

# The Role of Church in a Pluralist Society: Good Riddance or Good Influence?

## Summer 2016



Trinity College Dublin  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin



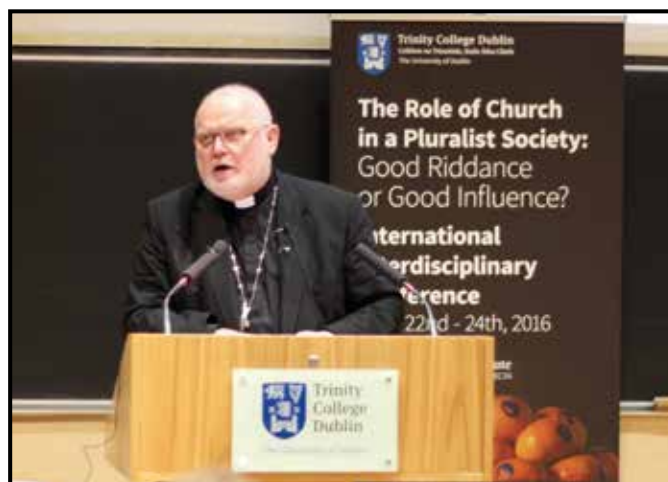
The Loyola Institute  
TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



## CONFERENCE NEWSLETTER



After dinner speaker, Baroness Nuala O'Loan, Sim D'Hertefelt, Belgium, Prof. Fáinche Ryan, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin



Cardinal Reinhard Marx, Archbishop of Munich and Freising

**Was it to be good riddance or good influence?** In today's pluralist society there is a significant movement towards protection of identity and security. This was one of the themes highlighted by Cardinal Reinhard Marx at the conference. His topic was 'The Church and the Challenge of Freedom'. Proper Christian openness to the other is a real challenge today. He noted that while there had been great progress in the area of freedom in recent centuries in Europe, the Church has not always been on the right side, but, as he said, the Bible was. In our time, when there is such an obvious right wing retrenchment, he asked, "Can we as Church be part of promoting responsible freedom for all and not just for us as Church? That is the way of Jesus. We have to be concerned about the poor, the marginalised, the world."

More than 300 people were in the auditorium listening to Cardinal Marx's challenging words. He was one of the fourteen stellar scholars who gave papers from a variety of different perspectives on the conference theme. Besides this, there were over forty short papers given by junior and senior scholars from places as diverse as Australia and Malta, Holland and Finland, the United States, Korea and Poland. These all provided wonderful input. The buzz during coffee and lunch time showed that the papers did indeed spark very lively discussion. Discussion didn't end there. In a press conference on the flight back to Rome after his weekend trip to Armenia, Pope Francis commented on issues that had been raised at the conference.

During the conference it became obvious that one cannot discuss the role of Church in any depth without also critiquing the society we live in, with its claim to be a pluralist one. In the next few pages we offer a brief sketch of some of the conference debates. This brief summary is in no way comprehensive. We are currently working towards a publication of papers from the conference in 2017.

This conference, together with the publications emanating from it, is an expression of Loyola's academic mission: the creative intersection of theology, Church and society.

*Dr Cornelius J. Casey, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin*

The conference organisers are grateful for the generous support of the Loyola Trust (Augustinians, Carmelites (O.Carm.), Columbans, Jesuits, Loreto Sisters, Marists, Oblates, Society of African Missions), and for very generous private sponsorship.

Organising Committee: Dr Cornelius J. Casey, Dr Maria Duffy, Dr Patrick Hannon, Dr Gerry O'Hanlon and Dr Fáinche Ryan.



Professor Terry Eagleton delivering the opening paper to the conference



A packed audience at the conference

## Pluralism?

“Against Pluralism” was the provocative title of the opening paper. This was given by well-known public intellectual Terry Eagleton. He said: “I take it that the Christian gospel is about critique rather than conformity, and that such critique must be directed to the idea of pluralism as much as to anything else.” His paper offered scintillating critique and wit. His argument was that there is abroad a kind of bogus pluralism. It holds that a point of view is to be respected simply because it is a point of view. An incident involving his friend the late Dominican theologian Herbert McCabe came to mind. McCabe was giving a lecture critiquing the work of another theologian who happened to be sitting in the front row. “I don’t want to say”, Herbert declared, “that the difference between him and me is one of emphasis. I want to say either, that I am right and he is wrong. Or, if he is right then I am wrong.” In other words, truth counts. Truth-seeking counts. Eagleton’s paper, among others at the conference, challenged the view that the riot of plurality celebrated in the modern market place, can in itself substitute for truth-seeking.

Papers by Professor William T. Cavanaugh of De Paul University, Chicago and Professor Patrick Deneen of Notre Dame continued this critique.

## Consulting the faithful

The issue of the seriousness and the importance of truth seeking was raised, from another angle, by Professor Fáinche Ryan (Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin) in a paper entitled ‘On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine ... 2016’. This paper argued that there is a kind of dualism in our current ecclesiology, in our current self-understanding. On the one hand there is an assertion of inclusive participation written large in the documents of Vatican II. On the other hand, also written large in the documents of Vatican II, there is the insistence on an unassailable division between the

teaching Church and the learning Church. These are different understandings of what it means to be Church: one overlays the other, without real integration. Ryan concluded: “The challenge of our time is how to give due force to an ecclesiology of equality in the Holy Spirit while at the same time validating the importance of the diversity of roles within the ecclesial body. Giving practical effect to this vision in the workings of Church today is crucial if Church is to be an effective force for truth-seeking.”

## Engagement with secular culture

Several presenters spoke in favour of the possibility of a constructive engagement of Church with secular culture. Professor Hans Joas (Humboldt-Universität, Berlin) offered an analysis of pluralism, arguing that genuine pluralism means taking others seriously. Professor Patrick Riordan (Heythrop College, London) advocated an engagement with secular society. His paper demonstrated that St Augustine, for instance, was not necessarily hostile to the ‘earthly city’. The theology of John Courtney Murray, the theologian whose thinking is the seed from which this conference grew, was among the themes explored in a wonderful paper by Professor Bryan Hehir of Harvard University. In a similar vein, Cardinal Marx, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, insisted that the Church cannot give up the effort to be a public Church. ‘It cannot be up there like a castle looking down at what the world is doing.’ Professor Massimo Faggioli of Villanova, Pennsylvania prompted us to ‘consider what we can let go of the established Church, and what is worth retaining’. His paper offered an invitation to understand better the historical and political complexity of the role of the Catholic Church today.

## Good riddance or good influence?

Was it to be good riddance or good influence? Margaret O’Brien Steinfels (Fordham, New York) argued that this kind of binary



Prof. Fáinche Ryan, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin. Cardinal Marx, Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Prof. Siobhán Garrigan, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin

thinking didn't quite fit the case. In the context of the Church in Ireland Professor Gerry Whyte (Trinity College Dublin) noted that the power that the Church had enjoyed in Ireland 'is a part of the explanation for the dreadful things that happened'. Professor Siobhán Garrigan (Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin) and Professor Peter Steinfelds (Fordham, New York) offered papers arguing that there are indeed aspects of Church to which we should say 'good riddance'. In the context of the English Church Catherine Pepinster (editor of *The Tablet*) argued similarly.

In a fascinating presentation entitled "Shaping and sharing digital religious experiences" Sim d'Hertefelt (digital media expert from Belgium) explored the communication of faith in a digital era.

### Truth seeking

What is the role of Church? For one thing, Church must seek to be a truth-seeking presence. It should be a truth-seeking presence alongside others in a society proclaiming itself to be



Dr Cornelius J. Casey, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Prof. Fáinche Ryan, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Tom Layden SJ, Provincial of the Jesuits in Ireland, Prof. Linda Hogan, Vice Provost, Trinity College Dublin, Prof. Hans Joas, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, Margaret O'Brien Steinfelds, Fordham, New York, Prof. William T. Cavanaugh, De Paul University, Chicago

pluralist. This is a tough role, a tough vocation. Take heart from words of St Augustine. He was there before us. In his dispute with Manicheans he wrote: "Let us, on both sides, lay aside all arrogance. Let us not, on either side, claim that we have already discovered the truth. Let us seek it together as something which is known to neither of us. For then only may we seek it, lovingly and tranquilly, if there be no bold presumption that it is already discovered and possessed."

**The Intersection of Theology, Church and Society: New PhD Scholarship**

Building on the theme of this conference the Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin will shortly be announcing a new PhD scholarship.

Details available from the end of October 2016 at [www.tcd.ie/loyola-institute](http://www.tcd.ie/loyola-institute)

**INDEPENDENT - INFORMED - INSIGHTFUL**

**OPEN YOUR DOORS TO THE TABLET**

For in-depth and balanced coverage on world Church news and current affairs

**Call 01 885 3634 to order your 4 week FREE subscription today**  
or Email: [thetablet@bosmanagement.com](mailto:thetablet@bosmanagement.com)

Reference Loyola.

**INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC WEEKLY JOURNAL**



## Reflections of a First Year Theology Student

Being a novice theologian I came to the conference eager to absorb and take it all in. I have to say I found it intriguing from first to last. I was fascinated to hear Terry Eagleton and Patrick Deneen tackling, from different angles, what is really meant by speaking of a pluralist society.

William Cavanaugh discussed the relationship between Christianity and consumerism drawing on the work of Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Cavanaugh presented Taylor's ideas on the secular in an accessible, grounded and humorous manner. His insights, critiquing Taylor, had the effect of illuminating our current cultural situation. Cardinal Marx gave me a new perspective on the philosophers of the Enlightenment. He stated that they strove to develop a secular code of ethics, not bound up in religion. They saw this as a way of avoiding the sectarian violence of a previous age.

Much to my surprise, the greatest enlightenment came, not from the lectures themselves, but from the discussions in the intervals, as I and my fellow attendees debated points presented. We strove to develop some of the intriguing ideas that we had heard.



Ruairi Meyler, student, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Prof. William T. Cavanaugh, De Paul University, Chicago, Prof. Hans Joas, Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, Dr Patrick Prendergast, Provost Trinity College Dublin, Meaghan Higgins-Coyne, student, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin, Dr Cornelius J. Casey, Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin

I thoroughly enjoyed the conference. It gave me an insight into how theology in the modern age can look to the past in order to tackle pressing questions of our time.

*Ruairi Meyler 1st year student at the  
Loyola Institute, Trinity College Dublin*



*The Loyola Institute is a teaching and research department devoted to the Catholic theological tradition. Our purpose as an institution is to reflect academically on Christian faith, social justice and contemporary culture. Our central concern is the creative intersection of theology, Church and society. To this end we offer degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate level, both taught and via research mode. We welcome students from a diversity of backgrounds and interests from across the world. Scholarships (undergraduate and postgraduate) available. See website for details.*

**Further information: [www.tcd.ie/loyola-institute](http://www.tcd.ie/loyola-institute)  
Email: [LoyolaInstitute@tcd.ie](mailto:LoyolaInstitute@tcd.ie)  
Phone +353 (0) 1 8964790**



loyolaTCD



@LoyolaTCD



**Trinity College Dublin**  
Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath  
The University of Dublin

