

MICHAEL McGRATH

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
AND CATHOLIC SCHOOLS IN
NORTHERN IRELAND

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... whatever their future, [the Catholic Schools], Dr. McGrath's book will be the reliable guide to their past.'


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FOREWORD BY BRENDAN O'LEARY

IRISH ACADEMIC PRESS	ISBN 0-7165-2651-4  780716 526513 >
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IRISH
ACADEMIC
PRESS

Foreword

This very important study prompts major questions of political and historical analysis. The Roman Catholic Church and its ancillary institutions, and their relations to political power, are now rarely the subjects of detailed research by historians, sociologists and political scientists. This is strange given that the Church was one of the first successful trans-national, international and indeed global institutions, and that it has been the longest running organisation of the modern Occident. Indeed it has been an amazingly hardy survivor, a long-lived multi-national enterprise and pioneer of a range of managerial and bureaucratic techniques – including the subordination of conscience and intellect to other-ordained rules, the papal-line. As an organisation it exemplifies, *par excellence*, the routinization of charisma. Sometime the sovereign, sometime the joint sovereign of Christendom, the Church is older than all the states of the world, and has outlived an astonishing range of empires and more recent ideologies. Its very name reflects its claim to the legacy of the greatest empire of European history, with which it made its first political accommodation.

Students of statecraft and of management have much to learn from the history of the Church – a subject too important to be left to the in-house and partisan concerns of its theologians, or the pieties of its tenured staff, and too interesting to be left to the abuses of its religious competitors. Students of nationalism also have much to learn from the history of the Roman Catholic Church. It is a testing site for the power of nationalism as a principle of political and indeed moral authority. Roman Catholicism, like Islam, has never, in principle, been national, either in form or content. It is declared to be universal, catholic, and cosmopolitan: unlike its Judaic predecessor it claims that it is not the religion of a people, but of all peoples. Its sacred language, the language of Rome, was at once a language of power and mystery but also a language to unify its diverse officials – its priests, nuns, monks, abbots, bishops and monsignors – enabling them to transcend their parochial, or ethnic identities. In fact, the first nations of European

history to be called such were the students of Catholic universities organised in clubs, or halls of residences, in rough correspondence with their students' geographic origins and mother-tongues. Like their patron the Church, the universities recognised these harbingers of national difference and managed them, but they aspired to create a transcendent integrated identity out of them – a Latin-literate clerisy with supreme loyalty to the Church of Christ and his apostles' successors on earth rather than to the nation or local kings. The effort was made to strip the clerisy of local particularisms notably through such radical innovations as the requirement that senior management positions would be confined to celibates, those who would break with hereditary commitments to family and tribe – an innovation eased by the creed's deep fear and hatred of sexuality, especially female sexuality as Dr Uta Ranke-Heinemann has reminded us.¹ The Church, in short, has been for much of its history a much more successful multinational *Internationale* than those organised by socialist or communist parties.

In principle, one might therefore expect organised Catholicism, especially at the highest clerical level, to be anti-nationalist – loyal to Rome rather than to home. And, in considerable measure so it has been, and, at a doctrinal level, so it will always be. The Church's successive leaders struggled with the emerging European State in early modern Europe. They sought to protect their organisational and decision-making autonomy, above all their powers of appointment, from merely national state interference. Where the Church lost these contests national Protestant churches took over its local branch offices in concert with impious princes – the most locally interesting nationalisation without compensation was the formation of the appropriately named Anglican church – facilitated by the difficulty an English king was having with his Spanish wife. Where the Church won these contests it nevertheless often had to compromise, as it had originally with Constantine, and let the local organisations acquire a limited national coloration or patronage – 'Gallican' compromises that were despised by the hard-liners, those loyal to supreme papal authority on the other side of the Alps, the aptly named 'ultramontane'.

Gallican deals were one thing: necessary side-payments, mostly within the aristocratic class, to preserve the universal church. Protestants were more serious, heretical rivals, both to hierarchy and to the ordered religious regulation of politics, and dangerous facilitators of individualism – even if they did not always practice it. But the Church's worst enemies were yet to come, the secularists. The Church famously feared Jacobins, and their liberal and socialist associates, as kindred

spirits. Jacobins, liberals and socialists were rightly seen as the nationalisers and secularisers of education. As nationalisers and as democrats they sacralised the people's will – rather than God's, or the Pope's – a blatant form of self-worship that Durkheim helps explain but the Church regarded as idolatry. And as secularisers the Jacobins and their allies demanded that the state (and sometimes private entrepreneurs) should take-over education, nationalise it, sometimes in every sense of that word, and expel the superstition-mongering cosmopolitan clerics that were not properly national, not fully loyal, because, after all, they were subordinate to Rome.

That, however, has been only one side of the story. While the Church has been cosmopolitan by disposition its adherents have not, and everywhere it has proselytised, the Church accommodated ethnic, religious and national pasts that were not of its making. In Ireland the Church had, so it was later claimed, saved civilisation, or at least the civilisation of Rome and Greece as filtered by the Christian censors.² It had successfully evangelised amongst the Gaelic natives before the first Anglo-Norman conquests of the twelfth century – though their pagan traditions and cults were tacitly adapted in the Irish version of Romanism. At least one of its Popes legitimated, or was held to have legitimated, the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. The pre-Reformation Church in Ireland catered to an ethnic and linguistic colonial dual society, one with considerable signs of assimilation (of the settlers by the natives), and reflected these divisions within its ranks and organisation. But after the Reformation the Church found itself an alien power within the English empire, as the Church of the natives and the old settlers but not of the new settlers; and it was an alien power tacitly and explicitly allied to England's major competitors, Spain and France. The historian Hugh Trevor Roper puts these developments pithily,

'Why was Ireland so sensitive an issue in English politics? It was, of course, our postern gate through which foreign enemies – first the Spaniards, then the French – sought to attack us. It was to us what Poland was to Prussia once Prussia was strong and Poland weak; and through fear we treated it similarly: colonisation, expropriation, discrimination, partition. The response too was similar: exasperated nationalism inflamed by religious difference, religious difference inflamed in turn by awakened nationalism.'³

After the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, and leaving aside complicated tales which found the Pope temporarily allied with the Dutch Protestant King William and organiser of the *coup d'état* of 1688,

the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland was outlawed, and its adherents, mostly the natives with a leavening of the 'old English', were the targets of 'penal laws' that, amongst other things, were not designed to assist a good Catholic education. The precarious survival of organised Catholicism in these circumstances was remarkable, and the reality and myths of the martyred church and nation did much for the subsequent convergence of Catholicism and Irish nationalism. Indeed the ethnic identification of the native Irish with the Church was, so to speak, an equal and opposite reaction to the penal laws.

Within two centuries of the passage of these laws the Catholic Church in Ireland was to be remarkably powerful, more powerful and rigorous than it had ever been in regulating its flock, organiser of the religion of the island's majority, the natives, and in charge of much of the island's education and social services. What explains the nineteenth century comeback of the Roman Catholic Church? In a phrase, the conjunction of British imperial policy and Catholic opportunity. It was also aided by the repercussions of the Famine, that brutal moderniser of Ireland. Politics was, however, primary. The threat of Jacobinism, manifest in the United Irishmen, and in nineteenth century republicanism, concentrated English and Papist minds. The British state in Ireland abandoned the attempt to Anglicise the native Irish through mere coercion. It would collaborate with the Catholic Church – it would be given permission to pacify and civilise the native Irish, most importantly in education and social welfare.⁴ The Protestant state of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, having failed to pacify Ireland through centralised policing, Protestant education and subsidised emigration, tolerated and eventually supported the Catholic Church in Ireland: Catholics had restrictions on citizenship and property rights lifted after the 1770s, were emancipated in 1829, and had the Anglican Church (the so-called Church of Ireland) disestablished in 1869.⁵ The investment in reform was partly repaid: the Church would significantly assist in creating a Catholic rural bourgeoisie with a stake in the imperial order; and the Church would regularly counsel against insurrectionary secular republicanism.

The Church that would do so was built by Cardinal Paul Cullen, an ultramontanist who tempered the Church's policy to Irish circumstances, and who brought with him from Rome the distinctly puritanical version of Catholicism now associated with Irish Romanism. The Church had followed an astute collaboration, obtaining control of schools in Ireland that had been intended to be non-denominational, and it was vigorously critical of militarist republicanism, but Cullen knew there

were limits to effective collaboration. The Church could not become enthusiastically in favour of the Union of Great Britain and Ireland without endangering its ethnic base – whose political leaders minimally favoured repeal of the union and home rule. So the Catholic Church resisted the British state's offer to subsidise its clergy, and Cullen opposed 'current endowment', the British state's remarkable proposal to establish both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church of Ireland. Cullen worked instead for no established church in Ireland rather than two – although Vatican policy of the time held that the separation of church and state was an evil. Cullen's reconstruction of an autonomous, centralised and re-invigorated Church between 1849 and 1878 put a major road-block in the path of British nation-builders in Ireland, secured the Church's ethnic base, and gave it an organisational penetration of native civil society that would not diminish until the 1970s. The Church would have been entirely content with home rule – as it was it had to cope with the unexpected victory of militant republicanism between 1916 and 1921 before, as usual, making an accommodation with the new powers that were.

As Dr McGrath's book goes to press the remarkably long nineteenth century of Irish Catholicism is surely ending. The Republic of Ireland and Catholics in Northern Ireland are secularising fast, though not at the same pace as in Quebec in the 1960s. Native priest and nun production rates are respectively low and negative. The Papal visit of 1979, when half of Ireland's Catholics turned out to see him somewhere, will be seen in retrospect as the last moment of its moral hegemony. The Church's austere, indeed wintry reputation, is now deeply damaged by scandals, both financial and sexual. It does not have the work force to run its core let alone its ancillary organisations, and is slowly beating retreats – ceding power to lay Catholics in hospitals, charities and schools. The ambitious no longer pursue a churchly career as a first or second choice. Modernization is working its normal impacts – albeit with a long delay that can largely be attributed to the Church's successful accommodation with Irish nationalism. The Church is now becoming a mere interest group, with special influence over the politics of the body – over public policy debates on birth-control and abortion – though it has lost its war of position on abortion and looks set for further defeats.

It is against this backcloth that Dr McGrath's book should be read: a book about times past that has compelling intellectual and public policy interest. *The Catholic Church and Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland* will establish itself as the opening reference for anyone

interested in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and Catholic Schools in Northern Ireland between 1920 and 1993. Dr. McGrath's book is a scrupulous investigation, based on primary, governmental, and diocesan archival sources, of a much neglected subject: the relations between the Roman Catholic Church, the Northern nationalist community and the state of the United Kingdom, during both the Stormont era (1921–72) and that of direct rule (1972–).

Dr. McGrath tells the tale as one of incremental gains by the Church, staving off threats to its control of its own educational institutions in the 1920s, gradually extracting a greater degree of public funding of Catholic schools, and in 1993 full funding for Catholic schools was achieved – though not entirely because of the Church's efforts as we are told. McGrath notes that the price of financial success has been the loss of clerical control within the Church's own educational bailiwick: 'Catholic clerics have surrendered power within Catholic schools, but to Catholic parents, Catholic teachers and DENI officials rather than to Unionist politicians' (p. 244). The other price of success over the long run was that Catholics in Northern Ireland had inferior physical accommodation in their schools, and, in the early days, teachers who were paid less than their colleagues in the state/Protestant sector. The Catholic community paid a further price for its autonomy in education, a 'double burden', paying taxes for schools they did not use, and making voluntary contributions towards their own. Dr. McGrath rightly draws attention to the difficulties in establishing the educational, credentialist and labour-market damage that Catholics experienced in consequence – but no one disputes that there was some.

Dr. McGrath suggests in his conclusion that Catholic schools were vital in preserving both the Catholic and nationalist identity in Northern Ireland. The first claim is almost true by definition; the second is less evident. The Protestants of Northern Ireland, in the main, as the 1920s controversies showed, did not want secular or integrated education: and it is difficult to imagine any successful integration project, whether pan-Christian or pan-British, at that time. Moreover, Catholic schools, as Dr. McGrath shows, and as I can testify from personal experience, were not, in the main, vigorous stalwarts of Gaelic and republican culture – indeed they have become more so after the events of 1969 than they were before, accommodating rather than leading their flock's ethno-national sentiments. Under the system of control, organising the majority and disorganising the minority, that the Ulster Unionist Party ran between 1921 and 1969, the Catholic Church was both a site for autonomous education and social and

political activity by nationalists, and a mechanism through which unequal relations between Catholics and Protestants were preserved. Under the system of direct rule, which was not, as Dr. McGrath shows, as magnanimous in its educational largesse as is sometimes suggested, the Church has become less important in the politics of a community that has broken free from unionist domination and has its own authentic political parties and autonomous civil society. Compared with the 1920s the nationalist identity of northern nationalists is now at least as vigorous, overt and obvious, whereas their Catholic identity is much less vigorous, overt and obvious – a change which suggests that Catholic schools are now less effective at producing Catholics than they once were. Whether the schools were, and are, the principal aquaria of nationalist sentiments may legitimately be doubted, but that they played some role in the communal, collectivist and moralising character of northern nationalism cannot.

The Church's schools place in the new political system agreed on April 10, 1998 remains to be confirmed, not least because it is uncertain whether the Good Friday Agreement will be implemented. That Agreement does, however, suggest a clear possible future for Northern Ireland's educational system, at primary and secondary levels.⁶ Power-sharing, proportional representation and veto rights are the key governmental principles in the new consociational political system to which the parties agreed, and the public endorsed, for the internal politics of Northern Ireland. The parties and their publics did not, however, agree to any new model of integrated education, though they did not oppose it in the Agreement. By implication the principal parties will maintain the new system of equal funding of all systems, Catholic, state/Protestant, and the small integrated sector. This principle of educational autonomy is part of all known consociational systems. It suggests a future for Catholic schools in Northern Ireland as part of the mechanism through which nationalists protect and express their identity – and it suggests that they will become more nationalist, less Catholic and more secular in character, driven by the material and educational priorities of an emancipated laity (in continuation of existing trends). But whatever their future Dr. McGrath's book will be the reliable guide to their past.

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2. The most recent and extremely popular statement can be found in Thomas Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization: the Untold Story of Ireland's Heroic Role from the fall of Rome to the Rise of Medieval Europe* (New York: Doubleday, 1995).
3. Hugh Trevor Roper, 'The Lost Moments of History', *New York Review of Books*, 27 October 1988.
4. This is the theme of Tom Inglis's book *Moral Monopoly: the Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987)
5. John Whyte, *Church and State in Modern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1979) is a scrupulously reliable guide to the political history of church-state relations in Ireland.
6. For further analysis see Brendan O'Leary 'The Nature of the British-Irish Agreement' *New Left Review* (1999) 233: 66–96.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This is a tale of one of the most profound forms of power; the power to fashion fundamental values and beliefs in schools. The central purpose of this book is to examine the efforts of the Catholic authorities¹ to improve the funding conditions for Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, and to measure their success during the four major contests which led to the Education Acts of 1930, 1947 and 1968 and the Education Order of 1993. The book also assesses the scale of the financial and educational price paid by Northern Ireland's Catholics to maintain a network of autonomous Catholic schools.

The principal conflict between the Catholic authorities and the Northern Ireland government centred upon clerical efforts to extract higher rates of public funding and the politicians' attempts to exert an influence within Catholic schools. The clergy refused to abandon clerical control, and the politicians refused to grant Catholic schools increased funds without obtaining some influence for the education committees established by the 1923 Education Act. The dilemma troubling the Catholic authorities after 1923 was whether to accept a degree of political influence in exchange for improved rates of funding, or maintain a principled resistance to state influence which would exact a severe financial burden upon the Catholic laity and, eventually, condemn many Catholic children to a second-class education.

'THE POWER OF CATHOLIC TRUTH'

Pope Pius XI defined the demands of the modern Catholic Church in the Papal encyclical *Divini Illius Magistri* of 1929:

Letters, the sciences, the arts, so far as these are necessary or useful to Christian education and to her whole work for the salvation of souls, are fostered by the Church, and she founds and maintains her own schools and institutions for the teaching of all subjects and for the imparting of every degree of knowledge.²