
Settling old Scores?

Religion, Secularisation and Recent Irish Cinema

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THE DEATH OF POPE John Paul II in April 2005 occasioned a minor but extremely significant controversy in Ireland. The Irish government was criticised in some quarters for not declaring a national day of mourning on the morning of the late Pope's funeral in Rome. This would have brought the country to a standstill, closing all schools, factories, offices and other places of work. Ireland decided, however, that despite the solemnity of the occasion, it must be 'business as usual'. Admittedly, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) did request that employers be sensitive to the wishes of those workers who might want to attend Mass on the day. Nonetheless, in a country once renowned for its devout Catholicism, this was a clear victory for mammon over God. Nothing better illustrates the changes that have occurred in Ireland in the last twenty years than this demonstration of the country's growing secularisation and its now deeply embedded disenchantment with the Catholic Church.

This state of affairs is also reflected in a range of recent films which have explored aspects of Catholic Ireland with a sense of outrage, anger and betrayal that was scarcely imaginable even twenty years earlier. These films have explored and exposed child abuse – both sexual and violent – that was a frequent, if disguised, factor in the Church's domination of education and institutional care in Ireland for most of the twentieth century. (Thus in the archdiocese of Dublin alone, the Church has admitted that more than 100 priests have faced paedophile accusations and more than 350 children have been abused since 1940 [Bowcott, 2006: 22]). More generally, the films have depicted the stultifying and oppressive impact on people's lives in Ireland of an author-



itarian institution that saw no distinction between Church and State and exercised its authority with a dogmatic and rigid discipline. Such has been the uncompromising nature of these films that it is possible to see in them a kind of revenge – a settling of old scores – by the generation of young Irish who embraced secularism by rejecting the rigid laws of their spiritual fathers. These films, in other words, both reflect and are a reflection of the much diminished role of the Church in Ireland today.

The Catholic Church and Irish Identity

IT is useful to reflect on how and why the Catholic Church came to play such a dominant role in Irish life in the first place, the better to appreciate the extent of recent secularisation and the nature of the cinema that it has produced. In a sense, the Church gained its dominant position because it gave the Irish people both moral and practical support in the darkest moments of a shared history of persecution and oppression. This bond has an echo in contemporary Poland, where the Church in general and Karol Wojtyła in particular played a central mobilising role in the struggle of the Polish people against Soviet domination. In Ireland, the bond between Church and people was finally cemented in the 19th century after two centuries in which both suffered from colonial domination and political and cultural oppression.

The state suppression of Catholicism followed a prolonged period of religious, political and military turbulence during the seventeenth century as the native Irish fought to resist the further incursion of English influence in Ireland. The Parliament in London enacted a series of laws between the 1690s and the 1720s effectively outlawing the Catholic Church in Ireland and encouraging Irish Catholics to convert to Protestantism. The Penal Laws, as they became known, were motivated by England's fear that her Catholic rivals in Europe – Spain initially and then France – would use Catholic Ireland as a backdoor into England. Although the Penal Laws also reflected the ideological convictions of Ireland's Protestant masters, they were enacted essentially as a security measure that went with the confiscation of Irish land and the planting in Ireland of English and Scottish Protestant settlers whose loyalty to the English crown could be relied upon. The result was penury for the Irish Catholic peasantry and persecution for the faith to which it adhered with such stubborn resistance.

During the period of the Penal Laws, Catholics were, among other things, debarred from owning weapons, buying land or indeed, inheriting land from Protestants, voting or sitting in Parliament or learning and practising law. There were particular edicts against the priest in the community as the Crown sought to break the bond between the priest and the people. In many parts of the country, Mass had to be celebrated secretly in the wild at so-called Mass stones. Catholics were also forbidden from teaching in or running schools in Ireland and they were also forbidden from going abroad for an education. This prohibition gave rise to clandestine education schools ('hedge schools') often run by the parish priest. The result was that the bond between the people and the priest was strengthened rather than weakened and the Catholic Church took upon itself the task of educating an ➤

increasingly impoverished peasantry. For the next two centuries, education in Ireland remained under strong clerical influence. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the affluent, secularised Ireland of today, the Church's role in education has become a contentious issue. It is hardly surprising either that many of the recent films about religion in Ireland have focused on aspects of Catholic education.

By the time that the final restrictions of the Penal laws were repealed in the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, the shared sense of persecution and oppression had forged a strong, mutually dependent bond between the Irish people and the Church. This bond was to be further strengthened during the horrific years of the Irish famine (1845-49). The Irish peasantry was wholly dependent on the potato crop for subsistence and when most of Europe was hit by potato blight during these years, the failure of the crop impacted on the Ireland more than elsewhere. Famine led to disease and by 1850, over one million people had died in Ireland and millions more had emigrated to Britain and North America to escape the starvation and disease. The Church was again the major institution that gave the demoralised Catholic peasantry both moral and practical support in the crisis and re-established a sense of dignity in a population that was devastated by disease and hunger. When the country emerged from the trauma of the Famine, the Church held sway as the dominant force and as Irish political opinion hardened against its British rulers, Catholicism in Ireland also aligned itself with the rising tide of Irish nationalism.

From the 1850s down to the 1970s the Church influenced all aspects of Irish political culture and through the mediation of the parish priest dominated all aspects of Irish personal and social life. In the words of Tom Inglis, this was the Catholic Church's 'long nineteenth century' during which it controlled public discourse in Ireland 'through a rigid system of physical and moral discipline centred on the elimination of individual freedom' (Inglis, 1987). It

was a very conservative ethos, in other words, an ultramontist version of Catholicism that, despite its strong support for Irish nationalism, aligned itself unquestioningly to the Vatican in all matters of social and moral teaching. After the Famine, the Church gave back to the Irish people a renewed dignity and sense of purpose and helped in the necessary process of modernising the country in ways that helped it to recover from such a trauma. It was, however, a very conservative revolution that it helped to promote, creating a new moral and civil code adequate to a society recovering from a loss of confidence in the previous established order and this essentially conservative ethos was to hold sway for over a century afterwards.

The Church's authority was absolute across a whole range of discourses in Ireland - health, welfare, education, ethics and morals, the latter especially in relation to the family and sexuality. It is interesting, then, but not surprising that in much contemporary Irish cinema that explores the years of this Catholic hegemony, the priest in the community and the mother in the home are the two enduring stereotypes that come in for sustained criticism and revision.

The high point of Catholic hegemony in Ireland was probably in the period between 1922 and the late 1950s, when Church and State were most closely aligned. This hegemony reached its apotheosis in the 1932 Eucharistic Congress when Church and State came together in a public demonstration of Catholic belief and over one million people gathered in the presence of the Papal Nuncio to celebrate Mass in Dublin's Phoenix Park. There were, of course, some more secular, more liberal and even more radical versions of Irish identity being promoted throughout the period of the Church's dominance but these were from marginal, muted and effectively silenced minority voices. When they emerged to challenge Church authority, as in 1951 when a radical Minister for Health in a coalition government attempted to introduce a mild measure of social welfare in a 'Mother and Child' scheme, the Church mobilised to thwart the proposal and indirectly to bring down the government. The proposal was seen as an unwarranted interference by the State into the 'sanctity of the family'— a direct challenge to the Church's authority. The

Church, in other words, attempted to uphold a remarkably narrow and homogeneous single culture – Catholic, Irish, conservative and one in which the Church itself held the dominant position. It promoted a philosophy of 'splendid isolation' and through a rigid system of censorship, strove to repel any incursions from the secular world outside.

From this high point, however, the Church's influence began slowly to wane. The Church itself was changing, of course, and the reforms and modernisation proposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had the effect of making Ireland's ultramontist Church look old-fashioned and out of touch. From the 1960s on, the country went through a period of economic expansion that resulted in steadily rising standards of living and a general rising of expectations. Television encouraged a more questioning attitude to all kinds of authority and helped to spread more secular values. From the 1970s onwards, political and cultural discourse widened as Ireland was integrated more fully into the European community. By the time of Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979, the country had moved a long way from the conservative religious ethos of former times. In an echo of 1932, over one million people again attended the papal Mass in Phoenix Park, but as one media commentator expressed it, 'The pope's visit set Ireland back fifty years – for three days'. Despite the enormous success of John Paul II's visit in 1979, by the early 1990s, racked internally by scandal and buffeted externally by an increasingly wealthy and secular younger population, the Church's decline seemed terminal.

The Cinema and the Church

During the long period of the Church's hegemony in Ireland, very little indigenous cinema was made. For the first fifty years of independence from Britain, the country remained a poor, largely rural and fairly insular society. There was neither the necessary private capital nor the desire on behalf of the State to support a film industry. Although the cinema, like elsewhere in Europe, was the most popular form of entertainment in Ireland at the time, the films screened were mostly American and British and were subjected to a rigid system of censorship that reflected the values of the Catholic Church, especially in regard to sexuality and ➤

moral teaching. As Kevin Rockett has shown, censorship of the cinema in Ireland was the most severe in Europe and was specifically directed at all representations of sex or transgressive social behaviour or to uphold Catholic moral teaching. The Irish censor operated the principle that all films must be available to a general audience and therefore they were cut to excise anything of an adult or morally dubious nature (Rockett, 2005). The films, in other words, were infantilised to conform to the infantilised conception of the Irish people that was promulgated by the Church. In such a hostile cultural climate it is hardly surprising that an indigenous cinema failed to emerge in Ireland.

In the absence of an indigenous cinema, most cinematic images of Ireland and the Irish were made either in Hollywood or by the British industry, right down to the 1970s. American cinema in particular tended to depict Ireland in a sentimental way, conjuring up a dream-like world of rural simplicity set against a romantic landscape. The Catholic Church (usually in the form of the parish priest) was depicted within this bucolic utopia as a central part of an organic community that was close to God and at one with itself and with nature. The cinema's greatest statement of this sentimental Irishness is John Ford's 1952 comedy *The Quiet Man*, even if some critics have argued that the film does exude a self-reflective awareness of its own romantic myth-making (McLoone, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). The film is narrated by the parish priest, Fr. Lonergan (Ward Bond) ('That's me there, that tall saintly man ...' is how he introduces himself in a voice-over). When Fr. Lonergan is introduced to the film's hero, returning Irish-American Sean Thornton (John Wayne), he and the Church are established as central aspects of the this organic community. Fr. Lonergan hears that Sean's mother died in America years earlier and he promises to remember her in the Mass the next day. 'You'll be there, of course, Sean. Seven o'clock', he assumes. 'Of course, I will', Sean confirms.

It's as if the question need not have been asked. Nothing could be more natural, more normal - more organic - than the priest at the centre of the community and in Sean's reassuringly firm response we can see the cinema's most definitive portrayal of 'cultural Catholicism'.

Hollywood cinema more generally has a long history of celebrating, in a mostly sentimental manner, the (Irish) Catholic priest in the community. The most famous and most successful depictions of the priest show him as the central figure in communities under stress, as in Spenser Tracy's Fr. Tim Mullin in *San Francisco* (1936) and his Oscar-winning role as Fr. Flanagan in *Boys Town* (1938). However, cinema's most enduring representation of the Irish priest stereotype is probably Bing Crosby's crooning Fr. Chuck O'Malley in Leo McCarey's *Going My Way* (1944), in which he co-starred with Barry Fitzgerald's irascible Fr. Fitzgibbon and *The Bells of St Mary's* (1945) in which he sparred with Ingrid Bergman's chaste and virtuous, if mildly flirtatious, Sr. Mary Benedict.

This history is interesting because the turn against the Church in Irish cinema was focused on the character of the Irish priest and it is in its treatment of the priest in the community that recent Irish cinema exudes the sense of a nation 'settling old scores'.

The Humiliation of the Priest

A recognisably indigenous cinema emerged tentatively in Ireland during the 1970s. It is hardly surprising that right from the beginning this new cinema should begin to explore aspects of Catholic Ireland. One of the earliest films to do so was Tommy McArdle's low-budget short from 1978, *The Kinkisha*. The film is notable for one extraordinary shot which considerably reconfigures the cinematic image of the priest in the community. The film deals with a young woman in rural Ireland who gets pregnant after having pre-marital sex and is forced into a loveless marriage as a result. In a flashback sequence, Margaret (Barbara McNamara) remembers the visit her parish priest made to her bedside in the maternity hospital after she gave birth. The priest pauses his conversation with Margaret to look around the hospital ward at the other new mothers with their babies. We see the women in a slow, silent point-of-view pan - a shot that suggests the

priest's great distance from, indeed his ignorance of, this world of women, sexuality and reproduction. The celibate priest could hardly be less qualified to offer advice or encouragement to Margaret and twenty five years after the Church precipitated the downfall of a government over the Mother and Child scheme, the cinema eloquently visualises the priest's irrelevance and inadequacy in this world of women. The film, in other words, marks Irish cinema's first attempt to undermine visually the great nineteenth century alliance of priest and mother which Inglis identifies as a crucial factor in building the Catholic 'moral monopoly'.



In *Hush-a-Bye Baby* (1989) Margo Harkin's award-winning study of a teenage pregnancy, the priest's humiliation is at the hands of the adolescent schoolgirls he tries to talk to about the sanctity of marriage. As he blusters through his empty platitudes, the girls very consciously stare at his crotch and begin to giggle. The priest wriggles in embarrassment and shifts uncomfortably in his chair. Once again, the film draws attention to the absurdity of this celibate man talking to the girls about sexuality.

The priest is again humiliated in David Keating's *Last of the High Kings* (1996) this time by adolescent male, Frankie Griffin (Jared Leto). What is interesting about this film is that the Irish mother is also subjected to ridicule. It is a 'rites of passage' and generational conflict comedy set in the summer break between Frankie leaving school and going to university. Part of the process of his growing up is that he must leave behind the things of his childhood and enter the adult world. He must also confront the overbearing presence of his mother. The generational conflict is resolved when Frankie rejects her recidivist Catholic sectarianism (and the priest she brings in to bolster it). Again the alliance that Tom Inglis referred to - between the priest ➤

in the community and the mother in the home - which formed the regulatory core of Catholic Ireland is first ridiculed and then rejected by the film. Ireland, like Frankie, must move on.

Syd Macartney's *A Love Divided* (1999) recreates the political and cultural atmosphere of 1950s Catholic Ireland and documents a famous challenge to the Church's authority. The film is based on real events which took place in the small Wexford village of Fethard-on-Sea in 1957 and which generated considerable national and international controversy at the time. The Church's *Ne Temere* decree insists that a mixed marriage couple can only be wed in a Catholic Church if both parties pledge to bring up their children as Catholics. The Protestant Sheila and her Catholic husband Sean Cloney agreed to this at the time of their wedding. However, when the oldest child reached school age, Sheila changed her mind and sent her children to the local Protestant school that catered for the tiny and diminishing Protestant community. As the dispute between her and the Catholic Church escalated she took the children away into hiding. The local Catholic clergy (including the bishop) responded by imposing a boycott of the local Protestant shops and ostracising the small and vulnerable Protestant community, arguing that this close-knit community must have colluded in the 'kidnapping' of the Cloney children.

At a time when the Irish government was keen to expose the sectarian and anti-Catholic nature of the Northern Ireland state, the brutal anti-Protestant sectarianism revealed by this incident was a particular political embarrassment. The then Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, appealed to the Vatican to have the boycott called off. Forty years later, in 1997, the Church publicly apologised for the boycott.

The funniest and at the same time the angriest humiliation of the parish priest occurs in *The Magdalene Sisters* (2002), an uncompromising study of institutional abuse in Ireland by Scottish actor/writer/director Peter Mullan. The film generated

considerable debate and controversy in Ireland (and also in Italy, after it was awarded the Golden Lion at the 2002 Venice Film Festival). It was dismissed at the time by the Vatican as crude anti-Catholic propaganda but the irony of this is that the film was based on documented testimonies of former inmates of the infamous Magdalene laundries at the centre of the film.

The Magdalene laundries were run by the Sisters of Mercy and became virtual prisons for countless of young women (usually teenage girls) incarcerated there for a variety of so-called 'crimes' (they became pregnant sometimes as a result of incest or rape) or because their simple-mindedness was seen to put them at risk.

One of the most complex and challenging films to have emerged from Ireland in recent years is Neil Jordan's *The Butcher Boy* (1997) – a film that recreates the Ireland of the early 1960s through the traumas faced by the twelve year old hero, Francie Brady (Eamonn Owens). As Francie's home life disintegrates following his mother's suicide and his alcoholic father's death, he is cast into the care of the Catholic agencies. Here, he is subjected to physical and sexual abuse and is victimised by an uncaring and brutal mental health system. In many ways, this is Irish cinema's most complete visualisation of Catholic Ireland at its most uncaring and most hypocritical. Jordan's film most brilliantly brings various elements together in a moving and deeply disturbing portrait of a dysfunctional society on the edge of frustration and violence. In a way, Francie becomes a metaphor for Ireland itself - the abused child of history - wracked by ignorance, guilt, neglect and abuse and descending himself into irrational, psychopathic violence.

The infantilisation of the Irish people, promoted by the Church through the alliance of the priest in the community and the mother in the home, produced this abused child as much as did the Famine and colonialism of an earlier era. *The Butcher Boy* is Irish culture's most brilliantly realised and most disturbing response to this traumatic history and represents the most complete 'settling of old scores'.

Conclusion

The secularisation of Catholic Ireland has been a major factor in the rapid economic development of the country over the last two decades. The indigenous cinema of Ireland has produced a series of subversive

and angry denunciations of the Church, focused on the image of the priest in the community. The cinematic image of the Church represents a kind of revenge - a settling of scores - by an increasingly secular younger population and the diminished status of the Church in the culture of the cinema reflects its diminished status socially and politically.

Two caveats need to be noted, however. First, it is important to remember that the Church still exercises great power and authority in Ireland - in the school system and in health - and that its diminished status can also be exaggerated. The influx, especially from Poland, of immigrant Catholic populations has also reinvigorated the Church as well as the Irish economy and Church attendances are on the rise again.

Second, as Ireland embraces global capitalism and develops an increasingly consumer-led sense of identity, there is now growing evidence - in alarming levels of alcohol consumption and a high suicide rate among the young - that the decline of Catholicism (and of nationalism) has left a kind of moral and ideological vacuum that economic success alone does not fill. Quite simply, the Irish do not seem to believe in any 'grand narrative' at the moment, other than that of hedonism and consumption.

The films that reflect this new kind of national angst are also now beginning to appear, suggesting that success may solve some old problems but that it also brings a set of new problems to replace them.

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