

Atheist Ireland

**Contributions by Michael Nugent and Jane Donnelly
to the Plenary Meeting of the Dialogue Process
between the Irish Government, Churches and
Non-confessional Bodies, Dublin Castle, 4 July 2019**



Summary of Contributions

Theme 1 – Effective Structured Dialogue

In order for the State to protect equally for everybody the right to freedom of conscience, religion, and belief, the State must remain neutral between religious and atheistic beliefs. We should not use the discriminatory phrase ‘a new Church State Covenant’. The State’s relationship should be explicitly equal with all belief groups, whether religious or atheistic. People have rights, beliefs do not. The State must treat people with respect, and protect us from discrimination and crimes based on our beliefs. But it must not protect the content of our beliefs from being challenged, and it must not insist that we respect beliefs that we consider irrational or harmful or unjust. Individual people, not majorities, have human rights. Indeed, the point of human rights law is to protect individuals from the tyranny of the majority. The Irish people have moved on. The State must remove legacy laws that discriminate against atheists, including in schools, healthcare, religious oaths for high office, charity law, and the Civil Registration Act. This dialogue process should treat everybody equally. The Government has already met bilaterally with some Christian churches. The next bilateral meetings should be with groups who have not yet met with this Government.

Theme 2 – Inclusive and Diverse Communities

Atheist Ireland promotes ethical secularism as the only way for a society to justly balance inclusive and diverse communities. Everyone must have the right to freedom of religion and belief. But there must be one law for all, based on human rights and democratic values. Atheists and religious people can both support secularism. Atheist Ireland has a unique working alliance with Evangelical Alliance Ireland and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Ireland to jointly promote secular schools. We do not confine our joint work to Ireland. When the UN Human Rights Committee was questioning Pakistan in 2017, we sent a joint delegation to Geneva to address the Committee. Secularism correlates with many aspects of a just society. There is a pathway to secular rational values, as shown by the World Values Survey. The developed world is relentlessly becoming more secular, with some fundamentalists fighting back. Ireland is following that trend.

Theme 3 – Education

Multiple patronage and multiple ethos as the basis for policy causes segregation and inequality in Irish schools. Divesting some schools will not solve this. The European Union, the European Court, and the United Nations all give secular parents (whether atheist or religious), the exact same rights as parents of the majority religions. However, in Irish schools, the State aims to contribute to the moral and spiritual education of our children through religion. This is indoctrination. It disrespects our right to ensure that the teaching of our children is in conformity with our convictions. The right to respect for our convictions includes a negative and positive right. The negative right is to not be indoctrinated, including the right to opt out of religion classes. The positive right is to the same active help that you give to majority religion parents. As two specific examples, the State has failed to protect the right of all students to objective sex education, and the right of atheist and minority faith teachers to equal access to jobs. The State must rebalance its approach to these rights, to ensure pluralism and to fulfil its duties under the Constitution, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention, and the various UN Conventions that Ireland has ratified.

Theme 1 – Effective Structured Dialogue

Atheist Ireland proposes the following six principles as the foundation for this dialogue process.

1. The first duty of the State is to protect the rights of its citizens. Only when you do that can you help every citizen to live a flourishing life, as part of a just society.

In this dialogue process, your first duty is to protect our unconditional right to freedom of conscience, religion, and belief, and our conditional right to practice those beliefs as long we don't infringe on the rights of others.

2. To do this, the State must remain neutral between religious and atheistic beliefs. This is both a requirement of Article 17, and also the only way that you can protect these rights, equally and fairly, for every one of us.

We should not use the phrase 'a new Church State Covenant'. The State's relationship should be explicitly equal with all belief groups, whether religious or atheistic.

As atheists, we are not looking for any privileged advantage over our religious friends and neighbours. Indeed, we would be just as opposed to the State giving privilege to atheism as we are to the State giving privilege to religion.

3. People have rights, beliefs do not. The State must protect the right of every person to be respected and treated with dignity as an individual, to hold our beliefs, and to be protected from discrimination and crimes on the basis of our beliefs.

But you must not protect the contents of our beliefs from being questioned, challenged, or even ridiculed. And you must not insist that we respect beliefs, if we consider them to be irrational or harmful or unjust.

4. Individual people, not majorities, have human rights. Indeed, as the UN Human Rights Committee told Ireland on the abortion issue, the whole point of human rights law is to protect individuals from the tyranny of the majority, and majority votes cannot be used to deny human rights.

5. The people have moved on. The State must catch up. In recent referenda we have voted to respect individual rights to same sex marriage, abortion, and blasphemy.

The State must now remove other legacy laws and practices that discriminate against atheists and minority faiths, including in schools, healthcare, religious oaths for high office, charity law, and the Civil Registration Act.

6. This process should treat everybody equally. This Government has already had bilateral meetings with the Catholic Church, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist Churches, and the Taoiseach has met with the Jewish community.

Atheist Ireland is awaiting a date for the meeting with us that the Government has agreed to hold. In the interest of fairness, we ask that the next bilateral meetings should be with groups such as us, who have not yet had a bilateral meeting with this Government.

Theme 2 – Inclusive and Diverse Communities

Atheist Ireland promotes ethical secularism as the only way for a society to justly balance inclusive and diverse communities. By secularism we mean politically separating Church and State.

Everyone must have the right to freedom of religion and belief. But there must be one law for all, based on human rights and democratic values. And we as citizens should act ethically.

Atheism is not the same thing as secularism. Atheists and religious people can both support secularism, and work together for secularism.

Atheist Ireland already does this. We have a unique working alliance with Evangelical Alliance Ireland and the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community of Ireland to jointly promote secular schools.

Unlike interfaith forums, that bring together only religious people, our work brings together both atheist and religious groups.

The key to our success is that we respect each other as people, we respect our right to hold our very different world views, and we accept that we disagree on the source and content of much of our world views.

But we can unite around our support for human rights and freedom from discrimination. We are all discriminated against in Irish schools and other situations.

We can jointly promote moral values like empathy, compassion, cooperation, reciprocity, fairness, and justice, while respecting that we have different beliefs about the source of our morality.

Our three groups do not confine our joint work to Ireland. When the UN Human Rights Committee was questioning Pakistan in 2017, we sent a joint delegation to Geneva to speak out for persecuted atheists, Christians, and Muslims who could not speak out for themselves.

Secularism correlates with many aspects of a just society.

In general, secular countries, which include atheist and religious people, have lower rates of homicide, juvenile and early adult mortality, STD infection rates, teen pregnancy, and abortion.

Studies published by social scientist Phil Zuckerman and others have shown that secularists are typically less nationalistic, less prejudiced, less racist, less dogmatic, less ethnocentric, less closed-minded and less authoritarian; and more politically tolerant and more supportive of gender equality, women's rights and gay rights.

There is a pathway to secular rational values. The World Values Survey, conducted by social scientists, suggests that as individuals move from survival values to self-expression values, which is triggered by investments in health, education, communication technologies and democracy, societies move towards secular rational values.

International trends are clear.

The developed world is relentlessly becoming more secular, with some fundamentalists fighting a rearguard action against it, and some Governments unsure how to react.

Ireland is following that trend. The sooner we attain a secular State, the easier it will be for religious and atheist citizens alike to work together to shape a just society that accommodates inclusive and diverse communities.

Theme 3 – Education

Multiple patronage and multiple ethos as the basis for policy is the underlying problem in Irish schools. The Oireachtas Education Committee has already concluded that this brings about segregation of children and inequality. Divesting some schools will not solve this.

Article 17 of the Lisbon Treaty equally respects non-confessional minorities. But the Irish State does not respect us equally in Irish schools.

The European Union, the European Court, and the United Nations all give us the exact same rights in schools as religious parents.

The European Court has said that the right to respect for parents convictions is an absolute right, and not one to be balanced against the rights of others.

The Irish Constitution speaks of the inalienable rights of parents, and the Irish Courts have never found that the State can disregard the rights of secular parents (whether atheist or religious) who seek secular education for their children.

However, in Irish schools, the State aims to contribute to the moral and spiritual education of our children through religion. It teaches our children the relevance of religion to their lives, and to respect religious beliefs.

Those aims are indoctrination. They disrespect our right to ensure that the teaching of our children is in conformity with our convictions.

Imagine the outcry from religious parents if Irish schools sought to contribute to the moral education of their children through atheism.

The right to respect for our convictions includes a negative and positive right.

The negative right is to not be indoctrinated in beliefs contrary to our own. The positive right is to the same active help that you give to parents of the majority religions.

With regard to our negative right, the Constitution allows our children, without prejudice, to not attend religion classes in Irish schools.

But that right is often not vindicated in practice. And when it is, it is not vindicated without prejudice. Even State ETB schools do not offer an alternative subject to the NCCA religion course and the Goodness Me Goodness You course.

Even worse, with regard to our positive right, the State simply ignores this.

If you actively help Catholic parents to ensure that their children's education is in conformity with Catholic beliefs, you must also actively help secular parents (whether atheist or religious) to ensure that our children's education is in conformity with secular beliefs.

As two specific examples, the State has failed to protect the right of all students to objective sex education, and the right of atheist and minority faith teachers to equal access to jobs.

The State must rebalance its approach to these rights.

You must do this both to ensure pluralism, and to fulfil your duties under the Constitution, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, the European Convention, and the various UN Conventions that Ireland has ratified.

You must respect both the negative and positive sides of the right to education in conformity with our convictions, as part of the wider right to freedom of conscience, religion, belief, and expression, free from religious discrimination.