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Finding Meaning in a Web of Confusion

EAMON MAHER

TOM INGLIS has long been to the forefront in applying the discipline known as Sociology of Religion to the Irish context. The publication of Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland, firstly by Gill and Macmillan in 1987, and then in an updated version by UCD Press in 1998, was a landmark moment in the reappraisal of the dynamic between the Catholic Church and Irish people. Inglis outlined how the Catholic ‘habitus’ in Ireland was so strongly embedded in Irish culture that one could acquire social capital simply by being perceived to be a good Catholic.

However, this moral power has been declining since the 1960s. Irish Catholics are becoming less influenced by the Church in their struggle to attain power. It is no longer as necessary as it was in the past to adhere to Catholic rituals in order to seem the same and to be treated with respect. This decline in the Church’s moral power cannot be separated from the growth in the power of the state and the media.¹

Inglis’ study illustrated how the power wielded for many years by the Catholic Church was dependent to a certain degree on a compliant and poorly educated population being willing to accept without question what their priests told them. With the growing affluence of Irish society in the 1960s, more and more people left the countryside,

¹ Tom Inglis, Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland (Dublin: UCD Press, 1998), 246.

traditionally the bedrock of Catholic piety and religiosity, for the cities, where enhanced independence and more disposable income allowed them to enjoy the sort of social life that would have been unimaginable even a decade previously. Politicians, too, began to realise that the Church's power was starting to wane and that they could assume some of the functions traditionally carried out by priests:

In the same way that the priest was seen as the mediator with God, the politician became the mediator with the state. In the same way that if people put faith in the priest it was believed he would lead them into heaven, so if people put faith in the politician, it was believed he would get them all kinds of pardons, permissions and pensions.²

The cult of the politician has equally been tarnished in recent years, along with professions like lawyers and bankers. It would seem well-nigh impossible for any group nowadays to attain the unbridled control over the inhabitants that was once the preserve of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Inglis was among the first to predict that the fall in vocations to the priesthood and religious life, along with the increased secularisation of Irish society, pointed to a trend that was set to continue.

The visit of Pope John Paul II in 1979 and the huge crowds that came out to see him, did not indicate a renewal of spiritual fervour, but was, rather, the final vestiges of a once-domineering Church. Culturally, Ireland still felt a nostalgic attachment to Catholicism and the newly elected Pope had both the energy and charisma to ensure that those attending the ceremonies during his visit were not disappointed. Divisive referenda on divorce and abortion in the 1980s, followed by the clerical abuse scandals of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, would be the final nail in the coffin of an institution that was showing signs of a serious decline.

In 2003, Inglis wrote a critical account of one of the major events in the social history of Ireland, the Kerry Babies scandal.³ This case

2. Inglis, Moral Monopoly, 254.
3. Inglis, Truth, Power and Lies: Irish Society and the Case of the Kerry Babies (Dublin: UCD Press, 2003). This miscarriage of justice against a single mother, Joanna Hayes, and the tribunal that was set up to investigate the issues surrounding it, revealed that attitudes
revolved around the wrongful charging of a single mother with the murder of a baby who in the end turned out not even to have been hers. In 2008, Inglis published another important study, this time dealing with the impact of globalism on Ireland. So I think it is fair to say, on the basis of his output alone, that Tom Inglis has come to grips with many of the events that shaped Ireland in the latter decades of the last millennium up to the present day. In all cases, the conclusions drawn by the professor emeritus of sociology are insightful, objective and based on scrupulous research.

MEANINGS OF LIFE

Hence the publication of the latest book by Inglis, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance* more than justifies this review article. During the years 2008-9, the author interviewed 100 people from various backgrounds and areas in Ireland in an attempt to discover what they found important and meaningful in their lives. The reports of the interviews all use fictitious names, and the interviews were conducted in five distinct areas to which Inglis also assigned fictitious names:

- Mayfarm, a working-class, inner city area of Dublin;
- Hillbrook, a large country town;
- Castlebay, rural area in the west of Ireland;
- Greyrock, satellite village near Dublin, and
- Falderry, a third-level college in the suburbs of Dublin.

The interviewees were questioned about what would be commonly viewed as key areas in a person’s life: family, finance, politics, sport, religion and love. The results are intriguing on many levels. For example, Angela Doyle, a 41-year-old resident of Greyrock, a commuter town located around Dublin, suffered the trauma of a miscarriage at 20 weeks and a full term stillbirth, events which did not cause her to turn to God as a source of comfort. Instead, it was her husband and family to issues such as sex outside of marriage were still anything but liberal. It is shocking to think that this case happened a little over three decades ago, in 1984.

5. Tom Inglis, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pbk). All future references to this work will be within the text of the article, citing page numbers in brackets.
who helped her through the ordeal. Although she comes from a very committed Roman Catholic family, Angela says: ‘I think I can manage without the Church.’ (p. 5) Nevertheless, she sends her children to a Catholic school and is President of the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA). What emerges from Angela’s responses to the questions she was asked is that she continues to believe in God and reaches out to him through Catholic prayers and rituals. She insists on devising a religion that meets her needs: for instance, she doesn’t much care if Jesus is the Son of God or not, and has an unflinching belief in miracles: she is strongly of the view that God intervened to save her life the time she nearly died in childbirth. Similarly, she prays regularly to Our Lady and St Anthony and is happy for her children to receive the sacraments and be brought up as nominal Catholics. This type of adherence to a certain type of à la carte Catholicism is prevalent among many of those interviewed for this study. Inglis believes that people are hugely affected by their culture or ‘habitus’:

Culture shapes individuals not just through ideas, values, beliefs, and attitudes but also by instilling desires, moods, and motivations. Irish Catholic culture instilled not just a loyalty and commitment to the institutional church and its teachings and practices, but also a view and understanding of what constituted a good life and a good person. People used Catholic language, metaphors, and symbols to develop and maintain a shared understanding of life. (p. 8)

Inglis also asserts that the strong commitment to family and community in Ireland can be traced back to ‘a culture of self-denial’. He continues: ‘The body became the site of penitential practices of repression and mortification. Expressions of self were limited and controlled through external forms, particularly through strategies of humiliation, belittling, and teasing, which led to and reinforced internalized self-restraint.’ (p. 9) Clearly, that culture of self-denial has largely disappeared in a society where the forces of globalisation took root in a significant manner (particularly during the years of the Celtic Tiger) and where the neoliberal economic model, with its underlining philosophy that consumption and the acquisition of material goods lead to happiness, had been warmly embraced. It is not without significance, however,
that Inglis carried out his interviews during the years 2008-2009, when the full force of recession and austerity was being felt by the interviewees. A certain renewal of religious fervour is characteristic of periods of economic meltdown; nevertheless, the move away from organised religion has continued throughout the period of austerity in Ireland.

Speaking of Angela Doyle, Inglis argues: ‘In the 1990s and 2000s, the cultural strategies of many people like Angela led them to mix and match increasing emancipation with many of the rituals and traditions of Catholicism while distancing themselves from the constraining rules and regulations of the institutional church.’ (p. 11) Angela is therefore representative of what Inglis refers to as a ‘cultural Catholic’, someone ‘who, although she embraces a Catholic heritage and “chain of memory”, does not see the institutional church as relevant or meaningful in her life.’ (p. 11) This sums up the position of a huge number of people on the island of Ireland today, who find that what once was a badge of honour (being Catholic) is now increasingly, in the words of Vincent Twomey, ‘more often than not an embarrassment to be reluctantly admitted’.6

‘EXTRA-INSTITUTIONAL’ RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

In her thought-provoking book, Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity (2016), Gladys Ganiel speaks of what she terms the ‘extra-institutional’ nature of religious practice in Ireland. By this she means that people now tend to opt for a model that is ‘outside’ or ‘in addition to’ the Catholic Church. This adds credence to the use of the term ‘post-Catholic’ as a descriptive, empirical concept which involves a shift in how the institutional Catholic Church is viewed. It is no longer embraced as it used to be by the majority of the population, is no longer feared in the same way by Protestants, and it does not wield anything like as much power in the realm of social and political life.7 That said, Catholicism has not disappeared in this country: far from it, in fact.


7. Gladys Ganiel, Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity (Oxford: OUP, 2016). Ganiel’s study is a very welcome addition to the literature available on ‘post-Catholic’ Ireland and is based, like Inglis’s research, on qualitative research based on interviews and surveys.
The owner of a busy shop in Mayfarm, Mark O’Neill, is open about the importance he attaches to his work and family. He feels justified buying expensive clothes for himself and his family, going on holidays, driving a nice car – there is not much indication of self-denial in such actions. Mark claims not to believe in God but, when pressed, seems a lot less sure, saying he finds the local priests very nice, and adding: ‘I’m not overly religious’. (p. 71) He has no problem with the fact that his children go to Mass (one of his daughters sings in the choir) and says that he never prays. For Inglis, Mark can be viewed as a cultural Catholic:

Catholicism is part of his cultural repertoire. He makes use of it not so much for providing an explanation of his life or how to live a good life, but more in terms of it being part of his family heritage. (p. 71)

While it is viewed as being an essential part of their lives, respondents did not usually equate success in life with money.

Collette Philips is a 55-year-old wife of a farmer who works part-time in a veterinary clinic. When asked about how she would rate the importance of success, she replied: ‘To me success is ... to be able to interact with people, you know make friends, not be antagonistic, accept people’s different points of views ... Success in work... ‘. Later, she added: ‘success is probably rearing your family’. (p. 80) This is a recurring trope in the interviews, the importance of their children to parents as a gauge of success. Repeatedly, one reads about how bringing up children well is a prime goal in life, a goal to which all else should be secondary. Making money and becoming wealthy, acquiring social capital by being knowledgeable, artistic, religious and loving, these things, while undoubtedly important in themselves, pale into insignificance in comparison to having a healthy, well-adjusted family.

The chapters on politics, sport and love, although interesting, will not be covered in detail in this article, as they are not as revealing as the core chapter in Inglis’ study, which is devoted to religion. The people interviewed for this study ‘have used and adapted the symbols, teachings, beliefs and practices of the Catholic Church to suit their own ends.’ (p. 123) They are therefore different from the Irish of previous generations who took what the Church said as irrefutable
and did not waver from its dictates. Nowhere is the change so stark as when one examines the numbers attending Mass and the sacraments. Mass attendance has declined from 91% in 1973/74 to less than four in ten in 2008. As for Confession, the numbers are even more stark. Almost half of Irish Catholics (47%) went to Confession at least once a month, according to the 1973/74 survey. Within 15 years (1988/89), this had declined to 18%. Inglis offers the following interpretation of what is happening:

It may be that this represents what could be termed the 'protestantization' of Irish Catholicism, that is, of Catholics devising their own path to salvation: while believing in core Christian beliefs, they do not belong to the church or participate in its rituals and practices in the same way as in previous generations. (p. 125)

At the same time as some practices show a significant fall in participation, it is noticeable that others such as Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmations, church weddings and funerals are still extremely popular among the Irish. (p. 125). Inglis distinguishes between different categories of Catholics: orthodox, cultural, creative and disenchanted. Among his sample, 43 of the 90 who were brought up as Catholics could be classified as traditional or orthodox. They may have some misgivings about some of the Church's teachings, but they refrain from too much critical reflection: 'It was as if they had a bagful of catholic beliefs, values and practices, which they were adept at using to create and maintain the meaning and purpose of their lives.' (p. 126) Interestingly, Brian Doheny, a 66-year-old priest, when asked what happens when one dies, replied:

All being well, all the little knots and pains and aches will be gone and I'll be back to pastures fresh and lovely when we need nothing, when everything is just relaxation and calm and delight. (p. 134)

He wasn't too sure about the notion of hell, figuring that 'you'd want to be really, really a bad apple to get left out' (p. 135) by an all-loving God. The clerical abuse scandals caused much pain to Brian, who had to endure being spat upon and insulted during a trip to Dublin when wearing his Roman collar. The days of priests being moral policemen is
long since gone and even many orthodox Catholics are no longer afraid to criticise certain aspects of Church teaching. One wonders now the extent to which the Church still has a role to play in being the moral conscience of Irish Catholics, even orthodox Catholics, any more.

Maisie Finnerty, a 44-year-old single mother with two children, is a good example of a cultural Catholic. She declares she does not believe in God and has not been to Mass in a long time. Notwithstanding, she has held on to certain customs: ‘Like I’ve my own prayers, I say my own prayers, I’d always bless myself and like I have a cross in my house, I got my house blessed and all.’ (p. 142) Inglis supplies what I consider an excellent explanation of how cultural Catholics distance themselves from what used to be called ‘the simple faith’ and its attendant rituals. For them, ‘Being Catholic is less about salvation and getting into heaven and more about identity and a sense of shared meaning, bonding, and belonging.’ (p. 143) The more the Church loses its influence over families and schools, the more a Catholic habitus will continue ‘to give way to more personal, privatized ways of being spiritual and moral.’ (p. 144) This will possibly open up more opportunities for creative Catholics who would be more susceptible to ways of being spiritual and who are not afraid to consider new ways of reaching out to the transcendent. This category take various parts of the Catholic faith and its rituals and link them to different traditions.

DISENCHANTED

Disenchanted Catholics accounted for 21 of those surveyed and are described thus: ‘They have little or no identity with God, the church, or being Catholic. Many neither believe in core church teachings nor have any sense of belonging to the church.’ (p. 147) Some female participants were old enough to remember how they were deprived of access to family planning, and the time of women being committed to Magdalen laundries if it was discovered they had engaged in sex outside of marriage. It was an era which left women filled with guilt about their bodies. Clearly such experiences left them disenchanted and disillusioned with the Church. The successful businessman Brian Mason figured that the Church kept people in fear and ignorance far too long, with the result that they were afraid of everything.
In his conclusion to this section, Inglis remarks an increase in personal belief in preference to belief in institutions. He feels that Catholic Ireland has become secular, with the result that the Church's influence is no longer nearly as marked as it once was. Increasingly, the power of the media in civil society has meant that the messages being transmitted are more likely to encourage unbridled hedonism over asceticism, money over charity, individualism over the collective. It is difficult for the Catholic Church to get its message across in such a changed environment. The digital age is one of instant gratification, of strong visual images, of sound bites and slick advertising logos. In such a setting, the Church seems outdated and uninspiring even to those who continue to attend its services and believe in its teachings.

What Inglis argues in his study is that increasingly religion is just one of many options when it comes to enjoying spiritual enlightenment. The webs of meaning can sometimes appear to be strangely contradictory and confusing, as the old certainties disappear to make way for what will ultimately replace them. It is fitting to leave the last word to Inglis himself, who concludes this wonderful study in the following manner:

There is not any one, true universal meaning to life. There are many truths. Inasmuch as it is difficult to discover the meanings of our own lives, we can never discover the meanings of the lives of others ... We can only approach them and develop an approximate understanding. But unless we try to understand them, we can never understand ourselves. (p. 192)

Such commitment to understanding is a fittingly Christian approach, is it not?