

Mary White: *I am a small part of the great sea of life*



Mary White (born in 1948) is a former Green Party Member of the Irish Parliament for Carlow/Kilkenny and former Minister of State for Equality, Human Rights and Integration. She is a walking guide, forager, and flora and fauna specialist and runs Blackstairs Ecotrails in the Blackstairs Mountains in County Carlow with her husband Robert and their daughter Dorothy-Ellen.

Mary works with schools and organisations running wildlife and foraging workshops, as well as fun trails for children and adults. Since the 1980s she and Robert have been recording birds, butterflies and fungi in the Blackstairs Mountains and the Barrow river valley, and have tracked changes in local biodiversity due to agricultural practices and climate change.

What does religion mean to you?

If I think carefully about what religion means to me, I think of growing up in an Ireland that was moulded by religion. Every aspect of life, politics, sport, business and education was impacted by it. There was a sense of fear, of being under pressure to behave in the correct way – that was what religion meant to me in the past. However now when I reflect on the mystery of life, the sacredness of life, what I call religion is in the magnificence of the creation of life and the beauty and terror of the natural world.

I was brought up in a conventional Catholic family. My parents were liberal but we went to all the religious ceremonies when I was young. What religion is to me now, is not what it was growing up in County Wicklow. I have had a good think about what it means to me – I am not anymore a conventional Catholic in a strict sense, though I go to Mass and I read in church, and help out in the parish locally. But I find as I get older I am thinking more widely, more deeply and more outside of traditional church dogma. I am quite happy in my own head about my religion which is verging on the pantheistic in the sense that the environment and how we treat our world matters deeply to me rather than a formal belief.

Religion, outside of my own meaning of it, is often the glue that keeps communities together – the ritual, the weekly gathering, the sense of community, the sense of belonging, even if that faith is not as strong as some would like to have it. Religion is not a building, it's not a place; it is people searching for meaning in the world. Often that search is fruitless, but sometimes the clouds part and there is a peaceful illumination of ideas, thoughts and beliefs, which is what I experience as natural grace.

My own personal religious belief has been an inspiration to me in public life. When the chips were down and the Green Party deputies had huge pressures when in government during the economic collapse between 2008 and 2010, walking out of Leinster House (the seat of the Irish Parliament) and up into the mountains or along a beach listening to the crash of the waves, I found great peace. There was such peace in being up high, being away from people and away from stress. When having political difficulties walking for me cleared my head; after walking I knew what to do and was not looking over my shoulder at what others thought. I took to the mountains or the sea to resolve my problems. I found great solace

walking at night in the long evening light between dusk and nightfall, I would walk with my husband Robert, often for hours in silence, and at the end I would know what to do and how I was going to vote and I would be at peace with it all.

I once read about what is in a teaspoon of soil, and when you are walking along for a couple of miles you are walking on literally millions of fungi and billions of bacteria and protozoa. I would feel the earth and the soil underfoot giving back to me this incredible life that is going on under my feet as I walked along, the living world, I found it very energising to think that I was walking on this living soil full of living creatures. I would find it soothed me with the sense that my problems were irrelevant compared to the power of the life force in the soil. It was a wonderfully energising walking at night in the hills looking down on the city and simply putting one foot in front of the other.

It sounds like a very powerful experience of being alive, and that everything else falls into perspective when we have that direct experience of being and primal aliveness

Yes it was a primal experience of feeling and hearing my own beating heart in the dark and knowing I was a small part of the great sea of life. I agree with Emerson that enlightenment is more possible in a forest than a cathedral and that the preservation of wilderness is essential to creativity. There has always been a tug between orthodox churches and thinkers such as Emerson and Thoreau arguing, as Emerson said, that "revelation was possible through nature". I side with Emerson on that one.

There has been a return to earth centred concern in religion. This is sometimes viewed as pantheism, but most people do not care about the labels traditional religions give to this core relational idea. I feel much freer as I get older from the traditional mould, I am thinking more outside the box. As I get older I have become more radical rather than more conservative, as often happens. I feel like a migrating butterfly venturing across the ocean getting stronger and freer in my mind.

Do you see a difference between religion and spirituality?

I do feel there is a distinct difference between religion and spirituality. I find that formal religion has become less important to me but I am deeply aware of that spiritual part of my life. I find immense solace in sitting in huge Gothic cathedrals, thinking of the faith of generations of worshippers who came to these magnificent buildings, who found solace within those ancient walls and were moved by the incredible beauty of sacred music. I feel moved by that myself. It was probably what induced me to study the great Gothic cathedrals of Western Europe while at Trinity College.

I think that there is a huge divide between institutional religion and personal spiritual experience. It seems that people want the church for the most important parts of their lives, baptisms, christenings, weddings and burials. No matter how secular Ireland is becoming, there is still that pull towards religious celebration at these pivotal times of life. So what does that say about us? Are we being hypocritical? Are we linking in to our local church so that our children will belong when they first go to school? Or is there a residual longing to belong to a wider community despite the secularisation and individualisation of Ireland and the times that we're living through? Perhaps we need some teaching about practical

spirituality that the churches do not at present provide, such as how to pray and meditate for example.

Has religion been an inspiration or a hindrance to you in green activism?

Possibly a hindrance. I have always believed in the separation of church and state, so for that reason I believe religion was a hindrance in green activism. Many public debates in Ireland, such as that on the abortion issue, euthanasia, the switching off of medical support for people in a persistent vegetative state, have been dogged by rigid religious belief. The state should govern and legislate for all the people not only religious minorities. Having said that, when canvassing and looking for support as a Green candidate, immensely personal issues came up on the doorstep and people wanted to know where I stood on these contentious issues and in a rural, conservative constituency my answers were not always what they wanted to hear. However I ignored the pressure to conform to Catholic doctrine on these matters.

Traditional religion in Ireland was full of petty rules and fear based compliance. I remember the nonsense over the Lenten fast, there was an aura of fear about breaking the rules. A little fasting is good for the body, but I think that as a nation we came to have a dislike of fish because we were forced to eat fish on Friday as a penance. I went to Trinity College Dublin and at that time there was a ban on Catholics attending the Protestant University, therefore you had to get permission from the archbishop to attend Trinity, if you were Catholic. My father thought this was nonsense, and he said "I am not going to any archbishop, the ban will go sometime and you won't all go to hell for attending Trinity", and so my brothers and I all went to Trinity. When you recall it nowadays it seems utterly bizarre. It came from an era in which the church expected total obedience, but that is now long past.

Religion has been very present in Irish public life in a very explicit way. How has that affected your own political and public life?

We have experience on this island of two states which have been dominated by religious faith; Catholic Ireland in the republic and a Protestant state in Northern Ireland. It has been a relief to see the development of the separation of church and state. In the past this conformity to church doctrine led to so much personal pain for many people. However it did not really affect me personally because I ignored it. When I was a councillor and member of parliament and active in politics, religion was almost irrelevant in that it didn't affect my politics at all except when issues of the anti-abortion amendment to the Irish Constitution or euthanasia or such issues of conscience came up. There was always a prayer before we started proceedings in the Council Chamber and in the Dáil Chamber (the National Parliament) which I thought unnecessary but I could see the symbolism of what it meant to others.

Religion has affected our public space and growing up it was totally in your face, religion was all pervasive and, while it's a much weakened force, I think there should be greater separation of church and state in Ireland. Of course there is a formal separation in the Constitution, however the state still has a good way to go to remove religion from public life, for example in the schools and hospitals. This is because during the early years of the Irish state in the 1920's and 1930's the churches built, owned and ran the schools and hospitals and the new state was dependant on them for these essential services, which of course is very different to the experience of other European states. Therefore there are issues in

relation to hospitals and hospital care, regarding abortion and women's health and end of life care, which in Catholic hospitals have to conform to the Catholic ethos. However both hospitals and schools are now staffed and run by the state and paid for by our taxes, but the ownership of the buildings is still in many cases vested in the religious orders, and these hospitals are controlled by Boards of Management which remain dominated by the religious orders who founded them. The situation is ambiguous in practice as to how end of life care and care during a life threatening pregnancy is to be effected legally and properly in the Irish health system, and it is a nightmare for doctors.

I remain a member of the Catholic church and I am not being disrespectful when I say it is essential to see a clearer separation of powers because, as a former legislator, I see it as absolutely necessary for legal clarity for both patients and health care workers, so that we do not end up in the Supreme Court again and again over an individual case. However the state is not something separate from the people who inhabit it so these changes are also personal changes, changes in people. The people are sovereign under the Irish Constitution, and it is because of the 8th amendment to the Constitution (the anti-abortion amendment) which was carried in 1983 that these difficulties arise, and can only be addressed by a referendum of the people, not by legislation in Parliament.

Another example of this is the recent referendum to the Constitution on gay marriage, which passed with a landslide vote. The personal stories of families were immensely influential in passing the referendum. For example I had a friend in a lesbian partnership who died, leaving behind her partner and a little baby. Although they were in a civil partnership she had no rights to guardianship of the child which they had both been raising. The mother of my friend went on TV and spoke of her anguish of her daughter's death and how she wanted to support the Marriage Referendum. These personal stories so moved people – of parents supporting their children for a fairer and more equal Ireland. The referendum was not won by the political class but by those personal stories, not the political voice but the personal stories of families, because Ireland remains a strongly familial society. As a former Minister for Equality, Human Rights and Integration, for me it was a great and significant opening up to diversity for our country.

In Ireland we do have a formal separation of powers under the Constitution, however people imbued with a particular religious belief want to see laws which reflect their religious ethos in their Constitution, and this has created a great many difficulties in practice, particularly as we become a more diverse society. As Ireland transformed itself from a pre-modern to a post-modern society with great rapidity, these issues emerged in public debate because of the way they affected people's lives, and they are debated with great intensity. I think this is a good thing – we do not impose laws on people on these issues, we arrive at them through intense debate, brought about by painful experiences. The church has seemed to focus intently on sexuality in a negative and forbidding way, and people react against this and forget that Catholic social teaching has also been very positive in Irish society, tempering capitalism and consumerism and providing great examples of practical charity and care.