

Social Justice and the Secularisation of Catholic Ethics in Ireland

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I suspect that, like myself, most people here today are partisan: we believe that Dr Seán Healy and Sr Brigid Reynolds have, over many years, done Ireland some service and deserve our recognition and thanks for that. I also believe, though, that while their work has earned all the encomiums it will get today, it deserves something more than praise. It also warrants effort at understanding. What exactly have they done? Why was it important? What difference has it made to Ireland in the early 21st century? These questions require not only that we list their remarkable achievements and recognise the exceptional personal qualities which produced them. They also require that we stand back, try to tie it all together and say, in the round, what their overall contribution has been.

Here I suggest that that contribution can be examined at two levels. One level is about Brigid's and Seán's personal work for social justice. During the ups and downs of social and economic life in Ireland over the past forty years, they have done more to defend and enhance the social protection functions of the Irish welfare state than any two other individuals of their generation. In consequence they have made a unique contribution to fairness and social inclusion. At no point did they do that on their own, but the sheer longevity, consistency and effectiveness of their efforts – their promotion of the same message to such effect over such a long time, as I will talk about later – has been unique. Others came and went and did good things, but they stayed the course, kept the pressure on all the time with a remarkable clarity and consistency of vision, and that sets them apart.

That role, in their case, had religious origins and motivations, as it had for many social justice activists in the Christian world in their lifetimes. I believe that we cannot get a rounded view of their place in Irish life without taking that context into account. This brings me to the second level of assessment of their contribution, which stands back from their personal activities and looks at the significance of the social justice movement they took part in for the religious culture of Ireland in their era. Here I contend that the rise of social justice activism after Vatican II was an important though by no means the sole strand in a process of ethical secularisation that transformed the role of Catholicism in Irish life and had important cultural effects. By 'ethical secularisation' here I mean

not a loss of faith nor decline in religious practice, trends that did not materialise in Ireland until the 1990s.

I mean rather a process that grew out of mid-20th century Catholic thinking on the proper relationship that should exist between the two core virtues in the Christian tradition, namely, faith and charity. In the pre-Vatican II paradigm, faith, the domain of love of God as lived through the sacramental life of the Church, had primacy. Charity, the domain of love of neighbour where human relations and their accompanying ethical codes could be thought of as the main concern, played a supporting role. That role constrained charity with an obligation to support and reward faith. This constraining of charity occurred to such a degree that concern about the suffering that humans could cause each other faded into the background of moral thinking, to be supplanted by worries about transcendent ends.

Major strands of thought that fed into Vatican II challenged that subordination of charity to faith. A new paradigm emerged which looked back to the gospels and found there a vision of charity as a co-equal virtue in its own right, standing alongside faith but partly going beyond it. This semi-independent status of charity arose not least because, as the parable of the good Samaritan suggested, love of neighbour could and should aspire to be universal and human in a way that faith could not: it could be practised by non-believers as well as believers and be directed at human betterment in the here and now without necessary validation by links to the goal of eternal life. The further implication was drawn that for this bountiful human dimension of love of neighbour to be fully realised, charity should not be claimed as the exclusive property of any single faith – a certain de-linkage of the two had to occur to allow the universal scope of charity to be fulfilled. Vincent MacNamara, a moral theologian of this period, summed up this idea by saying that, in the sphere of ethics, for charity to fully flourish, ‘a certain kind and degree of secularisation is demanded by Christianity’.¹

I will explore this idea further and talk of its effects on Irish Catholicism later. But before that, I will turn back to my first level of reflection on our topic today, which deals with the personal contribution of Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy to social justice in Ireland.

A key part of the Catholic institutional background from which their social justice work emerged was Pope Paul VI’s encyclical of 1967, *Populorum Progressio*. This document brought a novel focus on

¹ Vincent MacNamara, *Faith and Ethics. Recent Roman Catholicism*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan (1982), p. 39. For the broader history of these movements in Catholic moral theology, see James Keenan *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Continuum (2010), esp. Chaps 5 & 6. See also Patrick Hannon *Church, State, Morality and Law*, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan 1992.

human development and global social inequalities into the centre of Catholic social teaching and threw down a challenge to all peoples and governments, not just Catholics, to tackle social injustices both in the world as a whole and in their own countries. The Pope's call was rapturously received by social justice movements that had been growing in many parts of the Catholic world, particularly in Latin America, since the mid-1950s.² It took a couple of years for these new ideas to percolate into the upper reaches of the Catholic church in Ireland but by the end of the 1960s the Catholic bishops had taken to them with some enthusiasm and embarked on an impressive array of initiatives in the new mould.

These initiatives included the setting up of the Irish Commission on Justice and Peace in 1969, the holding of a conference on unmarried mothers in Kilkenny in 1970 which repudiated the Church's traditional harsh treatment of child-bearing outside marriage, and the setting up of Trócaire, the bishops' Third World development agency in 1973. However, the initiative that most closely prefigured the social justice campaigns that Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy would embark on a decade later was the setting up in October 1970 of the Council on Social Welfare. This was a sub-committee of the Irish Catholic episcopal conference that was charged with the task advising the bishops on social welfare matters. The bishops appointed one of their number, Dr Peter Birch, Bishop of Ossory, as chair of the Council. He had already gained a national reputation for his creation of Kilkenny Social Services, an umbrella body designed to coordinate voluntary and community welfare services in his diocese and had just sponsored the just-mentioned conference on lone mothers in Kilkenny.

Under Bishop Birch's direction, the Council on Social Welfare soon had quite an impact. Its first and most significant public act was to hold a 3-day conference on poverty in Kilkenny in November 1971. This conference would soon come to be recognised as a landmark event in the modern history of Irish social policy. Its centrepiece was a presentation by Séamus Ó Cinnéide, then a young social policy researcher, who used social welfare payments data to estimate that at least 24% of the population and possibly up to 30% were living in poverty. This was Ireland's first attempt at providing a social scientific definition and measure of the extent of poverty. Its revelation that the rising tide of prosperity of the 1960s had not lifted all boats caused shock and helped place poverty on the national political agenda.

It especially energised the Labour Party which entered government with Fine Gael in 1973. Taking charge of the Department of Social Welfare in the new government, the Labour leader, Brendan

² For a general account, see John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism: A Global History from the French Revolution to Pope Francis*. London: Norton (2022)

Corish, and his energetic lieutenant, Frank Cluskey, launched the largest expansion of social welfare provision to have occurred in the history of the state to date, inspired at least in part by ideas emerging from the Council on Social Welfare. Frank Cluskey was also taken with models of community development that Bishop Birch had championed through Kilkenny Social Services. He secured newly available European money to fund a national scheme of local neighbourhood experiments in how to counteract social disadvantage. His pick to chair the national committee that run these 'pilot schemes to combat poverty', as they were called, was Sr Stanislaus Kennedy. She had been part of Bishop Birch's team in Kilkenny Social Services since the mid 1960s. This programme in effect gave state recognition to local community development as an instrument of social policy and provided a link in a chain of connection between the community focus of Kilkenny Social Services in the 1960s and a more institutionalised communitarian strand that emerged in Irish social policy in the 1990s.

The bishops' Council on Social Welfare continued its work for much of the 1970s. It ran a second policy conference on poverty in Kilkenny in 1974 and another in 1981, and produced documents on a range of social justice issues. The bishops also issued their own collective statements, most notably the joint pastoral of 1977 titled *The Work of Justice*. However, with the advent of John Paul II to the papacy in 1978, the Vatican's ardour for social justice activism cooled. Engagement in it declined among the Irish hierarchy, though as we will see later it did not disappear. This was followed by a shift in the institutional base for Catholic social justice activism: as the bishops stepped back in the early 1980s, the religious orders and Catholic lay organisations stepped forward. An important moment in that transition occurred in 1982 with the setting up of the Social Justice Commission of the Conference of Major Religious Superiors (the latter was later renamed the Conference of Religious in Ireland, or CORI). This was event that in 1982 and 1983 brought Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy into the field of social justice in Ireland.

There was no institutional connection between the bishops' Council on Social Welfare and the Social Justice Commission of the joint religious orders, but there was close continuity between their work. The Reynolds-Healy approach picked up particularly on two strands of the Council's actions of the previous decade. One was an intense focus on income poverty as a core aspect of social disadvantage and on state income supports – that is, the social security system – as the essential ingredient in a solution. The 1971 Kilkenny Poverty Conference has been credited with the rediscovery of poverty in the newly prosperous Ireland of the 1970s and with installing it on the national political agenda. As they began their work in Ireland in the early 1980s, Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy grabbed that issue, ran with it and made it their own. For the following forty years, they did more than any other advocacy group to keep the problem of poverty in the public eye and to

hold government to account in its efforts to deal with it. In 1986, for example, they instituted the practice of providing a post-mortem analysis on the government's annual budget the day after the budget was published, usually with a forensic focus on the likely impact of budget measures on poverty. This practice continues as a landmark annual event in the Social Justice Ireland calendar to the present.

The second key strand of continuity with the 1970s in the Reynolds-Healy approach was its emphasis on community. The neighbourhood-level pilot schemes to combat poverty that Frank Cluskey had initiated in 1974 had come to an end in 1980, but the kind of anti-poverty work they represented continued to flourish in marginalised communities, quite often relying on European funding. By the 1990s, new forms of officially recognised local social partnerships had emerged to give structure to these activities and these generated some excitement for their promise as new participative mechanisms of local social governance.

In the meantime, a social partnership process involving government, business, trade unions and farmers had emerged at national level in the effort to dig Ireland out of the fiscal and economic crisis it had experienced in the late 1980s. Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy had strongly supported the local versions social partnership that emerged in this period and in the 1990s they set about using national-level developments to bring this work onto a new plane.³ They joined forces with a small number of other actors, mainly the Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed and the Community Workers Cooperative, to lobby for a join-up between the local and national versions of social partnership. Quite remarkably, that lobbying bore fruit in 1996 when the Fine Gael government of the day mandated the addition of a 'community and voluntary pillar' to the national social partnership process. NGOs and representative bodies working for the poorest sections of the population, including CORI's Social Justice Commission, thus got a seat at the national negotiating table on a wide range of policy topics, an exceptional social governance arrangement by European standards.

Having been at the forefront of the drive to create this outcome, the Reynolds-Healy contribution relentlessly used the platform it provided to protect and expand the social security system as the national backbone of anti-poverty efforts. We'll hear more of this work later this afternoon and I will not dwell on it now. But it seems fair to say at this point that the dozen or so years after 1996, during which national social partnership operated at full tilt with the community and voluntary pillar having a secure place in the process, represented a high point of influence for the Reynolds-Healy

³ The account here draws from Joseph Larragy, 'Origins and significance of the community and voluntary pillar in Irish social partnership' *The Economic and Social Review* 37, 3 (2006), pp. 375-98.

advocacy programme. A build-up of social security provision in the early 2000s could be counted as one outcome which that programme helped to achieve. The cushioning effect of that build-up for those on low incomes when the financial crash came in 2008 could be counted as another. The national effects from these efforts were thus large. They give an indication of the scope and scale of what Brigid and Seán did over those years and continued to do until their retirement last year. On these counts alone, they can be said to have made a difference.

There are other dimensions to their roles too and here I return to the changes in religious culture associated with social justice activism that I mentioned earlier. I have already pointed to a re-balancing in the relationship between faith and charity, or to put it another way, between the sacramental and the ethical dimensions of religious life, as a central strand in Catholic religious change in the post-Vatican II era. My view is that there is little appreciation in academic accounts of these movements of how deep, how sudden and how total they were and how transformative their impacts on cultural trends turned out to be. I will therefore comment on them briefly and present them as a context within which Catholic social justice activism should be seen.

The starting point from which these changes in religious culture set out can be hinted at by looking the *Manual of Social Ethics*, a volume that was widely used in the 1950s and 1960s in the training of Catholic trade unionists, business people and socially influential professionals in what was then called 'Catholic action' or Catholic 'social ethics'.⁴ It was authored by James Kavanagh, priest of the diocese of Dublin and a protégé of the Archbishop, John Charles McQuaid. We could spend some time detailing how the perspective of this manual differed from that of later Catholic activism in various fields, including social justice, but here I will focus on its fundamental point of difference: its sacralisation of Catholic ethics as an instrument of faith, to be practised by Catholics for Catholics in service of the goal of Catholic evangelisation, under guidance of the teaching authority of the Church. Quotes from Pope Pius XI in the 1930s set out in the introduction to the *Manual* highlighted these faith objectives and the primacy of Church teaching in defining what those objectives entailed:

'Catholic Action is in effect a social apostolate inasmuch as its object is to spread the Kingdom of Jesus Christ ... It must therefore make it a chief aim to train its members ... to fight the battles of the Lord ... [I]f the manner of acting of some Catholics in the socio-economic field has left much to be desired, this has often come about because they have not known and pondered sufficiently the teachings of the Sovereign Pontiffs on these questions'.

⁴ My references here are to the fourth printing of this volume in 1960 – James Kavanagh, *Manual of Social Ethics*, Dublin: G.H. Gill and Sons (1960)

James Kavanagh was appointed as Professor of Social Science in UCD in 1966. But by then Vatican II had happened and his *Manual* soon transitioned from authoritative document of the 1950s to a relic of a bygone age. As Professor in UCD, he and his department developed a close working relationship with Kilkenny Social Services, in 1970 Bishop Birch drafted him onto the Council of Social Welfare, and in 1971, he chaired the sub-committee of the Council that organised the 1971 Kilkenny poverty conference. The nature and content of that conference showed that a new Catholic understanding of social action had arrived and taken over. In the programme for the conference, all reference to evangelisation and the quest for eternal life as a goal of intervention was gone and all reference to papal authority as a guide to intervention was equally gone. Instead, human betterment in this life, in this instance the guise of relief of material poverty, took over from salvation as the core objective. Human experience took over as the guide to how that objective should be achieved, in this instance in connection with social policy analysis of state-directed income distribution measures. The validity test for ideas in this new field lay in empirical analysis of what worked, not in clerical pronouncements on what offended God. One important linkage with faith remained. This was represented in a talk to the conference delivered by Sr Stanislaus Kennedy on the Christian imperative to treat the sufferings of the poor as a profound moral challenge – that is, on the background *why* of Catholic intervention but not the proximate *what* or *how*.

In sum, as Sr Stan's talk made clear, the *motivation* for action in regard to poverty on the part of the Council of Social Welfare remained strongly religious and its ultimate rationale was based in Christian notions of virtue. Yet all of the Council's operational content -- its objectives, methods, partners, audience, and intended beneficiaries -- were formed outside of the penumbra of faith and were informed by an ethical and intellectual commons that crossed denominational boundaries and was both added to and drawn from in the conference. This operational content, in other words, was, in its relative independence from faith, more or less fully secular and was presented as properly having that secular character by the religious leaders who promoted it.

There were many instances in the early 1970s which reflected the same pattern of religiously-driven ethical secularisation and illustrate how quickly and totally that pattern took over in Catholic thinking in this period. I would suggest, in fact, that the suddenness and near totality of this transformation was its most remarkable feature. In 1971, Archbishop McQuaid issued a furious denunciation of calls for legalisation of contraception in the service of responsible parenthood among married couples. That was a significant legacy from an older approach but it was also more or less the last of its kind. At no time since has an Irish bishop addressed his faithful in such uncompromising terms and nor laid down a dogmatic guide from faith, with no regard to the human dimensions of the issue at hand.. After McQuaid's retirement in 1972, no heavyweight advocate on

Irish bishops' bench persisted with his faith-based dogmatic style. That style had been central to the functioning of the global Catholic Church since at least the Council of Trent nearly 500 years ago, but when he departed it departed with him and a new prioritisation of the human dimensions of Christian charity had arrived.

Ireland today is nearly unique among European countries in having gotten this far into the 21st century without an upsurge of right wing political populism or the emergence of a politically influential right wing religious faction. A case could be made that the currents of religious change we have talked about here have contributed to this outcome by helping to preserve cultural cohesion and avert a slide into culture wars or identity politics. The Catholic social justice movement both represented and benefitted from that pattern of moderate cultural centrism. It presented its case in secular terms, focused on specific issues to be dealt with in established policy processes rather than on confrontational campaigning or fundamentalist disputes over questions of identity, and steered clear of party-political involvement.

So too, however, did other forms of activism that are usually thought of as having a Catholic background. An example is provided by the acrimonious referendum campaign on abortion – the pro-life amendment campaign – which took place in 1983. This was the period when Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy began their work on social justice in Ireland. Much excited commentary arose at the time on how divisive this and later similar episodes of sexual-moral debate were and how their outcomes represented a triumph of reactionary Catholicism over the forces of progress and enlightenment. Contrasts were sometimes drawn between the progressive, liberal face of Catholicism represented by the social justice movement and the backward-looking illiberalism of the Catholic stance on the big 'moral' questions of contraception, divorce and abortion.

In retrospect, however, when we compare Ireland's episodes of national debate on these issues, including the referendum campaign on abortion of 1983, with what happened under similar headings in other countries, including for example, the United States, what stands out is how fleeting and superficial the divisions they created proved to be. They represented periodic squalls in an otherwise steadily moving airflow rather than a growing perpetual storm – and here too the contrast with the permanent turbulence caused by abortion activism in the U.S. is a case in point. It is striking to note, for example, that neither the abortion referendum in 1983 nor the divorce referendum in 1985 had significant knock-on effects on the general election in 1987 – that was the election where the economic crisis of the time hogged national attention. Indeed it is difficult to find any general election over the past 50 years which were disturbed by the after-effects of the

campaigns or referendums on sexual-moral issues that regularly occurred in the interval since the preceding election.

Here, what stands out about these sexual-moral controversies when we look closely, is their structural similarities with social justice campaigns. For many participants, they may have had religious motivations, as many social justice activities did, but otherwise it is striking how secular they were. For example, as recounted in Tom Hesketh's book on the 1983 abortion referendum, the lay leaders of the pro-life amendment campaign strongly advised their followers to avoid associating their cause with the stance of the Catholic bishops. John O'Reilly, for example, the backroom organiser of PLAC, warned that it would be the 'kiss of death' for their campaign for PLAC activists to be seen as mouthpieces of the bishops. William Binchy, the PLAC's chief public campaigner who was himself a human rights lawyer, presented the abortion question as a standalone secular human rights issue, to be resolved within the standard procedures of Ireland's constitutional democracy and not fanned as a flashpoint in a wider struggle about Ireland's Catholic heritage. All of the PLAC leaders also remained a-political, in that they avoided entanglements with any political party – and again, in that they echoed the character of social justice activism. In other words, they withdrew from the public stage for the intervals between the successive episodes of debate on the limited range of issues that concerned them. They made no attempt to foment a sustained culture war centred on questions on Ireland's putative true national character.

In other words, they avoided the slide towards religiously-linked populism that happened almost everywhere else in the rich world in recent decades. As with the social justice movement, that is part of the positive legacy of religious change in Ireland in recent decades and gives a larger context within which the work of Brigid Reynolds and Seán Healy can be appreciated.