

Michael Adams, Censorship and Catholic Activism¹

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Michael Adams' career displays some interesting exceptions to received generalisations about the cultural-religious divisions of post-1960s Ireland. The fact that Adams was both a leading critic of the pre-1967 Irish system of literary censorship (and the author of a classic text on its workings) and a celibate member of Opus Dei has often been seen as incongruous and, when I began research, I assumed that while his career as a publisher would be well-documented, it would be difficult to find much about his Opus Dei activities. In fact, his occasional writings, notably reported speeches and letters to the papers from the 1960s and 1970s, mid-1960s columns for the magazine *Hibernia*, and late-1970s and early-1980s book reviews on Catholic topics in *The Irish Press*, make it possible to say a good deal about how Adams related his activities to Opus Dei spirituality. These writings also show that he was not a simple pre-Vatican II traditionalist. He was an example of a phenomenon more conspicuous in Britain and the United States than in Ireland – someone critical of aspects of pre-conciliar Catholicism and regarded as a 'liberal' in pre-conciliar terms, who saw the Council as a Catholic evangelisation project, which stemmed from the mid-century Catholic cultural revival, rather than as an assimilation of Catholicism to secular modernity. In this way, without having changed his underlying beliefs and attitudes, he was regarded as 'conservative' in the post-conciliar era.²

This paper falls into two parts. The first outlines Michael Adams' life and career, relating his expressed beliefs and actions to the Opus Dei project of developing a Catholic lay spirituality of work and the everyday. The second discusses his comments on literary censorship, not so much in his book *Censorship: The Irish Experience* (1968), as in occasional journalistic writings before and after the 1967 censorship reform. Extensive quotations from some of these lesser-known writings give an indication of his mindset.

There are three preliminary points I would like to make. The first is that I was slightly acquainted with Michael Adams, but never discussed these

topics with him. The second is that I have not been in any sense a member of Opus Dei, though I have friends who are members; this paper's primary focus in discussing Opus Dei is on relating the actions and published reflections of one individual to his vision of its spirituality, rather than an overview of the organisation as a whole. For a survey by a relatively sympathetic outsider I suggest the study of Opus Dei by the American religious journalist John Allen Jr.³ The third point is methodological: published statements, often made with an apologetic purpose, do not tell the whole story of a person's attitudes. Furthermore, Adams' contributions to the secular press tail off after the early 1980s, possibly because of changes in reporting attitudes, possibly because he was more preoccupied with his publishing activities, so it is harder to trace his reactions to later developments.

MICHAEL ADAMS' LIFE AND CAREER

Michael Adams was born in Dublin on 22 June 1937, the eldest child of Francis Adams, Enniskillen cattle-dealer, victualler and Justice of the Peace for Fermanagh (from a Catholic landowning family), and his wife Mary or Maud (née Atteridge), born a Protestant, whose father was a County Inspector in the RUC.⁴ Francis Adams was a member of the hunt and yacht club and had customers in both communities. Adams recalled:

[I] was brought up among Protestants whom I treated as well and as badly as I treated Catholics long before the word 'ecumenism' became *de rigueur* for all non-controversial contacts between people of different faiths. Now, instead of that natural, obvious relationship I find that there is a risk that my relationship with non-Catholics will be understood as 'official' or smacking of 'ecumenical activity'... like the parish priest who used to often attend Christening parties of his Protestant neighbours and now finds that such attendance is expected or official or something other than the natural expression of affection.⁵

His 1965 complaint that Catholics grew up ignorant of the Old Testament may owe something to this Protestant contact. (The major literary project of Adams' later years was translating the multi-volume biblical commentary produced by the Opus Dei-affiliated University of Navarre in Northern Spain.) Another Fermanagh memory is glimpsed in his 1979 book on chastity when, in talking of spiritual brotherhood, he recalls climbing a hill in Killyhevlin

(south Fermanagh) with a group of men to attend night-time Mass.⁶

He grew up in Enniskillen and was educated at St Michael's College and at Queen's University Belfast, where he took a degree in economics and political science (1958). Recalled by a local contemporary as a quiet, studious young man, he had previously undertaken an apprenticeship as a butcher, which suggests he had been intended to inherit his father's business.⁷

Opus Dei membership

In 1956 he joined Opus Dei, a controversial Spanish Catholic lay organisation (with an affiliated society for priests) – founded in 1928 by the now-canonised Fr Josemaria Escrivá de Balaguer – which spread to Ireland in the late 1940s and recruited among university students. Adams was attracted by its claim to have devised a distinctive form of lay spirituality (as opposed to adaptations of monastic spirituality for lay people, which shared the assumption that only religious were truly holy and the laity were second best).⁸ Opus Dei was based on the idea of a universal call to holiness, involving sanctification through combining prayer and devotional practices with the conscientious performance of one's daily work, whatever it might be.

His 1977 brief introduction to the spiritual life underlines Opus Dei's emphasis on the vocation to holiness as a heroic choice freely offered by God, which cannot be coerced and may be freely declined, albeit at the cost of mediocrity, as well as Escrivá's insistence that religion is not merely to be believed but lived, and that holiness is to be achieved not by isolating oneself from the world but by reaching out to sanctify it.⁹ These principles, regarded by admirers of Opus Dei as embodying anew the essential demands of Christian faith, and by enemies as implying brainwashing and theocracy, underlay Adams' career even in respects where this is not immediately apparent.

This outlook underlies his 1966 criticisms of Catholic religious education, presumably drawing on his own experiences:

The current position is that students leave secondary school with a good smattering of apologetics and capsules of social doctrine. They never heard of Esther – the Bible (Old Testament) is still very much a closed book. Their religion is not well integrated with their secular studies (consider the teaching of history and English literature). Their vocational guidance has been nil or casual or confined only to the vocations of the priesthood or the religious life; this means

in effect that they do not readily associate the idea of service to the community with the professions or trades they find their way into. And – perhaps this is the key to the problem – their religious education is not practical; it is not concerned with the living out of their faith in their day-to-day lives; it is quite theoretical and threadbare at that. This means that our religion tends not to be rooted in our human and lay lives.¹⁰

Opus Dei has several types of membership. Adams became a numerary, making a commitment to celibacy, living in Opus Dei centres, in his case those located mainly in South Dublin (where he practised his favourite recreation of hill-walking in the Dublin and Wicklow mountains), and following a structured routine of prayer and asceticism. (Numeraries are officially lay people, not members of a religious order; one of the major themes of Adams' 1979 book on chastity is that laypeople practising apostolic celibacy is a logical development of the call to holiness being universal rather than reserved for clerics and religious). For the remainder of his life, he combined his publishing career with working in youth clubs and university residences operated by Opus Dei.

He never made a secret of his membership, and from the early 1960s was one of the organisation's highest-profile Irish members. He regularly wrote letters to Dublin newspapers defending the organisation.¹¹ During a 1981 newspaper controversy on the alleged secrecy of Opus Dei, Adams stated that all the supposed secrets could be found in the organisation's freely-available publications, and described himself as 'an Opus Dei publicist on and off for twenty years... Far from being secretive, Opus Dei is very keen to be known; otherwise how could it develop?'¹² In 1973 he co-founded, and for about twenty years co-edited with Fr Charles Connolly, a monthly Opus Dei newsletter *Position Papers*, which reprinted from various sources articles explaining and defending Catholic teaching on controversial issues.¹³

Journalist and publisher

For a time Adams studied journalism at the University of Navarre. He began his publishing career in 1959 with the Opus Dei-linked, predominantly religious publisher Scepter Books, based in Chicago, serving as a director and one of two employees in its Dublin office. In 1966 Scepter brought out a series of small Latin and English texts of individual decrees of the Second Vatican Council, with reprinted commentaries by various theologians

and with Fr Austin Flannery as overall editor. Adams edited *Vatican II on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio)*, with commentaries by himself, Kevin McNamara, Enda McDonagh and others. He cited Escrivá as a pioneer of ecumenism, noting that in 1947 Opus Dei – against considerable opposition – secured papal permission to enrol non-Catholics and even non-Christians as ‘co-operators’ and emphasising Opus Dei influence on certain Council documents.¹⁴

He extended Scepter’s range into less conventionally pious areas, planning a full reprint of the works of James Stephens (only *The Charwoman’s Daughter* and *The Insurrection in Dublin* appeared).¹⁵ In 1964 Scepter published an American book (by a nun) on *The Challenge of the Retarded Child*;¹⁶ in 1967 it published a book on marketing in Ireland, and Adams expressed the hope that it might be followed by more books on business studies for Irish readers.¹⁷ In the same year Adams told *The Irish Times* that Scepter was publishing ten titles a year and exporting about fifty per cent of its output, having acquired significant markets in India and the Philippines.¹⁸

He was highly critical of what he saw as the ghettoised nature of Catholic publishing. In 1963 he was director of a Dominican-sponsored conference on religious publishing. As *The Irish Times* reported it:

The conference was entitled ‘Abandoning the Ghetto’ and was aimed at studying how the religious press, which is to-day an essential part of the Church’s apostolate, could reach out to the general mass of people, who rarely read, or even come by a ‘religious book’. There was general agreement that vast – and even ‘respectable’ areas of Catholic and Protestant publishing were wide open to criticism, particularly on the score of professional, if not doctrinal incompetence.

Adams complained that many Irish Catholic magazines were ‘dead wood ... some did a disservice to the Church ... supported ... out of a mistaken sense of duty and affection towards the organisations which published them’.¹⁹

Adams on Irish Catholicism

He was a regular contributor to the current affairs magazine *Hibernia*, then edited by Basil Clancy and seen as a platform for liberal Catholic intellectuals, from 1965 writing a ‘Review of Reviews’ which drew readers’ attention to articles of interest in a wide range of journals from Opus Dei publications to *Index on Censorship*:

As far as I am concerned, and I hope *Hibernia* agrees with me, this is not a Catholic magazine. Why do we have to plaster ‘Catholic’ everywhere, even over the most secular things? It is surely enough for journalists to be good Catholics, good Protestants, or just good honest pagans. And then how very many less crimes will be committed in the Church’s name? *Hibernia* is not a Catholic paper; it is lay, secular, cultural and within that setting it can be twice as Catholic or Christian in outlook than all the edifying little tracts put together; and what it says won’t compromise the Church.²⁰

He was commissioned by Clancy to produce an article in January 1966 on how the insights of the just-completed Council might be deployed to educate laity. His criticisms were unsparing; he argued that Irish seminaries were grossly negligent in failing to develop contacts with universities, and cited the long-standing practice of clerical students attending Queen’s University Belfast in lay dress as a model to be followed. He suggested that a faculty of Catholic theology be created at Trinity (still formally prohibited to Catholics), provided the staff were not *risqué* (i.e. heterodox), and criticised the view that the NUI was not suitable for faculties of theology by pointing out that the UCD philosophy department was largely staffed by priests and its curriculum geared to clerical students: ‘Until it is possible to have lay professors of philosophy at UCD, there is little point in discussing the possibility of a faculty suitable for the education of laymen’. He commented on suggestions that Catholic institutions should set up theology courses for nuns, brothers and lay people, as was being done in England:

My own view is that it would be counterproductive since it would further separate ‘Catholic’ studies from civic studies and normal secular life. The natural place for the education of the layman is a secular and civic social environment, not one which is ecclesiastical and stylised. The theological preparation of the Catholic layman must surely dovetail with his professional preparation. It must be done in its own milieu, otherwise it will be rootless and hyper-intellectual.²¹

Catholics and politics

Throughout its history, Opus Dei has attracted criticism from Catholics and others (who accuse it of being secretive and linked to right-wing politics – notably in Spain during the regime of General Franco, when several Opus Dei ‘technocrats’ were cabinet ministers – and of an elitism incompatible

with the 'spirit' variously defined, of the Second Vatican Council) and from some on the theological 'right' who believe it ought to resemble a traditional religious order. Adams denied that Opus Dei had a corporate political 'line'; he maintained that the Francoist ministers, like other Opus Dei members, were simply living out their freely-chosen political views in accordance with their individual understandings.²²

He was consistent in maintaining that there should not be a single Catholic political 'line'. (In 1970 when reviewing a book on the Salazar regime in Portugal he takes what might be seen as an over-sympathetic approach, regarding Salazar as honest and well-meaning and accepting the regime's claim to have achieved racial integration in its African colonies. At the same time he criticises Salazar for imprisoning political opponents and presiding over economic stagnation; he certainly does not share the view of some mid-century Irish writers that Portugal was a Catholic Utopia).²³

In 1961 he opposed, as a counsel of despair, the suggestion by the cultural critic Desmond Fennell that, in a post-Christian world, liberal rationalism, as a purely negative and critical outlook, would be displaced by communism unless *some* rival social philosophy was developed. Adams thought Fennell overestimated the durability and attractiveness of communism, and underestimated the prospects for Christian re-evangelisation of the West.²⁴

Mr Fennell has all the time assumed (perhaps from excessive reliance on the Swedish analogy) that he is living in a *post-Christian* world. That preposition really begs the whole question: if one were to speak of 'non-Christian' or even of 'anti-Christian', one would still leave room for future re-Christianisation. Since, however, Mr Fennell frequently uses the expression 'post-Christian', he has committed himself to a pessimism which few people would share.

At this time he himself could be described as on the left. He participated in demonstrations against nuclear weapons at the RAF airbase at Aldermaston; in his exchanges with Fennell he cites the Aldermaston marches as showing how the West, whatever its shortcomings, extended liberties not available in the Eastern bloc.²⁵ He joined the Irish Labour Party, though he later resigned due to its policies on social issues; he was, however, critical of the English Catholic-Marxist group *Slant* (which included the well-known critic Terry Eagleton), because of what he described as its quasi-fascist insistence that there could only be one legitimate Catholic political viewpoint.²⁶ The same suspicion is visible in his wariness of the vogue for Teilhard de Chardin's

view of the world as ineluctably evolving towards God. (Adams noted Teilhard's initial ambivalence towards the Nazis as exemplifying the danger of admiring progress for its own sake with insufficient reference to foundational principles).²⁷ He admired US President John F Kennedy and his brother Bobby; when President Kennedy visited Galway in 1963 Adams ran alongside his motorcade.²⁸

In 1968, when addressing a conference in the RDS (with Garret Fitzgerald) on Pope Paul VI's social encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Adams praised the post-conciliar Church for rejecting the concept of immutable social and colonial hierarchies and declaring that social progress, though not inevitable, was morally obligatory through achievable human effort:

Who would have thought that the same Church that wrote so clumsy if orthodox a Syllabus of Errors in 1864 could in the space of 100 years ... embrace so affectionately the aspirations of the poor and deprived of the modern world? How many good people were scandalised thirty years ago at the teaching of a man like Escrivá?²⁹

Culture wars

Three months later he was writing to *The Irish Times* to defend Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which reasserted the traditional Catholic prohibition on contraception, and denounced by another correspondent as one of the 'Irish Boss-Laity ... the secret societies of wealthy laymen who run the Church in poor Catholic countries like Spain, Ireland and South America'.³⁰ He initially commented that there was much to be said on both sides and described opponents of the encyclical as evidently sincere and some supporters as intolerably smug. He based his acceptance on the Church's teaching authority and stated that discussion should centre on how it could be implemented as sensitively as possible:

The question of Church doctrine on the transmission of life is so complex that it is very difficult for the individual to work out its rationale (for the record, I remember reading both majority and minority reports and finding that there was much to be said on both sides – in fact each group seemed to be speaking a different language.) But one would have hoped that once the doctrine had been so clarified everyone in the Church would study and pray rather than rush into print adopting prior (and, therefore, more legitimate) controversial standpoints – and, worse than that, try to organise dissent. Very many

of the ‘we told you so’ supporters of the Encyclical seem to be so incapable of real conversation that it is rather futile to say anything to them. But so very many of those who favoured or favour a change in the law so command my respect – by their evident integrity and warmth – that I hate to see them waste those qualities by turning the Church into a place of politics and lobbies. The Church is mystery and love as well as law and its Christ is human and understanding. Church pastors are realising that it is not enough to issue – sometimes – hard sayings: they must take on an exhausting pastoral action to help people cope with those sayings. But if Christians who feel they cannot obey the teaching on contraception reject the invitation to partake of the sacraments (plural) one cannot help feeling that there is, oddly enough, a streak of Puritanism in that approach.³¹

In later years, however, he grew more enthusiastic in his support for *Humanae Vitae* as a statement of how life should be lived. In 1978 he edited an issue of *Position Papers* (No.59) setting out the case against the legalisation of contraception,³² and his 1979 book on chastity expressly endorses Paul VI’s reasoning on the teleological nature of marriage and declares that couples who frustrate its natural end are vitiating their own commitment.³³ For the rest of his life his commitment to Opus Dei would be primarily associated, for those not personally acquainted with him, with the culture wars fought in late twentieth-century Ireland over the legislative endorsement of Catholic sexual morality; he campaigned against the legalisation of contraception, argued in various fora against removal of the constitutional ban on divorce,³⁴ and participated in television debates in support of the 1983 constitutional amendment outlawing abortion.³⁵

He maintained that while the clericalist ‘closed Catholicism’ described by analysts such as J H Whyte was real and often harmful, self-described ‘open Catholicism’, whose exponents advocated legal abortion and sent their children to non-Catholic schools, was so incoherent as to be meaningless:

The political activity of Catholics operating as free agents, uncommissioned by clerics, engaging in politics and doing what they can to direct temporal affairs according to God’s will (this is the very definition Vatican II gives of lay people). This I would describe as open Catholicism but I would not fancy being a political scientist working on it. The data are extremely elusive ... but what is Dr Whyte’s open Catholicism? It is a setting in which bishops

have (in fact) nothing to say on matters of morality. It is equitable to mass Catholic disobedience, where Catholics act in the body politic without reference to Church authority. Take for example the question of education. The Catholic Church (by definition) teaches its members that they have a duty to give their children a Catholic education (*Dr Whyte misreads Vatican II on this*); yet I cannot get into my factory at 9 a.m. with queues of Dublin middle-class Catholics bent on handing their infants over for Protestant or 'neutral' education. Education is one of the crucial areas where Catholicism and world meet; in this sense it is a political area. If Catholics ignore the Church's directives their behaviour is so inconsistent as not to make sense; this inconsistency may disconcert Church authorities (I'm sure it does) but it ought to make for a sociologist's nightmare. Yet Dr Whyte sees significance in all this: when 'Catholics' vote for abortion, he seems to think he is in the world of open Catholicism: he suggests that here, still, is some sort of meaningful Catholic political behaviour. What in fact he is filming is a Gadarene swine-rush.³⁶

Adams also took a dim view of attacks in the early 1980s on the papacy of John Paul II by critics such as the American Redemptorist academic F X Murphy, better known as the author of reports on the Council in *The New Yorker* under the pseudonym 'Xavier Rynne': 'How can Catholic colleges survive *bona fide* if they are headed by clerics of this type... [marked by] the modernism apparently endemic in Catholic theological circles today?' He complained that such writers claimed to represent Vatican II's emphasis on collegiality without acknowledging its clear statements that the college of bishops must act in communion with the Pope, and expecting the magisterium to solve all the world's problems while themselves refusing to obey it even in its areas of special expertise. 'This book suggests that to be a success, the Pope must be humanly perfect. That's not the kind of miracle I believe in.'³⁷

It was not only in the internal development of the Catholic Church by which Adams' 1960s hopes for the 1970s were disappointed. His reviews of the press in *Hibernia* during the mid-1960s take a sympathetic interest in advocacy of reform in Northern Ireland by intellectuals writing for the *New Northman* magazine, but in September 1971 *The Irish Press* published a rather incoherent letter from Adams criticising his old friend and former academic supervisor Cornelius O'Leary for endorsing a statement by Bishop William Philbin which denounced IRA violence. Adams declared that IRA

violence was a tragic necessity, since only violence had secured recognition and concessions for Northern nationalists; he suggested bishops and their advisers who condemned the IRA concentrate on conciliating Ulster Protestants to secure a united Ireland by agreement.³⁸ O’Leary replied that it was unreasonable to expect Protestants to be conciliated while their lives and property were attacked.³⁹ Although Adams held republican views for the rest of his life, this letter should be seen as the response of a Northerner to rapidly escalating anarchy, rather than his considered long-term opinion; some years later he lamented in book reviews that violence in Northern Ireland reduced the Church’s credibility,⁴⁰ and he maintained a deep and lifelong friendship with O’Leary.⁴¹ In 1997, however, the 1971 letter was cited by critics of Opus Dei as evidence that it harboured political extremists.⁴²

Adams’ most enduring contribution to Opus Dei was as a publisher. In addition to the Navarre Biblical Commentary, he translated and published some twenty-five volumes on spirituality throughout his career, mostly by Opus Dei authors.⁴³ He also produced two original works of spirituality. His most personal publication, *Single-Minded: A Tract on Chastity, Mainly in the Context of Celibacy* (1979), attempts to renew readers’ commitment to traditional Catholic teaching by developing an initial statement of the sinfulness of extramarital sexuality and the need to preserve chastity into a positive exposition of celibacy as undertaken not out of selfishness or a desire to separate oneself from the world, but in a positive attempt to transform the world and the self from personal love of God. *The Hard Life: Religion for Young Adults* (1977) is a series of short discursive reflections, resembling in style the spiritual works of Escrivá, which challenges readers to shape their lives through a positive and immediate choice of vocation, so that their lives may be an achievement rather than an accident.

IUP, IAP, Four Courts Press

To return to his publishing career: in 1968 he was recruited – with much ‘grandiose talk’ from executives – as sales manager of the short-lived Irish University Press (IUP).⁴⁴ IUP was created through the acquisition (as part of a major consolidation of Irish printing and publishing in the aftermath of Anglo-Irish free trade and the run-up to EEC membership) by the international conglomerate Trinity Holdings of a number of Irish firms, including CJ Fallon, the Cahill Group printers, and Mellifont Press. Trinity had taken advantage of the tax concessions attached to the new town at Shannon, Co

Clare, to establish an enormous printing operation, used from 1967 under the IUP imprint to reprint texts for sale to university libraries (a reflection of the vast expansion of the university sector in the 1950s and 1960s). Its major project was the re-publication of nineteenth-century British Parliamentary Papers ('blue books'), dealing with selected topics such as the Great Irish Famine and the slave trade. Adams later described the operation as 'a book-factory rather than an academic printing house'.⁴⁵

IUP's plans were recklessly optimistic, with senior management devoting a great deal more attention to prestige and scaring off possible competitors than to the scale of the likely market or to long-term viability. In 1970 Adams became a director, 'with broad administrative responsibilities'. By mid-1971 sales were being severely affected by a recession in the USA. The prominent Dublin solicitor Christopher Gore-Grimes was installed as non-executive chairman and managing director, with Adams as his personal assistant. The company was sold (as part of the Cahill Group) to a property developer, William G Stern, in December 1971. In 1972 Adams was appointed sales director, retaining this position until the Stern empire fell into bankruptcy in 1974, with Laurence Crowley appointed receiver to IUP.

Adams was one of a four-member syndicate, headed by the publisher Frank Cass, who formed Irish Academic Press (IAP) in November 1974, originally to buy up and sell IUP's remaining stock.⁴⁶ IAP later developed into a significant publishing imprint in its own right, initially through its high-profile legal publishing imprint, Round Hall Press (developed by Adams in 1981 and sold to the Sweet & Maxwell subsidiary of the Thomson organisation in 1996) and the associated Irish Law Reports.

Shortly after the establishment of IAP, he sold his own share in the company for a lump sum, while remaining managing director (from November 1974). He used the lump sum to finance Four Courts Press, an imprint which he established in 1972 (initially under the title Michael Atteridge Press; it adopted the Four Courts title in 1977) to publish poetry (including *The Gradual Wars*, the first collection of the writer and critic Seamus Deane)⁴⁷ and theological works, including Adams' own publications, and commentaries on current affairs by Bishop Jeremiah Newman.⁴⁸ In later life he would comment humorously on the wealth he might have enjoyed had he invested his lump sum in Dublin property.⁴⁹ He later expanded Four Courts into the areas of mediaeval and Celtic studies. In 1996, when IAP was restructured, he launched Four Courts as a full-scale academic imprint, employing many of

IAP's former staff, while Cass retained ownership of IAP as sole shareholder.

Due in large part to Adams' tight cost-control and editorial efforts, and the fact that decisions could be made on the spot in Dublin rather than being referred to a remote chain of command, Four Courts was able to ride the wave of increasing Irish affluence, a growing market for academic publications, and interest in high-standard local and institutional history, to establish itself as Ireland's foremost academic publishing house. This involved certain apparent ironies; Anglican scholarly friends commented on the piquant sight of an Opus Dei numerary presiding over so many publications on the history of the Church of Ireland and participating (within the limits of official ecumenism) in Anglican services at the launch of some of these publications, and, when Adams received an honorary doctorate in 2005 for his services to Irish publishing, it was from the historically-Protestant Trinity College Dublin.⁵⁰ It was also noted that Adams never attempted to impose his own beliefs on his authors, even when they criticised views he himself held. Moreover, his fondness for detective stories, good food and Spanish Rioja and (despite a certain gruff shyness towards casual acquaintances) the wit and humour displayed in his speeches at book launches, did not accord with stereotypes of stern Spanish Catholic asceticism.⁵¹ His Opus Dei brethren, and Adams himself, did not see any contradiction in his professionalism and his belief that academic publishing possessed its own integrity and the Opus Dei project of living out spirituality through one's daily labour. At the time of his death Four Courts Press had over 500 titles in print.

Michael Adams died of complications following treatment for cancer in St Vincent's Hospital, Dublin, on 13 February 2009. He was a central figure in the Irish publishing industry of his time and reflected many of its shifts, from a fragmented and provincial market with a strong religious component to a more affluent, specialised, secular and outspoken industry.

MICHAEL ADAMS ON CENSORSHIP

In 1963, while working for Scepter, Adams received the first PhD awarded by the Politics Department at Queen's University Belfast, for a dissertation (supervised by Cornelius O'Leary) on the workings of the Irish system of literary censorship.⁵² This was published in 1968 (by Scepter Books and University of Alabama Press) as *Censorship: The Irish Experience*. The book's focus is primarily on the legal framework of censorship (as

distinct from the experience of banned writers, the principal interest of such works as Julia Carson's 1990 *Banned in Ireland*) and provides the first comprehensive account of the journalistic and parliamentary debates surrounding the enactment and enforcement of censorship legislation, as well as the structure and workings of the secretive Censorship Board and Appeal Board.⁵³ In addition to extensive journalistic research, Adams interviewed both supporters and opponents of censorship and had access to the private papers of some censors (notably Robert Donovan and JJ Pigott); the depth of research and clarity of exposition underlie the book's continuing status as an indispensable resource for historians of Irish censorship. Simply by explaining how the system worked in practice, Adams did much to expose its shortcomings.

Debating the law

Although he confines his personal views to a final summing-up in the book, in the mid-1960s he participated in the debates which led to the 1967 relaxation of the censorship laws. The critic Ulick O'Connor even suggested that Adams' contribution in the matter of literary censorship was second only to that of Brian Lenihan, the minister who carried the relevant legislation through the Dáil.⁵⁴ Adams was a founding member of the Censorship Reform Society⁵⁵ and engaged in debate on RTE's *Late Late Show*⁵⁶ and in Catholic periodicals such as *The Word* with defenders of censorship such as the journalist John D Sheridan.⁵⁷ (Sheridan's prediction that relaxation might lead, as in Britain, to the sale of unexpurgated editions of the Marquis de Sade has proved more accurate than Adams' expectation of continuing limited censorship).

An example of Adams' campaign activities is seen in newspaper reports of a November 1964 seminar on 'Censorship and the law' at Opus Dei's Nullamore University residence in Dublin, chaired by Cearbhall Ó Dálaigh. Adams forthrightly declared that, in his opinion, many bannings had been 'illegal', noting that the Censorship Board (whose members worked part-time and without payment) could not possibly read the ever-increasing number of books submitted to them in the time remaining after their everyday occupations. He also stated that the working of censorship tended to turn Ireland into a 'cultural ghetto', suppressing legitimate social criticism and promoting an unreal, idealised view of Ireland, and limiting Irish awareness of important strands of modern thought (whether or not he personally agreed with them). The fact that bans, once imposed, were perpetual meant no

recognition could be given to changes in social and literary manners.⁵⁸

The apparent contrast between Adams' anti-censorship activities and his Catholic 'conservatism' has attracted some comment, but his contributions to the debates and his retrospective comments show that his views were never straightforwardly liberal. He recalled feeling confused and embarrassed on the subject in his youth, at first imagining that he had to regard much of modern Irish literature as obscene, then deciding that while the motives behind censorship were legitimate its enforcement was shamefully provincial.⁵⁹ In the mid-1960s he expressed admiration for the artistic little magazines *Arena* and *The Holy Door*: 'What was *Arena*? I like to think of it as a statement; it had to be heard; to make its point (a cynical, bold, bawdy, happy, pagan-Christian attack on the emptiness of Irish life) and give a vision of the artist as saviour'. He did, however, comment of one contributor:

No attempt is made to understand the ordinary, and without the ordinary life has no roots. In fact I could argue that Michael Kane doesn't seem to have understood existentialism, for existential prudence, existential restraint, are very deep, painful and true realities.⁶⁰

What should be censored?

He always explicitly opposed the view that adults should be allowed to read anything they liked – for example, during the controversy over the banning of John McGahern's novel *The Dark* he told readers of *Hibernia*:

Like most people who are talking about it I have not yet read *The Dark* and am therefore incompetent for commenting on it. The Censorship of Publications Acts were devised to keep the country clear of sheer pornography and I have little time for people who object to this on the grounds that censorship *in principle* is bad. But after almost forty years of censorship here we do know – very acutely – that censorship in practice has often gone wrong and has affected 'marginal' books which many of us feel should be available in this country. But are there such things as marginal books? Do all books fall within a sweeping range from absolutely non-obscene to absolutely obscene, so that you have a no-man's land somewhere in the middle where censorship decisions (private or public) are hard to make? Or is there a discontinuity in this range so that some books which are superficially obscene are in fact profoundly non-obscene human statements on life, on death?

He went on to invoke another critic of censorship, who could not be described as a secularist libertine: the Maynooth priest-academic Peter Connolly, ‘If you are really interested in this subject you should read Peter Connolly’s excellent article “The moralists and the obscene” in the *Irish Theological Quarterly*’.⁶¹

In the same article he endorsed criticism by the magazine *Censorship* (later *Index on Censorship*) of the restrictions placed on British theatre by the Lord Chamberlain, with particular reference to Edward Bond’s controversial play *Saved* (set in a lumpenproletarian milieu and featuring a scene where a baby is stoned to death in its pram):

Really, some of the censored words are so innocent that one would be quite ready to march the streets with all the young playwrights frustrated by Lord Cobbold’s band. When Kenneth Tynan used that four letter word in an academic and non-‘obscene’ way on BBC3 there was a self-righteous outcry. Is there a big hypocritical game going on or is it that the average Englishman can only grasp at such straws to protest against the kind of society he seems to find developing around him? Pathetic.

He went on to point out, however, that the same magazine found it difficult to take its professed opposition to censorship to the extent of placing political censorship by pro-Western regimes on the same level as the actions of anti-Western governments:

Nkrumah is the bad man and therefore all his censorship is bad. But Malaya is different and the author of ‘Malayan Complexities’ is much less critical of official actions and attitudes. This is dangerous, surely; for once you admit any kind of censorship you are logically back where you started. It is so difficult to be consistent.

The question of pornography

He cited *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* by DH Lawrence as deserving to be banned as pornographic despite possessing literary merit,⁶² and in 1970 remarked that, while the first works of the novelist Edna O’Brien were ‘unjustly banned’, her later productions were ‘singularly repulsive’ (though he thought ‘legal quietism’ preferable to a renewed ban).⁶³ He saw the 1967 legislation not as leading to the complete abandonment of censorship (as became the case in subsequent decades) but as a necessary updating, producing a workable system which could and should continue to be enforced.⁶⁴ His criticisms

of censorship generally emphasise that it had not been some uniquely Irish peculiarity and that other countries' censorship legislation had been referenced in Irish legislative debates on the subject. (He failed to grasp, however, just how extensive the international collapse of such restrictions became in the late 1960s and early 1970s). In 1972, when reviewing a number of books dealing with debates in Britain over the wider availability of pornography as a result of relaxing the obscenity laws, he suggested that Britain should copy the 1967 Irish legislation, and devoted particular praise to the writings of a British secular critic of pornography, David Holbrook.⁶⁵

The argument is consciously conducted at a philosophical level but it is highly practical. Thus, Holbrook dismisses the challenge to prove that pornography has harmful social effects by saying that since a 'man is not a simple input-output machine, it is impossible ever to prove that a good cultural experience improves him, or a bad one harms him', and three pages later it is reported that the Danish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals is petitioning the courts to stop the use of four-footed animals (pigs, dogs and stallions in particular) in sexual partnership with women in Danish sex fairs. 'I am sorry', Adams writes, 'but it is very difficult to jettison one's Victorian hang-ups and welcome commercial displays of bestiality'.

Adams' 1979 reflections on chastity include a remark that while the old censorship was 'heavy-handed', it at least restricted the misuse of sexuality for book-marketing purposes and for wider commercial conditioning:⁶⁶

I don't deny that if you offer me a straight choice between the Ireland of the *Midnight Court* and the Ireland of John McGahern's novels I'm for Merriman all the way (though I'm a *Catcher in the Rye* man myself)... But what I am saying is that there is nothing new under the sun; that sex has always been good and important; that purity has always been difficult and possible.⁶⁷

His position that the earlier censorship legislation derived from a mistaken view that it was possible to avoid corruption by shutting oneself off from the wicked world rather than working in it to transform it directly reflects Opus Dei's self-image. Indeed *Single-Minded* can be read as a companion piece to *Censorship*, in that it advocates the maintenance of chastity through internalised prayer and self-control rather than external enactments. His later thoughts, if any, on the fate of Irish censorship have not so far come to my attention.

Conclusion

In conclusion, then, I would suggest that the career of Michael Adams raises some interesting questions about the cultural history of modern Ireland. First of all, the fact that someone of such fundamentally conservative cultural views became such an outspoken critic of the censorship system indicates how discredited that system had become by the 1960s. Indeed, the massive restructuring of the Irish publishing industry in the wake of EEC membership, whose fall-out we see in Adams's publishing career, was a factor in the demise of that system which might repay closer attention. Finally, accounts of cultural changes from the 1960s onwards are perhaps written with a bit too much retrospective whiggishness, an assumption that the conservative and liberal positions were clearly defined from the outset. Some attention should be paid to those participants who were detached from, and critical of, the old order but did not necessarily desire or anticipate the eventual outcome.

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Notes

- 1 This paper, an offshoot of my research for the *Dictionary of Irish Biography* entry on Michael Adams, principally based on research in online newspapers, was originally read to Eunan O'Halpin's Twentieth Century Irish History seminar at Trinity College Dublin in January 2016. I would like to thank Fr Charles Connolly, Martin Fanning and Four Courts Press for advice and material; they bear no responsibility for the finished product.
- 2 For a discussion by such a 'conservative', see James Hitchcock, *The Decline and Fall of Radical Catholicism* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971). Adams' early career can also be seen as illustrating Mary Daly's point that the 'progressive' Ireland of the 1960s in many respects remained quite conservative, and that the Irish Catholic Church of the period should not be seen as merely static but often tried to incorporate new developments: Mary E. Daly *Sixties Ireland: Reshaping the Economy, State and Society 1957-1973* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
- 3 John Allen Jr, *Opus Dei: An Objective Look Behind the Myths and Reality of the Most Controversial Force in the Catholic Church* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2005).

- 4 *Fermanagh Herald*, 4 February 1984.
- 5 *Hibernia*, June 1965, pp.12-13.
- 6 Michael Adams, *Single-Minded: Tract on Chastity, Mainly in the Context of Celibacy* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1979), p.102.
- 7 *Fermanagh Herald*, 2 July 1977.
- 8 Adams cites Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* (c.1420) as unduly exalting the life of religious orders and St Francis de Sales' *Introduction to the Devout Life* (1609) as a model for everyday holiness.
- 9 'Single-Minded', in Michael Adams, *The Hard Life: Religion for Young Adults* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1977), pp.41-84. He remarked in 1979 that when he first read Escrivá's 1939 book of meditations, *The Way*, on life as a crusade for manliness and purity – presumably in the 1950s – 'I did not warm to it. I did not want to be a crusader', and only in recent years had he grasped their full force (p.41).
- 10 Michael Adams, 'The laity's lack of theology', *Hibernia* January 1966. It is noteworthy that the Tridentine form of the Mass made much less extensive use of Old Testament readings than the *Novus Ordo*.
- 11 See the acerbic exchanges between Adams and Xavier Carty (*The Irish Press*, 26 February, 1 March, 5 March 1969), and Adams' defence of Escrivá against accusations of misogyny (*The Irish Times*, 12 August 1969).
- 12 *The Irish Times*, 24 January 1981.
- 13 Charles Connolly, 'The genesis of *Position Papers*', *Position Papers*, 500 (June/July 2016), 12-16. *Position Papers* is still published in 2017 as a professionally-produced monthly magazine.
- 14 Michael Adams (ed.), *Vatican II on Ecumenism: Text and Commentaries* (Dublin & Chicago: Scepter Books, 1966), p.16.
- 15 *The Irish Times*, 6 January 1967.
- 16 *ibid.*, 20 January 1964.
- 17 *The Irish Press*, 1 September 1967.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 *Irish Independent*, 16 May 1966.
- 20 *Hibernia*, May 1965, p.18.
- 21 *ibid.*, January 1966.
- 22 *The Irish Times*, 3 November 1969.
- 23 *Irish Independent*, 12 December 1970.
- 24 *The Irish Times*, 18 April 1961; see also 8 April (Adams), 15 April (Fennell).
- 25 *ibid.*, 8 April 1961.
- 26 Information from Martin Fanning.
- 27 *The Irish Times*, 18 June 1968.
- 28 *The Irish News*, 21 February 2009.

- 29 *The Irish Times*, 18 June 1968.
- 30 *ibid.*, 26 September 1968.
- 31 *ibid.*, 14 September, 20 September 1968.
- 32 *ibid.*, 16 December 1978.
- 33 'Single-Minded', p.100.
- 34 Cf. his exchange with John O'Connor of the Divorce Action Group in *The Irish Times*, 22 September 1983 (Adams); 7 October 1983 (O'Connor); 4 November 1983 (Adams); 23 November 1983 (O'Connor, with a parting gibe at 'elitist groups and secret societies which practise as a Church within the Church').
- 35 *The Irish Times*, 26 August 1983.
- 36 *The Irish Press*, 18 February 1982.
- 37 *ibid.*, 6 April 1981.
- 38 *ibid.*, 14 September 1971.
- 39 *ibid.*, 18 September 1971.
- 40 *ibid.*, 6 August 1981.
- 41 Personal knowledge.
- 42 *Irish Independent*, 30 August 1997.
- 43 *The Irish News*, 21 February 2009; *Independent* (London), 19 May 2009.
- 44 The following paragraphs rely heavily on Michael Adams, 'The world of Irish University Press' in Clare Hutton (ed.), *The Irish Book in the Twentieth Century* (Dublin, Irish Academic Press, 2004), pp.157-177. See also 'Speech by Brendan O'Donoghue, formerly of the National Library of Ireland, at launch of Michael Adams Festschrift' (2006; text supplied by Four Courts Press); *The Irish Times*, 23 September 1972, 24 December 1974, 17 October 1975.
- 45 Adams, 'The world of Irish University Press', p.162; 'for the first seven or eight years of its existence [1974-81], IAP was largely a bookselling, rather than a publishing company', *ibid.*, p.170. It produced some Opus Dei titles, including a volume of *Conversations with Mgr Escrivá*. A former colleague of Michael Adams who attended the original presentation of this paper in TCD and whose name I failed to obtain recalled that, before the final collapse of IUP in 1974, they discussed founding an imprint to republish formerly-banned books of literary value, which would have been called Millington Press. Incidentally, he thought that this paper overstated Adams' conservatism and recalled that Adams had never discussed Opus Dei with him.
- 46 'For the first seven or eight years of its existence [1974-81], IAP was largely a bookselling, rather than a publishing, company' (Adams, 'The world of Irish University Press', p.170).
- 47 Adams was an occasional poet himself, see *The Irish Press*, 9 October 1971.

- 48 *The Irish Times*, 24 May 1989.
- 49 'Who would invest in publishing? Michael Adams, doctor in letters honoris causa', Books Ireland (February 2006).
- 50 'Dr Michael Adams', *Church Review* (March 2009).
- 51 Obituary by Toby Barnard, *Independent* (London), 19 March 2009; Raymond Refaüssé, 'Dr Michael Adams 1937-2009', Irish Society for Archives Newsletter 2009.
- 52 *The Irish Press*, 18 December 1963.
- 53 *The Irish Times*, 14 September 1990.
- 54 *Sunday Independent*, 10 August 1974.
- 55 *ibid.*, 11 February 1965.
- 56 *The Irish Times*, 18 April 1968.
- 57 *The Word* (published monthly by the missionary Society of the Divine Word), January 1968 (unpaginated), symposium on 'Should Ireland's censorship laws be abolished?', with Sheridan and Adams among the contributors.
- 58 *The Irish Times*, November 1964.
- 59 *The Irish Press*, 15 April 1970.
- 60 *Hibernia*, June 1965, 12-13.
- 61 *ibid.*, July/August 1965, 13-14.
- 62 *The Irish Times*, 13 November 1964.
- 63 *The Irish Press*, 15 April 1970.
- 64 *ibid.*, 15 April 1970.
- 65 *ibid.*, 14 October 1972. An example of Holbrook's work is *The Masks of Hate: the problem of false solutions in the culture of an acquisitive society* (London: Pergamon Press, 1972); see also his obituary, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 October 2011.
- 66 'Single-Minded', p.19.
- 67 *ibid.*, p.12.