

For God and Ireland: The Fight for Moral Superiority in Ireland 1922-1932

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'There is no man or movement', according to the late Emmet Larkin, 'that can be intelligibly discussed apart from the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland'. Larkin's 1964 article in *Church History* – later republished in *Studies* – succinctly stated a truth that many Irish historians are forced to face in conducting and framing their research.⁽¹⁾ The authority and importance of the Catholic Church as a social, cultural, and political force has historically been a commanding facet of Irish life, and study of seemingly unrelated forces is often forced to confront this reality. Studies across the breadth of Irish historiography are frequently forced, at varying lengths, to address this issue.

Michael McCabe's *For God and Ireland* attempts to deal with this dynamic as it applied to the Irish bishops and republicans in the first decade of the Irish Free State's existence. The author's principal aim is to 'observe and study trends across both sides of the ideological divide that separated republicans and the bishops' (p. 10). Underpinning this focus is the argument that both parties (republicans and bishops) competed for moral authority in the emerging Free State; in the case of republicans, rhetoric laden with religious imagery was often utilized to claim moral and political legitimacy. Key to the author's interpretation of such 'moral competition' is his belief that the bishops acted unjustifiably (morally and otherwise) in order to maintain social and political authority, often showing an unseemly level of interest in political and other secular affairs.

Documenting such a conclusion is allowed by the author's impressive breadth of research, which includes materials (such as Monsignor Luzio's papers) which have only recently become available. The author's assessment is also partially founded in his view that the hierarchy has been shielded by historians from an appropriate degree of criticism. This necessarily implies that the hierarchy does, in fact, warrant the historian's critique and that it is a purpose of this study to provide it. This disposition informs the study's interpretive approach: the desire to provide an objective and dispassionate study providing a critical counterpoint to overly-sympathetic studies (p. 3). According to the author, this historiographical problem is particularly pronounced in Irish ecclesiastical history. Patrick Murray's well-received monograph *Oracles of God*, published in 2000 (2), is highlighted as indicative of what is suggested to be a broader problem in Irish historical writing as it pertains to the Church. Historians, including the late Emmet Larkin, have been far too sympathetic to the Catholic Church; in the author's view, some histories are little departed from outright hagiography and apologetic (p. 3). Murray's work in particular provides a source of interpretive tension.

For God and Ireland is structured as a generally chronological narrative. It begins with an analysis of the moral and religious dimension of republican language, with the author borrowing Paul Bew's assertion that analysis of the Land War lacked critical discussion of the interplay between popular piety and radical politics. This is argued to be equally applicable to post-Treaty Ireland (pp. 15, 16). While rich in detail, discussion of this interaction reaches few new conclusions, ultimately arguing that republicanism was justified as a commitment to a religiously-informed moral ideal superseding democratic mandate. A pronounced sense of moral superiority sustained republican fervor, with pro-Treatyites dismissed as morally weak (p. 31). While embraced by republicans, such spiritually-laden political criticism was avoided by clergy sympathetic to republicans. This seeming curiosity is convincingly explained by the author as an attempt by the clergy to shield themselves from the wrath of less sympathetic Church officials. According to the author, the republican claim to spiritual authority that superseded ecclesiastical authority was essential to continued claims of political legitimacy (p. 47).

The narrative proceeds to the role of episcopal pronouncements in establishing the moral authority of the bishops. This chapter primarily focuses on an interesting discussion of the public role of the bishops with regard to nationalism prior to the Treaty, as well as their role in the political tension resulting from the Treaty debate. Widespread condemnation of British misdeeds in Ireland transitioned to initial episcopal silence on the Treaty. The eventual April pastoral, which declared the Treaty to be a legitimate point for political discussion, is interpreted by the author to be the bishops attempting to 'remain within their spiritual realm while offering their opinions on the state of current affairs' (p. 67). The October pastoral, which lamented the state of affairs in Ireland, represented a turning point after which republicans increasingly used moralistic language to criticize ecclesiastical involvement. De Valera notably wrote to Pius XI to complain that the bishops continually abused their authority through excessive involvement in political questions (p. 93).

One of the author's most compelling original contributions is his discussion of Monsignor Luzio's mission to Ireland. He ably discusses the level of Anglophobia pervasive in the Irish hierarchy, as well as the degree to which their belief of vast English influence in the Vatican was unrealistic. Although this Anglophobia was not the only factor that predisposed the bishops to view Luzio's visit with hostility, it certainly exacerbated an already negative predisposition. The author's discussion of Luzio's visit itself is similarly compelling as

Luzio's own papers and his final report submitted to the Vatican are skillfully utilized. These hitherto unavailable resources add significant value to the study's account of Luzio's mission, revealing an extremely negative assessment not only of the bishops, but of the Free State Ministers, who Luzio described as 'fanatical [and] proud' (p. 277). Luzio had little use for the Ministers and Bishops that he met during his trip and formed a far higher opinion of republican opponents, who he described as 'much more religious, preferring the ancient and genuine Catholic faith of the Irish people' (p. 277).

The author then proceeds to a discussion of the issue of executions and hunger strikes, which will be discussed in greater detail below. *For God and Ireland* concludes with chapters on the partition question and the relationship between Fianna Fail and the bishops. Discussion of partition focuses on the general acquiescence of the bishops to accepting partition as a political reality while still retaining the right to address political issues facing northern Catholics as matters within their purview. By 1926, Cardinal O'Donnell announced that Northern Ireland was a 'fixed entity', finally conceding a political settlement to which the bishops had originally been opposed. The 'ghetto mentality' of Archbishop MacRory – O'Donnell's replacement – is argued by the author to be a primary cause of lasting sectarian tension in Northern Ireland, ultimately placing much of the onus for future conflict upon the Catholic bishops (p. 233).

The final chapter, which deals with Fianna Fail and the bishops, offers some interesting concluding points. Rehabilitation of the former anti-Treatyites occurred, at least in part, due to their willingness to embrace a degree of Catholicity which Cumann na nGaedheal eschewed. The author compellingly posits that the ability of Fianna Fail to elaborate economic policies more closely in line with Catholic social thought played a large role in warming the previously hostile bishops. This warming attitude was also facilitated by new blood in the hierarchy, lacking the 'same emotional baggage in their relationships with republican leaders' (p. 249). The ability of Fianna Fail to outmaneuver Cumann na nGaedheal politically by situating itself as the more Catholic political party was aided substantially by the accession of bishops without the hostilities of their predecessors.

There are aspects of the work's presentation that serve it well. The study's structure allows deep discussion and analysis of key events and themes, providing on occasion a great depth of detail. This provides obvious benefits that enhance the value of each chapter. Msgr. Luzio's report is also invaluable reproduced in the appendices, and makes for fascinating reading. However, at times the narrative structure presents as somewhat disjointed, exacerbated by the decision to put end notes at the conclusion of each chapter. In fairness, the author's discussion is focused on specific points of contention between the bishops and republicans, and he certainly cannot be held responsible for editorial decisions. However, a more structured approach as well as a more concisely stated rationale for the material considered might have presented the reader with a better guide to the topics discussed and a firmer narrative thread.

The author's criticism of existing works is stridently put. This stridence is at times justified, though dismissing Emmet Larkin's ground-breaking and foundational work is rather lacking in charity. Regardless, his call for dispassion is welcome, and one that is all too often imperfectly fulfilled. Unfortunately, this proposed dispassion is not always present, and more often than not overt sympathy is replaced with overt hostility. One can reasonably and convincingly argue that uncritical sympathy is indeed a significant problem in existing studies; however, this over-correction undermines points of the author's otherwise reasoned interpretation. This over-correction is particularly relevant with regard to the degree of moral judgment interspersed throughout the study. Example of this can be found in analysis of the hierarchy's attitude toward the execution of republican prisoners. The author, while acknowledging Archbishop Byrne's documented opposition to the executions, refers to the wider attitude of the hierarchy as 'shocking' and 'inexplicable' (pp. 160, 161). In his introduction, the response of the hierarchy to the executions is referred to as morally unjustifiable (p. 5).

While on much firmer ground in analysis of attitudes toward hunger striking, the author concludes that it is 'remarkable' that a large number of bishops remained 'completely uninvolved' in the issue (p. 187). Such a conclusion shows a degree of interpretive inconsistency: while the author's presumption seems to be that the bishops displayed an unhealthy (and inappropriate) interest in the political arena, lack of political

involvement is similarly deemed inappropriate. The reader might be forgiven for feeling that the insertion of an often excessively judgmental voice occasionally leads the author to stray from dispassionate, judicious assessment: at one point, the form of the bishops' claim to authority is pointedly characterized as 'quite a self-serving Mobius strip of an argument' (p. 69). While one would be hard-pressed to fully dispute some of the author's more critical assessments, their interpretive pervasiveness hinders dispassionate historical analysis and presentation.

The author's study frequently interacts, as noted, with Patrick Murray's survey of the same period. While the study interacts with Murray's on several isolated points, broader 'correction' centres on Murray's rather hedged analysis, which in part argues that the activity of the bishops cannot be reduced to narrow political self-interest. One might reasonably suggest that Murray's conclusion rightfully acknowledges the complexity of the Church's position by noting that its 'evangelical role' is not easily separated from its 'political role'.⁽³⁾ The author's response to Murray is that such a conclusion affords the hierarchy shield from criticism and scrutiny; he particularly points to Pius XI's reluctance to condone ecclesiastical interference in political issues as proof of an ideal spiritual role from which the bishops diverged. But if one looks at the rise of the Catholic action movement, a consistent Vatican line on appropriate involvement in political questions becomes significantly more muddled. Although Luzio argued that it was 'necessary to prohibit the Bishops entirely from taking part in politics', his assessment came at a time when the Catholic Church was simultaneously distancing itself from politics while claiming a greater number of political questions as within the purview of its authority (p. 279). With regard to the question of the Treaty, the author might have strengthened his case by noting that in that *specific* instance, the Bishops explicitly violated the guidelines set in *Immortale Dei*. By denying the sacraments to opponents, they violated the encyclical's guideline that differences of political opinion as to the form of government could not be rightly be characterized as a '[violation of], or wavering in, the Catholic faith,' provided that their 'piety is in other respects known'.⁽⁴⁾ This explicit guideline renders Luzio's assessment of republican piety all the more significant.

Outside the question of the Treaty, assessment becomes more difficult. As the author laudably notes, clerical publications such as the 'Social Action Series' published through the *Irish Messenger* represented significant spiritual encroachment on seemingly secular issues (p. 18). This series was not unique to Ireland, and was in line with the broader sanctioned growth of Catholic action in England, Canada, and the United States.⁽⁵⁾ As an example, Msgr. John A. Ryan, head of the Social Action Department of the National Catholic Welfare Council, is famed for his vocal public support for the New Deal. Although Catholic action may have eschewed overt political organization and direct involvement in party politics, it certainly addressed questions with principally political solutions. While most strongly advocated by a small core of Irish clergy (principally concentrated in the Jesuits), early Irish forays into Catholic social teaching (beginning in earnest in 1913) were embraced by the hierarchy. Though this discussion is not directly within the scope of the author's survey, it does raise question as to whether or not the demarcation between the spiritual and temporal role of the Church was a straight line down the middle. While teaching was clear in some areas where the bishops clearly contravened accepted norms, other areas remained murky. Discussing this complexity would have been a welcome addition to the author's work.

For God and Ireland offers an impressive breadth of research and value. Such depth undeniably enriches historical understanding of the interplay between faith and politics in the Irish Free State, for which the author should be commended. This depth is particularly evident in the author's fresh discussion of the role of Monsignor Luzio's visit to the Free State and the threat it represented to the authority of the bishops. However, the insertion of an excessively pronounced moral voice into the narrative frequently and frustratingly distracts from the study's worth. This significant limitation aside, the author offers an interesting first work that will hopefully stimulate vigorous discussion of the degree to which Catholicism directly and indirectly informed the political culture and debates of the Irish Free State.

Notes

1. Emmet Larkin, 'Socialism and Catholicism in Ireland,' *Church History*, 33 (1964), 462.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Patrick Murray, *Oracles of God: The Roman Catholic Church and Irish Politics, 1922–37* (Dublin, 2000).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Murray, *Oracles of God*, p. 419.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See Leo XIII, *Immortale Dei*, <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_01111885_immortale-dei_en.html [2]> [accessed 5 June 2013].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. While 'the social question' had been the subject of much wider continental discussion and action, a latter wave of Catholic social action (later rendered Catholic action) began in England c. 1909 and spread to Ireland by c. 1913. By the 1920s, 'the social question' was a topic of significant attention throughout the English-speaking world.[Back to \(5\)](#)

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