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REVIEW ARTICLE

Deciphering Irish Catholic identities: past and present

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Irish Catholic identities, edited by Oliver J. Rafferty, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013, 384 pp., £65.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-7190-8495-9

This collection of essays, compiled and edited by Oliver Rafferty, is a significant contribution to making sense of the tangled labyrinth that is Irish Catholic identities. The plural is important here, as there are, in fact, multiple Catholic identities, something that is often forgotten in the rush to blandly link “Irish” and “Catholic”. In his excellent Introduction, Rafferty talks of how historians, literary critics and sociologists have in recent times concerned themselves with “questions of identity formation as a paradigm for explaining how peoples and nations function geographically, politically and in terms of social cohesion” (1). The danger that Rafferty sees with this approach is that it can produce what he terms a “historico-mythic consciousness” which, while it might conform to a nation’s sense of identity, may not adequately capture “the historical evolution of that particular group or nation” (1). He also recognises how in certain cases the “myth” might be a truer representation of a group’s sense of identity than the historical experience itself. All of which makes the task he sets himself quite problematic, especially as the book seeks to cover the history of identity formation in Ireland from the Middle Ages through to the present. Two primary components of those who have lived on the island of Ireland during this period were a sense of “Irishness” and an “adherence to the Catholic faith” (1).

Rafferty is acutely aware of the problems associated with the term “identity”. He asks questions like the following: “Is Irish identity simply a construction, an ‘invented tradition’, which is then read back into Irish history for the purposes of nationalist and sectarian hegemony?” (2). It is clear that the temptation to “read back” a certain view of Irish history is strong among many historians and social commentators, but it is not a method that will yield the best results. In order for a proper interrogation of the relationship between Celtic/Irish culture and the professing of the Catholic faith to take place, there would need to be a challenge to the hegemony of Catholicism, such as the one that took place as a result of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation that resulted in there being “no easy equation between Irishness on the one hand and Catholicism on the other” (2).

The essays assembled by Rafferty are in the main written by some of the leading figures in Irish “Catholic studies”. The latter is an area that will grow in stature in the coming years, as Ireland begins to assess the psychological and cultural void that is being created by the emergence of what could be termed a “post-Catholic” society. From being hailed as one of the Catholic Church’s most loyal daughters, with extremely high attendance at Mass and the sacraments, we now have a situation which is described

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by the co-founder of the Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland, Brendan Hoban, in the following terms:

The decline of religious practice and the consequent shuffling of religion to the margins of life means that we are coming to a point where an increasingly ignorant (in the literal sense) populace [*sic*] hasn't the knowledge or vocabulary to understand or even sometimes respect the subtleties of a religious faith embedded in our culture.¹

In order to appreciate the changed circumstances pertaining to Catholic identities in Ireland, the fact that the essays in this book begin in the Middle Ages allows for a chronological assessment of how we have come to the point we are at currently.

Given that there are twenty-two chapters in total in this book, I will not be in a position to comment on each one individually. I will begin with Donnchadh Ó Corráin's chapter, which challenges certain aspects of the commonly accepted portrayal of early medieval Ireland as a land of saints and scholars. Ó Corráin shows how the institutional Church of this period was far from being preoccupied solely with things spiritual and scholarly:

The Irish churches were rich, landowners on a vast scale, and the beneficiaries of a large population of rent-payers, workers, serfs and slaves. They enjoyed, in addition, a generous income from their pastoral ministrations to the faithful at large – baptismal offerings, payments for penance, requiems, burial payments, tithes, and the like. They received the endowments, gifts and patronage of kings and nobles, and large payments for offences against their churches and persons. (49)

In other words, the God of Mammon was often preferred to the Christian God and priests and bishops regularly shared many of the obsessions of their secular counterparts. Which is not to say that they neglected the arts: churchmen were also patrons of scholarship, literature and sacred scripture. Ó Corráin concludes: "It is unfortunate that the papally sponsored English invasion should have exacerbated disorder and conflict, especially in the church and among the patrons of learning" (50). So it is accepted that they played a major role in promoting learning in all its guises, which implies that it was the "saintly" aspect of the period that was the more neglected of the two characteristics that are commonly employed to describe the Middle Ages.

I found Brian Jackson's chapter on the seventeenth-century Irish Jesuit Henry Fitzsimon fascinating. Jackson takes issue with what he describes as the "faith narratives" of historians such as Hogan, Ronan, Corcoran, Corboy and Dudley Edwards, who conclude that the Jesuit mission to Ireland in 1630 was marred by the persecution of its priests at a time when the fortunes of the Catholic Church in Ireland were quite bleak. What emerges from Jackson's chapter is a starkly different narrative. He argues that Fitzsimon and his fellow Irish Jesuits "led privileged and comfortable lives. They lodged in well-appointed residences and were courted by wealthy patrons and supporters drawn from their extended families and social networks" (114). They were very much in the "Old English mould" in terms of their worldview: "The church and the monarch are twin pillars of a well-ordered society. Each supports the other and together they form a solid and enduring bulwark against dissent and social unrest" (114). Seeing that he was a proponent of such a philosophy, it is not surprising that Fitzsimon viewed with apprehension the erosion of the power and influence of the ruling class in the Pale, and particularly the dismantling of the ecclesiastical establishment by the Tudor state. The Stuart succession did not meet the hopes of the Irish Catholic elite either: "James, like Elizabeth before him, was an enthusiastic supporter of favourites and the new regime proved to be a disappointment to many of the new king's prominent Catholic subjects" (119). In the end, what emerges from the portrait of Fitzsimon in this chapter is that he was a sophisticated thinker, a man who by his training and life experience was aware of "the intellectual origins and historical strands

within Christianity” (121). He was opportunistic and daring, capable of great pragmatism in his attitude to Ireland and the Catholic Church. For Jackson, he definitely did not conform to the simple paradigm of “faith and fatherland” into which some historians like to place him.

Thomas Bartlett’s chapter, provocatively entitled “The Penal Laws against Irish Catholics: Were They Too Good for Them?”, sets about re-examining whether the laws imposed against Catholic practice in Ireland, long held up as evidence of Protestant hatred of Catholicism, were in reality that punitive. Bartlett proposes that the main motivation behind the penal laws was a genuine desire to convert the natives to Protestantism and not to punish them for their allegiance to the Catholic faith. He points out the ad hoc manner in which Protestants dealt with key issues such as education, landowning and military service abroad, all highly sensitive issues in the Ireland of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, before concluding: “. . . the remarkable recovery of the Catholic Church has often been highlighted, especially the stabilisation and improvement of its diocesan and parochial structure. The church and Catholicism, so far from expiring or declining during the period of the so-called penal laws, actually flourished” (155). In reality, the penal laws against English Catholics were more severe and lasted longer than was the case in Ireland. Actually, Irish Catholics probably resented the laws a lot more after their repeal than in the period of their implementation. As Rafferty observes in his Introduction: “Although in the subsequent history of Ireland it would be theoretically possible to differentiate between Irishness and Catholicism, the history of the penal laws would underscore the bitterness between Catholics and Protestants at times of social and political tension” (9). It is this element that ensures the penal laws will be brought up as a convenient drum with which to beat the well-worn tune of discrimination by England and the Anglican community against Irish Catholics.

Caitriona Clear’s contribution considers the often overlooked voices of Catholic women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since they were part of a patriarchal Church and an equally male-dominated nationalist movement, it was difficult for women to make their opinions heard. However, Clear illustrates how the huge growth of numbers in female religious orders (apparently there were more than twice as many nuns as priests by the end of the nineteenth century, and seven times more nuns than brothers) and their role as educators of girls and young women in their schools, ensured that their contribution was a significant one. The invaluable education Kate O’Brien received from the nuns at Laurel Hill in Limerick is wistfully evoked in *The Land of Spices* (1941). The English Reverend Mother in that novel, Helen Archer, fights hard to ensure that Anna Murphy is allowed to take up the University Scholarship she has won in preference to accepting a position in the bank, an option favoured by her grandmother. Nuns were fiercely ambitious for their students and were not afraid to make bold statements like the following, which issues from the mouth of O’Brien’s fictional character:

Our Order is world-wide and powerful, Mrs Condon, and it takes care of its children. That is its *raison d’être*. And Anna is very particularly our child. We shall look after her, and she can rest assured that between us and the Bishop, means will be found to prevent her becoming a clerk in the Four Provinces Bank.²

The tone of this remark shows the genuine desire felt by Mother Archer that her students be allowed to reach their full potential and overcome the gender obstacles that were often placed in their way. In spite of increased access to education and the professions, however, it would take some time for Irish women to wrestle free from the shackles of

discrimination. Clear points out that: “the energy that might have propelled many Catholic women into politics and activism was channelled into religious life” (205), which resulted in many of the most intelligent and potentially effective voices for change remaining silent behind convent walls. There were many orders, nonetheless, which demonstrated an admirable commitment to working with the poor and highlighting their problems, as well as supplying a worthy education to generations of Irish women.

The final section of the book brings the discussion right up to the present day. Louise Fuller notes the extent to which the “Troubles” in Northern Ireland forced Southerners to question painful issues in relation to Catholic nationalist identity, especially when it resulted in the IRA’s campaign of violence against Protestants and members of the British armed forces. She picks out the 1960s as the decade when cracks began to appear “in the too cosy coalescence between Irishness and Catholicism” (312). Increased mobility allowing young couples to attend dances and social gatherings more easily, improved access to education and foreign travel, the establishment of the national television station in 1962, all these developments “led to a more open Irish society” (312) where Catholic hegemony was no longer blindly accepted. Surveys of Irish Catholicism in the 1970s and 1980s, while they still indicated a higher level of religious observance compared to other European countries, “also recorded a decline in practice among younger people, especially males, and the urbanised” (314). It may have been this decline that prompted the visit of Pope John-Paul II to Ireland in 1979. However, even the charismatic pope could not stem the onslaught of secular values. Garret FitzGerald’s “constitutional crusade” of the 1980s brought the urban–rural divide into sharper focus, with more traditional values being prevalent among farmers and inhabitants of the western seaboard in particular. Constitutional amendments on divorce, contraception and abortion, the most recent taking place in 2013, along with the decriminalising of homosexuality among consenting adults, have resulted in the emergence of a more liberal, secular society. Fuller concludes: “The automatic synthesis of Irish and Catholic was no longer sustainable and would be a thing of the past as the twentieth century came to a close” (318).

Niall Coll’s chapter, the final one of the collection, takes up the debate where Fuller left it, quoting journalist John Waters’ view that the broader Irish culture is inimical to the very existence of Catholicism. This has become particularly acute in the wake of the clerical abuse scandals. Coll has read widely about the current crisis in the Catholic Church and is co-editor, with Pascal Scallan, of *A Church with a Future*, the title of which forms the basis of his contribution to this book. He argues that in the wake of the Celtic Tiger excesses, and the subsequent austerity that has been imposed on Irish citizens, an even greater gap has been created between the haves and the have nots. The decline in the reputation of the Catholic Church has deprived the poor and the marginalised of one of their major champions. The invaluable work carried out by Catholic priests, members of male and female religious orders, and organisations such as the Vincent de Paul to ameliorate the suffering and hardship endured by the underprivileged of Irish society often goes unnoticed. Although he accepts that it is “most unlikely that Catholicism will ever again be woven into the fabric of what it means to be Irish” (372), Coll does see a role for a Church that is capable of responding more effectively to what is a very altered religious landscape. This new Church needs to be “both humble and truly evangelical” (372), an aspiration that could well find concrete embodiment in Pope Francis’ commitment to these very qualities.

In his analysis of the impact of the “Troubles” on Northern Catholics, Oliver Rafferty describes how the Church and the IRA became locked in a struggle for the “soul” of the members of the minority religion in that part of the country. Church leaders found it a

difficult task to find a via media that would allow them to highlight prejudice against the Catholic community while not identifying too closely with the subversive organisation that claimed to be the sole rampart between Catholics and annihilation. The dilemma that faced Cardinal Conway (who emerges quite well from Rafferty's account) was the following:

He [Conway] was not slow in pointing out what he took to be human rights abuses on the part of members of the security forces, which he insisted had a deplorable effect on Catholic public opinion. Nor could he understand that while the IRA was rightly an illegal organisation the government seemed unwilling to proscribe Protestant paramilitary groups. (351)

Whereas the Irish Catholic hierarchy could enlist the Vatican to pressure the British government with regard to concerns about the mistreatment of terrorists and innocent civilians by the security forces, Downing Street had the support of influential English Catholics such as the future Cardinal Basil Hume, who publicly expressed his abhorrence of IRA violence. Bloody Sunday, internment without trial, the hunger strikes, all these led to more and more Catholics joining the ranks of the IRA and the influence of the Catholic Church being marginalised: "From the outbreak of the Troubles, the Catholic Church and Republican movement were locked in a Herculean struggle over the symbols and identity of northern Catholic life" (356). Government intransigence, especially evident in Margaret Thatcher's handling of the hunger strikes at the beginning of the 1980s, made the task of the Northern bishops very difficult. In the end, the Provisional IRA were the ones who set the agenda up until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998.

I will conclude by discussing two chapters that deal with how the Catholic imagination is captured in Irish writing. Frank Shovlin argues that John McGahern, a self-confessed non-believer, continued to be fascinated by Catholic rituals and ceremonies. In an interview with this reviewer, he stated that the Catholic Church was his first and most important book. By that, he meant that it was through the Church that he came to appreciate grace and mystery. There was a more sinister side to Catholicism also, in McGahern's experience, and it surrounded the stigma attached to sexuality. In an essay from *Love of the World*, we read the following lines:

We are sexual from the moment we are born until we die. The church I was brought up in turned this powerful and abiding instinct that suffuses everything we feel as precious or hold dear into the functional act of human reproduction, surrounding it with shame and sin, as it sought to turn the human act of becoming, which is modified moment by moment and day by day, away from the love of what is merely human into the love of God. (327)

McGahern, according to Shovlin, eschewed didacticism and ideological certainty, which is "what makes him such an interesting chronicler and observer of the Catholic Church in Ireland over the past fifty years" (330). His aesthetic quest undoubtedly owed a huge amount to his Catholic upbringing, encapsulated by the example of the devout mother who introduced her first born to the stories of the Bible and imbued in him a love of beauty and tenderness.

Bernard O'Donoghue turns our attention to Catholic-Christian identity in modern Irish poetry. Of all the literary forms, poetry seems to lend itself best to capturing the transcendent. O'Donoghue skilfully covers poets as different as John F. Deane, Tom Paulin, Paul Durcan, Paul Muldoon, Medbh McGuckian, Michael Longley and the late Seamus Heaney. Of Durcan, he says: "Like many other twentieth-century Irish poets, the language of religion is Durcan's stock in trade, whatever purpose he is putting it to" (342). Speaking of Muldoon, he makes the point that: "for any Irish poet, however allusive or whimsical, to be taken seriously, he or she must draw on the religious wells of the

language and culture” (341). It was Heaney who mined this particular heritage most successfully. He saw the transcendent in the most ordinary scenes of rural Derry. In the poem “Fosterling”, from the 1991 collection *Seeing Things*, O’Donoghue quotes the following lines which establish the “centrality of transcendence” (334) in Heaney’s work:

Me waiting until I was nearly fifty
 To credit marvels. Like tree-clock of tin cans
 The tinkers made. So long for the air to brighten,
 Time to be dazzled and the heart to lighten.

Like McGahern, Heaney was not especially religious, but he “grew up in the world of marvels and apparitions, a world where the numinous was always immanent, ready to appear” (334). It seems appropriate to end with the testimony of the Nobel Laureate, a man who was keenly aware of the extent to which he was subject to many Catholic identities. This collection of essays is a very worthwhile panorama of the past, present and possible future impact of Catholicism on the Irish psyche. It is a volume to which someone such as myself, with a genuine fascination for the subject matter, is immediately attracted, but there is plenty between its covers for anyone even remotely interested in the interplay between religion and identity.

Notes

1. [Hoban](#), *Where Do We Go from Here?*, 10. Hoban is a very astute observer of the crisis that has taken hold of Irish Catholicism. As a priest working on the ground in Mayo, he has first-hand experience of the lack of leadership in the Irish Church, the crisis in vocations and the poor morale among the overworked diocesan clergy.
2. [O’Brien](#), *The Land of Spices*, 262.

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