CHRISTIAN WITNESS IN A SECULAR WORLD

A discussion of the role of Christianity in a
secular age with special reference
to Northern Ireland.

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As presented to the Ballymascanlon
Inter-Church Meeting
March 3, 1983.

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THE RIGHT REVEREND DR. R.H.A. EAMES
BISHOP OF DOWN AND DROMORE

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1. AN EXPLANATION

It has become something of a tradition to speak nowadays of
Christianity against a background of secularism.   In many
instances the degree to which the community concerned is truly
secular goes unquestioned.   It is simply assumed that the
secular state has come of age.

Many commentators, not all of them theologians, have frequently
made general assumptions about the nature of society, not all
of which have been based on a careful or detailed examination
of the degree of secularism present at any one time in any one
place.

In Ireland to-day there is evidence of degrees of secularism
within society. However, for a variety of reasons, historical
and contemporary, Ireland is still resistant to that degree of
pressure which would make it a totally secular community. In
the past the presence and witness of the Christian Church in
Ireland has contributed to this resistance in a substantial way.
How far her influence to-day can be assumed to provide a similar
degree of resistance is debatable.

However, restrictions of time and space make certain assumptions
inevitable for the purpose of this paper. This is particularly
applicable to the nature and implications of secularism in
general.

The approach adopted in these pages is practical rather than theoretical, pastoral rather than purely theological. While many of the conclusions and comments stem directly from an experience of Ministry and people in Northern Ireland it is suggested the problems and questions are universal.

2. . GENERAL

"Ireland has been slower than most of the 'western' countries to reach the condition of a predominantly secular society. Yet even here the tide of secularism is rising. The response should be not to retreat before the tide but to learn to swim in it. Or, changing the metaphor, to be no longer the baker of the loaf 'but the leaven of the dough'."

> Christianity and Secularism : Final Report of Working Party 1V, Ballymascanlon, 23rd April, 1975.

It is a sign if not a symptom of the Irish condition that for too long too many Christians viewed the possibility of secularism in Ireland as remote.

This view contained within itself a strange comfort. It could also have contained the seeds of disaster for the Irish Churches.

When the theologian considers the purely secular it can be a most uncomfortable experience. The degree of discomfort becomes particularly pronounced when he views a country as small and as insular as Ireland.   Nor is the experience made any the more palatable when history has high-lighted a vision of an island dedicated to learning, piety and religious pursuits : a land in which mythology and fact have a peculiar habit of becoming so inter-woven : a land to-day divided by the very traditions whose contrast and inter-play could have been her glory.

It is not always easy to confront the concrete city with a
discipline and approach which is spiritual. Too frequently
in the past theological attempts to interpret the secular
have taken on the guise of a form of spiritual escapism.
The vehicle of this escape has been the posing of questions
society is not in fact asking. The object has been the
provision of spiritual answers to secular questions which have
been at times based on a scant knowledge of real facts.

Perhaps the Irish Church has been too slow to listen and too
quick to pronounce.

The real difficulty the pastoral theologian faces in an exercise
of this nature is one of selection. The relationship of 'Church
and Society' poses so many questions which go right to the
foundations of both. In Ireland to-day we see society under-going
a revolution which is as complex as it is diffuse. Questions
need to be asked about the nature of society and our expectation
of the future.   The Irish Churches have not always been eager
to ask these questions.   Through the centuries they have been
an integral if not dominant part of that society.

To-day their role in the social process is under severe scrutiny.
So far their response has been spasmodic. They have yet as a
whole to respond in a realistic manner to what must be a painful
process. Their relevance in the Ireland of to-morrow will
depend as much on their integrity in facing up to the questions
asked of them as it will on their role in Irish society.

The tragedy and the paradox for the Churches is simply this:
The most important function for the Christian Church in Ireland
to-day may be to make less pronouncements but to ask more
realistic questions.

Behind the smokescreen of the violence and political upheavel
in Northern Ireland changes have evolved in the structures of

society which are significant and lasting. Concern with more than two decades of violence have so dominated thinking that trends and patterns of social behaviour and outlook have developed which are arguably of greater significance in the long term for community life than even the tragedy of broken lives and sectarian division. Of these trends few are of greater significance for the Church than the emergence of a particular blend of secularism and its attendant manifestation of materialism. Sociologists are never anxious to delve into the realm of the absolute. Modes of judgement which are relative have an attraction in many disciplines which at times can reflect a reluctance to total commitment which is as much due to a failure to read the signs as it is due to a lack of sufficient analysis in depth of what is in fact happening in society.

How far is the process of secularisation confused with secularism itself? Historically the truly secular state has been slow to emerge. Too frequently theologians have spoken as though the phenomenon has arrived overnight. All the implications of the secular state have at times been attributed to a community which in fact is merely demonstrating what can but be described as trends in secularism. What is merely a tendency can quickly be given the cloak of the absolute. Modern sociological attitude, particularly in recent American writing, is anxious to underline the dangers inherent in the designation of the secular as a principle which is devoid of any other strictly non-secular ingredient. This danger is particularly potent for a host of reasons when one considers the Irish situation.

Few will dispute that the Irish scene is the result of a long series of historical factors which are cultural, social, economic and political as well as religious. The complexity of the scene bears ample testimony to this fact. Over-simplification of issues and an at times strange enthusiasm for the separation of one stream of thought from all the others has led to many of the problems we now face as a people. The emergence of a

community awareness has been as much the result of the pressure
of events as it has come about from the fragmentation of Irish
society itself.

The last fifteen years in Northern Ireland have been dominated
by social and political unrest and unease. The violence,
bringing with it a sharpening of community division and a
heightening of community tensions, has also compelled analysis
of community needs, discussion of social concerns and a new
awareness of social structural ingredients which for generations
was virtually non-existent. From the emergence of local
community associations and pressure-groups to a new recognition
of the nature of political and economic power the social scene
is now dominated as never before by analysis and counter-analysis
of needs, hopes and expectation for the individual. The degree
to which these individual concerns are in turn dominated by
sectional interest determines the rate of so much social
progress in Northern Ireland. Historical factors representing
in their turn a myriad of pressures, not least quasi-political/
religious allignments, have produced the sectarian divisions
which so frustrate true community development.

When one adds to this picture the pressures which are external
to the immediate such as world recession, economic upheaval
and global economic trends the local scene becomes one in which
the relevance of many historical perspectives comes into serious
question. The process of relevance itself is no longer the
prerogative of the theologian. It becomes the growing concern
of people in general. The speed of this process is determined
by the cumulative effect of the social, political and economic
package - but it is more and more becoming a question of
priority for the Church as to the extent to which 'the religious'
is a part of this package.

The outward and visible manifestations of this picture are
themselves complex:

> fragmentation and break-up of local communities,
> (through the problems of urbanisation and
> social change as much as violence, leading to
> widescale movement of population),
> sharpening of community division along sectarian lines,
> increasing awareness of social instability,
> political uncertainty,
> economic depression,
> unemployment
> and, violence.

Presumptuous it may be to suggest that what is happening represents
developments of interest for the rest of Christendom but
undoubtedly what is happening in Ireland at present contains
principles of immense importance for Christian concern with
the nature of fragmented society.   It concerns questions of
mission and outreach.   It concerns pastoral activity.   It speaks
to the ecumenical dialogue - if only to underline its real absence.
It poses questions about the nature of Ministry.   It raises the
issue of the nature of a caring Church.   It asks about the
ingredients of the just society.   It points us beyond the narrow
confines of the ecclesiastical to the nature of a just society
as it confronts us with principles of freedom, liberty and
co-existence.

It asks yet again for a re-appraisal of the Church's role and
purpose on the frontier of man's experience of God.

3.   LIFE STYLE - PATTERNS, TRENDS AND ATTITUDES

> "Revolutions occur, but for the most part they are
> not immediately recognised as such. It seems as
> though a new method of approach can gain admittance
> to science or philosophy only by transforming itself
> into something like the shape of one already existing."
>
> Charles Singer, 'A Short History of Scientific
> Ideas to 1900'   (1950) p.418.

In terms of material well-being alone the last thirty-five
years has seen continuous change in the Irish life-style.
While the facts of unemployment and social need have become
stark realities for many people, items considered luxuries
in the 1950's are now essentials for the average household.
The outward fabric of domestic life for a good percentage of
people notwithstanding the rigours of inflation and the recession
has been one of progress. The fact that such a consideration
brings us face to face with a degree of class distinction in
terms of the sufficient as opposed to the needy requires
further examination. Yet in general terms this picture of
purely material progress can be substantiated.

Not for the first time a paradox has emerged. With the
satisfaction of so much that is material is emerging an ever-
increasing disillusionment. Frustration, especially among young
people without employment, is increasing. The links between
unemployment, vandalism, violence and the connection between
social deprivation, housing conditions, lack of recreational
amenities and levels of both serious and petty crime statistics
are obvious. Alongside areas of immense social need one can
place large areas where the standard of living is comfortable
and there is little outward sign of social need or distress.

Contrasts

Northern Ireland is an area of contrasts. The social divisions
are becoming more and more obvious. Such divisions are not only
geographical. Class distinctions and attitudes may no longer
depend on birth and privilege. To-day there are ample signs
of a growing distinction between those most vulnerable to social
pressure in the essentials of life and a growing middle-class
which is increasingly insulated from such effects of the social
revolution.

The social divisions in Northern Ireland are becoming more and

more identified with those who live in areas of violence and
those who do not : with those who live where there are high
levels of unemployment and those who have remained untouched
by it : with those who have seen their lives and homes subjected
to urbanisation and re-development and a middle-class which
one feels is becoming more and more self-contained and self-
sufficient.

A new consciousness of the need to fill a vacuum which has
itself been created by our sufficiency is emerging. The extent
to which this consciousness can be equated with the purely
religious or spiritual is not yet clear. Historically such a
need would always have been seen in Ireland as something which
could only be discussed in terms of organised religion. No
longer is this true. For many disillusioned young people the
spirtiual experience they seek is not to be found in the
traditional terms of the Church. Nor is it always to be expressed
in ways acceptable or understandable to the traditional Churchman.

There is much talk of the challenge to the Churches in the
"post-industrial revolution" period. How far this is true of
Ireland as a whole is debatable. To what extent we have even
experienced the industrial revolution is for others to debate.
For the Irish Church it might be more realistic to direct our
minds to what can be designated 'the post-industrial society'.

If unemployment is <u>the</u> concern of the moment it is only a
symptom of the revolution we now experience. The tragedy is
that our society has been largely unprepared for the revolution
in patterns of work, life and experience which is now taking
place. In Northern Ireland itself we were largely unprepared
for unemployment on the scale now experienced. Society in
general had not read the signs. Those who had, failed to
interpret or communicate them in such a way that society as a
whole was prepared for the reality when it came.   In this lack

of preparation industry, the unions, management and government
cannot escape degrees of responsibility. The Church for other
reasons was unable to interpret sufficiently clearly the changing
circumstances - and it failed too to be the real prophetic voice
within society.

Reactions

Reactions to the various stages of the computer and micro-
revolution have varied from the optimistic, (people will have
more than sufficient leisure time to achieve all they wish) to
the pessimistic (Ireland will face 50% unemployment by the end
of the century). The alternatives facing society do not
include the option of a refusal to utilise the new technology.
The manufacturing industry will continue to decline in terms of
employment if only because a failure to encompass the new
technology will spell economic ruin through loss of competitive
productivity. The service industries cannot escape the
implications of this same spiral. What choice society can
exercise is the use to which economic gains from increased
productivity can be put.

In this process of choice the Church can have a voice : but it
will be a voice which may not always be in tune with that of
business or commercial expectation.

To be the true agency of direction in society, particularly in
the area of industry, commerce, employment and use of resources,
the Church must first be the agency of awareness and sensitivity.
To be the prophetic voice in society demands that we are first
the listening ear. Micro-technology and the computer revolution
contains a threat to Irish society - they also encompass a promise
of opportunity. The directions offered to society by the Christian
Church must take into account many considerations.

At all costs they must not fail to avoid the threat and realise
the promise:

"There are, of course, two sides to the
computer revolution, one that is full
of promise and one that can discourage
and defeat. We shall need to keep in
mind an earlier Church and Society
conclusion that more power and more
choice and more freedom require more
wisdom if they are to add up to more
humanity."   (1)

"What is actually under threat at this period
of our history is not muscle, but skills
and knowledge." (2)

Radical

Some will challenge the use of the word 'revolution' to describe
what we are experiencing in this post-industrial era. Yet
such is the social impact of the changing demands and opportunities
of many traditional industries in Ireland, and in Northern Ireland
in particular, that radical and fundamental issues are confronting
us daily.

In 1950 it would have been economic suicide to replace a person
by the type of machinery then available. By the late 1970's
a subtle change had taken place: it became economic nonsense
not to replace man by machine. This fact became alarmingly clear
in Northern Ireland in such areas as heavy engineering and ship-
building.   If that machine costs £2 million and requires a
large building to contain it the man will not be replaced. If
it costs £50,000 and can be moved around on a trolley he will
be replaced.

Even in Ireland the last two centuries have seen a movement from
traditional agriculture to the manufacturing industry. By the
1920's this was the largest sector of employment. By the end
of the twentieth century 15% of the population will be able to
supply all our material needs. What will be the lot of the
remaining 85%?   How much thought has the Church given to the

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(1) David Bleakley, "In Place of Work ... The Sufficient Society"p.2.
(2) See 'The Church in a Post-Industrial Society', Dr. M. Brown:
    address to the Irish Council of Churches Annual Meeting, 1981.

place in society of 85% of our population who will be non-essential to the real needs of the community?

The service sector has grown in both parts of Ireland. Indeed this very growth has presented government with a factor of the post-industrial era which it has yet to completely incorporate into long-term economic planning. To regard it as parasitic to the manufacturing industry is to pay it less than justice in our changing society; yet there is a growing attitude, not yet fully recognised among theologians, that the only criteria of real work is that of its value in terms of direct economic advantage to the employing agency. Perhaps this trend speaks more directly than many others to the need to consider attitudes in society. Unfortunately in any society dominated by the harsh realities of unemployment on a vast scale attitudes towards the philosophy of work become for most a luxury.

Unemployment

It is when one turns to the actual figures of unemployment that the full impact of the current trends becomes more clear. On 9th December 1982 112,310 people were registered as unemployed in Northern Ireland. This total represented 81,601 males and 30,709 females. In percentage terms 20.1% of all employees, 25.8% of all male employees and 12.7% of all female employees were without work. (3) 4831 young people leaving school aged under 18 and 9600 full-time education leavers over 18 were unemployed. Of the total unemployed in Northern Ireland for this period 12,729 people under the age of 20 were out of work.

What are the implications of these figures for the secular society - and for the Church?

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(3) Official figures issued by Northern Ireland Department of Economic Development.

First, they represent a pattern which points to a completely
new structure for society.   It is now generally agreed that
anything like full employment is a thing of the past. Past
and existing work patterns in many areas of the Province have
been radically changed. The future holds a picture of partial
employment and a life-style in which a shorter working life
will be the reality. The component parts of this life-style
will consist of greater periods unoccupied by employment for
those with work to do, expectation of longer retirement, and
for society itself the provision for a sizeable percentage of
its population which will have to be dependant on public
assistance for the essentials of life.

For the Christian Church such a situation will demand a re-appraisal
of such basics as the so-called 'Christian work ethic'. The
morality of the traditional teaching on a just reward for a
day's work which contained within itself a comfortable and
understandable ethical code will be sufficient no longer.
Attitudes towards work, and the very meaning of the word 'work'
itself, will have to change throughout society. For the
Christian talk of the dignity of work and the value of the
individual will be only part of the necessary re-adjustment
process. The Church will have to address itself with some degree
of urgency to the direction such trends will indicate for society.

To offer the Christian Ministry in areas of high unemployment
is an experience which is at once harrowing and searching.
Frustration, anger, resentment, bewilderment and a turning away
from traditional sources of social comfort and support is
added to a growing sense of fatalistic acceptance.

Perhaps the real tragedy is to be a teacher of teenagers who
will shortly leave school - and will probably never work.
Such a situation was vividly summed up by the teacher from
west Belfast:

> "How in God's name do you teach the value
> of the individual in society to a youngster
> who sees all around him evidence that
> society couldn't care less about him?"

What is the connection between this tragic picture and education
in general, religious education in particular?   What has
Christianity to say to such a youngster about human dignity,
the purpose of life and the 'need to be wanted'?

Planners

Much of our thinking is directed to the results of unemployment
and redundancy.   Not for the first time the Churches find
themselves reacting to events in society.   Nor for the first
time another question can be asked: What has Christianity to
say to the economic planners of our society about attitudes,
planning, policy - and consequences?   Can a clear Christian
voice emerge which will speak in an informed and realistic
manner about the relation of economic and monetary trends to
human lives?   Can the Churches provide the vehicle for this
voice or have we already opted-out of the prophetic role in
Irish society?

Surely there is an urgent need for an informed and up-to-date
Christian critique of the economic structure of Irish society,
north and south?   In the Northern Ireland context such a
critique would involve an analysis of the consequences for
the quality of life of prolonged unemployment just as much as an
examination of the structure of economic development.   For the
Christian questions of principle in economic planning cannot be
separated from such concepts as the dignity and sanctity of life
or the nature of a compassionate and caring society. To be a
voice of prophecy and reasonableness in such a situation will
require, first, informed insight into the nature of economic
problems, and then, the courage and vision to comment with
conviction.

The Churches have a vital role as agencies of interpretation
within society. More and more in a world of growing secularism
this will be their most acceptable role.   The interpretation
of trends and events is an integral part of the prophetic voice.
It will be this activity which will permit the translation of
statistics into human terms.   It will be this opportunity
which will draw out principles from a myriad of conflicting
pressures.   It will be this role which will allow them to put
cold facts into human terms: to emphasise the importance of
the individual at a time when individuality is a cheap commodity
in society.

Inflation

Few aspects of the current scene provide as clear a picture of
the challenge facing the Irish Churches in understanding and
then interpreting the economic facts of life than inflation.

It is inflation that actually brings home to the individual
the complexities and the contradictions of the world economic
scene.   What has the Christian Church in Ireland to (a) under-
stand and then (b) interpret when she faces up to inflation
and its effect on ordinary everyday life -

First, inflation inflicts injustice on a society. It does so
in terms of those who have and those who have not.   Those who
are in strong bargaining positions such as trade unions and
corporate enterprises have the ability to protect their own
economic society.   This they can achieve through additional
income to off-set rising prices. While their real economic
position may not change appreciably the value of the pound sterling
and the Irish punt has.   For the fixed income bracket, pensioners,
low paid and unorganised workers, such facts cause definite
suffering.

Secondly, inflation forces local and national authorities to
cut back on essential services such as health, social services
and education.   Such cut-backs are likely to affect most those
in the weakest economic position.

Thirdly, within industrial relations inflation makes agreement
more difficult. The parameters which should normally exist
between wage increases and productivity become eroded. Demands
for huge wage rises increase the speed and intensity of the
inflationary spiral.

Compared with many other regions Northern Ireland's industrial
relations are good. However, to an increasing degree it is
becoming impossible to separate local effects in Northern Ireland
from decisions taken 'across the water'. Recently it has
become more obvious that unions in their wage claim have shown
more regard for what other unions have gained rather than any
realistic concern with the ability of firms to meet such
increases and remain competitive or solvent.

Fourthly, inflation attacks the moral standards of society.
The pursuit of sectional interests regardless of their effects
on society as a whole are encouraged. Physical militancy can
become the consequence of sectional resentment. Debt and broken
homes, disrupted family life and an inability by many to adjust
to dramatically changed circumstances can and does lead to social
distress. In the past decade such agencies as the Samaritans in
Northern Ireland have drawn continual attention to such consequences
of inflation in society.

Inflation has also brought into society a philosophy of 'borrowing'
which is among the most significant social and commercial trends
to be seen in Northern Ireland to-day. The logic appears to be
that the consumer society encourages the borrowing of as much
money as possible now, spend it on what may appear to be
'essentials' for some though falling into the category of 'luxury'
for others, and then repay later with inflated currency. This in
turn leads to a way of life which can be insecure, unstable and
materialistic - though understandable in to-day's climate.

In speaking to a society more and more conscious of the consequences
and changes inflation can bring the Christian voice must be one
which resists the temptation to moralise for the sake of it.

It must be a voice which understands that at times it is better to give a controversial lead than to give no lead at all.

Above all else, the Church while working in and through the structures of society will attempt to bring Christian love into the economic maze which has produced inflation. This will mean striving for justice, equality of opportunity and compassion for the weak. It will also bring a new relevance to the role of the Christian in secular society.

Conflict

There must come a point when the conflict between Christian principle and economic fact cannot be equated : a point when the Church not only asks relevant questions, but is prepared to say to society that it has gone far enough.

In this connection we can contemplate such questions as these:

At what point do unemployment figures become socially unacceptable?

At what point does a purely monetary policy become unethical when related to the social consequences of its implementation?

At what point does social division and deprivation within sections of the community cease to be acceptable to the Christian conscience?

Is the current unemployment situation in such areas as Strabane, west Belfast, Newry and Londonderry really inevitable in a period of world recession?

To what extent is the aspiration of so many for an ever improving standard of living compatible with Christianity?

At what point do the benefits bestowed by successful economic activity become incompatible with the Christian life style?

Leisure

In our earlier discussion of Church and community we suggested the need for a greater sensitivity on the part of the Church towards what is in fact happening within society.

Do we have a satisfactory theological attitude towards the
new patterns of work which are emerging daily?

Do we yet fully realise the implications of the new trends in
employment for the Christian view of the dignity or sanctity
of life?

What does Christianity say about the use of leisure - and
about its quality?

Have the Churches been as active as they should have been in
emphasising the need for the provision of adequate leisure
facilities particularly in such urban areas as Belfast,
Londonderry, Strabane and Newry?   Have we yet reached a point
in our thinking when we can speak of a Christian purpose for
community leisure?

If a reasoned theological re-appraisal of the nature of work
is necessary, then so must be our attitude to leisure. From
being the 'optional extra' for society leisure has now become
an integral part of the structure of Northern Ireland community.
The coming of the shift system first confronted the theologian
with a need to define his attitude to the component parts of
a man's life in industrial society. Now the emphasis has again
changed. Leisure must be recognised as not merely a rest from
work, even less an escape from work.   It is part of the total
attitude to life. With work-activity it has become an essential
ingredient of human well-being. Now we must re-emphasise the
fullness of the life of God, the fullness of God's involvement
in human experience as a whole. The sense of purpose this
recognition must give to each department of life must now become
the hall-mark of our attitude to how a man uses his leisure.
In Biblical terms, a Christian examining his use of leisure will
look at the whole pattern of his life to see if "whatever is
excellent and admirable" has its proper place" (4)

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(4) Phil. 4 : 8

In the Church's mission to the secular state a recognition
that we have too often placed a limiting interpretation on
'vocation' is becoming apparent. Our concept of vocation has
been developed in particular relation to work-activity. Now we
must surely encompass leisure in the same way. The use of
God-given talents in work situations has equal application to
free time. This fact takes on special significance when we
consider involuntary leisure. The element of job or activity
satisfaction relates to the worth and value we place on life
in general. While from the point of view of public attitude
and esteem, to say nothing of financial reward, work-activity
is more highly valued than leisure, a new emphasis must be
given to the fact that it is similarly valued in the sight of
God. "We should have a sense of worth about what we do freely,
just as much as what we do under constraint". (5)   In the
end society must come to recognise that neither work nor leisure
is the principal source of identity and meaning in life.

Surely we must now begin to take leisure time into our thinking.
Into the sociologists' consideration and into the theologians'
concepts must come the fact that Irish people are going to spend
less and less time in employment. This fact must become an
integral part of the individual's expectation. Leisure must
be accepted as part of the experience of life along with our work,
family responsibilities and our responsibilities to the community
in which we live.

To-day Irish society appears to value most those who contribute to it
through paid employment. The crucial question the Christian
must be prepared to put is this : will society accept that people
can acquire identity, values and status in free time as much
as in paid employment?

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(5) "Leisure in Ireland" A Report to the Churches 1982.
    (I.C.C./R.C. Joint Group on Social Problems) p.33

"Perhaps the presently strictly defined
parameters of employment and unemployment
will give way to the idea of <u>activity</u> where,
for example, to be unemployed no longer means
embarrassed inactivity but simply temporary
withdrawal into other meaningful spheres of
activity ... In the idea of activity the
division between work, i.e. paid employment, and
leisure also starts to break down ... those
who suffer enforced leisure must be taken
seriously and incorporated into our attitude
and values". (6)

Abuse

Some recent statistics illustrate the social dangers inherent
in an abuse of leisure. They also contain serious implications
for the Christian as he looks at society.

In Northern Ireland the rate of admission to hospital with
alcoholism or alcoholic psychosis doubled between 1968 and 1979.
The rate of admission was 13% per 100,000.   This compares with
97 per 100,000 in Scotland and 27 per 100,000 in England and
Wales. Convictions for drinking and driving offences more than
doubled between 1968 and 1978.

In the Republic in the decade beginning in 1969 there was a
230% increase in the number of women admitted to psychiatric
hospitals because of alcoholism. The increase for men was
136%.   It is estimated that £1R.1.5 million is spent per day
on alcohol.In the United Kingdom as a whole in 1980 £10,000 million
was spent on alcohol.

Considerable sums are spent on gambling. Almost 1% of household
expenditure in the Republic and about ½% in Northern Ireland are
spent each year on some form of gambling. (7)

If these figures do nothing more than remind society of the
social patterns which can and do emerge when life-style in periods
of leisure becomes more secular-based, when society loses the
balance between essential and non-essential spending in periods

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(6) "Leisure in Ireland" p.36

(7) I.C.C./R.C. Joint Report, 1982.

of inflation, and when social abuse of leisure threatens the
foundations of a stable community, they are worthy of serious
and prolonged analysis by the Churches.

4. EDUCATION - A DELICATE BALANCE

"Education is an issue of increasing
controversy - particularly in
Northern Ireland".

The Churches' Rights in Education
in Ireland, Advisory Forum on
Human Rights, I.C.C. 1982, p.5.

No area demonstrates more clearly the sensitivities of the Churches
in Northern Ireland to the possibilities of secularism than that
of education.

No area more clearly illustrates the dilemma facing the Churches
in working towards a definition of pluralism than the provision
of education for/young people.   Yet no area presents greater
opportunity for reasoned, committed and enlightened presentation
of Christianity as a way of life - as a contribution to the
pluralistic society.

Throughout the history of the Province schools and their control
have played a prominent part in political and social debate.
The history of Church involvement in education has been long and
diverse. Its interest has not only been concerned with moral
principles, courses or its own vocation, but it has found itself
involved in debates on vested interests, finance and privilege.

In Northern Ireland these questions have resulted in controversial
discussions and decisions, in struggles which appeared to be
centred on matters of principle and in at times opon conflict
between the Church and government, other social institutions and
groupings - and between the Churches themselves.

A distinction

The threat of the secular within education is a particular
problem for the Churches of the Protestant tradition. The
distinction between the maintained and the controlled school
goes much further than the niceties of administration. The
decision by the Protestant Churches to oppose the Education Act
of 1923 was based on a fear that an essentially secular system
would be introduced. The emergence of the maintained school
and its particular and vital place in the structure of the
Roman Catholic system has given ground for outside observers
to see one system as 'religious' and the other as 'secular'.
Such a picture is understandable. Yet in the action of
transferring certain rights and obligations for their schools
in those early days Protestant Churchmen did not envisage any
diminution of 'the religious ethos' of such establishments.
Over the years since there have been misunderstandings of the
position of both controlled and maintained. The anxiety of the
Roman Catholic authorities to protect and preserve their schools
is completely understandable. But the action of transfer on the
part of Churches of the Reformed traditions must never be
interpreted as an opting-out or lack of concern for the well-being
of their children's education standards.

Two recent examples of this position underline a growing concern
on the part of Protestant Church bodies to emphasise the
distinction:

(a)   "The Working Party recognised the fears of trustees
        of Roman Catholic maintained schools that 'a
        substantial reduction in the proportion of their
        representation might impair their ability to
        preserve the distinctive religious character of
        their schools'. The Northern Ireland Committee's
        oral evidence to the Working Party made it clear
        that transferor's representatives have no less a
        concern for the religious teaching ethos and
        character of controlled schools."   (8)

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(8)   Church of Ireland Board of Education commenting on the
      Astin Report, see General Synod Journal 1980 p.152

(b) "The Presbyterian Church, throughout its
history, has been deeply committed to and
involved in education. The aim has not been
simply the instruction of young people in
things religious, but that they might be
assisted and encouraged to develop their full
potential as persons in a Christian environment.

Presbyterian people, who represent a considerable
proportion of the population of the province,
are convinced that the Church's role in education
is as vital to-day as ever it has been. In an
age of conflicting values and declining moral
standards, parents want their young people to
grow up in an environment of Christian nurture
and moral principle."   (9)

Balance

The extent to which the Protestant Churches will be able to
continue to view their role in the 'transferred sector' as a
strong obstacle to secularism in society remains to be seen.
It is dependent on many variables. It can of course be argued
that legislation provides them with a secure foundation for
such continuing stability. But it can be argued equally that
a growing secularism in society at large can influence education
in ways which have nothing to do with the historic events of
1923, 1925 and 1930.   There is also always the danger of a
change in the delicate balance of the agreed partnership and if
so, the role undertaken by the Protestant Churches in 1930 will
be no longer attainable.   The rights that the Churches retained
in the education field could become increasingly devoid of
Christian meaning.

Clearly, as in all areas we have discussed so far, definition of
purpose is important.   In 1974 Edward Short spoke of education
as

"the keeper of society's identity". (10)

While he was undoubtedly referring to the situation in England

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(9) See General Assembly Report, 1977, p.183.
(10) "Education in a Changing Society". 1974 p.3.

the point about identity has particular importance for our
current discussion. It underlines again the reason for
our traditional sensitivities in Northern Ireland when we talk
about education; it reminds us that at least two communities
with distinctive identities to-day view the rise of secularism,
and it brings to the surface once more the vital importance of
education within the community at large.

How conscious are we of the threat a secularised society can
pose to education which has for so long been a prime concern for
the Churches?

What is the precise nature of this threat if it does in fact
exist?

Is there a need for a re-definition by <u>all</u> the Churches of the
overall purpose of education?

If there is such a need, what are the chances of agreement among
the Churches as to the precise purpose of Church involvement
in education?

Ethos

If the main purpose of Christian witness in society is to present
the claims of Christ within human experience, to teach and
emphasise the love and forgiveness of God in every aspect of the
human - then Church involvement in education is much more than
the provision of "religious education". It is a concern for
the whole ethos of the school. It is a concern for the well-being
and place within society of a school. It is a concern for the
maintenance and development of a school system which will not
only be "the keeper of society's identity" but will be the place
that identity will be explained, justified and scrutinised.
Only in this way will young people find the self-identity which
is so much a part of community life to-day. The Christian in-put

to this process is vital. More and more schools are becoming
community-conscious. The community is not only to be served
by its schools, but it is being given a larger and larger say
in the running of those schools. If secular trends are
emerging in society then by their very nature such trends will
be reflected in the life of a school.

In simplistic terms, this is the danger for those who wish to
see the continuing interest of the Churches in controlled schools.

Perhaps one sign that the above analysis could become a reality
for the Protestant Churches is contained in the proposal that
transferor's representatives should be reduced in number on
management committees for controlled schools.

It is too easy for the Churches to imagine that a historic link
with education, a once-established legislative right or privilege
and a traditional influence within society will be sufficient
grounds alone for confidence that the 'Christian ethos' will always
be present in controlled schools. Rights and privileges can only
be justified if responsibility and interest are developed to a
degree of confidence between Church, management and teacher. To
this formula we must now add parents.

Over the years state involvement in education has become a
dominant influence. The concept of participatory democracy demands
that the local community and parents should play a part in the
running of the schools. The teaching profession itself has looked
for an increasingly important say in the directing of education
policy. The result is that the Church is now only one voice among
many.

The true ethos of a school serving a community which contains
degrees of secularism will be determined by several factors.
The extent to which an historic link to Church bodies, embodied
in legislation, tested by controversy and manifested by represent-
ative management, will control the degree of this secular influence
within the school will depend on much more than an insistence on
vested interests.

Community

Not unnaturally the concept of the school and that of the
community are inter-related. The school along with the local
church was a centre for the community, particularly in country
areas of Northern Ireland. While the unit of church and school
always assumed particular significance for a Roman Catholic
community, the school came to have an equally important symbolism
for their Protestant neighbours. With growing community involve-
ment in school life and administration added to the natural
family connections with a local school there has grown up a
new recognition of the place of the school in the life of a
Protestant community.

Different views

Christians hold divergent views on how far secularisation in
education is to be encouraged. This divergence ranges from
the need to keep control of all aspects of education under Church
auspices to a belief that such an ethos in a pluralist society
can lead to segregation or a lack of community spirit.

These differing views high-light the main approaches to education
in Northern Ireland by the two sections of the community. On
the one hand there is the carefully guarded and preserved Church
control of the maintained sector in which the Roman Catholic
ethos is involved in each step of the education process. On the
other there is the 'state' sector in which the community has a
growing involvement and in which the Protestant Churches continue
to watch with anxiety their vested interests.

Does the fact that a maintained school under Church control preserves
a Church-based ethos mean that it will be less susceptible to
the process of secularization than its counter part in the
controlled sector where community and school are apparently

becoming more and more dependent on each other?

For the Churches in Northern Ireland it is a sobering fact
that in a growing number of cases religious education in schools
will be the only real contact with a systematic presentation of
Christianity many young people will have. In addition a large
proportion of the population now loses contact with church-
conducted education by the ages of 12 or 13. As a result many
adults' appreciation of religion remains static at a level which
does not represent much more than a glimpse of Biblical basics.
Indeed there is little comfort for any branch of the Christian
Church in the current situation. Churches of the Reformed tradition
view with concern the place of the traditional Sunday School to-day.
Does it still provide the real point of contact with children
it once did? Does it still usefully supplement the work of the
day school in Northern Ireland? Such reports as that of
Dr. John Greer suggest that the position in many controlled schools
is only slightly less affected by secularisation that it is in
others. (11)

For the Christian of any tradition the fundamental question to
be faced is this : Does secularisation of education inevitably
lead to secularism? Put another way : Does the influence of
secular theories from within the community either in method or
content necessarily lead to that ethos which is rejected by
Christians? Or is it once more a question of degree?

Northern Ireland is synonomous in the eyes of the outside world
with sectarianism. If a degree of secularisation in education
could be proved to be an encouragement for young people to move
away from either induced or inherited sectarianism then it must
be accepted. However if it can be proved that such a process leads
only to the decay and destruction of moral standards or spiritual
values then the result will be a new generation of confused,
rootless and materialistic young people devoid of any real
spiritual dimension to their lives.

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(11) Teachers and Religious Education, Dr. J. Greer,
      Education Centre, N.U.U., 1974.

If education is the process by which a young person is given
the opportunity to reach his or her full potential intellectually,
morally and spiritually then the Churches have a clear respon-
sibility to their children to ensure that traditional Christian
values are involved in the process. If this task is to be
accepted willingly in a growing atmosphere of secularisation
then the Church has a moral duty to ensure that the presentation
of the Gospel to school children is as professional, imaginative
and intellectually satisfying as any other voice claiming their
attention.

5. TOWARDS A NEW AWARENESS

> "We believe there is a void left
> in the imagination of mankind
> by a merely materialist inter-
> pretation of life; and the Church
> is called to fill that void with
> a re-presentation of the Christian
> Gospel."
>
>   Working Party iV, Ballymascanlon,
>   1975.

The Christian Church exists in a situation of tension when
confronted by the secular society.   The nature of that tension
will depend on several factors, not least the degree to which
the Church finds itself at variance from the prevailing attitudes
of that society.

Irrespective of the degree of tension or the variance between
the ethos of the community and the teaching of Christianity this
relationship will not always be viewed as one of conflict. The
presence of a tension can be a most positive and progressive
element. It can produce an awareness on the part of the Church
of opportunities of service, witness _to_ the community and involve-
ment _with_ the community which would be impossible if a relationship
of negative tension was allowed to prevail.

The premise for such witness and service must always be that
the Church exists <u>within</u> the community concerned. To become
isolated from society as it is, is to become the very antithesis
of the Body of Christ, the 'servant Church'.

False distinction

At all costs the Church must not appear to be antagonistic
to the implications of secularisation. She must/never adopt
the attitude of confrontation but rather, seek the position in
which dialogue leading to persuasion will be most possible.
This dialogue will, as we have already suggested, depend first
on an intimate knowledge of what the community is in fact saying
and doing. It will involve detailed and informed information -
and it will mean patient listening.

Faced with varying degrees of secularism the Church is called
upon to re-assess the theological implications of a society or
community as a part of the true revelation of God. It is a
revelation which calls for the interpretative teaching Ministry:
interpretating God to society and interpretating society to itself.

In Northern Ireland there is ample evidence of opportunities
to see these principles in action. Violence has become a part
of everyday experience. Few if any living in the Province remain
untouched by its consequences. While the particular circumstances
of our society have given their own dimension to terrorism,
community unrest and disturbance, it is a fact of life that violence
has come of age on a global scale as a means of influencing
opinion, compelling attention and attempting social change.

The Churches in Northern Ireland have passed through three distinct
phases or attitudes since 1968. First they were part of a
community which was in a state of shock as the full force of events
broke. The confusion and inter-reaction of the community at
large was reflected in the confused and fragmented reaction of
the Church in general.

Then came the period of condemnation. The air was over-laden
with statements and expressions of condemnation, but condemnation
with little or no understanding of what violence was doing to
the community. Traditional divisions along sectarian lines
became hardened. Tensions grew.   Yet the individual Churches
tended to allow a natural identification with the fears and
apprehensions of their own people to become that dangerous and
potentially destructive element, over-identification.

To-day one senses a wind of change. All the major Churches
have unreservedly condemned violence. But serious efforts are
being made to understand the nature of violence, its causes, its
consequences and the nature of its effect on society. Courageous
efforts have been made to isolate violence not just from that
section of the community most closely identified with a particular
denomination - but to isolate violence from the Christian ethos
as a whole.

Let there be no doubt in anyone's mind. The entire community
stands to suffer if any one section becomes dominated by those
who see violence as the main vehicle for their activities.
When Bishop Cahal Daly spoke recently of the threat to Catholicism
posed by terrorism the implications for the Christian community
spread much further than west Belfast. Whether they recognise
it or not the Protestant community throughout the Province has
as much to lose as their Roman Catholic neighbours if paramilitary
organisations win the battle for hearts and minds in west Belfast.

It is not without significance that during his address at Drogheda
Pope Paul II spoke to the wider implications of violence in a
secular society:

>"To all of you who are listening
>I say: Do not believe in violence;
>do not support violence. It is not
>the Christian way ... " (12)

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(12) Pope John Paul 11, Drogheda, 1979.

Perhaps the most serious attempt to interpret the nature of violence from a Christian stand-point came in 1976 with the publication of the Report "Violence in Ireland". This joint effort by the Working Party appointed by the Irish Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church Joint Group on Social Questions represented a sincere and detailed analysis of the role of the Church in a violent society. One significance of its work, which has gone largely unnoticed, has been the conclusion that in a secular society it is all too easy to allocate the Church a particular role - and deny it opportunities elsewhere:

> "It is easy to jump to conclusions about
> what the teaching of the Churches ought
> to be in a situation of conflict ... the
> dilemmas are profound". (13)

When the Christian Church honestly seeks to interpret God to secular man, and secular man to his neighbour the dilemmas it will face are indeed profound. There are vast 'grey areas' in which such genuine attempts at interpretation will appear to only further cloud the issues. But until the Christian Church is prepared to take a risk in entering such areas and facing up to its consequences, she will not have begun to understand the nature of secularism, let alone fully understand herself.

Answers

Apart from a new awareness of her role as an interpreter the secular society presents another canvass for the Church. Throughout her history the nature of authority has played a full part in Christian thinking on society. Ireland for centuries had a special place for the authority of the Church. To-day that authority has diminished. As with education so in almost every social sphere she is one voice among many. With this changing picture has come an urgent need to analyse in depth the nature of the authority society accords to the Church in Ireland to-day.

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(13) Violence in Ireland, 1976, page 56

In this process of being 'the servant Church' we must learn
again a lesson which is relatively new to the Irish situation -
the Church must state its answers to the needs of the secular
society and its people - but we must not assume that our solutions
will be accepted without question.

Most of our denominational Churches would claim to have authority
over their members. To this statement we would probably have
to add yet another qualification. We can anticipate some
authority over our committed members. Outside that rather narrow
circle, whether we like it or not, our voice must be persuasive
only. Society is not necessarily waiting for our distinctive
contribution. Society is more and more seeking solutions to its
many problems in terms of efficiency, expediency and material
progress. More often than not the authority given to Church
contributions to this process will be based not on the source
from which they come but on the quality or efficacy of the
contribution itself when compared to the in-put from many other
sources:

> "In the secular society ... in seeking to
> influence the decisions of society on moral
> and social questions the Church has to
> recognise its position as one authority in
> a pluralist situation".   (I4)

In Northern Ireland the Church will speak to society with what
its committed members will view as the objective voice of God:
to the rest of the community it speaks only for its subjective
human self. It will undoubtedly express its voice with conviction
but that conviction is unlikely to be equally shared by those who
are making judgements about several contributions within society.
No longer can the Christian answer to the needs of secular man
be viewed as the final unquestioned answer which has the authority
of total truth; rather such answer must be viewed as solutions
offered to man for his own well-being. The Christian Gospel
with all its moral implications must be offered to secular
society and must be expected to stand because of its own intrinsic

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(14) 1975 Ballymascanlon Working Party Report.

value and truth rather than through the authenticity of the
body which proclaims it.

Homosexual law reform, penal reform, after-care of young
offenders, education policy, provisions for elderly - such
questions have been placed before society and opinions sought.
Like many other agencies in the community the Churches in
Northern Ireland were asked for opinions.   No one now believes
that any such opinions offered will be viewed in any particularly
special light simply because it is the Church which offers them.
Such is the nature of pluralism.   Such a lesson will be
particularly hard to learn if one is used to institutional
authority. However, it may in time reflect more faithfully
the manner of Christ in whose life authority and human weakness
were co-related.

Morality

It has already been suggested in this discussion that the Church
has a clear role as 'the prophetic voice' in society, that her
calling as a 'servant' will be most clearly manifested when she
points directions to society. In one sphere more than any other
this role becomes urgent and emphatic in the pluralist community:
public morality.

The nature of society and analysis of what constitutes the just
society occupies much attention to-day.   Sociologists,
economists, politicians and numerous other community interests
have become involved in prolonged debate on the nature of society
in Ireland. Given the tensions and divisions within Northern
Ireland such discussion takes on a relevancy which is both vital
and urgent.

This debate takes many forms:
How far can any religious or political grouping enforce its
attitudes on society in general?
What degree of discrimination exists in such areas as

employment and housing allocation?

What form of government will provide the most stable,
democratic and representative structures for the whole
community?

What is the relation between the views of a majority of the
population and those of a minority?

At what point can any group within society reasonably expect
to impose its views on the remainder of the community?

What is the connection between power and consent in Northern
Ireland?

What are the ingredients of justice?

How does a pluralist society give ample recognition to the
existence of a divided community?

It is generally accepted that in any community social morality
is not the result of pure reasoning or logical inference in a
vacuum. It is fashioned by the various influences, cultural,
religious and economic which are at present visible in society
or have been visible in the past.

An eminent English jurist, Lord Devlin, places the emphasis
for law and morality on society itself:

> "The true principle is that the law exists for
> the protection of society. It does not
> discharge its function by protecting the
> individual from injury, annoyance, corruption
> and exploitation ; the law must protect also
> the institutions and the community of ideas,
> political and moral, without which people
> cannot live together. Society cannot ignore
> the morality of the individual any more than
> it can his loyalty; it flourishes on both
> and without either it dies." (15)

While there is a large measure of agreement among Christians
on a wide spectrum of social or "public" morality there is also
an area of disagreement. In Irish society such differences high-light
the variance in denominational appraoch. Such issues include
contraception and birth control, abortion, sterilisation,
divorce and homosexuality. In Northern Ireland the close
religious/political relationship usually dictates the divisions

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(15) "The Enforcement of Morals", Lord Devlin, 1965, page 35

in terms of Roman Catholic and Protestant "attitudes". Within
the fragmented nature of the Protestant community fundamentalism
frequently dictates a rigorous, absolute approach to such matters.

Those who would argue for a total prohibition by society through
its laws of such practices usually base their argument on the
grounds that there is an infallible authority for the moral
working of society. On occasions 'infalibility' in such areas
leads to the belief that there is an equal duty to exert pressure
on government, and to exercise control over legislation concern-
ing moral issues. In this sense morality is absolute and
objective.

On the other hand there are those who would hold that morality
is relative and subjective. They cannot see an objective 'right'
or 'wrong'. Morality is simply a matter of private or subjective
opinions and society should not aim at the possession of a
single morality but at the mutual toleration of different
moralities.

While the authoritarian view emphasises objectivity at the
expense of freedom, the permissive encourages freedom at the
expense of objectivity.

In the authoritarian view all morality is of public concern; it
sacrifices freedom and preserves a moral code; it concentrates
on transcendent sanction. The permissive view views all morality
as of private concern; it denies any objective moral order in
the interests of individual freedom and in so doing concentrates
entirely on people in society, rejecting any idea of transcendence

Such are the two extremes. Such is the diversity in many
contemporary communities. With certain reservations such are the
extremes which make up the pluralist society confronting the
Churches in Ireland.

Is it just possible that the Churches can still point a way
forward for society which recognises two principles:

(a)   an objective public morality binding on
        society

    and,

(b)   the right of freedom or moral conscientious
        choice of each individual?

While Christians believe that the principle of love has a
divine sanction, objective and transcendent quality which is
universally binding, there is disagreement even amongst
individual Churches and Christians on the interpretation and
application of them in particular instances. In Northern
Ireland there is general agreement that murder, and assault
should be prohibited and punished by society in its code of
public morality - yet there is also disagreement on such
questions as contraception, divoice, abortion and homosexuality.

The true pluralist society encompasses democracy and freedom.
It must surely also tolerate different interpretations of moral
questions? It must avoid being morally legalistic and enforcing
a particular view through its laws and courts in matters of
controversy in the moral sphere.

A pluralist society does not abstain from the making of public
moral judgements or enforcing certain moral principles.   No
society can discard its general moral ethos, fashioned by a
myriad of influences, past and present. The moral attitudes of
any society are naturally reflected in its concept and implem-
entation of its social or public morality.

However, for legislators merely to reflect the majority opinion
can be dangerous.

The Church has surely a clear duty to emphasise that while
legislation in a pluralist society should always be concerned with
prohibiting what is likely to corrupt society it should always be
conscious of the difference between the prediction of social decay

on empirical and factual evidence and such predictions based
on prior theological, political or other convictions.

The characteristic of a truly pluralist society is not that it
abstains from making moral judgements or enforcing certain moral
principles, but that it is prepared to submit its proposed
moral legislation to the most rigorous scientific and informed
examination. The open and just society is one in which those
who carry the responsibility of ordering its laws are prepared
to listen to serious and constructive views from any section of
the community.

A pluralist society will keep its legislation on moral matters
to a minimum.
The possibility of such an approach gaining widespread acceptance
in Ireland is not as remote as may be imagined at first sight:

> "If a society, especially one which places a
> high value on authority, moves away from
> traditional rigid values by making concessions
> to minority groups who think differently from
> the majority forebodings may well be justified.
> It may be time to batten down the hatches, to
> turn a definite face of refusal to any wish
> for a pluralist society. But there is another
> view.
>
> It is beginning to be seen, if somewhat dimly,
> that it is possible for the Irish to create a
> community which is not a sell-out to pessimism
> nor secularism but which is something new and
> modern in Irish relationships.   It will be a
> community which will preserve what is best in
> our traditions, will hold fast to Christian
> belief and practice and yet at the same time
> will strive to do this in a new context where
> priority of value is set on freedom, reconciliation
> and unity."   (16)

Let none of us doubt that a pluralist community can give rise to
possibilities of disintegration within society which are just as
potent as those for growth and progress.

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(16) "Pluralism", Studies, Spring/Summer Issue, 1978.

Toleration is not sufficient. Toleration can become passive
and non-productive in social terms. Northern Ireland has yet
to reach the stage of widespread toleration. But when it does
it will only be the beginning of a long road.

What is really required is genuine understanding and respect
for deeply held differences. A positive response to
pluralism involves the risk of at least questioning convictions
and traditions.   It equally involves dialogue.

How far can the Churches go along this road?
How far are we yet willing to travel?

6. MISSION : THE WAY AHEAD.

> "We believe that here in Ireland,
> the Church, which in the company
> of all Christian peoples, must
> work in every way it can to reject
> the pessimism and despair of the
> world. The Church must recognise
> itself as 'the seed, the leaven,
> the salt and the light ...
> holding its place in a changing
> world with sincere confidence
> and saying to men - 'Here in my
> possession is what you are looking
> for'."
>
> Ballymascanlon Report on Secularism
> 1975 quoting Vatican Council 11 :
> "The Church in the Modern World."

This paper has been an attempt to discuss some of the main
characteristics of contemporary society which must be recognised
and understood by the individual Christian and his Church.
In particular it has been an attempt to discuss part, and only
a part, of the role of the Church in Ireland in a period of
growing secularism.   While most of the practical issues have been
drawn from Northern Ireland it is suggested that the implications

for the mission of the Church have much wider application.

At the beginning of this paper it was emphasised that there are degrees of secularism in a society and that there is a danger in regarding such a tendency in terms of the absolute.

It is suggested that while Ireland, north and south, has not escaped the influence of secularism our society is still far removed from the totality of materialism one associates with the completely secular state. Not only has Ireland been slower than many another region to indicate secular tendencies in life-style but she has intentionally or otherwise remained a society in which the basics of the Christian ethos have prevailed in much of her life.

Even in Northern Ireland where life has been so dominated by division, uncertainty, social upheaval and violence the vast majority of her people would still claim some allegiance to the Church of their family connection or baptism. Church attendance and the outward connection with denominational life has declined steadily but there are few who would not claim a connection with a particular Church at one time in their lives. In much of the reaction to events the Northern community would still tend to adopt the braodly Christian ethos. Family roots run deep in Northern Ireland and the family unit while under immense pressure from public events and an increase in the number of broken homes and marriages has largely remained intact. However, because of the sectarian violence and divisions, there has been a definite erosion in contacts "across the divide" and the ecumenical movement, while extremely strong in some local areas, has suffered accordingly.

In a secular age the Church is compelled to seek out her priorities. Some activities or interests tend to become luxuries when materialism and secularism confront her. It may be stating the

obvious but perhaps in our present context it is necessary to do
so : in an age of growing secularism the divisions and disunity
of the Church weakens her base to witness and serve. The more
such divisions appear obvious to secular man the less he is likely
to listen or be influenced.

It appears obvious that before she considers her mission in
terms of secular society she must look at herself. Apart from
disunity even in those areas where a broad Christian appraoch
is possible the complacency of many otherwise committed Christians
is highly damaging. There is widespread complacency in the Irish
Church.   It is a complacency based on the comfort of historical
associations with the Faith, based on the comfort of a Church
which has demanded too little from them, and based in the end on
that assumption mentioned at the commencement of this paper, that
secularism will never really take root in Ireland.

Empty pews in a Protestant Church should be no source of comfort
to a Roman Catholic in Northern Ireland. Likewise an erosion
in Church allegiance in a Roman Catholic community in the age of
secularism should provide no comfort for a Protestant.

What then is the mission of the Christian in a secular society?

First, he must be one who takes his faith into society <u>as it is.</u>
To do so he must first know what society is about. He must
recognise that he can no longer count on a submissive audience
for the reception of his ideas. He is now a competitor for the
attention of society. What authority his faith once had for the
community outside his Church is largely eroded. He will be
judged by actions and involvement rather than words.

Second, he must present his faith in ways which are positive and
practical. The integrity of his argument must be exposed by
being compared with other arguments presented 'for the good of
society'.   His method must be that of informed persuasion for
he can no longer lean on unquestioned authority.

Third, he must be prepared to see secularism not in terms of outright confrontation but in _dialogue_, listening and example. The persuasive argument will only prevail if it has 'the ring of truth'.

What is the mission of the Christian Church in a Secular World? What is the actual role of the Church in Northern Ireland?

As with the individual Christian it must be the supreme agency of hope and reconciliation.   Not only, as in Northern Ireland, is reconciliation between religious groupings and communities essential, but reconciliation within fragmented society between age groups, between members of broken homes and families and a greater desire to be a truly caring society must be the concern of the Christian Church.
A divided community requires radical treatment.   When those divisions are given a religious connotation then much heart-searching is demanded.

The just society we seek and the level of public morality and concern which are necessary to realise it must concern the Church in Ireland.   The task of building those bridges in a divided and increasingly secular community which will help to heal the wounds of a fragmented society is a task for anyone with the good of the community at heart.

For the Christian and the servant Church no greater task can be imagined.   The challenge of secularism comes in many forms. The question for the people of God at this time is simple to frame, but not as easy to answer : Have we yet realised the full implications of secularisation for a community such as that in Northern Ireland?

Perhaps the greatest consolation we have comes not just from the idea of a 'servant Church', but from the reminder that we

follow a 'suffering servant':

> "Man is at present only half alive,
> he is imperfectly human, he is as yet
> in the making. God destines him to
> become human through and through, to
> become fully and abundantly alive in
> the land where, in the company of his
> fellows, he will explore without end
> the unfathomable mystery of the
> Godhead." .   (17)

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(17) "The Heart in Pilgrimmage", C. Bryant, 1980, p.181