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### **The Influence of the Catholic Church on Modern Irish Society**

Irish people behave in much the same way as people from other Western societies. They work at the same kind of jobs. They are taught the same things at school. They live in similar kinds of houses. They have similar manners and habits. They eat the same foods. They drink the same beer. They watch the same television programmes. They follow the same football matches. They read the same articles and stories in newspapers, magazines and books. They speak the Queen's English. Ireland has moved from the periphery to the centre of Western culture.

But in this vast ocean of similarity the Irish are also different. The traditional image of the Irish, which is sometimes denigrated but which many Irish like to live up to, is of an easy going, happy people who are outgoing and caring; who have a deep devotion to their family, community and Church; and who, compared with other Westerners, have a greater interest in the spirit of things — that is, in being social, cultural and artistic, rather than having a selfish concern for material success. This image is grounded in habitus, in an orientation to life and to people, which, sometimes unintentionally, was fostered and developed by the Catholic Church and was, in part, a result of its symbolic domination of Irish life. The traditional image, like the Catholic Church, is in a period of rapid transition and is blending with a new image. The new image of Ireland is of a Celtic tiger which has the fastest growing economy in Europe. If we are as others see us, then we are no longer, as the English cartoonists used to depict us, the untamed savages of the West. We have become what we always were, a spiritually sophisticated Celtic people who are educated, cultured, disciplined and innovative. In some respects, then, Catholic Ireland is going through a process of assimilation in which the best of the old is being married with the best of the new. There is new self-confidence. There is no longer the same fear. There is a willingness to open and look behind doors which were previously shut tight. The silence that reigned over sex,

pleasure and the expression of oneself has been broken. There may well be a new Irish Catholic emerging from the orthodox cocoon of rules and regulations in which they were enmeshed. But what is the position of the institutional Church? Are the two images of Ireland, which I have represented, two realities passing each other by like ships in the night? Do they correspond to Flannery's description of two generations of Irish priests passing each other on the stairs of their religious house early in the morning, one generation descending to say early morning Mass, the other going up to bed after a hard night on the town?<sup>1</sup>

While there is definite evidence of the decline of the influence of the institutional Church in many fields of Irish social life, it would be wrong to think that Irish Catholicism is dying, especially when the Church still has such control in education. There is no doubt that the institutional religious life of priests, nuns and brothers, as it was thirty years ago, is rapidly fading away. There is no doubt that the absolute religious power of the Catholic Church in Ireland is dying, if not already dead. But we live in a rapidly changing culture in which, increasingly, fundamentalism is being pitted against postmodernism – the absolute against relative truth. It would be a foolish Christian who did not believe in the power of the institutional Catholic Church to resurrect itself.

So what can be said of the religion of the people? In the same way that there was a general movement away from magical-devotional religion in the last century to a more legalist-orthodox way of being religious, so towards the end of this century there has been an ongoing, gradual move away from both of these towards individually principled ethics. Irish Catholics are becoming more Protestant and probably more secular. But it would also be wrong to think that this is some kind of definite, irreversible trend. We live in a disenchanted world, but it could easily be re-enchanted. The different ways of being religious which I have described can be seen as points on a path towards rational, secular society. They can be also be seen as universal elements of being religious which become embodied in specific rites and rituals which are re-enacted and given emphasis at different times. They are points around a circle rather than in a straight line. Irish Catholics are, in Weber's terms, moving more towards an inner-worldly, ascetic type of religion in which people work hard and focus on what is happening in this world. But the residues of orthodoxy and devotionism remain deep with the system. They have been embodied from a young age. They linger in the individual personality as well as the social system and can be reactivated at short notice.

Most Irish Catholics still adhere strongly to the teachings and practices of the Church, and for many their religious life is enlivened with holy water, statues, shrines and pilgrimages. The priest is still treated with respect, but

maybe not with the same awe and reverence as a holy man from a peasant society. His word is one among many. It may be the word of God, but it now has to compete with the word of the media whose messages may not be completely secular, but certainly correspond less and less to the teaching of the Church. It was the dominance of the Catholic Church in everyday social life, but particularly within the family, which was associated with the pious humility of the Irish, their practice of self-denial and the surrender of individual interests to those of family and community. Irish mothers were seen as paragons of Christian virtue who were happy to stay at home rearing their children in the love and sight of God, and who fussed and worried about their husbands spending too much time in the pub. The surrender of self in religious and family life was mirrored in the pub. What made male community life in Ireland different was not so much that they drank more, but the way they drank. Hard drinking is about the elimination of the self. This was done in an atmosphere in which nobody was powerful enough to avoid having their leg pulled. Like the pub, and teasing, many of the practices which make the Irish different, and yet as civil and as moral as other Western people, may be linked to the cultural traits inherited and adapted from Catholic Church teaching. Indeed it is because the Irish became the same as other Westerners in and through the Catholic Church that they have remained different.

In order to explain the position of the Catholic Church in modern Irish society, this study has posed and sought to answer four main questions. What was the nature of the Church's power in Irish society? How has this power been maintained? When and how did its power become established? How has its power diminished? In attempting to answer these questions, I have developed a particular theoretical perspective on the Church and social life in general. I have avoided looking at the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland as being founded simply on people's commitment to a supernatural faith in God and Christ. Instead, I have developed a more sociological perspective which, following the work of Weber and Bourdieu, has examined the field of Irish religion and how it relates to other social fields. The dominance of Catholicism was linked to the institutional structure of the Catholic Church and the strength of its human and physical resources. An understanding of the institutional structure of the Church enables us to understand how it was able to dominate the religious field in Ireland and have such an influence on the way Irish Catholics were religious. But in the heyday of the Catholic Church's power, particularly during the fifty years after the foundation of the state, its influence expanded beyond the religious field into the field of politics, economics, education, health, social welfare, the media and many other fields. The power of the Church meant that it structured not just the religious life of

the Irish people, but their social, political and economic life as well.

Consequently, the strategies through which Irish Catholics struggled to gain cultural, social, political, economic and cultural capital were linked in with living a good Catholic life.

However, this moral power has been declining since the 1960s. Irish Catholics are becoming less influenced by the Church in their struggle to attain power. It is no longer as necessary as it was in the past to adhere to Catholic rituals in order to seem the same and to be treated with respect. This decline in the Church's moral power cannot be separated from the growth in the power of the state and the media. The state abandoned the Church's ideal of a self-sufficient, rural society based on small-scale production in which family, community and religious life took as much precedence as the acquisition of material possessions. From the end of the 1950s the state began to pursue economic growth through increased industrialisation, urbanisation, international trade, science and technology. The growth of the media brought enormous changes to family and community life. It is the media which symbolically dominate the lives of Irish people. The media and the Catholic Church have changed positions. People used to make a trip to read a newspaper, listen to the radio or, more recently, watch television. God, Christ, Our Lady, the saints, as well as their priestly representatives on earth, were more on their minds, in their hearts and on their lips than what was said by Gay Byrne, Gerry Ryan or other media gurus. Instead of going out to the church or kneeling down to say the rosary, Irish families now sit down and watch television. Many of the programmes portray rich, glossy American and British lifestyles in which priests and religion have little or no representation or influence. Television changed the nature of social discourse and practice in Ireland, because watching television in the privacy of one's home became the main family ritual. Television programmes rather than Church rituals became the basis of shared experiences about which people communicated and related to each other. It is now the media more than the Church that form and inform consciences and expand or limit how people perceive the world. It was the development of television, film and magazines which were mainly responsible for loosening the censorship on sex. It was the growth of the media which forced the Church into confessing its sins in public.

The other question which this study has sought to answer is when and how did the Church manage to attain such a powerful position in Irish society, and how this power was developed over successive generations? The growth of the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland cannot be attributed to one or two factors. Rather has it been the result of numerous events and processes coming together over a period of time. One of these was a transformation in the way in which the British state sought to control

the Irish population. There was a shift away from repressive Penal Laws and the systematic attempt to subjugate Irish Catholics, to

softer, more indirect forms of control centred on policing, emigration and education. Once it was realised that the attempt at Protestant evangelism was doomed to failure, and once the reports from various investigative commissions began to be submitted, the state started to hand the task of educating and civilising Irish Catholics over to the Catholic Church. One of the reasons which precipitated this capitulation was that the Irish Church, in and through Rome, was already emerging as a cohesive, bureaucratically organised power bloc, able to challenge and harangue the state.

But again it would be too easy to explain the growth in Church power simply as something which was imposed on an unwilling people by power blocs, in this case the Roman Catholic Church and the British state. Hierocratic power, or the power of priestly religion, cannot be considered coercive in the same way as the power of the state, even though the threatened denial of salvation is often as effective as the threat of death itself in attaining compliance to commands. One of the reasons why the Church was able to attain compliance with its teachings and practices was because it afforded the ability, denied during the Penal Laws, for Irish Catholics to become the moral equals, if not the superiors, of the Protestants who had dominated them for so long. Indeed Irish Catholics are a good example of a traditional people who, in the transition to modernity, place primary importance on becoming the same, as civil and refined as those who have dominated them, but who use a different means — in this case the Catholic Church — to attain that end. In some respects the Penal Laws were a failure in that they made Irish Catholics more Roman and attached to the Church than they might ever have been. On the other hand, they were a success in that once they were abolished there was such an intense interest in becoming as civil and moral as modern Europeans and in creating a Catholic nation-state, that with the exception of the struggle to attain ownership of the land, economic development was of secondary importance. In other words, the abolition of the Penal Laws may have had the unintended consequence of fostering the very economic backwardness which they had been intended to establish among Irish Catholics.

The interest in becoming as moral and civil as Protestants, and in worshipping in large, ornately furnished churches rather than in secluded back-streets (or worse still in the open air) was a major factor in the physical growth of the Church in the first half of the nineteenth century. But the interest in being civilised had much deeper roots. The modern civilising process had been spreading throughout Europe since the sixteenth century. In its early stages, it essentially involved the imitation of the manners and customs that characterised the court behaviour of aristocrats,

by the bourgeoisie and later by other classes. What is coincidental is that the development of this civility involved a moral discipline over passions and instincts which was best achieved through an internalisation of shame and guilt about the body — a process

which, in part, had been developed and exported to the Continent by Irish monks back in the sixth and seventh centuries. The most rationally developed forms of this morality were Puritanism and Jansenism. Now while there is no evidence that Jansenist doctrines were ever preached or adhered to in Ireland, there is little doubt that a Catholic brand of Jansenist practices was imported under the umbrella of rigorism. It is a matter of debate whether this rigorism was Roman or French in origin or whether it was a development within the Irish Church itself. Whatever its exact origins — and again it was probably a combination of all three — this new morality began to develop from the middle of the last century, first in churches and later in schools and homes.

The strict adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church became the means of halting the impoverishment which had been caused by the subdivision of farms. There was little differentiation of time and space in the mud cabins which dominated Irish housing until the Famine. There was a differentiation between animals and humans, but the pig was often given the right to his space since he at least helped pay the rent. It was in and through the church and the school that the child began to take precedence in Irish homes, and the pig was removed to the out-house. The new moral discipline aided the adoption of postponed marriage, permanent celibacy and emigration. These practices became the principal means of consolidating farm sizes and raising the standard of living. Homes, like churches and schools, became well-ordered, supervised spaces in which there was a time and place for everything, and everything was in its proper time and proper place. The transformation in the size, quality and durability of Irish houses during the second half of the nineteenth century involved an internal revolution of time and space centred on body discipline. It was paralleled by an initial differentiation of spaces; of churches from schools; of churches from homes; and, within homes, of kitchens, bedrooms and living-rooms. It was because this initial differentiation of space took place in and through the supervision of the Church, and because the Church continued to be able to determine what went on in schools and homes, that the rational differentiation of social fields in Irish society was delayed and, consequently, the full modernisation of Irish society did not commence until the latter half of this century.

But for all the priests and teachers, the development of the Church and a rigorous moral discipline could not have been attained without the Irish mother. She became the sacred heart of the Irish home. It was she who

inculcated a ritualistic and legalistic adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church. She brought the family to prayer and enforced the Church's code of morality. She was the Church's representative in the home who supervised the moral conduct of her husband and children. She became the living embodiment of Our Lady — humble, pious, celibate and yet fecund. She gave herself to

the Church, and in each succeeding generation produced the religious vocations that sustained the Church. Her moral power in the home was sanctioned by the priests, nuns and brothers that she bore.

The mother maintained her power within the home in the same way as the Church did in wider society. She did the dirty, menial tasks involved in the care of members of the household. She looked after the young, the sick, the elderly, the weak and the distraught. In Humphreys's terms, she 'dominated by affection'.<sup>2</sup> She slaved, especially for her husbands and sons. She encouraged her daughters, as part of their training, to be good mothers, to do likewise. By doing everything for her sons, the mother made them dependent on her. But by limiting and controlling the physical expression of her affection, she inculcated an emotional awkwardness in her children. This denial of the physical expression of affection was a major childrearing practice in the preparation for emigration, postponed marriage and permanent celibacy. The segregation of the sexes, the lack of physical contact between bodies, the denial of emotional expression, the ridicule and teasing about affection, especially in the male bachelor drinking group, partly accounts for the awkward distance between the sexes in Ireland. This also explains the cold and often formal relationship that has existed between husband and wife in Ireland. Whatever possibility there was of a warm, physical relationship, there was little or no possibility of any open, honest communication about sex. This helped perpetuate the high level of fertility which has continued to be a major characteristic of Irish marriages. Only since the 1960s has the reproductive cycle of high marital fertility, maintaining the need for postponed marriage, permanent celibacy and emigration, begun to be broken. It has been broken because women have begun to acquire a knowledge of sex and a control over their bodies which has been instrumental in attaining economic and political power, thereby shattering the bonds that made them dependent on the moral power of the Church.

### *The Modernisation of Irish Society*

Two questions which arise from this study are how did the modernization Irish society take place, and what role did the Church play in the process? The answers to both of these questions are interrelated but depend on what one means by modernisation. If one means the end of magic as a

dominant form of ethical behaviour; the end of people living with and like animals in mud cabins; the beginning of a new control over life and death; the adoption of many of the manners and practices of modern Europeans; and the adoption of a new discipline over the body — then Ireland can be said to have modernised during the nineteenth century and the Catholic Church to have played a major role in the process. If, on the other hand, one means by modernisation the advent of an industrial type of society in which



religion becomes rationally differentiated from the rest of social life, the state becomes separated from the Church, religious belief and practice become a private rather than public affair, the rational choice of individuals in the market place takes over from the pressures of tradition and community to conform; and production and consumption take primary importance over being spiritual — then it might be said that Ireland did not begin to modernise until the 1960s. It might also be argued that the Catholic Church, because of the nature of its teachings and practices, in particular its opposition to materialism, consumerism and individualism, was an inhibiting factor in modernisation and industrialisation of Irish society. In other words, Ireland went through two stages of modernisation. The first stage was the creation of a new class of civilised, educated and disciplined tenant farmers, a latent bourgeoisie. But because this initial stage of modernisation took place in and through a form of external constraint towards self-constraint, operating through a rigorous morality which centred on self-denial, this bourgeois class did not fully realise itself and, consequently, the state remained Catholic rather than becoming capitalist, and agricultural production remained within a peasant subsistence rather than modern entrepreneurial type model.<sup>3</sup> In other words, I am arguing that the socio-religious context in Ireland, particularly the dominance of the Catholic Church's vision of self and society, did influence the world of work and politics (particularly the vision of the state) as well as family and community. However, it should be pointed out that most commentators argue by default (since they rarely give it any space) that socioreligious culture did not have much to do with Ireland's late development as an industrial society.<sup>4</sup>

If it is accepted that modern industrialisation is to a certain extent dependent on the prior and full development of agriculture along the lines of small-scale petty commodity production, then we might ask what were the social and cultural practices that existed in Ireland which inhibited the development of this form of production, and what role did the Catholic Church play in maintaining this inhibition? In other words, accepting the dominance of external and internal economic and political factors, what were the internal socio-cultural factors that may have inhibited Irish farmers from modernising their holdings, capitalists from being more

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expansionary, intellectuals from being more critical and visionary and the state from being more supportive of capitalist economic growth?

Some analysts have emphasised the impact that of socio-cultural factors in Irish underdevelopment. In attempting to explain why more mature capitalist agricultural production developed in Northern Ireland and how, by the end of the nineteenth century, that region became one of the core industrial areas of these islands, some commentators have argued that people in the south were generally more interested in leisure than work. Black, for example,

claims that ‘the people of the north did devote more time and energy to their work and less to fairs and race-meetings, patterns and wakes than did the people in the south.’<sup>5</sup> The implication is that, in the south, being sociable, engaging in collective rituals and surrendering the self to community and tradition had an equal, if not higher, priority to being productive.

Lee points out that there was no shortage of capital in nineteenth-century Ireland but that farmers were inclined to keep it for dowries, to give it to their children for a professional education, or simply to put it in the bank, rather than invest it in their farms. He associates this with Irish Catholics always trying to emulate their social betters, the Protestant upper classes, and says that they were more interested in the veneer of respectability than in developing trade.<sup>6</sup> The traditional lack of respect and support for working class trades may be linked to an obsession which successful farming families had for getting their children into professional employment — or at least non-manual work — and the extent to which this was reinforced through the classical education given in the schools run by priests, nuns and brothers. Larkin attempted to draw a more direct link between the interest in social and moral respectability and economic underdevelopment. His argument was that capital which could have been invested in enterprises was directed towards the Church. He claimed that in the second half of the nineteenth century the Catholic Church absorbed almost 15 per cent of the surplus available over subsistence for the Catholic population.<sup>7</sup> However Kennedy has argued that, far from inhibiting economic growth, the Catholic Church made a positive contribution:

The Catholic Church was itself a major consumer of goods and services. It had strong linkages to enterprises in the local economic context. By raising the level of economic demand for such services as building and maintenance services, as well as requiring steady supplies of food and food products — outputs which, on the whole, could only be provided by native industry — it is quite probable that the Church contributed to economic growth rather than the reverse.<sup>8</sup>

Whatever the merits of this Keynesian economic argument, more important from the perspective of the present study is that Kennedy goes on to claim that the intensive and systematic propagation of Catholic

Church teachings did not have any major effect on the modernisation of Irish agriculture. He argues that although high marital fertility ‘might be seen as increasing the economically dependent proportion of the population and as straining the productive resources of the country’, this cannot be linked to the Church’s prohibition on forms of birth control since ‘the people of nineteenth century Ireland possessed neither the desire nor the techniques to practise family limitation.’ He also claims that there was a ‘relative autonomy of the religious and economic spheres’ which is evidenced by the fact that ‘the growth of piety was paralleled by a growing consumer consciousness, rising material

expectations, and a ruthless commitment to land possession, almost irrespective of the human costs involved.’<sup>9</sup>

My argument is very different. I maintain that the ethos and teaching of the Catholic Church were the reason why contraceptives were not legally available until 1979 and that the desire to have large families was exactly because married people, but particularly mothers, operated within a Catholic habitus in which there was an inherited predisposition reinforced by other women towards having children. It is not enough to say that Irish fertility was so high simply because Irish people wanted to have children. The question is where this desire came from and how it was maintained over generations. I have argued that the image women had of themselves, and the way they lived their lives, cannot be separated from the Catholic Church’s image of women. But, more importantly, I argue that the type of personality — the understanding that people had of themselves, their hopes, their felt needs and desires, their interpretation of what it was to be good person was constructed within a Catholic habitus.

In his analysis of twentieth-century Ireland, Lee dismisses the idea that the Catholic Church or Irish religiosity had anything to do with Ireland having the least impressive economic performance in Western Europe. He argues that the ‘image of Ireland as an island sublimely submerged in a sea of spirituality carries little conviction’ and that the real cultural explanation for lack of economic growth was not that we were not opportunistic materialists, but that we were lazy and inefficient.<sup>10</sup> Lee goes on to blame what he refers to as a possession mentality (holding onto land, possessions and jobs) rather than a performance mentality (making enterprising use of resources) among the Irish. He links the persistence of this habitus not to the Catholic Church but to the failure of Irish intellectuals, particularly those working in the social sciences, to provide the necessary critical reflection which would have formed the basis for a vibrant civil society.<sup>11</sup> But again, we have to ask what socio-cultural forces created and maintained a possession mentality among the Irish, and why it was that social critique remained underdeveloped for so long.

Fahey follows a somewhat different line. He argues cogently, using America as a primary example, that there is no necessary opposition between a society being religious and being modern and industrial. However, he accepts that the Irish Church ‘was committed ideologically to a rural fundamentalism which was suspicious and fearful of the industrial city and it glorified the family farm and the little village as the pillars of social and economic life.’<sup>12</sup> But he does not say if this fundamentalism had an impact on Irish modernisation. Other analysts have pointed out that the distinctive combination of religious orthodoxy, family based production, and the Church’s unrivalled prestige and legitimacy, resulted in the goals of state policy being by and large those of the

Church. A consequence of this was that the Catholic education system remained unsuited to the needs of a modern, industrial economy.’<sup>13</sup> Daly has shown that the Catholic vision of Irish society being founded on spiritual ideals of frugal comfort lived out in the fellowship of family, friends and neighbours was a central feature of Irish political philosophy up until the 1960s. She insists that ‘while cultural attitudes may not provide the major explanation for Ireland’s poor economic performance, ideals did influence policies and, indirectly, performance.’<sup>14</sup>

The argument here is that up to the 1960s and in many cases after then, religious belief and practice were often not rationally differentiated from economic and political activity. If it was differentiated it was quietly at the level of practice, but what was done economically and politically was within the ethos and rhetoric of the good Catholic life. There was a sacred Catholic canopy which hung over most aspects of Irish life. It could be bypassed in what was done, but not in terms of what was said. But the impact of Catholic values and practices was primarily through social and political activity. The constant invocation and support for surrender to God and the Church, for the surrender of the self to family and community, and for the good life being one of humility and self-denial became ingrained in the hearts and minds of Irish Catholics. It became their second nature to put themselves down. This had a direct impact on people not seeking success and considering their success to be undesirable and unjustified. Even if people were ambitious and successful, they had to deny continually that they had done so deliberately. The state may have decided in its economic policies to pursue unashamedly economic growth and success. But the residues of Catholic culture lingered for longer in the Irish collective consciousness, in their view and understanding of the world and of what constituted the good life and a good person.

Surrender to Church, family, community and nation — the daily life of Irish martyrdom — created a disposition in which people were not encouraged to think for themselves. In the same way that in religious life salvation was not in one’s own hands, but was attained through adherence to the

Church, so too in political life people were dependent on persuading local and national politicians to get things done for them. In the same way that the priest was seen as the mediator with God, the politician became the mediator with the state. In the same way that if people put faith in the priest it was believed he would lead them into heaven, so if people put faith in the politician, it was believed he would get them all kinds of pardons, permissions and pensions. Flannery describes the link between God and state, priest and politician as follows:

The notion of God at that time was one of a severe distant being, pure and undefiled, and not easy to approach. The average Catholic regarded themselves as unworthy to approach and be heard by this God. They needed somebody ‘holier’

than themselves to speak on their behalf. In an uneducated society this notion of having someone to intervene for you with the people in power was common. Politicians, with their clinics, played the part in secular life. Religious and priests filled that need with God. People came to them with their worries, problems and sins, and asked for their prayers. Because religious were believed to live a particularly pure and good life, God would listen to them.<sup>15</sup>

There is, then, a link between the decline in the image of and trust in the priest being holier than thou and the decline in the image of and trust in the Irish politician being honest and incorruptible. In moving away from the Catholic Church and thinking morally for themselves, Irish people are no longer as much dependent on priests and politicians and no longer see them as the great heroes in and saviours of their lives.

But it is argued that the impact of the Catholic habitus has lingered longest and still has most impact on the way Irish people view and understand themselves and socially interact with each other. The residues of Catholic belief, thought and practice are still to be found in Irish people's immediate orientation to denying, surrendering and putting themselves down. This is reflected in the humour, banter and repartee of Irish social life. It revolves around strategies which reinforce the belief that nobody is bigger than the social group, family or community to which they belong. Those who 'get beyond themselves' are saved through a generally gentle but sometimes harsh strategy of teasing and ridicule. It is, of course, the ability of the Irish to surrender themselves to the collective conscience and consciousness of the group which brings a unified way of seeing and interpreting the world; and which gives them such a strong sense of purpose, meaning and identity and enables them to let go and enjoy themselves. But, I argue, the origins of this social self lie back in a series of institutional changes and social processes and strategies which have their origin in the nineteenth century.

In this book I have argued that the teachings and practices of the Catholic Church did have a significant influence on the economic outlook

and performance of Irish people, but that this influence was rooted not just in ideals but in the Irish habitus and the practices of family and community life. It was through a rigid disciplining of the body, which was propagated in and through the Church, that Irish farmers embodied the discipline that was central to increased production. It was through a rigid adherence to Church teaching on sexual morality that Irish mothers were able to inculcate in their children the type of stem-family practices which were essential to the consolidation of farm sizes and an improvement in the standard of living. These practices centred on the inculcation of piety and humility and the systematic surrendering and denial of self. This strategy would have worked except that each successive generation of couples who did marry continued to have very high levels of fertility. This necessitated ongoing strategies such as postponed

marriage, permanent celibacy and emigration. Lee is partly correct when he argues that the Irish were as materialist and economically strategic and calculating as any other European. But he fails to recognise that they were materialist and calculating in ways which the peculiar socio-economic environments necessitated. When he states that 'few peoples anywhere have been so prepared to scatter their children around the world in order to preserve their own living standards', he reveals something crucial about the nature of Irish society and the calculating materialist strategies which people adopted to create a decent standard of living.<sup>16</sup> How was it that successive generations of Irish farm families ended up encouraging, if not enforcing, emigration as a strategic means of maintaining a decent standard of living? Emigration was a strategic solution to what had become a peculiarly Irish problem of persistent high levels of marital fertility.

I argue that the Catholic Church had an important influence on Irish modernisation and, consequently, on developing the type of social relations associated with mature capitalist societies. Because the Church played a crucial role in the initial phase of modernisation, it came to have a dominant influence in the sphere of family life, particularly in relation to mothers and, simultaneously, in the relations between husbands and wives, the level of fertility, the circumstances and manner in which children were reared and the resulting type of personalities which emerged. The role the Church played in this first period of modernisation meant that its influence in social, political and economic life continued to grow and develop late into the twentieth century at a time when in more mature capitalist economies, the role of religion and churches in social life was being systematically reduced. This dominance manifested itself in two ways. At a structural level it meant that the Church maintained control of important fields such as education, health and social welfare. This meant that the Church had a crucial influence on certain aspects of state policy. It meant, for example,

that up until the 1970s middle-class schoolchildren received a classical rather than a scientific education and that contraception did not become widely available until the 1980s. It was this Catholic version of what was the good life which had a significant impact on political and economic life. The absence of mechanisms of fertility control, combined with a lack of knowledge or communicative competence about sex, maintained a high level of marital fertility among Irish women until the 1960s. The high level of marital fertility not only increased the economically dependent proportion of the population, but led to the persistence of a labour intensive form of agricultural production. The persistence of large families was also characterised by a need for a set of child-rearing practices which inhibited self-confidence, ambition and achievement. These became extended into practices such as teasing and ridicule which became established within the wider community. These practices prevented the development of an economic individualism that is the

prerequisite for modern Western risk-capital production. The curtailment of individuality, combined with an unquestioning obedience to the Church, led to what Hutchinson has called 'a dominance of familial and social conformity'.<sup>17</sup> It was a rigid conformity that led to, and maintained, an interest in social prestige that was equal to, and sometimes greater than, economic and political interests. In other words, as well as having an influence in the social structure of Irish society, the Church had considerable influence on the Irish habitus, that is the way Irish people saw and understood themselves and the family, community and society in which they lived. The Church was instrumental in creating and maintaining the understanding of what was a good man and woman and what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. In many ways, it was because the Catholic Church was responsible for the initial modernisation of Irish society that Irish Catholics became legalistically moral rather than secularly civilised. It was not until a new urban bourgeoisie achieved dominance, and through the state broke free from the shackles of rigid moralisation, that men and, in particular, women broke free of the Church's image and understanding of themselves, that Catholics unashamedly began to express themselves in languages and practices which did not conform with Church teaching and, to openly seek and recommend sensual pleasures and material comfort.

The long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism is, then, drawing to a close at the end of the twentieth century. A transformation is occurring in present-day Irish society as dramatic as that which occurred during the middle of the last century. The monolithic Church which brought a holistic view to Irish social, economic and political life is beginning to fragment. The days of the unquestioned moral power of the priest are over. The awe, reverence and obedience which the priest enjoyed during the heyday of

holy Catholic Ireland have begun to dissipate, sometimes into open disregard, sometimes in open hostility. At the end of the first edition, I went on to say that 'Irish Catholics are still a long way from publicly criticising and challenging priests and bishops' The events of the last ten years are testimony that this is no longer the case. The media have driven a stake into the heart of the institutional Church from which it will recover, but never fully. It is unlikely that we will ever see the likes of the Catholic Church's moral monopoly again. Not only do the media symbolically dominate public and private life in a way that is far more pervasive and effective than the Church ever achieved, but it is the media which calls the Church to come to it to give an account of itself. One of the main problems facing the Church, as Peillon pointed out fifteen years ago, is that it no longer has a vision of the future of Irish society. It has never managed to adapt its social philosophy to the needs and interests of contemporary Irish society. It can hold firm to its traditional conservative teaching based on the Natural

Law, or it can try and adapt its message to suit the needs of a more Protestant, secular, liberal, pluralist society. The Church in general is facing a dilemma which has been growing rapidly in recent years; how to contain all the different, divergent trends which have appeared within it and yet maintain itself as a monolithic, multinational organisation? In Ireland, the future power of the Catholic Church will depend on its ability to reconcile the demand for an adherence to its rules and regulations as the criterion of Church membership with the more Protestant do-it-yourself type of ethic which is becoming dominant among the younger generation.

A related problem for the power of the Catholic Church in Ireland is the increasing demand for status by the laity. The shift from a legalist to an individually principled ethic has led at some levels to disaffiliation from the Church; at other levels it has led to a demand for more power by the laity. The days of a rigid, hierarchical division between the permanent, celibate members of the Church and the laity to whom they ministered, are coming to an end. The recent decline in vocations and, consequently, in the number of religious personnel, has necessitated the incorporation of some members of the laity into the inner core of power. But an increasing role for the laity threatens the organisational cohesiveness of the Church as a power bloc, especially at a multinational level. It could threaten not just an acceptance of papal infallibility, but of the rules and regulations by which the universal power of the Church has been maintained. It could lead to a Protestant-style situation of sects and churches doing and saying their own thing. It is this threat which has led to the recent Ultramontane campaign of Dr Connell which in many ways is similar to that waged by Cardinal Cullen in the last century. Yet the reality is that this campaign will alienate 'lapsed' Catholics even further.

The Catholic Church in Ireland is also threatened by the encroachment of the state into areas in which it previously held a monopoly, especially the provision of education, health and social welfare services. This is not to suggest that the vast organisational network of schools, hospitals and other institutional buildings will not continue to be a major aspect of the Church's power, but it is to suggest that the more there is a revolt by 'lapsed' Catholics against the power of the Church, and that the less dependent the state becomes on the Church for legitimating and maintaining its power, then the more likely it is that state financial support for these institutions will dwindle. The state will continue, as it has been doing, to set up its own schools hospitals and welfare systems. Catholic institutions will be forced increasingly to rely on private, necessarily middle-class, support. Until now the Catholic Church in modern Ireland has received support from every economic class. The Church was able to educate and legitimate the position and possessions of the rich, and discipline and compensate the poor for their lack of possessions. In the days when the Church dominated



education, when the media were there to support and not to challenge the Church, and a rigid adherence to the rules and regulations of the Church was the dominant ethic, these inequalities in wealth and power were easily explained and justified. However, the more withdrawal of state funds forces the Church to depend on private support, and the more the supporters of liberation theology side with the poor and oppressed (whose poverty and oppression is often caused in part by an exploitative bourgeoisie within their own Church), the more the cohesion and unity of the Catholic Church in Ireland will continue to fragment.

There was a time, until quite recently, when there was a unified, holistic view of life in holy Catholic Ireland, in which the Church put forward a vision of an ideal society of saints and scholars. It was a vision of a democratic, decentralised society in harmony with nature in which the interest in materialism and economic growth was limited by a sense of spiritual well-being centred on Church and family. The non-rational acceptance of the values on which this vision was based depended on people being content with the possessions and positions they held. It has been the state, and the science and technology by which the state has sustained economic growth, that have done more than anything else to destroy this vision. In accepting the rational differentiation between religion and politics, between what the Church does and what the state does, the Church has lost the possibility of maintaining a unified holistic vision of Irish society. A holistic view of society may be necessary for the salvation not just of Irish society but of all human societies and living species. But for such holism to become a reality the Church needs to challenge the power of the state directly. It also needs to challenge the media which, like the Church itself

formerly, are increasingly attaining the position of being accountable to none other than themselves. More importantly, the Irish Church will have to transcend its interest in an unquestioning, legalistic adherence to its rules and regulations. It must adopt an ethic of individual responsibility, leaving behind its obsession with sexual morality and individual salvation to embrace an ecological ethic of global responsibility and, perhaps, the salvation of the earth.

## NOTES:

### Chapter 10. The Influence of the Catholic Church on Modern Irish Society.

1. Tony Flannery, *The Death of Religious Life?*, Dublin: Columba Press 1997, 44.
2. Alexander Humphreys, *New Dubliners*, New York: Fordham University Press 1966, 20.
3. For a detailed analysis of this dimension to the development of Irish agricultural production, see D. Hannan and P. Commins, 'The Significance of Small-scale Landholders in Ireland's Socio-economic Transformation', in *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland*, 79—104; D. Hannan, 'Peasant models and the understanding of social and cultural change in rural Ireland', in *Ireland: Land, Politics and People*, ed. P. J. Drudy, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982, 14 1—65.
4. See, for example, D. O'Hearn 'The Irish Case of Dependency: An Exception to the Exceptions?', *American Sociological Review*, 54 (1989), 578—96; Raymond Crotty, *Ireland in Crisis: A Study in Capitalist Colonial Underdevelopment*, Dingle: Brandon Books 1986; Eoin O'Malley, *Industry and Economic Development: The Challenge for the Latecomer*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 1989
5. R.D.C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817—1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1960, 157.
6. J. Lee, 'Capital in the fish Economy', in *The Formation of the Irish Economy*, ed. L.M. Cullen, Cork: Mercier Press 1968, 62.
7. E. Larkin, 'Economic Growth, Capital Investment and the Roman Catholic Church in Nineteenth-Century Ireland', *American Historical Review* LXXII (1967), 874.
8. L. Kennedy, 'The Roman Catholic Church and Economic Growth in Nineteenth Century Ireland', *Economic and Social Review*, X (1978), 52.
9. Kennedy, 'The Roman Catholic Church', 55.
10. Joseph Lee, *Ireland 19 12—1985*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1989, 521—2. However, Lee later notes that the relationship between the spiritual and the material is not straightforward and 'requires exploration of surgical delicacy'. Lee, *Ireland 19 12—1985*, 650.
11. Lee, *Ireland 1912—1985*, 390ff, 650.
12. T. Tony Fahey, 'Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland', in *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland*, ed. John Goldthorpe and Chris Whelan, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1992, 262.
13. Richard Breen, Damian Hannan, David Rothman and Christopher Whelan, *Understanding Contemporary Ireland*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan 1990, 108,138.
14. M. Daly, 'The Economic Ideals of Irish Nationalism: Frugal Comfort or Lavish Austerity?', *Eire/Ireland*, XXIX.4 (1994), 79.
15. Flannery, *Death of Religious Life*, 47.
16. Lee, *Ireland 19 12—1985*, 522.
17. B. Hutchinson, 'On the Study of Non-Economic Factors in Irish Economic Development', *Economic and Social Review*, 1(1970), 528.