

Of Faith and Fatherland: Churches and States in Ireland from the Act of Union to the Belfast Agreement, 1800-1998

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For centuries Catholicism and Protestantism have been defining elements of identity in Ireland. The churches surveyed in this essay are the Anglican Church of Ireland and the Roman Catholic Church and the term 'church' refers to the institutional churches, especially their episcopal leaderships, rather than the broader communities of believers. The Church of Ireland was the established or state church between 1537 and 1869. Although never numbering more than about one-sixth of the population, it enjoyed a privileged position and dominated social and political life as well as land ownership. That status became increasingly untenable during the nineteenth century. Anglicanism was not the only Protestant denomination in Ireland with Presbyterians, concentrated in the north-east, forming the largest dissenting tradition. By the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, the Catholic revival in Ireland was well advanced, having benefitted from relief acts in 1778 and 1782 which removed most of the penal law restrictions on religious practice. The 'state' with which the churches interacted until the early 1920s was the British state. In response to the rebellion of the United Irishmen in 1798 and the threat of French invasion, the Act of Union, which came into effect on 1 January 1801, created the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Under its terms, the Irish parliament was abolished, and Ireland was given 100 MPs at Westminster while the Irish peerage was represented in the House of Lords. During the nineteenth century there was an increasing political and religious alliance between all Protestants in defence of the Union and the protestant character of the state in the face of a resurgent Catholicism to which the vast majority of the population adhered. The Act of Union defined the relationship between the British state and Ireland until 1920 when the Government of Ireland Act partitioned the island and created a predominantly Protestant unionist six-county Northern Ireland. The following year the Anglo-Irish Treaty granted the Catholic nationalist Irish Free State dominion status on the same footing as Canada. One other state – the Vatican – will feature briefly in this account. For the purpose of clarity, a broadly chronological approach is taken to some of the key developments in church-state relations. Broadly, this period of momentous political change witnessed the steady decline in the status,

influence and demographic strength of the Church of Ireland and the reconstruction, consolidation and then ascendancy of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church before the Great Famine, 1820s-1840s

A census in 1834 revealed that of an Irish population of 8 million, 6.5 million were Catholic, 853,000 were Anglican and 665,000 were dissenters (mainly Presbyterians). Although Catholics occupied all social grades, the vast majority lived in poverty. Visitors to Ireland such as the political scientist and historian de Tocqueville and the novelist Thackeray commented on the strength of popular Catholic religious devotion. Ministering to such a large flock posed significant difficulties for the Catholic hierarchy which faced the challenge of an insufficiency of clergy and church buildings. The British state alleviated this by providing funds for the establishment of a national seminary at Maynooth in 1795 which was supported by an annual grant. There were significant regional variations but there was about one priest for every 3,000 people. Mass attendance, estimated at about forty per cent, was a fraction of what it would become in the post-Famine decades (Miller 2000).

During the nineteenth century, the Catholic hierarchy emerged as a powerful body and its annual meetings became a means of coordinating policy. Unlike other European countries, the British state had no say in episcopal appointments and there was no nuncio in Ireland as the church was directly under the Congregation of Propaganda Fide until 1908 (Kerr 2002). From the 1820s, Irish Catholic bishops were increasingly trained in Maynooth rather than in the Irish colleges in Europe as had been necessary during the penal restrictions of the eighteenth century. This cohort of younger bishops was more forceful in demanding an end to Catholic grievances. When Catholic emancipation – in particular the removal of the oaths that prevented them becoming MPs – did not accompany the Act of Union, Britain's Catholic question was transformed into an Irish question (Bartlett 1992). The bishops and clergy supported the campaign of Daniel O'Connell's Catholic Association which became a non-violent mass movement. The achievement of emancipation in 1829 earned O'Connell the title 'the Liberator'. It was a symbolic and psychological victory for Irish Catholics. Emancipation allowed them to assume most public offices and sit in parliament. Fittingly, O'Connell became the first Irish Catholic MP to take his seat at Westminster. The example of a clerical-nationalist alliance became a template for future political movements.

The 1820s witnessed the new reformation – a crusade to accomplish what the first reformation had not achieved. This led to an intensification of religious antagonisms. Catholic churchmen were alarmed by Protestant missionary endeavour. All the Irish churches underwent significant reform and religious revival in the early nineteenth century. The pace of Catholic reorganization and the introduction of Tridentine reforms increased after emancipation. In 1844, the *Irish Catholic Directory* reported that within the previous thirty years some 900 Catholic churches had been built or refurbished (Kerr 2002, 176). There was also an upsurge in the provision of schools and welfare for the poor and underprivileged by religious orders such as the Sisters of Mercy (founded by Catherine McAuley) and the Sisters of Charity (established by Mary Aikenhead). In addition, foreign missionary activity by the Catholic and Protestant churches increased and remained prominent for over a century.

O'Connell's second great campaign to repeal the Act of Union was not successful but it did compel the British government to allow some concessions to Catholics such as a larger grant to Maynooth in 1845. Plans to give the Catholic Church a form of concurrent establishment with the Established Church by Lord John Russell, the Whig prime minister,

were opposed by his political party and overtaken by the catastrophe of the Great Famine (1845-9) which altered Ireland profoundly: 1.25 million died, another 1.5 million emigrated, the cottier class who lived at a subsistence level were eliminated, and the Irish language and popular religious practice were largely destroyed (Delaney 2012; Gray 1998). Clergy of all denominations did much to relieve suffering but accusations, often exaggerated, of the use of food ('souperism') as an inducement to convert abounded and left a bitter legacy. By the time of the 1861 census, which was the first to include a question on religious profession, of a total population of 5.76 million, Roman Catholics comprised almost 4.5 million (78 per cent), Anglicans 678,661 (11.7 per cent), Presbyterians 528,992 (9.2 per cent) and Methodists 44,532 (0.77 per cent).

The development of a denominational education system

Throughout the period under review, education was the most significant area of interaction between the churches and state. In the 1820s, several bishops joined with O'Connell to press the British government in vain for an educational system acceptable to Catholics. The Whig government in 1831 introduced the National System of Education whereby a state-supported primary school was established in each parish. The system was under the auspices of a state board of commissioners which replaced a multiplicity of ad hoc educational agencies and controlled the management of school buildings, curriculum, textbooks, teacher training, and a system of inspection. The state's desire to create a non-denominational system was opposed by the main churches because religious formation was regarded as a fundamental element of a child's education. The Catholic bishops were bitterly divided, and two opposing factions emerged. Archbishop Daniel Murray of Dublin and eighteen other bishops supported the initiative because they believed it was the best the government could provide. They were opposed by Archbishop John MacHale of Tuam and ten fellow prelates who feared the state schools could be used to convert Catholic children to Protestantism. In 1841 the pope ruled that each bishop could decide how schools were run in his own diocese.

The primary school network spread rapidly and became increasingly denominational in character. By 1900 almost sixty-five per cent of the 8,644 schools, which catered for 770,622 pupils, were denominationally homogeneous and eighty per cent had clerical managers (Walsh 2016, 10-11). As the number of schools increased, so did the need for trained primary school teachers. Of almost 8,000 Catholic teachers in 1883 three-quarters had no training (McElligott 1966, 7). Between the 1860s and 1883 an arduous campaign was waged by the Catholic hierarchy to obtain state support for denominational training colleges as was the norm in England. To increase pressure on the government, the bishops banned Catholics from attending an interdenominational and co-educational training college at Marlborough Street established after 1831. The Church of Ireland's Kildare Place training college also demanded state support. Grant-in-aid was provided by the state to teacher training colleges under local management from 1883 (Parkes 2016, 74).

Paul Cullen and the transformation of the Irish Catholic Church

The dispute between the Murray and MacHale factions in the 1840s also extended to charitable bequests, a proposal to establish secular higher education, and the succession as archbishop of Armagh. In late 1849 Pius IX chose the Irish-born and Rome educated Paul Cullen as the new archbishop. He was charged with bringing unity to the Irish church and was

determined to make it conform to the fullest extent with the Roman model. A national synod at Thurles in 1850, the first since 1642, 'laid the foundations of Cullen's transformation of Irish Catholicism' (Barr 2009). Four broad areas of decision merit a brief comment. First, the Vatican ruling on primary schools was upheld and under Cullen's leadership the Catholic hierarchy grew more united on the education question. A paramount concern was to resist any increase in state control, particularly at second level. In this domain Cullen introduced a number of teaching orders. Secondly, restoring ecclesiastical discipline among clergy and episcopal authority over them was emphasized. In addition, Cullen used his influence in Rome to reshape the bench of bishops in his likeness over time. Third, sacraments such as baptism and marriage could only be administered in church. Lastly, greater religious practice among the laity was encouraged amid fears of proselytism by evangelical Protestants. During Cullen's tenure there was a boom in church building and clerical recruitment. The number of Catholic clergy relative to the size of their flock, severely diminished by the Famine, and relative to the number of Protestant clergy grew dramatically. In 1851 there was one priest to approximately 2,000 lay people; by 1911 there was one per 1,000. Emmet Larkin devised the term 'devotional revolution' to describe these changes in Irish Catholicism (Larkin 1972). This idea has been contested by other historians who have maintained that the changes were part of a longer process of modernization of Irish religious life (Connolly 1985).

The University Question

In 1845 the British government created three non-denominational queen's colleges to cater for Catholics and Presbyterians. Anglicans traditionally attended Trinity College, established in Dublin by royal charter in 1592. In 1848 Pope Pius IX condemned the colleges as dangerous to faith. Cullen responded by establishing the Catholic University in Dublin in 1854 with John Henry Newman, the distinguished Oxford convert to Catholicism, as first rector. Cullen's hopes that the university would become Europe's leading English-speaking Catholic institution were not realized because it lacked a charter and could not award degrees or attract enough students.

In 1873 William Gladstone's proposal for a single comprehensive secular national university that would include every university institution in Ireland foundered. The gradual secularization of university education was anathema to the Catholic hierarchy. In 1879 the British government established the Royal University which had the power to grant degrees to all students who passed its examinations. Although the Catholic University (renamed University College Dublin in 1882) was not recognized as a teaching institution in its own right, its students could at least now obtain degrees. The university question remained vexatious as the Catholic majority were denied a publicly endowed university. At the same time, Ulster pushed for its own university. The demand for higher education increased because the 1878 intermediate education act expanded the second level sector. Under this measure, secondary education was promoted by holding public examinations, awarding exhibitions and certificates, and payment of fees to school managers based on results.

During the 1890s the idea of two non-denominational universities alongside Trinity gained popularity. In 1908 Augustine Birrell, the Irish chief secretary, introduced the Irish Universities bill which envisaged two new state-funded and non-denominational universities. The National University of Ireland, with constituent colleges in Cork, Galway and Dublin, accommodated Catholic concerns, while the Queen's University Belfast catered for nonconformists. The legislation included legal protections against interference in religious

beliefs. By the early twentieth century, Ireland had three secular universities each with its own religious atmosphere. For the Catholic Church, the 1908 act was a crowning achievement because it now had effective control over all levels of a denominational educational infrastructure that was financed by the British state.

The Disestablishment of the Church of Ireland

Disestablishment was the most significant 19th century example of constitutional reform. It was the first breach of the Act of Union by which the Church of Ireland and Church of England had been joined 'as by law established' under article five (Vaughan 1989). At the November 1868 general election, Gladstone rallied the Liberal Party behind the cause of disestablishing the Church of Ireland. Somewhat incongruously, Irish Catholic bishops and clergy helped him to secure sixty-six seats in Ireland or half his overall majority in parliament. In general, Cullen believed that the church should concern itself with politics only when religious issues were at stake. In the 1850s he had withdrawn clerical support from the Independent Irish Party which hastened its demise, and he vigorously condemned Fenianism in the 1860s which sought Irish independence by military means. The Catholic hierarchy rejected a proposal to level up referred to as concurrent endowment. The alternative was levelling down or disendowment of all churches, thereby putting them on an equal footing, free of legal links with the state. The Church of Ireland was disestablished and disendowed with remarkable speed. A bill was introduced in parliament in March 1869, received the royal assent in July 1869, and the Church ceased to be established on 1 January 1871. Henceforth, it was a voluntary body, its ecclesiastical law was no longer part of the law of the land, bishops were no longer Crown appointees but would in future be chosen by an electoral college.

Disestablishment came as a shattering blow to most churchmen. The Church of Ireland faced challenges in terms of finance, church government, doctrine, and relations with the Church of England (McDowell 1975; Shearman 1995). The Representative Church Body was created to act as trustee of money and property at the church's disposal. Places of worship no longer in use passed into the care of the Board of Works, and in this way many ancient ecclesiastical sites became public monuments. The Church of Ireland adopted a synodical structure of governance by bishops, clergy and laity that was modelled on Westminster with a House of Bishops and a House of Representatives. It retained Dublin as its administrative capital. The crisis drew out reserves of ability, self-reliance and cohesion that proved a credit to the Church of Ireland.

Disestablishment also had a range of wider social and economic implications. Ireland became the only component part of the United Kingdom where there was no established church and where Catholics were in an overwhelming majority. The act was almost entirely concerned with various arrangements for the transfer and dispersal of property. In essence, it was the first in a series of Irish land acts which over time occasioned a revolution in land ownership. The Irish Church Act also served as a precedent for developments in Wales, where disestablishment was introduced in 1919 (Bell 1969). Lastly, it united Protestants of all denominations against the perceived threat from Catholicism.

The Land Question and the Pursuit of Home Rule, 1870-1893

The established church, land, and control of local government were the tripod on which the Protestant ascendancy rested. Each aspect was undermined during the nineteenth century.

Between the 1870s and the early twentieth century, the land question and the demand for home rule or an autonomous Irish parliament were the dominant Irish political issues. In the 1870s, landlords of 1,000 acres or more owned four-fifths of all Irish land. Half of the total number of tenants farmed less than fifteen acres and the vast majority were on insecure annual leases. The agitation associated with the Land War (1879-82) differed from earlier economic crises because the Land League created a mass movement and transformed an economic issue into a political problem for the British state. The ultimate aim of the league was the establishment of a peasant proprietorship. Crucially, the involvement of Catholic clergy in large numbers made it difficult for the British state to proscribe the league. The hierarchy was more circumspect. Archbishop Thomas Croke of Cashel recognized the dangers of alienating the laity. By contrast, Edward McCabe, who succeeded Cullen as archbishop of Dublin in 1879 and cardinal in 1882, opposed the league, the involvement of priests in political agitation, and the campaign for home rule. While McCabe's stance found favour in Rome, it was condemned in Ireland. The land agitation led Gladstone to introduce the 1881 land act which granted tenants fair rent, fixity of tenure, and free sale (the 3Fs). The legislation did not resolve the Irish land question, but by providing a mechanism for purchase, it ushered in the beginnings of a social revolution in terms of land ownership.

The land war catapulted Charles Stewart Parnell to the forefront of politics in Britain and Ireland during the 1880s when home rule became an aggressive political campaign. Parnell's ascendancy was the product of three factors: the development of a powerful party machine in the shape of the National League; exploiting the Franchise and Redistribution Acts of 1884-5, which trebled the size of the electoral register; and the cultivation of an informal but high effective alliance with the Catholic Church. He supported the hierarchy's demand for Catholic control of education at all levels and in return their lordships formally supported the National League (Larkin, 1975). The Catholic Church was not neutral and hoped for the emergence of a Catholic nation state (Miller 1973). In June 1885, the politically adept William Walsh became the new archbishop of Dublin. Under his leadership the Catholic bishops endorsed the IPP's position on home rule and the system of purchase as a solution to the land question. Following the 1885 general election, the price of Irish support for Gladstone and the Liberal Party was the introduction of the first home rule bill in April 1886 which was predictably defeated in the House of the Commons. In Ireland, opposition to home rule quickly developed sectarian overtones, particularly in predominantly unionist Ulster which rejected any notion of an Irish government in Dublin. There was a determination to maintain the union with Britain and the political status quo under which the north-east had prospered economically. Strong resistance was mobilized in 1886, in 1893 during the second home rule crisis, and in 1912-14. In Britain, it was feared that Irish self-government would lead to the dismemberment of the empire.

Land agitation resumed with the Plan of Campaign of 1886-91, an effort at collective bargaining on individual estates. An alarmed Pope Leo XIII dispatched Monsignor Ignatius Persico to Ireland in July 1887 to investigate ecclesiastical involvement in agrarian agitation. The papal envoy did not grasp the intricacies of the land issue or Walsh's motivations in supporting the tenantry. His report regarded the archbishop of Dublin 'as much too politically-minded, too closely involved in public affairs through his association with the parliamentary party, the National League and Plan of Campaign and less committed to his pastoral work than he should have been' (Macaulay 2002, 355). By contrast, Persico admired the moderate nationalism and prudence of Michael Logue, who had been appointed archbishop of Armagh in December 1887. Walsh was summoned to Rome and while there a papal rescript was issued

condemning the Plan. This was the product not simply of Persico's report but of the divisions within the Irish hierarchy and strong lobbying by the British government. In Ireland, there was intense anger at perceived papal interference in domestic political matters. Walsh reassured the pope that the decree would be obeyed by all good Catholics. However, he dexterously finessed the distinctions between pronouncements on moral and political matters to comply with the decree, keep violent agitation in check, preserve nationalist unity (both lay and clerical), and maintain the church's influence (both religious and secular) in Ireland. Historians have tended to dismiss the dour Logue and depict Walsh as the *de facto* leader of the Irish Catholic Church. In fact, as Logue's biographer makes clear, over two decades they maintained a strong friendship and an effective collaboration (Privilege 2009). Logue generally left the political direction of the hierarchy and the campaign for Catholic university education to Walsh while he retained responsibility for ecclesiastical discipline.

The papal rebuke was overshadowed by the downfall of Parnell, following revelations of a ten-year liaison with Mrs Katharine O'Shea, and the consequent schism in the IPP in 1890. A political crisis was provoked not by the stance of Irish Catholic hierarchy but by the opposition of English non-conformists. This forced Gladstone to signal that Parnell's continued leadership imperilled the alliance with the Liberal Party which was poised to win the next election. Effectively, the choice was between Parnell and home rule. In December 1890, the IPP split with 45 MPs opting for home rule and 27 supporting Parnell. The anti-Parnellite majority seemed justified when in 1893 Gladstone's second home rule bill negotiated the House of Commons but was defeated in the House of Lords. On his death in October 1891, Parnell's immediate legacy was a shattered political party. The myth of a leader sacrificed by his own people and the Catholic Church rather than as a result of his own actions proved enduring. The church continued to play an important role in home rule politics. Many churchmen were also involved in the extraordinary cultural revival of the Irish language and sport at the end of the nineteenth century.

Third Home Rule Crisis (1912-14) and Easter 1916 Rising

The home rule question lay in abeyance, despite the reunification of the IPP in 1900, until the second decade of the twentieth century. A constitutional crisis in Britain over the rejection by the House of Lords of the 'People's Budget' of 1909 led to two general elections in 1910. The IPP found itself holding the balance of power. Once again, the price of Irish political support was home rule. In April 1912, Prime Minister H.H. Asquith introduced the third home rule bill. It provoked a crisis that verged on civil war in Ireland between unionism and nationalism. The situation differed from earlier home rule crises because the Parliament Act (1911) replaced the veto of the House of Lords with delaying powers for a maximum of two years. The Catholic bishops shared in the general air of expectancy that nationalist aspirations would therefore be fulfilled by 1914. The national question overshadowed other political concerns for church leaders such as preaching the dangers of socialism and labour agitation in the 1910s. While Logue and Walsh deemed the IPP leadership too secularist, too reliant on the British Liberals, and too inclined to accept an attenuated version of home rule, a large episcopal middle ground was determined not to interfere in politics and was supportive of the national cause. For the Ulster Catholic bishops, the spectre of partition and the creation of a unionist government in Belfast imperilled their religious and educational interests. Conversely, Protestants of all shades feared that home rule would amount to Rome rule. Religious tensions were exacerbated, particularly in Ulster, by the *Ne Temere* decree (1908).

For the main Protestant churches, religious and political fears proved mutually reinforcing. At the root of this was a lack of confidence in an Irish government to maintain civil and religious liberties for all. The General Synod of the Church of Ireland denounced *Ne Temere* which was raised frequently at anti-home rule protests. The bogey of religious intolerance proved impossible to quash.

In 1913, as tension rose in Ireland with the formation of unionist and nationalist paramilitary forces, the British government proposed partitioning Ireland to exclude the predominantly unionist north-east from home rule and compelled the IPP to accept this approach. Edward Carson, the Ulster Unionist leader, initially sought the exclusion from home rule of the entire nine-county province of Ulster but was willing to settle for six counties. John Redmond, leader of the IPP, articulated the Irish nationalist position by declaring 'the idea of two nations in Ireland is to us revolting and hateful'. Exclusion raised several intractable questions: what area was involved, would exclusion be temporary or permanent, and what jurisdiction would be retained by Westminster (Jackson 2003). Conflict over home rule was averted by the outbreak of the First World War. Although home rule was placed on the statute book in September 1914, it was immediately suspended for the duration of the war and accompanied by an unspecified provision for the special treatment of Ulster.

The length of the war had profound consequences for Redmond and home rule. Equally, it had significant consequences for a small group of republican separatists who were determined to organize a rebellion while Britain was engaged in a major international conflict (Townshend 2005). The Easter 1916 Rising proved a watershed in the subsequent trajectory of Ireland. The British response in the form of martial law, executions, arrests, and internment worked a sea-change in Irish public opinion. Accurately judging the public mood, the Catholic hierarchy followed the lead of Archbishop Walsh and made no public pronouncement on the 1916 Rising. The British government made an ill-fated attempt in the summer of 1916 to introduce a home rule settlement based on partition. With the exception of Patrick O'Donnell of Raphoe, a confidante of the IPP leadership, the northern bishops publicly disavowed the proposals. Famously, Cardinal Logue declared that it would be 'infinitely better to remain as we are for fifty years to come under English rule than to accept these proposals' (*Irish Catholic Directory 1917*, 517). In May 1917, an appeal against partition was organized by Bishop Charles McHugh of Derry and was signed by sixteen Catholic and three Church of Ireland bishops. McHugh later made clear that he would never submit to the Catholic community becoming 'serfs in an Orange [unionist] Free State carved out to meet the wishes of an intolerant minority' (*Irish Independent*, 18 Feb. 1920).

Transition to an Independent Irish State, 1916-23

Repudiation of political violence but not the goal of Irish independence, obedience to the legally constituted government, advocacy of majority rule, hostility towards partition, and a desire for order and social stability characterized the stance of the Irish Catholic hierarchy between 1916 and 1923 (Keogh 1986; Murray 2000). This required considerable political and theological dexterity. While the political influence of Catholic bishops and clergy during this traumatic period should *not* be overstated, the church was sensitive to the shifting political landscape and determined not to alienate the laity. By the time of the December 1918 general election, home rule had been jettisoned in favour of a popular demand for an Irish republic. Championed by Sinn Féin, which annihilated the IPP at the polls, that goal was pursued politically and militarily during the War of Independence (1919-21). An underground counter-

state in the form of Dáil Éireann challenged British rule and claimed public allegiance. At the same time the Irish Republican Army (IRA) engaged in guerrilla warfare, principally against the overwhelmingly Catholic Royal Irish Constabulary. The Catholic Church's alignment with majority nationalist opinion was cemented during the massive protest campaign against conscription in April 1918 which the bishops declared 'an oppressive and inhuman law' which the Irish people had a right 'to resist by all the means that are consonant with the law of God' (*Irish Times*, 19 Apr. 1918). The wholehearted involvement of the church prevented widespread disorder and scuppered any prospect of conscription being applied in Ireland.

During the War of Independence, the Catholic hierarchy was fearful of lending moral sanction to either side in the deepening conflict. In their statements in 1920 and 1921, they denounced violence, blamed failed British policy for the disturbed state of the country, called for an undivided Ireland to be allowed choose its own form of government, and increasingly drew attention to the excesses of the Crown forces. Just one bishop excommunicated members of the IRA. The Catholic hierarchy did not formally recognize the Dáil, however. The bishops were greatly perturbed by the conditions endured by beleaguered northern Catholic nationalists. Between July 1920 and July 1922, communal violence claimed over 450 lives in Belfast, its epicentre, two-thirds of whom were Catholic. In addition, thousands of nationalists lost their jobs and homes, and hundreds of nationalist-owned businesses were destroyed (Parkinson 2004; Feeney 2021). In June 1921, the hierarchy delivered a scathing condemnation of the Government of Ireland Act, which made partition and a Northern Ireland government a reality, for facilitating a 'campaign of extermination' against the Catholic community (*Irish Catholic Directory 1922*, p. 595). Bishop Joseph MacRory of Down and Connor was in the invidious position of seeking to end sectarian violence while at the same time being unwilling to give formal recognition to the Northern Ireland government.

Once the Anglo-Irish truce was declared in July 1921, the bishops bestowed moral sanction on Sinn Féin as the Irish government in waiting. This was a pragmatic move ahead of peace negotiations which produced the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921. Unsurprisingly, the bishops welcomed the settlement. As Bishop Michael Fogarty of Killaloe put it: 'The terror is gone and with it the foreign power that held our country in destructive grip for seven hundred years ... Ireland is now the sovereign mistress of her own life' (*Irish Catholic Directory 1922*, p. 553). Enthusiasm for the settlement among northern bishops was tempered by anxiety about partition – 'the big blot on the Treaty' – as Bishop McKenna of Clogher put it (Murray 2000, 356). The northern bishops reluctantly concluded that the Treaty offered the best hope of all Ireland unity. The Church of Ireland bishops had no desire for a change of constitution but pledged their loyalty to the new political dispensation (Seaver 1963, 119). A majority of Catholic Ireland supported the Treaty which granted a significant measure of self-government but not a republic. The settlement was approved by the Dáil on 7 January 1922.

In the months that followed, the Catholic bishops attempted through word and deed to avert the disaster of civil war. When that conflict began in June 1922, the hierarchy unequivocally upheld the authority of the provisional government in Dublin, sustaining and reinforcing the authority of an *Irish* state (Murray 2000, 34). This extended to producing a partisan pastoral on 10 October 1922 to coincide with an amnesty offer to republicans by the government before the imposition of a draconian public safety act. The pastoral rejected the legitimacy of the anti-Treaty republican campaign because 'no one is justified in rebelling against the legitimate Government ... set up by the nation and acting within its rights', an argument reinforced by the overwhelming endorsement of the Treaty at the June general election (*Freeman's Journal*, 11 Oct. 1922). The hierarchy threatened to deprive those

engaged in unlawful rebellion of the sacraments of eucharist and confession, and to suspend priests who gave spiritual aid to the anti-Treaty IRA (in the event neither was stringently applied). Lastly, the pastoral enjoined republicans to pursue grievances through constitutional action. Outraged republicans appealed to Pope Pius XI who despatched Monsignor Salvatore Luzio to report on the Irish situation in 1923 by which stage the civil war was almost over. Cold-shouldered by church and state authorities, the government petitioned the Vatican to recall the envoy for endeavouring 'to interfere in the domestic affairs of the country' (Laffan 2014, 123). The October pastoral may have emboldened the government to take a sterner stance against republicans. Two manifestations of this were the policy of executions and the toleration of often gruesome reprisals. This was matched by an anti-Treaty IRA campaign of arson, intimidation, and assassination. Private appeals by individual bishops against executions, such as that of Erskine Childers, went unheeded. However dismayed the bishops were at the excesses of the Irish state during the civil war, no public condemnation was issued. In this, there was an element of pragmatic self-interest. The creation of Northern Ireland under a unionist government inimical to Catholic interests filled the Catholic bishops with foreboding. That strengthened their determination to secure the Irish Free State and the opportunities that it promised.

A partitioned Ireland and its legacies

The traumas and legacies of the early 1920s shaped church-state relations in significant ways. First, all the main Christian churches continued to operate on an all-island basis despite contending with two political jurisdictions. Some Catholic bishops refused to accept partition. In his consecration address as bishop of Derry in 1926, almost a year after the boundary between north and south had been confirmed, Bernard O'Kane referred to the 'anomaly and absurdity' of having one part of his diocese 'in one kingdom and the remainder in another state' and pledged to work for a united Ireland (*Irish Catholic Directory 1927*, 615). There was never any question that the political border would compromise the religious unity of the Catholic Church or Church of Ireland whose map image remained an all-Ireland one. Second, partition proved deeply traumatic for the Catholic Church given the appalling civil strife between 1920 and 1922, the number of its adherents in Northern Ireland, its conviction that the Unionist government was hostile to the nationalist community which it regarded as a security problem, and the church's overwhelming desire to safeguard Catholic education. Unsurprisingly, resentment and political aloofness lingered. The northern Catholic experience before the 1960s was marked by a sense of being in but not of the state, where, as Marianne Elliott suggests, 'their religion was their politics' (Elliott 2015, 177). Third, partition reinforced the association of political allegiance and religious affiliation on both sides of the border. It produced a remarkably homogenous population in the Irish Free State. In 1926, Catholics accounted for almost 93 per cent of the population. This had a significant bearing on the political and public culture and the status enjoyed by the church. It also facilitated the depiction of a unionist and Protestant Northern Ireland in contrast to a Catholic nationalist south. There was little reflection on the relationship between the Protestant churches and unionism before the 1960s.

State-building in the Irish Free State and Catholic ascendancy

The Catholic Church was uniquely well placed to contribute to the state-building project in the Irish Free State in terms of enhancing national unity and self-definition, providing an unmatched institutional presence, and controlling policy areas, none more so than education. Catholicism helped bind some of the wounds inflicted by the civil war. There was remarkably little republican resentment towards the church, no anti-clerical party developed, and de Valera and his Fianna Fáil party (on the losing side of the civil war) could demonstrate their devout Catholicism. This facilitated a remarkable level of continuity and harmony in church-state relations when Fianna Fáil took office in 1932. Denominational homogeneity facilitated a Catholic habitus – a way of thinking and acting in conformity with a systematic view of the world – that permeated all social classes (Inglis 1998). Therefore, during the first fifty years of independence, both church and state leaders, irrespective of political party, shared a desire to develop the state according to a philosophy of Catholic nationalism. Catholicism also differentiated the new Irish state culturally from its former British master. The centenary of Catholic emancipation in 1929 and the 31st Eucharistic Congress in 1932, an international showpiece of global Catholicism, were symbolic expressions of a triumphant Catholic nationalism. They allowed the Irish Free State ‘to proclaim its permanence, its separate identity from England, and to give a high profile to its image as a Catholic nation’ (McIntosh 1999).

The Catholic Church provided the new state with continuity, stability and an extensive infrastructure. In return, a financially bankrupt government was content to see the church consolidate and extend its institutional presence in the realms of education, health and welfare with minimal interference – a pattern that continued until the 1960s. As various commissions of enquiry have revealed, the status enjoyed by the church contributed to inadequate state oversight. During the first four decades of independence, the Catholic Church was more secure and more confident than at any previous time and enjoyed close links with the southern state. While an informal consensus between political and religious leaders was often evident, ministers did not always submissively dispose as the bench of bishops proposed. For example, diplomatic relations were established with the Vatican in 1929 despite the known opposition of the hierarchy, and the Dunbar-Harrison case in 1931 demonstrated the resolve of the W.T. Cosgrave government to reject the imposition of religious tests against non-Catholics. There was a commitment to retain the support of the Protestant minority which dominated business, banking and insurance.

In the 1920s and 1930s, significant elements of the Catholic moral code were enshrined in law, particularly in the areas of sexual morality (other forms of morality were largely ignored) and family relations. Conservatism defined most aspects of Irish life between the 1920s and 1950s. For this reason, the censorship of films (1923) and publications (1929), the abolition of the right to divorce by private member’s bill in 1925 and a constitutional prohibition in 1937, and a ban on the importation and sale of contraceptives (1935) were broadly favoured by all the Christian churches. Too much has been read into W. B. Yeats’s celebrated defence in the Free State Senate in June 1925 of divorce facilities as inflicting a wrong on his co-religionists (Whyte 1971, 59-60; Regan 1999, 254; Foster 2003, 293-300). His argument was not representative of either the Church of Ireland or other Protestant churches. The Church of Ireland was markedly reticent about divorce and remarriage which featured in just one of its pre-Second World War public statements in 1944. Measures such as censorship were not unique to Ireland. What differed was the stringency and longevity of Irish moral protectionism. For instance, the censorship of publications was not relaxed until 1967. Between the 1920s and the 1950s, the institutional Catholic Church was at its most

dominant and devotional practices by a devout and deferential laity, in addition to weekly attendance at Mass, were at their most visible and numerous. Nevertheless, after the Second World War, the hierarchy unsuccessfully lobbied the government on aspects of the moral law not deemed rigorous enough! For example, in 1952 the Catholic bishops wanted all dancehalls closed at midnight and in 1958 the government was urged to have the police and censorship of publications board clamp down on foreign evil literature. Such requests were declined by the Irish state.

Many commentators have suggested that Catholic social teaching had a significant influence on de Valera's 1937 constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*). The 1922 constitution was secular and did not mention the Catholic Church at all. While *Bunreacht na hÉireann* guaranteed religious pluralism, Article 44.1.2 conferred a special position on the Catholic Church 'as the guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of citizens'. Recent legal-historical scholarship has downplayed the Catholic influences on the 1937 constitution and emphasized its secular values, the extent to which the conceptualisation of the state was greatly enlarged, and the degree to which it borrowed heavily from European constitutions, such as Weimar Germany, before later being supplemented by Catholic teaching on natural law (Hogan 2005; Kissane 2020; Coffey 2018). The 1937 constitution did not establish the Catholic Church or describe it as the one true church and recognized other churches in Article 44.1.3, to the chagrin of Cardinal Joseph MacRory, Catholic archbishop of Armagh and primate of all-Ireland from 1928 to 1945. Article 45, listing the 'directive principles of social policy', drew heavily on Catholic teaching but was intended only for the 'general guidance' of parliament. The 'special position' clause was deleted with minimum fuss in a constitutional referendum in 1972 under the shadow of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Despite their disquiet at the economic and cultural policies pursued by the Free State and alarm at widespread Protestant emigration, the Church of Ireland received the new constitution with quiet acceptance. The most notable effort to incorporate Catholic social teaching into the Irish state's administrative system was the Commission on Vocational Organisation between 1939 and 1943, chaired by Bishop Michael Browne of Galway. Its 300,000-word report proposed a vocational board composed of employers and workers for each trade or craft. The Fianna Fáil government (and the opposition parties in the Dáil) simply ignored it, having no appetite for a non-party centre of power in Irish life (Lee 1979).

Control of Education and Health

Until the Second Vatican Council, Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*, which developed the concept of subsidiarity, was frequently cited by the Irish Catholic bishops, who remained suspicious of state activity, even though in an Irish context the state 'stepped in not too much but too little' (Ryan 1979, 6). The most significant areas of policy interaction between church and state before the 1960s were the sensitive areas of education, and to a lesser extent health. Control of education (its ethos, school management and teaching appointments), wrested from the British government in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was regarded as essential if Catholic faith and values were to be transmitted to future generations. The same was true for the Church of Ireland. After 1922, the department of education had limited power over the management of primary and secondary schools, which remained vested in the Catholic and Protestant clergy. The state paid the salaries of teachers, but its influence was largely restricted to control of the curriculum and an inspection system to ensure minimum teaching standards (Ó Buachalla 1988). The Catholic Church's priority, which was facilitated by the

state, was to maintain the status quo. For the Church of Ireland, schools were of particular importance in the south in terms of preserving community identity and that church was treated generously by the Irish state (Ó Corráin 2006).

In the 1960s, it was belatedly recognized that the extension of educational opportunity was a central aspect of national economic development. In 1965 *Investment in Education*, an OECD study of Ireland's long-term educational needs, revealed that just one-quarter of those leaving primary education continued to second level. This prompted the introduction of free post-primary education from the 1967 school year. John Walsh has revised the cordial characterization of church-state interaction in this period put forward by earlier studies. Although the denominational character of schools remained unaltered, a new balance of power in education had been achieved, in which the enhanced influence of the state in education was accepted with varying degrees of reluctance (Walsh 2012).

During the 1990s and 2000s, there was a flurry of new policies in education by an increasingly interventionist and secular Irish state. For example, under the new primary school curriculum, introduced in 1999, there was a greater separation of secular and religious instruction than ever before. Under the 1998 Education Act, for the first time the state recognized a variety of nondenominational schools such as Gaelscoileanna (Irish-language schools) and multidenominational schools (which from 1984 came under the umbrella of Educate Together). The Catholic Church still exerts immense influence on the education system through its patronage, management and ownership of 90 per cent of primary schools; in addition, about half of post-primary schools are under denominational control.

In the domain of health and welfare there was also significant continuity with patterns established in the nineteenth century. Following emancipation, a number of Catholic voluntary hospitals were founded by religious orders, particularly in the cities. After the 1898 Local Government Act, religious orders also began to extend their influence into the poor law or workhouse system. When this was abolished in the mid-1920s many workhouses were closed, some became county hospitals and others became county homes to care for the infirm, the elderly, the intellectually disabled and unmarried mothers (Cox 2018). With plentiful vocations, religious orders increased their involvement in county homes and hospitals which were financed by local rates.

By the late 1920s, the voluntary hospitals, both Catholic and Protestant, faced grave financial challenges due to rising operational and treatment costs, a fall in the value of their endowment funds following the First World War, and a reduction in income from charitable donations. Increasingly, hospitals relied on income from patient fees as their debts mounted. To meet this, in 1930 the Public Charitable Hospitals (Temporary Provisions) Act permitted sweepstakes on horse racing (Coleman 2009). The proceeds of this remarkably popular venture went into a Hospitals Trust Fund which was increasingly controlled by the minister for local government. To benefit from the fund voluntary hospitals had to reserve at least one-quarter of their beds for non-paying patients. The sweepstakes ensured the survival of a large number of voluntary hospitals which otherwise would have been forced to close or amalgamate (Barrington 2003). From the late 1940s, the fund was used for capital investment in the State hospital sector.

After the Second World War, expanded medical services in western Europe and the establishment of the National Health Service in Britain prompted the Irish government to address the pressing issues of tuberculosis, wider access to medical care, and improved ante and postnatal care. When a comprehensive health service was mooted in the mid-1940s, the medical profession feared socialized medicine and the end of private practice. The Catholic

bishops were anxious about state control of voluntary hospitals and a dilution of Catholic medical ethics. Opposition to greater state involvement in healthcare by doctors and the hierarchy was at the root of the Mother and Child controversy in 1951, on which much has been written (Barrington 1987; McKee 1986; Horgan 2000). This cause célèbre has often been portrayed simplistically as a clash of church and state, with the latter coming off second best. In fact, it was a three-cornered tussle involving the state, the Catholic Church, and the powerful medical profession. Ultimately, the doctors secured concessions on retention of a means test and private practice. The 1953 Health Act ended any prospect of a health service on British lines. Free medical care of mothers before and after birth, and of their infants until the age of six weeks was permitted along with free health clinics for schoolchildren to the age of six. The pattern of hospital consultants using voluntary hospitals for private medical practice in return for treating the poor for free became entrenched. The voluntary hospitals retained their independence as they did after the 1970 Health Act established eight regional health boards, even though they were largely funded by the exchequer.

A changing Irish Republic, 1960s-1990s

In a survey of Dublin Catholics in 1962, a remarkable 87 per cent of respondents disagreed that if there was a conflict between the church and the state, the state should prevail (Biever 1976). However, the context of church-state relations was soon altered due to transformations at home and within the universal church. From the 1960s, the state began to prioritize economic growth over the simpler Catholic nationalist vision of society that had prevailed since independence. In addition, legislative and constitutional support for a Catholic ethos was undermined by a variety of societal developments. These included the establishment of a national television service in 1961 which reinforced a growing questioning of church and state authority; the transformative extension of educational opportunity at second and third level; the changing position of women which challenged the patriarchal nature of Irish society and traditional church teaching; the relaxation of censorship; the *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council of which the Irish Catholic bishops were unenthusiastic lest it undermine their magisterium; and the onset of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Furthermore, previously plentiful vocations went into steady decline from 1968 onward with obvious implications for maintaining the Catholic Church's institutional presence in traditional areas of activity such as education and health. From the 1970s, the church developed a more critical view of the Irish state's social policy shortcomings, particularly in relation to inequality, poverty and unemployment.

The first papal visit to Ireland in 1979, when an estimated 2.7 million people greeted John Paul II, is often regarded as a celebration of Catholic Ireland. It is more accurately understood as an unsuccessful attempt to slow down the inroads made by materialism and secularism, and an increasing detachment from the institutional church (Ó Corráin 2021). For much of the twentieth century, Ireland was unique among western countries in not permitting abortion, contraception, or divorce. The Catholic hierarchy held the traditional line on these issues, but for the first time in November 1973 it openly acknowledged that the state should not be the guardian of private morality. In Britain and the United States, change in this sphere occurred over a century but in Ireland this was telescoped into a much shorter time span. Seven bruising 'moral issue' constitutional referenda on abortion and marriage were held between 1983 and 2002. They were preceded by the legalization of contraception in 1979 with further extensions in 1985 and 1992. Accompanying these campaigns, even before

the full revelations of a litany of clerical sex abuse scandals, was ‘a growing coolness between the government and the hierarchy’ and little prior church-state consultation, something unimaginable in earlier decades (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 1995, 611-12).

Northern Ireland, the Troubles and the Belfast Agreement

Between 1921 and 1972 Northern Ireland was effectively a one-party unionist state. The Unionist Party was a diverse coalition held together by a trenchant stand on the union and constant fears of enemies within, chiefly the nationalist community and labour. Antagonism initially characterized relations between the Catholic Church authorities, who had a political importance as spokesmen for the minority, and the Northern Ireland administration. After the Second World War the opportunities occasioned by the welfare state saw the northern Catholic bishops adopt a more pragmatic approach, as they moved from highlighting the injustice of the state to injustices within it (Ó Corráin 2006, 43-69). The government’s readiness ‘to pander to sectarian pressures was influenced by fear of the rise of cross-community, working-class support for Labour’ (Holmes & Biagini 2017, 101). In 1969, unionism splintered under the impact of the civil rights movement and Northern Ireland was plunged into three decades of conflict which cost over 3,700 lives. Throughout the Troubles, which promoted inter-church rapprochement and a reassessment of church-state relations, the Catholic Church was indefatigable in condemning violence (whether paramilitary or state-sanctioned), disassociating the vast majority of the nationalist community from the IRA campaign, and calling for cross community dialogue (Power 2021; Scull 2019). At the New Ireland Forum in 1984, the Catholic hierarchy made clear that the Catholic Church ardently sought peace and justice in Northern Ireland and that it rejected the concept of the confessional state. The leaders of the main Christian Churches supported the peace process during the 1990s and welcomed the Belfast Agreement in 1998 which went further than just providing political institutions. It also addressed the issue of equality between the two traditions in the economic, social, and cultural domains. The agreement was approved by simultaneous referenda north and south in May 1998 and won the support of 94 per cent of those voting in the Republic and 71 per cent in Northern Ireland. Whereas the Catholic nationalist community was overwhelmingly in favour, only about half of the Protestant community was.

Conclusion

For most of the period covered in this survey, there was a clear intertwining of religion and political allegiance in Ireland. Both the Catholic Church and Church of Ireland feared the implications of new political arrangements for their religious freedom and key interests. In some respects, the experience of the Church of Ireland at the time of disestablishment when it lost its privileged status and links with the British state has been mirrored in the closing decades of the twentieth century by the Catholic Church. For a variety of economic and social reasons, it lost the hegemonic status it had enjoyed since Irish independence. Once above public scrutiny, scandal has engulfed the Catholic Church in Ireland since the 1990s. More than any other factor, that accelerated the recalibration of church-state relations that had been in train since the 1960s.

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