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'So, Is It True?' Time to Embrace the Hermeneutical Turn in Catholic Religious Education in the Republic of Ireland

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Abstract: A key challenge for educational provision in the Republic of Ireland has been the need to develop appropriate approaches to religious education that are effective in terms of meeting the needs and rights of students in a democratic pluralistic society. At the centre of such discussions, although rarely explicitly recognised, is an attempt to grapple with the question of truth in the context of religious education. This paper argues that religious education, in attempting to engage with this evolving context, is challenged in two trajectories: (a) by approaches that operate from the presumption that objective truth exists and (b) by approaches that are sceptical of any claim to objective truth. It will be argued that proposals, such as those offered by active pluralists, to deal with religious truth claims in religious education are limited in terms of their capacity to adequately treat such claims and the demands that these carry for adherents. This paper argues for a hermeneutical treatment of the context for Catholic religious education in the Republic of Ireland, which is considered under the following headings: (1) irruptions from the periphery, (2) the theological matrix, (3) the status of religion, and (4) the position of students and teachers in religious education classes. From this it will be suggested that promoting religious education as a hermeneutic activity allows for a respectful engagement with competing truth claims.

Keywords: hermeneutics; Republic of Ireland; truth claims; pluralism; religious education; detraditionalisation; Catholic Education

1. Introduction

This paper argues that two trajectories are operative in religious education in the Republic of Ireland: (a) approaches that operate from the presumption that objective truth exists and (b) approaches that are sceptical of any claim to objective truth. These directions are sometimes caricatured as denominational approaches versus multi-denominational, though increasingly non-denominational, approaches. Underpinning these two approaches, although rarely explicitly recognised, is an attempt to grapple with the question of truth in the light of an accelerated secularisation, detraditionalisation and pluralism of belief in the Republic of Ireland. It will be suggested that proposals such as those offered by active pluralists in response to religious truth claims in religious education are limited in terms of their capacity to adequately treat such claims and the demands that these carry for adherents. Instead, an approach rooted in epistemological and hermeneutical pluralism which recognises the existence of contrary truth claims is called for. Such an approach is shaped by and responsive to the contemporary context for religious education in the Republic of Ireland which is considered through a Catholic lens under the following headings: (1) irruptions from the periphery, (2) the theological matrix, (3) the status of religion, and (4) the position of students and teachers in religious education classes. From this it will be concluded that promoting religious education as a dynamic hermeneutical activity allows for a respectful engagement with competing truth claims and calls for a more considered attention to the hermeneutical task of religious education in detraditionalised and pluralised contexts.

2. Religious Education in the Republic of Ireland: Challenged in Two Directions

A key challenge for educational provision in the Republic of Ireland has been the need to develop appropriate approaches to religious education that are effective in terms of meeting the needs and rights of students in a democratic pluralistic society. In many instances, religious education is often caricatured in a binary sense, e.g., denominational and non-denominational. There are a variety of conversations currently taking place in the Republic of Ireland, where such binary thinking is evident. In the primary sector, for example, it is explicit in the context of the future redevelopments of the primary school curriculum (NCCA 2020). In the post-primary sector, it finds particular expression in the debate generated by Circular Letter 0013/2018 and Circular Letter 0062/2018 (Department of Education and Skills 2018a, 2018b) about the place of religious instruction and worship in ETB schools. Arguably, there is some attempt toward a middle ground in the approach and language adopted by the *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (NCCA 2019). These discussions are coloured by an understanding of religious education, which has been shaped principally by the Christian traditions (particularly the Catholic tradition), which assume the existence of an objective truth which can be known as God and from which all other truth claims flow. Denominational religious education, regardless of the specific faith tradition, assumes the existence of such objective truth. This designation, i.e., God as objective truth, is not and cannot be made by other non-denominational based approaches to religious education. Rather, some approaches operate from the paradoxical postmodern designation that the only objective truth that exists is that there is no such thing as *the* truth. An acceptance of the existence of objective truth does not imply that knowledge of objective truth can be approached in a detached manner akin to some mode of pure objectivity. Rather, the existence of objective truth, or even the possibility of its existence, forces the person to respond to the claim being made by way of a truth response. This understanding of objective truth refutes any conception of neutrality in relation to the question of truth, not only in religious education but also in the wider educational enterprise as well as in wider society.

This discussion, more often than not, takes on a rather polemical trajectory with stakeholders either arguing for denominational RE or for non-denominational RE. Approaches characterised as non-denominational in the Republic of Ireland often take a cultural or historical approach to religion, which is viewed as a heritage to be preserved and valued as the historical beginnings and resources of a particular civilisation are represented in religion. It follows then that the main disciplines for clarifying the role of religion in society, for studying the religious traditions, and for choosing the appropriate information to be given to subsequent generations are the sciences of religion (i.e., anthropology, sociology, philosophy, psychology, etc. of religion). The central hermeneutical key of this approach to religion is cognitive understanding in which educators of religion are called to encourage and promote "a documented insight into the historical reality of religions" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 12).

Recent proposals (NCCA 2015, 2020) within the primary education sector in the Republic of Ireland have placed this cognitive aspect at the centre of religious education. This important aspect is often referred to as learning 'about' religion in the Republic of Ireland and is evident not only in the primary sector but also in the post-primary sector (NCCA 2019). However, it is envisaged that such learning 'about' emphasises the importance of students' own exploration of the human religious traditions, philosophical beliefs, and world views that protect and illuminate the spiritual and ethical dimension of the human experience.

This cognitive dimension, especially in relation to learning about religions and beliefs other than one's own, is also present as a significant dimension of a denominational approach to religious education in the Republic of Ireland (*Catholic Preschool and Primary School Religious Education Curriculum* (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015)—hereafter, CP-PREC), This important dimension of religious education is highlighted by Kieran's claim that "schools are key locations where citizens are educated about diversity of belief and

religious pluralism" (2013, p. 28). It is important here to recognise that learning 'about' is but one dimension of a Catholic approach to Religious Education.

For Catholic religious education, proposals such as those presented in the consultation document on *Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics* (NCCA 2015) as well as the more recent *Draft Primary Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2020) present a rather limited understanding of the *telos* of religious education. The latter even suggests that religious education be removed from the core curriculum and be placed in a curricular category called 'flexible time', alongside daily tasks such as roll call. It is also interesting to note that the term 'religious education' as a distinct category does not appear in the draft curriculum; instead, the document uses a smorgasbord of terminology, i.e., 'religious/ethical/multi-belief—patron programme' (NCCA 2020). Such proposals are imbued with the judgement that religious education is insignificant in terms of the educational enterprise. In arguing that this cognitive dimension is the only purpose of religious education, or by proposing to remove religious education from the core curriculum, these proposals fail to adequately appreciate the richness of the contribution made by religious education, even broadly conceived, to the person and wider society. This position appears to be at odds with the more positive proposals offered in the *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (NCCA 2019): "Religious Education provides a particular space for students to encounter and engage with the deepest and most fundamental questions relating to life, meaning and relationships. It encourages students to reflect, question, critique, interpret, imagine and find insight for their lives. The students' own experience and continuing search for meaning is encouraged and supported" (p. 4).

In attempting to give an adequate account of the contemporary context within which religious education finds itself in the Republic of Ireland, a useful comparison presents itself by way of the context that has emerged in Belgium, specifically Flanders. Writing from this context, Boeve (2012) suggested that many thinkers have become critical of a religious education curriculum which is primarily concerned with the Christian faith and argued that "the time has come for a non-confessional religious education that introduces the various religions/fundamental life options that a pluralised field recognises" (p. 147). Such critics, according to Boeve, identify themselves as taking up an "active-pluralist position" and emphasise that the time has arrived for a shift to occur "from 'education into religion' to 'education about religion(s)'" (p. 147) if young people are to be adequately prepared to live in an active-pluralist society.

2.1. The Active Pluralist Approach

Active pluralists De Groof et al. (2010) and Franken and Loobuyck (2017) call for a reciprocal and active recognition of plurality and difference. De Groof et al. (2010) argue:

> "A decent society asks along with reciprocal recognition of secular and religious views for forms of reciprocal recognition which go further than passive tolerance [. . .] No one has to give up his/her own truth, but reciprocal willingness to listen and learn is certainly a condition for a peaceful coexistence and social cohesion". (p. 8)

An inherent shift is operative in the proposal of establishing an active-pluralist religious education that aims to introduce pupils to all of the religious traditions. This proposal attempts to meet the needs of students in relation to the development of religious literacy and attempts to support them in their identity construction process by overcoming an indifference to religion(s). One should heed caution, however, as such a proposal, in attempting to avoid privileging one religion's claim to truth over another, offers in their place another claim to truth, one that is equally value-laden and tradition-specific.

In terms of the proposals offered by active-pluralists, one is faced with the following questions: from where do these values originate? Are such values merely evident in the religious sphere as a mode of meta- or instantaneous level above or between a range of fundamental life options and religions? Are they part of a single tradition, or do they come from a variety of traditions? Are these values some kind of common wisdom that have

been constructed in light of the conflicts that occurred between fundamental life options? Do said values exist separately from the tradition(s) out of which they grew? Or does the relation to such traditions remain necessary to sense these values, to take them on and to enhance them? Moreover, is it rather presumptuous, if not precarious, to assume that any manner of consensus could be arrived at in relation to such a set of values?

In attending to such questions, another question is encountered: if religious education is to set about practicing such a set of values, is an education merely 'about religion' sufficient in and of itself? For instance, Boeve (2012) asks:

> "Is Religious Education that is limited to learning about religious traditions not *too narrow,* if it is not paired, at the same time, with a reflection on one's own religious position and the manner in which one deals with diversity and difference (both on the level of knowledge and of commitment)?" (p. 148)

If such reflection does not occur on the level of commitment as well as knowledge, an RE curriculum could ultimately move toward religious relativism or indifference. This raises an even more pressing question: if religious education is conceived and practiced as such, i.e., as a broad religious education about a range of fundamental life options and religions, does it not present itself as merely a variation of the neutral-secular manner of addressing religious plurality, one which fails to recognise its own value commitment? If so, such an approach would become yet another confessional RE in its own right, one directed towards the service of *post*-Christian and *post*-secular religiosity.

Another question arises concerning the manner in which RE as conceived above addresses the tension that is evident between the unique identity construction of an individual and their relationship with tradition in an increasingly detraditionalised context. The active-pluralist proposal suggests that there is a large majority of highly individualised persons who construct their own identity, freely and autonomously, using material from classical traditions and other sources. Such persons, therefore, possess a non-tradition bound identity (Kieran and Mullally 2021). When this proposal and its contrast with the smaller cohort are considered in greater detail, it is apparent that such an approach, for example, proposes that "the more individualisation, the less tradition, and the opposite: the more tradition, the less individualisation" (Boeve 2012, p. 149).

Although it makes a positive and necessary contribution to discussions in religious education, on its own, the active-pluralist position is limited in two ways: (1) it offers an approach that is equally as value-laden as denominational approaches and (2) it is restricted in its capacity to adequately treat religious truth claims and the demands that they carry for adherents. The active pluralist position fails to recognise that reflexive belonging operates within the context of those who construct their identity from a single tradition. These limitations further highlight the need for an approach to religious education that is explicit in its awareness of its own particularity, and by embracing this hermeneutical horizon, carries a capacity to meaningful address difference, the need for dialogue and mutual recognition from this particularity. In this way, it offers itself as a *sui generis* position that ought to be situated as another position in the sphere of religious diversity.

There is another tension worth considering in terms of the proffered active-pluralist position, namely, the tension that exists between the lack of a coherent identity formation or construction that has emerged from detraditionalisation on the one hand, and on the other, "the conditions for the possibility of an active-pluralist conversation, which in one way or another presupposes a degree of identity construction" (Boeve 2012, p. 149). This point is further explicated by Boeve, who asserts that if one is to be capable of taking part in a dialogue between religions and fundamental life options, and therefore, be capable of arriving at a dialogical identity construction in mutual recognition, then diversity and difference must be explicitly present. Such dialogue presents significant challenges for religious education in the Republic of Ireland as elsewhere. It assumes that individuals are sufficiently grounded in their particular tradition prior to participating in such dialogue. Such an assumption does not correlate with the current classroom context in the Republic

of Ireland in that there is a significant degree of variation evident in this regard amongst pupils and teachers (McGrady et al. 2019; Mc Guckin et al. 2014).

While there are a variety of formulations of the active pluralist proposal, it can be said that each of them claims that it would be more beneficial to remove denominational religious education altogether from the curriculum and replace it with a general religious education that attempts to avoid dealing with the complexities and challenges raised by claims to religious truth. While attempts are sometimes made to complement denominational programmes, or vice versa, such efforts, more often than not, operate from conflicting epistemological perspectives. From this discussion, it is evident that the view that a non-denominational approach, such as that offered by an active pluralist perspective, provides an alternative or even superior approach to religious education than a denominational approach finds itself in a rather precarious position, particularly in terms of addressing diversity and plurality.

2.2. Moving beyond 'Active Pluralism' and the Myth of a Value-Neutral Approach to RE

Though a welcome response to the discourse about the values and purpose of religious education in the context of detraditionalisation, individualisation and pluralisation, the need for the proposed active-pluralist alternative to denominational approaches to religious education is no longer explicitly evident, nor is there any indication that such approaches ought to be considered inferior to it. Instead, all religious education should lead pupils "to become conscious of the inescapable religious character in every manner of human thinking, acting and living, and of the plurality which this involves" (Boeve 2012, p. 150).

In this way, then, as part of a denominational religious education curriculum, pupils are invited and encouraged to consider their own identity within the context of engagement with other witnesses. In such a curriculum, each pupil is moved "to arrive at religious maturity and interreligious conversation, whether they now are Christians, post-Christians, agnostic, Muslim, indifferent etc . . . " (Boeve 2012, p. 150; Irish Episcopal Conference 2010, 2015). According to Boeve (2012) "if all (non-) confessional Religious Education curricula did this as well, there would be the additional advantage of also including the organised religions and world views in becoming reflexive" (p. 150). This is made possible by the fact that "all of them then would be challenged to work at reflecting upon their own truth claims in relation to diversity and difference" (p. 150). This position offers, perhaps, the most efficacious countermeasure to inclinations towards "neo-traditionalism and fundamentalism, which are often present in all of them" (p. 150). From this discussion, it is evident that in the current post-Christian and post-Secular European context, Catholic religious education is characterised by its caring disposition for the future of the Christian tradition as well as a desire to meet the needs of the contemporary context.

The active pluralist approach to religious education attempts to bracket out '*learning from*' or '*learning into*' a particular tradition. This is evidenced by the introduction of 'Education about Religion and Beliefs' (ERB) programmes across Europe. It must be recognised, however, that the introduction of such programmes highlights the challenges faced by education systems in attempting to accommodate the diversity that is evident within schools (Jackson 2013). These programmes focus on 'learning *about*' different religions and beliefs, but do not facilitate 'learning *from*' or learning *into*' religions and beliefs, as they seek to adopt a neutral stance regarding the validity of truth claims by utilising the approach of ideological pluralism (Donovan 1993). This approach moves that for a programme to be 'pluralist', it ought to take up an ideological project which strives to neutralise any authentic recognition of diversity by imposing a totalitarian apprehension of truth, i.e., there is only one truth, the truth of pluralism (Merrigan 2013, p. 66). Such programmes, therefore, further perpetuate 'the myth of neutrality' in religious education discourse.

In attempting to move beyond an active pluralist approach to religious education, it is necessary that religious education accommodates the possibility of God and a student's right to freely choose to accept faith. There appears, however, to be an emergent position

amongst many contemporary religious educators in schools that in no instance should a child be *intentionally* initiated into a given faith or taught that such a faith might be true because of a fear of indoctrination. As noted above, some educators would suggest that children may be taught *about* a faith only as an account of what many people have chosen to believe. In such an approach, there is no opportunity for pupils to freely accept faith if they so choose. The freedom of the individual to choose to accept faith is a central pillar of a Catholic approach to religious education. Faith *qua* Faith is a gift that must be *freely* accepted by the individual. This freedom is not accommodated in approaches to religious education that attempt to bracket out '*learning from*' and '*learning into*' a particular tradition.

On this point, one is not implying that pupils should be *indoctrinated* into any particular faith. As outlined thus far, to force one to belief defeats the very notion of faith that is proclaimed by the Christian tradition. Rather, this point merely suggests that to present religious truth as just that, 'truth', is not to move towards indoctrination (Topley 2008). It must be recognised too that whether or not one takes a denominational- or non-denominational-based approach to religious education, both involve 'learning into' a particular tradition, i.e., a particular religion, philosophy, worldview, belief or beliefs, etc. This insight is essential if the person is to not only enter into a meaningful conversation about the area of religious education, but also in terms of adequately addressing the post-Christian and post-Secular context in which religious education now finds itself. This point is also made by Boeve, who outlines that such specificity or particularity must be openly acknowledged if religious education is to adequately address the contemporary pluralist context within which "each identity is structurally challenged to conceive of itself in relation to difference and otherness—especially to the effect of other truth claims to its own claim" (p. 146). This can be observed even more clearly when considering the fact that each school community makes a unique contribution to the public square by virtue of the fact that every school educates from a particular worldview.

2.3. Ethos, Epistemological Pluralism, and Participative Knowing

The ethos of a school has a direct correlation with but is not limited to the way in which a school approaches religious education. For instance, Catholic schools adopt a particular approach to religious education, one that makes an explicit claim to objective truth. Contrary to an approach to religious education that is sceptical of the existence of objective truth, or is reluctant to exercise judgemental rationality in relation to truth claims, a Catholic approach to religious education utilises the perspective of epistemological pluralism. This approach shows that an authentic understanding of diversity is central if one is to be 'pluralist'. Epistemological pluralism recognises the existence of contrary truth claims, and proposes that "the cause of truth is best served by way of discussion and argument" (Kennedy 2021, p. 109). This proposition is central to an appropriate contemporary approach to religious education, particularly if it is to accommodate the "strangeness, difference and otherness" of religion (Biggar 2009, p. 317).

Taking up the approach of epistemological pluralism acknowledges that participative knowing (in the Gadamerian sense) and inter-faith engagement are central to Catholic religious education. The transformation of one's 'prejudices' is at the centre of participative knowing and is brought about through dialogue with the other (Gadamer 1975). This relationship between transformation and dialogue signals the value of inter-personal conversation in religious education, particularly in the area of inter-faith engagement. As opposed to an approach to religious education that moves exclusively towards "the acquisition of a detached knowledge about religions or the *accents* of religions" (Kennedy 2021, p. 109), such inter-personal conversation promotes an approach that accommodates an authentic "openness to a deeper relationship with the other through participation in a process of interpretation and understanding" (p. 109). All knowing necessitates a critically important hermeneutical event, a moment of interpretation. In truth, therefore, there is no such thing as entirely "detached knowing, nor is there such thing as simply attending to the facts without some value-laden process of selection and interpretation of the facts"

(Lane 2011, p. 48). Hermeneutics makes clear that "one cannot step outside of history, location and culture in the process of interpreting the data, texts, history and religion" (p. 48). Hans-Georg Gadamer (1975), for example, claimed that the time has come to overcome "the prejudice against prejudice" (p. 272) within modernity. While hermeneutics is traditionally associated with biblical or textual interpretation, contemporary hermeneutics moves beyond its traditional textual orientation to engage with life itself. Such hermeneutical discourse embraces contingency and historicity. It seeks meaning in both texts and life itself as it unfolds historically. This hermeneutical process of interpretation and understanding clearly further supports the idea that school communities, especially Catholic school communities, are best understood as interpretative communities. This hermeneutical context has ultimately challenged religious education in the Republic of Ireland in two directions: (a) approaches that operate from the presumption that objective truth exists and (b) approaches that are sceptical of any claim to objective truth.

3. Hermeneutics Emerging in the Realm of Religious Education

In recognising the centrality of hermeneutics to religious education in the Republic of Ireland, it is proposed here that any future treatment of the hermeneutics of religious education in this context must take account of the following themes: (1) irruptions from the periphery, (2) the theological matrix, (3) the status of religion, and (4) the position of students and teachers in religious education classes. These themes act as a potential framework for a treatment of the hermeneutics of religious education in the Republic of Ireland by mapping the horizon within which religious education is taking place.

3.1. Irruptions from the Periphery

There are numerous examples to which one can turn to demonstrate the significance of interpreting emerging authentic forms of the Christian faith (Lane 2008). The past decades, as Pollefeyt and Lombaerts (2004) suggested, demonstrate just "how much a new awareness, new needs of vast populations, and new opportunities for exploring God's presence are at the core of the present evolution" (p. 5). Pollefeyt argues that a two-fold process is unfolding in that the institutional structures and bureaucratic rule are losing credibility, while at one and the same time, emerging or new religious movements and initiatives animate people to look for continuity. Elementary misunderstandings direct one's attention to the complexity of the shifts that confront and challenge religious people in contemporary society. Of particular interest to believers in this context, for example, is the confrontation between what Edmund Chia refers to as peripheral "irruptions" (Chia 2003, p. 29), explicit practices or reactions to critical local issues, and the standardised options of the Vatican. A serious 'irruption' that disrupts Christian churches and confronts religious educators as well as pastoral ministers in Western Europe is the disaffection that young people and middle-aged adults demonstrate towards religious practice and affiliation. This is illustrated by the empirical research conducted by Andrew McGrady et al. (2019), on the religious identity of 16- to 19-year-old Catholic school leavers in the Republic of Ireland: "well over half of these young Catholics perceive their own religious trajectory to be moving away from the religious profile of their parents" (CSO 2016, p. 173). An over simplistic and superficial analysis or conclusion on this point gravitates towards the concurrent blaming of catechists and teachers of religion for falling short of what is expected of them in terms of presenting Church teaching, appropriate methodologies, and for surrendering to contemporary society concerning individualism and relativism.

Yet, when this insight is considered in greater detail, it is evident that a fundamental shift has taken place in Western consciousness—a shift "from a metaphysical conception of reality to a hermeneutical perception" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 7). A new self-awareness of the subject, however, presents itself as a significant hermeneutic constituent of growing up: "the real self emerges from a subjective appropriation of the objective social reality" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 7; Boeve 2012). This insight is far from novel. It was discerned in the late 1960s along with the challenges encountered in terms of the

status of religious education in schools and religion in wider society. This necessitated that teachers of religion cooperate with their students in a more authentic and forthright manner (Hession 2015; Byrne 2013b; Anderson et al. 2016; Dineen 2008).

One of the main issues facing institutional religion is in fact that it has become but one life option among many with regard to meaning within a society. As Mullally (2018) states "religious pluralism is identified as a new reality in Ireland that needs to be addressed and catered for by the educational system" (p. 17). While the Republic of Ireland has always been diverse, Hession (2015) highlighted that "increasing immigration into Ireland from the 1990s onwards has led to an increase in the number of people espousing differing, religious and ethical worldviews" (p. 16). In this globalised world, children are encountering a plurality of ideas, values, models and alternative stances for living. In this context, the term 'plurality' is used as a descriptive term that signifies the actual cultural and religious diversity present in Irish society. Its usage points to the fact that institutionalised religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, is no longer understood as being an exclusive source of meaning within Irish society and, even for some, no longer a legitimate one (Cullen 2019).

Another irruption is the development of "a universal capitalism or a democratic world order moves towards reinforcing the secular nature of the global governance of this world" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 8; Lane 2013; Habermas 2016). Religious authorities actively work alongside secular movements. The suggestion is to formulate criteria for discernment and decision-making in matters with direct implications for people at the deepest level of their existence. The experience of this historical process motivates one to consider the hermeneutic question as a central and unavoidable issue for religious education. In attempting to overcome the current impasse, scholars are anxious to move into new liberating grounds that facilitate the univocal potential of religious truth to affect and orientate young generations. From this standpoint, it becomes clear that religious efforts must be creative in adapting to unique issues and concerns that are evident at all levels of the social reality (Falk 2001).

3.2. The Theological Matrix

A significant feature of the new context in which education and religion finds itself across Europe, and particularly in the Republic of Ireland, is what Lane (2013) described as "the declining influence of the modernity narrative" (p. 10). Modernity narratives' assume that one size fits all in relation to education and religion. This is understood as problematic as it exerts "a negative influence on the self-understanding of education and religion in the Republic of Ireland" (p. 10). This negative influence has been felt at several levels across mainland Europe and the Republic of Ireland: "(1) a narrowing of reason, (2) the presence of spirit-stifling practices, (3) a contraction of the social and religious imaginaries, and (4) the privatisation of religious faith" (Lane 2013, p. 10). Arguably, the supremacy of the modern narrative has been challenged and transformed by the post-modern critique that all knowing is provisional. In this way, post-modernity facilitated the realisation that there is no neutral, value-free approach to knowledge and understanding. Rather, it enabled persons to recognise that "all knowledge is tradition-specific, and that the personal enters into all knowledge and self-understanding" (p. 10). This insight brings another pivotal point in the development of this new context for education and religion to the fore—the shift within the anthropological structure of religion.

The intimate relationship that exists between the self, the person, and the 'Other' was rearranged as a consequence of secularisation and modernity. The anthropological structures of religion had traditionally found their foundations in transcendence, but now, as a result of the 'disenchantment of the world', find their roots in immanence (Tracy 1994; Bergo 2005; Hampton 2018). This is in keeping with the shift from positivism to constructivism in educational theory, and the move to student centred pedagogical approaches. Traditionally, the anthropological structures of religion centred on transcendence which necessitated submission on behalf of the individual to the externally mediated Other. In this new context, however, the contemporary move towards transcendence in immanence

makes for the interiorisation of the Other in the individual and the emancipation of the individual in terms of one's relationship with the Other, and thereby, bringing said relationship into an existential context (Hampton 2018; Bergo 2005). In contemporary society, therefore, the significance of the Other is apprehended in terms of an increasingly inductive or existential approach to the quest for the meaning of life that leads to an emancipation of the individual that, in turn, prompts an interiorisation of Other in the individual.

The Enlightenment paradigm of knowledge had the effect of sideling religion within the public space. This is not only evident across mainland Europe, but also in the Republic of Ireland. The type of knowledge offered by theology came to be viewed with a certain degree of scepticism by advocates of modern rationality, and as a consequence, apprehended as being irrelevant in matters or affairs related to modern life. The modern, scientific paradigm of knowledge stresses, for example, the significance of detachment, objectivity, and concentration on empirical proofs, whereas theology, from the perspective of modernity, appears to be concerned with the mere personal, the subjective, as well as the utterly transcendent dimensions of existence. This perspective is rather unjust as theology "must also attend to the data of human experience, history, revelation, texts and rites" (Lane 2011, p. 4). Religion, perceived with such suspicion, came to be understood by many as a "purely private and personal matter that is best left on the margins of public discourse" (Lane 1997, p. 360).

This relegation of religious knowing arises from the fact that the unprecedented progress in knowledge inaugurated by modern science since the Enlightenment, particularly in terms of the natural sciences, medicine, and the cosmologies, has motivated modernity to hold up the scientific method as 'the gold standard' or norm of all knowing (Lane 2011). Theology, in response to this claim of modernity, argues that there is more than one mode of knowing which should be considered as equally valid forms of knowledge (Gadamer 1975). Such knowing is founded on "the personal participation, engagement and involvement of the individual in the subject matter under review that applies to the Arts, Humanities and Religion" (Lane 2011, pp. 47–48).

In his rehabilitation of William James' work, Taylor (2002) claimed that James further develops an Augustinian perspective in that certain domains of life, self-opening and love facilitate persons in coming to understand that which we would never otherwise grasp. For James (1974), "it is only in the act of personal participation and self-surrender to a particular experience or event or text that its full meaning and light and truth actually emerges" (Lane 2011, p. 49). This experience of the discovery of new knowledge through personal engagement is revealed most clearly in the areas of human relationships which provide the most appropriate analogy for understanding what occurs in religious knowing. For example, to dismiss the areas of life, such as human relationships, "to the margins of the world would be to relegate the drama of existence as expressed in the arts, the humanities and religion to the sidelines of life" (p. 49). Rather, the form of knowing that one is considering here must be acknowledged as possessing "its own validity alongside the knowing which belongs to the scientific method of the enlightenment" (p. 49). While the former context of knowing characterises religious and theological knowledge, i.e., 'participative knowing', Lane claimed that it would be inappropriate "to polarise or separate these two modes of knowing" (p. 49). Instead, he suggests that "they should be seen as complementary", emphasising that "it is debatable whether one can happen without the other" (p. 49).

It is evident, therefore, that if one polarises or exaggerates the difference between scientific knowing and religious knowing, it would be to misinterpret the complexity and delicacy of these forms of knowing. This polarisation fails to apprehend that the difference between them is not as great as many would have one believe, in that for some, the concept of 'detached knowing' is self-contradictory (Taylor 2011). Both scientific knowing and religious knowing place truth at the centre of enquiry; therefore, truth for both the scientific and religious enquiry is a genuine goal. The theological matrix, as evidenced across Europe and in the context of the Republic of Ireland, has been shown to be significantly

complex. Such complexity has a significant bearing on the manner in which religious education has progressed to date within the context of the Republic of Ireland. In particular, it brings into sharper focus the confusion that surrounds not merely understandings of what constitutes religious education, but also its viability as a valid pathway to human knowledge (Kennedy 2021).

3.3. The Status of Religion

Following from this insight, it is important to consider the way in which the status of religion has changed across Europe and the Republic of Ireland. When one considers the contemporary context in which religious education now finds itself, one must ultimately ask: in a pluralist, open, democratic society, what status is granted to legally recognised religions? Likewise, in terms of social position what, if any, might a particular religion attribute to itself? In addressing these questions one can discern five unique points of view: (1) a cultural and historical perspective, (2) a community of faith perspective, (3) an aesthetic perspective, (4) a liberation perspective, and (5) an inter-religious perspective. Each perspective is dependent upon differing sources, works towards different educational goals, commits itself to a different hermeneutical key, and calls on the educator/teacher to reflect a distinct profile in their relations with pupils.

In each of these five positions, religion is assigned a specific social position in society, or permits itself a particular function in said society. In this context, a particular hermeneutical problem is encountered as persons come from a multiplicity of backgrounds, each one referring to various sensitivities, experiences, and presuppositions concerning their understanding of 'religion', or connection with the sacred, the transcendent, or the refusal of it. In many contexts, a religion that once exercised a significant role in the development of a certain state or nation maintains a particular value within the collective memory, in the identity of said state's or nation's population.

In contemporary Irish society, which is perhaps best understood as a pluralist society, religion has taken on "a different hermeneutical meaning in comparison to recent history when religion functioned as the cement or cornerstone of society at large" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 15). This shift is best understood as a historical turnover. One must be attentive, therefore, to the fact that it is essential in this contemporary context for one to initially clarify the exact status that religion is granted in a particular discourse or civil institution, where, arguably, religion no longer boasts meaning and authority autonomously. Rather, religion may permit itself a specific authority within its particular horizon and its social context (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004). Furthermore, religion may be permitted some manner of authority by other external social and political institutions.

There is another significant historical turnover that must be highlighted, one that is brought into focus by way of the move from a transcendent to a 'transcendence in immanency' perspective. This move brings a particular hermeneutical problem to the surface. The participants in a 'religious event', for example, relate either consciously or unconsciously to one or more particular ways of recognising the theological or social significance of religion (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004). In this way, understandings of religion may differ on a basic level and, consequently, persons tend to adopt various pragmatic strategies for addressing religion's presence in the public sphere (Hannam 2019). Therefore, it is not difficult to concede that religious discourses presuppose or involve the learning process all the while—there is "a clarification of the status granted to the religious reality" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 15). It is not necessary, therefore, for one to emphasise that "the distinctions may partly overlap and co-exist in the vision and practice of a concrete person, an institution, or a theory of religious education" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 15).

3.4. The Position of Students and Teachers in Religious Education Classes

The movement towards immanency as the most credible context for reclaiming the Other and the transcendent, as well as the existence of numerous social standpoints

assumed by religion, challenge religious education with plurality (Meehan 2019). In a European context, the vast majority of participants in religious education in schools were considered homogenously 'Protestant', 'Catholic', or 'Jewish' roughly before 1990 (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004; Tuohy 2013). This premise was the starting point from which the majority of religious education programmes, textbooks, media, and methods were developed (Mc Guckin et al. 2014, Alive O, 1996–2004).

During the 1960s, with the rise of the Catholic working class, Irish society witnessed a significant increase in religious practice (Inglis 1998). This assumption, i.e., that a person was Catholic or religious at the very least, exercised significant influence regarding the recruitment of teachers across Europe and the Republic of Ireland. While from a sociological perspective, such an assumption may not be accurate, it has been accepted that shared religious roots were considered to be a valid starting point for constituting and formally establishing religious education in schools (Hession 2008). Since the record high number of practicing Catholics of the 1960s, Ireland has been subject to substantial societal change (CSO 2016; McGrady et al. 2019; Mc Guckin et al. 2014; Rami and Lalor 2006). With the arrival of the European Union, Irish society came to experience a rapidly changing social and economic structure, and changing demographic patterns emerging from immigration and emigration (Mullally 2018; Devine 2011; Darmody et al. 2011; Faas et al. 2015). This shift corresponds with the beginnings of a twenty-five-year period of significant religious change in the Republic of Ireland (CSO 2016). Between 1991 and 2016, the number of self-professed Catholics decreased to 78.3% of the population. This equates to a 13.3% decrease over a twenty-five-year when compared to the figure of 91.6% recorded by the CSO in 1991 (CSO 2016). During the 1970s, a movement towards a more secular approach to religious education emerged in the vocabulary of religious education in Europe, where the language of catechetics or confessional religious education was replaced by religious education theory, which may not have a denominational focus.

This move towards a significantly more 'secular' or 'professional' perspective demonstrates an important change amidst religious educators, particularly in relation to the goal of their religion education classes. Religious educators began to question whether initiation into faith should be a central goal of religious education (Irwin 2013; Dineen and Lundie 2017), and expressed an emerging dissatisfaction regarding the historically held position that theology, supported by appropriate 'teaching methods', ought to be the exclusive resource subject for teaching religious education (Dineen and Lundie 2017; Heinz 2013; Heinz et al. 2018; Byrne 2005). Religious educators were critical of such a conviction, as there was a growing appreciation for the insights emerging not only from theology, but also the human sciences and the sciences of religion which assisted in expanding the horizon for addressing religion within an educational context (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004). This openness to the human sciences and the sciences of religion in religious education is evident in recent post-primary reforms set out by the NCCA in the Republic of Ireland, such as in the revised *Junior Cycle Religious Education Specification* (NCCA 2019). For instance, there is a recognition that it is necessary for religious education to "engage critically with belief systems and principles of moral behaviour which can serve as a foundation for decisions" (NCCA 2019, p. 6).

This renewal of religious education came to place particular importance on the process of learning (NCCA 2019; Irish Episcopal Conference 2015). This shift towards process emphasises that the outcome of learning is the consummation of a specific individual's original learning process. One of the most significant obstacles faced by this renewal of religious education, particularly in relation to the management of teaching and learning processes, is the way in which one overcomes the distance that has emerged between the historical reality of the Christian tradition, i.e., beliefs, institutional settings, texts, rituals, practices, life style, vocabulary, etc., and the attitude of secularised contemporary society (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004; Mc Guckin et al. 2014; Heinz 2013; Heinz et al. 2018).

It is evident that a distorted presupposition exerts a particular negative influence in terms of overcoming the gap between historical reality and contemporary society. It can

no longer be assumed that the pupils encountered by teachers represent a homogeneous group of people with a Catholic or Christian background, when in fact they actually are a group that is representative of a plurality of backgrounds (Cullen 2019; Mullally 2018; Mc Guckin et al. 2014). Neither can it be assumed that the religion teacher identifies with a particular religious tradition (Kieran and Mullally 2021). The challenges posed by such plurality became clear when teachers turned to programmes and methodologies that were ill equipped to address such plurality, particularly in their engagement with matters such as "the meaning of life and moral behaviour" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 16). In the Republic of Ireland, for example, the Catholic RE programme used in primary schools during the 1990s and 2000s, Alive O, faced challenges in terms of its usability for a new generation of teachers (Dineen and Lundie 2017; Heinz 2013). Such programmes were ill equipped to adequately address the plurality encountered not only in terms of the changing religious demographics evident amongst the pupils in classrooms (Rami and Lalor 2006; Dublin Archdiocese 2004), but also in relation to the changing religious demographics evident amongst those entering the teaching profession (Heinz 2013; Heinz et al. 2018), particularly in terms of their ability to meaningfully engage with differing religious tradition or even the Christian tradition for that matter (Dineen and Lundie 2017).

This view presents a significant shift in relation to the foundational presuppositions of religious education curricula development as well as for the teaching strategies utilised by such curricula (McGrady et al. 2008). It is no longer possible for an educator to depend on the mutual ground or the hegemony of a class cohort for their work in the classroom. As a consequence of the plurality of this new classroom context, pupils speak different languages, refer to a variety of experiences, employ different vocabularies, and represent a range of differing connections with the Christian tradition and other denominations or world views (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004; Mc Guckin et al. 2014). Attempts to adequately address such plurality are evident amongst the various religious education programmes currently being utilised in primary schools in the Republic of Ireland, such as *Goodness You, Goodness Me* (Community National Schools 2018), *Learn Together* (Educate Together 2011), *Follow Me* (Wilkinson 2010) and *Grow in Love* (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015–2019). Even recent NCCA (2015, 2020) proposals at primary level demonstrate the challenges faced by the sector in addressing such plurality, particularly in terms of the need to respect the particularity of the ethos of each school in terms of attending to the plural nature of Irish classrooms.

The contemporary landscape in the Republic of Ireland is radically different to that of the old landscape evidenced by the presuppositions of the past (Mc Guckin et al. 2014), i.e., the homogenously Catholic or Christian group setting, and brings with it a renewed appreciation and recognition of the important role of hermeneutics in contemporary religious education. For instance, the contemporary teaching and learning experience moves towards bringing into focus "the presuppositions of each one of the subjects when they start to share their convictions, insights, behaviour, their familiarity with religious, philosophical or ethical life options" (Pollefeyt and Lombaerts 2004, p. 17; Byrne 2013a). From this standpoint, academically speaking, it is postulated that the formation of a common foundation for comprehending each other in dialogical contexts creates the necessary and appropriate conditions to afford access to the religious quest, to religious traditions and particularly to Christianity (Lane 2013; Cullen 2017; Byrne 2013a). Such an approach is evident in the Catholic religious education curriculum for pre-schools and primary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015). Within the learning group, participants, through their efforts to communicate, should be gradually and continuously introduced to a complex and diverse range of religious traditions (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015). From this standpoint, it is clear that the hermeneutical key is not exclusively situated in the interpretation of old texts. Rather, the hermeneutical principle rests firmly in the possession of young people themselves and is reflective of a far a broader gamut than 'experience' alone.

4. Conclusions

This paper has demonstrated that religious education has encountered significant challenges when faced with the complexities emerging from a detraditionalised and pluralised context. Amidst the complexities of this context four key observations point to the need for an exploration of the hermeneutics of religious education: (1) irruptions from the periphery, (2) the theological matrix, (3) the status of religion, and (4) the position of students and teachers in religious education classes. From engaging with these four areas, it is clear that if any approach to religious education is to adequately address the contemporary educational needs in the Republic of Ireland, it must, first and foremost, take the question of truth seriously. The status given to truth claims as well as the way in which one approaches them is of central importance to educators and pupils in religious education—that is, if religious education is to be held to the same account as other academic subjects as "valid pathways to human knowledge" (Kennedy 2021, p. 99). The diversity and plurality among people demonstrate that there are opportunities offered by an open or inclusive society for situating oneself sharply towards established and assumed social, cultural, religious, and ethical traditions. The person finds themselves situated in a 'fragile hermeneutical space' where reality, even one's inner reality, is "radically marked by a form of polyphony, by a multiplicity of voices, by plurality" (Pollefeyt 2020, p. 117). Religious education should move towards opening this hermeneutical space up for children and young adults with the view to developing their capacity to interpret reality through both a philosophical and religious lens and encounter the truth that nothing is obvious, normal, or simple.

This understanding of the person operates from the perspective that each person, "without exception, religious or nonreligious, Christian or otherwise, is characterised by this hermeneutical openness and that, by way of this openness, this indeterminacy, the given of existence, everyone has to sort out his or her own thinking" (Pollefeyt 2020, p. 116). This anthropology purports that the human subject can "create, discover and exchange sense, meaning and orientation within this openness, and that it is by way of "this shared openness that all people are also structurally linked as relational beings" (Lane 2015, p. 116). In taking the fragile hermeneutical space of the human person seriously, it is clear that there is a need to embrace the hermeneutical turn in Catholic religious education in the Republic of Ireland. If such an embrace is to occur, however, the hermeneutical task of religious education needs to be accounted for in such a way that its orientation adequately speaks to the needs of a contemporary classroom. It must, therefore, not only be attentive to the theological sensitivities that surround religious education in the Republic of Ireland, but also those philosophical complexities which have received limited attention to date (Kennedy 2021). It can be argued, therefore, that there is an urgent need to consider the hermeneutical task of religious education in the Republic of Ireland if religious education is to be effective in meeting the needs of students in a detraditionalised and plural cultural context.

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