A SOCIOLOGICAL POINT OF VIEW

By PETER HUGHES

A CRITICAL discussion of some of the social aspects of catholic education in this country is no easy task for Catholics themselves. The difficulty lies in the remarkable degree to which the story of catholic education has become ingrained in the folklore of the catholic community. Whether one perceives the story in terms of the hagiography of penal times or in terms of the financial sacrifices of more recent times, it has become a pervasive element in the collective consciousness of english Catholicism. An unquestioning commitment to separate catholic education seems to have become one test of catholic identity and orthodoxy. It has become so much a part of the everyday life of the catholic community that any radical questions are virtually pre-empted. The story of the emancipation and the struggle for the schools has assumed a quasi-sacred character in which fighting slogans such as 'Catholic schools with Catholic teachers for Catholic children' have been transmuted into something akin to articles of faith.

The unquestioning acceptance of the official catholic stance on education and the existence of separate catholic schools is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the almost total lack of a well-worked and critical theology of education. There is much discussion and experiment in the field of religious education as a matter of curriculum, but remarkably little theological appraisal of the principles and strategy of catholic educational policy in this country or of the educational enterprise in general. It is as if the historical background and the memory of the catholic community serve to put radical questions out of play.

This paper attempts to bring out some of the issues of social and historical interest as a preface to theological discussion of contemporary catholic education. Even sociology may serve as a handmaid to theology, for as one writer has remarked:

> An empirical theology is, of course, methodologically impossible. But a theology that proceeds in a step by step correlation with what can be said about man empirically is well worth a serious try.[1]

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[1] Berger, P.: *The Social Reality of Religion* (London, 1969), p 188.

The history of the sons of the catholic nobility and the landed gentry is well worked, especially in the accounts of the establishment in penal times of english schools and colleges on the continent. Much less is known of the attempts to provide catholic education for the children of the common people among the recusants, except that in some localities of substantial catholic continuity there were catholic schoolmasters at work. Even though the present evidence is patchy, it has been argued strongly that the english Catholics of the period had a consistent catholic educational policy and that 'beneath the policy lay one constant and inflexible principle: to keep the faith alive through priest and schoolmaster'.[2]

It was essentially a survival policy in circumstances of active ideological opposition supported by state power. Education was explicitly regarded as an instrument for sustaining the religious identity of a minority group in a society by its nature opposed to pluralism. All this can be appreciated, but the present tragedy is that these historical circumstances have so deeply informed catholic attitudes to education as to inhibit the development of an educational strategy relevant to our present pluralistic society.

Two factors in the penal situation are especially worthy of note in attempting a social understanding of later catholic education. First, it is clear that the main thrust in educational provision was towards the establishment, on the continent, of schools and colleges catering largely for the upper classes and for those Catholics wealthy enough to afford them. This was, of course, partly a reflection of the more general social realities of a time when differential access to education was regarded as being in the nature of things. The demand for education, conducted largely within the ethos of renaissance humanism, was inevitably restricted to the more privileged classes. To this secular education was added not only instruction in catholic doctrine for the lay pupils, but also a more extensive theological education and professional formation for the priests necessary to the english mission. Many of these schools and colleges became the catholic public schools of today and they may well view their historical origin as a central element in their identity. This serves as an historically based legitimation for a basically élitist form of catholic education.

Most christian denominations have had no difficulty in accommodating themselves to an educational system which reflects class privilege

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[2] Beales, A. C. F.: *Education under Penalty* (London, 1963), p 267.

and the grossly unequal distribution of wealth. The theological rationale would be convincing if one assumed the permanence of social arrangements. Such a rationale appears to disregard the rapidly accumulating evidence from the social sciences concerning the part of education in creating and perpetuating these social inequalities. It is only in relatively recent years that there has been an awakening to the inconsistency in terms of the gospel of continuing such provision within the broad spectrum of catholic education. In the case of english Catholics it may be held that one of the outstanding factors in delaying a sensitivity to this inconsistency has been the historical tradition deriving from penal times. The crucial participation of the schools in the past ideological struggle has provided their present existence with a legitimacy which, although it often poses as theological, is really derived from history. It may be impossible to escape from history but it is not impossible for Christians to transcend it by living in their own historical moment. The uruguayan Jesuit, Juan Luis Segundo, has put the point well in his comment that we may 'thank God, our God takes a stand in history, and our interpretation of his work is bound to follow in the same path'.[3] He goes on to comment that in our days theologians are presented with the choice of doing theology like any other liberal profession, or doing it as a revolutionary, liberating activity. It is, perhaps, this kind of theology which would serve to liberate english catholic education from its past.

The second constraint derived from the experience of persecution is the pre-occupation with catholic institutional identity and exclusiveness. This has resulted from the past concern with survival and the function of education as an instrument in that task. The english catholic community came to develop all the classical qualities of a closed group. The maintenance of cultural specificity became an end in itself and this was realized by such social devices as endogamy and separatist education. Differences in faith and morals became instruments of difference for its own sake rather than instruments of gospel engagement in the larger social and political concerns of society.

The overriding need of any group, as a group, is to ensure and to intensify its social solidarity. This is always a crucial social response to external persecution. Unfortunately, it can dull the capacity to hear what God is saying through other groups. It could be argued that the

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[3]   Segundo, J. L.: *Liberacion de la Teologica* (Buenos Aires, 1975), p 36.

catholic concern with community identity has prevailed long beyond the need of historical circumstances. It is a concern that has prevailed to a degree so pathological as to cast some doubt on the capacity of Catholics to realize together a christian mission to contemporary society. A czechoslovak theologian has noted that:

> The way taken by the confessing Church, instead of looking forwards, leads back into a ghetto existence. The confessing Church becomes preoccupied with self-preservation and ceases to be a Church of the future.[4]

This catholic preoccupation with social solidarity and identity is very clearly reflected in the official educational policy that has prevailed since the war. It is a policy that has displayed an inflexible commitment to separate catholic schools financed, so far as can be negotiated, out of public funds. It has never seriously questioned whether there should be such a system at all. Where it notes alternatives it does so as the unacceptable consequence of the lack of separate catholic schools. This policy is fully set out in *The Case for Catholic Schools*, published by the Catholic Education Council in 1955, in which, by way of introduction, it is arrogantly claimed that:

> We Catholics are the only body in this country consistently concerned with the content of education; we are the only body who have clear ideas on what education is for, and how its whole purpose is to be achieved.[5]

If we were as sure as that twenty years ago then we ought to be asking why we are not so sure now.

Somehow there persists a fear that children cannot be effectively initiated into the faith outside separate schools and that to do so would threaten the very existence of the catholic community and indeed of western civilization as a whole. The socialization into catholic faith and practice of young children in separate primary schools may well be based on sound sociological principles. The case for catholic secondary schools may well be tenuous. However, the real debate as to the validity of our educational arrangements cannot take place while the issues are treated monolithically as a fundamental principle. The so-called 'religious problem' in education has become a symbol of separate identity and as such serves a central function in

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[4] Smolik, J.: 'The Church without Privileges' in *Ecumenical Review*, vol XXVIII, no 2 (Geneva, 1967).
[5] Catholic Education Council 'The Case for Catholic Schools' (London, 1955), p 1.

maintaining the community solidarity of Catholics. It puts a radical, political, and social discussion of education out of play.

A further illustration of the socio-historical constraints that act upon the catholic attitude to education can be seen in the struggle for catholic emancipation during the nineteenth century. As a social process it represents the struggle of a minority to be assimilated into the general life of society. But the continuing memory of penal times, and the associated mythology accumulated over the generations, rendered catholics not a little resistant to becoming an integral part of english life. In Liverpool during the 1820s, when already a quarter of the population were Catholics, the Whigs found it necessary to encourage the catholic citizens to engage in the struggle for their own political emancipation. This reluctance may be viewed not only as a fear of provoking renewed protestant hostility to the popish threat, but also as a fear of disturbing the ordered realities of the ghetto by engaging in the larger world. Assimilation and integration into the larger life of society may appear to involve a compromise on principles. It is this negative fear of compromise and of diluting cultural purity which characterizes so much of the catholic attitude.

English Catholicism displays many caste-like qualities. The identification with society involved in emancipation inevitably conflicts with the maintenance of community identity as established and developed from penal times. This is a tension which has not yet been resolved, for national acceptability can make inroads into the subjective perception of catholic identity. The existence of opposition serves to reinforce that identity. Not only that, but the very separation of Catholics leads to the reinforcement of the way in which other citizens perceive them as alien.

In terms of educational policy this tension has sometimes been resolved by claiming, for example, that catholic education is,

> of supreme importance for the defence of all those values on which the civilization of this country is based; and also for the toughening of its moral fibre, which this country needs in order to withstand the corrosion of godless materialism.[6]

In other words, our schools are defended on the ground that they contribute to the moral and cultural defence of the nation. The range of argument of this kind that can be brought forward to defend catholic educational institutions would be impressive if one could

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[6] Catholic Education Council, *op. cit.*, p 7.

eradicate some awareness that national chauvinism is being used to conceal a denominational chauvinism where our schools are concerned. The cardinal principle of our catholic educational policy is the defence of separate schools at whatever cost.

Emancipation occurred at the beginning of the Industrial Revolution and not long before the main influx of irish immigrants, occasioned by the great famine and by the need for cheap labour in the development of heavy industry and the railways. Thus there arises an exceptionally complex social situation in which the indigent Catholics, already constrained by a long experience of a quasi-immigrant character, are overlain by a truly immigrant catholic population. A population which by economic necessity occupied a very deprived position in the class structure. This economically based class division within what might now be called british Catholicism is exacerbated by the existing class divisions within english Catholicism itself. So there comes to exist within one religious denomination both the typical class situation of industrialization and the class situation of pre-industrial England as captured within the indigent catholic community. This is a highly complex social stratification vastly different from the class homogeneity of other nonconforming denominations such as the Methodists or the Congregationalists. Cardinal Vaughan explicitly conceded that the class divisions within Catholicism complicated the educational question. He noted that 'our people, generally speaking, are divided into classes and coteries and avoid social intercourse with a caste-like rigidity'.[7] He was commenting on the problem of higher education for Catholics but the point may apply equally well to other sectors of education.

Quite apart from these highly complex social divisions among Catholics themselves, there were other problems arising from the effects of industrialization. For present purposes these can be identified as the national provision of compulsory elementary education for all children, and the need for the increasing social mobility associated with a society orientated to achievement. If Weber's thesis on the relation between the rise of capitalism and the protestant ethic is broadly accepted, it can be appreciated that, both structurally and culturally, the socially complex nature of nineteenth-century Catholicism rendered effective integration into economic life very difficult indeed. It is not without relevance to the position of Catholics to note that the main spurts of pre-industrial economic

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[7] *The Tablet* (February 1897).

growth in this country occurred during the Reformation and the Methodist Revival.[8]

The coming of compulsory elementary education in the second half of the nineteenth century raised in a more acute form the separate position of Catholics. The struggle to provide catholic parish schools consonant with the secular educational standards of the state is well known. The passage of successive education bills through parliament were contested by Catholics with not a little political sophistication. The official catholic position still remains one of a sense of grievance that Catholics are financially penalized in their pursuit of educational separatism. This underwrites the point that the formal argument of the catholic authorities never questions the separatist principle as a good end in itself. A separation seen as fundamentally necessary to the preservation of the faith in a society now alien, not so much because it is Protestant, but because it displays the contradictions of capitalism.

This is all the more remarkable when one brings to mind the Liverpool experiment in the early nineteenth century when protestant and catholic children were educated together in non-denominational schools, or the irish system in which the same arrangement prevailed. This is a part of the catholic background to which reference is rarely made. One historian has noted that:

> . . . in Liverpool with full consent of their priests, Roman Catholic children had attended schools controlled by a Protestant Committee, had received secular instruction from Protestant teachers and had received a non-denominational form of religious instruction in company with Protestant children.[9]

This might, of course, be interpreted as a willingness on the part of the catholic clergy and parents to compromise their religious distinctiveness in the pursuit of publicly financed education. No doubt they were as anxious as others to provide their children with an opportunity for achieving literacy. However, contemporary evidence suggests that catholic leaders viewed non-denominational schools in a positive way as well. For instance Dr Doyle, Bishop of Kildare, had remarked in 1830 that he could not think that 'peace could ever be permanently secured if children are separated at the commencement of life on account of their religious opinions'.[10] A few years later

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8   McClelland, D. C.: *The Achieving Society* (New York, 1961), p 133ff.
9   Murphy, J.: *The Religious Problem in English Education* (London, 1959), p 259.
10 *Ibid.*, p 19.

Cardinal Wiseman was asked whether Catholics and Protestants could be educated together; he replied with some encouragement that

> Protestants and Catholics could attend anything in the form of a University or Public School, without any harm ensuing, good perhaps might be done. I think also that in the lower branches of education it might easily be managed to give them a common education, reserving the religious education of their respective classes to their own pastors.[11]

The research into the Liverpool Corporation Schools, which were financed out of the rates and opened long before the 1870 Education Act, demonstrates convincingly that the catholic parents and clergy positively welcomed the opportunity for their children to attend non-denominational schools. It demonstrates an awareness among Catholics that the specifically religious education could be a duty of the parents supported by the clergy. It is therefore pertinent to ask what had occurred to reverse catholic thinking as a formal educational policy was developed. Even a papal rescript of Gregory XVI in 1841 had commented specifically on the irish system that 'for ten years since the system was introduced, the catholic religion does not appear to have suffered any injury'.[12] To appreciate in detail the shift in catholic educational policy would require research into episcopal archives beyond the scope of this paper. However, from the sociological perspective it is possible to come to some understanding of the change in catholic educational strategy by examining the increased social mobility required in an industrializing society.

In their curricula and organization our catholic schools have been no different from the state schools. Indeed they have been at some pains to establish their capacity to fulfil public educational criteria. In part this may be viewed as an anxiety to be an integrated and accepted part of the national education scene. It is one of the forces inherent in any emancipation process and, in this case, is often enunciated as a concern to demonstrate that catholic pupils and students are as capable as others in fulfilling a diversity of secular roles. In a more fundamental way the curricula and organizational development of catholic educational institutions is an accommodation to the requirements of industrial society. Essentially schools serve the purposes of society and there is very little evidence that catholic schools are different in this regard. The catholic educational system not only

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[11]   *Ibid.*, p 19.
[12]   *Ibid.*, p 138.

accurately reflects the unequal structure of society by providing a private and public sector but it also reflects the organizational arrangements of education within the public sector. The public schools remain largely fee-paying and their positive qualities remain available largely to those Catholics who can afford them. The only other catholic children to receive a residential education is that small minority at the other end of the social spectrum who achieve it through the juvenile courts. It is only after the event of educational re-organization that the Church generally finds a religious rationale for the new forms. The Church has very rarely taken the lead in initiating major educational change on the basis of christian principles of social justice. One educationalist has commented that 'christian thinking about education is no different from any other where bourgeois values are the implicit criteria of analysis'.[13] Unfortunately, as we have seen in outline, the case for catholic schools rests on what has been called the principle of limitation; that is a specifically closed education for maintaining identity in a pluralist society.

It is ironic that the post-war debate on catholic schools stressed their part in the fight against contemporary materialism for, all along the line (with the exception of public schools which is a fight on the political horizon), catholics have submitted to a form and content of education largely dictated by the government of the day. This has been made possible by not adopting a profoundly critical stance towards the fact,

> . . . that to succeed educationally is, essentially to acquire the skills and congruent attitudes for economic development, that is to say acquisitive participation in the technological advance which has marked the material progress of the West.[14]

The writer, an american educationalist, is referring to the competitive materialism to which our schools have readily accommodated themselves. Whereas we have claimed that our schools share in the teaching mission of the Church, they have, in practice, prepared our children for a functional submission to the needs of an industrial society.

The secular function of catholic education in facilitating individual achievement is frequently justified on the ground of extending the influence of the Church in the secular world by providing a lay apostolate. This influence is implicitly used to preserve the

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13   Bright, L. and Clements, S. (eds): *The Committed Church* (London, 1966), p 146.
14   Curle, A.: *Education for Liberation* (London, 1973), p 3.

institutional integrity of the Church. The Church has to be articulated to the social structure to survive institutionally. A rationalization in terms of a lay apostolate leaves out of account the way in which denominations as entities are themselves socially mobile as has been demonstrated partially by the statistical account of Catholics and their education in the now defunct Newman Demographic Survey. It has been well argued by sociologists of religion and others.[15]

The catholic community of penal times was a suffering Church in a directly religious way. The catholic community of the irish immigration was a suffering Church in a directly economic and social way. Since then the catholic community has participated in the general social mobility of english society and this has been occasioned by its educational style as much as by anything else. The social mobility of the catholic community seems more an uncritical drift towards enslavement to the economic values of society than as a form of liberation from them. Again one is faced with the historic irony that one of the major factors in the social change of the catholic community was the possibility of Catholics entering those provincial universities founded in the second half of the nineteenth century as emancipation was fulfilled and that,

> . . . the effect of the papal prohibition on the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge had been to weaken the hold of the aristocratic families and the landed gentry on the control of the Roman Catholic Church in England and to hand it over to the new growing professional classes, to the people at large.[16]

Thus the new educational freedom of Catholics paradoxically came to place the Church in the hands of those most susceptible to the social and economic constraints of industrial society.

Since the 1870 Act, the Church has responded to external pressures for change in its educational system in practically every respect except the maintenance of a separate system. It is hard to find instances where it has initiated fundamental change in education as an expression of its apostolic mission to a changing world. Some would argue that the defence of catholic schools is itself a witness to a secular and materialistic world. The Church's inactivity on the educational front can be understood if one accepts the significance of the historical and

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[15]   See, for example, Wilson, B.: *Religion in Secular Society* (London, 1966), and Niebuhr, R.: *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1957).
[16]   McClelland, V. A.: *English Roman Catholics and Higher Education* (New York, 1973), p 377.

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social factors that have been selectively outlined. Yet an understanding
of the present derived from an analysis of past events ought not to be
construed as justifying the present situation.

Education is not only concerned with initiating people into a
culture but also with the ways that culture is changing and the choices
that may be made within it. The sad fact is that by providing both
private schools and public sector schools the Church has pre-empted
choice by allowing their co-existence.[17] So rather than taking part in
the debate on the more radical questions about education, the Church
simply reflects the divided and unequal structures of society. Although
individual Catholics may take sides in the debate, the Church, as such,
has no view on the matter. Rendering Caesar his due is capable of a
quite comfortable interpretation. It is interesting that in its commit-
ment to a closed system of education the Church shows considerable
intuitive sociological sophistication in achieving institutional self-
preservation. Yet in its understanding of differential access to education
and differential performance within education it has hardly awakened
to the findings of the human sciences. Education is essentially a
political matter bound up closely with fundamental issues of social
justice, nevertheless the Church only engages in political struggles that
affect its control of a separate denominational system of education.
This situation has been succinctly summarized by Niebuhr in his
comment that

> . . . the domination of class and self-preservation ethics over the ethics
> of the gospel must be held responsible for much of the moral
> ineffectiveness of christianity in the West. Not only or primarily
> because denominationalism divides and scatters the energy of
> christendom, but more because it signifies the defeat of the christian
> ethics of brotherhood by the ethics of caste is it the source of
> christendom's moral weakness.[18]

This paper has attempted to illustrate the almost sociological
inevitability of this weakness occurring, by an account of some of
the social and historical factors which have been carried through into
contemporary english Catholicism. They illustrate the institutional
passivity of the catholic community. Which of us would have done
otherwise in those circumstances of sheer survival and in the struggle
for emancipation? But we might ponder that education is more than
an instrument for community survival; it is also a part of salvation and

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17   See Bright, L. and Clements, S.: *op. cit.*, p 267.
18   Niebuhr, R.: *op cit.*, p 21.

an activity within God's purpose. In reminding us that 'the Kingdom of God is not a promise we have to await passively but a task to be fulfilled', Garaudy relies on Rahner's view that 'history is the only place where the Kingdom of God is being built and man is the only field of theology'.[19]

It will require courage to initiate a radical re-thinking of catholic education in the face of the social history of Catholicism in this country. But it is that same history that points the way to our capacity to direct the educational enterprise towards engagement in the social and political struggle to achieve the Kingdom. Sociology can illuminate how we enslave our children and young people to the economic and social values which the gospel rejects. It can illuminate the task of liberation. But it is only theology which can use these insights in developing a christian strategy for action. Some sociological understanding of our educational history may be a useful preface to theology but it is the development of a radical theology of education which is the preface to action.

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[19] Garaudy, R.: 'Faith and Revolution' in *Ecumenical Review* XXV, no I (Geneva, 1973).

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