FIANNA FAIL, which first came to power in Ireland in 1932, was largely deferential towards the Catholic Church. The Taoiseach, Eamon de Valera, a devout Catholic of conservative religious views, neither smoked nor drank and “his strictures extended beyond the evils of drink to the evils of jazz, the evils of betting on the races, the dangers from indecent books” (quoted in J.H. Whyte: Church and State in Modern Ireland, 1923-1979, Gill and Macmillan, 1984, p40). As a young man he considered joining the priesthood and claimed that he had a vision of Jesus at Blackrock College in 1928. He also made several public pronouncements which implied that the only true Irishmen were Catholics. The most explicit occurred in his St Patrick’s Day broadcast to the United States in 1935: “Since the coming of St Patrick, fifteen hundred years ago, Ireland has been a Christian and a Catholic nation. All the ruthless attempts made down through the centuries to force her from this allegiance have not shaken her faith. She remains a Catholic nation” (Catholic Bulletin, 1935).

THE 1937 CONSTITUTION
The constitution, BUNREACHT na hÉIREANN, which de Valera introduced in 1937 was heavily infused with religious thought and phraseology. Its Preamble begins: “In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred...Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ, Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial...”. Article 6 states that “all powers of government ... derive, under God, from the people”. In Catholic theory the phrase ‘under God’ means in practice ‘under the Church’, since it is the only authentic voice of God on earth. Article 40 gives a Catholic interpretation of freedom of speech in that the ‘organs of public opinion’ must not be used ‘to undermine public order or morality or the authority of the State’. The publication or utterance of blasphemous, seditious or ‘indecent’ matter is also an offence. Article 44 on Religion begins: “The State acknowledges that the homage of public worship is due to Almighty God. It shall hold His Name in reverence, and shall respect and honour religion”.

De Valera found a useful ally in drawing up Bunreacht na hÉireann in John Charles McQuaid, then Headmaster of Blackrock College, with whom he had established a friendship since the late 1920s. Other inputs came from John Hearne, the legal adviser to the Department of External Affairs, and the Jesuits notably Fr Edward Cahill.

But there is no doubt that McQuaid’s contribution was substantial. Indeed John Cooney heads a chapter in his biography of McQuaid, ‘Co-maker of the Constitution’. McQuaid’s influence was present in the Preamble, in the definition of a nation and the status of private property, and he was also a key figure in determining the constitutional prohibition of divorce and its outline of education and social policy. “Most controversial of all, perhaps, was his input into establishing that the role of mothers was in the home” (John Charles McQuaid: Ruler of Catholic Ireland, p103). In this respect Article 41.2.2 was blatantly sexist: “the State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties within the home”.

One issue where McQuaid did not get his way was in regard to the status of the Catholic Church. Both he and Fr Cahill wanted it to be designated as ‘the One True Church’. De Valera felt that he had to avoid an outcry from Protestants and therefore went with the formulation that “the State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens” (article 44.1.2). In the next section the State recognised other Christian denominations and Jewish congregations. Article 44 was actually praised at the time by leaders of Irish Protestant churches and by Jewish groups. But it only gave the appearance of pluralism. The vague phrase ‘special position’ reads in this context as merely a statement of demographic fact, and in any case Catholic doctrine does not claim the right to political and legal influence on the basis of the size of its flock but on the basis of its claimed objective truth; and yet the whole document is riddled with Catholic teaching on the family, on education, on divorce, on private property, on the limits to freedom of speech and on public morality, and the external reality since 1922 was that the Catholic Church was effectively the state church in all but name.

THE MOTHER AND CHILD CONTROVERSY
This reality was demonstrated by the Mother and Child controversy. In 1948 Dr Noël Browne, a 32-year-old member of the radical republican party Clann na Poblacht, became Minister for Health in the new coalition government led by the Fine Gael leader John Costello. Browne’s parents died of tuberculosis, and he himself had suffered from the disease. One of his pressing concerns, therefore, was to tackle the problem and to this end he began an emergency bed programme, which was...
highly successful, providing two thousand extra beds for T.B. patients in a little over years and getting the death rate from the disease tumbling down from 124 per 100,000 in 1947 to 73 per 100,000 in 1951. However, the infant mortality rate in Ireland was still the highest in western Europe, and Browne proposed to tackle this problem by implementing the Mother and Child scheme in the 1947 Health Act introduced by Fianna Fáil but in abeyance owing to a legal challenge and the government's fall in February 1948. The plan was to provide free anti and post natal care for mothers and free health care to all children under the age of 16 – in short, a partial national health service. It also proposed health education for children and for women in regard to motherhood and free gynaecological care. At the time there was no opposition from any Dáil Deputy, but the Catholic hierarchy did voice its objections in a private letter to de Valera.

Unaware of this opposition, Browne submitted his proposals privately to the Irish Medical Association in July 1950. It opposed the scheme on the grounds that it was a dangerous step towards complete state control of medicine and in any case the treatment was not subject to a means test. Then in September details of the plan were published in the press. On 10th October McQuaid summoned Browne (right) to his palace in Drumcondra and read out a protest letter which the hierarchy then sent to the Taoiseach. It expressed disapproval mainly on the grounds that: it was "in direct opposition to the rights of the family and the individual"; "the right to provide for the health of children belongs to parents, not to the state"; "the right to provide for the physical education of children belongs to the family and not to the state"; the state had no right to give instruction on education in regard to motherhood; and there was no guarantee that gynaecological care would not include provision for birth limitation and abortion, which would be contrary to Catholic principles.

McQuaid also objected to the absence of a means test, according to Browne in his autobiography, asking "why it was necessary to go to so much trouble and expense simply to provide a free health service for the 10 per cent necessitous poor". This weird comment was, as Browne says, "not only wrong, since the percentage involved was 30 not 10, but surely represented a strange attitude from a powerful prelate of a Christian Church towards the life and death of the necessitous poor and their children (Noél Browne: Against the Tide, Gill and Macmillan, 1986, pp159-161).

On 6th March 1951 Browne released a pamphlet outlining the scheme to the press and to all the members of the Catholic hierarchy. There followed several meetings and phone calls between Costello and McQuaid at which the former bizarrely asked permission of the Archbishop to write to Browne. On 8th March McQuaid replied to Browne, repeating his earlier disapproval. On 21st March Costello duly wrote to Browne, telling him that "my withholding of approval of the scheme is due to the objections set forth in the letter to me from the Secretary of the Hierarchy, written on behalf of the Hierarchy, and to the reiteration of their objections by His Grace the Archbishop of Dublin, as Archbishop of Dublin" (J.H. Whyte: Church and State in Modern Ireland, Appendices, p432). The repetition of the titles is a clear indication that the Prime Minister of Ireland was yielding not merely to the hierarchy's objections but to the superior power of the Catholic Church itself.

On 4th April the hierarchy sent a statement to Costello again rejecting the proposals as contrary to Catholic social teaching. The next day McQuaid met the Taoiseach and described the hierarchy's letter as a clear-cut condemnation of socialistic state medicine. Costello later agreed to brief the Cabinet on 6th April. As a result, all except Browne rejected the scheme. Even MacBride, the leader of his party and its other member in the Cabinet, deserted him. Relations between the two were in any case poisonous, as demonstrated by Browne's scathing letter in reply to MacBride's order on the night of 10th April for him to resign from the government. He castigated his party leader for his "two-faced hypocrisy and humbug" and unwholesome brand of politics and recalled the executive meeting at which MacBride had accused him of political 'inexperience' by allowing himself to be photographed with the Protestant Archbishop of Dublin. Browne commented: "this puerile bigotry is scarcely calculated to assist the cause of national reunification which you profess to have at heart" (see Appendices, pp422-423, J.H. Whyte: Church and State in Modern Ireland).

The following evening Costello informed McQuaid that Browne had resigned but had, without permission, sent a long statement to the press. He had actually handed the editor of the Irish Times his correspondence with McQuaid, Costello and MacBride. It appeared in the paper on 12th April along with an editorial headed 'Contra Mundum', which stated: "This is a sad day for Ireland… an honest, far-sighted and energetic man has been driven out of active politics. The most serious revelation, however, is that the Roman Catholic Church would seem to be the effective Government of this country". (Irish Times, 12th April, 1951). Seán Ó Faoláin put it succinctly in the monthly magazine The Bell in the April issue. The case showed that the Republic had two parliaments: "a parliament at Maynooth and a parliament in Dublin… The Dáil proposes; Maynooth disposes. The Dáil had, when up against the Second Parliament, only one right of decision: the right to surrender".

The role of McQuaid in the crisis should not be underestimated. As Cooney suggests, Browne “was defeated
ultimately by the condemnation of the bishops on McQuaid’s official dictation. McQuaid’s detailed notes confirm that from as early as October he effectively stalked the increasingly beleaguered Browne, until he was fully satisfied that he was isolated in Cabinet and was helpless in the face of the vested interests of the medical profession with whose leaders McQuaid dealt behind the scenes” (John Charles McQuaid, Ruler of Catholic Ireland, p273). That role was noted at the time by many Protestants in the north. The writer Sam McAughtry, who lived in the loyalist Tiger’s Bay area at the time, was interviewed by John Cooney, who quotes him as saying: “If you can imagine that the essence of our fears was that Catholic politicians were controlled by their priests, John Charles McQuaid embodied those fears. Before then, McQuaid was unknown to us. In destroying Browne, he emerged from the shadows. He was the Catholic leader” (op. cit. p275).

NOT SINGLE SPIES, BUT IN BATTALIONS

As we have seen, McQuaid was a co-maker of the essentially theocratic Irish Constitution even before he became Archbishop of Dublin. Then for more than three decades in that post from 1940 to 1972 he was a malign influence, imposing a puritanical and intolerant Christianity on Irish politics and society – what his biographer John Cooney has called an ‘austere spiritual terrorism’. Above all, there was an obsession with sex, displayed in the imposition of a strict code of sexual conduct, an opposition to ‘filthy’ books, a snooping on people about their sexual conduct, an obsession with purity, a segregation of boys and girls, an insistence that girls become housewives, an opposition to mixed sports, and so on. The opening up of his archive material in 1997 revealed an Irish version of the East German Stasi: an intelligence system of covert information from his spies in government departments, the medical, legal and teaching professions, the army and the Garda, the Knights of Columbanus, the Legion of Mary and various other ‘collaborators’ and ‘helpers’, as he himself called them, who reported to him on sexual libertines, socialists, Jews, Protestants and any other deviants from Catholic orthodoxy.

What was not exposed, however, was the widespread physical and sexual abuse by Catholic clergy in church institutions that were occurring under his primacy. The Ryan Report on Child Abuse (2009) focused largely on sixty residential Reformatory and Industrial Schools operated by Catholic orders and funded and supervised by the Irish Department of Education. It found that sexual and psychological abuse was ‘endemic’ in Catholic-run industrial schools and orphanages in Ireland for most of the 20th century. It focused on a 60-year-period from 1936 and took submissions from 2,000 people winding down, and were addressed in a supplementary report. It refers to two child sex abuse complaints against him, as well as a separate ‘concern’. One complaint alleges abuse of a 12-year-old boy by McQuaid in 1961. However, McQuaid was not mentioned by name but is described as a cleric who ‘has been dead for many years’. The Irish Times established that the cleric referred to in the report is McQuaid, but these allegations have so far produced no real evidence to back them up.

Like Paisley in the North, McQuaid in the South embodied the tragic irony of Irish Christianity. In contrast to the ‘gentle Jesus, meek and mild’, they epitomised a narrow and dogmatic form of the Christian faith which displayed intolerance and aggression towards its opponents and an iron grip on its followers. In this they symbolised Brian Friell’s judgement of the Irish as a ‘retarded people, divided by similarities’. The sad fact, too, is that this blatant distortion of the kind and peaceful message of Jesus was allowed to dominate each community largely unchallenged. Paisley and McQuaid were allowed to stamp their authority and malign vision on the island and thus gave proof to Lecky’s verdict that “if the characteristic mark of a healthy Christianity be to unite its members by a bond of fraternity and love, then there is no country where Christianity has more completely failed than Ireland”.

Let us now hope that bigoted Ireland’s dead and gone; it’s with Paisley and McQuaid in their graves.

The Big Questions

If swimming develops poise and grace, then what about ducks walking?

Whither Atrophy?

If we’re here to help others, what are the others here for?

Is Karl Marx’s grave a Communist plot?

What is behind the National Front?

Will the 2020 Olympics be restricted to athletes with perfect vision?

If there’s afterbirth, why no afterlife?

Why is there only one Monopolies Commission?

Are EXIT signs on the way out?

Do the Wasps have a Bee team?

If absolute power corrupts absolutely, where does that leave God?

Who is General Failure, and why is he reading my hard disk?

If music be the food of love, why don’t rabbits play banjos?