

The role of Churches and religion in Education

1. Historic transferor role

Controlled schools are 'church-related schools' because in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, the three main Protestant Churches transferred their school buildings, pupils and staff into state control on the understanding that the Christian ethos of these schools was to be maintained in perpetuity. This agreed principle was enshrined in an Act of Parliament. As a result of this, Transferors were given rights of representation on Boards of Governors (formerly school management committees) and the Education Authority (formerly Education and Library Boards). Transferors were also given rights of representation in the management of new controlled schools built subsequently by the state.

In the present day, Transferors seek to work in partnership with parents, teachers and Education Authority representatives in the governance of schools, and with other educational professionals and community representatives. Transferors from the Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist churches work together at a policy level within a grouping formally recognised by the Department of Education and known as the Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC). The establishment of the Controlled Schools Support Council during 2016 is an important development for the controlled sector.

2. Transfer of a Christian concept of education

During the Transfer process the leaders and Boards of Education of the Protestant Churches were at pains to stress that it was not simply buildings which were being transferred but staff and pupils and a concept of education directly informed and shaped by Christian teaching and values.

It is important to stress that by giving the church the rights of representation there was an implicit recognition that they had a vital contribution to make to education and that the government of the day, in making this arrangement, was expressing the will and desire of the population. That such an arrangement was put in place reflected the inherent belief that religion had a fundamental role in setting the preferred context for education to take place.

3. Why is the RE Core syllabus Christian in content?

Christianity has played such an important part in the formation of our cultural heritage. It would be all but impossible to comprehend our society and its background without an understanding of the Christian story, an introduction to Christian doctrines and the historical development of the Christian church and consequently Western society. Christianity has also been the dominant ethic which has provided the underlying values for Irish people and which still today informs the shape of living in Northern Ireland.

Examples

The calendar is determined primarily by the Christian festivals – Christmas, Easter, holy days, Sunday.

The main division of religious traditions in Northern Ireland is between different understandings of Christianity; for good or ill. We must know why we are the people we are and what are the character and origins of the differences that exist before we can find better ways of living with our differences.

The Christian church has brought many gifts to this world, including the founding of hospitals and schools. Church people were instrumental in many of the political and social reforms such as the factories acts and the abolition of slavery.

The most significant historic buildings in villages, towns and cities are predominantly churches or cathedrals. To understand their architecture requires the explanations of Christianity and the doctrines and traditions of the church. In rural society especially the church had a vital influence on the ordering of life and work. Historically the church and its traditions had an important role in developing the sense of community. In the past the churches had a lead role in providing education at a time when the state had little or no interest.

The moral 'givens' of right and wrong are generally informed by the Ten Commandments and the teachings of Jesus Christ. Patterns and norms of society were set by the church which had a major role in providing for the key moments in life; baptisms, marriages and deaths. Although this influence is fading it is still an important influence for the majority of people in Ireland.

Consider the dominant influence of Christianity upon music and the arts. Most of the great composers of the past were inspired by the Christian story and biblical themes. Taking a tour of the Louvre or the National Gallery reveals how much artists of the past were influenced by the biblical stories and Christian historical traditions. In fact many famous paintings are incomprehensible without a working knowledge of the Bible.

The Christian Church would of course admit that its influences have not always been good or benign. There is much in the record of the church in history and society which is not worthy of her Lord. However, individuals are human and often fail to live up to the high standards of God, yet the potential gift of good to the world offered by Christianity has yet to be fully realised. Lessons of the past can be learned from the original Christian foundations of love, justice and righteousness which we believe offer lasting hope and peace for a chaotic world.

4. Education in other religions

It has been agreed by the churches that children ought to be given an introduction to world religions other than Christianity in order to develop sensitivity towards the religious practices and lifestyles of people of other religions in Northern Ireland.

It has also been decided that students from the Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions should study the Christian Church from each other's perspective as a means of promoting mutual understanding and respect and, ultimately, strengthening equality of opportunity.

In an increasingly multicultural society it is important that children gain an understanding of their neighbours. Making a contribution to broadening the religious education of children could be an important part of enabling society to learn to live with difference.

We are not persuaded that such instruction in other faiths is helpful at primary level. Some research evidence has suggested that, if introduced too soon, it could lead to confusion.

Schools will be offered material on six world religions represented in Northern Ireland and it will be up to each Board of Governors to decide which would be most relevant to the school setting.

For each religion considered, topics such as origins, beliefs, sacred writings and symbols, worship and prayer, feasts and festivals, family life and religious ceremonies will be studied.

5. Indoctrination or education?

There is no doubt that in the past, parts of the Christian Church were guilty of indoctrination. Many adults in Ireland had poor experiences of religion being drummed into them. This is something the Church must acknowledge and repent of. However the errors of the past do not preclude the potential for much good in the future. Governments and politicians have done much in the past too which was wrong or bad, yet we put our faith in them again and again at each election.

Different education sectors have different emphases.

For the maintained sector, the parish school is a vital arm of the Roman Catholic Church and a means of fostering faith commitment shared by parents, teachers, pupils and community. This is accepted by the vast majority of parents when they enrol their children. The ethos is clearly spelled out and it is Catholic education. Parents know what they are signing up to and the vast majority do so willingly.

For other sectors the emphasis is different. The outcomes of religious education will involve laying the basic foundations and a framework which will enable pupils to acquire a knowledge and understanding of the Christian message which may help them into a stronger relationship with their own Christian tradition or to develop their own perspective on religious and spiritual values.

The aim of the core syllabus is to identify those elements of faith and biblical teachings to which all who use the core syllabus can subscribe, while at the same time fully acknowledging that there will be wider dimensions to Religious Education in the variety of schools that exist.

In the case of a church primary school the teacher is sharing values and commitment including religious practices with others. In the case of a teacher in the controlled

school he/she enables the pupil to appreciate the Christian vision without denominational distinctiveness.

Christian faith is not the product of Religious Education in school alone. Other agencies are involved; home, family, the church and the relationship already existing between the child and God.

6. What does the Church really have to offer to education?

The partnership between the churches and the state is a living symbol of considerable significance and is of value to all involved.

- It provides the churches with the opportunity of continuing to make their traditional and special contribution in the field of education, as highlighted in the Education Reform Order, 1986.
- It offers the state a large number of dedicated and committed school governors
- It is a public declaration and recognition that the Christian faith has not only played a key role in the formation of our society, but remains a living faith for many of its citizens.
- It is based on a belief that God is involved in the affairs of humankind.
- It can provide a set of values which have the potential to enable future generations to make life-decisions and judgements which will lead to personal fulfilment and a healthy community. As Christians we would add that such an ethical framework enables the will of God to be discovered.

7. Religious Education and Spiritual development

Spiritual development will continue to be interpreted in many ways for educational purposes, until it is further defined or described. Our understanding is that spiritual development should include those aspects of personal development that help pupils understand who we are and what life is about. It should seek to develop in pupils the capacity to reflect on, and come to views about, questions of life and death and God.

'The essential purpose of education' wrote Dante, 'is to bring the pupil face to face with something great, so that the pupil experiences first awe and then curiosity'

Religious education is surely concerned with helping the school to bring the pupils face to face with what is truly great and to experience awe, curiosity, joy and delight. That task has never been easy. However the following are a list of skills and attitudes under the heading of developing spirituality:

- being able to feel and express awe, wonder and curiosity about the natural world and human achievement,
- being challenged and moved by the experiences which life throws up - experiences such as love, beauty, goodness, joy, compassion, injustice, evil, suffering, death,
- appreciating that people have shared beliefs on which they base their lives, and being helped in the formation of personal beliefs,
- being aware of feelings that some would describe as feelings of transcendence,
- developing the ability to ask questions about the origin and purpose of life and reflecting on different responses to these questions,
- valuing the worth of each individual and developing a sense of community,
- developing the ability to make responsible and reasoned judgements,
- establishing one's bearings in relation to the diversity of shared human experience.

In a healthy school curriculum spiritual education and the potential for spiritual development should never be confined to the school gatherings for Religious Observance. Much of what we have defined as spiritual development is contained within Religious, Philosophical, Moral and Ethical Education. Spiritual development goes on in English, through literature (story, poetry and drama), Music, Art and many other curricular areas. A school reviewing its policy on Religious Observance would need to take account of how participation in Religious Observance contributes to spiritual education and complements teaching and learning in other classroom subjects.

8. Human phenomenon of belief

The human phenomenon of belief in the divine, and an awareness of 'spiritual experiences,' is noted from the earliest communities of homosapiens and certain hominids.

Religious experience is admitted by a growing population of people in western society.

Organised religion provides a coherent approach to the experience and understanding of the principal strands of 'God-aware' community.

Christianity in its various denominational forms is the principal cultural determinant in Irish society and has been and continues to be the principal influence on the main phenomena of social organization in Ireland as it has been for 1500 years.

Parents want their children to have an understanding of Christianity; most also want their children to have a living faith.

Religion as a phenomenon and Christianity in its various forms as the most influential form of religion in Irish life, is as important a core subject as history, geography, modern languages, science and mathematics. In a cross-curricular way it informs history, geography and language per se and informs the study of the history of science and maths.

9. Is Northern Ireland a Christian society?

It is frequently claimed that Northern Ireland is a Christian society. If by this, it is meant that the population is almost exclusively Christian (albeit encompassing different levels of commitment) this is undoubtedly true. Yet the claim that Northern Ireland is a Christian society is directly challenged by those who contend that it is a pluralist society. The argument here is not that it is a multi-racial society but that the society is becoming more pluralist in terms of moral and religious commitments.