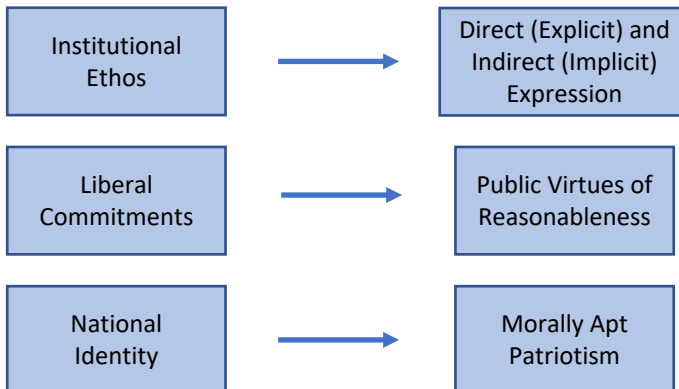


“Flipping the Script:” Issues of Religion, National Identity, and Liberalism in Irish Education

Abstract

Western liberal democracies have grappled with the challenge of drawing the bounds of interference with illiberal individuals and groups since their inception. Contemporary liberal philosophers have developed frameworks aimed at addressing fringe cases following in the wake of Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*. Although some progress has been made, the Irish Republic poses a unique case in which religion, specifically Roman Catholicism, is broadly institutionalized, thereby putting forward a new challenge of dealing with illiberal elements of culture and ethos latent within the state itself. The issue is especially pervasive given that Roman Catholicism is an important part of national identity, and helped form a coherent nationalism that led to the establishment of the Republic in the first place. This thesis aims to extend contemporary liberal thought to the realm of Irish education, where Roman Catholicism remains as a significant component of school ethos. I argue that the liberal conception of the person, in combination with Rawls’ account of political liberalism, entails a set of public virtues that require a secularization of the Irish education, in part. The impact of institutional ethos on students is explored, in addition to the role and importance of national identity in the stability of liberal societies. I conclude with a basic sketch of the bounds to which liberalism and commitments to national identity may continue to converge in the educational setting, and offer some thoughts about the Irish liberal project generally.

Dimensions Considered



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Honors Thesis

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Question:

How might we be able to extend contemporary liberal theory to the Irish case, where illiberal elements are not external to the state, but latent within the the state itself?

Background & Context

- Irish schools are required by law to have an explicit institutional ethos that permeates through all its activities, including curriculum
- Just over 80% of state-sponsored schools have a Roman Catholic ethos
- This is in part a result of Roman Catholicism being an important characteristic of Irish national identity



Some Important Ideas

1. Expressions of institutional ethos come in two forms: direct and indirect. Both impact the student’s development of a sense of reasonableness, and worldview generally.
2. Political Liberalism entails a set of public virtues stemming from reasonableness. These include an acceptance of the burdens of judgement (acceptable sources for difference of opinion) and a spirit of political collaboration
3. National identity can be seen as morally valuable in the context of promoting “good” patriotism, which reinforces the public virtues of reasonableness

Conclusion: Liberal commitments require the state to remove support for religious education, but can accept instruction in Roman Catholicism to promote awareness of social and political trends, in addition to inform historical national identity.

Thoughts in Reflection

- Although contemporary liberal thought doesn’t necessarily consider cases like that seen in the Irish Republic, it seems comprehensive enough to adequately address issues in this context
- The conclusions reached here are merely prescriptive and theoretical, and do not reflect the actual political process of achieving an ideal (liberal) state of affairs