

BOOK REVIEW

Memory and Redemption: Church, Politics and Prophetic Theology in Ireland, by Terence P. McCaughey. Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1993. 167pp. IR £12.99 (paperback).

M*emory and Redemption* is a timely book, thought-provoking in its content and refreshing in its honesty. The author's unfailingly stimulating diagnosis of the Irish situation reveals a subtle, humane and generous mind, moved by the tragedy of Ireland, but not panicking. Terence McCaughey, a Presbyterian and native of Belfast, who teaches in the Irish and Theology Departments of Trinity College, Dublin, is well-placed to address most aspects of the intractable and apparently incurable disease afflicting our country.

He takes up the prophetic 'context-widening' (p. 6) dimension of Christian faith and uses this as a focus for studying the reality of modern Ireland. The role of conscience is central to the exercise of the prophetic gift, but conscience understood as the widest possible *consciousness* of others and their needs, together with an awareness of the imminent reality of the Kingdom of God. Hence the Christian must attempt to keep the three dimensions of time — past, present and future — constantly in view, not out of historical curiosity, but because of the glorious destiny revealed first in Jesus to which God is calling the world. The past holds the clues, or at least some of the clues, as to why things are now as they are, and it may offer some unsuspected clues about how to negotiate the passage from here to eternity. To see Christianity as a historical religion means — and McCaughey's book reminds us of this — to see it as a religion related not only to the past but directed also towards the future.

Proceeding to his examination McCaughey scrutinises closely the two main foundational stories in Ireland: the 'Protestant story' of Ulster and the 'Catholic story' of Ireland, stressing however that little is to be gained by simply giving *both* of these mutually antagonistic stories as well-meaning but vacuous endorsement. For how can one honestly endorse what is flawed even if it is passionately and honestly held? Ulster Protestants see themselves, he argues, chiefly in terms of their experience of conquest and endurance in Ireland and are reinforced in their self-understanding by reading the Old Testament tale of ancient Israel's trials, triumphs and tribulations in the Promised Land as a foreshadowing of their own. The heady doctrine of Election, McCaughey observes, has taken on public meaning in Ulster, confirming the Protestant people in their own religio-political ideology: they hold the former lands of the unregenerate by divine decree. This is the underlying reason, according to McCaughey's fascinating analysis of the Ulster Protestant self-understanding, why ecumenism must be unwelcome to Protestants, since if taken seriously, it might

conceivably subvert the ideology which makes sense of and legitimates for Protestants their ascendancy in Ulster. Even affluent and liberal Protestants, much to their *chagrin*, cannot afford to distance themselves too far from their co-religionists on whose muscle they depend for the maintenance of their own privileged position.

The Catholic-Nationalist story which underlies the Irish Catholic sense of identity rests on an 'origin tale', which reinforces the Nationalist sense of 'being there first'. This story has been used to voice the Catholic community's refusal to accept the humiliations of the past four hundred years as the definitive expression of their identity. Of all the institutions and cultural emblems of Gaelic Ireland Catholicism alone survived intact into the nineteenth century and became increasingly the only real badge of Irishness, there being little else left to fulfil this role. The Irish nationalist story combining confessional allegiance and the memory of lost land, could not but become an exclusive story, excluding those 'others' in Ireland who were identified as, or with, the dispossessors.

Why this apparent obsession with the past, noted especially by the English in regard to Ireland? Ireland, the author explains, has few visual monuments or native institutional structures to remind its inhabitants constantly of their past, i.e. how things came to be the way they *now* are. Hence in Ireland people are almost inevitably driven to commemorating their past in story form in order to reinforce the basic element in any human identity.

The unsettling changes of the twentieth century have of course altered the way in which all commitments in Ireland now imagine their future. On the Protestant side the more distraught elements within Ulster Unionism tend to harbour apocalyptic visions of an immanent crisis. However among the vast mass of liberal Unionists — similar in this respect to the English South Africans — the author detects a widespread disturbing lack of vision, people just drifting along, emotionally detached from the horror nearby. On the Catholic side, the gulf opening up between the North and the South is revealed in the decay of any serious belief in the South in the ideals that inspired the foundation of the State. The South is drifting rudderless, paying lip-service at official level to the pieties of the past, and encouraging a practical cynicism even among the young. Those from the Catholic community who still have passionate convictions — mainly to the North — have a tragically flawed understanding both of the true nature of the enemy they are fighting, and of the position of the Unionists in contemporary Ireland.

Moving on to discuss how each side in the conflict — including of course the British government — views the 'others', McCaughey stresses the essential sterility of most current positions that rely simply on a 'scapegoat solution' to the problem, and he confronts the 'scapegoating' habit of mind with the New Testament understanding

of Jesus as the definitive scapegoat. His conclusion is that *no one* can be excluded in the search for a resolution of the conflict: 'Refusal on our part to speak to them [i.e. paramilitaries] is unlikely to convince them that for us talking and negotiation are the only constructive way forward — in contrast with the way of violence *they* have chosen' (p. 76).

The understanding of conscience implied in such a judgment, i.e. conscience as a developing *consciousness* of the 'other' and ultimately of the altogether 'Other' is taken further in later chapters. McCaughey highlights the failures of various groups in Ireland to recognise and respond to each other's needs or their own. He illustrates these failures in, among other areas, the sphere of education. As an educator himself, it is not surprising that the author should take the Churches' role in education in this century under his microscope as a test-case of how they operate. This thorny question is not one to which the Churches anywhere in Ireland responded with prophetic imagination or creative generosity of spirit. Not exclusively, but generally, they have tended to see their role as one of exercising power and control in defence of interests that could not always be identified as unambiguously Christian.

On the important issue of how conscience is to be informed, McCaughey argues that the Irish Catholic bishops, for example, did not give the best leadership to their flock in this area in relation to the controversial 'pro-life' and divorce referenda. A deliberate effort was made to give conscience its due, in theory, but the bishops, by ducking questions of truth, failed, in his view, to meet the intellectual and theological, and therefore the complex pastoral challenge presented by the grave issues involved. They argued from essentially pragmatic considerations for the outcome they desired to see reached. In so doing they may unwittingly have contributed to the marginalisation of the Church in Irish life, allowing it to become just one more pressure group within secular society, whereas Christian faith claims to be bound up with the truth of *all* of life. That the bishops may have been swayed in their approach by a very understandable fear of change, can be readily conceded, but McCaughey insists that Christianity is not at heart a religion for an immutable world, but on the contrary was born in the expectation of cataclysmic change. Now assessments of the proportions of new and old in Christianity, even in the earliest Christianity, will no doubt always differ, but a sensitivity to the reality of God's *difference* from us and our stale habits of mind and action can perhaps at times provide a wholesome stimulus for needed change.

On the question of *how* the past can be recovered for the sake of the future, McCaughey mentions firstly the fact that, for believers at any rate, the story of Jesus must be allowed to 'monitor' any new path into the future one may be contemplating. As regards attempts to improve the Irish situation by 're-contextualising' it, e.g. in the so-called new

Europe, he warns against false solutions which would ignore aspects of the Irish past that should be cherished in any future, such as the Irish experience of poverty and exploitation which should alert future generations of Irish people to the needs of the exploited in the world of today and tomorrow. More controversial but patiently argued is his suggestion that the time has perhaps finally come for Protestant Unionists to consider breaking the link with the British monarchy in order to *enable the best elements in their own tradition to flourish*, and to operate creatively for the benefit of all in Ireland. As a Presbyterian McCaughey looks back with legitimate pride and gratitude to the brief spring of the 18th century United Irishmen whose attitudes towards the burning questions of their day were intelligent, magnanimous and liberating, and not unconnected with their lively Calvinist sense of the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of predestination which permitted them to face merely worldly power undaunted.

The final tentative chapter stresses the inevitably ambiguous nature of Christian prophetic speech and action in a world where limits on human insight and freedom are legion and where honest disagreement among Christians, as people who walk by faith and not by sight, will simply have to be lived with. However in the face of such ambiguity, the author draws comfort from Bonhoeffer's reminder that 'ultimate responsibility is not ours' (p. 141). Yet — dare one ask? — can such consolation make the problem of evil easier to live with? The author's insistence — voiced more than once in the book — that Christian faith should not be confined to the mystical and the private is valuable, but presumably should not be taken to mean that the mystical and the private are to be 'excommunicated' from the Christian universe. Evil, and the havoc it causes, can be inexpressibly private, and its resolution is surely beyond the scope of the prophetic calling alone. Indeed the inner logic of prophecy itself may lead inexorably to mysticism, and *vice versa*.

In conclusion it is perhaps of relevance to the concerns of *Memory and Redemption* to recall what Nietzsche said about the burden of the past in 'On the uses and disadvantages of history for life', the second of his *Untimely Meditations*. 'For since,' he wrote, 'we are the outcome of earlier generations, we are also the outcome of their aberrations, passions and errors, and indeed of their crimes; it is not possible wholly to free oneself from this chain ... The best we can do is to confront our inherited and hereditary nature with our knowledge of it, and through a new, stern discipline combat our inborn heritage and implant in ourselves a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature, so that our first nature withers away. One of the many strengths of McCaughey's immensely rich book is that he is sensitive to the poignancy of the attachment that many in Ireland have to their past. Whether in the future a discriminating loyalty to the past can be

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combined somehow with the forging of 'a new habit, a new instinct, a second nature', in Nietzsche's terminology, that will allow all the diverse groups within Ireland to breathe freely within her boundaries, is a question that this book should give those interested valuable help in responding to.

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