

Thomas A. O'Donoghue. *The Catholic Church and the Secondary School Curriculum in Ireland, 1922–1962*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999. Pp. 188.

When asked to read a book with the word “curriculum” in the title, I usually balk. Is there anything more tedious on the printed page than the absurd jargon and tortured prose peculiar to the “curriculum theory” movement? This movement has done more to discredit educational research in the academy than most other passing fads put together. It was a great relief, therefore, to discover that *The Catholic Church and the Secondary School Curriculum in Ireland* is completely free of this contagion. Indeed, Thomas O'Donoghue has given us a book that is a pleasure to read. Based on exacting scholarship, it is fair and balanced in its judgement on a potentially controversial subject.

O'Donoghue is concerned with a set of unique institutions: Irish academic secondary schools that were overwhelmingly controlled and staffed by functionaries of the Catholic Church in the first forty years of Irish independence. He examines the curriculum of these schools and how it was shaped by Church interests. Along the way, he paints some vivid portraits. We see a Church, wary of modernity and democracy, sedulously propping up its feudal privileges, cognizant that its virtual monopoly of educational provision was the key to its enduring hegemony in the independent Irish state. We are taken on a tour of schools whose curricula never wavered in their central mission: the relentless socialization of a select group of youths into dogmatic belief systems and constrained codes of conduct.

One of the strengths of this book is O'Donoghue's ability to conjure the atmosphere of the mid-twentieth century classroom. He does this through the skilful deployment of a wide variety of sources, including the reminiscences of writers (of whom there is no shortage in Ireland). The picture that emerges is unpleasant. Teaching methods, for example, were mechanical and authoritarian. The emphasis was on memorization and other low-order skills with set texts and examinations overshadowing all. Little was done in the classroom that was not geared towards the Intermediate and Leaving Certificate examinations. There was no room for creativity or discussion. And it was all propelled along by regular applications of corporal punishment. None of this should come as a great surprise since the brutal reputation of the Irish Christian Brothers, the religious order that ran many of the schools, is now well established around the world.

The curriculum content itself was narrowly academic, with a small range of subjects on offer and a heavy emphasis on the mastery of dead and almost dead languages. The few variations that there were are attributable to gender. Girls were more likely to study French, presumably for its alleged refining influence, and other subjects in keeping with their domestic destinies.

O'Donoghue explains why this narrowness endured. The schools were too small to provide a wide range of subjects, and amalgamation to create larger units was unthinkable since it would have involved co-education with its grave sexual dangers. Besides, deciphering grammar and memorizing texts precluded a questioning attitude. And supine conformity was in keeping with the schools' ultimate function: maintaining the flow of young people into religious vows and reproducing a bourgeoisie that would defer to Church leadership on moral and social issues.

It is refreshing to read such insightful and critical analysis especially since most Irish academics write about their educational system in bland conformist and celebratory terms. Perhaps it is significant that O'Donoghue works at the University of Western Australia rather than in his native Ireland where dissenting voices have usually been stifled or banished, at least until recently.

It is rather a pity that Ireland rarely bans books anymore because it was always a mark of distinction to get your work on the prohibited list. Had this book been published three decades ago, it would undoubtedly have earned such an honour. May it be widely read and enjoyed—and denounced too.

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