

Culture and the Church: Appropriate Expressions of Christianity in the Context of Ireland Today

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The Ireland of modernity offers a serious challenge to the Christian communicator in general and to the faith community in particular. Because the good news is articulated most effectively out of a worshipping body which is biblically informed and spiritually inspired, the *kerygma* of the proclaimer cannot be totally detached from the *koinonia* of the church. The Thessalonican model as adverted to by Paul in I Thess. 1:3-10 shows the significance of the local community of faith, characterised by "work of faith, labour of love and patience of hope", who became "imitators of us and of the Lord" and "examples of all those who believe". Out of such an atmosphere "from you has sounded out the Word of the Lord".

Before a theory of evangelisation is placed on the agenda of contemporary churches it is necessary to bring a number of related matters within the purview of the discussion. These include the cultural, sociological and religious changes which are altering the landscape of modern Irish society. As the good news does not arise out of a theological/cultural vacuum, neither does it arrive in a sociological no-man's-land. The failure of Christian communicators and communities to become aware of and acclimatized to the cultural matrix which is being impacted with Gospel ideas and values creates confusion and imbalance. Since all Christian witness works out of an organized scheme of ideas and pre-suppositions, a particular set of values and world-views, the criterion of adequacy must be applied to these ideals from time to time. Because of the rapidity with which new modes of thought are appearing on the Irish horizon it is time for Christians to pause and reflect. If the traditional methods and emphases which have been used as the legal tender of evangelicalism are not subjected to re-evaluation and are stubbornly retained at all costs, there will be an absence of spiritual interfacing with the thought patterns of the potential receptors. When this happens relevance goes out the window and the audience just looks the other way. Torrents of abusive rhetoric usually flow from the wounded witnesses who go on the defensive and blame the non-registration of the message on the hardness of the hearers rather than the obscurantism of the bearers.

Self-criticism of the structures, methods, language and emphases used by ecclesial communities is a priority in the present climate. This must

happen if we are to succeed in scratching where the itch is strongest and in healing where the hurt is deepest. Ireland desperately needs a fresh philosophy of evangelism married to a church delivered from fear and poised for action. The most innovative initiatives which might arise out of outdated structures or inadequate models are insufficient to meet the present case or to answer the questions of the time. Therefore religious entrepreneurs who are only concerned to operate within the existing structures cannot deliver a fully relevant, registering word. One of the issues facing Christians in every generation is whether their way of expressing the ideas, truths and values of the Gospel is adequate or appropriate. Our problem in most parts of Ireland is to incite communities and congregations to pose the question. So much is taken for granted that outworn modes and outdated methods are employed without anxiety or apology. The difficulty is compounded when the 'communication' is occurring in an alien cultural setting, leading, inevitably, to a collision of interests and a faulty and untidy reading of the message. In proposing a corrective strategy it may be helpful to indicate the areas where there are obvious inadequacies and also to itemise the factors which are conducive to constructive change.

1. *Christianity must be expressed in such a way as to come to terms with historical conditioning*

Christianity is both a social and historical faith. Cradled in a Jewish matrix, it developed decisively within the history of a covenant people. The Lucan writing which we call the Acts stresses the idea of a faith continuum, especially in the public speeches it records, while also reporting the conflictual elements which emerged when the church started to organize a separate existence and ethos. On assuming the mantle of the historical identity of the Hebrew people, Christianity took on, in a modified form, the *Heilsgeschichte* of the chosen people. This ensured that Christianity, even when operating with universal categories and penetrating into new and alien cultures, could still affirm its rootage in real-life events and flesh-and-blood realities. It also provided Christians with a vision of the Kingdom of God, on the one hand transcending all cultural manifestations but on the other hand "coming" within the historical process. Furthermore, it compelled Christian strategists to display an awareness of and a sensitivity to the cultural consciousness of the receptors of the *kerygma*.

Ireland is an impressive and tragic example of a gigantic failure on the part of pro-church and para-church organizations to take history seriously. It is not unusual for Irish missionaries of various traditions to show a concern for the ethnic, social and religious formation of the people to whom they are ministering abroad, and at the same time to ignore the claims and contributions of history in the homeland. Within evangelicalism there has been a tendency to narrow the focus of interest to the theological realm and to evaluate attitudes and responses from an exclusively doctrinal premise. The result of this tunnel vision is the kind of static, detached assessment

which for example, judges Irish Catholicism only from the perspective of the heavily polemicised and reactionary statements of the Council of Trent. Unless there is an attempt to analyse how the Tridentine theology reached the Irish Church, how far it penetrated into the religious consciousness of the people and in what ways it is being questioned or rejected in the wake of Vatican II, there can be no intelligent or realistic response to the challenges of Irish Catholicism. Historical research will show that Roman Catholicism in the post-Famine era became increasingly monolithic through the influence of Tridentine theology, Jansenistic spirituality and Ultramontane ecclesiology, largely through the efforts of Cardinal Paul Cullen. It is possible to argue that this mold has been broken and that an internal collision has taken place between Trent and Vatican II. It may be as ludicrous to assume that a housewife in South Dublin is bound by the Decrees of Trent, as to presume that a factory worker in West Yorkshire is impelled by the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion!

Dangerous pre-suppositions are also made concerning the origin and development of Protestantism in Ireland. Largely through successive plantations Protestantism arrived on Irish soil and because of the political preferences of these religious settlers, they were given agricultural and social prestige at the expense of the native Irish. Because events happened as they did the Protestant faith was associated with privilege, power and triumphalism in contrast to the egalitarian monotony of the nationals. The Established Church of Ireland gained notoriety in the 19th century colourfully expressed in James Doyle's claim that it was viewed "as a more political than a religious establishment . . . not as the spouse of the Redeemer, but as the handmaid of the Ascendancy."¹ Although Presbyterians and other Dissenters initially made common cause with the ostracised Catholic majority eventually they too were drawn into the power bloc of Protestant resistance which took upon itself the defence of the inalienable rights of the religious minority. Thus historical developments institutionalised polarisation and created an atmosphere of suspicion and resentment. As these attitudes were exploited by political agitation and community violence the religious traditions became so blinkered that they virtually abandoned objectivity. The failure to come to terms with the historical hurts and grievances of the opposing religious tradition removed from Irish Christianity an effective prophetic voice and prevented corporate repentance.

Evangelicals who have functioned within this general milieu have not been notable in their efforts to re-read history without pejorative accretions and must accept their share of the blame for the spiritual stagnation which has afflicted the Irish church. There is now an unprecedented opportunity for them to redress the failures of the past and to come to terms with Irish history in the light of Gospel values so that they can create a theology which is sufficiently distanced from folklore and romanticism to become an

imaginative framework for building the Kingdom of God. In the exquisite statement of South American theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez,

*it means sinking roots where the pulse of history is beating at this moment and illuminating history with the Word of the Lord of history.*²

Unless this is done with the stridency and stringency of a radical movement dedicated to change for the sake of the Kingdom, Ireland will settle back into its old defensive posture where staleness prevails and unreality rules.

2. Christianity needs to appear in detachment from any ideological system

It is painfully obvious that Ireland has suffered from the consequences of ecclesiastical attachment to political and social ideologies. In this area the guilt must fall at the door of the two major traditions in both parts of the island. While the Irish shared in the witty castigation of the Church of England as "the Tory Party at prayer", they have not been sufficiently aware of the uncomfortable alliances which have wrought havoc in their own country. Although Ireland has been without a State Church since 1870, there are few other European countries where political religion and religious politics are so powerful.

In Northern Ireland political Protestantism has all but killed the eirenic core of ecclesial life and robbed the churches of their spiritual clout as instruments of reconciliation. In the Republic, meddling Catholic conservatism has repeatedly restrained social legislation and confused the electorate. If Ulster voters stand in awe of Bible-thumping political preachers, Southern legislators cannot ignore the influence of crusading bishops with croziers in their hands. In spite of spirited denials by religious leaders on both sides of the Border the ideological complexion of much Irish religious practice and policy is a serious impediment to the Gospelisation of the social order.

From a Southern perspective the identification of nationalism with Catholicism has produced the kind of social climate in which Irishness is often religiously defined. It is a short step from that position to the sacralisation of the political process. What often happens, in practical terms, is that Canon Law is almost equated with Divine Law and State Law is expected to be subservient to both. While this is not "official" church policy it is frequently the popular understanding of what is happening. An interesting example is the procedure of ecclesiastical annulment of marriage, which the State does not recognize. Those who receive a church annulment are free to enter into a new contract and the church is prepared to bless such a marriage even though it has no standing in law. In this way canon law operates on a higher plane than that of the civil power. Although resisted by large sections of the population there is still the ghost of the Church riding high in the corridors of the Dail. Ulster's dilemma is different. Protestantism

has wedded itself to the political ideology of Unionism and loyalty to the Protestant faith and the loyalist cause are viewed as synonymous. Such a position is irrational from a historical perspective, where evidence is abundant which shows that Irish nationalism had strong Protestant roots. Republicanism which in most other countries is a vital and viable political system, is viewed with almost universal contempt by Ulster Protestants. The outcrop of this kind of thinking is a serious loss of spiritual and political impact on the part of the churches. Instead of the church being free to critique the political order and offer Gospel insights, it is so much aligned with the ideology that it becomes part of the disease and is consequently unable to be part of the cure. When this happens, not only is spiritual effectiveness sacrificed on the altar of political expediency but the church is locked into systemic totalitarianism which kills its prophetic impact and stymies its internal renewal. The seriousness of this alliance is described by Belfast minister, John Dunlop:

Our Churches are so imprisoned within the perspectives of alienated communities that we find it difficult to provide the prophetic insight which is required by the Gospel. This failure has serious consequences for politics. If we provide an uncritical chaplaincy service for political ideologies we confer a quasi-religious character upon them. Necessary political compromise can be portrayed as the betrayal of a religious trust. Politics need to be desacralised so that they become manageable and in the process the Churches will be set free to be the Church³

One of the most urgent matters to place on the agenda of Christian bodies is the construction of a methodology which will unlock the Christian community from ideological bondage and encourage political pluriformity amongst church members. Such a courageous step will require the initiative of religious leaders who are ready to lead from the front in pioneering a creative spiritual order which will liberate the church and at the same stroke enrich the social and political process.

3. Christianity requires release from bondage to a defined sub-culture

Within evangelicalism, and to a lesser extent among other religious communities where orthodoxy is centralised, there is often an obsession with external conformity to a routinised code of conduct which is regarded as mandatory for all the adherents of an ecclesial group. As presented, this cultural code is assumed to have been underwritten biblically and therefore inviolable. It is regarded as having Divine sanction and is usually not negotiable. Its imposition is normally placed in the hands of ministers and elders who act in solidarity with the community which supports it. It has gained widespread respectability in many countries and often becomes the criterion for assessing the faithfulness of the leaders and the spirituality of the church. In Ireland it appears in its most rigid form in various

denominations and para-church societies in Northern Ireland but also in a less severe form throughout the South. Within the parameters of this sub-culture there is a fairly standard set of practices which are forbidden or considered 'worldly'. These include forms of female dress, dancing, cinema-going, smoking, drinking and in some cases organized sport.

In suggesting that this sub-culture should be abandoned it is necessary to advance reasons why it is not an appropriate way of expressing Christian faith and discipleship in Ireland today. It must be said that the matters under consideration may be real issues in the lives of individual believers and ought to be settled in the court of conscience, informed by biblical principles and practical considerations such as health, time, cost and usefulness.

- i. Its imposition removes in a subtle and unintended way the sufficiency of the grace/faith model of salvation. If conversion is conditional on the abandonment of practices which have, in the main, a 'neutral' status in Scripture, there is a logical inconsistency in proclaiming a *sola fide* doctrine of salvation.
- ii. Its selective codification damages the concept of the Christian life as a relational experience and a pilgrim journey.
- iii. Its 'packaged' spirituality opens the door for legalism which easily degenerates into the 'leaven of the Scribes and Pharisees' which came under the censure of Jesus. Such causticity is closely related to the classification of sins, such as mortal and venial, in Roman Catholicism.
- iv. Its implementation encourages judgemental, negative Christianity and almost inevitably leads to an outright rejection or a patronising attitude to those who fail to conform.
- v. Its greatest deficiency lies in its definition of worldliness — the weightier burdens which Christians face, commonly called 'sins of the spirit', are not given adequate stress. Such traits as extravagant life-styles, exorbitant expenditure and materialistic greed are often ignored when the external code is observed.
- vi. Its attachment to Gospel values and appropriation by the community of believers confuses those who are searching for a living faith. If they are told verbally that Christ saves on the basis of repentance and faith and are later confronted with a set of practices which are regarded as taboo they may abandon the greater quest because of the intrusion of the lesser issue.

In the new climate of Irish Christian profession it is becoming clear that those who are coming into the circles of faith will increasingly reveal an interest in a series of preferences and practices which are foreign to many conventional evangelicals. Such things as Irish music and dancing, Gaelic games, love of the Irish language, nationalist or republican political allegiances and the observance of national occasions like St. Patrick's Day,

will come to the fore. If these new believers are not accepted for their own sake and accommodated with their cultural and traditional customs, the Church of Christ will be fragmented further and weakened in its impact. Only a church shorn of superfluous accretions can respond adequately to those who are searching for a new spiritual home and waiting to be incorporated unconditionally into the local limb of the Body of Christ. The incisive and somewhat excessive statement of American theologian Langdon Gilkey summarises the argument:

*Religion developed in another cultural epoch and enshrining their religious ideas, norms and roles in the shape of that past cultural existence can become, when historical changes occur, anachronistic, oppressive, even possibly demonic and certainly irrelevant in the new age.*⁴

4. *Christianity will respond honestly and courageously to changes and challenges within society*

If this is to happen in a meaningful way there must be an end to the kind of obscurantist withdrawal which has pervaded much Irish Christian posturing. In order to instigate a meaningful response it is essential to construct an overview of the new features which are appearing on the Irish scene. These include sociological shifts, ecclesiastical changes, political developments and popular movements.

i. Ecclesiastical changes

Observers of religious trends in Ireland have perceived a significant change in the atmosphere of church life in Ireland since Vatican II. This Council, which is conveniently ignored by those who adhere to a rigid *semper eadem* view of Roman Catholicism, was the most significant change within Catholicism since the Counter-reformation. Because the Irish hierarchy have been slow to implement the teaching of the Council in other than tokenistic ways, it seems to the outsider that Archbishop McQuaid was justified in commenting on his return from the Council — “Nothing has changed”.

Within Catholicism there is certainly an awareness of considerable change, and the confusion created in the minds of older church members along with the resistance to the Tridentine rites proves the point. The implications of the break away from dependence upon Thomistic philosophy as a framework for theological definition are far reaching. New visions of church life, of charismatic leadership, of the Kingdom of God as distinct from the church, have arisen out of the theology of Vatican II. The possibilities for significant changes in theological understanding and ecclesial life are more real than at any time since the Reformation. It is now possible to open up fruitful discussions on such central doctrines as Transubstantiation and Justification by Faith with the prospect of a break

in the old dogmatic intransigence. The kind of fresh thinking induced by Vatican II is articulated by David Regan, an Irish priest:

*A Church, already suffering from excess of authoritarian government requires, above all, leaders who have faith in the dynamism of the Spirit, hidden in the hearts of God's people and only needing the right conditions for growth. Not a heavy hand, but a willing ear; not a vigilant eye but a word of encouragement; not stern teachers, but humble co-learners are what is needed for putting God's people in new touch with the sources of life today.*⁵

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council there have been noticeable sociological alterations in Ireland, and this has created an inviting openness and a growing alienation. The slow drift into the atmosphere of modernity has created something of a crisis of identity within Catholicism:

*The verdict of the people on the continuing relevance of their ecclesiastical institutions? If the broad front of Catholic religious practice in Ireland only a decade or two ago seemed as solid as an Arctic ice-pack, then it must be said that the melting of that ice-pack is now well under way outside its core in rural Ireland, and that even that core is inexorably shrinking.*⁶

These developments must not be overlooked by those who are concerned with the task of Christianising Irish life by direct, dynamic evangelisation.

While it is prudent not to exaggerate the changes which have taken place, either theoretically or actually, it is also important not to explain them away. The *aggiornamento* envisaged in Vatican II must be seen against the background of Tridentine thought and judged in the foreground of aspirations, tendencies and movements within Irish Roman Catholicism. Vittorio Subilia has given us one of the most incisive studies of Catholicism from the perspective of a Waldensian theologian living and working in Rome. He describes the ecclesiastical thinking which has been institutionalised in Roman Catholicism in such a way as to blockade a massive shift:

Every ecclesiology based on the assumption that the Church has been once for all given by God to man, and which therefore takes account only of the Christological element, presupposes a crypto-patristicism, i.e., a doctrine of God the Son which more or less deliberately overlooks the doctrine of God the Father and centres its attention exclusively on the Incarnation. An ecclesiology based so onesidedly on Christology gives rise to the institutional type of Church, in which the emphasis comes to be set on the Church's constitution by the Jesus of history and to a disproportionate stress on the element of succession as the ground of the divine right of hierarchy and teaching, of priesthood and sacrament. Then the Church conceives of herself as an extension of the Incarnation and elevates

herself into an institution where truth is deposited, outside of which there is no salvation. She loses her sense of reference to God, the Lord of election, who remains sovereign master of his liberty. Such a Church thinks the dialectic of revelation has come to an end in her; to all intents, she regards the series of the successive times of God's work as at an end; hence in speaking of the time to come, she asserts her jurisdiction over even it, because her self-regarding logic, the logic of a once for all time givenness, includes the eschaton inside the scope of her ecclesiastical laws. If ecclesiology holds to a sense of the horizontal and historical, and lets go of a sense of the vertical and the eternal, the God of the Church is in danger of being another God.⁷

Considering the implications explicit in this statement, along with the centuries of tradition which sustained this ecclesiology, it becomes increasingly obvious how major a move was initiated at Vatican II. Therefore, as the old dogmatic rigidity recedes, albeit slowly, so the traditional defensiveness of Protestantism must recede allowing for realistic, balanced and informed evaluations and discussions shorn of negative, destructive polemicism.

ii. Sociological Factors

All Christian work, witness and activity occurs within a social setting. When the landscape alters sociologically, there needs to be a serious attempt by churches to come to terms with the new conditions in which the *kerygma* is offered and in which *koinonia* is practised. In the Republic of Ireland the twin developments of urbanization and secularization have created the kind of social shake-up which must not escape the notice of Christian respondents. The Minister of Finance in the present Dail, John Bruton, has written descriptively of the effects of these developments:

The urbanization of Ireland since the 1950's has undermined many of the subsidiary institutions of Irish life and thus placed ever increasing responsibilities on the Central Government and on those who pay taxes to it. Urbanization has also contributed to a mass of social problems whose alienation still further adds to the burden of Central Government . . . (producing) a society in which closely related families live miles from one another and from their workplaces. This 'distance' undermines the support that the family and 'the neighbours' can give when difficulties arise . . . Urbanization has also meant that people feel less secure in their places in society. Competition in material things, fed by mass advertising, has bred dissatisfaction despite the fact that real income levels are considerably better for most of us.⁸

This major dislocation of the fabric of society presents Christian strategists with several challenges including the brooding loneliness which is found in many of the new conurbations. It also offers a fresh opportunity for Gospel insights, values and promises to bring meaning into an existence

which becomes more routinal and frustrating. In Northern Ireland the political disruption and social unrest has introduced different and often sinister elements into the sociological milieu. Christianity cannot stand aloof from the causes and effects of violence, the ghettoised mentality, the scourges of unemployment and the disillusionment which is endemic in Ulster. As the healing and reconciling agents of the Holy Spirit, Churches are ideally suited to be practitioners and instruments of forgiveness within an atmosphere of hatred and fear. In addition to the light of the world and the salt of the earth stances the Christian presence needs to be expressed in terms of restorative healing which is a sort of Divine alchemy designed to effect a societal transmutation. The cost of this 'third way' will involve the Christian in a vocation which Henri Nouwen describes as "following Christ in the downward path of His compassion".

Our vocation is to follow Christ on his downward path and become witnesses to God's compassion in the concreteness of our time and place. Our temptation is to let needs for success, visibility, and influence dominate our thoughts, words, and actions to such an extent that we are trapped in the destructive spiral of upward mobility and thus lose our vocation . . . To follow Christ requires the willingness and determination to let his Spirit pervade all the corners of our minds and there make us into other Christs. Formation is transformation and transformation means a growing conformity to the mind of Christ.⁹

5. *A Christianity that projects a vision of human existence which is fully holistic*

In terms of a realistic response to the pains and pressures which are discernible in contemporary Irish life, the evangelistic strategist should seek an alignment to a perception of Christian witness which stresses salvific wholeness and is emancipated from all forms of dualism. Spiritual and social insularity and introversion is the product of evangelistic narrowness. There is urgent need to explore fresh categories of concern and to open up new territory of interest for the thrusting dynamic of imaginative evangelisation. Such a development will demand honest, radical and sometimes painful re-assessment and re-alignment. There is a price to be paid for such a courageous move but anything less will perpetuate church structures where devout protagonists continue to whistle splendidly in the dark. Even where there are possibilities of modest brinkmanship it is well to remember that the church must live dangerously if it is to work effectively. We now examine what this shift might entail for Irish Christians.

i. There will be an ambitious widening of the concept of evangelization
Much evangelical zealotry has been afflicted with the statistics syndrome which measures success quantitatively without much interest in the qualitative outcome. We are bombarded with an elitist religious mind-set which is propelled by the success *telos* and which is noted for its catch-cry

on the doors.' Although not universally defective this approach has a serious flaw in that it tends to regard 'contacts' as the objects of spiritual propaganda with little reference to the actual questions and concerns of the person within their community. Unless door-to-door visitation has the visible referent of an incarnated worshipping community, it is likely to be ineffective because of a feeling of detachment on the part of the receptor. From the point of view of the sending group it is often less complicated to commission a band of enthusiasts on an evangelistic enterprise than to become thoroughly involved with the pains, disappointments and frustrations of a single family over a long period of time. There is also the pressure to indulge in 'conscience salving' and this may divert the church or agency away from the deeper meaning of in-depth evangelisation. It may also blind them to self-examination as the following story illustrates. Monica Hill, editor of the *British Church Growth Digest* tells of a pastor who mobilised some of his people to knock on doors with Christian literature as a method of outreach. The first quarter they knocked on 2,000 doors. When asked about the response the pastor replied — 'None, so we are going to redouble our efforts. We will knock on 4,000 doors next quarter!'¹⁰

In many parts of Ireland there is evidence that the only form of Christianity which is likely to capture the interest or arouse the response of the spiritually uncommitted is the 'honey-pot' type rather than the 'missile' type. In the first model people are drawn to a caring base like bees to a honeypot, while in the second they are struck from a defensive base like warriors in a war. Our churches should be sending out scout bees to tell about honey at home rather than firing cold missiles to capture clients for action.

ii. There will be a thorough re-evaluation of conventional methods and emphases

The tendency to canonise the methods and movements of a former era has produced a static dependence on an extraneous paradigm from a former generation. In its most serious manifestation this obsession with the Protestant Reformers, the Great Awakening or the Evangelical Revival, effectively imprisons and restricts the contemporary church in responding meaningfully in the language, thought-forms and life-style of the present world. An unquestioning allegiance to any system of thought or transformative movement is damaging because it encourages the recall of images, models and emphases, deep-frozen in history to be re-heated in the contemporary climate. Because the spiritual palate changes with each generation there may be little appetite for the warmed-over menu of another chef. It will also be discovered that other dishes have been created in the interim which are more attractive to the discerning palate of today. Who would be satisfied with the Pauline attitude to slavery in the light of Wilberforce, or with Luther's treatment of the Jews and the Anabaptists following the pogroms and Nazi holocaust, or with Henry VIII's ransacking of religious houses judged from our modern concept of religious freedom? In every movement and manifestation of spiritual reform and renewal there

were whole dimensions of Christian truth and practice missing, and the church must find a contemporary *raison d'être* and live amongst the questions and longings of the here and now. Richard Lovelace, one of the most creative writers of our time, has presented a cogent argument in these terms:

The Protestant Reformers did not clearly point to the Kingdom of Christ as a goal to be pursued beyond the concern for individual salvation. This opened the way for self-centredness to reassert itself after the event of conversion. The Reformation corrected the Catholic understanding of individual salvation, but did not go beyond it to define adequately the collective Christian enterprise. In the same way, the Reformers did not thoroughly grasp the other great collective image of the church, the body of the Messiah. Their treatment of spiritual nurture and growth is still only a corrected individualism, which defines the 'means of grace' simply as 'the Word of God, the sacraments and prayer'. These elements are vital dynamics of spiritual life. But they are not the whole story. Taken by themselves, they convey an image of lonely spiritual individualism which generations of Protestants continue to live out. Puritan Christians, for example, were like spiritual deep-sea divers, each with his or her own air line up to God through the 'means of grace'. Each one intent on private spiritual goals viewed others only dimly through clouded faceplates.¹¹

As Catholicism is being renewed by severing its philosophical dependence on Aquinas so Protestants need to revise their uncritical allegiance to the great movements of a past era. There is the dual danger of operating with the idea that God stopped working effectively after the 16th century or assuming that faithfulness to the Gospel is determined by employing or departing from the methodology of the Reformers. Without devaluing the massive impact of men and movements of the past or abandoning their theology we need to pursue a course of action which is inspired by their leadership but not bound by their stances, methods or emphases. If the *ecclesia semper reformanda* vision of the Reformers is taken on board by the modern churches it will liberate them to respond to contemporary needs in a positive and powerful way.

iii. There will be imaginative and suitable initiatives

If intelligible sounds are to be made by the faith community which will resonate in the minds of those who are being Gospelised there are several thematic adjustments which must be made. In naming some of these concerns we are able to catch a glimpse of the contours of the emerging church. Therefore in positing a vision of an alternative ecclesiology or 'way of being church' we are coming close to the heart of the matter. The robust verbosity of Irish religious communities stands in need of revision. Evangelicalism with its strong emphasis on verbal communication and suspicion of liturgical modes and underuse of the worshipping assembly as

a sign of the Kingdom in the world needs to undergo a traumatic transformation.

(a) Discipleship as an evangelistic goal

Although firmly lodged in the theology of the Great Commission, the emphasis has too often been upon gaining converts rather than making disciples. Orthodoxy reigns over orthopraxy and the assent of the mind to truth is the criterion of genuineness rather than the commitment of the life to love and service. The discipling of believers was an important insight of the biblical Anabaptists who, while assenting to the Lutheran teaching on justification, were uneasy about the idea that faith was all about a change of status before God. This forensic understanding, while thoroughly Pauline, must be supplemented and expanded by the Synoptic and Johannine vision of Christianity as believing the truth but also walking in the Way. The recovery of this emphasis is central to renewal as seen by Jim Wallis:

It is highly significant that they were called the people of the Way. Christians at the beginning were associated with a particular pattern of life. Their faith produced a discernible lifestyle, a way of life, a process of growth visible to all. This different style of living and relating both grew out of their faith and gave testimony to that faith. To all who saw, Christian belief became identified with a certain kind of behaviour . . . The faith of these first Christians had clear social results. They became well known as a caring, sharing and open community that was especially sensitive to the poor and outcast. Their love for God, for one another, and for the oppressed was central to their reputation.¹²

(b) The Kingdom as the greatest entity

Much confusion has arisen because of an equation between the Kingdom of God and the Church of Christ. While there is a close relationship between the *basileia* and the *ecclesia* they must be kept distinct. Both Catholicism and Protestantism have been subverted as a result of the failure to see the Kingdom as the wider and superior entity which the Church signifies and promotes. When the church arrogates to itself the prerogatives of the Kingdom the way is open for the destruction of the servant model and its replacement with the ruling one. George Eldon Ladd has set out this distinction in a succinct way:

If the dynamic concept of the Kingdom is correct, it is never to be identified with the church . . . In the Biblical idiom, the Kingdom is not identified with its subjects. They are the people of God's rule who enter it, and are governed by it. The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself . . . The Kingdom is the rule of God, the church is a society of men.¹³

In Ireland there is a pressing need for ecclesial reductionism so that the

church becomes the bearer and sign of the Kingdom to be corrected and renewed by the wider dynamic of the universal rule of God.

(c) *The church as the salvific sign*

With the collapse of an institutionalised church model and the abandonment of the Jesus-Kingdom-Church conflation, the nature of the church and its role in salvific encounter must be examined. We are beginning to see the possibilities of the impact of a powerless church which is no longer concerned with exerting authority but in the style of John the Baptist points beyond itself to the King and His Kingdom. In the words of Gutierrez, the church must be involved in the “annunciation of the Kingdom and the prophetic denunciation of oppressive structures” which prevent its coming. In the Irish context the inadequacy of present ecclesial associations is highlighted by Gerry O’Hanlon, who writes of the Northern Irish situation:

On the Protestant side this takes the form of allowing God to be interested in a one-to-one relationship with me as a believer, and in a supportive relationship with my group in political life — but at the cost of excluding any interest God might have in the political and social rights of the other group, the non-Protestant, non-Chosen people. On the Catholic side there is a somewhat similar ‘writing-off’ of God’s interest in the world of political morality: God can comfort us in injustice, offer the rewards of the after-life, but is not seriously concerned with our struggle for greater justice in this life nor in our efforts to form community with those outside our own group . . . In a strange way, from different starting points, Protestant and Catholic images of God deriving from this situation converge in presenting a God whose perfection is seen to involve limitation, exclusivity and partiality in such a way that acceptance of individuals and groups that are different is made more difficult.¹⁴

If there is to be significant change in the style and thrust of Christian witness in Ireland there will need to be a more comprehensive application of Gospel principles and values to the whole life situation of the recipients. For evangelicals this will require a radical re-evaluation of the approach which considers that social concern is only about writing fat cheques for Tear Fund while ignoring structural injustice locally. This re-orientation would create a better church and in the end make the Gospel more credible because it becomes visible as well as audible.

While the complex needs of Irish communities will not be met by ecclesial re-shuffling, there are many areas of traditional church life which must be re-shaped. Instead of persisting with irrelevant and outmoded structures there is a need for ambitious and imaginative renewal within the corporate family of faith. The old Protestant principle of the ‘priesthood of all believers’ needs to be taken out of cold storage in many churches where clericalisation is endemic. A whole range of options in polity and leadership within congregational life should be investigated. It is becoming clear that

the homogenous unit principle, which has been a characteristic of many groups and denominational churches, is under great strain in many places. The new wine is bursting the old wineskins and the spillage is beginning to be noticed. As churches start to experience a new pluriformity they are compelled to re-adjust their concept of the Body of Christ as a unit with many and varied parts. Where this happens, in more than a token way, believers form trans-cultural allegiances and multi-racial expressions are able to cohere in creative spiritual growth rather than merely co-exist in conformist religious association.

Part of this liberative creativity will be expressed in the emergence of an alternative society; what John Stott has called "an authentic Christian counter-culture". This is a missing dimension in much Irish Christian practice, where the polarisation has been in the direction of a pietistic, introverted huddle or towards a cultural captivity to the prevailing social and political order. This polarisation can be broken by the emergence of communities of 'loving defiance' as proposed by Ron Sider. These communities would strive to incarnate the servant values of Jesus, to live out the principles of the Kingdom and therefore to offer to society a Christianised order which would be seen as a genuine and attractive alternative. In his book *The Mustard Seed Conspiracy*, Tom Sine envisages the shape of this new spiritual order:

Not only are we called to be the family of God celebrating our life together; we are also called to incarnate His new society in the world around us, to prophetically challenge the existing order. That means we are to model together the right-side-up values of Jesus even when that means going against the values of the dominant culture.¹⁵

Conclusion

Within the context of contemporary Irish life the foregoing proposals are offered as appropriate Christian responses to the current societal needs. Christian communities and communicators will require persistent sensitivity to the changes which are taking place in Ireland with uncharacteristic rapidity. It must also be remembered that much of the traditional entrenchment remains and that many parts of the country are still affected by the more conventional patterns of thought. Therefore, flexibility is required by all those who are concerned to maintain a purposeful presence and to convey a reconciling word. The churches need to have their sights firmly fixed on the coming of the Kingdom of God and to make it the *terminus ad quem* of their evangelistic and pastoral activity. The final shape that the adumbrations of the Kingdom will assume in any given place or at any given time is not susceptible of exact prediction. It will certainly not

be confined to a past cultural consciousness or conformity. In the words of Charles Kraft:

*The dynamic of Christianity is not in the sacredness of cultural forms — even those that God once used. The Christian dynamic is in the venturesomeness of participating with God in the transformation of contemporary cultural forms to serve more adequately as vehicles for God's interactions with human beings.*¹⁶

Such a vision is entirely appropriate for the Irish situation. Although we can only trace the faint outlines of a far-off horizon, there is no need for ecclesial anxiety. The Lord of history is the God of the church — and, thankfully, the architect of the future.

NOTES

1. Quoted in *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70* by Desmond Bowen (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1978) p. 134.
2. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 1973) p. 15.
3. John Dunlop, 'The Self-Understanding of Protestants in Northern Ireland' in *Irish Challenge to Theology* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1986) pp. 19-20.
4. Langdon Gilkey, *Catholicism Confronts Modernity* (1975) pp. 32-35.
5. David Regan, *Doctrine and Life*, Vol 34 (May-June 1985), p. 264.
6. Parig Digan, *Doctrine and Life*, Vol 34, (May-June 1985), p. 259.
7. Vittorio Subilia, *The Problem of Catholicism* (London: SCM Press, 1964) p. 179.
8. John Bruton, *The Furrow*, (April 1986), p. 215.
9. Henri Nouwen, quoted in *Ventures in Discipleship* (Scottsdale, Penn: Herald Press, 1984) pp. 208-209.
10. C. Peter Wagner, *Leading your Church to Growth* (MARC: Europe, 1986) p. 203.
11. Richard Lovelace, *Renewal as a Way of Life* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1985).
12. Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981) pp. 13-14.
13. George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Erdmans, 1974) p. 111.
14. Gerry O'Hanlon, 'Images of God: Northern Ireland and Theology', *Studies* (Winter 1984), p. 294.
15. Tom Sine, *The Mustard Seed Controversy*. (MARC: Europe, 1986).
16. Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture* (New York: Maryknoll, 1980) p. 382.