

**Religion and Schools in Northern Ireland – building a
consensus in the light of new challenges**

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Research Resources for RE



Research Resources for Religious Education
Occasional Paper No. 3

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Written by: James Nelson

Edited by: James Nelson and Norman Richardson

Cover Design: James Nelson

Published by:

Research Resources for Religious Education
Stranmillis University College
Stranmillis Rd
Belfast BT9 5DY

First Published: 2007

Abstract

This paper begins by assessing how consensus has been achieved in solving the problem of the role religion should play in schools in European states and regions. Particular consideration is given to the case of religious education in Northern Ireland and how, in the light of changing circumstances, consensus might be achieved in the future. It is suggested that a 'new consensus' must be rooted in reality, acknowledge wide diversity, empower schools to develop local solutions based on underlying principles and that any new syllabus must possess a clear pedagogical approach.

It is generally acknowledged that coming to agreement on the role of religion in schools in contemporary Western Europe is not straightforward. Indeed for many countries within Europe it is regarded as a contemporary problem needing solved, but it is not a new issue. Difficulties surrounding the place of religion in education have been a feature of European countries since the emergence of national education systems, and all have found their own solutions; from those which choose to educate predominantly through faith schools to those which demand complete separation of religion and education. I want to begin to understand the issue of religion and schools in Northern Ireland, and its particular solution, within this Europe-wide context.

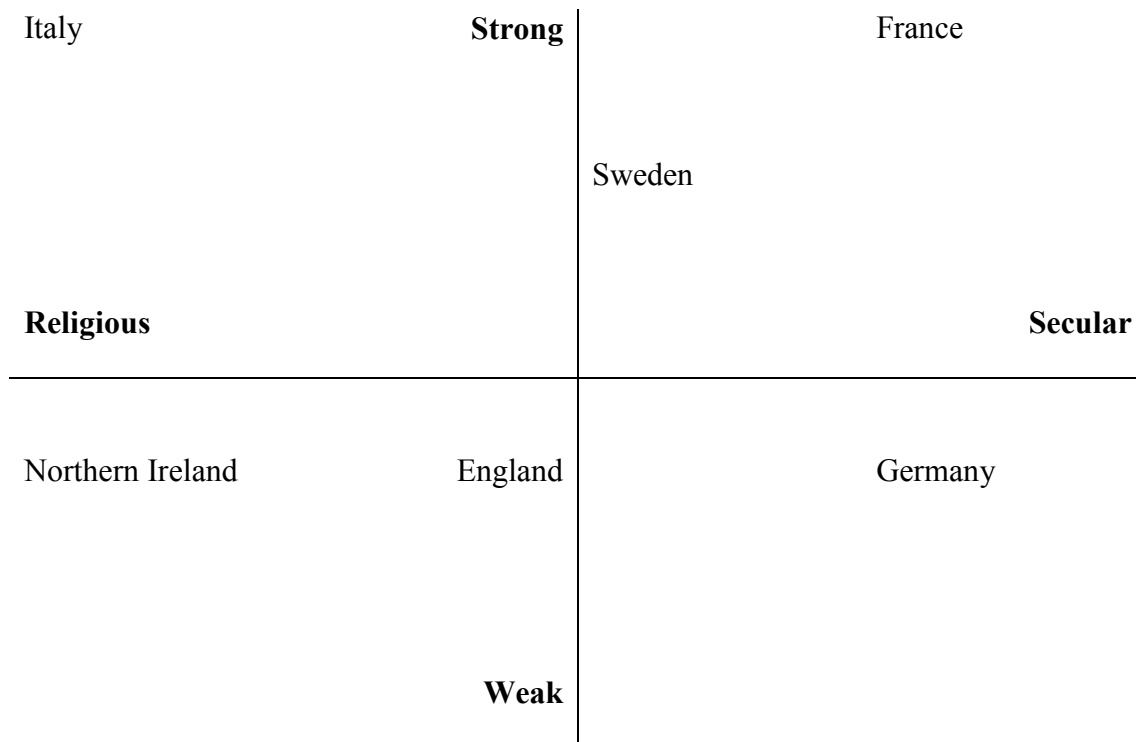
Using the work of Geir Skeie (2001) I will show how the Northern Irish solution is a 'weak' political solution which allows significant religious influence in schools. This is the task of the first part of this paper. The second part follows on with the observation that new circumstances, in relation to increasing multicultural and multireligious populations in Western Europe, are providing new challenges to existing arrangements regarding the role of religion in schools in many European

states. In response to these challenges I suggest how a new consensus on the question of religion in schools in Northern Ireland might be developed.

Religion and Schools in Europe

In many European states such as the UK, Ireland, Italy, Denmark, Spain, Norway and the Netherlands the role of religion in education has emerged out of a Christian dominated and church owned education system in which religious education has been a part of the curriculum and has been delivered in a confessional manner. During the twentieth century this situation was challenged through increasing secularisation and the changing role of the churches in society. This led in many cases to heated debate between churches, governments, parents and schools over what role religion should have in schooling and who should have ownership of religious education. In each state a particular solution to the question of the role of religion in schools evolved¹. Helpfully Geir Skeie (2001) has provided an analysis of how different European states or regions have responded to the challenge of how to organise the relationship between religion and schools.

¹ For more information on RE in European countries see Schreiner (2000)



Firstly, he examines the level of control states exercise in response to the issue of religion and schooling and sees that the responses range from strong to weak solutions. Strong solutions are characterised by a high level of conformity and centralised decision making. Weak solutions are seen in countries where the state is reluctant to intervene on questions of religion and schools and would prefer to react to circumstances as they arise. Both strong and weak solutions can also vary in relation to their secular or religious tendency. So, an example of a strong solution which provides a secular answer would be France, which imposes a strict separation of religion and schools, and a strong solution which allows a strong religious influence would be Italy where a strong church-school relationship is maintained throughout the majority of the country. Turning to weak political solutions, Germany could be

characterised as tending towards the secular in that it pursues a policy of separation between church and state and when it comes to education the state has to be neutral in terms of religion, although religious groups are permitted to have access to educate children in schools during the school day (Schreiner 2000). Northern Ireland is also an example of a weak political solution but one in which the majority of schools have a religious background or base and in which the religious education is largely confessional.

It is appropriate at this point to mention another observation Skeie (2001) makes in relation to religion and schools. He notes that responses to the question of how the relationship between religion and schools should be organised are inevitably linked to issues of identity, 'Within the educational system religious education can be seen as the most 'identity-sensitive' part' (p248), and because the question of religion and schooling tends to overlap with issues of national or local identity, solutions tend to have a strongly regional or country-specific character. It will be important to return to this point later in this paper when considering future solutions.

Religion and Schools in Northern Ireland

In relation to Northern Ireland, Skeie's analysis is helpful in illuminating a political perspective on the place of religion in schools and I would concur with Skeie that the primary characteristic of the solution provided by the state authorities, up to the present day, to the issue of religion in schools in Northern Ireland is a 'weak' political solution within a largely religious context and favouring religious tendencies. Let me substantiate this observation with some evidence.

In Northern Ireland almost all publicly funded schools claim to possess a religious base or ethos. Maintained schools are Catholic Church schools, Integrated Schools are Christian in character and the majority of Controlled schools claim a Christian ethos and have Protestant clergy on their management boards. It is the job of the Department of Education (DE) to set educational standards and to inspect these but they generally restrict themselves from interference in the religious ethos of a school and do not involve themselves in the inspection of religious education.

A second example of the 'weak' nature of the state authorities' approach to religion in schools can be seen in relation to religious education. The Dept of Education has overall responsibility for religious education but does not exert direct control over it. Legislation states that the design of a syllabus for religious education should be given to 'persons having an interest in the teaching of religious education in grant-aided schools' (HMSO 1986). This loose and ambiguous phrase is then interpreted by the DE in a way which privileges a religious perspective; they ask leaders from four Christian denominations to oversee the task. In effect, successive governments over many years have been happy for there to be strong religious influence in schools as long as the government's Department of Education has overall (if distant) control. The DE may well argue that this is a reaction to the reality that all schools in Northern Ireland have a religious base. Such a reactive approach is also characteristic of a 'weak' political response.

Consensus Building in RE in Northern Ireland

To further understand the particular solution that has been developed in Northern Ireland in relation to dealing with the problem of religion and schools I want to examine how consensus was built around the creation of the current Core Syllabus for religious education. This was drawn up by a Working Party which was representative of the four 'main' churches in Northern Ireland – in this choice the DE were acknowledging the need to take account of diversity across the Protestant-Catholic divide, although even then it was seen to be a very narrow form of diversity excluding many thousands of parents and children associated with other Christian churches, never mind members of other religious minorities. The policy was based on the simple majoritarian principle of power being given to the largest denominations of the majority religion.

The Working Party provided a syllabus containing a lowest common denominator of content which the churches could agree on. The basis of the solution offered by the Core Syllabus was that it was possible to find enough commonality across four Christian traditions which all could agree on and which possessed a Christian character. The study of other religions or of smaller Christian traditions was largely ignored. While it was lauded by some, such as Archbishop Robin Eames, it was a failed agreement based on a false perception of reality. Despite the fact it was to be a common syllabus, the majority of Catholic Maintained schools continued to follow their own catechetical programmes in primary schools and in secondary schools chose to study Catholic modules for external examinations at GCSE level (Nelson 2004). Controlled schools continued to emphasise a Bible-based approach at Primary and

Secondary level and in their study of the three main attainment targets many schools limited their definition of Christianity to its expression in one or two local Protestant denominations (Nelson 2004).

Agreement among the members of the Working Party was also strengthened by a sense of solidarity against secular forces. While the threat of the secular was not obvious to many outside of the churches, who saw the churches being handed a privileged position and outright control of part of every school curriculum, the secular threat was very real in the minds of the Working Party. This meant RE was characterised as a separate and unique subject, different from all other subjects and beyond the interference of secular curriculum planners. This is a claim which has been strongly invoked by the current Working Party (The Churches R.E. Core Syllabus Review Working Party 2003).

It might be helpful to summarise the characteristics of the consensus which has been achieved in Northern Ireland in respect of the relationship between religion and schools:

CONSENSUS
‘Weak’ political control. DE have overall (if distant) control and are happy for strong religious influence in schools
Responsibility for religious education with DE but ‘owned’ by the churches
Based on commonality across different traditions, Christian in character
Solidarity of churches in face of secular challenge
Narrow diversity acknowledged
Power held exclusively by majority culture
RE emphasised as a separate and unique subject.
Content is key and agreement on content of RE is based on Lowest Common Denominator approach

Challenges to the Established Consensus

Returning to the work of Skeie (2001), he notes that compromises reached on the question of the relationship between religion and schooling are ‘ambiguous and temporary’ (p247) and subject to change in the light of how different countries respond to new challenges, in particular increasing plurality. Issues of plurality are presenting new challenges for the old order in many European countries (Heimbrock et al 2001; Skeie 2006). While the number of children from religious or ethnic minorities attending schools in Northern Ireland is still small (DENI 2006 p6f), there is no doubt that it is growing and having an impact on educational developments. A clear example of this is the difficulty which accompanied the shaping of a new Core Syllabus. The process, begun in 2002, took five years to produce a result. The DE was frank about the fact that competing views on the teaching of world religions was the main cause of this delay (DENI 2006 p8f). While a new core syllabus which includes some study of world religions at Key Stage 3 has been produced it is unlikely to

satisfy some local groups such as the Northern Ireland Inter-Faith Forum (NIIFF) and the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM) who wish to see a more inclusive approach to religious education at all levels. As plurality increases it is likely that challenges to the Core Syllabus will remain.

Shaping a new Consensus

Following on from the observations above I would like to make some comments on how consensus might be built between competing ideas of the role of religion in schools in light of the challenges from plurality. The points relate particularly to the context of Northern Ireland and I suggest some practical ways forward for the future, particularly in relation to finding agreement on a syllabus. It should be noted that I am not arguing for the withdrawal of Church or religious influence from schools. As I have shown, political authorities have adopted a policy of 'weak' control over religion in education and there is no reason to assume that this is likely to change. My comments therefore set down some key elements which would assist the development of a new consensus in the light of the challenge of plurality and assumes that the Christian Churches will continue to be a strong power bloc in education in the future.

1. Consensus must be rooted in reality. A new consensus must take account of difference as well as commonalities. In the past in Northern Ireland there has been a belief that when it comes to shaping a religious education syllabus emphasising similarities, particularly across the Protestant-Catholic divide, is socially desirable and educationally rational. Andrew Wright (1993) reminds us that the cost of pursuing a study of religious education which is not true to the experience of the pupils is to lose

the pupils' interest, and Jackson (1997) argues strongly that we must avoid reifying religions into homogenous systems. So, we need to first acknowledge that when it comes to religious education Catholic churchmen have a different view of aims than their Protestant counterparts, and also that there are a host of other competing views in the wider religious and educational field locally. This may mean that agreement on a shared syllabus is more difficult, or that an agreed syllabus is less prescriptive or it may even mean that agreement on a shared syllabus may not be possible but any of these is a better scenario than a false agreement which attempts to paper over huge cracks.

2. Consensus requires clear pedagogical principles. As Grimmitt (2000) points out, any effective syllabus must be based on pedagogical principles which are given expression in pedagogical strategies. The principles are 'general laws or substantive hypotheses about teaching and learning which inform the process of devising pedagogical procedures or pedagogical strategies.' In turn these strategies 'determine how pupils will *experience, engage with and respond to the content.*' (2000 p18). Ultimately the question of how a subject is taught is more important than what content should be conveyed in the teaching. Agreement over the content of a syllabus is important but is secondary to the issue of establishing a pedagogical approach. As Grimmitt (2000 p19) notes, 'It is when teachers are unaware of the importance of applying pedagogical principles in their work, or have a limited understanding of them, that pupils' potential for learning in RE is rarely actualised.' How much more damaging must it be when a syllabus, such as the Northern Ireland Core Syllabus for religious education, is silent on the issue of pedagogical principles or strategies.

3. It is essential to acknowledge wide diversity. This might be termed by some as wishing to introduce a multicultural model but I want to advocate an intercultural approach. Robert Jackson (2005) in an article which traces the development of multicultural education in England acknowledges that multicultural education, or a multifaith approach in religious education, if done in a superficial way has the effect of stereotyping groups and emphasising difference and separateness, so that rather than promoting understanding it plays into racist hands. Using the *Warwick RE Project* as a model Jackson argues that effective intercultural education should include ‘flexible representations of religions and cultures’ and that ‘pupils should be provided with materials that reflect the real lives of children and adults from a range of religious and cultural backgrounds and, whenever possible, should be given opportunity for personal interaction’. But key to such an approach is again pedagogy, for Jackson believes that not only should the content be broad in its diversity but that pupils are helped to interpret what they discover and to reflect on the impact of it on their own beliefs and values.

Terence Copley in a critique of religious education in Great Britain argues, ‘What British religious education needs to do... is not to continue teaching a sort of disembodied world-religions course as it is currently doing, but to engage with the complex cultural realities of religion in Britain, including popular spiritualities’ (Copley 2005 p138). In the case of Northern Ireland acknowledging wider diversity need not mean simply adding more content to an already content heavy syllabus by increasing the number of religions studied from one to six but it requires an approach which allows pupils at primary and post-primary level the opportunity to explore

diversity in religion through the real lives of pupils in their class, people in their community and beyond. Agreeing the numbers of religion to be studied is less important than establishing an inclusive approach to religion in schools which naturally encourages an appreciation of wide diversity.

4. As I noted earlier one key influence on agreements reached over the role of religion in schools is identity, and this is particularly the case in Northern Ireland where, historically, decisions about religious influence in schools have touched on issues of religious, political and national identity. In the past many schools in Northern Ireland have struggled to know how to accommodate two competing identities, it can only become more difficult for them in a context of increasing plurality.

Skeie (2001, p247) notes that in circumstances of 'weak' political control a basis for communality is 'the mutual recognition of difference'. Granted, consensus building of this type can struggle to work effectively with groups who do not readily accept the concept of diversity as a basis for communality, however, it may be possible to encourage participation in celebrating difference on religious grounds. As Mitchell (2006 p16) points out, religion does not only create boundaries but can provide a means of building bridges: 'it is not simply that religious beliefs are a mask for a deeper boundary. Sometimes, they may even encourage believers to forgive or reconcile with their persecutor.' And it is to these values of concern for 'the other' embodied by different religions to which any consensus must appeal, for it both creates the motivation for the mutual recognition of difference and reinforces the associated religious identity.

Governments can also play a part in this for it is important that education in Western Europe is built upon values of democracy, freedom and justice. It is crucial that such shared values provide a safeguard against the abuse of religion in schools while allowing for the nurture and expression of distinctive majority and minority identities, cultures and traditions. It is already the case that access to government funding for education is conditional on giving consent to basic principles, this concept might be extended to grant influence over religious education in schools to those who consent to basic principles or an agreed pedagogy of religious education.

5. A second influence on agreements reached over the role of religion in schools I noted earlier was locality. Agreements need to take account of regional characteristics. Particularly in a situation of weak political control, where state authorities are reluctant to interfere, there are opportunities for consensus building at the micro level of schools, teachers, pupils and parents which can be utilised for increasing diversity awareness and promoting appropriate pedagogical strategies. Indeed, if political authorities who exercise weak control are largely reactive in their approach it may require changes at the micro level before any region-wide progress is made.

Schools should therefore feel empowered to develop local solutions, and in some recent comments made by the DE this is something they have directly encouraged. Recently they stated, firstly on their website (www.deni.gov.uk) and then in the EQIA report on religious education (DENI 2006 p3), that the Core Syllabus for religious education ‘should take up around half of the teaching time devoted to RE. *It is then up to schools as to what religious education they provide.*’

What is not so clear from this is how schools are to make decisions about what material is appropriate for the remaining fifty percent of religious education. Again, it is essential that teachers and schools are guided by underlying principles or an agreed pedagogy.

In relation to Northern Ireland, then it may be possible to suggest some pointers for a new consensus:

Obviously the test of a new consensus of this type is the ability of the various parties (churches, religious minorities, government departments, educational bodies etc.) to agree on the cornerstone of the proposals which I believe is an agreed pedagogical approach based on educational principles set down by the Department of Education. Admittedly, such agreement cannot be guaranteed but the possibility of it should at least be tested.

OLD CONSENSUS	NEW CONSENSUS
'Weak' political control. DE have overall (if distant) control and tolerate a strong religious influence in schools	'Weak' political control. DE have overall (if distant) control and tolerate a strong religious influence in schools.
Responsibility for religious education with DE but 'owned' by the churches	Responsibility for religious education with DE who set down key educational principles and facilitate creation of a syllabus by local representatives of Christian Churches, Muslims, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Baha'i and others, such as CCEA, with an interest in RE. Religious education is 'owned' by schools, teachers, parents and pupils.
Based on commonality across different traditions, Christian in character	Based on shared values and mutual recognition of difference while having opportunities for the expression of distinctive majority and minority cultures and traditions
Solidarity of churches in face of secular challenge	Churches and representatives of minority religious groups work together according to agreed principles
Narrow diversity acknowledged	Wide diversity acknowledged
Power held exclusively by majority culture	Power shared on the basis of consent to key principles
RE emphasised as separate and unique subject.	RE as educational and fully integrated into the curriculum
Content is key and agreement on content of RE is based on Lowest Common Denominator approach	Pedagogy is key and agreement on content of RE is based on local needs (particularly in relation to the child) within broad framework

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