

TARGETING OPUS DEI

Dermot Roantree

May Catholics let the moral view of their Church bear on their contributions to public life? Recent controversy in Ireland suggested that this was not welcome, and that those who were appointed to public life should be questioned about their religious affiliations, membership of Opus Dei being mentioned as an example.

Dermot Roantree, in an article published in the Irish Times on 19 January, situated this affair in the context of democracy: a 'rough and ready' system, but one where people may not be cut out of public discourse because of their beliefs.

Democracy is a much more fragile business than we usually suppose. It is easy to think that its long life and good health are guaranteed by the checks and balances of a constitution, court system, electoral system, bicameral parliament, and so on.

But that is not true. A developed democratic structure is quite compatible with intolerance. John Stuart Mill, thinking of English non-believers of his time, noted this phenomenon: 19th century intolerance, he said, does not root out opinions as past ages had done, 'but it induces men to disguise them, or to abstain from any active effort for their diffusion'.

He could as well have been thinking of Catholics in Ireland today.

Imposing disability

Catholics here are told to feel guilty because their Church lurks behind the constitution. They are told to keep

their Catholicism to themselves when it comes to legislation on moral matters, and to follow the lead of those who hold the whole country's interests at heart. This way, those who agree with their Church on divorce or abortion or whatever, are not being brutalized; they are simply being harangued into opting out of the discussion.

It is easy to see recent pronouncements on Opus Dei fitting into this scheme. We have heard some of the country's highest public officials intimate that members of Opus Dei ought to be excluded from high office. No reasons were given—extraordinary when you think that the matter concerned the imposition of a disability on citizens on the ground of their religious profession—but we can imagine it involved the supposition that Opus Dei has some kind of corporate agenda.

Nuala O'Faolain came right out and said as much in her article of 9 January

in this paper [*The Irish Times*]. Opus Dei is secretive, she says; it promotes a Catholic socio-political agenda; and in some obscure, if not mystical, way it connects with a distant past of Irish bishops manipulating public affairs.

Private, not secret

This is not the kind of thing that inspires confidence in the nation's habits of discourse. There is no hard argument, no sense that serious charges require serious proofs. Why, for example, does she state as fact that Opus Dei is secretive? What does she know that rebuts Opus Dei's repeated denial?

Opus Dei has made it clear often enough that it is not set up to attain a philanthropic, political, or social end. It is a personal prelature, a part of the ordinary legal structure of the Church—like a diocese for example. Its members are, just like their Catholic neighbours, under the jurisdiction of the local bishop. By joining Opus Dei they accept an additional—not an alternative—jurisdiction, a jurisdiction which extends only to their spiritual lives. It has no extra civil significance.

And just as Catholics at large do not introduce themselves as members of one diocese or another—and people readily understand that this is because it is private, not secret—no more do members of Opus Dei go about introducing themselves as such. It is not a public credential. Furthermore, each member's freedom to think and act as they like in public matters would be badly compromised by other members going about as if they stood for the whole body.

Catholics need not apply

I don't believe, however, that Ms O'Faolain's difficulty with Opus Dei really has to do with secrecy. It has to do with the so-called 'Catholic socio-political agenda'. And the real target is all Catholics who let the moral view of their Church bear on their contributions to public life. Members of Opus Dei comprise only the smallest fraction of these, but you can assail them more easily than Catholicism at large; and, like the farmer hanging a dead crow over his cornfield, you send out a potent warning signal.

And so we get the extraordinary syllogism at the end of her article: members of Opus Dei (a code here for a much larger group) are bound to want Catholic teachings to become law; not all citizens accept that teaching; the Taoiseach is answerable to all citizens; therefore, prospective Attorneys-General are asked if they are members.

Papier mâché democracy

I am a member of Opus Dei. I am not bound to want Catholic teachings to become law. I do not want a theocracy. I am quite content with the liberal democratic model. (Where other Catholics stand, members of Opus Dei or not, is for themselves to decide.) Yet I am against the legalisation of divorce and abortion. I actually believe the presence of these would do more harm to my country than their absence. Where I get my conviction is no-one's concern. I can believe what I like. That is democracy.

Cutting people out of public dis-

course because of their beliefs is not. Nor is it pluralism, though it passes for it in Ireland these days. Democracy is a rough and ready system, and that is its greatest strength. It is a wide open talking shop—sometimes even a fighting arena, with a lot of cursing and shouting and kicking and biting. And everyone can muck in. Pluralism Irish-style is the party-pooper, the prim authoritarian who shuts people up because he or she knows what's best for everyone.

State-orchestrated democracy

It is vital that we remember what commentators as diverse as de Tocqueville, Mill, Laski and Arendt have noted, that there are times when democracy will eat itself. It becomes a form of tyranny when it ceases to be political and becomes ideological, when the people are seen not as human beings with unique voices but as a mass of mere citizens that can be

homogenized in the interests of a state-orchestrated democratic unity.

And when this happens, the word 'pluralism' gets abused. It becomes a sanitization process, an analogue of the worst excesses of political correctness, where intellectual discourse is stymied by people who fail to realize that all they have is just one other view of the cosmos and the place of man in it.

In all this I do not mean to say that democratic decisions are always the best ones. But I wholeheartedly believe that it is much safer to live with all the imperfections of the system than to subvert it by trying to exclude others from it. If you want change you have to put on the gloves and fight for it. It is one of life's caprices that the best man does not always win; but with a true liberal democracy, at least there is a good chance of a fair fight.

Dermot Roantree, a teacher, is a member of Opus Dei. He writes here in a personal capacity.

As regards decisions in professional, social, political matters, etc., the lay faithful of the Prelature enjoy, within the limits of Catholic faith and morals and of the discipline of the Church, the same freedom as other Catholics, their fellow citizens; hence, the Prelature does not make itself responsible for the professional, political or economic activities of any of its members (*Declaration concerning Opus Dei from the Sacred Congregation for Bishops*).

Since Opus Dei [has only] spiritual and apostolic aims, the nature of its influence . . . can be none other than spiritual and apostolic. Opus Dei's influence in civil society is not of a temporal order (social, political or economic); though it is reflected in the ethical aspects of human activities. Like the influence of the Church itself, it belongs to a different and higher order In temporal and debatable matters Opus Dei does not wish to have and cannot have any opinion, since its goals are exclusively spiritual (*Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*).