

'Religion in the public square: a personal paper submitted to the Church Action on Labour and Life (CALL) network of the Church and Society Commission of the Conference of European Churches'

by

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I am well aware that what follows is a superficial treatment of a very complex matter which we in Ireland must seriously take to heart. For decades, the people of Northern Ireland have been preoccupied with the acute problems stemming from a deeply divided society, while the Republic of Ireland, emerging from a dependency relationship with Great Britain and following a period of revolution and civil war, was coming to terms with the responsibilities of national sovereignty. Addressing the question of 'pluralism' among *Christians* was the most urgent task in both parts of Ireland. New and compelling issues now face us all.

Since 1922 the island of Ireland has comprised two political jurisdictions: Northern Ireland (about one fifth of the island), which is part of the United Kingdom, and the Republic of Ireland, which is a sovereign state. However, the Irish churches minister throughout the island, members of the Roman Catholic Church forming a majority of over 90% of the population of the Republic, while in Northern Ireland the Protestant population forms the majority-about 55 %.

The written constitution of the Republic opens with an invocation of the Holy Trinity 'from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred.' The constitution does elsewhere, however, appear to imply the separation of church and state. Nonetheless, given the overwhelming numerical strength of the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic,

and the effectiveness of that church's discipline, social legislation and social mores in the Republic, especially where family matter such as divorce and contraception were concerned, have, until comparatively recently, been strongly influenced by Roman Catholic teaching. Because Northern Ireland has experienced since the 1940s the benefits of the British welfare state and of a largely free education service, and it is only in more recent years that social welfare provision in the Republic has begun to match that in the United Kingdom, society in the two jurisdictions has developed along separate lines.

A convergence has been in process in recent times. This is due to several factors affecting the Republic in particular. The economy of the Republic has made huge advances, recent setbacks notwithstanding, enabling the state to intervene to a much greater extent in social provision. Whereas in the past health and education services in the Republic were largely dependent on church effort, mainly, but by no means solely, under the auspices of the Roman Catholic Church, this extremely high church profile in social provision is in decline. Again, because of immigration to Ireland, partly, but not exclusively from within Europe, the Republic has become a much more diverse society than had traditionally been the case, bringing about a situation where the Muslim population is the third largest faith community after the Roman Catholic Church and the (Anglican) Church of Ireland. A further agent of change has been the revelation of grave shortcomings in the past in the Roman Catholic Church's response to serious abuses in some church-run institutions, so that that church's influence may not be what once it was.

In an endeavour to meet such a transformation of society in the Republic, the government has initiated a consultation process whereby it intends to meet with representatives of the churches and other faith communities on a regular basis. However, as with the citizens' initiative provided for by the

Lisbon Treaty, this Irish initiative will in large measure depend on the churches themselves if it is to bear fruit.

Some commentators would claim that the Republic of Ireland has had a considerably less developed sense of 'civil society' than was to be found in most other countries of northern and western Europe and that this owed much to the traditional status of the churches. Now, the social cohesion that the churches provided has to some extent diminished. Which is not to say that the role of the churches is redundant: if anything, they are more necessary than ever at a time of economic and social turbulence, and of much questioning of hitherto accepted social and economic doctrines.

It has sometimes been implied that changes in society in the Republic have made it increasingly 'secular, or 'materialistic' (though whether or not these terms are interchangeable is debatable). Some voices in Northern Ireland would claim to discern a similar 'secularisation' there, and that Northern Ireland is 'post-Christendom', though not necessarily 'post-Christian'. The political settlement achieved by the Belfast Agreement of 1998 has profound implications for the development of civil society in the traditionally divided communities of Northern Ireland, and fresh opportunities are presented to the churches. This 1998 accord brought about a power-sharing administration in Northern Ireland whereby unionist, republican and nationalist parties participate in government, and has also removed historic impediments to co-operation between the governments of Northern Ireland and the Republic.

On both parts of the island there are those who would attribute the changes that have overtaken Ireland, both north and south, very largely to membership of the European Union., and we should not underestimate the importance of the role that the European Union has had in changing society, especially in the Republic, and not least where the rights of women and certain social minorities are concerned. Likewise, we should bear in mind that the founders of the movement towards European unity, such as Jean Monnet, and some of its leaders to-day, stress that it is not only a common market,

but also a union of values. It would, therefore, seem a priority for the Irish churches to proclaim that they too are concerned with the preservation of values, not power. They are, themselves, part of civil society, and though less influential than heretofore, rather than abdicating from a leadership role they must seek all the more to proclaim the values of the Christian gospel, and to provide society with their unique ministry.

There are, of course, diverse ways in which the churches can exercise this ministry. Perhaps the most obvious is by providing Christian ministry in hospitals, schools, universities and prisons, which is still very much the case in both Irish jurisdictions. Sometimes such ministry, usually in the form of chaplaincies, is funded by the state (occasional complaints about this being voiced by those who perceive it as an infringement of the separation of church and state). Sometimes, the churches themselves provide the funding.

Church leaders continue to have the opportunity to remain influential at public policy level. But nowadays the churches can also be seen to be more alive to the need for credibility at community level, and at a time of increasing unemployment they see the need to address the needs of those who have no work place as well as of those who do. In the inner-city areas of Belfast and Derry they are initiating community-based projects to relieve the unemployed. ‘Christians Against Poverty’ is an organisation which helps those who are confronted by spiralling debt, and there are parishes that provide subsidiary organisations available to the entire community. Again, the Church of Ireland (with which I am most familiar) has appointed a chaplain to minister to the anticipated needs of the ‘Titanic Quarter’, a massive housing, business and education project in east Belfast. There is a Diocesan Employment Bureau in Dublin, and at least one Dublin parish provides an employment centre where counselling and practical advice are forthcoming. Similar examples could be given of social outreach in other parts of the country.

The churches seek to contribute to public discourse through their publications, addressing issues such as alcoholism, unemployment and the challenges posed by an unprecedentedly plural society. Sometimes these publications are focussed on problems common to both north and south, but on occasion they have one or other of the two jurisdictions specifically in mind.

Legislative proposals by governments tend first to appear as consultative documents, and it is vital that these should be subjected to a theological critique, such as is to be expected from the churches. A highly visible means of entering public discourse is through responding to official publications, whether emanating from London, Belfast or Dublin. Sometimes in partnership churches regularly respond to invitations to comment on official discussion papers on issues of public importance. This has also been the case from time to time where EU matters are concerned, most recently on the ‘citizens’ initiative’ provision, and it is necessary continually to stress to our members the importance of engagement with Brussels where so many policies affecting the daily life of our society now originate. A working-group which is ultimately responsible to the General Synod of the Church of Ireland exists to promote such engagement with the agencies of the European Union.

The unprecedented rate of transformation now encompassing society world-wide, and in which Ireland is caught up as never before, demands an equally unprecedented effort of imagination on the part of the Irish churches if we are to see opportunities rather than impediments in an ever-changing social, physical and intellectual environment.