

# Church and State: The Case of Ireland

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— The bishops and priests of Ireland have spoken, said Dante, and they must be obeyed.

— Let them leave politics alone, said Mr Casey, or the people may leave their church alone.

(James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*).

The spectacle of Mr Casey waving the pope's nose over the Christmas dinner table towards the irate Mrs Riordan seems a good place from which to approach the issues of Church and State, not least for its exposition of the prejudices, half-truths and common assumptions that will crown round and must be thought through: the Church is really the hierarchy; the bishops' word is final in a Catholic country; religion should be kept out of politics. But it indicates also the way Church-State relations in Ireland are the product of a complex history, just as they are in most countries. Without proper attention to that history, it is impossible to analyse the present situation adequately. The description and analysis on offer here are bound to be sketchy and incomplete, yet it is possible and timely to pick out some of the key features of the historically moulded present and then reflect on the potential opportunities and challenges in the immediate future.

## *1. The Matrix of History*

Historically a predominantly Catholic country, Ireland has known only one established church, the (Anglican) Church of Ireland. Since its disestablishment in 1869 no attempt has been made to substitute any other in law or constitution. This is one simple but important fact of Irish history which immediately sets it off from its nearest neighbours in England and Scotland. Its implications are manifold, something not always appreciated by the churches in Ireland themselves, who have sometimes behaved as if they did enjoy some kind of established status as churches of majority populations, Catholic in the South and Protestant in the North. This unconscious, and sometimes conscious, stance has compounded the historic, political and cultural divisions between the peoples of Ireland, even when the churches have rejected religion as the basic source of present division. In analysing the difficulties and charting the possibilities for creative rather than inhibiting or destructive Church-State relations serious attention must be paid to these informal alliances

of particular churches with certain traditional cultural and political positions.

## *2. Consequences of Informal Alliance*

Three basic consequences may be noted of these varied but close relations between churches and states in Ireland (and the plurals are important to keep in mind). Firstly, there is the impact of church moral attitudes on the law of the land. The notorious examples are divorce, excluded by constitution in the Republic (the South), the restrictions on Sunday recreation in the North, and the laws on homosexuality in both states. Secondly, the primary and secondary schools have been largely denominational in character and control, even though they have been mostly funded by the states. Thirdly, the near identification of Catholics with the nationalist cause and of Protestants with the unionist cause, particularly in Northern Ireland, has made the communal division and associated violence so much more entrenched. Other dimensions of the unionist-nationalist and north-south divides contain religious elements and carry religious reinforcement which must influence further discussion of our topic, but these may emerge in their own time and place.

## *3. Contemporary Challenges*

Consequences of the kind we have noted are not, of course, peculiar to Ireland. Something similar can be seen to afflict Britain, Germany and the United States, so that the virulent nationalism displayed during the Falkland and Vietnam wars was no surprise to Irish observers or indeed to anybody with a sense of history. There are, however, other deep-seated challenges to the Church in society which Ireland is now facing and which compound the more traditional problems. Secularism and developing socio-economic division, two of the more obvious ones, are forcing the churches to examine their mission in ways which bear very directly on relations between Church and State.

Third world churches have led the way in tackling the state on socio-economic issues and their example has altered the self-perception of the first-world churches whose missionaries and aid agencies have offered their solidarity. In Britain and Ireland, the established Church of England and the majority Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, with its equivalent influence, have been very critical of State provision and Government action in relation to the poor and needy. In the summer of 1988 a left-wing politician of considerable significance suggested a rainbow coalition made up of politicians on the left, various voluntary groups interested in poverty, and the churches to educate the public and harness resources in a joint effort to wipe out poverty.

Secularism is proving more difficult, at least in Ireland, to identify as a challenge which can be met in such specific ways. The churches cannot hope to enlist the same allies. The irony may be that allies against

secularism may prove opponents in the fight against poverty and privation. Two different types of Christians seem to be concerned for these different causes, and indeed two different types of non- or post-Christian. It is not unknown for people who no longer count themselves as 'churchgoers' to be critical of their former church for its social stance becoming 'political' or its liturgical changes as eliminating the 'mystery'. (This, in turn, is something for which theology and theologians must bear not a little responsibility, not only because of what was taught and taught badly, but because of the ways in which Church-State questions have often been neglected, not asked.)

#### *4. A Fresh Theological Framework*

Church-State relations were traditionally treated as relations between two well-defined institutions, a model still influential in contemporary discussion. In fact this was reduced further to relations between the governing bodies of the two institutions, for example, between the bishops and the cabinet, or the pope and king. Such a highly reductionist and misleading model must be set aside, so that Church and State may be set in the larger context suggested by contemporary ecclesiology and politics.

The Church as institution is only one dimension of the Church. It provides a certain basic structure which serves the Church as people, embodying and promoting the transforming presence and power of God in the world. The transforming presence and power is a way of describing the Kingdom which Jesus preached and inaugurated. The Church as people is itself the sign and partial realisation of this presence and power. It is preacher and promoter of Christ's Kingdom to and within the whole of humanity and the world of creation. The Church relates to people and their environment with the promise and power of fulfilment, available within history, to be pursued in history, but only complete beyond history's bounds.

But the Kingdom of God, in Jesus' terms, is preached and promoted in two distinct ways, by way of liturgy and by way of life. In liturgy the Church exposes the fundamental structure and power of the Kingdom, the unity in equality and freedom of all humanity by virtue of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The community which celebrates Christian liturgy symbolises the ultimate community of mankind. This symbolising demands at the same time the witness in life to the ultimately inclusive human community to which we are called by the God of Jesus Christ. Opening humanity up to its originating depth and final destiny, the Church by its worship and engagement in service fulfils its Christ-given mission of bringing the good news of salvation to all.

The liturgical structure of Church and humanity underline the great 'Kingdom-values' of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Such 'Kingdom-values' as justice, freedom and peace have in other forms and language entered into the basic structure of contemporary politics.

Contemporary ecclesiology meets contemporary politics in the converging of scriptural 'Kingdom-values' and current political values. Church and State as institutions relate through their sharing of these values in their differentiated service of humanity. Liberty, equality and fraternity, with their institutional expression in democratic government, human rights and the rule of law, create a philosophy and framework for the State which the Church, as servant of God's Kingdom and its values, may and should endorse, criticise and transcend.

Limited government, with the person transcending her or his citizenship and a society of persons transcending the State and its powers, derives from the very duality (our belonging to two cities) for which Jesus and his martyr followers died. Liturgy remembers and upholds that death and duality. It does so authentically in so far as it is committed to promoting in society, in the wider set of relationships and structures within which all people must live, the personal and communal values called 'Kingdom-values'. Just as the Kingdom exceeds and transcends the Church, so does society exceed and transcend the State. Church and State interact within society and so within history as each seeks to protect and promote the fulfilment of persons in society from different perspectives and with different means. The duality and the overlap have been at the root of many struggles over the centuries. Separation of Church and State or a free Church in a free State, historical slogans for a relationship that goes beyond the Constantinian connexion, do not automatically resolve difficulties such as the Irish ones listed earlier. They may help us to utilize the deeper vision of Church and State as servants of Kingdom and society.

### *5. Irish Divisions and Church-State Relations*

With two State jurisdictions and four (major) churches which do not in their own organisation recognise the political border, the island of Ireland allows for many combinations in Church-State relations. The most significant may be the cultural and political interpenetration between Catholicism and nationalism/republicanism on the one hand and, on the other, Protestantism and unionism/loyalism. All this has tended to produce a 'Catholic' state in the south and a 'Protestant' state in the north. I use inverted commas to stress the qualifications which must attend such claims together with the historical and contemporary complexities of the relations. It is now generally admitted that, while the divisions in Ireland and the accompanying violence are not simply religious in origin, religion plays a significant role in their continuance. So the churches have a responsibility in contributing to the solution of our problems. This must be part, in any event, of their mission to preach and promote God's Kingdom and its values of freedom, peace and justice. In the case of Ireland, where in however limited a way they have contributed to an attack on the Kingdom, the context demands a more committed and imaginative role.

Inter-church relations in Ireland are not only made more difficult by our other divisions, but more urgent. Church-State relations in Ireland cannot be satisfactorily discussed or developed except in a framework of developing inter-church relations. The new ecclesiology, with its emphasis on proclamation and promotion of the Kingdom, could free the churches to be genuine partners in this work. Such partnership in their mission to society would help to liberate their peoples from idolatrous nationalism and unionism, and from the fears which have hardened these originally proper political positions into intransigent or violent idols. The partnership has to be sought at every level and in every area of activity. Partnership in prayer is an essential element in Christian partnership in service of the Kingdom. Its authenticity in turn is related to partnership in the search for freedom, justice and peace in society. Through their institutional leaders and structures, through bishops, priests, ministers and their various assistants and assemblies, the churches will together engage in their work in society for the Kingdom, not instead of nor in competition with the politicians. Rather, they will be promoting the attitudes, relationships and occasionally the structures within which the politicians can build fair, liberating and stable structures. This will be the churches' major contribution to a new set of Church-State relations in Ireland. The serious work has scarcely begun.

#### *6. Law and Morality*

Discussions on Church and State may be quickly reduced to questions of law and morality. How far should a particular moral position be given the force of State law? Issues such as abortion and divorce have caused enormous debate in Ireland, as elsewhere, and readily dominated Church-State relations. These problems remain even in countries where radical changes in law have occurred. From the Church side, important advances in understanding their responsibilities have come with the new insistence on questions of justice and freedom, of human rights and economics, of peace and ecology as moral questions. This has not exactly simplified the churches' task, but it has enabled them to place certain issues in the perspective of the Kingdom, something that was often missing in a preoccupation with sexual or family issues.

The broad scope of Church service to the Kingdom in society will often require a setting of priorities. Not all 'Kingdom-values' can be realised at once or in full. Indeed, they will not be realised completely in history. Which values the churches should emphasise and more strongly promote at a particular time will depend on the context. How far they should seek the backing of State law is also a matter for prudential judgement. Such State law is not a resource of the churches and they must seek to discharge their responsibilities with or without its support.

## **7. Education**

As communities of the Word of God with a divinely given commission to preach the Good News to everybody, the churches are inevitably engaged in the business of education. So it has been from the beginning and so it will be to the end. And in the history of Western education the churches were instrumental, firstly in conserving the higher learning of the ancients, and then, in many cases, initiating the mass education of our own time. All this has been essential Kingdom work. Yet questions arise today, not so much about the value and necessity of the churches' work in education, but rather about the manner and institutionalisation of it. Indeed, with the decline of religious vocations people question the very possibility of it. But that is to take far too clerical a view of the churches and their educational resources.

In the Irish situation the churches might well be advised to examine their present use of educational resources and their relation to the needs of the community. In particular, the Catholic Church might give a lead in initiating debate with other church and state authorities on the vexed question of joint education. This should be understood, however, in a much more comprehensive sense than integrated schools. They could, of course, play a useful, if at the beginning certainly a limited, role for geographical and other reasons. The whole range of educational endeavour, formal and informal, should be examined by the churches together and in consultation with states in order to promote a more liberated, egalitarian and peaceful country. Unless some such initiative is taken, the pressure to exclude the churches from the schools may prove very strong in the years ahead.

## **8. Secularisation**

The exclusion of the churches from the schools would be a very powerful expression of what is usually called secularisation, certainly in the Irish context. The deeper and broader meaning of the exclusion of religious influence and significance from all areas of human living applies increasingly to Ireland, North and South. Its impact on Church-State relations is already evident. One of the parties in the present Coalition Government passed a resolution at its recent annual conference that reference to God in the constitution be deleted. This was not based on anti-religious feeling, as far as one could tell, but on a fairly widely held view that religion is divisive in Irish politics and law.

There is of course much muddle in all this debate. The distinction between Church and Kingdom would itself indicate that the world as a whole is not to be ecclesiasticised in the name of God or Gospel. Incarnation and Redemption affirm and empower humanity and cosmos to be fully human and cosmic. There is a certain secularising thrust within the Christian mystery. Church control may in fact prevent the fuller expression of the mystery. Yet the Church is necessary to keep the world open to the mystery and so to its own fulfilment. Closed

secularism, which is always a danger in secularising movements, renders the world self-destructive. The Church's responsibility is to resist this closed secularism for the sake of the world as well as for the sake of its God. When and where and how to do that is not always easy to determine. The Church can easily make mistakes in resisting a proper secularising move and in yielding to an improper one.

In Ireland such decisions are extremely complicated. In the Republic, where the population is practically coterminous with the membership of one church, the Roman Catholic, it is difficult to avoid turning the Church into a chaplaincy to the State (a sacristy service) or the State into a confessional state. In Northern Ireland the opposing communities may be the captives or captors of the divided Catholic or Protestant Churches. Insistence on the distinctions between Church and Kingdom and between society and State will provide a theoretical framework for freedom for both Church and politics. Spheres in which these distinctions may be applied with profit derive from that other serious set of problems afflicting all Ireland: poverty, unemployment, economic division and forced emigration.

### *9. The Economic Challenge*

The churches have at the level of charitable assistance an honourable record in assisting the poor. More recently, it has become clear that such an assistance was not an adequate expression of their service to the Kingdom. The promotion of structural change to remove the causes of poverty has become a regular aspect, at least of Church preaching and teaching, if not always of its activity. This has created strains in Church relations with the State. This was evident in the run-up to the 1989 Budget and well before. In other countries the strain is sharper still. However carefully the churches move, and precisely because they move at all, they will meet the resentment of some politicians and of the wealthy within and without the churches.

In following its Master in its service to the poor the Church will devote itself to the most needy in society, to their long-term as well as their short-term needs. This is basic Christian duty. It will by this work also keep the society and its members open to the transcendent dimensions of human life which are expressed in the dignity and radical equality of every human being, in the values of freedom, justice and solidarity as ultimately grounded in a transcendent origin and destiny we call God. The challenge of a closed secularism may be most immediately engaged in the search for justice and peace to which Jesus already committed his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. In this fashion also the Church will set the tone for its further relations with the State.