

# The 2008 C S Lewis Lecture

A Response to Dr. Greg Clarke

By Gerard O'Neill

## **What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?**

Let me begin first by congratulating Greg on his excellent lecture and his thoughtful contribution to the crucially important debate about the role of Christianity in contemporary society. As I have been asked to respond to Greg's lecture, I have taken my cue from his 'third call to maturity': namely for a mature, Irish contribution to the debate. Nevertheless, it will only be a modest response to his 'modest proposal'.

I have given my response the title: *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?* A play, of course, on that wonderful scene in *Monty Python's Life of Brian* when John Cleese and the rest of the cast debate 'what have the Romans ever done for us'. A scene, I suspect, that has done more for the cause of historical revisionism than any academic treatise!

And so it is when reading the works of the new atheists like Richard Dawkins or Christopher Hitchens that I often feel like the characters in the movie who reply to John Cleese's question about the Romans with a long litany of things that the Romans did. Only, instead of sanitation and aqueducts, I think of things like democracy, science, capitalism and Western Civilisation as benefits of Christianity which – it seems to me – far outweigh the costs.

But rather than address the issue of the West and its Christian roots – a subject well covered by Greg in his lecture – I want instead to talk about Ireland in the context of Greg's analysis and the wider debate he refers to. My subject then is: what has Christianity ever done for Ireland, and what of Christianity's future in Ireland?

## **How Christian is Ireland?**

But first let me explain where I'm coming from in this debate. I am an economist by training and a market researcher by occupation so I can't help but bring the insights and practices of those two disciplines to bear on the subject we are discussing this evening. That means lots of statistics – just to forewarn you!

In terms of my own personal values and beliefs I am wary of labels but if I had to put it in a sentence I would describe myself as a pro-Christian, post-Christian. What do I mean by that? By post-Christian I mean that I

share a Christian heritage with other Christians in that I grew up a Catholic in Northern Ireland. On the other side of the North's religious divide, as it happens, from that into which C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast in 1908. However, I don't share the core metaphysical precepts of mainstream Christianity, being more aligned to the perspectives of radical Christian theologians like Don Cupitt. That's the post-Christian bit.

As for the pro-Christian label: that is more straightforward to explain. I share the philosophical outlook of conservative thinkers such as Edmund Burke and F. A. Hayek who had a deep respect for the nature of human society as an organic, spontaneous order with which you meddled at your peril. I see Christianity as a deeply embedded, evolving stream of ideas and beliefs that have fundamentally shaped the world we live in today. As such, any attempt by those who subscribe to world-improving ideologies to simply abandon the teachings and practices of Christianity in order to start a new chapter in human history are doomed to failure. Indeed, such attempts will leave us considerably worse off than if we leave things to evolve organically. The history of the 20th century has taught us this if nothing else surely?

Still I don't want to go too far into a discussion about the relationship between Western Civilisation and Christianity: Greg has done that for us. As I said, I want to bring the focus back to Ireland.

So first things first: is Ireland Christian? I did say I am an economist by training so naturally I have to answer the question with an 'on the one hand, and on the other' response! On the one hand, according to the 2006 Census we are an overwhelmingly Christian country. More specifically we are an overwhelmingly Catholic country: of the total population of 4.2 million men, women and children living here some 3.7 million ticked the 'Roman Catholic' box in response to the question 'What is your religion?' That's 88% of the population; or nearly 9 people in every 10 living in Ireland. Indeed, the number of Catholics rose by 6.3% from the 2002 census, just as it rose in every inter-censal period since the 1960s. While we're at, the numbers belonging to practically every religious faith have grown in recent years – from C. S. Lewis' Church of Ireland (up by 8.6%), to Muslims (up by 69.9%), to Pentacostals (up by 157.5%).

So you might wonder, given these trends, at the widespread perception that Ireland is becoming a secular society; one witnessing the demise of Christian faith in general and Catholicism in particular. I guess this is where I give you the 'on the other hand' answer to the question about Ireland's Christianity: because the second largest group in Ireland in

terms of religious affiliation after Roman Catholic is those who tick the box for 'no religion' – their numbers were up 34.8% to 186,000 in the last census. Mind you, that's still only 4% of the population – or less than one in twenty people.

### **Like Everyone Else**

But the Census only tells us so much. It is the attitudes and practices behind the labels that are more revealing. For example, in a survey my own company did in 2006, the same year as the Census, only a slim majority of adults (53%) agreed with the statement 'I would describe myself as a religious person'. Even though almost 95% described themselves as belonging to one Christian denomination or another in the Census. The percentage of those in our survey describing themselves as 'a religious person' fell to just 31% of 15-24 year olds.

In most respects this isn't that surprising. When it comes to religious beliefs, the reality in the 21st century is that Ireland shares most of the characteristics of other developed countries. In other words, those more likely to consider themselves to be religious in any given population tend to be women more than men, older people rather than younger people, and those whose formal education ended at primary or secondary levels.

A chart in a recent international report by the US-based Pew Research Center plotted GDP per capita against the percentage of the population in each country who agreed that 'religion is very important or somewhat important' in their lives. It showed a strong negative correlation of -0.8, in effect a straight line relationship between economics and religiosity. The higher GDP per capita, the lower the reported level of belief. Ireland was not included in the survey, but I know from asking the same question of Irish respondents in other surveys that our country is firmly in the same place on the chart as Britain, Australia and most of Western Europe. The exception to this apparent economic determinism, it goes without saying, is the United States.

Nevertheless, what seems to be happening in Ireland is that we are becoming what I believe they call in Britain 'four-wheel Christians'. We come to be baptised in a pram, to be married in a limo, and to be buried in a hearse. In the meantime, fewer and fewer darken the doorsteps of our churches – less than 50% of Irish Catholics attending mass once a month or more often. That's still high, mind you, relative to other, nominally Catholic countries.

## Irish Exceptionalism

But just as we have American exceptionalism in matters religious, so also have we Irish exceptionalism. Indeed it would be wrong to simply pigeon-hole Ireland as 'just like everywhere else' when it comes to our experiences of Christianity and secularism. And as an economist I know better than to base analyses on naive economic determinism. It's rarely that simple. There are in fact several aspects of our society's history and development that add a unique perspective to the debate. Two in particular strike me:

1. The role of the Catholic Church in Ireland and its relatively recent, if meteoric demise as a religious force.
2. The sectarian conflict in Northern Ireland and its continuation right up to the dawn of the 21st century.

In his marvelous book *Preventing the Future – Why Was Ireland So Poor for So Long?*, Tom Garvin reminds us of the extraordinary power the Catholic Church wielded in Ireland as recently as the 1990s. Referring to the findings of various attitudinal surveys in the 1950s and 1960s, Garvin observes that:

It must be remembered that Irish religious culture was one of literal belief in God, Christ, the Virgin birth, miracles, saints, heaven, hell, purgatory, limbo and all the rest of it – a belief system partly pre-Christian in origin and certainly non-Christian in psychological texture.

Garvin then describes the onset of secularisation in Ireland through the 1960s and 1970s right up to the present day, going on to note that:

... the counterexample of the United States, a very religious country, indicates that the death of faith has nothing in particular to do with modernisation or economic development, but everything to do with politics. In particular, faith in the modern world seems to be liable to be poisoned by an overly intimate relationship between church and state, and, more generally, by an intimate relationship between ecclesiastical organisations and political power. ... In other words, Ireland is not so much becoming secularised ... Rather, it is that Ireland is becoming *declericalised*.

Ireland's exceptionally intimate relationship with the Catholic Church from cultural to social through to political levels is now rapidly giving

way to something else. Something that does not fit neatly into two dimensional models of economic development and secularisation.

But before exploring what that ‘something else’ might be let's look at the second aspect of Irish exceptionalism – Northern Ireland. The North is by far the most religiously observant region of the UK – with 81% of the population describing themselves as Christian (versus a UK average of 53%), and 45% saying they attend church at least once a month (versus a UK average of 15%).

I suspect that Northern Ireland is going through its own rapid secularisation at present, brought on by the cessation of armed conflict between Republican, Loyalist and state forces. That cessation means that the traditional badges of religious identity and ‘tribal affiliation’ no longer need to be worn so explicitly as they were until quite recently. It probably also means a more reflective approach to religious faith and practice, driven more by personal than by political imperatives.

The question, of course, is whether the normalisation of religious practices in Northern Ireland will impact on Southern Ireland. I suspect it will: if only because the traditional schism between Catholics and Protestants will lose its resonance with the younger generation now growing up on both sides of the border - leading to a more open and perhaps more experimental approach to religious insight and faith. Perhaps.

### **Propelling the Future**

Where next then for Christianity in Ireland? Its future course will undoubtedly be shaped by global trends now underway. Both by trends at the level of ideas – for example, the challenge of the New Atheism addressed by Greg – and by those at the level of institutions: in particular the European Union from Ireland's perspective.

Anticipating the possible future direction of Christianity in Ireland does demand that we have a clear understanding of the role and impact of Christianity at a societal as well as at a personal level. In their book *Suicide of the West*, authors Richard Koch and Chris Smith note the pivotal role played by Christianity in shaping Western Civilisation – from Europe to America to Australasia. All that we hold dear as Westerners – democracy, freedom and equality between all human beings regardless of class, colour or gender – have their origins in Christianity's fusion of ancient Greek and Judaic teachings with its unique emphasis on individual integrity, agency and responsibility.

Moreover, the free market economy is a uniquely Western invention which only became possible because of innovations such as those of Pope Gregory VII in the 11th century which created private property rights that could not be violated by monarchs or by the state. As Indian-born economist Deepak Lal has pointed out, only Christianity ended the despotism and poverty that typically prevailed under almost all other religious traditions. The result: some 10 centuries later we have globalisation and a standard of living enjoyed by billions of people only available to kings throughout most of human history.

But back to Ireland. We still enjoy the social capital built up through centuries of Christian faith and practices. The special emphasis on family life in Irish society is a crucially important legacy of our Christian past, and one reason for the relatively low incidence of divorce and family breakdown – so far. Christian tolerance and compassion has undoubtedly played a part in our country's remarkably trouble-free adjustment to immigration and with it the arrival of nearly half a million people of many different faiths and from many different countries in the past 12 years. Even some of our institutions – such as Social Partnership and the Seanad – have their origins in earlier Catholic social teachings such as Vocationalism and Corporatism.

Like all capital, our Christian social capital in Ireland can quickly be depleted unless preserved and reinvested. That in turn requires a far more public debate about our values than heretofore: not just in terms of what Americans call 'culture war' issues such as abortion and gay marriage, but also about that quintessentially Christian question, i.e.: what sort of life should we lead? And what sort of society is best suited to support the choice of such a way of life?

We can see some hints of a debate about this question, for example, in relation to the emerging area of happiness research and the role of social, economic and psychological factors in enhancing or diminishing happiness. I suspect that the rich seam of Christian teachings on the good life, that build in turn on pre-Christian philosophies, has much to contribute here.

Likewise, Christians should see the popular distinction between 'spirituality' and 'religion' as an invitation to contribute to a more reflective, personal evaluation of how best to live in this world. After all, the distinction has a powerful heritage in Christianity's history – all the way back to Spinoza, one of the Enlightenment's greatest philosophers.

But the preservation of our Christian social capital also demands a political response too. The current Irish angst post the failed Lisbon referendum is in part about a lost sense of direction. Someone once said that religion is spread through stories – not through theology or dogma or philosophy. It is the stories we tell one another; that we tell our children; and that we tell the world about ourselves that provide the narrative for our individual and collective lives.

So what stories will we tell about Ireland – about where we have come from and where we are going? I believe that the stories that will resonate most, and be the most effective, will be those that weave Christianity into the narrative.

And if there's one thing we do well in Ireland it is telling stories!

Thank you.