

# **Church power in the south...**

**Home rule or Rome rule?**

Des McCarron

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THE CAMPAIGN to Separate Church and State have been busy. They've been taking a court case against the government for employing Chaplains in Vocational schools. The 26 county Constitution prohibits the state from "endowing" religion. Though we wouldn't place much faith in the courts or De Valera's Constitution ourselves we got to admit that they've got a point, paying for these 30 priests and ministers is costing the taxpayer £800,000-£1,000,000. However this is only the tip of the iceberg!

The Catholic church in Ireland has always been massively supported by the State and allowed a huge say in the running of the country. This article will attempt to cover the facts of church power in Ireland and the long history of State support beginning hundreds of years before the establishment of the 26 county state.

## **Religious belief**

Firstly it must be made clear that we see religion as a personal matter. Everyone should be free to worship as they want and hold whatever beliefs they want. We condemn totally any attacks on an individual's religious freedom.

Equally we are opposed to any one telling us how to run our lives, including religious leaders. This article will hopefully show how organised religion works with State and bosses to oppress all whatever their personal religious beliefs. Within the Irish 26 counties we are referring of course to the Catholic church ...and now a brief history lesson.

## **A bit of history**

In 1951 Noel Browne, Minister for Health in the "inter-party" coalition government, introduced his "Mother and Child Scheme". This was a proposal for free gynaecological care for pregnant women and a comprehensive health programme for children up to 16.

Following their Autumn meeting in Maynooth the Catholic bishops sent a letter to the government.

"The powers taken by the State in the proposed Mother and Child health service are in direct opposition to the rights of the family and of the individual and are liable to very great abuse. Their character is such that no assurance that they would be used in moderation could justify their enactment. If adopted they would constitute a ready-made instrument for totalitarian aggression"(!)

Such was the power of the bishops (helped by other conservatives and with the strong support of many wealthy doctors fearing for their practices) that this tripe was sufficient to send Labour and Clann na Poblachta tripping over each other to catch up with Fine Gael in the "No" lobby. Noel Browne was forced to resign.

## **The Church as Capitalists**

The church's fear of "totalitarian aggression" (i.e. communism) is of little surprise when you consider its material base in society. Recently (1987) the church's total assets in Dublin alone amounted to £100 million, with an estimated income of £7.5 million per year.

According to the Irish Independent (31/01/83) it owned 234 churches, 713 schools, 473 houses and 100 community centres in Dublin. In 1979 in the midst of appalling poverty they spent £2.5 million on the pope's visit.

Needless to say the ordinary members of this company (i.e. the vast majority of Irish people) have no shares, and voting rights lie in the hands of a non-elected board of management: the Bishops.

As well as its direct wealth, it has a massive amount of control in State institutions. They control 3,300 out of the country's 3,500 primary schools despite the fact that all the staff wages and 90% of building costs are paid by the State. They also control 67% of secondary schools and own Maynooth College. They have a majority on the boards of most orphanages, 'reform schools' and hospitals. This allows them to veto even legal operations such as sterilisations in most hospitals.

## **Keeping in with the in-crowd**

The Catholic church has always known which side its bread was buttered on. It worked hand in glove with British imperialism (while engaging in a little nationalist posturing to maintain its credibility with the masses) and after 1921 worked to prop up the weak Irish ruling class. They opposed the first stirring of radical democracy and egalitarian republicanism of the United Irishmen at the end of the Eighteenth century.

In 1795 the English authorities began to recognise their usefulness and helped build Maynooth seminary to replace the one in Paris destroyed by "Godless French revolutionaries". The cornerstone laid by the Lord Lieutenant in 1795 was the rock on which the clerical elite was to build its power over the next 200 years.

In 1799 the bishops met at Maynooth to vote their support for the Act of Union. In 1845 Robert Peel (the English Prime Minister) trebled the annual grant for Maynooth and gave them a large sum to expand the college. During the famine Bishops hardly commented on the mass starvation gripping the country while grain exports to England continued to grow.

## **Kitty O'Shea**

They opposed the Fenians and even constitutional nationalists like Parnell, whom they hounded out of politics after his affair with Kitty O'Shea. The Catholic hierarchy was in the front-line in condemning the locked-out workers in 1913. Priests and lay Catholic activists physically prevented children of the strikers being sent on holiday to trade union families in "Godless" England during the dispute.

The 1916 proclamation represented the views of the more radical wing of the Irish bourgeoisie & intellectuals and had a vague aspiration to "cherish all the children of the nation equally". After 1921 the Free State government and the weak Irish ruling class fell back into the arms of the church. The bishops condemned the anti-treaty side in the civil war, recognised the "legitimate government" and attacked republicans for "causing criminal damage".

After the war both pro- (Cumann na Gael/Fine Gael) and anti- (Fianna Fáil) treaty sides were in the palm of its hand. In 1923 the Censorship of Films Act was passed, 1924 saw the Intoxicating

Liquor Act, in 1925 divorce was outlawed and in 1929 the Censorship of Publications Board was established.

In 1937 De Valera's Constitution was passed with the bishops being consulted on every syllable. Among its articles was:

“The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the guardian of the faith professed by the majority of citizens”.

(This was not repealed until 1972).

Fine Gael did not allow themselves to be outdone in abject grovelling. In 1947 Costelloe, head of the new coalition government, wrote to the Pope:

“on the occasion of our assumption of office.....my colleagues and myself desire to repose at the feet of your holiness the assurance of our filial loyalty and our devotion to your August person”.

## **A new Ireland?**

The 1960s and 70s saw an upturn in the Irish economy with international investment. This led to an increase in the number of women working outside the home, and combined with the emergence of the Irish women's movement, led to a slight weakening of the church's position. In 1979 Fianna Fáil actually went against the hierarchy to bring in limited availability of condoms.

But the 1980s saw a series of defeats for liberal reforms. In 1980 Noel Browne, once again, got the thin end of the stick when not one T.D. would support his divorce bill. In 1983 the Constitution was amended to “uphold the right to life of the unborn”. In 1985 a “Lenten Pastoral” forbade Catholic hospitals carrying out sterilisations. In 1986 an amendment to the Constitution allowing divorce in very limited circumstances was defeated.

However there are some definite signs of a weakening of the ideological power of the church in Ireland. There has been a decrease in both church attendance and “vocations to the priesthood” since the 1970s. For example there has been a 9% drop in Mass attendance between 1974 and 1989, attendance at confession has declined from 47% to 18% (according to a recent survey by Rev. Michael Mac Grail – Irish Times 2/3/1991). The recent election of a “liberal” woman President (Mary Robinson) and the Fianna Fáil attempt to widen the availability of condoms would also seem to confirm this.

## **Is there a way out?**

Though we must acknowledge that liberals such as the Campaign to Separate Church and State have the right idea, we don't think that their methods will work. We stand for the complete separation of Church and State. Yes, I know somebody will point out that we oppose the State as well. This is a tactical question, just as our opposition to the wages system doesn't stop us looking for higher wages.

In the short-term we have to fight against clerical control of hospitals, schools, community centres and youth clubs. We also fight against the laws which place restrictions on peoples'

personal lives. The WSM is in favour of campaigning for the best possible secular laws in the areas of divorce, contraception, abortion, sterilisation, adoption and gay & lesbian rights.

We fully realise that there are limits to what can be achieved under the present system, but that should stop nobody seeking to win those limited goals that are immediately possible.

A victory in any one of these struggles exposes the wide powers of the church and shows whose side it is on. It creates the possibility of involving more people in future struggles. The long-term alternative we offer of a new free, self-managed world where people control their own lives will be one in which the mystical and authoritarian ideas of most religions will probably attract little support.

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