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Irish Studies in International Affairs, Volume 32, Number 2, Analysing
and Researching Ireland, North and South 2021, pp. 617-619 (Article)

Published by Royal Irish Academy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/isia.2021.0075>

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Shaking Ideologies

A RESPONSE TO ‘PULPIT TO PUBLIC: CHURCH LEADERS
ON A POST-BREXIT ISLAND’ BY GLADYS GANIEL

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No study of Irish history or survey of future prospects on the island of Ireland is complete without an assessment of the role of religion. This first-class paper by Dr Gladys Ganiel summarises a potentially intractable and controversial subject. It serves, as the French would say, to ‘clear the terrain’ for action.

In organising her difficult material, Dr Ganiel makes a number of bold moves. She takes as a jumping-off point the plentiful recent evidence of engagement by the churches in the public sphere, focussing on three phenomena: Corrymeela, the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter-Church Meeting

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.52>

(ICC/IICM), and the Church Leaders' Group (comprised of the Catholic and Church of Ireland archbishops of Armagh, the Presbyterian moderator, the Methodist president and the president of ICC). The work undertaken through these three channels constitutes a remarkable step forward in inter-church relations—all the more so as ICC includes the Orthodox churches and other Christian communities.

Ganiel demonstrates that the work of the churches in the public sphere is largely shaped by the legacy of conflict. Corrymeela is a professional reconciliation centre employing around 40 full-time staff. Sources of funding include official bodies north and south of the border. The IICM (where the ICC and the Catholic Bishops' Conference work together) consistently supports the principles and relationships set out in the Good Friday Agreement. IICM has been active since Brexit, resourcing local communities, undertaking policy research and engaging in theological reflection with counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales. The public contributions of the Church Leaders' Group are very similar in character to the work of IICM. For example, in the period December 2018 to February 2019, four regional dialogue events were held in Northern Ireland under the auspices of the church leaders. Arguably, this initiative contributed to the restoration of the assembly in January 2020. An important statement on St Patrick's Day 2021 called for critical self-awareness on the part of the churches: 'we have often been captive churches; not captive to the Word of God, but to the idols of state and nation.'

Dr Ganiel situates the churches' recent public engagement in a broad context. Her nimble summary of Irish history since the 17th century leads to a discussion of partition and its impact north and south. Who can disagree with Ganiel's vision of Catholic religious actors in one jurisdiction and Protestant religious actors in the other enjoying far too much power? Using José Casanova's definition of secularism, Ganiel shows that 'a century after partition, the island can be described as secularising.' Secularisation is less advanced in Northern Ireland. There, public authorities and the media take heed of church concerns to a greater degree than their counterparts in Dublin. I return to the question of secularisation at the end of these comments.

Dr Ganiel's paper offers at least two important recommendations. The first concerns the domains of public policy to be addressed by the churches. Ganiel's research tells us that the churches' principal contribution to public debate in recent years has been 'the discursive framing of Brexit, reconciliation, and dealing with the past as inter-related.' She favourably notes the broader ambition underlying Corrymeela's public theology project, 'Border Crossing: Exploring

Belongings through the Book of Ruth.’ From the thinking behind this project, an even more substantive agenda might emerge. ‘A consideration of Brexit in light of climate change’ is one way of framing such a wider agenda. The IICM/DCU research projects cited by Ganiel, including an extensive project on the future of multilateralism, are already moving in the direction she recommends.

In Ballycastle and Dublin, Corrymeela has begun sponsoring low-key discussions around ‘health services, education systems, political structures, and the pastoral implications of possible constitutional change.’ The reader (at least this reader) is tempted to associate this development with Ganiel’s other major recommendation, which is for church leaders to ‘enhance their contributions by extending their focus to the southern side of the border.’ Here, Ganiel makes a creative suggestion: might the Catholic Church be able to go further in acknowledging past abuse, and the continuing trauma arising from this abuse, by relating the discussion to an all-island approach to reconciliation and dealing with the past?

As Dr Ganiel carries her valuable work forward, I would like to see further exploration of ways in which dominant orthodoxies were challenged post-partition both south and north of the border. What does it tell us that the 1937 Irish Constitution was not a conservative Catholic document by the standards of the 1930s? That Louis MacNeice, John Hewitt, John Montague, Seamus Heaney, Derek Mahon, Michael Longley and other poets from Northern Ireland preserved a space for respectful encounter—Yeats’s ‘Truce of the Muses’—even in the most troubled times?

Finally, it seems to me that we should not overinterpret the decline of church influence in the late 20th and early 21st centuries—if only because this decline has its counterpart in the shaking of secular orthodoxies. The liberal emphasis on freedom of choice can lead to the destruction of the natural environment and of shared social meaning, absent common objectives and agreed limitations. The present historical moment invites both religions and public authorities to practise humility and come together to re-evaluate key aspects of our culture. A religion ‘finding itself’ through *relevance*—placing its understanding of truth at the service of society—is a very good fit with our political need for a *standpoint* from which to critique the status quo and assume responsibility for the future. By connecting politics and religion in better ways, we can help to counteract the principal occupational hazard of politics, the losing touch with essential values. Our shared task is to formulate in new ways a number of planetary and inter-generational projects aimed at a ‘just transition.’ A global theory of change mediated by church institutions, among others, offers a horizon of hope.