Nationalism, Religion and the Education Question

Dermot Moran

"Religion's never mentioned here," of course. "You know them by their eyes," and hold your tongue.

"One side's as bad as the other," never worse.

— Seamus Heaney from North (1975)

Writing in An Chadhach Solus in April 1903 Pádraig Pearse declared: "take up the Irish problem at what point you may, you inevitably find yourself in the end back at the education question. The prostitution of education in this land has led to many other prostitutions. Poisoned at its source, the whole stream of national life has stagnated and grown foul."

For Pearse, revolution begins with educational reform: "our education was designed by our masters in order to make us smooth and willing slaves. It has succeeded; succeeded so well that we no longer realise that we are slaves."

Against this slavery, Pearse proposed that we develop a "national consciousness" and struggle for the "intellectual independence of Ireland."

Education was to play a primary role in the dismantling of a new liberal national consciousness. How far has Ireland progressed towards this ideal of intellectual freedom since Pearse wrote?

Many would object to the linking of intellectual freedom with national identity, they would argue that intellectual freedom is an international idea which transcends local national factors. How the ideal of independence may be interpreted is however a matter which varies from one nation to another. To a great extent we are all caught up in an educational practice moulded by the demands of an international technological culture, but the manner in which this culture is understood at the centre of the industrial world varies considerably from how it is received in the periphery. Ireland belongs to the periphery.

There is therefore an urgent need to evaluate the kind of intellectual freedom that prevails in an Ireland seeking to survive in the international technological world. Are we simply receptors and processors of ideas? Or do we play an active role in their generation and interpretation? Given the connection between ideas and education, what is the prevailing philosophy of education in this country? Can a definite philosophy or ideology of education be sifted out from under the prevailing pragmatisms? Given that there is so much talk in Ireland about the need to impart values through the educational process, it is imperative that we question what those values are. In this essay I have looked briefly at the history and traditions of the Irish university system in order to get a provisional picture of the Irish intellectual landscape, as a first step towards trying to tease out the values implicit in our educational system, values which are all the more vague and elusive, the more universal and unquestioned they are. It seems clear to me that much of the ambiguity and confusion, which surrounds the area of values in our education, stems from our lack of understanding about the meaning of the Irish nation. The twin problems of nationalism and intellectual independence are as allied now as they were in Pearse's time. Indeed the terms of the debate on education have changed hardly at all since Pearse wrote: the role of the Churches, the participation of women, student representation, the involvement of the people in educational planning, and the overall ends of education, are all issues Pearse wrote on clearly and incisively. Indeed much of what Pearse was legitimately demanding has not been implemented today almost sixty years after his death. Educational goals cannot be divorced from societal goals, if we are serious about the kind of society we would like to build, we must make serious and far reaching revisions in our educational practice. To that extent this essay is a catalogue of the failures of the university structure, a critique of the ethos of the institutions rather than a criticism of the endeavours of individuals within the system.

The Irish university system in its present form is essentially an English solution to an Irish problem. The Irish Universities Act of 1908, which established the N.U.I. and the Queen's University of Belfast, was the brain child of that "honest Englishman" (as Pearse called him) Augustine Birrell. The Act was an admitted compromise, which aimed to satisfy the century-old demand of Irish Catholics for an acceptable educational system by setting up the N.U.I., while at the same time it left intact the institution of the establishment, Trinity College. Birrell aimed to provide education which was, in his phrase, "cheap, popular and good," his efforts were part of the last phase of the Liberal policy of killing Home Rule with kindness.
Several attempts had been made during the 19th century to redress the grievances of Irish Catholics in regard to education. Robert Peel, Gladstone, Daniel O'Connell and other early 19th century politicians all found it impossible to give the Catholics in Ireland any educational opportunity, partly due to the political atmosphere of the time. However, the 1854 Act opened up all fellowships and posts in Trinity College to non-Anglicans and in 1873, Fawcett's Tests Act was passed. The Vatican's N.V.I. (No Vatican Influence) campaign was organised which enrolled the help of the Dublin and Ulster Unionists. On the other hand, the Catholic Bishops in Ireland had not been successful in their attempts at securing an end to mixed education in 1867.

In 1906, the Bryce Commission reported in Ireland after Trinity and thus the rightful position. We have had in Ireland the solution of the problem of handling denominational claims in education, as he himself would not send his son to Trinity if it lost its importance rather than national interests which was prevalent, and he was strongly in favour of the Irish nation as a whole having representation in the new university. He criticised the fact that the Irish Universities Act which gave Birrell most trouble in Parliament, was a non-denominational one.

But the Bryce Commission failed, and was replaced by Augustine Delaney S.J., president of University College, who resigned from the position of Ireland's Catholic University. The general state of Irish education was, closely, highly unsatisfactory.

In the first decade of the 20th century, two important Royal Commissions were held to inquire into the state of third level education in Ireland. The National University of Ireland was established in 1908.

The Bryce scheme, suggested that University of Dublin should be broadened to include another college which would be mainly for Catholics. The then Chief Secretary, Bryce, attempted to introduce his own scheme, based on a proposal that the national university should be a true university and not a state college. Under the Bryce scheme, the University of Dublin would be a state university and the new college would be a Catholic college.

None of the proposals were implemented. The Bryce scheme drew sharp reaction and criticism from nearly every quarter. The Bryce scheme was one of the Bishop's proposals. When one reads the Commons and Lords debates on the 1908 Bill one quickly realises that educational principles are hardly ever mentioned, let alone discussed. As far as one can make out from the debates about the benefit to be gained from exposing Irish minds to the liberalising atmosphere of university life, the main focus of the debates was not educational, but religious. The problem was simple - how to provide for the Irish without being seen to be subsidising spiritual education. The answer Birrell had hit upon was clever, but it had been suggested to the Catholic Bishops, and he did little more than implement their suggestions.

In line with Fawcett's 1913 Tests Act which had opened up Trinity to non-Anglicans, Birrell proposed that the new universities were to have no religious tests of any kind on staff or students. Theology, as a subject was to be excluded. Thus the new N.U.I. was a non-denominational institution as was Queen's, although Birrell conceded that one would flourish "on Catholic soul" while the other would do so "on Protestant soil." The Commissions set up to found N.D.I. and Queen's were carefully balanced on religious lines - N.U.I. was mainly Catholic with 7 Protestant members, Queen's Commission was Protestant with 1 Catholic, 12 other denominations were carefully balanced on religious lines.

For handling denominational claims in education, Birrell proposed that the new universities be given the power to "recognise" or affiliate denominational colleges, with the proviso of education by a university standard in a limited number of areas. He had in mind Maynooth College and Magee College in Derry. However, the National University of Ireland was established in 1908.

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country, there is no professor of agriculture, although there was a Professor of Hindustani, a Reader in Tamil, and Telugu, a Reader in Hindi, a Reader in Indian Law, several Indian class lecturers, and a lecturer in Dutch. 18

In reply to this kind of criticism, the Very Rev. J.H. Bernard Dean of St. Patrick's stated to the Board of Education that a university acceptable to Roman Catholics might have a "Chair of Breeding" but certainly no chair of Anglicanism. The recently founded Chair of Irish (set up in 1896) was itself a good example of the Trinity Establishment attitude. Mahaffy, a well-known Trinity man had stated that he could well see the usefulness of knowledge of a few words of Irish for a gentleman out grouse shooting in the west of Ireland, but otherwise the language had little to recommend itself philosophically. The Chair of Irish was set up with money from a Protestant trust system. However, this Irish nationalist sentiment for a gentleman out grouse shooting in the west of Ireland was totally ignored, the Irish manuscript was treated as a dead language, as the usefulness of knowledge of a few words of Irish was barely recognised. 20 The general Irish was treated as a dead language, as the Ireland, but othen...
Indeed his scheme for the merger of UCD and Trinity into a single University of Dublin was little more than an academic exercise. Most of the English proposals of 1907, and it too met with considerable opposition and was dropped. In 1907 the following year, removed the ban on Trinity for Catholic students, and by the 1980s about 70% of the students were Catholics of the middle and professional classes, the same classes who had been sending their sons to Trinity in 1907. Although vast changes have taken place, some Trinity lecturers like Tommy Murtagh believe that Trinity has retained its Ascendency ethos even if it has switched its support from the Protestant to the Catholic Ascendency, and support for the two nations of the Trinity Provost of 1907 still is readily found among Trinity tenants. Meanwhile, the equation of liberalism, secularism, atheism and imperialism is still to be met with in the writing of some Catholic Bishops and the emergent of sexual politics of the past year in Ireland should leave no one in doubt that the old equation of Protestant with liberal, Catholic with authoritarian is still very deeply embedded even among intellectuals. The two sides are still identifiable and fight the same battle in the same language.

It is within this overall heritage that the person seeking to assess the intellectual independence of the Irish university system must construct his or her analysis. In my view, the inability to go beyond these two ideals of Irish education (to use Prof. Coghlan's terms) has impeded the development of a true national university system. The proposal that Queen's and Coleraine should be brought into closer contact with the NUI made in the 1967 Commission on Higher Education Report has not been acted on. The subject is mentioned frequently in the Forum for a New Ireland discussion, but it seems to me little will come of it. The true interrelation of educational, political and religious attitudes is better understood.

We would do better to pay closer attention to the writings of Pádraig Pearse who tried to steer Irish education were a self-appointed group not rooted in the needs of the people. Pearse wrote:

When we say the people we do not mean the benevolent foges - medical men with expanse whitewash and impression, school inspectors, elderly lawyers whose brains have become obfuscated in the dust of the Four Courts, clerks who for thirty years have not come into vital contact with the practical problems of Irish life at any one point - who pose as the leaders of "educated opinion" in Ireland. He criticized the lack of consultation between the Catholic leaders and the Irish people, and argued strongly for the need to educate the Irish people. Offering comments on the dispute about the teaching of Irish in the new universities, Pearse and others were of the opinion that the people of Ireland were in favor of a strong Irish component. A certain Colonel Moore had made such a statement but was rebuked by Dr. Healy, the Archbishop of Tuam with the words:

The people of Ireland! What do they know about it? I would not give a pinch of stuff for their opinion, what do they know about it?

To which Pearse replied in An Claisdeachta Soluis: "the people will remember." Let us hope that the people will be remembered in the restructuring of the universities and that they will not be forced to find themselves drawing the conclusion that Pearse drew:

The new education system in Ireland has to do more than restore a national culture... Along with its inspiration it must therefore bring a certain hardening. I would bring back some of the starkness of the ancient world. No dream is more foolish than the dream of some sentimentality that the force of the past, or passing; that the world's ancient battle lines have been repealed; that henceforth the first duty of every man is to be darker. The question of the intellectual freedom of Ireland must be asked again. If the history of the educational institutions is to be taken as a pointer then the answer is not encouraging, indeed there are signs that despite the radical changes in our national life, our cultural and intellectual life remains defined within very narrow boundaries. Given that involvement in education is seen by many as a buttress against the increasing alienation and violence brought about by unemployment it is imperative that the educational structures be guiding lights of tolerance, freedom and enlightenment. It is difficult how they can be seen as long as they cling tenaciously to traditions which are separatist and divisive. Only within a united national structure of the school and the Irish university system provide such guidance.

Of course it may well be argued that the considerable changes which have completely transformed Irish universities and that the separatist ethos I have been describing has largely vanished. These values may however only appear to be absent because explicit criticism may reappear. I believe that the goal of intellectual independence in Ireland will be advanced by catechism arguments which stress the importance of Irish educational practice, and that consciousness of history is an essential part of any such scrutiny. The lack of explicit statement of values in the universities today may indeed provoke the very difficulties it seeks to avoid.

NOTES


2. Ibid. p. 355.

3. Ibid., p. 1. The Irish language as a repository of religious tradition has a special role in this nation. In fact, its foundation is defined linguistically.

4. First Reading of the Irish Universities Bill, 21 March 1907, Reprinted in the Irish Universities Bill (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1908) no. 1. In one year, the "towns" of Manchester, Liverpool, Manchester, Sheffield and so on, not yet in Ireland, 1901.


6. The Dawson scheme proposed that all the Colleges, including Maynooth be brought under the mantle of the University of Dublin. Maynooth would have "affiliation". As the statement submitted by The Rt. Hon. Viscount Oct. 21, 1907 in the Documents submitted to the Commission p. 452-453.

7. The Catholic position is complicated. On the one hand, the scheme by Rev. Daniel Coghlan D.D. of Maynooth, College to the Commission, the bishops have been critical of the scheme in universities (Documents to the Commission p. 412) and have the hope that students who "have been brought up in the precepts of Catholic doctrine, that they may not be led astray by the many opinions that are current in the schools of modern learning." (p. 415).

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9. Rev. Daniel Coghlan, "The Two Ideals", in Trinity College Dublin: Two Centuries, 1851-1951 (Dublin: Gill and Son, 1951) p. 10. Although these are still out of fashion with modernists, the time is ripe for another attempt at an Irish university.

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There is good reason to think that the history of art should be taught backwards. No matter how sympathetic the young are to tradition no art will have quite the vitality of what is contemporary: it will be a long time before any old master has the vividness of what is new when you are new. But histories of art are inevitably written the other way round, from the past to the present. This has meant in Europe that they are histories of an almost inevitable stylistic and technical development marked out by a succession of great names from Giotto to Monet, to be enumerated for their "discoveries". It has been too tempting to interpret the arc made by these discoveries as a 'progress' and to ignore what could not be seen to subscribe to it. But artists are concerned with reality as it is GIVEN to them, whether spiritually or materially. They are seldom conscious of the art backwards we discover, not an arc, but a web of thousands of different threads appearing and disappearing, and reappearing and being lost again, and then, by a contemporary and urgent need, are found yet again. To learn the history of art backwards is to follow the pattern of education itself commencing with our subjective moment in time and our need to secure its objectivity in conflict and brotherhood with all previous generations.

It was from such contemporary and urgent need in Spain at the end of the last century that the artists known as the 'Generation of '98' rediscovered the much maligned canvases of Dominikos Theotokopoulos, a Venetian painter of the 16th century who had come to be known simply as "El Greco" the Greek. In the Toledo of the Spanish Renaissance he had been its most revered painter, and while most of the locals in the trade had been treated as craftsmen, he had been honoured as the 'learned artist' and treated as an equal by the poets and cognoscenti of the day. Then, from the day he died, his life and work were forgotten, and such brief references as were made to his work by historians spoke derisively of an eccentric who had lived too richly in his own overheated brain.

The Generation of '98 had good reason to discover El Greco. They were not very happy with the tendencies of the then 'modern' Europe and their flight back to what they regarded as the cultural identity of Spain in its distinction from it. What drew them most immediately to El Greco was his mysticism for, even though he was a foreigner, the temper of his art is essentially Spanish, in keeping with the same movement that animated Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And the ignorance with which his work had later been treated was due to the culpable Europeanisation of the Spanish soul, a fate that the "Nineteen-nineties" set themselves to redress.

In 16th century Europe Crete must have been as remote from Venice as was Achill Island a short while ago from Dublin. It was in Crete that El Greco was trained in the traditional art of Icon painting. Some cultured person with Venetian ideas must have seen his work and, recognising his talent, advised or possibly even sponsored him to go and study in the most adventurous place of its time for art, Venice. There the immigrant saw and inwardly digested the most sophisticated ideas of his time and from that passed on the most spiritual part of his art to his new environment. This was taken apart and put together again in the boldest and most original way the West has ever seen until our own times.