



Written by [Jack Kenny](#) on June 24, 2013

Obama Comment on Ireland's "Segregated" Schools Still Rankles in U.S., U.K.

One week after President Barack Obama made his controversial remarks about religiously "segregated schools" in Northern Ireland, the comments continue to draw sharp rebukes on both sides of the Atlantic. "His call for an end to separate Protestant and Catholic educational institutions does not generate widespread public approval," wrote former North Carolina congressional candidate Bill Randall in Sunday's *Washington Times*. "Obama's comments would have caused less consternation if he'd been looking in his own American back yard and made a conscious effort to mend the divisions he and his administration have caused," Randall wrote.



Obama, while in Northern Ireland for the G-8 economic summit last week, made the comment during what the White House billed a "[Town Hall](#)" meeting with "the youth of Northern Ireland." While praising the contributions Irish immigrants and their descendants have made to American life, Obama also praised the "just and hard-earned peace" of a "thoroughly modern Northern Ireland," after centuries of violence and religious strife among Catholic and Protestant factions. Noting there are "still wounds that haven't healed, and communities where tensions and mistrust hangs in the air," he urged the Irish youth to "continue your courageous path toward a permanent peace," saying that would benefit not only Ireland, but people in other parts of the world who could profit from that example. "We need you to get this right," Obama said, praising the compromises and cooperation he said nurtured peace and progress in today's Northern Ireland.

"Because issues like segregated schools and housing, lack of jobs and opportunity — symbols of history that are a source of pride for some and pain for others — these are not tangential to peace; they're essential to it," he said. "If towns remain divided — if Catholics have their schools and buildings, and Protestants have theirs — if we can't see ourselves in one another, if fear or resentment are allowed to harden, that encourages division. It discourages cooperation."

The use of the word "segregated" in describing religious schools seems odd since the word is usually used in reference to an enforced separation of people based on racial or ethnic differences, rather than a choice by families and religious communities to educate children according to their own faith. The claim that the religiously "segregated" schools contribute to "fear or resentment" and a hardening of prejudices brought a swift rebuke from the *Scottish Catholic Observer* in an editorial [response](#) to the U.S. president's "alarming call for an end to Catholic education."

"President Barack Obama repeated the oft disproved claim that Catholic education increases division in front of an audience of 2000 young people, including many Catholics," the publication noted, while pointing out that the U.S. president's "unfounded claim" came only two days after a top Vatican official



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had praised the work of Catholic schools in a speech in Glasgow, Scotland. During a lecture at Glasgow University, Archbishop Gerhard Müller, prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, said Catholic education brings “intellectual training, moral discipline and religious commitment” together. During Mass the previous evening, the archbishop called Catholic schools “a critical component of the Church,” providing Catholic youth the opportunity to “grow up with Jesus.”

Criticism in the United States was sharper and more disparaging in its assessment of the president’s view of the impact of religious education on civic life.

“President Obama’s anti-faith, secular agenda was shamefully on full display yesterday when he told the young people of Northern Ireland that Catholic education and other faith-based schools were divisive and an obstacle to peace,” according to a statement issued by [American Catholics for Religious Freedom](#). “All Americans of faith should be outraged by these comments which clearly telegraph the President’s belief system and are in fact at their core even anti-American.” The president’s comment, the group declared, “demonstrated just how dangerous this administration is to eroding the rights of all people of faith.”

In Italy, Father John Zuhlsdorf, a priest in the diocese of Velletri-Segni, weighed in on [Father Z’s blog](#), comparing Obama’s comment about Catholic and Protestant schools with the deference he has shown to other religions: “Off the top of my head, I can’t think of a foreign visit to a Islamic nation where he told people on his arrival that they shouldn’t have madrasas. Can you?” he asked, referring to Islamic seminaries in Pakistan that train students to be Muslim clerics. “Did he when visiting, say, Israel, say ‘You Jews shouldn’t have synagogue schools and you Muslims shouldn’t have mosque schools.’ I can’t remember. Did he?”

Surprisingly, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights President William Donohue, frequently a sharp critic of Obama on matters on touching religion, dismissed the hostile response to the president’s comments as “simply insane.”

“Never did Obama say he wants ‘an end to Catholic education,’” Donohue said in a Catholic League [press release](#). “Indeed, he never said anything critical about the nature of Catholic schools. It makes me wonder: Have any of his critics bothered to actually read his speech?”

Donohue is correct in saying the president did not call for “an end to Catholic education,” but Obama did say the “segregated schools” — both Catholic and Protestant — are among the factors that encourage division, and he implied the schools are incubators of “fear or resentment.” In his *Washington Times* commentary, Randall argued the comment fits a pattern of statements and actions by the Obama administration that have “marginalized Christian and Jewish organizations” in the United States. He cited, among other examples, the ObamaCare health insurance program that requires religious institutions to provide coverage for abortion and contraceptive services, and U.S. Army Reserve [training materials](#) — based on a report by the left-wing Southern Poverty Law Center — that labeled Catholicism, evangelical Christianity, and the Jewish Defense League as examples of extremism in a long list that included the Ku Klux Klan and the Muslim Brotherhood of Egypt.

“It is not the president’s place to lecture another nation on religious liberty and religious divisions within its borders,” Randall wrote. “The best thing that he can do for religious liberty and peaceful relations between faiths in the rest of the world is to set an example in the United States.”

Photo of President Barack Obama: AP Images



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