RELIGION IN IRELAND IN TODAY’S WORLD
(The Faith and Irish Culture Today)

Micheál Mac Gréil, s.j.

(Lecture given in Beechwood Avenue Church on Thursday, 26th February 2015)

A Chathaoirigh agus a Cháirde

Réamhrá:

Is cúis áthais dom a bheith ar ais anseo anocht chun an lèacht seo a thabairt ar “An Creideamh agus Cultúr na hÉireann Inniú”. Ardaíonn sè ceisteanna móra na linne i bhforbaint agus éabhlóid ár muintire. Tá fréamhacha láidir na Criostaíochta á shamhlú i gcultúr na nGael. De réir cuid des na tráchtaírí tá ré stairiúil an Chreidimh ag cúlú agus an t-ábharachas agus an ‘saolachas’ ag teacht ina úit. Cé go bhfuil cursai chreídimh á bhrú sios in ord úr dtosaithe (priorities) ag na meán agus ag roinnt polaiteoirí, ní dóigh liom go bhfuil “an tine múchta go foill”! Ná déanaimid dearmad gur gheall Íosa Críost go mbéadh sé linn go deireadh ar t-saoil.

1. Introduction

It is both an honour and a privilege for me to have been invited back to Beechwood Avenue Church to give a lecture in your Centenary programme. I hope you will find at least some of this lecture on “Religion in Ireland in Today’s World” (The Faith and Irish Culture Today) of interest. It is indeed timely that we should sit back and try to diagnose and (where possible) understand what is happening to our culture which is so important in guiding our daily lives and the meaning and welfare of the lives of those coming after us.

The title of this lecture, which was agreed with Fr. Bernard Kennedy, Adm., is quite a wide and challenging one. Most human scientists, philosophers and theologians would agree that Irish society has gone through significant socio-cultural change in recent times – especially
since the end of the 1950s. In terms of material social change we have gone from a family and community – based social environment to a more individual – centred and a society - based one. The cultural consolidation of our new situation has not so far been achieved. In other words, we are now experiencing what Ogburn called culture-lag. Material change (which is causal) is going ahead of cultural change (which is retrospective). Society is always catching up on the human effects of material change, e.g. twitter, genetic manipulation, etc. We are also witnessing a disturbing level of metaphysical agnosticism among some of our academic elite!

Recent experience in Ireland and elsewhere has shown that both the Church and its secular alternative have failed to satisfy the people, resulting in both religious and socio-economic crises, with negative consequences for us all. The wise response is ‘not to throw in the towel’ but to see the situation as challenge to be addressed with all the spiritual and secular energy we can muster. From the Faith perspective we must not forget that we are not alone. We have God and our neighbours with us to guide and help us on our way.

2. Outline of Lecture

In the course of the rest of this lecture I propose to comment on each of the following sub-topics:

a) Definition of Terms;
b) Religion in Ireland in Recent Decades;
c) Revolt in the 1960s;
d) The New Northern Ireland Crisis;
e) Decline in Religious Practice and Vocations;
f) The ‘Prophetic’ and ‘Priestly’ Church;
g) The Challenge of Religious Pluralism;
h) Church Renewal and Pope Francis;
i) Conclusion.

Obviously, I will not be able to be comprehensive in dealing with the above topics because of restraints of time.
3. Definition of Terms:

Since this is a formal lecture it is necessary to explain what is meant by the key terms i.e. Religion, Faith, Church and pluralism. One of the most aggravating aspects of trying to understand much of the current public debate/discussion about matters relating to religion is the careless use of terms.

(i) I would define Religion as a social institution, i.e. a set of norms relating to the living out of belief in God, including prayer, worship and other related norms and practices.

(ii) Faith is ‘a commitment to the existence of God and a willingness to live our lives according to God’s will’. For Christians, God’s will is revealed to the believer primarily by the teaching of Christ in the Gospel and other biblical texts. The God of Christians is a personal God, who invites the faithful to communicate with the Divine through prayer and worship.

(iii) The meaning of Church is basically ‘the people of God’. Its place in the world may be seen as ‘the corporate pressure of Christ on earth’ whose function it is to spread the ‘Good News’ and promote the Kingdom of Christ among the people.

(iv) The fourth concept which needs explanation is integrated pluralism. This is the co-existence in the same society of diverse cultural, ethnic and religious communities in a system that guarantees recognition and support for differences and ensures equality of rights and access to economic, cultural and social amenities. In certain areas of life, which the communities judge necessary for the transmission and living of their cultural diversity, there is need for its provision of what is called institutional duplication. This means separate schools (up to a certain age), separate places of worship, etc. Failure to provide such facilities leads to forced assimilation and a great threat to minority religions and community groups and collectivities.
4. Religious Change in Ireland in Recent Decades:

The current situation of the Faith/Religion in Ireland today can be seen as the results of changes in our society and in the world around us – markedly since the end of the 1950s. Inter-generational social change in modern Ireland has been quite difficult to accept by many and to understand by most people.

Between the 1920s and to the late 1950s the **family** and **Religion** were the pivotal institutions in Irish society. There was widespread consensus among the people in relation to social and personal values and norms of behaviour which were very supportive of its family and the Faith. It was a time of extraordinarily high religious practice and vocations to the priesthood and Religious life in the Roman Catholic Church. Many Irish priests and religious laboured in the **foreign missions** in Africa, Asia and Latin America. They also ministered in the English-speaking so-called ‘developed world’ of the United Kingdom, United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Such a level of commitment and generosity from a relatively small Roman Catholic population must be unique in the history of civilisation. It also manifests a very high level of religious belief and practice in to homes and local communities of Ireland in to early 20th century.

During the late 1950s and early 20th century it was also possible to note evidence of the harsh consequences of an unhealthy adherence (at times) to Victorian Puritanism and Roman Catholic Jansenism in relation to **extra-marital norms**, i.e. the treatment of unmarried mothers. This was in part due to the protection of legitimacy which affected material inheritance in relation to property.

On Ireland’s achievement of Independence we carried on the unenlightened public structures (if somewhat modified from British rule and already cited by Dickens, Harding and others). Both Protestant and Catholic Churches helped to implement these harsh and accepted socio-political norms in good faith. We also lacked any real sense of inter-Church ecumenism. The 1960s were to help us to create the basis for changing some of these negative and inherited structural aspects in Irish and other societies. These harsh socio-cultural norms
should not negate the extraordinary level of altruism and charity witnessed by committed religious and others at the time.

5. The 1960s Revolution:

If one were to define a revolution as a radical and rapid change of cultural values and norms of behaviour, then the 1960s could be defined as a revolutionary decade. World War II once again had manifested the failure of the economic, political and religious institutions in the provision of a just and peaceful society. The war also bore witness to the more savage and unethical methods of conventional and nuclear warfare (on both sides). It was inevitable that the Church had to re-examine its pastoral and spiritual role following its inability to bring Christ’s message to bear on society before the war.

Post-War Europe was beginning to return to relative affluence and participation in second and third level education was on to increase. This was to lead to extended adolescence and to the emancipation of youth with both positive and negative consequences in areas of social and personal behaviour. Even in Ireland we had experienced economic and industrial growth and the displacement of the pivotal place of the family, neighbourhood and local community. The economic institution was becoming pivotal.

Vatican II and the World Council of Churches were welcome initiatives which enabled the Christian Churches to address changing society and re-appraise their norms and practices. The renewal included a revival of Biblical research and study and a new interest in theology, spirituality and morality. A new emphasis was also placed on social justice as a basic expression of the Christian Faith. Ecumenism became a more serious question to be addressed by all denominations. The priority of pluralist Church Unity was becoming more acceptable. Puritanism and Jansenism were implicitly challenged. Despite many social, political and religious problematic situations still prevailing in the world, there was an ethos of hope and optimism in the Church and society by the mid 1960s. The Second Vatican Council was the most notable herald of change in the Roman Catholic Church.
6. The New Northern Ireland Crisis!

The failure of Stormont and Westminster to respond to the non-violent Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland in a positive and constructive manner was to result in a ‘hammer-blow’ to the new spirit of optimism in 1969. This new outbreak of State and paramilitary violence was to last for the next twenty-seven years, i.e. until the ceasefire of 1996. It was providential that the ecumenical movement had already begun to establish dialogue between leaders of different Christian denominations by 1969 and this was going to play a positive role during the next quarter of a century. At least, it mitigated the pain and suffering and ultimately contributed to the peaceful solution of 1998. The positive role of the Churches in the Northern Ireland Conflict/Troubles has not been adequately recognised by most regular commentators, i.e. academics and journalists.

The three elements of concern to the Churches in the case of the whole Northern Ireland problem include:

(i) The sectarian dimension,
(ii) The political polarisation and
(iii) The ethical problem of military/para-military violence

The history of Post-Reformation Ireland must be one of the most tragic stories ever told. What was been played out in the agony of the Troubles and of the sufferings since the foundation of the State is part of that legacy. What we see today in the Muslim internal conflict and external hostility had already been acted out (in part) in this country during the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. At the end of the day, pluralist ecumenism is an essential condition for peaceful co-existence. Secularist elimination of religion only aggravates the problem. The sectarian question is always going to be a challenge in a pluralist society. We should not forget that when the State seeks to deprive religious community of their pluralist rights it is being sectarian!

The political problems in Northern Ireland since its foundation in the early 1920s was the tyranny of exclusive majority rule, which alienated the Roman Catholic Nationalist community. True democracy is based on consensus rather than majority. Roman Catholic
Nationalists, as a result of the 'exclusive majority rule', felt alienated, i.e. powerless. The genius of the Good Friday Agreement has been the distribution of administrative responsibility to all significant minorities. I would like to see this system in operation in all countries, to ensure participation of all minorities as well as dominant communities.

The ethical problem of military/paramilitary violence in the pursuit of social and political aims has become more serious among committed believers. With the increase in the military capacity to kill and destroy due to the advances of science and technology and under the control of States and their alliances, the paramilitary response of those who feel oppressed has become unconventional and generally defined as 'terrorist activity'. The days of conventional battle fields with recognition of rules of war are becoming obsolete. Such unconventional war was experienced in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1996. The Churches succeeded in keeping communications open with both sides and never ceased to preach the gospel of non-violence. My regret has always been that ecumenism has not yet succeeded in reaching to grass-root level in Northern Ireland, and elsewhere.

7. Decline in Religious Practice and Vocations:

The Papal Visit to Ireland (over a weekend) in autumn of 1979 was an extraordinary and unique outpouring of public devotion and respect for Pope John Paul II and the Papacy. Professor Liam Ryan of St Patrick’s College Maynooth believed that the visit had a huge symbolic significance for Irish Roman Catholics, who had emerged from over three hundred years of penal persecution and denial of religious recognition, i.e. after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. It was merely one hundred and fifty years since Catholic Emancipation in 1829 and the gradual growth of religious status and positive self-identity for Roman Catholics. In this context the Pope’s visit was the ritualistic celebration of our full restoration. Deo Gratias

It may appear ironic to some that vocations were beginning to decline for over a decade (since 1967) before the Pope’s visit and continued to do so after it. ‘Liberated youth’ experiencing their ‘extended adolescence’ did not seem to be attracted to the challenge of
priestly or religious life. The rise in materialism and the decline in the average family size may have contributed to the decline in celibate vocations. The new worldly optimism following Ireland’s entry into the European Economic Union could also have affected our vocational aspiration towards individual worldly success.

It is interesting to note that average Church attendance in Ireland did not decline for some decades after the decline in vocations. I personally believe that the decline in family prayer preceded both the decrease in vocations and regular religious practice. Family prayer has not been studied adequately to date as a basic element in the handing on of the Faith and in the life of the Church! Obligatory celibacy for entry into the priesthood and religious life adds to the sacrifice made by the candidate for the love of God and of the neighbour.

The future role of Religious Orders in Western Society is something which merits serious prayer and reflection by the whole community of the faithful. The role of dedicated and committed men and women engaging in prayer, theological reflection and pastoral work for the promotion of the ‘Kingdom of Christ’ on earth will always be of greatest value in our world. In the area of social justice alone “the harvest is great”. This may involve courageous confrontation (in charity) with the rich and the powerful in the defence of the poor and powerless. Religious play a vital role in helping the faithful to pray and meditate.

The intellectual fields of theology and the study of Sacred Scripture require much dedication. The faith is necessary to make religion meaningful. Without the serious study of the sacred sciences there is a real danger of fundamentalism and superstition. In a world where the average level of education is higher, the challenge facing the Church in the intellectual field is enormous. Hence, the importance of more religious and laity who dedicate their lives to the study and communication of the ‘sacred sciences’. Religious are a very necessary part of the collectivity of believers.

As a step towards the creation of a more inclusive Church in the area of religious life, I believe the time has come for religious orders to invite women and men to become full
members in the same order or congregation. Gender-mixed religious orders would be more meaningful in the 21st century – especially to the Western World. I had the privilege of spending a few days with a ‘Shaker Religious Community’ in New England (in the US) in the summer of 1966. They had been a mixed celibate Protestant religious community in the U.S. and had achieved much pastoral and spiritual success. They were inspired by the Quaker Congregation.

With the decline of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, the Holy Spirit seems to have turned to Core Catholics, i.e. in the administrative, pedagogical, liturgical, pastoral and spiritual life in the Church. The Parish Council Movement throughout the Dioceses has been most successful. This is something to be greatly welcomed. According to the (limited) research I have done over the past twenty years it was interesting to record that seventy per cent (70%) of ‘Core-Catholics’ are female. I found a similar distribution in sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, we have not, so far, seen a commensurate rise in the provision of courses in pastoral, spiritual and theological studies geared to the obvious needs of our Core Catholics who have and will become an essential part of the ministerial Church now and in the future, (even if there is a revival of vocations to the priestly and religious life). I would consider the formation of lay ‘Core-Catholics’ a priority task for the Church in Ireland.

8. The ‘Prophetic’ and ‘Priestly’ Church:

The rise in the numbers and role of ‘Core-Catholics’ is changing the Church. At this stage it might be useful to look at the Universal Roman Catholic Church and try to identify where we are at present to the Prophetic and Priestly Cyclical Evolution. Both elements are always present but, at times, one or the other seems to be more prominent. The origin of this categorisation is Biblical, going back to the times when ‘prophets’ dominated and other times when ‘priests’ were the major influence. The former emphasised times of change while the latter were characterised by periods of consolidation. If I were to apply these categories to the Roman Catholic Church in our lifetime, prior to the reign of Pope John XXIII, we were more priestly with strict adherence to rules and rubrics. During the 1960s and 1970s we experienced a prophetic period both in the spiritual and pastoral life of the Church. The rise
of liberation theology in Latin American and elsewhere was evidence of a dynamically 
prophetic Church. The 1980s, 1990s and 2000s could be seen as a return of the ‘priestly’
model (with some exceptions of course). It may be too soon to say, but I feel we are seeing a
return to ‘a new prophetic phase’ in the Roman Catholic Church under Pope Francis. His 
emphasis on social justice is significant in this regard. I personally find this exciting and 
optimistic. Of course, we must not neglect the “de more”! As Milton Yinger (sociologist
of religion) once said: we must keep the trains running while changing the station”.

During ‘prophetic’ periods in the history of the Church, conservative political forces who 
feared the structural consequences of this ‘new liberation’ were likely to counter and oppose 
the changes proposed. This led to the persecution and martyrdom of the prophets (as we 
have seen in Latin America and elsewhere in the recent past). In priestly periods most of the 
new saints would be confessors. Of course, both martyrs and confessors are saints. Priestly 
is not to be confused with clerical!

9. The challenge of Religious Pluralism:

It is quite clear that religious diversity (which was always present within the Christian family 
and Jewish community) is growing in Irish and most open societies today. It is often 
coupled with ethnic diversity. I welcome multi-culture society and hope that the Irish State 
facilitates a fair and integrated pluralist accommodation of our diverse communities and 
collectivities.

It seems to me that the State’s authorities can adopt one of two approaches with regard to 
the culturally diverse composition of our Irish population, i.e. assimilation or pluralism. 
Assimilation ends up with creating cultural uniformity as was promoted in the United States 
and often referred to as the “melting pot” approach. This would be seen as the approach 
favoured by the bureaucratic superstructure and promoted through common socialisation 
programmes. At the end of the day, cultural diversity would be reduced to tokenism and 
nostalgic symbolism, i.e. if a policy of assimilation is pursued.
The pluralist approach recognises, promotes, welcomes and facilitates the continuity of the true diversity of communities and collectivities, while ensuring equality is guaranteed in relation to all essential services, i.e. domestic, economic, educational, housing, political, religious, etc. Where it is considered necessary for the transmission of the culture of the diverse groups, (e.g. religion, language, etc.) institutional duplication is necessary in areas such as separate places of worship, separate schools at the primary and junior secondary level. Separate denominational schools are the opposite of sectarianism! In fact, true ecumenism is best taught in denominational schools and different places of worship. Cultural phenomena such as religion and language require institutional duplication for their survival. This is particularly true for minority religious and language groups.

The enactment, enforcement and application of minority rights’ legislation are essential for the co-existence of minority groups in any society that claims to be pluralist. The 1989 Act, while welcome, is not adequate. The provision of strict anti-blasphemy legislation will become more and more necessary to respect the religious sensitivities of diverse religious groups. While one must unequivocally condemn the recent shooting of the satirists in Paris, at the same time, true pluralism requires that we should always treat with respect the name of Mohammed as the leader of a religious community. The argument that freedom of the press gives journalists or the media a licence to insult the religious sensitivities of members of the population is, in my opinion, invalid.

If we are genuine and sincere about the creation of a society where real co-existence of diverse cultural communities and collectivities can take place, we need to be prepared to facilitate their recognition, promotion/survival and pluralist integration. This involves “minority-rights’ legislation”. I often get the impression that some of Ireland’s political and media commentators do not seem to understand the basic requirements of integrated pluralism!
10. Church renewal and Pope Francis:

The Church, which I have already defined as the ‘people of God’ and ‘the corporate presence of Christ in this world’, whose function it is to spread the Good News and promote God’s Kingdom among its entire people, is organic and continually renewing itself to meet the needs and challenges of the on-going present. Church historians and ecclesiologists can tell of its path to date. Where are we at present?

Within the Roman Catholic Church our recently elected leader, Pope Francis, is carrying on the work of his predecessors and also breaking new ground. His emphasis on simplicity, collegiality and the priority of the needs of the poor and marginalised is, for me, a sign of a revival of a new ‘prophetic phase’ and a source of hope and optimism. The prioritising of social justice as an essential component of our Faith characterises Pope Francis’ pastoral approach. Both his words and actions have attracted a positive reaction among all Faiths and none all over the world.

Among the challenges facing the Church on the ground include the socialisation of the young in their Faith in a world that is less supportive of the handing on of religion. This is an enormous challenge when we see the advances in pragmatic education. The nurturing of youth in their Faith at home needs to be encouraged. Family prayer should be revived where it is absent. Attendance at Mass and the practice of Sacramental Confession (three or four times a year) should be proactively supported by clergy and the parish councils. The promotion of positive religious articles and features in the public media is very desirable. The study of Sacred Scripture and theology by laity has become a necessity to equip them to take a greater part in the life of the parish today.

May I also say that we should not neglect or look down on popular devotions which the faithful savour. There should always be a place for the simple aids to personal devotion, e.g. religious pictures and statues in the homes, novenas, pilgrimages, the use of Christian (saints’) names, etc. There should also be a promotion of the ascetic and self-denial for the Glory of God. Perhaps, we should encourage regular fasting and abstaining in reparation for
the sins of the world. The above listed practices are in addition to the need for the Church as a body to pursue peace and social justice with all the energy and force it can muster.

11. Conclusion.

In the course of this lecture, an attempt was made to comment on some of the issues affecting the relations between religion/faith and contemporary Irish culture, which seems to be no longer as Faith-friendly as at times in the past. In fact, materialism and individualism have characterised much of modern Irish culture, as opposed to the spirituality and collectivism which are basic to Roman Catholicism and Christianity in general.

The Roman Catholic Church has gone through ‘ups and downs’ in the past and in recent times, i.e. the heady 1960s, the Northern Ireland Troubles, the much publicised child-abuse scandals, the rise of materialism, the decline in clerical and religious vocations, and the welcome rise in lay participation. At this particular moment there are signs of hope emerging under the leadership of Pope Francis and evidence of a ‘new spring’ among the faithful. Hopefully, Irish society will renew its appreciation of the contribution of religion to the welfare of our people and meet the challenge of pluralist integration of diverse religious communities and collectivities in our country today.

It is a great time to be a committed member of the Church because of the challenges and possibilities facing us. With the help of God, we will re-humanise Irish life in areas where greed and neglect have created an unjust society to the detriment of us all. The Christian Churches should strive to establish ecumenical relations with Jews, Muslims and other major religions as we all strive to serve the same God.

Go raibh maith agaibh.