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# How Different Are the Irish?

EAMON MAHER

THIS review-article sets about assessing the significance of a new collection of essays edited by Tom Inglis, *Are the Irish Different?*<sup>1</sup> Tom Inglis is the foremost commentator on the factors that led to the Catholic Church in Ireland securing a 'special position' during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The Church's 'moral monopoly' has effectively been eroded by a number of recent developments; the increased secularisation that accompanied greater prosperity, the tendency among a better educated laity to find their own answers to whatever moral dilemmas assail them, and, of course, the clerical abuse scandals. But even in the 1980s, and earlier, change was afoot. We read in *Moral Monopoly*:

The criterion of a good Irish Catholic has traditionally been perceived as one who received the sacraments regularly and who followed as well as possible the rules and regulations of the Church. Innocence was regarded as a virtue. People were not encouraged to question their religion or their priests. The appropriate responses to any questions one might have about religion were learnt off by heart in the catechism. ... Irish Catholics have not developed an intellectual interest in, or critical attitude towards, their religion.<sup>3</sup>

1. Tom Inglis (ed.), *Are the Irish Different?* (Manchester University Press, 2014). Subsequent references will be given in the main text, with page numbers in brackets).

2. Inglis explores this to great effect in his ground-breaking study, *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Irish Society* (Gill and Macmillan, 1987).

3. *Moral Monopoly*, pp. 1-2.

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**Eamon Maher**, Director of the National Centre for Franco-Irish Studies at the Institute of Technology, Tallaght, is currently compiling with Eugene O'Brien a book of essays entitled, *From Galway to Cloyne, and Beyond: Tracing the Cultural Legacy of Irish Catholicism*.

Inglis realised that such a template was no longer fit for purpose in the 1980s and that people were already moving away from a blind adherence to what was handed down from the pulpit, especially in the realm of sexual morality. The way in which Ireland was 'different' from other Western societies in the 1980s can be seen in the fact that the Catholic Church was still 'a strong and active force' in the everyday lives of the vast majority of ordinary Irish citizens. Fast forward to the present day, which is the concern of Inglis' new book, and you have a very changed scenario.

The Catholic Church is now just one of the many institutions in Ireland that are viewed as having been governed for too long by 'group-think', oblivious to the views of other interest groups and anxious at all costs to preserve their influence and reputation, not to talk of their assets. In some ways, the Church would appear to be held in equally low esteem as the banks and the politicians in today's Ireland. In the Introduction to *Are the Irish Different?*, Inglis makes the following point:

It would seem that what makes Irish Catholics similar to other European Catholics, and different from American Catholics, is that the clerical abuse scandals have led to a distaste for and a disenchantment with the Church. Mass attendance continues to decline rapidly and there is less sense of belonging to the Church. This is in contrast to America, where Catholics seem to have withstood the challenges of the sex abuse scandals and, more generally, the undermining forces of individualisation and secularisation (pp. 5-6).

We will come back to the parallel drawn with America later, but for the moment I would like to say that the clerical abuse scandals, while undoubtedly a key element in the disillusionment of countless Irish people when it came to religion, was merely one in a series of factors that led to a slow disenchantment with the Church. Before the revelations of the paedophile crimes of Brendan Smyth, Ivan Payne, Seán Fortune, Paul McGennis, Noel Reynolds, to name but a few of the priests who were found guilty of having indulged in these activities, the move away from the Catholic Church was quite pronounced. Fewer people attending Mass and the sacraments, a fall in vocations, a political elite that was intent on following a more liberal agenda on

issues like abortion, contraception and divorce, all these contributed to a departure from traditional religious practice. In an interview with Caramine White, novelist Roddy Doyle (born in 1958) expressed resentment of the Church's attempt to set the agenda on areas which, in the writer's view, went beyond its remit. When asked why there is such an absence of religion in his books, Doyle replied:

There's no religion in me own life, for certain, I've no room for it at all. It's difficult in a country like Ireland because you do have to put your face out and tell it to go away – "Fuck off." You have to be quite blunt to allow yourself your own agnostic space.<sup>4</sup>

Finding your 'own agnostic space' is far easier in the Ireland of the third millennium. (In fact, it could be argued that it is now more difficult to find a 'religious' than an agnostic space in this country.) The rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger, the liberalisation of attitudes to sexuality, the rapid development of technology, the growing popularity of, and access to, social media, have resulted in Ireland becoming a far more 'global' community. It was significantly easier to control public opinion when outside influences were kept at bay due to Ireland's insular status.

Now, Ireland is one of the most globalised societies in the world, with instant access to events as they happen,<sup>5</sup> made possible by an unusually high per capita ownership of laptops, iPhones and other such accessories. Writing in 2003, Colin Coulter, commenting on an advertisement he came across featuring an attractive Irish male, noted the extent to which attitudes towards and within Ireland had evolved:

To be Irish is to be young, fun, fashionable and, above all perhaps, belligerently sexual. Irishness has, in other words, become shorthand for 'cool'.<sup>6</sup>

4. Caramine White, *Reading Roddy Doyle* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), p. 168.

5. Witness the recent murders that occurred in the offices of the French satirical newspaper, *Charlie Hebdo*, and the subsequent follow-up search for the perpetrators, which millions of Irish people followed online.

6. Colin Coulter, 'Introduction', in Colin Coulter and Steve Coleman (eds), *The End of Irish History? Critical Reflections on the Celtic Tiger* (Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 2.

I am not sure the extent to which this still holds true, but certainly it is irrefutable that the values that hold sway in Ireland today are likely to be almost identical to those of any other developed society of the Western world. The sense of cultural specificity or uniqueness has thus become eroded.

This brings us back to the collection of essays, *Are the Irish Different?* It is invidious to leave any of the 23 essays out, as they are all relevant, but there are a few that strike me as being particularly pertinent to the readership of *Doctrine and Life*, and it is to them that I now turn.

### PROTEST

The UCD sociologist Kieran Allen opens his chapter with the question: 'Why don't the Irish protest?' Allen argues that the supposed absence of large street protests in Ireland after the financial collapse and the draconian programme of austerity imposed on its citizens in 2008 is a 'myth' that has been promulgated by a number of journalists and academics. Allen points to the 15,000 pensioners that surrounded Dáil Éireann and forced a government back-down on the withdrawal of medical cards; or the more than 100,000 people who marched in protest at the imposition of the pension levy on public-sector workers in 2009. Were these not examples of substantial public protest?

Allen argues that the historical success of Fianna Fáil 'arose from its ability to translate the broad language of Irish republicanism into the smaller change of economic advance' (p. 59). The close bonds that developed between Fianna Fáil and the dominant religion of the early days of the state led to a hegemonic system that allowed little scope for rebelling against the status quo:

Together, these twin pillars of twenty-six county conservatism, Fianna Fáil and the Catholic Church, held Irish society in a vice grip for decades and marginalised the left. (p. 59)

After Ireland's entry to the EEC and the benefits that brought to agriculture, initially, and then to our infrastructure and broader economy, Fianna Fáil began to espouse a more neoliberal model that revolved around the idea that capitalism was the way forward and that Ireland would finally gain its rightful place among the nations of the



earth through massive industrial expansion. During the Celtic Tiger boom, it seemed as though this view might have some validity, with all the indicators showing that Ireland was an economic powerhouse whose wealth would continue to grow 'going forward'.

According to Allen, there is a strong fatalistic streak in Irish politics, and in Irish society, which was used to good effect when the Irish economy went into freefall and harsh measures were put in place to bail out senior bondholders and keep the country afloat. Phrases like 'We all partied', or 'Irish citizens will have to make sacrifices in the public interest', were used to convey the impression that the excesses of the Celtic Tiger were somehow everyone's responsibility, and not just imputable to the political and other elites who benefitted most from the boom and who did least to pay for the bust. Allen, a well-known left-wing activist, concludes his chapter with the following remarks:

Thus, while the political elite have been extremely skilful in drawing on a historic style of rule to manage the crisis, they must still rely on a promise that sacrifices today will bring rewards tomorrow. When these rewards appear ever more distant, there is likely to be considerable 'austerity fatigue'. And that also means that the myth of the passive Irish, who do not protest, may also be broken. (p. 63)

#### THE IRISH AND THE BODY

Chapters 9 and 10, by Tom Inglis and Marie Keenan, concentrate on the Irish body and sexual abuse, and the Catholic Church respectively. There is an obvious connection between the two themes.

Inglis begins his discussion with a stark quote from the Ryan Report which details the forms of physical abuse inflicted on children in the Industrial Schools, which he links to Foucault's theory whereby 'if we want to understand the history of the West, then we should begin not with the mind and ideas but in the ways the body became subject to power'. (p. 88) He continues: 'It was through the regulation of bodies and strategies of sexualisation of self-monitoring and regulation that the modern self emerged' (p. 89), something that allowed the Catholic Church in Ireland to develop a monopoly, not only over education and the disciplining of bodies, 'but over the discourse and practice of sexualising bodies'. (p. 89)

Inglis quotes from a survey of Irish adults in 2001 which found that three in ten women and one in four men reported some level of sexual abuse in childhood, which prompts him to ask: 'Was what happened in industrial and reformatory schools exceptional, or did it reflect a negative, harsh and often brutal attitude to the body and children that was normal in wider Irish society?' (p. 91)

While not in any way justifying the brutalising of children in state-supported institutions, most of them run by religious orders, Inglis does make the pertinent point that what went on in such places was merely a mirror of the dominant attitudes in Ireland at the time towards children, and the body more generally. The following lines sum up the main thrust of this chapter and link up well with Marie Keenan's contribution:

What happened to children in industrial and reformatory schools and to women in Magdalen laundries, cannot be divorced from the separation of celibates from the rest of society and the task they had in regulating, controlling, disciplining and punishing those who did not comply to the normative Catholic order. (p. 95)

#### THE CELIBATE STATE

The celibate state was promoted as an ideal in Irish society, largely because sexuality and the body were seen in a negative light, the 'temple of the devil', a source of temptation and sin. Marie Keenan argues that the prevalent mind-set among the Catholic hierarchy maintained that clerical sex abuse 'was a problem of flawed individuals, rather than a problem that has significant organisational causative dimensions that became systematically embedded in Church thinking and practice'. (p. 99) Keenan quotes from the SAVI (Sexual Abuse and Violence in Ireland) report of 2002, which notes that 42 per cent of women and 28 per cent of men reported experiencing some form of sexual assault over their lifespan.

It goes on to say that of those who are now adults and who had been abused as children, Roman Catholic clergy were the perpetrators in 3.9 per cent of cases. This is a figure that should be borne in mind, because the prevalent thinking would suggest that the clergy were responsible for a much higher percentage than this. Stating the case that the vast

majority of child sexual abuse is not attributable to members of the Catholic clergy, as Keenan has done on numerous occasions, is not a popular stance. Nevertheless, the facts bear out the following claim:

it may well be the case that cover-up was a feature of how Irish people and the Irish state responded to the abuse of children from the 1920s until the 1990s and that the neglect of children's plights was not a feature of the Catholic Church alone. (p. 102)

The state was happy to opt out of child welfare and to turn a blind eye to the evidence they received that children in industrial schools and reformatories were being abused. The abuse of children was 'a systemic problem' according to Keenan, one that was not helped by enforced celibacy:

There is substantial literature on the sexual lives and behaviour of 'normal' clergy who make a celibate commitment at ordination. The sexual underworld of 'normal' clergy and the unhealthy organisational culture, in which the problems of sexuality arise, are part of the context in which child sexual abuse by Catholic clergy becomes possible. This perspective raises the issue of celibacy as an important area for research in relation to this problem. (p. 105)

Other issues raised by Keenan include an inadequate theology of sexuality, which focuses on 'the sex act' and not on the consequences of the 'act'; the ingrained fear of scandal among the clergy; clericalism; and finally, 'a moral education that is overly intellectualised and technical and focuses mainly or only on theoretical or abstract problems' and 'does not equip students to make good moral judgements' (p. 106). There is ample evidence to the effect that traditionally Ireland had quite a unique view of the body that manifested itself in the way in which the Church and society at large reacted to the problem of child sex abuse. Such a view does differentiate us from many other Western societies.

#### GOING TO AMERICA

Michelle Dillon's chapter offers a rewarding comparative study of the differences between Irish and American Catholicism. Starting with



John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1989, Dillon recounts how a female Moore Street trader shouted at Archbishop Dermot Ryan as he accompanied the pontiff in his Popemobile: 'Sit down lanky. It's not you we've come to see'. Such brazen irreverence was not commonplace in Ireland at this time, where deference to the clergy, and especially to bishops, was the norm. Dillon notes how the visit was 'a source of collective self-congratulations that the Irish could organise such a phenomenally successful event'. (p. 110)

From Ireland, the Pope travelled (in the aptly named Aer Lingus plane, *St Patrick*) to Boston for his first visit to the United States. Once more, he was greeted by state dignitaries and huge crowds, but Dillon points out that the Catholic

Church in North America occupied a far different space than in Ireland, being a minority religion with none of the political and social influence that was enjoyed in Ireland for a large part of the twentieth century. While considered at the time a confirmation of Ireland's special devotion to Catholicism, the papal visit of

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1979 was more than likely prompted by a realisation in Rome of an impending crisis in the Irish Church. The 1980s were the decade of the divisive abortion and divorce referenda, which had seen a significant number of Irish Catholics vote differently from what their clergy recommended. Dillon offers this assessment: 'The questions at issue were complex and wide-ranging, encompassing individual rights, family structure, support and protection, the role of the Church, the duties of the state and the character of Irish society'. (p. 112)

Irish Catholics tended to interpret the rules of the Church in a rigid, legalistic manner: 'The idea that Catholics might have a personal morality that was independent of official Church teaching was slow to intrude on the Irish mind'. (p. 117) Across the Atlantic, however, 'the lived experience of being Catholic entailed a certain amount of individual interpretative autonomy'. (p. 114) When one considers

the significant Irish influence on American Catholicism through the vast numbers of emigrants and priests who made their lives there, it is intriguing to consider how this American 'autonomy', probably the result of Protestant individualism, developed to such a high degree. For example, the majority of American Catholics were much more likely to use contraception and still attend Mass, unlike their Irish counterparts. Dillon concludes:

Thus began the crafting of a Catholic identity that saw Catholics assert their own individual autonomy vis-à-vis the church hierarchy; they would decide for themselves what is entailed in being a good Catholic, and, in particular, would make up their own minds about personal sexual morality. (p. 117)

This independence is borne out by statistical surveys showing that two thirds of American Catholics in the 1980s, and over three quarters in 2011, held the view that one can be a good Catholic without going to Mass every Sunday. Dillon posits that this independent approach may well have led to the Catholic population in the US demonstrating a less virulent reaction to the sins of certain Church officials than was the case in Ireland, where the dominant view appears to be that 'the Church is the Church hierarchy and it, not the laity, owns and controls the institution and the larger tradition'. (p. 119) This is something that will have to change in the near future if Catholicism is to have any future in Ireland. The priest numbers are declining rapidly and, as the title of Brendan Hoban's recent book asks, 'Who will break the bread for us?'<sup>7</sup>

#### GLOBAL CULTURE

I hope you will gather from the few samples I have given that *Are the Irish Different?* is a challenging and thought-provoking collection of essays. It interrogates the whole notion of Irishness and concludes that, like all Western world societies, Ireland is now part of a global culture that inevitably dissipates some of our uniqueness. Inglis argues that Irish Studies would be well-advised to look more closely at

7. Brendan Hoban, *Who Will Break the Bread for Us? Disappearing Priests* (Ballina: Banley House, 2013).

internal class structure, the dominance of the Catholic Church and the oppression of women and children, more than at the traditional postcolonial paradigm, which has been exhaustively mined, when seeking to determine how the Irish may be different. It is fitting to end with Inglis' own words, which capture the essence of this collection:

Being Irish, being a citizen, having Irish cultural products, being able to engage in Irish cultural practices, can be used, as being Catholic once was, to attain social position, honour and respect.  
(p. 226)

*Loving and honouring the Jews in Christ* – It would be a major step if Christianity were to commit itself not to making the Jews jealous, but to entering fully into solidarity with them. Yet even such solidarity is not enough; nor are contrition, confession, or (insofar as possible) reparations. Beyond such things, what the Gospel requires of Christians is love. Christ must be loved and honored in the Jews, because the Jews must be loved and honored in Christ. They must be loved and honored in Christ precisely because he has made them his own.

While there are precious few examples of what this solidarity and love might look like, here is at least one. During the Nazi occupation of France, the lives of as many as two thousand Jewish children were saved in the southern mountain village of Le Chambon, under the leadership of a Reformed pastor named André Trocmé, who urged members of his congregation to shelter the children in safe houses, often under assumed names. Le Chambon stands as an emblem of Christian solidarity and of a love toward the Jews grounded in love for Christ. Significantly, the people of Le Chambon did not try to convert the children. They simply tried to help them by taking the necessary risks of love.

George Hunsinger, 'What Christians Owe Jews', Commonweal, February 9, 2015