

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The End of Irish Catholicism?* by D. Vincent Twomey

Review by: Eugene Duffy

Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 54, No. 9 (Sep., 2003), pp. 506-508

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27664806>

Accessed: 14-12-2018 12:18 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Furrow* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Furrow*

## New Books

---

**The End of Irish Catholicism?** D. Vincent Twomey. Dublin: Veritas. Pp. 220. Price €12.97.

This is a book which grew out of a paper presented by Twomey to a seminar organized by the Institute of Irish Studies, Fordham University, in 2001. The topic of that seminar was 'The Irish Catholic Church Today'. This may have been a better title for this book which is an interesting and provocative catalogue of much that is problematic with the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland today (it does not address the state of the Catholic Church in Northern Ireland). The current title, while sounding a pessimistic note (even allowing for the question mark), is probably a good marketing stroke as there are many who would be tempted to believe that the end of Catholicism in Ireland is not far away and would like to see the road map in advance. If that is what they are looking for this will not be their guide. It reads more as an indictment of the past century, particularly since Vatican II, than as a prediction of the future.

In the first chapter, with very broad brushstrokes, Twomey outlines the emergence of a 'Catholic Irish identity', which he claims led to a certain insularity and smugness that rendered Irish Catholics, and especially their clergy, immune to the challenges and questions that faced their fellow Catholics in Europe for the greater part of the twentieth century. The very close links between Church and State contributed further to this malaise. A culture of submissiveness and unquestioning obedience stifled any serious theological enquiry, compromised a healthy relationship between Church and State and contributed to many of the problems of institutional abuse only now coming to light. At the end of this chapter he addresses the poor theology and 'half-baked ideas' that were offered to priests and religious immediately after Vatican II which, he claims, brought theology into further disrepute. Towards the end of the chapter he reminisces, with some regret, over a National Mission Congress held in 1968 when the difficult questions arising from Rahner's thesis of anonymous Christianity were faced but not answered. He claims that many went away wondering if their 'toil under the tropical sun was all in vain'. He speculates that, '[f]uture historians might well date the end of the modern missionary movement to that week in 1968'.

His exploration of how Irish is Irish Catholicism is, for the most part, a comparison of his own experience of Bavarian Catholicism and Irish

Catholicism. The latter he concludes looks 'like a Protestant culture decked out with some second-hand Catholic garments made of various neo-something-or-other art and architecture, French or Italianate devotions, and plaster saints ... [it] to an alarming degree, seemed to be, if not Jansenistic, at least puritanical both in the original sense of the word (as being iconoclastic, dualist, and militant) and in the narrow sense of disdain, not to say, hatred for the pleasure of the body in a mistaken notion of Christian piety' (48-49). He locates much of the poverty of Irish Catholic culture in the fact that we inherited a dehydrated, moralistic spirituality through English language and culture in the nineteenth century while the Irish language with its own spiritual idiom had been forcefully abandoned. He even sees this linguistic deficit as part of the current problem with the vernacular liturgy in Ireland.

A constant theme throughout the book is the extent to which Irish Catholicism has suffered because a serious theological tradition had not been developed in the country. This deficit has contributed to a wide variety of problems for the Catholic Church in Ireland today: the spirit of Vatican II was never seriously appropriated; Christian feasts and festivals were seen more in terms of obligation than celebrations of faith and identity; secularization and economic prosperity have easily stifled an awareness of the genuinely transcendent dimension of life; the country is bereft of a religious imagination, and there is no theological or a moral leadership to challenge the consumerism that threatens to choke the land.

Twomey touches on the issue of Church-State relations in Ireland and presents them in the light of debates regarding recent legal and constitutional changes. He raises some important issues here which deserve attention, for example, the application of the party whip when serious issues of conscience are at stake for the legislators or the creation of better structures to accommodate the contributions that the various Churches and religious groups make to the well-being of the nation. While he describes the tensions in the relationship as 'more accurately Church-media tussles', he overlooks a very significant contributor to much of the change that has occurred in this area over the past twenty years, namely, the conflict in Northern Ireland. The Government of the Republic considered Church-State relations to be an important issue for it to address if it was to make a significant contribution to a resolution of the Northern conflict. The issue was dealt with in the context of the New Ireland Forum with a view to making the Republic less confessional, particularly in the area of public morality, and therefore less threatening to the Unionist population of Northern Ireland. Significantly, too, the bishops and their advisors contributed to the New Ireland forum and spoke positively about the separation of Church and State. The political and sectarian tensions within Northern Ireland have cast their shadow over the Republic and to ignore their impact on Church-State relations here is to omit a very important dimension of recent developments in this area.

The final section of the book is a reflection on the decline in vocations to the priesthood and vowed religious life. He suggests that missionary congregations lacked any coherent theological vision and so devoted

## THE FURROW

their energies to issues of justice, peace and, latterly, ecology as a substitute for what they were originally founded to do. They no longer hold any attraction for young people with faith and idealism. He detects a fatalistic attitude among many older priests and religious to the decline in candidates for priesthood or religious life, an attitude which he claims is symptomatic of a lack of faith on the part of those who espouse it. Their attitude is, he claims, more sociological than theological and while it is they will not inspire confidence in another generation to follow them. However, his analysis of the vocations question, too, would need to be situated in the wider context of the Western Europe and North America trends (the Parisian exception, which he highlights, seems only to prove the rule). Some of the problems that he identifies here as Irish may not be as Irish as they first appear.

In his introduction Twomey tells us that this is not an academic book (despite forty-two pages of endnotes, many of which could have been included in the main body of text without any disruption of the content or style). He says that it is an exercise in pastoral theology. It could be more suitably described as personal reflections on the situation of Catholicism in Ireland today. This would more accurately reflect the nature of the book. Many of the opinions expressed are personal but nonetheless very interesting and valuable. One would have liked to see more of them developed and better substantiated. There are occasional errors of fact and some interesting *non sequiturs*. CORI is given as an acronym for the Conference of Religious Orders of Ireland, when in fact it should be the Conference of Religious of Ireland (p. 98). An interesting *non sequitur* occurs in the context of a reflection on sexual morality: 'When man (*sic.*), of his own initiative, separates the unitive significance of his act from its procreative significance, he is usurping the place of God. Is it any wonder that our Churches (*sic.*) are emptying and vocations falling?' Or perhaps this is more a sociological than a theological observation.

The book ends on a hopeful note regarding the development of theological centres and programmes around the country. Perhaps the end is not as near for Irish Catholicism as the title of this book might suggest at first glance. Indeed, many of the author's own suggestions would contribute to its revitalisation. Both his criticisms and the suggestions deserve to be taken seriously.

EUGENE DUFFY

*Galway*

**A Short History of the Church of Ireland** (Fourth Edition). Kenneth Milne. Dublin: The Columba Press. Pp. 80. Price €6.99 (£4.99).

**Changing Scenes: Changing Ministry in a Changing Church in a Changing Land.** Brian Mayne. Dublin: The Columba Press. Pp. 122. Price €12.99 (£8.99).

These two books from The Columba Press are both concerned with aspects of the Church of Ireland and its history, and yet their approach