

# RELIGION IN IRELAND

## FROM HUMAN SETTLEMENT TO THE PRESENT

*Daltún Ó Ceallaigh*

Evidence we have for the beginning of human habitation in Ireland puts it about 12,500 years BP.♦ The earliest signs of religion date back approximately 6,000 years in the shape of dolmens, apparently signalling a belief in an afterlife, which had probably been the case for millennia previously. Later constructs such as New Grange (c 5000 BP) indicate sun worship as the main religious focus. This form of worship continued as part of Celtic theology when the Gaelic order began about 2,500 BP.

Religion, as now, did not only deal with the theistic, but also with at least a de facto code of morality. This evinced a society which was freer in certain respects than that which came to be promoted afterwards by Christianity. It was apparent, among other things, in the right of women to divorce and a liberal attitude to sexual behaviour. While Christianity eventually became the predominant religion in Ireland, what Christians call paganism did not disappear completely and persisted to some extent in the minds and lives of people. In fact, that is still true to this day.

As for the arrival of Christianity in Ireland in the 5th century CE and its subsequent expansion, albeit often nominal, acquiescence in it was a regressive

development. What was thus introduced was a guilt-ridden and neurotic influence in the life of the people. One began with original sin, proceeded through life as a transgressor, constantly begging forgiveness and doing penance, in the hope of eventual salvation so that the promised life after death would be spent in heaven rather than in hell, although there was a strong likelihood



that a sentence would first have to be served in purgatory. In other words, humans are born evil rather than good. And that is the basic philosophical dichotomy which has constantly had to be chosen from throughout history.

Christianity is thus a life-denying and depressing creed which has only recently been put into serious retreat in Ireland. There are those who claim to be joyful and fulfilled 'in Christ', but, where this is actually the case, it is difficult to see it as being because rather than in spite of the core teachings of the faith in question. Moreover, there are

too many examples of the psychological damage which has been done to several people in order to regard this scenario as generally credible.

The next major development for religion in Ireland occurred in the 16th century CE. It was then that Reformation Protestantism began to arrive on the island. However, this was not a purely religious occurrence, but was largely a consequence of colonization whereby the native Irish were dispossessed of their land by Protestant planters from Scotland and England. For those who were committed to the Reformation in purely religious terms, this was counter-productive as Protestantism and colonialism were seen by the natives as two sides of the same coin. Therefore, it could be said, from a sincere Protestant point of view, that colonialism possibly undermined the Reformation in Ireland. And, from then on, the religious question in the country was not merely one of belief and unbelief, but also of inter-communal sectarianism.

To some degree, even Protestant theology was co-opted in order to justify the colonial project. That is to say, planter Protestants were the predestined elect and the native Irish were the predestined damned; one could thus steal their land in good conscience.

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♦ Recently revised to 33,000 years.

Furthermore, in human terms, Catholics were viewed in a racist way as superstitious savages in thrall to the 'Whore of Babylon' (the Pope). As we all know, the traces of that phenomenon unfortunately persist to this day.

Apart from the effect of gradual demographic change in Ireland on religion, the next significant development was probably the growth of ultramontane Catholicism in the latter part of the 19th century. This led to the advancement of an authoritarian and domineering Catholicism regarding the faithful and, in particular, to an intensification of a puritanical ethos which seemed to concentrate mostly on sexuality. (Although, ultramontanism also looked askance at the advance of republicanism with secularism as seen lurking not far behind it.) It also had the regrettable consequence of a counter-sectarianism in attitudes towards Protestants who were seen as destined for hell because they were outside the 'One, Holy, Roman, Catholic and Apostolic Church', i.e. the 'true' church. On the political front, the campaign for Catholic emancipation, which was realised in some measure in 1829, had reinforced the juxtaposition of Catholicism and nationalism.

It has only been in the past 50 years or so that Christianity in Ireland, in both its forms, has begun to noticeably wane. There are probably a number of reasons for this.

Generally, there are three conditions for the decline of

belief in religion. These are material security, enhanced education, and scientific mentality.

Material security refers to the situation whereby a society allows nobody to starve, while usually still being far from eliminating poverty. This contrasts with the life-threatening destitution which tragically can yet be witnessed in many parts of the world where religion clearly fills in as the opium of the people.

Enhanced education refers to going beyond the three functional 'r's of reading, 'riting and 'rithmetic, at least by providing for compulsory secondary education and, preferably, free third level study.

Scientific mentality tends to grow out of the preceding situation whereby one is increasingly inclined to seek a rational and evidenced explanation for things rather than a fantastical one.

These conditions have largely come to obtain throughout Ireland in the course of the last half-century, as in the rest of Western Europe. There is a reasonable if not wholly adequate level of welfare. Free secondary education was introduced in the Republic in the Sixties and, latterly, free third level education has become available there as well. It is also discernible that people nowadays are more inclined to in effect think scientifically than has been the case heretofore. The overall state of affairs is also influenced by mass communications, both within the nation and internationally.

Census data and sociological research clearly signal that people have moved markedly away from religious belief.

We have commented before on what we call total belief, partial belief, and nonbelief. To briefly recap, total belief refers to the comprehensive acceptance of church teaching, partial belief to disengagement ranging from as little as disagreement on the likes of contraception to just a vague endorsement of a hazily understood god, and nonbelief obviously refers to the simple rejection of all religion.

As stated elsewhere, the most striking statistic recently in this regard was the 66% vote for what was in effect abortion on demand within a certain timeframe in the referendum permitting provision of same. That percentage was obviously made up of partial and non-believers in indeterminate proportions.

One of the most notable changes that has occurred in people's lives as a result of religious decline has been sexual liberation. The repression of the erotic has always been a crucial element of Christianity. It finds its main roots in Gnosticism, about 2000 years ago.

This saw the world in terms of a duality of good and evil corresponding to the spiritual and the material respectively. And sexuality in this outlook came to be regarded as the ultimate in the materialistic and sinful. One of the most famous adherents of this perspective was the prophet Mani with his followers being described as Manichaeans. And

one of the most famous adherents of Manichaeism was Augustine of Hippo, otherwise known as St Augustine. When Augustine adopted mainstream Christianity, he brought into it his Manichaean predilections. He may have been a bit of a boyo in his youth, but he was determined that none of us who accepted Christianity would have that respite.

The outcome of this anti-eroticism was to establish sexual neurosis as a key component of Christianity. The sexual instinct is the second most powerful instinct in humans, the first naturally being that for survival. The sexual instinct is of course necessary for the reproduction of the species which is why it is

such a potent factor in our lives.

However, humans, as in other responses to nature, have not accepted sexuality as confined to biological purpose and thus just a matter of reproduction, although such mechanical adherence to this dogmatically naturalistic position is seen as adherence to god's commands by Christianity.

Beyond reproduction, sexuality, or more precisely the erotic, is viewed by humanists both as a simple source of mutual pleasure and, more profoundly, the ultimate in the expression of love, whether or not offspring are intended or result because of it. Indeed, the nearest that one can experience physiologically to a sense of genuine transcendence is in the orgasmic act of love.

One of the most pernicious effects of religion is to encourage a mindset of at least pleasure negation and at worst debasement of the physical expression of intimacy. In fact, if we are to cast off this anti-erotic perversion, we will be returning at last to one of our Celtic roots. Therefore, and also taking account of female liberation in recent times, progress in this area amounts, as paradoxically happens on occasion in history, to us coming full circle.

In summary, Christianity can be viewed as amounting on balance to a damaging experience in the millennia-old history of our homeland. But, at least, in the new millennium, we are witnessing it receding into the past.

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