

SUBMISSION TO NCCA ON RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

27 September 2018

1. Introduction

1.1 This is a joint submission made to the NCCA consultation process on Junior Cycle Religious Education from:

- Michael Nugent and Jane Donnelly, Atheist Ireland
- Imam Ibrahim Noonan, Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Ireland
- Pastor Nick Park, Executive Director, Evangelical Alliance of Ireland

1.2 This is a short follow-up to our previous submission in November 2017:

- <https://teachdontpreach.ie/2017/11/ncca-junior-cycle-religious-education/>

2. Overview

2.1 We have not changed our opinion of this proposed new specification for Religious Education Course since our previous submission.

2.2 Our main objections are that:

- The course breaches our Constitutional and Human Rights
- The course does not respect parents' philosophical convictions
- The aims of the course cannot be achieved
The course does not respect the right to privacy
The State course is combined with Catholic Religious Instruction and Worship
- The course is being used as a vehicle to promote Catholicism

2.3 Atheist Ireland, the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community and the Evangelical Alliance of Ireland object on conscientious grounds to the new specification for Religious Education (to be introduced in 2019).

2.4 This Religious Education course is not in accordance with human rights principles as it is not objective, critical and pluralistic.

2.5 We are seeking our Constitutional and Human Right to opt our children out of this course. We are also seeking to ensure that our children can choose another subject if they opt out of this course in all schools.

2.6 Since our last Submission to the NCCA the situation for minorities in relation to this subject has got worse. We believe that this Religious Education course has contributed to this. Children from minority backgrounds are being forced into this course against the wishes of their parents. This course is undermining our Constitutional and Human Rights, promoting disrespect for minorities, discriminatory and breaching the right to freedom of religion and belief.

3. Response by ETBs and Teachers Unions to Circular Letter

3.1 An example of how this Religion course is contributing to the breaching of our rights is the attitude of ETB schools and teachers to a Circular Letter that the Minister for Education issued in February 2018.

3.2 The Circular Letter outlined how ETB were to approach the opt out in schools to ensure that the Constitutional Rights of parents were protected. You can find that Letter here

3.3 The ETBs, Religion teachers and Principals have refused to implement this Circular Letter. When parents approach schools and teachers they are informed that the course is not religious

instruction but religious education and that their children cannot pick another subject on those grounds.

3.4 In addition some children and their parents have been questioned and some even interrogated on their reasons for wishing to opt out their children. This is contrary to the Circular Letter. Parents have informed us that their children are then forced to take this course.

3.5 This behaviour by the ETBs, Teachers and Principals illustrates the very reason that we wish to opt out children out of the course. Their behaviour in this matter supports our conscientious objections that this course does not respect our convictions and that it is undermining the rights to freedom of religion and belief.

3.6 Their behaviour also shows clearly that the course is undermining the rights of parents and their children. If teachers and principals respected and recognised the rights of minorities they would not have behaved in such a manner.

3.7 We do not want our children to be taught that it is in order to disrespect the rights of minorities in this manner. We believe that this behaviour is not in the common good. Children in a class are aware that other children are being forced to take this course against the wishes of their parents. This course is not contributing to the development of the communities in which we live.

4. Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students

4.1 In a Background Paper and Brief for the Review of Junior Cycle Religious Education, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment relegated one of the main Constitutional and Human Rights issues with regard to the State Religious Education course to a footnote on page 9 of a 47-page document. This really says a lot about the disrespect that the NCCA has for the rights of minorities, it supports our conscientious objection to the course.

4.2 The footnote on page 9 of the NCCA Background Paper and Brief states that:

“Within faith-based schools, Guidelines were developed to enable teachers to teach for religion and so continue to engage in faith formation, alongside teaching the State syllabus. See for example, Irish Bishops Conference, Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic Students: Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus (Dublin, Veritas, 1999)”

4.3 In a Document (that Atheist Ireland obtained under FOI) prepared for the ETBs on ‘Exploring and Expressing the Characteristic Spirit of publicly managed Education & Training Board schools’, it states that:

“Schools appear to have a wide range of attitudes to and arrangements for religion and religious education. The interview data let the research team to conclude that ‘Catholic/Christian values’ as part of the set of core values underpinning Characteristic spirit’ of ETB schools”

4.4 The above means that the Guidelines for the Faith Formation and Development of Catholic students are being taught alongside the state syllabus in the vast majority of schools in Ireland. Some ETB Community and Comprehensive schools claim to be Catholic schools while the Minister for Education and the Department of Education claim they are multi-denominational.

5. The State course undermines the right to freedom of religion and belief

5.1 The research carried out shows that many ETB schools operate as ‘faith schools’ despite their multi-denominational status. These schools are in many cases forcing students into Religious Education against the conscientious objections of their parents, this is because the course has failed to promote and protect the rights of minorities. We are also aware that Catholic Diocesan Advisors visit all ETBs and that Religion Teachers attend in-service days hosted by the Catholic Church alongside the PDST.

5.2 If the State RE course fulfilled its aim to promote respect, pluralism and inclusion then this would not be happening. Teachers and schools would recognise and respect the rights of parents and their children and ensure that their conscientious objections were guaranteed and protected.

5.3 We believe that the State Religious Education course is undermining the right to freedom of religion and belief. It is also ensuring that parents will have no trust in the NCCA to promote and protect their human rights because the RE course is also used as a tool for the Catholic Church to indoctrinate and evangelise minorities.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Any hope of a future state curriculum course ABOUT Religions and Beliefs at primary and second level, delivered in an objective, critical and pluralistic manner is being undermined by the second level Religious Education course. How are minorities going to trust the NCCA to introduce a course given the background and dismissal of their Constitutional and Human Rights?

6.2 The very reason that parents and students wish to opt out of the course is because it is forced on them and because it is not objective, critical and pluralistic. It is undermining our rights it has put schools in the position that they just ignore our conscientious objections.

6.3 To conclude we object on conscientious grounds to the new Specification for Religious Education. We believe that it promotes disrespect for our convictions, is undermining the right to Freedom of Religion and Belief and the rights of parents to ensure that the teaching of their children is in conformity with their convictions.

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- Pastor Nick Park, Executive Director, Evangelical Alliance of Ireland