

Consumerism Replaces Catholicism?

The Case of Ireland

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We have reached a nemesis in our affairs in Ireland where consumerism is in the process of replacing Christianity as the shaping influence on all our lives. We are rapidly approaching a point where the social and moral order is being dictated by market forces alone. As we build shopping centres with the zest that we once built cathedrals and as brand names replace saints' names, the land of saints and scholars is being recast as the land of customers and consumers. [...] There is a sense out there that the whole business is out of control. [...] There is no longer any national consensus about what we want as a society, merely a bunch of politicians making it up as they go along.¹

On 3 July 2019, Ireland's Taoiseach (Prime Minister) Leo Varadkar, in a Dáil (parliament) exchange, compared the leader of the opposition party Fianna Fáil, Micheál Martin, to "one of those parish priests who preaches from the altar telling us to avoid sin while secretly going behind the altar and engaging in any amount of sin himself".²

1. Tom McGurk, "Land of Brands and Consumers", *Sunday Business Post* 2000-09-02. Cited in D. Vincent Twomey, *The End of Irish Catholicism?*, Dublin 2003, 194, n. 27.

2. John Downing, "Taoiseach Says Martin Is Like a 'Priest Telling Us to Avoid Sin While Secretly Sinning behind the Altar'", *Independent.ie* 2019-07-03, <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/politics/taoiseach-says-martin-is-like-a-priest-telling-us-to-avoid-sin-while-secretly-sinning-behind-the-altar-38279258.html>, accessed 2020-07-23.

It seems that not only is consumerism replacing Christianity, but all respect for Christians, Catholic Christians at any rate, is ended.

But is this the case? The argument of this article is that the truth of the matter is more complex. Ireland remains among the most Christian countries in Europe. Ireland's Catholics maintain a relatively high rate of practice of their faith.

This exploration of the complexity of Christianity in Ireland will begin by citing some significant statistics. This will be followed by an historical overview of the story of Christianity, in particular Catholicism, on this island of Ireland. The third section of the article will interrogate the reality of today, in an Ireland where “for the Irish Catholic Church, the tectonic plates really have shifted”.³ The paper will conclude by arguing that it is unwarranted to baldly assert that consumerism has replaced Christianity. While Catholicism in Ireland has been decentred, the future is still open.

The Statistics

A recent Pew Research survey informs us that Ireland remains one of the most Christian countries in Western Europe. Four out of five Irish people identify as Christian and 37 % of the population attend church monthly.⁴ In terms of church attendance this leaves Ireland between Portugal (35 %) and Italy (40 %).⁵

During Pope Francis' visit to Ireland on 25–26 August 2018 the Irish media gave virtually 48-hour coverage of the visit.

The most recent census of 2016 found 3,729,115 people identified as Catholics – 78 % of the population. While down from 84 % in the 2011 Census, it is still a substantial number of people. The percentage varies between rural and urban – Dublin has a lower percentage – and by age, 60 % for 27-year-olds, rising to reach a peak of 91.2 % for 82-year-olds.⁶

A study based on surveys from 2014 and 2016 ranked Irish people between the ages of 16 and 29 as among the most religious in Europe, alongside Poles and Lithuanians. 54 % in this age bracket identify as Catholic, 5 % as

3. Brendan Hoban, “Another Beginning?”, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review* 108 (2019), 151.

4. Jonathan Evans & Chris Baronavski, “How do European Countries Differ in Religious Commitment?”, *Pew Research Center* 2018-12-05, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/12/05/how-do-european-countries-differ-in-religious-commitment/>, accessed 2020-07-23.

5. Patsy McGarry, “Ireland Still One of the Most Christian States in Europe”, *The Irish Times* 2018-06-04, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/ireland-still-one-of-the-most-christian-states-in-europe-1.3518269>, accessed 2020-07-23.

6. “Census 2016 Reports”, Central Statistics Office, <https://www.cso.ie/en/census/census2016reports/>, accessed 2020-07-23.

belonging to other Christian denominations, 2 % as being part of a non-Christian religion, and 39 % state that they have no religion.⁷

Before Independence, census results show that in each of the four censuses held from 1881 to 1911 Roman Catholics represented on average 89,5 % of the population.⁸

With a decline from 89,5 % to 78 % in just over a hundred years, it hardly seems consumerism has yet replaced Christianity.

Ireland and Christianity: Historical Overview

Christianity has been in Ireland since at least the fifth century – that is for more than 1,500 years. The era from 600 to 900 CE is often identified as a golden era of learning.⁹ Many people came to Ireland to study, Irish monasteries produced illustrated manuscripts, stone sculptures (the High Crosses), and metal work. Irish monks gained a reputation as pilgrims, travelling back into mainland Europe to re-evangelize it. It was in regard to this era that Ireland was given the label “the island of saints and scholars”. It is important to note, as the historian Peter Brown reminds us, that while the monasteries flourished, and were powerhouses of learning and centres of high culture, large numbers of people were living outside this monastic form of life. In an “island of saints and scholars” there were very many unlearned and un-Christianized people.¹⁰

This golden age ended. The structures of Christianity in Ireland changed. Christianity perdured, but not without difficulty. The memory of this golden era was to have strong resonances much later. In the late nineteenth century when a new wave of Irish nationalism was gathering force, some of the artefacts of this era became icons of Irish identity (the Book of Kells, the High Crosses, and the ornate chalices). Exhibitions to this effect were staged among Irish emigrant communities, especially in the

7. Patsy McGarry, “Young Irish People among the Most Religious in Europe”, *The Irish Times* 2018-03-27, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/young-irish-people-among-the-most-religious-in-europe-1.3441046>, accessed 2020-07-23. The article refers to a study of religious affiliation and practice among young Europeans aged 16–29 by Stephen Bullivant, *Europe's Young Adults and Religion: Findings from the European Social Survey (2014–16) to Inform the 2018 Synod of Bishops*, London 2018.

8. In 1922, 26 counties of 32 got independence from Great Britain. On Easter Monday in April 1949, the 26 counties officially became a Republic and left the British Commonwealth.

9. In the limited scope of this article it is not possible to provide a detailed overview of how Irish culture and Catholicism have interacted historically. The intention in this section of the article is to point to some historical episodes that have significance for developments that occurred during the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.

10. See Peter Brown, *The Rise of Western Christendom: Triumph and Diversity, A.D. 200–1000*, 10th ed., New York 2013.

United States. This, in turn, reinforced a link or a sense of positive influence between Irish identity and Catholicism.

The Norman invasion of Ireland in the late twelfth century marked the beginning of 700 years of Norman and then English presence in Ireland. In 1541 the English Crown asserted full control of Ireland. The title of King of Ireland was bestowed on Henry VIII (1491–1547). This was the era of the Reformation and the Plantations, when Irish people, largely Catholics, were evicted from their land and Protestant settlers from England and Scotland were settled on this land. This marked a significant point in the relationship between the two countries, and centuries of conflict followed.

The Penal Laws, a code of laws regulating the status of Roman Catholics, were imposed. Their purpose was to exclude the majority of Irish Catholics from political and economic power. A further aim was to entice the colonized Irish to convert to Protestantism, and thus avoid the oppressive effects of the laws. “By deliberately defining the haves and the have-nots, the politically powerful and the oppressed, on the basis of religion, these statutes had a profound effect, not only on the eighteenth century, but on the subsequent history of Ireland.”¹¹ Monasteries were suppressed. Catholics who could afford it went to the continent for education, some to become ordained priests. It is likely that very considerable numbers of Catholics would not have attended any form of public worship regularly during these centuries but still the tradition of Catholic identity perdured.

These laws were rescinded in 1829 with the Catholic Emancipation Act. While this marks a significant step in the journey toward Irish independence it is important to remember that the struggle for independence, for an Irish republic, was never a sectarian one. It always included people from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds. It was a question of what might be termed “Irishness”, not of religion, rooted in an idea of “a nation in which common citizenship would override religious difference”.¹² There seems to be a marked difference in these developments towards national independence in Ireland and the Polish case as described by Magdalena Dziaczkowska in this special issue.¹³

In 1850 Archbishop Paul Cullen (1803–1878) returned to Ireland from Rome. He returned to a country devastated by the Potato Famine of the

11. “Irish Penal Law – Introduction”, <https://www.law.umn.edu/library/irishlaw/intro>, accessed 2020-07-23.

12. Richard Killeen, *The Concise History of Modern Ireland*, Dublin 2006, 65. For more detailed information, see Marie-Christine Veldeman, “Cultural Nationalism in Late Nineteenth-Century Ireland, a Step Towards Political Separatism?”, *Equivalences* 36 (2009), 145–155.

13. Magdalena Dziaczkowska, “The Polish Case: Pedophilia, *Polak-Katolik*, and Theology of the Nation”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020), 235–251.

1840s, during which a million people are estimated to have died, a further two million emigrated.¹⁴ Shocked by what he encountered, Cullen initiated a twofold mission: to relieve poverty, and “to rescue this Catholic country from the [...] religious inferiority in which it now lies”.¹⁵ He had a profound impact on the Church and society in Dublin, and throughout Ireland. Cullen expanded the influence of the Catholic Church in the civic and political life of Ireland, asserting Catholicism in the public sphere. He fostered the development of popular Catholic piety – a development the historian Emmet Larkin termed a “devotional revolution”.¹⁶

It is from this recent period in Irish history that the birth of the “exceptional Irish Catholic piety” can be traced. Belief and practice developed as a distinct form of Irish Catholicism. Thus, one could suggest, that it is as recent as the late nineteenth century that Catholic religious practice came to be at the heart of Irish social life. Larkin terms Cullen “an ecclesiastical imperialist”. Cullen was aware of the dangers that the modern liberal secular state would pose to the Catholic Church in Ireland. He believed that the secular state promoted a society which, when unmasked, would be exposed as promoting “materialism dressed up as progress”, premised on “rampant and irresponsible individualism” and “infected by the values of the enlightenment”.¹⁷

Ireland since Independence (1922)

Ireland gained independence from England after a protracted struggle that began in 1916. The 1916 Proclamation began with the words “Irish men and Irish women”. The mention of gender equality is extraordinarily far-sighted, in a time when women did not have voting-rights. The Proclamation continues: “We declare the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland [...] The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens.” These facts are recalled to emphasize that the struggle for independence in Ireland was in no way a struggle for Catholic supremacy.¹⁸

14. This largescale emigration continued right up to the 1950s.

15. Oliver Raftery, “The Ultramontane Spirituality of Paul Cullen”, in Dáire Keogh & Albert McDonnell (eds.), *Cardinal Paul Cullen and His World*, Dublin 2011, 74.

16. Emmet Larkin, “Paul Cullen: The Great Ultramontane”, in Dáire Keogh & Albert McDonnell (eds.), *Cardinal Paul Cullen and His World*, Dublin 2011, 16.

17. Larkin, “Paul Cullen”, 16.

18. Maud Gonne (1866–1953), one of the leaders of the independence struggle even in its military phase, was a Protestant. She was the first woman elected to the Westminster Parliament, but refused to take her seat as Ireland had not yet been granted independence.

The fight for independence culminated in a bitter civil war where the core issue was not radical social change, but rather the acceptance or rejection of a partitioned state.

Even before independence the Catholic Church had considerable influence due in part to the work of Archbishop Cullen. The newly influential position of the Catholic Church was strengthened by the partition, which created an Irish state with a population that was more than 90% Catholic. The Church played an important role in securing legitimacy for the new Irish Free State. In return, the government (which was largely bankrupt) allowed the Church to extend its presence in the realms of education, health, and welfare. A majority of educational, health, and care institutions, such as reformatory schools for delinquent youths and institutions for women pregnant out of wed-lock, were in Church governance of one kind or another. There is a sense in which the Catholic Church in Ireland in this era could be termed a Church of possession, as distinct from a Church of mission.¹⁹ However, it is important to emphasize that the Catholic Church in Ireland was not ever an established Church, in the sense of the official Church of state recognition and privilege. The only established Church in Ireland was the Anglican Church, in the centuries before independence.²⁰

Some of the positive aspects of this situation were well expressed in the address given by the Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar on the occasion of Pope Francis' visit to Ireland in 2018:

It is easy to forget that the Irish State, founded in 1922, did not set up a Department of Health or a Department of Social Welfare until 1947.

These are now our two largest and best funded Government Departments accounting for more than half of Government spending between them today. Providing healthcare, education and welfare is now considered a core function of our State. When the state was founded, it was not. The Catholic Church filled that gap to the benefit of many generations of our people.²¹

19. It is illuminating to view the church in Ireland in this era as a “Church of possession”, in contrast to the discussion of contemporary Catholicism in Sweden in Ryszard Bobrowicz, “Catholicism in Sweden: Embodying the ‘Church of Mission’”, *Svensk Teologisk Kvartalskrift* 96 (2020). 273–283.

20. For more on the complex story of the Anglican Church in Ireland, see Kenneth Milne & Paul Harron (eds.), *Irish Anglicanism 1969–2019: Essays to Mark the 150th Anniversary of the Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland*, Dublin 2019; Mark Empey, Alan Ford & Miriam Moffitt (eds.), *The Church of Ireland and Its Past: History, Interpretation and Identity*, Dublin 2017.

21. “Speech of An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, on the occasion of the Visit of Pope Francis”, https://www.gov.ie/en/speech/d9f784-speech-of-an-taoiseach-leo-varadkar-on-the-occasion-of-the-visit-of-/?referrer=/eng/news/taoiseach%27s_speeches/speech_of_an_taoiseach_leo_

However, the Church that stepped up to roles of influence had been structured in an inward-looking culture, one that “championed a clerical elite, institutional loyalty, conformity, anti-intellectualism and resistance to change”.²² When some state funds (meagre and limited) began to be directed in a more organized way to healthcare, education, and welfare they were mostly channelled through Church institutions so that there developed a kind of mutual State-and-Church responsibility for governance.

In the 1960s, when Ireland began to make efforts to move towards social reform, particularly in the areas of education and social welfare, the Church found itself mostly resisting this kind of reform. Resentment began to build up against such a conservative Church. This became much inflamed when revelations of abusive and scandalous behaviour began to emerge in the public view at the end of the twentieth century. Alongside the protracted series of revelations of clerical sexual abuse, there was a protracted series of revelations of cruelty and abuse and mismanagement in reformatory schools, homes for unmarried mothers, and other institutions. As the Irish Taoiseach noted in this same address:

There are “dark aspects” of the Catholic Church’s history [...] we remember the way the failures of both Church and State and wider society created a bitter and broken heritage for so many, leaving a legacy of pain and suffering.

It is a history of sorrow and shame.

In place of Christian charity, forgiveness and compassion, far too often there was judgement, severity and cruelty, in particular, towards women and children and those on the margins.²³

All these developments took place from the 1960s, paralleled by an era in which the economy was being transformed into the contemporary model of consumerist marketing.

Is Ireland Christian Today?

“For the Irish Catholic Church, the tectonic plates really have shifted” – undoubtedly Brendan Hoban is correct.²⁴ In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century we have witnessed a Church brought to its knees by a succession of unsavoury scandals. Furthermore it has been decentred from

varadkar_on_the_occasion_of_the_visit_of_pope_francis.html/, accessed 2020-07-23.

22. Colin Barr & Daithí Ó’Corráin, “Catholic Ireland, 1740–2016”, in Eugenio F. Biagini & Mary E. Daly (eds.), *The Cambridge Social History of Modern Ireland*, Cambridge 2017, 75.

23. “Speech of An Taoiseach”.

24. Hoban, “Another Beginning?”, 151.

the mainstream of Irish cultural values by a too rigid adhesion to what many term conservative social norms, and a failure to champion much needed social reform. These are factors of great weight. Alongside these factors there is the influence on Irish values of new market driven global consumerism. While the scandals and the excessive conservatism are usually blamed for the shifting of the “tectonic plates”, the effects of consumerism are not insignificant.

Ireland has changed rapidly, following the economic modernization and secularization of other Western countries, but at a very fast rate. Ireland has experienced “compressed modernity”. It has been said to have “grown up” very quickly. In growing up, it is normal for most people to reject something of their past, of tradition. In Ireland, to reject the past was to reject the conformity of the tight Catholic way of life that had developed from the Cullen era, and which marked distinctiveness from the British colonial power we sought to overcome. The institutional Church was too much associated with control and conformity, with obligation. It had been the centre of people’s world. This all changed rapidly.

Television came in 1962, free secondary education in 1968, the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. Emigrants had more opportunities to return home, with new ideas and experiences. The Celtic Tiger, an era of great economic boom (mid-1990s to late-2000s), meant many migrants came to Ireland with different ideas and different religions. Today there are many ways of being Irish. Irish culture has been greatly enriched by many of these developments. Most people in Ireland still believe in God and many still go to church. “What has changed most profoundly is the fact that belief in God and participation in the church is now optional in a way that it was not before.”²⁵ This development is not necessarily a bad thing. In 1950, 1960, and even 1970 to be Irish was, in the main, to be Catholic – this is not the case today. This change is in line with the arguments developed by Charles Taylor in his book *A Secular Age*: “The change I want to define and trace is one which takes us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others.”²⁶ This is the world in which the Catholic Church exists in Ireland today.

At the same time there is unease as evidenced by Tom McGurk’s quote, cited earlier: “We have reached a nemesis in our affairs in Ireland where consumerism is in the process of replacing Christianity as the shaping

25. William T. Cavanaugh, “The Church’s Place in a Consumer Society: The Hegemony of Optionality”, in Cornelius J. Casey & Fáinche Ryan (eds.), *The Church in Pluralist Society: Social and Political Roles*, Notre Dame, IN 2019, 72.

26. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA 2007, 3.

influence on all our lives.” This unease was expressed some years earlier at the National Conference of Priests of Ireland: “We feel that the swamping of Ireland by consumerism has created an environment hostile to the survival of real religion.”²⁷ Irish society has changed. In this consumerist world Irish people have options they never had before.

Jane Lister describes consumerism as referring to

the excessive over-consumption of consumer goods without regard to the negative impacts to people and the planet. [...] As a cultural phenomenon, consumerism underlies a growing consumer society where human values are commoditized, and individuals engage as economic actors in the marketplace more than as citizens in the political realm. Commentators equate it to a deadly virus.²⁸

Plurality and optionality may not be as liberating as they appear.

Some see consumerism and Christianity as competitors in seeking to cultivate our desires. A consumerist culture is market driven – to survive, the market must seduce us, create in us the desire to shop, shop, shop. We need to eat in this new restaurant, try a new craft beer. Business needs to maximize profit. “I shop, therefore I am” has become the new catchphrase of this throw-away era. A new shopping mall built in Dublin quickly came to be called the Cathedral – it was where people opted to go on Sunday, instead of to church. The Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), once a great supporter of the Catholic Church, now has practice for children on Sunday mornings, so families can choose either sport or mass for their children. Choice, it seems, liberates me. But are we free, or manipulated by the powerful retail expression of global capitalism?

It is certainly not all negative. Ireland has benefited from capitalism, from modernity: it is good to be able to have a pair of shoes, and indeed to have a spare pair, for when they get wet; it is good to be able to choose whether or not to emigrate; it is good that many women can choose to work, to decide to marry or not to marry. Nonetheless unease persists – many ask if consumerism, choice, optionality, has taken over Christianity as the centre of Irish values?

27. National Conference of Priests of Ireland, “Statement”, *The Furrow* 29 (1978), 382–383.

28. See Jane Lister, “Consumerism”, in Philipp Pattberg & Fariborz Zelli (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Global Environmental Politics and Governance*, Cheltenham 2015, 9. Cavanaugh, “The Church’s Place”, 76, describes consumerism as “the retail expression of global capitalism”.

Pope Francis on Consumerism

Pope Francis, in his first Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013), is critical of consumerism gone astray. His insights are pertinent to Ireland. The Irish people are indeed experiencing a turning-point in history. Advances in science and technology have improved people's lives. Health care, education, and communications have all improved radically. Yet, for many, there is no joy in living. Suicide statistics remain high. Violence seems to be increasing, respect for others declining. For many, Pope Francis writes,

it is a struggle to live and, often, to live with precious little dignity. This epochal change has been set in motion by the enormous qualitative, quantitative, rapid and cumulative advances occurring in the sciences and in technology, and by their instant application in different areas of nature and of life. We are in an age of knowledge and information, which has led to new and often anonymous kinds of power. [...] The free-market's trickle-down theory of economic growth is not working. It never has, for it expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting. To sustain a lifestyle which excludes others, or to sustain enthusiasm for that selfish ideal, a globalization of indifference has developed. Almost without being aware of it, we end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own. The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase. In the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us.²⁹

If the market is deified we are reduced to being consumers. In this world, God and faith can only be seen as dangerous and threatening. Christian teaching is clear. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Francis quotes John Chrysostom (c. 347–407): “Not to share one's wealth with the poor is to steal from them and to take away their livelihood. It is not our own goods which we hold, but theirs.”³⁰

29. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, §§ 52, 54, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, accessed 2020-07-23.

30. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 57; John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro Concio* II, 6: PG 48, 992D.

Is Christian Ireland Godless?

“I don’t believe in God, but I fear a godless society.”³¹ These, the words of the left-wing politician Gregor Gysi, are surprising to hear. Is Ireland “godless”? Have the scandals so rocked us that we shall never recover? Has the consumerist culture overwhelmed the heritage of Christian faith in Ireland? Gregor Gysi, an atheist, fears a godless society. Christianity, he believes, has given Europe its moral core.

While in Ireland we still have people affiliated to Christianity, and a third who regularly worship publicly, today some wonder if Ireland’s moral core has gone. In recent history there was the story of two 12-year-old boys murdering a 13-year-old girl; there are many homeless on Irish streets; we have had the Celtic Tiger and its collapse rooted in banks’ and financial institutions’ corrupt dealings in the marketplace. All this in the recent years of the twenty-first century. Have the Irish become godless “Christians”?

Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* warns of a culture of indifference, a culture which does not feel for others. He asks: “How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion. Can we continue to stand by when food is thrown away while people are starving? This is a case of inequality.”³²

Still Christian?

The criteria Francis offers would suggest that Ireland is still Christian, at least today. It remains a news item in Ireland when a person dies homeless. People are moved by the suffering of others. In 2017, the Government spent over 740 million Euros on Ireland’s aid programme (Official Development Assistance, 0,32 % of Gross National Product).³³

In 2014 the OECD (in the four-yearly peer review of Irish development assistance policies and operations) noted that Ireland “sets an example in focusing development aid on neediest countries”.³⁴ The well-known Brookings Institution said a number of years ago that Irish Aid was “the outstanding aid donor”.³⁵

31. Wolfgang Schütz, “Gregor Gysi im Interview: ‘Ich fürchte eine gottlose Gesellschaft’”, *Augsburger Allgemeine* 2018-05-05, <https://www.augsburger-allgemeine.de/kultur/Gregor-Gysi-im-Interview-Ich-fuerchte-eine-gottlose-Gesellschaft-id51032731.html>, accessed 2020-07-23.

32. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, § 53.

33. “Where the Money Goes”, Irish Aid, <https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/how-our-aid-works/where-the-money-goes/>, accessed 2020-07-23.

34. Erik Solheim, “Ireland is a World Leader in Foreign Aid to Countries Most in Need”, *The Irish Times* 2014-12-02, <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/ireland-is-a-world-leader-in-foreign-aid-to-countries-most-in-need-1.2021843>, accessed 2020-07-23.

35. “Irish Aid on the Interconnectedness of Innovative Research, Government Funding and

The Irish public give very generously when it comes to special appeals. In 1973 the Irish Bishops established Trócaire, an Irish aid group, as Ireland was identified as rich among the nations of the world.

Ireland's missionaries have gone all over the world, and Irish priests, brothers, and religious sisters looked after the sick, the homeless, the unmarried, and educated the poor when no one else would do it. This continues today. In Ireland there are iconic figures such as Father Peter McVerry and Sister Stanislaus Kennedy who work with homeless people, and Sister Consilio, who established a charitable drug, alcohol, and gambling rehabilitation organization.

Consumerism Has Not Replaced Christianity – Yet

The times are dangerous. Perhaps Ireland is in its Catholic twilight. A recent article in the Irish journal *Studies* identifies the complex times we live in.³⁶ It cites from a short essay by the poet, novelist, and critic Stig Dagerman (1923–1954). One of his last works, developing his reflections on the meaning of existence, of life and death, narrates his search for a way to stay alive. It has been described as a small work of hope. The first paragraphs go as follows:

I lack faith and, for that reason, can never be a happy man; for a happy man should never need fear that his life is a pointless, aimless race towards certain death. I am heir to no suitable, fixed place on earth whence I might attract the attention of some god. Neither am I heir to the sceptic's well-concealed rage or the atheist's ardent innocence.

I do not, therefore, dare to throw stones at one who believes in what I doubt, or at one who worships doubt as if it, too, were not encompassed by darkness. I should be hit by such a stone, for of one thing I am sure: that person's need for comfort is insatiable.

I stalk comfort like a hunter stalks his prey. Wherever I glimpse it in the woods, I shoot. More often than not I hit nothing but air, though sometimes a kill plops down at my feet. Since I know that the constancy of comfort is no greater than the wind's in the crown of a tree, I make haste to devour my victim.³⁷

Global Citizenship”, Irish Research Council, <http://research.ie/what-we-do/loveirishresearch/blog/irish-aid-on-the-interconnectedness-of-innovative-research-government-funding-and-global-citizenship/>, accessed 2020-07-23.

36. Hoban, “Another Beginning?”.

37. Cited in Hoban, “Another Beginning?”, 156.

Not long after these words were written Stig Dagerman died by his own hand, aged 31.

The context of Dagerman's writings was the 1940s and early 1950s – a time when he drifted between insight and despair. Brendan Hoban relates Dagerman's reflections to the contemporary Irish context:

With the decline in a religious sense and the loss of the context and vocabulary of faith, Ireland in the twenty-first century could be said to be facing into Dagerman's experience of purposeless and hopelessness. With no god to raise heart and mind, or even to distract us from the still sad music of hopelessness and the looming spectre of death, society will be forced to confront the question – is this all there is?³⁸

Many in Ireland today, like Dagerman, long for a God to give meaning to their human journey. Hoban highlights the need for a credible breaking of the bread to mediate something of the comfort and the solace of God's presence in the world. He then asks:

But are we able for it? For who will there be to articulate Dagerman's dilemma: the thirst for meaning combined with a conviction that faith in God seems impossibly remote in the lived reality of a life? Who will attest to the presence of a God who loves us beyond all reason and all imagining? For priests, we will have none. And the few we have may not be up to it.³⁹

An address given by the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, to the Patrick McGill Summer School in the Glenties in Co Donegal in July 2005 asked "Will Ireland be Christian in 2030?"⁴⁰ Both Hoban and Martin seem to agree that Ireland is still Christian, more or less, in 2019. Both agree that the situation of faith in Ireland is in crisis. Martin critiques a faith, a spirituality that believes in a generic God of our own creation, and an Ireland where the force of consumerist desire seems to be quenching the human desire for the transcendent. He identifies a need to rejuvenate the Church, and the need for dialogue, a dialogue with culture that may at times need to be countercultural. The Church needs to rethink its mission.

38. Hoban, "Another Beginning?", 156–157.

39. Hoban, "Another Beginning?", 157.

40. Diarmuid Martin, "Will Ireland be Christian in 2030?", <https://www.dublindiocese.ie/180705-will-ireland-be-christian-in-2030/>, accessed 2020-07-23.

Almost fifteen years later Hoban asks: “Who will attest to the presence of a God who loves us beyond all reason and all imagining?”⁴¹

Concluding Thoughts

Seamus Heaney (1939–2013), poet and Nobel laureate, lived through twentieth century Ireland, witnessing the changing role of the Church amidst consumerism and scandal. At times critical of Catholic teachings that oppressed, he also noted:

Catholicism has given me the right to joy: People talk about the effects of a Catholic upbringing in sociological terms – repression, guilt, prudery. What isn’t sufficiently acknowledged is the radiance of Catholicism. It gave everything in the world a meaning. It brought a tremendous sense of being, of the dimensions of reality, the shimmering edges of things. That never quite vanishes. The older I get, the more I remember the benediction of it all.⁴²

In writing of the benediction of it all, Heaney is underlining what Catholic faith, at its best, can add to life. Alongside others, the Church too has a responsibility to educate people in what it means to be human, to live humanly.

Catholic Christians celebrate the benediction that life is in their Eucharistic celebrations – but before one can appreciate this, there is a long path of formation. There is much to be done. Hoban identified the hunger for meaning among people. The Church needs to be seen to be committed to justice and respect. It needs transparency in its own structures. This has not been the case. Dialogue and debate need to be engendered. For this to happen proper theological formation needs to be made available to all members of the Church. Articulate Christians are required to lead, and to speak for the Church and for Christian values. Christian values and practices presuppose proper debate.

Consumerism has not yet replaced Christianity in Irish cultural values. Undeniably though, the values of Christianity are severely challenged. Some people call for a more synodal church, for “coresponsibility”.⁴³ In our consumerist world parents do their best to ensure their children are highly educated so that they can “succeed” in life, thus becoming wealthier than their parents. The Church leadership needs to enable Christian children (and

41. Hoban, “Another Beginning?”, 157.

42. Cited in Hoban, “Another Beginning?”, 158.

43. Léon-Joseph Suenens, *Coresponsibility in the Church*, New York 1968.

adults) to be educated in the vast repository of richness pertaining to the Christian heritage, and to be formed to live accordingly. It is time for the Church in Ireland, for all its Christians to, in the words of another Irish poet Brendan Kennelly, “begin again”:

Begin again to the summoning birds
to the sight of the light at the window,
begin to the roar of morning traffic
all along Pembroke Road.
Every beginning is a promise
born in light and dying in dark [...]

Though we live in a world that dreams of ending
that always seems about to give in
something that will not acknowledge conclusion
insists that we forever begin.⁴⁴ ▲

SUMMARY

This article explores the way in which Catholicism, its value and its life vision, once central to Irish culture and identity, has in recent decades been decentred. Some claim that consumerism and market values now occupy the centre of Irish culture. Catholicism has a long history in Ireland. However, it is in the final decades of the nineteenth century and in the decades following independence that Irish identity and Catholicism became intertwined. After independence, the Catholic Church was important in securing legitimacy for the Irish Free State. In return, the Irish government allowed the Church to extend its presence in the realms of education, health, and welfare. Change came in the 1960s as educational and social reform movements began to gather force. The Church often seemed to be rigidly conservative. Its powerful social and educational presence were resented. This resentment was greatly aggravated by scandals which emerged within Church governed institutions in the 1990s. Alongside came cultural and economic transformations. Ireland underwent what has been called a "compressed modernity". In conclusion, the paper argues that while Catholicism has indeed been decentred, it is not the case that it has simply been replaced by the forces of consumerism or global capitalist values. The situation is complex, the future is still open.

44. Brendan Kennelly, *The Essential Brendan Kennelly: Selected Poems*, Winston-Salem, NC 2011, 33.