

Good afternoon

Irish society is in tension between the pre-secular / secular / post-secular states. Until relatively recently, Irish society was comfortable with public expression of religious belief, public engagement by the Christian churches (especially the Roman Catholic majority church) in the public square of debate, influence and policy-making. In the last couple of decades that has begun to change quite rapidly with the secular perspective of religion belonging properly to the private sphere becoming a much more commonly held view. At the same time, rapid globalisation along with other changes in Irish society has meant that Ireland has taken on many of the aspects of the post-secular. In a post-secular society, there are multiple voices representing multiple beliefs including a range of world faiths alongside personal and humanist beliefs. All seek an equal right to be heard.

Our education system in the Republic of Ireland emerged out of the pre-secular mid-nineteenth century and reflect the concerns and social diversity of that time. It is interesting to note that the government of the day sought to impose a particular model of multi-denominational elementary education but that Irish people and institutions resisted this successfully, creating their own denominationally separate provision. This denominational provision was structurally embedded after the foundation of the State. The structure and ownership of Irish education, the roles and rights of churches and of parents have certain constitutional guarantees attaching to them. As a result, the process of change is not only very slow in many instances, but also very complex. The difficulty with the system that we have inherited is that it no longer accurately reflects the wishes and diversity of the society that it serves – our population profile has now changed and broadened. Some have their identities recognised and made visible within the existing system, while others do not.

I ask the question – are faith schools a good thing? My answer is ‘yes, but....’. The ‘but’ or the problem reflects the relatively poor fit that we now have whereby some members of our diverse society find themselves invisible or excluded from a system expected to serve everyone. I see a genuine value in schools that allow for the holistic development of the child, the moral, the intellectual, the physical, the social, the spiritual. The spiritual is not developed simply through learning about faith but also needs to have the opportunity to be developed as part of a community where belief is discussed, questioned, practiced and enjoyed. That particular aspect of education may differ significantly for various groups of people and this is where a proper diversity of provision is more likely to provide a better fit for the diverse population that now makes up the Republic of Ireland.

It is important that I state the following clearly – schools are places where teaching and learning in the broadest possible sense take place. That is their core role. We make a mistake if we muddle school and church. I come back to faith schools and take the Irish Protestant school as an example. What do these type of schools look like and what do they offer to the

Irish education system? First, these are schools that have served not only their own minority community but have also traditionally served diversity in Irish society. We know that Protestant schools continue to have a diversity of pupil population both within the diverse Protestant community and beyond it. These schools, while having a Christian ethos, have at the same time left specific faith development to the parishes or other places of worship for those who choose to engage. There is no sacramental preparation during the school day in these schools for example. But there is much more to Protestant schools than just the religious education element. There is a broad culture associated with these schools which includes the following characteristics:

- (a) Flat democracy
- (b) Individuality and autonomy
- (c) Independence of thought and speech

I see those characteristics very much in action in Mount Temple Comprehensive, where I am privileged to act as Chair of its Board of Management. All members of the school community benefit from a culture and ethos that encourages independence of thought and speech.

When we talk about faith schools, it is important that we recognise all aspects of the culture that are associated with the various types of faith schools rather than focusing only on the religious education element. It is also important that we recognise that the various types of faith schools in the Irish context engage differently with the teaching of religious education, participation in worship or other spiritual activities and in how they engage with those who do not share the school's faith affiliation.

In the past, Irish society in the Republic of Ireland was characterised by many different types of segregation, religious affiliation being just one of those. People had access to separate institutions and different social activities which meant that they could follow quite a segregated life-path. The kinds of invisible walls that divided people along denominational and religious lines have become much more porous, not least because of the increasing post-secularisation of Irish society. There are many things that we should celebrate as those invisible walls become more porous, but there is also the danger that minority groups will become swamped in a single majoritarian-dominated culture. That majoritarian culture is now one that is both Roman Catholic and post-Roman Catholic where many of the cultural aspects of Roman Catholicism such as Baptism and First Holy Communion are retained as cultural markers.

Minority groups have much to add culturally, socially, politically to a diverse Irish society. For many decades after independence many in the Irish Protestant community tended to keep quietly to themselves and there were many factors that led to that situation. The Irish Protestant community, just like the Irish Jewish community, the Irish Muslim community, the

Irish Buddhist community, the Irish Humanist community all have a great deal to offer to post-secular Ireland. All such groups are internally diverse as well. These multiple diversities deserve to be recognised, respected, accommodated and celebrated rather than being homogenised.

At the very end of the 1926 Lennox Robinson play *The Big House*, which tells the story of the burning down by the IRA of an Anglo-Irish house during the Civil War, the central character Kate is asked by the Vicar why she must glory in her Irish Protestant identity. Her reply is 'because we're who we are'. My hope is that our society and our institutions, including our education system will allow both the majority and the various minorities to glory in who we all are, in all our diversities and that we can all be 'who we are', and be respected and celebrated for it.

Thank you.