



# CNI

## **Comment - Eliminating Catholic influence will not enhance respect for religious minorities**

**Not everyone will be happy with the dilution of religious content arising from recent changes, writes Martin Mansergh**



Many readers will have a better grasp than me of the religious significance and historical origins of the Angelus which go back to early mediaeval times. It is a moment of quiet devotional prayer and reflection, originally three times a day, morning, noon and dusk, associated with the Incarnation and with salutation to the Blessed Virgin Mary, summoned by the chiming of a bell.

Since 1950, it has been on radio at noon, and precedes the early evening news on national radio and television at 6pm.

The images on television have changed over the years, becoming less explicitly religious, and moving from something proudly expressive of a Catholic country to a less specific portrayal of diverse but busy people pausing to meditate to the sound of a bell.

Not everyone will be happy with the dilution of religious content arising from recent changes.

I miss the high-quality devotional art work and the many fine churches that are a feature of our landscape that were till recently part of the Angelus. Some viewers may be even more concerned about the possibility of new changes, removing it even further from its religious context.

Nevertheless, it has become a fixed point in the broadcasting schedule. At 6pm, it also announces the imminence of the news.

The Angelus comes under periodic attack, leaving broadcasters to wonder whether, in a society much changed since its introduction in 1950, it is still appropriate to the values of a multicultural or secular society.

It has to be said that either way, the issue is not a burning preoccupation for most people. I cannot recall receiving a representation for the removal of the Angelus (or of Church and parish control of primary schools) from any constituent in Tipperary South during my time in the Oireachtas between 2002 and 2011, nor was it raised with me by any local Church of Ireland fellow-parishioner.

However, the demand has certainly been aired in the national media and by lobby groups dedicated to the removal of Catholic and Church influence in the public sphere, excepting its involvement in causes deemed progressive, such as social justice, development aid and protection of the environment.

Objections to the Angelus come, broadly speaking, from two sources: elements

traditionally opposed to or suspicious of Catholicism within minority religious traditions in Ireland, and from assertive secular and humanist groups.

There was a push on this issue after the Good Friday Agreement from a newly-formed group in the South called the Reform Movement, supported, though not controlled, by the Orange Order in the Republic. It was looking for national minority rights, British citizenship, and Ireland's return to the Commonwealth. They made much of a controversial claim by then Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) leader David Trimble that the Republic was a sectarian state.

Criticism from such sources, unsympathetic to the State since its foundation, had limited impact. Compared either with Northern Ireland in the past or more substantive issues in the history of the Republic, it is difficult to identify any adverse impact that the broadcast of the Angelus has had on people of minority religious persuasions, Christian or otherwise.

## **Orange Order**

The Orange Order in Northern Ireland takes deep umbrage at any curtailment of its freedom, beginning with its *bête noire* the Parades

Commission, as an attack on “our Protestant culture”. If there had been a Protestant equivalent of the Angelus on BBC Northern Ireland, there is little doubt that they would defend its retention, regardless of the feelings of others, as fervently as they do the flying of the Union Jack.

There has been a more liberal Protestant tradition that would hold that it is wrong in this manner to identify the national broadcasting station with the majority Catholic faith.

These days, of course, it stretches credulity beyond breaking point to view RTÉ as a propagator of the faith, outside of its other religious broadcasting which is scrupulously pluralist. This is not a criticism, but what proportion of Irish television presenters, who are Catholics, smear ashes on their forehead on Ash Wednesday, compared to the number of British broadcasters who wear poppies on screen up to a month before Remembrance Sunday in November?

The first reflects free choice; in the second case, peer pressure may also sometimes play a role.

Walton Empey, when he was Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, spoke for most of his co-  
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religionists when he urged that the Angelus be left alone, without contradiction since.

Paradoxically perhaps, seen from an historical perspective, it is in a pluralist context that retention of the Angelus is best defended today.

There is and should be a respect for different religious traditions, recognising their potential in most things to be mutually supportive. Eliminating all manifestations of Catholic influence will not do anything to enhance respect for religious minorities. It will just ensure that they can be comprehensively ignored as well.

While secularism is hard to measure or classify neatly, it is worth reminding ourselves that in the 2011 census about 6% of the population (or double the Protestant denominations combined) declared themselves to be of no religion, of which slightly over 7,000 people or 0.02% declared themselves to be atheists or agnostics. While down on the peak of 95% recorded in 1961 in a significantly smaller population of slightly less than three million, the proportion of Catholics in 2011 is still 84%, consisting of just under four million people. Obviously, the return comprehends both practising Catholics and occasional Massgoers.

On the face of it, a pluralist/multicultural state should reasonably reflect, in a balanced but generous way, the religious make-up and identity of its population, rather than treat a secular humanism as an organising principle, as demanded by a small, albeit growing, vocal minority claiming that as a right based on their supposed neutrality.

As a Republic, we are not obliged to adopt French or American models. One of the purposes of independence was to be able to fashion a society of our own, still mainly Christian in inspiration.

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