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Editorial

The recent elections in both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland have drawn attention once again to the running sore of Ulster, which always seems to elude the healing it so desperately needs just at the moment when hopes for a brighter future begin to appear. Thus it transpires that the election of a Labour government in Britain, which wants a fresh start to be made in peace negotiations, has to be balanced against a resurgence of Sinn Fein and traditional Irish nationalism, on both sides of the border, which is one of the best ways of ensuring that the new dawn will never arrive.

The key to the Irish problem does not lie in Britain, which does not understand it or want to be involved. Whatever the past history of the two islands may have been, the modern British electorate has no desire to perpetuate a centuries-old conflict which has lost whatever purpose it may once have had. It is in Ireland, where the past remains fresh in a way that it does not in Britain, that a solution to the troubles must be found. Furthermore, it is in the south of Ireland, rather than in the north, that the real opportunity for progress lies. The Irish republic is a society which is undergoing rapid and profound change. It may seem unkind to say so, but this change is one which overtook most of the rest of Europe in the nineteenth century. It is a change from a rural to an urban way of life, which in turn brings about a shift in patterns of behaviour. The traditional morality of the Catholic church cannot withstand this pressure and gives way in practice to a more secular outlook.

All of this has long since taken place in France, Germany and Italy, and in recent years it has affected Spain and Portugal as well. Poland and the other countries of Eastern Europe have been in the deep-freeze of Communism for a generation, but they too are quickly catching up with their Western neighbours. It is only to be expected that Ireland will follow suit, though history and politics may conspire there to give this evolution its own peculiar twist. We should not forget that during the years of union with Britain Ireland was forced to adapt to what were then 'modern' ways, and that when the Free State was founded in 1922 it did all that it could to turn the clock back. As a result, modernization and Anglicization are even more closely linked in the Irish experience than they would otherwise have been.

One of the unfortunate side effects of this is that secularization appears to many Irish Catholics to be a form of Protestantism. Those in the Republic who campaign for divorce, legalized contraception and abortion often do so in the name of ecumenism – Catholics may not want these

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things for themselves, but they have to allow them if they want the Northern Protestants to feel at home in their country. The truth, of course, is rather different from this. Liberal and lapsed Catholics are only too eager for these things, while Northern Protestants seldom talk about them, and certainly none of them would regard such questions as belonging to the heart of their faith. Catholics find it hard to understand that Protestants can and do think for themselves, and that those who are convinced Christians will have a morality and lifestyle not all that different from the one the Roman church holds out as the ideal. The difference is that it will have been adopted from personal conviction, not because it has been imposed by an external ecclesiastical authority.

The de-Catholicization of southern Ireland is a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it is hard to regret the demise of a church authority which has frequently been abused, and which tries to impose regulations which are far from biblical on a population which is kept in ignorance of the truth and has little personal experience of God's grace. On the other hand, it is impossible to rejoice that this unsatisfactory situation is being replaced by another which is just as bad, if not worse. An ex-Catholic society, resentful of the church and hostile to any form of Christianity, is not what Protestants, especially Protestants in Northern Ireland, want to see, and it will probably alienate them even more than Catholic rigidity alienated them in the past. Pursuing the right thing in the wrong way may be bad, but it is not as bad as pursuing the wrong thing in the right (or at least in a more acceptable) way!

Ireland is becoming more like Britain, but unfortunately this is happening in all the wrong ways. And unlike Britain, the south of Ireland does not have the long tradition of Protestant spirituality which continues to leaven the lump of the wider society, however much it may have been weakened. In this country, the official churches may not get very far when they intervene in public life, but there is still a Christian witness in the hearts of many politicians, and not least in the new Labour government, which has more impact than we give it credit for. At least there is a residual Christian conscience to appeal to, which is in grave danger of disappearing entirely in the Irish republic. If anyone doubts this, just consider the fact that the new Irish Prime Minister, the leader of the most conservative and Catholic party in the country, is separated from his wife and living openly with another woman. Britain may have sunk far in moral terms, but would something like this be tolerated in Downing Street? Even with all our secularism, it is unlikely, precisely because we expect the Protestant conscience to forbid it in practice, whatever the law or the trendy media might have to say about it.

But if the moral force of the Catholic church is not replaced by the

moral force of the Christian conscience, what will there be to stop the Irish republic from sinking into a culture of corruption and violence even greater than the one which exists there now? If nationalism fills the void left by religion, how can things ever get better? The outlook, it must be said, is not promising, but Christians in Ireland, whether they are Protestant or Catholic, have a pressing duty to make the gospel message heard at this critical time in their nation's history. Only the mass conversion of Catholics to a living faith has any hope of changing the current atmosphere. Protestants too must come to a living faith when they have not already done so, and that could transform the north in a similar way. Above all, it might have some impact in Britain, where a similar change of heart and mind is also urgently needed. None of us has any cause to throw stones, or to feel superior to our neighbours. But in the Irish conflict, where religion is so often brought to the fore, let us at least make it clear what the real problem is, and proclaim as loudly as we can how it can be solved. That way there is at least a chance that the future will be an improvement on the past, and that the long-awaited healing of Ireland, like the long-awaited healing between Britain and Ireland, might actually take place.

GERALD BRAY