IRELAND AND EUROPEAN POST-SECULARISM

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Fears that a yes vote might eventually force Ireland to legalise abortion and recognise same-sex marriages have fed the campaigns against the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty. Following the Pope, Catholic critics of the document have also noted the lack of any explicit reference to God in its final draft, justifying suspicions that the European Union was fundamentally secular and ultimately threatened Christian values.

In sharp contrast, European laicists have criticised the treaty for reintroducing religion into public life and restoring an all too traditional moral order in Europe. They consider that European authorities have yielded to the pressure of the Catholic Church, which is known to have lobbied in favour of some sort of acknowledgment of the Christian contribution to the making of Europe. The preamble of the Treaty on European Union thus refers to "the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe" ("Treaty of Lisbon," TL/en 11) as a source of inspiration. In the same way, the Charter of Fundamental Rights, which is appended to the treaty, underlines the "spiritual and moral heritage" of the Union ("Charter" C 83/391). It also includes, in its definition of "the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion," "the freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private, to manifest religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance" ("Charter" C 83/393). As for the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, it expresses the Union's respect for "the status under national law of churches and religious associations or communities in the Member States." It also recognises "their specific contribution" and pledges the Union "to maintain an open, transparent and regular dialogue with those Churches and organisations" ("Consolidated Version" C 115/55).

Not only is the Lisbon Treaty not a fully secular text, but it amends previous treaties, namely the Treaty on European Union and the Treaty establishing the European Community, to include religious provisions. It is significant that the compromise reached between widely diverging views across Europe should have allowed for such an unexpected move after decades of secularisation. Jürgen Habermas, who coined the concept of post-secularism to define the current trend, notes that "the secularistic certainty that religion will disappear worldwide in the course of accelerated modernization is losing ground" (Habermas). Even though a professed atheist himself, he thinks the time has come to reflect on the relevance and desirability of a purely secular justification of political rule. In his estimation, "cultural and societal secularization" should be understood as "a double learning process that compels both the traditions of the Enlightenment and the religious doctrines to reflect on their respective limits" (Habermas & Ratzinger 22-23). Such an evolution is necessary to provide the con-

ditions for a renewed respect of the value of solidarity between citizens, on which democracy is grounded (Habermas & Ratzinger 35). Should modernisation and secularisation "go off the rail" (Habermas & Ratzinger 22, 35), this essential cornerstone of the democratic system might indeed be threatened. Therefore, it is "in the interest of the constitutional state to deal carefully with all the cultural sources that nourish its citizens' consciousness of norms and their solidarity" (Habermas & Ratzinger 45), while accepting the basic principle of tolerance which defines a post-secular society. "In the postsecular society," Habermas writes,

> there is an increasing consensus that certain phases of the 'modernization of the public consciousness' involve the assimilation and transformation of both religious and secular mentalities. If both sides understand the secularization of society as a complementary learning process, then they will also have cognitive reasons to take seriously each other's contribution to controversial subjects in the public debate. (Habermas & Ratzinger 46)

The Lisbon Treaty clearly follows these recommendations, and we may thus suggest that it can be read as a post-secular constitution for a post-secular Union. However, a post-secular society and post-secularism itself are not so easily defined. Religious considerations and in particular the so-called 'return of religion' must come into the picture at some stage as well as more general considerations on the nature of Christianity and the reduced influence of Europe in today's globalised world.

This article seeks to identify the essential components of European post-secularism and examine the interactions between post-secular Europe and Ireland. It will argue that post-secularism may be central to the elaboration of a new worldview, currently in the making. Post-secular society is still a land of possibilities that is being explored and shaped as a result of debates between individuals and groups that have fundamentally different interests. In the Irish context, it will be argued, both the secularisation debate and the current policy of the Catholic Church may be numbered among the attempts to contribute to the invention of a new Europe as well as of a new Ireland. To Habermas, "a 'post-secular' society must at some point have been in a 'secular' state" (Habermas), which certainly limits the possible application of the notion to affluent western societies but also raises the question of the nature of a secular state. As concerns Ireland, it clearly raises the issue of the extent and depth of the secularisation process. Commenting on the Garda's ban of Sikh turbans, Fintan O'Toole points at the non-secular frame of the Irish state and calls for more secularisation at state level, which, to him, implies "creating a public realm in which all religions are respected because none is invoked" (O'Toole). The secularisation process has only just begun in Ireland, and we may wonder if it is relevant as yet to talk of this residually Catholic state as a part of post-secular Europe.

Indeed, if we are to believe Klaus Eder, a prominent theorist of post-secularism, the label can only be applied to a society in which secularisation has meant the disappearance of religion from public discourse, which is not really the case in Ireland. In such societies as Ireland the current paradox is this: "On the one hand, we speak of

secular society, but, on the other hand more and more people discuss religious matters" (Bosetti & Eder). This phenomenon is certainly difficult to assess in a partly secularised society. Yet we may wonder if any European state has ever been fully secular. It is highly significant, for instance, that objectively secularised and largely de-christianised France should have banned Muslim scarves from state schools while in effect never prohibiting the wearing of Christian symbols in spite of a legal ban on all religious symbols. Nicolas Sarkozy's Catholic commitment and his desire to reconcile Church and State have been much commented on as a symptom of post-secularism, but one of his most noteworthy predecessors, General De Gaulle, one of the founding fathers of the European Community, was also a practising Catholic. Are we to believe that secularism has ever implied schizophrenia? As we proceed, we shall see that it never did, because the liberal values of the Enlightenment have Christian roots. Following Charles Taylor, we may suggest that it would be more appropriate to say that the modernisation process simply induced a shift in the place of religion. Ireland, for its part, features among the modern states in which "the disappearance of an ontic dependence on something higher" has been replaced by "a strong presence of God" in its national identity. According to Taylor, such states may be defined as secular on grounds that they experienced a "shift from the enchanted to the identity form of presence that set the stage for the secularity of the contemporary world" (193). Vincent Twomey, while lamenting the disappearance of the "profound faith" (31) which characterised the Irish tradition, is aware that the politicisation of Catholicism may very well have stood at the origin of secularisation. He notes:

> As a civil religion, transcendent faith tends to become immanent, the bond that binds the nation together […], and so the Church serves the nation rather than transcending it. Nationalism, even with a catholic face, runs the risk of becoming 'the angel of the nation' […] who sets himself up against God. (33)

Whatever the origins of what Twomey calls "the ultimate cause of the implosion of the public face of the Church" (33) over the past decades, it is clear that events in Ireland have echoed the trends analysed by Klaus Eder. "Over the course of my political career," Bertie Ahern said in 2008, "I have observed a growing hesitation in public debate to refer to religion, the churches, issues of faith and belief, and sometimes even to acknowledge the very fact of the impact on our culture and institutions of the historical contribution of the church communities." To him, there has been "an attempt to exclude matters of faith and religious belief from the public debate and confine them to the purely personal, with no social or public significance" (Ahern, "Reception"). Today, things have changed. In an oft-quoted speech delivered at the inauguration of structured talks with churches, faith communities, and non-confessional bodies in February 2007, Bertie Ahern condemned "the aggressive secularism which would have the state and state institutions ignore the importance of [the] religious dimension. Ireland shares in the inheritance of over two thousand years of Christianity [and] this heritage has indelibly shaped our country, our culture and our course for the future." It is not true, he added, to say that religious belief, religious identity, and

the role of religion have been shrinking. Consequently, "governments, which refuse or fail to engage with religious communities and religious identities, risk failing in their fundamental duties to their citizens" (Ahern, "Inauguration"). Religion is back in the public sphere as in the rest of Europe; even if some practices of the Irish state are still reminiscent of its pre-secular past, Ireland's evolution arguably fits in the pattern described by Klaus Eder when he defines post-secularism:

> During secularization, religion did not disappear *tout court*. It simply disappeared from the public sphere. In other words the voice of religion was no longer audible, having become a private matter. Today religion is returning to the public sphere. This is what I call post-secularism. (Bosetti & Eder)

That this Irish version of post-secularism is European is confirmed by its nature and the explicit references that are made to the European model. Thus, when Bertie Ahern inaugurated the Structured Dialogue with Churches, Faith Communities, and Non-Confessional Bodies in February 2007, he summarised the contents of an early draft of the European Constitution and concluded:

> The legitimate role of Churches and Faith Communities in the public life of the Union is thus acknowledged. The participation of civil society and the recognition of, for example, social dialogue in the draft Treaty makes the provision for dialogue with the Churches entirely proper and welcome. The Government considers that the principle of a structured dialogue with the Churches is equally applicable at national as at Union level. It would be anomalous if such recognition and dialogue were occurring in Europe, without its clear counterpart at home. (Ahern, "Inauguration")

By acknowledging both the contribution of religion to the formation of Irish identity and the necessity to reintroduce the churches in the public debate, the Irish government reflects the European commitment to religious freedom and its attempt at moving away from excessive secularism. It also echoes Habermas's call to Christians and secularists to talk to each other, to assess the limits of their respective worldviews and contribute to the building of a common post-secular society based on mutual understanding. This view seems to have become largely consensual since Pope Benedict XVI wrote that he was "in broad agreement with Jürgen Habermas' remarks about a post-secular society, about the willingness to learn from each other and about the self-limitations on both sides" (Habermas & Ratzinger 77). He also recognised the responsibility of both the Christian faith and western secular rationality for building the future. Faith and reason, he concluded, are complementary and "they are called to purify and help one another" (Habermas & Ratzinger 78). This view has Irish parallels. For instance, in his Christmas 2006 Homily, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said:

> Social peace presupposes an ability to dialogue, to be firm in one's principles without becoming intolerant and disrespectable of the other. A culture, which attempts to impose its views and interest through force or violence, undermines the rule of law and is a threat to democracy. (qtd. in Gillespie)

If Paul Gillespie, writing in *The Irish Times*, then rejoiced at such open-mindedness on the part of the Irish Hierarchy, he also warned secularists to beware "in the face of

new trends and influences raising serious questions about whether religions are definitely on the way out" (Gillespie). Secularists in Ireland also had reasons to be concerned[1] when some TDs expressed regret that the Church had not clearly urged a yes vote in the first Lisbon Treaty referendum. Even Cardinal Daly noted: "The church rarely directed people on how to vote unless there was a clear moral issue in question" (qtd. in Kelly). Indeed, it is quite difficult to establish where compromises stop and compromising begins, and there are grounds for ambiguity. At the European level however, things are relatively clear, as the Lisbon Treaty connects religious heritage and the secular values promoted by liberal Europe. Its claim is that it draws inspiration from "the cultural, religious and humanist inheritance of Europe, *from which have developed the universal values of the inalienable rights of the human person, freedom, democracy, equality and the rule of law* [my emphasis]" ("Treaty of Lisbon" TL/en 11). Besides, "it places the individual at the heart of its activities" ("Charter" C 83/391), and neither God nor any specific Church or religious tradition is mentioned. This certainly explains why the Catholic Church in Ireland (and elsewhere) and Catholic public opinion generally have mixed feelings about the Lisbon Treaty.

Shortly before he was elected Pope, Cardinal Ratzinger actually denounced the refusal to mention both God and the Christian roots of the European Union. In his opinion it proved that "Europe ha[d] developed a culture that, in a manner hitherto unknown to mankind, excludes God from public awareness" (*Christianity* 30). He complained that "the Churches are assigned their place on the level of day-to-day political compromises; but their message is not allowed to make an impact on the level of foundations on which Europe rests" (*Christianity* 32). Indeed, today, the Charter of Fundamental Rights expresses an equal respect for believers and non-believers. Post-secularism is therefore fundamentally relativistic and pluralistic. Such an understanding of post-secularism is incompatible with the domination of one Church or even one cultural tradition.

As early as 2004, Bertie Ahern had announced that Ireland had moved to "a healthier model of Church/State relations than existed in the past" since it now "value[d] religious liberty and practise[d] religious tolerance" ("Wolfe Tone"). Three years later, he made it clear that the Irish government did not wish "to recreate a special or privileged relationship with any denomination or creed." It simply meant to deal with "the multicultural reality" of contemporary Ireland ("Inauguration"). True, the Irish government supported the introduction of a reference to God in the European Constitution and its Lisbon avatar, but it was bound by the rules of democracy to submit to the wish of the majority, which opposed it. The state in Ireland also has republican roots and "is inspired by the principles of equality and fraternity" (Ahern, "Wolfe Tone"). To Pope Benedict, "the modern concept of democracy seems indissolubly linked to that of relativism" (Ratzinger, *Values* 55); to him, freedom as understood by liberals is

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1   See for instance the reaction of blogger Pat Corkery: "Secular Ireland is dead and gone, it is with McQuaid in the grave" (Corkery).

thus in essence incompatible with truth interpreted by the Church as the Eternal Truth of God. Two rival forms of universalism have emerged from the Christian roots of Europe, one secular and the other religious, both arguably authoritarian in the name of different principles. The latest version of the Catechism of the Church makes it clear that the fundamentals of the Catholic moral message have remained un-changed. As for the democratic states of Europe, they are prepared to make citizens vote several times to have their way in the end. It is tempting to suggest that the two campaigns over the Lisbon Treaty in Ireland may be seen as one episode in the struggle between these two worldviews. Both sides actually try their best to model post-secularism according to their beliefs and shape the compromise as best suits them.

Indeed, if the Churches are back in public life and are in a position to influence public opinion throughout Europe (Habermas), it seems that a new form of civic morality is more influential still. Secular authorities feel their moral authority and legitimacy is such as to allow them to express their competence in religious affairs and even to claim a form of moral superiority over Churches. It is significant in this respect that Taoiseach Brian Cowen should have reacted to the Ryan Report by apologising in the name of the state for not intervening and coming to the rescue of children being abused in religious institutions (Regan). The new law making blasphemy a criminal offence for the first time in Irish legislation is another interesting example of such atti-tudes. In the words of an Irish correspondent of *The Guardian*, "nobody wanted this law: no one can think of a single thundering priest, austere vicar, irate rabbi or miffed mullah ever calling for tougher penalties for blasphemy" (Reidy). In the face of the controversy caused by Islamic cartoons in European countries such as Denmark, France, or Belgium, it is understandable that the Irish government should wish to fill a gap in its constitution in this area. However, one could have expected the Irish Churches to be consulted about the law proposal. It was not so, and the plan seems to have come as a surprise to all. Besides, the Holy See is a known supporter of the international Covenant on Civil, Cultural and Political Rights as the best protection for religious freedom, "as an alternative to prohibiting the defamation of religions" (Coulter).

Political moralism is actually dismissed by Benedict XVI on grounds that "far from opening the path to a real regeneration, it blocks the way," because God has become "irrelevant to public life" (Ratzinger, *Christianity* 28, 30), and "the decision of the majority occupies the position of truth" (Ratzinger, *Values* 54). The Church, he adds, has a role to play in the state in today's world: it "must exert itself with all its vigour so that in it there may shine forth the moral truth that it offers to the state and that ought to become evident to the citizens of the state" (Ratzinger, *Values* 69). Catholic com-mitment in contemporary Ireland involves a mission of that type at the European

level. Ireland is called to contribute to the shaping of "the soul of Europe."[2] Commentators frequently recall St Columba's mission to the continent and call on Ireland to contribute to the spiritual rescue of the Union. To Bishop Donal Murray, the contemporary Church should draw its inspiration from the sixth-century Irish saint to win it back to Christ (*Secularism* 126). Mark Hederman, for his part, comments on the responsibility of European development for people's loss of faith and suggests that Ireland's role in the new century "could be to act as another Ariadne to Europe's grandchildren" (38).

The ultimate shape of post-secular Europe and post-secular Ireland will depend on the outcome, as yet unknown, of the struggle for influence of political and religious authorities. It will also depend on the impact of the compromises that emerge at national and European levels from the pressure exerted by groups ranging from the most reactionary to the most radical, from the Knights of Saint Columba or Muslim fundamentalists to the New Atheists, to mention but a few. Post-secularism resulted from the realisation that secularisation may very well have been "a modern myth" (Luckman 37). Today, all contributors to the debate are aware that the stakes are high, since a page in the history of modernity – or late modernity – may have been turned.

One challenge that states, Churches, and the European Union will no doubt have to confront to build the new post-secular Europe is exacerbated individualism and the distrust of institutions, which have been induced by ultra-liberalism. In Europe, post-secularism is classically described as the outcome of secularisation and the child of both the Enlightenment and Christianity. In his seminal work entitled *Le désenchantement du monde*, Marcel Gauchet thus suggests that Christianity is the religion that freed men from religions because of its human dimension and its historical connection with the state. In this respect, it is interesting to note that the so-called secularisation process essentially occurred in Christian countries, and particularly in Europe, the heartland of Christianity. The fact that Europe features as an exception has become more and more visible in recent years, as its influence has waned. The spectacular rise of Islam in the wake of decolonisation has been a clear reminder that secularisation has not been an international phenomenon in essence. However, the thesis of the continuity between Christian and secular eras in Europe must be qualified since, in the end, "Christianity has not been replaced by a secular culture, but a plurality of life views and religions have moved in to occupy the vacant space it left behind as a result of its diminishing impact" (Boeve 107). The sense of the divine has survived modernisation, but one paradoxical face of "the new visibility of religion in Europe" is that it has been accompanied by "pluralization," "de-institutionalization" and "de-traditionalization" (Boeve 104). Churches have in fact had to cope with the phenomenon of "believing without belonging," as described by Grace Davie. The so-

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2   The notion has become commonplace; see, for instance, Donal Murray, *The Soul of Europe* (2002).

called return of religion is a multi-faceted vibrant phenomenon, involving the rise of à la cartism, syncretism and new religiosities, but also the reconciliation of faith and reason, or science and religion, through the channel of new scientific developments. Yet this revival goes hand in hand with the disaffection of traditional Churches, among them the Catholic Church in Ireland. Practice and vocations have dropped in an alarming fashion, and commentators point at 'religious indifference,'[3] even though atheism has not gained ground. In *Foi et savoir*, Derrida wrote that new religious forms had emerged at the expense of what had hitherto been understood as religion (57). The post-secular era may very well usher in a new definition of religion. To the Irish Catholic Church the post-secular mood is an opportunity to contribute to the creation of a new soul for Europe and put an end to the supposed 'soullessness'[4] of Ireland. However, if it also wishes to save the institution, as its current pastoral initiatives would seem to indicate, we may wonder if European multi-cultural and post-secular relativists will take the risk of letting the absolute and universal truth of an authoritarian Church blur the distinctions between pre-and post-secularisms.

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3   See, for instance, the recent report published by Micheal Mac Gréil on the basis of a national survey of religious practices and attitudes in the Republic of Ireland in 2007-2008.

4   See, for instance, John Lonergan, who calls Irish society "soulless and heartless" (53).

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