



## FAITH AND RESPONSIBILITY IN CONTEMPORARY IRELAND

Catherine Mignant

Jesus says, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Mt 19: 17). Commenting on The Dialogue of Jesus with the Rich Man in his 1993 encyclical letter entitled *Veritatis Splendor*, Pope John Paul II warns that if no-one can "escape from the fundamental question: what must I do? How do I distinguish good from evil?," the only possible answer must be through obedience to the truth of Christ. He goes on to say that "in order to make this 'encounter' with Christ possible, God willed his church" and that only the respect of the Church's moral teaching will ensure man's salvation as well as freedom (*Veritatis Splendor* 1-3). "The moral life," he argues,

presents itself as the response due to the many gratuitous initiatives taken by God out of love for man. It is a response of love, according to the statement made in Deuteronomy about the fundamental commandment: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children' (Dt 6: 4-7). (*Veritatis Splendor* 4)

Trying to define the meaning of 'religion,' Jacques Derrida suggests that it is precisely the function of religion to provide *the* ultimate answer to all questions man may ask himself. No response, however, is possible unless a legitimate authority prescribes in an absolute truth this response on the basis of a sworn faith. The Latin *respondeo*, from which the term 'response' is derived, means to provide an answer, to be worthy of and to pledge oneself in return. The term is therefore closely associated with the notion of obligation and akin to that of responsibility, which is derived from the same Latin word. To Derrida, religion means responsibility since it implies a promise of truth and the presence of God who is the (absent) witness of that truth. "Si peu qu'on sache de la religion," he comments, "on sait qu'elle est toujours la réponse et la responsabilité prescrite, elle ne se choisit pas librement en un acte de pure et abstraite volonté autonome" (Derrida 44-45, 53-54).

Attempting to define the concept of responsibility in the contemporary religious context is, however, no easy task. Indeed, Derrida's theory suggests a reciprocal obligation of the type induced by the parable analysed by Pope John Paul II in the above-mentioned encyclical. According to Catholic teaching, both the Creator and the creature are answerable to each other through the intermediary of the Church. There can be no distinction between morality and faith and no questioning of the legitimacy of the Church's authority. It seems, however, that nowadays such an understanding of religious responsibility is challenged in Western societies, as many within and outside Christian circles denounce the excessive authority of the churches as depriving men

of their innate freedom and condemning them to absolute irresponsibility. Ronald Hutton, Professor of History at the University of Bristol and (obviously sympathetic) specialist of the contemporary neo-pagan movement in England, thus argues:

I think that neo-paganism appeals to a certain type of individual, which means that its catchment areas is both going to be big and going to be limited.

It doesn't, for example, attract (in some ways it actively excludes) the sort of person who feels completely personally disempowered, trashed by life, broken, and is seeking for a higher force on which to rely totally. That sort of person would go to the kind of religion that tells you you are nothing, that their deity is everything, and you should lose yourself entirely and service the deity and thereby be rebuilt.

Modern paganisms depend very heavily upon people who are very independent minded, pretty self-confident, anxious to express their own creativity, and deeply resentful of an authority that makes claims based upon the past or upon superhuman forces that can't be substantiated or practised. (Hutton 6)

Such a critical attitude is not restricted to neo-pagans. It appears that the purpose of *Veritatis Splendor* is precisely to warn Catholics and non-Catholics alike of the dangers of a free interpretation of the Church's teachings, which may lead to a questioning of "the intrinsic and unbreakable bond between faith and morality":

At the root of these presuppositions is the more or less obvious influence of currents of thought which end by detaching human freedom from its essential and constitutive relationship to truth. Thus the traditional doctrine regarding the natural law, and the universality and the permanent validity of its precepts, is rejected; certain of the Church's moral teachings are found simply unacceptable; and the Magisterium itself is considered capable of intervening in matters of morality only in order to 'exhort consciences' and to 'propose values,' in the light of which each individual will independently make his or her decisions and life choices. (*Veritatis Splendor* 2)

It seems in fact that the questions of individual responsibility and personal understanding of truth stand at the very heart of postmodern religiosity. The question which can be raised as a consequence is that of the effects of the evolution of the representation of responsibility in connection with religion in our ultra-individualistic age. Examining the case of the Republic of Ireland, this paper will argue that a re-definition, if not a re-invention, of religion may very well become necessary in the short run.

Ireland is undeniably part of the global religious village in spite of its long-lasting attachment to Catholic orthodoxy. As early as 1988, Christian Churches collaborated to launch Dialogue Ireland, an organisation designed to react against the proliferation of new religious movements of all kinds, from sects to Eastern philosophies but also New Age and neo-pagan groups, among others. Their ambition was, and still is, to keep up to date with the development of such movements, to establish contact and initiate dialogue with adepts, and to "provide pastoral support to members and former members of NRMs and their families according to their needs."

Much more worrying to the Catholic Church are no doubt the results of the European Values Survey 1999/2000, which more than confirm those of the second wave survey of 1990. Church attendance has indeed dropped more in Ireland than anywhere else

in Western Europe. As concerns shift in church legitimacy, Ireland is again the country of western Europe where confidence in the Church has most dropped. It thus appears that fewer and fewer people consider that the Church gives adequate answers to moral problems, family problems, people's spiritual needs and social problems. Religiosity, however, remains quite high by European standards, and the number of non-religious persons has dropped. Permissiveness has also slightly increased, even if it remains at a relatively low level when compared with other countries. All in all, however, all data point to a decrease in the influence of the Catholic Church's teachings on people's lives, even if atheism remains extremely limited. As in 1990, there seems to be no connection between the loss of confidence in the church and any significant decrease in religiosity.

As early as 1994, the Irish Theological Commission noted:

The New Age challenges the Church to look at the way she serves people. [...] For if she does not meet the real needs of believers, people will go outside the Church. This is demonstrated by the fact that many are turning to new ways to get help and are finding that the 'New World Servers' are only too willing to respond. (Irish Theological Commission 1)

The Commission's proposal, however, did not go beyond a critical analysis of New Age postulates, followed by defence of the Catholic creed based on the belief in an eternal truth dictated by God and in "the reality of sin which Christ had come to overcome" (Irish Theological Commission 1). Official documents later issued by the Catholic Church confirmed that no compromise was possible in the field of absolute truth. In his 1998 encyclical letter entitled *Fides et ratio*, John Paul II thus proclaimed that in an age when "the search for the ultimate truth seems often to be neglected" (*Fides et ratio* 9), there was no option left for him but to reaffirm that "dogmatic statements, while reflecting at times the culture of the period in which they were defined, formulate an unchanging and ultimate truth" (*Fides et ratio* 138). In the same way, the report on the New Age phenomenon released by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 2003, while confirming the Irish Theological Commission's 1994 diagnosis,<sup>1</sup> still persevered in its determination to correct mistaken assumptions about the Christian message (Pontifical Council 6). Whereas, however, the Irish Theological Commission set itself the task to "refute encircling errors" in the hope of letting "the radiant fullness of Catholic faith speak for itself" (1), the Council for Interreligious Dialogue now seeks to understand and suggest compromise, in a context where the Church actually "need[s] to resist the pressure of the dominant culture." "Emphasising what is lacking in other approaches should not be the main priority," the Commission states, "[i]t is more a question of constantly revisiting the sources of our own faith, so that we can offer a good, sound presentation of the Christian message" (Pontifical Council 34).

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1 "People feel the Christian religion no longer offers them – or perhaps never gave them – something they really need" (Pontifical Council 6).

Times have changed. Even in the Irish Church, not everyone has actually been able to resist the pressure and many have put forward views which fully justify John Paul II's comment that

[n]ote should be taken of the lack of harmony between the traditional response of the Church and certain theological positions, encountered even in seminaries and in Faculties of Theology, with regard to questions of the greatest importance for the Church and for the life of faith of Christians, as well as for the life of society itself. (*Veritatis Splendor* 2)

As an observer notes, Glenstal Abbey thus intriguingly seems to attract young men to the monastic life more than any other monastery in Ireland, because "the monks [...] have managed to reinvent themselves very well." It may be so because they are allowed "a lot of freedom." After doing the rounds of religious orders, young William Fennelly eventually chose Glenstal, because, as he says, "I feel that they don't pretend to possess the truth. It suits my own approach to how people relate to God" (Andrews). To Mark Patrick Hederman, who has been a monk at Glenstal for several decades, "despotism itself" (Hederman 34) is wrong and does not correspond to what God ordained. Catholic ethics as still understood by the ecclesiastical authorities "must inevitably prove inadequate," since "[i]t proposes a morality that fails to comprehend what we are as human beings. It neither asks nor answers the right questions" (Hederman 35). He continues to say that "such a morality must cease to be an 'asceticism of punitive discipline'" (Hederman 35). To philosopher and theologian P.J. McGrath, a former lecturer at Maynooth, the very notion of Church infallibility is ludicrous. "Infallibility," he argues, "will provide certainty only if one is already certain, not merely that the Church is infallible, but also as to where one finds the infallible voice of the Church. [...] Who in the Church is infallible? In what circumstances? Concerning what subject-matter?" (McGrath 95). And he concludes: "Fallible man cannot be provided with an absolute assurance against error" (McGrath 97).

The question of the infallibility of the Church is a very serious one if we consider that what is at stake is the legitimacy of Church authority. If several understandings of the Scriptures are possible, the very notion of absolute and ultimate truth loses much of its credibility, which, in turn, justifies the loosening of the bonds of obedience that have held the Catholic Church together for centuries. Besides, as has amply been demonstrated above, the response that the Church offers no longer seems to satisfy the needs of the faithful. Why then should the latter endorse the responsibility to perpetuate a moral teaching that has such shaky foundations? Why should they accept responsibility for acts that are condemned by traditional morality but may be seen as acceptable according to other criteria?

To Mark Hederman, the fundamental mistake of the Church was to misunderstand what God expected of man. What was subsequently denied to man was the right to

be human. His animality was condemned and divine perfection was the model set before his eyes. This, he says, was particularly true in Ireland:

Something in the Irish temperament, something about our geographical isolation, something about our historical circumstances, caused a symbiotic alignment between the newly emerging Irish Republic and such angelic idealism. It was a conspiracy of wishful thinking and desire to control an otherwise irrepressible reality. It is the almost irresistible temptation of fascism when faced with anarchy. It demands order, hierarchy, central government. It arranges everything according to its own categories of superiority. Everything must lead step by step to the highest point, which must be singular and from which must flow all legitimation and authority. The one point that remains is invested with totalitarian power over all the others. (Hederman 34)

The result was the coming into existence of a “schizoid culture” founded on the great divide between “spirit and flesh, soul and body, mind and matter, heaven and earth,” but also male and female and, even more, good and evil, right and wrong. All this fundamentally goes against the message of God, for “as one of the first Christian teachers, Irenaeus, born in 130, put it: ‘The Glory of God is humanity fully alive’” (Hederman 28). This, in turn, means accepting human diversity and accepting to be oneself. That is the best way to honour God, who never asked us to be anyone but ourselves. Hederman then concludes that man must learn to accept the darkest parts of his personality as God-given and he goes so far as to question the notion that if you do not conform to traditional moral prescriptions you will be punished for eternity (Hederman 31).

This view is no doubt echoed by those outside the Church who have opted for a more personal understanding of religious feeling whatever their affiliation. Distinctions between good and evil have become blurred, belief in hell and the devil as well as in the notion of sin have lost considerable ground and becoming reconciled with one’s own nature has become a priority. Feeling good in body and mind has become a central preoccupation, hence the fashion of yoga, reflexology, and acupuncture, which were all listed by the Irish Theological Commission as part of the New Age problem as early as 1994. Dialogue Ireland, for its part, also mentions the enigmatic Tony Quinn as a New Age guru who offers courses in yoga and holistic medicine in thirty centres across Ireland. Reconciliation with one’s sexuality is also on the agenda of most neo-pagan groups, whether Wiccan or neo-Celtic.

In 1994, The Irish Theological Commission sought to demonise new religious movements by denouncing what its report called “the Lucifer connection.” The more balanced report of the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, whilst regretting the past systematic demonisation of new religious perceptions stresses that the “exaltation of humanity overturns the correct relationship between Creator and creature, [...] one of its extreme forms [being] satanism.” But what is perceived as a central difficulty in any attempt at initiating dialogue with the members of these groups is mostly, among other things, their rejection of the notion of sin and the absence of revelation and salvation.

Far from being attributable to any form of actual satanism, latent hostility to Church authority is no doubt connected with the desire of human beings to be reconciled with their nature. Moral relativism and the polytheism of values, which are characteristic of the postmodern age, are a privileged expression of man's desire to accomplish his humanity fully, which implies taking advantage of his innate freedom. As Christian churches in general and the Catholic Church in particular systematically tried to deny man's humanity, it has become common to seek religious models in oriental philosophies or in archaic societies. In this manner, French sociologist Michel Maffesoli argues that contemporary society seeks to redeem life and its diversity, even in its most sulphurous aspects:

Contre le progressisme judéo-chrétien, s'employant à expliquer (ex-plicare, enlever les plis) toutes choses, s'affirme une pensée 'progressive,' sagesse impliquant toutes les manières d'être et de penser, impliquant l'altérité, impliquant l'errance. Voilà bien la mutation post-moderne, celle qui accepte les 'plis' des archaïsmes prémodernes. (Maffesoli, *La part 15*)

Restoring human nature to favour also means accepting that man is more than simply endowed with reason. Imposing the notion of an absolute truth defined by God was a way for Christianity to rationalise religious feeling and to deny the validity of individual human perceptions. Based on personal imagination and experience these were indeed a threat to the institution which feared to lose control: man's animality had to be curbed at all costs for order to be maintained in the community formed by the faithful. Yet modern anthropologists and biologists have demonstrated that imagination stands at the core of human greatness. Pope John Paul II is right to lay the blame for disobedience on scientific discoveries when he notes that even within Church circles, "it is no longer a matter of limited and occasional dissent, but an overall and systematic calling into question of traditional moral doctrine, on the basis of certain anthropological and ethical presuppositions" (*Veritatis Splendor* 2). Indeed, contemporary anthropologists actually insist on the innate duality of man. In his magisterial study of human nature, which he significantly calls *Le paradigme perdu* ('the lost paradigm'), Edgar Morin thus argues that *homo sapiens* is also *homo demens* and that it is precisely this capacity to go beyond rationality which has allowed the extraordinary development of the human species. Imagination plays a key role in defining human perceptions of reality. To Morin, religious feeling itself, the origin of which is to be found in the necessity for *sapiens* to be reconciled with death, must be understood as a response provided by imagination to unbearable grief and unacceptable loss. Reality and illusion, objective truth and myth thus go hand in hand, as do absence and presence, or life and death, which are believed to be one due to man's inner duality (Morin 107-26).

Some biologists' recent conclusions confirm such assertions. Thus, in their controversial book entitled *Why God Won't Go Away*, American brain specialists Andrew Newberg and Eugene D'Aquili argue that religious ecstasy produces visible alterations in some areas of the brain, which justify the feeling mystics have of union with

the divine.<sup>2</sup> This, however, is not to say that men necessarily imagine or invent their gods, and the two scientists' theory can be reconciled with religious belief if we admit that if a divine spirit exists, the only way he can make himself known to human beings is through their brain. In the same way as quantum physics demonstrates that the human brain builds its own reality, this theory establishes that there can be no representation of God or the divine outside the human brain. Such hypotheses clearly support the views of progressive Christians such as Mark Hederman or of most adepts of new religious movements, who are convinced that God can be found inside man. Responsibility to God is therefore primarily responsibility to man, individual responsibility towards oneself or the divine in oneself. Such perceptions lend little credibility to the existence of a transcendental personal God represented by an authoritarian human institution feeling responsible to the community rather than to the individual, whose divine nature it denies. To the Council for Interreligious Dialogue, such reconciliation between science and religion is a result of the "tendency to interchange psychology and spirituality, which developed from the end of the 1960s." It is also to be connected with "transpersonal psychology, strongly influenced by Eastern religions and by Jung," which "offers a contemplative journey where science meets mysticism" (Pontifical Council 14).

Rejecting Christian moral teachings also necessarily means rejecting its patriarchal interpretation of the society willed by God. New religious tendencies aim to give women the place they deserve in contemporary society. Wiccan covens, and also, perhaps more surprisingly, neo-Celtic groups insist on the existence of a male spirit and a female spirit as the fundamental deities that should be venerated. Apart from what remain minority communities in Ireland, some Catholic feminists have taken an active part in the attempt at modernising Church teaching as concerns the place of women both inside Irish society and inside the Church. For instance, Clare Murphy, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, based in Dublin, published a book significantly entitled *Woman as Church*, in which she defends the view that feminism is a fundamentally Christian movement and that "the rejection of patriarchy includes the search for a new morality, not an acceptance of immorality" (Murphy 25). To Mark Hederman, each individual has both male and female characteristics anyway, which must also be accepted as part of our human nature. "It is understandable," he says,

that we try to hide the evidence, bury the body and throw the alarm-clock down the stairs, which must be part of the motivation to obliterate the 'feminine' both in ourselves and in itself, because it prevents us from being hard, durable and immortal diamonds, embodying, as it does, what is soft, tender, ephemeral. [...] Whatever the explanations, it is true that our culture and so-called 'civilisation' have undervalued and degraded the

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2 "Les faits donnent à penser que les origines les plus profondes de la religion se fondent sur l'expérience mystique, et que les religions persistent parce que les connexions du cerveau humain continuent de fournir aux croyants une gamme d'expériences unitaires qui sont souvent interprétées comme des assurances que Dieu existe" (Newberg et al. 190-1).



feminine, both as part of each one of us and as incarnated in over fifty percent of the human race registered as human. And this balance has to be restored. (Hederman 57)

Talking about neo-paganism, Ronald Hutton denies that searching for a new form of spirituality is an escape from the Age of Reason. To him, it is even "quite reasonable in itself." Indeed,

[i]t's a reaction to an oppressive social morality that limited how people could express themselves, and particularly damned things like human sexuality as something sinful and fearful. It was a reaction to a social system which disempowered women in spiritual and very often in social and political terms. (Hutton 3)

But it is even more than that: "it's a reaction to urbanisation and industrialisation which makes people value the world of nature as something precious and lovable, and perishable, rather than something dominant and frightening that you need to propitiate" (Hutton 3). In the name of nature, the divine and divinely-inspired individual thus has a responsibility both towards the creature and Creation. Not only is ecology part and parcel of contemporary religious thinking, but preserving the earth is considered as the primary religious responsibility of humanity. "A big priority for me is healing the land," writes an Irish Shaman. "I asked my power animal recently," she continues, "[...] was there any message it wanted me to impart. The answer was very simple: tell people to honour the Land" ("Irish Shamanism" 3). The neo-pagan Celtic Coven of the Dagda's Cauldron for its part claims: "We believe modern paganism as a phenomenon is no accident. After experimenting with patriarchal religions and industrialisation there has come a genetical racial call in our species to return to the Garden." Webmaster Peter Doyle then goes on to say: "Evolution has allowed us to stand above all species on the globe. This is a great gift but with this gift has come a terrible responsibility to cherish, respect and maintain in so far as we can the denizens of our natural environment" ("Paganism and Conservation" 1). The head of the Irish school of witchcraft, based in Castlepook near Mallow, Co. Cork, agrees, when he states "magic is about tuning into nature and taking the time to say thank you to the world around us" (Lister). The Catholic Church has also been marginally contaminated, as the development of eco-theological thinking demonstrates. To Catholic priest and eco-theologian Daniel O'Leary, to whom the Gaia theory obviously appeals, it is thus necessary today to recover the lost feeling that we belong to the world created by God and that we wrongly assumed we had a right to dominate (O'Leary 182-98). Father Seán McDonagh, for his part, wishes the Church realised the importance of the rhythms of the Earth and the Cosmos (O'Leary, 195). Sister Stanislaus Kennedy comes close to defending the cult of Mother Earth when she claims: "Now is the time to revere the earth as our mother and the sky as our father" (Kennedy 44).

However, the Catholic Church's official position about ecology is far less enthusiastic, especially as "deep ecology" serves the theory justifying the belief in the possibility of human union with the cosmos resulting in divine cosmic unity (Pontifical Council 15-17). Another type of criticism which the Church addresses to what the members of

the Council for Interreligious Dialogue see as a new form of gnosis concerns the ultra-individualistic nature of religious quest. This is a spirituality “of the self” and “for the self,” a form of “philosophy of egoism” (Pontifical Council 18-19). This approach to the sacred is a personal response to personal problems and as such implies the individual responsibility of oneself towards oneself. Religion should be understood as providing a collective response to a situation affecting the community, in the hope of serving the community. The question which is raised is the following: can an authentic religion exist outside collective responsibility (notably understood in social terms), which implies authority and discipline? To Eoin Cassidy, a senior lecturer in philosophy at the Mater Dei Institute, the answer is clearly in the negative. Religion should not be understood as “a form of escapism” (Cassidy 61).

According to the accepted definition of ‘religion’ based on tradition, authority, and obedience to that authority, no self-legitimised belief or religiosity/spirituality can be given the name of religion. Yet, the latter seem to correspond to the needs of an important proportion of our contemporaries, as is made obvious by the success of such books as John O’Donoghue’s world best-sellers (*Anam Chara* in particular) or Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist*. Our day and age is characterised by the longing for a God of love provided with infinite healing powers, who can reconcile us with our lives and ourselves. The quest is unsatisfactory and therefore endless, since only loosely coherent New Religious Movements are prepared to accept the notion of self-defined and self-legitimised creeds and practices.

The issue that postmodern religiosity raises is in fact clearly that of the individual’s relationship to authority, legitimacy, and responsibility. Sociologist Alain Ehrenberg’s classic study of the nervous breakdown in contemporary society shows that it is the pathological answer to life in a society in which “norm is no longer based on guilt and discipline, but on responsibility and initiative” (Ehrenberg 16). Some people, it seems, simply cannot cope.

In the religious field, those who reject the teaching and the authority of the Church are desperately seeking for a tradition that might legitimise their beliefs. In recent years, under the influence of the so-called reconstructionists, an attempt has thus been made in neo-pagan circles to research into the roots of their beliefs. To them, lack of serious scholarship has been detrimental to the credibility of neo-paganism, as has fanciful embellishment of non-historical traditions (in the case of Wicca, for instance). Seeking to create the sense of a community and thus providing a convincing response to people’s quests, committed neo-pagans now plead for “authenticity,” which is one of the keys to credibility. A Celtic neo-pagan thus writes: “While acknowledging that spirituality is an individual matter, it is important to remember that people representing themselves as experts and spiritual guides have a responsibility to clearly differentiate between facts and conjecture” (“Neo-Paganism” 3). Inventing one’s spirituality is one thing, creating a religious community is another. In the absence of a dogma by which a group of people could abide, it is extremely difficult to

create the sense of a community. The veneration of individual autonomy and human diversity as well as the belief in human fallibility<sup>3</sup> complicate matters further, as does the global and syncretic nature of the creeds and religious practices involved.

The only common denominator between the members of the loosely connected postmodern tribes, as Michel Maffesoli calls them, may very well be their perception of a 'sense of place,' their adoption of a territory as central to their cultural and hence religious identity. "Le lieu fait lien," he says and thus creates a community (Maffesoli, *Notes* 70-76). Dialogue Ireland notes that "due to its Celtic origins, Ireland is fast becoming the place to be for wiccans and pagans of all kinds." Ironically, if most leaders of neo-pagan Celtic groups across the world, particularly in the United States, are of Irish origin, most of those based in Ireland, be they neo-druidic or wiccan, are foreigners. Identification with the land is the result of individual choice and in most cases has no basis in the personal life of the people involved. In many cases, connection with the land is just as virtual as the existence of the communities themselves. Indeed, most of these communities only exist on the Internet and suffer from the fact that their members find it impossible to actually meet. Virtual religious communities of solitary cyber-faithful have so far not succeeded in providing the hoped-for response and they remain a symptom of unease and despair in a dehumanised world.

Compounding these difficulties is the fact that there are many who by seeking a legitimising tradition that might accommodate their own representation of the divine actually try to reinvent an open-minded form of Christianity. The people whom Darren Kemp calls the "Christaquarians" come from all Christian traditions but are trying to reconcile Christianity and New Age priorities (Kemp VII 15-22), much to the dismay of Christian Churches, which reject such compromises even if they acknowledge, as Dialogue Ireland puts it, that the vast majority of [New Religious] movements "were set up with good intentions" and that "in many instances, the Church has much to learn from them" (Dialogue Ireland 1). Given the context and the evolution of mentalities, even within progressive Christian circles, we may wonder if the very definition of the concept of religion may not be made to evolve under the pressure of dominant individualism, taking the form of the passionate defence of individual autonomy in all its aspects. Less than one third of the Irish now believe in a personal God. The overall European figure has dropped to 38 per cent, even though 68 per cent of Europeans claim they believe in God. The Catholic Church is right to take the threat of the New Age mentality very seriously, since it now has insidiously contaminated the mass of the faithful. All Christian churches are concerned about this phenomenon: one of its expressions in Ireland is no doubt so-called Celtic Christianity. An article published in *Christianity Today* magazine in 2000, while expressing puzzle-

3 Thus the archdruid of Ár nDraocht Féin, a neo-druidic community based in the United States, claims: "The only dogma promulgated by any group so far has been the 'Doctrine of Archdruidic Fallibility'. [...] Members of Neopagan Druid groups are encouraged to (politely) argue with their leadership to form their own opinions and special interest groups, and to communicate as much as possible with both 'insiders' and 'outsiders'."

ment at the realisation that a “web search on the word *Celtic* identified 976 sites while a similar search on *Jesus Christ* located 896,” noted that Christians had much to learn from this tradition, in that it restores “the sense of God’s loving” and “active presence” as well the sense of God’s fundamental immanence (“Saving Celtic Christianity”). Whether Christian Churches in Ireland and elsewhere want it or not, a re-definition of the essential tenets of Christianity is under way as a result of changes induced by postmodern religiosity. It must be understood as a true challenge, since it is unlikely they will be able to survive unscathed (Lenoir, 367-95). The meaning of religion has already evolved in that the pick-and-choose mentality characteristic of our time already pervades both lay and clerical approaches to Christianity. Churches provide a form of legitimacy that believers need. Yet maintaining the authority of churches in the difficult context of the twenty-first century will necessitate an effective capacity to adapt to pluralism, which goes against the core of their dogma, since they believe that they are the holders of an absolute, universal, and eternal truth. It will be their responsibility to decide whether or not they take steps to provide the response people need to feed their faith and if they are prepared to lose part of their soul in the process.

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