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Where Stands Ireland Now?

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Stands Ireland where it did? The Shakespearean idiom is borrowed from *Macbeth*, with Macduff's question (about Scotland in the play) eliciting this response from Ross, his fellow knight: "Alas, poor country, almost afraid to know thyself".

Is this where we're at? Who are we now? In the Ireland of the 1950s, when I was growing up, these questions were much easier to answer. It was an Ireland at the centre of which stood three great institutions – the Catholic Church, the Gaelic Athletic Association, and the *Irish Press*.

The contours of our world, our worldview, our sense of who we were, and our moral code were all largely shaped and determined by reference to these central institutions, the pillars of our society.

But since the foundation of the Free State in 1922, it was Catholicism most of all that was the main structuring force of Irish society. Its decay and the consequences of this have yet to play out in the 21st century, but what is already evident is a society *adrift*, cut loose from its moorings and in some important respects floundering.

Even in pre-Independent Ireland our sense of collective identity was fixed, certainly since the time of Daniel O'Connell's campaign for Catholic Emancipation which came to fruition in 1829. We were bound together by faith and fatherland; and in the new Free State we were consciously white and Catholic and our sense of fatherland – and the related sense of "Irishness" – was located very definitely within the territory of the 26 counties. Belfast was as remote and alien as Saigon.

In Croke Park on All-Ireland Final day, the 80,000 spectators sang with gusto *Faith of Our Fathers* before *Amhran na bhFiann*.

1 An earlier and much shorter version of this article appeared in the *Irish Examiner* on 6 July 2022

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Our flag was the Tricolour, but the orange segment was as foreign to us as the red of the Hammer-and-Sickle, the flag of the old Soviet Union.

As for the white middle segment, signifying unity, we felt closer to the Irish in Birmingham and Boston than we did to the Unionists of the North. “There is such a disconnect, because people from Dublin, from down South generally, they don’t spend any time up here, in places like the north coast, unless it’s for rugby or golf.” This was said by former Irish rugby international Andrew Trimble in 2022 in an interview in the *Irish Times*.² But this was much more the case in the 1950s.

In the meantime, of course, and mainly because of the Provisional IRA’s murderous campaign, the Tricolour has become for many unionists a hated sectarian symbol, which is why in any consideration of or conversation or debate about a united Ireland flags and anthems and symbols will invariably be stumbling blocks.

Unlike Northern Ireland, where it was openly proclaimed that it was a “Protestant state for a Protestant people”, such a claim on behalf of Catholics was never made for the Free State or, later, the Republic. “It is true,” wrote Conor Cruise O’Brien, “and interesting considering the overwhelming Catholic majority, that the Irish State has never officially proclaimed itself to be a Catholic State.”³

As to why this didn’t happen, it could be said that it was just so obvious that it never needed to be formally declared. As Mary Kenny wrote in her recent book: “With the ascent of Eamon de Valera to power, the Irish State developed a stronger Catholic ‘brand’ – largely with the support of the media, and indeed the people”.⁴

The feeling engendered by a lot of the commentary on and from the 1950s was that life in Ireland was unremittently awful: but were things that bad?

The sheer awfulness of the picture painted makes one wonder how we ever came through it all relatively unscathed. It’s as though we were permanently trapped in the Ireland of *Angela’s Ashes*.

But then I remember the late Paddy Downey, one of the foremost commentators on Gaelic games in the 1960s and 1970s, disputing the stereotype of the decade of the 1950s as dreary and dull.

Yes, of course there were constraints. Economically things were bleak. For thousands of young people the only option was the emigrant ship. And for the political establishment emigration was a crucial safety valve.

2 *Irish Times*, 12 March 2022

3 *States of Ireland* (London: Panther Books, 1972), p. 108

4 *The Way We Were: Catholic Ireland Since 1922* (Dublin: Columba Books, 2022) p. 55

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Noting that between 1915 and 1960 nearly half a million Irish people went to England, the writer John McGahern said if “that siphoning off of the younger generation hadn’t happened then, social change would have happened here far more quickly ... it would have been like an explosion, like the lid blowing off a kettle. In a way, a lot of the Irish problems were avoided through emigration, by getting rid of some of our youngest and best of our people, and that generation who disappeared into England were looked down on by the crowd that stayed, who did very little for the country or anything else... the facts are unpleasant”.⁵

My generation also fell victim to a purity culture that was so repressive that we had in time to free ourselves of a calcified sense of sexuality.

The absence of contraceptives meant that many marriages were left sexually impoverished. The absence of divorce meant there was no way out of an emotionally or erotically shrivelled relationship.

The version of Catholicism that won out in Ireland was one that determined that the faith would be otherworldly, private, individualistic and focused on the next life rather than the lives people were living. Irish Catholicism was very slow in developing a theology of the “social gospel”, and that, notwithstanding the more recent scandals, may be its greatest failure. It had an impoverishing effect with long-term consequences.

Perhaps never was the absence of such a theology more evident than during the Celtic Tiger era. Of this John Naughton in his weekly column had this to say: “Or think of Ireland’s ‘Celtic tiger’ moment between the mid-1990s and 2008, with its attendant property boom fostered by a government that functioned as the political wing of the construction industry”.⁶

Shortly before he died in May 2011, former Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald wrote an article focusing on this impoverishing effect. “A factor common to a whole range of recent Irish economic and financial failures seems to be a striking absence of a sense of civic responsibility throughout our entire society. The civic morality that underlies the social cohesion of many democratic societies, especially in northern Europe, has been absent in Ireland for quite some time.” One might have hoped, said Dr Fitzgerald, that the situation would change after independence. “Yet the Irish Catholic Church sought instead to bend the new State to its purpose, relying upon the strong personal faith of members of successive governments to secure its objectives. And it succeed - up to a point. It secured censorship of books and films, and was successful in having contraception banned.”

5 Tom Garvin, *Preventing the Future* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 2004) p. 43

6 *The Observer*, 2 July 2022

But the refusal of Eamon de Valera, in drawing up the new Constitution in 1937, to make Ireland formally a Catholic State, despite Vatican pressure, was a setback. “This underlying stand-off between Church and State seems to have inhibited the Irish Catholic Church from advocating civic responsibility. Instead, much of its energy was concentrated on aspects of sexual morality – an area where it eventually lost credibility not only with the younger generation but with the older one as well.”⁷

One might have thought that the great social encyclicals, beginning with *Rerum Novarum* by Leo XIII in 1891 (which came to be known as “The Workers’ Charter”), would have nurtured that sense of civic responsibility of which Dr Fitzgerald spoke, and nurtured also a sense of “social sin”.

Perhaps, if Vatican II (1962-1965) had had a greater impact on Irish Catholicism than one of its more significant documents, the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* might have helped to foster the growth of a richer appreciation in our polity of the importance of the common good.

This is the opening passage in that document of a section on the common good: “Because of the increasingly close interdependence which is gradually extending to the entire world, we are today witnessing an extension of the role of the common good, which is the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”⁸

It is true that the Bishops issued a pastoral letter entitled *The Work of Justice* in 1977, but this was seed falling on barren ground. That ground had never been properly prepared.

The “social gospel” never became a full-fledged ecclesial reality here. Insofar as it manifested itself at all it did so in the work and witness of individuals – people like Fr James McDyer, Austin Flannery OP (a former editor of *Doctrine & Life*), Fr Sean Healy, Sr Margaret MacCurtain, Fr Michael Sweetman SJ, Fr Des Wilson, Fr Peter McVerry, p4 1905 Fr Harry Bohan, Sister Stanislaus, Bro Kevin Crowley, founder of the Capuchin Day Care Centre and a bishop like Peter Birch in Ossory. In this context also, mention must be made of the work and witness of *lay* people such as Sean Mac Reamoinn, broadcaster and writer, John Horgan, journalist-turned politician (later biographer and academic), and Noel Browne, onetime Minister for Health, as well as Mairín de Burca, journalist and activist, and Pádraigin Ní Mhurchu, trade union leader.

7 *The Irish Times*, 9 April 2011

8 Austin Flannery OP (gen. ed) *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1966) p. 191

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The irony is that there was in Britain a tradition of Christian socialism associated with the likes of RH Tawney (1880-1962), the economic historian and author of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926) and William Temple (1881-1944), who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1942 and wrote an influential book, *Christianity and Social Order*, first published in 1942.

There was even a Catholic strand to this; in 1966 a group of young Catholic radicals published the *Slant Manifesto: Catholics and the Left*, a collection of essays by, among others, Terry Eagleton, Neil Middleton, Brian Wicker and Laurence Bright OP. There was never anything similar in Ireland.

Even in the USA – the heartland of turbo-capitalism and with a political culture distorted by a paranoid dread of Communism (usually conflated with democratic socialism) - Christian socialism has roots. These were explored in a 2020 book which contains a chapter entitled “The Convergence of Catholicism and Socialism”, and mentions the lay-dominated Catholic Worker movement led by Dorothy Day (1897-1980).⁹

Here in Ireland, in January 1977, the Irish Theological Association organised a conference at Clongowes Wood College “to examine liberation theology with a view to discovering what light it might throw on the possibility of developing an Irish theology of liberation”. The conference papers were published later that year in a volume edited by Dermot Lane, who was lecturer in theology in Mater Dei Institute then. In the closing paper (“An Irish Theology of Liberation?”), Enda McDonagh, at the time professor of moral theology in Maynooth, opened with this query: “Before discussing the substantive question it is necessary to raise the preliminary one. Can one speak of an Irish theology at all?”¹⁰

There was never a *Catholic Left* in Ireland, though it may have been prefigured briefly in embryonic form during the 1960s in that small, left-wing group fondly known as “Flannery’s Harriers”. We have the Labour Party of course, but it never acknowledge a debt to gospel values, and James Connolly’s socialism had Marxist roots. He regarded religion as a private matter, and believed that socialism, in order to preserve its non-sectarian character, required that socialists “should fight shy of theological dogmas and religions generally”.¹¹

Arthur Griffith, who founded the original Sinn Féin, in 1905, was hostile to socialism. And the Labour Party, by standing aside in the 1918 election, albeit for honourable reasons, placed itself on

9 John C. Cord, *Christian Socialism* (New York: Orbis Books, 2020)

10 *Liberation Theology: An Irish Dialogue* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1977) p. 87

11 “Socialism and Religion” in *Socialism and the Irish Rebellion* (Florida: Red and Black Publishers, 2008)

the periphery of Irish politics, a position from which it never really recovered.

The two parties that emerged from Sinn Fein - Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael - would dominate Irish political life into the 21st century, but both were inherently conservative right-of-centre parties. Columnist Una Mullally was scornful of a claim made by the then Tanaiste Leo Varadkar in the course of an interview on Newstalk, dismissing “the Leo-fact that Ireland never really had a party of the Right,” describing it as “a fiction spun by both Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil to absolve themselves of their collusion in the oppressive right-wing theocratic deal between Church and State that moulded this country for a century”.¹²

What is Ireland’s sense of itself in the 21st century? Confronting the dark recesses of its past, scarred by various scandals, and making proper redress, is still a very incomplete process. Can we say this was part of an Ireland that is now past?

Despite the hope that the partial solidarity displayed during the pandemic would take hold, it is still the case that individualism and selfishness are hard-wired into our culture. The greed that characterised and fed the Celtic Tiger showed that from the government on down we were happy to embrace neoliberalism with the alacrity of the most ardent Thatcherite. Boom was followed by bust, and Ireland will start the painful process of repaying the €40 billion-plus EU part of its international bail-out in 2023.

In 2007 the UCD sociologist Kieran Allen published his book *The Corporate Takeover of Ireland* in which he argued that the “political state that was supposed to serve the people as a whole has been replaced by a corporate state”.¹³ Our increasing dependence of multinationals was highlighted in April, 2022 by the Irish Fiscal Advisory Council which warned that “as much as €9 billion or 60 per cent of the Government’s corporate tax take may be ‘temporary’, meaning it cannot be counted on in the future”.¹⁴

This dependence on multinationals is extremely precarious – as one of the lessons of globalisation has shown elsewhere. The public affairs consultant Gerard Howlin had warned about this. “Ireland now depends on literally a handful of the world’s largest multinationals for its day-to-day spending.”¹⁵

This was confirmed later by a report from the Department of Finance. “The State could collect €20 billion in corporation tax in 2022, €13 billion more than it did in 2015 and €5 billion more than last year,” according to the report. “However, the analysis suggests

12 *The Irish Times*, 27 June 2022

13 *The Corporate Takeover of Ireland* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007) p. xvii

14 *The Irish Times*, 17 April 2022

15 *The Irish Times*, 30 August 2022

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the ‘concentration’ of these receipts within a small number of multinational companies – with more than half coming from just 10 ‘large players’ or ‘superstar firms’ – represents a ‘major ... risk with potential to create a ‘fiscal hole’.’¹⁶

It is repeatedly said that Ireland is a wealthy country, but the sources of that wealth cannot be taken for granted. The greater reality is *inequality* and the fact that wealth in Ireland is very unevenly distributed. In August 2022, for instance, it was reported that a record number of people (10,568) were homeless – “a seventh consecutive monthly increase and a tally which prompted fresh calls for more action to stem the flow of people entering and remaining in emergency accommodation”.¹⁷ Against that background, any talk of a “just society” rings hollow.

Back in 1922, Michael Collins warned of the need in the new State to avoid “destitution or poverty at one end and at the other an excess of riches”.¹⁸ One hundred years on how have we met that test?

CONCLUSION

Irish society today is a very fractured one. It is also a more ethnically and culturally diverse society, and a more secular one. So as the de-Catholicising of society proceeds, what *values* does the Ireland of the 21st century embody?

Whatever its aberrations, Catholicism provided the social cement that held the basic elements of society together.

Now that is in disarray. The decay of Catholicism as the main structuring force of Irish society saw the growth of a selfish individualism and a conservatism (outside of the socio-moral sphere) that today stand in the way of reform.

And even if the Fine Gael-Fianna Fail dominance of the political landscape is coming to an end, it is by no means certain that a Sinn Fein-led government will usher in a new era. That party’s rhetoric about a “socialist republic” has been sidelined of late.

And now, having emerged from one pandemic, we are plagued, according to a new report from the Health Research Board, by a cocaine epidemic.¹⁹ The report tells us the use of the drug is now ubiquitous across age groups, social classes and regions.

As we seek to explain ourselves to ourselves what does this tell us, given that cocaine is today as much a rural drug as an urban one?

16 *The Irish Times*, 9 September 2022

17 *Irish Examiner*, 27 August 2022

18 Diarmaid Ferriter, *Between Two Hells* (London: Profile Books, 2021) p. 239

19 HRB report *National Drug Treatment Reporting System* published on 13 June 2022

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So, do we know *who we are* in 2022? Or are we hoping that in a future united Ireland a new version of “Irishness” will be fashioned?

We are indeed in strange times and unsure what resources we have to deploy to attempt to *refashion* the nation so that justice and the promotion of the common good become paramount concerns, while also being mindful that, as Mary Kenny has emphasised, “a functioning society needs to cohere around shared values”.²⁰

What in 21st century Ireland – a post-Catholic Ireland in the eyes of many – have we to offer by way of “*shared values*”?

20 *The Way We Were*, p. 241

The Irish Wake. The death of a person is a community event. It affects us all. The Irish traditions of the wake and the big funeral were wise community events, recognising the need for support in the work of grieving, the need for us all to wrestle with our understanding of death, suffering and grieving. Indeed, we, and many other ancient rich cultural traditions, have much wisdom that we need to hold on to in the twenty-first century.

– JEREMY CORLEY *et al* (eds.) *Maynooth College Reflects on Facing Life’s End*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022. p.68.