

# **CHRISTIANITY AND THE JUST SOCIETY**

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At conference on**

## **Church and Theology in the Contemporary World**

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Those who have sought to create the conditions for a just society in Ireland have often faced difficulties. The most prominent casualty in recent memory was Mr Justice Declan Costello. In the 1960's he promoted "the just society policy" in the Fine Gael party and, in so doing, put an end to his political career.

The church itself has been partially responsible for this climate of suspicion. The era of the Cold War was one in which the church took an active interest in anything that even hinted of socialism. As a counterpoint to socialism in Ireland the church has been active in welfare matters for a very long time. We have never had a classic welfare state in this country. What we have instead is what has been described as "a mixed economy of welfare" meaning that significant areas of social provision are the responsibility of the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector has a strong base in Catholicism. Moreover, Catholic social teaching has been very influential in public discourse. This, of course, is not an entirely unique phenomenon. After all it was Harold Wilson who said that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than to Marx.

In the Spring 2001 issue of "Studies" Tony Fahey of the ESRI wrote a very interesting article concerning the change in attitude towards the Catholic Church over a period of forty years between 1960 and 1999. A study by an American Jesuit, Fr Biever, in the 1960's revealed a statistic that would be quite startling today. Over 61% of people questioned in a survey said that they would be willing to do whatever the church told them to do. In the area of welfare over 88% of people surveyed gave a positive response to the question "Does the church do more for the welfare of society than anyone else?" As one might suspect the position had changed radically by 1999 when an EU values survey revealed a huge collapse in support for the church. Nevertheless, more than half of the people surveyed said they had "a great deal of confidence" in the church. It is a much better finding than you might expect. Particularly so when you consider how other organisations fared. Trade unions for instance had the support of only 44% of people surveyed and members of the Dail only 37%.

The problem, of course, is that all of these institutions have suffered in one way or another from the collapse of two great value systems over the period of study. Both Marxism and Christianity have been deserted wholesale. It is amusing at times to compare the latter day pronouncements of many members of the British Labour Party for instance, now in Government, against the utterances of their earlier years. But the collapse of these value systems brings with it an undermining of all forms of solidarity type activities and erosion of collective action of any kind. It is a little scary that more people voted in the "Big Brother" television series than voted in the last British General Election. Interesting too that Jim Callaghan got more votes in the last election he lost than Tony Blair got in his landslide victory last year.

In his "Studies" article, Tony Fahey sought to strike a positive note for the future of the Catholic Church. He compared the very strong position of Christian Churches in the United States with their decline in Europe and concluded basically that they responded better to market conditions. I recall the former Director General of IBEC, Mr John Dunne, making a similar point at a conference in All Hallows College last year when he urged Church authorities to be responsive to the needs of their "shareholders".

In marketing terms both have a valid point. Indeed, the fact that representatives of the Church sometimes take a very strong position on social justice issues is greeted with irritation by members of their flock. In marketing terms it is certainly not always the way to win customers.

However, there is one slight problem in the marketing strategy that is hard to overcome. Modern capitalism works on the basis that the Chief Executive will do everything possible to please the shareholders. The problem with the Church is that it is the shareholders who are responsible to the Chief Executive. And he was fairly explicit about how we are expected to behave ourselves and with particular reference to our neighbour.

Take for example the parable of "The Good Samaritan". It contains a simple message which most of us have no difficulty understanding. It is also true that most of us would like to think that we would act as the Good Samaritan did. After all, a once off generous act is not necessarily going to cost us all that much. It is a straightforward injunction to altruism, is it not?

Well perhaps it is just that but consider, if you will, how the good Samaritan might act if he found a victim of robbery on the roadside, not just once but, say, every second time he made the particular journey. What is he supposed to do about that? Will he not get fed up bringing victims to the inn to be looked after? Will he have the resources to keep paying the Innkeeper? Can he afford the time from his journey to keep doing this? Will he consider why this is happening or will he eventually pass by on the other side?

Perhaps the problem is the result of inadequate policing in the area. Maybe it is compounded by the absence of an ambulance service to help victims of robbers when they are discovered. The reason, maybe, is that the Government does not engage in adequate public spending. It could also be that the ambulance does come but will not take the victim because he does not have any private medical insurance. It may also be that the robbers engage in this activity because they have been driven to desperation by lack of employment.

It may even be that the landlord is an entrepreneur who has a contract with the robbers to provide him with guests for his inn. He may have bribed public officials and the police in order to allow the situation to continue. There may, in short, be no proper governance or political accountability in this particular area.

If any or all of these conditions exist it makes life very difficult for the Samaritan. He cannot continue to fuel this market so he has a choice. Does he try to change the conditions of this society or does he indeed pass by on the other side?

It is interesting by the way that the Samaritan in the story is a foreigner. Jesus put a lot of emphasis on the positive role of foreigners in many of his stories. Perhaps there is a lesson here too in terms of how we look at visitors to our shores.

John Kenneth Galbraith in his book "The Affluent Society" condemned the developing

condition of private affluence and public squalor he observed at the time he wrote it. Forty years later he was asked to update his conclusions in an article for the 1998 edition of the United Nations Development Programme Report. One of the observations he made was that it now seemed to him there was an attitude that being poor was the fault of the poor and that society explained away poverty and injustice in this way. What I think Gailbraith was getting at was that the birth of neo-liberalism elevated personal greed as a value system of its own. It was not always this way. The original works of Adam Smith sought to locate capitalism on a moral platform. This was later stripped out by Hayak and subsequently Milton Freidman and instrumentalised by Thatcher and Reagan. Strange as it might seem, though, some people do see the market as a value system. There was an article in the Financial Times within the last three weeks discussing the question whether the market could be regarded as a religion. It was, I suspect, a little tongue-in-cheek. It would be certainly difficult to sustain this outlook in the post-Enron situation and in the context of the collapse of Argentina, a country that was for a long time an exemplar of the new liberal model.

It is my opinion that the Christian case against capitalism can be stated thus:

- It presupposes that the entire sphere of economic behaviour is regulated by an impersonal mechanism which is beyond the authority of morals;
- Co-operation and not competition is the natural basis of the Christian approach;
- Its reliance on self-interest elevates the moral vice of selfish greed into a supposed social virtue and its stress on striving for wealth and accumulation of goods and capital fosters materialism;
- It excludes two billion of the world's citizens.

In the mid-1970's Ms Bernadette Devlin, then a twenty-one year old Member of Parliament wrote an autobiography entitled "The Price of my Soul". It might seem in retrospect unwise to write an autobiography at that stage of one's life but I recall one interesting observation in it. She said that she could understand how a socialist might not be a Christian but she could not understand how a Christian would not be a socialist. Prima facia, that conclusion has merit. In theory there are many common principles between socialist and Christian doctrine. But the case against socialism, at least in the Marxist/Leninist and Trotskyist variants of it, is that of its propensity for totalitarianism. In other words its disregard for individual freedom. I saw this philosophy in operation at close quarters in North Korea and I would not wish to live under it.

The degree of deregulation of the labour market - one of the central institutions in a market economy - is a litmus test, which shows how far any society allows capitalism to go. There has always been, ever since the Middle Ages, the idea of the just wage, which the Catholic church supported - and continues to support. When Catholic societies embarked on capitalism in the 19th Century they tried to retain the idea of the just wage for the worker, and with it notions of the just price, just profit, and even the just enterprise. They still do, and it's the reason Christian Democratic Parties in mainland Europe as attached as they are to a less raw, more stakeholder-orientated capitalism. What the Americans say instead is that capitalism is opportunity for all and risk for all; if you win that game you get lucky. It is the alternative tradition of Catholic capitalism, social market capitalism, or stakeholder capitalism - call it what you will - that is retreating as globalisation spreads.

It is this difference, I think, which is at the heart of the current debate about the future of Europe. It manifests itself in this country as the argument of "Boston versus Bonn". In essence it is a debate about equality. I recall that Tony Blair was criticised in the Economist, strangely enough, because he never mentioned the word equality. Last week the

current Director General of IBEC, Mr Turlough O'Sullivan, in an article in IRN News also raised the point but in a different context. He said, in effect, that he was fed up of the emphasis on equality in the current partnership process. That everything had to be "equality proofed" whereas it should be "competitiveness proofed". Taken in the context that equality discourse is a sort of political correctness about gender, sexual orientation, race or whatever, in which language is scrutinised and offence taken at the drop of a hat, it is understandable that he would express these sentiments. I think, however, he may be missing a fundamental point. We have achieved great things in this country with our partnership process over the last fifteen years. What we have been less successful in achieving is reducing the level of inequality in our society. By this I principally mean the relative levels of national wealth enjoyed by different social economic groupings within the population as measured by the Gini coefficient. While Ireland had made the transition to being a mainstream European nation in terms of statistical wealth per capita we have definitely not made the transition in terms of its distribution. In that respect Ireland remains very much an Anglo-Saxon country. In my opinion this is our main challenge for the future, to decide what sort of country we want and whether it will be a just society as well as a prosperous one.

The great Scottish Labour Party leader, Keir Hardy, once said that the main question facing mankind in the 20th Century was the choice between God or Mammon. Perhaps it can be said that the great political question of our day is how to combine economic efficiency, individual freedom, and social justice. I think that the modern age has lost the correct balance between these components of the political equation.

In conclusion I would like to pay a tribute to the role of the Conference of Religious in Ireland in the partnership process and particularly its main advocates Sister Brigit Reynolds and Fr Sean Healy. They have laboured consistently within the community and voluntary pillar while many others have moved on to better pastures. They have provided the cement for the community and voluntary pillar - an activity that must be akin to "herding cats at a crossroads". They have had to operate against a background of scandals within the Catholic Church. They have had to endure a degree of resentment of their activities and, in Fr Sean's case at least, a strong attack from the right wing of the Catholic Church in Ireland. There must have been many times when the partnership project seemed like a cold house indeed. If the question for this conference is whether the church should engage in social dialogue or in the partnership process specifically I do not think you need my opinion. It seems to me to be an area in which the Chief Executive again has been very precise in his instructions. You need look no further than the Gospel according to St Matthew as preached at Mass yesterday: *"You are the light of the world. A city built on a hilltop cannot be hid. No one lights a lamp to put it under a tub; they put it on the lampstand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of men, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your father in heaven"*