A key leadership issue of the twenty-first century: Religion in schools in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland

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This article argues that engagement with religion is a key challenge for all leaders of schools in twenty-first-century multifaith societies. It outlines the historic and current context of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, and national and European policies that prioritise community cohesion in education. The functional and substantive roles of religion are considered as reflected in education, where they adjudicate power and shape values and behaviours. The article analyses data from nine schools in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland to provide a snapshot of a range of leaders' philosophies, policies and practice in relation to religion. The preferential attention and resources given to the dominant community are evident in some cases. It is argued that, irrespective of whether a school is affiliated to a specific religion or not, school leaders have some freedom in positioning religion. Their influence significantly shapes how religion and/or secular values are understood and enacted. The article concludes by suggesting that policy at national and European level that emphasises shared identities and community cohesion masks the differential power and struggles between communities that cannot be resolved by anodyne exhortation. Rather, leaders need to be selected, trained and supported to recognise the centrality of belief in the lives of many of their learners and their families and to engage with the inevitability of ongoing disagreement and struggle.

Keywords: leadership; religion; faith; inclusion; discrimination; power

Religion as a key issue

Longstanding inequality in education related to socio-economic class, gender, ethnicity and disability persists into the twenty-first century. Intersectionality perspectives have impelled a fine-grained consideration of how these interact with each other and with further attributes to create complex and multifaceted disadvantage. Recently, the role of religion, in particular, has become far more significant in children's status and trajectory. This article uses data from schools in England, Wales and the Republic of Ireland (referred to as Ireland, throughout) to consider leaders' most fundamental task: to provide value-driven direction that shapes schools and replicates or subverts existing power structures. It is concerned with how leaders position religion through their schools' ethos, culture and activities. It argues that, far from being a

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peripheral issue, orientation to religion is a touchstone of the purpose and values of twenty-first century education. The article begins by sketching in the context, considers the functional and substantive roles of religion in society as embedded in schools, describes the methodology and explores the data from a leadership perspective.

The context: leadership, religion and schools

The language used in relation to religion in schools and religious education is varied. In the UK, a substantial minority of schools are designated as having a religious character. In Ireland, this group of schools would typically be referred to as schools with a religious ethos. Despite these fomal descriptions, in both contexts there is widespread use of the term 'faith school'. For example, in Ireland, 'The Catholic school is a **faith school**' (Dioceses of Kerry, 2020, original emphasis) and in the UK, the government website refers to faith schools in its information on school admissions policy (DfE, 2020). Religious education, that is, a subject that addresses a range of religions within a structured curriculum, is taught in schools in both nations. Religious instruction or faith formation is normally confined to schools aligned to a single faith or religious tradition.

Notwithstanding these patterns of practice, there remain multiple definitions of religion, ethos and faith in both scholarship and common usage, and no agreement on how they differ or their relationship to a third concept, spirituality (Harris *et al.*, 2018). Varied disciplines present kaleidoscopic perspectives (Barbalet *et al.*, 2014; Michel, 2014). This article echoes Beckford's social constructionist approach (Beckford, 2014), replacing a single generic definition of religion with an emphasis on the processes that evolve different meanings, and uses the term as shorthand for the plethora of understandings of this multifaceted phenomenon of human engagement with a supra-human power.

Religion is increasingly a key global issue of potent controversy within national policy (Davie, 2009; Byrne, 2014; Greeley, 2017). Flows of migrants have increased the diversity and number of faith groups in many locations, creating global religious markets (Turner *et al.*, 2011). Growth lends groups greater power, such that many states feel impelled to continuously oversee those perceived as a potential challenge. A discourse involving partnership, multiculturalism and cohesion reflects processes in which differences in aims and power may be camouflaged by the presentation of values and goals as inclusive and equitable (Beckford, 2014; Modood, 2014).

In this context, education is a key tool to adjudicate between the demands of those of religious or secular beliefs and the state. Beckford (2014) depicts the decisions made as reflecting the 'full gamut of positions between total inseparability and mutual exclusion' (p. 44). The UK system has a history of entwined education and religion. In 2019, 36.8% of primary schools and 18% of second-level schools were affiliated to a specific religion, mostly Church of England (DfE, 2019a). A daily act of collective worship is mandated. In Ireland, schools have been a vehicle for the Catholic Church to shape Irish society's values, behaviour and culture for nearly 200 years, and it retains patronage of over 90% of primary and over 50% of second-level schools (Lumby & MacRuairc, 2018). More fundamentally, religion may be a significant element in driving school leaders' evaluation of society and orientation to change

(Dantley, 2003). However, it cannot be considered in isolation. As becomes evident in the data reported in this article, perceptions of the impact of socio-economic inequities and discrimination colour how religion may be understood and positioned by school leaders, from the principal through to those who lead teams and services.

The role of leadership itself is also contested and contingent, yet is widely held to be fundamentally to shape what a school is, its ethos and culture (Bush & Glover, 2003). As stated in governors' national competence standards, leaders' formal responsibility to uphold their schools' ethos and, if appropriate, religious nature avoids reference to power or conflict (Government of Ireland, 1998; DfE, 2017). The anodyne exhortations sidestep the often-incompatible demands of parents, learners, inspectors and the wider school community to meet the needs of specific religions, to ensure a primarily Christian context or to eject religion entirely (Lewin, 2017; Adams, 2018). In Ireland, the patterns of practice between the denominational ownership and control of schools have led to claims that, with respect to the meaningful inclusion of religious diversity, the current school system is not fit for purpose (Keane & Heinz, 2016; Heinz *et al.*, 2018). In both the UK and Ireland, the evidence repeatedly suggests that there is continuing discrimination in schools and resulting disadvantage to those who espouse religions other than Christianity (Panjwani, 2014; Mirza, 2015). This is the context in which leaders must work, where numerous groupings, including the state, attempt to use religion instrumentally and expediently to forward an agenda and/or to strengthen the security of their beliefs and/or to diminish that of others (Turner *et al.*, 2011).

The functional and substantive roles of religion

The function of religion as a means by which the dominant sustain existing power structures and minorities challenge them is an old story (McKinnon, 2017). At a group level, McKinnon (2017) follows Bourdieu (1991) in seeing religious differences as structuring 'class-salient social cleavages (Protestant versus Catholic, for instance)' (para 4.6) that shape and justify struggles for dominance within society. At a state level, Weber (1993), Marx and Engels (2012) and more recent commentators have variously explored the relationship of religion to status and capital, asserting that its function is to maintain the relative positions in society's hierarchy (Dawson, 2016).

State responses to an increasingly multifaith society vary. Shain (2013: 63), writing of the state's engagement with diversity, distinguishes three ideologies in UK education policy since the 1950s:

> 'assimilation' (the expectation that immigrants will abandon their language and cultural norms and practices in favour of those of the host society), 'integration' (acceptance of the majority culture's laws, customs and values through partial assimilation) and 'multiculturalism' (the recognition of a plurality of cultures)

She challenges narratives that see a transition from assimilation and integration to an acceptance of multiculturalism, arguing that state initiatives, such as the UK's 'Prevent' strategy, undermine such a trajectory. Her model of ideologies is related to diversity within society broadly and immigrants specifically, rather than groups of a

particular religion. Nevertheless, she makes clear that the state-perceived problem of immigrants is 're-coded through ethnicity, community and/or faith' (p. 63). Consequently, her model can be applied helpfully as a heuristic in trying to unravel orientation to religious communities and education.

In Ireland, Rougier and Honohan (2015) suggest a rather halting process of offering increased equality through a more diverse school system and attempts at greater responsiveness to those of different religions in each school. To date, the process has been partial and, they argue, ineffective. In the UK and Ireland, contestation around religion is embedded in the system's structure, in the legislation around admissions and permitted curricula and in the positioning of learners of different religious beliefs and no belief by the staff, the learners and the school's wider community. The function of religion in adjudicating power is clearly visible.

The substantive aspects of religion are taken to be those that focus on a purpose beyond material or political benefit, serving a divine power rather than oneself. Grace (2000) argues that education historically prioritised spiritual and moral education yet, while schools may be rhetorically required to focus on values supporting cohesion and tolerance within society, from the late twentieth century onwards state measures of what constitutes an effective school are generally not overly concerned with such outcomes. The substitution of humanistic for religious goals is entirely satisfactory to many of a secular outlook, or the belief that religion should be a private matter for outside school. However, for some in the UK and Ireland, the relationship of a school to spiritual capital, understood as personal empowerment by following guidelines derived from the transcendent, is a matter of importance in how it is led (Buchanan, 2013; Patrikios & Curtice, 2014).

In summary, as Paloutzian and Park (2013) conclude, religiousness is a cultural fact that cannot be subsumed within other phenomena, displaying both functional and substantive facets that impact considerably at individual, organisational, community, state and global levels. Whatever one's position, there is no doubting the social reality of the beliefs of those with a commitment to religion or of the serious challenges to school leaders where religion has become an increasingly contentious matter of control of society through the beliefs and values nurtured in children.

The research

The aim of the research was to gather a range of perspectives of leaders in England, Wales and Ireland on positioning religion within their schools. The objectives included a critical examination of the issues that the leaders encountered, together with their policy and practice response in the context of a multifaith society. Religion is a highly personal and often contentious issue, so it was anticipated that access would not be easy. This proved to be the case. For example, it was intended to include schools in Scotland and also Jewish and Islamic schools, but none would take part. The context in Northern Ireland is so complex that it was decided that this small-scope project could not adequately include this geographic area. It is likely that those schools that agreed to take part were those in which religion was a significant issue and whose leaders were confident in their policy and practice. No claim is therefore made that the sample of schools is in any way representative; on the contrary, it is

likely to be skewed towards leaders whose practice in this area is particularly self-aware.

A convenience sample of six schools in England and Wales and six in Ireland was selected to reflect a variety of factors: primary and secondary; urban and rural location; varied socio-economic status; and both affiliated and not affiliated to a specific faith. In Ireland, more recent categories of school that are not Catholic were included. One is an Education and Training Board (ETB) school under the patronage of the Minister for Education and Skills and the Education and Training Board. Such schools are multidenominational and aim to cater for children with a variety of belief systems, including those whose parents do not wish their children to receive faith-specific teaching. Another is an Educate Together school, one of 58 at the time of writing, each established by parents with the support of the Educate Together group, formed in 1984. For detailed information about the policy on school patronage in Ireland, see Lumby and MacRuairc (2018).

The sample is indicated in Tables 1 and 2. Though the project data are from 12 schools, a decision was made to use only nine in this article as the issues emerging were not extended by reference to all 12.

It was intended to interview the principal of each school, but some variation arose where, for example, both the executive principal and the headteacher in a multi-academy trust or a curriculum/pastoral leader wished to be involved. The starting point was two semi-structured interview schedules, one for schools designated as having a religious character and one for schools that are not. A variety of context and mission was accommodated by offering participants every opportunity to expand and follow up their responses to questions, the better to elucidate the policy and practice of their school.

Interviews inevitably offer a snapshot of how leadership is performed at a point in time, influenced by the self-identity of the interviewee, his or her preferred notion of the school and the relationship with the interviewer. Consequently, the data are not presented as an absolute, reflecting a triangulated reality, but rather as the lived experience of individuals who find psychological and practical responses to the requirements and pressures encountered. The perspective of the principal in each school

Table 1.   Range of case examples, England and Wales

Interviewee role	Age range	Faith status	Region; socioeconomic status (SES)	Pseudonym
Executive Principal & Principal	Primary	Church of England	Southeast; low SES	Chestnut
Principal	Primary	Church of England	Northwest; low SES	Willow
Principal	All age	Community	Midlands; low SES	Oak
Principal & Head of Religious Education	Secondary	Community	Northwest; low SES	Birch
Principal	Secondary	Catholic	Northwest; low SES	Maple
Curriculum Access Team Leader	Secondary	Community	Wales; low SES	Ash

Table 2. Range of case examples, Ireland

Interviewee role	Age range	Faith status	Region; socioeconomic status (SES)	Pseudonym
Principal & Deputy Principal	Secondary	Catholic	Urban; high SES	Beechwood High
Principal	Primary	Catholic	Urban; high SES	Laurel Grove
Principal	Primary	Catholic	Urban; low SES	Canal View
Principal	Primary	Catholic	Urban; high SES	Virginia Heights
Principal	Primary	Educate Together	Urban; mixed	Crescent
Principal	Secondary	Education Training Board (ETB)	Urban; low SES	Elmwood Community

may differ, sometimes substantially, from that of their staff and learners. However, as it is leadership that is the central focus here, such data have value even while their limitations are acknowledged.

The analysis used a hierarchy of codes garnered from the literature and then added to it, as necessary, where additional ideas emerged from the data. The major codes include admissions, the pressures of the market, the implications of diversity amongst learners, the ethos and curriculum of the school, the efforts to achieve inclusion, the practice of faith, and the role of the community and parish. The central concern was how leadership was enacted in all these areas. An intersectionality approach was assumed, recognising that the experience of learners rests not just on their religion/secular belief but on how this interacts with their ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and so on. Overall, the analysis resulted in a snapshot of how school leaders are wrestling with a highly contentious and fast-moving issue.

Tree names are used as pseudonyms for the schools in England and Wales, and, in Ireland, the names of housing estates and apartment developments with no association whatsoever to the schools' location.

Examples of substantive and functional aspects of religion

Nine examples follow: in Ireland, a Catholic secondary, an Educate Together primary, an ETB second-level school and a Catholic primary; in England and Wales, a Catholic secondary, a community comprehensive, an all-age community school and two Church of England primary schools. The examples use quotations to highlight the differing approaches to positioning religion in each school.

Beechwood is a Catholic secondary school in Ireland. The learners, predominantly from Catholic families, include a substantial minority of Muslims. The principal makes a point of meeting parents prior to their child's admission '*to highlight the fact that we're a Catholic school first and foremost*' and to make explicit the parameters for all learners. There is no accommodation of Muslim religious requirements, such as prayer:

> *I wouldn't be going the route of providing an additional kind of space because… that kind of, for me, waters down the Catholic ethos within the school… there is no prayer space… no-one is permitted, is too strong a word, but no-one is facilitated in any praying on the school grounds.*

The principal feels that by setting out the situation before admission, she can pre-empt a situation where, for example, learners ask to bring in a prayer mat and be allowed to pray:

> *We say, 'Well, this is how we operate, we're not going to change'. Those who are not happy with such restrictions are encouraged to take their child elsewhere. Parents wearing a veil are not welcomed. We have a policy around that. When they enter the building, they have to take it away.*

This principal interprets maintaining Catholic values as ensuring that the practice of another religion does not enter the school.

Maple is a Catholic secondary school in England. Its diverse student body is about 40% Catholic, 30% Muslim and the rest of other faiths. The assumption is that every learner *'is a child of God'* and that the children themselves wish to engage with religion:

> *Young people today, although going to church, that's not what floats their boat, being spiritual does… they're very much interested in talking about faith and… and they want to be spiritual in many ways.*

As a consequence, the imperative is to encourage all in the practice of their faith or secular beliefs:

> *We try to build that in, and that's not to water down the fact that, as a Catholic school, this is what we are saying the Catholic Church believes in, but it's important that people can express views from other faiths and also from no faith at all, as well.*

Consequently, religious services include all:

> *If, for example, we have a liturgy with Year 11 leavers, we would always involve the faith of any student who is in that group so, although you might have one Sikh child, we try and include a reading from Sikhism as well as being predominantly Catholic. So, we're just trying to make sure that everyone feels valued and is part of what we are doing.*

Situated in an area of deep economic disadvantage, the school takes responsibility for developing spirituality in all its learners, given that many of its parents are unable or unwilling: '*We look at this as the chance of spiritual development within our children, whether Catholic or non-Catholic, comes predominantly through us.*'

Chestnut is a Church of England primary school in England. The children are of many religions, with a majority of Muslims. The executive principal and headteacher see religion as crucial to the children's identity and wholeness: '*The majority of children that come here have got religion that they respect and they hold dearly, so that makes them into a whole person in a way.*' The intention is to facilitate living a religion or secular values, and to embed this in the day-to-day life of the school: '*They live it and I think in a lot of schools it's not lived.*' The school has used a Venn diagram to identify the principles common to many faiths. These are embedded in the curriculum and, alongside adjustments in language, are intended to enable a shared experience of practising beliefs:

> *The faiths are very different but the principles are the same, so you know I pray, the Muslim children they go and pray, you would have the Hindus, they go and pray, you would have Christianity, they would go and pray… so when we talk about praying in school, rather than say we are praying we say we reflect.*

The local vicar who supports the school has been asked to ensure that any input from the Church embodies language and spirit that include both those of each religion and those of no religion.

Willow is a Church of England primary with a 90% Muslim and a 10% Polish Catholic intake. Christian prayers are part of each day, as are other Christian practices, such as a Nativity play: '*We do Nativity, parents love it.*' The principal is adamant that '*We are not trying to convert people or preach… I don't preach at the parents*'. Issues of difference, such as wearing a headscarf, are resolved in discussion with parents. The belief is that what unites the children and parents is a common set of values that are garnered from, but do not involve professing, a particular faith. Consequently, when a Muslim child '*said to the Inspector about our Christian values… she was meaning* our, *including herself,* our *Christian values, that's what she said*' (italics added), this was perceived as referring to the school's shared standards, rather than to either conversion or assimilation.

Crescent is an Educate Together school in Ireland, and 60–70% of its parents were born outside Ireland. The principal estimates that about 60% of children come from families with no professed religion. The number of Catholic children is very small, and opportunities to take part in Catholic religious practice are advertised in school yet take place elsewhere. A small minority of parents choose the school because of its secular nature:

> *Some of the families wouldn't want a Catholic influence for their child and they would feel that they don't want them to even be sitting at the back of a room or even leaving the classroom for the religious time, they would prefer to not have to be a part of it. Now at times that has been a little bit of a surprise to some families because Educate Together schools are not absolutely secular in the strictest sense either, there is quite a place for religion to be discussed and particularly the family's personal beliefs. It is a regular part of the discourse.*

However, the principal believes that the large majority choose Crescent not because of its stance on religion but because it is the local school.

Amongst the approximately 30–40% of children who are from a family with a religion are Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Jains and Hindus. Festivals cause questions to be raised. Some objections to activities at Halloween and Christmas present a challenge:

> *I feel that we should mark it* [Christmas] *as much as we are marking any other major festival… But, for example, we made the conscious decision we wouldn't get a Christmas tree, we wouldn't decorate every classroom or everything Christmas, because we're not going to do that for Eid, we're not going to do that for Diwali… we just wouldn't sing anything that would be deemed holy, religious. So, no* Away in a Manger, *but you might sing* All I Want for Christmas.

There have been many questions, concerns and challenges from parents about the appropriateness of particular policies. The principal stressed attempting to establish a new kind of relationship between teachers and parents, one that is open and democratic:

> *I suppose it's about not being afraid when there is a little wobble where someone is unhappy. And to not be responding in that quick, 'Well this is the way in our school and if you don't like it, that's that'.*

The principal intends to lead staff meetings to concentrate not on outcome statistics but rather, deeper values.

Ash is an 11 to 19 comprehensive in Wales. It is not affiliated to a faith. The school admits immigrants regularly and has a minority of students of a religion other than Christianity:

> *We don't really think about faith very much… We don't really take too much notice of where they come from, what's happened before they come into Ash School: as Ash pupils, they are Welsh straightaway.*

Aspects of identity such as faith and ethnicity, disability or any other characteristic are subsumed into a common persona:

> *The definition we want for our kids is that they are achieving young people in an achieving school, and that's our overarching part of our core values and principles for school.*

Positioning religion in the curriculum

The following three schools offer examples of differing approaches to positioning religion in the curriculum. Religious education can be a discrete element in the curriculum or a single or multiple religions can be embedded throughout the entire curriculum.

Laurel Grove, a mixed primary Catholic school in Ireland, sees Catholicism as inherent in everything it does. Religious education is viewed as a minor aspect of the school's approach: '*I think the ethos is there and… if we decided tomorrow that there was no formal religious teaching, I don't think it would make any difference here*.' The impact is evident, for example, in limitations on content. The principal claimed to be unaware of the content of lessons on sexual relations but believed that contraception would not be covered. A teacher had displayed the 'Different families, same love' poster developed by the primary teacher union in Ireland (INTO), intended for display in all Irish schools (INTO, 2018), but the principal asked the teacher to take it down since its Lego people might be interpreted as gay men.

Oak School, an all-age school in England with a majority of Muslim learners and a mix of other faiths, stresses an intersectionality approach in which religion and many other characteristics are not 'accommodated' or 'tolerated' but are held as the norm, reflected throughout the curriculum. Religion is understood both in its substantive importance to individuals and as a cultural tradition. Wherever possible, teaching material is drawn from differing perspectives, not related only to religion but to socio-economic class, nationality and sexuality. Additionally, a specific time is allocated to learning skills about relating to diverse others:

> *What I have got is a policy on having a culturally inclusive curriculum in that there are specific statements: teaching children to challenge racism, prejudice, Islamaphobia, homophobia, xenophobia, and so on, and giving them the skills to do that.*

At the time of writing, teaching about different kinds of families and sexuality is causing serious contention in England, with some parents objecting to teaching materials and, in a small number of cases, temporarily withdrawing their child from school (Parveen, 2019). Just as Beechwood makes it clear to parents that no religion other than Catholicism will be tolerated in school, so Oak spells out to parents and potential learners before admission a curriculum that includes different religions, teaching about sexuality and acceptance of other kinds of difference between people. This is:

> *. . . in terms of tolerance and respecting this multicultural school that they're joining. And if they don't want to come here they don't have to, you know. We don't really tolerate racism in school. We don't tolerate children that are bigoted in any way.*

Though asserting an absence of intolerance, this insistence that all who join the school conform to preset values echoes Beechwood's imposition of a way of thinking and behaving, irrespective of individual belief. Insistence on tolerance is intolerant of variation.

Elmwood School, an ETB multidenominational second-level school in Ireland, is highly diverse, surrounded by a mosque, a Catholic school and eight different Evangelist churches. While not affiliated to a faith, it is obliged to offer religious education: '*A lot of ETB schools were kind of just doing one period a week sort of thing and just to tick the box. I didn't want to do that.*' This principal believed that knowledge about religions and how to relate to people of different religions must be taught within schools, because the alternative is learning from family or religious leaders in the community, who may be primarily conversant with only one religion and potentially fundamentalist:

> *I thought to myself well, do we want to be like Paris? Do we want to have the suburban Algerians of Paris learning religion from the local butcher and whatever? Or are we an educational institution that will teach them history, religion and so on so that they will all get to know each other?. . . You have to teach moral, social, spiritual education. . . and by the end of it I will know that at least they know what Muslim is, what oppression is, from an intellectual prospect as opposed to what their granny tells them.*

The principals of both Oak School in England and Elmwood School in Ireland see religious education as teaching about intercultural relations and prejudice as much as the beliefs and history of specific faiths.

What is evident from this brief range of snapshots is the variety of philosophy and practice amongst leaders. The understanding and intentions of the leader strongly influence how religion is positioned.

Variety of approach in positioning religion

In every case apart from Ash, religion is perceived by the school leaders as a foundational feature. In some cases, such as Beechwood, it is of primary concern. In others, such as Oak, it is important yet is viewed as inextricably conjoint with many other characteristics of significance to children's future. How religion works in schools, and to what end, might be explored from various theoretical angles. There are political arguments around assimilation, integration and multiculturalism. All the schools use

the concept of inclusion, believing their school to be inclusive. The determination of some to find commonality in language and religious practice echoes Baumann's (1995) ideas on convergence as a process of syncretism, that is the merging or alignment of differing beliefs, particularly using the tool of language. Implicit or explicit in the relevant theoretical perspectives is power play, in which the process of positioning religions is never on a level playing field.

Inclusion is the most common concept referred to in the schools, but its unclear definition, a kind of catch-all 'feel good' policy title, does not necessarily help a robust analysis of the subjective experience of learners of both varied faiths and none. Most examples here do not indicate equal attention to and support for all the religions represented in the school community. If inclusion, then, is taken to mean equality in learners' experience of process and output—that is, not identical yet reflecting equal commitment by the school to all—then what is apparent in the data is often not a process of inclusion; it is something else, where different levels of resource, in terms of curriculum attention and time, are adjudicated by leaders. Inclusion remains mostly relative to the existing power structure.

The three ideologies of state policy related to immigrant communities described by Shain (2013) can be used as a heuristic to reflect on policy in relation to groups of a particular religion at school level, as she recognises that immigration and/or ethnicity is often recoded as religion. Beechwood insists on assimilation, and integration is visible at Ash and Maple schools. In the latter two, attention is paid to the beliefs and practice of a range of religions beneath an overarching identity: in Ash, as a learner with a national identity; and in Maple, as a spiritual being. In both, this partial assimilation appears respectful, yet the positioning is very different. For Ash, religion remains a peripheral characteristic, celebrated at festivals and taught in discrete parts of the curriculum yet not foundational to children's lives. Learners are seen as 'achieving young people in an achieving school'. The prevalent mandated European value-set that prizes accredited achievement as schools' prime obligation largely obscures, and consequently diminishes, religious/secular beliefs. For those families and children for whom belief is much more central, positioning religion in this way, as a kind of virtual non-event, substitutes a standards-led, economically driven, dominant set of values (Singh *et al.*, 2019) in which alternative value priorities are notable only on the periphery. In Maple, the prime mission is perceived as the development of spirituality across a range of religions. Here, while Catholic practice takes precedence, the leadership believes that reference to other religions creates a kind of shared experience that is based not on the same language or rituals but on a kind of communal commitment to a presence beyond humanity and to its obligations on people. At its core, there is belief in religions as both different yet fundamentally the same.

A definition of multiculturalism as the recognition of different cultures does not help to unravel the threads of dominance and resistance in a multicultural community. Recognition is a neutral term that leaves much unsaid regarding the relative status of competing belief systems. Just as Maple recognises different religions, so Oak, Chestnut and Crescent, in various ways, recognise different religions and cultures. The recognition, however, embodies strongly contrasting approaches.

In some cases, syncretism (Leopold & Jensen, 2016) appears to be evident. Historically, where alternative belief sets are perceived as constituting a potential risk, this

has been adopted as a form of unity to defuse the threat. For some, mixing what appear to be incompatible is a matter for rebuke; for others, this is a positive and necessary step to achieve unity in the face of tension. Beechwood is an example of the insistence that alternative beliefs are incompatible, driven by a conviction of a zero-sum game in which adopting any aspect of other religions inevitably causes loss to the dominant religion. Schools such as Maple and Chestnut sit at the other end of the spectrum, reflecting a position that 'all religions are ultimately one' (p. 39), thus syncretism is an appropriate way forward. Accommodating differences within a common format necessarily involves considering fundamentals such as language. Consequently, Chestnut's insistence that nobody prays but that all reflect, for example, acts as the vehicle for a common, substantive practice of religion.

Baumann (1995) argues that the process of convergence does not take place in a power vacuum but that the practices concerned are differentially privileged. Willow School's Muslim child who referred to 'our Christian values' and most children participating in a Nativity play present challenging examples. The school sees this as positive evidence of an acceptance of common values across religions (Vincent, 2019). If children were participating in any other aspect of a culture alien to them, for example ballroom dancing, most would see this as an educative extension of their cultural repertoire. Participating in a Nativity play finds less acceptance amongst some, because of fears of assimilation and conversion (Lumby & Coleman, 2016): the Christian children in Willow do not refer to 'our Muslim values' as much as to 'our Christian values'. Some may assume that this is entirely proper within a Church of England school; however, in Chestnut, another Church of England school, fundamental attention to language and practice, creating a curriculum around consciously mapped shared values with reference throughout to multiple religions, has constructed the intended environment that is, arguably, both multicultural and inclusive. There is equal recognition and resource given to all major religions and secular beliefs. Similarly, Crescent and Elmwood intend to pay equal attention to all religions and secular beliefs, and they share with Oak an emphasis on prioritising the development of the intellectual skills relevant to religion. Their aim is to create confidence both in enacting one's beliefs and in relating to those who hold other beliefs.

The schools in this sample are adopting different approaches in how they position religions, intended to achieve a sense of shared identity amongst their learners. The strategies used vary, as summarised in Table 3.

Leaders' role in positioning religion

This small sample from England, Wales and Ireland is insufficient to draw conclusions about religion in schools. However, even this limited dataset evidences significant variation in current aims and practices and how the resulting processes define understandings of religion and its function. The analysis suggests that the debate that has dominated many public discussions in both the UK and Ireland—that is, whether the state should support schools designated as having a religious character or ethos— does not address the more fundamental question of religion's place in all schools. However much those with secular beliefs may wish to exclude religious practice from schools or those with strong religious convictions may wish their faith to dominate in

Table 3. Approaches to positioning religions

Approach	Policy	Exemplar school
Perfunctory	Minimal conformity with legislative requirements	Ash
Secular	Avoidance of religious practice, but religious education inclusive of a range of religions	Crescent Elmwood
Exclusive single religion	Emphasis on conformity by all to the religious practice and culture of a single religion	Beechwood Laurel Grove
Shared religious practice within an overarching dominant religion	A single religion such as Catholicism or Church of England dominates, but other religious practices are accommodated	Willow Maple
Shared religious practice, emphasising commonality through language and values	Adjustment of language and behaviour to ensure religious practice and education do not allow a single religion to dominate	Chestnut
Educative skills-based	Holistic emphasis on skills to follow and defend not only one's own and others' beliefs but other characteristics that may meet with discrimination	Oak

their children's education, the exigencies of the current context challenge their preferences. Attempts to divide education into homogeneous faith-affiliated or secular cells run the risk of schoolchildren experiencing the comfort of sameness in an illusory and temporary fashion until they join an increasingly diverse and multifaith adult society. Some, such as Hammad and Shah (2019), argue that the leadership of schools designated as having a religious character differs from that of secular schools, as these have only an 'add-on religious dimension' (Rymarz, 2013: ix). Our analysis suggests that nowhere can religion be an add-on if a school is to serve its learners adequately. Whether a school is affiliated to a faith or not, its leaders face issues where religion or secular beliefs matter a great deal to a large number of children and their families—if not in a specific school, then at societal level.

We have argued that the major thrust of the European policy reflected here is one of expediency, controlling potential challenges to the state and smoothing over differences to artificially construct a shared identity. The responsibilities placed on leaders press in this direction and, as a consequence, some of the practice revealed here embeds ideas of community cohesion that may underplay the contested values and power inequalities between those of various faiths (Flint, 2007). There is a danger that religion so conceived in schools may act as a displacement activity, distracting attention from an understanding that community 'stands for the kind of world, which is not, regrettably, available to us, but which we would dearly love to inhabit' (Bauman, 2001: 3). Bauman's theme, evident in his subtitle, *Seeking security in an unsafe world*, explores the common human impetus to respond to difference with fear and a retreat into the unreality of belief in a greater commonality that is illusory.

School leaders are tasked with achieving a cohesive community while respecting diverse religions, as if this was a common-sense goal and not one that is highly problematic. Levitt and Muir (2014) criticise religious education that 'presents religions as complementary and as acknowledging the truth within each other's claims, whereas, in fact, religions are in competition and religious identities are exclusive' (p. 230). The irony that the establishment of common values, intended to contribute to equality in society, itself embeds intolerance of those who dissent to this philosophy is evident in the practice of several principals, such as those at Oak, Chestnut and Willow.

Leadership and power

One-dimensional power is evident in the ability to force others to act as one wishes (Lukes, 1974). To an extent, the state holds one-dimensional power and can mandate principals' actions, but not entirely. For example, Irish legislation mandates equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer staff and learners, yet there is evidence that this is sometimes set aside, for instance by the Laurel Grove principal and more widely in Ireland (Lumby & MacRuairc, 2018). The UK law on daily worship has been resisted in many cases for some time (Hunter & Richardson, 2018). Principals' power, however, may lie not so much in direct opposition to legislation as with Lukes' (1974) two-dimensional power that establishes both boundaries to what is acceptable or rewarded and the point at which fear of transgression leads to silence by those who disagree. Oak principal's insistence that there will be no bigotry establishes, in effect, a boundary that learners and parents cannot cross. Of course no school can accept oppression, if that is what bigotry implies: the key issue is whether discussion is allowed or is closed down.

Lukes' three-dimensional power is also evident where individuals are socialised into accepting the interests of a dominant individual or group as their own, as in Willow's children's adherence to 'our Christian values', irrespective of their own faith. Leadership in relation to religion essentially relies on two- and three-dimensional power to guide the development of understanding what a community is in the twenty-first century. Is it, for example, where a dominant religion excludes others, as in Beechwood, or where religious diversity is 'conveniently packaged and smoothed over for government consumption' (Beckford, 2014: 54), as in Ash? Leaders must traverse difficult terrain when notions of shared identity and universal features of religion are for some a given, but for others contested and unrealistic.

Something more is needed in the training and selection of leaders to recognise that, contrary to many assertions, positioning religions in all our schools is not a peripheral but a key issue. The National Professional Qualification for Headteachers in England and Wales includes six content areas and seven leadership behaviours, all broad and general (DfE, 2019). The final assessment uses as its focus pupils' progress and attainment and a school's resourcing and capability needs. The core function of leadership, to establish underpinning values, is sidelined. The assessment framework mentions faith just once, and in terms of respecting faiths. The Church of England is an accredited provider and does refer to faith, but from the perspective of members of the Church of England rather than of a multifaith society. The 2015 *Domains and*

standards for school leadership by the Irish Ministry for Education and Skills makes no reference to religion; spirituality is mentioned just once and, in this instance, relates to school leaders attending to their own 'mental, physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing' (DES, 2015: 12). To ignore these issues in a context where denominational education is so dominant creates institutionalised silence about this core issue for school leadership in Ireland.

Unrealistic and bland exhortations for community cohesion need to be replaced by a greater understanding of the need for ongoing dialogue, negotiation and adjustment. In his personal philosophy, Crescent's principal perhaps comes close: 'It's about not being afraid. . . and to not be responding in that quick, "Well this is the way in our school and if you don't like it that's that". So, it has to be an openness.' Of course there must be boundaries. Giving free rein to disrespectful disagreement is not appropriate, yet leaders must be supported to allow a permeability in the moral and religious boundaries and an acceptance that community may be based not on agreement, nor necessarily on core shared values, but on ongoing negotiation and exchange.

In twenty-first-century society, and so in education, religion holds a key place that cannot be encapsulated merely by counting those who practise a faith. More research is needed into the interplay of differing forms of power and religion in schools. The perceived elasticity of values—that is, how far leaders are prepared to adjust their own or their school's professed beliefs to accommodate a diverse school community—also requires research. As the century progresses, in the absence of a tune that all can sing, to use Bauman's (2001) metaphor, it is the leader's task to engage with the cacophony. The task is not to smooth all over with apparent agreements that conceal the exercise of power but, rather, to facilitate contest, dialogue and challenge, and to do so while protecting individual rights to belong to a school, a community and a society. Relying on tidying away religion as a discrete element of the curriculum, or attempting to defuse challenges by seeing all religions as essentially one, may do little to prepare children for tough contestation over how the world is shaped.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data availability statement

Research data are not shared.

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