Searching for European Identity: Culture, Religion and the Irish Experience

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As Ireland modernised itself in the latter half of the last century, intensified by joining the then European Economic Community in 1971, it has moved rapidly from a land- to a knowledge-based society in the flush of the postmodern condition. As with most communities, peoples and nations, change and development have led to fragmentation in their traditional supporting myths, stories and narratives, in turn leading to what is called a crisis of identity.

What are the changes and developments that have taken place in Ireland over the last fifty years?

With rapid economic growth, a culture of greed has emerged more conspicuously in flaunted materialism, white-collar crime and tax evasion. There is a sense of "commodity fetishness". Company logos and labels are especially in fashion. Despite Ireland being economically rich with low unemployment, still the gap between the contented rich and the socially excluded, is getting wider. A substantial section of the population are not participating in the economic boom. They cannot be part of a society which demands of them what they have not got, and does not allow them to achieve even a fraction of their potential. Material wealth ruptures the community and the myths are no longer needed and the story takes a different turn.

There has also been a shift in the centre of power from the Roman Catholic Church and as such no longer the centre of the coordinates of identity. At one time, the chief influence in the State, then to the state briefly asserting itself, to the media becoming the most influential institution in the country as it sets the agenda in politics and have colonised it to a large extent. As such political institutions have lost authority, authenticity and credibility. Voter turnouts are declining (though the recent election shows a slight increase), and a growing number of citizens are regarding government as less important and useful in their lives. Apathy towards democracy as we know it is dominant.

Culturally, the main influence in society as a carrier of meaning is the media, having taking over from both religion and education. The presence and power of the media is pervasive, invasive and ubiquitous. They have been particularly influential in moving from an exclusively Irish culture, where Catholicism and Nationalism are closely linked in recognised Irish identity to an increasingly pluralist and relativist culture, an information society that despite its pluralist tendencies is becoming more globally uniform, for example, MacDonald's, high street shops or department stores, hotel

chains. As a multicultural society, Ireland is in the initial stages, yet it has been problematic, managing and dealing with the issues arising.

As Irish society has become more individualistic and private, there is consequently less bonding between people, and between communities and less emphasis on community. It has resulted in more competitiveness, more success and failure, more greed, less social conscience, though Irish people are still good at giving to charity as a substitute to getting their own hands dirty. Longer working hours have made the pace of life hectic, as there is no time to do the important things, taking time and space from oneself and looking after health, no time for thinking and critical reflection, everyone is too busy. There is a sense of urgency, coupled with anxiety, with little sense of direction or destination. There are also very many (a majority) who are excluded from creating meaning in Irish society. Anyone not applauded by the high druids of the media, together with those who cannot subscribe to material superficiality of society, is excluded.

Institutional religion is in decline, yet there is a hunger for spirituality, which is being met at market and private level, i.e. proliferation of books, of health and life skills coaches, consultancy gurus, most of which are of the self-help type. This decline has been aided by the absence of a discursive tradition in Ireland (particularly in Catholicism). Questions that should have been asked were not, the new is valued over tradition, there is complete rupture rather than continuity and little sense of history. Values of human dignity and centrality of community seem to have taken a backseat, not just in society, but also in religious institutions.   Once, the State reflected the church's image, now it is the reverse.

Accompanying the culture of greed, there is now a culture of contentment in Ireland with a majority of citizens well off and are not interested in equality and fraternity and the common good; so there are policies of reducing taxes, public spending and the state role in society, with short-term rather than a long-term focus. Belief is in the power of the marketplace to govern everything. Government policy has become accommodated to the beliefs of the contented.

There has been a demographic shift from rural to urban and suburban and dormitory towns. Dublin, the capital city, accounts for one third of the country's population, an imbalance which has numerous consequences. Decentralisation to the provinces has been minimal. Poor infrastructure is a cause of this imbalance.

There is a loss of community sensed by people and a hunger for its development, yet no new structures have developed to take account of new work and housing patterns where people live. The consequences for voluntary work,and the environment are already apparent. Materialism and individualism means less bonding, fewer relationships, and many of a lower quality: loneliness and lives of quiet desperation. There is concern for social and environmental issues but it is still within the culture of contentment.

What is shaping identity in Ireland at the moment? What is identity anyway? Can we take a snapshot of Irish identity and be able to point to what is characteristically Irish? Have these characteristics a religious dimension? Can the same be said about being Polish, English, Italian, French, German and so on? When the various identities are all

put together as with the European Union, what is the result? When I say I am European, what does that mean? Perhaps, asking the question: what does it mean to be British for an English person, or Welsh person, a unionist in Northern Ireland though not for a nationalist in Northern Ireland? There may be a clue to the answer of international identity there somewhere.

This paper will attempt to answer these questions about identity and religion in the European space with the aid of Charles Taylor's and Paul Ricouer's philosophical understanding of identity.