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Her research draws on Irish mythology, political psychology, psychoanalytic, philosophical and feminist theories and she currently has several books in progress. The first focuses on the role of sacrifice, violence and legitimation. The second concentrates on the Old Irish figure of The Cailleach, The Mysterious One. The Cailleach is the precursor to the figure of Brigit, goddess, saint, and folklore figure, patron of smithwork, healing, poetry and mercy who is the topic of her ongoing research.

**You have had a long involvement in the peace movement, and in feminism and religion, and your work on sacrifice, violence and legitimation combines both. How therefore do you define religion?**

There are different definitions; some people define it as a system of faith or belief. I define it as a system of regulation, how different societies regulate the people who live within them. This would include the world view, values, ethics, rituals and the symbols and stories and rituals that support those values.

Timothy Fitzgerald has queried the binary division between religion and secular that is the norm in modern society and he asks why are transcendental values such as the belief in progress, or the values of 'freedom' and 'equality', the practice of secret ballots and the elections of democratic governments, many of which millions of people died to establish and institutionalise, not included in books on 'religion'? He also argues that it is the conduct and appearance of women that mark the boundary between the institution of the state and what the state calls 'religions.' This aspiration to control women derives from times when 'religions' did have the power to put women in defined and subordinate places. In contrast, more contemporary states have, since their inception, been rather puzzled about where to put women. Questions such as – Can they own property? Can they vote? Are they citizens? Should they be educated? Can they be judges or lawyers? Can they run for office? – have animated national histories for a long time. It is only in the last century that women have been accorded some powers and positions within what are known as nation states.

**Reverting to the current binary division, what are the challenges for religion as a source of values for political life?**

The problem is that the dominant religions of our time cultivate patriarchal mythological images and ideas such as blood sacrifice. There is an indistinct separation between the mythology of blood sacrifice which is valued by some Christians and the practice of blood sacrifice which is exercised in war by the state. So I can't say uncritically what the relationship between religion and state is because the question is confused by the fact of the overlap between patriarchal mythology and contemporary religion.

The dominant rituals, theologies and symbols focus on blood sacrifice and we see the effects of that at the moment where horrific acts of terror can be justified in the sanctified name of *sacrifice*. In the First and Second World Wars (and subsequent wars across the globe) the rhetoric of sacrifice permeates the narrative of all sides. The language of sacrifice, therefore, continues to legitimate war. Even in so-called post-religious societies, people are immersed in a kind of a psychic field from which they cannot extricate themselves even today.

In Ireland during the 30 years of war between 1968 and 1998 – because people sacrificed their lives on behalf of Irish freedom – others felt they had to continue the struggle; they had to honour the sacrifice of those who died. In other words, sacrifice takes on a fertile life of its own, in that each sacrifice calls out for more. The more people are sacrificed, the more others have to continue to sacrifice, which is why W. B. Yeats wrote in his poem: 'too long a sacrifice makes a stone of the heart'.

The role of sacrifice in the political world had hardly been interrogated by academics until the shocking events of 9/11 in the US. However, in recent years there has been an explosion of academic writing on the topic of sacrifice. However, as sacrifice is used in today's world it is a gendered language but it's not recognised as such and that is deeply problematic. Nevertheless, very few take seriously the question of gender and are dismissive of feminist theorists who say that sacrificial rituals and sacrificial language and discourse is one of the ways in which we split the world between male and female, between the ethics of the public and the private, between the language of rights and the language of responsibility.

Because people use the word sacrifice in multiple ways, such use completely obscures the extent to which sacrifice serves to legitimate the current social order. In other words (and very broadly speaking) men usually sacrifice in the public realm and women sacrifice themselves through various forms of forms of private self-sacrifice which mask female subordination

***What is your experience as a feminist theologian with religion in public debate?***

I think it's very difficult for a woman to be taken seriously when debating religion because all the dominant symbols and rituals are male-centred and under the control of men. Especially in the Roman Catholic Church (and Ireland is a Roman Catholic country) the commentators are usually men. When I'm asked to speak at a public debate on religion through the national media, for instance, they usually make sure to have a priest there as well because there is no recognition that I have any legitimacy even though academically I may be a lot better qualified than some of the priests alongside whom I am speaking.

However academic qualification is perhaps not the only issue when dealing with religion. Sacramental authority is. Women in the Church of Ireland do have that sacramental authority which is not extended to Catholic women. However, women religious in Ireland did have tremendous authority historically.

The question of religion and authority go hand-in-hand. Because, as a woman, I don't accept many of the precepts of patriarchal religion, my authority is constantly questioned and not taken all that seriously. Women religious certainly had authority with certain spheres,

hospitals, schools, and in some kinds of social work. However, they have had very little decision making power, and without such power, their roles have tended to be confined to cleaning up and unwittingly maintaining structures of injustice. For instance, the tragic role of such women in staffing the Magdalene Laundries has only come to light in recent years.

I do however think that we need to acknowledge the role of women religious in the ecology movement. Many of them, especially the Sisters of Mercy and the Dominican Sisters, are deeply involved in a hands-on way in Green and ecology issues, and it does have an impact. They were influenced by the Irish theologian Anne Primavesi and the Dominican Sister Miriam MacGillis and her work on spiritual ecology. Sister Miriam actually came to Wicklow and worked with the sisters there on developing the ecology project.

***What actual debates exist on the relation between church and state in public debate in Ireland and what is the historical background?***

I think people in Ireland have turned away from the institutional religion for all sorts of reasons. The main reason for me would be the continued promotion of a mediaeval worldview which no longer speaks any more to this generation. The second reason, and the one commonly put forward, is because of the Roman Catholic Church's role in child sex abuse, which has become synonymous with the church, despite the fact that most such abuse actually takes place in the home, or among family members.

Many people are turning to various forms of spirituality, meditation and so on; others are going into different forms of hedonism under the influence of consumer culture and advanced capitalism.

Spiritual practices can be ennobling and very helpful for the individual and certainly help people not to conform to group culture. The problem with them is that they don't have any political standing; they don't have any political voice because they are individual practices.

I think the mediaeval world view of the dominant religion is largely superseded today, and I don't think it will last very much longer beyond our current generation in the sense that there is now massive cultural change. Similar cultural shifts took place at the time of the Reformations with the invention of the printing press. Up to that point, the Roman Catholic Church had effectively held the power to legitimate (or refuse to legitimate) the kings. The invention of the printing press allowed the Bible to circulate and be widely read in the vernacular languages of the people of Europe, and not only in Latin by the clergy. You had a whole different source of authority opposing the universal power of the Pope. The Reformers had another source of authority in the literal interpretation of the Bible.

Now there is a similar cultural massive cultural shift in the sense that we have a proliferation of social media and people, even the most remote parts of the world, have access to international communication. I don't think we've even begun to understand how that's going to affect people's consciousness. For instance, in recent uprisings around the globe, social media has played a massive and very ambivalent role. People can be mobilised instantaneously, and not always for beneficent purposes.

***How do you think that Irish life is currently dealing with the debate between religion and the state?***

I think the current level of debate is infantile in the sense that on the one hand you have a cohort of Roman Catholics who are defending traditional religion and patriarchal theology to the hilt and clinging onto a mediaeval world view that no longer speaks to this generation. On the other hand, you have those who blame the Catholic Church for everything that ever went wrong in Ireland, which is equally infantile.

For instance, there is no recognition that the current cultural mirrors that are held up to this generation are no longer in the hands of the church but in the hands of the social and official forms of media. In other words, cultural mirrors are no longer dictated by or formed by any kind of organisation which at least aspires to ethical reflection. There is a great deal of bullying going on in social media and the mirrors that are held up are also those of the group collective. This is extremely dangerous and many young people are suffering deeply on that account especially if they can't confirm to the images that are portrayed as normative for them.

In a sense, the worship that used to take place in the church has now been redirected in various cults of celebrity. For instance, following the recent departure of a member of the group *One Direction*, young women started a social media campaign in which they urged others to literally cut themselves to persuade him to return. This is very primitive and dangerous thinking, and reflects the fact that the cult of celebrity has now inherited energies traditionally directed toward religion. The abdication of individual responsibility is constant across both fields. This re-direction has other consequences. For instance, for many young people (as philosopher Michel Foucault argued), the body is now the site of power in the sense that unless the young adults conform to the idealised media-created body which is the site or focus of power then they are not considered to be part of the group. Group pressure is exerted upon them in very destructive ways.

***Are you talking about the group collective in the sense that any consensus is right and that scapegoating is therefore acceptable?***

Scapegoating appears to be culturally endemic, but at least within the Christian churches you have ethical debate and ethical discussion and some kind of catharsis to counteract the scapegoat or to direct it in some way. I am saying that, at the moment, there is nobody in charge any more. As one theorist wrote "If the revolution were to come tomorrow, where would we find the Winter Palace?" The collective holds up the mirrors and the values being promoted are being dictated not by ethical or religious systems but by advanced forms of capitalism and consumerism.

***What conflicts are there between fundamental rights like freedom of religion and the principle of sexual and gender equality?***

That's a very complicated question especially when it comes to questions of gender. Very often religions are the main vehicles and mouthpieces for gender oppression. Particularly in situations where gender relations are insecure, religion tends to be the agent or the enforcer of gender relations. For instance, over the last twenty years in Ireland people from different cultures and religions are settling here and demanding freedom of religion. The problem is that such calls can act as a kind of a Trojan horse to bring back gender inequality

and to challenge the gains that have been made by feminism. We need to ask serious questions therefore, such as do we want to promote freedom of an abstract ideology or promote freedom of individuals as gendered persons? I would be much more interested in promoting individual freedoms of gendered persons rather than traditional worldviews that no longer speak to today's world.

### ***How do you see the place of Islam in Europe?***

Islam is a very broad church just as Christianity is a very broad church and there are many facets of Islam which are enlightened and noble. However, I think what's happening is that people who are migrating to new culture can use their religious identity in a petrified kind of the way in order to shore up the sense of personhood. Their strategies do not necessarily have much to do with the central and liberating beliefs of Islam, as much as they have to do with their own need to secure an identity within a threatening context.

For example, after the War of Independence, Ireland might have established political independence but the Catholic Church was the major social agency capable of carrying out education and building and running hospitals. The Roman Catholic Church became the only major social institution with the infrastructure, personnel and ability to put educational and healthcare structures in place. However, as we now know, this has turned out to be a very mixed blessing, especially for women. As in several other post-colonial countries, sexual purity was one of the ways in which Catholic Ireland asserted its identity against what was considered to be pagan England, so that the purity of Irishwomen women became central to national identity. This led to severe sexual repression; it led to the Magdalene homes; it led to the incarceration of unmarried mothers, usually with the assistance of their families whose rights and reputation were also at stake. Those who deviated from the sexual norms were severely punished.

I think a similar process is happening with Muslims in Europe who are also anxious to maintain their traditional identity versus a surrounding secular culture. In many cases, Muslim women have been made to carry that identity. The problem is that identity can be petrified; for example, Muslims set up their own schools there is no real sense in which integration is either desired or made possible. The difficulty is then, if integration is not made and if economic deprivation coincides with ethnic identity, this could have the kind of political implications that we now see in Britain. Ethnic ghettos can foster and become the breeding grounds for the kinds of terrorism that are now so threatening to the world.

Also, because of new technology and the proliferation of social media, people in the developing world are aware of the great disparity between our lives and theirs, our resources and theirs. It is a relatively simple matter for some to make the connections between our ecologically destructive lifestyles and some of the ecological disasters they are now experiencing. It could well be that this is feeding radical discontent that sometimes take the form of religious fundamentalisms. Religion may become the symbolic focus or cloak for that anger, but the source of that anger (often justified) is because of the disparity between the wealth and often greed of the West compared with the rest of the world. I'm struck by the similarities between the Catholicism of Irish Immigrants to Britain and the US in the early 20th century and with Islam in Europe now. I mean by that there was a sense of asserting an even then rather old-fashioned religious identity and purity. I see a lot of

congruence between the experiences of the Irish immigrants clinging to Catholicism as a support and an identity in a situation that was foreign to them, but that the real need was actually to assimilate while maintaining a sense of values.

When people are very poor they need symbols that enable them to belong to or achieve a superior identity from the actual lives they are living. The Irish abroad were far more Catholic than those at home and far more traditional in their beliefs. The same thing happened in Northern Ireland where the division between Protestants and Catholics has been acute and is also politically charged. I find that Northern Irish Catholics are far more embedded in their Catholic identity and in the sacramental life and belief systems than are those in the south. The current generation after 30 years of conflict are far more devout than my parents' generation were. Religion becomes a kind of protective identity in the absence of any other form of symbolic identity.

**To refer to Timothy Fitzgerald again:** Religions can be thought of as vestigial states, which have been displaced by newer regimes but continue to function. The displacement, particularly the removal of the power to use violence, creates attenuated state-like groups within dominant states. These former states are renamed 'religions' and are accorded a certain status and certain rights and privileges as long as they stay in their place. However vestigial states tend to be restless and dissatisfied with the limits placed upon them. They are inclined to press the dominant state to cede more recognition and power in the public space, in the courts or in the schools. Islam is particularly problematic for states such as France because it still functions as a state in many parts of the world with its own court systems etc. Western democracies are repeatedly trying to domesticate Islam, to get it to behave like a religion that knows its place and limits. Terms like "Islamist", "political Islam" or "militant Islam" are invented as ways to separate Islam that exists vestigially within dominant states from dominant forms of Islam. Perhaps if Western governments could speak clearer terms about what is expected of former states like those linked to Christianity, Judaism and Islam, public policy might be more precise.

In fact the development of Christianity and Islam may in fact be closer than we think. Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the 4th century CE. The Emperor Theodosius came to believe that the entire empire should have one single unifying religion, so the bishops were required to discipline the direct expression of dissent and the result was that instead of Christians being persecuted by the state, heresy was persecuted by the church. Now Islam conquered a vast part of the territory of the Eastern Roman Empire, and learned the lesson about the importance of a single unifying faith from the empire it had conquered, although it tended to tax heresy or religious difference rather than persecute it systematically.

**Sources:**

Timothy Fitzgerald; *"Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories"* (2007).