

Settling old Scores?

Religion, Secularisation and Recent Irish Cinema

Martin McLoone

THE DEATH OF POPE John Paul II in April 2005 occasioned a minor but extremely significant controversy in Ireland. The Irish government was criticised in some quarters for not declaring a national day of mourning on the morning of the late Pope's funeral in Rome. This would have brought the country to a standstill, closing all schools, factories, offices and other places of work. Ireland decided, however, that despite the solemnity of the occasion, it must be 'business as usual'. Admittedly, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) did request that employers be sensitive to the wishes of those workers who might want to attend Mass on the day. Nonetheless, in a country once renowned for its devout Catholicism, this was a clear victory for mammon over God. Nothing better illustrates the changes that have occurred in Ireland in the last twenty years than this demonstration of the country's growing secularisation and its now deeply embedded disenchantment with the Catholic Church.

This state of affairs is also reflected in a range of recent films which have explored aspects of Catholic Ireland with a sense of outrage, anger and betrayal that was scarcely imaginable even twenty years earlier. These films have explored and exposed child abuse – both sexual and violent – that was a frequent, if disguised, factor in the Church's domination of education and institutional care in Ireland for most of the twentieth century. (Thus in the archdiocese of Dublin alone, the Church has admitted that more than 100 priests have faced paedophile accusations and more than 350 children have been abused since 1940 [Bowcott, 2006: 22]). More generally, the films have depicted the stultifying and oppressive impact on people's lives in Ireland of an author-



itarian institution that saw no distinction between Church and State and exercised its authority with a dogmatic and rigid discipline. Such has been the uncompromising nature of these films that it is possible to see in them a kind of revenge – a settling of old scores – by the generation of young Irish who embraced secularism by rejecting the rigid laws of their spiritual fathers. These films, in other words, both reflect and are a reflection of the much diminished role of the Church in Ireland today.

The Catholic Church and Irish Identity

IT is useful to reflect on how and why the Catholic Church came to play such a dominant role in Irish life in the first place, the better to appreciate the extent of recent secularisation and the nature of the cinema that it has produced. In a sense, the Church gained its dominant position because it gave the Irish people both moral and practical support in the darkest moments of a shared history of persecution and oppression. This bond has an echo in contemporary Poland, where the Church in general and Karol Wojtyła in particular played a central mobilising role in the struggle of the Polish people against Soviet domination. In Ireland, the bond between Church and people was finally cemented in the 19th century after two centuries in which both suffered from colonial domination and political and cultural oppression.

The state suppression of Catholicism followed a prolonged period of religious, political and military turbulence during the seventeenth century as the native Irish fought to resist the further incursion of English influence in Ireland. The Parliament in London enacted a series of laws between the 1690s and the 1720s effectively outlawing the Catholic Church in Ireland and encouraging Irish Catholics to convert to Protestantism. The Penal Laws, as they became known, were motivated by England's fear that her Catholic rivals in Europe – Spain initially and then France – would use Catholic Ireland as a backdoor into England. Although the Penal Laws also reflected the ideological convictions of Ireland's Protestant masters, they were enacted essentially as a security measure that went with the confiscation of Irish land and the planting in Ireland of English and Scottish Protestant settlers whose loyalty to the English crown could be relied upon. The result was penury for the Irish Catholic peasantry and persecution for the faith to which it adhered with such stubborn resistance.

During the period of the Penal Laws, Catholics were, among other things, debarred from owning weapons, buying land or indeed, inheriting land from Protestants, voting or sitting in Parliament or learning and practising law. There were particular edicts against the priest in the community as the Crown sought to break the bond between the priest and the people. In many parts of the country, Mass had to be celebrated secretly in the wild at so-called Mass stones. Catholics were also forbidden from teaching in or running schools in Ireland and they were also forbidden from going abroad for an education. This prohibition gave rise to clandestine education schools ('hedge schools') often run by the parish priest. The result was that the bond between the people and the priest was strengthened rather than weakened and the Catholic Church took upon itself the task of educating an ➤