Secularization and secularism : is there a distinctive Irish experience?

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Secularization and Secularism:
Is there a Distinctive Irish Experience?

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I. It is the way of clergy, and indeed of bishops, to shake hands in a well-intentioned way at church doors – outside if the weather is fine, inside if there is a hint of anything derived from that now largely forgotten canticle *Benedicite*: showers and dew or ice and snow, or any other form of inclement weather. I was standing outside a church in the early days of my episcopate in my former diocese, doing just that – shaking hands. I looked round and saw one of those whom I had just confirmed within the hour texting vigorously from behind a tombstone, to find out how England was faring in the Football World Cup tie which had been running concurrently with the Service of Confirmation. Somehow, I realized that in the heart of rural Northern Ireland, in a small town right on the Border, modernity, post-modernity and secularization had all arrived to stay – and religion was still going on, too!

Of course I realize that this is an innocent example of what happens every day, but it illustrates, even though it is out of date by almost a decade now, how people make their own priorities in what, in the past, would have been a much more staid and formal religious occasion and one in which ready communication itself would have been much more limited. I do not wish to suggest that the young person was disrespectful of God, the liturgy or the church. She was simply able to prioritize and then re-prioritize and she had the technology to do so and the confidence to get what she needed from it.

Let me fast-forward you to July 20, 2011, and quote from a speech made by the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic in light of The Cloyne Report, then just published, on child abuse in one of the Irish dioceses:

> Cloyne's revelations are heart-breaking. It describes how many victims continued to live in the same small towns and parishes in which they were reared and in which they were abused. Their abuser is often still in the area and still held in high regard by their families and the community. In one case, the abuser even officiated at the victim's own wedding.

We have here a very different picture of Irish experience of religion and of rural Ireland. The highest elected politician in the land gives voice to the

anger and incomprehension of the people at what happened through the church to which the overwhelming number of the people belonged (96 %), in which the overwhelming majority of the people had placed faith and trust since before the foundation of the Irish state and for which the remainder of the population had respect, even if they did not belong. Relations between Ireland and the Vatican can, I think, never be the same emotionally again – whatever the shape of those relations formally and diplomatically. In fact during November 2011 Ireland has withdrawn diplomatically from the Vatican; its needs are now serviced primarily through the Irish Ambassador to Italy.

I have found time and again that when I am boxed into using -ism words, whether it be Augustinianism, Calvinism, Catholicism or Anglicanism, I have to plead for the plural rather than the singular. And secularism is really no exception. Although there is a wide range of characteristics of secularism per se, there are different ways in different contexts for such secularisms to work themselves out. French and English secularisms and forms of secularization are quite different and Irish secularism and secularization is different once again. A common thread, of course, as far as secularization is concerned, is the progressive, but not necessarily unilinear, withdrawal on the part of a significant proportion of the population from public adherence to religion. One of the commonest indicators of this is taken to be statistics relating to attendance at worship. Tangible and quantifiable though this indeed is, it is only part of the picture of religious belonging and religious affiliation – as has ever been the case. As it has well been expressed in relation to Britain and Ireland, it was in the now long-gone Victorian era that the big gathering brought the sort of social cohesion and respectability that people craved. In a recent book, Simon Green speaks pertinently of how, by the 1960s, the large crowd no longer defined the culture of affluent society and goes on to argue for the Protestant churches in England experiencing the deprivation of public presence and the diminishment of social prestige as a manifestation of advancing secularism.[1]

Religious people need also to remember that it is too easy to demonize secularisation; it can become a ready explanation of all our current and future ills and failures as churches and religious bodies, tending as we do so often towards an unrealized idealism. The dying Augustine, in *City of*

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[1] SIMON J. D. GREEN, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularism and Social Change c.1920–1960* (Cambridge: CUP, 2011), pp. 280ff .

God, as the Goths stormed the walls and ramparts of his city of Hippo, urged his fellow-Christians to engage with the *saeculum*, the world of lived and living history, even while it was crumbling around his ears and theirs. Within our own wider tradition, we need to let the catch-cry: *ecclesia semper reformanda* ring out. The dynamic doctrine of the Holy Spirit points us in the direction of what is happening in the world every bit as much as in the church in the search for where God is at work. It also points us beyond a lazy dualistic reading of the division between Christianity and 'the world' – big, bad and beyond. From time to time, valuable and enriching imperatives for change have come from beyond the church and have demanded them for the life of the church itself and will continue to do so. Theological criticism of secularisation cannot simply feed off fearfulness for the survival of religion or off an ecclesiastical superiority complex which feels that it does not need to explain itself.

The classic definition of what secularization is still comes from the work of Bryan Wilson who, in 1966, established the following defining shape and context of secularization: religion seen as a way of thinking, as the performance of particular practices, and as the institutionalization and organization of those patterns of thought and action which have lost influence and therefore adherents.[2] Secularization, as it affects churches, is often seen to issue in a new privatization of belief and, therefore, of belonging and involvement: people don't go to things the way they used to any more. But if secularization is the companion of modernization, then the experience of 1960s Britain, as analyzed by Green,[3] shows us that not only did churches feel the squeeze at that time, but so did working men's clubs and cinemas. We who are in and of the churches feel numerical withdrawal in very particular ways and become especially bereaved, but we need also to be careful to remember that we are not the only bodies and institutions – many of them voluntary like ourselves – who feel the chill winds of modernity and secularization. More and more people who encounter what are now deemed the old-style religion of official Christianity do not like and are not nurtured by our definitions of community, authority, tradition and conformity.

II. Turning to Ireland, it is important to remember that in both parts of today's Ireland, conservatism and traditionalism have long been the de-

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[2]   BRYAN R. WILSON, *Religion in Secular Society: A Sociological Comment* (London: Watts, 1966).

[3]   See footnote 1 above.

fault settings of the societies in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland. This brings an eclectic mixture of conformism and rejection, of critical rebelliousness and nostalgic sentimentalism. The other thing to remember is that statistically the expression of religious belonging in Ireland remains among the highest in Europe. In fact, Ireland is 'right up there' with Poland and Malta. People in Ireland still go to church in significant and sustained numbers and seek the Occasional Offices of the church with high numerical density. Cultural identity is highly prized in Ireland and, regrettably, it has lain at the root of the strife which has characterized Irish history for centuries. Religion stands at the crossroads of this battle and gives voice to identity. Part of the continuation of religion and, in this context, deeply denominationalized Christianity, in Irish life seems to be the absence of any sustained alternative. The great Irish socialist, James Larkin, made a plea which went unheard in the early twentieth century. It was to the effect that even a small proportion of the money which is regularly given to the church be given instead to alleviate the plight of the working people of Ireland. This was simply a continuing voice of frustration at the fact that one of the results of Irish Independence was the increasing marginalization of the working classes by the ruling elite. Again, during The Troubles in Northern Ireland, those who really were in need of infrastructural regeneration – the working classes of the urban areas – who had so much for which to fight together found themselves sectarianized and divided, and their struggle distorted into a religio-political dogfight along what to all intents and purposes still looks to the rest of the world like a denominational war between Protestant and Catholic.

In one of the rooms in the house where I live in Dublin is a large round table with the following inscription on a brass plaque:

> THIS TABLE BELONGED TO THE RIGHT HON: WILLIAM GLADSTONE, M.P., AND AT IT HE AND THE MINISTERS OF THE DAY PLOTTED THE DESTRUCTION OF THE IRISH CHURCH. LORD ARDILAUN PURCHASED THIS TABLE FROM MR GLADSTONE WITH 11 CARLTON HOUSE TERRACE, S.W. IN 1875. IT IS PRESENTED BY LADY ARDILAUN TO THE DUBLIN DIOCESE OF THE CHURCH OF IRELAND TO REMAIN IN THE PALACE OF THE ARCHBISHOP OF DUBLIN. 1916.

The Archbishop has no palace any longer but the table remains in the house in which the Archbishop lives. It points to the utter sense of be-

trayal understood to be effected by the Disestablishment of the Irish Church and felt by so many in 1870 – and yet we are still in existence and in creative communion with so many churches worldwide, including the Old Catholics.

During the nineteenth century, the English policy towards Ireland changed and in particular it changed towards Ireland's Roman Catholic majority. Rather than being oppressed, the Roman Catholics were henceforth encouraged to take responsibility for the affairs of their own people as defined by religious observance, by being given such responsibility for education, healthcare and social services in their own tradition and idiom. Right up to today, these three areas form the pressure points in Irish life: schools, hospitals and the interplay between provision for the disadvantaged and the prescribing of moral codes for people who in other countries might expect to make these decisions for themselves according to non-religious criteria. Throughout the period from Catholic Emancipation in the 1820s to the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland in 1870, Irish Catholicism was formed and fashioned in a character it assumed and retained right up until the 1960s. There was, of course, a symbiosis of sorts between politics and religion. That is what had been the case during the time of the apogee of the Established Church of England and Ireland and was in a certain sense a model. With Emancipation there came a new political engagement on the part of the Roman Catholic majority and the particular urgency which questions of land inevitably bring. But the question has to be asked: Did Roman Catholicism in effect and in this period become *the* religion of the parts of Ireland which, in time, became The Free State and the Irish Republic? And secondly: Is the contemporary sense of betrayal felt by Irish people a result of this sustained period of trust and obedience?

The Roman Catholic Church itself underwent structured change during the nineteenth century. With the introduction of particular dogmatic theological ideas together with new devotional practices centred on church buildings and on the priest, there was a replacement of the immanent domestic religion of earlier times by a much more transcendent understanding of the church and of the relationship of its people to God, brokered, if I may use that word, by the clergy and religious. And so began the uneasy new relationship between religion and politics in Ireland in which priest and politician needed one another and yet stood off against one another with a sort of mutual *hauteur*. As recently as July 3rd, 2011, it emerged in *The Cloyne Report* on sexual abuse by clergy of lay people in that diocese

that the person administering the rules of the state on behalf of the church, himself a priest, simply had not implemented them as they stood – not adequately or even objectively. Why? Because he did not agree with them, and that seemed to him to be a sufficient explanation of acting as he did.

One of the most sustained treatments of the relationship of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland to the state is: *Moral Monopoly*.[4] In regard to our topic – secularization and secularism – Inglis's identification of three strands: (a) the magical, (b) the legalistic, (c) the independent ethical decision-making, all together as components of Irish Catholicism, offers important clarification, although I personally shy away from the word 'magical' in such a context. This tri-partite division is useful because, as Inglis argues, at different times in history one or more of these may be in the ascendant. I have spoken already of the devotional practices combined with the increasingly dogmatic understanding of the faith institutionalized and systematized in the nineteenth century. They certainly strengthened the hold which religion had on the thought-pattern and rhythm of daily and weekly life of the Irish people. They gave a particular framework to Irish Roman Catholic life, secular as well as strictly religious. It can, I think, continue to be argued that the secularization of Ireland, even to this day, has not resulted in a blanket rejection of either content or practice of religion. Sporadically some practices even become more intense because of local circumstances and happenings. In many ways this may seem to be a self-evident truism; my point however is that religion clearly continues to run deeper than its detractors might like us to imagine.

The mood music between politicians and church figures has changed significantly. Over the past fifty and increasingly the last thirty years, politicians have been forcing the issue and giving the Irish people the opportunities through the democratic means of referenda and legislation to exercise their capacity to make binding on a society such independent ethical decisions, without ecclesiastical strings attached, particularly regarding the great taboo subjects of sexual ethics and practice. (Even in the speech made by the current Taoiseach Enda Kenny in reaction to *The Cloyne Report* – and with increasing critical bite – we are talking about people who refer to themselves as practising Catholics publicly criticizing the Roman Catholic Church on what are valid secular criteria and without embarrassment.) This is the culmination of a process and of a develop-

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4 Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998).

ment at which we will look later. In the midst of an advanced seculariza-
tion of society generally and pervasively, both North and South, there re-
mains a maturing yet uneasy combination of what elsewhere would be
called liberal developments alongside continuing religiosity.

A number of terms can be used to delineate this: the privatization of
religion, *a la carte* Catholicism, believing without belonging, all three of
which will be familiar from our own knowledge and experience of other
parts of Europe. Regarding Northern Ireland, I would also use another
category for a considerable number of people, that of 'belonging without
believing' and perhaps particularly of parts of the Protestant community
as most broadly envisaged. A cultural backdrop in Ireland is served and
serviced by religious expression, however vigorously any 'religious pro-
fessional' might recoil from the idea. This feeds directly into the question
of identity and the way in which religious definitions have historically
been used. Inglis, perhaps somewhat provocatively, refers to the upsurge
in the application of individual moral conscience as a *de facto* Protes-
tantization of the Irish Catholic psyche, much accelerated since the 1980s.
This seems to me to refer to the advancing sense which an individual has
of entitlement to and responsibility for decisions and actions affecting
herself or himself. Alongside this runs another reality. While the socio-
logically acute and the professionally religious concentrate on terms such
as secularization, people on the ground are still struggling with raw sec-
tarianism, alienation, social disadvantage and now economic collapse.
There has not, in any sense, been a return, like a rushing mighty wind, to
public religion since the economic downturn nor, to my mind, will there
be. Crisis has not helped church statistics this time around.

I referred above to the term Protestantization as a way in which Inglis
expresses the move towards something of a lifting of the lid on the pres-
sure cooker of Irish Catholicism. The other and parallel explanation of-
fered by John Littleton and Eamon Maher in *Contemporary Catholicism
in Ireland*[5] is the impact of Vatican II on Ireland. The very word 'impact',
regarding the 1960s itself, may well sound rather too energetic, not least
as the then Archbishop of Dublin, on returning from the Council, stated
that there was nothing in the Proceedings of the Council to worry the Irish
faithful. However, built into Vatican II is the philosophy of pluralism and
the emergence of the conscience of the individual as living entities. My

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5   JOHN LITTLETON and EAMON MAHER, *Contemporary Catholicism in Ireland: A Critical Appraisal* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2008).

argument is that the receptivity to the outworking of this may not have been strong at the time but the ideas were 'out there' and, as the population was changing and being changed by the political leadership, the ideas have been given opportunity to find their voice – particularly among married women in the educated workforce.

Gaudium et Spes (1965) can be argued to encourage the church to accept human freedom in the name of human rights. It also accepts the reality of private conscience. *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) by Paul VI goes further and accepts the reality that the political field is where Christians should exercise their freedom of conscience.[6] The myopic particularity of Ireland is further shown in relation to the field of education when one considers the capacity of the church worldwide to grapple with interreligious dialogue in Africa as part of the educational life of Roman Catholics; see John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), and Benedict XVI's Regensburg Address of 2006: 'Research and interreligious and intercultural dialogue are not an option but a vital necessity for our time.' John Paul's document shows the church presenting the Catholic schools as a lively centre of proclamation, apprenticeship and dialogue between people of different social and religious backgrounds. This is very much in the spirit of *Nostra Aetate* (1965).[7] The Roman Catholic schools in Ireland have taken to heart recently the fact that social and religious pluralism along with enforced migration worldwide brings into classrooms around Ireland pupils who are members of world faiths other than Christianity and has in the last couple of years produced an excellent guide to good practice in the area of inter-faith encounter.

Peadar Kirby[8] argues that nineteenth century Irish Catholicism, with its new-found confidence in the political, social, educational, medical and ethical fields, in fact led the way in the first and revolutionary stage of Irish modernization. It also saw its role quite significantly in the creation of a Catholic nation, and both of these words are important. In this way, politics became the place on earth where salvation to a heavenly end was worked out with the guidance and control of the church. This facilitated the church's increasingly un-self-critical engagement with and interference in the workings of politics and the thinking of politicians. It also was

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6   *Ibid.,* chapter 4: 'From Modernity to Ultramodernity'.

7   *Ibid.,* chapter 3: 'Embracing Change: The remodelling of Irish Catholic primary schools in the 21st century'.

8   *Ibid.,* p. 27 and following.

the way to counter the inherited dominance of Irish economic and political life by Protestants. The education system, modelled largely on the Classical system of the English schools, was pivotal, particularly through the Christian Brothers, in mapping out what Kirby calls a new 'imagined community' and in creating a Catholic elite for Irish public life. The new imagined community of Irish nationalism was the key to this project. It meant in effect that, as the Irish language and Gaelic culture declined as badges of separate identity (they were no longer needed in the same way with the erosion of English political and religious domination in Ireland), Roman Catholicism *per se* although not *tout seul* filled a vacuum of identity.

Into this category falls what Inglis calls the Catholic *habitus* in Irish life, a way of being and living which was all-encompassing of life as known and experienced. The 'new Catholicism' as a way of living daily life religiously was not as indigenous as it was meant to look. Rather, it was a combination of French and Italian components in a predominantly Victorian idiom and was significantly un-intellectual – many would argue, pro-actively anti-intellectual. Throughout the nineteenth century the bishops fought for a separate Catholic education system to educate an administrative and executive as well as medical and nursing elite under the umbrella of religious orders and diocesan agencies. There was also the Irish Catholic 'spiritual empire', the work of missions which abroad mirrored and at the same time built up the life of the church at home. The Irish Human Rights Commission document *Religion and Education: A Human Rights Perspective,* May 2011,[9] argues through this point laboriously and painfully. The Constitution of 1937 safeguards both the primary parental entitlement to educate children and the religious denominational ethos of schools. The question being asked is: Where does all of this now stand in relation to the primary human right of the child as a pupil to be free to choose religiously and indeed not to choose at all? and: What are the implications for schools, as providers of education, of any such choice by a pupil? The frustration is palpable because of the continuing faith formation component in school life in the context of the critical secular world of educational philosophy. This is a very contemporary battleground.

The word 'anti-intellectual' as alluded to above merits further exploration. In this context it means the primacy of devotionalism in worship and it was for the embedding of such in the school day and the school experi-

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[9] Published by the Irish Human Rights Commission.

ence that the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church fought as an extension of home, family and church. The thinking was that the school was an extension of the home life of the child, hence the school was carrying through the devotional expectation of parents in the educational context. There is another facet to this word. When, in the middle of the nineteenth century, the National University of Ireland was founded, with Queen's Colleges in Belfast, Galway and Cork along with University College in Dublin, the academic teaching of theology did not feature on the curriculum. Maynooth and the Pontifical University provided all the theological expertise the Irish church and people could want or need. But philosophy did feature and philosophical thinking, taught by members of Religious Orders, has contributed significantly to the open and flagrant criticism of much of Irish religion as intellectually deficient for a well-educated and well-argued population.

And this, of course, introduces the other great plank in this edifice – clericalism. Many critics – and not all critics are wilfully destructive or triumphantly iconoclastic – of the Catholic Church speak of clericalism as the greatest pathology (a strong word) of Irish Catholicism. They say this out of frustration at the insufficient inclusion of lay people in the essentials of church life. The decade of disclosure of the scandals of sex abuse has, even as a by-product, begun to break open this system which, on the admission of so many, has almost dismantled the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. The findings of *The Cloyne Report* in one particular aspect instance this. Monsignor O'Callaghan, whom the bishop put in charge of implementing Government-led Guidelines, gave to Gardai the name of a victim but not the name of a clerical abuser, a colleague. At the time he seemed to see nothing untoward in this partial withholding of information about a fellow-priest.

In a totally different but often muddled and muddied contemporary context, Ireland, like many historically Roman Catholic countries in Europe, can espouse civil partnerships as a democratic right with legal, contractual underpinning far more binding than anything the churches dare insist on in Holy Matrimony. At the same time, there is no desire or seeming intention on the part of the churches in Ireland – other than the Society of Friends who do not view themselves as a church – that such civil partnerships be honoured liturgically and in an act of worship. The current position of both churches and the state, by mutual agreement, is that a civil partnership is what it says it is and is not what many people refer to

as 'gay marriage' according to the churches' understanding of marriage and matrimony.

The Irish Constitution of 1937 manifests quite clearly the structure of Irish life which came directly out of the ferment of the nineteenth century as described above. In its original form, it enshrines special status for the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland. This well illustrates the fact that Ireland was democratic without being liberal, perhaps to many a strange combination. Politics and religion could at that stage share in rejecting the liberal version of modernity, especially individualism and secularism. Francis Lyons described the Constitution as attempting 'to reconcile the notion of inalienable popular sovereignty with the older medieval conceptions of the theocratic state.'[10] One of my predecessors, John Fitzgerald Gregg, as Archbishop of Dublin, went to Eamonn de Valera in 1937 to ask him bluntly if there were no longer a place for the Church of Ireland in the Irish state. The old assumptions were in place at least until Noel Browne's Mother and Child Scheme of 1950. This *cause celebre* marks the turning of the tide, even though it was never implemented. Browne was Minister for Health and decided with what he thought was the reality of political power to introduce a scheme which would give free maternity care to all mothers and free healthcare to all teenagers, regardless of income. Out of a fear that the scheme would prepare the way for widespread abortion and birth-control, the Irish Catholic authorities deemed it to be against Catholic teachings and 'the Taoiseach cancelled all his appointments *instanter* and rushed to Drogheda (he could not, of course, enter Northern Ireland and go to Armagh) to attempt to negotiate with the Cardinal at a time of crisis.'[11] Noel Browne had to apologize and shortly afterwards resigned.

The argument can be advanced, in relation to another historically Roman Catholic country, France, that from the 1960s faith came to be perceived as a personal matter that should not dictate a country's social and political organization. The change was slower to come in Ireland but the components are interesting and important. First among them is membership of the European Union. This brought with it not only a greater, renewed sense of belonging to a Europe of which an earlier medieval Ireland was very much part but it also, from the 1960s, gave an introduction to a

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[10] Francis S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 538.

[11] Tony McNamara, 'Church and State in the Twenty-First Century,' *Doctrine and Life* 54.1 (2004), pp. 31–36.

sense of incipient globalization to a country of all-encompassing insularity broken only by enforced emigration. The conscious economic policy of the Irish Government from the 1960s onward meant that Ireland was an early and willing participant in the European experiment. Secondly, the media has been hugely influential. It has often been said that Irish Catholicism succeeded because it was not afraid of symbols. The symbols not only pervaded schools and homes (again see the Irish Human Rights Commission Report of May 2011) but also hospitals and residential homes as much as churches and public space, even including lay-bys, particularly after the Marian Year and first Eucharistic Congress. The symbol of the Irish household is now the flat-screen TV and increasingly the peripatetic laptop or iPad. These are the places where people, young and old, are connected with ideas beyond their own contexts and beyond the control of anyone. They are the places which, along with mobile telephones, know no boundaries which can be imposed or effectively policed. This is surely a remarkable impact of secularism and modernization on a country where censorship of books for all citizens by the Roman Catholic hierarchy was once a norm. Television and other media are the places where the church, the moral guardian of the nation, came to be interrogated and 'grilled' particularly on issues to do with personal morality, personal identity and of course sexual abuse of minors and the vulnerable. All churches in Ireland have found no effective way of responding to this barrage of criticism and disclosure. And consumerism made sure that the 'I' remains ever at the centre of the agenda.

A number of significant happenings precipitated the changes. I have already spoken of Vatican II. However lukewarm its reception at the time, it was soon followed by significant interest and involvement in the Charismatic Movement in the 1970s among Irish Roman Catholics. Also, independently of what was happening within church circles, in 1972 under Taoiseach Jack Lynch there was an Amendment of Article 44 of the Irish Constitution, revoking the special position of the Roman Catholic Church. 85% voted to rescind such a special position. In 1973, Mary Robinson, later to be President of Ireland and subsequently UN Commissioner for Human Rights, introduced an Abortion Bill where the issues clearly came across as matters of private conscience. There is a documented shift here in the perspective of the hierarchy (*Irish Independent* 26th November 1973): 'There are many things which the Catholic Church holds to be morally wrong and no one has ever suggested, least of all the Church herself, that they should be prohibited by the state.' Even though the Bill never

became law, there was a new expression of the fact that people and politicians had privacy of conscience which they could express democratically and freely.

The 1980s saw the work of Garrett Fitzgerald systematically make legal in Ireland things on which previously the Roman Catholic Church had expressed prohibition. He also at the very same time contributed much to crafting The Peace in Northern Ireland and the new North-South co-operation which has given Ireland a peace dividend unparalleled in modern times. The Family Planning Amendment Act of 1985 meant that non-medical contraceptives were made available to adults without prescription. 1983, 1992 and 2002 saw Referenda on Abortion and 1986 and 1995 saw Referenda on Divorce. The people of Ireland rejected abortion, on the last-mentioned occasion by a very narrow margin, and accepted divorce by a very narrow margin – the exercise of franchise and conscience is well illustrated in this, whatever individually we make of the issues concerned. Perhaps the third leg of this triangle is that European Union membership has forced Ireland as a nation to rethink its laws on homosexuality and civil partnership.

It would seem that something interesting and important is happening. Secularization is indeed here to stay – as is conventional religion and as also are the pendulum-swing responses to the continuity of religion. Secularization is most clearly at work in education and in healthcare. The political arena has also changed and is the place where the new 'New Ireland' is being formed and chiselled out. Issues of conscience, human dignity, redress for abuse – all of them profoundly theological – now inhabit the public square. Two Taoisigh in succession have opened the door to Faith Fora – Bertie Ahern and Enda Kenny – the latter including not only Christianity in its multi-denominationalism, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism but also Humanism. For the first time in Irish history a representative of the Humanist community participated in the Inauguration of President Michael D. Higgins on November 11th, 2011. 'Inclusive' is a great watchword and catch-cry – and it is vital to the future of Ireland on both sides of the Border, for different yet interlocking reasons. But sophisticated and principled arguments from Human Rights and the philosophy of inclusion as a manifestation of national fair-mindedness are not going to go away either. All religions in Ireland have to accept this as real and a real criticism of who they are and what they do.

III. It may even be of interest briefly to map out areas where influence has shifted and where there is a genuine movement in the active influence

of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, lest you think I am simply seeking to hold on to a rosy picture of religiosity through the back door. Tom Inglis's work, to which I referred earlier, is strongest on this aspect. As well as his argument about the Protestantization of a Roman Catholic *habitus*, he is clear that no longer do the Irish seek symbolic legitimation of what they think or do from the church. He argues that the setting to one side of supernatural reference in relation to education (the philosophical strand to which I referred earlier along with the nano-revolution which engendered the Celtic Tiger) and healthcare (scientific rather than supernatural context of medicine and people asking their own ethical questions of generally accepted medical procedures and interventions) mark a process of secularization rather than simply a decline in the visible influence of the Catholic Church. If you realize that you do not any longer inhabit a flat earth, then you have no need to fear falling over the edge.

Statistics point to reduced religious observance, but such shrinkage is not uniform when taken across sectors. While attendance at Confession had plummeted from 47 % in 1974 to 14 % in 1995, there is a parallel increased attendance at Mass in the same period. It is always difficult and dangerous to attempt to codify or streamline an understanding of the religious motivation of others. A greater sense of personal decision-making is bound to alter your perspective on how you understand sin; you may continue to belong and to believe in your own particular way and yet, by resolving in a way now quite different who you are in your own decision-making, you can begin to look more keenly for sustenance in other parts of your religious inheritance. Set alongside this is the recognition that no more than 42 % feel that the church gives adequate answers to moral problems and the needs of the individual.

The decline in the institution and in its pervasive control of many aspects of Irish life is directly related to the near-collapse of vocations. During the period 1970 to 1995, the overall number of nuns, brothers and priests in Ireland decreased by 35 %; during the period 1966 to 1996, the decline in vocations was from 1409 to 111, a decline of 92 %. Inglis speaks of 'the aura of sacred difference' being lost. I wonder if, however, it is in part at least being redistributed among people who are not what I might call 'professionally religious.' There is no real scope in a much flatter sociology for an hierarchical ecclesiology. That is why I want to suggest that the aura no longer sits above us but is being redistributed among us – alongside a full recognition that many more people are at the same time opting out of it altogether.

The fundamental liberation of thought and ideas which has been accelerated by globalization and post-modernism, by active membership of EU and by the intense commercialization of Irish life, has been formed and fuelled by a revolution in technology which world-wide has made the uncritical availability of information itself much more instantaneous and attractive. And it is a liberation, however relative and modest it may seem – particularly for young people in both parts of Ireland – from a profoundly dualistic theological understanding of life once viewed from the perspective of the church which did not take kindly to criticism – and that is not in any sense confined to the Roman Catholic Church. The picture was broadly as follows: The world is profoundly evil and corrupting and our time on earth through our actions is best understood as a preparation for heaven or for hell. Dualism was pervasive in religious houses and institutions as elsewhere and these houses and institutions did so much to shape the popular mind. A post-modern world does not understand unaided what anyone means by stated certainties, precisely because truth itself in our time requires the insatiable questioning of formerly accepted truths. The sex abuse scandals, of course, fit in here because it seems that, had it not been for the new voice of the nation's conscience – the media – the church would not have found its voice to begin the urgent process of re-engaging and re-integrating with its own membership and the totality of society by the first steps of admitting to and condemning the actions of some of its members in exploiting the privacy of intimacy of others of its members who had no hierarchical status other than being the people of God. I would myself argue that they needed no other status to exercise and receive the dignity of being children of God in the fullest sense.

Regarding politics, the important indicator of decline is not so much the failure or success of Referenda but the fact that, while all of this was happening, particularly in the period 1988 to 1998, the church was still operating in an almost homogenous Roman Catholic society; the difference, even at that time, was that it could no longer be claimed to be monochrome. The Second Referendum on divorce in 1995 – 50.3% for and 49.7% against – brought about such a result in the face of the Roman Catholic Church stating that it would withhold sacraments from the divorced. The background to this is manifold: the capacity of people to learn for themselves the moral values which they will chose to espouse; the ongoing separation of the political and the religious in Europe generally; the church, although capable of trenchant criticism of society, envisages or envisions no coherent and cross-denominational picture of Irish society,

nor does it yet work effectively with those of other world faiths who are Irish citizens to frame one; the church cannot produce people who talk the media-talk with the church's content. Irish popular opinion is formed largely in the first instance by popular radio, often with a strong and therefore subjective and emotive phone-in component, investigative documentary and late night discussion with panels of experts. The churches have few, if any, exponents of this type of media, hence no message is voiced or heard.

Education is a very contemporary battlefield. In 1996 Ruari Quinn, then Minister of Finance, now Minister of Education and Skills, said: Ireland is a 'post-catholic, pluralist republic.' It may not be so straightforward. The appetite among parents for denominational faith-based schooling remains strong and subtle. The Constitutional position is strong also in defending what to many seems antique – the religious and the parental components. However the shift has been made to include theology as a curricular component in the Leaving Certificate. This is a significant move in the direction of objectifying the study and appreciation of God. Perhaps of equal interest is the fact that the attempt by the church to have the Relationships and Sexuality Programme (1997) taught in the regular religion classes failed. Furthermore, in this programme there is no specific curriculum, rather a set of guidelines and resource material for each school to deliver to pupils in a manner consonant with its own ethos.

Medicine and health are also foci of contention. I think that the *casus belli* here is, as often, the meeting of arguments from natural law and pressing new ethical questions in a world of hitherto unimaginable medical and scientific possibilities. In December 2010, a woman in Cork, who had an advanced cancer, was also pregnant. The medical opinion was that to save her life (and consonant with Roman Catholic doctrine, this could be substantiated because she had existing responsibility for a child already born) she needed an abortion. Nobody would perform it in the public hospital where she was being treated, so she had to go to England. There are other instances which show progressive secularization and the havoc it causes to an enclosed theological system of societal ethics when it opens up legitimate possibilities of medical intervention which have not happened before. One is the opening, enforced closure and re-opening of a Vasectomy Clinic in Letterkenny General Hospital – all in March 1997. Social welfare has come in for a considerable battering because of the academic and professional discipline of the social sciences and provision of social workers who today will probably be in more households than will

parish priests. The other thing is that in a media-driven world, social workers increasingly are pitted against clergy because, following the agenda of child abuse, it is their evidence which is seen by everyone relentlessly to expose error and wrongdoing. The myth which has been exploded in contemporary Ireland is that of the church nurturing and fostering the family as a sacred haven for children and, by extension, doing this for less fortunate children through orphanages and industrial schools. Particularly shocking was the eventual disclosure of the export of babies for adoption in the 1950s, particularly to the USA. They were children of unmarried mothers, the system was operated by nuns, sanctioned by the Archbishop of Dublin and administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Derisory though it may now sound, it seems that in 1958, at the establishment of a national television station for Ireland, Pope Pius XII took a personal interest because the Vatican thought Ireland, because of its geographical position, could broadcast on both sides of the Atlantic and therefore advance a Roman Catholic agenda. The economic policy of the government, however, brought in its train invasive advertising into scattered Irish homes through television. A quantum shift occurred which has rendered Ireland to this day a highly-consumerized society – self-indulgence as well as self-expression moved to the centre and replaced self-denial and a sort of untutored reticence which is still to be found in some places and in some people. An effective media in today's world simply blows wide open any idea of predictable, hierarchical certainty. Monopoly is no longer possible particularly when public broadcasting is commercially based and financially driven. Successful people in the media have been and remain quite different from church spokespersons. They quickly became the new high-priests of the court of popular opinion. The media will run debates and discussions on what people are interested in: contraception, abortion, divorce – and all of these rightly elicit the opinion of the feminism which is strong in Irish society – quite correctly. The church, having previously, perhaps, seen the recording studio as the conservatory of the sanctuary, now finds itself subjected to competition and debate whereas it had presumed upon consensus and deference. Because of the indifferentism of a post-modern age and because the churches generally do not have a media profile of positive, relevant and contemporary engagement, we find ourselves increasingly listening to a plethora of principled but sometimes predictable religious special interest groups – and then not really listening terribly hard. And, as I said earlier, it is now somewhat an old hat to think

of the television when many Irish teenagers have in their own rooms a computer on which they can watch any thing at any time.

In relation to family life, I think the evidence points in a number of directions. Between 1971 and 1996 the number of women in the workplace rose by 130% from 212,000 to 488,000; within this statistic is a further statistic whereby the percentage of married women in work rose from 14% to 50%. Two Presidents in a row have been women, both highly effective, both lawyers. The definition of family has in reality expanded, as it has everywhere else, to include one-parent families, co-habitants and same-sex partners. At the very same time, significant numbers of Irish people want to have and do have families of four or more children. These realities rub along.

IV. Where are we now? Successive census figures reveal a number of things: a slight rise in numbers of Church of Ireland and Methodist adherents; more people (already in 2006 Census, with 2011 Census not yet adequately analysed) than all Protestants together for the first time in the history of the State declared as atheistic or agnostic; Irish people from more than one hundred and fifty declared nationalities. Yet the fact is that the Roman Catholic Church is without competitors as we speak in a rapidly secularized Ireland. Perhaps it is because of the history which has kept religious affiliation to the fore, indeed guarded it jealously, as a working identity in every part of Ireland that religion remains in such a predominant position – but I myself think this is too cynical a view. Secularization is selective and at times subtle. Roman Catholicism may look as if it is lapsed, nay even collapsed, it may be *a la carte*, it may be fiercely devotional, but it remains as a constant component in what is to be a modern Irish person, whether individuals love it or hate it. The economic boom, called The Celtic Tiger, brought an unprecedented self-confidence to turn over stones and see how white the grass has become, to open windows and doors and see what inhabits the cobwebs and to do things which previously had not been conceivable or possible. The three components identified by Tom Inglis – nineteenth century devotional, twentieth century legalistic, twenty-first century individualistic – have been components from the start of modern Roman Catholic Ireland. They form and create an amoeba and should not be absolutized within a timeframe or a social geography. It is important to remember that Irish Catholicism can and does constantly re-invent itself. The Roman Catholic Church was in the forefront of creating a totally new concept, that is a nineteenth century

nation state in Ireland. The emphasis on agrarian life socially and economically in this period somehow facilitated the church in having a comprehensive grasp of so many aspects of life that the church found and retained a dominant position throughout society at the very time when other capitalist economies were seeing the role of religion reduced. Therefore the time delay in Ireland is significant. The changes occurring now, in the second revolution, do so at a time of rapid technological and communicational change, so the focus and the pace are very different. The second revolution was begun at the time when the state and the church in the 1960s were diverging effectively on grounds of principle for the first time – and the divergence has stuck and grown.

Research shows the following trend: males and the young are more likely to disavow religious affiliation than females and the old, and also to be light on religious conviction. But as we all know, the young become the old and there is no knowing, predicting or expecting that this group will for any reason turn towards religious observance with anything approaching a stampede. The level of any working knowledge of the bigger narrative of redemption and salvation by God of the world created by God in Ireland today is very minimal. Rhythm and regularity do not sufficiently form the building blocks of religious experience for enough people for anything new obviously to happen. It seems as if too much of the educational work of the churches is concerned with the first steps and finds it hard to build critically on this elementary framework. Our thundering silence in the face of the economic melt-down will emerge as our greatest structural deficiency in the next quarter century. The trend, as I have outlined it above, began before 1990 but between 1990 and 1999 had already spread to other age-groups also. The future is bound to contain changes which alter again and again the face of religious Ireland. Other world faiths now form minorities which are here to stay. Their understanding of and contribution to religion in Ireland needs to be researched and understood in the context of the Irish response to and assimilation of secularization.

Ireland is an island of two halves. In the Republic there is considerably less confidence in the church as offering a pathway for society than there is still in Northern Ireland, despite The Troubles and despite the fact that secularization is of longer standing in Northern Ireland. At the same time there is less of a haemorrhage than one would expect in the Republic of Ireland, taking into consideration the extent of child sex abuse with the media driving such an agenda. There are strong and populous Indepen-

dent Churches which relate very little to the older churches. There certainly is selectivity in terms of church attendance. There are also communities of exploration and informality, emphasizing the integrity of the basics. There is strong evidence of continuing secularization. Irish people have learned across time to live with what seem to others to be mutually exclusive contradictions. Within Irish religion there is a quiet theological revolution going on. More and more lay people are undertaking the study of theology as mature adults in ways which never happened before. There has emerged a new body of people who can cope with vast areas of secularization and also engage critically with religion and clericalism by virtue of both their acquired knowledge and their personal experience. The New Atheism in seeking to be missional is perhaps ironically encountering exactly the same obstacles in Ireland as the old Christianity.

When I talk with people about religion and secularization in Ireland, what I hear is that the church, by which the Roman Catholic Church is meant, is receiving a considerable hammering. There is often a less noisy aside to the effect that other elite groups in society throughout the whole period 'must have known something' of what was going on – civil servants, medical and nursing personnel, educationalists, the forces of law and order, politicians, parents and siblings. This is the muted voice of a very angry society, betrayed by those to whom it was conditioned to touch its forelock, doff its cap and from which it was expected to avert its gaze as not being quite 'grand enough.' There is also the voice which suggests that the maturing of Irish society is happening at a greatly accelerated rate. All of this is happening at a time when confidence in unregulated modern elites, as they stand, has virtually gone – the churches because of the abuse scandals and the lack of vision for society, the banks because of the successive economic collapses built on what many see as an international gambling culture with sub-prime mortgages at the heart of it. Disillusionment with churches does not mean rejection of belief in God, however, as a *carte blanche* response. The fact that there are more agnostics and atheists in Ireland than there are Protestants combined is, nonetheless, saying something new which we have not heard in this form before. Modern, post-modern, Ireland is another permutation in the contemporary European expression of the battle lines of conviction drawn between and across those for whom the God of divine revelation is to be embraced and articulated and commended with vigour and conviction and those for whom this same God is to be contradicted, disarmed and rejected. It is a very modern debate and it is entirely live!

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Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag zeichnet den abnehmenden Einfluss der römisch-katholischen Kirche in Irland im Hinblick auf das öffentliche und das private Leben der Bevölkerung in den letzten Jahrzehnten nach und analysiert die Gründe für diese Entwicklung. Er illustriert anhand einiger Beispiele, wie in Irland Säkularisierung als soziopolitisches Phänomen und Säkularismus als Gefüge von Ideen und Lebensstilen miteinander interagieren.

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