

# Catholicism and the Irish State - Time to Separate

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Irish Catholicism is declining. Nominally, 78 percent of the population declared themselves Catholic in a recent census. This data, however, is often completed by the 'head of the household' who defines the religion of their teenage sons and daughters. The reality is that religious practice has fallen dramatically. Only one third of declared Catholics attend mass on a regular basis. In the Dublin area, the figure is even lower at 14 percent.<sup>1</sup> Vocations to the priesthood have almost collapsed. At the high point of Irish Catholicism, every respectable family hoped that one of its sons would enter the priesthood and, possibly, join the great missionary project of converting 'Godless' Russia or the 'black babies' of Africa. During the 1940s and 1950s there were over 20,000 members of religious orders. Today, just about 20 men volunteer to train for the priesthood each year in Maynooth. There are less than 2,000 priests and their average age is 65 and rising.

The rapidity of the change is even more remarkable because the Catholic Church never faced sustained political opposition until recently. The contrast with the secular tradition in France, for example, could not be more pronounced. Here the church was identified with the ancient regime of feudal privilege. Throughout most of the nineteenth century, it was seen as a supporter of the aristocracy and a defender of the worst form of reaction, including anti-semitism. As a result, republicans knew that they had to combat its influence if were to hold political power. In a major speech in 1900, for example, the French premier Waldeck-Rousseau, warned about how church representatives were 'doing their best to make their pupils hostile to the Republic and to republican ideals'.<sup>2</sup> As a defensive measure,

republican governments enacted a series of laws to create a more secular society. In 1882, religious education was banned from French schools; in 1886 priests were banned from schools, and in 1905 the formal separation of the church and state was declared in France. These attacks on the church, however, differed from the earlier Jacobin tradition of the French Revolution which sought to destroy religious belief completely. By contrast, the Ferry laws, as they became known, were carried through in the name of a liberal individualism where religion was to be pushed into a purely private sphere.

## Political loyalty

In Ireland, however, no major political force opposed church control. The main reason was the ambiguous role that the Catholic Church had played in a colonised country. Until the end of the 18th century, the Catholic religion was targeted in a series of penal laws imposed from Britain. Catholics were barred from inheriting Protestant land; excluded from occupying public office; forbidden to marry Protestants; banned from entering Trinity College. As a result, the Catholic Church took on all the appearance of an oppressed church and adherence to Catholicism a sign of resistance to imperialism. However, British strategy in Ireland changed after the French Revolution and it sought to incorporate the hierarchy of the Church. It supported the training of priests in Maynooth and promoted Catholic control of schooling. One result was a dramatic increase in the size and strength of the institutional church. Previously, Irish Catholicism had a much looser structure and a greater mixture of religious and superstitious beliefs but this changed dramatically. The number

<sup>1</sup>'Dublin mass attendance drops to all time low of 14 percent' *Irish Central* 14 December 2011.

<sup>2</sup>C. D. Hazen, *Modern European History*, New York: Henry Holt, 1917 p. 400-401.

of priests rose by 150 percent at the very time the population was shrinking. In 1861, there was one priest for every 755 Catholics but by 1911 there was one for every 210.<sup>3</sup> The growing niche that the Catholic Church found within the imperial structures made it deeply hostile to the Irish revolutionary movement. Cardinal Cullen, the leader of the Irish Catholic Church for much of the nineteenth century put it like this:

For thirty years I have studied the Revolution on the Continent; and for nearly thirty years I have watched the Nationalist movement in Ireland. It is tainted at its sources with the Revolutionary spirit. If ever an attempt is made to abridge the rights and liberties of the Catholic Church in Ireland, it will not be the English government, nor by a 'No Popery' cry in England but by the revolutionary and irreligious nationalists in Ireland.<sup>4</sup>

Yet alongside this hostility, there remained a verbal opposition to 'Protestant England'. Some of the clergy joined movements like the Land League and supported Conradh na Gaeilge. One result of this ambiguous legacy was that after independence, there was no sustained opposition to the church's role in Irish society from either the republican movement or from the weakened form of Irish social democracy.

Irish republicanism differed from French republicanism in refusing to challenge the dominant role of the Catholic Church. There was a rhetorical appeal to the 'unity of Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter' but the republican tradition was imbued with a Catholic culture. Faced with condemna-

tion of its armed struggle, republicans typically responded with anti-clericalism -rather than outright opposition to the role of the Catholic Church. Republican leaders remained devout Catholics and, even while they were condemned by Bishops and Cardinals, found sympathetic individual priests as their confessors. Throughout its history Sinn Féin ensured that its politics did not challenge the Catholic church in any fundamental way. In 1931, for example, Sinn Féin adopted a radical Saor Éire programme written by Peadar O'Donnell. But after a ferocious assault by the Bishops, a subsequent Ard Fheis, disassociated the movement from 'anti-Christian principles' and promised a social order based on the ideals of Popes Pius V and Leo X<sup>11</sup>.<sup>5</sup> In the early 1950s, Sinn Féin adopted a 'national unity and independence programme' which, promised a 'reign of social justice based on Christian principles'.<sup>6</sup> The republican fighter Sean South of Garryowen is celebrated in song for his attack on an RUC barracks. Less well known is his membership of the extreme right wing movement Maria Duce and his activities in chasing courting couples out of cinemas. The early Provisional IRA often said the rosary at its funerals and even in recent years its former Sinn Féin leader Martin McGuinness has stated that abortion 'on demand' is incompatible with his Catholic beliefs - even if his party was willing to allow it in certain circumstances.

Irish social democracy has taken an even more supine relationship to the Catholic Bishops. Leaders of the Irish unions and the Labour Party proclaimed their loyalty to the Catholic Hierarchy for decades. In the 1940s, for example, the ITGWU formed an alliance with Fianna Fáil and *The Catholic Standard* to attack Larkinism and communism. It fomented a split in the

<sup>3</sup>Strauss, *Irish Nationalism and British Democracy*, p. 210.

<sup>4</sup>E. Purcell, *The Life of Cardinal Manning: Archbishop of Westminster*, New York: Macmillan, 1896 p. 610.

<sup>5</sup>H. Patterson, *The Politics of Illusion: Republicanism and socialism in Modern Ireland*, London: Hutchinson Radius 2010. P53.

<sup>6</sup>*ibid.*

Labour Party and helped to create a National Labour Party which 'was clear and definite on fundamentals intertwined with Faith and Nationality'.<sup>7</sup> The official Labour Party, however, was hardly less loyal to the same principles. It joined the Bishops in opposing Noel Browne's Mother and Child scheme which would have given free medical care. Even when Labour shifted left in the late 1960s and proclaimed that 'the seventies would be socialist' its leader, Brendan Corish, was a member of the Knights of Columbanus, an elite and secretive organisation. He stated that he was a Catholic first, an Irish man second and a socialist third. He added 'If the hierarchy gives me any direction as regard to Catholic social teaching or Catholic moral teaching, I accept without qualification in all respects the teaching of the Hierarchy and church to which I belong.'<sup>8</sup>

Given this history, the question arises as to why the Catholic Church declined so rapidly. Opposition to the power of the Catholic Church only came from the margins on Irish society and there was no generalised opposition to its role in society. Even as late as 1983, when Catholic fundamentalists pushed through the eighth amendment to the Irish constitution which equated the life of a woman to that of a day old foetus, active opposition came only from the tiny forces of the revolutionary left and radical liberals. The Labour Party was largely silent and the Workers Party only campaigned against it without mentioning the word abortion in their literature. Yet within a decade of this victory, the Catholic Church had entered a period of crisis and decline.

The main reason is that that Irish Catholicism came into conflict with the lived experience of people in a rapidly industrialising society. The working class has expanded massively over the last few decades

and there has been a huge exodus from the land. In 1951, 38 percent of the Irish labour force worked on farms. Today the figure has declined to 5 percent. There are more unemployed people in Ireland today than there are farmers. Moreover, a very high proportion of the population *identify* themselves as workers. Some 42 percent of the Irish population regard themselves as working class - a figure that is just below the British figure.<sup>9</sup> Ireland has also become an increasingly urbanised society, with 40 percent of the Irish population living in the greater Dublin area.

Industrialisation undermines the bonds which link individuals to church and tradition. These communal ties were deeply rooted in rural Ireland and produced a particularly strong variant of Irish Catholicism. Brinsley McNamara captured this intense form of conformity in his novel *The Valley of the Squinting Windows* which tells a story of a fictional village, Garradrimna, most probably based on Devlin in Westmeath. It is a tale of shame, gossip and tragedy based on sexual relations stigmatised by Catholicism. However, as Irish people moved off the land in vast numbers, belief systems slowly changed. There is a German expression that 'the city air makes free' and it could not be more appropriate to Ireland. But the process was highly uneven and contradictory. Irish people began, - in practice, and often in secret - to break free of Catholic values in their personal lives. In 1971, for example, 63 percent of the population agreed in a survey that 'contraceptives should be forbidden by law'.<sup>10</sup> But at the same time importation of contraceptives grew and younger people began to use them more frequently. Sometimes this occurred under the guise that the pill was a 'cycle regulator'. On other occasions packets of condoms were secretly imported from England and the North.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* p. 75

<sup>8</sup> B. Chubb, *The Government and Politics of Ireland*, London, Oxford University Press, 1970 p 103

<sup>9</sup> D. Goldthorpe and C. Whelan, *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (Oxford 1992), p. 389.

<sup>10</sup> B. Girvin, 'Contraception, Moral Panic and Social Change in Ireland, 1969 -1979', *Irish Political Studies* 2008 vol 23 No 4

This gradual undermining of Catholic values produced a reaction from a lay fundamentalist movement which was ultimately to culminate in the 8th Amendment. Emily O Reilly produced a brilliant book in 1992 titled *Masterminds of the Right* which described how a network of fanatical Catholics spearheaded by John O'Reilly tried to turn the tide on the 'permissive society'.<sup>11</sup> He even had his youngest daughter order contraceptives from the Irish Family Planning Association in a legal ruse to try to shut them down. But the greater the success the fundamentalists had in influencing the political structures, the greater the gap between the culture of official Ireland and the lived reality of working class life. When it became impossible to criminalise the use of contraceptives, the Fianna Fáil leader Haughey bowed to fundamentalist pressure and made them only available for 'bona fide' family purposes. It served only to make a mockery of the political establishment and create an abundance of satirical material.

At the heart of these changes was the position of working women. Traditionally Ireland had one of the lowest numbers of married women in the paid workforce, second only to Greece in the EU. However, the multi-nationals who spearheaded industrialisation favoured a disproportionate employment of women. Between 1971 and 1991 the number of economically active women increased by 50 percent while the number of men increased by 10 percent.<sup>12</sup> With economic independence came a greater desire for free expression of sexuality and control of childbirth.

Writing in 1994, for example, Dymphna McLoughlin suggests that there were three main characteristics of the traditional 'respectable Irish woman' (1) an overwhelming desire to marry and to remain faith-

ful, dependent, and subordinate; (2) an unquestioning readiness to regard the domestic sphere as her natural habitat and to engage in reproduction rather than production; and (3) a willingness to accept that women's sexuality was confined to marriage.<sup>13</sup> In addition, in the 1950s Irish family life was often characterised by late marriages and then a very high birth rate.

But the growing involvement of women in the paid workforce changed all that. Women began using contraception and planned the number and spacing of children. Fertility rates were halved as the number of births per woman fell from 4 to 1.9 between 1960 and 2000. More and more women left unhappy marriages and had children born outside of marriage. The age of marriage increased and no longer came to be regarded as the only 'legitimate' framework for sexual relations. In 1980, the average age of marriage for the bride was 24 but by 2005 this had risen to 30. The proportion of first births outside marriage grew from 15 percent in 1980 to 44 percent in 2005. The number of abortions to women with an Irish address grew from 261 in 1970 to 6,672 by 2001.<sup>14</sup> Despite the bans on abortion, Irish women in the age group 18 to 23 are having the same number of abortions as women in other countries. The difference is that they had to travel to Britain. These dry but quite dramatic figures indicate that the lived experience of tens of thousands of Irish women put them into direct conflict with the values of catholic Ireland.

First came the practice, and then came the anger. Initially, the changes occurred at a subterranean level and they found little expression at a political or institutional level. The conservative parties continued to warn against a 'permissive society' and the liberal elements within the elite expressed

<sup>11</sup>E O Reilly, *Masterminds of the Right*, Dublin: Attic Press, 1997

<sup>12</sup>B. Walsh, *Labour Force Participation and the Feminisation of the Labour Force* (Dublin 1992)

<sup>13</sup>Cited in Tom Inglis, *Origins and legacies of Irish Prudery: Sexuality and Socila Control in Modern Ireland*, Eire- Ireland Vol 40 No3-4, 2005, pp. 9-37

<sup>14</sup>A. Punch. 'Marriage, Fertility and Family in Ireland – a Statistical Perspective' *Journal of the Staticial and Socioal Inquiry Society of Ireland* Vol. XXXVI

themselves in the most cautious way possible. But the lack of an organised expression only made spontaneous explosions more likely. The first came in 1992, when tens of thousands mobilised to demand that a 14 year old rape victim be given the right to travel to Britain for an abortion. The ban had been imposed by an attorney general who was a member of the Catholic Marriage Advisory Board. It was a glaring example of how the fundamentalists tried to use their institutional positions to stop the tide of liberalism - and how it backfired so spectacularly.

Since then the mobilisations have grown in organisation and expression. In 1983, for example, less than 200 people marched in a gay rights demonstration after a homophobic murder in Fairview Park. Within two decades, tens of thousands were participating in the annual gay pride event. As the mobilisations increased, so too did the level of anger. Why, many asked, had the Catholic Church a right to interfere in our personal lives? This question dovetailed with an emerging neoliberal discourse of individual choice. But at a deeper level, it brought greater numbers into conflict with the power structures of society. Further questions began to be asked which were never even formulated before. Why had the Catholic Church a right to exclude children without a baptismal certificate from schools? Why do young teenagers have to attend religion classes in secondary schools if they do not want to? What right does the Catholic Church have to impose its ethics on medical procedures in hospital?

In more recent years, the political elite have been forced to respond to this growing anger and have sought to incorporate it within a discourse of 'personal choice'. This has been most evident on the issue of gay rights. In 1988, for example, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that Ireland was in breach of human rights for criminalising homosexuality. In the aftermath of the huge 1992 mobilisations on the X case,

the Fianna Fáil Justice Minister Maire Geoghan Quinn brought in a decriminalisation measure that was more liberal than that of Britain. Later in 2015, Ireland became the first country in the world to introduce gay marriage by popular plebiscite. This was in marked contrast to the situation in the more secular France where huge mobilisations by the Catholic Church and the fascists led the official right to oppose the move. It is a powerful illustration of how one should not hold a mechanical view of 'enlightenment' progress. The growing anger that drove the very late break from Catholic values in Ireland brought about a more radical response than that in more liberal France. The paradox can only be explained by a dynamic that comes with mobilisations from below.

## **Skin deep liberals**

The central problem for the political establishment is that they must try to relate to the new realities of Irish society - while maintaining most of the power structures that have served them well for decades. They will accept a degree of liberalisation but they are unwilling to dismantle structures that have promoted obedience and deference. Thus they will talk about individual choice and a 'tolerant modern Ireland' but they will not take measures that their counterparts took in other countries more than a century ago. To put matters more simply, they will talk liberal but leave Bishops in control of large areas of Irish social life.

The contradictions of this skin deep liberalism are most apparent in the case of Leo Varadkar, whom the international press have labelled Ireland's first gay Taoiseach. In 2009, the same Varadkar expressed his distaste for a Civil Partnership Bill in the following terms

Two men cannot have a child, two women cannot have a child. . . That is a fact, nobody can deny. Every child has a right to a mother and father, and

as much as possible, the state should try and vindicate that right, and that the right of a child to have a mother and father is much more important than the right of two men, or two women, to have a family.

However as anger with the Catholic Church grew and radical dynamic behind the demand that Ireland liberalises increased, Varadkar changed his tune. He came out as openly gay and campaigned for gay marriage in the name of individual freedom. But while many young people were delighted to see the political establishment embrace some of their concerns, they framed the issue in somewhat different terms to Varadkar. They saw it as an issue of *equality* - Marriage Equality, for a start but more equality in Irish society. At an LGBT Noise demonstration before the referendum many speakers drew the links between the LGBTQ demand for equality and the rights of refugees to equality of treatment; the rights of transgender people to be recognised, the rights of women to gain control over their bodies. Leo Varadkar may have monetarily caught up with the new mood, but the movement was going far beyond Leo's liberalism.

To understand why the Irish elite have difficulties dealing with the new realities of Irish society, we need to explore the role that the Catholic Church played - and still plays - in upholding capitalist privilege. In other words, we need to move beyond the familiar - and absolutely correct - story of Catholicism and sexual repression which has been well aired in literature and political discourse. We need to examine its role as a mechanism of wider social control and order.

## Keeping the mob in line

Contrary to its own mythology, the 26 county Irish State should not be described

as a product of the 1916 rebellion or the Irish Revolution that followed in its wake. It owes far more to the Free State victory in the Irish Civil War of 1922. This marked the end of a radical turbulent period where the poorest elements of Irish society tried to forward their aspirations. The victory of the Free State forces - amply supplied with guns and credit from their former imperial masters - heralded a counter revolution. The Catholic upper professional class which were initially reluctant to lead a fight for Irish freedom took over the helm of the state. The key figure who articulated their class perspective was Kevin O'Higgins. He saw the period of revolution as one where the moral fabric of society was torn apart and was determined to re-mend it. He despised the 'attitude of protest, the attitude of negation, the attitude sometimes of sheer wantonness and waywardness and destructiveness which... has been to a large extent a traditional attitude on behalf of the Irish people.'<sup>15</sup> He was determined to cure the patient and establish respect for 'the rule of law.' To do so, he surrounded himself in the cabinet with ex-Clongowes boys and members of the Catholic upper professional class who barely concealed their contempt for a lawless but land hungry peasantry. By 1926, there were more ex-Clongowes boys in the cabinet than veterans of the 1916 Rising.

The key institution they used to control Irish society was the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The Catholic bishops backed the Treaty and as soon as news of it became public, six Catholic prelates issued a statement supporting it, with one Bishop claiming that 'the men who made the treaty would be immortal.'*G.G. Corone, The Catholic Church in the Irish Civil War, Madrid: Cultiva Comunicacion, 2009, p.22-3.* Bishop Colohan summed up the reasons, stating that 'Christ himself lived in a country suffering foreign domination. But he did not counsel the Jews to have recourse

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<sup>15</sup>J. Knirck. *Afterimage of the revolution: Cumann na nGaedheal and Irish Politics, 1922-1932* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014, p. 43.

to arms, to seize money and goods, to destroy public property'<sup>16</sup>. The Bishops excommunicated republicans who opposed the treaty but said little about the Free State policy of reprisal executions. Once the Civil War was won, they gave full backing to O'Higgins campaign to restore order.

The new Free State elite offered its population one compensation - a strict Catholic morality. This became the spiritual antidepressant that offered consolation for the dashed hope of the revolutionary years. Even if no improvement in living conditions resulted from their heroic struggles, the people could console themselves that they were the most Catholic country in the world. The more Catholic and respectful you were of the priests, the more you asserted your victory over the Brits. This was linked to a romanticisation of rural life because, as Curtis put it, there was a conviction that 'life on a small Irish farm represented a purity and decency of life that set Ireland apart from more commercial societies that surrounded them'.<sup>17</sup> Even if there were few jobs and thousands had to emigrate, Ireland could keep clear of the moral 'filth' of British urban life. It could be both self-sufficient and avoid the 'materialism' and immorality of modern life.

As the identification of Catholicism with Irishness intensified, Fianna Fáil asserted that they were more Irish and, therefore, even more Catholic. When they came to power in 1932, they not only continued using the Catholic hierarchy to control the population but extended it further. The constitution of 1937 laid down the broad parameters for a Catholic State for a Catholic people. It was accompanied by a shadow theocracy whereby proposed legislation was first filtered through the partnership of de Valera and John Charles McQuaid, the Archbishop of Dublin. McQuaid believed that that the Bishops had a 'divine right to guide

the faithful... whenever political or social or economic doctrines are at variance with the Divine Law.'<sup>18</sup> McQuaid bombarded de Valera with letters ranging from instructions about promoting Catholic medical interests, to calls for more censorship, to offering advice on how to handle strike. The partnership of Fianna Fáil and the Bishops set the framework for one of the most conservative societies in the world.

The Catholic Bishops helped to uphold the capitalist order in four main ways.

First, they promoted a strict adherence to family values and regulation of sexuality. Historically, these are key themes of the rhetorical toolkit of the Right. Family values imply a strict authoritarianism whereby the father figure controls the family and the mother is reduced to role of emotional supporter. Just as the father runs the family, so too does the boss run the factory and the bishop runs the church. This authoritarian structure is bolstered by the regular targeting of transgressors. After all, how are complex and messy human emotions to be disciplined if not through shame inducing gossip or public humiliation? Fear and shame are also powerful ways of getting people to know their place - to accept their lot as God given.

The Irish Catholic focus on sexuality reflected its own institutional base. The core of the priesthood was drawn from the property owning farmers of the countryside. Out of the 429 students, for example, who entered the Maynooth seminary between 1956 and 1960, a massive 72.5 percent came from the 'open countryside' or small towns and villages.<sup>19</sup> These strata had imbibed the strict repression of sexuality from the farming class and transmitted it to the cities. The farmers were terrified of 'illegitimate' births and the break-up of marriages lest these affect ownership of the farms. Repressing sexuality became their obsession

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p 19

<sup>17</sup> Curtis, *A Challenge to Democracy*, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> J. Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland*, Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1999 p. 70-71.

<sup>19</sup> T. Garvin, *Preventing the Future; Why Was Ireland so poor for so long?* Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004, p. 36.

and the priests became the agents of control. The Catholic Church had the institutional resources to push a message of 'purity' and 'modesty' as it controlled the schools and hospitals. It had constructed so many churches that by 1997 there was one church for every 1,092 Catholics.<sup>20</sup> It also had a huge army of priests who could visit - and morally inspect - family homes. A national survey in 1973-4, found that nearly half of homes had been visited by a priest in the previous six months.<sup>21</sup> For the minority of women who were disobedient there were always the church-run Mother and Babies homes and the Magdalene laundries.

Second, the Bishops promoted a wider culture of obedience. In his first pastoral letter in 1941, McQuaid stated that parents must regard their children as souls to be prepared for the carrying of the cross of Christ. 'It will be impossible to train youth to the maturity of Christian virtue unless from infancy the habit of obedience has become, so to speak, an instinct.'<sup>22</sup> Control of the schools was the main mechanism for achieving this and so corporal punishment and rote learning became the norm. Corporal punishment was a brutalised form of repression used widely by orders like the Christian Brothers. Its primary purpose was to instil unquestioning obedience. Rote learning was - and still is endemic - in Irish education. 'Learning off by heart' became a method that replaced in depth understanding. It dovetailed neatly with the ethos of learning off one's Catechism. Instead of children asking a subversive question such as 'Who Made God' they learnt 'off by heart' that 'God made the World'. By instilling simple easy responses in the brains of the young, the Bishops thought that adherence to Catholicism would be guaranteed forever. Subjects such as philosophy or sociology were excluded from Irish schools as they opened the

possibility for more critical thinking. Science was reduced to a minimal subject and more emphasis was placed on the facts or science rather than training in scientific methods. This deep culture of obedience was seen as highly productive for both state and religious authorities.

The agreement was that the clergy would instil general obedience in school children and in return get to indoctrinate them in Catholic teaching. It was certainly understood by de Valera that the church and the state were working together to have the population obey both its temporal and spiritual leaders. After a minor dispute with one of the Bishops, de Valera wrote to the Papal Nuncio urging him to remind the clergy to

secure their active co-operation in inculcating in the people that respect for lawful authority without which the continuance in their country of a Christian church and a Christian state would soon become impossible.<sup>23</sup>

This was the essence of the Fianna Fáil-Catholic church project. It was case of rendering unto Caesar and unto the clergy a respect and a subservience which were mutually beneficial to both.

Thirdly, the Catholic Church was the main ideological opponent of social rights. The primary argument used was the principle of subsidiarity. This suggested that the state should only delegate to itself functions which could not otherwise be performed by groups in civil society. These civil society groups were in turn permeated by Catholic principles. The Papal encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* put it succinctly, 'social charity ... ought to be as the soul of this order, an order which public authority ought to be ever ready effectively to protect and

<sup>20</sup>T. Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1998, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup>*ibid.* p. 48

<sup>22</sup>Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, p. 133

<sup>23</sup>De Valera to Papal Nuncio, 9 July 1933, in De Valera Papers, File 1280/1, UCD archives.

defend'.<sup>24</sup> This principle was rigorously applied in Ireland and an unholy alliance was formed between the mandarins of the Department of Finance and the Catholic hierarchy to discourage social spending. Under McQuaid's leadership, an extensive charity and voluntary social care network was established. Instead of developing a welfare state, the state encouraged voluntary Catholic organisations to develop a safety net. J.J. McElligot, the secretary of the Department of Finance, spelled out the practical implications of the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle has not been generally accepted that the state has responsibility for the relief of poverty in all its degrees - the principle underlying any social measures undertaken by the state in this country up to the present is that the state's responsibility is limited to the relief of destitution i.e. extreme cases where employment and the minimum necessities of existence is lacking.<sup>25</sup>

This ideological principle was not always upheld because the political elite were subject to pressure to provide some social protection, especially after the Beveridge Report in Britain. Nevertheless the principle of subsidiarity created a framework by which social rights could be limited.

The proposal by Noel Browne to introduce a Mother and Child scheme to provide free health care and children up to the age of sixteen illustrates succinctly how this occurred. As soon as Browne's plans became public, he was ordered to a meeting at Archbishop McQuaid's palace. A statement was read that claimed that 'the right to provide for the health of children belongs to parents, not to the state'. He was told that the Bishops would oppose him because and his free

health measures would 'constitute a ready-made instrument for future totalitarian aggression'.<sup>26</sup> The hysteria about state control and dictatorship was only a cover to allow the Bishops work with the Irish Medical Organisation to create a two tier medical system which protects privilege and the doctors' lucrative private practice. It is a system that works against the poor to this very day.

Fourth, the Catholic hierarchy was the main bulwark against any political shift to the left. Anti-communism was an ideology that was disseminated widely and its focus was not simply any expression of support for Stalin's Russia. Anti-communism was the catch-all defence against any variant of left wing ideas. The modern College of Industrial Relations, for example, is a renamed version of the Catholic Workers College which was set up by the Jesuits in 1951 with the explicit aim of training a generation of union leaders in Catholic social teaching as against 'communism'. In 1968, when the Labour Party swung to the left, Fianna Fáil launched a red scare and its leader did a tour of convents and monasteries. Right into the 1980s, left wing TDs such as Michael D Higgins - the current President- and Jim Kemmy were targeted as pro-abortionists in the midst of a general election.

All of these tasks that were undertaken by the Bishops played a valuable role in upholding the order of capitalist Ireland. An institutional network was forged that linked the political establishment to the Bishops, bosses and union leaders. Social Catholicism functioned as a diffuse ideology that permeated the whole of society. Even as it started to weaken, it was also modernised and made more institutionally secure. Instead of charity for the deserving poor, the state changed the rhetoric during the social partnership years, for example, and began to

<sup>24</sup>[www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html)

<sup>25</sup>J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989 p.281

<sup>26</sup>Cooney, *John Charles McQuaid*, p.258

speak of the 'excluded'. The category was a passive one and there were no active agents who did the excluding. But it was a useful rhetorical device to attack 'selfish' and 'sectional' workers who wanted high pay rises. It was suggested repeatedly that they should make sacrifices so that the 'excluded' could be supported. Similarly, as the state withdrew from building council housing, it spoke of the need for a 'social mix' and rhetorically stigmatised large council estates as hotbeds of social problems. Voluntary housing associations were promoted instead and in many cases they were linked to religious bodies.

Social Catholicism was most concentrated among the grassroots political activists who worked for Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael. Overwhelmingly, these were the 'respectable' people who forged close relationships with their parish priests. Involvement in a party branch or cumman was always a help to getting a position as judge or town planner or school principal. So too was a reference from the local priest. Once they took up their new position, the occupants learnt that there were ways of dealing with troublemakers with a 'few quiet words'. The priest might make a phone call or put in a request and the matter would be sorted out, without any public mention. Similarly, politicians were kept informed of key school events, funerals or social gatherings organised by the Church so they could make an appearance. If the Left saw the streets as their prime arena for mobilisation, the Right knew that there was an institutional network available to bolster their support.

## Outdated but useful

Much of this is now outdated. A substantial proportion of the elite have no desire to socialise with, or seek the advice of, the Bishops. But this does not mean that they wish to displace them in any radical way.

Typically, there are two streams to Right wing thought. On one hand there are the neoliberals who are fervent believers in the

market and who, rhetorically, can embrace a certain libertarianism based on freedom of choice. On the other hand, there are the neo-conservatives who value community and tradition. Broadly, speaking at this current juncture, most of the Irish elite lean towards the neoliberal wing. But the two streams are not mutually exclusive.

Even a pure market based society needs some mechanisms for promoting order and social control. In other countries, the mainstream media replaces church as the key funnel for bourgeois ideas. Instead of sermons from pulpits every Sunday, there is a daily diet of praise for 'competitiveness' and abuse directed at a 'loony left'. The more the system comes under pressure, the more the pretence of balance and impartiality is dropped. In many cases, the mass media functions as an effective tool for dividing the population and directing anger away from the ruling class onto different categories of scapegoats.

However, there is an important weakness from an ideological point of view. Essentially, the mass media functions as a bridge between the ruling class and atomised individuals. It is most influential when the mass of people lead private lives and there is little sustained organised opposition. But when there is a huge movement - as occurred during the water charges protests - the propaganda and smears are less effective. Economic experts may appear on television to intone about 'efficiencies' but they lack a network that can demoralise and divide. As Gramsci pointed out, the hegemony of the ruling class often rests on elements in civil society who disseminate the world view of the bourgeois. Typically, this strata of society assume leadership positions and are 'looked up to'.

The dynamics of modern capitalism, however, tends to undermine the very structures which link the mass of the people to the embedded elements who promote a bourgeois world view. Mass 'apathy' and declining civic engagement become a feature of a society that becomes increasingly commod-

ified. As Chris Harman pointed out,

The ‘functional intellectuals’—the lawyers, teachers, priests, doctors—no longer play a key role in local opinion formation. Advanced capitalism leads to a centralisation of ideological power, to the atomisation of the masses—with the crucial exception of workplace-based union organisation—and to a weakening of old political and cultural organisations.<sup>27</sup>

The Irish ruling class may not have read Gramsci but they instinctively understand the need to combine control of the media with the maintenance of support networks in civil society. In brief, they want to use both traditional and modern methods of preserving order. They want to keep their power base in civil society - alongside greater control by the mass media. They are glad that Denis O’Brien has gained control of the private media - but the right wing politicians will still attend funerals and promise people they can get them houses. RTE will use economists as experts who reduce political choice to the necessities of the market - but Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael want to keep the support networks that are permeated with social Catholicism. They will create space for a liberal more urban wing - but they are not going to demoralise their rural conservatives. In brief, they combine the two streams of right wing thought - a neoliberal enthusiasm for the market and a neo-conservative embrace of tradition.

This effort to combine skin deep liberalism with the maintenance of a space for social Catholicism explains the current responses of the right wing parties. Varadkar may be hailed as Ireland’s first gay Taoiseach - but as soon as he took up the

leadership of Fine Gael, former TDs such as Billy Timmins and Terence Flanagan who left to join Renua because of minor moves to liberalise laws on abortion, indicated they would be returning. No wonder. Varadkar has stated that he does not want Ireland’s strict constitutional abortion law to be removed entirely, as it would ‘let the Dáil and Seanad do whatever they like’.<sup>28</sup> He is quite explicit in defining his brand of right wing politics as composed of ‘liberal, conservative.Christian -democratic ideals’<sup>29</sup> On the other side of the fence, Fianna Fáil talks about ‘compassion’ and ‘understanding’ for women who have been raped and want an abortion. But when the party gave its TDs a free vote on removing a 14 year jail sentence for a woman who takes an abortion pill, just three of its TDs voted in support. The Fianna Fáil leader Micheál Martin could not even give a commitment that even a woman who was raped had a right to an abortion. Here is a section from an excruciating radio interview he recently did.

**Interviewer:** So (a woman becomes pregnant after being raped by her father) and you don’t see that as a simple yes or no?

**Micheál Martin:** Well I don’t actually, it’s not a simple ‘yes or no’, that depends on a number of issues. I know people today who are alive through their mother being raped. In one particular case she was the outcome of that and she gets very angry when people suggest she should never have had a life.

This suggests that the political establishment will not take any radical measures to uproot the structures of rule that have served - and still help to serve - them so

<sup>27</sup>C. Harman, *Gramsci versus EuroCommunism* [isj.org.uk/gramsci-versus-eurocommunism/](http://isj.org.uk/gramsci-versus-eurocommunism/)

<sup>28</sup>‘Health Minister Leo Varadkar at odds with James o Reilly over Abortion vote’, *Irish Examiner* 30 November 2015

<sup>29</sup>‘No More Mr Nice guy’, *Hot Press* Interview 19 May 2010

well. They will not demoralise their support base by giving women a legal right to abortion; they will not push the Catholic Church out of control of the schools and hospitals; they will continue to allow Catholic influenced organisations control over social care. In brief, they will never carry out measures that the French bourgeoisie carried out over a hundred years ago.

This is what explains their hesitant responses on most of the key battle lines in Irish society in recent years.. After the Catholic Church was exposed for paedophile abuse, a Fianna Fáil Minister, Michael Woods, did an indemnity deal which costs the Church just €128 million. Even though compensation to the victims eventually ran to €1.5 billion, neither Fianna Fáil nor Fine Gael will tear up the deal. When he took up office, the Labour Party Minister for Education, Rory Quinn, questioned the amount of time spent on teaching religion in primary schools. He spoke of transferring 50 percent of these schools from religious patronage to a different ownership model. Yet just a handful of schools were transferred and no restriction was placed on the time spent on teaching religion. Subsequently, both Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael voted down a bill to outlaw discrimination against non-Catholic children in admittance to primary schools - 90 percent of whom are controlled by the Catholic Church. There was outrage when St Vincent's Hospital said that its Catholic ethics precluded it carrying out vasectomies - but, again, nothing was done to stop 'ethics bodies' in Catholic owned hospitals banning some medical procedures. It took a massive display of 'people power' to prevent the Sisters of Charity effectively controlling a new National Maternity Hospital. Without such a display of anger, Fine Gael would have happily handed over managerial responsibility to the nuns.

All the hesitation and contradiction in Ireland's skin deep liberalism comes to the fore on the issue of abortion. More than twenty years after the huge mobilisations on

the X case and after repeated attempts to dodge the issue, the Fine Gael-Labour government finally came up with a Protection of Life in Pregnancy Act. It was one of the most restrictive measures in the world. Abortion would only be available when a woman's life was in danger, including that potentially caused by suicide. But even in the latter case, the woman would have to be subjected to an examination by two psychiatrists and an obstetrician. But even when a woman said she was suicidal, she faced the danger of being detained under the Mental Health Act by one of these psychiatrists. This is -precisely what occurred when an adolescent girl became pregnant. Commenting on the incident, the 'Liberal-conservative, Christian Democrat', Varadkar said that 'decisions on terminations were a matter for doctors not politicians'. Nor, it appears, for the girl concerned.

## The left

Given these contradictions, only the genuine radical left, Solidarity- PBP and some of the left independents have the courage and principles to fight Church control. The Solidarity-People Before Profit grouping that has taken a firm stance on the key issues.

The Labour Party is trying to re-position itself as a more secular formation. But its own record hangs around its neck like an albatross. It was after all the Labour Party, who championed the Protection of the Life in Pregnancy Act, as the only 'realistic' option in promoting abortion reform. While in government, they voted against the calling of a referendum on the issue, arguing that it would be too divisive.

Sinn Féin presents itself as a 'progressive party' but is equally determined to maintain its green nationalist base. As a result, it will not stray too far beyond the strictures of the bishops. Its position on abortion is that it will only allow for it in three cases - that of rape, fatal foetal abnormality, or when a

woman's life is in danger. In other words, a woman must be presented as a victim before she gains a right to abortion. It cannot, in the Sinn Féin view, be a matter of choice - which they dismiss as 'abortion on demand'.

The genuine left on the other hand has been to the fore in demanding the removal of the Eighth Amendment to the Irish constitution. They are opposed to replacing it with another restrictive measure that will prevent democratic discussion on abortion, long into the future.

Once the constitution is replaced, Solidarity-People Before Profit will press for the legalisation of free, safe and legal abortion. These changes will not occur, however, simply by quiet lobbying behind the scenes. It will certainly not come by appealing to Fine Gael mavericks like Kate O'Connell, TD, in the hope that they can bring the conservative backwoods men with her. O'Connell spoke against a Dail motion to repeal the Eighth Amendment because it originated from the left. She said there were 'people on her side of the political spectrum who would agree with repealing the Eighth but they were conflicted that by supporting the bill, they might be guilty of endorsing the other policies and activities of the extreme left.'<sup>30</sup> The removal of the 8th Amendment will come about through a huge movement of 'people power'. Only the fear of such a movement and the political consequences

that flow from it can force the political establishment to remove this terrible article.

The genuine left will also be the key force in pushing for the full separation of church and state. Schools and hospitals which rely on public money must be taken out of church control and vested in democratic public control. The pattern of medical procedures being debated through a lens of Catholic theology must end. Public money to promote the teaching of any one religion must cease. None of this impinges on the democratic right of any grouping to practice or promote their religious views. School facilities, for example, should be made available to local communities after their hours of instruction end. In practice, political groups, local sports associations, and religious groupings should have a right of access to school hall to engage in whatever type of discussion or ceremony they like.

None of this implies a Richard Dawkins's type snobbery about religion. Religious belief is not simply the result of ignorance and it is not the primary cause of violence or intolerance in the world. How and why so many people adhere to a belief in God and an afterlife is not the subject of this article<sup>1</sup>. Our focus is simply the democratic right not to have religion imposed on people by their state. That right is now being asserted by the real left.

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<sup>30</sup>'Government Eight Amendment motion described as 'disgraceful manouevre" *RTE News* 26 October 2016 [rte.ie/news/2016/1025/826607-eighth-amendment/](http://rte.ie/news/2016/1025/826607-eighth-amendment/) For Marx's profound analysis of the roots of religion see *Introduction to A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm](http://marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm) Also useful are Paul Siegel, *The Meek and the Militant*, 1986 and John Molyneux, 'More than Opium' *International Socialism* 119, [isj.org.uk/more-than-opium-marxism-and-religion/](http://isj.org.uk/more-than-opium-marxism-and-religion/).