

INSTITUTE FOR BRITISH-IRISH STUDIES

REPORT ON CONFERENCE “OLD STRUCTURES, NEW BELIEFS:RELIGION, COMMUNITY AND POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND” UNIVERSITY COLLEGE DUBLIN, 15 MAY 2003

Organised by the Institute as part of the programme of the Guinness Newman Scholar in British-Irish Studies sponsored by Diageo Ireland, the conference lasted for one full working day in the University Industry Centre. It brought together eight distinguished speakers and attracted an audience of about 55, drawn from the public service, the diplomatic corps, voluntary and other bodies and the academic community. The academic convenor of the event was Dr Claire Mitchell, Guinness Newman Scholar in British-Irish Studies.

Theme

It is well known that many of our most familiar contemporary institutions and practices have been shaped by values and belief systems of the past, and that interaction between these two levels carries influence in both directions. Public institutions—political and other—reflect underlying systems of belief; but they also help to shape these. This relationship arises in varying form in all societies, and it poses particular challenges in the context of rapid change at one level or the other. This conference was conceived as an exploration of a particular facet of this relationship in one society, Ireland; it sought to analyse the tension between religiously motivated beliefs and practices, on the one hand, and forms of political organisation and political priorities, on the other. While economic modernisation in the south and political reconstruction in the north have changed the context in which religion now operates in Ireland, the reality is that in both parts of the island levels of religious belief and practice are extremely high by comparison with the rest of western Europe. It is also clear that religion has not yet retreated solely into the private sphere and has retained much of its significance at the level of social life and political culture.

The purpose of this conference was, then, to examine the extent to which, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Irish political life continues to be entangled with religion. At least at first sight, there appear to be significant differences between north and south. In Northern Ireland, as is well known, political loyalties are, by and large, structured by religious affiliation. Protestant organisations and Protestant theology have had a major but uneven impact on the character of unionist politics. The influence of Catholic institutions and theology on nationalist politics in Northern Ireland is less obvious, but is nonetheless clearly discernible. Until recently, these influences have had a similar significance in the Republic of Ireland, where the salience of religion as a badge of communal identity has for long paralleled the importance of religion (and specifically of the Catholic church) as a source of influence on public policy. Whilst in the present the authority of the Catholic church is dwindling, social and political life cannot yet be described as wholly secular. Moreover, Ireland is experiencing trends of religious revitalisation amongst ethnic minorities, raising new issues for communal relationships and political accommodation, both north and south.

The conference was organised in such a way as to explore the significance of religion for communal identity and political activity in the two parts of Ireland. It examined separately the two great religious traditions that have traditionally dominated the life of the island, as well as exploring alternative formulations of religion and politics, and mapping the implications of change in the contemporary religious landscape for politics and ethno-national relationships on the island.

Papers

The day's proceedings were divided into four sessions, at each of which two papers were presented. Presentations were structured to allow some time for discussion, and this was initiated in each case by a pre-designated discussant (see annex 1 for the conference programme).

The conference began with a panel on Protestantism and a paper by Dominic Bryan, Queen's University Belfast, that explored the diminishing role of the Orange Order in the context of wider divisions within the Protestant and unionist community in Northern Ireland. The relationship between religious beliefs and ethno-nationalism was examined by John Brewer, Queen's University Belfast, who argued that Protestants in Northern Ireland are not yet experiencing secularisation and nor are other changes in religiosity impacting upon unionist political identity.

The second session focused on Catholicism. Claire Mitchell, University College Dublin, argues that Catholicism played a political role in a variety of top-down and bottom-up ways throughout conflict in Northern Ireland, and speculated that although these roles have changed in recent years they have not yet disappeared. Mary Harris, National University of Ireland, Galway, charted the relationship between Catholicism and politics over the 20th century in Ireland. She argued that although official religious involvement in political life is no longer needed, there is still ongoing respect for some elements in the church and interest in spirituality.

In the third session, the focus shifted to alternative formulations of religion and politics. Gladys Ganiel, University College Dublin, traced the religious and political lineage of dissent from the United Irishmen through to current evangelical peace groups, assessing their failures and potential for success in overcoming sectarianism. In a paper on religion and reconciliation, Terence McCaughey, Trinity College Dublin, examined the potential for global and moral dimensions of a faith in Ireland that calls for the oneness of humankind, rather than focusing on social and political divisions.

The conference concluded with two papers that examined emerging trends in Irish religion and politics. Bernadette Hayes, Queen's University Belfast, and Ian McAllister, Australian National University, considered the impact of secularisation on political life finding that there are a significant number of religious independents in Northern Ireland who differ considerably from the affiliated in their political attitudes. Alice Feldman, University College Dublin, looked at the impact of ethnic diversification in Ireland, arguing that multiculturalism poses new social and political challenges far beyond the traditional Protestant-Catholic divide.

Future plans

Texts of several presentations were circulated at the conference, and some are being prepared for inclusion in the Institute's working paper series.

In addition, a book proposal based on the conference proceedings has been prepared. Provisionally entitled *Religion, Community and Politics in Contemporary Ireland*, this is planned to be completed in Spring 2004, and is to be edited by Claire Mitchell. In addition to revised versions of the papers presented at the conference, this will include one additional commissioned chapter, an introduction and a conclusion. The proposal has been sent to UCD Press with a view to its possible inclusion in the new series *Perspectives on British-Irish Studies*.

ANNEX 1: CONFERENCE PROGRAMME

Session 1, 09h30-11h00: Protestantism and the union

Chair: Rev. Brian Kennaway, former convenor, Education Committee, Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland

- *Where have all the Orangemen gone? The Orange Order and unionist politics*
—Dr Dominic Bryan, Queen's University Belfast
- *Continuity and change in contemporary Ulster Protestantism*
—Prof John Brewer, Queen's University Belfast
- Discussant: Dr Jennifer Todd, University College Dublin

Session 2, 11h15-12h45: Catholicism and the nation

Chair: Dr Tom Inglis, University College Dublin

- *Northern Catholicism and the politics of conflict*
—Dr Claire Mitchell, University College Dublin
- *Southern Catholicism: state, society and nation*
—Dr Mary Harris, National University of Ireland, Galway
- Discussant: Rev Tim Bartlett, St Mary's University College, Belfast

Session 3, 14h15-15h45: Alternative formulations of religion and politics

Chair: Dr Kenneth Milne, Historiographer of the Church of Ireland

- *The politics of dissent*
—Gladys Ganiel, University College Dublin
- *Religion and reconciliation in Irish politics*
—Rev. Terence McCaughey, Trinity College Dublin
- Discussant: Dr Geraldine Smyth, Irish School of Ecumenics

Session 4, 16h00-17h30: The future of religion and politics in Ireland

Chair: Dr John Coakley, University College Dublin

- *The impact of secularisation on political life: the role of religious independents in Northern Ireland*
—Prof Bernadette Hayes, Queen's University Belfast and Prof Ian McAllister, The Australian National University
- *Religious minorities and the challenge of pluralism*
—Dr Alice Feldman, University College Dublin
- Discussant: Prof Stephen Mennell, University College Dublin and Director, Institute for British-Irish Studies

ANNEX 2: REGISTERED CONFERENCE PARTICIPANTS

ARNOLD, Mr Bruce—*Irish Independent*

BARTLETT, Fr Tim—St Mary's University College

BRENNAN, Ms Jean—University College Dublin

BREWER, Prof John—Queen's University Belfast

BRUGHA, Mrs Maire—Irish Association

BRUGHA, Mr Ruairi—Irish Association

BRYAN, Dr Dominic—Queen's University Belfast

BRYSON, Dr Anna—Trinity College Dublin

CAVATORTA, Mr Francesco—University College Dublin

COLLINS, Mr Sean—Drogheda Borough Council

COAKLEY, Dr John—University College Dublin

CROSBY, Mr Paul—Embassy of the Holy See

DALTUN, Mr Antoin

DAVIDSON, Mr Andrew—Reform Movement

DE PAOR, Ms Jacinta—Glencree Centre for Reconciliation

FARRELL, Mr Pierce—University College Dublin

FELDMAN, Dr Alice—University College Dublin

FINNEGAN, Prof Richard—Centre for Irish Studies, UCG and Stonehill College, USA

FULLER, Dr Louise

GANIEL, Ms Gladys—University College Dublin

GUSEN, Mr Bill—Embassy of Canada

HAMILL, Ms Judith—University of Limerick

HARRIS, Dr Mary—NUI, Galway

HAYES, Prof Bernadette—Queen's University Belfast

HEFFERNAN Mr John—University College Dublin

HONOHAN, Dr Iseult—University College Dublin

HOWARD, Mr Kevin—University College Dublin

INGLIS, Dr Tom—University College Dublin

KENNAWAY Rev Brian—Belfast

KENNEDY, Mr Michael—University College Dublin

LANE, Mr, Finnbar—University College Dublin

LANG, Ms, Karin—IBIS

LOUGHLIN, Mr Vivian—Dublin

LYSAGHT, Ms Karen—NUI Maynooth

MAWHINNEY Ms Alison—Queen's University Belfast
MCCAUGHEY Rev Terence—Trinity College Dublin
MCGRATH, Ms Brid—Trinity College Dublin
MENNELL, Prof Stephen—University College Dublin
MILNE, Dr Kenneth—Historiographer, Church of Ireland
MITCHELL, Dr Claire—University College Dublin
MULCAHY, Dr Aogan—University College Dublin
MURRAY, Mr Paul—Atlantic Philanthropies
NAUGHTON Ms Carmel—Dublin
NIC GHIOLLA PHADRIAG Dr Maire—University College Dublin
O CORAIN, Mr Daithi—Trinity College Dublin
O'ROURKE, Ms Brid—University College Dublin
O'SULLIVAN Ms Noreen—University College Dublin
PUIRSÉIL, Dr Niamh—Trinity College Dublin
SMYTH, Dr Geraldine—Irish School of Ecumenics, Trinity College Dublin
SMYTH, Mr Alan—Northern Ireland Office
STUART, Mr Alan—ISSC
SWANN, Ms Eithne—University College Dublin
TANNAM, Dr Etain—University College Dublin
THEILER, Dr Tobias—University College Dublin
TODD, Dr Jennifer—University College Dublin
WHYTE, Dr Jean—Trinity College Dublin