**Anti-Catholicism in Ireland**

**A talk by David Quinn**

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**Speaking notes**

**Recognising anti-Catholicism**

We are quick to see prejudice when the target of criticism is a minority group. We readily use labels like ‘racist’, sexist’, ‘Islamophobe’ etc.

Sometimes are too quick to use them.

Any attempt to have a debate about immigration is ‘racist’

Being opposed to abortion is ‘sexist’

Criticising aspects of Islam is ‘Islamophobic’

But we are too slow to see attacks on Christianity or Catholicism as a form of prejudice?

Are we too quick to see all attacks as fair, well-intentioned, even if sometimes angry criticism that ultimately has the best interests of Christianity at heart, or at least does not wish it ill?

I think we are

What is the difference between criticism and prejudice?

Is the attack motivated by a desire to harm the target or benefit it?

For example, all Catholics will criticise their leaders for their repeated failures to properly address the abuse scandals. They want their Church to measure up.

So do many critics from outside the Church. The scandals are a source of justifiable disgust and anger

On the other hand, do we attach the scandals to the nature of Catholicism itself? To its hierarchical structure, for example? To its teachings on sex (warped and repressive)? To the male-only priesthood?

Now we might be moving from fair to unfair criticism

Is a person motivated by a basic hostility toward the target under attack?

Do they wish to reduce its influence below what would be fair?

Do they want it to disappear completely?

Are the worst interpretations constantly attached to the object of attack?

Are the attacks relentless?

How much good do you see in the thing you criticise?

Do you highlight only the harm it has done?

How often do you apply negative stereotypes to it? (The cruel nun, the authoritarian or perverted priest, the hypocritical Mass-goer)

Let’s apply this to a couple of examples that are not the Catholic Church.

**Anti-Irish**

How about Ireland itself?

If we see ourselves being stereotyped as being stupid, or violent, or drunks, we tend not to like it and we see an anti-Irish agenda at work.

Very recently, the Irish Ambassador to the UK, Adrian O’Neill, accused the Spectator magazine of ‘anti-Irish sentiment’.

His accusation was triggered by an article that attacked Ireland for joining the French version of the Commonwealth and not the British Commonwealth. It referred to Leo Varadkar as ‘Little Leo’.

Ambassador O’Neill said article in the Spectator were often ‘snide’ and ‘hostile’ towards Ireland.

**What about the EU?**

Would it be fair to say that Nigel Farage is anti-EU?

Why do we say that?

He is relentless in his attacks on it

He credits it with little or nothing

He puts the worst interpretations on everything it does

It is either incompetent or interested only in advancing its own power

We see the Daily Mail as anti-EU. Same with the Daily Telegraph.

It is not good enough for Irish journalists to be so quick to attack elements of the British media as anti-EU and to be so slow to see any anti-Catholicism in any part of the Irish media

**Anti-Trump**

Would it be fair to say our media are anti-Trump?

How many articles are carried attacking him?

How many are carried defending him?

How many are even neutral?

**Anti-British**

When do you know when criticism of Britain has slid into anti-Britishness per se?

It is even the focus is only the bad aspect of British history and not on the good aspects.

In the case of Ireland, we would talk only about the Penal Laws, the Famine, the Black and Tans, the two Bloody Sundays and so on

We would not talk about its fantastic tradition of parliamentary democracy, or the way in which it stood alone against Hitler for part of WW2

Here in Ireland it was extremely difficult for a long time to say anything good about Britain. You would be attacked as a ‘West Brit’

But when the Queen came here in 2011, we were anxious not to talk about the dark side of British involvement in Ireland. We wanted to improve relations. This was a sign of our maturity

We decided our past criticisms had gone on too long and lack fair-mindedness in the end

We pushed to one side republican voices of opposition to the visit

**The scandals**

You can’t give a talk like this without discussing the scandals. This includes not alone the sexual abuse scandals, but also the likes of the mother and baby homes and the Magdalene laundries

These have obviously led to justifiable anger at the Church which should not be confused with anti-Catholicism

My writing and commentary on the scandals has normally focussed on a number of aspects to them.

One is their extent

Another is the matter of accountability (bishops and other religious leaders) and justice for the victims (meaning punishment of the guilty plus compensation)

A third is whether something in the nature of Catholicism itself was the cause?

I want to look at this third aspect in particular because it is the most relevant to my talk tonight

Is celibacy to blame? The answer is no. To begin with, other organsations have also been scarred by these scandals, other Churches for example, sporting bodies, where celibacy is not an issue at all

Is Church teaching on sex to blame? No, and for the same answer as above?

What about the hierarchical nature of the Church? But every organisation has hierarchies. The main problem is that organisations seek to protect their reputations and cover-up scandals

Is it the male-only nature of the priesthood? Answer, no, and again for the reasons given above.

But when analysis of these issues again and again points the finger of blame at certain aspects of Catholic teaching, at the nature of Catholicism itself, then fair criticism becomes unfair criticism

By contrast, when we discuss terrorist attacks by Jihadists such as happened in Sri Lanka on Sunday, we almost never have a discussion about the nature of Islam itself because we are so worried that such attacks might be unfair or motivated by ‘Islamophobia’

On the contrary, we are reminded that Islam is a religion of peace

Why the huge difference in approach? It is because we are inclined to protect minorities from all criticism, whereas we think majorities are fair game?

But even in countries where the Catholic Church is a minority, e.g. the US or Australia or Britain, its sexual abuse scandals still receive massive coverage compared with those of other organisations

Is this because the Catholic Church has such a huge global presence? Perhaps. (But so does Islam)

Is it because the Catholic Church preaches such high moral standards and has often so badly failed to live up to them? Perhaps. But all Churches preach moral standards.

Indeed, the UN preaches very high moral standards, but has been guilty of every sort of scandal, scandals that receive very little coverage, even when the UN is otherwise in the news, for example, when it criticises Ireland about something

In respect of the mother and baby home and the Magdalene laundries, even the international media have a particular focus on how these were run in Ireland.

But such institutions were widespread, in the English-speaking world at least and outside of Ireland, they were not run by Catholic religious orders in most cases.

In Britain, for example, there were 370 Magdalene homes in operation a century ago under the auspices of an Evangelical body within the Church of England. Many others were also in operation. The last did not close until the 1970s by which time they were called ‘training schools’.

The last mother and baby homes in Britain did not close until the 1970s and tens of thousands of children were placed for adoption by them. The peak year was 1968, when 16,000 children were adopted. Often proper records were not kept.

Just 12pc of these homes were run by the Catholic Church in Britain.

In the US from about the turn of the last century, professionally trained social workers began to take over the care of unmarried mothers from church organisations. Their condition did not improve.

At least as much as before, they were seen a social problem to be solved, expect that this time not religion, but ‘science’ was applied. The mothers were often diagnosed as “feeble-minded”. Sometimes sterilisation was seen as the answer. (see ‘Fallen Women, Problem Girls’)

In Sweden from the 1930s until the 1970s, 60,000 women were sterilised under a Social Democratic government.

So our institutions, as awful as they could be, were not an Irish or a Catholic phenomena as such, not by any stretch. They weren’t even necessarily religious.

Am I engaging here in ‘whataboutery’? But else how do you point out a double standard? Why single out Ireland and Irish Catholicism and not talk about similar scandals elsewhere?

And how do you even know about similar scandals elsewhere without pointing them out.

In fact, the accusation of ‘whataboutery’ can be turned around. Why do you not want similar scandals elsewhere highlighted?

The legacy of the institutions has been dramatized in movies like Song for Raggy Boy, A Love Divided, and the Magdalene Sisters.

But no Irish-set movie I can think of has been made in recent about the priests and religious who gave heroic service to their communities.

**Hero priests and religious**

What about Nano Nagle who founded the Presentation Sisters and who helped the poor of Cork, contracting TB in the process and dying prematurely?

What about Mother Mary Aikenhead who founded the Sisters of Charity who built St Vincent’s Hospital in 1834 and went out to help the sick and dying in cholera and smallpox and typhoid and TB epidemics, long before antibiotics and vaccinations?

How many of the Church’s most ardent critics are alive today because a religious nursed an ancestor back to health?

What about Frank Duff of the Legion of Mary who helped 3,000 unmarried mothers to keep their children from the 1930s at a time when no-one else appears to have been doing so?

**The Pope’s visit**

I imagined that with the abortion referendum out of the way, Pope Francis might have received better coverage than he in fact got, especially given that he seems to be a new kind of pope, but no.

A huge report was published in Pennsylvania just prior to his visit dealing with clerical abuse, but even before that the coverage was negative.

We were warned that

* Disease would break out in Phoenix Park
* Temporary morgues would be established
* That the way to the site would be long and arduous

Even though no new scandals had emerged in Ireland in the run-up, or there was no report into abuse since the 2011 Cloyne report, nonetheless, the issue dominated coverage of the visit

This was completely different to coverage of the Queen’s visit here in 2011. They are not the same of course. Nonetheless, British crimes in the North are well within living memory and no apology was expected on behalf of the British State, or given

One Cardinal remarked to me that it was the only visit he could remember when a Pope arrived and the atmosphere did not change for the better

**The place of the Church now**

An Amarach poll in 2011 found that 20pc of Irish people would prefer if the Catholic Church disappeared from Irish life completely

One in five is a lot of people and wishing the Church to disappear completely is certainly anti-Catholicism.

But most would not go that far. They are content merely to ‘separate’ Church and State. But what do they mean by that?

It is one thing to mean that the Church should not control the State or vice versa.

After that, things become more complicated

The Church is a part of civil society and its influence over society should be proportionate to its level of support within society

Few would say the trade union movement (for example) should have no influence on society or the State

Few would say that Irish business should have no influence on society or the State

But there are many who want to reduce the influence of Christians in society or the State to close to zero. They want totally privatise religion

They want all public funding withdrawn from faith schools and faith hospitals

There has been a suggestion that religious symbols should not be displayed in hospitals

The law requires that priests break the Seal of Confession if they hear a confession of child abuse

The law requires doctors to go against their consciences so as to facilitate abortion

The law requires Catholic hospitals to perform abortions

There is a proposal that Catholic schools must teach about abortion (in what way?) in RSE class

Some TDs are suggesting that religious ethos must have no influence over RSE. What does the Government think?

If we go much further down these paths as a country then we will have gone further than most Western countries have so far done

**Final remarks**

Given the scandals, it is understandable that so much anger has been directed at the Church in recent decades and a certain amount of anti-Catholicism in response is understandable

But there comes a point at which we have to ask for fairness

We have a right to ask for balanced coverage of the Church

To ask that the positive as well as the negative side of the Church’s history is highlighted

Turning the dark side of Catholic history into the dominant side of its history is anti-Catholicism

Finally, we have to become more willing and able to call out anti-Catholicism when we see it because it does exist

**(Note: the talk as delivered differed in some places from the speaking notes)**