteenth century further prompted the Church to assert its exclusive claims to truth and authority and to intensify its opposition to national control by appealing to the principle of Ultramontanism that signifies "the man beyond the mountain" (i.e., the Alps) living in Italy (i.e., the Pope) (Hitchcock, 2012). The assertion by the authorities in the Vatican was that Papal authority was superior to the authority of local, temporal, and other Catholic spiritual hierarchies. Accordingly, a radical departure from the Gallicanism that had long held sway, including in Ireland, was what they promoted. In a strict sense, Gallicanism refers to the control the French monarchy had established over national ways by which Church officials in various countries became supporters of their respective nation-states and insisted on managing their affairs with minimal interference from Rome (Hanson, 1987).

Ultramontanism, the dominant force in the Irish Catholic Church, exalted papal authority and promoted a dogmatic, combative theology. Those traits found expression in the promotion of a hierarchical, strongly centralized and highly organized system of ecclesiastical administration dominated by the clergy (Newsinger, 1995). Specifically in

relation to schooling, the Irish bishops, as with the Church hierarchy internationally, justified their hegemony in the field by referring to proclamations in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical Rerum Novarum (Revolutionary Change) and Pope Pius XI's Divini Illius Magistri (The Christian Education of Youth) of 1929 and Quadragesimo Anno (In the Fortieth Year) of 1931. Similarly, they drew attention to the fact that Catholic schooling was expanding, and particularly for the poor, at the elementary school level in traditional Catholic countries as well as in Africa and Asia due to a great wave of missionary work. In this activity, members of religious orders from Ireland worked alongside those from France, Italy, Belgium, and Holland in particular.

On the home front as well, new religious orders were founded and run by pious and wealthy Irish men and women who played their part from the late 1700s in a process of cultural change, class formation, and class consolidation. For that, they utilized schools as a major instrument for the imposition of bourgeois values and beliefs. Through engaging in that process, they were among the main agents responsible for trying to bring about religious, linguistic, social, and cultural transformations, including in the traditional Gaelic spiritual culture of the poor.

Research Approach

While writing this work, we were conscious of belonging to an academic community whose members study society from the position of the ideographic discipline of history rather than that of the nomothetic social sciences. In other words, we are interested more in the descriptive and the particular than in the theoretical and the general. At the same time, we recognize that more than description is required of the historian. Accordingly, we decided to locate our exposition within various contexts, ranging from the local to the international, to assist the reader to appreciate what living in the period may have been like and why matters developed in particular ways. The fact that we were prohibited from accessing the archives of many religious orders stymied at times our efforts to undertake a comprehensive sweep of relevant sources. That situation is attributable to the defensiveness of archivists arising out of revelations of sex abuse by clerics in the past.

Overall, we took a position that foundational works like ours should concern themselves with the "whats," the "wheres," the "whos," and the "whys," of one's topic. Accordingly, we felt an approach guided by a set of general questions rather than specific hypotheses would be of most help in seeking to produce the account we envisaged. Equally, we sought to address these key questions in relation to what various social historians have for some time considered to be the most important category types, namely, class, regionality/locality, ethnicity, gender, and religion. We realized also that as the work would unfold we would be likely to uncover various unanticipated issues worthy of further research and would need to draw the attention of the reader to them. A belief, too, that our first task should be to provide a general outline of the history of the system of schooling in Ireland, especially since national independence in 1922, and particularly in terms of the role of the Catholic Church in conceptualizing, constructing, and regulating it, also guided us.

While we consulted a range of secondary sources on the history of the period and of the Catholic Church in addressing our tasks, we followed up by interrogating documentary evidence on the vision or moral purpose of the religious teaching orders. We attended to those aspects of their "constitutions" that elaborate on how their shared vision was to be realized and to their "books of customs" that describe desired adaptations to local circumstances. Equally, we found sources on the memories of teaching religious, lay teachers, students, parents, and other interested parties illuminative, while recognizing that what is available constitutes a slim corpus of testimony.

To assist us in arriving at our interpretations we drew on human science concepts. They include those that guided revisionist historians of education in the USA in the 1960s and 1970s (Abrams, 1982; Bailyn, 1960; Burke, 1992; Cremin, 1965; Katz, 1975; Thompson, 1963; Tyack, 1974), inspired to highlight inequality and discrimination in schooling historically. In addition, Bowles and Gintis' *Education in Capitalist America* (1976) provided us with a number of concepts for considering, albeit with caution, whose interests were served by the nature of the relations that existed in schooling in Ireland between the Catholic Church and the State. Equally, we drew upon both "insider" and "outsider" accounts, considering participants' "definitions of situations," their perspectives, and their ways of thinking, while drawing at the same time on certain fundamental "objective" sociological concepts.

Influenced by Weber's (1974) notion of "ideal types," we set out to produce an account that would be helpful for comparative study by virtue of being a "synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena which are arranged . . . into a unified analytical construct" (Shils and Finch, 1949, p. 90). In saying this, we recognize that there were teachers, students, and others who engaged in actions that departed from those we foregrounded.

Given the extent to which we draw upon "insider" accounts to illuminate our general area of focus, it is apposite that we also say a little on the associated research approach we used to generate oral testimony. In investigating what it was like to be a school student, for example, we set out to ensure we had a gender balance among participants, and to have the memories of those who were boarding school students recorded alongside memories of those who were day students. Moreover, in conducting interviews with former students, with teachers both religious and lay, and with others, we were not engaged in oral history research in the "traditional" sense where the aim is to gain information about the past. Rather, we produced a "topical life story" for each participant, that being the history of an individual's life in relation to one phase, aspect, or issue (in this case schooling) given by the person who lived it and solicited by us. Thus, the testimony is about individuals' memories of how they experienced schooling rather than accounts collected from them when they were at school (Harford and O' Donoghue, 2011; O' Donoghue and Harford, 2013; O'Donoghue and Harford, 2016; Harford and O' Donoghue, 2021).

The Process of Education in Catholic Secondary Schools

Here we outline our consideration of three aspects of the process of education in Catholic schools that have been neglected in many accounts to date, namely, how privilege, piety, and sex education were approached.

Privilege

A consequence of the State's reluctance to take a leadership role in secondary schooling, and its continuation of that policy up until the 1960s, was that it was almost impossible for the national Department of Education to engage in far-reaching planning to address social and geographical disparities in provision (O' Donoghue, 1999). In 1924, the pattern nationally was one of 493,382 students enrolled in primary schools, while secondary schools only included 22,897 enrolees. The number of secondary school students did increase gradually over the next four decades, yet by 1955–1956 it had still reached only 59,306 (Department of Education, 1956), the majority of whom were from the financially better-off sectors of Irish Catholic society. Furthermore, the overall pattern whereby a small, privileged group had access to secondary schooling denied to the majority was of little concern to senior Catholic clerics who oversaw that hegemony.

A key obstacle to wider student participation was the uneven pattern of schools in existence throughout the country. The situation was particularly challenging in the northwest and southwest of the country, areas characterized by large stretches of infertile land and significant levels of emigration. In the school year 1939-40, for example, towns in the west and northwest of the country that did not have a secondary school included Gweedore, Dunglow, Glenties, Killybegs, Donegal Town, Bangor-Erris, Boyle, Castlerea, Claremorris, Clifden, Oughterard, and Spiddal (Department of Education, 1940). In the southwest of the country, the following towns did not have a secondary school: Sneem, Kenmare, and Bantry.

These patterns confirm the fact that religious orders failed to provide for the rural poor in vast swathes of the countryside. While it is the case that a small number of students living in these areas were among the 30 per cent of the overall student population who were boarders, the majority of students nationally, regardless of their geographical location, were not able to afford boarding school fees. A greater number of children might also have attended second-level schooling had their economic position allowed for it. Many, indeed, commenced schooling but subsequently withdrew. Hence, while the rate of attendance at secondary schools increased between 1940 and 1960, so too did the rate of attrition. Furthermore, while approximately two females entered the first year of secondary school for every three males throughout the period overall, most of those females were still in secondary school four years later. Further, the various costs involved in educating students for four or five years suggests that the vast majority of females who did attend secondary schools were from financially comfortable backgrounds.

The level of provision of local authority scholarships was woefully inadequate as an aid and as an incentive to those in the lower social groups to pursue a secondary school education. In 1950, for example, the number of scholarships awarded as a percentage of the number of students in the sixth class of primary school was only 1.54 per cent. In addition, those were not distributed equitably on a regional basis.

Those areas identified as having the lowest number of secondary schools also had the lowest provision of vocational schools (officially termed "continuation schools" and "technical schools") established under the Vocational Education Act of 1930. Over time, those institutions embraced a more applied focus, offering courses that were essentially practical in nature, oriented towards the world of work and designed to meet the needs of early school leavers. Vocational courses were typically of two years' duration and there was no scope for students to transfer from vocational to secondary schools, owing to Church opposition.

The Promotion of Piety

From the early years of the new State, the level of commitment of the great majority of the nation's politicians to the Catholic Church became apparent through public pronouncements of support. Those included emphasizing the importance of primary schools to the teaching of religion. Typically, students at this level were exposed to daily religion classes lasting 45 minutes, delivered by teaching religious and consisting of dogma, morals, Church history, prayers, and hymns, and engaging in devotional practices.

Teachers of religion in Irish secondary schools also oversaw the practice of various rituals aimed at reinforcing what they taught in their classes. There were, for example, rules decreeing how daily prayer should take place, with the *Directory and Rules of the Irish Christian Brothers* stating that on entering the classroom a brother should kneel and recite privately the "Prayer Before School" and each student should follow suit. Likewise, every hour the clock struck in school, students had to stand and recite a Hail Mary. In some cases, orders required that students also pray at noon each day.

Since most secondary school teachers were male and female clerics, and had great freedom in both managing schools and in teaching the curriculum, there was also nothing to prevent them from adopting very Catholic-centred approaches in the classroom, and many did so. The writer John McGahern recalls, for example, that reading for pleasure was considered a "dissolute, a waste of time" (Murphy, 1987, p. 39); reading should instead assist in passing exams or acquiring employment. Those who attended diocesan colleges experienced practices that were even more restrictive because the authorities there forbade the reading of newspapers and various other publications.

While certain religious orders, including the Jesuit priests and the Dominican nuns who educated a minority, introduced students to their intellectually rigorous traditions, the great majority, educated by other orders, were discouraged during religious education classes from engaging in critical debate. The poet, Thomas Kinsella, for example, who attended O'Connell's School run by the Irish Christian Brothers in Dublin,

argued that while the teaching process was efficient, "inspiration was not necessarily inherent in the system. It was a matter of running into exceptional people" (MacSweeney, 1982, p. 59). Fellow artists Thomas Murphy, Charles Harper, and Robert Ballagh (Ryan, 1984) noted that there was a lack of encouragement for the development of a questioning attitude to religious beliefs. Commenting along similar lines, the academic and poet Professor Brendan Kennelly stated that Catholicism introduced him to a notion that everything was answerable (MacSweeney, 1982).

Preparation for Confession commenced in primary school and was also a characteristic of secondary schooling. Teachers trained each student to examine his or her conscience systematically by considering actions taken with regard to God, others, and oneself (Cornwell, 2014). One then had to ask oneself if one had been negligent in prayer, disobeyed one's parents and superiors, spread rumours, or yielded to thoughts of sexual pleasure. Engagement in providing instruction on those practices facilitated teachers in their actions aimed at reinforcing among their students a belief that good Catholics were obedient, compliant, and devoted to their clergy.

Another way in which teachers worked to shape future loyal Irish Catholic middle-class minds was through their employment of religious icons and symbols. In her novel, *Light a Penny Candle*, Maeve Binchy (1987) describes how she and her school friends, constantly surrounded by statues, holy pictures and little altars to the Sacred Heart of Jesus came to form a view that religion provided the meaning of life. Using heroic language, teachers equally familiarized students with the founders of religious orders whose schools they attended and with the institutional histories of the orders themselves. Additionally, there were annual religious retreats lasting for several days, during which students prayed, engaged in spiritual exercises, and read religious works, including versions of the lives of saints championing their courageous acts (Stone, 1926).

Sex Education

Single-sex education was the norm for many years both in church and in state education systems throughout much of the world. From the middle of the nineteenth century, however, coeducation as a model for schooling began to emerge in European countries, especially in state schools. Catholic educators, however, were vociferous in condemning the practice (Albiseti, 1999). The Irish bishops, in 1926, also argued that it was detrimental, especially for older students (Akenson, 1975).

Over the next 50 years, a gendered ideology developed that placed women firmly within the home sphere through an alliance between the State and the Catholic Church (Beaumont, 1997; Harford and Redmond, 2021). Whyte (1980) has argued that that alliance was natural given that most of the government ministers were Catholic, as was the majority of the population, and hence the implementation of Catholic ideology was only to be expected.

The Church was especially active in reinforcing its emphasis on the domestication of women in Irish Catholic society, including in schools. A major view was that mothers, despite being absent from the decision-making processes within the Church, occupied a

pivotal role since they had a major responsibility for the spiritual welfare of their families and for ensuring that their children's souls were not endangered. Through promoting this, it was able to perpetuate the notion that women had a natural vocation as stay-at-home wives and mothers. Further, the message was consistent: if a mother went out to work, there would be a destabilization of family life. To reinforce the strategy, a common image presented to girls in Catholic schools was that of the submissive Blessed Virgin (Nelson and Nelson, 1986).

Overall, the argument presented was that mothers minimized the risk to their own immortal souls by taking on primary responsibility for the spiritual welfare of their children. In addition, in the coeducation settings of the early years of primary schooling, females had a virtual monopoly on the teaching of both boys and girls, who from an early age thus came to regard moral and religious instruction as primarily women's work. A related position of Church authorities was that the sexes should be kept apart once they had completed schooling at kindergarten level. Officially, the dogma of original sin and the notion that human beings are more naturally disposed towards evil, including in sexual practices, underpinned it (Wiley, 1989). The Catholic bishops thus made it clear that they considered coeducational schooling "insuperable on moral grounds," a position they espoused well into the 1960s.

The Church also opposed any teaching in relation to sex education in schools. Pope Pius XI expressed the official view with great vigour in his encyclical, *Divini Illius Magistri* (On Christian Education of Youth) issued on 31 December 1929. Over two decades later, in 1951, amid concerns about the expanding sex education movement in Europe, Pope Pius XII called on Catholic parents to "cripple and bring to naught the campaigns, under whatever name they go, under whatever auspices they mask themselves" (Donovan). This position was also reinforced in lay circles and lay publications. Secondary schools, nonetheless, were not devoid of reference to sex. On the contrary, sex was regularly on the agenda, but usually in the form of prayers, and often with reference to the Blessed Virgin. Older students prayed to the "virgin most pure, virgin most chaste" daily (IBVM 1914, p. 9), whom, they were told, had been "undefiled," being clean, pure, and unspoiled. In addition, they were regularly reminded of the significance of the sixth commandment, "Thou shall not commit adultery," the violation of which was a mortal sin that could lead them into the fires of Hell.

Students were further counselled that the principal risks to chastity were idleness, intemperance, dubious acquaintances, improper dances, immodest dress, indecent conversations, books, plays, and films. Prayer books, likewise, had sections informing readers that "company keeping" was not lawful in the eyes of the Church until one was of marriageable age and in a position to partake in the sacrament of marriage, for which they were told they should prepare, not through sinful indulgence, but through a life of prayer, restraint, and purity (Burke, 1951). Thus, it was considered essential for individuals to practice self-denial when single, since sexual pleasure for Catholics was only lawful in marriage.

When one priest produced a book in 1949 to assist with the teaching of sex education in secondary schools, *Sex and Innocence: A Handbook for Parents and Educators* (O'

Hea, 1949), the Catholic bishops blocked its dissemination and discouraged teachers from using it (Ferriter, 2009). Others continued the attack by publishing works outlining every imaginable difficulty that might arise if school authorities introduced sex education (Von Gagern, 1953). Accordingly, while public debate on school-based sex education had gained momentum in many countries after World War Two (Carter, 2001; Limond, 2006), the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland and its entrenched position in education resulted in the almost total suppression of the subject there. It is only in recent years that the miserable and even devastating outcomes for many resulting from such actions have become the subject of much research, writing, and portrayal in the media.

Conclusion

By the late 1960s, the Irish State was playing a proactive role in formulating education policy, largely due to a new commitment to economic expansion (Fleming and Harford, 2014). Its more interventionist and strategic approach had its origins in the mid-1950s when economic stagnation, continual balance of payments predicaments, rising unemployment, and widespread emigration were reaching crisis levels. Successive governments created a new spirit of hope, enterprise, and innovation. There was substantial State investment in productive industry and incentives to encourage foreign investment, and in 1958, the first of a series of national economic plans was introduced that paved the way for the mercantile paradigm that, over time, came to replace the theocentric one that had dominated for so long. A new interest in vocational education subsequently developed. Cognizant that the fee-charging second-level schools were excluding the talents of those of the lower social classes, small local primary and second-level schools were absorbed into larger regional units. The State, too, provided capital grants for secondary school expansion, encouraged authorities responsible for small secondary and vocational schools to share resources, and abolished fees for attendance at those second-level schools that agreed to accept exchequer-funded capitation grants, which was the great majority.

Nevertheless, by the closing decade of the twentieth century, Ireland was still a largely homogenous society, the great majority of the population being white, English speaking and Catholic. The nation was also relatively poor by Western European standards, experiencing high levels of poverty, unemployment, and inflation, and low levels of economic growth. Within a decade, though, it had a transformed complexion due to a dramatic surge in economic growth from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s and earned Ireland the title of "the Celtic Tiger." This was in large part due to the benefits derived from membership of the EU and the striking of social partnership deals in relation to industry.

By 2008, Ireland fell victim to the fate of other major economies due to a European economic crisis and a dependence on an overheated property market. Significant change in social thinking and values was also being witnessed. Many Catholics who remained loyal to Church teaching expressed a new level of liberty in their interpretation of Church doctrine. A significant proportion of the population also chose to move away

from institutionalized religion. The net impact has been a marked diminution in the role and power of the Church, as reflected in the loss of influence in the fields of health, social welfare, and education, and the erosion of its symbolic presence.

A most significant setback for the Church was the passing by the national government of the 2018 Admissions Act. It forbids the authorities of Catholic schools from giving priority to enrolling Catholic pupils, while other religious groups, because they are very much in a minority, can continue to give precedence in their admissions policies to students of their faith, in order to protect what they see as their distinctive ethos. There has also been an interpretation in some circles of the provision of a State-mandated programme of relationship and sexuality education as further erosion of Catholic Church control. Moreover, the amount of time that the State permits for the teaching of religious instruction in all primary schools has been reduced to 30 minutes a day, and school authorities provide alternative programmes for pupils who opt out of religious education.

In relation to the Church itself, a pluralist, outward-looking approach to Catholic education, unlike in the past, characterizes some of the latest changes at the level of governance and curriculum. Regarding piety too, promotion and practise in Catholic secondary schools is now more benignant, personal, ecumenical, and inclusive of those of other faiths than was previously the case, even if it is also much more diluted in terms of the extent to which it permeates school life (Byrne and Devine, 2018). Having said that, the majority of Catholic secondary schools in Ireland, like their Protestant counterparts, continue to function to enable groups with various levels of privilege to succeed academically and, in doing so, perpetuate existing inequalities. The greatest challenge the education system and wider society now face is the fact that despite a number of measures introduced over decades to democratise education, participation in education in Ireland continues to be shaped by social class, reproducing intergenerational advantages for dominant social groups (Harford, Hyland, and Fleming, 2022; Fleming and Harford, 2021).

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