

Review: Millennium Meditations on Irish Faith and Culture

Reviewed Work(s): Religion in Ireland Past Present and Future by Denis Carroll

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Featured Review

Millennium Meditations on Irish Faith and Culture

Eamonn Conway

Columba Press is to be congratulated for producing two quality publications¹ to mark the millennium: *Religion in Ireland*, edited by Denis Carroll, and *New Century, New Society*, edited by Dermot Lane.

Generally, contributors to both publications take as their starting point the contemporary and rapidly changing socio-cultural context in Ireland. They seek to understand and interpret it. They wish to point a way forward, which either recovers or discovers fundamental Christian values.

Carroll's book is a convincing critique of serious deficits in twenty-first century Ireland: intolerance, a keen sense of individual ambition, and an allergy towards inclusivity. Michael Drumm lays the blame at the door of the Famine. He argues that preoccupation with survival, emigration and fear for the future left little room for concern about the rights of the individual, freedom of enquiry or respect for the emerging sciences. According to Drumm, the Famine can even be blamed for our attitude to sex:

In the aftermath of terrible famine, it is not difficult to link sexual experience and guilt; celibacy and sexual abstinence would have emerged as socioeconomic as well as religious values... one must surely regret the oppressive ethos of sexual repression so characteristic of post-Famine Irish Life.

Regrettably, short articles leave insufficient space to substantiate claims such as this. Nonetheless, at the very least Drumm shows that a critical appreciation of our recent history is vital to contemporary self-understanding. Personally, I think he is on to something in terms of explaining why, as a people, we have been repressed and inward looking.

1. *Religion in Ireland Past Present and Future*, Denis Carroll (ed.); *New Century, New Society, Christian Perspectives*, Dermot Lane (ed.) (Columba Press, 1999).

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John Dunlop's article ('Who are these Irish Presbyterians?') reads like a Presbyterian primer for Roman Catholics. It is largely a historical overview of Presbyterianism in Ireland, with an account of how Presbyterians as a community feel in the wake of The Troubles. That the editor considered such a rudimentary essay necessary is itself evidence of how ill-informed Roman Catholics have been regarding other Christian traditions on this island and of what little contact communities have had with one another. However, this thought led to two others. I wondered how many Presbyterians would read these collections of essays and would take note of the very serious self-analysis with which at least some in the Roman Catholic tradition are prepared to engage. I also began to wonder if a Roman Catholic would be asked to contribute to a similar collection of essays from within the Presbyterian community.

Bishop Richard Clarke's contribution mirrors that of John Dunlop, but from the Church of Ireland perspective. Another Dunlop, Robert, who is Baptist Pastor of Brannockstown, Co Kildare, contributes a paper entitled 'Minorities cherished and Affirmed', and with it these so far cosy ecumenical conversations begin to move out of the armchair. Dunlop makes two points well worth noting. He questions the value of well-crafted pronouncements on behalf of the four Churches which 'give the impression of ubiquitous collegiality and Church consensus, *una voce*'. He asks what is wrong with diverse voices among Christians. Dunlop also points to the value of an authentic inclusivism which supports rather than smothers difference:

When religious minorities open themselves to the big picture and embrace an authentic inclusivism, they are actually contributing to their own affirmation and enrichment. Numerical strength should not be confused with either efficiency or spiritual credibility.

Dermot Keogh's essay on Judaism in Ireland confirms that we are far from an authentic inclusivism. It is hard to believe it, but apparently one in five people in this country hold the Jews as a people to blame for the death of Christ. Many people also blame Jews for money-lending rackets in Dublin. Add to this the findings of a recent survey in which 42 per cent of settled Irish people admit to being unfavourably disposed towards Travellers, and immigrants have every reason to fear that *céad míle fáilte* is merely a turn of phrase. Joseph Liechty, who works with the Irish School of Ecumenics, continues this theme with a piece on sectarianism.

Some of the other essays in this contribution focus on contemporary faith and culture, and for this reader were as much 'miss'

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as 'hit'. More liberal use of the editorial red pen might have been useful in tempering contributions that tended to be too self-indulgent or sentimental. I will mention the exceptions. The Augustinian theologian Gabriel Daly provides a stimulating reflection on the interplay between liberal democracy and Christianity and is the first among these contributors to hint at what might be an authentic Christian vision for twenty-first century Ireland. One important point he makes is that the Church thrives on crises as long as these are genuinely religious or moral. If they are institutional, however, the situation is much less healthy. Those in leadership who justify sitting back and strapping themselves in on the basis that the Church has survived worse storms than this and will ride this one out as well, take note. Daly presents the stark choice currently facing the 'humiliated and discredited' Catholic Church in Ireland:

It can follow the wretched precedent of circling the wagons and resentfully nursing its wounds, or it can recognise that here is a God-given opportunity to experience and speak of the deepest Christian truths with greater authenticity and effectiveness than it was able to do when it was unchallenged and confident.

Religion in Ireland concludes with papers from Colm Kilcoyne and Bishop Willie Walsh. Perhaps more than all the other essays, these provide hope that Christianity has a future in Ireland. They are grassroots, common sense, Gospel sense contributions. They highlight that small changes, simple in themselves, could make a huge difference, if only we had a Church leadership which would lead. And if those in leadership who have some insight into what is going on would find the courage (the faith) to act on it.

The grassroots are not exactly forgotten, but they are viewed through a long-distance lens, in the series of papers edited by Dermot Lane.

Given that Lane's book sets out to evaluate critically recent changes and developments in Ireland and their implications for Christianity, it is to be expected that content overlaps with that of *Religion in Ireland*. But in general, *New Century*, *New Society* is more penetrating. The articles by Bruce Arnold and Tom Giblin, SJ, for example, highlight more subtle and severe threats to inclusivity in Irish society than those already discussed. Vested interests claim that the information explosion will serve inclusiveness, that it will augment democracy, that power will return to the people. Arnold argues to the contrary. As he sees it, we are becoming like rabbits trapped in the headlights of the information super-highway (my image), dazzled and paralysed. New media-friendly élites are emerging which reduce the majority of people to the

status of spectators/consumers, thus undermining democracy. They get away with this partly because of a moral vacuum. Arnold seems to want to argue that Christian faith and moral values are needed now more than ever in public life. Unfortunately, his article does not quite get that far.

Giblin, an economist, delves into the shadow side of our economic boom. He provides irrefutable evidence that Ireland is heading for even greater socio-economic inequality, and on top of that, environmental disaster. His article alone is a charter for Christian engagement in Ireland at the dawn of a new millennium. But my experience of organising talks and public lecture series, both in Dublin and in the West of Ireland, is that our quietest evenings are those during which we discuss social justice or environmental responsibility. Either people find these issues too challenging or else they think that they have nothing to do with their faith. Perhaps both. Seán McDonagh's piece, 'The Environment and the Catholic Church' leaves the reader in no doubt about the relationship between faith and care for the earth. Taken together with Mary Sutton's examination of our sense of responsibility for international development and world debt, these articles provide an excellent basis for a series of parish homilies.

More usually we evaluate Christian discipleship according to fidelity to the Church's sacramental life and this is the stuff of contributions from Michael Drumm and Dermot Lane. The section headings in Drumm's contribution highlight both what is absent and what is needed in sacramental celebration: celebrating creation and redemption, tasting transcendence, abandoning magic, building community, cherishing memory and hope. Though Drumm doesn't go into this, clearly the fundamental flaw is a false operative notion of revelation.

Dermot Lane sets out to assess the state of Christian faith at the end of the second millennium. He repeats what has become the episcopal mantra viz., that the real issue facing Church and society in Ireland is a crisis of faith. Unfortunately, at least at this point in his contribution, he does not define what he means by 'faith' and he leaves open the impression that he sees it in the narrow terms of adherence to Church attendance and moral and doctrinal teaching. Actually, I agree that the real crisis at the moment is one of faith, but by that I mean the absence of trusting faith among those in leadership. Instead we have rigid belief in structures that can no longer serve the mission of the Church. In the absence of an 'Abraham', we stay with the familiar if ineffective.

According to Lane, post-famine preoccupation with survival coupled with twentieth century concern about national identity meant that we are only now coming to terms with the European

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enlightenment (echoes of Drumm). At the same time he notes the rise of a post-modern sensibility. Lane seems to see two paths for Christian faith in Ireland to escape from the (post-)modern maze. One is that we will recognise the limitations of the liberal enlightenment project and learn from the mistakes of our European siblings. The other is that we take seriously the relationship between faith and reason, and faith and everyday life. He describes attitudes to religion as apathetic and holds theology responsible for this.

While I agree with the broad thrust of Lane's analysis, I am unsure that pre-modern, modern and post-modern are happening in Ireland in any neat time sequence. I think that part of what makes Ireland such an exciting and confusing context in which to do theology today is that each of us carries around within us at any one time voices and images which are taken from all three.

Lane seems to contradict himself. On the one hand he states that 'apathy concerning religion abounds in Ireland' and that 'anyone who seeks to talk about the Christian faith must be prepared to cope with 'the yawn factor' among the audience'. On the other hand, he writes,

most people, the vast majority of people in Ireland, are principally interested in discovering the truth about the big questions in life concerning life and death, brokenness and healing, history and eternity, suffering, evil and God.

I am also puzzled by the nature of his distinction between 'primordial' faith and 'religious' faith. The former he defines as a 'trust in life and acceptance of people which is pre-supposed as the necessary condition of all human thinking, talking and doing'. In contrast, religious faith offers an ultimate ground and absolute source for meaning and values. The object of basic and religious faith is different, Lane says, 'the former being finite and historical and the latter being infinite and transcendent.' Surely from the Christian viewpoint we must hold that all faith, whether primordial or religious, has a transcendent source? In which case it would be more precise and critically important to say that there are those who *perceive* the basis of their faith as going no further than this world.

I have left comment on the most outstanding contribution of both volumes until last. Aidan Mathews's piece, 'Stationing the Cross: The minutes of a millennium', is a superb interweaving of faith, reason and everyday life. Mathews composes a contemporary Stations of the Cross that contrasts the responses of 'Christianity Inc.' with the core of Christian discipleship. It is a disturbing article, remindful of Kennelly's *The Judas Book*, which argued that what was once a passion has become a parody of

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itself. But because it flows from a unique insight into what lies at the heart of Christian revelation, Mathews's piece is more compassionate, as inspiring as it is disturbing.

The other contributions in this volume are as valuable as they are varied: Education (Anne Looney), Marriage (Garret FitzGerald), Media (John Horgan), Peace (Gerry O'Hanlon), Politics (Denis Carroll), Values (Pat Hannon) and Women (Linda Hogan). They are testimony to the vibrancy of theological reflection in Ireland at this time, and to the willingness of Christian faith to engage with many of the burning issues.

Religion in Ireland, edited by Denis Carroll, and *New Century, New Society*, edited by Dermot Lane are both well worth buying. They are informative and thought provoking for the present as well as a valuable record for the future. The latter is a hardback and so has a £17.99 price tag. But it is still worth it.



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