

Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland

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I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion . . . Religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world in all its branches . . . So, although the form of religion remains, the spirit is swiftly vanishing away (John Wesley, as quoted in Weber, 1958: 175).

Introduction

MAX WEBER, more than most, credited religion (especially ascetic Protestantism) with a part in creating the 'tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order'. But echoing the prescient thoughts of Wesley, he also gave classic expression to the view that the economic order which Protestantism helped create had by his day lost the spirit of religion and had become based instead on the technical and economic conditions of machine production. The culture of the machine and the spirit of religion, in his view, were simply incompatible, and the triumph of the former had made the latter irrelevant to economic organisation in the modern industrial world. Weber's linkage of industrialisation with secularisation became a commonplace in subsequent social theory. Technical rationality, large-scale urbanisation, the decline of community, institutional differentiation and other social changes associated with industrialisation have been widely viewed as inimical to religion and as responsible in particular for a long-term decline in the place of institutional Christianity in the western world (for characteristic statements of this position see Acquaviva, 1979 and Wilson, 1982).

However, this view of the fate of Christianity during industrialisation does not tell the whole story. Ireland, and particularly Catholicism in Ireland, seems to have had a somewhat different experience, and the purpose of this paper is to assess how real and wide that difference was. But Ireland was not the only exception. The broader picture of the western world offers many contradictions of the view that industrialisation was generally antithetical to religion. If we are able to grasp properly the peculiarities of the encounter between Catholicism and industrialisation in Ireland, we first need to get a better sense of what the broader picture was.

General Patterns

In Max Weber's lifetime, many parts of the western world were experiencing a religious boom of sorts. This took the form especially of a surge of growth in the main Christian churches in much of western Europe and North America. Protestant churches were invigorated by waves of revivalism and evangelisation, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and the Catholic church achieved new levels of organisational strength and popular adherence. In Britain, all the churches thrived in the second half of the nineteenth century: 'membership, attendance and related series indicate that in the major churches organisational expansion continued to the eve of the First World War' (Gilbert, 1980: 76). In Weber's own Germany, the Catholic church flourished in an unprecedented way up to the end of the Weimar republic, not only in the traditionally Catholic south but also in places such as the Rhine valley and the Ruhr district where industrialisation was most intense (Sperber, 1984). In the United States, the emerging giant of the industrial age, Christianity 'came to the mid-twentieth century on a rising tide' such that in 1961 the 'proportion of the population who were members of the Christian churches was higher than in any other year in the nation's history' (Latourette, 1962: 135). The success of the Catholic church in the United States was especially striking. From a base of 6.25 million members in 1880 (just over 8 per cent of the population), the Catholic church grew to nearly 44 million members in 1963 (roughly 23 per cent of the population), with its main support base in the working and middle classes in the highly industrialised north-east states (Dolan, 1987: 139; Hennessey, 1981: 175). Church attendance remained high—about 70 per cent of Catholic adults in the U.S. attended church regularly in the mid-1950s, according to Gallup surveys at the time (Hennessey, 1981: 287). And church organisation continued to expand until the mid-1960s: between 1954 and 1965, the number of religious sisters in the American Catholic church rose from 158,000 to 181,000, the number

of brothers rose from 8,700 to 12,500 and the number of priests rose from 47,000 to 60,000 (Hennessey, 1981: 287). Generally within the industrialising west—that is, in addition to Africa and Asia where western colonialism presented the Christian churches with new opportunities for missionary expansion—the first century of industrialisation in many ways enhanced rather than retarded the position of institutional Christianity.

The paradox is that the vitality of western institutional religion in this period, though real, does not contradict the idea of secularisation as a feature of the industrial age. In the Victorian era, secularisation and ecclesiastical vitality went hand in hand, a paradox summed up in the heading used for the 1850–1914 period in Bihlmeyer's *Church History*: 'Church grows stronger; Increasing secularisation of state, society and culture' (Bihlmeyer and Tuchle, 1966, vol. 3). Church growth took place within a framework of institutional differentiation such that larger, better organised churches were but one dimension of the increasing size, scale and organisational complexity of the social system as a whole. It was thus possible for churches to expand and popular religious practice to become more regular and disciplined even while religion lost influence in major areas of cultural and intellectual life (especially science) and in the major institutions of state (Dobbelaere, 1987: 117–118).

In addition, church expansion was uneven. In some regions, rural as well as urban, Christianity weakened steadily. France in the nineteenth century, for example, became a patchwork of intensely Catholic and intensely secular regions; with no easily discernible logic in the resulting patterns of affiliation. An area such as the Limousin region, which was poor, rural and mountainous, was as firmly on the anti-clerical, secular side as the the left-leaning working classes in the big cities. In Spain and Portugal, the important contrast in religious terms was not between urban and rural but between the devout north and the anti-clerical south (McLeod, 1981: 54). Other social cleavages were also reflected in the unevenness of church growth. Women became more devout than men, though in some areas the gender gap was much wider than in others. Class divisions between workers and the bourgeoisie were sometimes reflected in differential attitudes to religion, though the nature of the differences varied from place to place. Working class religiosity was strong in many areas, so that the idea that the working class tended to reject organised religion as a bourgeois device is as often wrong as it is right (McLeod, 1981).

As well as being socially and regionally uneven, religious growth was limited by time. As the twentieth century progressed, church expansion, Catholic as well as Protestant, gradually slowed down, halted and turned into decline—though even this temporal pattern had many variations and

some apparent exceptions (examples of which can today be found in eastern Europe). Gilbert (1980) identifies the First World War as the turning point in Britain, the 1930s or the 1940s might be thought of as more decisive in other western European countries, while in the United States the crisis (for the Catholic church at least) did not arrive until the 1960s. Most indicators today, especially those related to church membership and attendance, suggest that 'de-christianisation' is now far advanced in many countries, particularly in western Europe.

However, though ecclesiastical contraction is now common in most of western Europe and North America, so was the growth of the Christian churches which preceded it. This suggests that in these regions industrialisation was accompanied by a curving trajectory within institutional religion, beginning with a phase of rapid (albeit uneven) ecclesiastical expansion from around the mid-nineteenth century onwards, followed by a levelling-off period which in most cases occurred sometime between 1900 and 1960, and followed in turn by a decline of varying steepness up to today. The present-day sociology of religion has given little attention to the first phase of this evolution—the spurt of church growth which took place within the first century of industrialisation—as it has concentrated on developments since the 1940s. De-christianisation provided the impetus for the revival of sociological interest in religion in the 1950s and placed questions about how far industrial society had killed off religion at the centre of interest (Beckford, 1990; Dobbelaere, 1987). Some sociologists disagree that western society in recent decades can be assumed to be more secular simply because the traditional churches are contracting. Religious sentiment may survive in 'civil religion', as Bellah (1967) has argued, or as privatised 'invisible religion', as Luckman (1970) has claimed, or indeed Christianity may not be dying so much as migrating to a separate, narrower realm of modern life (on this argument see Dobbelaere, 1987: 117–118). However, a certain kind of secularisation has undoubtedly occurred, in that the indicators of churchly religious adherence which became so strong in so many western countries since the early nineteenth century have now almost everywhere shown a decline.

No satisfactory theoretical explanation has yet been provided either for the general shape of the religious growth curve since early industrialisation or for the many local variations in that curve which can be observed across the regions and social groups of western Europe and north America. Theoretical interest has concentrated on the ways in which industrialisation has been inimical to organised religion, though even this interest has tended to focus on the centres of industrial expansion and has not examined how negative effects have spilled over into rural hinterlands and peripheral regions. Countervailing positive influences which fostered

religious expansion in both core and peripheral regions have attracted less attention, though it is clear that these positive influences were as much a part of industrialisation as the negative ones. This is shown nowhere more clearly than in the appeal of religion to the migrating populations in nineteenth and early twentieth century industrialisation—among European ethnic groups migrating to North America and among rural-to-urban migrants within Europe itself. For many such groups, churchly religion acquired a significance and vitality in their new urban-industrial settings that it had in some cases lacked in their traditional homelands. Churchly religion in these circumstances was important not only as a psychological bridge between the old and the new, a stable reference point in the midst of change, but also as a practical institution which provided social contacts and a system of supportive services in unsettled urban communities. Churches, especially the Catholic church, were rich in organisational and ritual resources. These gave to churches a range of strengths in responding to local communal needs which secular systems often lacked and which gave the churches the capacity to complement, and sometimes compete with, secular systems as objects of loyalty and identification. The Catholic church especially deployed this capacity both in the evangelisation of new urban populations and in the revival of its position in older rural hinterlands (for overviews, see Dolan, 1987; McLeod, 1981; for sample case studies, see Sperber, 1984; McLeod, 1989).

Churches in the industrialising world thus were not simply struggling survivors of pre-industrial peasant piety, though their pre-industrial roots and traditions were important. Rather they were creative, adaptive institutions playing an active role in shaping the new order. Weber may have been right in saying that the economic order of the nineteenth century was no longer open to religious influence in any fundamental way. But the same was hardly true of the political order in the age of Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, of the Dreyfus affair in France, of the conflict over the papal states in Italy, of the politics of church versus chapel in Victorian Britain, of Protestant triumphalism in the United States. Nor was it true of social organisation when religion provided a reference point for communal solidarity and ethnic identity during the migratory upheavals and cultural dislocations of the industrial era. In many ways, therefore, the question to be asked is not just whether in the West in recent decades industrialisation has killed religion—or even institutional Christianity—but also how the development of industrial society interacted with the remarkable growth in organised religion which preceded the recent decline and which provides the benchmark against which that decline is measured.

The Irish Exception?

It is against this background that religion in Ireland is of interest.¹ No doubt at one level, Ireland attracts attention simply because it has stayed so Catholic for so long. Irish Catholics today practise their religion with exceptional regularity and in exceptional numbers and, on some issues at least, pay more attention to the teachings of their church than in any other western country. In everything from sport to education to the mass media, Irish society accords a prominence to the church and to religion that makes the image of the post-Christian society an exaggeration if not entirely irrelevant. However, Catholicism in Ireland is equally interesting because of its typicality. Although there are differences in timing and degree, it too shows signs of the standard expansion-contraction sequence which has been a feature of so much of institutional religion in the west in the last hundred and fifty years or so. For Catholicism in Ireland, the expansionary phase ran from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth. That expansion has certainly halted in the last two decades or so and, despite the continuing importance of the church in Irish society, there are significant signs of incipient decline. Only time will tell how far or how fast that decline will proceed, and so we shall have to wait and see if the full sequence will be run through.

But much of the sequence—the expansion and levelling-off stages—has already happened. That gives us a country-level case-study of the dynamics of ecclesiastical expansion and of its relationship to the development of industrial society. Ireland itself (or at least the Catholic part of it) could hardly be called industrial in the narrow sense for much of the period in question. Economic output and employment were dominated by family farming, the bulk of the population lived in the countryside and small towns, and such heavy industrialisation as occurred was concentrated in the mainly Protestant north-east (particularly Belfast). On the other hand, Ireland since the industrial revolution was closely integrated into the international capitalist economy. It was a major supplier of emigrant labour to the burgeoning industrial centres of Britain and North America; emigrants' remittances regularly have amounted to a significant level of its

¹ This paper focuses on Catholicism in the Republic of Ireland. As a result, the religious situation in Northern Ireland, both on the Catholic and Protestant sides, is referred to only in a marginal way, even though it is closely intertwined with that of the Republic, both historically and at the present time, and is equally relevant as a case-study of religion in industrialising societies. However, the differences between the two regions, both in their religious life and in their experience of industrialisation, are great enough to justify concentrating on one at a time, as far as that it is possible, and this is the course taken in the present paper.

national income; its domestic economy was until recently geared very much to the production of agricultural commodities for the British market; and its consumption patterns have long relied on the importation of finished industrial goods. Internally, the concentration of industrial development in the north-east of the island became a major influence on social structure and political developments. Because of the pervasiveness and importance of these external and internal links, industrialisation thus had direct and immediate ramifications for Catholic rural Ireland as well as for places like Belfast, Coventry and Pittsburg, though rural Ireland experienced these ramifications as a peripheral rather than a core region of the industrial system.

And of course Christianity in Ireland, especially Catholicism, was also part of an international system. Indeed, the Catholic church as a whole in the nineteenth century came the closest of any church at any time, Christian or otherwise, to being a world church. From a vigorous European base (and in addition to its large but in some ways organisationally weak presence in Latin America) it built up a powerful position in North America and Oceania in the nineteenth century, made substantial inroads into Africa and expanded its bridgeheads in China, India, Japan and other Asian countries. The Irish church was a notable force in this international expansion of Catholicism. It retained a strong sense of its membership of an international ecclesiastical community not just because of its allegiance to Rome but also because of the 'spiritual empire' which its floods of emigrant priests, religious and laity had fashioned around the world. Irish Catholicism thus encountered industrialism not as a small isolated religious tradition facing up to an overwhelming revolution in international economic and social structures, but as a branch of a powerful, international ecclesiastical system which it proudly proclaimed to be the universal church.

The interaction of religion and industrialisation in Ireland, therefore, was not a discrete national experience constructed in isolation from developments elsewhere. Nor is it a recent experience dating only from the spurt towards internal industrialisation in the Ireland of the 1960s. Rather it was a local variant of patterns that were widely echoed elsewhere and that were in constant evolution since the industrial revolution. Sperber (1984: 292-294) suggests that Ireland in the nineteenth century provides the outstanding example of a model of Catholic revival which was quite widespread throughout central and northern Europe at that time. The north-west region of Germany, studied by Sperber, was characterised prior to 1850 by a debilitated, disorganised Catholic church, lax religious practice among an impoverished, rapidly growing rural population, strained relations with a hostile Prussian state and a Catholic bourgeoisie

heavily influenced by enlightenment secularism. Following a rural subsistence crisis in the 1850s, the region was marked by rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, fed in population terms by high levels of rural to urban migration, along with a Catholic revival in rural and urban areas brought about by a reassertion of clerical leadership, a transformation of popular piety in both cities and countryside towards new, disciplined religious practices and an accommodation between the church and the Prussian state. In this case, then, Catholic revival began with a disorganised church struggling to administer to an over-burdened rural subsistence society and generated out of that a revitalised, more streamlined church successfully finding its place in a rapidly changing, newly integrated rural-urban social system. The generality of such a revival model in Europe and North America may be open to question. The reason for its success in some areas and its failures in others, along with the widespread crisis which has affected it in recent decades, may also be hard to specify. But echoes in the Irish situation are fairly obvious and invite us to consider Irish religious history since the nineteenth century not as an exceptional case on the fringes of Europe but as a reflection of tendencies that were closely tied to broader patterns of social and religious change in the contemporary west as a whole. We shall look in turn here at the Catholic revival in Ireland since the early nineteenth century and at its levelling-off since the 1960s, before returning in the final section of the paper to the question of the exceptionalism or otherwise of the Irish experience in the context of general patterns in the industrialising West over this period.

The Catholic Revival in Ireland

The revival and expansion of Catholicism and the Catholic church was a major feature of nineteenth century Irish history, affecting politics, culture and social structure. The revival was such that by 1880, 'the Catholic church was beginning to take on some of the characteristics of an establishment' (Corish, 1985: 226), even though it was not then and never became an established church in the legal sense.

As in other regions which experienced a Catholic resurgence, Catholic revival in Ireland was founded upon the restructuring and revitalisation of clerical organisation. The Catholic church in most dioceses in Ireland in 1800 was in a disorganised, weakened state following the anti-Catholic penal laws of the eighteenth century. Priests were scarce, church buildings poor or non-existent, clerical discipline was lax and diocesan structures were in disarray, with the result that the day-to-day pastoral functions of the church were performed poorly or not at all. By 1900, parish and

diocesan structures had been thoroughly restored and the Irish church as a whole had been brought under firmer allegiance to papal authority. The number of priests had increased from 1,850 in 1800 to almost 3,500 in 1900, despite rapid population decline over the latter half of that period. A surge of church building also in the latter half of the nineteenth century had equipped every Catholic parish with at least basic centres of worship. All parish clergy by then were equipped with a narrow but effective training for pastoral work and were subject to thorough episcopal control. The church was not a significant owner of land or commercial property but rather derived its finances largely from popular subscription, thus strengthening the ties between church and people. The clergy were drawn mainly from the middle classes in the small towns and countryside and identified closely with the concerns of their largely rural populations, but even in the largest towns and cities church presence was strong. By the early twentieth century, the supply of priests had begun to exceed the domestic needs of the Irish church and thenceforth was sufficient to man a steadily expanding missionary effort, directed first at the Irish diaspora in Britain, the United States and Australia and subsequently at the 'pagan' mission-fields of the British colonies and elsewhere.

In many ways, the reorganised Catholic church in nineteenth century Ireland implemented the reforms worked out at the Council of Trent in the 1560s and in that sense was a neo-Tridentine institution. However, in its approach to women, the nineteenth century church, in Ireland as elsewhere, introduced a number of innovations which departed in some ways from Tridentine ideas and which proved fundamental to the vitality and popular impact of the church. The most obvious of these was the evolution of female religious congregations, an institutional device for harnessing the energies of women to the pastoral work of the church which was one of the major institutional innovations within Catholicism in the nineteenth century. Since the thirteenth century, church teaching had insisted on total and permanent cloister as the only acceptable basis for the religious life of nuns. This approach was reiterated at Trent and again on a number of occasions up to the mid-eighteenth century. The injunction to cloister was frequently flouted by women religious, sometimes out of disregard for the spirit of the religious life and sometimes out of the impulse to live it more fully and actively. But it effectively shackled the female religious orders, confined their members to lives of seclusion and silence and prevented women from performing any extensive pastoral role in the church.

Some successful breaches in the church's resistance to active female religious had been made as early as the seventeenth century. But it was not until the nineteenth century that the active female religious

congregation became an accepted element of church organisation and indeed it was only in the early 1900s that its canonical position was regularised. The concept of the active female religious congregation was introduced into Ireland in the form of the Presentation Sisters, founded in Cork (in the face of considerable clerical resistance) in the 1780s and 1790s. Two other major Irish foundations, the Sisters of Mercy and the Irish Sisters of Charity, along with a number of lesser foundations, helped secure the institutional basis for the active female religious life in the 1830s and 1840s. From about the mid-nineteenth century, in Ireland as in other countries, the movement took off in spectacular fashion. The number of sisters in Ireland grew from around 1,500 in 1851 to just under 9,000 in 1911. The growth continued until it peaked at around 16,000 in the mid-1960s and was such that for most of the preceding sixty years nuns had outnumbered male clergy and religious of all kinds by more than two to one. The main contribution of this new force to the church lay in the network of schools and other social services which the female congregations built up over this period. By the 1920s, convent schools catered for some 17 per cent of children in the primary school system and all Catholic women primary teachers were trained in teacher training colleges run by nuns. Up to the 1960s, secondary schooling for Catholic girls was provided almost exclusively by convent schools. In the medical field, the largest hospitals in the country were run by nuns and much of the nursing profession was formed in nursing schools attached to these hospitals. Nuns were active also in orphanages, reformatories and other social services. Although nuns continued to endure a humble and subordinate status within the male-run church, it was largely as a result of their efforts that, in addition to the ministry and pastoral work of the clergy in the parish system, the church was enabled to enter people's lives through the education, health and social services which the female religious congregations provided on such an extensive scale (Fahey, 1987; Clear, 1987).

The increase in female religious in the Catholic church was paralleled by a certain 'feminisation' of the church's support base in the population at large. In Ireland as elsewhere, religion among lay people in the nineteenth century often came to be seen as primarily women's business. In some areas, the gender gap in religious adherence became very wide: women became or remained devout while men drifted away from religion or became actively hostile (McLeod, 1981). In other countries, of which Ireland was one example, the gap was much narrower since religious adherence was high among men as well as women. But even here there still remained a sense in which women were more important than men as carriers of the faith, especially within the family where they were ascribed

the main responsibility for preserving a religious ethos in the home and for passing on the faith to children (see Inglis, 1987: 187–214, where the theme of the Catholic mother as the key figure in the church's lay support is developed). The particular links between women and religion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is still a largely unresearched area, but changing definitions of femininity and of the nature and significance of women's roles clearly enhanced both the appeal of churchly religion to women and of women to churches in this period. Consequently, changes in the position of women in economic life, in the family and in the wider community emerge as an important mediating factor in the relationship between religious and social change during industrialisation.

The pastoral work of the clergy, along with the educational and social service work of the religious congregations, thus provided a powerful machinery for church growth and consolidation. It also placed a strong, clerically-dominated church at the centre of the religious life of Irish Catholics. For most Irish Catholics the church and religion were synonymous, thus giving a strong institutional expression and focus for popular religious faith. In some ways, Irish Catholicism may have been more church-oriented than elsewhere. It produced less in way of lay Catholic action (in the form of Catholic political, business or trade union organisations, for example) than the Catholic church in many European countries. But, in general, the features of Irish ecclesiastical expansion just described were not unusual by the standards of the Catholic church in much of the rest of the western world and reflected a general trend towards making the church internally stronger and more present in the daily religious lives of believers.

Yet another important feature of the success of the institutional church in Ireland was the degree to which it became embedded into the system of social services developed under the nineteenth century British state. Despite the tension between the colonial state and the Catholic tradition in Ireland in the nineteenth century, the basic outlines of a tacit concordat between the two had been worked out by the end of the century. That concordat was based, on the one hand, as Whyte (1980) puts it, on a certain aloofness between church and state. For the most part, the church kept its distance from state affairs and the state likewise steered clear of such potentially contentious issues as episcopal appointments and state payments for clergy. On the other hand, there was a small but vital range of areas where church and state closely intermingled.

By far the most important of these was education. The distinctiveness of the Irish school system from a religious viewpoint was not so much the denominational character of schools supported by the state (other countries where state support was provided to denominational schools are

mentioned by Whyte, 1980). Rather, denominational control of Irish schools lay to an exceptional degree in the hands of the clergy and religious orders rather than of lay representative bodies, so that it was the institutional church—clergy, brothers and nuns—rather than the Catholic laity which stamped the schools with their denominational character. At the foundation of the national primary school system in 1831, local management of schools devolved onto the clergy and religious orders by default rather than by design, in that nobody else came forward to do the job, reflecting the weakness of local civic leadership at the time. But having gained that position, the church clung to it. Although responsibility for the curriculum and for the payment of teachers was centralised under state control, the managerial role of clergy and religious orders at local level gave the church powerful leverage at all levels of the system. The effectiveness of this leverage was shown, for example, in the 1880s when the state in effect handed control of primary teacher training to denominational teacher training colleges, largely because of the long-standing refusal of Catholic school managers to hire teachers trained in 'godless' state colleges. In the same period, the state began to extend modest financial support to second-level schools, most of which were owned and run by religious orders. Subsequently the secondary school system emerged as a publicly funded but privately owned network of church-run schools. The end result was an education system which at primary and secondary levels gave unparalleled ownership, access and local control to the church, while the burden of the financial and central administrative responsibility was carried by the state.

The pattern in education was repeated to a more limited extent in a number of other social services, including hospital services, the care of orphaned and homeless children, the 'rescue of fallen women' and a limited range of services for the poor and for unemployed women (Clear, 1987; Inglis, 1987). In each case, the church was the only institution capable of sustaining a level of provision which approached that evolving under state direction. The response by the state at some points was hostile or competitive. But for the most part partnership of some sort was the preferred option, with the result that key areas of the social services became a joint venture between 'voluntary' church effort and official funding and administration.

The most obvious expression of Catholic vitality in nineteenth and twentieth century Ireland was the high level of popular religious practice. This practice went beyond church membership and minimum church attendance to include plentiful and varied forms of day-to-day religious ritual. Some years ago, the historian Emmet Larkin used the term 'devotional revolution' to refer to the sudden emergence of this pattern

among Irish Catholics around the mid-nineteenth century. Since then there has been some debate as to whether we should speak of an evolution over a longer time rather than of a sudden revolution (Connolly, 1985: 42–60 reviews this debate). But the consensus is that whatever about timing and pace, the new devotionalism represented an unprecedented expansion and strengthening of orthodox Catholic practice in daily life. Miller (1975) has argued with some basis in quantitative evidence that attendance at Sunday Mass in rural Ireland in the 1830s was low, reflecting the shortage of priests and churches and the weakness of clerical influence on popular practice. It is also clear that many ritual customs of the pre-Famine era, such as wakes and patterns, owed more to pre-Christian tradition than to post-Tridentine orthodoxy. These were a particular target of reformist clerical concern. By the end of the century, universal weekly Mass attendance had become the norm for Catholics throughout the country and in all social classes, even in the cities. Indigenous ritual had been rooted out and had been replaced on clerical prompting with a panoply of Italian and French-style devotions—benedictions, novenas, the rosary, first Friday Masses, forty hours adoration, and so on. By then, mass attendance and regular devotional practice came to be seen as the outward and necessary signs of being a Catholic and became a routine part of Irish Catholic life on a very wide scale.

The popular spiritual significance of Catholic religious practice was intensified by a pervasive sense of the reality of sin and of the potency of the miraculous in daily life. Sin was for many identified less with internal lapses of the spirit than with external breaches of social respectability, that is, with anything that hinted, however remotely, of debauchery. Drink was considered one of the great sources of sin. Attitudes towards drink were ambivalent, however, and its immovable place in large segments of Irish popular culture made the church reluctant to attempt an all-out offensive against it. The attitude to sex was less uncertain: sexual immorality often seemed to be the central form of sin and resistance to the temptations of sex became a central preoccupation of Catholic morality. Sexual repression seemed to intensify in Irish Catholic culture as the nineteenth century progressed, though in this, as in other areas, Irish Catholicism was an extreme example of patterns common throughout the Victorian world rather than an utterly deviant case. Popular faith in the miraculous powers of certain saints, relics and sites of pilgrimage sometimes bordered on the unorthodox and prompted watchful attention on the part of church authorities. However, it was a central focus of religious commitment among ordinary Catholics and the church provided abundant approved locations and methods for its expression.

Apart from the personal consolations and satisfactions it offered to

believers, Catholic ritual and religious doctrine also acted as a symbol of the distinctively Catholic view of the world and so served as a way of marking and maintaining boundaries between Catholicism and the world around it. To further this boundary maintenance, the international Catholic church regularly threw itself into symbolic confrontation with key strands of modernity. In the age of progress it harked back to medieval Thomistic models for its image of the good society; in the age of democracy it promulgated the doctrine of papal infallibility and of the authority of the magisterium; in the age of technical rationality it cultivated a popular devotionism which was suffused with a sense of the supernatural as a living force in the practicalities of daily life; in the age of the melting-pot it fostered a sense of Catholic distinctiveness even among those urban-industrial communities subject to the standardising influences of modern production systems. These assertions of a distinctively Catholic view of the world served not to undermine popular support but to give an unmistakable, clearly identified profile to which Catholics could offer their allegiance.

The assertion of a distinctive Catholic identity found an especially receptive audience in Ireland. The communal bonding effect of shared religious practice among Irish Catholics had been reinforced since the Reformation by a shared alienation from Protestantism. In the wake of the collapse of the Gaelic tradition, Catholicism provided a substitute badge of identity in an Anglo-centric world and, as the era of modern nationalism dawned in the nineteenth century, Catholic history provided Irish nationalist myth-makers with a fertile source of material for national self-definition and consciousness raising. Thus, as nationalist sentiment gathered force in nineteenth century Ireland, Catholic alienation from Protestantism merged with the Irish nationalist alienation from British rule and the modern nationalist identification of Irishness with Catholicism took firm hold. Politically this was expressed in an alliance between the church and the constitutional nationalist political movement. That alliance provided much of the Church's political strength in the struggle over education, just as it helped to give nationalist movements, particularly as represented by the Home Rule party in the 1870s and 1880s, a broad base of popular support.

In the longer term, the identification of Catholicism with nationalism helped secure the Church's position in the new state created after independence in 1921. Most of the Protestant population was sectioned off into the northern six counties and in the remaining twenty-six, Protestants dwindled from about 10 per cent of the total population prior to independence to 5 per cent by the 1950s. With Catholics forming almost 95 per cent of the population in the independent state, the religious

community, the nation and the state became as one. Reflecting its unchallenged place in an homogeneous, solidly Catholic culture, the church allowed an air of smugness and triumphalism to creep into the conduct of its affairs and the few fragments of a Catholic liberal intelligentsia which existed complained of the stifling and oppressive cultural atmosphere. The church was allowed to consolidate its position in education and social services, and the Catholic ethos was acknowledged overtly in legislation and in the public utterances of politicians. But formal arrangements with the state were avoided, and as Whyte (1980) says, the tradition of aloofness between church and state in most political areas, combined with a ready acceptance of church interest in certain key areas, remained characteristic of church-state relations in the decades after independence.

The Levelling-off Period

The upheavals in the Catholic church brought by the Second Vatican Council were fully reflected in Ireland and were part of the overall disturbance in economic and social life which gave the 1960s the appearance of a watershed in recent Irish history. The economic policies of the inward-looking nationalism of the preceding decades had failed and this failure rubbed off to some extent on the old allegiance to Catholicism. The question of the 1960s for Catholicism in Ireland was how it would adapt to the new wave of economic prosperity, social freedom and openness to outside influences then sweeping the country. The experience of other countries at the time suggested that the old religious adherence would not live easily with the new prosperity and would succumb rather quickly to what was thought of as the corrosive effects of secular liberalism. From the vantage point of the early 1990s, we can see that change has not been so dramatic: the strength and pre-eminence of Catholicism in Irish culture has been reduced in many ways but has not been radically undermined. However, in judging the significance of recent developments in Irish religious life, the comparison with countries which have experienced rapid religious decline in the post-war period may not be the most appropriate one. Rather the preceding period of levelling-off in church expansion and the onset of incipient decline may provide more relevant parallels. Ireland may be thought of as relatively late in reaching the plateau stage in the sequence of expansion and contraction rather than as an entirely deviant case (though the fact that the American Catholic church likewise did not reach its plateau until the 1960s should remind us that Irish lateness in this regard was neither entirely unique nor entirely linked to economic

Table 1. Catholic clerical and religious personnel working in Ireland, North and South, 1970 and 1986 (excluding Irish church personnel working overseas).

	1970	1986	% Change 1970-86
Diocesan clergy	3,813	3,697	-3
Clerical orders (male)	4,019	2,789	-31
Sisters	15,145	12,332	-25
Brothers	2,195	1,230	-44
Total	25,172	19,113	-24

Source: Weafer (1988: 502).

marginality). At any rate, we will review in this section some of the main indicators of recent trends in Catholicism in Ireland.

First of all let us look at the church in organisational terms. In the late 1960s, the Catholic church in Ireland (North and South) had at its disposal a full-time staff of well over 30,000 priests and religious, of whom over 25,000 lived and worked in Ireland. This was the Irish church's highest number of personnel in its history and, relative to the population it served, made it the most heavily staffed in the western world. Since then, it is scarcely surprising that there has been a fall-off in numbers from this high peak. The numbers of diocesan clergy have fallen the least, declining only by 3 per cent between 1970 and 1986 (see Table 1) and projections from current rates of entry to the priesthood and from losses through death and departure suggest that this rather stable pattern is likely to hold for the near future (Weafer, 1988).

The stability in the numbers of diocesan clergy provides a relatively strong basis for the future of the parish system at least in the short-to-medium-term and renders the issue of lay participation in parish ministry somewhat less pressing than in other Catholic countries. Among the other personnel, however, decline is quite sharp. Male clerical orders, congregations of sisters and congregations of brothers have dropped between 25 and 44 per cent in numbers over the period 1970 to 1986. Intake of new members has fallen even more sharply so that those organisations now have a rapidly ageing membership. These developments bring the future of many of these orders and congregations seriously into question, and for some of them, amalgamations, rationalisations and the closing of houses have already become facts of life.

The contraction of the religious orders and congregations is important not only because of what it suggests about changed public attitudes to the religious life but also because it contributes to a marked loosening of the church's traditional partnership with the state in important areas of the

social services. The most notable of these is secondary education, which until recently was dominated by religious order schools supported out of state funds. Attempts in the 1960s to build up a community-based comprehensive school system as a counter-weight to the religious order schools were resisted by the church, failed to generate popular enthusiasm and had little success. But now, church influence in the post-primary school system is declining by default rather than as a result of public policy. Because of shortage of personnel, the religious presence in the secondary system is waning rapidly and religious personnel in those schools have been concentrated into administrative positions. On the other hand, however, there is little public demand for a secularisation of the school system and considerable sympathy for attempts to preserve a religious ethos in schools in spite of the weakening of the direct religious presence. In primary schools, the clergy continue to play an important and widely accepted role in management boards and the majority of primary teachers accept an obligation to teach orthodox Catholicism as part of their work. Thus in the field of education, as in other areas, Catholicism now faces a period of re-organisation and of noticeable reduction in its position but it is by no means confronted with radical eclipse.

Impressions about the high level of religious belief and practice in Ireland were given their first systematic test in 1973–74 by means of a large-scale sample survey conducted by Maire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig of the Irish Bishops' Research and Development Commission (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1976, 1987). The results of the survey more than confirmed the view that religious adherence was, in fact, very strong. Almost 91 per cent of Catholics reported that they attended Mass at least once weekly and participation in other forms of devotion was correspondingly high. The results also showed that Catholics seemed to be more given to devotion and practice than to belief and conviction. Levels of belief in items of Catholic doctrine, and even knowledge of doctrine, seemed to be lower than the high levels of practice would imply, thus giving an indication that convention and social conformity rather than strong personal conviction might underlie some of the devotionality of Irish Catholics.

Subsequent studies of a type similar to the 1973–74 baseline enquiry enable us to make some assessment of recent trends (see Table 2). The main impression for this intervening time-span is that, while change has occurred, it has been limited. The proportion attending Mass at least once a week has dropped from 91 per cent in 1974 to 82 per cent in 1988–89, and monthly confession has dropped quite sharply (from 47 per cent in 1974 to 18 per cent in 1988–89). The trend in orthodox doctrine is also downwards, though not much: the proportion who believe in God is down from 96 per cent in 1974 to 93 per cent in 1984, while the proportion who

Table 2. Selected indicators (%) of religious practice and belief among Irish Catholics, 1974–1984.^a

	1974	1984	1988–89
Attend Mass at least once per week	91	87	82
Attend Mass more than once per week	23	30	21
Receive Communion weekly	28	38	43
Attend Confession monthly	47	26	18
Pray daily	80	85	71
Fully accept belief in God	96	93	n.a.
Fully accept that the Catholic Church is the one true Church	83	73	n.a.
(N)	(2,499)	(1,006)	(943)

^a The data for 1984 are based on measures which replicated those used for the 1974 data, while the 1988–89 data are based on somewhat different measures. Thus while the 1988–89 data are reasonably comparable with the 1984 and 1974 data, that comparability is not complete.

Sources: 1974 and 1984 data, Weafer (1986b); 1988–89 data, Mac Gréil (1991).

believe that the Catholic church is the one true church is down by a bit more. On the other hand, some important indicators of practice are stable or have actually risen: about the same proportion, 21–23 per cent attended Mass more than once weekly in 1988–89 as in 1974 (this indicator having risen to 30 per cent in 1984), while the proportion who receive communion weekly has risen from 28 per cent to 43 per cent.

Some other patterns from survey data in the 1980s gave additional support to the notion that secularisation is taking place in Ireland at a considerably slower pace than had been expected. The 1973–74 study had shown a markedly lower level of belief and practice among young adults, 21–25 year olds especially, than in the rest of the population. However, by 1984, church affiliation among 21–25 year olds had risen and generally the rate of decline in other ‘high-risk’ groups (males, urban-dwellers, the highly educated) was relatively slight. Weafer (1986b: 517) concluded on the basis of these findings that ‘the state of religion among Catholics in the Irish Republic is in a relatively stable condition, with high levels of belief and practice persisting into the mid-1980s’.

Other indications of church influence seem to show the same pattern of change alongside continuity, with continuity often seeming to be the stronger. Artificial contraception, long banned under Irish law and opposed by the Catholic church, was legalised without too much protest in 1979. However, recent referenda on the Constitution have re-affirmed the constitutional ban on divorce and installed a ban on the legalisation of abortion, leaving Ireland in a quite exceptional position in developed countries on these issues. The visit of Pope John Paul II to Ireland in 1979

evoked an enthusiastic response, with one million people (almost one-third of the population) attending his open air Mass in Dublin alone. In 1988, the newly formed Progressive Democrats, a political party with a secular-liberal slant, proposed a new national Constitution which omitted reference to God and quickly retracted the proposal once its unpopularity among its own members became clear. (It was said that the proposal was adopted at a party conference on a Sunday morning when many of the delegates were at Mass). Straws in the wind such as these often surprise commentators. They indicate a stubborn durability in conservative Catholic allegiance in Ireland which seems out of step with Ireland's other image as a rapidly changing, increasingly liberal, secular society of a typically modern, western type. On the other hand, none of the trends mentioned above contradicts the notion that Catholicism in Ireland has reached a plateau and may be about to begin a descent. They suggest rather that the pace of that descent is slower and more uneven than has often been expected.

Conclusion

The historical record shows that institutional Christianity continued to act as an important part of the social fabric in western societies during industrialisation, at least, in most cases, until well into the twentieth century. Indeed in many places, in both metropolitan and peripheral regions, its significance grew as the early disruptive effects of capitalist industrialisation became more pronounced. In general terms, therefore, the strengthening influence of the Catholic church in Ireland in this period is not as far out of step with developments elsewhere as we often tend to think. However, this very general point does not make it any easier to specify the precise links between the dynamics of industrialisation and religious change, either in Ireland or in other countries. It may be tempting to interpret those connections in functional terms, looking at the role of religion as a mechanism of social integration during a time of rapid social change. However, while religion undoubtedly had certain integrative effects, it did not have the field to itself in this regard: nationalism, secular liberalism and socialism also offered themselves as potent ideological systems. These sometimes worked alongside and sometimes dislodged religion as means of group integration. Thus while the need for cultural identity and social integration offered religion a social function, it does not explain why religion, rather than any of the competing ideologies, sometimes fulfilled that function and sometimes did not. Nor does it explain the difficult question of the social level at which the integrative

effects of religion operated. In the United States, among Catholics at least, religious identity and cohesiveness were most evident at the level of the ethnic neighbourhood (McLeod, 1986b), while a more general, non-confessional patriotism bound religious-ethnic groups into American society as a whole. In Germany, Catholic organisations—workers' associations, trade unions and political parties—played a similar role at sub-national level (McLeod, 1986b), but here too nationalism succeeded in transcending confessional affiliation to provide an ideological underpinning to German society as a whole. Elsewhere, religion could be integrative at one level and disruptive at another. In Ireland, religious and national communities tended to become co-terminous, leading to the breakaway from the United Kingdom of the largely Catholic independent state in the south and the formation of the 'two nations'—Catholic-nationalist and Protestant-unionist—in the north. Cases such as Poland suggest that the importance of religion in defining national identity is not unique to the south of Ireland, while the Balkan states show how even today competing religious allegiances can, as in Northern Ireland, tend to sunder fragile political entities. Further complications arise when we consider that patterns of religious adherence have changed even since industrialisation: in most cases, churches grew, levelled off and went into decline, though the pace and timing of that evolution have varied greatly from country to country and even between regions, social classes, gender groups and ethnic groups within individual countries.

The variety of religious patterns during industrialisation thus defy easy summation, though for Catholicism at least there are a number of regularly recurring features. The most obvious of these—all of them well-represented in the Irish case—can be listed as follows.

- 1 Strong ecclesiastical organisation, founded on a plentiful supply of well-organised, effectively equipped and efficiently deployed clergy and religious.
- 2 A particular appeal to, and association with, the world of women, as reflected both in the floods of women who joined female religious congregations from about the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries and in the widespread tendency to identify religion as women's business, particularly within the confines of the home and in connection with the socialisation of children.
- 3 Strategic flexibility in shaping the local-level presence of the church to suit local circumstances: in American cities, the parish was linked to ethnic neighbourhoods, in rural Ireland it was identified with a strong sense of local place, while in many continental countries, the Catholic organisation was the key focus of local Catholic attachment.

- 4 The top-down cultivation of a rich ceremonial devotionism, coupled with a sexually repressive morality and a tolerant approach to the popular demand for a quasi-magical or miraculous element in the veneration of saints, shrines, relics and pilgrimage sites.
- 5 The building up of extensive Catholic services in education, health-care and social welfare as an adjunct to pastoral ministration. Sometimes (as in Ireland since the days of British rule, or as in other European nations for varying periods of their recent histories) these were provided to some degree or other in formal cooperation with the state, while sometimes (as in the United States) they were provided as independent systems running parallel to or even in competition with state services. Religious congregations, particularly of women, provided much of the personnel and financial resources which enabled the church to provide these services on such a large scale.
- 6 A pragmatic approach to church-state relationships, with an emphasis on finding a workable *modus vivendi* in dealing with the political authority rather than on ideological confrontation.

It is hard to move from this list of features to anything like a formal model of the relationship between religion and industrialisation which would successfully account for the peculiarities of Catholic history in western countries since the early nineteenth century. All we can say is that the ways in which those features worked together in different countries help us to account in an *ad hoc* way for one of the paradoxes of Catholic development during industrialisation: Catholicism was the most successful of the larger Christian denominations in riding out the upheavals that accompanied industrialisation, even though it was widely perceived—by Catholics as much as by non-Catholics—as the least at home with the culture of the industrial world. The church's symbolic defiance of many of the main strands of modernity gave it sympathetic appeal for many population groups who shared a sense of alienation, while its pragmatism and organisational strengths helped those same groups cope with the social forces pushing them towards the margins.

The Irish case is in many ways typical of this combination of resistance and accommodation in the Catholic church's relationship with the industrialising world up to the mid-twentieth century. In Ireland, despite the vigour and pace of the Catholic church's advance, there was undoubtedly something closed and defensive about its ethos. That defensiveness was generated in part by the Irish church's position as the only substantial Catholic church in the British Empire, a world which had long been dominated by Protestantism, which was rapidly becoming secular and was revolutionising its economic and social structures at a bewildering

pace. As a result of the collapse of the Gaelic tradition, the Irish church lacked the cultural defense of a separate language to ward off the influences of that environment and consequently bristled with antipathy to the many of the cultural currents flowing from it. The training it gave to its clergy was narrow and anti-intellectual, and was as much concerned with shunning new ideas as stimulating the capacity to deal with them. Its powerful role in education was accompanied by little in the way of new educational thought; it was generally strong on instruction but weak on creativity. Its social base lay in the countryside and the middle-sized farming classes. In common with the nationalist tradition with which it identified, it was committed ideologically to a rural fundamentalism which was suspicious and fearful of the industrial city and it glorified the family farm and the little village as the pillars of social and economic life. It was a church, in other words, which often gave the appearance of being in, but not of, the larger industrialising world in which it was embedded.²

At the same time, the church's unease with much of the greater world around it was an important source of affinity with the marginality felt by Irish Catholics, first of all within the British empire and later, after independence, within the broader industrialising world. That sense of affinity was an important pre-disposing factor for the close and vigorous alliance between the Catholic church and Irish nationalism which grew with the nineteenth century. But the translation of this predisposition into achieved fact also required the church's organisational capacity to cope with both the threats and opportunities the wider world offered. The church may have disliked modernity but it did not dismiss or disregard its instruments. The church's internal structural reforms—greater centralisation of control in the papacy, tighter vertical integration through the episcopacy, better trained, more numerous and more rationally deployed clergy, the proliferation of new, functionally specialised religious congregations—were themselves representative of the increasing organisational rationality of nineteenth-century social systems and suggests an organisation coping with rather than fleeing from change. In Ireland, the broader

² Many general arguments have been advanced to the effect that the Catholic ethos was in one way or another hostile to the performance culture of modern capitalism, or in some way hindered the cultural developments common to modernisation in other western countries (see, e.g., Inglis, 1987; Lee, 1989). In addition, some attempts have been made to find structural links between Catholicism and poor economic performance in Ireland in the last hundred years. Kennedy (1978), for example, argued that church building in the nineteenth century hampered economic development by diverting a significant share of domestic capital away from productive uses. Concerning the more recent past, it has been argued that the church's influence in key institutional areas such as education has hampered the state's capacity to direct social development and so has hindered economic progress by impeding state action rather than by direct effects on the economy (Breen *et al.*, 1990).

society in which the revitalised church carved its place was visibly modernising, even if its economic structures remained fairly stagnant, and there were many ways in which the church both benefitted from and promoted that modernisation. Outside of normal parish ministry, the church's most important agent was the teacher in the primary school and its grasp of mass schooling in Ireland placed at its disposal one of the principal instruments of modern social engineering. Through the work of the religious congregations, the Irish church not only gained a foothold in the rapidly emerging system of social services, it also did much to mould the profession of lay teacher, as well as other modern 'caring' professions such as that of nurse and social worker. Its pastoral, educational and social services were focused very much on the family and it promoted a familial piety which reflected the increasing nuclearisation of the family and the growing importance of women as the moral centres of family life. No doubt the appeal to tradition was an important basis for the church's authority. But the church of the nineteenth century was a new species of organisation, fertilised in part by tradition but endowed also with much of the newly evolved social and cultural equipment of the modern world growing up alongside it.

The tension between resistance and accommodation was thus a source of creativity and strength for the Catholic church in the first century of industrialisation. Resistance came from the sense of the main strands of modernity as a threat to Catholic traditions, accommodation from the pragmatic awareness that modernity could not be avoided. A 'fortress mentality' was endemic in the church even where it was locally or nationally strong, since it always perceived the menace of external cultural forces. But the fortress was a base from which the church did business with the world, often with impressive effect. It mattered a great deal for the position and impact of the church whether its 'fortress' was built on a national population, as happened in Ireland, or whether it was based on sub-national regions or ethnic groups, as happened in many other cases. But in all these situations, the adaptive devices at its disposal had many general similarities. The Irish case demonstrates in an especially striking way how effective these devices could be. But there were many other success stories for the church and together these suggest how central to the history of industrialised societies organised religion continued to be until well into the present century at least.

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