

Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford, *Piety and Privilege: Catholic Secondary Schooling in Ireland and The Theocratic State, 1922–1967* Oxford University Press, 2021. 256pp. £75.00. ISBN: 9780192843166

The Catholic Church has loomed large in the historiography of Irish education and deservedly so, given its distinction as the oldest continuously running provider of education on the island and indeed across the western world. There are few historical texts which exclude the Catholic church from the study of any type of education in Ireland, yet as authors Tom O'Donoghue and Judith Harford argue, there continues to be great interest in the formative relationship between church and state that largely determined the current Irish educational landscape. *Piety and Privilege* examines second-level education and the role of the Catholic church from the founding of the Irish Free State until the introduction of free second-level education in 1967 with an interest in how these two institutions contributed to the construction of class, gender, and religion in modern society. While these themes are familiar to scholars, the authors offer new evidence about the perception and experience of a Catholic secondary education using interviews, records from religious teaching orders, and policy documents. Their central argument is that the Irish Catholic church resisted the inclusion of lay teachers and parents in secondary education in order to promote the 'reproduction of fellow clerics and a loyal middle class.' The Irish state willingly assented to the demands of religious organizations to run their secondary schools in accord with their religious traditions because it lacked the financial and administrative capability to offer an alternative. The state was interested in the promotion of Irish language and nationalism, and the teaching religious were generally willing to offer a curriculum that reinforced the nation building project. Though church and state both benefited from a mutually cooperative relationship, the authors argue that the church was at all times the dominant partner.

Although the title of the book suggests a focus on class privilege and the social reproduction of the middle-classes via Catholic schools, there is little explanation of how the concept of class is defined and conceptually deployed. Given the voluminous secondary literature on class privilege and education it seems strange that these terms are not fully explained nor the larger literature on elite reproduction or social mobility referenced. Similarly, the use of the term theocratic in the title is provoking and requires justification. It is not obvious that the Irish Free State can be categorized as theocratic in any classical sense, though a discussion of that terminology and the criteria used by the authors to depict the state as such would have been interesting and worthwhile. In a truly theocratic state we would expect official policy to disenfranchise or severely handicap the operation of non-

Catholic schools, or a degree of compulsion applied to religious catechesis, neither of which was the case during this period. Piety and religious devotion pose similar challenges as historical concepts; do we measure the piety of Irish schools by the attendance at mass each week, the quality of theological studies, the number of sodalities, or rates of attrition after leaving school? How did piety feature in respectability and class status or to what degree was religious observance an expression of genuine religious feeling? While the authors largely depict piety as a stifling and oppressive force, there are more liberal ways to interpret religious practise and vocation which capture a greater diversity of experience.

The book is divided into ten chapters, the first three lay out the trajectory of the Irish Catholic church after Catholic Emancipation and in the post famine period; types of schools and access to secondary education; and the curriculum on offer at secondary schools. Chapter five considers the preference for single-sex education, the church's teaching on sex education, and the construction of Catholic femininity for lay women. It also discusses the didactic style and predilection for rote memorization which characterized Catholic pedagogy during this period. With the introduction of the Intermediate and Leaving certificates, preparation for assessment and examination became the animating principle for many teachers. Chapter six considers how secondary schools operated as recruitment fields for the priesthood and religious life. Here a number of contradictions occur in the argument that secondary school pupils were barraged with glorified images of religious life and pressured into vocations at a susceptible age, while later in the book, interviews and memoirs observe very little pressure on students to join religious life (p. 181). However, there is fascinating insight into how juniorates or separate schools were established for boys interested in the priesthood to begin their seminary studies during secondary school. This was not a common practise in female schools, who typically accepted females once they finished secondary school, though there were some exceptions.

The final four chapters of the book elaborate on interviews conducted by the authors with teachers and pupils attending school before 1967. These interviews provide rich accounts of themes not included in policy or administrative records, drawing attention to the great deal of variation we might expect to accompany experiences of secondary school. Some students enjoyed their education, made lasting friendships, and had largely positive accounts of their experience, while others highlight dull teachers, boring and limited curricular choices, and social isolation. The interviews shed light on new themes in the historiography such as discipline, bullying, and friendship. The theme of piety and religious devotion similarly elicits a range of feeling and experience; some students enjoyed the devotional practices which

punctuated daily life, others found them repetitive and nonsensical. On this theme it seems that retrospective accounts of adolescent religiosity are highly colored by the religious affiliation adopted in adulthood. However, the sources indicate how Catholic ethos and moral formation were not the preserve of the school but permeated society at large. Perhaps the inclusion of Northern Ireland, or a more direct comparison with other Catholic countries in Europe, might temper some of the exceptionalism which the authors attribute to the church's dominance in educational policy. Their critique of religious education, and the lack of secular alternatives, is reflective of current concerns and criticisms but seems too diffuse as a historical argument.

*Piety and Privilege* covers familiar territory in the history of education but opens new questions for exploration centering on student experience and religious affiliation. While some may disagree with the theoretical premises of the book and the persuasive quality of their argument, the authors succeed in capturing a key period in Irish educational history and bringing it into conversation with studies of secondary education in other western contexts. The text is particularly strong in its use of oral history and memoir to explore the experiences of students and teachers, including their motivations and identity as Catholic educators. The book raises, but ultimately does not convincingly answer, interesting questions about the interests of the Irish state in second-level education and the pursuit of modernization.

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