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## **The Future of Catholic Schools in a Secular Culture of Religious Choice**

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### **Abstract**

Recent cultural shifts, most notably a rise in a modified form of secularization, which privileges choice, have led to a general decline in religious commitment. This is best described as a process that may eventually lead to complete religious disengagement. This decline has implications for many religious groups, such as the Catholic Church, that maintain a large number of affiliated institutions, many of which have an educational focus. In the absence of strongly committed individuals, Catholic schools face significant challenges in accommodating this new cultural reality. In response to these challenges Catholic schools need to develop ways to better maintain a strong and distinctive identity.

### **Introduction**

[1] Kelly has pointed out that in many Western countries the most significant contribution of Catholicism to the wider society is the operation of schools. In recent times, however, Catholic schools in both the United States and Canada have experienced a serious and sustained decline both in terms of the number of students enrolled and in the total number of schools operating. In the United States overall, Catholic school enrollment now stands at about 2.3 million, down from the peak of 5.2 million in the early 1960s (DeFiore et al.) The impact of declining Catholic school enrollments on the wider culture can be seen more starkly if we consider the change in terms of the percentage of the U.S. population enrolled in Catholic schools. In the forty-year period between 1965 and 2005 this dropped from 12% to 5% (MacGregor). In both Newfoundland and Quebec, provinces with at least nominal Catholic majorities, have abolished funding to Catholic schools, a move undertaken without widespread protest (Mulligan). This paper seeks to examine the place of Catholic schools in

societies where they have traditionally played an important public role, with focus on the relationship between Catholic schools and the wider culture.

[2] One way of better understanding the cultural context in which Catholic schools operate in countries such as the United States is to see choice as fundamental to religion. This approach has chiefly been associated with the American sociologist Rodney Stark. The first premise here is that individuals make religious choices on the basis of perceived benefit and cost. This idea is captured in Stark and Finke's proposition 1: "Within the limits of their information and understanding, restricted by available options, guided by their preferences and tastes, humans attempt to make rational choices" (85). Religious behavior, like all human endeavors, can be best understood as a rational choice and not, as held by many social theorists, as some type of illogical response to group pressure, lack of education, or superstitious fear. In this view religion and, by extension, the services that religious groups provide, such as schools and other educational institutions, can be seen as competing in the market place for followers. The idea of the religious marketplace has been developed principally by Iannaccone. This marketplace has been evident for centuries and is dynamic, fluctuating, and responsive. This view is often a counterpoint to the so-called secularization thesis articulated by, amongst others, Bruce (1994, 1998). This maintains that modern Western culture is marked by the inexorable decline in religious belief and practice, evidenced most strongly in Northern Europe and increasingly so in Britain and elsewhere.

### **Religious Choice and Secularization**

[3] A detailed discussion of secularization theory is beyond the scope of this paper. It will be used in a limited way to offer some insight into the situation of religious institutions such as Catholic schools and their susceptibility to how and why people make religious choices. In this sphere there is some overlap with theories that emphasize the rational nature of religious choice. Classical secularization holds that religious beliefs decrease as a society evolves or modernizes. A strong, early proponent of the secularization thesis was the influential Austrian social theorist Peter Berger. A number of statistically powerful studies have shown, however, that metaphysical beliefs such as belief in God have remained high even in Europe. What has declined is adherence to characteristically Christian beliefs such as in a transcendent, as opposed to an immanent, God (Davie 2007: 112-16). Religious beliefs per se have not disappeared but have become more individual, internal, and not representative of a common creedal position. Individual beliefs are ones that lack a communal expression and so cannot readily be reinforced by others. In these circumstances Mason et al. commented, "The beliefs which survive best 'without belonging' are those which are less costly, such as belief in an undemanding, indulgent deity" (56). The link between privatization of beliefs and their "cost" is important. Religious institutions such as Catholic schools have traditionally benefited when many in the wider culture have been prepared to send their children to Catholic schools despite some sacrifice in making this decision. Parents who are prepared to take on this burden display a relatively high level of religious commitment, so a pertinent question becomes how can this type of commitment be better understood and why is this threatened in contemporary culture?

[4] Bellamy and his colleagues have argued that there is a clear connection between decline in church attendance and what they call conventional Christian beliefs. Beliefs, for example,

such as the resurrection of Jesus and the existence of a personal God, are diminished in those who still identify as Christian but who no longer or infrequently attend church. In contemporary culture religious beliefs do not disappear, instead they become privatized, unorthodox, and lose salience. A consequence of the privatization of belief is that this will, in turn, weaken religious commitment. One way that this is manifested is in a decline in support for religious institutions which participation in, relatively speaking, involves meeting certain requirements. By expressing a preference for a weak religious affiliation, that is, one that does not involve strenuous demands, many people are also adopting a worldview that gives religion very little salience in terms of shaping lifestyle or influencing important life choices. A belief, for example, in a benign divine entity does not generally have an impact on how people live. It is at best comforting rather than a strongly formative factor. Contrast this with belief in a personal Christian God. This usually has consequences for how people live and to what they will personally and strongly commit.

[5] In secularized societies the influence that religious groups have on the general culture also declines (Sikkink). One consequence of this is that the capacity of the wider culture to sustain and support religious institutions is greatly diminished. This is, perhaps, most evident in the weakening power of cultural religious symbols and explanations to shape meaning and behavior (Chaves). This has implications for many religious institutions. Catholic schools, for instance, in contemporary culture have a difficult task because of the unfamiliarity of many in the school community with the Christian metanarrative. This makes it difficult to communicate religious meaning even to those who are part of faith communities. It does not, however, obviate the place of religious schools, as in even highly secular cultures they can offer a service that is in demand.

[6] The view of secularization as a process, where beliefs become more individual and privatized is well summarized by Dobbelaere. He outlines a three dimensional model that includes separate but not completely independent movements. The first is a decline in religious practice, typically in the ritual forms of a particular group. For Catholics this would include activities such as participation in and reception of the sacraments. Secondly, religious institutions become weaker in the sense that though they may still retain some type of nominal allegiance they lose their capacity to direct and influence both individuals and society at large. The final stage of the secularization process involves religion becoming interior and idiosyncratic. Religious beliefs become highly personal and eclectic and religious practice private to the point of being almost hidden. This process, in cultural terms, is gradual but one where the most telling indicators of religious disaffiliation can be masked by continuing utilization of, broadly defined, religious services offered by religious institutions. These are not typically participation in worship or other overtly religious practice. Catholic schools are much more likely to provide services that fulfill an ongoing need.

[7] Stark and Finke challenged the idea that contemporary culture is growing more secular in a critical regard, that is, they do not accept that earlier times were any less secular than today. A well-known study, which supports this contention, is the longitudinal work on “Middletown” a pseudonym for Muncie Indiana. These studies show, among others things, higher rates of religious observance in the 1980’s as opposed to earlier times such as the 1920’s (Caplow et al.). It is a mistake to see the past as some type of golden age where rates of religious practice and affiliation were much higher. The remarkably high rates of religious

participation by Catholics, in many countries, in the immediate post war era would be explained by this view as an unusual confluence of factors, which made religious affiliation attractive. Some of these included factors such as strong metaphysical compensators, internal social cohesion, and high birth rates (Davidson). Historically, this situation was not typical. The so-called golden age of faith, in this view, never existed and it is a serious mistake for Christians today to measure themselves against an almost mythical standard. There is also an argument that choices made in the past by Catholic parents do not reflect a hegemonic view. In terms of Catholic schools, Ryan has pointed out that in earlier eras when Catholic schools were staffed by professed religious it is a common oversight to assume that there were not large numbers of Catholic students in public schools. Catholic schools, in this sense, have always operated in a type of religious marketplace where parents have made choices about the perceived benefits of a Catholic education. Levels of religious commitment in turn, influence perceived benefits. In general, Catholic schools do not have to work as hard to sustain enrollments in times when religious commitment is high.

[8] Levels of religious commitment have fluctuated over time. In terms of Stark's argument, religion does not disappear but can remain dormant if religious groups do not offer something of high cost and value. Religious groups can emerge quickly if they meet perceived needs and also fall away just as rapidly if they no longer fulfill a need. Finke and Stark use the example of the Methodist church in the USA (in contrast to Baptists) to illustrate the point that religious group can emerge, flourish, and decline in relatively rapid succession. What governs this growth and decline is the ability of the tradition to maintain, amongst other things, a relatively high level of conflict with the surrounding culture. If the conflict is not maintained, then the boundaries between the religious group and others becomes blurred and members drift away as they can see no reason to remain affiliated. From this argument flows an important principle. In for individuals to make choices to associate with religious groups there must be some perceived benefit – "Humans seek what they perceive to be rewards and avoid what they perceive to be costs" (Stark and Bainbridge: 27). Indeed, the greater the benefit, the stronger the commitment. There are many benefits that accrue from being part of a group such as social networking, shared activities, assistance in times of need, and an "exchange with the gods" (Stark and Finke: 91). In seeking these benefits, however, individuals will make assiduous judgments about what obligations are espoused when certain choices are made.

[9] Religious choices are heavily influenced by considerations of cost and benefit. Stark and Finke put it in these terms: "[An] individual will seek to minimize the cost of association with a group without decreasing the perceived benefits" (100). Contemporary culture religious groups, and institutions such as schools that are associated with these groups, enter into an exchange with individuals on the basis of what is being offered and what is being asked. Consider here the case of many younger Catholics. They are part of a large cohort that, in much of the Church's contemporary pastoral practice, capitalizes on the perceived importance of inclusion. Some have described this inclusiveness as a *big tent* model of Church (O'Grady: 39). Many have made a strong bargain, one where the individual has effectively managed to reduce the cost of religious affiliation without losing many of the benefits.

[10] Many benefits accrue to post-conciliar Catholics at relatively little cost. They avoid, perhaps most importantly, an existential void by identifying, albeit loosely, with a historically significant group. They do not need to confront alone major questions about existence and their place in it. To use a postmodern term, they have a place in a meta-narrative if they should desire it. There is also a range of very practical benefits. Post-conciliar Catholics can maintain, if they wish, a strong familial religious connection. When the family gets together (for example, at Christmas) they can visit a church with other family members. If they wish they can marry in a church, bury their parents in a religious service, send their children to Catholic schools, and associate with a wide range of people who are very much like them. All of this can be gained for very little cost. Individuals are not required to attend services, hold difficult or challenging beliefs, give up a substantial part of their income, or take part in any ritual or process that may stigmatize them. In these circumstances it is not surprising that many post-conciliar Catholics choose not to formally disaffiliate from Church membership, at least for the time being, when it offers so much and allows for so much freedom on the part of the member. It would also seem clear that the inexorable pull on most post-conciliar Catholics would be toward this type of loose affiliation. Hechter comments that a rational person will not join an organization, if he or she can reap the benefits of membership without participating.

### **The Rise of the Religious Consumer**

[11] A feature of all the theoretical frameworks discussed in this paper is that they describe many Catholics as being on the periphery of the Church but who, more importantly, may have no real inclination to change this state of affairs. In a sense they reflect on a personal level what Brown said on a cultural level: “British culture did not so much turn hostile to organized religion as indifferent. This sense of the secular that grew in Britain between 1960 and 2000 was not an intruding sense in peoples’ lives, but rather a comfortable absence” (2006: 316). As religious consumers, many have made a strong bargain, which precludes a high level of religious commitment. Many have experienced, in their view, what Catholicism has to offer, taken what they want from it, and seem to be more than content with their current position or the choices they have made.

[12] A very pertinent question becomes, what is the best pastoral and strategic approach to take when dealing with people who have assimilated some type of Christian sensibility but do not display the deep inner conversion that is the life of vibrant religious institutions, such as Catholic schools. It should be recognized and acknowledged that ministry to this group is difficult, needs to be carefully conceived, and success may be best measured in small incremental steps. To use the language of vicarious religion many Catholics see religion as a type of safety net or an insurance policy. To extend this analogy, with what may seem a trite example but one that reveals the practical difficulties involved; if a person is satisfied with the level of insurance coverage they already have what would induce them to increase their premium? The position taken at the moment may fulfill all the needs and expectations of the person. They are content with what is being offered and see no reasons to explore other options. In this context asking people for some type of greater commitment when they are satisfied with the current benefit is a difficult task. One pastoral strategy that seems worth exploring is to reach out, initially, to those who seem most responsive to a call to deepen

their Christian commitment. To push the analogy perhaps too far, this strategy would be identifying those who are not completely happy with their current insurance coverage. This is recognition that without some type of strategic thinking, efforts may dissipate by a lack of focus and squandering of limited resources.

### **The Future of Catholic Schools**

[13] In their excellent study of generations of American Catholics, D'Antonio and his colleagues intersperse well-presented quantitative data with a series of dialogues between a hypothetical mother and daughter. One represents a more socialized, highly committed older Catholic and the other is more typical of the post-conciliar pattern. A critical question is, however, what is the granddaughter, the next generation of Catholic, going to contribute to this dialogue? Is the existence of large numbers of loosely affiliated Catholics indicative of a consistent pattern that will continue into the future or is it a more terminal scenario, where following generations drift out of the Catholic orbit altogether? For Brown this question has been answered conclusively. He proposed a three generational process of religious disaffiliation from the mainline Christian Churches in Britain. The third generation becomes thoroughly secular, in the sense that their worldviews and opinions are indistinguishable from the general public (2001).

[14] Many people make religious bargains only if they see some benefit accruing to them. Perceived benefits may, however, diminish over time. For example, it was proposed here that one of the benefits currently available for Catholics who wish to retain some connection with the Church is that it enables them to remain part of a family circle. This includes the option of attending Catholic schools. Once the first generation dies off, however, will the third generation feel the same need to retain this type of link with their parents? If a child has been socialized to go to religious services Christmas and Easter because it is a chance to catch up with “nana and pop” and their relatives, rather than some theological justification, what will be their attitude when their own parents grow old? (Davie 1999). In a similar way, if the connection to Catholic schools is not reflective of a strong, underlying religious ideology, the motivation of the third, and following, generations to choose Catholic schools over and above other options should decidedly wane. The other benefits of maintaining a loose religious connection could easily become less obvious over time. Writing about the future of Catholicism in Quebec, a community that has experienced a dramatic decline in religious practice, Christiano notes that while the historical place of Catholicism is recognized, most Quebecers have an ever-weakening connection with these historical roots. Christiano observes, “whether future generations of Quebecers, more than ever imbued with the secular attitudes of their most accomplished artistic, intellectual, and economic elites (if not the critical foundations of those attitudes), will find such loose attachments to religious tradition either useful or ultimately satisfying is still an open question” (61).

[15] It seems that many Catholics are, to use Rahner's analogy, somewhere caught in the middle as the Church changes from a national Church where membership was automatic, if unreflective, to one where individuals make a personal decision to be associated. Berger makes a similar point from a sociological perspective, noting that Churches have moved from an imposition model to a marketing model (1967). Catholic schools, in this schema, become one choice among many for the increasing number of Catholics with marginal levels

of religious affiliation. The Catholic school is not discounted but its competition is from other schools, which may better meet the needs and aspirations of a diverse clientele. The privileged position of the Catholic school as being able to provide a religious dimension to education is undermined in a culture where such a dimension is not irrelevant but is not highly valued.

[16] At the very least the new cultural reality must make Catholic schools more attuned to responding in a proactive way by encouraging people to become part of the faith community and to nurture those already affiliated. The days of uncritical, almost passive, enculturation appears to be over. For Catholic schools, strong identity is not an option as much as a necessity in a culture where options abound. An explicit and prolonged discussion of the “branding” of Catholic schools is beyond the scope of this paper. It is worth noting, however, that identity for Catholic schools is associated with not only a distinctive configuration of programs and practices but also a strong religious dimension. This religious dimension is best exemplified by a consistent and manifold support of religious education in the school as well as the cultivation of opportunities for catechesis.

[17] There may be a suggestion of a way forward here in Neitz’s study of charismatic Catholics. She pointed out that these people have chosen a particular religious reality. They have done so, in the face of many options, because they see this as an attractive and life giving decision. They are not overwhelmed by choice if something stands out as exceptional. Here choosing to be a Christian is a mark of discipleship rather than of tribalism, so this is in accord with an ecclesiology that recognizes the new cultural reality. In the recent past, Catholics have been part of a subculture that was intact and functioning. This ensured that a steady stream of members move toward more committed levels of religious affiliation. This subculture has not existed in any meaningful sense for many decades. Catholics do not have to become part of the subculture because this is what is expected of them and it is what most of their peers do.

[18] If many Catholics today and in the foreseeable future do not have strong sociological incentives to become, or remain, religiously committed why should they choose to send their children to Catholic schools? In keeping with the notion of the religious consumer, Wuthnow points out that many young adults today are in some type of bargaining position, not just with religious affiliation but also with many other aspects of their lives. An important factor in this bargaining is self-interest. Wuthnow comments, “But people have to get something out of the bargain, too. Everything social scientists have learned about volunteering, philanthropy, and joining organizations underscores this fact. There is no such thing as pure altruism. Human Nature is self-interested” (217).

[19] Catholic schools face the challenge of having to articulate a message and a rationale to a more demanding and discerning audience. This requires an awareness of a new type of social reality where religion is not preeminent or vigorously opposed but needs to make its case along with many other competing groups. Bibby illustrates the need for a new type of consciousness in mainline churches, one more geared to proclamation and strong identity, when he recounts a story about a Canadian Anglican diocese. The diocese decides to undertake an outreach program to those on the margins. It takes out newspaper advertisements and the like, highlighting a contact phone number. It then hires a number of

people to staff its enquiry centre. One of the receptionists asks the telling question, “What do we do if someone calls?” In other words, what do we have to offer? By analogy, the Catholic school must be able to offer a clear and distinctive rationale in a competitive religious market.

[20] If Catholic schools can cultivate a strong identity and project this to a more disconnected, distracted, and discerning audience, one important consequence concerns those who hear and accept this message. They are likely to display the characteristics of the religiously committed. They are not Catholic primarily because their parents were or they drifted into this unreflectively. They have made a decision to join or to remain a part of the faith community and could also be described, using Lonergan’s terminology, as having fallen in love with God. One significant consequence of the emergence of this group is how the wider Church deals with them. To return to Rahner’s analogy, they are coming into a Church that is still very much in transition from a monopoly to a community of conviction. Some may view their zeal and ardor with suspicion. In a culture where religion is accepted most readily in its benign and private forms those who take on a much stronger commitment may not always be received with enthusiasm, even by some in their own faith community. They have some resemblance to St. Paul, who experienced perhaps history’s most famous exogenous conversion experience and could be the human exemplar for strong presence in a religious marketplace. Even a brief perusal of the Acts of the Apostles indicates that Paul was not always greeted with open arms either by Jewish or Roman officials, or the nascent Christian communities.

### **Conclusion**

[20] At least for the short to medium term the number of Catholics who express a loose affiliation to the Church will, in all likelihood, remain quite large. Moreover, the cultural conditions that have shaped the decline in religious commitment, described here as a rise of secularization marked by the prominence of religious choice, also seem likely to continue. This presents a significant challenge to Catholic schools that have traditionally relied on a core of strongly committed people to support denominational schools in a variety of ways, but perhaps most importantly, by sending their own children to these schools. Catholic schools seem especially vulnerable if parents are enrolling their children for a variety of reasons that are not primarily religious. This places them in direct competition with other schools. If parents are concerned with the religious aspect of Catholic schools then this is a relatively stable clientele. 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.

[21] In this cultural context one way forward for Catholic schools is the cultivation of a strong and distinctive identity that will provide both a rationale for schools and a reason for increasingly demanding and discerning religious consumers to choose Catholic schools over other educational alternatives. In a theoretical sense, Catholic schools should respond to this new cultural reality by developing a strong and distinctive identity. A pivotal topic for future research and investigation is how, in practical terms, can this identity be developed? A critical

issue is the ongoing engagement with questions such as, what Catholic schools have been successful in developing distinctive identity and what are the markers of this?

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