



Margaret MacCurtain lectured in Irish History in University College Dublin from 1964-1994. During those years she was also Professor at the School of Irish Studies in Dublin, and in 1972-1989.

A Dominican Sister, she was the Prioress of Sion Hill and a member of the Academic Council of the Irish School of Ecumenics. She is an internationally recognised and honoured scholar, educator, writer, feminist and human rights activist who has campaigned for many years for the abolition of corporal punishment in schools. She has played an eminent public role in Irish life as a respected historian and as a public intellectual defending the rights of minorities.

She has been seen as a liberal voice from within the Roman Catholic Church on the social issues that have convulsed Ireland over the past forty years and created polarising conflict in Irish political life. Almost singlehandedly at times she has prevented the voice of the Catholic Church from being seen as only conservative, regressive and monolithic. She is, in her old age, regarded as a national treasure.

You are known for your human rights and social justice work, and as a feminist and advocate for the mainstreaming of women's history. However you are not known for your interest in Green issues, but I do know that they are key element to your own life.

Our environment, the life around us within which we have our being, is basic to everything, I think, an awareness of that stems from my rural childhood. My sister Joan (McCarthy) a biologist was an important influence, she showed me the beauty of insects such as earwigs, which I was afraid of. She was a real Green and had a lot of respect for Trevor (Sargent). Her daughter Thea (Allen) was a Green Party councillor in Balbriggan in the 1990s.

Do you regard the presence of religion in public life as a source of inspiration or an obstacle for Green politics?

The Greens are alive intellectually and emotionally to the whole of the universe, which is clear from their wide ranging scientific and philosophical engagement, and I feel this cannot but be underpinned by the religious sense, whatever form it takes in an individual or a culture. I think the Green movement could, in fact, be addressing the divide between religion and science and the humanities and science, and this is very interesting to me.

Tom Berry, the cultural historian and eco-theologian, proposes to us that a deep understanding of the history and functioning of the evolving universe is a necessary inspiration and guide for our own functioning as individuals and as a species. He tells us that the story of the universe is the essence of reality, that we perceive the story and we put it in our own language, the birds put it in theirs, and the trees put it in their own language also. We can read the story of the universe in the trees, the story has its imprint everywhere, and that is why it is so important that we are present to it. If you do not know the story of the universe, in a sense you do not know yourself; the universe, in itself and in its evolutionary

emergence, constitutes for the human community the primary revelation of that ultimate mystery whence all things emerge into being.

The Greens are a prophetic voice and a voice that is not only prophetic but also offers hope. I think that the Greens are modern prophets and are challenging us to live in the right way. It is not an easy challenge but the Greens must give hope as well as challenge, because it is urgent that they make an impact in a world that is confused by populist political debate. Young people especially can be very idealistic, but in an unrealistic way. The Greens are idealistic but have their feet on the ground – they are in touch with what is happening to our world.

What is religion how you would define it?

All my life has been spent as a Roman Catholic. Religion in that sense is a set of beliefs; however, religion in the wider sense, is a profound realisation that there is a meaning to life that is not bounded by a lifetime of living and dying and that that is the end. I have a profound sense of the great world religions as honouring the creator of the world and bringing people to an ethical relationship to each other and our world.

I grew up in the Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s in North Kerry. There was huge poverty and epidemics of children's diseases such as scarlet fever, diphtheria (which I had myself) and polio. It was nevertheless an idyllic childhood despite the poverty, contained within rural life and an old religion, not our modern urban revelatory religion but a religion of the farming year and seasonal rituals, of a sense of mystery. Religion permeated our lives in a comfortable unchallenging way that accompanied the rituals of farm life and fishing life; the blessing of the boats, confirmation, first communions, etc. There was an intertwining between religion and life.

We respectfully attended the parish Mass in Listowel, but we had a sense that it was different from the freer religion of the countryside that is explored in Brian Friel's plays such as *'The Well of the Saints'*, or the plays of Michael J. Molloy such as *'The King of Friday's Men'*, and *'The Wood of the Whispering'*. Yes it was a church religion we had, but it was not inquisitorial. A rural religion, not pagan by any means, but with the old traditions inherited from the distant past, local saints honoured, our own St. Brendan in Fenit and Ardfert.

What is your view on religion in the public debate in Ireland?

Public debate on religion is at an exciting and disturbing turning point. We are seeing a challenge to hegemonic secularism in Europe and the bleakness of modern philosophy. Religions such as Islam are challenging secular society and there has to be a profound response intellectually.

The historian of the Irish famine, Emmet Larkin of Chicago, suggests that after the famine a deep anxiety overtook Irish society and out of that grew the devotional religion. Irish Catholicism is far more devotional than theological, which would account for the retention of local devotions we spoke of earlier. We have not thought profoundly about the great philosophic questions in Ireland. I venture to say that the same is true of Irish Protestantism, which is not so much devotional as cultural and very unlike the Lutheranism of my German friends. German philosophy and theology, we don't have that, and it does not really interest

us, let's be honest, although we do have some very able theologians. Religion in Ireland has been so intrinsic to our lives that we don't even reflect on it, although that is changing. There is a great transition happening although we are not yet able to see what the future is. We sense a large change and we are forgetting our devotional Catholicism which remained the central characteristic of Irish Catholicism until the Second Vatican Council, and we cannot yet see what will take its place.

There is much renewal of interest in the old traditions and pilgrimages such as St. Bridget in Kildare and indeed the Patrician pilgrimages to Croagh Patrick and Lough Derg, and you have supported this, so do you think this is helpful to us today?

Yes I am absolutely passionate about the old pilgrimages. There is at the present moment in the early 21st century a surprising energy in the way that so many thousands of people participate in the annual pilgrimage up Croagh Patrick and to Lough Derg, both special and very sacred places. What has dropped away are the local shrines, the celebration of the saints days and their holy wells which was so much a part of my youth. I regret the passing of the patterns and rounds to St. Brendan for example, but the major pilgrimages still attract thousands of people every summer, they are native to us and part of the spiritual life of the people back into the deep past, and I would urge our clergy and teachers to value the old pilgrimages of Ireland.

What are the current debates on the relationship between religious institutions and state, and what is the historical background?

The huge hostility in Ireland now from the people towards the Catholic Church stems I think from the intrusive intervention of Catholic clergy into sexuality in Irish life, the intense focus on sexuality as the only moral sin. With the revelations of terrible abuse, this is now seen to be hypocritical at best. It set me thinking about sexuality and the churches stand on contraception, which only began in 1890 when a doctor in Germany wrote to the Pope, urging him to take a stand on modern forms of contraception. The whole contraception debate which was like a shadow over the church in the 20th century was very recent and was a completely untenable position taken up by the church leaders which was ignored by Catholics worldwide. It was very ill advised to give it such significance that it brooded over the lives of great popes, particularly a pope like Paul VI, who crashed on it you might say, and *Humanae Vitae* went against the advice of the commission that the Pope himself set up and all for something promulgated so recently in church history as the end of the 19th century.

What conflicts do you see between religion and such things as gender equality and sexuality?

On gender we need simple fairness for a start. We are lacking a factor fairness and indeed justice in the church with regard to gender. I think if we start from that rather than from denial and theological justification we can do better.

On sexuality I have to wonder what has been the impact of celibacy for the abuse of children. Our theologians and hierarchy, as well as our historians, do not address this in a real way, and until they do we are operating in bad faith. The Catholic Church has been insensitive about homosexuality in particular. Pope Francis has addressed the issues well, and is saying something very different, he has said 'who am I to judge them' which is a great

step forward from intrinsic disorder but still not enough. The theological view that homosexuality is intrinsically disordered is at odds with science, we can see from biology that homosexuality is natural. The Church has a long way to go but Pope Francis has made a start, however he must not disappoint because if the Pope offers hope that is then dashed it will have very negative consequences.

I think the Church has indeed a narrow focus on sexual morality. Seán Brady (Cardinal Archbishop of Armagh) wrote to me when I was an MEP asking me to support amendments against the destruction of embryos. I wrote back asking him for information regarding their position about the destruction of embryos in stem cell research and cloning, I asked him what did the Bishops have to say about that? I never received anything but a polite acknowledgement, nothing of substance. It was as if once human embryos were outside the womb of a living woman they had no interest in them.

The Irish Bishops are not capable of addressing these issues in a proper way because their theological training is so narrow. My friend Enda McDonagh had encountered a very difficult time in Maynooth, which was the situation for anyone of intellectual rigour, because they came up against this wall of wilful ignorance.

How do you see the place of Islam in Europe?

Islam has been influential in Europe before, and Islamic scholarship particularly the transmission of the forgotten classics was important in the renaissance or rebirth of Europe at the close of the middle ages. We need to become comfortable with our differences and celebrate our common ground and common heritage. There is an on-going dialogue between Islam and Christianity involving not only the Roman Catholic but also Protestantism and orthodoxy and we are at an important crossroads in this dialogue.

The penetration of other religions into Irish life is perplexing to us because we accept our religion as something intrinsic to ourselves, we don't think very much about it, and I would imagine that it is similar for people of the Islamic faith. Just as it seems a profound mystery for us to experience such different rituals to our own religious rites, the rituals of Islam I mean, when we visit Islamic parts of the world, so they must feel a sense of dislocation when they come to the non-Islamic west, and so I think we have a lot to learn from each other.