

SOCIAL DIVISIONS AND THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1999, composer James MacMillan caused a storm in the Scottish press by arguing that Scotland remained a bigoted and sectarian society: 'Northern Ireland without the guns and bullets'. The broadsheets devoted considerable space to reader's letters and invited columns on the issue. It was clear from that debate that few academic students of modern Scotland endorsed MacMillan's view and a number (for example, Tom Devine, the author of this article, and the editor of this journal) specifically challenged it.

The consensus among social scientists (to the above one might add Graham Walker, David McCrone, and Tom Gallagher) is that the social, political and economic disadvantages experienced by the Irish migrants to Scotland and their descendants in the first quarter of the twentieth century have largely disappeared¹. While Ulster Protestant migrants (who formed perhaps a quarter of all migrants from Ireland) were quickly assimilated, Catholic Irish migrants tended to enter the labour market at the bottom and, for both cultural and economic

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¹ *The one exception is Joseph M. Bradley who introduces his study of religion and ethnic identity by talking of a 'growing ethno-religious cleavage' (1995) but even he makes little claim to objective disadvantage and instead argues for a more nebulous 'chill' towards the descendants of the Irish.*

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reasons, there were many Scots who were set on keeping them there. At the end of the nineteenth century and for the first part of the twentieth, the Irish immigrants and their descendants formed a clearly identified people with its own religion, culture, politics (largely determined by the Irish question), and economic interests. These people received a hostile reception from Protestant Scots (and, it should be noted, from Old Scots Catholics who shared many of the anti-Irish prejudices of their Protestant neighbours).

Yet, rather than follow the Northern Ireland example of increased polarization leading to a minor civil war, Scotland has proved a model of accommodation and assimilation. In what is partly a description of the changes and partly an explanation, we can note that after the war housing segregation disappeared.

When Glasgow was rebuilt and parts of its population decanted to the new suburbs and out-lying new towns, there was no attempt to recreate Protestant and Catholic areas. When Belfast was re-developed, its sectarian geography was reproduced in the new peripheral estates. Rather than follow the European example of creating separate Catholic parties and trade unions, Scots Catholics became involved in the secular Labour movement². Patrick Dollan became Lord Provost of Glasgow in 1938 and Catholics became so prominent in the Labour Party in lowland industrial Scotland that during the period of the Glasgow District Council (1975-1996), not one Protestant served as Lord Provost. In contrast, Belfast did not get its first nationalist major until 1995. The anti-Catholic political parties that flourished in the early 1930s in Edinburgh and Glasgow fell as quickly as they rose (Gallagher 1987a, 1987b) and by the 1970s, anti-Catholic sentiments were sufficiently unpopular to blight the careers of the rare individual who expressed them

² *Relative size probably explains why the Hiberno-Scots Catholic world had church and school but, unlike its Dutch counter-part, did not also have trade union, mass media and university.*

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(Bruce 1998). By the 1980s the SNP was working hard to shed its *douce* Presbyterian image and to appeal to Catholic voters, with such success that, in the 1997 elections, the political preferences of Catholics were not markedly at odds with those of non-Catholics.

As for socio-economic status, social surveys from the 1970s onwards show a clear convergence between Catholics and non-Catholics. The 1972 Scottish Mobility Survey showed only a small difference in the social-class profiles of Catholics and Protestants and that was greatest for the oldest age groups in the sample (Payne and Ford 1977). A 1992 survey showed that while 4 per cent of Church of Scotland identifiers had university degrees, the proportion for Catholics was 6 per cent (Bruce 1998, p.118). Upward social mobility should provide a good measure of enduring discrimination. Are there significant differences in the chances of Protestants and Catholics born to working class parents making it up into the middle class? Using the 1997 Scottish Election Survey, if we divide the Scottish population by age and compare those who attended school before and after 1974 (when the comprehensive reforms of the education system had largely taken effect), we find that for the older sample, Protestants enjoyed a clear advantage but that for the post-1974 sample the difference in social mobility rates is very small and favours Catholics.

Finally in this very brief summary, we can consider marriage patterns. One of the most obvious and powerful marks of a divided society is that two peoples do not inter-marry. Inter-racial marriage in South Africa is very rare and still rare in the USA. In Northern Ireland, only some 5 per cent of marriages are mixed and it is common for people who marry 'out' to be targets for arson attacks and worse. In the industrial lowlands of Scotland, about half of all Catholic marriages are with non-

Catholics³. Although this is powerful evidence of Protestant-Catholic mixing, it may under-represent its true extent if we conclude that those people who co-habit rather than marry are more likely than those who marry to be marginal members of the Catholic community.

On the basis of a very small and informally constructed sample, Bradley (1995) has argued that the descendants of the Irish are still distinctive in cultural identity. The much larger Scottish Election Surveys show no difference between Catholic and non-Catholics in the extent to which they feel respectively Scottish, British or something else. In 1997, 23 per cent of Catholics and the same number of all respondents said they felt 'Scottish, not British'. Identical proportions said they were Scottish rather than British. For no option did Catholics deviate more than 2 percentage points from the Scottish norm (Bruce 1998, p.124). This confirms the general impression of most observers: in addition to their religion, Catholics differ in a number of leisure interests (fondness for Irish music and support for Glasgow Celtic Football Club, for example) but such personal preferences are not part of vital group identities and are no longer closely tied to socio-economic or political differences.

THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF SCHOOLING

The apparent disappearance of sectarianism as a major social force in Scotland does not prevent commentators supposing that segregated education is divisive. That most Catholic children are educated in Catholic schools and are thus separated from their non-Catholic peers is allegedly bad because it makes it almost certain that children will acquire friends almost entirely from

³ *The Church's own figures show that almost half of Catholic marriages in the early 1970s were 'irregular' (McRoberts 1979, p.237). Although I do not have more recent published data, informal conversations suggest that the figure has since increased markedly. 'About half' may be a considerable under-estimate.*

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their co-religionists and fail to make positive bonds with members of the other religion. The supporters of Catholic schooling deny any such deleterious consequences. Fortunately for my argument here, it does not matter how divisive is segregated schooling. We can give it any notional value. What matters is that, if we accept the case for assimilation made above, either Catholic schooling has become less divisive or it has been insufficiently divisive to prevent the above social changes. Following the latter line, we could conclude that schooling does not have a powerful autonomous effect: it only serves to maintain salient social divisions if it reinforces other divisive social forces (such as national conflict, or structured competition in the labour market). Following the former, we might note that Catholic schools have become less distinctively Catholic. One mark of that change would be the decline in the role of the clergy and the teaching orders and the increasing proportion of non-Catholic staff. However, while there may have been significant changes in the content of education, there has been little change to the fact of social separation. Indeed the same can be said of the depiction of sectarianism in my introduction. Irrespective of how severe sectarianism now is, we need only agree that it is markedly less potent than it once was in order to formulate the question I wish to address. How could Catholic-non-Catholic relations have changed so much when the core institution for the reproduction of Catholic identities - confessional schools - have remained in place?

I would like to add a new element to this discussion. In the absence of research specifically directed to examining this possibility, this presentation can only be speculative and is offered as a stimulus to debate and research rather than as a final answer. I would like to suggest that the debate about divisiveness has missed an important point by concentrating on the social experiences of children in schools and paying

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insufficient attention to the interests, social ties and attitudes of parents.

The general point is very simple and can be introduced anecdotally. I moved to my village of some 600 souls eight years ago. My three children, aged 11, 8 and 5, all attend the village primary school. Attending PTA meetings, fund-raising events, school socials, and parent-teacher meetings has brought me into contact with the parents of children who are ages with mine. In addition the school is the hub of a wide variety of other activities for my children: Rainbows and Brownies, school trips, and sporting events. Standing outside the school to meet my children, taking them to their friends' parties, and arranging shared lifts and the like has brought me into contact with about 30 families in the village. Without exaggeration, I can say that almost all my non-work friendships have resulted from my children attending that particular school. The point is even clearer made the other way round. When I try to explain what those people in the village that I do not know and rarely meet have in common, it is that they do not have children in the school.

If my experience is at all common, and I see no reason why it should be unusual, then it follows that the social worlds of adults are strongly influenced by the schooling of their children. We need only stipulate that social attitudes (especially those which contain images of other social, ethnic, racial or national groups) are at least in part influenced by actual social interaction to see how schools, children and the attitudes of their parents may be related.

So how do we explain the declining divisiveness of segregated schools? First, schools only play a major role in the social relations of those adults who have school-age children and the number of children has fallen markedly. One way of producing a standard measure that can be used for comparisons across time, irrespective of marriage patterns, is to express the number

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of children women are having as a proportion of those they could have had: 'even when the high rates of illegitimate fertility are taken into account, only some 14.4 per cent of Scots women's potential fertility was being realised by 1988, compared with 19.2 per cent in 1931 and 26 per cent in 1911 (Anderson 1992, p.33). This markedly reduces the number of adults linked to schools through their children. So although almost all Scottish adults will have been influenced by their own schooling, an ever growing percentage will not have had that experience reinforced and continued by having their adult relationships shaped by their own children's schooling.

A related change that should have borne more heavily on Scottish Catholics than non-Catholics is the decline in the typical family size. A woman who has five children at eighteen month intervals will have children in school (assuming they typically start at 5 and leave at 16) for 19.5 years. A woman who has only one child will be involved in its schooling for only 11 years. Thus the decline in typical family size should have had a major effect on how long parents are involved in schooling, even allowing for the increase in typical span of schooling over the twentieth century (some of which is offset by the increasing popularity of post-Standard-Grade education taking place in state sector colleges rather than schools). National data from 1911 show that 'women married between the ages of 22 and 26 and living with their husbands for at least fifteen years had on average almost six children. More than one fifth had nine or more' (Anderson 1992, p.36). 1971 census data show that women who married between the ages of 22 and 24 in the mid-1940s had a mean family size of around 2.5 children. 51 per cent had one or two children.

Although the links between age of marriage, prevalence of marriage, number of children, and life-span are complex, the basic point can be extrapolated from the following:

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In 1900, Scottish working-class women would have spent around a third of their lives (i.e. fifteen to seventeen years) producing, nursing and nurturing children up to the age of ten. ... By the early 1990s, with the average number of children per family at two and life expectancy up to seventy-seven years, this maternal care period had contracted to constitute about fifteen per cent of a woman's life span.

(McIvor 1996, p.191)

Clearly if we add the years from 10 to 15 on to those figures to cover the rest of formal schooling the point would be even stronger.

Of course this is a gross simplification, but I am suggesting that we divide social relationships in two spheres: the home and the world of work. Given that the world of work is more controlled by bureaucratic rationality and typically involves mixing with large numbers of people, it is likely to encourage people to meet with members of a different nationality, ethnicity, or religion on equal terms. The private world of the home is structured around personal preferences and hence relationships are more likely to reflect and thereafter reinforce one's existing preferences. Thus even in Northern Ireland, where the conflict has caused radical residential segregation, major employers tend to have mixed work forces. At work Protestants and Catholics mix; at home they are divided. Hence the more time that people spend in the home as opposed to work, the more likely they are to recreate sectarian social preferences. The decline in fertility rates means that the home and the school decline in importance as a source of friends and acquaintances.

For women, this change is amplified by the numbers of mothers who work either full-time or part-time. Between 1901 and 1931 the proportion of women in work changed little and was about 35 per cent. After the Second World War it rose rapidly so that by 1991 it was 67 per cent. It is also clear that the nature of women's work has changed. Many working class women in the 1930s or 1940s worked part-time but that work would usually have been in a small operation, close by the home or in other

people's homes; that is, in the sorts of workplaces most likely to hire by religion.

CONCLUSION

This essay is mercifully short because the point I have sought to make is a simple one. The debate about the divisiveness (or otherwise) of parallel school systems has concentrated on the consequences for children. If, as I have suggested, the school is a major source of friends and acquaintances for parents, then the decline in the average family size may well have had a major impact on the social relationships of adults. In particular, it may have reduced the importance of the home and raised the importance of the public world of work.

Elsewhere I have stressed the role of changes in political and economic structure in reducing the opportunities for people to reproduce social advantage and disadvantage (Bruce 1998).

During the Stormont era, Ulster unionists had the political and economic power to favour their own and alienate nationalists.

Some of the explanation for the decline of sectarianism in Scotland can be found in the removal of economic power from the locale (first to larger Scottish companies, then to UK firms, then to US, and finally to Japanese firms). Some can be found in political impotence. The minority who wished to pursue an anti-Catholic agenda found themselves subordinated to UK-wide party structures and agendas. This style of explanation supposes that Scotland became more tolerant, not because Scots became more tolerant, but because they lost the ability effectively to be otherwise! Structural change reduced the ability to discriminate. The descendants of the Irish became less and less distinctive and thus made the prejudices of the bigots less persuasive. Unable to shape the world to conform with their prejudices, a few bigots clung to their animosities but most gradually lost interest.

What I am supposing in this brief essay is another element of the same complex changes. Group identities require the boundaries

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of the group to be policed and require frequent interaction within the group. Of itself proximity does not change prejudices, especially when major structural divisions remain in place. That is why thirty years of well-meaning mixed holiday camps for Northern Ireland children has had little impact on communal ill-feeling. However, when the main social divisions are themselves weakening, then increased amounts of positive interaction with 'them' will weaken the sense of 'us'. The shrinking of the typical family should have reduced the centrality of schooling in maintaining social relationships and allowed other fields (such as place of work, non-confessional leisure activities, voluntary association interests) to become relatively more important. Clearly there is much research to be done to fill out the elements of this argument, which may need refining to take account of period, class and region. For example, it may be that school only became a major source of friends and contacts for parents after the post-war housing boom took people out of the densely packed tenement streets. Prior to that, the social ties that could have developed around children's schooling were perhaps already in place by virtue of parents being tightly packed in streets around their schools. Or to put it another way, Catholic schools could hardly be 'divisive' if the population was dense and religiously segregated; then all schools, Catholic or state, were merely local schools. The social world created by school repeated the world created by the neighbourhood. But, unlike Belfast, Glasgow, Dundee and Edinburgh, even in the 1930s, had few areas that were so segregated. We can thus reasonably see the school as an autonomous source of social contacts, and not just as a mirror of the neighbourhood. But even if it were the latter, the point about shrinking family size permitting women to live more of their lives away from the home, the school and the neighbourhood remains a powerful one. Finally, even if my claim for the role of the school in shaping the social worlds of parents is germane only for urban Scotland

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after the growth of the new towns and new peripheral estates, it remains a powerful observation because it may go some way to explaining how the segregated school system was reproduced in those areas without the deeper sense of sectarian identities also being reproduced.

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