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Catholic Education and the Future: Insights from René Girard

Sean O’Conaill and Eugene McElhinney

‘I have integrity, but when winning gets in the way of integrity, integrity goes out the window.’¹

Attributed in 2011 to a seventeen-year-old contestant in the UK televised reality show, *Young Apprentice*, this comment resists easy assessment. Read lightly it can certainly be understood as the facetious acting-out of an ebullient stage persona, by a shrewd young aspirant to stardom who knew there can be media advantage in appearing outrageous.

However, this student’s own Catholic school might have worried that such enthusiastic public support for amorality could be taken more seriously by the school’s competitors, and even by prospecting parents, in a widely diverse and still conflicted society (Northern Ireland).

As former teaching colleagues in that very school we two add our own misgivings over that to other concerning data - to raise the question of the impact of even the best catechetical formation in Catholic schools when set against the background of a fragmented student experience that is far wider and weightier, and is now seriously impacted by international media of all kinds. This wider formative experience – of the school as well as the student – increasingly pressurises schools to succeed in terms of ‘winning’ something – and cannot be subject to the intent of the church’s *General Directory for Catechesis*.

Under the heading of ‘other concerning data’ we mention especially the implications of the two-to-one rejection of the church’s official position on the Irish referendum to repeal the 8th amendment to the constitution (forbidding abortion) on May

1 *Lord Sugar launches his search for a new Young Apprentice*; BBC Media Centre, 2011; <http://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/mediapacks/youngapprentice/boys>

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25th, 2018 – with younger generations proving even more solidly in favour of repeal. This reinforces the implications of the widely observed departure of school-going teenagers from religious observance in Ireland, and the testimony given by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin to Pope Benedict XVI in 2006: *‘I can go to parishes on a Sunday where I find no person in the congregations between the ages of 16 and 36. None at all.’*²

We hear also from our own contacts that, increasingly, young people will freely declare that they find such observance too often ‘boring’ and ‘irrelevant to our lives’. This is supported by sample research reported by the US Barna Group in 2017 – suggesting that less than one in three young people in the Republic feel they have a clear grasp of core Christian beliefs, while one in four may be facing a crisis of faith. The same report found that, increasingly, young people are dissatisfied with what they see as the passive/conformist faith of older generations, while one in four now claims to have no religious belief at all.³ It seems that increasingly while our Catholic schools are considered successful in teaching a ‘life-readying’ curriculum they are less effective in their efforts to pass on an observant and committed Catholic faith.

REASONS FOR OPTIMISM

Nevertheless, despite these worrying indicators, we two are far from pessimistic about the long-term dominance of that wider disintegrated student experience, heavily influenced as it is by post-modernist scepticism. Furthermore, we foresee a new adult faith formation initiative that will change the mind of any adult who thinks that their school formation taught them all they could wish to know about the meaning of the Gospel.

The reason for our optimism is simple. We see unmistakably, in an international context, the beginnings of a deeply rational response to secular scepticism, a response of extraordinary explanatory and educative power – and we see that gentle ‘force’ growing. Heavily influenced as they are just now by the scepticism and relativism of the secular Enlightenment – currently cresting in Ireland – the ‘human sciences’ are nevertheless, in all cases, under growing international challenge from an academic movement inspired by a single powerful 20th century insight – an insight that strongly supports orthodox Christian belief.⁴ This is the observation that we

2 *Irish bishops in Rome for talks with Pope*, Irish Times, Mon, Oct 16, 2006

3 Barna Group, *Finding Faith in Ireland: the Shifting Spiritual Landscape of Teens and Young Adults in the Republic of Ireland*, 2017. (This report is based on both qualitative and quantitative study of 790 subjects in the 14-25 age range, and interviews with 63 youth workers.)

4 See e.g. the website of the international *Colloquium on Violence and Religion*, at <http://violenceandreligion.com>

humans do not in fact behave as though ‘naturally’ free to choose our own separate destinies, as the secular Enlightenment tends to teach. We tend instead to be trapped unconsciously in replication of one another’s desires, because – at least to begin with – we literally *do not know what we want*.

This insight first surfaced in the late 1950s in the context of literary criticism. René Girard, a French émigré academic in the US state of Indiana, came to notice a pattern in the heroes of five ‘classic’ European novels. In every case the desires of those heroes had been absorbed from a *model*, an historical or contemporaneous ‘other’, to whom those heroes were drawn by the supposed superiority of that model.

For example, Flaubert’s provincial heroine *Madame Bovary* is absorbed by the supposedly far more glamorous lives of the Parisian society women in her magazines, and seeks to model herself upon them, with fateful consequences.

In all such cases these heroes find freedom from mimetic ‘followership’ only in the tragic realisation that this captivity has prevented them from being their fearful yet real ‘selves’. In the case of Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, this character has literally been ‘out of his own mind’ in wanting to be the mythical medieval knight, Amadis of Gaul.⁵

In writing these stories these great novelists (Cervantes, Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, Proust) had also been admitting their own vanity in once supposing themselves heroic authors of their own destiny. Furthermore, in the case of Stendhal (*The Red and the Black*), the hero of this novel, Julien Sorel, points to an earlier historical sequence in the case of his own heroic model, Napoleon I. Through his many admiring biographers this same non-fictional Emperor of the French was well known in Stendhal’s time to have modelled his own career on classical European military predecessors, Alexander of Macedon and Julius Caesar of ancient Rome.

For Girard this raised the question of what other literary sources might point to this phenomenon of ‘mimetic desire’ (desire acquired unconsciously from someone else) – as a dominant influence on human behaviour, and therefore as a pervasive ‘human problem’ of which the secular Enlightenment seemed oblivious. Already possessing a doctorate in medieval history Girard had no doubt that this phenomenon was important not only in literature, but in ‘real life’ – as a potent source of real violence. Pursuing this interest Girard branched into anthropology and philosophy, and came to identify mimetic desire as a dominant theme of world literature

5 René Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1966

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– with special attention to the Judeo-Christian texts that we know as the Bible. As the imitation of the desires of a living person is obviously dangerous (e.g. in the case of the desire of Paris, prince of Troy, for Helen, the wife of King Menelaus of Sparta; or the desires of both Argentina and Great Britain to control the Falkland Islands in 1982; or the desire of Joseph’s brothers for his coloured coat) how had humanity coped with and survived this problem from earliest times? Girard theorised then that the answer to this question was to be found in archaic religion, centred on the practice of ritual sacrifice, and that the thrice uttered climactic warning in the Decalogue of Moses – not to ‘covet anything your *neighbour* has’ – was also an attempt to limit the potential damage of doing just that, by simple prohibition.

The singular importance of the Bible lies, according to Girard, in its exposure of the typical culmination of the dangerous enmities caused by mimetic rivalry. Wanting what another also wants will lead easily to the striking of a blow if the object of desire cannot be shared, and the first blow struck in anger can then quickly escalate to a civil crisis – especially in any society without adequate policing and judicial structures. The human tendency to evade responsibility for our own mistakes has led always naturally to the unjust blaming of someone else. Those with most to lose from any such escalating crisis will therefore tend to sink their own differences in the accusation of, and then the killing or expulsion of, an isolated individual – the ‘scapegoat’. This has the effect of ‘saving the community’ by releasing the tensions of the crisis at minimum cost, bringing a temporary peace.

Again and again this phenomenon is revealed in scripture to Girard’s lens: in the throwing overboard of Jonah by the entire crew of the ship on which he has attempted to flee; in the story of Joseph and his brothers; in the many psalms which tell of a single victim surrounded by enemies; in the story of Job who is deserted and accused even by his own friends; in the ‘suffering servant’ of Isaiah; in the Gospel case of the intended stoning of the ‘woman taken in adultery’ (John 7:53-8:11). Finally, the meaning of what is happening is explicitly identified by Caiaphas in his justification of the killing of Jesus: “*you fail to see that it is to your advantage that one man should die for the people, rather than that the whole nation should perish*”. (John 11: 49)

Ritualised sacrifice in archaic religion was, according to Girard, the half-conscious commemoration of this spontaneous scapegoating event. In that ritual the essential all-against-one character of the event was faithfully replicated, as was the

shedding of the victim's blood.⁶ As Girard is being taken seriously by Catholic theologians, as well as by academics in the entire range of the human sciences – from philosophy and history to anthropology, literature, economics, political science and even psychiatry – it is surely appropriate for all who have an interest in Catholic education – and in the wider influences that now also impact on all students – to pay attention. As Girard's insight can explain also such enveloping phenomena as celebrity mania, high-street fashion, body-fixation, life-style modelling, Internet trolling and needless 'consumerism' – and the unpredictable violence and many other developing crises of our era – it should, we believe, be in discussion in Catholic schools wherever curriculum development is taken seriously.

In our particular experience of that one school (which ended for O'Conaill in 1996 and for McElhinney in 2003) it was not on the school's pressurised timetable to discuss the impact of that changing wider society, or even of what was being learned in 'secular' subjects, on 'faith development'. To our regret we never met as colleagues to discuss the possible impact of the curriculum of the History department, or of classes on 'current affairs' (O'Conaill) on the programme of 'RE' (McElhinney), or vice versa. Looking back we find this an important reflection on the current situation – especially because O'Conaill had a particular interest in the 18th century Enlightenment and McElhinney was simultaneously fighting that very challenge. We know that now we would want to be discussing 'mimetic desire' as an obviously overlapping concern – and with other humanities departments too, as a 'whole school' concern.

THE HISTORY TEACHER

Back then O'Conaill was typically explaining things in history class as follows: England's '1066' as 'the rivalry of kings'; Henry II's invasion of Ireland in 1171 as 'acquisitive imperialism'; Northern Ireland conflict as having to do with 'clashing nationalisms'; the Cold War as 'a struggle for global hegemony'. Now he would probably view Islamic Jihadism in western cities as 'frustrated envy of the West'. To see and say that all of these might simply *also* be 'wanting what your neighbour wants' would have appeared far too *naïve* back then.

6 For Girard, Christian sacrifice as ritualised in the Mass is radically different – because no deflection of violence onto another is involved. Jesus as the model for the sacrificing priest was also victim, the 'giver of himself'. In exposing the injustice of the scapegoating process Jesus also provided a ritualised bloodless alternative to the sacrifices of the ancient world and now bids all believers to imitate this self-giving. It is implicit that no further victimisation should follow.

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O’Conaill was noticing also the apparent reciprocal need that each of the far extremes in NI politics had to ‘feed off’ the enmity and opposition of the other, their clashing yet ‘symbiotic’ relationship. He notices now, and regrets, this need for an elaborate vocabulary for the pervasive phenomenon of rivalry, the inevitable ‘locked in’ nature of each of two ‘neighbours’ wanting always what the other wants – sovereign power. He would also probably be utilising some of the resources of the nearby Corrymeela community, in Ballycastle, where Protestant teachers seeking peace have been drawing also from the Girardian well.⁷

Now also O’Conaill would wish to know what biblical stories are currently being covered in RE classes at all age levels, and could be confident that he shared a basic common explanatory vocabulary with RE. He would be interested in knowing when the story of Tom Sawyer’s painting of his Aunt Polly’s fence was likely to be discussed in English class, or if Pip’s desire to become ‘a gentleman’ in order to court Estella, Miss Havisham’s niece, might be ‘coming up’ in Dickens’ *Great Expectations* – or with what year group Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* might occur, the dictator of Rome who was ‘neighbour’ to and envied target of ‘lean and hungry’ Cassius.

THE RE TEACHER

As a young teacher of Religious Education back in the late 1960s, McElhinney’s received wisdom was that the subject had to move away from the apologetics that had marked his own experience of it as a schoolboy. Two influential educationalists, Fr. Josef Jungmann, an Austrian Jesuit, and, later, Johannes Hoffinger, were now advocating what they called the kerygmatic approach. To them scripture was the kerygma, or herald of the good news of salvation. The emphasis switched from dogma to scripture, liturgy, doctrine and service.

Although this was seen as an improvement on the old creed-based approach it was still removed from pupils’ experiences of living out their faith. As we moved into the seventies and eighties an Irish Catechetical Programme was drawn up for use in Key Stage 3 which was more pupil-centred. It drew on pupils’ experiences and used modern interactive methods such as song, story, discussion and illustration to engage pupils with content that touched on scripture, sacrament and liturgy.

An important element of this programme was the complementary support that was hoped for from the home and the parish. In

⁷ See e.g. Duncan Morrow, *The Far Side of Revenge: Reflections on the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, 2016. <https://www.corrymeela.org/cmsfiles/resources/PeaceandConflict/The-Far-Side-of-Revenge-Glucksman-Ireland-House-Duncan-Morrow-Jan-2016.pdf>

retrospect these programmes were attempting to present to young teenagers the history of salvation and the church's mediation of that salvation through sacrament in a way that was supposedly suited to their physical, cognitive, moral, social and religious development. In Key Stages 4 and 5, less overtly catechetical programmes dominated with greater emphasis being placed on the academic aspect of Religious Education which meant that it had to pursue a more academic and open approach to religious belief.

While religious education teachers were 'delivering' this prescribed curriculum within the confines of their classrooms, societal changes were exerting powerful influences outside the school that were to challenge, and in some cases undermine, the liturgical and moral beliefs and practices of the religious education being followed. The growing inter-connectedness of the world, revealing greater success in the natural sciences, coupled with largely unregulated and unchallenged dissemination of information and ideologies, left religious education teachers having to counter an avalanche of counter cultures. There was no coming of age in this new dispensation and little coming to terms with these pervasive pressures. In a generation we had moved from a village culture to a global one and we were not prepared for the latter. As Barry warned us back in the mid nineties the "... influence of culture escapes our consciousness". We need to find "... how any of us encultured human beings can become free enough from our culture to be believers".⁸

From 1985 McElhinney became aware of the seminal influence of the counter culture led by René Girard (1923-2015). This French academic, who began his academic life as a teacher of medieval history, had from about 1961 begun to expose in a series of books and articles, elements of culture that were to advance our understanding of our anthropology. This helped many catechists to find that way sought by Barry to free ourselves from our culture in order to proclaim the Good News in a new way.

Girard's mimetic theory engendered McElhinney's own conversion from seeing the world and social relations in a binary perspective to understanding it in a triangular one. That is, in addition to an object of desire and the person who desires it, there is also, pervasively, a *third party* – the admired person, the model whose desire has been mimicked. The Romantic Lie of the 18th century Enlightenment had led the academic world to believe that we have autonomy in decision making and that we are autonomous in our social relations and in our sense of self. Girard's exposure of this lie has revealed to us, as Michael Kirwan expresses it:

8 Barry, W., "U.S. Culture and Contemporary Spirituality". *Review for Religious* 54, 6-21 (1995)

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“The self is, rather, an ‘unstable, constantly changing, evanescent structure’ brought into existence by desire.”⁹

McElhinney was led by the realisation of this dynamic to a deeper understanding of teacher/pupil relationships; pupil/pupil relationships; culture/pupil relationships and the Judeo/Christian history of salvation. Put simply, he now believes that the role of the Religious Education teacher in a Catholic school has to take account of Girard’s mimetic theory because at the core of the relationship between the teacher (catechist) and the pupil must be the quality of *authenticity*.

McElhinney was introduced to this idea in 1985 by a Dutch Academic, Roel Kaptein, who explained it like this. The teacher wishes the pupils to learn and the pupils wish to learn because it is the wish of the teacher. This is mimesis. At those times when the pupils do not wish to learn we teachers tend to wonder what is wrong with *them*. That is the wrong question to ask. We should ask, what is wrong with *us*? If the teacher is not wishing (in heart and mind) for the pupils to learn, the pupils who are in mimesis with the teacher will recognise this and cease to wish to learn. We need to understand that mimesis is not just something of the head, and teaching is not just something of the head either. It is related to the totality of one’s being. Otherwise the teacher is just using words. When this is the case the pupils also will only deal in words – because again they will be in mimesis with the teacher.

A particular problem in this regard for the Catechist is that because schools place such a high priority on academic success and hence provide a breeding ground for rivalry and envious desire, pupils need to be reminded that while there is a corresponding academic aspiration for success in religious education, there is also a requirement to follow the prospectus set out in the Sermon on the Mount. The religious education teacher has to witness to this in his/her classroom and in his/her life.

The matter of autonomy exercises the minds of teenagers greatly. They feel constrained by some of the sexual moral teaching of the Church, which they think outdated and repressive. The prohibitions of the Decalogue seem to them like a blunt instrument to subdue and spoil their enjoyment of life. In pre-Girardian days McElhinney’s teaching on moral issues upheld the orthodox approach of the Catholic Catechism. Today he would approach moral issues via an exploration of the mimetic dynamic of the reciprocity of desire and self-identity. He would be challenging students to look for mimetic models of their own desires – and to note the impact of Christian servant-leader models, beginning with Jesus, upon the behaviour of countless ‘followers’ throughout history. This is not to say that

9 Kirwan, M., *Discovering Girard*, Darton, Longman and Todd (2004), p. 19.

sexual fidelity and discipline should cease to be a deep concern of a Christian school. In fact mimetic theory also exposes the role so often played by mimetic competition in the destabilising of sexual relationships. Girard was very supportive of the Augustinian understanding of ‘disordered desire’ (concupiscence) as a very real phenomenon that continues to cause intense harm and suffering. His insight helps us to see this disorder more clearly in the all-too-frequent ‘conspiring’ of sexual desire and mimetic desire to form a dangerous ‘perfect storm’ – a theme that Shakespeare and so many others have so often visited.

OTHER DISCIPLINES

As authenticity and enthusiasm will be present in all effective teaching – and all of the ‘humanities’ must now address a gathering human crisis – both of us see enormous potential in Girardian insight for the entire second level school curriculum.

With respect to the environmental crisis, we wonder how Geography and Economics explain the frustrating reluctance to grapple with that now, in arguably the world’s most advanced ‘consumer society’? How do these academic subjects explain desire for the latest iteration of the iPhone when it is not truly needed – or why Rory McIlroy finds it so profitable to wear the Nike logo - the ‘swoosh’ – on his golf cap? For those who now study politics, how is the rivalry of one-time close political colleagues – so often a potent source of political instability – to be explained?

When it comes to the personal welfare of pupils we wonder if the phenomenon of online ‘trolling’ is being addressed as an inevitable effect of mimetic rivalry and of competition for the ultimate put-down – rivalry that must happen when an audience of unknown size is known to be observing a ‘discussion’. What of the dynamic of the bullying of a pupil, if it happens within the school itself, or via mobile devices outside? Are some pupils perhaps dangerously over-needy of attention, and resentful that others may be getting more of that? What explains the pull of ‘social media’ and ‘fear of missing out’ if not the discontent that arises from the apparently greater success and happiness of others – with ‘viral popularity’ and ‘celebrity’ as the supposed last horizons of human achievement? Is it time for all schools to challenge – head on – the deepest mistake of contemporary culture – the belief that our value as individual human beings (and the worth of any school) is determined by social accolade?

We two also remember vividly the occasion of the loss by one pupil of a treasured role in a school musical – a part then given to her close friend, whose friendship she then rejected bitterly. Is it now understood why that rupture happened (and could happen

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again to others) and why the pupil concerned felt that she could not remain at the school?

Under the heading of pupil welfare and the possibility of ‘self-harming’ (in the context of media obsessed with body image), who in the school might read with benefit Girard’s essay on the coincidence of the very first clinical diagnoses of anorexia with the rise of 19th century printed popular media – media that obsessed over the body rivalries of highly connected ‘beauties’, including ‘Sissi’, Empress Elizabeth of Austria (1854-98) and Eugénie, Empress of France (1853-71)?¹⁰

As for that 2011 declaration by a bright pupil of our own old school – that, when it came to *winning*, his integrity would go ‘out the window’ – was that not simply a case of ‘catching’ the very same desire that motivated his rivals (‘mimetic contagion’)? And might the young author of the comment now be able to see that he was explaining, albeit unconsciously, the cause of so many failures of integrity, in all eras?

Teachers of the ‘hard’ sciences should surely be interested also, as they will be aware of the accusation that modern science has destabilised the human ecosystem. Nor can they be indifferent to instances of the corruption of scientific research through intense mimetic competition for global fame. Is the misuse of science – for example in the nuclear arms race – not in itself a scientific conundrum that needs our deepest attention? Girardian insight into ‘coveting’ makes RE a compelling component of a ‘rounded education’ for students who specialise in science or computing – or in languages.

CONCLUSION

The gravitational pull of the problem of sexuality has for too long unbalanced Christian moralism and education. Jesus’s own celibacy has facilitated an idealisation of that specific life-choice as the sine-qua-non of sanctity, while his obvious rejection of the status-seeking and power-seeking cultural models of the ancient world has received far less attention.

Girard’s insight teaches us to look more closely at those temptations of Jesus that are recorded in the synoptic Gospels, at the start of his ministry. None of these was sexual. All three were invitations to aspire to power and status – of the sorcerers of the ancient world; of the Jewish Temple hierarchy; and of the kings and emperors of Jesus’s own era (e.g. Matt 4: 1-11). That is, they were appeals to mimetic desire. Jesus himself claimed to have

10 René Girard, *Eating Disorders and Mimetic Desire*, Contagion 3, 1996. (To be found also as a .pdf document on the World Wide Web by searching for author and title.)

overcome not the problem of sexual attraction but the problem of ‘the world’, i.e. of an enveloping culture that provided so many dangerous models of desire to distract him from his mission of bringing all humans back to the spirituality of Psalm 23, i.e. to intimate relationship with ‘the Father’.

That ‘sinlessness’ has therefore centrally to do with overcoming covetousness – understood as mimetic desire – becomes clear in the Girardian lens. That Jesus’s supreme achievement lay in this rather than in his celibacy could not be so easily seen or preached in the long centuries of Christendom. Beginning with Emperor Constantine in the fourth century, the church was always then beholden to state power won by force, from whose military elites it so often drew its own hierarchs. How, for example, could the Christian bishops of Constantine’s time see covetousness (i.e. mimetic rivalry) in the decisive battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, when Constantine’s supporters were insisting that he had been told by Jesus’s God to defeat Maxentius under the sign of the cross? The self-censorship – even connivance – that fell then upon Christian hierarchs in their relations with their own state actors and social elites was to persist into our own time – with deeply scandalous consequences.

Now that the tide of Christendom is fast receding, René Girard’s insight has revealed that phenomenon of covetousness as the dominant human and political problem of both past and present – and given an entirely fresh relevance to the Creeds. We feel confident that this insight is set to redirect the Enlightenment, to revolutionise the way that future generations will interpret the world, and to undo what Pope Benedict XVI has termed ‘the dictatorship of relativism’.

Knowing well that Enlightenment scepticism derives huge leverage from the argument that all claims to an ‘objective truth’ are necessarily oppressive, we know also that there can be no question of imposing Girardian mimetic theory on any school, or any teacher. As the bishops of Vatican II observed in 1965, “Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power”.¹¹ In the end it can only be the explanatory power of Girard’s insight, and its verification in the personal experience and observation of any teacher, that will together ‘win over’ anyone. We two can only ask: *Do* we humans tend to imitate those we see as ‘modelling’ our own ideal lives? Is there danger or futility in many of the ‘models’ or ‘icons’ that our pupils encounter these times? And has evangelical secularism yet explained, or even squarely addressed, its own Utopian failures?

11 *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, #1.

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If Girard is correct about the dominance of unconscious imitation in the desires that drive us, it follows that we humans simply cannot do *without* models – that we are *necessarily* ‘mimetic’. We can all surely agree that Christianity, and Catholicism – in contrast to ‘media culture’ – have many real models of integrity. These in turn have sought to model their own lives on the one who denied himself the kingdoms of the earth – and who called us to attend to those whom the world miscalls ‘losers’. To be ‘counter-cultural’ is to continue that tradition. If we are to learn how to do that now, decisively, in our own time we surely need to observe closely how the wider culture ‘works’, and come to our own conclusions on why this happens.

For us two retired Catholic teachers the central Christian belief in the human importance of a historical model of complete integrity is now amply supported by rational mimetic theory.¹² Challenging philosophical relativism on its own ground, this seems to us the best explanation so far of the failure of the secular Enlightenment to take us to *liberty, equality and fraternity* in over two centuries of trying. We are confident that a thoroughly integrated and coherent Christian second-level curriculum – and a thoroughly reorganised adult faith formation system – will someday bear witness to this.

12 Wolfgang Palaver *René Girard's Mimetic Theory* (Michigan State University Press), 2013

Christian Debate. Writing of the shape of the church to come, Karl Rahner noted that difference of viewpoint, tension and even conflict is inevitable when Christians debate the nature of their task in the world. For Rahner, the answer is not to avoid the fray but ‘to learn ... to maintain the Church’s unity and mutual love’, something that ‘must be constantly learned and practiced’. It has been a great merit of Ronan Drury’s stewardship of *The Furrow* that it has not avoided the fray though without becoming partisan, and that it remains a space where Christian community may be practised and learned.

– PATRICK HANNON, ‘Style Matters’, *Performing the Word*, ed. Enda McDonagh (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 226.