

## **IONA/*The Word***

### **Conference: In defence of denominational schools**

#### **Concluding remarks**

#### **Fr Vincent Twomey**

I should like to preface my concluding remarks by saying that I am not speaking in a purely private capacity as a theologian and not in any official capacity on behalf of the Catholic Church.

This morning we were privileged to listen to two of the foremost educationalists from England and Wales, as well as Scotland, argue in favour of denominational schools. In addition, we heard John Murray defend what he calls a pluralistic denominational educational system here in Ireland, which I would like to support.

As he pointed out, education is primarily the responsibility of parents. This is anchored in our *Constitution* and confirmed by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, art 26, no 3: “Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.” Since the family as an institution is antecedent to the State, so too its rights are antecedent rights imposing certain duties on the State, above all the obligation to provide the necessary material and other conditions for parents to see that their children receive the kind of education they desire, including formation in character and in the faith of the parents. Thus the obligation of the State to promote a pluralist system of denominational schools is clearly established in principle, provided that none of these denominations teaches, under the umbrella of education, what is inimical to public order, justice or the academic integrity of secular subjects. This pluralist system would also include equal provision for parents who do not want to send their children to a denominational school, provided that the critical mass of children of such parents would make such a school viable.

Commenting in the *Irish Independent*, 25 March 2008, on the new model of primary education, John Carr, General Secretary of the INTO proposed, among other suggestions, that “a common religious programme for all children with some separate instruction, perhaps for one or two classes per week could be arranged.” This, it seems to me, is based on a misunderstanding of what religion is. Just as there is no such thing as “literature” in the abstract, only English, Irish, and French literature, likewise there is no such thing as “religion” as a subject with some added elements that distinguish one religion from another. Religious education is more than receiving a body of information. Religion is a way of life.

Getting back to the question of religious instruction \*\*, *The Irish Times* editorial of last Monday, 31 March 2008, posed the right question: “Is it to be an education *about* religion

or *into* a particular religion ...?” Any believer of any religion would surely answer that religious education is more about initiation than information, though that too is included, and that such initiation is always initiation into a community of faith and its rituals. Here, we must distinguish between primary and secondary faith-based schools. Because at primary level faith-formation is concerned mostly with initiation, it is rooted in the local faith community, which is the basic justification for the present system of National Schools, both Protestant and Catholic. It is encouraging to hear Mr Carr say: “[I] believe that the concept of a community national school, where religious education is provided in accordance with parental wishes, is a good one.” (I fear, however, that he may have another notion of community.) Secondary level education is related to the broader civil society, including its national dimension, and should be characterized by a more comprehensive information and a growing critical appreciation of one’s own faith-tradition. But even at secondary level, there is a need for a clear religious ethos where character building, the acquisition of virtue, and prayer, both personal and liturgical, are taken seriously. The recent creation of prayer rooms in certain secondary schools is a most welcome development. Pope Benedict XVI said recently:

..... an education that is not at the same time an education with God and in the presence of God, an education that does not transmit the great ethical values that have appeared in the light of Christ, is not education. Professional formation is never sufficient without the formation of the heart. And the heart cannot be formed without, at least, the challenge of the presence of God. We know that many youth live in environments, in situations, that make the light and the Word of God inaccessible. They are in life situations that represent a true slavery, not just exterior, but that provoke an intellectual slavery that obscures the truth in the heart and in the mind.

As John Murray pointed out, the creation of a non-denominational State school system would undermine each and every religion with its underlying moral code. It would thus foster moral relativism, which, among other things, is the serious threat to democracy, as Fukuyama once pointed out. In addition, practical atheism combined with moral relativism results in widespread corruption in society, where might is right, while the poor and the weakest members of society are defenceless, and nihilism (symbolized by drugs, terrorism and suicide) becomes rampant.

There is another, broader issue that must be mentioned, however briefly, namely the danger to society of a non-denominational State school system, namely that the State may be tempted to encroach into areas, where it is best kept at bay. Modern bureaucratic democracy has an inbuilt and quasi-totalitarian tendency to control many aspects of the lives of its citizens, a tendency that the welfare State has (unintentionally) encouraged by conditioning its citizens to expect the State to provide for all their felt needs, real or imagined. Since there is no such thing as a value neutral or ideologically-free education, there is always a danger that government – or those with a PC cause, who might set the curriculum – will use its control of education to mould the minds and hearts of the younger generation to suit its own agenda, which might be anything but wholesome.

Finally, a word about one of the objections to denominational schools peculiar to Ireland namely that they might be socially divisive. In this context, it is worth repeating David Quinn's call on the INTO to clarify where exactly it stands with regard to the future of denominational schools in the light of the contradiction between Mr Carr's own professed belief in denominational education and his contention that this would lead to a 'two-tier', 'segregated' system of education, which would necessarily be divisive. Experience in the North has taught us the very opposite. It can be argued that it was precisely because of the pluralist denominational system there that the damage of civil war was significantly limited and that the majority, who were products of these schools, voted consistently over the years for the mainstream Nationalist and Unionist parties. The more one is at home with one's own religious identity, the more one can relate sympathetically to believers of other denominations, in particular in the wake of the ecumenical movement and the Second Vatican Council. Catholic schools in the North, as elsewhere throughout the world, generally achieve the highest academic standards, often with what would seem to be the most unpromising of resources and even in the midst of a civil war. One thinks immediately of St Genevieve and her secondary school, St Louise's Comprehensive College, at the top of the Falls Road, Belfast.

Another sister, reading about this conference in *The Word*, emailed me earlier this week as follows: "Before I came to Indonesia, I taught for 15 years in the parochial school system in Buffalo NY and in the Columbus Ohio diocese. Those systems in the USA must be supported by the Catholic people themselves. So, the schools and the teachers do not have the financial backing and the equipment etc. of the public schools. Nevertheless, even the *Reader's Digest* magazine in one of their articles wanted to know why the education given in them was actually better than in the public school systems. The character training received and the discipline was also stressed in the article." The answer surely must be the faith commitment of the teachers. The challenge for the future, as I see it, is to develop our existing pluralistic denominational school system to make it truly denominational, a task which paradoxically is addressed primarily to Catholic schools because of our majority status, which leaves us more vulnerable to the general trends in society, which are increasingly materialistic. And here the decisive issue will be, as it always was, the witness of the teachers themselves, their joy at being Catholic or Protestant or Muslim, and their desire to pass on the great gift of faith to the next generation, a gift to be freely accepted – and where the parents make their own irreplaceable contribution to the process of education, their own generosity and sacrifice which under-girds the whole enterprise of denominational education.

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