
Humanism and “The Priest in Politics”: Sean O’Faolain, Edward Said and John Henry Newman

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Abstract. The November 2012 death from septicemia of an Indian woman, Ms Savita Halappanavar, at an Irish hospital and the subsequent claim from her husband that she had repeatedly asked for a termination of her pregnancy over a three-day period but was refused on the grounds that Ireland was a “Catholic country”, has once again brought to the fore the issue of the separation of Church and State in Ireland. In response to the controversy that has arisen, this paper revisits the inspiring figure of Sean O’Faolain with a view to showing his relevance to today’s debates. Reading O’Faolain in relation to the humanistic language of Edward Said, and consciously influenced by the latter’s recommendation that scholarship be attuned to currents of the past as well as the present, this paper looks closely at O’Faolain’s polemic, “The Priest in Politics”, in which he invokes the inspiring, humanistic, intellectual example of Cardinal Newman, with a view to showing the importance of public intellectuals in bringing about change and the value of the strategic use of humanism in order to contest the hegemony of powerful institutions such as the Catholic Church.

Key Words. Church and State, Humanism, Edward Said, Sean O’Faolain, John Henry Newman.

Resumen. El fallecimiento por septicemia de una mujer India, Savita Halappanavar, en un hospital irlandés en noviembre de 2012 y la posterior alegación de su marido explicando que a lo largo de tres días, durante los que ella había solicitado de manera reiterada la terminación de su embarazo, se encontró con una negativa fundamentada en el hecho de que Irlanda es un “país Católico”, ha levantado una vez más la polémica en torno a la separación de Iglesia y Estado en Irlanda. Como respuesta a la controversia surgida, este artículo pretende reexaminar la figura inspiradora de Sean O’Faolain con el propósito de resaltar su relevancia en el contexto del debate contemporáneo sobre la mencionada relación entre Iglesia y Estado. Leyendo a O’Faolain desde la perspectiva del discurso humanista de Edward Said, y conscientemente influido por la recomendación de éste de que el ejercicio de la labor académica debería permanecer en contacto tanto con las corrientes del pasado como con las del presente, este artículo examina la polémica de O’Faolain, “The Priest in Politics”. En dicho ensayo O’Faolain invoca el ejemplo intelectual y humanista del Cardenal Newman con el propósito de hacer hincapié en la importancia de los intelectuales públicos a la hora de promover cambios en la sociedad y recomendar el uso estratégico del humanismo con vistas a rebatir la hegemonía de instituciones poderosas como la Iglesia Católica.

Palabras clave. Iglesia y Estado, Humanismo, Edward Said, Sean O’Faolain, John Henry Newman.

Since the foundation of the Irish State, and particularly since the writing of de Valera’s 1937 constitution, the desire for the separation of Church and State has been a central concern

for many of the country’s more prominent intellectuals.¹ Chief among these was Sean

1. In his contribution to a June 2012 *Irish Times*

O’Faolain. In his address at the May 1991 memorial service held for O’Faolain, Conor Cruise O’Brien, himself a notable critic of what he called “The Catholic State”,² offered a nuanced picture:

Seán was often referred to as anti-clerical, but that is a misleading description. Seán was incapable of humping together so disparate a body as the Irish clergy, whether for the purposes of condemnation or commendation. What Seán was against was what Burke was against: abuse of power, whether by Right or Left, Catholics or Protestants, laity or clergy. In Seán’s day, the senior Irish clergy commanded a great deal of authority, even in what are thought of elsewhere as purely secular affairs and they sometimes abused that authority (1991: 95).

In this paper I wish to examine how O’Faolain contested the abuse of power of the Church while doing so with a view to stressing, in line with the subtle intellectual politics not of Burke but of Edward Said, the important role to be played by the individual intellectual in bringing about change, and the potential value of the utilization of a renewed language of humanism. By revisiting O’Faolain, and by invoking his presence in dialogue with Said’s humanistic idiom, we can reappraise the worth of his ground-breaking challenge to Church authority and consider it particularly in relation

series “Catholicism Now”, historian Diarmaid Ferriter emphasises that the 1932 Eucharistic Congress was the key event which cemented the relationship between Church and State. Anxious to seek favour with a hierarchy which had previously excommunicated him and his fellow anti-treaty “irregulars”, de Valera very enthusiastically supported the mass event, so preparing the ideological parameters for the 1937 constitution.

2. In *States of Ireland*, one of the signal texts on Irish culture and identity published in the second half of the twentieth century, O’Brien dedicates a chapter to “The Catholic State” that evolved after partition, and while he notes that it was never officially called a Catholic State, he indicates the extent to which “the oppressive pieties of the Catholic State” were eventually to become apparent (1972: 110). He also wrote of O’Faolain as a “Catholic writer” in *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Catholic Writers*. Among the other writers in the study are Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and François Mauriac.

to ongoing tension in Ireland around Church and State relations and the consequent fallout with regards to individual and gender rights. To illustrate the character of O’Faolain’s interventions, a close reading, in the manner advocated by Said, will be undertaken of his article “The Priest in Politics” which was published in 1947 in *The Bell*, that key magazine often attributed with offering the first important challenge to the terms of national self-definition which had become hegemonic in the decades following independence.³

Following the above quotation, O’Brien went on to claim that it was in fact his own cousin, Owen Sheehy Skeffington, who had been the most aggressive in critiquing the abuses of clerical power before then recalling how O’Faolain himself had ended his memorial address at Skeffington’s funeral declaring: “you won, Owen, you won” (1991: 96). The words had been articulated in 1970 in relation to the broad mood of liberalisation which had marked the 60s and the perception that the “Catholic State” had, in effect, fallen to the secular tide of modernisation, part of which involved the increasing acknowledgement of a humanist charter of rights and liberties not modelled to the exclusive prerogative of the Catholic Church. In the light of the recent controversy in Ireland following the death from septicæmia of Ms Savita Halappanavar, and the subsequent

3. Although *The Bell* more than any other periodical is associated with the challenge to the values of official Ireland, earlier periodical publications did, of course, engage in debate over the terms of national self-definition. Evident dissent to the new Catholic hegemony was to be found in George Russell’s *Irish Statesman*, while, as Diarmaid Ferriter has noted, the satire of *Dublin Opinion* was very popular, notably its lampooning of national self-glorification (2004: 346-347). Both of these publications achieved substantial circulation figures. Other significant periodicals include *The Capuchin Annual* which prioritized high culture over religious content, and *Ireland To-day* which, although it lasted for only two years, served almost as a precursor of *The Bell*, including as it did, contributions from O’Faolain and Frank O’Connor in which Daniel Corkery’s nationalist vision was challenged. Ferriter indicated that its aim was to critique “an outdated and narrow national identity” (2004: 375).

claim from her husband that, according to *The Irish Times*, she had repeatedly asked for a termination of her pregnancy over a three-day period but was refused as there was still a foetal heartbeat, while also being told “this is a Catholic country”, the celebratory words of O’Faolain do perhaps appear somewhat premature (Holland and Cullen 2012). Indeed, O’Brien himself had been notably less sanguine than O’Faolain, remarking that following the results of the two referenda held in the 1980s, the words of victory would have to be spoken without the same confidence, while still concluding that “Yet basically, Seán was right” (1991: 96).

If the degree to which Ireland has moved away from a Catholic identity remains an issue of debate, it is unquestionably true that the change has been considerable since the mid-century period, and it is equally important that, particularly in view of the contemporary controversy, attention be placed once more on the seminal role played in promoting change by individual intellectuals who, in the parlance of humanism and the language of human rights, ‘speak truth to power’. Unquestionably, in relation to the current controversy, the perception exists that a primary influence on the perceived need to change current legislation on abortion away from one heavily influenced by Catholic teaching is the ‘negative publicity’ achieved internationally, but one feels that in view of the diffuse nature of public debate resulting from a globalized, digitalized world, and of the fractious condition of much popular debate in Ireland, it is salutary to reinvoke as exemplary the role played within Ireland by individual intellectuals in bringing about change in the past.

O’Brien provides a useful synthesis. In explanation of why he felt O’Faolain was basically right, difficulties notwithstanding, to declare victory, he clarified that:

The climate in Ireland today is far more liberal and open than was the case at the mid-century period. Partly, the change is due to outside influences. But outside influences alone could not have done it. There had to be, in Ireland itself, some powerful minds, deeply committed to liberal values and possessing the courage to court unpopularity by publicly defending them at all points where they were challenged or denied. Among those who did that, three names are foremost: Owen Sheehy Skeffington, Hubert Butler and Seán O Faoláin: an agnostic, a

Protestant and a Catholic. There is a fitness about that (1991: 96).

Yet, there is, perhaps, an excessive neatness about O’Brien’s formulation which fails to register the extent to which, more than anything, O’Faolain defied categorisation. He did not easily fit into any clear mould or under any defining rubric. More protean than Catholic, when, in one of his last interviews, he was asked how he would react to being called a Catholic writer, his response was to exclaim: “That is very funny. I’m not a Catholic, I’m not anything in fact, I have no religion. How could I be a Catholic writer?” (Kennedy 1991: 5), before being explicit that such a condition would be incompatible with his vocation as an intellectual: “It is a contradiction in terms. You can’t have an Irish Catholic intellectual. There is no such a thing. The Church has too strong a hold on things. It is a small country. We need our anticlericals, they are healthy for the country” (6).

O’Faolain’s self-definition is thus best understood not in isolation, or in unchanging, finite terms, but in relation to the world and specifically in combative dialogue with the individuals and institutions which exercised hegemony in the Ireland he had returned to in 1933 following seven years in the US and the UK. As he notes in his autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, the advent of censorship had him feeling like a man left naked in the pillory to be pelted with rotten vegetables by his fellow citizens, pelted, in effect, by the sort of anonymous letters sent not only to himself but also to his wife and mother which contained the likes of what he termed “a typical effusion: ‘No detractor of Ireland’s fair name must whine because we Irish want to clean our house after dirty little dogs like you have dropped your filth on our clean carpet, as a pup is whipped so shall you be’” (1993: 268-269). It is thus no wonder that he could conceive of his engagement in the public sphere as a fight on a battlefield or that his oppositional vocation should lead him many years later to proclaim Sheehy Skeffington the winner in a vocabulary bordering on the pugilistic.

But, for much that O’Faolain’s engagement with the dominant powers and those whom he termed “stuffed shirts” could sometimes be expressed in terms of battles with winners and losers, his activity as a public intellectual was

above all subtle, strategic and always nuanced.⁴ And so it had to be. Following his death, the ‘Protestant’ *Irish Times* paid homage, in its editorial comment, to the key role he had played in securing for Ireland a measure of spiritual freedom, while stressing the importance in this achievement of the recognition that what he had faced, and engaged with, was not just the boorishness of the peasantry come to power, but the sophisticated machinations of a new Catholic elite with a specific ideological agenda, and a determination to secure passive acquiescence from the population to a hegemony most clearly manifest in the uncomfortably close relationship between Church and State. *The Times* wrote:

Certainly O’Faolain was not the only writer to suffer under Irish censorship laws, but he was one of the few who clearly recognised these laws for what they were: not the ignorant fumbings of a philistine bureaucracy, but a conscious effort on the part of sophisticated ideologues in Church and State to impose upon a country still reeling from the horrors of civil war their vision of what life is and how it should be led. They wanted obedience; O’Faolain wanted freedom. If as a nation we have made any progress towards freeing ourselves spiritually, it was O’Faolain and a few like him who urged us on our way (1991: 15).

John Banville, writing specifically on the decade of the 50s, stresses how “docile” the population was, how “grimly accepting of the status quo” in a society which “seemed to me monolithic, impregnable, eternal. The structures of it appeared not man-made but the result of natural and inevitable forces before which the individual must bend, or break. This feeling of impotence was endemic ...” (2004: 25). Banville identifies as productive of such docility, “a kind of applied spiritual paralysis” which had its source in not only the failure of liberal intellectuals but more importantly “the

triumph of will among reactionary intellectuals, led by the redoubtable corporatist politician and amateur mathematician, Eamon de Valera” (26). In broad consonance with *The Times*, Banville too recognised the source of the problem was not “small-minded ignoramuses” but reactionary ideologues “who knew exactly what they were doing” and who identified as of primary importance the protection of the people from foreign influences and “liberal tendencies within our own borders” (27).

In reaction to this reality it was above all intellectual freedom that O’Faolain sought. Although since his death critics have emphasised his revisionism and apparent anti-nationalism, it is, one feels, important to consider the degree to which we can establish as his metier the desire to promote, among a broad public, critical thinking. Such critical thinking, which would question dominant values, and offer alternative, often ‘foreign’ intellectual references, is perhaps best understood as intended to create a fertile, active sphere of public debate rather than as evidence of a particular hostility to the nationalist or indeed Catholic traditions within which we can, to varying degrees, place him at different stages of his life. Close reading of O’Faolain’s *Bell* pieces shows how inaccurate it is to understand his role as merely a critic of the supposed backwardness of Irish society and a defender of modernity but rather as that of a secular, humanist intellectual who takes up polemical positions from which to offer alternatives to the dominant discourses and their institutions which operated precisely in the fashion of military or religious communities in which the authorised hierarchy issued encyclicals without the expectance of dissent, precisely that which, by contrast, O’Faolain attempts to provoke. Let us examine closely, as an exemplary instance of his style of intellectual engagement, the stimulating January 1947 *Bell* contribution “The Priest in Politics”.⁵

4. “The Stuffed Shirts” was one of his more famous editorials in *The Bell*. In it he berated the Catholic and Gaelic ideologues determined to shape the nation to their very limited imaginings. In his final *Bell* editorial, “Signing Off”, he admits to some weariness with his role of taking to task the “Bourgeoisie, Little Irelanders, chauvinists, puritans, stuffed-shirts, pietists, Tartuffes, Anglophobes, Celtophiles” (1946: 1).

5. A slightly modified version of the polemic constituted the chapter “The Priests” in O’Faolain’s *The Irish*, which he described as “a creative history of the growth of a racial mind” (9). Originally published in 1947, the same year as the article in *The Bell*, the chapter was revised in 1969 to include two further pages in which he attributed the lack of an ecumenical element in the Irish Church to “the

O'Faolain's key ideas with regards to the separation of Church and State and the need for intellectual engagement in relation to faith are here elaborated more explicitly and in a more nuanced fashion than in perhaps any other of his publications. What is noticeable from the outset is how O'Faolain attempts to deconstruct the priest as a primary signifier of Irishness in the nation's historical narrative. The article begins as follows: "Although Christianity came to Ireland in the 5th century the Catholic priest, without whom any picture of modern Ireland is unthinkable, does not occupy a central position in that picture until the 19th century" (1947: 4). Having questioned the figure of the priest, O'Faolain then proceeds to highlight how his contemporary prominence is due to "political influence" rather than to any quasi-natural historical role that automatically placed the priest at the centre of things in Irish life, noting that in the past monks rather than priests were of most significance (4). His provocation is further apparent as he points out that the latter were often not even Irish. Whereas official discourse in the early decades of the Free State emphasised the effective symbiosis between the Catholic Church and the nation, O'Faolain pointedly cleaves one from the other, so insisting that the Church had loyalty really only to itself rather than to the people or the nation.

It is thus represented as askew, as not synonymous with the nation but in part outside, its loyalty, its sense of belonging marked by coordinates that reach into the metropolitan centre. O'Faolain, making a rhetorical appeal to the emotional nationalism of his likely reader, highlights the Church's collaborationist tendencies particularly during the penal century when "the constant policy of the hierarchy was to proclaim its loyalty to the Throne in the hope of winning at least some reliefs from the Penal Laws" (6). Equally, the hierarchy had actively condemned and sought to marginalise the rebels who had fought against the British

Conquest in Ireland" before going on to recommend the introduction of divorce to Ireland, while lamenting that intelligent discussion on the issue was greatly hampered by the lack of "independent periodicals" and the fact that Radio and Television were "firmly controlled with quiet caution by the State" (119-121).

presence and, as he writes: "A small, but telling, illustration of the Church's indifference to 'the Nation' as such is offered by the Irish Language Revival" (20). The Church is not behind the language movement, and, as he says, "why should it be?" (20). Its loyalty is to itself as an institution rather than to the particular Irish circumstances it serves and certainly not to the liberationist movement which had brought about national independence. As he explains of the priest:

His secret is that of all the arcane professions. It is impossible to isolate ... his personal from his professional elements. What the military academy does to the cadet, what the law-schools do to the law-student, the seminary does to the young cleric. Each one makes a sacrifice of his personal liberty, of the single-mindedness, or unity of his personality, in order to achieve the enlargement of power that comes with membership of a great professional caste (10-11).

Consequently, the priest's participation in the public sphere is always circumscribed by both the demands and protection afforded by the institution to which he belongs, "The priest, like the soldier, will always explain his public acts in professional terms, never in merely human terms" (11). Implicit in this suggestion is the idea that such professional loyalty, like that of the cloistered academic, involves turning a blind eye to inhuman practices and abuses. This loyalty would not in itself be of consequence were it not for the huge influence the Church has wielded in Irish society particularly since the Act of Union with these values spilling over into the public realm, so much so that, as he notes, even as influential a figure as Daniel O'Connell often found himself forced to hold his peace and to dissent only in private (11). Availing of military metaphors to emphasise just how effective the Church could be in silencing dissenting voices and, in a manner which recalls the military disciplining of colonial subjects of the sort he reveals in his autobiography to have been key in his own upbringing, O'Faolain concedes that "the artillery of argument against him is colossal; not to mention the deadly power of such fragmentation bombs as the cry of 'anti-clerical,' 'anti-God,' 'Red,' 'Leftist,' 'lay-bishop,' and that most devastating bomb of all, on which is chalked - 'Yah! Intellectual!'" (11).

What O’Faolain perceives is that the intellectual is cast as the anti-priest, he who is inalterably in opposition and effectively rendered as other, as an outsider whose alien values and opinions can, from the Church’s perspective, be legitimately censored and silenced. Indeed, as he states in “The Pleasures and Pains of Ireland”, the climate of hostility towards the intellectual was such as to allow him to consider the country “a hell for the intellectual” (1944: 369). By contrast, the intellectual is here shown by O’Faolain as more in tune with the liberationist ideas through which the collective nation achieved its freedom. This is achieved through subtle recourse to rhetorical strategies designed to accentuate in the public mind a sensitivity to, and regard for, individual liberty expressed in universal human, or humanist terms.

Fundamental to the intellectual project of O’Faolain is the breaking down of the barriers that seek to copper-fasten power within elite institutions and discourage the traffic of ideas and knowledge between the broader public sphere and the space of the institution. O’Faolain explicitly critiques the tendency of the Church to exclude or censor those whose public pronouncements are not strictly doctrinaire, a fate both he and the majority of the country’s creative writers then suffered. Edward Said offers some reflections on institutional power in his late work, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*. These are suggestive when considered in relation to O’Faolain and particularly with regards to our understanding, in the context of Ireland’s current debates, of the potential benefits of interpreting the humanist legacy in a radical manner which, in effect, ‘dialogues’ with a broad public constituency and not a set of elite practitioners of any particular faith or doctrine. Said asks the salient question: “Is it necessarily the case that a belief in humanism as an educational and cultural ideal must be accompanied by reams of laundry-list exclusions, the prevalence of a miniscule class of selected and approved authors and readers, and a tone of mean-spirited rejection?” (2004: 21). His answer is emphatic:

I would say no, since to understand humanism at all, for us as citizens of this particular republic, is to understand it as democratic, open to all classes and backgrounds, and as a process of unending disclosure, discovery, self-criticism,

and liberation. I would go so far as to say that humanism is critique, critique that is directed at the state of affairs in, as well as out of, the university (which is certainly not the position adopted by the carping and narrow humanism that sees itself as an elite formation) and that gathers its force and relevance by its democratic, secular and open character (21-22).

Clearly, the kernel of Said’s idea is that the contemporary intellectual should not be at odds with humanism *per se* but with the sort of interpretation of it that is reactionary and aimed at closing off its sphere within elite institutions such as the academy or the Church. As O’Faolain points out in his own defence of a humanistic liberty in relation to the figure of the priest, this reactionary turn involves keeping the public at bay, disqualified from engaging in debate. O’Faolain shows that the Church in Ireland has a very clear history of keeping the people and its potential interests at a distance and in a very secondary position to that of the needs of the Church itself, while he, by contrast, above all attempts to put it into dialogue with the lay mind, to have it engage with ideas from the secular sphere, to create a traffic of exchange between interconnected and not strictly separated realms. His project is consistent with Said’s valuable insistence that:

...there is, in fact, no contradiction at all between the practice of humanism and the practice of participatory citizenship. Humanism is not about withdrawal and exclusion. Quite the reverse: its purpose is to make more things available to critical scrutiny as the product of human labor, human energies for emancipation and enlightenment, and, just as importantly, human misreadings and misinterpretations of the collective past and present (2004: 22).

This issue of critique is important and has led to some misunderstanding of what Said’s relationship to humanism actually is. In reaction to his *Orientalism*, he has been criticised, for example by James Clifford, for a “relapse into the essentializing modes it [*Orientalism*] attacks” with the book “ambivalently enmeshed in the totalizing habits of Western humanism” (2004: 8-9). However, from Said’s point of view, the key issue is that Clifford’s understanding is of a humanism totally at odds with the sort of post-structuralist theory found in the work of, say, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, where the autonomy of the individual subject was shown

to be fundamentally challenged by the power of systems of thought and knowledge. Yet Said did not see in humanism “only the kind of totalizing and essentialising trends that Clifford identified” (10), rather a strength of radical critique that is fundamental to humanism and from which scholars such as Foucault and Barthes drew inspiration even as they deconstructed its excesses.

Nor did he see the so-called grand narratives of enlightenment and emancipation as strictly defunct. On the contrary, he states:

... as a fair deal of my own political and social activism has assured me, people all over the world can be and are moved by ideals of justice and equality ... and the affiliated notion that humanistic ideals of liberty and learning still supply most disadvantaged people with the energy to resist unjust war and military occupation, for instance, and to try to overturn despotism and tyranny, both strike me as ideas that are alive and well (10).

Conor Cruise O’Brien, Owen Sheehy Skeffington, John Banville and Sean O’Faolain would, no doubt, have concurred. Whether as individuals or collectively, people can and do cause real change for the better. Liberty, justice, equality and learning are not, then, in the model of humanism deployed by Said and O’Faolain, just jettisoned. They are concepts that have application within established institutions such as the academy and the outside world, and in the traffic between the two expressed in terms of human rights. But they aren’t to be applied without historical caveats, without drawing attention to their tainted past in what is in effect the application of humanistic critique to humanism itself:

I believed then, and still believe, that it is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and-language bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past from, say Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer and more recently from Richard Poirier, and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present, many of them exilic, extraterritorial, and unhoused (10-11).

These “currents of the present” are paramount as knowledge is never complete. Drawing on the example of Giambattista Vico’s frustration at the fallibility of the human mind,

Said remarks that, “there is always something radically incomplete, insufficient, provisional, disputable, and arguable about humanistic knowledge” (12). If for Vico this was a motive of regret, for Said it is an enabling, transformative trait.

Said rescues the figure of the much neglected Vico in a clear attempt to show how the engagement with the past should not involve just the staid veneration of a canonical figure but may mean invoking potentially inspirational examples of how humanistic critique and dialogue involved a constant reinvention of truth and knowledge in the present, and in defiance of the reactionary efforts of institutional elites to maintain the status quo and to reinforce versions of history resistant to critique. The model proposed is based on interpretation and dialogue, on engaging with the past in a manner that doesn’t present history and its protagonists as a closed book, as a sacred text whose meaning has already been fixed by the authorised experts such as the clerics with their privileged knowledge, but as a continual source of engagement and debate.

The example here of Vico is key and very relevant to our understanding of the precise nature of O’Faolain’s engagement with the past. His engagement with history is greatly misunderstood leading to very inaccurate readings of the nature of his intellectual project, with very major implications in terms of the debates around Irish identity and his own association with, for example, revisionism. Our attempt to here read his public attitudes in the light of the ideas of Said is not casual but in fact points to a key coincidence with regards to intellectual traditions and models of the individual intellectual.

In O’Faolain’s “The Priest in Politics”, we find intellectual positions notably similar to those we have highlighted from Said. He shows how it used to be done, so to speak, by invoking the hugely influential but complex figure of Cardinal John Henry Newman and by doing so attempting to “absorb lessons of the past”. This allows him to turn to that very interesting place of intersection between the Church, the university and the public and demonstrate just how the reactionary, self-preserving version of Church thinking is not the only possible one, that the institution of the Church does not have to be, *a priori*, in

opposition to the intellectual and to humanist values.

O’Faolain explains how, in the period after the penal laws and up to the establishment of the Catholic university by Newman, the Irish Church and its national seminary at Maynooth proved more than pragmatic in its dealings with political power, for example subjecting its Catholic bishops to the *visa* of what O’Faolain calls “that foreign government, which is surely the apex of lay control?” (1947: 12-13). Indeed, generally he sees the Church’s attitude as being, “wherever power emerges it will follow after-to bargain again” (13). Nonetheless, in its dealings with the public and with its own flock, crucially, “It is, as a Church, superior to all merely human sympathies, however it may severally be agonised by the chaos of life and affairs about it” (13). It demands total loyalty, to itself of course not the nation. The alternative, he says, is mortal sin. Clearly, the provocative O’Faolain is advocating this sin of alternatives, this humanistic insistence on dialogue between the cloistered sphere and the world. It is a turn that is consistently apparent in all his writings and public participation.

A particular example was the declaration by the Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid, that it was a mortal sin for Catholics to attend the Protestant Trinity College without his permission. At the time of writing in *The Bell* this was an important issue that had considerable resonance in public discourse, yet few had the capacity to deal with it quite so effectively as O’Faolain. Rather than merely rail against the power of the clergy as evident in the contemporary moment, he chose to avail of the complexity of history in order to contextualise the controversy of the day. In 1852, in response to the founding of Peel’s secular or “godless” colleges, Cardinal Paul Cullen persuaded John Henry Newman to come to Dublin to set up a Catholic University. However, Newman’s humanistic spirit soon ran into conflict with the desire of the hierarchy to constitute a college which was virtually immune to secular influence. Newman reported that Cullen was wary of any lay influence particularly because he associated the lay mind with the revolutionary ideas then abroad as a result of the Young Ireland movement. Cullen’s rejection of lay influence found no sympathy with Newman. As O’Faolain reveals:

To this Newman could never agree: he said that if Dr. Cullen’s views were to prevail the University would ‘simply be priest-ridden.’ ‘I mean men who do not know literature and science will have the direction of the teaching. I cannot conceive the professors taking part in this. They will be simply scrubs.’ And, again—‘On both sides of the Channel the deep difficulty is the jealousy and fear which is entertained in high quarters of the laity ...Nothing great or living can be done except when men are self-governed and independent’” (15).⁶

Just to what extent Newman was successful in opening the Catholic University to external influence is debatable, but certainly his very presence as an outsider served to trouble the complacent certainty of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland. But he didn’t remain in Ireland and returned to England to find the primate Manning similarly distrustful of the liberal lay influence of Stuart Mill, Darwin and Huxley.

Although a Church figure, Newman takes on many of the characteristics of the travelling and secular intellectual Said defends. He does not remain firmly within the institution, instead preferring to act as a conduit for ideas which contest the institution’s self-constituting borders and its unrivalled hegemony, in favour of an engagement with external humanistic values of liberty and justice and their lay proponents. Thus, O’Faolain, by evoking the figure of Newman, powerfully demonstrates that if the Church in the Free State tends to render the intellectual as a godless other in direct opposition to its authoritative self, it is in fact negating the erstwhile presence within of that intellectual other and a concomitant space of dialogue and debate. It is thus denying its own tradition.

O’Faolain writes: “Newman was an intellectual; his whole turn of mind was speculative and analytical; he foresaw that not authority but knowledge, not an absolutist

6. It is worthy of note that Newman can here highlight the importance of both literature and science, a turn illustrative of a humanistic spirit that refuses specialism, values similar to those Said defends in his *Representations of the Intellectual* Reith lectures, namely those of the amateur, secular intellectual. Newman’s defence of both literature and science is also reminiscent of Vico. In particular as a result of the dominance of Cartesian thought, Vico sought to revalorise literary language which would serve as a critique to the scientific method.

church but a teaching church working hand in hand with an educated and independent-minded laity, was he (sic) only possible answer to the agnostic danger” (18). As an intellectual, his responsibility was to advocate debate, to probe the boundaries of Church authority and to encourage a traffic of ideas back and forth between the clergy and the laity rather than, as Said put it, to either act as a professional or uncritically serve some God that always fails, so becoming, in effect, condemned to a perpetual conflict with Satan.⁷ O’Faolain writes in relation to Newman:

It is a matter of record that when he raised such questions, to answer them, the priests, whether of England or Ireland, mopped and mowed and clutched their crucifixes as if he were introducing Beelzebub in person to a gullible and incompetent laity. (This is the usual contempt of the *professional* for the layman.) The laity welcomed Newman’s fighting attitude. New ideas were pouring in on them in the streets and the clubs and the universities and men like W. G. Ward and the future Lord Acton simply had to have access to the replies. Newman has said, ‘Great changes before now have taken place in the Church’s course and new aspects of her aboriginal doctrines have suddenly come forth,’ and the layman wanted to know what those new aspects were and what light they threw on modern scientific and biblical research (18-19 emphasis added).

Clearly, O’Faolain is now bringing this historical reality forth as a dialogue with the issues of his day and as a challenge to the authority of the hierarchy. He does so with a view to broadening the perspectives within which the questions of debate might be considered and with the intention of providing his public with reference points and suggestive precedents of behaviour other than those offered by their clergy. This approach thus seeks to put the Church and the laity, past and

present into debate, and to encourage a model of intellectual engagement that promotes ongoing debate rather than facile conclusions. He himself is exemplary of the values he defends.

Interestingly, and very much in tune with his nuanced intellectual approach, O’Faolain does point out that even though the Church wielded enormous influence there was not necessarily a coincidence between it and the government of the day. As he states: “The extent to which there is an alliance between Church and State in modern Ireland is debatable” (22), and he goes on to praise the fact that the Church, unlike many historical precedents, was not merely the instrument of the government. Quoting from Lord Acton, he highlights how in fact the Church could serve as a space of liberty in the face of excessive government control: “‘Liberty,’ he concluded, ‘consists *in radice* in the preservation of an inner sphere exempt from State power’” (22). This original and surprising caveat exemplifies O’Faolain’s constant desire to be strategic, with his use of the Church as a potential space of liberty here significant, particularly given that it allows him couch his arguments in a manner which does not alienate an audience which identifies, *a priori*, with the Church. The key issue for O’Faolain is, however, that even where the Church could develop an “inner sphere” immune to state influence, it is important that this should not be exempt from criticism. He concludes: “It need not be added that the quality of the liberty which will exist inside any ‘inner sphere’ will, of course, depend on how civilised and humanised that envelope, that sanctuary itself is. This is the great test of the Catholic Church in Ireland to-day” (23).

As we can see, O’Faolain insinuates himself into the spaces between the Church and the government, between the Church and the people and attempts to reconstitute these borders as places where dialogue and the traffic of ideas can take place. The problem is that the institutional sphere of the Church keeps the intellectual at bay, he is rendered completely outside with the result that his salutary critical role is negated, leaving the Church excessively authoritarian:

Only one group is held at arm’s length, the writers or intellectuals: They, at a far, far remove from that unapproachably great man whose name I have invoked several times, Newman, see

7. Said suggests in his “Gods that Always Fail” Reith lecture that: “Because you serve a god uncritically, all the devils are always on the other side” (1994: 88), and “Those gods that always fail demand from the intellectual in the end a kind of absolute certainty and a total, seamless view of reality that recognises only disciples or enemies. What strikes me as much more interesting is how to keep a space in the mind open for doubt and for the part of an alert, skeptical irony (preferably also self-irony)” (89)

that the intellectual struggle is upon Ireland's doorstep. They want questions to be raised, and answered. The Church relies mainly on the weapon of authority (23).

Chief among the tactics of the Church is of course censorship, but this is clearly a losing battle given that, as O'Faolain points out, the hierarchy may try and police the content of films and print publications but are patently failing to check the inward flow of people, largely returning emigrants, and the huge influence that they were having on the national "inner sphere" as "Above all a constant flow and reflow of emigrants flood in the world outside with all its questions, challenges and bright temptations" (23).

We find the repeated insistence on questioning as the critical template of a humanistic approach reminiscent of Said's. O'Faolain particularly laments the almost complete absence of any Catholic layman's journals of substance, journals to which one could apply adjectives such as "enquiring" or "intelligent" (24). The essence of his argument is that rather than being pitched in opposition, the priest and the writer should operate together, should forge a strategic alliance that would serve both in their struggle against ignorance and the "vulgarity that is pouring daily into the vacuum left in the popular mind by the dying out of the old traditional life" (24).

O'Faolain above all urges change that he unequivocally associates with humanist interchange and dialogue. His approach is radically different to the sort of rearguard, reactionary notion of humanism designed to buttress existing institutions instead of bringing new relations into existence where a sort of a "liberty" may be wrought away from the existing relations of power. He concludes in terms that are stunningly reminiscent of Said's proposal of a "process, the give-and-take of vital interchange" between the secular intellectual and the religious.⁸

8. Said writes in *Representations of the Intellectual*:

In and of itself religious belief is to me both understandable and deeply personal: it is rather when a total dogmatic system in which one side is innocently good, the other irreducibly evil, is substituted for the process, the give-and-take of vital interchange, that the secular intellectual feels the unwelcome and inappropriate encroachment of one realm on another. Politics

But there can be no such common ground as long as the priest follows the easy way of authority instead of discussion, takes the easy way out by applying to all intellectual ideas the test of their effect on the poor and the ignorant. Above all, how can there be common ground when even the least observant can see on all sides that the primary attitude of the layman to the priest is less one of co-operation than of a businesslike caution. In this generation the chasm is unbridgeable, and the loss is mutual. In another generation one may hope that, with the Church in Ireland a little more humanised, there may exist the sort of give-and-take which characterises the relations of the priest and the writer in countries where the Church uses its political and social influence with finesse. For the moment Newman's opinion seems to hit the mark: 'A population of peasants ruled over by a patriotic priesthood, patriarchally.' And the significant word there is 'ruled' (24).

Authority is the enemy of real discussion. O'Faolain appropriately represents the relationship of the Church and the laity as being that of the patriarch, the autocratic ruler over the family who does not answer back to this father figure who himself alone retains the prerogative to make decisions on behalf of the still immature laity. The coincidence with the structures of colonial power is more than apparent. It is also clear that O'Faolain is very sensitive to the manner in which notions of liberty, justice, and equality are very clearly anchored within institutional and historical contexts. Even if the Irish national struggle brought about a degree of liberation for former colonial subjects their capacity to subsequently obtain a working version of "liberty" is very much constrained by institutions such as the nation state and the Church. In other words, even though on occasion he is guilty of employing essentialising vocabulary when referring to types such as 'the priest' or 'the politician', O'Faolain's engagement with the issues and his employment of the language of humanism cannot be understood in a generic sense independent of the concrete situation and of his relation to the institutions such as the Church, the universities and the State as well as the historical reality of colonialism.

becomes religious enthusiasm – as is the case today in former Yugoslavia – with results in ethnic cleansing, mass slaughter and unending conflict that are horrible to contemplate (1994: 84-85).

What stands out in “The Priest in Politics” is the degree to which O’Faolain identifies his role as intellectual as involving tackling the concentration of power within institutions by revealing how these institutions continuously impinge upon liberty. Said, writing on Matthew Arnold, has criticised his key role as intellectual in the development of the English nation, particularly in bringing the nation together by emphasising the degree to which people belonged and fitted into an increasingly defined, homogenised tradition (2000: 412-416). This project was essentially conservative, predicated more on the veneration of a national tradition than on the promotion of critical thinking, and so conducive to the sort of a fusty humanism within elite institutions intended to prop up the existing hierarchy. O’Faolain, like Said, insists on contesting the borders of these institutions, of problematising loyalty and

belonging, on opening up a traffic of ideas that allows movement towards a continuously renewed, and more enabling, progressive new order where identities are reinscribed and creatively reinterpreted according to more complex coordinates. Cognisant of the poverty of intellectual debate in Ireland today and the striking paucity of engaging and engaged public intellectuals, it is in the spirit of the promotion of a traffic of ideas that does not just reach out beyond the borders of Ireland in the search for intellectual models, that here we propose the value of also attending to the lessons of the past and so still remaining attuned to the vital, humanistic voice of the likes of Sean O’Faolain. He is always worth revisiting but never more so than when Church and State decide once again to take centre stage.

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Received 12th December 2012

Last version 18th January 2013

Alfred Markey has taught at the universities of Vigo, A Coruña and León, lecturing in both English language and literature, the latter primarily on postcolonialism and the twentieth century. His research centres on Irish studies in relation to postcolonial theory and in a comparative context, as evident in his PhD dissertation, entitled *From Ireland to Equatorial Guinea: A Comparative Study of Sean O’Faolain and Donato Ndongo*. He has published mainly on twentieth century Irish literature with an emphasis on the work of Sean O’Faolain, particularly his role as a public intellectual. His current research focuses on the cultural and political intersections of the Irish and black worlds.

Sean O'Faolain, Irish writer best known for his short stories about Ireland's lower and middle classes. He often examined the decline of the nationalist struggle or the failings of Irish Roman Catholicism. His work reflects the reawakening of interest in Irish culture stimulated by the Irish. { "425606": { "url": "/biography/Sean-O'Faolain", "shareUrl": "https://www.britannica.com/biography/Sean-O'Faolain", "title": "Sean O'Faolain", "documentGroup": "TOPIC PAGINATED BIO MEDIUM", "gaExtraDimensions": {"3": "false"} } }. Sean O'Faolain. Irish author. Article. John Henry Newman (21 February 1801 – 11 August 1890) was an English theologian and poet, first an Anglican priest and later a Roman Catholic priest and cardinal, who was an important and controversial figure in the religious history of England in the 19th century. He was known nationally by the mid-1830s, and was canonised as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church in 2019.