

‘Facile ignorance’ and ‘wild wild women’: religion, journalism and social change in Ireland 1961–1979

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. . . by the mid-1960s the newsman had become a new kind of expert, a critic of society as he saw it, imbued with an intellectual and political ambition. Although to a great extent this has gone almost unnoticed, the truth is that it involved a radical and qualitative change whereby the newspaper became more like the magazine and the journalist was transformed into a commentator.¹

Bishop Jeremiah Newman, 1977

It is no exaggeration to say that, over the course of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church was the predominant institution in the Irish state. Taoisigh, governments, political parties, and media organisations came and went, but the Catholic Church was eternal. Indeed, it pre-dated the state and, in the immediate aftermath of independence and civil war, it became the institution that politicians and the public looked to for guidance, continuity and normality. In a state that was, in faith terms, overwhelming Catholic, the Church was omnipresent and omniscient. It effectively ran the healthcare, education and social welfare sectors, and many issues – among them divorce, contraception, and adoption – were legislated for through the prism of Catholic teaching. Where, one may reasonably ask, did journalism sit amid this relationship between Church and state? And how did this relationship alter over time? Not neglecting the fact that the Church itself was active in the media world, this chapter presents an overview of the changing dynamics of the relationship between the Church and journalism between 1961 and 1979 and argues that in any analysis of this relationship, three phenomena loom large – the advent of a national broadcaster obliged by law to be fair and impartial in its coverage of news and current affairs, the Second Vatican Council, and the emergence of a more strident form of female journalism.

Setting the tone

In one of the few self-critical reflections on journalism in early to mid-twentieth century Ireland, journalist Michael O’Toole observed that up to the 1960s journalists were generally ‘a docile lot, anxious to please the proprietor, the advertiser, the prelate, the statesman’. The era was, he argued, characterised by ‘an unhealthy willingness to accept the prepared statement, the prepared speech, and the handout without demanding the opportunity of asking any searching questions by way of follow-up’.² The fundamental defect of Irish journalism during this time was, he concluded, ‘its failure to apply critical analysis to practically any aspect of Irish life’.³ In his analysis, O’Toole put forward several reasons for this journalistic stagnation. These included what he described as ‘the general paralysis that afflicted Irish society during those years’, the lack of commitment and resources on the part of newspaper proprietors, the effects of wartime censorship, and the fact that the majority of Irish journalists were poorly educated, poorly motivated and poorly paid.⁴

The ‘general paralysis’ mentioned by O’Toole was caused by the mostly unchallenged power wielded by some political parties and the Catholic Church. In 1929 the Church had ensured

¹ Jeremiah Newman, *The State of Ireland* (Dublin, 1977), p. 99.

² Michael O’Toole, ‘The Roman Catholic church and the media in Ireland’ in Tony Fahy and Mary Kelly (eds), *The Role of the Media in Irish Society* (Dublin 1988), pp 11–14 at 12.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11

⁴ *Ibid.*

the passing of the Censorship of Publications Act that sanitised literature and certain aspects of journalism and in 1951 the Church paralysed the political establishment with its opposition to the Mother and Child healthcare scheme.

This power was underlined by the ownership structure of the newspaper industry, the proprietors of which, as O'Toole noted, did not overly resource their newspapers. During this period most mainstream newspapers were effectively the organs or semi-organs of political parties or interest groups. While Fianna Fáil had the uncritical support of the *Irish Press*, Fine Gael was supported by the business-oriented *Irish Independent*, and both these newspapers were wholly uncritical of the Catholic Church. As one *Irish Independent* journalist put it:

You wrote 'nice' copy and nice copy meant the sub-editors did not have to entertain qualms about letting it through. It was eminently suitable to the era when the Catholic Church exerted an influence in Irish life that was awesome and it extended into what went into the papers and what stayed out . . . Those who made it to the top had an uncanny perception of what did not ruffle the feathers of the Hierarchy or bring blushes to the faces of the 'good nuns' as we invariably seemed to describe them.⁵

Things were little better at the *Irish Press*, where, as one journalist recalled, any mention of breast-feeding was bound to be edited beyond recognition:

An epidemic of gastro-enteritis was killing babies by the hundred in Dublin. I interviewed a woman doctor who told me that the death rate could be slashed, the epidemic halted, perhaps, if only mothers would breast-feed their children. The assistant editor of the newspaper changed the phrase 'breast-feeding' to 'feeding the children themselves'. When I protested, he said: 'That other phrase is indelicate'. When I said his alternative was confusing, and reminded him that lives were at stake, he walked away. 'Feeding the children themselves' it was. The blinds were as thick as that.⁶

It is important to note that the Church's position was also buttressed by lay-owned weekly newspapers such as the *Irish Catholic* and *The Standard*. In a review of these publications in 1945 one critic (Conor Cruise O'Brien) expressed the view that, since Ireland was an important provider of missionaries, both publications were 'weapons in a world battle' rather than reflections of Irish Catholic opinion. The Catholicism of the average Irishman was neither as 'demonstrative nor aggressive' as that reflected in the two papers and the 'long tirades against Communism' were, he asserted, 'about as real as an outburst of anti-Semitism on the Blasket Islands'.⁷ Established in 1888 the *Irish Catholic* was 'a conservative-national organ, supporting the Irish Hierarchy in their corporate decisions on all religious and political matters'.⁸ *The Standard*, which first appeared in 1928, was equally devoted to the Church line, and never missed an opportunity to warn its readers about the dangers of communism. In one edition, the paper, described by one writer as 'a rabidly right-wing and quite influential lay Catholic paper', condemned the library of the Irish Bakers' Union because it contained

⁵ Raymond Smith, *Urbi et Orbi and All That* (Dublin, 1995), pp 2–3.

⁶ Alan Bestic, *The Imporance of Being Irish* (London, 1969), pp 3–4.

⁷ Donat O'Donnell [Conor Cruise O'Brien], 'The Catholic press: a study in theopolitics' in *The Bell*, 10 (1) 1945, pp 30–40 at 31–32.

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 34. For more on the *Irish Catholic* see John Dunne, *Headlines and Haloes* (Dublin, 1988).

books written by Karl Marx and James Connolly. Was the cost of buying such books, it enquired, ‘included in the price of bread?’⁹

There were, however, occasional breeches of this ‘general paralysis’. In July 1949 the *Irish Times* published a four-part series on venereal disease, then a much hidden aspect of Irish society. The special correspondent that wrote the series noted the ‘astonished unbelief’ in official quarters when he/she went looking for information. Many doctors felt that the series would ‘offend religious susceptibilities and direct the thoughts of clean thinking persons unnecessarily towards unpleasant matters’: the vast majority, however, felt that ‘a certain amount of well-reasoned and tactful publicity would be good’.¹⁰ Two years later, that paper’s editor, Robert Smyllie, played a central role in the Mother and Child controversy by publishing the correspondence between the inter-party government and the Catholic hierarchy that objected to the scheme on the grounds that, as one bishop put it, it was ‘based on the Socialistic principle that children belonged to the State . . . and reminded one of the claims put forward by Hitler and Stalin’.¹¹

Television and Vatican II

In many ways, the Mother and Child crisis represented the zenith of the Church’s power: by 1959, when Seán Lemass succeeded Eamon de Valera as Taoiseach, the country was at what one author described as ‘the threshold of a delayed peaceful, social revolution’.¹² With the adoption of free trade came an economic boom, an increase in disposable income, an expansion of the middle class, urbanisation, and the rise of a consumer society. Emigration declined, more females joined the workforce and, in 1967, the censorship of publications regime was liberalised and free second level education was introduced. Change was very much in the air: the Second Vatican Council convened in Rome to examine Catholicism in the modern age and the national broadcaster, Telefís Éireann, began broadcasting and both were, in their own ways, central to altering the relationship between the Church and journalism.

The personnel hired to staff the broadcaster’s news and current affairs sections were a mix of older newspaper reporters and young university graduates. In a report to Dublin’s Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, one source noted that of the sixteen producers hired by the new broadcaster, only four were Catholic. The producers – who were variously described as ‘a Liberal’; ‘a Left-wing trade unionist and writer’; ‘a divorced actress who has been associated with numerous left-wing groups for many years’; ‘violently anti-clerical’; ‘an admirer of Joyce, Yeats, etc.’; ‘anti-clerical and is against all forms of censorship’; ‘one of the leading Liberals here’; ‘a divorced Jewess . . . associated with the production of indecent plays in Dublin for some years’; ‘a former member of the IRA’ – appeared not to subscribe to the Church’s authority on social issues.¹³

The development of television and the critical perspective that began to inform journalism during the 1960s resulted in journalists repeatedly asserting their independence from institutions that had once dictated the news agenda. Indeed, the acquiescent relationship that

⁹ Mike Milotte, *Communism in Modern Ireland: The Pursuit of the Workers’ Republic Since 1916* (Dublin, 1984), p. 117; *Irish Times*, 8 Apr. 1977.

¹⁰ *Irish Times*, 21 July 1949. The series ended on 25 July 1949.

¹¹ *Irish Times*, 1 May 1951. The bishop concerned was Michael Browne of Galway.

¹² David Thornley, ‘Ireland: the end of an era’ in *Studies*, 53 (209) 1964, pp 1–17, at 16.

¹³ Dublin Diocesan Archives [DDA]; XXVI/a/3/54 (report on Telefís Éireann staff).

the press had with the Church was neatly summed up in a report presented to Archbishop McQuaid in 1964:

Many journalists believe that the Church enjoys a special protection from criticism in the editorial and letter columns of newspapers other than the *Irish Times*. They believe that the clergy enjoy an immunity from unfavourable reports even in instances where the clergy figure as citizens rather than as priests, e.g. in breaking the law. It is well known among journalists that certain newspapers have a policy of keeping off issues in which the Church may be involved . . . Many journalists believe that the intervention of ecclesiastical authority is responsible for the cautious policies of editors or they believe that newspaper proprietors are so afraid of falling foul of the hierarchy and clergy that they always play safe . . . Journalists believe that all too often the Church abuses the press in attempting to control what should or should not be reported or commented on.

The document also wryly observed that ‘a favourite occupation in every news-room is the writing of imaginary headlines for religious news, headlines which, of course, could never be printed’.¹⁴

Television, however, was a different animal and McQuaid was well aware of its potential. Immediately after the establishment of the national television service he sought to appoint one Canon Cathal McCarthy to liaise between himself and the broadcaster. Such overtures were not reciprocated by the station’s first director general, Ed Roth. A letter from one Fr Fehily that indicated that Roth was unaware of McCarthy’s supposed role prompted an angry retort from McQuaid: ‘Mr. R. was given 1½ hours of my time during which I asked Fr McC to call over. Mr R. was at once to phone Fr McC to see him. From that good day he has never given any sign of life. If Mr R. thinks we can take that treatment, he is mistaken’.¹⁵ There followed a letter from McQuaid to the chairman of the RTÉ Authority, Eamon Andrews informing him that he had appointed McCarthy as his ‘personal liaison priest in Dublin, the City and Diocese in which is situated the Television centre [to] facilitate the necessary consultations between the Television authority and the Archbishop of Dublin’.¹⁶ The polite response from Andrews noted that he hoped there would ‘be many and fruitful contact between him [McQuaid] and the Television Authority’.¹⁷

In reality, Andrews and the station’s new director general, Kevin McCourt, were working feverously to prevent McQuaid from having any involvement in the station: McCourt later recounted how he and Andrews ‘spent many hours . . . analysing, planning against giving the Hierarchy collectively or singly, any voice in control of programme-making’.¹⁸ McQuaid sensed such plans: writing to McCarthy in September 1962 he observed that ‘we ought to move at once, for the position in TÉ is hardening every month that passes and a permanent shape is appearing in which we do not properly take our place . . . Our policy, in my view, is dilatory, timorous, and piecemeal’.¹⁹ Ultimately, Andrews and McCourt succeeded in appointing a Dominican priest, Fr Romuald Dodd, to the position of religious advisor while McQuaid was in Rome attending the second session of the Second Vatican Council. As a

¹⁴ DDA; XXVI/e/78 (Public Image Committee), ‘The Journalist and the Church’.

¹⁵ DDA; XXVI/a/3/9, memo dated 2 May 1961.

¹⁶ DDA; XXVI/a/3/9, letter dated 11 Oct. 1961.

¹⁷ DDA; XXVI/a/3/9, letter dated 17 Oct. 1961.

¹⁸ Cited in John Bowman, *Window and Mirror: RTÉ Television: 1961–2011* (Dublin, 2011), p. 67.

¹⁹ DDA; XXVI/a/3/9, letter dated 16 Sept. 1962.

Dominican, Dodd was outside McQuaid's sphere of influence. McQuaid's reaction to this move was telling: in a letter to McCourt he declared himself 'the sole authority competent in matters of Faith and morals in the Diocese in which your station is situated'.²⁰

McQuaid's asserted authority was refuted by the station the following month when the liberal theologian, Fr Gregory Baum, was interviewed on its *Newsview* programme in relation to the Second Vatican Council. This prompted a next-day missive from McQuaid's secretary, Rev. James McMahan requesting McCourt 'to state by whose authority Rev. Gregory Baum, OSA, who appeared on a Telefís Éireann programme, was invited to speak and did speak in this diocese on matters of Faith and Morals'.²¹ In a riposte, McCourt declared that while the station was responsible for using Baum's services, it assumed 'that if he required ecclesiastical clearance to participate in a programme of the kind involved, this would be a matter between him and the ecclesiastical authorities'.²²

McQuaid also struggled with the new sense of independence demonstrated by print journalists, particularly those who had been appointed as religious correspondents without any formal training in theology. Among the journalists who covered the Second Vatican Council were Des Fisher of the London based *Catholic Herald*, Seán Cryan of the *Irish Press*, Liam Shine of the *Irish Independent* and Seán MacRéamoinn and Kevin O'Kelly of RTÉ. The Church's reticence in dealing with journalists was evident from the beginning: journalists were excluded from the debates and the scarce press releases did not associate individual bishops with the various points being made. As Louis McRedmond of the *Irish Independent* remembered, at the first session in autumn 1962 'journalists were refused all opportunity to compile the best evidence. They were deliberately thrown back on second-rate and third-rate sources [including] the known views of certain Fathers, interviews with bishops trammelled by their oath of secrecy, and even Roman gossip'.²³ McRedmond believed that 'using all the unsatisfactory evidence they could get [journalists] managed to piece together a narrative, which, for all its shortcomings, gave a reasonable, thorough and basically true account of what happened'. Archbishop McQuaid disagreed.²⁴ In a note written in 1964 he recorded his opinion that 'the reporting on the Council has been very bad – deplorable'.²⁵ The following year he fulminated at the 'facile ignorance' of journalists who were reporting the Council as a battle between progressive and conservative forces.²⁶

Much of this critical attitude, it seemed to those advising McQuaid, stemmed from the advent of television. In a report presented to McQuaid in June 1964, his 'Public Image committee' noted that television had transformed the media landscape by giving 'a new and powerful platform to many people who never had it in the Press' and had 'accustomed people to take it for granted that men who hold positions of authority and responsibility owe it to the public to explain their actions'. Referring to the press, it observed that 'prior to the Council most Irish lay people took it for granted that there was an official line on most, if not all problems, and that Bishops more or less all held the same views without having to arrive at them by

²⁰ DDA; XXVI/a/3/9, letter dated 7 Nov. 1963.

²¹ DDA; XXVI/a/3/71 & 72, letter dated 12 Dec. 1963. McQuaid's original dictation referred to Baum as 'the stranger priest'.

²² DDA; XXVI/a/3/70, letter dated 17 Dec. 1963.

²³ Louis McRedmond, 'Dialogue in the church: the journalist' in *The Furrow*, 15 (1) 1964, pp 3–13 at 6.

²⁴ Louis McRedmond, *The Council Reconsidered* (Dublin, 1966), pp 162–63.

²⁵ DDA; XXVI/e/78 (Public Image Committee), notes dated 24 Jan. 1964.

²⁶ DDA; XXVI/a/6, (Radharc), letter to Fr Joe Dunn, dated 4 Nov. 1965.

discussion. The Vatican Council, as reported by the press, presented a very different picture . . . From that reporting the Irish hierarchy appears conservative'.²⁷

The final session of the Council in 1965 was reported on by Louis McRedmond of the *Irish Independent* and John Horgan of the *Irish Times*. Their reportage, no longer influenced only by the Irish hierarchy but more so by their international sources and media colleagues, grated with McQuaid. When, on the eve of that session, Pope Paul VI issued a strident encyclical, *Mysterium Fiedi*, McQuaid praised it as 'a firm statement of the unchanged and unchanging doctrine of the Church'. But he was again unhappy with its reportage: he described McRedmond's report in the *Irish Independent* as 'tolerable' while Horgan's report in the *Irish Times* was dismissed as 'lamentable in its ignorance and immaturity'. While McRedmond had noted that the encyclical might have been aimed against 'new ideas that might have found champions on what could be called the extreme left-wing of the liberal fathers', Horgan had observed that 'the more patently progressive bishops and council experts . . . are anxiously concerned to preserve and enlarge the area of free discussion and questioning which has been such a major feature of the movement for reform'.²⁸ Horgan had, McQuaid dismissively concluded, 'met the lightweights', a reference to the journalist having met theologians enthusiastic about the reformist nature of the council.²⁹ The Dublin Diocesan press office kept an eye on how the religious correspondents were reporting developments in Rome: writing to McQuaid's secretary, the diocesan press officer, Ossie Dowling observed that 'Horgan is leading the way' and that 'McRedmond may be trying to out-Horgan Horgan'. In a letter to McQuaid himself, Dowling observed that McRedmond 'is aware of the line Horgan is taking and may colour his own dispatches accordingly, lest he be classified as a "conservative"'.³⁰

When he arrived back in Dublin McRedmond received what he called 'a shattering jolt': while 'the strenuous efforts of Irish newspapers, radio and television had borne fruit in widespread interest' in the Council's deliberations, within certain sections of Irish society 'preconceived notions had hardened in such a way that the news from the Vatican had been twisted to sustain a bias instead of being allowed to mould ideas afresh'.³¹ Similarly, John Horgan considered it 'astonishing, and frustrating, to discover that all the theological, historical and liturgical richness to which we had been exposed in Rome, and which had left an indelible mark on all those who experienced it, had only touched the fringes of Irish Catholicism'.³² At its most public, such orthodoxy was represented by Archbishop McQuaid's remark on his return to Dublin that while the faithful may 'have been disturbed at times by reports about the Council [and] worried by much talk of changes to come' he could tell them that 'no change would worry the tranquillity of [their] Christian lives'.³³

'wild wild women'

The tranquillity of many lives was, however, disturbed by the publication in July 1968 of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which re-confirmed the Church's traditional teaching on artificial contraception. The disappointment of many people, which caused the *Irish Press*' religious

²⁷ DDA; XXVI/e/78 (Public Image Committee), final report dated 5 June 1964.

²⁸ *Irish Independent*, 13 Sept. 1965 and *Irish Times*, 13 Sept. 1965.

²⁹ DDA; AB8/B/XXVI/c/27, letter from McQuaid to Ossie Dowling, 15 Sept. 1965.

³⁰ DDA; AB8/B/XXVI/c/27, letter from Dowling to Fr MacMahon, 20 Sept. 1965; letter from Dowling to McQuaid, 20 Sept. 1965.

³¹ McRedmond, *The Council Reconsidered*, pp 7 & 180.

³² John Horgan, 'Remembering how we once were' in *Doctrine and Life*, 53 (4) 2003, 241–46 at 241.

³³ *Irish Times*, 10 Dec. 1965.

correspondent, T.P. O'Mahony to predict the encyclical's 'widespread rejection by clergy and laity',³⁴ was amplified in subsequent years by the new female journalism that had emerged just two months before the encyclical's release. Amid the re-invention of the *Irish Times* during the 1960s, the paper's news editor, Donal Foley had proposed a dedicated page for women's issues to Mary Maher who was initially 'vehemently opposed' to the idea since in her experience 'women's pages were designed by male editors with the advertising department, for housewives whom they imagined had only one interest: to buy things to bring home'.³⁵ But when Foley suggested a 'woman's page with serious articles, scathing social attacks and biting satire', Maher agreed and in May 1968 'Women First' was born. The page is important because it was not restricted by the 'feminine angle' that had hobbled previous female journalism and, much to the horror of some of the faithful, openly discussed issues that had, up to then, been taboo and invisible to the media. Under Maher's guidance, the page cast a cold and discerning eye on the patriarchal nature of Irish society and how this impacted on the day-to-day lives of women. In its early days it advocated better training facilities for student nurses, and examined such issues as divorce and women's rights under early Irish (Brehon) law, contraception, martial celibacy, equal pay and how Dublin's housing crisis was affecting the health of mothers and children, though it regularly alternated such articles with the more traditional shopping, cooking and fashion columns.³⁶ Maher edited the page for eighteen months before handing the reigns to Maeve Binchy. Binchy was under no illusions of the battle facing women in seeking equal rights: in one article she noted that 'women demanding better conditions for women are too often and too widely dismissed as frustrated Lesbians sublimating everything nice and normal into a grotesque campaign'.³⁷

The page was a first for Irish journalism and the other national dailies scrambled to follow suit. At the *Irish Press*, Tim Pat Coogan appointed Mary Kenny as its women's editor in 1969. Her arrival caused quite a stir at the Press Group. Recalling her appointment, Coogan noted that she 'arrived in Burgh Quay like a comet exuding in its wake a shower of flaming particles from burning bras [and] surrounded herself with a coterie of talented young women, like Anne Harris, Nell McCafferty, Rosita Sweetman, June Levine, and Maire de Burca'.³⁸ Another frequent contributor was Nuala Fennell, who later established the first refuge for women in Dublin and was elected to the Dáil in 1981 for Fine Gael. Kenny's 'Women's Press' page published articles such as a three-piece series of testimonies written by deserted wives, a feature based on an interview with two female prostitutes, and a provocative (for the time) quiz so that its readers could establish whether they were an 'Emancipated Woman or Sheltered Lady'.³⁹ The Press Group chairman, Vivion de Valera, did not think much of this new departure in women's journalism: he referred to Kenny and her contributors as 'the wild wild women'.⁴⁰

At the *Irish Independent*, things were not quite as radical. Its dynamic female journalist, Mary McCutchan, wrote a series on the experiences of female gardai, troubled children, the experiences of blind people, emigrants in Britain, and orphans, before becoming the paper's women's editor and establishing the 'Independent Woman' page (helped by Mary Anderson,

³⁴ *Irish Press*, 30 July 1968.

³⁵ Elgy Gillespie (ed.), *Changing the Times* (Dublin, 2003), p. 11.

³⁶ *Irish Times*, 11 June 1968; 13 June 1969; 14 Mar. 1968; 1 Aug. 1968; 12 Sept. 1968; 9 June 1970 and 18 & 19 Sept. 1969.

³⁷ *Irish Times*, 13 Nov. 1969.

³⁸ Tim Pat Coogan, *A Memoir* (London, 2008), p. 145.

³⁹ *Irish Times*, 30 Sept. and 1 & 2 Oct. 1969 and 6 July 1970.

⁴⁰ Coogan, *A Memoir*, pp 148–49.

Nuala Fennell, and Janet Martin) in 1970.⁴¹ But given that the *Irish Independent* was the newspaper of conservative middle-Ireland its woman's page was somewhat tamer than its counterparts. Its first outing featured a 'peace plan for the sex war', a piece on the experience of Spanish au pairs in Dublin, and an article on 'the lethal side of electric blankets'.⁴² And when it did tackle contentious issues, readers usually protested. In an October 1970 article entitled 'The facts about women's wrongs', staff writer (and later women's editor) Janet Martin criticised 'the Government's downright refusal to look at the question of contraception [and] this country's insular approach to abortion, unwanted babies and unmarried motherhood'.⁴³ This prompted a 'regular reader' to ask whether Martin was advocating that Ireland 'follow England's example [and] allow the sale of contraceptives and legalise abortion, despite the fact we would be breaking God's law by doing so?'.⁴⁴ A subsequent report that Senator Mary Robinson planned to introduce a private member's bill to legalise contraception also prompted a backlash.⁴⁵ One reader advised the page to 'stop trying to putrefy the women of this country, lest God takes a direct hand against you' while another claimed that 'the Catholic Irishwoman is appalled by such publicity to subjects which are against our Church's teaching'.⁴⁶ Sometime later another reader accused the page of 'brainwashing married women to have careers outside the home and pressing for a change in the law relating to contraceptives'. This, the reader concluded, was 'all part of a plan to prepare the ground for "permissive" legislation, directly contrary to the teaching of the Catholic Church'.⁴⁷

As the 1970 began, topics that had once been considered taboo featured increasingly in women's journalism, helped in no small part by the emergence of the global women's rights movement and the part played by journalists in spreading its tenets in Ireland.⁴⁸ In September 1970 Mary Kenny and her *Irish Times* counterpart, Maeve Binchy, addressed clerical students at the national seminary in Maynooth and were not shy in stating their views. While Binchy told them that the day was gone when women were 'going to take advice from celibate priests', Kenny condemned the legislation 'which makes you a criminal if you want to plan your family'.⁴⁹ In November 1970 Kenny's 'Women's Press' published a full page on 'The case for and against contraception' while the following month Binchy's 'Women First' published a column on the topic written by an anonymous priest who pointedly asked when would the Church recognise 'that there are circumstances, in case of birth control, as in all other spheres of morality, which can lessen, and at times even remove, the guilt of those who break the law?' It also asked its readers to take part in a postal poll on whether the ban should be repealed.⁵⁰ The following week it revealed that 424 readers had voted 'yes' while only two readers had voted 'no'.⁵¹ Over at the *Sunday Independent*, June Levine occasionally wrote on the nascent women's movement and in one such article contended that patriarchal

⁴¹ *Irish Independent*, 19 & 20 Feb. 1969; 16–22 Apr. 1969; 28–30 May 1969; 8–16 Oct. 1969; 22–24 Dec. 1969.

⁴² *Irish Independent*, 1 Sept. 1970.

⁴³ *Irish Independent*, 15 Oct. 1970.

⁴⁴ *Irish Independent*, 24 Oct. 1970.

⁴⁵ *Irish Independent*, 27 Oct. 1970.

⁴⁶ *Irish Independent*, 4 Nov. 1970.

⁴⁷ *Irish Press*, 4 May 1971.

⁴⁸ For a contemporary account of the development of the women's movement in Ireland see Pat Brennan, 'Women in Revolt' in *Magill*, Apr. 1979, pp 34–46.

⁴⁹ *Irish Press*, 26 Sept. 1970.

⁵⁰ *Irish Press*, 3 Nov. 1970; *Irish Times*, 15 Dec. 1970.

⁵¹ *Irish Times*, 22 Dec. 1970.

governments emerged ‘because women have not come forward to take their share of the political burden’.⁵²

The unsuccessful attempts in 1971 by Senators Mary Robinson, John Horgan and Trevor West to introduce a private members bill in Seanad Éireann to lift the ban on contraception prompted much comment that sought to link the issue with wider issues such as divorce and abortion.⁵³ In a sermon in Ballina Cathedral (Robinson’s home town), the bishop of Killala, Dr Thomas McDonnell warned of the dangers of a ‘post-Christian world [in which] as in England, you have contraceptives made freely available, divorce permitted, and finally abortion allowed by law’. The legalisation of contraception would, he concluded, result in ‘an increase in extra-marital sex . . . the devaluing of marriage and the family and the spread of venereal disease’.⁵⁴ The debate prompted Mary Kenny to declare that the legalisation of contraception would not ‘instantly pave the way for divorce, abortion, euthanasia, mass prostitution of 11-year-old children and epidemic VD’ and to observe that people were ‘running around the place in a state of fevered hysteria as though the whole thing was a mandate for the statutory introduction of the Permissive society’. She also called on readers to recognise the reality of marriage breakdown: divorce Irish-style, she concluded, amounted to ‘desertion . . . no alimony, no legal custody of the children, no protection whatever’.⁵⁵ When, in March 1971, Archbishop McQuaid issued a pastoral letter that described the possible legalisation of contraception as ‘a curse upon the country’ many female activists walked out of the masses at which it was read and held a protest outside the archbishop’s palace in Drumcondra.⁵⁶ Mary Kenny later led a protest group that entered the grounds of Leinster House and sang ‘We shall not conceive’ to the tune of ‘We shall not be moved’.⁵⁷

Reaction and retrenchment

Kenny’s journalism and her actions irked many people, not least some of her colleagues in the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement who expressed concerns about her headline grabbing antics.⁵⁸ The Catholic hierarchy also upped the ante: in May 1971, the bishop of Clonfert, Thomas Ryan declared that ‘probably never before, certainly not since the penal days, was the Catholic heritage of our country subjected to so many insidious onslaughts on the pretext of conscience, civil rights, and women’s liberation’.⁵⁹ Politicians also reacted: in the Dáil, Fianna Fáil’s David Andrews declared that they ‘did not need an organisation led by her [Kenny] to tell us about our obligations to deserted wives, to the unmarried mother, or to the position of the illegitimate child in our society’. Politicians on all sides had, he concluded, ‘spoken forcefully in favour of this deprived section of our community’.⁶⁰ This exchange prompted a somewhat heated interview by Kenny of Andrews in which he observed that while he sympathised with some of the aims of the women’s movement, Fianna Fáil wanted ‘a proper social security structure brought about in an evolutionary fashion rather than in a revolutionary fashion’. By ‘stunting on the Late Late Show’ and engaging in campaigning journalism, Kenny had, he concluded, ‘abused [her] position in this country as woman editor of one of our national newspapers and as a member of Women’s Lib’. In response, Kenny

⁵² *Sunday Independent*, 7 Feb. 1971.

⁵³ *Irish Times*, 16 Mar. 1971.

⁵⁴ *Irish Times*, 29 Mar. 1971.

⁵⁵ *Irish Press*, 22 Mar. 1971.

⁵⁶ *Irish Press*, 29 Mar. 1971.

⁵⁷ *Irish Press*, 1 Apr. 1971.

⁵⁸ See Anne Stopper, *Mondays at Gaj’s: The Story of the Irish Women’s Liberation Movement* (Dublin, 2006).

⁵⁹ *Irish Times*, 24 May 1971.

⁶⁰ Dáil Debates, vol. 254, col. 85–86, 25 May 1971.

described Andrews as ‘a classical example of the threatened male’.⁶¹ Fine Gael politicians also viewed Kenny with suspicion: in his speech to Fine Gael’s 1971 *ard fheis*, party leader Liam Cosgrave took a dig at Kenny by noting that while ‘he could get publicity for his deputies, should he send them out in hot pants’ he would not do so. That *ard fheis* also heard one delegate call on the party to resist the ‘sex-tyranny’ represented by Kenny and her colleagues.⁶²

Despite such reactions, the women’s pages maintained their promotion of female activism, with varying degrees of success. The abrupt departure of Mary Kenny from the *Irish Press* to the London *Evening Standard* in 1971 saw its ‘Women’s Press’ page lose its edge. Tired of ‘Vivion [de Valera] harping on about her’, Tim Pat Coogan appointed a man, Liam Nolan, in her stead. Nolan, a broadcaster with RTÉ, was, according to Coogan, ‘alert to what was happening in society, but compared with Mary he could justly be termed a conservative [and] his sojourn put an end to Vivion’s fixation with the women’s page’.⁶³ But the *Irish Times*’ ‘Women First’ page continued to push boundaries. In the run-up to the 1973 general election it made a concerted effort to put equality on the political agenda. It published an open letter to politicians calling for the introduction of legislation on child maintenance payments, listed a fantasy all-female cabinet that included Senator Mary Robinson as Taoiseach and profiled all sixteen female electoral candidates.⁶⁴ It also published a questionnaire on social issues and women’s rights that it had distributed to all political parties and subsequently devoted two days of its space to publishing the responses it had received, outlining the various parties’ views on equal pay, discrimination in the workplace, the legalisation of contraception and divorce and the right of women to sit on juries.⁶⁵

Reviewing the impact of the women’s pages in September 1974, Olivia O’Leary observed that ‘some of the most influential, far-seeing and truthful examples of journalism at its best appeared under women’s page headings’ and that such journalism represented ‘a brave and unapologetic onslaught on social shibboleths of all kinds’. But, O’Leary concluded, such journalism should never have had to be grouped under women’s pages because female readers ‘had a right to see their particular problem or interest included in the general assessment or presentation of any question of human rights, politics, sport, labour relations, social change, foreign affairs, finance or social satire’.⁶⁶ O’Leary’s comments were prescient: at the *Irish Times* the ‘Women First’ page ceased publication the following month. In a farewell note, its editor, Christina Murphy, observed that women’s affairs had become ‘such a focus of public and political attention’ that they could move from ‘the cosy confines of the women’s page and onto the front page of the newspapers where it belongs’.⁶⁷

Regardless of what pages the issue appeared on, contraception remained highly contentious. When, in 1978, the Minister for Health, Charles Haughey proposed a bill to allow pharmacists to sell contraceptives to married couples who had a doctor’s prescription, Fine Gael’s Oliver J. Flanagan expressed ‘great fears in regard to the continuance into the 1980s of parliamentary democracy as we know it’ and criticised journalists for undermining moral values by pushing for social change. As Flanagan saw it:

⁶¹ *Irish Press*, 31 May 1971.

⁶² *Irish Times*, 18 May, 1971.

⁶³ Coogan, *A Memoir*, pp 148–49.

⁶⁴ *Irish Times*, 29 Jan. 1973; 14 Feb. 1973; 26 Feb. 1973.

⁶⁵ *Irish Times*, 7, 27 & 28 Feb. 1973.

⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 30 Sept. 1974.

⁶⁷ *Irish Times*, 26 Oct. 1974.

There has not been any widespread demand for legislation of this kind but it has been the subject of agitation by certain liberal-minded people, certain liberal-minded journalists in the Press, on radio and television, all anxious to help to establish a completely materialistic State without any regard for the need to maintain some reasonable degree of moral standards. When wildcat, crazy, daft journalists put their pens to paper it is to advocate a society in which marriage would be pushed into the background, in which abortion is not to be decried, in which countries are described where economic progress and abortion are portrayed side by side. These liberal-minded journalists think it is part of their modern obligation to pen articles which are evilly designed, an attack on family life and on the family as we have known it.⁶⁸

The legalisation of contraception for married couples – or as Flanagan saw it, ‘an attack on marriage as well as on human life and its creation’ – was the prelude to bitter divisions within journalistic circles on the issue of abortion. In September 1983, following a divisive referendum campaign, the electorate voted two to one in favour of inserting a pro-life clause in the constitution – heralding, as one female journalist described it, ‘a lousy decade for Irishwomen’. What she described as ‘the gulf between the lip service – paid by priest, politician, and lay fundamentalist to their own notion of womanhood – and the reality of women’s lives’ became more and more apparent as the years unfolded.⁶⁹ Despite some in-house criticism of how journalists had covered the referendum – *Irish Press* journalist Tim O’Sullivan contended that ‘the anti-amendment views of many Dublin-based reporters strongly coloured their presentation of the pro-amendment case’ – journalists continued to devote considerable attention to the position of women in society, particularly in relation to the sensitive topic of crisis pregnancy, a topic that was never far from controversy in the 1980s and 1990s.⁷⁰

Conclusion

From today’s perspective, the manner in which religion and social issues were reported up to the late 1960s is testament to the fact that the past is a foreign country – a country that we sometimes look back on in bemusement. But it is beyond doubt that the role of religion in society and the impact of Church teaching on people’s lives came under increased scrutiny from the 1960s onwards due to the advent of television, the coverage of Vatican II, and the rise of the new female journalism. The subsequent decades brought increased scrutiny on the role of the Catholic Church in Irish society – the outcomes of which need not be elucidated upon here – and have resulted in a radically altered relationship between church, state, citizens, and the media.⁷¹ The dismay felt at the unchanging stance of the Church in relation to sexuality, plus the scandals that followed in later decades, have also led to changes in religious practices: in a survey conducted in 1973, 91% of those surveyed attended mass once a week; by 2012 that figure had fallen to 33%.⁷² The past, indeed, is a foreign country.

⁶⁸ Dáil Debates, vol. 313, cols. 1258–1259, 5 Apr. 1979.

⁶⁹ Nell McCafferty, *Goodnight Sisters* (Dublin, 1987), p. 1.

⁷⁰ Tim O’Sullivan, *Fair and Accurate? The Amendment and the Press*, (Dublin, 1984), p. 7. In particular, O’Sullivan mentions Pat Brennan’s ‘Backlash and Blackmail’ article in *Magill*, July 1982, pp 14–24 as helping to frame media coverage of the referendum.

⁷¹ See Colum Kenny, ‘Significant television: journalism, sex abuse and the Catholic Church’ in *Irish Communications Review*, 11 (2009), pp 63–76.

⁷² Research and Development Commission, *Survey of Religious Practice, Attitudes and Beliefs in the Republic of Ireland 1973–74* (Dublin, 1975); *Irish Times*, 5 June 2012.