

**THE COMMODIFICATION OF RELIGION
AND THE CHALLENGES FOR THEOLOGY**
Reflections from the Irish Experience

Eamonn Conway, Ireland

*What you are in love with
What seizes your imagination
Will affect everything.*

...

*Fall in love, stay in love
And it will decide everything.*

Pedro Arrupe SJ

Introduction

The symposium that gave rise to these papers set out to assess the core thesis of Vincent Miller's recent book, *Consuming Religion*. As Miller's text is written from the perspective of the USA, our task was to consider whether or not his analysis spoke to the European context. The issues we were asked to explore included whether or not Europe could be considered to be as consumer-driven as North America; the extent to which religion is undergoing commodification in the European context; and whether or not the kind of responses to consumerism Miller recommends for the Christian community would, in our view, be valuable and effective in the European context.

We must differentiate when we speak of Europe; we cannot consider Europe to be in any way as homogenous as the United States. On this basis I intend in what follows to engage with Miller's thesis from the point of view of the contemporary Irish experience. What follows could therefore be taken as a kind of particular 'case study' consideration of his thesis, exploring aspects of faith and culture in contemporary Ireland within the broader European context.

Thus, the first part of this paper will point up and offer an interpretation of some key aspects of Miller's thesis. The second part will turn specifically to the Irish context. The UK sociologist of religion, Grace Davie has claimed that Europe is 'an exceptional case' in global terms because of its widespread secularisation. If so, I will want to argue that Ireland is the exception to this exception. While consumerism is rampant in Ireland, secularisation has not taken place in any way comparable to Great Britain and Western Europe. I will therefore suggest that Miller's thesis is particularly apt in the Irish context, a context that is viewed by many, to employ a phrase coined by one of our politicians, to be closer economically to 'Boston than to Berlin', with implications for values and attitudes towards religion.

The third part of my paper will consider the challenge which Miller sets for the theological community in his book. Here, still reflecting on the Irish context, I will draw attention to the danger of theology finding itself in collusion with consumer culture and therefore incapable of meeting the challenge set for it by Miller. Finally, I will suggest how theology might best position itself so that it can challenge consumer culture from the Irish perspective. What I have to say may have implications within the European context beyond the Irish experience but I will leave that to readers to decide for themselves.

1. Miller's Thesis

Since the 1970s when Jean Baudrillard first published *The Consumer Society*, much has been written about the particular challenge that consumer culture poses to religious beliefs and values. For the most part, commentators have set about critiquing consumerism as they would any ideology that proffered a set of values contrary to or in competition with their own. The opening chapter of Vincent Miller's *Consuming Religion* instances the writings of John Paul II as an example of such a counter-ideological approach. According to John Paul II consumerism more or less did to Western Europe what communism did to the East. Communism functioned by reducing people to mere servants of production. Consumerism does the same only in reverse: it makes them servants of consumption. In both cases the human person is reduced to an object of material things (*Centesimus Annus*, n. 19). Thus they become enslaved in a lifestyle and a value system injurious to and diminishing of their true vocation as human beings.

The focus of John Paul's critique was on showing how consumer culture offers *Ersatz* freedom when compared to the freedom found in Christ. His

solution lay in calling Christians to heroism of daily life in which they were to swim against the consumerist tide, living out Christian values in contrast to those dominant in the surrounding consumer culture. One can understand why the very many new Christian movements began and flourished during the pontificate of John Paul II, responding to his call to found and foster counter-communities witnessing to a Christian lifestyle and value system.

Miller is as critical of consumer counter-values as was John Paul II. However, he identifies a certain weakness in this counter-ideological approach. In his view, such an approach seems to assume that the main problem is that the shelves of postmodern culture are stacked with values counter to those of Christianity and the vacuous nature of which we need continuously to expose. He argues that the real damage done by consumer culture is that it infects our very capacity to perceive what is valuable.

According to Miller consumerism not only offers alternative values: it also subtly ensnares us in a consumer web of interpretation of and engagement with all value systems, including our own. Thus, Miller's approach is to direct our attention towards the non-intentional and behaviour-forming structures and practices operative in a consumerist mode of interpretation. When we examine these structures and practices we observe two forms of erosion at work. The first relates to the liquefying of traditions, shearing them of interconnectedness and resulting in a lack of internal coherence among beliefs. The second undermines the relationship between beliefs and their practice, resulting in a lack of consistency.

The point is that when a consumerist mode of interpretation is operative, lack of coherence and/or of consistency with regard to one's value system ceases to be recognised as just that: a lack. If anything, such a lack of coherence and of consistency is legitimised. What Christians face, then, is not so much a set of beliefs that are in competition with their own but rather a cultural infrastructure that legitimises and even appears to validate engagement with beliefs in an incoherent and inconsistent manner. Thus, in attempting to challenge consumer culture it is not sufficient or even likely to be fruitful to concentrate merely on contradicting what appear to be the 'heresies' of such a culture from a Christian perspective.

I just want to interject here that I do not think it is a case of 'either/or'. We need to attend both to countering value-systems we view as contrary to the Gospel as well as to recognising and critiquing the non-intentional and behaviour-forming structures and practices operative in our engagement with value systems.

Miller also makes a distinction between strategies and tactics. He is of the view that the end of Christendom means that 'we work on terrain we do not control'. This, he believes, rules out thinking in terms of a distinctive Christian strategy, though I find this somewhat problematic: the reign of God, after all, has to be understood as God's strategy, with us and in-breaking even if not still fully realised. Instead, Miller confines himself to proposing a number of tactics in which Christians, guerrilla-like need to engage. The first level is that of 'consumer formation'. This involves penetrating 'the veil of the commodity fetish' and countering 'the formation of imagination'. Miller wants us to become somewhat uncomfortable with the disembodied and dis-embedded way in which we consume things with scant regard for their origins and their possible meaning in their original context. At this level, the manner in which we have settled for incoherence among our various beliefs and an inconsistency between what we believe and what we actually do is challenged by developing the discipline of meditatively discovering and becoming attentive to the process which has led to everyday consumer items being produced and made available to us, be they bananas, coffee or a pair of socks. As we busily accessorise, whose stories are we also unwittingly denying as an integral part of our own?

The second tactic is to attempt to counter the commodification of culture by restoring the connection between belief and practice, if in simple then nonetheless in importantly symbolic and habit-forming ways. At this level Miller challenges us to become consequential in terms of belief and practice. Miller gives the example of purchasing and listening to the music of indigenous people, thus espousing support for their cause and professing such support as a value, as against actually putting ourselves on the line in our own daily context to stand up for those oppressed in our own work or community contexts in gestures of concrete solidarity that might actually cost us. In this way we are practising what we say we believe; our beliefs are not merely lifestyle accessories.

Miller devotes most of his attention to a third and final level. This presents the theological community with the task of evaluating and critiquing theological approaches in terms of how they support or undermine 'a robust sense of interconnections among symbols, beliefs and practices'. Thus, theologians are tasked to be like linesmen in an electricity supply company who have to find where power cables may have been broken and set about repairing them, restoring vital energy and connectivity. For the theologian, restoring connectedness involves uncovering and detailing in particular the effects of detraditionalisation and pluralisation. Here, the emphasis should not only be upon assessing the damage but also the challenge and the potential for development. As Miller points out, tradition is 'an ongoing argument in which

practitioners participate'. Presenting Christian faith as monolithic where genuine internal pluralism exists is both dishonest and unlikely to be fruitful. Acknowledging internal pluralism and diversity, on the other hand, can have at least two positive effects. At a theoretical level it can contribute to necessary development of doctrine; at a practical level it can also help develop new forms of popular religion which of their nature demand of their adherents genuine Christian action and engagement.

With this overview of Miller's thesis in mind I want to present as a kind of case study the contemporary Irish cultural context and then consider, in the light of Miller's thesis, the challenges and opportunities which this presents for Christian faith. We begin by consideration of Ireland's much celebrated recent economic progress.

2. Irish Economic Success

It is interesting to meet people who have never been to Ireland and whose only direct knowledge of the country comes from St Patrick's Day celebrations and Irish Pubs. On two occasions I have heard the mathematician, international thought leader and co-founder of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Seymour Papert, on brief visits here, refer to Ireland as though it were still overpopulated with 'saints and scholars'. On each occasion, Papert cited uncritically from Thomas Cahill's *How the Irish Saved Civilization*.¹ Hardly considered a serious historical work, Cahill tells the 'untold' story of the decisive part played by Ireland during the period from the fall of Rome to the rise of Charlemagne, the so-called dark ages. During this period, scholarship and culture were eclipsed right across Europe and it fell to the Irish monks to preserve Western culture. According to Cahill, the great treasures of Western Culture, whether of Greek, Roman, Jewish or Christian origin, would have been lost for ever if it were not for the faithful scribes in their lonely monastic cells on the edge of Christian Europe. Subsequently, when the shadows across mainland Europe lifted, Irish monks did not hand back these treasures without leaving their indelible mark on them and so the Irish must take some credit and responsibility for the shaping of the medieval European mind.

Assessment of the accuracy of Cahill's portrayal can be left to the historians. What is of interest here is that Papert and others are of the view that Ireland has

¹ T. Cahill, *How the Irish Saved Civilization*, Doubleday: Anchor Books, 1995.

the potential once again to play a role in 'saving' western civilisation. While this may seem naïve at best, hearing leading American academics say these things nonetheless bolsters a new-found confidence in being Irish, one that is based largely upon our current economic success. In 2005, Ireland was described in the following terms by *The Economist's* Intelligence Unit:

When one understands the interplay of modernity and tradition in determining life satisfaction, it is then easy to see why Ireland ranks a convincing first in the international quality-of-life league table. It successfully combines the most desirable elements of the new – material wellbeing, low unemployment rates, political liberties – with the preservation of certain life satisfaction-enhancing, or modernity-cushioning, elements of the old, such as stable family life and the avoidance of the breakdown of community. Its score on all of these factors are above the eu-15 average, easily offsetting its slightly lower scores on health, climate and gender equality. The United Kingdom, by contrast, ranks 29th in the world – well below its rank on income per person and bottom among the eu-15 countries. Social and family breakdown is high, offsetting the impact of high incomes and low unemployment. Its performance on health, civil liberties, and political stability and security is also below the eu-15 average. The United States ranks lower on quality of life than on income but it is above the eu-15 average. Italy performs well, but Germany and France do not – belying the notion that the big Euro zone nations compensate for their productivity lag with a better quality of life than in America.²

It would seem at least on the surface that we are getting things economically right here. Inflation is currently relatively low (ca. 2.3%). Our per capita income is second in the EU only to that of Luxembourg and we have the fourth highest per capita income in the world. Significantly, we are also considered for three consecutive years to be the world's most globalised country (the USA is generally ranked around seventh). Four factors are taken into account in determining these rankings: economic integration, technological connectivity, personal contact and political engagement. In addition, Ireland continues, despite recent restrictive legislation concerning asylum seekers, more or less to be 'the land of a thousand welcomes'. Between May 2004 and August 2005, almost

² See http://www.economist.com/media/pdf/quality_of_life.pdf (accessed May 2 2006).

130,000 people from the new EU accession countries were allocated Personal Public Service Numbers in Ireland; at the same time the bigger players in Europe continue to place restrictions on free movement within the EU. It is estimated that some 50,000 to 70,000 immigrants will be absorbed into Ireland per annum for the foreseeable future. Finally, Irish people are five times more likely to have experience of living overseas as anyone else in the European Union.

A few points are worth noting by way of comment. The first is that Ireland's high score on the Quality of Life Index is heavily dependent upon the perceived enduring quality of family and community life. Yet these are not areas of major state investment. Suicide, abortion, marital breakdown and divorce are all increasing problems in Irish society. While our fertility rates are slightly higher than the EU average, so also is the number of births outside of marriage, which currently stands at one in three and is steadily increasing. Abortion remains illegal but according to the Irish Family Planning Association, between January 1980 and December 2004, at least 117,673 women travelled from Ireland for abortion services in Britain.³ Divorce became legal in Ireland in 1995 and relatively speaking the divorce rate is a modest 16% of registered marriages.⁴ Our health care system seems so impervious to badly needed reform that an appointment to the Ministry for Health is colloquially referred to as 'being sent to Angola'.

Immigration into Ireland, which is relatively high in proportion to our population, is not having the pluralizing impact that many would have predicted because most immigrants come from countries that are still relatively traditionalised, Poland being one example. Thus, immigration is serving to reinforce rather than undermine traditional values. At the same time, there is increasing concern regarding how immigrants are portrayed in the media and the danger of a rising tide of racism.⁵

A recent very book by a well known Irish economist describes Irish people as a 'shopaholic nation with an insatiable appetite for newness'. Citing the Irish Central Statistics Office, David McWilliams notes that in 2005 as a nation of just ca 4.5 million people we will have spent Eur70 billion on consumer goods, an average of Eur20,000 per person. On dog food alone we spend Eur125 million per annum. At the same time, we spent over Eur100 million on the

³ See <http://www.ifpa.ie/abortion/iabst.html> (accessed May 2 2006).

⁴ See http://oasis.gov.ie/relationships/separation_divorce/divorce.html (accessed May 2 2006).

⁵ See M. Breen, E. Devereux, A. Haynes, *Media and Migration* (The Dialogue Series 6), Antwerp: Universitair Centrum Sint-Ignatius, 2006.

energy drink "Red Bull". What we spend on Coca Cola far outstrips the annual school transport bill for the school's nation.⁶

3. Religious Practice in a 'Full-On' Nation

Turning now to attitudes to religion, we find that while there is a trend towards detachment from institutional religion, attachment remains relatively and surprisingly high and the vast majority of Irish people continue to profess belief in God and consider themselves to be religious.⁷ The statistics show a robust resistance in Ireland to secularisation measured in terms of Church affiliation at least when compared with other European countries.

This, I believe, is because secularisation in Great Britain and elsewhere in Western Europe has been underpinned both philosophically and politically in a way that has never been the case in Ireland. Thus, the pattern across the rest of Europe has been one of a secularisation movement and process, bringing with it detraditionalisation and pluralisation, and a consumer culture, with varying degrees of affluence, emerging to fill the values and meaning void. The pattern in Ireland is different, perhaps uniquely so in the European context. Detraditionalisation and pluralisation are underway here much more slowly and in a context that is clearly not secularised.

Moreover, few people turn away from traditional religion for overtly ideological reasons. Even very serious and highly publicised cases of sexual abuse by clergy and the mishandling of such cases by bishops have had surprisingly little impact on Church practice figures. There are frequent, sometimes merited but often unjustifiably hostile attacks on the institutional Church in the Irish media, which are rarely responded to competently by the Church, but at the end of the day these critical and often ideologically driven elements in the media do not seem to have a major effect in terms of emptying the pews. Irish people seem to have a distinctive ability to separate the failings of the institution from their own experience of Church 'on the ground'; they can loudly criticise 'the Church' while being quite supportive of their local parish and clergy.

⁶ See D. McWilliams, *The Pope's Children, Ireland's New Elite*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2005, 11.

⁷ Based on the findings of the 1999 *European Values Study*. See T. Fahey, *Is Atheism increasing? Ireland and Europe Compared*, in: E.G. Cassidy, *Measuring Ireland: discerning Values and Beliefs*, Dublin: Veritas 2002.

Thus, the pattern in Ireland would seem to be one of economic prosperity delivering a consumer culture, which, if anything, is taking on the characteristics of a post-secular society without ever having been properly secularised. There are signs here that what sociologists of religion have to say currently about mainland Europe could well be describing an emerging pattern in Ireland, if one adjusts to allow for the fact that traditional religion is still a significant player.⁸ Today, people speak about the transformation of religion rather than its disappearance; about the emergence of 'off-piste spirituality'; about a growing religiosity without a necessarily more active Christian engagement, about 'believing without belonging' and even 'longing without belonging'. In Ireland it is more about belonging but increasingly on one's own terms. Irish people seem to be settling for a rather unique form of semi-detachment to formal religion, contentedly availing, for example, of the sacramental life of the Church at random.

Significantly, though practice rates in Ireland remain relatively high, the number of candidates for priesthood is well below what one finds even in countries as secularised as Holland. Many Irish dioceses now have no candidates for the priesthood. So while people still place some value on their traditional belief system, if even on their own terms, vocations to priesthood cannot compete in a successful economy that offers many other more prestigious and lucrative career paths. Significantly, in Ireland the caring professions in general, nursing, teaching etc are also declining in status, something that, disturbingly, is not also unrelated to the fact that they are (increasingly) perceived as women's careers.

That vocationally oriented careers are in decline in Ireland is further evidence of how consumer driven Ireland has become. Two key characteristics of consumer culture are immediate gratification and disposability. A consumer economy is dependent on people developing both a high expectation of satisfaction from consumer products, and subsequently becoming equally profoundly dissatisfied with these same products. People are schooled in the habit of intending to move on even from perfectly functioning products when something 'newer', ostensibly better, comes along. The introduction, for example, of so-called 'loyalty cards' by companies is an attempt to keep people faithful to brands but not to particular products; an attempt to commodify commitment in a way that serves rather than undermines consumerism. Once on

⁸ See L. Boeve, *Religion after Detraditionalisation: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe*, in: *Irish Theological Quarterly* 70 (2005) 99 – 122.

the mailing list you will be immediately notified when the latest, 'must-have' replacement model comes along.

This schooling in instant gratification and disposability can also impact on human relationships. As Zygmunt Bauman has observed, 'bonds and partnerships are (also) viewed as things to be *consumed* ... subject to the same criteria of evaluation as all other objects of consumption.'⁹ When a life choice or a relationship becomes difficult the default position is simply to exit, move on, and try again. For a variety of reasons, the reality is that in contemporary culture few people expect or perhaps even desire to have the same job or partner for the whole of their lives.

To summarise then: it is very difficult to apply the usual secularisation thesis to the Irish context. Viewed in comparison to the rest of Europe, Ireland is not becoming secularised in the same way or to the same extent. Institutional religion almost despite itself still has a level of importance in Irish culture, a level unique in Western Europe.

At the same time, there are no grounds for complacency. It would be a mistake to underestimate the eroding effect of a consumer-type lifestyle on Christian values. It would be naïve to expect that a semi-detached relationship to the Church would be robust enough to enable resistance to consumer culture, or perhaps even more importantly, to enable one to live in right relationship with economic prosperity. Such a semi-detached relationship inevitably leaves the individual believer relatively isolated and without the consistent support of a vibrant faith community.

Up-front secularisation of the kind found in many continental European countries in some respects is easier to identify and perhaps to deal with. The kind of secularisation that slowly and stealthily re-forms the imagination, subverts a Christian disposition to life and replaces it in a non-confrontational way is more difficult to engage with and to challenge. As the poet Seamus Heaney has put it in a recent poem, the loss of faith can occur 'off stage':

'Like everybody else, I bowed my head
during the consecration of the bread and wine,
lifted my eyes to the raised host and raised chalice,
believed (whatever it means) that a change occurred.

...

⁹ Z. Bauman, *Europe and North America*, in: M. Junker-Kenny and M. Tomka, *Faith in a Society of Gratification = Concilium* 35 (1999/4) 6.

There was never a scene
 When I had it out with myself or with another.
 The loss occurred off-stage.¹⁰

4. The Commodification of Religion in Ireland

The *a la carte* approach to religion outlined above lends itself easily to commodification. Although serious courses in adult religious education and in theology readily attract numbers among Catholics who welcome an opportunity to develop an adult faith, nonetheless, a glance at any issue of the Irish institutional Church's official internal journal *Intercom* shows what really "sells" in Irish religious circles today: "Meeting the God within through his(!) manifestation in nature", "Discovering the inner rainbow", "Dancing your story", "Healing touch - therapeutic touch", and, of course, "Celtic Spirituality". What is ironic is that many of these courses and programmes have become the bread and butter of former seminaries and religious houses throughout the country. The problem with many of these courses is that they are 'once-off' with no strings attached. They do not seek to immerse or initiate people into a sustainable believing community.

The popularity of so-called celtic spirituality is also worth mentioning, a classic example being John O'Donohue's *Anam Cara*.¹¹ This book dove-tails perfectly with the post-secular search for religious meaning. It draws on a wide variety of religious traditions and gurus: Buddhism, Pablo Neruda, Meister Eckhart, Zen, the Kalyani-Mitra, the Native American Indians, Hegel. Celtic myths and stories also get a mention but not nearly enough to merit the subtitle to the book "spiritual wisdom from the Celtic world". Little is said about Jesus Christ, nothing at all about Church. There are lengthy reflections on love but these focus more on its personal benefits than its cost.

McWilliams also comments on the transforming religious scene in Ireland. He suggests that religion here is 'merging into a fusion of New-Age spiritualism, mixed with Catholic ritual' and sees this as something in which the Church is colluding by 'employing tactics straight out of a cosmopolitan marketing course'. He refers specifically to the deliberate customisation of Church

¹⁰ S. Heaney, *District and Circle*, London: Faber & Faber, 2005, 47.

¹¹ J. O' Donohue, *Anam Cara. Spiritual Wisdom from the Celtic World*. London: Bantam Press, 1997.

sacraments by pandering to New-Age pagan and spiritual sensibilities.¹² If this were the case, then Miller's critique would very much apply in the Irish context. However, the more usual liturgical experience here is one of a very functional and peremptory approach to celebration, and of very little energy being expended in liturgical preparation or renewal.

McWilliams goes on to speak of a renewed 'reaching for the spiritual' which he sees as a reaction to mass materialism; a reaction to the ubiquity of consumerism. However, he does not recognise that it could equally be a manifestation of consumer culture. Nicholas Lash's observation is apt:

My mistrust of contemporary interest in 'spirituality' arises from the suspicion that quite a lot of material set out in book stores under this description sells because it does not stretch the mind or challenge our behaviour. It tends to soothe rather than subvert our well-heeled complacency."¹³

At the same time, Michael Paul Gallagher has cautioned against too easily dismissing this new openness to the spiritual. Even if it seems that people are satisfying themselves with what to us are at best 'sub-Christian' answers, nonetheless their spiritual hungers represent an important aspect of contemporary cultural sensibility with which Christians must engage.¹⁴

Given the distinctive sluggish nature of the Irish secularisation process, yet at the same time the presence of characteristics of a post-modern, post-secular consumer culture, arguably Miller's thesis has more to say to Limerick than Leuven. Even with a declining and ageing priesthood, parishes are still sufficiently resourced and can call forth a sufficient level of commitment such that a reflection process alerting people to the non-intentional and behaviour-forming structures and practices operative in a consumerist mode of interpretation could prove thought-provoking, liberating and perhaps even life-changing for many people who, at least at some level, know that living as a 'full-

¹² McWilliams, *The Pope's Children*, 247ff.

¹³ N. Lash, *The beginning and end of 'religion'*, Cambridge: CUP, 174. Writing on the same subject Hans Urs von Balthasar says, "Outside the Christian domain the most important religious phenomenon appears to be an urgent and often desperate desire to flee from the senseless merry-go-round of technical civilisation to a transcendental sphere of peace. It doesn't seem to matter whether this sphere is God's or the seeker's own self or something neutral in between" in: *Christian Prayer*, *Communio* 5 (1978) 16.

¹⁴ M.P. Gallagher, *Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age: A Perspective from Lonergan* in: D. Marmion (ed.), *Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005, 153.

on nation', to use a phrase from McWilliams, is neither satisfying nor sustainable.

A few further comments by way of conclusion to this section. The first is that consumerism does not only take grip among the affluent. Increasingly in Ireland the many 'have nots' experience themselves as trapped in a web of unrealistic and unrealisable lifestyle expectations. Even owning one's own home, something which perhaps because of our colonial past has always been seen as a reasonable expectation, is now beyond the reach of many people. Increasingly, people intuit a need to be rescued from inauthentic and sham sources of personal identity and self-worth. Rowan Williams has commented on the need for an educational process that lets us notice just how we are been constructed as consumers.¹⁵ For those who feel the extraordinary pressure to have and to own, an intelligent and intelligible presentation of just what is going on in consumer culture could prove liberating. In keeping with Miller's thesis, the focus here should not be only on showing up just how empty and inadequate consumer values are, but also on showing just how we have been schooled into a particular mode of interpretation with regard to what we perceive as being of value. Essentially what is needed is a healing of the imagination, a liberation of human desire; perhaps even a restoration of confidence that it is safe to fall in love with life itself; a process of teaching us to trust that a robust and coherent sense of identity can emerge from and be formed in ground more solid ground than merely that based on what I have and own,

It is also worth noting that designer spiritualities are fine so long as we remain at the superficial. Fascination with Christianity persists because at some deeper level people recognise that accessory-type spiritualities are simply not up to the task when it comes to the more profound moments of life, whether moments of celebration or of catastrophe. At such times we need to share and we need to let go, to surrender to a source of meaning beyond that of our own fashioning. We need to be communal and in a communion in a way that personalised spiritualities do not seem capable of delivering. Paul Durcan, the Irish poet, has commented that at Christmas we all have a desire to be 'choral'. But it is not just at Christmas.

Finally, it is significant that the first two tactics of engagement with consumer culture proposed by Miller have to do with nurturing a sense of connectivity. At the first level, Miller challenges us to connect with those who produce the items we consume. At the second, he challenges us to connect our beliefs with our practices. Perhaps at some deep level, we intuit that our lives are inextricably

¹⁵ R. Williams, *Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2002, 32.

bound up with those who produce goods which we enjoy, frequently at their expense more than ours. Gaps between what we believe and what we actually practise must also create a certain residual level of tension in our lives. Because of the basic human need to be 'choral' if our lives are marked by any kind of disconnectedness, then inevitably we suffer.

We move now to the final part of this paper which considers the responsibility of theology in helping us to face up to this cultural context.

5. The Commodification of Education and Implications for Theology

Miller entrusts to the theological community the important task of evaluating theological approaches in terms of how they support interconnectedness between symbols, beliefs and practices and he sees this as critical in stemming the tide with regard to the commodification of religion. But is theology, at least in Ireland, up to this task? Is its situatedness such that it can successfully challenge a consumer and commodification culture?

Theology here is undergoing considerable transformation. Thirty years' ago, it was almost exclusively offered at seminaries, and thus only for candidates for the priesthood or religious life. The only university then offering theology was Trinity College Dublin, whose school was considered suspect in Roman Catholic circles for a variety of reasons. Today, only one Irish seminary remains open, the number of seminarians there dwarfed by lay students. Others, such as The Milltown Institute and All Hallows College, have managed to transform themselves into centres for the pastoral and theological education of laity. The National University of Ireland Colleges still do not offer theology but there are a number of new departments based at catholic colleges whose traditional mission was the education of teachers. For the most part, these departments are accredited by less traditional universities with a strong technology and science orientation.¹⁶ Some Institutes of Technology have also welcomed theology as a kind of 'anchor tenant' in their humanities portfolio.

The re-location of theology within the state-accredited and in some instances the state-funded sector has been both valuable and inevitable. Valuable, in that more exacting academic standards apply than did in the cassocked and cosseted seminary context; there are greater opportunities for challenging interdisciplinary research with the natural sciences; the subject enters and influences

¹⁶ For a fuller treatment of this, see E. Conway, *Theology in Ireland: Changing Contours and Contexts* in, D. Marmion (ed.), *Christian Identity in a Postmodern Age*, Dublin: Veritas, 2005, 115 - 137.

the mainstream of Irish academic life; there is a steady stream of young and mature students interested in studying the subject; there are a small but vital number of state-funded lecturing positions in theology. The re-location of theology was also inevitable, in that otherwise the chances of survival for were very slim. Declining or even transforming seminaries found it difficult to continue financially and this became, in some instances, their over-riding concern.

At the same time theology in Ireland has far from entered the promised land. For example, whereas the traditional seminary faculties tended to have enough staff to allow for specialisation with regard to the many sub-disciplines in theology, university departments tend to be small, requiring staff to be more general practitioners, and having to compete for staffing, library and other minimal resources.

However, it is the changing climate within the state-funded third-level sector that causes the most concern. It is widely acknowledged that the single most important internal factor contributing to Irish economic success was the quality of our educational system. Although currently less openly or readily acknowledged, this in turn was due to the selfless work of members of the various religious orders who established and ran schools and colleges in all parts of the country. The standard of their own personal education, intelligence and commitment was high, perhaps higher than that of some teachers today, given the decline in the status of the teaching profession. In addition, the Irish educational system, at all levels, though strongly humanities-based, contributed to the production of generations of entrepreneurs who thrived in the world of industry, initially in Great Britain and the United States, and later, here in Ireland.

Few would deny that educational reform is needed, and that despite its successes the existing educational system also failed many sectors of Irish society. Religious-run schools had their limitations: it has to be admitted that some people experienced the education they provided as oppressive, as crushing rather than liberating them. For a few people their legacy was even one of abuse, whether physical, sexual or spiritual. It is to be welcomed that today education is becoming more 'learner-centred'. How 'learner-centredness' is understood, however, is cause for some concern. The overall thrust of reform is worryingly in the direction of subjecting education to the service of the Irish economy in a narrow and short-sighted way. We cannot go into it here, but the consumer/commodification approach to knowledge and to education is perhaps most evident when it comes to the encouragement of private/public partnerships for investment in research. Similarly, technology is changing not just how

education is delivered but what is delivered as well. The all pervasive *technē* mentality as we experience it today, severed from the arts, aesthetics, and the humanities, tends to promote an instrumental form or rationality and endorse a sense of purposefulness devoid of any obvious meaning in itself.¹⁷

At the level of curriculum, influential voices in Irish education have called for the humanities to be placed more at the service of the natural sciences and technology. The structure of education, it is claimed, has also much to learn from the business world which, ostensibly, is far less hierarchical and allows for talent to rise to the top more easily. Thus, governing bodies of educational institutes are to have as many business people on them as academics. Heads of educational institutions should see themselves as CEOs of major companies, as service providers, marketing, in a globally competitive environment, educational products to customers or clients. Gone are the days when educationally 'one size fits all'. Education is to become increasingly 'user-led': technology makes possible the customisation and personalisation of education, its effective tailoring to the needs of the individual, and its delivery wherever and whenever people want in a resource-efficient manner.

There are a number of difficulties with this but the underlying problem is perhaps two-fold. On the one hand, the dynamic is one of education understood as a commodity where teachers/learners become redefined as service providers and consumers. On the other, the individual is increasingly seen as an economic entity whose needs are perceived in terms of what will best serve economic prosperity. If, in the past, some people experienced an Irish education system in the hands mainly of religiously motivated people, however well-intentioned, as limiting and crushing, I believe this will be nothing compared to the damage that will be done if our educational system falls into the hands of those for whom economic interests are uppermost. In addition, tailoring education to the felt needs of the individual is appealing, but a core part of true education must be the education of human desire itself, opening up learners to as yet unanticipated horizons and unrecognised personal potential. Customising education to felt needs can also result in it becoming a merely private and individualistic affair by which certain skills are acquired for immediate application in a productive way and without any genuine experience of being part of an explorative and probing community of learners.

Perhaps the consumer/commodity approach to education is one into which people are being schooled, even from an early age, out of a sense anxiety that

¹⁷ See M. Breen, E. Conway, B. McMillan, *Technology & Transcendence*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2003.

they will be able to perform economically successfully. Yet life should be more about self-discovery than self-invention. It is interesting to observe the completely different approach which most adult learners take to education when they return to it later in life. For the most part they approach it with a sense of joy and solely for their personal fulfilment. This would seem to indicate that people, when free to do so, approach education as an end in itself and not a means to something else.

Conclusion: The Need for Church and State to Provide Theology in Partnership

To return, then, to consideration of theology. Can theology be part of the resistance movement against the commodification of culture, specifically, of religion? Does not its reliance upon an educational system that is increasingly marked by consumer culture undermine it?

In the past theology did not find its way on to university campuses in Ireland for two reasons: bishops feared that they would not be able to control it, that it could become a seed-bed of dissent, while university academics felt that it would lack academic freedom and integrity.¹⁸ It is to be hoped that these fears have sufficiently been allayed on both sides. Church leaders now recognise that theology can influence the public sphere if it is situated where it can dialogue with the academy. At the same time, universities are quite pragmatic and less ideological when it comes to opening up new fields of study and research.

As universities are increasingly accommodating themselves to public-private partnerships in order to fund research and teaching, it would seem opportune, for a Church which is still as well resourced as it is in Ireland to develop strategic partnerships with third-level institutions. The resources that in the past went into the education of seminarians should now go into the education of future generations of lay pastors and theologians of the highest calibre. In order to attract the best and the brightest, a number of steps would need to be taken. The roles of lay pastors and theologians would need to be clearly defined, but also more obviously valued and afforded status. At the same time the ideals sought after if not always realised in seminary education would need to be rediscovered and incorporated in to the education of theologians: formation in a community, personal and spiritual development, prayer and self-discipline. Above all,

¹⁸ See P. Corkery and F. Long (ed.), *Theology in the university. The Irish Context*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1997, 29ff.

students would need to be provided with an experience of Christian discipleship whereby the distinctively Christian vision of what it is to be human would sink deep into their hearts and minds, so much so that they would not only be able very quickly to recognise the defragmenting and dehumanising effects of contemporary culture, but also be able to resist it in terms of their personal lifestyles. Specifically, theological education would need in the words of Karl Rahner, to become, or better, become again, 'mystagogical', that is, 'it should not merely speak about objects in abstract concepts, but it must encourage people really to experience that which is expressed in such concepts.' It is only in this way that it can hope to serve Miller's legitimate intention of re-connecting contemporary want-to-be believers with the symbols of faith validated by centuries of prayer and worship, which is partly what Miller intends by his third level of tactics. Vital here is the challenging of what Paul Lakeland has referred to as a 'cheerful historicity' characteristic of many people today.

Miller's first two levels of tactics depend also on an approach such as this being adopted. If today people can blissfully hold contradictory beliefs, such as resurrection and reincarnation, this needs to be challenged in a context in which people actually experience the intensity of love which can have resurrection as its only logical conclusion. Thus, incoherence among beliefs is challenged. At the same time, the kind of community based approach to theology proposed here, in association with the university, insists that beliefs must be lived out inform one's lifestyle. Thus, inconsistency between belief and practice is also overcome.

At the same time, the negatives of the former seminary system would also need to be avoided. Theology in the seminary of the past was not always 'cultivated as a contemplation' (Newman). Preoccupation with the service of ministerial training meant that it was not engaged in for its own sake. In addition, the curriculum tended to serve the magisterial ideology of the day rather than take the risk of educating people to think genuinely theologically. This was not only a disservice to the truth but also a failure to trust. It showed a lack of confidence that good theological method would eventually reveal the better articulations of faith and that students could be trusted to discern the better from the worse.

The proposal outlined here also runs at least one serious risk. That is, that it would prove attractive to what I might term 'cultural refugees' seeking asylum from the challenges and difficulties of living in contemporary culture. People today find it difficult to establish a coherent sense of personal identity. They find cultural uncertainty difficult and can seek gated communities that offer a secure nest where their sense of fragility and vulnerability is protected and insulated.

Some basic Christian communities which have emerged in Europe in the recent past are prone to this kind of recruitment. But a preoccupation with certainty can be the enemy of truth, and an over-riding concern for security can prevent necessary growth in faith and love. Theologians of the future have to be comfortable with the complexity and sometimes the ambiguity that is part and parcel of living by the light of faith, hope and love.

It is to be hoped that whatever happens in a publicly-funded third-level context, academic integrity and rigour will not be compromised. The challenge for the Church is to trust in academic integrity and support the best of what the university has to offer to the discipline of theology. This includes the valuable and vital opportunity to engage in inter-disciplinary study and research with the natural sciences. At the same time, theology will have to take on board many of the legitimate priorities being set by educational policy-makers such as the development of centres of excellence, co-operation and rationalisation across institutions, and so on.

Church authorities will also have to realise that if theology is not to lose touch with the community which ultimately provides it with its *raison d'être*, if it is to perform fully the task it needs to in terms of challenging consumer culture, then it has to be genuinely valued and effectively resourced by the Christian community.

Summary

This essay examines and applies the thesis of Vincent Miller's book in the Irish context. It argues that in terms of faith and culture issues, for two reasons Ireland is closer to the United States than to many other European countries. The first is that recent economic prosperity has brought with it a tide of consumerism, experienced mentally, physically and spiritually, the characteristics of which are overwhelmingly North American in origin and perspective. The second is that the winds of secularization, at least as known and experienced in mainland Europe, and borne aloft by postmodern philosophical movements and trends, never quite reached Ireland's island shores. Thus, while Ireland tops various international indices measuring globalization and quality of life, Church affiliation and practice remain surprising high. At the same time, there is no room for complacency. Undoubtedly, religious sensibility is being steadily if surreptitiously undermined. More as a result of consumerism rather than secularization *per se*, Ireland is becoming a post-secular society, paradoxically without ever having being properly secularized at least in European terms.

Miller has certain expectations of theology and the theological community with regard to arresting and challenging consumerism. Thus, the paper reflects on the context within which Irish theology finds itself and expresses concern that theology in Ireland could itself be as much part of the problem as of the solution. In a radically consumer culture, in which both religion and education themselves become commodities, it is very difficult for theology to survive and to resist. The paper suggests the development of a new 'adult' relationship between Church and State authorities to provide theology in partnership for the benefit of both.

Résumé

Dans cet essai, j'examine la thèse du livre de Vincent Miller en l'appliquant au contexte irlandais. J'y démontre qu'en termes de foi et de traditions culturelles, l'Irlande est plus proche des États-Unis que de beaucoup d'autres pays européens, cela pour deux raisons. La première est que la récente prospérité économique a apporté avec elle une vague de consumérisme, dont on constate les incidences au niveau mental, physique et spirituel : un courant dont les caractéristiques sont majoritairement nord-américaines par son origine et ses orientations. La seconde est le vent de sécularisation, tel qu'on le connaît et l'expérimente dans la majeure partie de l'Europe, culminant dans les mouvements et courants philosophiques postmodernes ; il n'a jamais vraiment atteint les rivages de l'île Irlande. Par conséquent, tandis que l'Irlande accède au top des différents indicateurs internationaux qui mesurent la globalisation et la qualité de vie, l'adhésion à l'Église et la pratique religieuse restent étonnamment élevées. En même temps, il n'y a pas de place pour l'autosatisfaction. Il est indubitable que la sensibilité religieuse tient bon, même si elle est subrepticement minée. C'est par un effet du consumérisme plutôt que de la sécularisation comme telle, que l'Irlande est en train de devenir une société post-sécularisée mais, paradoxalement, sans jamais avoir été à proprement parler sécularisée, du moins en termes européens.

Miller a certaines attentes vis-à-vis de la théologie et de la communauté théologique en vue de stopper la progression du consumérisme et de relever le déficit qu'il pose. Dès lors, dans cette contribution, je réfléchis sur le contexte dans lequel se trouve la théologie irlandaise elle-même et je me préoccupe du fait que la théologie en Irlande pourrait être elle-même tout autant une partie du problème que sa solution. Dans une culture radicalement consumériste, dans laquelle religion et éducation deviennent l'une et l'autre des produits, il est très

difficile pour la théologie de survivre et de résister. Dans mon article, je suggère de développer un nouveau type de relation "adulte" entre l'Église et les autorités politiques en vue de promouvoir une théologie en partenariat, pour le bénéfice des deux parties.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Aufsatz behandelt die These aus dem Buch von Vincent Miller und wendet sie auf die irische Situation an. Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass sich Irland im Hinblick auf Begriffe wie Glaube und Kultur aus zweierlei Gründen besser mit den Vereinigten Staaten vergleichen lässt als viele andere europäischen Länder. Als erstes lässt sich anführen, dass der neue ökonomische Aufschwung das Konsumverhalten verschärft hat, was psychisch, physisch und spirituell zu erfahren ist und dessen Charakteristika sowohl in ihrem Ursprung als auch vom Blickwinkel her überwältigend nordamerikanisch sind. Als zweites können die Auswirkungen der Säkularisierung angeführt werden, die zumindest auf dem europäischen Festland gegenwärtig und erfahrbar sind und durch postmoderne philosophische Strömungen und Trends empor getragen werden, jedoch die Küste Irlands nicht erreicht haben. So bleiben Kircheneintritte und Gemeindeleben überraschend stabil, obwohl Irland vielfach internationale Kurswerte übersteigt, an denen sich Globalisierung und Lebensqualität messen lassen. Gleichzeitig ist aber kein Raum für Selbstzufriedenheit. Zweifellos geht die religiöse Sensibilität stetig wenn auch nicht augenscheinlich zurück. Dass Irland zu einer post-säkularen Gesellschaft heranwächst kann eher als ein Ergebnis des Konsumdenkens als einer Säkularisierung per se verstanden werden, da Irland paradoxerweise im Sinne einer europäischen Terminologie keine Säkularisierung durchlief.

Miller hat bestimmte Erwartungen an die Theologie und die Theologen im Hinblick auf eine Einschränkung und Infragestellung des Konsumdenkens. So wird in dieser Arbeit auf den Kontext eingegangen, innerhalb dessen sich die irische Theologie wieder findet und zum Ausdruck gebracht, dass die Theologie in Irland ebenso sehr Teil des Problems wie auch der Lösung ist. In einer radikalen Konsumkultur, in der sowohl Religion als auch das Bildungswesen selbst Waren werden, ist es für die Theologie sehr schwer bestehen zu können und sich dieser Entwicklung zu widersetzen. Der Aufsatz empfiehlt die Ausbildung einer neuen „alten“ Beziehung zwischen Verantwortlichen aus Kirche und Staat, um eine Theologie in Partnerschaft zu schaffen, die für beide von Nutzen ist.

*Prof. Dr. Eamonn Conway
University of Limerick
Mary Immaculate College
South Circular Road, Limerick
Ireland
Email: Eamonn.Conway@mic.ul.ie*