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The Ten Commandments as Our Code: Media Censorship in 20th Century Ireland

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This paper discusses how following the establishment of the Irish Free State, successive governments tried to create a society that was distinctly 'Irish'. As Catholicism was identified as an important dimension of Irish identity, successive governments throughout the 20th Century sought to preserve and strengthen Catholic moral teaching. In this essay, I use film censorship as a lens through which we can identify how an attempt was made to influence a distinct social reality by the governments of the new Irish Free State. This social reality was a distinct vision of what Irish culture was meant to be but I conclude that culture is not something that can be created or moulded by a government but is a social process.

Introduction

Ireland has become a more secular society. Although Roman Catholicism remains the most dominant religion in the state, the percentage of the population who call themselves Catholic has declined in every census since 1961. In 1961, 94.86% of the population identified themselves as being Catholic but this fell to 86.83% in 2006. It is also worth noting that the percentage of those who state no religion has continued to increase gradually over the same period, from 0.04% in 1961 to 4.39% in 2006, demonstrating an inverse relationship between the two (Central Statistics Office 2006). Many who claim themselves to be Catholics are not practising Catholics and for many the religion plays a largely

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negligible role in their lives. Research has shown that there are a significant number of self-declared Catholics that are actually atheist, agnostic or do not believe in a god. 16% of Catholics 'belong but do not believe' (Nic Ghiolla Phádraig 2009). Irish society has undergone significant changes due to a variety of factors. There is now an increasing foreign media presence with Sky News and CNN being viewed in many homes throughout Ireland. Television has become much more globalised with the increasing popularity of US sitcoms and British soaps. These foreign cultures and perspectives tend to have increasing influence on our own country as we become more in touch with what they portray to us. This increasing globalisation has slowly eroded the power of the Catholic Church as well as the distinctiveness of Irish culture. Ireland has also become more cosmopolitan due to the influx of many foreign immigrants. As many of these people are not Catholic, this reduces the monopoly power of the Catholic Church in Ireland. The CSO found that in 2006 3.27% of the population were of other religions (not Catholic or Anglican) compared with a figure of 0.19% in 1961 (Central Statistics Office 2006). The changes in nationalities are also very clear. In 2006 over 7% of the population were born outside of Ireland and the UK whereas in 1961 this figure stood at just over 0.6%. It is also worth noting that during this period the total population rose from 2.7 million in 1961 to over 4.1 million in 2006 (Central Statistics Office 2006).

This more diverse and liberal society differs significantly in its ecumenical and moral perspectives from the era of the Irish Free State and de Valera's time in power. The Catholic Church had significant influence for much of the 20th Century in Ireland and this was evident in almost each and every walk of life. Irish society today is the product of a gradual easing of the grasp of this institution on the Irish nation, and its involvement in regulatory authorities. In this paper I examine the role of the Catholic Church in censorship in Ireland

after 1922 up until the 1980s and explain how Catholic moral thinking was imposed on society as a result of its influence.

The Role for Censorship in Creating a Catholic Identity

At the outset it is important to mention the fact that prior to independence Ireland was by all means a very Catholic country. On gaining independence, the state sought the consolidation of this reality and the escalation and strengthening of Church power. The purpose of censorship in a general sense is restraining the displaying of certain information which may be seen as harmful to its audience. This can take the form of making changes to imagery, ‘bleeping’ profanities on radio and television or the ‘cutting’ of scenes deemed unfit for the eyes of its audience. In enforcing this in Ireland, anything that was feared may corrupt the minds of society could be easily removed.

“I take the Ten Commandments as my Code” (Rockett 2004, p.63). These are the striking words of James Montgomery, the official Irish Film Censor (1923-1940). Montgomery spoke these words after the introduction of the Censorship of Films Act, 1923 by Minister Kevin O’Higgins. This Act had stated that a moving picture or film could not be exhibited in public unless the Official Film Censor had certified that ‘the whole of such film is fit for exhibition in public’. The Irish Vigilance Association, a Catholic Organisation, had argued that there should be one censorship for the whole of Ireland as well as ‘one moral standard’ (Rockett 2004, p.64).

We may look at this today with some concern. The notion of one single man, with one single opinion, imposing one moral standard on society is problematic. Article 8 of Saorstáit na hÉireann, the Constitution of the Irish Free State, which was drawn up only the year previously had stated that all citizens have “freedom of conscience”. However this was “subject to public order and

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morality”. This can be viewed as being quite contradictory. One person’s moral standards can differ from another person’s, that’s what freedom of conscience conveys. This moral standard was based on Roman Catholic ideals and was one which the Irish Government wanted their newly formed state to live by. Censorship was to become a way of preserving the status quo, and to prevent the pollution of Irish society by some other alien culture.

Ireland was a new state, a Free State. With this came the desire to develop a true national identity, a culture that was entirely Irish. It was a time when Nationalism and Republicanism were at the forefront of society, together with a largely anti-British sentiment in the country. Radical feminists and Nationalists Inghinidhe na hÉireann (Daughters of Ireland) had declared in their constitution in 1900 that they sought-

“to encourage study of Gaelic, of Irish literature, history, music and art... to discourage reading and circulation of low English literature, the singing of English songs... and to combat in every way English influence which is doing so much injury to the artistic taste and refinement of the Irish people” (Ward 1993 in Rockett 2004, p.20).

It was not just the radical feminists that believed in this. This became to a large extent the government strategy. The government sought to encourage the development of Irish sports, to encourage people to listen to Irish music, and to restore Irish as the spoken language of the country. These were all recognised as part of Irish national identity. However the great pillar of Irish identity was Catholicism. For political leaders to be Irish was to be Catholic. It was easy to see why censorship became such an important part of the Irish media. It was the easiest way for the Irish Government to control the masses and to keep the country ‘Irish’ after 700 years spent under foreign rule. Restoring the identity of the country which had been diluted by the British influence began by creating a truly Catholic state which had its own sense of morality. Hence, this moral

standard was the ‘one moral standard’ of the people of Ireland. Then it is of no surprise that the Irish Government was happy to become subservient to the Catholic Church. Although not theocratic – the state was not run by priests and bishops (in fact there was usually little direct Church interference) – the influence of the Church was so great that they had the power to mould Irish society. The fact that most politicians were devout Catholics meant that the Church didn’t need a political hold of their own because Church teaching had made its way into the political sphere anyway.

The Church wanted Irish society to develop a distinctive Catholic culture, one which could display Ireland to the Vatican and the rest of the world as a country of great faith and religiosity. The Church wanted to protect its people from materialism and consumerism. Material possessions were only distractions from the more important spiritual way of life. Dr. Thomas Gilmartin, Archbishop of Tuam, described the ‘evils’ of the material world to the Mayo Feis in 1927-

"The cheap foreign products of machinery have taken the place of solid and lasting work of the Irish hand. Instead of milk and porridge, we have repeated doses of strong tea and white bread. Instead of socks and stockings made of Irish wool, we have foreign importations of imitation silk to minister the vanity of our girls. Instead of visiting and story-telling, there are cinemas and night-walking, often with disaster to virtue, Instead of Irish dances we have sensuous contortions of the body timed to a semi-barbaric music" (Inglis 2008, pp.14-15).

This moral code is part of what one Pierre Bourdieu would term ‘habitus’. Bourdieu defines habitus as “systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures” (Bourdieu 1990, p.53). In other words, habitus can be understood to be a structured knowledge that a social actor has of the social world. Practices that social actors generate will be constructed within the constraints of this habitus.

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The reproduction of this habitus over time leads to the “production of a common-sense world” (Bourdieu 1990, p.58). Applied to the issue at hand, borrowing from Inglis, we can say that Church influence in Ireland was part of the consolidation and strengthening of a ‘Catholic habitus’ (Inglis 2007 in O’Sullivan, pp.69-70). Catholic morality was a ‘common-sense’ value which was not invariably challenged. In understanding Bourdieu’s ‘doxa’, the “immediate pre-verbal taking-for-granted of the world that flows in the practical sense” (Bourdieu 1990, p.68), we can say that this was a doxic perspective that had become such a gargantuan part of the Irish psyche.

Inglis discusses further the issues that the Church had with materialism in his book *Moral Monopoly: The Catholic Church in Modern Irish Society* suggesting that the Church believes that people should instead ‘accept their God-given position, and generally follow Christ’s example in their suffering’ (Inglis 1987, p.73). He explains that ‘Catholicism is the opium of the Irish people as it maintains the status quo, and does little to reduce the economic inequalities of society’ (Inglis 1987, p.73). The idea of a status quo is of central importance in the examination of censorship. If Catholicism was to maintain society in its moral beliefs, and maintain the consciousness amongst the people that their economic position was of supernatural choosing, then they could not expose society to any ideas that would undermine the Church. Hence, there was a need for censorship. Otherwise, the ‘one moral standard’ for Ireland would not be sustainable. This would leave Ireland vulnerable to the influence of foreign ideas, and the true Irish cultural identity would be corrupted further just as the British had done before.

Tom Inglis described how the effects of censorship and Catholic morality worked their way into the entire society as a whole -

“It has not paid to oppose publicly the moral dictates of the church. Indeed censorship has often been self-imposed; anything which was offensive or critical of the church being hidden away. Booksellers, chemists and other traders in some parts of the country could still run an economic risk in selling goods which go against the dominant morality. Writers and journalists have also been forced to abstain from any serious criticism of the church and its teachings. An employee of the supposedly secular Irish Times noted that in the 1950s, journalists in that newspaper 'had to avoid writing about any subject in which criticism, even if justified, could be construed as criticism of the church'” (Inglis 1987, p.71).

This demonstrated how people had to work their lives around one moral standard for their own sake economically if nothing else. Censorship was thus not the only protection for ‘Catholic habitus’ for a fear of social exclusion or economic difficulty led to the reproduction of Catholic social norms within the status quo. Inglis again borrows from Bourdieu in clarifying this point. Social actors needed to attain ‘religious capital’ as this gave them the foundation for the attainment of other forms of capital such as economic and symbolic capital, or simply put, wealth and honour (Inglis 2007 in O’Sullivan, p.70). Therefore, we can think of religious capital as being a level of understanding or knowledge of Catholic moral teaching. This was a prerequisite for any self-progression that one may hope to achieve.

The election victory of Fianna Fáil in 1932 meant a continuation of Church power in Irish society. De Valera had always shaped policies in accordance with Catholic teaching. Priests were made delegates and took an active role in Fianna Fáil Ard Fheiseanna, and Eugene Coyle, Parish Priest of Garrison, County Fermanagh, was a member of the first Fianna Fáil National Executive (Murray 2000, p.283). De Valera was concerned with creating this National Identity,

similarly to the Church. The following is an extract from a radio broadcast that he made in 1943-

"That Ireland which we dreamed of would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as the basis of right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit - a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, with the romping of sturdy children, the contests of athletic youth and the laughter of comely maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of people living the life that God desires that man should live" (Inglis 2008, p.147).

The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 demonstrated the close ties between the Church and Fianna Fáil. This was demonstrated as the Eucharistic Congress provided de Valera with "an opportunity to baptize his synthesis of republicanism and Catholicism, reminding the papal legate... that he was a loyal son of Rome" (Lee 1990, p.177). Censorship would ensure the preservation of 'Catholic habitus' and this would present to Rome and the world the identity of Ireland as a deeply religious state.

The Enforcement of Censorship in 20th Century Ireland

The Censorship of Films Act was introduced in 1923 which as previously stated required the Official Censor to certify the film before it was exhibited in public. This was a demonstration of the authoritarian Catholic morality being enforced in Ireland as a way of preserving the 'Catholic habitus'. The Act drew much criticism at the time including criticism from Thomas Johnson, Labour leader. He asked if it was right to "choose one man, or even a small board of appeal... whose conception of morality and social order are too narrow and perhaps old-fashioned" (Rockett 2004, p.66). The Act did not give the censor power to reject films that contained insults to the Irish. As Ireland had practically no film

industry, all representations of the Irish tended to come from Britain or America. Nonetheless, censor James Montgomery proceeded to ban anything that seemed to ridicule the Irish (Rockett 2004, p.91). However, film was not the only area of the media that was under strict censorship. The Censorship of Publications Act was introduced in 1929. This meant that certain books were banned and others were available to some through restricted access. The Act also made it an offence to advocate the use of contraceptives (Murray 2000, p.288).

Montgomery would not allow any criticism of the Catholic Church. In *Angels with Dirty Faces* (1938) a priest in the film, Fr. Connolly, tells a lie. Montgomery stated that “no motive however good can excuse a lie... the priests lie must come out.” The film was later passed but with cuts (Rockett 2004, p.82). He also banned any films that depicted the life of Christ. Although some years after Montgomery, *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* (1979) was banned for this reason. It was a parody about a man named Brian who had been mistaken for Jesus all of his life. It was eventually passed by censor Sheamus Smith in 1987. Richard Hayes also banned or cut films that questioned Catholic authority and teaching. A documentary entitled *Monkey Land Up The Barito River* was cut as it portrayed the Darwinian view of Origin of the Species. This if anything highlighted how the censors sought to protect the Catholic anti-materialist standpoint (Rockett 2004, p.120).

Even films that had passed the stringent Hays Code in the U.S. were subject to cuts in Ireland. The Motion Picture Production Code, popularly referred to as the Hays Code, was a self-censorship code that had been drawn up by Will Hays who headed the trade body, the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (Rockett 2004, p. 98). There were many parallels between the code and the Irish attitude towards censorship. For instance,

bedroom scenes were prohibited if they showed characters in bed together and when in the bed a character must have one foot on the ground (Carty 1995, p.46). The principles that underpinned the Hays Code were that Catholic and Protestant reformers “wanted entertainment films to emphasize that the Church, the Government and the family were the cornerstones of an orderly society”. Kevin Rockett calls this “conservative middle class morality re-packaged” (Rockett 2004, pp.98-99).

The main problem that James Montgomery had with films was sex. He would not allow any references to sexuality, scenes containing nudity, or scenes that had an underlying suggestive nature. ‘Semi-nude’ was the expression used to describe any exposed part of the female body below the neck. He argued that “absolute nudity might be less offensive than semi-nudity which in my opinion is pornographic” (Rockett 2004, p.85). In the 17 years that he spent in office, Montgomery banned 1905 films compared with 177 films banned by the British Board of Film Classification in a similar period. Films were either made available to everyone or were banned in their entirety. Montgomery fought his corner though, taking the view that to certify a film for exhibition to adults only would create an air of curiosity, desire and inquisitiveness, something that Montgomery felt was unhealthy and would only draw it attention (Rockett 2004, p.91).

Richard Hayes took over the reins of censorship from Montgomery in 1940. Britain and America were beginning to come out from behind the curtain of censorship by the 1950s but Hayes’ was only to continue the hold that his predecessor had on the Irish media. The truth of the ‘Catholic habitus’ shone through in this quote from Hayes –

“There is a simple moral code, and there are principles on which civilisation and family life are based. Any ignoring of these or defiance of them in a picture bans it straightaway as far as I am concerned” (Rockett 2004, p.109).

The anti-sex approach was still heavily strict and Hayes would even censor anything to do with childbirth or pregnancy. The words ‘I’m Pregnant’ were deleted from Michael Curtiz’s *I’ll See You In My Dreams* (1952) and the word ‘Maternity’ on the hospital doors as well as references to triplets were cut from the film *That’s The Spirit* (1945) (Rockett 2004, p.118). The attitudes towards sex continued into the 1960s as censor of the time Liam O’Hora became concerned about Elvis’ pelvic gyrations in films such as *Rock Around The Clock* which premiered in 1957. Elvis became hugely popular among young women in Ireland, and this culminated in him toppling Bing Crosby’s 25 year reign as Ireland’s favourite screen star. It was also worth noting that Crosby was a Catholic. Journalist and film critic for the *Sunday Independent* Noel Moran thought “this fell far short of what we expected as a reflection of National taste” (Rockett 2004, p.151). In many instances the pelvic gyrations were cut from Elvis’ films. It was clear though that by 1960s that there was a real youth consciousness developing underneath this veil of apparent social morality.

Television was a huge development in the liberation of Irish society. Gay Byrne discussed many moral issues on ‘*The Late Late Show*’ which came to Irish screens in 1962. Television also brought American and British shows to an Irish audience, societies that had become far more open in the previous decades. Tom Inglis typified what this meant for Ireland - “Instead of the family kneeling down around the fire to say the rosary, they now sat down around the television” (Inglis 1987, p.90). Television helped the Irish to relax their strict adherence to Catholic teaching. Their daily rituals began to change. Media gave society the chance to be more open minded and opinionated on such topics such

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as religion, sex, the role of women and the family. Television portrayed lifestyles to the Irish in which religion was not at the forefront. This was the beginning of censorship's decline. The people wanted to break free and be liberated from this iron cage and they were prepared to dismiss the power of the Church to achieve this.

This reality is apparent when we examine the number of appeals lodged to the Censorship of Films Appeal Board. The Appeal Board had been set up as part of the Censorship of Films Act, 1923. In 1970 the Board had 65 rejects to view; only 4 of the censored films were not appealed. This pointed to the desire of society to be liberalised. Of the 65 appeals 19 bans were upheld, 28 films were passed with cuts and an over-18s certificate. Another film, *How Do I Love Thee?* (1970), was passed uncut with an over-18s certificate. 12 films were passed with over-16s certificates, 5 of which were uncut and the remaining films received general certificates (Rockett 2004 p.214). The vast number of appeals of banned films revealed the public dissatisfaction and anger of critics towards the power of the censor.

On the 31st January 1971 the first monthly list of banned and cut films appeared in the *Sunday Independent*. This change had come about thanks to persistent campaigning from film critics such as Ciaran Carty. These 'black lists' continued to appear each month up until 1974. Their appearance resulted in a campaign against censorship and its chokehold on Irish society. The black lists also undermined the position of Christopher Macken who was ousted from office and replaced by Dermot Breen leading to a new liberal era (Carty 1995 ,p.53). Sheamus Smith who became censor in the mid 1980s and remained in office until 2003 said –

“I don’t approve of cutting. I think that a film is a director’s work and he is the only one really entitled to cut it. Therefore I avoid it. I won’t do it on request and I rarely do it anyway” (Rockett 2004, p.246).

This was a far different approach than that of many who had filled this position previously to Smith.

All of the censors had been appointed by the Government of the time. Also, all of these were male. With Government policy being moulded to fit Catholic teachings it was easy for the Church to enforce its standards and ideas on what was acceptable national taste. This Catholic idea of ‘one moral standard’ was sustained for so many years this way. The de Valera vision of an Ireland that was essentially ‘Irish’ had become only a tool of suppression. Censorship sought to maintain this regimented way of life for the Irish in which people would surrender themselves to the institution of the Catholic Church. People put spiritual things above themselves, fearing that if they did not then they would be condemned to hell for ever more. The media brought to an end the common idea of the time that priests could not be criticised, and that they were always right because they were preaching the word of God. People had never before questioned the authority of the Church or its teachings. Catholic opinion of moral issues has now changed with regards to contraception, sex before marriage, homosexuality and divorce. Now people make up their own minds instead of being told what is right and what is wrong. Today’s media opens debate on the issues that censorship had previously sought to restrict. In this sense Ireland has been liberated from the arbitrary hold of censorship.

Conclusion

Censorship inhibited the development of Irish society. It led to the preservation and strengthening of a ‘Catholic habitus’. Despite this de Valera never achieved

the full restoration of the mother tongue nor did he ultimately create the culture that he had hoped to create. Identity and culture cannot be created out of the mind of a single man like de Valera, or the teachings of a single institution such as the Catholic Church. They take their shape out of social realities and through the everyday actions of the people that take part in society. The media helped Irish society to move away from the Catholic Church and to create their own National identity, free from the suppression of the censors and the Catholic Church. People have developed their own sense of morality and their own opinions both individually and collectively and are living lives where the membership of such institutions is entirely voluntary.

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