

increasingly impoverished peasantry. For the next two centuries, education in Ireland remained under strong clerical influence. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that in the affluent, secularised Ireland of today, the Church's role in education has become a contentious issue. It is hardly surprising either that many of the recent films about religion in Ireland have focused on aspects of Catholic education.

By the time that the final restrictions of the Penal laws were repealed in the 1829 Catholic Emancipation Act, the shared sense of persecution and oppression had forged a strong, mutually dependent bond between the Irish people and the Church. This bond was to be further strengthened during the horrific years of the Irish famine (1845-49). The Irish peasantry was wholly dependent on the potato crop for subsistence and when most of Europe was hit by potato blight during these years, the failure of the crop impacted on the Ireland more than elsewhere. Famine led to disease and by 1850, over one million people had died in Ireland and millions more had emigrated to Britain and North America to escape the starvation and disease. The Church was again the major institution that gave the demoralised Catholic peasantry both moral and practical support in the crisis and re-established a sense of dignity in a population that was devastated by disease and hunger. When the country emerged from the trauma of the Famine, the Church held sway as the dominant force and as Irish political opinion hardened against its British rulers, Catholicism in Ireland also aligned itself with the rising tide of Irish nationalism.

From the 1850s down to the 1970s the Church influenced all aspects of Irish political culture and through the mediation of the parish priest dominated all aspects of Irish personal and social life. In the words of Tom Inglis, this was the Catholic Church's 'long nineteenth century' during which it controlled public discourse in Ireland 'through a rigid system of physical and moral discipline centred on the elimination of individual freedom' (Inglis, 1987). It

was a very conservative ethos, in other words, an ultramontist version of Catholicism that, despite its strong support for Irish nationalism, aligned itself unquestioningly to the Vatican in all matters of social and moral teaching. After the Famine, the Church gave back to the Irish people a renewed dignity and sense of purpose and helped in the necessary process of modernising the country in ways that helped it to recover from such a trauma. It was, however, a very conservative revolution that it helped to promote, creating a new moral and civil code adequate to a society recovering from a loss of confidence in the previous established order and this essentially conservative ethos was to hold sway for over a century afterwards.

The Church's authority was absolute across a whole range of discourses in Ireland - health, welfare, education, ethics and morals, the latter especially in relation to the family and sexuality. It is interesting, then, but not surprising that in much contemporary Irish cinema that explores the years of this Catholic hegemony, the priest in the community and the mother in the home are the two enduring stereotypes that come in for sustained criticism and revision.

The high point of Catholic hegemony in Ireland was probably in the period between 1922 and the late 1950s, when Church and State were most closely aligned. This hegemony reached its apotheosis in the 1932 Eucharistic Congress when Church and State came together in a public demonstration of Catholic belief and over one million people gathered in the presence of the Papal Nuncio to celebrate Mass in Dublin's Phoenix Park. There were, of course, some more secular, more liberal and even more radical versions of Irish identity being promoted throughout the period of the Church's dominance but these were from marginal, muted and effectively silenced minority voices. When they emerged to challenge Church authority, as in 1951 when a radical Minister for Health in a coalition government attempted to introduce a mild measure of social welfare in a 'Mother and Child' scheme, the Church mobilised to thwart the proposal and indirectly to bring down the government. The proposal was seen as an unwarranted interference by the State into the 'sanctity of the family'— a direct challenge to the Church's authority. The

Church, in other words, attempted to uphold a remarkably narrow and homogeneous single culture – Catholic, Irish, conservative and one in which the Church itself held the dominant position. It promoted a philosophy of 'splendid isolation' and through a rigid system of censorship, strove to repel any incursions from the secular world outside.

From this high point, however, the Church's influence began slowly to wane. The Church itself was changing, of course, and the reforms and modernisation proposed by the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) had the effect of making Ireland's ultramontist Church look old-fashioned and out of touch. From the 1960s on, the country went through a period of economic expansion that resulted in steadily rising standards of living and a general rising of expectations. Television encouraged a more questioning attitude to all kinds of authority and helped to spread more secular values. From the 1970s onwards, political and cultural discourse widened as Ireland was integrated more fully into the European community. By the time of Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979, the country had moved a long way from the conservative religious ethos of former times. In an echo of 1932, over one million people again attended the papal Mass in Phoenix Park, but as one media commentator expressed it, 'The pope's visit set Ireland back fifty years – for three days'. Despite the enormous success of John Paul II's visit in 1979, by the early 1990s, racked internally by scandal and buffeted externally by an increasingly wealthy and secular younger population, the Church's decline seemed terminal.

The Cinema and the Church

During the long period of the Church's hegemony in Ireland, very little indigenous cinema was made. For the first fifty years of independence from Britain, the country remained a poor, largely rural and fairly insular society. There was neither the necessary private capital nor the desire on behalf of the State to support a film industry. Although the cinema, like elsewhere in Europe, was the most popular form of entertainment in Ireland at the time, the films screened were mostly American and British and were subjected to a rigid system of censorship that reflected the values of the Catholic Church, especially in regard to sexuality and ➤