DIVISION, DIVERSITY AND VISION - CHALLENGES FOR RELIGION IN EDUCATION:
a Case-Study from Northern Ireland

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Abstract:

Over ninety per cent of children in Northern Ireland attend schools that are separate according to their 'perceived religious identity'. Many observers have detected strong links between separate education and the conflicted society for which Northern Ireland has become well known, though the debate about the place of religion in schooling continues to evoke very strong views on all sides. In recent years the impact on education of traditional 'Catholic-Protestant' divisions has been intensified by the experience of a growth in wider religious and ethnic diversity. Research suggests that many schools are unsure of how to respond to division and diversity in culture and religion, presenting particular challenges to the teaching of intercultural education, Religious Education and related pastoral matters. This paper explores the impact of some of these issues and offers reflections on possible ways forward, with relevance to education in other regions.

"Something there is that doesn't love a wall" wrote the American poet Robert Frost in his 1914 poem "Mending Wall". Frost uses the poem to cast doubt on the saying that "Good fences make good neighbours". I've been thinking a lot about walls recently, not least because of the anniversary earlier this month of the fall of the Berlin Wall and because I was in Berlin back in November 1989 when it was all happening. I've just written a brief memo based on my diary and photographs from those days and this has led me to thinking more about walls and what they symbolise. Walls are often used to keep communities apart, whether on the grounds of race and ethnicity, or cultural and religious differences, or different political aspirations. We may feel that they protect us from what we don't want to be or to know, or from those who want to harm or change us. These kinds of walls may give people some sense of security, but there are other walls that are designed to keep peoples in, to stop them from escaping our influence, or from moving out and impacting "our" territory, to preserve us from having to deal with the different "other". Walls separate people, willingly or otherwise: ghettos; the Iron Curtain; the Separation Barrier in Israel-Palestine; the Green Line in Cyprus; the Military Demarcation Line between North and South Korea; Berlin; Sri Lanka; and some others in places like the Balkans.

Belfast also has a Wall; not a long Wall of some 155 km in length like the Berlin Wall, designed to keep the East German population from leaving, but several short sections of what we ironically call "Peace Walls" that are used as security barriers to keep some people from attacking other communities and to provide some sense of protection to people in a vulnerable flashpoint area. Sadly, there are actually more sections of peace wall in different parts of Northern Ireland now than when the post-Troubles peace agreement came into force in 1998. Unlike the Berlin Wall our Belfast walls remain in place and in places they are now more numerous and twice as tall. We also have some historical walls, like the one erected to a depth of about nine feet (2.7 metres) underground in the Belfast City Cemetery during the 19th century, designed to keep Catholics and Protestants separate even in death!

Some observers have suggested that the more significant barriers in our world are not the physical ones, devastating and disruptive as these can be, but the mental barriers that divide peoples and

set a sense of otherness and enmity between them. This functions not only on a national or global political scale, but in all kinds of human communities. The American political scientist Robert Putnam has written of the importance of social networks – what he and others have called "social capital". In his best-known work, "Bowling Alone" (2000), Putnam wrote about how American society has lost many of the benefits of this over the years since the 1960s. Social capital, he argues, is both a private and a public good; it involves mutual obligations – reciprocity. He suggests that social capital has two dimensions – "bonding", which is inward-looking and potentially exclusive, and "bridging" which is outward-looking and potentially inclusive. Both are actually important – bonding holds communities together, but bridging is what prevents that in-group loyalty from becoming out-group antagonism. Putnam cites the American civil rights movement and ecumenical religious organisations as examples of bridging social capital, and his message is that people need to reconnect with one another across barriers. This has resonances for me in how we understand situations like Northern Ireland and work out some ways forward.

Northern Ireland's diversity and divisions can only be outlined very briefly here though there are many background articles and sources that offer more detail. Northern Ireland's conflict, taking place over almost 30 years from the late 1960s, is often presented as a religious conflict between Catholics and Protestants. But this is misleading, as the common terminology of "Catholic" and "Protestant" are shorthand expressions for a wide range of differences in history, culture, politics, national identity, demographics – and, indeed, also religion. The conflict is not about theology or where people go to worship, though religiously-framed anti-Catholicism in particular is still very much alive in some Protestant communities. We can't completely discount the religious factors; they underpin a cultural and political rift going back over several centuries. One of the key ways in which this continues to be evident is in education and in the separate, parallel schooling systems, as we shall see. For some people national rivalries about British or Irish identity are still very much alive, occasionally evident on the streets in the form of marches, flags or other symbols. But at a time when some of the local sectarian antagonisms have become less explosive, Northern Ireland over the past two decades has experienced a growth in the numbers of people belonging to ethnic and religious minority communities; and this has brought in its wake a disturbing growth in race hate crime. Research has suggested that prejudiced attitudes in Northern Ireland against people who are perceived as 'different' in race, ethnicity, religion and sexuality are higher than in almost any other part of Europe. What does this tell us about people's capacity to be antagonistic towards a perceived 'out-group'? What does it tell us about how people in school and in society in general learn – or do not learn – to understand and deal with difference? When we want to address issues of division and diversity, to find new ways of sharing and building an inclusive society, we have to consider how we deal with the issues of barriers, physically and mentally. Education is one of the ways, though by no means the only way, in which we can do that.

In the mid-1970s Malcolm Skilbeck, a professor of education at what was then called the New University of Ulster, created something of a stir when he suggested at a conference that teachers in Northern Ireland were "naïve bearers of sectarian culture" (Skilbeck, 1976). The offence that this caused led to the word "sectarian" being removed when the conference address was eventually published. But Skilbeck was not making the point that all Northern Irish teachers were sectarian;

he was warning that if teachers and schools simply accepted the status quo, if they took the view that there was nothing that they could do to deal with some of the disturbing events in the Province's streets at that time, then they were in danger of allowing sectarian attitudes to grow unchecked. Skilbeck's promptings and those of other community educational pioneers were heeded by some educators and led to some important experiments in curriculum and in cross-community contact, though it was still some years before the official educational authorities adopted such ideas into their purposes and policies (Richardson & Gallagher, 2011).

Despite the attempts of governments in the 19th and early 20th centuries to create structures whereby children from all community backgrounds could be educated together, religious pressures ensured that the great majority of children were educated in separate school systems with different arrangements for the teaching of religion. The Catholic Church has consistently emphasised its view that Catholic parents should send their children to schools with a Catholic ethos and where they can be prepared for participation in the community of faith – today often termed "faith formation" – notably by preparation of children in Catholic primary schools for the sacraments of Reconciliation (first confession), First Communion and Confirmation. Originally having had to contribute some church funds towards these denominational privileges, Catholic schools have since the early 1990s been in receipt of full state funding. The Protestant Churches also wanted to continue to have influence in schools that they had initially established prior to the availability of state support, but in exchange for certain privileges relating to Religious Education and management they opted in the 1930s to hand their schools over to state control; today such schools are normally described as "Controlled" schools. Even now most controlled schools cater very largely for children from perceived Protestant backgrounds and while they are not church schools as such they are sometimes described as "*de facto* Protestant schools". Government statistics show that over 90% of children and young people of school-going age attend schools where the population is substantially or wholly either Catholic or Protestant in community/cultural background. The discussion about separate schooling is often presented as one of parental choice, though it could be argued that for a significant majority of families the choice of schooling is culturally predetermined and is a reflection of the intensity of territorial separation in the region. About three per cent of pupils overlap the systems for a variety of reasons and a further approximately seven per cent – about 22,000 children – attend Integrated schools which cater for Catholics, Protestants and others together. Supporters of integrated education have been frustrated at the difficulties that they have encountered in trying to expand the number of integrated schools, despite some evidence that many people favour schools of this kind. This is a very current debate in Northern Ireland and in recent weeks the Catholic Bishops and Catholic educational authorities have re-emphasised their opposition to integrated education despite evidence of growing support for it, including support within the Catholic community.

There have been many initiatives during and since the years of the Northern Ireland "Troubles" designed to offset the negative effects of separate schooling and to improve cross-community relationships between schools and their pupils. Some of these have been very high quality, though too many have been rather superficial. The latest manifestation of these initiatives has taken the form of encouraging school collaborations, usually given the term of *Shared* or *Sharing* Education,

with schools encouraged to share facilities or teachers and to establish joint classes. As with earlier initiatives, some of this work has been very valuable and effective but in other cases it has been rather minimalistic. Some people clearly regard it as a preferred *alternative* to full integration, some as a route *towards* eventual integration and some as a way of *perpetuating* a separate status quo. There is very little evidence of such programmes using Religious Education as the focus of their sharing activities and some teachers seem keen to avoid the inclusion of anything contentious of this kind.

Not only do most children in Northern Ireland continue to attend separate schools; many also live in separate areas and are kept apart by a combination of physical and ideological factors. This can make efforts to ameliorate separate education very difficult. Teachers too are victims of separation. Many of them have grown up in separate areas, have attended separate schools and even separate teacher education colleges. So when they are asked to give leadership in making education more inclusive by what and how they teach, this can be very challenging and it is not surprising that some feel very lacking in relevant competences when they contemplate such work. This lack of awareness and experience does not just impact on teaching about religion or on dealing with issues around identity and conflict, but also on relatively simple pastoral matters for members of faith and ethnic minorities. Research has revealed a significant level of frustration or concern on the part of parents and young people from minority communities around a range of schooling-related issues, such as diet, dress, fasting, faith-related holidays and the ways in which RE is taught (Richardson, 2003). There is other research evidence which suggests that teachers and student teachers would like to be more inclusive in relation to local and wider diversity but that they feel held back by a lack of personal and professional preparation and experience (Richardson, 2012).

Not surprisingly the teaching of religion presents particular challenges for many teachers. Many people feel uncomfortable talking about religion, especially when they are in what they perceive to be mixed company. They fear that they may give unintended offence; they often say that they don't know enough about their own or other people's religions to feel confident in teaching about them. They may well also feel confused about the purposes of religion in schools. Is it there to make children religious – to persuade them to believe – to increase their personal faith – to compensate for the fact that fewer people go to church? Should they just concentrate on learning about Christianity, which has been the predominant view taken by the various Church hierarchies, or should they teach about a wider range of religions? Will parents object to what they do? There is a familiar saying in Northern Ireland, perhaps encouraged by the experience of the years of conflict, "Whatever you say, say nothing"! Seamus Heaney wrote quite an angry poem about it in the 1970s[1]; others have parodied it. It seems to be particularly relevant when it comes to talking and teaching about religion!

For some the answer to these problems is simply to dismiss religion in all its forms from schools and to have a completely secular system, similar perhaps to that in the United States or France. While most religious educators will counter such suggestions by means of articulating an educational, non-

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[1] "Whatever you say, say nothing", from "North" (1975), published by Faber & Faber.

confessional rationale for the teaching of Religious Education, their case may all too easily be diminished by the realities of religious influences on schooling, by many people's negative experiences and the prevailing perceptions and confusions about the purposes of religion in a public educational setting.

Such confusions are not made any easier in Northern Ireland by the nature of the RE Syllabus that is a statutory requirement for all state funded schools in the region. The right to prepare this RE "Core Syllabus" (Department of Education, 2007), as it is called, was granted by government to the four largest Christian denominations – the Catholic Church in Ireland, the (Anglican) Church of Ireland, the Presbyterian Church in Ireland and the Methodist Church in Ireland – and while initially this was seen as a great ecumenical initiative it seems to have put those Churches into a defensive position. They have not chosen to involve any other faith communities in the curriculum planning process and have largely limited the syllabus to the teaching of Christianity; there was a somewhat grudging decision in 2007 to include limited teaching of world religions, but only for pupils aged 11 to 14, and not at all in primary schools. Their argument is that Northern Ireland "is still a Christian country" and that there are not enough members of "minority faiths" to justify their significant inclusion. Even the teaching of diversity *within* Christianity is limited in the Core Syllabus, mainly to older pupils – a stage when it is often pointed out that young people's attitudes have become more fixed. There has been significant criticism of the Core Syllabus, not least from minority faith communities and from inter-faith bodies, and there is perhaps some evidence that future revisions of the Syllabus will be more inclusive and open-ended, but there is still a long way to go in this process.[2]

So is there a role for education in general and Religious Education in particular in the task of trying to create a more shared and inclusive Northern Ireland – or anywhere else that is inflicted by cultural and religious diversity and division? I believe that is the very areas that appear the most challenging where we need to give special attention; avoidance of controversial political, cultural or religious issues only makes it more difficult to deal with them. Rather than side-lining or abandoning Religious Education on the grounds that it is too contentious or too difficult, we need to make special efforts to see that it is done well and that religious educators are properly equipped for the task. If Religious Education, by its controversial nature and its separateness, is part of the problem in Northern Ireland, then it must also become part of the means towards a solution; and this is no less true for other areas where religious and cultural identity can be a source of contention and division.

In recent years some international bodies have done some excellent work in looking at how the teaching of religion can be developed to these ends in an international context. UNESCO issued Guidelines on Intercultural Education in 2006, based on three key principles, with some useful reflections on the place of religion, emphasizing that: *"It is fundamentally important that democratic societies address inter-religious issues through education"* (UNESCO, 2006 p.14). The Council of Europe has also issued a number of statements, case studies and suggestions for the development of appropriate intercultural competences for teachers, most recently in a document entitled

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[2] The background to RE in Northern Ireland is dealt with in fuller detail in Richardson, 2014a.

"Signposts: Policy and practice for teaching about religions and non-religious world views in intercultural education" (Jackson, 2014). (Some of these can be downloaded for no charge from the CoE website, others downloaded or purchased in hard copy for a fairly small fee.) I would also strongly commend to you the Toledo Guiding Principles (OSCE/ODIHR, 2007), issued by a group of educators and human rights lawyers under the auspices of the Human Rights section of the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. I have also just produced a little book entitled "Sharing Religious Education" (Richardson, 2014b) designed especially to challenge and encourage teachers and student teachers in Northern Ireland to find ways of teaching religion inclusively. The key principles enshrined in these documents could perhaps be summarised in a few points:

- Those who teach religion need to develop their own skills in talking openly and comfortably about religion. Teachers are always role-models for the practices, approaches and skills that they wish their students to learn.

- Religious Education should be open and professional. It is a place for the exchange of ideas and views, not the promotion of those views: it is about listening, sharing and learning together. In those schools where denominational or confessional teaching is permitted this should ideally be done as a voluntary addition and should not impact on the possibility of shared, open-ended learning. This will be a particularly difficult challenge for some, perhaps many, schools in Northern Ireland.

- Teachers need to be well trained with a good awareness of their subject and good contacts and networks with their fellow professional and with the various faith communities in their area. Using non-specialists to fill gaps in timetables seems to happen often in relation to RE, but it is extremely unhelpful. In many countries there are networks and professional bodies that are designed to help in the process of professional development in RE. The excellent work of bodies like the RE Council for England and Wales and the National Association for Teachers of RE (NATRE) is not yet significantly available in Northern Ireland but would benefit us considerably.

- Like any area of education, religious education should help children to think, to develop critical skills, to be open, to engage in dialogue. RE teaching goes beyond the imparting of knowledge; there must be time for meeting, for discussion, for reflection. Where possible this should involve students from different backgrounds together, not separately.

- Teachers should develop professional and inclusive language that makes it clear that we are sharing a quest to learn, to listen, to share and to understand. In an area like religion teachers are co-learners.

- We need to develop ways of working with our pupils that encourage open discussion. This may involve setting out shared principles and procedures, such as in the *Ground Rules for Religious Discussion* that I use with my own students: "BE OPEN! BE HONEST! BE FAIR! LISTEN!" (see Appendix).

Above all we should try to ensure that religion is taught together, that it is a shared process whereby mutual awareness and understanding is developed. Many countries, including Northern Ireland, have systems where children are mostly taught RE separately according to their assumed confessional background. This, in my view, is counter-productive, but it is a very difficult assumption

to move. That is why I called my book "Sharing Religious Education"; it really is a challenge to the way we do things in Northern Ireland.

The issue of the separateness of schooling in Northern Ireland according to perceived religious identity, merits a few further observations. This separation is vigorously defended by some on the basis of parental choice and human rights and no less strongly criticized by others as divisive and a causal factor in the conflict that Northern Ireland experiences. The question of whether separate schooling is a cause or merely a symptom of division is much debated; in my view cause and symptom have become inextricably entwined. To some degree this relates closely to the debate elsewhere about Faith Schools, though the Northern Ireland version of it has its distinctive characteristics. My own belief is that in an already divided society separate schooling only further compounds the problem and if we were starting to develop an education system from scratch today this would certainly not be the route we would take. The human rights argument usually hangs on Article 2 of Protocol No. 1 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, which indicates that:

> *"the State shall respect the right of parents to ensure such education and teaching in*
> *conformity with their own religions and philosophical convictions"*.

This has been interpreted by some as support for the teaching of religion only according to the parents' confessional convictions; my own view, however, is that it is concerned with ensuring that states cannot force children to receive teaching that is, for example, antagonistic to a particular faith or anti-religious (as, for example, in a totalitarian state). Some later human rights documents more precisely set this issue in relation to "religious *instruction*" rather than RE in general and other statements about education emphasise the importance of encouraging mutual awareness and respect for cultural and religious diversity. This seems to me to give a much better balance to the discussion and to challenge the insistence on continued separateness in education.

In a report to UNESCO just before the new millennium a commission headed by Jacques Delors set out a simple but important model for education which they called *the Four Pillars of Education* (UNESCO, 1996). Education, they said was about:

> LEARNING TO KNOW
> LEARNING TO DO
> **LEARNING TO LIVE TOGETHER**
> and   LEARNING TO BE.

For all societies, especially those impacted by diversity and division, *Learning To Live Together* is a challenge that we need to engage with. It goes way beyond how we teach religion, but it must not exclude that dimension.

Many people travelled to Berlin in early November 2014 to mark the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Wall and I'm sure that they were very conscious of some of the symbols and memorials around the city, just as I was some weeks earlier when I made a return visit as part of the research for my own writing. If they are standing near the Brandenburg Gate they may spot the sculpture called "Der Rufer" - the Crier - by Gerhard Marcks, calling out for a world of peace and justice. They may

also have seen a sculpture entitled "Reconciliation", in which two people embrace, close to one of the iconic Berlin Wall memorials at Bernauer Strasse. There are casts of this same sculpture in the Hiroshima Peace Park in Japan, in the ruins of the war-bombed old Coventry Cathedral in England and also in the grounds of the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont in Belfast. A colleague and I used this image for the front cover of our book on diversity and mutual understanding in Northern Ireland about four years ago (Richardson & Gallagher, 2011). They remind us of the possibilities beyond walls and barriers towards peace, reconciliation and new ways of sharing in the process of which educators in general – and religious educators in particular – have a very important role. The challenge is to keep working towards that vision of education, wherever we may be.

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Appendix:

Ground Rules for Religious Discussion

A diagram initially developed for student teachers specializing in Religious Education and later published in "Sharing Religious Education" (RE Today, 2014)

Ground Rules for Religious Discussion

BE OPEN
Share your ideas and express your feelings

BE HONEST
Say what you mean and mean what you

LISTEN!
… at least as much as you talk

BE FAIR
Speak only for yourself and respect the right of others to think differently