

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Patrick Hannon

Faith and Morals – Irish Style

December 2016

Talking Faith and Morals

– Irish Style

Patrick Hannon

The debate about the Eighth Amendment prompts some reflections on the wider question of public discussion of moral and religious issues in the Republic of Ireland. By public discussion I mean in the first place that which takes place in the media: in opinion pieces in newspapers, current affairs programmes on radio and television, and of course in letters to the editor and blogs and tweets. One might include debate in the Dáil and Seanad and, stretching the term a bit, reports which influence government policy such as those of the Human Rights Commission and the Forum on patronage and pluralism in primary education.¹ What follows here is an assortment of remarks, from a standpoint within Catholic theology, the point of which is to suggest that our debates would benefit from an awareness of the experience of other societies, and of wider dimensions of the questions the debates address.

The debates that I have in mind are mainly those about issues at the intersection of law and morality, formerly considered under the rubric of church-state relations, nowadays often viewed in broader terms as concerning religion and society. Church-state relations was an appropriate paradigm when various recognizably Catholic influences on the Irish Constitution and laws came in question, and from a Catholic standpoint the Declaration on Religious Freedom provided a helpful framework within which to look at the issues. More recently however, with the influx of people who belong to religions other than Christian, and an increase in the number of citizens who profess no religious belief, the agenda is expanding to include questions about patronage and participation in the education system. And some attention is now given also to questions underlying specific issues, against a backdrop depicting tension and conflict between the forces of secularisation and religious interests.

¹ *Religion and Education: a Human Rights Perspective* (2011) and *Report of the Forum's Advisory Group* (2012)

Patrick Hannon is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne. He is Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.

THE FURROW

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

Debates such as these are to be expected in a society where there's cultural and religious heterogeneity, especially if one religion is or has been dominant, and it should be no surprise that they're happening here now. One could say that Irish society is as it were catching up with other societies of the former Western Christendom, engaging in discussions that are elsewhere long familiar. We haven't been well prepared for them, as is often remarked, in part owing to the absence of a tradition of public discourse about moral and religious matters, itself owing in part to the overwhelming dominance of Catholicism hitherto, and doubtless related to the absence until recently of theology in Irish universities. Irish political and social theorists within and outside the academy have important things to say, but the influence of their thinking isn't obvious. A consequence is that public discussion in Ireland rarely reflects an awareness of what other societies have been making of the same questions.

WHAT ARE THEY SAYING IN FRANCE AND THE UNITED STATES?

Every society is different of course, and the contours of any society's debates are shaped by the context of their origin. Thus in France the background to current controversy about the wearing of the hijab in public by Moslem women includes the doctrine known as *laïcité*. This is a view of church-state relations whose roots are in Enlightenment thinking and the French Revolution, and which was developed in an era when not only was Catholicism the religion of the majority, but the so-called Alliance of Throne and Altar was promoted by those who wished to see the monarchy restored. Current theory and practice is founded on a 1905 law on the separation of church and state, and is generally regarded as stringent. In the United States, by contrast, there was at its inception a pluralism of religious belief and practice, and a consciousness, born of the experience of immigrants from England and mainland Europe, of the importance of limiting the sway of state power over conscience and the practice of religious faith. Given these disparate histories, approaches to questions of religious freedom are bound to differ as between the two societies, but not to the extent of preventing the inclusion in the UN Declaration of Human Rights of a strong affirmation of the right to freedom of religious belief and its expression.

So we might look at the fortunes of *laïcité*, and learn from the way its limitations are becoming apparent in France now, when Islam is the second most numerous religion. The more flexible conception embodied in the First Amendment of the US Constitution is proving not to be trouble-free either, though in that case one might wonder

whether its problems stem less from inherent shortcomings than from its being a casualty of the so-called culture wars. In which case it must surely serve as a warning to religious leaders to steer clear of political entanglement.

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL COMMONPLACES

Although philosophy appears to be no more highly regarded than theology among some of our prominent opinion-makers, it cannot but improve the quality of Irish society's debates if discutants take account of a few commonplaces of modern philosophy. One of these concerns the apparently deep-seated human propensity to interpret reality according to binary categories. In a binary view things are right or wrong, good or bad, black or white, 'religious' or 'secular'; the scare-quotes for this last pair hint at the difficulty of assigning a fixed meaning to either term, raising indeed the suggestion – with which a Christian theology can concur – that the pair aren't truly binary at all. And of course there's the classification into liberal and conservative, a staple of the currency of discourse about religion as about politics. Binary classifications have their place, but if employed inflexibly they lead to unhelpful polarizations.

The alternative is not a moral relativism. There *is* good and evil, right and wrong, black and white, truth and falsehood, and there are views and attitudes that can meaningfully be classed as conservative or liberal. But in actual experience, good and evil are often found together; our choices may have good and bad consequences, and motives are frequently mixed; there are shades of grey and there are other colours. And there is a spectrum of outlook in religion as in social affairs generally, and it's not unusual to find oneself drawn now toward one end, now toward the other, or even in both directions simultaneously. *Pace* Gilbert and Sullivan's Private Willis, it's unlikely that every little boy and girl that's born into this world alive is either a little liberal or else a little conservative. True, there are times – the present? – when societies and individuals seem to want the black-and-white; perhaps there is in everyone somewhere a fear of freedom, as Erich Fromm and others have contended.² But it's well to be wary of zealotry on the left or the right.

For of course public discussion of religion as of politics is too often hijacked by extremists. I don't mean people who feel strongly about the issues, and who are passionately committed to their views. Abortion and euthanasia for example are matters, literally, of life and death, and at stake in these and other debates about morality and law is a society's understanding of fundamental values: of life

2 See Erich Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom*, Abingdon 2001; first published as *Escape from Freedom*, New York 1942.

THE FURROW

itself, of equality and personal freedoms, of all the values intrinsic to a common good. Apathy on the public's part would be unnatural and dangerous; advocacy and activism by interested groups is a sign of health. But debate too often tends to fundamentalisms, and intransigent ideologies that make only for bitterness and division. Respect for other viewpoints and an acknowledgement that people can differ in good faith shouldn't need to be argued for. And no, this is not anodyne; there's plenty of room for debate of the kind known nowadays as robust (O blessed word...).

On other matters also, commentary and interchange – and the utterances of politicians and those who influence policy-making – would be improved by an acquaintance with some of the debates that have taken place elsewhere. In discussion about the patronage of education, for example, one often meets the view that a key advantage of a secular system is that it's informed by a religious and philosophical 'neutrality', something that's thought to establish its superiority. But this appears to ignore a long-standing concern of philosophers, the resolution of which is widely agreed to be that there's no view from nowhere, to borrow the title of a work by a prominent Anglophone participant.³ This isn't an argument against the provision in appropriate circumstances of schools unconnected with a religion; only that the case for or against any system should not be made on specious grounds.

CATHOLICS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

A more general question already also thoroughly canvassed concerns religion's entitlement to be heard in the public square. 'Public square' is a metaphor that encompasses not just the literal public square as a venue for the exchange of ideas, but also the spaces occupied by institutions of the state, such as schools and courthouses and town halls and the like. In the US this question is associated especially with the work of the late John Rawls, and in Europe it's a particular interest of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Each had reservations about the admissibility in the public arena of religiously-premised arguments couched in religious language. But over time both moved to the conclusion that such argument is admissible, though any position advocated must be capable also of support in secular terms. Neither has ever contended for religion's exclusion.⁴

3 *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford 1989

4 Incidentally, a dialogue between Habermas and the then Cardinal Ratzinger, published in English translation as *The Dialectics of Secularisation* (San Francisco 2007) is a fine example of constructive debate between Christian theology and contemporary social and political philosophy. For another example of erudite and mutually respectful encounter see Umberto Eco and Carlo Maria Martini, *Belief or Non-belief: a Confrontation*, New York 2012.

Which brings us to Catholic church intervention in the public square in Ireland. Contenders for this or that point of view on, say, gay marriage or the law regarding abortion are likely to want religious leaders to back them. In Ireland there's usually pressure on the Catholic bishops to back movements and campaigns for socially conservative platforms. And on the whole the Conference and its leaders have supported these positions down the decades, from Conference statements in the aftermath of the McGee case in 1973 to Archbishop Eamon Martin's recent statement about the proposal to repeal the Eighth Amendment. Wisely, however, the Conference has repeatedly acknowledged that upholding a moral principle doesn't necessarily commit one to a particular view on whether or how the principle should be enshrined in law. And whilst reiterating Catholic teaching on the principle, and making their own legislative preference clear, they have continued to recognise that decisions about the law are for the conscience of the lawmaker and the voter. The fact is that the bishops cannot or ought not say otherwise; authority for this approach is arguably grounded in Jesus' injunction to render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and its theological basis and essential distinctions and principles are found in Augustine and Aquinas, to mention only the most outstanding contributors to a centuries-long tradition of thought.

Whilst the Conference's entitlement to be heard in the square doesn't usually come in serious question, the influence of the bishops nowadays is jeopardized by a loss of credibility deriving from the abuse scandals and the failures of the church's institutional response; nor is it obvious how lost trust is to be regained. But a waning of episcopal influence was already evident before the scandals broke, as may be seen when one looks at the impact of their interventions in debates about law and morality throughout the seventies and eighties. For, apart from the divorce referendum of 1986, the view espoused by the bishops didn't prevail, and indeed there's reason to think that what counted in that case was public uncertainty about the implications of a divorce law for property and inheritance rights. In any case it may be timely now to consider how a Catholic church voice might best contribute to the business of the public square.

And some questions occur. It will always be the bishops' responsibility to teach the way of the Lord Jesus, and they can be expected to preach and witness to the core values of the Christian moral vision. The Irish Conference has spoken to a range of issues, not least in the field of social justice, but the preponderance of their interventions has concerned family morality and related issues. And it might be asked, in words of Pope Francis, whether

THE FURROW

it's necessary to talk about these issues all the time.⁵ And it might be asked whether it's always necessary or useful to comment on specific legislative proposals, and not only because most such interventions in past decades have failed to influence the outcome. Is there a case for saying that restraint in these areas could help the hearing of a prophetic word when such a word is called for?

MORE LESSONS FROM THE US AND FRANCE

Earlier I mentioned France and the United States as places where there's a history of vigorous discussion of church-state relations and the role of religion in society, the respective experiences of which can be instructive for us. It happens that both countries also provide illustrations of two different kinds of church intervention in the public forum in recent times, also perhaps instructive. Since 2007, in advance of the presidential election, the US Conference of Catholic Bishops have published a document entitled *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, a comprehensive account of the responsibilities of Catholics vis-a-vis the unfolding political scene. The substance of the statement has remained constant over the years but the document was updated in 2015 and an Introduction added, in the course of which occurs the following:

In this statement, we bishops do not intend to tell Catholics for whom or against whom to vote. Our purpose is to help Catholics form their consciences in accordance with God's truth. We recognize that the responsibility to make choices in political life rests with each individual in light of a properly formed conscience, and that participation goes well beyond casting a vote in a particular election.⁶

Reception of the document however, both inside and outside the church and for some time now, has been attended by suspicion and scepticism. The reasons for this are various and complex, but it's fair to say that a key factor is the widespread impression that the US Conference has over the years become more and more obviously Republican in political sympathy. This isn't the place to evaluate the justice of that impression, but its mere existence is enough to show the vulnerability of moral authority and how easily it may be compromised.

A recent French intervention is faring better. This is a statement published in October by the Permanent Council of the Conference of Bishops of France, the title of which might be translated as

5 From his interview with Antonio Spadaro S.J., published in *America*, 30/9/2013

6 The latest version is found at USCCB.org, the Conference's website.

*On Recovering the Meaning of Politics.*⁷ They speak, the bishops say, out of love of country and because they are worried about the present situation. They do not claim to be specialists in politics but they do share the life of their fellow-citizens, and they listen to them, and they see what life for them is like. They are speaking out because Catholics must interest themselves in all that affects life in society and human dignity and the future of humankind.

The document presents a clear-eyed view of the state of the nation and the changes that have taken place during the past fifty years. It is blunt in its account of the dismal state of politics, and the failure of politicians to meet the challenges which the changed times have brought. But it notes too the potential for good that still exists, and the grounds for hope, and the Christian hope that can inspire believers to work with their fellow citizens in the building of a better world. What is needed is a new vision of politics, the bishops say, and this will require rethinking the social contract, and a recovery of the true meaning of the politician's vocation: the search for the common good, grounded in a real debate about shared values. The task ahead is not for those elected to political office alone; 'everyone, at his level, is responsible for the life and future of our society'.

Obviously a two-paragraph summary can't do justice to the French statement, but perhaps it gives hints of the reasons for its attractiveness. The bishops identify with the document's addressees; they are 'co-citizens', who share the fears and hopes of their fellows and want to join with their fellows in the search for a better way. They draw on their Catholic faith and hope, but not as though they have nothing to learn from other world-views. They don't hesitate to name evils, including the careerism, self-promotion, and corruption, of some elected politicians, but they manage not to sound as though they're judging from on high. And they continue to see reason to hope, though naively, or in a way that underestimates the challenges ahead.

Two of the oddest strictures to be heard from critics of Pope Francis is that he's loved by the media and that he appeals to people outside of the Catholic church. This can only mean, it seems, that his message is pandering to 'the spirit of the age', that he's accommodating the Gospel message to a secular culture that needs most of all to be challenged. It doesn't seem to occur to these critics that the appeal of Francis is the appeal of the Gospel itself: a message which tells of mercy and forgiveness and hope, and which in the telling invites its hearers to a transformation of life and of the world. Jesus gave a mission and mandate to his followers to

7 The document in French is available at www.eglise.catholique.fr/, website of the French Bishops' Conference.

THE FURROW

make the Good News known, and when the *episkopoi*, those whose ministry is to oversee, enter the public square, it's in service of that mandate and mission: a concept of their role which must inform the stance and style and content of what they say.

It is perhaps no accident that the *episkopoi* of the Catholic Church in France can speak more engagingly, as it seems, than do their counterparts in the United States. The principle of *laïcité*, for all its limitations – some of which are noticed in *On Recovering the Meaning of Politics* – has ensured a distance from politics and the institutions of state that must minimise the danger of attracting the verdict of partisanship that has come to dog Catholic bishops in the United States. It has also called for what is in a sense a more sophisticated mode of address, one which first listens, speaks from beside rather than above, accompanying rather than dictating the way. In these respects it's reminiscent of *Gaudium et spes* and the ways of Francis - and of course of the Word Incarnate.

Places and people. Its author, John Quinn, has given each writer, poet, historian, sculptor, artist, thinker and traveller, including me, what Seamus Heaney called 'room to rhyme'. From Skellig Rock to Ballyfin, from Tyrone to Westmeath and on to Galway and Monaghan, from Jerusalem and Wicklow to Warsaw and Tara, and from Ephesus to Anahorish Primary School, across and around our island north and south, and beyond, the stories of binding places and people and their profound and lasting influence on all the writers, seep through.

– MARIE-LOUISE O'DONNELL, *This Place Speaks to Me*, ed. John Quinn (Dublin: Veritas) p.11.