



Pastoral Statement from Bishop Alan McGuckian in response to the recent Supreme Court ruling on Religious Education provision in Northern Ireland.

Sunday 23rd November 2025

Bishop Alan McGuckian SJ

On Wednesday 19th November, the Supreme Court ruled in relation to a challenge brought by the father of a pupil [JR87] attending a controlled grant-aided primary school in Northern Ireland regarding the legality of the teaching of religious education and the practice of collective worship within that primary school.

The Supreme Court ruling upheld the earlier 2022 High Court judgement that,

“The teaching of religious education under the core syllabus specified under article 11 of the Education (Northern Ireland) Order 2006 as implemented through article 3 of the Education (Core Syllabus for Religious Education) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007 and the arrangements for collective worship in the primary school attended by [JR87] breached her and her father’s rights under [A2P1] read with article 9 of the ECHR.”¹

Many people have asked me; while it is explicitly noted in the judgement that this ruling applies to a controlled grant-aided primary school and **does not apply to Catholic schools**,² what difference is this Supreme Court ruling going to make to the provision of Religious Education across NI schools more widely? Is religion being driven out of schools? More specifically, some are asking ‘Is Christianity being driven out of schools?’

It has been suggested that the tenor of the Supreme Court ruling appears to call for an ‘objective’ presentation of all religions but with no priority being given to Christianity. The Supreme Court judgement clearly states:

“Denominational religious education and collective worship is not prohibited in Catholic maintained schools.”³

It is important and necessary to take time to critically reflect upon the detail of the Court ruling and its legislative significance and to attentively consider the implications for the development of the RE Core Syllabus and the wider engagement with religious practice and ethos within NI schools.

We will have to wait and see how legislation and educational policy develop in the light of this ruling. Right now, however, I want to challenge the principle, that people of a secular mindset assert; namely that Christianity should be given no priority in all schools. That principle is simply ungrounded, unreasonable and illogical.

Christianity and the Judaeo Christian worldview, provides the value-based foundation for all that is good in western society and is deeply embedded within Human Rights legislation. The idea of the rights of the individual to be free from coercion, all the freedoms contained in the various charters of human rights, are based on and

¹ ‘Judgement in the matter of an application by JR87 and another for Judicial Review (Appellant)’, The Supreme Court, 19 November 2025, par. 3.

² ‘Judgement in the matter of an application by JR87 and another for Judicial Review (Appellant)’, The Supreme Court, 19 November 2025, par. 16, 54.

³ ‘Judgement in the matter of an application by JR87 and another for Judicial Review (Appellant)’, The Supreme Court, 19 November 2025, par. 54.

stem from the biblical teaching that every single person is created 'in the image and likeness of God'. (Gen. 1:26,27) Enlightenment thinkers of a more secular viewpoint have built on that *fundamentum*, and, in many ways, they have served us well, but they grounded and built their insights on underlying Christian values that protect the dignity of every human person.

Those who seek to have Christianity sidelined in our shared society are cutting off their noses to spite their face. The very values and principles on which they base their case are rooted in western civilisation which owes a great debt to the teachings of Christianity.

Other world religions should also be respected, and they also have a contribution to make in an increasingly diverse multi-cultural and multi-faith society. However, it should be recognised that Christianity, centrally and uniquely, has provided the framework of values that underpin western society. In schools across the western world, Christianity should, indeed, be given priority in our educational systems and everybody, including those of other faiths and none, should recognise and welcome this because of its foundational importance.