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The Challenge of the New: Education, Religion and Citizenship in a traditional and conflicted Society
A case-study of Northern Ireland

Norman Richardson zieht eine nüchterne Bilanz des weiterhin spannungsvollen Zustands zwischen den mit Katholizismus und Protestantismus in Nord Irland verbundenen Volksgruppen und des ganz überwiegend separierten Bildungssystems. Der Mangel wechselseitiger Kenntnis und Begegnungsebenen perpetuiert die vorurteilsgeladenen Einstellungen, die sich noch verschärfen, wenn es über die interkonfessionelle Dimension hinaus in die interreligiöse geht. Damit ist „Religion“ immer noch Teil des Problems, statt Teil der Lösung zu sein. Die Pioniere, die sich beharrlich um neue Möglichkeiten multireligiösen Zusammenlebens und Erziehens bemühen, brauchen einen langen Atem und viel Überzeugungskraft, um nicht zu resignieren. In dieser Situation ist der Austausch von Erfahrungen mit Pilotprojekten in anderen vergleichbaren Spannungsgebieten wie Sri Lanka, dem Nahen Osten, dem Balkan und Teilen der früheren Sowjetunion eine besondere Hilfe, die nötigen alternativen Visionen im Bildungs- und Erziehungssystem „wahr zu machen“.

Through this presentation I want to explore how a traditionally religious society may be shaped by the interaction of religion and education, positively or negatively. While focusing on Northern Ireland as the case study I hope to raise related questions for those who are engaged with similar interactions in other societies.

In the process of examining why there can be significant suspicion and mistrust between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, a group of academics once designated religion as “one of the darkest regions in education” (Crozier, 1989)! Others have suggested that Religious Education “may easily become part of the process of initiation into the tribalism in Northern Ireland” (Greer & McElhinney, 1985). Are there any grounds for believing that this does *not* have to be the outcome? Can Religious Education contribute to the solution, rather than simply appearing to aggravate the problem?

By contemporary Western European standards Northern Ireland – a corner of an island, off an island, off a continent – may seem to be a highly conservative and traditional society, especially in relation to religious attitudes and practices. Church attendance is still relatively high, especially in rural and suburban areas, and clergy retain an influential position in public life. Much debate has taken place over the “Troubles”, from which Northern Ireland now seems to be emerging, but few would naively and simplistically describe the conflict as “a religious war”; yet the identification with the terms

‘Catholic’ and ‘Protestant’, even by those who practise no religion, remains strong. People around the world know about the Protestant Orange parades – “for God and Ulster” – or about Catholic children barred on their way to school by angry ‘Protestant’ crowds. When there are discussions in other parts of the United Kingdom about the virtues or otherwise of “faith schools”, the example of Northern Ireland’s divided school system is frequently put forward to warn of the grave dangers of religious separation.

In any society where significant numbers of people fear that their political-cultural-religious identity is, or may be, under threat, religious attitudes can all too easily become defensive. Clergy in Ireland as a whole have often been criticised for being highly effective as “chaplains to their own communities” (Inter-Church Group, 1993) while failing to take the kind of prophetic role that transcends sectional interests. Theological conservatism tends to dominate both Catholic and Protestant attitudes, and the two probably effectively reinforce each other, stretching into other areas such as politics and national aspirations. Overt protestant fundamentalism, often combined with strident anti-Catholicism, impacts on wider society and in some communities the process of ‘looking over one’s shoulder’ continues to prohibit more progressive approaches.

Many people regard the separateness in education as the structure that effectively keeps these attitudes and separate identities in place. Despite opinion polls that suggest that many people would prefer children to be schooled together, and despite an emerging integrated education sector, it is still the case that about 90% of Northern Irish school-children attend schools where everyone belongs to the same broadly defined faith community. In such an environment it is not very surprising that the status quo is fairly effectively preserved in the process of cultural and religious transmission. The Catholic bishops continue to argue strongly and successfully for Catholics to send their children to Catholic schools, and for the retention of a separate Catholic teacher-training institution, and these views are clearly shared by many Catholic educators. Research (Richardson, 2003; 2006) suggests that a majority of student teachers have had very limited opportunities to get to know their contemporaries of “other communities”. In such a system teachers may well be the greatest victims of educational separation, and are well-placed to carry these limitations through to the next generation. One academic famously – or perhaps notoriously – described Northern Ireland’s teachers as “naïve bearers of sectarian culture” (Skilbeck, 1976). Furthermore, recent research (Connolly et al, 2002) has shown that children as young as three years of age in Northern Ireland have a capacity for partisan attitudes which, if not checked at an early stage, can develop through childhood into full-blown sectarianism and racism.

The diminution of local political violence over the last ten years gives some grounds for hope that people in Northern Ireland can move away from these destructive processes. But there are new challenges, albeit ones that have come later to Northern

Ireland than to many other parts of the UK and Europe. Confidence in human kindness and progress as the sectarian violence diminished was somewhat shattered by the corresponding rise in attacks on Northern Ireland's ethnic minorities. Such incidents have risen sharply since the mid-1990s, and there has been evidence of the involvement of paramilitary groups. Some in the media have described it as "the new sectarianism", and a recent headline proclaimed Belfast as "the racist capital of Europe" (Searchlight Magazine, October 2006). Statistics clearly suggest that there are proportionately more racist incidents in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK:

"Overall racial prejudice appears to be around twice as significant as sectarian prejudice in the initial attitudes of the population of Northern Ireland. Around twice as many respondents stated that they would be unwilling to accept and/or mix with members of minority ethnic communities than they would with members of the other main religious traditions (i.e. Catholic and Protestant)." (Connolly & Keenan, 2001)

Religious conservatism may well be a factor in this also. In 2004 one local evangelical church very publicly advertised in the press a series of talks on 'other faiths', including Islam, Buddhism and the Bahá'í Faith, under the title "Strongholds of Satan". The larger Churches in Northern Ireland hold firmly on to what they describe as their "ownership" of Religious Education in schools, arguing for a retention of "the essential Christian character of Religious Education" (Churches' Working Party, 2003) and making only very minor – and grudging – concessions to the place of 'other faiths' in the subject. As a result most pupils leave school without ever having studied any religions other than Christianity, including even the majority of student teachers commencing their course to train as Religious Education specialists. (Out of 27 new entrants in September 2006 to my own Religious Studies undergraduate degree course for student teachers, only one has ever studied *any* aspect of world religions *at any level at all!*) How easily the spiral of unawareness continues!

How may those involved in religious life, and especially those involved in Religious Education, face up to these new challenges – the changes in a traditional culture; the working out of new Catholic-Protestant relationships; and the ways in which people of other faiths and ethnic backgrounds are received; the ways in which we prepare young people for life in a religiously diverse local and global society? Many people, including some in the churches, have worked hard to build up these processes and new relationships over the years – pioneers of hope and good relations. The process is one of generational change, but it has to be engaged with now.

The traditional paradigm for the communities in Northern Ireland has been described at best as a form of "benign apartheid" – leaving each other alone. It is symbolised by the defensive barriers and walls (higher than the Berlin Wall ever was!) that have separated communities in Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland over several decades –

barriers that are even more strongly reinforced in some people's minds. The new paradigm, encouraged by government and some community leaders, is of a shared society – working for “A Shared Future”, as the title of a government policy document puts it. The document includes challenges for ‘shared education’, most notably that “schools should ensure through their policies, structures and curriculae, that pupils are consciously prepared for life in a diverse and inter-cultural society and world” (OFMDFM, 2005)

The increasing presence of faith communities outside the traditional Catholic/Protestant divide may be seen as a threat by some people, but others view it as an opportunity for new relationships. If some Religious Educators in the past could argue that to teach about world religions was unnecessary on the utilitarian grounds of small numbers, the growing diversity of Northern Ireland's classrooms increasingly challenges such naïve and dismissive excuses. Yet there is an enormous task ahead in attempting to raise the awareness level of many teachers and others in education, and in promoting more positive attitudes to ethnic and religious diversity. The temptation to ignore or avoid controversial issues relating to religious or ethnic difference may be strong, but it simply encourages a status quo that may well enhance prejudice. Teachers and others, in schools and in churches, have to learn new skills and make new relationships.

Some are reluctant to engage with this process, fearing a loss of personal or cultural identity. They fear that dialogue means somehow “giving in” or “giving way”. Perhaps a parallel can be made with moves towards greater European unity – which should not be at the expense of existing national or regional identities, but rather should be an inclusive expansion, an opening out, a receiving in, an enrichment. One of the new realities that will have to be learned is how our local and global identities – because we do have both – inter-relate. We have to learn the skills of cultural interaction, in education as in other areas of life; this is the new paradigm. Churches and other faith communities have to learn how to relate, how to engage in dialogue; and the skills that are encouraged and developed in the school classroom can surely contribute to this. Several influential Religious Educators (Jackson, 2004; Ipgrave, 2002; Leganger-Krogstad, 2003) have in recent times encouraged what they have called “a dialogical approach”, promoting participation, thinking and listening skills. These surely have far more potential for engaged human development than the lowest-common-denominator approach of simply listing content that pupils ‘should know’, although this is a lesson that has not yet been learnt in Religious Education in Northern Ireland.

We have other processes that will have to be learned if we are to move towards a healthier approach to religious diversity in Northern Ireland. We have to encourage governments and administrators to take religion and religious education seriously, not just to pay token lip-service to it as “a good thing”. The traditional avoidance by government of really tackling issues relating to religion in education in Northern Ireland has led to an unhealthy deference to the views of church leaders at the expense of genuinely

educational decisions. Publicly there is still considerable reluctance on the part of many people to talk openly about religion “for fear of offending someone”; and this is not helped by religious separation in education and the failure of the Religious Education syllabuses to deal with differences and controversial issues. Part of the process of Religious Education must surely be centred on how to engage constructively with difference; we do our young people, and perhaps our wider society, a grave disservice if we fail to do this, not least in a world where religious conflicts are emerging increasingly on the national and international scene. We need to see cohesion in the curriculum and be open to the significant links between Religious Education and Education for Citizenship, not least in relation to issues of prejudice, racism and sectarianism. And in order to make these changes we will need to ensure that teacher training in Religious Education is strong and well supported, and that it, too, models the skills and processes that we identify as crucial for the future of R.E.

I have argued these points from the local situation in Northern Ireland, but the learning from them is not unique to that situation. There are challenges to other situations, too – many of the same kinds of concerns arise in places like the Balkans, Sri Lanka, the Middle East, parts of Africa and some of the former Soviet Bloc countries – and we *can* learn from each other’s experience. At the level of international contact – such as at the Nuremberg Forum – there is a valuable basis for mutual learning and mutual support. Those of us who are still engaged in a struggle to make Religious Education more truly educational and professional need the support of those who have travelled further down that road. The value of other international projects, such as the Oslo Coalition’s programme on Teaching for Tolerance (www.oslocoalition.org), is also considerable. We need to find ways of extending these partnerships and sharing our international learning and insights more effectively, not least to encourage all our governments to be more courageous in affirming good practice in Religious Education.

At a different level I do believe that the issues we have faced in Northern Ireland stemming from religious separation in education present real challenges to other societies where such separation may even yet seem appealing. Do we really do a service to our children and young people if we promote separation for religious learning, whether by separate schools or separate, confessional classes? I suggest that this offers a real warning from the experience of Northern Ireland.

I close with the post-9/11 observation of the Chief Rabbi of Britain, Dr. Jonathan Sacks, whose words challenge all of us who dare to wish to bring religious issues into the public sphere: “Religion”, he writes, “...is fire – and like fire it warms, but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame”! (Sacks, 2002)

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