The de-Catholicising of the curriculum in English Catholic schools

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This article offers a critical policy analysis of the curriculum within English Catholic maintained schools. It highlights one of the policy challenges faced by the Catholic Church in England, that is to say, the reconstruction of a ‘Catholic’ curriculum. Drawing on the author’s research it outlines the historical context of policy development in regard to the curriculum in Catholic schools, both in State legislation and Church policy, noting the contradictions and pragmatic difficulties in arriving at such policies. It proceeds to articulate a view of the assumptions and principles underlining what might represent the goals of a ‘Catholic curriculum’ based on Church teaching. This is contrasted with the secular context and liberal ideology that dominates modern schooling in England. The article reviews the realities of current practice in curriculum policy development in Catholic schools and contrasts these with some international examples of good practice. It argues that the curriculum in English Catholic schools has effectively been de-Catholicised through a process of internal secularisation. It concludes that today’s typical English Catholic school curriculum is almost indistinguishable from its secular counterpart and that increasingly those who teach in and attend Catholic schools have no particular commitment to the official vision of Catholic education.

Keywords: curriculum; policy; Catholic schools; secular; central control; Church–State relations

Introduction

In a series of research articles between 1990 and 1995, my early research and policy analysis outlined the key challenges facing Catholic schools which culminated in a fuller account in the publication of The Ebbing Tide in 1995. These articles and book examined the traditional policy positions of the Catholic Church in England, which were namely to ensure the existence of a Catholic education (curriculum) for Catholic children (admissions) taught by Catholic teachers (appointments) in Catholic schools (control). Essentially my developing thesis was that the secularisation of Catholic education policy and practice had resulted in the erosion of the Catholicity of the goals (Arthur 1990, 1994c, 1995c), curriculum (Arthur 1992), appointments (Arthur 1995b, 1995d), admissions (Arthur 1994b) and control of Catholic schools (Arthur 1991, 1993, 1994a, 1994d). I also questioned whether this traditional policy on Catholic schools was coherent, credible and sustainable. Twenty years on, the research evidence continues to support my basic thesis that the secularisation process in Catholic schools proceeds at a dramatic pace with policy and practice consequently more distant than ever from the educational principles of Church teaching.

The statistics alone testify to the rapid changes in the demography of Catholic schooling within England. Between 1978 and 1993 the percentage of non-Catholic teachers in maintained Catholic schools increased from 22% to 29% (Arthur 1995a,
190f). Between 1993 and 2011 this percentage increased to 45%, with the pace of change accelerating annually. The number of non-Catholic children admitted to Catholic schools also increased rapidly. In 1974 there were a total of 944,536 children in all maintained Catholic schools of whom only 14,000 were non-Catholic – less than 2% of the total. By 1992 the number of children in Catholic maintained schools had declined to 709,932, but non-Catholics accounted for 85,090 – more than 11% of the total (Arthur 1994c, 36). Between 1992 and 2011 the number of children in Catholic maintained schools had risen to 762,282, of which 29% were non-Catholic, representing a dramatic increase (Catholic Education Service Census Data 2012). This set of statistics may even be an underestimate of the direction of travel as it is legitimate to question the accuracy of this census. Some Catholic schools and colleges often feel under pressure to demonstrate their Catholicity and can inflate actual numbers in their ‘self-declaration’ of Catholic staff and pupils (see Arthur 1995e for a remarkably good example of this practice).

In the 1970s the Catholic education authorities were primarily concerned about the number of non-practising Catholics in its schools; today, the overwhelming majority of children and teachers within Catholic schools are either non-Catholic or do not practice and therefore can only be considered, at best, as ‘baptised Catholics’. Demography is, of course, only one factor in evaluating a school’s Catholicity, but when the overwhelming majority of staff and pupils do not attend Mass in their parishes and therefore do not contribute to the financial maintenance of Catholic schools then the demographics cannot be ignored for long. There has undoubtedly been a decline in Catholic religiosity measured by Church attendance which raises the question of why admissions to Catholic schools are expanding within a declining Church. There is a demand for the education that Catholic schools offer, but not for a ‘Catholic education’ per se. Research in Australia has also demonstrated that those who attend Catholic schools hold a plurality of views in faith and morals that are inconsistent with Church teaching (McLaughlin 2005). Whether there is still a critical mass of English Catholic parents, teachers and pupils associated with Catholic schooling who are able and willing to sustain and ensure that the Church’s unique teaching on the educational purpose of presenting a Catholic worldview to children is now, more than ever, arguable.

The Catholic school curriculum

In order to assess the Catholic responses to curriculum proposals initiated by government or quasi-official State agencies, it is necessary to provide a brief historical background to the Church’s policies on the curriculum. Catholic elementary schools in the nineteenth century did not provide religion on the school curriculum as a parallel subject to reading or writing. The secular and religious were seen as inseparable and if they were divided it was to demonstrate the principle that one was of mediate and the other of immediate reference to God. In other words, some subjects such as religion and liturgy directed the student immediately to God while others – history, art, science – the greater number, directed them mediatly to God. It is one of the reasons why Catholic inspectors often found themselves in conflict with the Privy Council. It is also why there was conflict over the Privy Council’s grant for the purchase of books from their ‘approved list’. Controversy continued over the appropriateness of secular school textbooks well into the twentieth century.
In accepting money from government in the nineteenth century, Catholic schools became subject to secular inspections of the curriculum, but in the passing of the 1902 Education Act the Church lost all control of the ‘secular’ curriculum, which was now set by local education authorities. Section 23 of the 1944 Education Act restored the ‘control of the secular curriculum’ to Catholic school governing bodies while Sections 1 to 4 of the 1988 Education Reform Act removed this control once again. It cannot be said with any confidence that control of the secular curriculum is a policy that has been consistently adopted or advocated by the Catholic Church in England or by the Universal Church. The Vatican directly negotiated and approved of the ‘Scottish Solution’ in 1918 and subsequently held it up as a model arrangement for bishops in other countries. The ‘Scottish Solution’ entailed the secular curriculum being controlled by the local education authority. In 1931 the Catholic Education Council in England supported the ‘Scottish Solution’ for Catholic schools in England. However, it should be said that at that time Catholic governors did not control the curriculum in England. Nevertheless, after full statutory control of the curriculum was returned to Catholic governors in 1944, Bishop Beck thought it was more important who taught than what was taught. The national financial crisis of 1957 led the Catholic authorities to again put forward the ‘Scottish Solution’ to the government which would have consciously entailed the loss of the Catholic control over the secular curriculum, indeed over the very control of Catholic schools (Conroy 2001). By 1988 the Catholic authorities had changed their policy and were now opposed to the curriculum being set by secular bodies outside its control. The bishops compromised on curricular matters and used the control of the curriculum as a bargaining tool in negotiations with the government. However, the key is whether the Catholic Church in England actually used its freedom, when it legally possessed it, to set the secular curriculum within a Catholic worldview or whether it simply adopted the secular models from other maintained schools (see Sullivan 2002; Walbank 2012).

A distinctive Catholic curriculum theory
The term ‘curriculum’ is understood in this article in its broadest sense: all learning within classrooms as well as the process by which this learning is communicated. It also includes all school activities that make up the general ethos of the school, particularly the general school environment and the multitude of interactions among pupils and staff. Developing a school curriculum will involve assumptions about the nature of learners, the purposes of schooling, the kind of knowledge that is considered important and the kind of society and world we live in. Consequently, viewpoints on any particular curriculum will vary according to the assumptions that people hold. It is within this broad understanding of the school curriculum that we should ask the question: can there be said to be such a thing as a Catholic school curriculum? How is the Catholic school different from the courses offered elsewhere? Indeed, Thomas Groome (1996, 107) asks ‘What Makes a School Catholic?’ and answers: ‘that the distinctiveness of Catholic education is prompted by the distinctive characteristics of Catholicism itself, and these characteristics should be reflected in the whole curriculum of Catholic schools.’ The perspective of the Catholic Church, in this view, permeates all of the content that teachers present in each subject area as well as in all their interactions with pupils. Groome’s answer suggests that there is a clear Catholic philosophy of education that influences the Catholic school
curriculum? According to Vatican II and the post-conciliar documents there is a Catholic worldview that should indeed influence the Catholic school’s curriculum. A Catholic worldview is therefore a way of looking at the world through a Catholic perspective. This worldview is derived from Catholic teachings, scripture and tradition. These teachings, scripture and traditions have the potential to form the basis of what is taught in Catholic schools. In other words, it is possible to define and reflect upon Catholic education in these terms in order to consider what is now being taught, how it is being taught and how it ought to be taught.

In the curriculum, Catholic education, according to the post-conciliar documents, seeks to integrate the person around love of God and of neighbour. This necessarily involves a more integrated view of all that is learnt as Catholic schools are theoretically committed to attempting a proper synthesis of religion and culture, faith and life. The main quality that differentiates the Catholic school from the secular is the importance it attaches to religion. As the Congregation for Catholic Education stated in 1988:

Complete education includes a religious dimension. Religion is an effective contribution to the development of other aspects of a personality in the measure in which it is integrated into general education.

The aim of the Catholic school is to enable students to achieve their complete dignity as persons in a relationship with Christ. According to this view, religion cannot be separated or divorced from the rest of the curriculum, nor can religious education be seen as the raison d’être of the Catholic school. The idea that the school subjects that make up the curriculum (excluding religious education) are value-free and therefore somehow separate from the Catholic faith is clearly contrary to the Catholic worldview. If they were separated, then it would also be contrary to the basic premise of unity between revelation and other sources of knowledge and would ignore the view that all subjects in the curriculum need the light of the Gospel in their delivery. From the Catholic point of view, God is the source of all knowledge and in creating human beings he has endowed them with a desire for knowledge and a freedom to pursue it.

As the Church has become committed in principle as well as in practice to a variety of educational efforts, it would seem natural that it should have its own unique and distinctive contribution to make – a contribution centred on the life and teaching of Christ in the Gospel. The Church has given emphasis to this point in declaring that:

Intellectual development and growth as a Christian go forward hand in hand. As students move up from one class into the next, it becomes increasingly imperative that a Catholic school help them become aware that a relationship exists between faith and human culture. Human culture remains human, and must be taught with scientific objectivity. But the lessons of the teacher and the reception of those students who are believers will not divorce faith from this culture; this would be a major spiritual loss. The world of human culture and the world of religion are not like two parallel lines that never meet; points of contact are established within the human person. For the believer is both human and a person of faith, the protagonist of culture and the subject of religion.

The assertion made is that the integration of learning and living in the light of Christian faith should be a distinguishing feature of the Catholic school’s
Because Catholicism is a value system which believes that the world is ultimately meaningful and that fundamental values are not arbitrary, a significant and distinctive contribution to the purpose and content of the curriculum would appear inevitable. Therefore, adherence to Catholicism should make a difference to the focus and content of the curriculum. Consequently, some, like Patrick Walsh, have argued that Catholic schools must draw on Christian sources and resources if they are to remain Christian, which implies a focus and content of an appropriate ‘Catholic curriculum’. He asserts that education is ‘good in a Christian way’ when the content is based on the Church’s heritage.

Simply teaching religious education does not qualify a school as Catholic. The only model of the school that can be adopted, according to Church teaching, is an all-embracing one of faith, and so as one English bishop put it: ‘We do not accept that we can include religious education in any curriculum and be content that our duties are fulfilled. Nor can we be satisfied with a situation where a teacher is competent in a particular discipline but does not share in an agreed vision of the whole task’. The central point remains that a school cannot be truly Catholic unless Catholicism and its values are diffused into the entire curriculum, methods, organisation and ethos of the school. If Catholicism is a comprehensive way of life, it would seem logical that it would animate every aspect of the curriculum (see Miller 2006).

In order to facilitate the integration of religious truth and values with the rest of life, Catholic educators would therefore need to discern what is valuable in current curriculum theories and incorporate those aspects into their schools. Nevertheless, some modern educational approaches to the curriculum such as the pragmatic and the utilitarian are incompatible with the Catholic worldview. In particular, these approaches think of education almost exclusively in terms of curriculum structure and course content which inevitably treats knowledge as a product for consumption resulting in an overemphasis on targets, tests and tables. The Catholic Church’s position is that knowledge has a value and significance irrespective of its usefulness and it warns:

"Education is not given for the purpose of gaining power but as an aid towards a fuller understanding of, and communion with man, events and things. Knowledge is not to be considered as a means of material prosperity and success, but as a call to serve and to be responsible for others."

In considering the curriculum, the attitudes and values which underpin its factual content would need to be consistent with the Catholic vision of the person and society. The first priority of the Catholic Church in education is the maintenance of the Catholicity of its curriculum in schools. However, because many Catholics at all levels are so immersed in current secular theoretical approaches in education, there is a danger that this stated priority is impossible to implement.

**Secular curriculum theory**

In England the dominant values in schooling are largely secular or what Denis Lawton (1989, 30) terms ‘moral pluralism’. It is an education system which acknowledges that there are many good ends and that while these ends may conflict with each other, none is necessarily overriding. The threat that Catholic parents see...
in ‘morally pluralist’ schools, which are often viewed by them as being entirely secular in orientation, is that the values that their children have learnt in the family are adjusted in such schools and may even gradually disappear in a school system which emphasises that children ought to choose and design their own set of values, even if this means detachment from the beliefs, practices and values that have been carefully nurtured in the family. In other words, the Catholic Church is conscious that transmitting secular values can undermine a child’s sense of religious identity.

The Catholic position as outlined above is challenged by secular and liberal ideology, which form part of the modern Zeitgeist to be found within Catholic schools. Dobblelaere (1988), in a study of Catholic schools in Belgium, detailed how ‘internal secularisation’ could be measured by the reduction in the frequency of liturgical celebrations and other distinctly Catholic events on the school premises. While maintained schools in England, in a largely secular society, cannot presuppose a particular philosophy of life to direct their curriculum, Catholic schools can. Any failure to presuppose a Catholic philosophy would mean that Catholic schools merely align their curriculum with all other schools who do not claim to possess a distinct philosophy of education. Indeed, if Catholic schools do not reaffirm a Catholic philosophy within a secular society, then they have no response to the modern Zeitgeist and thereby cannot justify their continued existence.

Values are unavoidable in the practice of education whether they are Catholic or not. All teachers make value judgements daily. Schools also work according to a set of values, whether they acknowledge them or not. Education, by its definition, is so intimately connected with the shaping of human beings and can thus never avoid choices between different visions of human flourishing. We all have worldviews: a set of assumptions, prior truth commitments, by which to interpret the world and to live by. In Catholic schools, both teachers and pupils should to be able to articulate a Catholic world view through a set of values. Therefore, if values and value judgements are everywhere in schools it is vital that they are made explicit, particularly in a Catholic school. The danger facing Catholic schools, according to Cupyers (2004), is that they adopt woolly and unfocused mission statements that are merely hollow Christian slogans signifying nothing in particular about a Catholic philosophy of education – school mission statements that reduce Catholicism to the repetition of hollow formulas. If such statements remain at the level of Catholic ‘edubabble’ there can be no meaning or justification for Catholic schools and inevitably such schools become secular in all but name. It is vitally important that Catholic schools recognise the threat of secularism and even the word ‘secular’ for which some conceptual clarification is needed.

Clarifying the secular

Secular is a word for which a clear and contemporary definition is elusive. The history of the word is both complex and ambiguous, which has led to modern understandings and usages suffering from running together different definitions (Bruce 2003). Traditionally, ‘secular’ emerged as a particular Christian theological category and simply meant of an age, an era or a generation (from the Latin saecularis, of an age, from saeculum, generation, age). The word came to mean that which belongs to this life, to the here and now, in this world and had little or nothing to do with disavowing or disapproving of any particular belief in God. Secular, however, has become a central modern social science category understood, both in
academia and popularly, as being differentiated from religion. As Jose Casanova (1994, 20) remarks, ‘the secular, as a concept, only makes sense in relation to its counterpart, the religious’. There are two main uses of the word in the academic literature. First, secular is concerned with the public space, both geographical and institutional, in which something called the ‘secular’ realm exists. For William Connolly (1999, 21), the key idea is of a ‘self-sufficient public realm fostering freedom and governance without recourse to a specific religious faith’. Religion and social institutions, like maintained English schools, have become gradually distinct from one another – free of the surrounding substance of religious assumptions. Second, the ‘secular’ is concerned with beliefs that people hold either individually or collectively. Charles Taylor (2007, 2) adds perhaps a third dimension: ‘among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be an option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.’

The secular has no fixed definition and has been subject to a long history of continued modification. Indeed, it is widely contested because it is a socially and historically constructed word that is interpreted diversely, all to a greater or lesser extent differentiated from the religious. The modern interpretation of secular is determined to a great extent by a rationalist rationality. In contemporary discussions of the word it is often interpreted dualistically: secular is immanent rather than transcendent; temporal rather than eternal; material rather than spiritual; concerned with the body rather than with the soul; and even temporary rather than permanent. There is often a clear immanent/transcendent and a sharp public/private distinction made. When secular is combined with education, one is faced with extraordinary difficulties, as no body of scholarly literature exists in which the term ‘secular education’ is used with any consensus (Arthur 2008, 2013; Arthur and Holdsworth 2012).

English maintained schools are usually defined as schools wholly provided by the taxpayer and open to all. Maintained Catholic schools receive 100% maintenance from government and 90% of capital costs. The kind of schooling provided in a non-Catholic maintained school legally and theoretically seeks to adopt a largely neutral and impartial approach and content to education, even if legislation also directs such schools to provide a largely Christian, but ignored, daily act of worship and religious education for their pupils. The process of secularization has weakened traditional religious faith, affiliations and practices along with insisting upon a stronger distinction/separation between religion and education. Indeed, theoretical explanations of the secular are committed to the view that this world and this age is all that exists. In regard to English maintained schools, religion is still included in the curriculum as a distinct school subject on a voluntarily basis and pupils may wear religious symbols on their person – cross, skull cap, head scarf. A relatively positive attitude towards all religious denominations is usually promoted and schools are theoretically not hostile to religious beliefs, but they do not promote any one belief system as part of the compulsory curriculum. Religion is seen as playing a role in shared public life, but not an exclusive or entrenched role. In contrast, Catholic maintained schools are legally and theoretically different as they are able to promote a particular Catholic philosophy of education, but practice in reality varies not least because of the demography of Catholic schools and the inability of teachers to make their pupils aware of the Church’s position during lessons, discussions and in other curriculum
activities. It cannot be said that the curriculum in English Catholic schools is designed as an instrument of evangelisation: to create communities of faith where pupils come to know the person of Jesus and the teachings of the Catholic Church in an intimate way. Indeed, even within Catholic schools, when secular values are in conflict with religious values the latter generally lose.

The question of whether or not there is or even ought to be a Catholic school curriculum based on its own distinctive aims is still surrounded by much confusion in English Catholic schools. In a study of the curriculum in Catholic schools in the early 1980s, Robinson (1982) found little evidence to suggest that Catholic schools were conscious of any specifically Catholic considerations in designing their curriculum. Although in Robert Burgess’ (1988, 170) study of Bishop McGregor school in London, it is claimed that Christian principles were transmitted through secular subjects and he lists them as home economics, child care, sex education, and science. Nevertheless, Roy Wake (1986), who cites a fellow H.M.I.’s comment on visiting a Catholic school, is still pertinent here:

Apart from the crucifix on the wall, in what way does the place differ from a maintained school?

Or as Green (1990, 1271) puts it:

It is the Catholicity of our schools which is especially in question. We all admit that they should be something more than “state schools with statues”; but the vexed question is the nature of that “something more” – for unless the difference is really significant, is there any value in keeping them?

In order to consider what that ‘something more’ might mean for the Catholic school curriculum, it is important to briefly survey what efforts have been made by the English bishops to equip Catholic schools with the unique curriculum purpose of presenting a Catholic world view to their pupils.

Curriculum development and Church–State relations

The idea of an English Catholic school curriculum generated controversies at the start of the twentieth century when the State controlled the school curriculum. It led to the establishment of the Westminster Catholic Federation, formed in 1927, to examine historical textbooks and subsequently to protest to publishers, authors and local councils about the ‘manifest unfairness’ with which the Catholic faith was treated in schools (see Finan 1976). The Federation aim was to protest vigorously to publishers against three things: (1) historical incorrectness; (2) misinterpretations of Catholic teaching; and (3) offensive anti-Catholic bias.

The list of publishers included Macmillan, Nelson, Cassell, Edward Arnold, Oxford Press, Chambers and Longman. There were many hostile accounts of Church misdeeds in their publications that often seemed to drift into polemic, as if these misdeeds were integral to the beliefs or values system of Catholicism itself. The campaign was relatively successful, but simply removing false interpretations and bias from historical texts does not make a book appropriate for a Catholic curriculum.
After the Second World War, the Catholic Social Guild produced a number of school textbooks for Catholic schools especially in the humanities. The Catholic Education Council (CEC) in its house journal, Catholic Education: An Educational Review, promoted the continued development of a Catholic view of the curriculum and dedicated a full edition in 1956 to the Catholic school curriculum, mainly in the arts. In another issue in 1956 the Review's editorial warned against over specialisation and utilitarian tendencies in the Catholic school curriculum. The balance between secular and religious education continued to be a source of tension for Catholic schools in the 1960s.

Throughout the 1960s there was a continuing discussion about the Catholic dimension of the secular curriculum within the Catholic educational periodicals. However, there was growing criticism to the very idea of a ‘Catholic curriculum’ from within the Church. Terry Eagleton argued that there was no such thing as Catholic history or Catholic science, and it was damaging for the Church to attempt to seek to create them. There is, however, no evidence that this was what the Church sought, yet Eagleton continued his criticisms, especially about the place of religion in the Catholic schools curriculum. He could not see how religion and secular subjects could be combined or integrated without damage to subjects such as history.

The government began to take a greater interest in the school curriculum by the establishment of the Schools Council in 1965. There was nothing prescriptive about the Council’s activities, but it did have a substantial influence on curriculum development in all schools. Some of the projects it offered schools dealt with controversial areas and this was especially true of the Schools Council Humanities Projects (SCHP) begun in 1967 under the directorship of Lawrence Stenhouse. The teaching principles behind the humanities packages emphasised open discussion among pupils with the teacher acting as a neutral chairman. With its criterion of neutrality and its clear moral implications, the project attracted considerable comment and even some hostility.

The most important response by the Church to the Schools Council Humanities Projects was to establish its own Catholic Schools Humanities Projects under the directorship of Tony Higgins in 1979. This was charged with developing suitable Catholic materials for Catholic schools as a ‘distinctive Catholic effort’ on the themes which the SCHP had already outlined. The rationale behind this initiative was that the Catholic Church had its own particular view of the humanities and of the notion of neutrality. Neutrality for the Schools Council required a sense of balance between different viewpoints but for the Church this sense of balance was considered to be different for Catholics. While materials were produced, the Catholic project lacked financial support and suffered from a lack of consensus on what the particular Catholic vision of the humanities should be. There was division on the body which sponsored the parallel Catholic project, namely the CEC. Some argued that it was divisive and unnecessary as the SCHP was acceptable to Catholic schools. Others argued that the Church must have a distinctive contribution to make in areas where morals are being discussed and that the SCHP’s selection of materials was coloured by a secular mentality, or as Higgins later explained:

A concern for objective truth, as taught by authoritative Church from whom the Catholic teacher has a mission was the most fundamental and specifically Catholic of the reasons why many Catholics were opposed to the [Schools Council] Humanities Project.
This Catholic project was abandoned in 1972 and no practical attempt to provide an alternative Catholic vision of the secular curriculum was made by the Church until 1990.

Government intervention in the curriculum debate of the mid 1970s was not initially directed at Catholic schools. Nevertheless, it was clear that government interest in the curriculum would impinge eventually on Catholic schools. Pressure had been building up gradually to remove the control of governors of Catholic schools over the curriculum in government circulars and in national reports such as the McFarlane Report and the Swann Report. The latter was fundamentally opposed to any separate educational provision for religious groups and recommended a ‘common educational experience’ for all. The Catholic Church launched a campaign against the provisions in the Education Reform Bill. The bishops fought hard and stated that Catholic schools had hitherto ‘enjoyed the right to determine the complete school curriculum in the light of their understanding’. The Church’s campaign suffered from a major weakness from the start. The theoretical principles which govern design, implementation, development and evaluation in terms of contributing towards the aims of Catholic education were almost wholly absent from the debate.

The move from a system that emphasized school autonomy to one that produced a centrally prescribed curriculum was made easier as a result of this confusion about what the nature of the Catholic school should be. While the bishops argued that ‘The Bill effectively removes from the Governors...the right to determine the school curriculum in the light of their understanding’, Bishop Konstant, who largely wrote this statement on behalf of the Bishops, seemed to write the opposite in The Tablet in 1987: ‘the Catholic school curriculum has never caused any controversy or conflict with the county school – perhaps the reason for this is that the Church school curriculum did not differ much from the State school’. Some within the Church clearly advocated that the curriculum should be ‘relevant’ and acceptable, while others advocated a defensive and traditional curriculum which looked to the past. What was missing was an understanding of the forces in education that were confronting Catholic schools – there was simply no evaluation of these secular forces or any attempt to learn from them. Nevertheless, it was essentially this debate about ‘control’ of the Catholic school curriculum that gave a new impetus to the idea of a ‘Catholic curriculum’.

The government is still responsible for designing the curriculum in Catholic schools regardless of what these schools may think they are supposed to achieve by their own school aims. Some ‘safeguards’ under Section 17 of the Education Reform Act 1988, which allow ‘exception clauses’ or ‘specified modifications’ to be made on the National Curriculum, were added, partly through Catholic pressure. Consequently, the ‘technology of contraception’ aspect of the national science curriculum did not apply in Catholic schools. However, as the Act removed from governors this right and placed it in the hands of the Secretary of State, it is the Minister who has the last word on such exception decisions, even if it conflicts with Catholic teaching. There are no longer any guarantees in statute with regard to the curriculum in Catholic schools.

Nevertheless, in 1990 the Bishops established a group, led by Professor Paul Black of King’s College, London, to prepare papers on the curriculum in which there was much use of the Congregation for Catholic Education’s publications. It is repeated, for example, that the curriculum, in all its aspects, must reflect the fact that Christ is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school. The document, using exactly the same words as Rome, goes on to say that:
Although it may be convenient to speak of the ‘religious’ curriculum and the ‘secular’ curriculum in the Catholic School, as though these were separate and distinct, in reality the curriculum as a whole, and every part of it, is religious, since there is nothing which does not ultimately relate to God. 18

Professor Black sought to provide a series of subject commentaries in the hope that these might provide teachers in Catholic schools with the means of being more aware of the contribution they should make to the vision of life that ought to be distinctive of the Catholic school. For example, the draft science commentary begins:

The values of the school are conveyed through the whole curriculum. While the relationship of the teacher and pupil will convey many of the qualities expected in a Catholic school community, each area of the curriculum opens doors of human discovery and achievement, and has something specific to convey in developing a Christian understanding of human life and knowledge. 19

Other draft commentaries speak of how the National Curriculum can offer positive opportunities to enhance the values and ethos of the Catholic school. 20 In the draft commentary on ‘Economic and Industrial Understanding’, it is advocated that teachers should have an understanding of creation, incarnation, redemption and the Church’s social teachings in their teaching of economics and business studies. Indeed, it suggests that the fundamental principles in Vatican II’s declaration Gaudium et Spes and Pope John Paul II’s encyclical Laborem Exercens should be used as the foundation for all economic teaching in Catholic schools. 21

The working out of the concrete application of these statements was intended to be left to individual schools with the warning that Catholic schools must not allow:

Your curriculum to be influenced detrimentally by pressures from groups within or without the Church. 22

While these drafts have never been published, they indicate the thinking of at least some in the Catholic Church’s educational structures. Because there are no Catholic examination boards, no specifically Catholic inspectors of the secular curriculum, no Catholic publishing houses of school textbooks, no national Catholic curriculum projects and no national Catholic curriculum advisory committee, it is difficult to see how the Catholic Church can have any influence. On curricular development it could be argued that the Catholic Church in England has neither the resources nor the competent personnel to transform its idealism on the curriculum into a practical reality for its schools. This gap between intention and reality in the curriculum is something that Catholic schools in other territories also experience and there is growing attention to the consequences of such gaps (see de Robertis and Morrison 2009). Many Catholic schools seem content to search no further than the structures and curricula developed by their secular counterparts.

**Catholic curriculum development: international perspectives**

As the efforts of the English bishops have not resulted in any substantial development of a specifically Catholic curriculum, it is insightful to look elsewhere for exemplars of how this might be achieved. Most countries with a Catholic school system have responded to the question of a ‘Catholic curriculum’ in different ways. It
is helpful to look at some of these examples of specifically Catholic development of the curriculum. One of the best examples of how a Catholic school curriculum has been developed is in the work of the Institute of Catholic Education in Toronto. The Institute states that: ‘Catholic education exists to provide a holistic formation of people as living witnesses of faith. We demonstrate our mission when we engage with, and support our member boards in sustained, substantive school improvement and student growth that is reflective of a Catholic professional learning community’. The Canadian bishops in Ontario have worked through the Institute with local Catholic teachers in order to organize Catholic schools in a way that pupils study and are taught subject-specific expectations related to the various disciplines, but also include elements which are the foundations to teaching in a Catholic school system and what makes such a system distinct. It is a project that has led to the production of ‘Catholic Curriculum Maps’ that seek to assist in making the Catholic context visible in the curriculum. These resources are considered a starting point for teachers by helping them look for opportunities to infuse the Catholic faith within the curriculum.23

The work of this project is impressive for it seeks no less than the integration of the Catholic faith into all aspects of the curriculum. The list of resources available to teachers is also extensive all of which are designed to assist Catholic teachers be mindful of the Catholic perspective on the school curriculum. The resources aim ‘to integrate thinking and effective thinking strategies into a holistic unity wherein Faith is real and alive’. Through discussion the documents address the following areas: the need for effective thinking skills and strategies for all faith development; the need for effective thinking skills and strategies for theological reflection in today’s church; and the need for effective thinking and strategies to critique and prevent false religious reasoning. The documents help Catholic teachers to monitor the implementation process for developing a curriculum and provide self reflection tools and questionnaires which help inform curriculum implementation decision-making and encourages self-reflection about the integration of Catholic perspective into the Ontario Catholic school curriculum. The material is suitable for all those writing curriculum units for any subject areas in a Catholic school.

The Institute also promotes a series of practical teaching books that are intended as curriculum guides for those preparing to teach in Catholic schools. Ian Knox (1994) provides the theological background and principles that should be known by Catholic teachers. Judith Dunlop (2004) has written a concise book that provides inspiration and practical ideas for teachers to share their faith in the school environment. Palmer Parker (1998) focuses on good teaching, which he claims comes from self-knowledge, and encourages teachers to reflect on their commitment to teaching as a vocation. Notice that all these resources and books are targeted at Catholic teachers – the situation in England is very different, with fewer Catholic teachers in its Catholic schools.

**Conclusion**

In a recent research report (Irvine 2012) it was reported that English Catholic schools, at GCSE level examinations, outperform the national average by 6% and that the majority of schools are judged by OFSTED as good or outstanding. Of secondary schools, 44% were rated ‘outstanding’ for pupils’ behaviour, compared with a national average of 24%. International evidence also suggests that Catholic
schools make a difference to a student’s access to higher education and earning power in the labour market (Evans and Schwab 1995; Vella 1999). This is an impressive picture, but it simply indicates that the Church has some very good schools. The research says nothing about whether they are good ‘Catholic’ schools. It does not answer what is Catholic about Catholic education. The Archdiocese of Westminster (1999) continues to state in its philosophy of education that: ‘The curriculum, in all its aspects, must reflect the fact that the person of Christ, and the message, which the Church has received from Him, is the foundation of the whole educational enterprise in a Catholic school.’

What are the curricular expectations outlined here? There is little guidance on the curriculum to be delivered or how this can be implemented practically. How much authority does the statement have among teachers? There are no rewards for compliance or sanctions for non-compliance. It simply indicates the eclipse of a distinctive Catholic philosophy of education (see Elias 1999).

The dominant models and practice of schooling that Catholic teachers know and have access to are fundamentally secular in nature. In so far as schools claim to be specified by their Catholicity, there is little in the way of benchmarks to assure the wider Church of their Catholic identity. Most schools, including Catholic, are also marked by a high degree of formal control emphasizing selection, competition and vocationalism and these are linked to future career opportunities and potential social status. It is an approach which thinks of education in terms of curriculum structure and course content and which tends to treat knowledge as a product for consumption. Grace (2002, 47) calls it the ‘market curriculum’ which, he says, is the market commodification of knowledge and pedagogy that directly results in pupils being ‘differentially valued’ in schools. Apart from viewing knowledge as a value irrespective of its usefulness, the Church teaches that education is not to be given for the purpose of gaining power or as a means for material prosperity and success, but rather to serve others. In other words, many Catholic schools look no further than the secular models of education which surround them. They adopt what I have called a ‘dualistic model’ of the curriculum (Arthur 1995a, 227) which divides education conceptually and practically into a religious section and a much larger secular part. There is also little in the way of an evaluation of the secular context far less a coherent response to the secularisation process in education. Indeed, the Church has adopted and embraced secular thought in education through a process of internal secularisation resulting in conformity to secular models of the curriculum. Religious identity is eroded in these secular models with links to Catholic educational principles becoming historical memory.

In 1956 the great Catholic historian of ideas, Christopher Dawson, said ‘we know only too well how little effect the Catholic school has on modern secular culture and how easily the latter can assimilate and absorb the products of our education system. The modern Leviathan is such a formidable monster that it can swallow religious schools whole without suffering from indigestion’. Dawson was aware that the more education had advanced the more secular culture became, and he thought that Catholic schools were simply presenting an alternative system of secular education with a Catholic label. The challenge before English Catholic schools is both to reconstruct a Catholic curriculum and address the militant secularism which surrounds them (Arthur 2009). The task of the Catholic school, as Dawson saw it, is first to recover its own cultural inheritance through its curriculum and teaching and secondly to communicate it to a sub-religious or neo-pagan world. Failure in this project simply maintains the fact that many English Catholic schools are currently
indistinguishable from their secular counterparts and a focus on their academic success simply advances secular culture. The de-Catholicising of the curriculum through a process of internal secularisation in Catholic schools is the result which raises the question of what is the Church trying to accomplish with its considerable investment in Catholic schools?

Notes
5. Ibid., para 19.
7. Ibid.
11. This is one of the major arguments contained in Arthur (1995a).
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.

Notes on contributor
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References


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