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# **'Education about Religions and Beliefs ERB and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper' A Response**

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**March 2016**

## **Summary**

1. While there is clearly a need for a curriculum in ERB and Ethics for children who 'opt out' of Religious Education, no evidence has been given to show why *every* child has to take ERB and Ethics.
2. The vision for Catholic education already promotes a learning about and from other religions and worldviews.
3. There is already a great deal being done in the area of ERB and Ethics in Catholic schools that goes unmentioned and unnoticed in this document.
4. There is a lack of clarity regarding the nature of the Ethics being proposed in this paper. While ERB is a learning 'about' different religious traditions, the Ethics is concerned about forming the character of children – given the lack of clarity regarding the Ethics, this is problematic. There is also a great deal of overlap between the aims of the Ethics in this paper and what is already happening in Catholic schools.
5. Three reports indicate a high degree of satisfaction with Catholic education in primary schools – where is the need for *every* child to take ERB and Ethics?
6. Many of the philosophical and pedagogical presuppositions for ERB and Ethics are incompatible with Catholic schools.
7. The online questionnaire is hardly 'objective' and 'critical', rather it displays a clear bias towards a particular outcome of answer.
8. It is inevitable that if ERB and Ethics comes into schools that the time for Religious Education will be shortened.
9. I believe that none of the four outlined approaches would work in Catholic schools. The NCCA ought to back and speak with the patrons' of denominational schools, recognise the work already being done regarding ERB and Ethics in these schools and find a way to address their concerns that would be in keeping with the characteristic spirit of the school.

## **1. From 'some' to 'every'**

The 'Education about Religions and Beliefs ERB and Ethics in the Primary School: Consultation Paper' proposes a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics for all children and schools in the state. The general aims of this curriculum in ERB are:

- develop self-awareness, confidence, personal beliefs and positive social identities
- have knowledge and understanding of how religious and non-religious worldviews

have contributed to the culture in which we live, and continue to have an impact on individuals and relationships between individuals and their communities

- express comfort, empathy and joy with human diversity,
- use accurate language for human differences, and form deep, caring human connections
- recognise unfairness, injustice and inequality and understand the relationship between rights and responsibilities
- appreciate the impact of prejudice and discriminatory actions on others

Specific aims follow on and are set out in three areas: Personal understanding, Mutual understanding and Spiritual understanding. It is difficult to see how any of these general aims are not already part of the educational environment of schools.

The Introduction to the document mentions SPHE and SESE as places where 'many children already engage in learning about religions in their communities and across the globe' (5) and then how in the patrons' programmes in religions and ethical education 'children learn how beliefs shape actions, and how decision-making and choices reflect personal and community values, and that respect for the other and the different is fundamental to living together' (5). And so there is some acknowledgment that these aims are already being met. However, the NCCA believes that this is not enough, hence this proposal. In outlining its rationale for the new curriculum, it says that 'An important aspect of a child's education involves learning about and understanding the lives, values and traditions of friends, classmates and members of the wider community' (9). It points out that such learning already takes place in SPHE, Drama, the patrons' programme and 'indeed across elements of the entire primary curriculum' (9). But it then says that 'to ensure that *every* (emphasis added) child has access to structured, coherent and incremental learning in this area, and to ensure the good practices that already take place in schools are recognised and supported, the NCCA is developing a curriculum in Education about Religions and Beliefs (ERB) and Ethics' (9).

This emphasis on 'every' child is very important. This was recognised by the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector (Coolahan et al, 2012:92). The authors felt that all children have a right to ERB and Ethics and that the NCCA should develop curriculum guidelines for this. It was their recommendation that these guidelines could act as a help to programmes where the content of ERB and Ethics was already being met. But they had a

particular concern for 'those children who do not participate in religious programmes in denominational schools...For these children the proposed programme in ERB and Ethics are of central importance' (Coolahan et al, 2012:92).

There is no doubt that there needs to be an appropriate alternative to the patrons programme for those children who opt out of it. I fully agree with the Forum and the Consultation paper on this matter. However, I'm concerned that this clear need articulated by the Forum has expanded from those children who 'opt out' of the patrons' programme to now include 'every child' (9). The Consultation paper does not provide any adequate rationale for this expansion in its reach. Why do all children now have to take part in ERB and Ethics, even when they are taking part in Religious Education? What are the deficiencies in Religious Education at the moment, that require every child to now take ERB and Ethics? Where is the research on this matter?

## **2. Vision of Catholic Education**

My expertise is in Catholic education and I'll confine my comments to this sphere. The NCCA is clearly of the view that the provision of Christian Religious Education is not sufficient to meet the needs and aims of ERB and Ethics. I don't agree with this view. Allow me to take a step backward from the text of the proposal and say a way about the vision in the Catholic school that is pertinent to this discussion. Catholic schools are rooted in a tradition that informs the current life of the school. I will make brief reference to two Vatican documents which inspire and shape current practice in Catholic primary schools today: *Nostra aetate* (1965) and *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (2013).

*Nostra aetate* (1965) refers to the Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions of the Second Vatican Council. This document fosters the Church's recognition of the spiritual value and truth within other religious traditions. While not pretending that differences do not exist, *Nostra aetate* urges Catholics to 'turn [their] attention chiefly to what things human beings have in common and what things tend to bring them together (*Nostra aetate*, #4). Catholic primary schools are full of the sorts of activities that do just that, from working together to achieve a green or yellow flag, fundraising for people who are marginalised, organising quiz nights to raise funds for the school, rituals and activities that celebrate the uniqueness and value of each student, etc. In these sorts of

activities, children and adults can discover the identity of the other in an indirect manner. In working together, conversations emerge about where one is from, why one is involved in the project, and what gives life to the other person.

These ideas are echoed in the Vatican's recent document entitled *Educating to Intercultural Dialogue in Catholic Schools, Living in Harmony for a Civilization of Love* (2013). The 'givenness' of difference within Catholic schools is taken for granted and this reality is greeted with excitement and expectation at to what can be learnt through dialogue with one another. The second sentence of the document says 'The overlapping presence of different cultures is a great resource, as long as the encounter between those different cultures is seen as a source of mutual enrichment' (*Educating for Intercultural Dialogue, Introduction*, 2013). The centrality and importance of real dialogue between different worldviews is at the heart of the document. It is rooted in the 'an awareness of each individual's dignity and of the unity of all people in a common humanity, with the aim of sharing and building up together a common destiny' (Ibid., #21). This 'inter-cultural' dialogue is essential so that people are not separated into autonomous and impermeable cultural spheres, rather, the Catholic school needs to promote an encounter between those who are different, through dialogue so that there can be 'mutual transformation' (Ibid., #28). Such dialogue and encounter, in the Catholic school, can happen because 'pride of place *must* (emphasis added) be given to the knowledge of different cultures, with attention given to helping the students encounter and compare the various cultures' many different viewpoints' (Ibid., #66). One's own identity, assumptions, presuppositions and prejudices need to be brought into sustained, critical conversation with 'other visions of life' (Ibid., #70).

### **3. Practice in Catholic schools**

Much of these ideas might be summed up in a phrase used by Pope Francis, when he talks about promoting a 'culture of 'encounter.' This is one of his most popular phrases.

According to John Allen, 'Francis seems to intend the idea of reaching out, fostering dialogue and friendship even outside the usual circles, and making a special point of encountering people who are neglected and ignored by the wider world' (Allen, 2013). Such a vision inspires and shapes the culture in Catholic schools and are very much in keeping with the general aims of ERB and Ethics.

The following is taken from a submission by the Holy Rosary School (Catholic) to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector.

...we have sought ways to respect, acknowledge and celebrate the different ethnic and religious groups reflected in the school community. This has been done through a range of activities and programmes that have evolved over the years. Among these we can highlight sports, games, music, choirs, family fun days, recipe books featuring meals from over forty countries, a festival of faith, the annual arts week, meetings organised between parents and teachers to discuss curricular and educational concerns and the use of church rooms for instruction in other faiths. The net results of these activities is that the children do not see cultural or religious differences as a source of tension. Exploring difference offers an opportunity to grow in respect for traditions and cultures other than our own. The parents and teachers also acknowledge that the efforts to constantly promote a respectful dialogue have been a source of learning and greater understanding and have strengthened the sense of belonging in the local community (Tuohy, 2013:283).

The same submission reflected on the schools efforts in providing Christian Religious Education, the practical arrangements that were made to accommodate and integrate others:

By and large the experience has been positive. The Catholic identity of the school and its close links with the parish has not been compromised by the religious diversity within the school population. On the contrary the situation has led to a growing culture of respect and understanding. The major feasts of the great religions are acknowledged while children of other faiths have shared in the celebrations surrounding the first Holy Communion and Confirmation classes. There has been an effort to cater for the RE needs of other faith groups and this has included the use of the church premises by the Muslim community for classes. The Muslim parents have expressed their appreciation for the efforts of the school and parish to assist them in providing for the religious formation of their children. A recent delegation of educators from Saudi Arabia who were sent to the school on a visit by the Department of Education expressed their amazement at the use of the Church for Muslim Instruction and the easy integration of the Muslim children in the school community (Tuohy, 2013:283).

And so, when I look at the general and specific aims of ERB in this consultation document, I'm convinced that these are shared by Catholic schools also. However, there appears little acknowledgement of what is already being done in Catholic schools in this paper. The danger then is that this paper is proposing a solution to a problem that does not exist. Again, the paper lacks a sufficiently clear analysis about how Catholic schools are failing in their approach to ERB and Ethics currently in order to warrant such change in approach – which one public commentator referred to as a ‘game changer’!

#### **4. Whose Ethics**

Education about Religions and Beliefs and Ethics are separated in this proposal. While an argument can be made for an integrity to Ethics as independent to Religions and Beliefs, there is no integrity to Religions and Beliefs without Ethics. As outlined in the consultation

paper, ERB is concerned with beliefs, worship, symbols and celebrations. However, to leave out ethics as an integral element in any religious or worldview is a fatal flaw in this paper. In this proposal Ethics is distinct and will not be taught as a component part of a religious tradition. As proposed, the Ethics as outlined appears to be a liberal secular one (emphasis on the autonomous self leads this way, although this is little clarity as to what sort of ethics is being proposed) - not rooted in any one religious tradition. And so, it seems very strange to teach children about the beliefs and customs and rituals in different religions and worldviews but *without* any explicit reference as to what these beliefs might require of their adherents in regard to their responsibility to themselves, others, God (for those who are theist) and creation. While others will contend that they will receive an education in Ethics in this discrete strand, the educational flaw is that it is unconnected with the religious traditions and worldviews just studied. There is no effort to uncover the ethic from within a religion or worldview, one that makes sense and is in accord with the beliefs of that particular religion or worldview. Further, it is highly likely that children will pick up the impression that ethics is something separate to religions and worldviews – since it is in a parallel stance to them. This will be part of the 'hidden curriculum' and simply inadequate educationally. Ethics are an integral part of religions and worldviews – to remove ethics in this way, is to misinform children.

The specific aims for an Ethics curriculum are:

#### *Character Education*

- Ethics can play an important part in promoting character education and instilling an understanding of right and wrong by supporting the teacher to enable the child to-
- appreciate that people's rights also imply responsibilities, to understand that by taking
- responsibility for their actions, developing a pro active spirit and empowering themselves they can contribute to their world
- develop a sense of conscience, recognise the importance of personal integrity and promote an
- active tolerance and respect across religious/cultural divides
- develop the skills of reflection, discernment, critical thinking and decision-making when making moral decisions.

#### *Connection to the wider world*

- Ethics can play an important part in promoting the child's connection to their wider world and their awareness and understanding of diversity in local and global communities. The curriculum will support the teacher to enable the child to
- foster good relationships, respect difference between people and understand the destructive
- power of prejudice, discrimination, racism and bullying
- develop an awareness and respect for the environment and understand the concept of
- sustainable development and stewardship for the environment
- investigate and think about topical spiritual, moral, social and cultural issues and
- challenges of living in a changing democratic society as well justifying and defending personal opinions and beliefs
- develop a critical knowledge, understanding and awareness of human rights, equality, culture,
- social justice and social inclusivity (14).

And as with the point I made above with regard to ERB and the Catholic school, I will make the same one again - there is nothing to suggest that Catholic schools are not already meeting these objectives. For instance, there are four strands in the new Religious Education Curriculum for Catholic schools: Christian Faith, Word of God, Liturgy and Prayer and Christian Morality. Within the Christian Morality strand for Level 4, some of its aims are as follows:

- develop an awareness of social justice, ecological justice, universal solidarity and responsibility (126);
- develop their understanding of factors that call for, influence and promote moral behaviour (126);
- investigate and evaluate models for their own moral life, making connections between the decisions and personal attributes of moral models and their own sense of moral self (126);
- be inspired to work together with people of other faiths to promote human rights, social justice, good
- morals, peace and freedom (126);
- discern and evaluate values, attitudes and expectations with which they are surrounded in contemporary culture (126);



- develop strategies to promote a more just society and world (moral agency and imagination) (126).

So, while there is much overlap in aim between ERB and Ethics and what is happening in Catholic primary schools, my question remains – why require *every* child to take ERB and Ethics if much of the Ethics is already been covered in a Catholic school? Clearly, there is need for a formal curriculum in ERB and Ethics for children who ‘opt out’ of Religious Education but this paper has not established the need for all children to take ERB and Ethics.

The Consultation document states that ERB

helps children to know about and understand the cultural heritage of the major forms of religions, belief traditions and worldviews which have been embraced by humankind. It does not nurture the belief or practice of any one religion; instead it focuses on an informed awareness of the main theist, non-theist, and secular beliefs including key aspects of their cultural manifestations’ (6).

However, when it comes to Ethics, the approach changes. The document states ‘

The teaching of ethics includes the formation and the promotion of a personal commitment to the dignity and freedom of all human beings, the importance of human rights and responsibilities, the place of justice within society, and the service of the common good... Learning about ethics is important for all but developing modes of ethical behaviour is of central importance to children’s development (6).

Where the ERB aspect of the curriculum is simply information ‘about’ traditions, without any judgments either way, the Ethics component is concerned with the ‘formation’ and ‘character’ of the child. It is interesting to notice the difference in approach being adopted for ERB and for Ethics. The paper works out of a pluralist approach which ‘equally recognises the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups in society’ (20) but it is less agnostic when it comes to Ethics, despite the diversity of beliefs about what constitutes a good life and what is right or wrong, good or bad. However, when we go below the surface of Ethics, it is not as straightforward as it seems.

While there can be little argument about the importance of forming children in having a commitment to dignity, freedom, justice and service to the common good, the problems emerge when we try to tease out what does it mean in practical matters to honour dignity, respect freedom, work for justice and serve the common good. There is a content to ethics, it is not neutral or objective – nor should it be and it cannot be all things to all people. The ethics as outlined in the Consultation paper is too broad and not very clear in what it means in

practice. What sort of ethic is being proposed? To oversimplify, older theories of justice sought to maximize virtue, whereas modern theories start with freedom. Many modern theories of justice place great emphasis on one's personal autonomy and non interference from others and the state – this might be called a libertarian approach. Others counter that with an approach that might be called communitarian, where the well-being of community and relationships are of great concern. Then others seek to maximize one's welfare and well being and is best referred to as utilitarianism. What sort of ethics is being promoted in this paper? Is it one that seeks to privilege the autonomous self or one that works from more of a communitarian bias? Then to complicate matters further, there are all sorts of ethics: social ethics, virtue ethics, bio-ethics, sexual ethics and feminist ethics, etc.

The paper lacks the specificity as to where the ethics it proposes belongs – is it more utilitarian, libertarian, communitarian, concerned with personal and public virtue in approach? It would be problematic in a Catholic school to have a course in Ethics that might be at odds with the ethics the children are learning as part of the overall ethos of the school in general and in Religious Education in particular. We need to explore how the proposed Ethics would 'fit' within a Catholic school. Would the Christian approach to ethics find a complementary partner in the Ethics being proposed or would it find a rival in approach – one that privileges personal autonomy over all other goods, with less of an emphasis on natural law and objective moral norms and one that contributes to a culture of relativism? Were this to be the case, then these two approaches to ethics would be incompatible.

The paper is not clear nor does it explain the nature of the difficulty of the ethics currently practiced and taught in Catholic schools and so the solution, a course in secular ethics for all children, makes little sense. However, it is clear that children who 'opt out' of Christian Religious Education need to have some formal study of ethics but to make this compulsory for everyone is problematic, to say the least.

## **5. What is the nature of the problem?**

The development of ERB and Ethics for *every* child might give the impression that there are serious problems with Catholic schools (considering that they are almost 90% of the patrons' of primary schools in the state) concerning inclusive learning environments where children learn about and from each other, world religions, worldviews and ethics. However, some recent reports would suggest otherwise. The report from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), entitled *School Sector Variation Among Primary Schools in Ireland 2012*,

points out that Catholic primary schools are indeed very inclusive. It shows that they are more likely to have students from working class backgrounds and the Traveller community and it states that the “widest spread of nationalities was evident in Catholic schools” (7). The issue of inclusion is complex and no school can be all things to all people, but it does appear that Catholic schools are more inclusive than they are regularly portrayed. Inclusion necessarily means that children of different religions and worldviews have a sense of being recognized and welcomed into the school. Also, it is worth noting what the *Inspector General’s Report* said about parents’ views of primary schools. “High proportions (95%) of the parents surveyed as part of the WSE process during 2010-2012 agree that schools are welcoming of them” (2013:38). And it goes on to finish by saying, “Primary schools were found to be managing their pupils well and the vast majority of parents were happy with their child’s school” (2013:105). If there were serious problems that required *every* pupil to take a new course in ERB and Ethics, surely there would be some indication of this issue in these reports? In October 2012 and again in April 2013 the DES carried out surveys in 43 areas around the country, asking parents about their preference for school patronage. The report found that somewhere between 0.6% of parents (in Roscrea) and 8% of parents (in Portmarnock) with children in school would avail of another form of patronage (See Catholic Schools Partnership, ‘Response to the Reports from the Department of Education and Skills on Surveys of Parental Preferences in 43 Areas’, 2013). This is hardly a ringing endorsement for change.

## **6. Philosophical and Pedagogical Approaches to ERB**

The new curriculum in ERB and Ethics subscribes to a ‘pluralist approach’ (20), one that ‘equally recognizes the diversity of beliefs, values and aspirations of all religious and cultural groups in society’ (20). However, it does not go into any detail of what it means to recognize the diversity of beliefs. It seems to suggest that we display and observe the different worldviews without any attention being paid to what is true and trustworthy within them. What are the sources of life and humanization that can be found in these traditions and worldviews and what is there in these religious traditions and worldviews that might undermine the dignity of the human person? This, however, begs the question about the nature of the human person, what it means to live a good life and if there is a transcendent dimension to life. For young children, there is an element of nurture that is required when it comes to helping them make sense of their lives and the world around them. It is not appropriate to simply make visible the different world views and have children talk about

them, locate one that makes most sense to them, with the teacher acting as facilitator. This might be more appropriate at second level education but much less so, when it comes to primary school and young children. There needs to be guidance from the school and the teacher on what are trustworthy ways and approaches to making sense of the world. There is already, in every school, a way of making sense of the world. There are values that are operative and all sorts of practices and activities arising out of these values, in the hope that the children will also find these values important. Schools don't start from nowhere when teaching children – they are not 'objective' places and they are 'teaching' children all the time, hence the phrase the 'hidden curriculum'. Can you seriously omit the schools own way of making sense of reality from ERB and leave it up to the children?

The paper takes a very 'hands off' approach when it comes to teaching ERB to children. It suggests teachers be facilitators (and 'do not need to be experts, p.23 – I wonder would such a phrase be used for other subjects like English and Maths?). It suggests that teachers be facilitators in the child's learning process and while it places great emphasis on children exploring their own experience (which is very positive), there is little mention of what or how the learning takes place. Is it simply to share experiences of religions and beliefs with others? Or, how are children going to learn about and from these religions and beliefs for their own lives? Is there any place for these religious traditions and worldviews to challenge and interrogate the views of children?

Part of the answer to his question emerges when the paper says that the pedagogies are 'constructivist' (23). This will be problematic in a Catholic school. At a very basic level, this approach rejects the possibility of objective truth. There is no mention of how, in an educational setting, the truth or trustworthiness of a religious worldview or belief might be part of the conversation with children in the classroom. I appreciate that this is a very difficult thing to do. But my fear is that, in the real world of the classroom, that we might simply make visible religions and worldviews, have children share their experience of them, facilitated by the teacher and leave it there. Is that enough?

Stanley Fish outlines the problem

The chief danger is not of any particular doctrine to which the children might be exposed but the unannounced yet powerfully assumed doctrine of exposure as a first principle, as a virtual theology. This is where the doctrine comes in, not at the level of urging this or that belief, but at the more subliminal level at which what is urged is that encountering as many ideas as possible and giving each of them a run for their

money is an absolutely good thing. What the children are being indoctrinated in is a distrust of any belief that has not been arrived at by the exercise of their unaided reason as it surveys all the alternatives before choosing one freely with no guidance from any external authority (Fish, 1997:2289-90).

Is there not a danger today with the centring on the self, that children will come to think that they determine for themselves *alone* what is significant in their lives and the world around them. Many people today believe that significance is conferred by the very act of choosing; choice itself is the good – not so much what is chosen but the very act of choosing. Some believe that all options are equally valid and worth is conferred on something by the very act of it being chosen in the first place. However, this is to deny the pre-existence of horizons of significance, where some things are more valuable than others, even before we get to choose them, some things are good in and of themselves, regardless of what we think about them. There are some choices which are better than others (this is allowed for in the Ethics dimension of the suggested curriculum), are there some perspectives that are more helpful in interpreting reality and the world around us? Or are they all equally valid and if not, how do we try to undertake the difficult and sensitive task of finding reliable ways, in an educational setting, to search for the full meaning of being a human person? What are trustworthy ways of making sense of the world and our lives within it? Without a background or horizon of significance, choice becomes meaningless. Is something true or trustworthy simply because I think or believe it to be so or can I bring my own beliefs into critical conversation with horizons of significance in a way that can be transformative?

I believe as currently outlined, the approach to ERB (and it is very vague) will clash with the approach to Religious Education in Catholic schools, which is rooted more in a realist epistemology. This clash is acknowledged in the paper (23). It would be peculiar for Catholic children to be taught their own faith tradition in a particular manner (realist epistemology) and then learn about it from a secular point of view. This may be appropriate for a second level school, where young people have the intellectual development and maturity to make sense of these two approaches in the one school – such an approach would just be confusing for young children. This peculiarity would grow through the years, as children in Christian Religious Education will also be learning about other faith traditions and worldviews from within their own tradition (inter-religious literacy is one of the 5 key skills in the new curriculum for Catholic Religious Education see *Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, 2015) and then learning about them from a so called

‘objective, critical and pluralist’ (23) perspective. This twin track approach to Religious Education would be very problematic in Catholic primary schools.

While the paper purports to teach ERB in an ‘objective’ fashion, I think that this is misleading. There is no starting point that is free of particularity and bias, there is always some ‘privileging of some epistemic and ontological presuppositions’ (D’Costa 2013:115). To study religions and beliefs from a so called objective view point is to favour a secularist approach – which in itself is neither good nor bad but it’s not objective. We are not looking at these beliefs from nowhere. Inevitably secular beliefs and judgments are promoted in this approach. This is to say, that objectivity favours secularity. And the danger with this approach is that no value judgement is allowed or possible. This is to say that critical judgment is then minimised.

## **7. Online Questionnaire**

The online questionnaire for the consultation could hardly be described as ‘objective’ or ‘critical’. The questions are very vague and no one could possibly disagree with many of the proposals – they appear self-evident, given the bias in the propositions. There is no effort at all to tease out any of the complexity of the issues involved. The lack of proper research questions removes the integrity of the online consultation process and I hope this will be borne in mind when collating these responses.

## **8. Time allocation for Religious Education**

While the paper states that ERB and Ethics 'is in no way intended to replace the patron's programme or faith formation education in denominational schools' (7) it is inconceivable that parents would stand for two and a half hours of Christian Religious Education on the one hand and then perhaps, an hour or more of ERB and Ethics on the other. If ERB and Ethics comes into the school day for all children, it is inevitable that there will be less time given for Christian Religious Education during the school day. On this point, it is interesting to note that the Forum Report suggested that ‘that inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives work best in schools where the Catholic students and parents are most committed to their own religious practice’ (Coolahan et al, 2012:93). There is a value to fostering commitment to faith traditions of children – ironically, there is a danger that the very introduction of ERB and Ethics—through taking time away from Religious Education—might lessen the very learning that is sought after – more inter-faith and inter-cultural initiatives.

## 9. Which approach ?

I do not believe that a discrete subject ERB and Ethics ought to come into denominational schools for the reasons outlined above and given the reality of curriculum overload. There is a difficulty in imagining ERB and Ethics as integrated across the curriculum, as its approach would clash with that of the characteristic spirit of the school. Within denominational schools, there are horizons of significance – there is a ‘givenness’ to the reality of God who is love and revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and present in the world today through the power of the Holy Spirit, there is a particular understanding of the human person and their place in the world. This is not to say that there is not much to be learned from and with other faiths and worldviews but rather to point out that there is a particularity to the denominational school (there is a particularity to all schools). I think a lot of the concerns behind the proposed new curriculum in ERB and Ethics are shared by many in denominational schools and are being currently engaged with in a meaningful and worthwhile manner but the *how* as suggested by this document is fraught with problems for denominational schools. Perhaps the NCCA could consult further with patrons of denominational schools to find ways that will address their concerns but that are in keeping with the characteristic spirit of denominational schools.

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