

## PIETY AND PRIVILEGE: CATHOLIC SECONDARY SCHOOLING IN IRELAND AND THE THEOCRATIC STATE, 1922-1967

By TOM O' DONOGHUE and Judith Harford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, 233 pages. ISBN: 978-0-19-284316-6

This book encourages the reader to ask the question - did the Catholic Church authorities aid in the provision of Irish education or did Irish education aid the Catholic Church in its provision? The answer to this question may also be the answer to another question. The book, is at once a resource text and a reflective critique that will attract the practitioner and the researcher alike.

The writing structure, the explanations, the methodologies used in researching relevant and crucial secondary sources, coupled with an energetic and vibrant analysis of primary sources make for a thoroughly obtainable project. The writing is coherent, comprehensible, distinct and explicit, leading to a final outcome which is replete with concepts such as Gallicanism and Ultramontanism which are very clearly explored in such a manner that both the undergraduate and the senior lecturer will find much fodder for contemplation.

Priests, religious brothers and female religious, largely drawn from a social stratum well above that of the poor, were the main agents who responded to the Church's bidding and who contributed to transformations in schooling. The authors accept the traditional interpretation that the education system in Ireland was provided so as to 'pacify' the people, while other modern scholarship, leaves that door open.

Irish history offers many illustrations of the grip of the Catholic Church on the people. Even before the Famine of 1845-49 when evidence suggests that only a minority of Catholics attended mass, the Church

had become intimately involved in political movements – first in the movement for Catholic emancipation, then in that for repeal of the Act of Union, both led by Daniel O’Connell. This involvement continued and intensified in post-Famine Ireland.

In what has been described as a “devotional revolution” in the decades following the Famine, weekly mass attendance rates began to approach 100 per cent. Already before the new state was founded, Ireland was noted for the remarkable loyalty of Catholics to the Church and for the absence of a tradition of anticlericalism. This relationship was cemented through the education system, in which the Catholic Church had an unchallenged role. Like all processes of collective mobilisation, the political integration of the Catholic population had a negative aspect, its differentiation from others; in this case, the excluded group was the protestant population.

The dominance of the Catholic Church and its influence through the education system are likely to have strengthened authoritarianism. This influence was probably both direct (through the teaching of the value of obedience) and indirect (through a transfer from religious into political life of authoritarian values). Unlike the Protestant churches, the Catholic Church is strikingly undemocratic and hierarchical in structure, with instructions issuing from the Pope through the Bishops to the laity. The source of these precepts is itself sharply different from that in the Protestant churches, with their emphasis on the individual’s discovery of the truth in the Bible and decision on action in accordance with conscience; in the Catholic tradition the emphasis is on objective morality, on which the Church is authoritative arbiter, and on collective compliance with rules.

There were opportunities when the Catholic Church was in a position to exert its authority more than on other occasions. This was sometimes due to the personalities involved or sometimes it was due to political or economic reasons, or just convenience. Privilege can enhance convenience to such an extent that acquires a dignified veneer. Circumstances, social and economic, and political enabled the Church in the post-Famine period to steer, as well as embrace, a religious revolution. This period was in direct contrast with the lack of enthusiasm for church attendance on the part of the poor, prior to the Famine. This particular

opportunity was exploited by Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Dublin, who was the most significant individual leading the transformation of the Irish Church. Having lived in Rome for twenty-one years, Cullen acquired a horror of political revolution on witnessing Mazzini's advocacy of insurrection to integrate the Papal States into a unified Italy. In 1849 Cullen returned to Ireland as Archbishop of Armagh, becoming Archbishop of Dublin in 1852, and becoming Ireland's first Cardinal in 1867.

He was motivated by a fierce loyalty to the Catholic Church; he was also an enthusiastic Irish nationalist. This may come as a surprise as he is associated with the condemnation of the *Nation* newspaper and later on of the Fenian movement. His nationalism was something akin to O'Connell's whose death had occurred a little over a year before Cullen's return to Ireland from Rome. Cullen, like O'Connell, saw Irishness and Catholicism as opposite sides of the same coin. But, unlike O'Connell, Cullen had little time for new-fangled ideologies like liberalism and democracy. His time in Rome, coupled with his personal acquaintance with Pius IX ensured that he saw liberalism and other radical ideologies as the natural enemy of religion. He saw England as the natural enemy of Ireland, not because of any commitment on his part to abstract or cultural nationalism, but because England was Protestant. Indeed, Cullen tended to regard All English policy towards Ireland as Protestant persecution of a Catholic nation. This was probably as a reaction to the Ecclesiastical Titles Act of 1851 which had forbidden Catholic bishops in Britain to assume the name of the diocese over which they presided. It was hardly surprising, then, that the non-denominational system of the national schools and the Queen's Colleges in Ireland would find an inveterate critic in Paul Cullen.

He was an ultramontane cleric, believing that Church authority came solely from the Pontiff in Rome. Irish Bishops, in his view, were accountable to and regulated by Rome. During the 1850s, and later, the Irish prelates acted as a unified force, appointing a spokesperson, to issue pastorals on matters such as education.

Education was important to Irish people, and with an increasing level of literacy in the 1840s, modern Ireland was in the making. Before the Famine, the national Board of Education was spending £100,000 per annum, and there were 12,000 teachers registered in Ireland; by 1849,

500,000 pupils were being taught in 4,321 schools. Attendance levels were relatively high; contemporaries noted the priority placed upon education, regardless of the quality of the education received. “This was accentuated by the Famine and by the Church’s ability to manipulate the educational system.” Cullen’s “viscerally” realistic views about the national system of education deserves quotation: “very dangerous when considered in general, because its aim is to introduce a mingling of Protestants and Catholics, but in the places where in fact there are no Protestants this mingling cannot be achieved.”

One particular occasion the Bishops exerted their authority was on the occasion of the state’s attempt to legislate for education in Ireland. The McPherson Bill of 1919 was an initiative to introduce some level of democracy to Irish education: if the Bill were passed, a national department of education would be established, local education committees would be set in train, and some financial support for schools through local taxation was envisaged.

In one respect, 1919 was a fortunate year for the Catholic hierarchy as the War of Independence was in full flight, and the Standing Committee of the Bishops appealed to the growing nationalist sentiment by stating that the administrative structures proposed would be a foreign imposition. The Bill would mean that Irish education would be in “foreign fetters”. Cardinal Logue, Archbishop of Armagh, and Ireland’s leading prelate, issued a pastoral letter condemning the Bill, stating that it threatened the temporal and eternal interests of generations of Irish children. Another member of the hierarchy got on the bandwagon as an outspoken critic of the McPherson Bill: Dr. Foley, Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, asked his flock to resist “this latest brazen-faced attempt of a hostile government to impose on the mind and soul of an intensely devoted Catholic people, the deadly grip of foreign fetters.” The Catholic Clerical School Managers supported the Bishops when they considered that “the only satisfactory education system for Catholics was one wherein Catholic children are taught in Catholic schools by Catholic teachers, under Catholic control.”

When the education Bill was reintroduced in 1920, Cardinal Logue, Archbishop of Armagh, and Ireland’s leading prelate, issued a pastoral letter condemning the Bill, stating that it threatened the temporal and eternal interests of generations of Irish children.

The authors of *Piety and Privilege* quite rightly point out that, in John Coolahan's view, the real reason for the condemnation was the notion of local education committees that would have constituted an "infringement by the State through a democratic structure on the monopoly of power held at local level by the school patron and individual manager" (priest).

Circumstances, in this case, favoured the prelates, as the Independence movement caused a distraction, and the Bill was withdrawn by the government. This event bore testimony to the power of the bishops and it indicated how strong a force they could be in an independent Ireland.

During the early decades of national independence, the Catholic Church was satisfied that the State's administrative and curricular structures in primary and secondary schools safeguarded its educational interests. During this period, there were concerns expressed that the emphasis on the teaching of the Irish language could detract from curricular time devoted to the other subjects such as Latin and Greek, and there was also some disquiet regarding the status of English on the curriculum. It was felt that English should not be downgraded.

At the end of the Second World War, de Valera assembled the Irish diplomatic corps in Dublin for a review of foreign policy. At this gathering, T. J. Kiernan, representative to Australia (effectively Ambassador) made a speech and in the speech he suggested the national Film Institute should be commissioned to make a thirty-minute film of "A Day in the life of Catholic Ireland".

There were many politicians who felt that Ireland to withstand foreign influences, and the "denationalising influences of Great Britain, and in a lesser, but by no means small, degree to those of the United States". This was uttered by Eamon de Valera at the assembly of diplomats in 1945. In the same way he mentioned the language revival movement, symbols of our "national existence" which testify to our separateness, but above all, "close contact with the Catholic clergy is absolutely essential for all our representatives." He exhorts the diplomats to visit seminaries and colleges and Catholic institutions, and this should become a normal part of "your" work.

The curriculum in the secondary schools in the post-1922 decades ensured that demands of religious education were met, along with Gaelicization expectations, and there was an assumption that “general education” suitable for clerical occupations was part of the daily teaching and learning in the schools. However, what constituted “general education” was not at all clear. Was it the development of the mind rather than development along practical lines? Eoin MacNeill, as Minister for Education, alluded to the importance of education to the development of “habits of order”, “habits of discipline” and “the actual teaching of the faculties.”

In a similar vein, Rev. Corcoran said that history was important as a school subject as it fostered the development of “qualities necessary for personal development in a democratic state.” Professor John Marcus O’Sullivan, when Minister for Education, subsequently referred to the significance of certain subjects on the secondary school curriculum in promoting the “mental training, mental ability and the agility of pupils.”

During the same period, from 1922 to the 1960s, there were twin demands on secondary school teachers: one, satisfying the expectations of the Catholic Church, an institution that had an almost intrinsic input to the school curriculum, and, two, more secular assumptions that what was being taught was of a nature associated with ‘Irishising’ the students.

Coupled with the Catholic Church’s expectations regarding the curriculum was that schools be segregated on gendered lines as much as possible. Single sex schooling was the norm in Irish education, while coeducation, as early as the mid-nineteenth-century emerged in European countries. Coeducation was also expanding in the USA except in Catholic schools where it met with staunch resistance.

Archbishop John Charles McQuaid of Dublin took the attitude to segregation in education circles, and extended it to the wider community when he established a Vigilance Committee of senior clerics, who in turn had informants reporting on various activities within the archdiocese. In 1955 Cornelius Gallagher, was one such informant and he visited the Mambo Club in Dublin to observe at first-hand what was happening there. He wrote: “they all wore the crazy dress of the Teddy Boys style

(though he could not see any Teddy Girl styles). The dancing was almost 100% jiving... indecency was the order of the night and without supervision anything could happen.” At the end of his report, this dancehall spy, poses the question- “what’s the remedy?”.<sup>1</sup>

The task of education in Ireland during those decades was “to restore the sons of Adam to their high position as the children of God, citizens of the Kingdom of God, by the harmonious development of their physical, social, intellectual, moral, aesthetic and spiritual powers.” Therefore, a school should be a place in which moral virtue was inculcated. Negative influences should be excluded and motives for good conduct should be strengthened through training and instruction. This position was promoted by the Catholic Church in 1926 when arguing that coeducation was detrimental, especially for older students.

Catholics, however, were not the only advocates of such a position on coeducation at the time; Protestant traditionalists in Germany, England, and other countries equally favoured single-sex schooling.

Until the 1960s the Republic of Ireland was content to cohabit with de Valera’s idealized vision of a country that was rural and Catholic. Families were large, with simple tastes, and there was little hope of change but, according to Seán Lemass, the day of the unskilled worker, at any social level, is passing and with the development of modern science and technology, the future belongs to those who have trained themselves to meet its specific requirements in knowledge and skill. Liberalization from the 1960s onwards, the steady erosion of the authority of the Catholic Church and the rising prosperity have radically changed the way people live. One of the key factors in this metamorphosis was education.

From the early 1960s political, economic and social forces combined to generate an era of expansion and initiative. This was the decade of the *Investment in Education* report in 1966; it was also the decade of ideological shifts in education provision-state-funded comprehensive schools were established, and in 1961 the scholarship system was expanded and in 1964 capital grants for secondary schools were introduced, along with schools for the blind and those suffering from mental deficiencies. State

<sup>1</sup> John Bowman (ed.), *Ireland: the autobiography, one hundred years of Irish life, told by its people*. Penguin Books (2016), 228.



subsidies for national schools were also introduced, as were posts of responsibility for national teachers. The upshot of these initiatives was an increase in the standard of education being received by thousands of Irish school children. Patrick Hillery, Minister for Education between 1959 and 1965 was seen as a reforming and innovative incumbent. He brought coordination of provision and extension of educational opportunity. The 1960s experienced both qualitative and quantitative changes; education policy allowed for the expansion of opportunities and has contributed to promoting social mobility. Though the structure has remained largely conservative, access and participation have increased. Policy processes in 1900, for example, were simple compared to the labyrinth of structures we have now. Teachers and parents were excluded then.

Risteard Mulcahy, the ‘dungaree’ Minister for Education in the 1950s gave the strong impression that both innovation and leadership were not associated with his office. By 1960 primary schools were small, old, in bad condition, twenty-five per cent were without pre-service courses, one third of pupils finished their schooling at primary level, all schools implemented a common curriculum which was narrow, rigid, unbalanced and out of date, and the school management system had not changed for 130 years.

The book, *Piety and Privilege*, authored by O’Donoghue and Harford, narrates the social, political and economic events that shaped events in Irish education over two centuries, but particularly, between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1960s.

The purpose of the book is to give an even-handed contention to the participants involved in education provision during that period. That said, the authors do not miss out on the reality of the situation, with regard to the post-Independence conservative policies adopted by the State, while the omniscient Catholic Church had close ties with such policy-makers. The decades following Independence represented the apotheosis or elevation of Church-State connection with the enactment of laws which entertained key aspects of the Catholic moral code.

From 1932, for instance, the government (Fianna Fáil) stipulated that married female primary teachers should resign their posts. This caused much debate, and a great deal of angst. It also created a group of



women who did not have the minimum of contributions required to qualify for a full state pension.

These decades witnessed a period of gendered ideology, placing women firmly within the home. This was copper-fastened in Art. 41 of the 1937 Constitution, a document which was influenced by Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, and the Jesuits.<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1960s the concept of education became a topic for discussion, while prior to that time there was no tradition of White Papers. In 1964 the *Second Programme for Economic Expansion* was laid before the *Oireachtas*, and it included a section on education. It was being recognized that education and expansion were linked. The following year saw the publication of *Investment in Education*, a joint report by the Irish government and the OECD. This action-packed decade gave impetus to subsequent events. It meant a lessening of the stranglehold with which the Catholic Church and education in Ireland were associated.

There is absolutely no doubt that the authors capture the foreboding existence of female religious orders in a context of “suppressive and controlling Catholic structures.” And, this observation is supported by an oral History Project conducted by O’Donoghue and Harford in 2009. The results are published in *Paedagogica Historica*, 47, No. 3 (2011): 399-413.

Secondary schools, for the first forty-five years of Independence, were all private institutions, controlled by Catholic clerics, and the bishops opposed any joint responsibility between laity and clergy for schools. Overall, they operated to secure and augment the creation of an environment conducive to recruiting clerics, and to producing a middle class<sup>3</sup> whose members endorsed ecclesiastical privilege and advanced the nation’s social policy in accordance with Catholic principles. In short, the Church’s primary task was ‘the salvation of souls’ and thus it saw control of the schools as vital.

<sup>2</sup> Dermot Keogh, “The Jesuits and the 1937 Constitution”, *Studies* 78, no. 309 (1989): 82-95. See also, T. O’Donoghue, “Catholicism and the Curriculum: The Irish Secondary School Experience, 1922-62”, *Historical Studies in Education/Revue de l’histoire de l’éducation* 10, Nos. 1&2 (1998):140-58.

<sup>3</sup> E. B. Titley, *Church, State and the Control of Schooling in Ireland, 1900-1944*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan (1983), 5.

With regard to piety, change is now evident, and this attitudinal transformation stems from the 1960s when educators responsible for curriculum design bore in mind the social and economic needs of Irish society, and adopted a more open-minded outlook, and, perhaps a little more liberal, than hitherto had been the case. Change is evident especially in the manner in which piety is promoted and practised in Catholic secondary schools. It is now more ‘benignant’, more ‘personal’, more ‘ecumenical’, and more ‘inclusive’ of all those other faiths than was previously the case. It is also, somewhat, more diluted as it permeates school life.

Regarding the second theme in the book, the authors find that “students attending non-Catholic secondary schools that charge fees because they never opted-in to the free second-level education scheme, are most advantaged.” The education offered in the minority of Catholic schools and in those non-fee charging Catholic schools for the majority, are oriented towards catering more for students from the middle classes than are community schools, comprehensive schools, and community colleges.

Catholic secondary schools in Ireland, like their Protestant counterparts, continue to function to enable groups with various levels of privilege to succeed academically and to perpetuate enduring inequalities.

Despite the subject-matter, the book is superbly crafted so that the reader can derive a great deal of insights from the political wranglings that were afoot in the determination of Irish education provision. The writing style is exceptionally commendable, where arguments are thoroughly perfected.

The authors have produced a book concerning piety and privilege in Irish education provision from the post-Famine period onwards. The deals principally with post-primary education primary.

It is an exceedingly admirable endeavour, and it treats of its subject-matter with due diligence and aplomb. The standard of academic writing is particularly noteworthy, and its estimable style of presentation illuminates the twin central themes with clarity and precision. The conclusions are transparent and intelligible, and the arguments following a definite logical line of interrogation.

There is evidence of an extremely impressive array of a very appropriate variety of sources being utilised to splendid effect. This is a book that will stand the test of time and will be referred to again and again over the following number of decades. The world of academia is on *terra firma* with this work.

Regarding this book, tedium never enters the reader's mind – it engages, it entrusts a great deal of empathy with the reader, and its munificence bears testimony to first-rate scholarship.

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