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Imaging Ireland 2020

Dr Marie Breen Smyth



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An Address by Dr Marie Breen Smyth to the Irish Association,

I thought I would use the opportunity to try out on you some ideas that are really very new and somewhat garbled ideas and hopefully in the process of doing that you can help me move my thinking forward in relation to the topic that I have chosen to speak about.

I have rather unwisely chosen to talk about the topic of moral leadership, religion and politics in the Ireland of 2020. I want to base what I have to say about the Ireland of 2020 on our contemporary experience of moral leadership, or the lack thereof, religion and politics, focussing on my own doorstep largely and that is in the Ballymena area of Northern Ireland.

In preparation for the talk today I have carved out a little piece of something that I am working to focus on. It is really around the recent developments of sectarian attacks in the Ballymena area and the responses of the politicians and church leaders in the area to those attacks. Some health warnings, if I may: the first of which is, this is work in progress. I will change my mind no doubt as a result of some of the things you say here today and I am really trying out ideas, so please bear that in mind when you are listening to me. Secondly, it is not a complete picture. It is a very small little snapshot and I'm extrapolating out of something and I'm making a kind of naive assumption quite deliberately. And that assumption is that political leadership in particular, but also religious leadership, is aimed not at leading people into sectarianism or racism, but rather leading them towards some kind of moral betterment. That is a highly contentious assertion, but it is nonetheless one that I am going to make now and you can make another argument, but I think that for the sake of this purpose I am going to assume the best of our politicians and church leaders - which of course is somewhat naive maybe.

I want to start on that note with Senator John McCain and look at a statement that he made in the United States Senate earlier this month. I want to look at the context leading up to 2020 and the prospects for racism and sectarianism in particular and then I'd like to look at the little snapshot - the discourses of religion and political moral leadership in the sectarian attacks in the Ballymena area and make some conclusions.

Here is Senator John McCain: [I should say he is talking about the debate in Senate. It used to be that we had an agreement or consensus that torture was not admissible. It was not something that civilised nations should be engaged in. Nowadays, with the developments in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib, that is no longer the case. There is a debate now in the United States Senate about 'Can we torture?'



Is it justified and to what degree we can torture? etc'] "Mr President, let me just close by noting that I hold no brief for the prisoners. I do hold a brief for the reputation of the United States of America. We are Americans; we hold ourselves to humane standards of treatment of people, no matter how evil or terrible they may be. To do otherwise undermines our security, but it also undermines our greatness as a nation. We are not simply any other country; we stand for something more in the world - a moral mission, one of freedom and democracy and human rights at home and abroad. We are better than these terrorists and we will win. The enemy we fight has no respect for human life or human rights. They don't deserve our sympathy. [and this is the piece I'd like to emphasise] But this isn't about who they are, this is about who we are. These are the values that distinguish us from our enemies." It is a very powerful statement and, setting aside the content of it, it is one that strategically stands a good chance of success. It stands a good chance of success because it appeals to the superiority of the listener, the American listener. It is saying "We are better than", "We have a higher mission ... ", "We are not like these awful people that we are putting into prison". So it is based on an assertion of moral, or some kind of superiority. It also has a strong identification with a certain set of values - "We stand for something in the world" - and it also indicates, given the contemporary context of Washington and Senator McCain's ability to swim, at least to some extent, against a tide within his own constituency. He is capable of standing up and risking the accusation of being un-American or anti-American or giving comfort to terrorists. He is facing into that and he is turning to his own constituents and saying "Wait a minute. We can do better this and some of us are not doing very well. Those are the features that I'd like to highlight in Senator McCain's speech and I will ignore him until the very end.

I want to talk now about Ireland in 2020. A little bit about the population, the economy, politics, some social issues, particularly poverty and finish with crime.

The change in balance of population in the Ireland of 2020 is in favour of Catholics in the north at a rate of about 50,000 per 15 years and by 2050 Catholics and Protestants will be 50:50 in Northern Ireland, if it exists indeed at that time. But the economically active population is increasingly Catholic. There will be increasing demands of an elderly population which will be disproportionately Protestant, placing demands on the care and the pension systems and there will also be increasing immigration from other parts of Europe, but also from further afield. So there will be some rather stark changes in the population of Ireland as a whole and within Northern Ireland in particular. Those of you who are statistically equipped please forgive my cavalier attitude to statistics. I simply took the graph of the population as it is now and moved it along however many years I needed to, to get the graph for



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2020. But roughly speaking we are looking at a population which, under the age of 45, is predominantly Catholic. Over the age of 45 it is predominantly Protestant within the context of Northern Ireland.

We are also looking at a growing ethnic minority population. Currently, dipping into the issue of economy, Northern Ireland has the fastest growing economy in the UK and maybe further afield and therefore that brings with it the need for immigrant labour and it also attracts people who wish to have a higher standard of life. The increasing membership of the EU, including perhaps the membership of Turkey, will bring whole new waves of immigration into Ireland as a whole and into Northern Ireland in particular. We currently have an existing problem of racism and racist attack. If we look at crime in the present day we can see that the categories of crime that are on the increase are those to do with offences against the person, sexual offences and other notifiable offences, whereas the traditional type of crime such as criminal damage, burglary, theft and so on is on the decrease. So the whole public order issue, safety and security issue within the society is shifting away from crimes against property towards crimes against the person, some of which of course are motivated by hatred. Racial incidents have only recently started to be recorded within Northern Ireland. When we look at the record you can see the trajectory is indeed a startling one. Some of this is to do with measurement and people reporting for the first time, but certainly the trajectory is one where racial attacks are on the increase, at least according to the statistics and certainly by qualitative work that we have done in the field with ethnic minority populations.

We also have, in Northern Ireland, the highest concentration of police officers. The Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Northern Ireland have more police officers per capita than England and Wales and Northern Ireland far outstrips the other areas.

In a diagram representing sectarian segregation you can more or less draw a line down Lough Neagh and divide the state into two halves. There is a concentration of areas which are predominantly Protestant to the east and a concentration of the areas which are predominantly Catholic to the west. This pattern is increasing - segregation is getting worse and not better. We are living more and more separate lives even since the Peace Process. On a map of Belfast you can see the swathes of different areas and the peace lines keeping the two sides apart. These peace lines are the sights of continuing sectarian violence in many instances.

We have a situation in Northern Ireland in particular where there seems to be a reluctance to come out and name sectarianism and racism for what it is and, indeed, an emphasis on understanding why it is. I am involved in this enterprise of understanding why it is that there are these attacks and understanding the minds of



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the people who carry them out. For example, I pulled at random two pieces of newspaper coverage. One is from the Sunday Life talking about racist attacks in Donegal Pass against a Chinese community. Ordinary working class people see their streets filling up with foreigners and are afraid of that. Being afraid of it is one thing, but actually setting about to drive people out of their homes or attacking their businesses or preventing them from building community centres in sites that they have legally acquired is quite another. But this kind of discourse is produced in the context of "We must understand why these things are happening". The second one is from the Sunday Life about the prospect of building a mosque in Portadown. The comment from a local person was "I have no objections to a place of worship being built so long as it doesn't cause any problems for other people". The idea of a place of worship, a set of bricks and mortar causing problems for other people is something that I can't quite grasp.

In Ballymena we have an ongoing sectarian situation which seems to be getting worse. I live on the outskirts of Ballymena. The taxi drivers in my town, Portglenone, will not go into Ballymena now at weekends after about 10 o'clock at night. There is an ongoing attritional level of sectarian violence in the streets. Some of it is actually just drunken rowdiness and general mayhem, but some of it is also sectarian. The local Catholic church in Ballymena, famously was blockaded for a long period of time at an earlier stage in the troubles and is now again subject to attack, paint bombs and various other missiles have been thrown at it in recent times. On the outskirts of Ballymena, in the village of Ahoghill, various Catholic families who have been residents there for a long time, over thirty odd years, have been forced to move out of their homes and into Portglenone.

Now I would like to look at the behaviour of the political and religious leaders in this context. These attacks occur and the Catholic priest complains that there has not been enough condemnation, or indeed any condemnation, on the part of particularly the DUP, Dr Paisley, and the local DUP politicians. This is rebutted and there is a motion put to the floor of the Council by a Sinn Fein Councillor and supported by the SDLP condemning the attacks. The motion is amended by the SDLP, Declan Malone, and the DUP do not support it. The local Catholic priest recently has likened the loyalists to Nazis and one loyalist politician has taken recourse to the scriptures and has highlighted the role of the Catholic church in all sorts of crimes such as sexual abuse and the concealment thereof and blames them for their failure to excommunicate Gerry Adams and Martin Magennis who, according to another Catholic cleric, are, if not daily communicants, certainly weekly attendees at mass. The loyalist politician feels it his duty to point these things out as matters of moral concern to the population as a whole. Finally a police officer obfuscates the nature of



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the sectarian attacks by saying he wasn't quite sure what the motivation was for these attacks. He later, of course, had to rescind that under pressure from his own organisation. These are the kinds of things that are going on in the Ballymena area.

I did a very detailed interview with the DUP politician. I assumed he was a Free Presbyterian, but when I interviewed him I discovered in fact that he was from the secular wing of the party, even though a great deal of what he had said in the newspapers was based on scriptures. He had called in scriptures to justify and elaborate on a whole range of thing that he was saying. He was very adamant that he was not Free Presbyterian, he was a normal Presbyterian and he belonged to the secular wing of the party and he had some difficulty indeed with the Free Presbyterians in the party itself. As somebody looking in and not terribly well versed in scriptures, it does seem rather confusing to me that someone who claims to be a secularist will take recourse to scriptures.

It seems to me that both the politicians and the Catholic and Protestant clergy got involved in this unhappy situation. The Catholic and Protestant clergy were variously involved in either progressive or retrogressive actions. The Protestant clergy arrived at the Catholic church, for example, and assisted in a clear-up operation at one stage and yet at other times were engaged in verbal combat with the priest about various aspects of the response. It does seem to me that what has happened here is that there is a blurring of roles. There doesn't seem to be a separation of secular roles and religious roles, particularly on the loyalist side, where you have politicians quoting scriptures and clergy attaching political labels to people. The priest calls loyalists Nazis and the politician quotes scripture.

The politician that I interviewed pointed out the impossibility of supporting the motion at the Council, condemning the sectarian attack, because Sinn Fein had a role in it. Therefore, by definition, anything that has a role in Sinn Fein has a hand or part in cannot be supported by him or members of his party. Therefore he could not condemn the sectarian attack because Sinn Fein had condemned the sectarian attack. He points to the corrupt nature of the Catholic church and their condemnation and this is something that he moves into all the time and he moves out of the discussion of the sectarian attack and the airtime is taken up with a great deal of discourse about the Catholic church. He significantly asserts the pointlessness of condemning the attacks and says that those responsible are not church goers, so there is no point in even the religious leaders condemning them, they are ill educated and in fact really the only thing to do with them is to call the police. The police are the only possible intervention to prevent this kind of attack happening in the future. He also says they bring a bad name to loyalism.



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Let us apply the McCain test. This would say that he asserts the superiority of his side and he certainly does that, but he does it in religious, rather than in moral, terms. He talks about the Catholic church rather than about any set of secular values that he is espousing as a loyalist. Secondly, McCain identified his side with a specific moral mission and values. It seems to me that in the matter of the sectarian attacks the loyalist politician hasn't in fact managed to do that. In fact he abdicates responsibility for any kind of marshalling of these people, who probably do vote for him, to the police - it is a criminal matter, it's not a political matter. McCain sets a standard for his behaviour and he is prepared to swim against the tide. I could find no evidence that this loyalist politician was prepared to swim against the tide in the matter of dealing with the sectarian attacks in the public domain. However, he was prepared to swim against the tide in another matter and that was in the condemnation of Sinn Fein and the refusal in the future to engage with them, should there come a day when Sinn Fein goes into government. He will leave the party if the party chooses to lead him in that direction. So he is prepared to swim against the tide of his own party on some matters, but on other matters he is not prepared to do so. The claims to superiority that he made rested on the lack of paramilitary involvement of his party, or indeed of any other party, on the unionist side. He is saying that "Actually we are better people. We are more moral people because we have not been involved in paramilitarism. That is absolutely, patently obvious and true. Nonetheless it does present a problem for who then can represent politically those aspects of loyalism that have been so involved. They do not have elected representatives and they do vote in elections. So therefore, presumably, there must be some relationship between unionist and loyalist leadership and those who support paramilitarism on the loyalist side but there is an absolute denial or refusal to engage with that at a political level. This does give me some pause for thought because it seems that one of the things that we might look to as a solution for racism and sectarianism is indeed political leadership. The McCains of this world who are prepared to turn around to their own side and say "Pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. We can do better than this. This is a disgrace". Although privately this politician is prepared to say "These people are disgracing loyalism", he is not saying it to his own people. He is not saying it in the public discourses that he produced about this. In fact he is doing quite the opposite. He is blaming the Catholic church for all sorts of accelerations and he is saying "You have got to understand why these people are doing this kind of thing because they feel threatened, because of the behaviour of the Catholic church in the past".



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The other major thing that I'd like to say is that on both the parts of the leaders and particularly the religious leaders, they were indeed offering moral leadership. He said some important things to say about the Catholic church, some of which I agreed with. But he is offering leadership to people who are rather unlikely to follow him, it seems to me. He's offering critical comments aimed at improving the performance of the Catholic church but he is doing it from a position of enmity from without Catholicism, rather than from within. That seemed to be a theme that happened right across the board. He derogated any responsibility in relation to the behaviour of his own constituents in relation to the moral or religious codes that he might appeal to in terms of exhorting them to behave better in future and in fact it seemed to me that there was a great deal of hopelessness in relation to the project of leadership, both within the religious and particularly within the political context in this situation.

In the Ireland of 2020 I would like to pose a series of questions. What is the role of politicians in relation to sectarianism, racism and xenophobia? Do they have a role and a moral responsibility to swim against a tide and challenge racism and xenophobia amongst their own constituents and recognise that it exists and deal with it as a leadership project? Are they more concerned with their ability to be re-elected and reluctant to do so? There is a real sense in which I concluded that politicians in fact were the followers, following on the trends of the behaviour of their constituents, scared to open their mouths and challenge it in case it cost them votes at the next electoral contest. In the context of a globalised situation where religion has become a more important aspect of political discourse and where fundamentalism is on the rise, what role will religion play and continue to play as a marker of division rather than a definer of moral standards? In the Ireland of 2020 to what extent will we have even further blurred the religious and political roles that we see played out here in Northern Ireland?

Q1: You started off using the term "loyalist" and then you said a DUP politician. The term loyalist has come to mean in Northern Ireland not DUP, not UUP, but specifically those elements of loyalism which are outside the main stream. It is difficult when you keep jumping between this term "loyalist". The DUP are not particularly liked by the loyalists and the relationship between them is a very difficult one. When you come to the point about the element of hopelessness it is a very good word because I think there is among unionist leadership and among church leadership a feeling of hopelessness. They don't know how to handle this and they don't know what to do about it. I don't think you can really say that the DUP people are worried about losing loyalist votes. They are worried about losing DUP votes.



MB: I take your point about the naming of DUP and loyalist. I am doing what people have asked me to do. They consider themselves to be loyal. The word he used to describe himself is "loyalist". I talked to Ulster Unionist party members who preferred the term "loyalist" to be applied to them, rather than "unionist". They would argue, also for historical reasons, that in fact "unionist" and "loyalist" are synonymous terms. I would like to elaborate on the relationship between the DUP in particular and loyalist paramilitarism. The loyalist paramilitaries would blame the DUP and Dr Paisley in particular for stirring them up into great passions of rage about the continuing situation in Northern Ireland which they would attribute as part of the motivation for them becoming involved in paramilitarism. Yet, at the moment when they become involved in paramilitarism, they are disowned by the DUP in general and by Dr Paisley in particular. They are very angry about that. You can see that same pattern writ into this whole discussion on sectarianism in particular. Some of the discourse increases sectarian tension and yet takes no responsibility for that.

Q2: There was an interesting point about the changing composition of the population of Northern Ireland in 2020. It is important to remember the difficulties about future demographical and social projection in Ireland. At a conference I attended in the Republic of Ireland, where the population had declined, a young man at the conference said he would not be surprised if in 2050 the population of Ireland would be 8 million. It seemed so bizarre in projection. When you looked at the projection you heard last night that even in 2020 the population could well be 7.5 million. I think a note of caution has to come in about these projections. I hope that the population will be 7.5 million but it may not be. Referring to the social changes. It may well happen but I feel that there may be a few more twists in the future demographic history of Ireland. Remember too that this also applies to the United Kingdom. At the moment there may still be a window of opportunity in this community here where you have two groups and although they are segregated they are still amazingly mixed up if you look at the actual demographic position.

Q3: I am from Ballymena and I would ask at this stage if you have any comments to make given your study to date in regard to the church leadership and political leadership and the within the business community in Ballymena.

MB (In relation to Q2): My methodology demographically was cavalier. I just did it as a way of painting a backdrop to what I have to say. I have no pretensions to be accurate.



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(In relation to Q3): I think the business community, particularly if we look at Derry and the role the business community there played in the resolution of the parades disputes in the city, where business leaders actually became directly involved in mediation of bringing the parties together and motivating them to resolve the dispute in a way that is good for business and good for the city. It does seem to me that there is the potential for the business community to become more involved in that kind of enterprise in other parts of Northern Ireland and I think in other parts of Ireland. It is very clear that there is an economic argument here about the value and the merits of a peaceful environment in which the economy can prosper. I think that there is definitely aspects to leadership that are worthy of exploration.