This paper is taken from

The Experience of Citizenship
Proceedings of the sixth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network

London: CiCe 2004

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 378 6

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

From Old Europe to the New Europe: the changing profile of religion in civic identity in Irish educational policy[1]

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The school curriculum is used in most countries as an instrument of public policy through which national self-understanding is expressed and communicated to the young generation. This has been the tradition in Western Europe since the time of the Reformation when each ruler decided what was to be the religion of his region on the basis of *cuius regio, eius religio*. From the time of the Enlightenment, the conjunction of the civic and religious remits of schooling has been questioned and in France has been firmly rejected. Today the serious disagreement about the *invocatio Dei* in the proposed European Constitution and about the wearing of religious emblems in schools shows that the nature of the relationship between religion and civic life remains problematic in the 'New Europe'.

This paper aims to map the change in the profile of the religious dimension of citizenship education from the 'Old Europe' to the 'New Europe' in the Irish context. From shortly after the foundation of the State in 1922 until 1971, education for citizenship was envisaged as having a strong religious dimension. In 1996, a new programme of civic education entitled Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) was introduced at for junior cycle at second level and it contained to reference whatever to religion. The most recent revision (1999) of the primary curriculum shows an effort to produce a more balanced version of the relationship between civic and religious identity in educational policy.

But first I wish to note that it is mistaken to conceive of Ireland as polarised between Catholic and Protestant alone. Diversity is a more pervasive and long-standing feature of Irish culture than is sometimes appreciated. Cultural diversity has been present among the inhabitants of the island long before the notion of diversity acquired its contemporary currency. To use some phrases from Louis McNeice's poem, 'Snow', the Irish ethnic/cultural/ moral landscape is 'incorrigibly plural' and consequently 'crazier and more of it than we think' (in Allott, 1968, pp. 151-2). The names to be found in Ireland today reflect wide and varied ethnic/cultural origins: Gaelic (the majority of Irish names); Norse (Harold, Sigerson, Sorensen); Norman (Norman itself, names with the prefix 'Fitz'); English (English itself, Green, Brown, Black); Scots (Scott), British (Britain) Jewish (Bloom, Wolfson, Goldberg); Huguenot (Blanche, Champ, D'Olier, Boucicault, Le Fanu, La Touche). Then there are names such as Fleming, Holland, French and Spain that also derive from continental Europe. As John Hewitt puts in his poem 'Ulsterman': 'Kelt, Briton, Roman, Saxon, Dane, and Scot,/time and this island tied a crazy knot'.[2]

[1] This article is based on research supported by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social Sciences.

[2] The full poem can be found in P. Craig (ed.) (1999), *The Oxford Book of Ireland* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), p. 14.

Historical Context

One important reason for the failure of the Reformation to gain adherents in the country was the resistance by Gaelic Ireland to the attempts made by the English crown to promote the Protestant faith. This resistance led to an identification of Catholicism with freedom from foreign interference and this in turn prompted the development of a version of national consciousness that saw a fusing of religious, political and cultural elements. The closing years of the sixteenth century heralded the emergence of the tradition of Catholic nationhood and 'the elements of an ideology of Irish Catholic nationalism' (Lennon, 1994, p. 324) which has endured to the present. Conversely, the later Plantation of Ulster was to lead to the emergence of a version of Irishness which was eventually (particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) to associate its political identity with Britain and with Protestantism. To this day many people associate their political and cultural sense of who they are with religion.

Awareness of the potential for social disharmony deriving from 'crazy knot' of identities, the aspiration to separate religious from cultural and national identity formed part of the impulse behind the attempt to introduce a multi-denominational school system in the nineteenth century. The aim of the architects of the system of national education that was eventually established in Ireland in 1831 was therefore to promote a shared identity on the part of the inhabitants. The multi-denominational system which was introduced limited the remit of the state to secular learning and assigned responsibility for catechesis to the respective churches. This attempt by Lord Stanley in 1831 to 'unite in one system children of different creeds' (in Hyland and Milne, 1987, pp. 100/101) was strenuously resisted by all the churches with the result that education in practice assumed a denominational character.

Religion and Civic Identity 1922-1996

When in 1922 the Irish state was founded, a system of educational administration was already in place through which the government could realise its aim of promoting cultural nationalism and reinforce the denominational character of schooling. In the light of the salience of religion in Irish culture, this also involved the continuation and strengthening through education of the connection between religion and national identity. As William Trevor tartly puts it: 'the emergent nation, seeking pillars on which to build itself, . . . plumped for holiness and the Irish language' see Craig, 1999, 424).[3] In Ireland the strong association between the Catholic Church and the struggle for independence has contributed to a close identification between loyalty to the nation and loyalty to the church. The nationalist or republican tradition in Ireland is very different from that of France (or Portugal) where secularists perceive *l'église* (together with *le château* as being in alliance against the republican institutions made up of *la mairie, l'école, et la poste* (see Raffi, 1997, p. 84).

It was not until 1966 that the subject 'Civics' at second level was formally introduced into schools. This gave an opportunity to give focused attention to the relationship

[3] William Trevor, *Beyond the Pale*, extract in (Craig, ed, 1999, p. 424).

between religion and civic identity. Previously this had been affirmed but in the course of comments on the general curriculum. The authors of the Department of Education's document in 1966 (aimed at junior cycle at second level) argue that religious education is primary and that moral education and, by extension, civic education, derive from religious principles. 'During his religious studies especially', they write:

> the pupil will have instilled into him the virtues of charity, honesty, self-sacrifice, purity and temperance and will acquire a complete moral code which will serve as the chief guide of his conduct and the mainspring of his actions and thinking. (Department of Education, 1966 in 1986/1987 edition, p. 165)

Although it is noted that civics is not:

> to be regarded as a substitute for religious and moral training nor for that training in character formation and general behaviour which is an essential objective of all education, but rather, again, as the complement to and extension of such training. Its concern will be the imbuing of the pupil with the social and civic principles which help in the formation of the good citizen. (ibid.)

The dependence of civic education upon religion and is also evident in the 'Notes on the Teaching of Civics' published in the same year.

> It is not difficult to see the importance of co-ordinating civics with religious instruction . . . . It would not be very effective for the civics teacher to discuss with his pupils the political and social duties of the citizen unless the moral principles underlying those duties had already been dealt with in the religious instruction class. (Department of Education, 1966, p. 3)

The following is a proposed sample treatment of a section of the prescribed syllabus dealing with 'Religion and the State: the provisions of the Constitution regarding religion. The various denominations' (ibid., p. 4). This will involve study of:

> Religion and the individual's ultimate destiny; its importance to the family, to society in general, to the nation, to the international community of nations; rights and duties; the reasons for and the importance of religious toleration; respect for denominations other than one's own [;] a brief study of denominations represented locally.
>
> A brief study of the relevant sections of the Constitution in the light of what has been discussed above. (ibid., p. 5).

Civic identity in the 1971 curriculum for primary schools

The conceptual link between civic and religious education is not as pronounced in the 1971 curriculum for primary schools. On the one hand, both areas are seen to 'share much common ground in the knowledge they seek to impart and the attitudes and virtues they aim to develop' and as a result 'there is obviously a very close affinity between Religious Education and Civics' (Department of Education, 1971, Part Two, p. 116). But the authors go on to reject the 'narrow viewpoint that matters of morals and behaviour belong exclusively to the sphere of the churches' (ibid.) and affirm the importance of encouraging pupils to 'embrace' moral values 'by personal choice' in the light of 'an upright conscience' (ibid.). Nonetheless, the religious dimension of civic education is articulated clearly. For instance, it is suggested that in the study of the family 'the love of Christ for His mother, His life as a member of the Holy Family and other aspects of the Divine example might be presented to the children as the ideal (ibid., p. 122). The form of patriotism recommended must '(a)bove all ...prove itself in its consistency with duty to God and to the moral law' (ibid., p. 124).

The 1990s: civic, social, political and environmental education

A great change occurs in the attitude to the religious dimension of civic formation in the 1990s. The notion of tolerance mentioned in 1966 emerges as a defining element in the document on Civic, Social and Political Education at second level published in 1996 (Department of Education, 1996). This document endorses the secular values of liberal democracy and also places a very strong emphasis on communitarian values of social responsibility (Ibid., pp. 10-12). What is significant is the failure even to raise the possibility of a connection between religion and civic education. In a country where religion and culture have been so intimately related, this neglect is very surprising. Whether this is a result of a considered change in policy or of an unselfconscious response to a new *Zeitgeist* is difficult to say, although I am inclined towards the latter explanation.

The salience of religion in Irish culture makes it a topic that should be included in any officially-sponsored programme of civic education. Apart from its role in the cultural self-understanding of both believers and non-believers, religion is a very significant feature in the political division of the island. There is also the role of the Church in raising awareness of disadvantage and exploitation. The missionary Church has animated much of the contribution of Ireland to the developing world and has highlighted the existence of poverty and exploitation in these areas of the world. Gene Kerrigan, (Kerrigan, 1998) no friend of the Catholic Church, captures this aspect of the remit of Christianity by pointing out that it was inspiration from the gospel that 'created the men and women, priests and nuns, volunteers, who went to the godforsaken spots of the globe to bear witness to finer values than accommodation to the local thug or dictator' (ibid., p. 118). Others, he writes, 'stayed at home and stood by the oppressed or spoke out against the complacency of the comfortable classes' (ibid.). The ideals of human conduct enshrined in the Christian tradition (in the parable of the Good Samaritan or in the Sermon on the Mount, for example) form part of the moral capital of our civic culture. Indeed, a close connection exists between the values which are

promoted in the CSPE programme (human dignity, interdependence and stewardship, for example) (Department of Education, 1996, pp. 10-12) and Christian values in general.

By contrast, the new syllabus in religious education has a section dealing with the place of religion in civil life (Department of Education and Science, 2000, p. 43). So it is strange there is not a parallel treatment of the theme in the CSPE programme. I am not saying that we should return to the pious over-emphasis on religion of previous documents. But the Judaeo-Christian story has played such a role in shaping the national psyche that it should be incorporated into the civic story of the country. This is acknowledged as an element in the conception of civic identity underlying the new Primary Curriculum.

Diversity and the Christian tradition: the new (1999) Primary Curriculum

The spirit and tone of the aims of the Primary Curriculum (1999) are very different from those of its 1971 predecessor. In the 1999 document we read that one of fourteen issues on which there was 'consensus' among those drafting the document was the place of 'pluralism, a respect for diversity and the importance of tolerance' (Department of Education and Science, 1999, p. 9). The following are some affirmations of respect for diversity. Under the heading 'European and Global Dimensions', the authors state that:

> The curriculum acknowledges, too, the importance of a balanced and informed awareness of the diversity of peoples and environments in the world. Such an awareness helps children to understand the world and contributes to their personal and social development as citizens of a global community. (ibid., p. 27)

This is consistent with the character of 'Social, Environmental and Scientific Education' which is described as follows:

> …as children mature they encounter a widening range of people, events and periods. These are drawn from local, national, European and non-European contexts and from diverse social, cultural, ethnic and religious backgrounds, so that children acquire a balanced understanding of local, Irish and international history. (ibid., p. 49)

One of the features of 'Social, Personal and Health Education' is that it will nurture '(c)oncepts of democracy, justice and inclusiveness . . . through the learning experiences offered and through the attitudes and practices inherent in the organisational structures of the class and school'. (ibid., p. 57)

The documents endorses the importance of understanding and tolerating diversity and the value of pluralism within the context of an acknowledgment of the country's Christian heritage.

The curriculum has a particular responsibility in promoting tolerance and respect for diversity in both the school and the community. Children come from a diversity of cultural, religious, social, environmental and ethnic backgrounds, and these engender their own beliefs, values, and aspirations. The curriculum acknowledges the centrality of the Christian heritage and tradition in the Irish experience and the Christian identity shared by the majority of Irish people. It equally recognises the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups in society. (ibid, p. 28)

It seems to me that from a liberal perspective, it is not inappropriate to draw attention to this dimension of Irish identity in civic education. As the cultural identity of many Irish people has been associated with religion, does all of this mean that the Irish must inescapably come to see their national identity in religious terms? Of course not. Although they live in a country where Christianity is deeply inculturated, Irish people do not have to be born or to remain Christians. But whether in anger, like James Joyce, or in sorrow like John McGahern, the attitudes to life of its citizens are shaped by the religion which was a prominent feature of the culture in which they grew up. Even Roddy Doyle (1993), an atheist who dislikes the Pope intensely, writes with bewilderment of his warm and positive reaction to seeing the Pope meet the Irish soccer team before the World Cup quarter final in Italy in 1990. When the Pope met the team - 'I couldn't fight down the lump in my throat as the lads in their tracksuits lined up to meet him. They were all Catholics, the reporter told us. Great, I thought; and I wasn't messing. It was strange' (ibid., p. 20). This response captures something of the resonance between the Catholic religion and national identity in the psyche of many Irish people.

The embeddedness of religion in Irish culture means that an encounter with religion is not something which can normally be avoided. As a result, individuals have to choose what their attitude will be to religious belief which, rather than being relegated to the strictly private sphere, enjoys a profile in the nation's culture. Although religious belief can be accepted or rejected, religious sensibility is a salient feature of Irish culture. This is not a plea to return to the Old Europe version of civic identity which the State sought to impose. In Ireland of the 'New Europe', this identity can be acknowledged without being imposed.

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