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What next for Christianity in Ireland?

Is Christianity in Ireland slowly dwindling away or is it moving into recovery mode after a few bad years? asks Hilary Wakeman

What is going on in the churches in Ireland? What is happening in the parishes? Does anyone really know? Is Christianity slowly dwindling away, or is it moving into recovery mode after a few bad years? Or are the numbers of churchgoers actually increasing, as some have claimed?

We don't do much in the way of surveys in Ireland, so it is difficult to know the answer. A young boy from Dublin came into a Church of Ireland service in the rural West recently and asked 'Is it usually this empty?' His home church is so full every Sunday that the number of services have had to be doubled. But which church gives the truer picture of the state of Irish Anglicanism in the twenty-first century?

A year or two ago we were hearing that the abuse scandals in the Catholic Church in Ireland were causing thousands to drop away from the faith. In a rare survey, conducted last year by Milltown Brown IMS, we learnt that almost two-thirds of Catholics had lost their trust in the clergy. The Archbishop of Dublin has said that in many city congregations there were no young people at all between the ages of sixteen and thirty-six. And with almost half of the 16,000 Catholic clergy now aged between fifty and seventy, and only nineteen ordinations last year, dioceses are beginning to think of amalgamating parishes.

Richard Holloway, former Anglican Bishop of Edinburgh, who will be speaking in Dublin this week, says he has given up trying to prophesy what will happen to Christianity. He sees religion currently as being in four strands. The first is what some people call fundamentalism, but he prefers to call 'strong' religion: the sort of faith that insulates itself from the world and goes on asserting the old ways and beliefs. It is easy to see its attractiveness in an insecure world. The second he calls, without being derogatory, 'weak' religion, perhaps typified by the Anglican Church, which has tried to adapt its theology and spirituality to be sensitive to what is happening in society. It wants to be loyal to its religious

tradition while taking account of current thinking about such things as equality, structures, science. The third group is the people who have moved from ‘weak’ religion to post-religion. Unable to buy the whole doctrinal package, they hold to the best of the religious tradition, in music and art and worship. They are practising but non-believing Christians. And finally there are those who find all talk of God bewilderingly absurd: these are the truly secular.

‘Strong’ religion will probably continue to flourish, he thinks, letting Christianity in for a difficult time. What will become of the second and third groups he doesn’t know. The Pope, who he thinks is a wise man, talks of battening down the hatches and weathering the storm. Holloway, who is the former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church, disagrees.

‘I would rather enter into dialogue with the world – because we are all in the world. Personally I welcome the excitement of all this. If humanity survives, religion could be the means of us all living in peace with one another – even though it isn’t doing that at present.’

The Open Christianity Network, which has invited Richard Holloway to speak, is made up mostly of people from the second and third groups. The purpose of its meetings in Dublin, Cork, and the North is to provide spaces where ideas about faith and tradition and about church structures can be freely and confidentially explored with others, without leadership.

What Richard Holloway finds most worrying about the current state of Christianity is its leaders. ‘They get into a kind of institutional ethic. There are people who like institutions. They set them up, they run them. But what happens to the main vision? The people in charge of the institutions are mechanics. They lose sight of what the journey is for, and all they care about is preserving the vehicle. The world-wide Anglican Church, in its difficulties over homosexuality, is obsessed with preserving the vehicle. But it would no longer pass the NCT. Maybe we need a new method of transportation.’

‘The biggest joy in the present state of things is the appetite in good human beings for non-institutional spirituality – they have been called “devout sceptics”.’ He is currently doing a television programme about art and religion, and is fascinated by the effect on the very secular crew of great works of art. ‘I am not talking religion at them, but they are picking up a sense of Otherness.’ Institutional religion, he adds, has no monopoly on human beings.

Richard Holloway’s talk, ‘Shaking the Kaleidoscope: religion in the 21st century’, is at 2pm at the Taney Parish Centre, Dublin 14, on September 16. Open to all. Further information, if required, from 01-2350285 or wakeman@iolfree.ie