

# The Iona Institute and Marriage

**Dick Spicer**

**T**HIS ARTICLE has been prompted by the views expressed by the Iona Institute, spearheaded by the journalist David Quinn, at a recent debate in UCD on marriage. It has now lodged a submission to Government calling for society to discriminate in favour of what it calls 'traditional marriage'.

David Quinn and others from the Institute's perspective extol the virtues of 'traditional' marriage and its effects on society. They define traditional marriage as the lifelong union of a man and a woman and argue that it is absolutely necessary as a social institution to successfully raise children and preserve society.

Now a humanist can agree that there are statistical figures which show that, on average, children from married couples have better social outcomes than children reared in other circumstances, but it is in interpreting such figures that differences can emerge.

The Iona Institute chooses to concentrate its fire on the comparative disadvantage demonstrated by children reared in single parent families. It shows no understanding that single parenting is often the unwanted consequence of the failure of the traditional marriage model. The constant theme of the inadequacy and undesirability of single parenting is a tactic by the religious right worldwide to bolster its conservative appeal. It seeks to curb and constrain women in particular within a relationship which may be oppressive by raising the cry 'but think of the children!'

As if any woman faced with crises in marriage or pregnancy does not have that factor in her mind. The religious right is raising the guilt threshold for women in such crisis situations. It ignores the fact that in the great majority of cases it is the woman in a dysfunctional marriage who initiates separation and divorce, despite the financial and other consequences they and their children may face. Similarly it is

women who largely shoulder the burden alone of single parenthood. This they do not do lightly and it seems callous beyond belief to burden them further with guilt at the wider effects of such decisions on society and seek to penalise the children financially.

Indeed it is when it comes to the attitude of these Iona Christians to the children of single parent households that the real repulsiveness of their views reveals itself. They argue that taxpayer's money should be channelled towards the (traditional) family to encourage its survival. The corollary of this is that single parenting should be financially penalised vis a vis a married couple. The further relative impoverishing of single parent families would of course worsen the outcome of their children's lives and yet it is the claimed poor social outcomes that Iona says motivate their concern?

---

***It is when it comes to the attitude of these Iona Christians to the children of single parent households that the real repulsiveness of their views reveals itself***

---

David Quinn and his Institute do not consider the channelling of funds on an equal basis towards all children to be desirable as a means of addressing the social outcome of single parenting. Single parenting can of course be addressed in a variety of ways and societies tackle it from many angles.

Proper comprehensive and free education for all whatever their social background would help but the Church opposes that (and one assumes that Iona therefore would not embrace that method!). Comprehensive sexual and social education with contraception as a prime component would help also but the Church opposes that too.

Abortion availability would help but the religious right would rather financially punish living children and women in the name of social requirements than interfere with 'unborn rights'.

Iona is in effect arguing that the single pregnant woman and her potential offspring become a single parent family (against many women's wishes) so that society may then discriminate against them financially for the 'greater good' and deal similarly with a woman who has to escape an unendurable marriage.

It is a profoundly hypocritical perspective on single parenthood and it is used to bolster a basic distaste from a conservative Christian group for equal status for civil unions by pushing the virtues of marriage. Many studies of single parenthood do not compare like with like, i.e. they do not equalise for other factors – social class, education and income – which might show that it is not the 'singleness' that produces the negative outcome but precisely the other factors which Iona and the Church do not seek to address.

Many social observers argue that the widespread abandonment of children to crèches and child minders rather than providing them with maternal care might emerge as a negative factor in children's social and developmental growth in the coming years. If this should prove to be the case then the inability of single parents to afford expensive childcare might ironically elevate social outcomes in the future vis a vis other families especially if other factors were addressed.

If Iona would articulate its agenda without hypocrisy it would be welcome. It is a group which aims to promote a fundamentalist Christianity and any genuine concern for society is subsumed within that perspective. It would require a referendum which does away with the constitutional guarantee to treat all the children of the nation equally, and that should be interesting. It might thus put itself in opposition to a more diplomatic stance by the Roman Catholic Church for a start.

It will continue to sideline and denigrate issues of education, contraception and abortion. It will continue to pander to right-wing religious prejudices, ignore evidence, which counters its perspective and demonise what it considers to be soft targets in the name of the greater good of the nation and society. Now where, I ask you, do the historical roots of that perspective spring from? □