The End of Catholic Education in Ireland?

– *Further reflections on the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism*

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The proposals of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, convened by the Labour Minister for Education and Skills, Mr Ruairi Quinn, will, if implemented, destroy the Catholic ethos in schools. Given the fact that the transmission of faith now mainly occurs in the schools rather than in families, this is effectively a recipe for the utter secularisation of Ireland. After a short overview of some of the main proposals, this article goes on to expose some of the problematic presuppositions of the Forum's Report.

WHAT IS BEING PROPOSED ...

The proposals include, in a first phase, the divesting of around 50 schools (or more) from areas where there is parental demand for schools with a non-Catholic ethos. This is to be welcomed, but this should only occur if and when Catholic authorities have obtained cast-iron guarantees that the schools that remain under Catholic patronage can retain their ethos. Now it is in those schools – the so-called Stand-Alone schools, where the Catholic school remains the only option – that a genuine Catholic ethos is under major threat. In relation to those Stand-Alone Schools, the Forum proposes, amongst other things, the following:

- Prayers are to be inclusive of the religious beliefs (and none!) of all children. This recommendation would effectively *prohibit specific Christian prayer* in a Christian school if there was even one atheist or, say, Muslim, enrolled.
- Similarly, the emblems of various religions are to be displayed and the feasts of different religions are to be celebrated without any allowance made for a religious patron's responsibility to

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uphold and foster its own specific ethos. (The Forum recommends that displays of religious artefacts and symbols should 'not be exclusive to any one faith or tradition.') So a Catholic school can no longer simply hang a crucifix in the class-room but it will also have to display a Muslim prayer mat, the Star of David, and a statue of the Buddha. This supermarket approach to religions is tantamount to a violation of religious freedom.

- Again, *sacramental preparation* (including First Holy Communion) should not occur during normal school-time and not 'encroach on the time allocated to the general curriculum.' It is unclear how this should be read, for its meaning depends on whether or not one considers the present religious education to be part of 'the general curriculum.' During the video-presentation on 17 November, 2011, Professor John Coolahan, the Chair of the Forum's Advisory Group, made the important addition that religious education should not encroach on the time allocated to the general curriculum, *which is the State curriculum*. The Catholic Schools Partnership appears to think that it allows for the continuation of sacramental preparation during school hours, i.e. in the slot allocated to religious education. In light of the addition mentioned, I doubt that this is a correct reading. (Incidentally, a comparison between the video-presentation, which was an invitation for critical feedback, and the final report, reveals that no negative criticism was taken into account at all. The Report simply reiterates and further develops the proposals that were first aired in November 2011 without taking into account opposing views).
- Again, the Forum recommends that *Rule 68* should be abolished. Rule 68 indicates that 'a religious spirit should inform and vivify the whole work of the school'. In other words, the Forum sees religion very much in terms of a 'discrete subject' which one can teach about, but there should be no scope for actual religious formation of the child.
- The implicitly secularist and a-religious bias of the Forum is further reinforced by its proposal to introduce an allegedly 'neutral' course on Ethics and World Religions, entitled 'Education about Religions and Beliefs' (ERB), which will be obligatory for all students. Here children are introduced to all major religious views, as well as atheist perspectives. They merely learn *about* religions, from an external, detached or allegedly 'neutral' point of view. But they will not be *formed* in the Catholic faith and ethos. These proposals apply, not to the schools that will be transferred away from Catholic patronage but to schools that remain, in name anyway, Catholic.

As I see it, the proposals combine two perspectives – a multi-

denominational one, and a secularist one, which are both deeply hostile to a Catholic perspective (or any particular religious perspective for that matter, including that of the Church of Ireland or Islam). The multi-denominational aspect comes to the fore, for instance, in its demand that religious symbols of all major denominations should be on display. The secularist bias is revealed in its demand to introduce an allegedly neutral course on Ethics and World Religions, as well as in its demand that Rule 68 be abolished, and religion be treated as a discrete subject.

The two perspectives may perhaps at first appear as mutually exclusive. It is a key aspect of secularism that it aims to ban religion from the public discourse, including, as in this case, publically funded schools. The display of symbols of all religions in the school may at first appear to clash with this secularist demand to deny religions any public presence. But this contradiction is not real, because the multi-denominational perspective is itself actually also secularist. For a detached display of all religious symbols, and a celebration of all religious festivals actually send out the message to children that all religions are actually equally valid. The Report may appear, at first sight, to be inclusive and attractive by celebrating the *differences* of an allegedly more pluralist Ireland. But this kind of celebration of difference makes all religions, in the end, a matter of *indifference*. In a multi-denominational paradigm children are exposed to all worldviews (religious and non-religious) *without being formed* in any single one of them; and for that reason it is fair to call the multi-denominational approach a disguised secularist one. In both the multi-denominational perspective, as well as in the secularist one, children are not allowed to be formed in one particular religion. So the proposals are not incoherent; but they are deeply secularist. Let's now examine in some greater detail what's wrong with this secularist bias.

1. *Religious education, if properly understood, is always formation*

First, the Forum's approach simply does not do justice to its subject. Catholicism, like any other monotheistic faith, deals with issues of ultimate meaning. It involves more than subscribing to a set of beliefs and doctrines; more generally it involves a specific perspective on the world and human beings; it has its own ethos and values (some of which are shared with other worldviews, including the secular one, and some which are distinct); it requires participation in its liturgical practices and prayer; and it cultivates a disposition of receptivity which allows the believer to discern the mystery of God in the heart of our world. Merely being taught

about religions is not entirely without value; but it is 'a paltry thing' compared to being formed into the Catholic religion as a living reality. It would be an absurdity to assume that one can teach somebody to play the piano by merely allowing the student to listen to recordings of piano-recitals, without any practice and real playing by either the teacher or the student. Just so, the notion that one can do justice to religious formation of children by merely teaching them about religion (as is proposed for the course Education about Religions and Beliefs), and without allowing them to practise it (or indeed setting an example in practising it as a school community in the liturgy) is equally absurd. It displays a truncated understanding of what proper religious education is about, for it reduces it to nothing more than simply knowing a collection of facts and figures; it has no understanding of what religious formation is about. In general any education is never just about imparting information from a detached standpoint. Education is about formation of the whole person, and is therefore always integrated. Some might perhaps argue that religious formation should not take place at all in schools but in the family and in the community. The school should be about education, not formation in any worldview whatsoever.

This argument is not neutral; it is predicated on the same secularist premise that religious formation should be banned from the public sphere, and is therefore guilty of arguing what it presupposes (*petitio principii*). Secondly, and more importantly, if the argument assumes that no socialisation takes place in non-religious schools it starts from an inaccurate premise. Non-denominational schools also impart values to children. Indeed, international experience reveals that those who promote a non-denominational perspective are usually not shy about using the school as a medium of socialisation, in which children are being exposed to 'politically correct' progressive policies (towards minorities, ecology, ...). As Frank Furedi has argued, the school is increasingly seen as medium of socialisation at the expense of its main role – education and the transmission of knowledge to the next generation so as to allow them to make sense of their world. There is, however, an important difference between the new politically correct 'values' and those of religion. While the former are being artificially imposed on children at the behest of policy makers who consider the school the best place to tackle society's problems and its dysfunctionality (often implicitly at the expense of undermining parental authority), religious values have organically grown within society and originate from within it.[1]

1. See the wide-ranging critique of education today in Frank Furedi, *Wasted. Why Education does not educate anymore* (London: Continuum, 2009)

2. The Forum operates with a philosophically out-dated and biased secularist paradigm, which is not neutral

The philosophical perspective is problematic in that its implicit secularist stance claims a neutrality which is simply non-existent. The secularist perspective derives from one particular line of thinking in the Western tradition, namely the Enlightenment, which rejects the authority of tradition and presupposes an understanding of reason as 'autonomous'. In a postmodern climate the alleged 'autonomy' of Enlightenment reason has been severely questioned, if not abandoned altogether. We now realise that the typically Western emphasis upon autonomous reason is the product of one tradition within Western intellectual culture; it is therefore perspectivist. Likewise, the notion that reason and science operate without presuppositions has been abandoned. Even the most rational of human disciplines, namely classical logic, operates with key axioms (for instance, the principle of non-contradiction) which it simply assumes but cannot prove. This illustrates what scholars call the fiduciary nature of all human rationality: a strict separation of faith and reason is not possible. We all operate with presuppositions. Nobody occupies a standpointless standpoint! A good metaphor to explain this is to compare worldviews to languages: each has its own distinctive character, and there is no meta-language which all people speak. Similarly, there is no such thing as a 'neutral stance' or 'over-arching perspective' when it comes to worldviews. Every perspective is biased – be it Catholic, non-religious, Anglican, Chinese, Muslim, or atheist (in order of relevance in an Irish context). The secularist perspective – a small minority view in Ireland – is therefore not a neutral meta-perspective; it is just as biased as any of the denominational perspectives. Secularism is therefore anything but neutral, objective or universal. To ban references to God from the public sphere is not a neutral stance; it is effectively a deeply anti-religious stance. As I mentioned earlier, when it comes to questions of ultimate meaning there is no neutral stance.

In this light the bias of the secularist nature of the proposals has become evident, not just in the introduction of the allegedly 'neutral' (read: effectively 'secularist') course on Beliefs and Religions; but also in the reduction of authentic liturgical practice, prayer, and sacramental preparation. As Bishop Donal Murray summarises:

> The suggestion that religious belief is not relevant to large areas of life is the essence of secularism. It may sound like a recipe for tolerance and harmony – 'let religion keep to its place and we will avoid a lot of divisive issues'. The reality is that this

> amounts to a denial or at least a profound misrepresentation of God. A god who is irrelevant to some spheres or aspects of the creation is not God at all.[2]

What sounds like a recipe for tolerance and neutrality is actually deeply intolerant of religious views and ethos.

3. Given its secular stance, the proposals, if implemented, may prove unconstitutional

In today's world, language of inclusivity and neutrality is adopted in order effectively to erase references to religion from the public sphere. This led, for instance, to the removal of Christian statues from a Community Hospital in Killarney, Co. Kerry.[3] While this was perpetrated in the name of inclusivity, the result was, of course, a more secularist outlook for the hospital, which illustrates our earlier point that multi-faith approaches are often predicated on a secularist premise.

Proponents of a secular education often invoke the principle of 'the separation of Church and State' to argue why religious formation should be removed from schools that are in receipt of public funding. This is wrong on a number of counts. First, it appears conveniently to overlook the fact that Catholics – the vast majority of people according to the latest Census – pay taxes too, and are therefore entitled to an education that caters for their needs. But more importantly, the principle of the separation of Church and State was never meant to promote a secularist agenda and create a religion-free zone in the public sphere. It was actually the opposite. The principle aims to safeguard religion from undue interference from the State.

The Irish Constitution is more explicitly religious than, for instance, the American one. In its preamble it invokes the Holy Trinity and Jesus Christ. Unlike the American constitution the word 'God' is used on numerous occasions, mostly in relation to oaths of officeholders (the President, judges,...). On religion it states:

2. See Donal Murray, 'The Catholic Church's Current Thinking on Educational Provision' from Eugene Duffy (ed.), *Catholic Primary Education – Facing New Challenges* (Dublin: Veritas, 2012), 59

3. See: 'HSE forced to review removal of statue from Kerry Hospital': "The statue, which has been at the entrance to the hospital for over 70 years, was removed last year by the HSE on what they said was 'safety grounds.' However, the HSE also claimed at the time that its removal was to accommodate other religious beliefs amid a changing culture in Killarney.' From: http://www.cinews.ie/article.php?artid=8575

Article 44

1. The State acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion.
2. 1° Freedom of conscience and the free profession and practice of religion are, subject to public order and morality, guaranteed to every citizen.
   2° The State guarantees not to endow any religion.
   3° The State shall not impose any disabilities or make any discrimination on the ground of religious profession, belief or status.
   4° Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations, nor be such as to affect prejudicially the right of any child to attend a school receiving public money without attending religious instruction at that school.
   5° Every religious denomination shall have the right to manage its own affairs, own, acquire and administer property, movable and immovable, and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes.
   6° The property of any religious denomination or any educational institution shall not be diverted save for necessary works of public utility and on payment of compensation.

Like the American Constitution the Irish Constitution prohibits the State's favouring an 'official' religion (cf. art. 44, 2. 2°, 3° and 4°). But that does not mean that the State cannot support schools that have a religious denomination (as art. 44.2.4° with its reference to a school 'receiving public money' makes clear). The separation of Church and State (not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution) does not aim at creating a religion-free zone in the public sphere. Rather it aims to protect religious denominations from undesirable interference by State authorities ('Every religious denomination shall have the right to manage its own affairs...'). In light of this one wonders whether the proposals of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism, if implemented, are actually constitutional. For surely the demand to display religious symbols of all denominations, conduct 'inclusive' prayer, etc. constitute a major interference in the affairs of religion?

Surprisingly perhaps, the Irish Constitution is actually a strikingly up-to-date and progressive document. Because of its Catholic inspiration it does not adopt a stale secularist approach that uncritically claims to be neutral and therefore attempts to ban religion from the public sphere. Rather, it fully acknowledges the

role that different religious denominations may play in the public domain, but it avoids favouring any one in particular. In that sense the Irish Constitution subscribes to a more pluralist understanding of society than for instance, official French policies which are deeply secularist and monochrome.

CONCLUSION

The proposals of the Forum, if implemented, will have a devastating impact on the ethos of Christian schools in Ireland. In my view, not one single Catholic school should be divested until we have cast-iron guarantees that a genuine Catholic identity will be maintained in the Stand-Alone schools. This can only be done by rejecting the implicitly secularist proposals of the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism.

In ainm na nglún a d'imigh romhainn. We have a dual tradition. We should dare to use Irish in our liturgy when neither priest nor congregation is particularly fluent. Our failure to do so may seem insignificant. But to recall that fifty per cent of the remaining six thousand languages of human-speak will die out in the next century invites the question: will Irish be one of them? Every language is an expression of the human spirit as it encounters mysterious realty. One language cannot simply replace another. When we pray in Irish we are claiming our inheritance in solidarity with those who have gone before. *Guímís.*

– HUGH O'DONNELL SDB, *Eucharist and the Living Earth,* (Dublin: Columba Press) p.69.