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Catholic Schooling and the Permeation Trap: A Response to McDonough

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Religious education is, to a certain degree, about boundaries. The extent to which these boundaries are defined, or, to use a less charitable term, *policed*, is one of the fundamental questions of religious education in Canada today. With several provinces still offering fully publicly-funded religious schools (Catholic *separate* schools, most notably), and with the range of religious charter school options increasing, the idea of religious school identity has become ever more pertinent. Because Catholic separate schools receive extraordinary public support, the question of Catholic identity in education is a strangely public question. What is *Catholic* about Catholic schools, and why should they be separated from public schools? It is rare for public discourse to reach so far into discussions of one particular group's religious identity.

As a former Catholic separate school teacher, and as a graduate of a Catholic school system, the manifestation of Catholicity in daily life has long been of interest to me. I attended my local parish, played for the parish hockey team (missing fewer matches than masses), and eventually took Catholic theology courses as part of my teacher training program. My experiences in each of these manifestations of religious life was largely positive, and the education I received was, insofar as I can tell, excellent. Seeing my neighbours attend the public school across the street, or play for the public hockey team in the same arena, was, however, periodically confusing. There was a boundary being drawn, and, years after I ceased to be a member of that community, I must confess that I still do not know precisely how it was drawn. What, I frequently wonder, does *Catholic* mean in particular contexts—educational or otherwise?

I am, therefore, quite grateful for the work being done by this year's Early Career Invited Lecturer, Dr. Graham P. McDonough. Understood as a whole, his early career work (especially McDonough, 2012) represents an important attempt to articulate a broad framework for Catholic identity in education. He directly addresses some of the most pressing questions of Catholic education today and, in this invited lecture, linked those questions to the boundaries one might draw around Catholic identity. In a country still considering the implications of the Marc Hall and Leanne Iskander cases, the specific nature of this identity is an important question of public educational policy.

Defining Catholic Schools

McDonough suggests that Catholic schools be seen as *diverse ecclesial spaces* built around a Catholic meta-identity, or, to put it more plainly, that Catholic schools feature diverse forms of Catholicism. If directed to Catholic educators and leaders specifically, this argument seems quite compelling. It is surely more defensible to permit a plurality of religious views than a more restricted subset—even within

separate or parochial schools. Provided that a substantive core of Catholic identity is preserved, one could imagine this position garnering broad support.

Given the complex interrelationship between the Canadian state and Catholic separate schools, however, we must not be content merely with implications internal to Catholic communities. A model of educational diversity in Catholic schools needs to address not only internal divisions and questions (such as the educational implications of the Second Vatican Council) but also the public policy problems such schools pose. Does the model, in other words, contribute to understanding of Catholic schooling in a way that means the Supreme Court of Canada need not intervene in regulating school proms (as in the Hall case)? Does it mean that provincial governments would not, in future, need to explicitly defend the right of students to form gay-straight alliances (as in the Iskander case)? Is there a boundary around Catholic educational life that is both supportive of individual students' Charter rights and sufficiently Catholic to justify separate schools?

There is a longstanding fear that Catholic schools, in general, will suffer the perceived fate of American Protestant schools (Youniss & McLellan, 1999). This narrative holds that, as society becomes increasingly diverse, the religious identity of the parochial school will slowly dilute as more persons from outside the tradition enrol and, perhaps, teach in them. Eventually, it is sometimes suggested, the community will reach a tipping point, at which the *critical mass* of practicing Catholic teachers is lost and the institution loses its identity (Sullins, 2004). This numerical concern is an important dimension of the identity of Catholic schools, but it is merely one among many. Scholars also cite the following as important: opportunities for religious development and activity (as in Janosik, 2013); particular required courses or curricula (as in Rodden, 2013 and Convey, 2012); and relationship with the institution of the Catholic Church (as in Janosic, 2013).

The critical mass requirement seems to be a (possibly) necessary, but not sufficient, condition for a coherent Catholic school identity. It is plausible to suggest that Catholic schools need a certain number of Catholic teachers, but it seems equally plausible to suggest that having a certain number of those teachers does not necessarily make the school distinctly Catholic. A public, secular school in a small town might draw ninety percent of its teachers from one particular faith without thereby being distinctively defined by that faith. There must, in other words, be some other condition—particular curricula, school activities or institutional links—above and beyond the mere fact of the faith composition of the school community. This is why, even in McDonough's liberalized model, institutional orthodoxy cannot be entirely dispensed with—why plurality is found in providing *varied opportunities to approach orthodoxy* (what McDonough labels "multiple approaches to orthodoxy"). There is, even in diverse ecclesial space, *an "intersection of Catholic identities"*—a form of overlapping internal consensus.

The boundary between the Catholic intersection and those intersections outside of Catholicism persists. At a certain point, however oversimplified the language might become, one needs to say that identity X is within the boundary and identity Y outside of it. Some schools simply aren't Catholic. Separate schools exist to nurture the particular intersection created by the varied voices within a given community. That intersection is, through the help of arguments like McDonough's, becoming more liberal and less reliant on the "narrowly defined … permeation of institutionalism" of the past. Modern Catholic institutionalism is, however, still *Catholic institutionalism*. It is by definition parochial.

The Permeation Thesis

This reality puts the proponents of Catholic separate schools in a philosophical quandary. If there is a coherent Catholic meta-identity, and if that identity is sufficiently distinct to merit the provision of separate schooling, it must be manifested in a way more substantive than mere numbers of Catholic students or teachers. Critical mass can only be met in an environment defined by some substantive commitment to institutional orthodoxy (however plural). Catholicism must, it is argued, comprehensively inform school life (see Dosen, 2000), which is why this characteristic is sometimes referred to as *permeation* or *infusion* (Krebbs, 2000). The level of permeation being proposed varies—McDonough, for example, rejects *narrow* institutional permeation—but the idea of a distinctly religious school tends to presuppose some level of permeation (henceforth, the permeation thesis).

Let us take, for example, a thought experiment. In many neighbourhoods in Canada, Catholic separate schools and secular public schools exist across the street from one another. In a time of budget cutbacks, the principal from the secular school asks the Catholic school principal to pool resources and have students share a single math teacher. Math, she argues, is the same in both schools, is it not? The permeation thesis holds that mathematics instruction is distinct in the Catholic setting because it is informed by Catholic values, concerns and world views. If the Catholic school principal were to accept this resource-sharing invitation, he would tacitly be rejecting the permeation thesis and associating himself with the contrasting position—that some things are sufficiently areligious to be taught the same way in religious and secular institutions.

This admission would be more significant than is immediately apparent. Our fictitious Catholic principal would likely be asked, when the next budget cuts arrive, if the schools could share gymnasia, cafeterias, language instruction and so forth. Because the permeation thesis was at least partially rejected in the first instance, it would become difficult to reject future requests for resource sharing. The Catholic school would thus risk becoming merely a set of Catholic classes or activities within a secular system. This gradual dilution creates a political incentive to understand Catholic and secular schooling as utterly parallel and distinct. If any ground is given, it is feared, one risks ceding the entire field.

I suspect this is why, when Marc Hall requested permission to bring his same-sex partner to the prom at his Catholic school, his principal felt obliged to resist. If the school had approved this request, it would have undermined the permeation thesis. If a prom is hosted by a Catholic school, that school must, somehow, infuse that occasion with Catholicity or risk supporting the thesis that some parts of school life are not substantively religious. If prom is recognized as areligious, it is immediately more difficult to sustain the argument that other social events are infused with religious meaning. Hall's principal thus arrived at the same conundrum as the principal of the preceding thought experiment. The school was obliged, to a certain degree, to resist Hall's request until the courts intervened. The school could follow an injunction of the courts, but could not willingly be seen to abandon the permeation thesis. Even if a particular educator or administrator empathized with Hall, the precedent set by a smooth approval of Hall's request would have been institutionally dangerous. Something similar played out more recently with respect to gay-straight alliances in Ontario Catholic schools (the Iskander case). Theological arguments about the distinction between persons and actions notwithstanding, to support such student organizations is, to a certain degree, to set aside the notion that Catholicity permeates all school life. It was for this reason quite difficult for some Ontario Catholics to accept and support these student groups.

These examples do not speak, of course, to the many thousands of Catholic educators across Canada making compromises and wrestling with their complex religious and institutional identities—

some of whom are explicit activists for the LGBTQ community. For every Hall example there are likely to be many more, both of conflict and accommodation, that the public does not come to know about. The fact remains, however, that cases like Hall's continue to arise. If we are to speak of a philosophically robust conception of Catholic schooling, we must, I think, somehow articulate a model that permits Catholic schools to be secure and respected, while at the same time allowing those schools to be defined by something other than institutional permeation. Permeation arguments have clearly produced a tendency, in some schools, to police Catholic identity in a way unacceptable to the courts and many private citizens.

The Limits of Diverse Ecclesial Space

Examining McDonough's arguments about diverse ecclesial space, I am thus of two minds. First, I am encouraged by the way in which he articulates a vision of Catholic schooling defined by multiple identities and contested spaces. His support for gay-straight alliances is, in this regard, quite well considered (McDonough, 2014). I am, on the other hand, not yet convinced that even *diverse* ecclesial space can avoid the trap of permeation arguments. Diverse ecclesial space must still be codified and, if public support is to be sustained in the way it exists today, that codification must discourage the form of institutional identity policing that draws Catholic schools into the courts. It is telling, I think, that in arguing that Catholic schools should not resist the establishment of gay-straight alliances, McDonough focuses on the internal, Catholic reasons for accepting them (rather than on secular legal or political reasons). The conversation about LGBTQ rights in Catholic schooling is, in other words, not yet about moving beyond institutional permeation—it is about what permeation ought to look like given particular changes in doctrine or ecclesial culture. The Church as an institution is still in the position of "resisting non-Catholic thought and secular culture" (McDonough, 2014, p. 79).

The argument for schools permeated by Catholicism encourages a binary view of Catholic life at odds with public educational policy and much contemporary Catholic thought. It should thus be abandoned as a justification for Catholic schooling. McDonough's work, writ large, represents an important attempt to negotiate some of the tensions around traditional Catholic schooling while preserving its Catholicity. This year's Early Career Invited Lecture admirably detailed one aspect of this philosophical negotiation. It maintained, however, a certain portion of the permeation argument. A fully comprehensive vision of Catholic school identity must account not only for internal diversity, but also for the possibility of non-Catholic experiences in Catholic schools. It must allow for principals to share the same gymnasium, or to send children to the same hockey team, without undermining the basic justification for Catholic schooling. This work, it appears, is unfinished.

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