Introduction

Religion, identity and citizenship in schools: the Irish case

The aim of this book is to examine a striking characteristic of the Irish State: the control of its education system by religious and private bodies, which entails an analysis of the place of religion in schools and its contemporary social, political and ideological implications in the Republic of Ireland. The chosen perspective is essentially political and ideological, with a study of education policies as they reflect government choices and of the standpoints and views of those involved in the educational sphere. This will be complemented with an analysis of the public debate and of the fluctuations of public opinion on the issue. The current Irish education system is commonly described as denominational and based on religious segregation. As the Catholic Church has remained the owner and manager of the vast majority of the so-called 'national' primary schools in the Republic (which are otherwise mostly financed by the State), Catholic schools act as state schools to all intents and purposes. The increasing diversity of the school population since the mid 1990s, as a result of socio-cultural changes within the Republic as well as of immigration, has highlighted the problematic aspect of the double nature and function of these schools. It has led some to question the legitimacy of the structural link between the Catholic Church and the great majority of schools, which has even been described as a form of cultural imperialism in recent years.

From an international perspective, contemporary developments in the Republic of Ireland are all the more interesting as Irish society struggles to come to terms with a self-image that may reflect these. It now has to try and reconcile its vision of itself as a colonised people (which, until recently, had felt the need to assert its cultural specificity through its schools) and the new position of the Republic of Ireland as a de-facto post-imperial country, the result of its fifteen-year economic boom and of the consequent substantial immigration for the first time in its contemporary history. The recession the country has been going through since 2008 does not fundamentally alter this new situation, even if there has been a return to a negative migratory

ratio. As former immigrants and Irish people leave the State, others choose to stay, and, more to the point, the social developments of the past thirty years have far exceeded the strictly demographic changes. The issue of the relationship between religion, culture and schooling is of international significance. Ireland's case also provides an opportunity, especially with regard to the political use of concepts of interculturalism and pluralism, civic or ethnic citizenship, inclusion and exclusion, to reflect on this issue as it may affect any democratic, open society.

Contemporary political, social and cultural developments (from Independence and Partition to the economic boom and the recent phenomena of secularisation and immigration, via the Northern Ireland conflict and European integration) have progressively led the Irish State to put into question the role of cultural transmission that had been assigned as a priority to Irish schools in the wake of Independence. The definition of Irish identity to be transmitted had been founded on the Catholic-Gaelic cultural nationalism that had developed in the nineteenth century in reaction to British domination and to the unionist discourse. Despite this gradual evolution, the dominant perception of a homogenous majority in Ireland and a form of religious ethnic nationalism have continued to colour current debates on the place of the Catholic Church and of religious and cultural minorities in Irish society in general and in the education system in particular.

A number of authors have charted the significant decrease in the social and symbolic power of the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland over the past thirty years. According to John Coakley, this transitional process is leading to the gradual replacement of an exclusive ethnic nationalism by a more inclusive civic nationalism. The school, which may be seen not only as a traditional vehicle of identity and cultural transmission but also, on a wider scale, as a microcosm of most major social and political debates, seems to be a particularly apt place for an examination of this process and of some of its practical aspects. To what extent can the field of education in the Republic of Ireland be seen as reflecting such a transition?

The religious dimension of the dominant conception of Irish identity, which was made explicit in education policy discourses as well as in the contents and objectives of the school curricula in the first decades after Independence, has now all but disappeared from official publications defining current education policy, but it remains very much present in the actual structure of the education system. While a number of significant developments in education tend to confirm John Coakley's analysis, this major element of permanence appears in direct contradiction with it. Exploring the discourses and practices of those actively involved in the field of education (the State, the Churches, the religious and non-religious personnel involved in managing the system, teaching and parent organisations – while the place of children among these various interests will also be considered) in relation to the issue of religion in schools in the Irish State will help highlight some contemporary contradictions and understand the nature of the resulting tensions.

In Ireland, as in Great Britain, the issue of discrimination resulting from the historical place of particular religions within the school system is most often viewed from a 'communitarian' or 'majority/minority' perspective, that is to say by focusing on the discrimination that might affect religious minorities and on the real or supposed effects of school segregation from this viewpoint. In the Republic, it has thus been established that, until recently, the existence of non-Catholic minorities was partly ignored, tolerated or considered as more or less of a problem in the educational context. The Protestant minorities, while they remained at the margins of the Irish State's self-perception, nevertheless had their own parallel network of schools, as is still the case today. But the issue of the social and cultural inclusion of minority groups in Irish education has now become a much wider one, as has been recognised in recent research.

Beyond the question of more or less recognised minorities (including the growing number of people with no religious affiliation in the country), the present work will look at the place of each child, whatever his or her socio-cultural origins and the religious convictions of his or her parents, in the school system and in Irish society as a whole. The choice has been made here to envisage the issue of discrimination by focusing first and foremost on children as individual human beings, without merely reducing them to the cultural and religious majority or minority groupings they belong to by virtue of their birth. Each child should be afforded equality of treatment and status, and each child's personal, social and cultural identity is seen here as a work in progress and not a set of prearranged or predetermined labels. This does not amount to ignoring their respective origins and experiences or to imagining some kind of abstract uniformity. Rather, each child is seen here as both the product of a variety of influences and a person actively involved in his or her own making and not as a passive recipient that one might fill by 'educating' one way or another.

The debate on the inclusive/exclusive concept of Irish identity and on its practical implementation in terms of cultural and religious transmission in schools has taken on a new dimension since the mid 1990s with the arrival of new immigrants, but this may be seen as just another step in a long-term process. The issue of exclusion was one that affected various minorities long before this new phenomenon. Even when adopting a group perspective, it has become obvious to all that there is now a growing number of children who do not fit the traditional image of the Catholic Irish, the children of immigrant parents representing only one group – itself widely heterogeneous – among others.

The traditional vision of national identity derived from Irish cultural nationalism was by definition exclusive, to the extent that only Catholic inhabitants who were perceived as being of Gaelic ancestry could be deemed fully Irish (apart from those individual Protestant nationalist heroes who became honorary members of the nation). As John Coakley writes, the conception of national identity that may be described as 'civic' is more inclusive or at least open to a higher degree of inclusion, as it is founded on the concept of citizenship, which may encompass all inhabitants who participate in a given society

as opposed to being applied only to a group based on a set of pre-established criteria of belonging. From this perspective, the term 'inclusion' can refer both to the collective dimension of social/national cohesion and to the individual dimension of citizenship equality. As Kathleen Lynch shows, full inclusion has to be underpinned by the notion of equality: a child may only feel fully included in the school group if he/she is considered as equal to the others, without any form of discrimination.³ The basic hypothesis here is that a true (search for) equality would recognise and respect individual difference, whereas the notion of respect for diversity does not necessarily include the idea of equality and privileges difference over commonality as its basic premise.⁴ In this context, it must of course be stated that the religious dimension is but one aspect of the issue of equality and inclusion in schools. The socio-economic dimension remains crucial in this respect, as Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge have shown in the Irish context.⁵

The issue of the discrepancy between the vision of Irish identity and culture conveyed by the school system and the existence of children of diverse socio-cultural and religious backgrounds in Ireland arose long before the 1990s, with the first wide-ranging political debate on education and Irish identity in the Republic already taking place in the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, it was specifically linked to the conflict in Northern Ireland and to the exclusive, and hence potentially conflictual, character of Irish identity that was then dominant in schools, and most marked in school history. From the 1970s onwards, the question of how to cater for children from families who did not belong to the main religions with their own school networks came up sporadically. Calls for alternatives to the existing structure remained isolated, however, and these matters were only brought to the fore with the arrival of immigrants, giving rise for the first time to a national debate on Irish identity in schools, on equality of access to education and on the existence of discrimination. The public debate has essentially focused on the treatment of (perceived) minorities in the school system - minorities that have been described as 'ethnic', religious or non-religious minorities, but also Irish Travellers, recently assimilated to an indigenous 'ethnic' minority. In this work I will also focus on the national debate on the place of religion in the Irish school system for its own sake, as it appears revealing of the changing Irish society and highlights issues most contemporary democratic countries have to face one way or another.

Catholic viewpoints and democratic perspectives

An overview of recent writings in Ireland on the relationship between schools and religion in Ireland will help provide a general insight into the issues at stake. The fact that it is possible to divide them into distinct categories founded on different premises is in itself revealing of the nature of the current national debate. Indeed, Irish writings on the subject may be divided into two main approaches, one emerging from the existing Christian educational structures

and trying to preserve their essential characteristics, while the other attempts to offer an overall critical analysis.

In the first approach, a prolific 'Catholic camp', with several books on the Catholic school and on the teaching of religion in Ireland in the past decade, has tried to take stock of the social changes, while generally adopting a defensive stance. These writings thus justify the existence and importance of the network of Catholic schools, with some nuances; they attempt not only to redefine but also to reassert the specific character of these schools; and they see the notion of inclusion as a natural part of the message of Christian tolerance.

Most of these works have been published by the Irish religious publishing companies Veritas and Dominican Publications, the former under the direct responsibility of the Irish Bishops' Conference. For the most part, their authors are involved in teaching Religious Education (RE) to future teachers of RE in secondary schools, at the Mater Dei Institute, as is the case of Kevin Williams, author of Faith and the Nation: Religion, Culture and Schooling in Ireland, 6 or James Norman, author of *Ethos and Education in Ireland*, or at the teacher-training colleges of St Patrick's College, Drumcondra and Mary Immaculate College, others are priests or members of either the Catholic hierarchy or a religious order. By way of illustration, Kevin Williams mentions in his book what he calls the 'liberal' discourse, but he does not himself offer any critical questioning on the legitimacy of the Irish State's continued acceptance of its role as a promoter of religion beyond presenting its main legal manifestations as a set of facts. Indeed, the main question that Williams would like to answer positively in his book is the following: 'Can Ireland's Christian tradition accommodate the demands of diversity?' (The question appears on the back cover.) The chosen wording of what sounds very much like a rhetorical question places the author's whole argument squarely in the perspective of a Christian Ireland, and, as a result, it amounts to an unquestioning justification of the bases of the system. Williams writes as a defender of the existing system of which he is a part and of the specific religious identity of Ireland as he perceives it; his object is to explore potential strategies of adaptation of the education system to the increasing socio-cultural diversity in the Republic of Ireland so as to preserve the characteristics that seem essential to him in this Christian perspective, rather than to offer a global critical analysis that might lead him to question its foundations. Other authors in the same vein generally defend the political and cultural status quo in education, even if many among them are prepared to envisage limited changes.

This is the case of a more nuanced analysis by David Tuohy, a Jesuit priest, who departed from a strictly Christian perspective in *Denominational Education and Politics* by looking at the wider political and public debate, although he devotes a significant part of the book to Catholic education and church views.⁸ Its international focus is limited to a descriptive overview of existing practice in other European countries, with the implication that Ireland should find its own path in this diversity of practices, rather than to a critical analysis of these situations from an international, rights-based perspective. The author seems

to distance himself from the concept of democracy by presenting it as a strictly 'Western' idea, in direct contradiction with much of the focus and work of the United Nations (UN). Although Tuohy discusses what he calls 'the language of rights', there is no mention of related literature by law specialists in Ireland (see below). There is also no mention of children's rights as distinct from parental rights. In his concluding comments, when envisaging the transfer of a proportion of schools from church to state control, the author assumes that the main challenge for the State is necessarily about providing choice for parents, and he insists on the ownership rights of the Church and on its 'historic' investment in the system.

Other Veritas publications may include one or two more critical contributions, as is the case, for instance, in *From Present to Future: Catholic Education in Ireland for the New Century* (2006), co-edited by James Cassin, Secretary of the Irish Bishops' Education Commission and Eithne Woulfe, of the Conference of Religious in Ireland (CORI). Most of the contributions in this work derived from a conference that gathered the various Catholic interest groups in Ireland. As Bishop Leo O'Reilly had indicated in his introduction to the conference, the book was clearly destined to help 'plan and develop policies guaranteeing the future of our schools', but it included an article that jarred somewhat with the general tenor. In what was in fact a reprinting of a 1991 article, Joseph Dunne (a specialist of the philosophy of childhood and education at St Patrick's College) perfectly summed up the two main perspectives described here in his first sentence: 'One might address educational issues from a Catholic viewpoint, or again one might address them from the perspective of a democratic state in a modern, pluralist society.' 13

Dunne, although he announced that he was going to take into account both viewpoints and examine the tensions between them, offered a global critical reflection, in an academic mode, which could not be reduced to a specific cultural or religious angle. It is his conclusion, finally justifying the maintenance of the denominational system, albeit with a number of reservations, that largely explains the inclusion of his article into the conference proceedings. In that ambivalent conclusion (he also envisaged the possibility of the Catholic Church completely withdrawing from schools in a 'three-option scenario'), Joseph Dunne nonetheless expressed a view which was somewhat divergent within the academic domain – broadly qualified as 'democratic' – by comparison with the majority of writings on the topic in the past few years. In this respect, the fact that the article dates back to 1991 should also be kept in mind.

The second approach or category of writings on this general topic in Ireland is made up of articles, book chapters and books, most of which have been written by academics. Apart from the training centres for future RE teachers like the Mater Dei Institute, most of the Irish third-level establishments are not under the patronage or control of the Christian Churches, the university of Maynooth and St Patrick's College, Maynooth, or Maynooth College, a private Catholic institution, having gone their separate ways in 1997. The teacher-training centres are somewhere in between, retaining denominational

status but with institutional links with Irish universities. Some of the authors who could be described as belonging to the 'democratic' academic tradition work in these teacher-training centres. The writings in this second category deal with educational policies, structures and contents, or with the philosophy of childhood and education. Recent works in the field of sociology, such as *Diversity at School* or *Primary Voices: Equality, Diversity and Childhood in Irish Primary Schools*, have focused specifically on issues of diversity, equality and discrimination in primary schools. There has also been an emerging literature from law experts, looking at the constitutional and legal backgrounds and critically examining the Irish situation from the perspective of international human-rights standards. Their general critical approach is founded on a belief in the importance of equal rights in a democratic society.

Research by these authors has an international scope, and the present work may be seen as part of the same overall framework. In a more or less direct way, many of the writers working on education policy or the sociology of education in the Republic of Ireland put into question a segregated, largely denominational system that allows for various forms of discrimination and exclusion, an approach that goes against the dominant political discourse in the State. Perhaps partly as a result of their chosen angles, even if they do point to a number of its weaknesses, they have not gone so far as to offer an overall critical analysis of the denominational characteristics of the Irish education system. The only works that have addressed this issue directly, Alison Mawhinney's *Freedom of Religion and Schools: The Case of Ireland, A Failure to Protect International Human Rights Standards* and Eoin Daly's *Religion, Law and the Irish State* (especially Chapters 4 and 5, with a cogent analysis of inequality and school choice within the patronage model), were written by law specialists. ¹⁶

In a book examining the major ideological shifts in the field of education in the Republic in the twentieth century, Denis O'Sullivan expresses surprise at the absence of a unified discourse that would take the argument on the weaknesses and drawbacks of the Irish education system to its logical conclusion. ¹⁷ The present work is an attempt at bringing together the various, often isolated but mostly convergent, strands of existing critical thinking and exploring the implications of international theoretical and comparative reflections for the Irish situation. The aim is to take the overall argument, if not to its end, at least one step further, so as to be able to offer some logical conclusions as far as education policy is concerned. The contributions of researchers in different fields can be viewed in a more global perspective. The present work is also an opportunity to highlight the reflections of Irish authors who have not managed to make themselves heard against the backdrop of the dominant political and religious discourse on education policy in the Irish context. Conversely, some elements of the Irish situation can be shown to have international resonance.

In 2002, Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge noted that the potential links between children's rights (which have become the focus of more work in the fields of law, sociology and philosophy of childhood in the past twenty years) and the great educational debates had as yet been little explored. ¹⁸ Most Irish

authors broach the issue of school and religion by looking at the representation of religious diversity in schools and found their arguments on issues of discrimination between religious groups or communities in society and on the question of the parents' citizenship rights and equality. A few authors (such as Desmond M. Clarke, Mawhinney and Daly in the fields of law and philosophy and Dympna Devine as a sociologist of education¹⁹) have started to focus on these links, but it is still perhaps this problematic of children's rights and how they relate to education policies that remains least developed in Ireland as well as at an international level, and it is one of the main aspects I would like to explore in relation to the religious issue. In an argument founded on citizenship equality and respect for human rights in a democratic state and an open society, it seems essential to also fully take into account respect for children's human rights in the educational context, even if it means indirectly opening the Pandora's box of the potential tension between the rights of parents and those of their children in matters of religious beliefs.

In his book, Denis O'Sullivan draws both a parallel and a distinction between two groups in the field of research on Irish education policies, those he calls 'cultural strangers' (such as Canadian authors Donald H. Akenson and E. Brian Titley) and the Irish proponents of a 'cultural counter-current' whom he calls 'cultural contrarians', because they chose to set themselves against the dominant cultural discourse in the Republic of Ireland.²⁰ It seems to me that it is possible, and perhaps it is also time, to go beyond this dichotomy between 'strangers' (and quasi-strangers as it were, for the 'cultural contrarians') and 'cultural natives' in critical analyses of Irish education structures and policies. O'Sullivan himself mostly refers in this context to 1970s and 1980s publications. Irish academics who work on education policies today have an international academic culture; many strive to look at 'the local within the global', and they recognise, as Jim Deegan puts it, the necessity of comparative and 'paradigmatically cosmopolitan' research.²¹ There is obviously still a certain dominant cultural discourse to be found in the media and main political circles, and this book also aims at highlighting some of its characteristics, but many Irish researchers have emancipated themselves enough from it to be able to develop their own critical discourse. That is why there is no question now of 'foreign' researchers posing as sermonisers in any way, as authors like Titley and Akenson were sometimes reproached with doing,22 and it has become much more a matter of common, associative research contributing to the necessarily international debate on Irish realities and policies in the field of education. It remains true however that the fact of working within the system – and often being personally involved in it – may inhibit one's critical approach at times, and not being subject to this may still be one of the advantages of an outsider's view.

Denis O'Sullivan explains the hitherto very limited, or even counterproductive, impact of writings going against the dominant political-cultural discourse by the fact that they have not managed to go beyond academia, whereas practitioners of education and religious actors in the field continued to support and convey the dominant 'indigenous' discourse.²³ Here

again the situation can be said to have evolved significantly in the past few years, at least as far as the teachers themselves are concerned. Beyond the academic world, the main Irish teaching organisations, and especially the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO), which represents the vast majority of primary-school teachers, have opened themselves to international influences and largely taken on board the defence of human rights, support for the development of intercultural education and the notions of equality and inclusion as they are understood and discussed internationally. Many Irish educational actors have now appropriated a critical discourse on the existing education system, and the debate is now taking place within the system.

After setting out the historical background to the place of religion and to the patronage system in Irish schools today, I will focus on how the political, social and cultural developments since the 1960s have led to a calling into question of the traditional, dominant discourse on the country's Catholic-Christian identity and to rising political tensions, between a communitarian trend that allows for the persistence and legitimisation of the privileged position of Christianity in the education system and a discourse founded on a renewal of the republican ideal. The two following chapters will be devoted to a study of the main trends in education policy in the past fifteen years as they appear in the Department of Education's official publications and in the school curricula, and of the way these trends may reflect the tensions outlined earlier. Chapter 5 examines the main structural characteristics of the Irish education system and the extent to which the Catholic Church has remained the structuring institution in the field, with a parallel presentation of the Irish political and educational debate since 2000 on the need for structural reform in the face of religious and cultural diversity. The last two chapters focus on the modes of legitimisation of ongoing discriminatory practices related to religion in the Irish education system.

Notes

- 1 Tom Inglis, Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998); Tom Inglis, 'Catholic Church, Religious Capital and Symbolic Domination', in Michael Bøss and Eamon Maher (eds), Engaging Modernity: Readings of Irish Politics, Culture and Literature at the Turn of the Century (Dublin: Veritas, 2003), pp. 43–70; Enda McDonagh, 'Church-State Relations in an Independent Ireland', in James P. Mackey and Enda McDonagh (eds), Religion and Politics in Ireland at the Turn of the Millennium (Dublin: Columba, 2003), pp. 41–63, at p. 63.
- 2 John Coakley, 'Religion, National Identity and Political Change in Modern Ireland', *Irish Political Studies*, 17:1 (2002), 4–28, at p. 25.
- 3 Kathleen Lynch and Anne Lodge, *Equality and Power in Schools: Redistribution*, *Recognition and Representation* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002); John Baker, Kathleen Lynch, Sara Cantillon and Judy Walsh, *Equality: From Theory to Action*, 2004 (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 159–61.

- 4 For a discussion on the complex relationship between the concepts of equality and diversity, see Walter Benn Michaels, *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Holt Paperbacks, 2007). Also Brian Barry, *Culture and Equality* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
- 5 Anne Lodge and Kathleen Lynch (eds), *Diversity at School* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration for the Equality Authority, 2004), p. 7.
- 6 Kevin Williams, Faith and the Nation: Religion, Culture and Schooling in Ireland (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2005).
- 7 James Norman, Ethos and Education in Ireland (New York: Peter Lang, 2003).
- 8 David Tuohy, Denominational Education and Politics: Ireland in a European Context (Dublin: Veritas, 2013).
- 9 Tuohy, Denominational Education and Politics, p. 80.
- 10 Tuohy, Denominational Education and Politics, p. 335.
- 11 Eithne Woulfe and James Cassin (eds), From Present to Future: Catholic Education in Ireland for the New Century (Dublin: Veritas, 2006).
- 12 Woulfe and Cassin, From Present to Future, p. 7.
- 13 Joseph Dunne, 'The Catholic School, the Democratic State and Civil Society: Exploring the Tensions', in Eithne Woulfe and James Cassin (eds), *From Present to Future: Catholic Education in Ireland for the New Century* (Dublin: Veritas, 2006), pp. 190–229, at p. 190.
- 14 Lodge and Lynch, *Diversity at School*; Jim Deegan, Dympna Devine and Anne Lodge (eds), *Primary Voices: Equality, Diversity and Childhood in Irish Primary Schools* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2004).
- 15 Alison Mawhinney, Freedom of Religion and Schools: The Case of Ireland, a Failure to Protect International Human Rights Standards (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag, 2009); Eoin Daly, Religion, Law and the Irish State: The Constitutional Framework in Context (Dublin: Clarus Press, 2012); Dympna Glendenning, Religion, Education and the Law: A Comparative Approach (Haywards Heath, Tottel Publishing, 2008).
- 16 Mawhinney, Freedom of Religion and Schools; Daly, Religion, Law and the Irish State.
- 17 Denis O'Sullivan, *Cultural Politics and Irish Education since the 1950s: Policy, Paradigms and Power* (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2005), p. 487.
- 18 Lynch and Lodge, Equality and Power in Schools, p. 10.
- 19 Desmond M. Clarke, Church and State (Cork: Cork University Press, 1985); Dympna Devine, Children, Power and Schooling: How Childhood Is Structured in the Primary School (Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2003).
- 20 See O'Sullivan, Cultural Politics and Irish Education, pp. 481–90.
- 21 Ciaran Sugrue and Jim Gleeson, 'Signposts and Silences: Situating the Local Within the Global', in Ciaran Sugrue (ed.), Curriculum and Ideology: Irish Experiences, International Perspectives (Dublin: Liffey Press, 2004), pp. 269-313; Jim Deegan, '"Intentionally or Otherwise": Children and Diversity in Statutory and Policy Discourses in Ireland', in Jim Deegan, Dympna Devine and Anne Lodge (eds), Primary Voices: Equality, Diversity and Childhood in Irish Primary Schools (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2004), pp. 225-44, at p. 239.
- 22 O'Sullivan, Cultural Politics and Irish Education, pp. 487–8.
- 23 O'Sullivan, Cultural Politics and Irish Education, pp. 489–90.