FAITH AND THE NATION: EDUCATION AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND

by Kevin Williams, Mater Dei Institute, Ireland

ABSTRACT: Through an examination of selected documents, this article explores the role which the Irish state attributed to education in promoting the Christian, specifically Catholic, identity of its young citizens. The essay also examines the evidence of a desire to distance the state from a direct role in reinforcing the religious dimensions of cultural identity and of an endeavour to reconcile respect for the nation's Christian heritage with respect for other versions of human self-understanding.

Key words: Ireland, identity, diversity, religion, policy

1. INTRODUCTION

In an essay entitled ‘Republic is a Beautiful Word’, Roddy Doyle (1993, p. 20), 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. This response captures something of the resonance between the Catholic religion and national identity in the psyche of many Irish people. 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'égüise (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).

The purpose of this article is to examine how the Irish version of republicanism was endorsed by the State from its inception and to illustrate, through an examination of selected documents, the role which the new State attributed to education in promoting the Christian, specifically Catholic, identity of its young citizens. The
final section of the essay examines the evidence of a desire to distance the state from a direct role in reinforcing the religious dimension of cultural identity. This is a feature of a general tension between confessional and liberal elements in educational policy and reflects an endeavour to reconcile respect for the nation’s Christian heritage with respect for other versions of human self-understanding. This tension has a long history and is particularly prominent in the Green and White papers of 1992 and 1995 respectively and in the Education Act of 1998. It is a tension which is likely to continue to characterise policy in the twenty-first century.

2. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Failure to put in place the administrative machinery necessary to support educational provision was one important reason why the Reformation did not take root in early modern Ireland (see Lennon, 1994). This was different from what happened on much of the European continent where Catholic and Protestant rulers assumed for themselves the auctoritas docendi which had hitherto been exercised by the Papacy. The Reformation rulers envisaged the authority to rule, to ‘command for truth’, and to educate as intimately linked. They used their newly appropriated authority to establish an administrative infrastructure to ensure that education would serve to promote a uniform identity which would integrate their kingdoms in the cultural and religious spheres. Another 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 which 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 which has endured to the present (ibid.).

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 the conflation of religious with cultural 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 which 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 to ‘unite in one system children of different creeds’ (Lord Stanley, 1831, 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.

3. The Early Years

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. 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. Indeed the Irish language, which the government undertook so eagerly to revive, gives manifold expression to this salience. Such expressions as Dia dhuit, Dia’s Muire dhuit, Dia’s Muire dhuit’s Pádraig, and Beannacht Dé ort (God be with you/God and Mary be with you/God and Mary and St. Patrick be with you/God bless you) illustrate the natural place which God holds in everyday life. (In this respect these expressions are like Grüß Gott which is still used in the southern parts of the German-speaking world or Namasté in Hindi.) The Catholic church in particular found itself dealing with a government which was sympathetic to its educational project. Three years after the foundation of the State, the Second National Programme Conference was held from 1925–1926. The following paragraph, which was included in the report on the conference, was adopted as policy for primary schools by the Department of Education.

Of all the parts of a school curriculum Religious Instruction is by far the most important, as its subject matter, God’s honour and service, includes the proper use of all man’s faculties, and affords the most powerful inducements to their proper use. We assume, therefore, that Religious Instruction is a fundamental part of the school course. Though the time allotted to it as a specific subject is necessarily short, a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school. The teacher, – while careful, in presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on
matters of controversy, – should constantly inculcate, in connection with secular subjects, the practice of charity, justice, truth, purity, patience, temperance, obedience to lawful authority, and all the other moral virtues. In this way he will fulfill the primary duty of an educator, the moulding to perfect form of his pupils' character, habituating them to observe, in their relations with God and with their neighbour, the laws which God, both directly through the dictates of natural reason and through Revelation, and indirectly through the ordinance of lawful authority, imposes on mankind (see Hyland and Milne, 1992, p. 106).

Thus did the new State affirm the centrality of the religious remit of the whole primary school curriculum. This statement has constituted policy since this time, although it was not formally incorporated (in a slightly amended form) into the Rules for National Schools until 1965 (Department of Education, 1965).

The relationship between religion and cultural self-understanding comes to the fore again some fifteen years later, in 1937, with the adoption of a new Constitution to replace the much shorter document of 1922 (Government of Ireland, 1937/1990). Even here, however, the tension between confessional and liberal impulses in educational policy is evident.

The Constitution

The association of the nation with Christianity is very explicitly made in the Constitution and its general tone is theocentric. For example, the document is enacted and adopted 'In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred . . . [while] [h]umbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial' (Government of Ireland, 1937/1990). And in Article 44.1, the 'State acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion' (ibid.). The following clause giving particular prominence to the Catholic Church was also included in Article 44 of the 1937 Constitution but it was deleted following a referendum in 1972.

The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the Faith professed by the great majority of the citizens.
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However, another provision, that was also deleted in the same referendum, referred to the role of other religions in Irish life.

The State also recognises the Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland, the Methodist Church in Ireland, the Religious Society of Friends in Ireland, as well as the Jewish Congregations and the other religious denominations existing in Ireland at the date of the coming into operation of this Constitution.

The liberal impulse is further reflected in the following clauses that also appear in Article 44 and which are still in force.

2.1 Freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen.

2.2 The State guarantees not to endow any religion.

2.3 The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious profession, belief or status (ibid.).

Moreover, in the provisions relevant to education, the Constitution confers upon the State no direct role in the religious formation of citizens. In Article 42, which deals with education, an undertaking is given that the 'State shall . . . as guardian of the common good, require in view of actual conditions that the children receive a certain minimum education, moral, intellectual and social' (ibid. 42.3.2.) but the article offers no undertaking in respect of a minimum religious education. Responsibility is assigned to parents 'to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children' (ibid., Art. 42.1). To this end, the 'State shall not oblige parents in violation of their conscience and lawful preference to send their children to schools established by the State, or to any particular type of school designated by the State' (ibid., Art. 42.3.1). In its support of education, the State must show 'due regard . . . for the rights of parents, especially in the matter of religious and moral formation' (ibid., Art. 42.4). This regard is reinforced by the provision in Article 44 (which deals with religion). It states that:

Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school (ibid., Art. 44.2.4).
The guarantees in the Constitution regarding the right to withdraw from religious education reflect the historical provisions made in respect of primary schools which were to be repeated later in respect of vocational schools/community colleges and community schools (see appendix). In these schools parents have the right 'to request in writing that their children be withdrawn from classes in religious instruction' (Department of Education, 1979). In community schools, religious instruction and religious worship are provided 'except for such pupils whose parents make a request in writing to the Principal that those pupils should be withdrawn from religious worship or religious instruction or both religious worship and religious instruction' (Association of Community Schools, 1992, p. 23).

In spite of the constitutional right to withdraw from religious education, the rules of the Department of Education for vocational schools, which are under the control of local authorities, endorse a view of religion as an integral part of the cultural identity to be promoted in these schools. This system of state/local authority vocational/technical schools was established in 1930, although the document (Memorandum V. 40) laying down the principles underlying the schools was not published until 1942. Let us examine these rules more closely.

Vocational Education

There was much discussion between the Minister and the Catholic hierarchy about the character of vocational schools and the content of their curriculum. The animating principles of vocational (called continuation) education were certainly designed to be acceptable to the church. Very strong affirmations, which are still in force, are made about the relationship between religion and the development of national identity. The Introduction to Memorandum V. 40, published in 1942, states that all schools which provide continuation education must ensure that such education 'be in keeping with Irish tradition and should reflect in the schools the loyalty to our Divine Lord which is expressed in the Prologue and Articles of the Constitution' (Department of Education, 1942/Hyland and Milne, 1992, pp. 224–232*). It then proposes the 'integration' of religion with national culture as 'a task calling for the co-operative efforts of all teachers' in order to provide within the school a 'unity' which would reflect that of the 'good home' where 'tradition, faith, work and recreation blend naturally and easily with one another' (ibid.). The conception of education underlying the document is unambiguously Christian. The Introduction affirms that the 'general
purpose of continuation education is to help each pupil to secure his own ultimate good' (ibid.). Later in the document, in the section entitled 'General Organisation of Continuation Courses', elaboration is provided regarding this purpose and the character of this 'ultimate good'. The 'general purpose' of continuation education is:

to develop, with the assistance of God's grace, the whole man with all his faculties, natural and supernatural, so that he may realise his duties and responsibilities as a member of society, that he may contribute effectively to the welfare of his fellow man, and by so doing attain the end destined for him by his Creator (ibid.).

In the body of the document, following reference to the appointment of teachers of religion, under the heading 'Religious Instruction and Social Education', it is stated that 'every effort should be made to collaborate with [teachers of religion] in their work'. The document then continues:

This collaboration is essential to the production of really fruitful results from vocational education. It is necessary not only that religious instruction be given at certain times, but also that the teaching of every other subject be permeated with Christian charity, and that the whole organisation of the school, whether in work or recreation be regulated by the same spirit. In the nature of the case all teachers have opportunities each day of showing the practical applications of religious doctrine, and can do much to form the characters of their pupils by inspiring them to acts of supernatural virtue and self-sacrifice (ibid.).

The document then goes on to state that '[s]ocial education is closely associated with religious instruction' in 'the right formation of citizens' (ibid.) — a conjunction of religious with civic/social formation which is also pronounced in later documents.

4. LATER DOCUMENTS

Before examining the relationship between religious and civic education, the general thrust of policy with regard to primary education must be considered. Although the focus of this essay is on documents that form actual or proposed state policy, it is worth noting that The Report of the Council of Education on the Function and the Curriculum of the Primary School, 1954 (see Hyland and Milne, 1992) endorsed very emphatically the denominational and catechetical character of primary education. The spirit of this document informs very strongly the treatment of the role of religion from 1965–1971.
Primary Education

In 1965, an edited version of the previously quoted statement, which emanated from the Second National Programme Conference, was formally incorporated into the Rules for National Schools. In the amended document, the admonition to be ‘careful, in presence of children of different religious beliefs, not to touch on matters of controversy’, was deleted (Department of Education, 1965, p. 38; Hyland and Milne, p. 135). As this document also gave ‘explicit recognition to the denominational character’ (Department of Education, 1965, p. 8; Hyland and Milne, p. 137) of state-sponsored primary schools, it was probably felt that this precaution was no longer necessary. When in 1971 a new curriculum for primary schools was introduced, the amended statement from the Second National Programme Conference in the Rules for National Schools was repeated in The Primary School Curriculum: Teacher’s Handbook together with the following commentary. ‘It is felt that this statement needs no further elaboration as a declaration of the principles by which Religious Instruction in our primary schools is animated (Department of Education, 1971, Part One, p. 23). The statement is consistent with the section ‘Primary Education: Aims and Function’. Here we read that

Each human being is created in God’s image. He has a life to lead and a soul to be saved. Education is, therefore, concerned not only with life but with the purpose of life. And, since all men are equal in the eyes of God, each is entitled to an equal chance of obtaining optimum personal fulfilment (ibid., p. 12).

The Primary School Curriculum: Teacher’s Handbook advocates very strongly the principles of the integrated curriculum so it is hardly surprising to find that the document attributes a crucial role to religious education in promoting this integration.

[T]he separation of religious and secular instruction into differentiated subject compartments serves only to throw the whole educational function out of focus. . . . The integration of the curriculum may be seen:–

(i) in the religious and civic spirit which animates all its parts (ibid., p. 19).

Every subject is envisaged as helping ‘the child to achieve a proper relationship with God, with his neighbour and with his environment’ (Department of Education 1971, Part Two, p. 117). One of the principal purposes of Social and Environmental Studies is to
'develop in (children) an appreciation of Nature as the work of God' (ibid., p. 12).

The very close relationship between religious formation and education for citizenship is striking and it merits some attention as it is particularly germane to the theme of faith and nationhood.

_Religion and Civic Education_

As was pointed out in the section on vocational education, in the 'right formation of citizens', social education was conceived as 'closely associated' with religion. In introducing the subject 'Civics' at second level in 1966, the authors of the Department of Education's document 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 his 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 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'. 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).

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 ‘[t]here 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).

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 of the document on civic, social and political education at second level published in 1996 (Government of Ireland/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. 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 an unselfconscious response to a new Zeitgeist is difficult to say, although I am inclined towards the latter explanation. However, the place of religion in general educational policy is a matter of direct concern in the Green and White Papers of the 1990s.
5. THE 1990S: THE GREEN AND WHITE PAPERS

Generally speaking the attitude towards religion in the Green Paper could hardly be more different from that of previous documents such as The Rules for National Schools and The Primary School Curriculum: Teacher's Handbook. Gone completely is any sense of a relationship between religion and cultural and civic self-understanding. Where matters of religion and spirituality are mentioned, they are treated in a dispassionate tone as aspects of a culture which merit being critically understood rather than assimilated in any formative sense. Trenchant and widespread criticism was directed at this treatment of religion⁴ and the White Paper, published three years later, is much more positive with regard to religion. Whereas, for example, the Green Paper refers to the aim of ‘fostering an understanding and critical appreciation of the values – moral, spiritual, social and cultural – of the home and society generally’ (Government of Ireland, 1992, p. 33), the White Paper speaks of fostering an ‘understanding and critical appreciation of the values – moral, spiritual, religious, social and cultural – which have been distinctive in shaping Irish society and which have been traditionally accorded respect in society’ (Government of Ireland, 1995, p. 10).

The change in tone is also marked in the treatment of the role of religious education in junior cycle of secondary school. The Green Paper states that ‘[r]eligious education should form part of the available programme for all students, with due regard to the constitutional rights of parents related to the participation of their children’ (Government of Ireland, 1992, p. 96). The White Paper, on the other hand, includes ‘formative experiences in moral, religious and spiritual education’ as one of the areas within the curriculum which it envisages as the entitlement of ‘all students, in accordance with their abilities and aptitudes’, by the end of junior cycle/compulsory schooling (Government of Ireland, 1995, p. 47/48). Yet even the White Paper refrains from endorsing any necessary link between religion and national identity in contemporary Ireland.

Underlying both Green and White Papers is a concern for those who do not share the religious self-understanding of the majority of citizens. This concern relates to the rights of parents whose world view is non-religious, particularly those who live outside the main urban centres and who in practice have no option but to send their children to religious schools. The White Paper re-affirms the commitment given in the Green Paper to ensure that ‘the Constitutional rights of children are fully safeguarded’
(Government of Ireland, 1995, p. 23) and undertakes in its revision of the primary curriculum to review the Rules for National Schools and Teacher’s Handbook with this in mind (ibid.). In the White Paper, it is argued that the denominational character of schools

must be reasonable and proportionate to the legitimate aim of preserving the ethos of schools and must balance this right of schools and their students against the rights to education of students of different denominations or none and the rights of teachers to earn a livelihood (ibid., p. 217).

Accordingly it proposes that a working party be established to develop the ‘good practice’ guidelines recommended in a previous document, the Report on the National Education Convention (ibid., p. 24 and see Coolahan, 1994, p. 33). In this notion of ‘good practice’ it is hoped to find a way of accommodating the wishes of parents who dissent from the conjoining of religious and cultural dimensions of identity in a context where religion and culture have always been closely related.

The attempt to reconcile the claims of religious and secular versions of human self-understanding in modern Ireland remains a feature of educational debate. Educational policy is one aspect of a general attempt to determine the relationship between church and state in contemporary Ireland. The two pillars of State policy are to remove from the State any role in prescribing the character of the ethos of schools on a national basis and to confer on individual schools discretion with regard to the ethos which they wish to embrace. This policy is reflected in the State’s first Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998). On the one hand, the State will endeavour to ensure that the education system ‘in the interests of the common good . . . respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society’ (Government of Ireland, 1998, p. 5). On the other hand, a ‘recognised school shall . . . promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school’ (ibid., p. 13). This spirit is determined by ‘the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school’ (ibid., p. 19). The Act also imposes on the Minister for Education an obligation to ‘have regard to the characteristic spirit of a school or class of school in exercising his or her functions’ (ibid., p. 29).

One practical effect of this new direction in Government policy is
to be found in the revised version of the document on the primary school curriculum (Department of Education and Science, 1999). The document affirms the significance for most Irish people of a religious perspective on life but does not commit the State to a direct endorsement of the Christian view of human destiny. It is therefore no longer State policy to expect all schools to subscribe to the same worldview. Consistent with the Education Act, it then becomes a matter for individual school communities whether or not they wish to promote an ethos reflecting the Christian view of life. By allowing schools to determine the version of human self-understanding that they will promote, the State is also giving expression the spirit of the historic Agreement concluded in Belfast on Good Friday 1998. In this way educational policy points the way to the Ireland of the twenty-first century.

6. Notes

1. Cultural policy with regard to the Irish language is examined in Williams (1989), and the treatment of religious education is considered in McGrady and Williams (1995). General philosophical consideration of the place of religion in state educational policy can be found in Williams (1998a, 1998b).

2. The invocations of God have a reality in these idioms which is certainly lost in the English 'good-bye' and the Spanish adiós. Admittedly there are many common expressions such as bail ó dhia ar an obair or go cumhdait Dia sibh (God bless the work/God protect you) which can be replaced by secular idioms, just as it is possible to avoid use of Grüss Gott. In Irish there are also words such as An Chéadaoin, Déardaoin and An Aoine (Wednesday, Thursday and Friday) meaning first fast, middle fast, and fast which have lost their religious significance, yet theological idiom retains a currency in the modern language.

3. The quotations from this document (except the last one) can be found in Hyland and Milne (1992).

4. See, for example, a fine essay by Bruce Bradley (1994) which appears in a special issue of the quarterly, Studies, devoted to educational policy.

7. REFERENCES

ASSOCIATION OF COMMUNITY SCHOOLS (1992) Model Lease for Community Schools (Association of Community Schools, Dublin).


DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (1942) Memorandum V. 40; Organisation of Whole-time Continuation Courses in Borough, Urban and County Areas, 1942 (Dublin, Department of Education).

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8. APPENDIX

Schooling in the Republic of Ireland

At primary level schools are largely state aided, with the state providing the major proportion of capital and current expenditure in order to supplement the educational initiatives of denominational and other bodies. At primary level there are some 3,200 state schools most of which are under the control of the Catholic Church. The others are divided along the following lines: 202 are under the control

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of various Protestant denominations, 18 are multi-denominational and there is one Jewish and one Muslim school.

At secondary level the state provides much of the finance to support schools (452) owned largely by religious bodies. At this level, however, some twenty-five percent of schools (246, known as Vocational Schools and more recently Community Colleges) are directly state owned and funded through local authorities. From the late sixties, a new model of second-level school, known originally as comprehensives and subsequently as community schools, has emerged. There are over eighty of these schools and they combine, through a deed of trust, a management partnership of state/local authority and denominational interests. They also provide a model for school amalgamations and are the model of second-level schooling likely to be favoured in the future.

Correspondence
Dr Kevin Williams
Mater Dei Institute
Clonliffe Road
Dublin 3
Ireland

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