

# **The Sickness of Long Thinking: Religious Education and the New Junior Cycle**

## **Introduction**

In Stef Penney's award winning novel *The Tenderness of Wolves*, the trapper Parker tells Mrs Ross of an abandoned wolf cub he once found and brought up as a dog. That is, until

It remembered it was a wolf, not a pet. It stared into the distance. Then one day it was gone. The Chippewa have a word for it - it means "the sickness of long thinking". You cannot tame a wild animal, because it will always remember where it is from, and yearn to go back.<sup>1</sup>

There is something at the heart of every living thing that remembers where it is from and yearns to go back. At some unfathomable depth there is a pull, a tug, reminding us of who we really are. It is an insight as old as the Scriptures, true for instance of the Prodigal Son. Luke tells us that when the younger son has hit rock bottom, alone in a foreign land and tending pigs, he 'comes to himself' (Lk. 15.17). He recognises something about his own identity and place in the world. In that dawning realisation the younger son understands who he really is, where he is from, and yearns to go back.

In this article I will set out how the sickness of long thinking is a phenomenon today, typified by the increasing loneliness documented among young people, and by an ongoing spiritual hunger prevalent in Western culture. Identity and rootedness, or more accurately, lack of both – both personal and communal – is at the heart of this sickness; only by addressing who and whose we are can healing take place. This is where religious education - here specifically Christian religious education - has a clear and vital function. Identity and rootedness, and discovering who and whose we are, lie at the heart of religious education. First disciple Andrew's encounter with Jesus presents a paradigm of this. It demonstrates how Christian religious education in its fullest sense can have a transforming effect. In the concluding section I will show how Christian religious education can contribute significantly to the vision and values of the new Junior Cycle in Irish second level schools<sup>2</sup>, and towards healing the sickness of long thinking.

## **Loneliness and isolation**

Our postmodern culture is characterised by a rootlessness showing itself in a diminished sense of the past, a kind of cultural amnesia, a lostness and loneliness. With no sense of who we are or where we came from, a new isolation takes hold.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.eurocrime.co.uk/reviews/The\\_Tenderness\\_of\\_Wolves.html](http://www.eurocrime.co.uk/reviews/The_Tenderness_of_Wolves.html) (accessed May 3rd 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The Junior Cycle in Irish second level schools is a 3 year cycle for students aged approximately 12-15. Although the emphasis of this article is on the role of Christian Religious Education in the new Junior Cycle, it has resonance with any holistic approach to education, particularly one rooted in the Christian faith tradition.

For instance, in 2010 the UK Mental Health Foundation found loneliness to be a greater concern among young people than the elderly.<sup>3</sup> The 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely, to worry about feeling alone and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s. Linked to depression, paranoia, anxiety, addiction, cognitive decline and a known factor in suicide, loneliness can be both a cause and effect of mental health problems.

Dr Grant Blank, a survey research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, points out that social media and the internet can be a boon and a problem.<sup>4</sup> They are beneficial when they enable us to communicate with distant loved ones, but not when they needlessly replace face-to-face contact. People often present an idealised version of themselves and their social lives online. Comparing friends' seemingly perfect lives with ours can lead us to withdraw emotionally and socially. Indeed, a 2013 study of social media at the University of Michigan found that Facebook reduces life satisfaction.<sup>5</sup>

For Ruth Sutherland, the chief executive of Relate, the antidote to reducing our isolation rests on laying the foundations to good-quality relationships earlier in life. But good quality interpersonal relationships depend on self-awareness, integrity, compassion and empathy - the ability to walk in the shoes of the other.<sup>6</sup> Healthy relationships depend on these qualities - exactly the qualities that characterise the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

### **Spiritual hunger**

The human instinct to ask questions and the quest for meaning is nothing new. This is reflected in core parts of the Irish Junior Certificate Religious Education syllabus. Introduced in 1990, the Junior Certificate is a state programme in the Republic of Ireland resulting in a terminal examination. Students take the Junior Certificate examination after three years of second level education, at age 15 approximately. Religious Education (RE) can be taken as a Junior Certificate examination subject, on an optional basis. The RE syllabus, while appropriate for all students whether they have a particular religious commitment or not, seeks to go beyond information giving to contribute to the spiritual and moral development of the students. For this reason, many schools that do not offer RE as an examination subject still follow the syllabus with their Junior Certificate students.

The opening section of the Junior Certificate RE syllabus focuses on historic and contemporary expressions of the search for meaning. But our traditional modes of

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<sup>3</sup> Griffin, J. 'The Lonely Society?'

[http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/the\\_lonely\\_society\\_report.pdf](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/content/assets/PDF/publications/the_lonely_society_report.pdf) (accessed April 10th 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Black, G., cited in Gil, N. 'Loneliness: A Silent Plague that is Hurting Young People Most.' The Guardian, Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Kross, E. et al. 'Facebook Use Predicts Declines in Subjective Well-Being in Young Adults.' <http://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0069841> (accessed April 10<sup>th</sup> 2015)

<sup>6</sup> Sutherland, R., cited in Gil, 2014. Relate is a UK relationship counselling organisation. See [www.relate.org.uk](http://www.relate.org.uk)

searching have been fractured. Instead of guiding us down the road of long thinking, contemporary quests tend to lead us around in circles. The fallout is an acute spiritual hunger tied to a sense of desolation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the burgeoning shelf space given over to new age spirituality and self-help manuals in the all the major book stores.

Let's take for example, Oprah's Book Club. When the show concluded in May 2011, Nielsen BookScan created a list of the top-10 bestsellers from the Club's final 10 years (prior data was unavailable). The top three bestsellers are as follows:

1. Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth* (2005), 3,370,000 copies
2. James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, 2,695,500 copies
3. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 2,021,000 copies.

It is interesting that in different ways, all of these books point to the acute spiritual hunger referred to above. Take for instance, the most popular choice: New York Times multi best seller Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. According to Tolle, the book's purpose 'is not to add new information or beliefs to your mind or to try to convince you of anything, but to bring about a shift in consciousness.'<sup>7</sup> He envisions a world population that is increasingly more humble, enlightened and pure and that involves a massive change in group think. When Eckhart Tolle, partnered Oprah for a series of webinars based on the book, they attracted more than 11 million viewers.

Pope Francis is acutely in tune with this spiritual hunger: 'The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience.'<sup>8</sup> For Francis, the joy of the Gospel, the rootedness of the Kingdom as preached and lived by Jesus, is a sure way to consolation, contentment and real fulfilment. Herein lies the basis of a compelling argument for religious education as a core element of the new Junior Cycle. This is a theme I will return to.

### **Identity and Integration**

By turning us towards who and what we are and always have been, Christian religious education has much to offer the sickness of long thinking. At its core is the fundamental claim that 'the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.'

Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the good news that the Kingdom of God is now at hand for all who are ready to receive it (Mk. 1.14-20). There is something so compelling about both messenger and message that many who hear it leave their old lives and become disciples.

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<sup>7</sup> Tolle, E. *A New Earth*. (Penguin Group, 2005), p.6–7.

<sup>8</sup> Pope Francis. *Evangelii Gaudium*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), n.2, 9.

Andrew is a typical example. Like many of the first disciples and many of us, Andrew is a searcher. When we first meet him in John's Gospel, he is a disciple of John the Baptist - a young man looking for something more to life. But he is not sure what that 'something' might be. Andrew sees Jesus walking by and senses that in this man he will find what he is looking for. Jesus takes the initiative and welcomes him into his company; he invites him to 'Come and see'. Then he asks one of the most fundamental questions of life: 'What are you looking for?' (Jn. 1.35-42). What is the aim or purpose to your life; what are you looking for inside yourself, what are you looking for in me, Jesus? It is the question he still asks of us today. His offer set us free from inner emptiness and loneliness is constant.

Through this prolonged encounter Andrew realises that he has found something essential to his identity, integrity and to where he belongs. His sense of himself is transformed and his first response is to bring his brother to share the experience. 'He first found his brother Simon and . . . brought [him] to Jesus' (Jn. 1.41-42). It is noticeable that the transformation of Andrew is both personal and communal. We hear very little of Andrew for the remainder of the Gospels, but when we do, he is invariable bringing people to Jesus. That extraordinary 'coming to himself' which happens to him through his encounter with Jesus propels him again and again to share it with others.

Knowing the person of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God continues to have a transforming effect on generations of people, just as it did on the first disciples. The word 'Kingdom' does not refer to a place, but to the power of God which is rooted in love. Wherever the love of God prevails in our world, the Kingdom is there. It suggests a matrix of interdependent loving relationships with self, others, God and the created world – very different to the loneliness and confusion previously described.

### **Christian Religious Education**

It is important to say from the outset that Christian education is committed to academic excellence. This is achieved through respecting the different disciplines while challenging students to achieve their potential across the curriculum. A successful education is one which provides students with the ability to draw from the rich treasures of both faith and reason in order to contribute towards a future that holds promise for all.

Christian religious education then is a subset of Christian education. It has particular significance because like all religious education, it deals with ultimate questions. How we answer those questions cannot but influence our values, view of life, and the choices we make. Our identity is inseparable from our faith – whether religious or not. It is not something we park at the school gate and take up again as we leave the schoolyard.

At its core, Christian religious education formally and informally, helps students into a warm and loving relationship with God. The ultimate aim is to help bring about the Kingdom of

God, that God's will for 'fullness of life for all' may be 'done on earth as it is in heaven.'<sup>9</sup> God's Kingdom was Jesus' sense of purpose; this is the meta-criterion that guides what and how we teach.

In other words, Christian religious education informs, forms, and transforms people's lives, enabling them, by God's grace, to become disciples to Jesus as 'the way, the truth, and the life' (Jn. 14.6) and 'for the life of the world' (Jn 6.51). At its best, Christian religious education reaches people at the level of heart and hands as well as head. In other words, rather than an exclusively academic exercise, it is a deeply holistic and relational knowing that helps people to know and manage themselves, and relate positively and constructively to the world around them.

While remaining true to the faith of the (Catholic Christian) community, Christian education also turns us out toward an intercultural, inter-religious society. This is increasingly important in a society that takes pluralism seriously. There is an expanding discourse of inclusion and respect for otherness while recognising the distinctive challenges and identity of our faith tradition.

Jesus himself reminded 'in my Father's house there are many dwelling places' (Jn. 14.3). The challenge for religious educators is to ground people in the particular while opening them to the universal. For Christians, every articulation of the story and vision must turn us toward the neighbour in love, including the neighbour who is 'other' rather than 'the same'.

### **Religious Education and the new Junior Cycle**

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) has taken an integrated approach towards the new Junior Cycle, which will replace the Junior Certificate programme. Traditionally, learning was centred on a series of independent subjects with their own aims and course objectives. The *Framework for Junior Cycle* is based on a set of principles, 24 statements of learning and 8 key skills. According to the NCCA, it is underpinned by research evidence, public and political consensus, professional concern and many years of consultation.

#### *The Framework*

describes what all junior cycle students should learn. It provides national qualifications associated with learning in junior cycle. But it also gives school management and teachers the professional space and flexibility to decide how best to organise the learning and adjust it to meet the learning of their students.'<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Groome, T. H. *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry*. (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 1991).

<sup>10</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). *Towards a Framework for New Junior Cycle*. (Dublin: NCCA, 2011), p.13.

Only 3 subjects are compulsory for Junior Cycle qualification – English, Irish and Mathematics. Other subjects such as Religious Education may or may not be included in the programme offered by a particular school, as long as the school meets the requirements of the *Framework*.

Key skills at the centre of the new Junior Cycle include managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, working with others and managing information and thinking. Depending on how a school designs its curriculum to meet these key skills among other requirements, time devoted to subjects such as religious education may be substantially decreased. In other words, the role of religious education in second level education is by no means guaranteed with these reforms.

However, the new Junior Cycle expects that through education the person will be ready, willing and able to make a contribution in the world at large. The values ‘fundamental to the vision’ are equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy and respect for human dignity and identity. There is a clear resonance between these values and those which characterise the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus.

We have already seen how Christian religious education is a deeply holistic and relational. Indeed, its aim is at one with that of the new Junior Cycle – to help people to know and manage themselves, and relate positively and constructively to the world around them. With its emphasis on identity and integration, Christian religious education has much to offer not only to the teaching and learning emphasis of the new Junior Cycle but to the loneliness and spiritual hunger described earlier.

## **Conclusion**

The human search for completeness is as prevalent as ever and resonates through popular culture. Christian religious education has much to offer in this context. In keeping with the vision of the new Junior Cycle it places the person at the centre, emphasising the importance of personal integration, good relationships and participating positively with community and society. In fact, because the Christian tradition shares much of the vision and values of the new Junior Cycle, it is well placed to contribute to many of the principles and key skills outlined in the framework document. Parents who wish to have their teenage children educated in their faith tradition can know that this tradition fully compliments the new Junior Cycle. But they must insist that religious education is not dropped a central component. The best chance of realising the vision and values of the new Junior Cycle depends on sufficient emphasis given to religious education.