Richard Rymarz

PERMEATION OF CATHOLIC IDENTITY:
SOME CHALLENGES FOR CANADIAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS (PART 1)

Abstract

Catholic schools seek to provide an educational vision where the religious dimension is given prominence not just in formal religious education classes but throughout the curriculum and in the wider life of schools. One way of expressing this idea is to argue that Catholic identity should permeate all that is done in the school. This paper, the first in a two part series, argues that while permeation may be a worthwhile goal for Catholic schools to strive for this must be undertaken within the context of a number of significant challenges. These include, most notably, the changing demographics of schools where many parents, students and teachers no longer exhibit high levels of religious commitment. This results in a loss of the critical mass needed for effective collaborative action.

Introduction

The notion that religious identity should permeate every facet of Catholic schools has been widely discussed, especially in philosophy of education literature (Buelow, 1985; Gleason, 1994; Joseph, 2001; O'Brien, 1987; Whalen, 1965).   This permeation notion, from the Latin permeare, or to pass through, is also well founded in Church documents. One of the strongest supporting statements comes from Pius XI's *Divini Illius Magistri* (DIM). Drawing on Pope Leo XIII's 1897 encyclical *Militantis Ecclesiae,* Pius XI (1930) wrote:

> It is necessary not only that religious instruction be given to the young at certain fixed times, but also that every other subject taught, be permeated with Christian piety. If this is wanting, if this sacred atmosphere does not pervade and warm the hearts of masters and scholars alike, little good can be expected from any kind of learning, and considerable harm will often be the consequence. (para. 80)

The essence of permeation described above as the creation of a "sacred atmosphere" is the cultivation in Catholic schools of a strong and manifest Catholic identity that is expressed in the very life of the school and is not restricted to any particular aspect. It would include: ritual action such as prayer and liturgy, symbolic representations such as the prominence given to religious and devotional art, both the formal and informal curriculum and the living witness of those associated with school communities. Catholic identify also involves what Miller (2006, p. 17) calls making manifest a supernatural vision of education along with imbuing schools with a Catholic worldview. In recent times Church documents such as *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (CCE, 1997) underline the importance of permeation as a guiding framework for Catholic schools.

The goal of permeation of Catholic identity throughout schools is well reveled in a number of Canadian curriculum documents. For largely historical reasons there is no single model of Catholic education in Canada (Baldwin, 2008). The Canadian constitution stipulates that education is a provincial concern, therefore, each of the ten provinces and three territories has autonomy on the approach taken to denominational education (Dixon, 2003; Power, 2003).   In British Columbia Catholic schools receive some funding and in other provinces Catholic schools are self-funded and private. In three provinces, Ontario, Alberta and Saskatchewan, Catholic schools receive full government funding. In these provinces although differences remain in management and

governance, Catholic schools share significant commonalties. Most important of these is that the activities of Catholic schools are regulated by popularly elected boards or trustees that, in turn, appoint superintendents (Stamp, 1985).

A key rationale for the existence of Catholic schools is that they provide a distinct and necessary alternative to what is offered in public nondenominational schools (Gilles, 1949; Tkach, 1983). This distinctiveness is closely aligned with the notion that Catholic identity should permeate Catholic schools. The goals of permeation are spelt out most explicitly in documents from Ontario, Saskatchewan and Alberta (Curriculum Permeation Report, 2010; Catholic Schools – Permeated by Faith, 1996; Ontario Catholic Supervisory Officers' Association, 1995; Saskatoon Catholic Schools, Board of Education, 2005).   One prominent and illustrative example is provided by Catholic schools in Edmonton, Alberta. Alberta has a number of Catholic Schools' Boards which have overseen elementary and secondary education in the province since it entered the Canadian federation in 1905 (Hiemstra & Brink, 2006). These Boards are also responsible for particular parts of the province and provide leadership and direction to schools in these zones. The importance of permeation for Edmonton Catholic schools is laid out primarily in *Permeation: Living Eucharist in the Learning Community* (PLELC) published by Edmonton Catholic Schools (2002). PLELC defines permeation in these terms:

> The notion of permeation flows from the central importance of the religious dimension of the school. The religious dimension can most authentically be expressed when all aspects of the life of the school are developed fully. (pp. 8-9)

PLELC builds on earlier work, especially, *The Religious Dimension of Education in Edmonton Catholic Schools: A Manifesto for Catholic Education* (RDEECS, 1999). Here Catholic identity is related to the "theological principles and vision of Catholicism" (RDEECS, 1999, p. 5). Catholic schools exist in a tension between faith and culture but it is from this tension that a distinctive Catholic vision arises. In RDEECS this vision is characterised by a number of markers of Catholic identify such as community, tradition and rationality. The challenge remains, however, as to how these markers are actualised in Catholic schools and who is going to bring them to fruition.

This paper will not provide further philosophical or theological discussion of the notion of permeation. Rather it will examine some of the practical challenges that are presented when contemporary Catholic schools attempt to actualise a permeation ideology. The significance of the study is that it critically examines some of the basic assumptions and ramifications surrounding the notion that Catholic identity permeates Catholic schools in Canada. The paper addresses, in the first instance, a Canadian educational context as the permeation notion is heavily used in official documents on Catholic schools in Canada. This is not to say that the discussion here does not have relevance for Catholic schools in other contexts, most notably in those places where permeation of Catholic identity, or something similar, has a central place in the discourse surrounding Catholic schools. The paper will examine, as a fundamental principle, the importance of understanding relatively recent changes in the wider culture. It will then discuss some of the ways these changes impinge on the ability of Catholic schools to realise the goals of permeation. Using this as a basis, the second part of this paper will make some comments on the place of religious education and modifications to the wider curriculum in schools which aspire to permeation ideals.

The Challenge of Permeation in the Contemporary Cultural Context

Aside from the notion that Catholic schools should be permeated with Catholic identity there has been much other discussion about the how Catholic schools should respond to the challenges placed before them by secular cultures (Cook & Simonds, 2011; Greene & O'Keefe, 2001; Ryan, 2008; Schreiter, 1997; Schuttloffel, 2012; Schweitzer, 2007). Pollefeyt and Bouwens (2010), in an illustrative example, look at four models of Catholic schools based on two descriptive scales: Christian identify and solidarity. The goal, in their analysis, is to achieve a dialogue school, one which maximises both descriptors. This is, however, premised on an assumption that Catholic schools have the resilience to reconfigure themselves to suit changing circumstances. This is a precondition for any putative model for Catholic schools in contemporary, secular culture.   In order to be able to make the theorised adjustments Catholic schools must, in the first instance, have at their disposal large numbers of highly committed people who are able to realise the particular model of education that is being proposed. This understanding is supported by a number of studies which examine the

role of commitment in both personal and institutional religion (Cornwall, et. al., 1986; Davidson & Knudsen, 1977; Wimbeley, 1974, 1989). Mol (1977) argued that commitment, described as a high level of emotional energy or attachment, is the vital mechanism for maintaining a religious identity both on a personal and institutional level. It is especially important in educational institutions which set for themselves high goals such as permeation of Catholic identity.

The permeation idea places significant demands on Catholic schools. These demands are not primarily in the area of curriculum development, a topic that will be explored in the second part of this paper. Difficult as it may be to shape a curriculum that reflects the principles of permeation of Catholic identity, a more decisive factor is the inclinations, background and talents of the teachers, parents and students who make up the school community. Teachers, for instance, in a range of Church documents are called to be not only exemplary professionals but also to animate and cultivate the unique religious atmosphere that is the essential precursor to permeation (Buchanan & Rymarz, 2008; Cook, 2001; Mayotte, 2010). *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (CCE, 1997) puts the responsibilities of teachers in Catholic schools in these terms:

> In the Catholic school, prime responsibility for creating this unique Christian school climate rests with the teachers, as individuals and as a community. Teaching has an extraordinary moral depth…we must remember that teachers and educators fulfill a specific Christian vocation and share an equally specific participation in the mission of the Church, to the extent that it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic school achieves its purpose. (para. 19)

Recent shifts, however, in the religious culture in many Western, postindustrial societies, such as Canada, have made the realisation of permeation of Catholic identity in schools much more problematic (Beckford, 1989; Rymarz, 2010). In particular, the changed contemporary cultural context has important consequences for the parents, students and teachers who make up the communities in Catholic schools. These changes have been characterised variously as an increasing secularisation, the rise of a consumerist mentality in religious markets or the relegation of religion to providing vicarious comfort in cultures that have moved beyond an active and salient expression of religious belief (Bibby, 1988; Davie, 1994; Metzger, 2007; Stark & Fink, 2000). What ties many of these theoretical positions together is that they all acknowledge, not the disappearance of religious belief, but its transformation into a private, almost idiosyncratic form. One key characteristic of this transformation, which has great relevance for our discussion here, is that strong religious commitment is greatly ameliorated. In Lambert's (2005) view this is in keeping with a generational process of secularisation where religion loses its ability to shape culture and in turn is transformed into a personalised construct which is ultimately subservient to the dominant cultural view.

Teachers' identity plays a significant role in influencing school identity (Gommers & Hermans, 2003). For Catholic schools, teachers who display strong religious commitment are indispensable for the permeation of Catholic identity to be realised in a variety of conceptualisations (Ormerod, 2008). To be sure there are other factors which play a role in permeation of Catholic identity in schools. Many of these rest, however, on the contentious assumption that schools have significant numbers of highly committed faculty. This is not simply a question of relatively passive agreement on the part of teachers. There are many individuals prepared to work in Catholic schools who "support its ethos," to use the ubiquitous expression (Braniff, 2007). Many of these people have a high level of training and bring professional competence to their working lives (Cook, 2000). They may accurately describe themselves as 'spiritual', where spirituality is understood as a private and personal set of beliefs (Bellah et al., 1986). This spirituality, however, often does not lead to an active, ongoing role in strengthening the Catholic identity of the institution (Small & Bowman, 2011; Uecker et. al., 2005). What is needed are teachers who not only support the notion of permeation but also are able to animate this ideal and create a formative moral community where the stated goals of the institution are shared and actualised (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Hill, 2009). Morey and Piderit (2006) commenting on vibrant religious institutions, drew attention to the difference between cultural knowledge and cultural inheritability. Strong religious institutions are able to call on large numbers of individuals who not only know about the institution but are willing to commit to its future. In order to prosper, "organizations require significant levels of commitment from the community of cultural catalysts" (Morey & Piderit, 2006, p. 271). For permeation of Catholic identity in schools to be realised significant numbers within the school community must be prepared to animate its Catholic identity.

In many Catholic school districts, such as those in Canada, there is an expectation that teachers be Catholics. Provost (2000) pointed out, however, the expectation of Catholic schools, especially if they embrace the permeation ideology, is that teachers exhibit a far more active and robust faith than that required by a simple canonical definition of Catholicity, namely that of being baptised. He calls for a "critical mass of people who are Catholics in full communion" (Provost, 2000, p. 23). The importance of critical mass in maintaining the religious vitality of institutions is well described in the literature (Oliver & Marwell, 1988). Oliver et al. (1985) have described lack of a critical mass of highly committed individuals as the most fundamental problem compromising collective purpose within groups. This argument can be extrapolated to Catholic educational institutions (Sullins, 2004).

If permeation of Catholic identity is to be realised, educational institutions do not need to be made up exclusively of people of strong personal commitment, and, indeed, it is not essential that the majority of people show this dedicated service (Convey, 2012; McBrien, 1994). However, there is a point below which the work of schools as genuine places of religious permeation is imperilled if they do not have a sufficient number of highly committed teachers to carry this work forward. This highly committed group is not in opposition to the more loosely affiliated individuals, but they are distinct from them because they are prepared to live out their deepest religious convictions and to practically support the goals of permeation. In terms of a practical strategy every effort should be made by School Boards and other planning agencies to encourage and cultivate highly committed teachers. Mulligan (2005) notes that the future of education in Canadian Catholic schools is closely tied to how successful the ongoing development of teachers is. To this could be added the need to use more sophisticated techniques to recruit suitable teachers into Catholic schools during university or college training.

Similar cautionary comments could also be made about the parents who presently send their children to Catholic schools. Implicit in the success of the permeation model is that parents support the idea that schools should become places where Catholic identity is prominent and integrated into the life of the school. Beyer (1993), however, has commented that many contemporary Catholics see religious affiliation in cultural terms, typified by "a diffuse spiritual quest, emotional and largely unorganised or even haphazard practice" (p. 153). This type of affiliation is more typically suited to Catholic schools that espouse a less integrated sense of Catholic identity. The fact that demands for places in Catholic schools can remain high in some places is not an indicator of resurgence in strong religious commitment on the part of parents (Flynn, 1995; Gibbs, 1994). Indeed, enrolment patterns in Catholic schools could change. In the United States overall, Catholic school enrollment has more than halved in the past forty years (DeFiore, 2011; DeFiore et. al., 2009). In Canada, provinces with at least nominal Catholic majorities, Newfoundland and Quebec, have abolished funding to Catholic schools, leading to their demise in these provinces (Mulligan, 2005). Catholic schools seem especially vulnerable if parents are sending their children to them for a variety of reasons, which are not primarily religious (Ajuwon & Bradshaw, 2009). This places them in an educational marketplace where more generic educational goals take precedence over the religious dimension of schools, with obvious implication for the Catholic identity of schools. If parents place a high priority on the religious aspect of Catholic schools, then this gives strong impetuous to the goal of permeation. Other schools cannot provide this educational dimension. They can, however, provide other educational experiences and if these are placed ahead of the religious dimension of the school in the eyes of most parents then enrolment in Catholic schools could fluctuate according to shifts in demand.

The background and expectations of students in Catholic schools also places significant challenges before those interested in realising the permeation model. The lack of religious socialisation of younger Catholics is now more acute than for those of older generations (Francis, 1986; Fulton et al., 2000; Rymarz & Graham, 2006). Gallagher (1998) argued that many young people today have few or no formative experiences with religion. If the religious socialisation and experience of many students are weak then this has ramifications for the religious dimension of Catholic schools, especially if the goal of these schools is to provide an atmosphere that is permeated with Catholic identity. It can be overlooked, but a key assumption in permeation models of Catholic education is that students themselves will provide much of the impetuous for making Catholic identity a distinctive marker of the school. In cannot be the task of the teachers alone to ensure the dynamism of the religious dimension of the school. One of the key markers of the cultural shift in wider society, however, is that there is a clear connection between levels of religious commitment and the age. As Bibby (2009), commenting on Canadian data, pointed out this is often a result of the starting point of age related cohorts:

> The adult change has not involved a movement to outright atheism so much as a movement
> from decisiveness about belief in God to tentative belief or increasing agnosticism. With teens
> we see what amounts to an ongoing intergenerational shift – from tentativeness to agnosticism,
> and from agnosticism to atheism. (p. 169)

Another important example of the direction of religious affiliation amongst younger Catholics has been supplied by D'Antonio et al. (2007). They observed that a trend to less commitment and greater disaffiliation seems to becoming established. They report comparisons between generational cohorts of Catholics, where the most disconnected and uncommitted Catholics are those born after 1979, the so-called millennials. Furthermore, the trend lines here seem point to continuing decline. Recent work in Canada points to a similar disengagement in religious commitment amongst younger Catholics (Eagle, 2011; Thiessen & Dawson, 2008).

It may be argued that declining religious commitment of students makes the permeation notion even more relevant as schools must now become the primary place of religious formation. This argument does not, however, take into account the irreplaceable role that the family plays in catechesis (Bourg, 2004; John Paul II, 1984). Schools cannot be expected to carry out the work of the primary formator of the child, namely, the family. In terms of realising a permeation model, critical mass arguments can again be applied to students now enrolling in Catholic schools. If a sufficient number of students enrolling in Catholic schools do not come from families where faith nurturing and sponsorship is occurring, this problematises the whole notion that Catholic religious identity can permeate Catholic schools.

Conclusion

The notion of permeating Catholic identity throughout Catholic schools can be addressed in at least two ways. It can be discussed in conceptual terms, drawing on theological and philosophical discourse. This paper has focused, however, on the human element that is pivotal if the goals of permeation are to be realised in Catholic schools. The second part of this article addressed some of the practical challenges, relating to the place of religious education and curriculum development in general and how these relate to the goals of permeation.

Significant challenges arise without a critical mass in the school community of teachers, students and parents who are highly committed to the deepest goals of Catholic schools. In light of this discussion two related issues arise all of which are worthy of further research and ongoing dialogue. Firstly, what is the best course of action for those Catholic schools where these challenges prove to be too great? For instance, what if some Catholic schools are unable to furnish a critical mass of teachers, parents, and students who exhibit, or wish to develop, a strong and ongoing religious commitment? Discussion on permeation can proceed on the assumption that Catholic identity can be somehow imposed from above, that school authorities, through policy statements and documents, can make up for a genuine desire on the part of school communities to see religious identity a strong and ubiquitous presence in Catholic schools. This is a fallacious assumption, as students, parents, and teachers must help generate Catholic identity and not just encounter it. This raises a number of policy issues for Catholic school authorities. Central to these considerations is the development of long-term strategic thinking which recognises the challenges facing Catholic schools in increasing secular cultures such as Canada. This cultural shift does not directly challenge the rationale for denominational schools. Rather it erodes the distinctive nature of such schools as a reflection of the diminishing place for institutional religion in public discourse.

Secondly, and of foundational importance, is what can be done to assist those schools that are trying to address the human aspect of the challenges that arise from embracing the notion of permeation. In this case questions about the best way to assist teachers, parents, and students grow in their faith and also in their commitment to seeing Catholic schools as communities with an indelible religious dimension become paramount. This is not a straightforward issue and something beyond an in-service approach needs to be considered. What may be needed in this case is a reconceptualisation of the role that families, schools and parishes play in ongoing formation and evangelisation. A related issue for further research is how best to nurture, in particular, religious education teachers.

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About the Author

Proffesor Richard Rymarz, Peter and Doris Kule Chair in Catholic Religious Education St Joseph's College, University of Alberta and Adjunct Professor Australian Catholic University - rymarz@ualberta.ca