

BÁS IN EIRINN: CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF DEATH IN IRELAND

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"Bás i-nEirinn" ["To die in Ireland"] is a Gaelic drinking toast whose resonance is explored in this case study of the relation of meaning and power. By viewing death as opportunity as well as problem, I interpret varying cultural constructions of Irish death in light of the historical dialectic between the Catholic Church and popular practice. Whereas the Church has generally assumed control of the ritualization of death, there are also striking examples of creative popular responses, including re-adaptation of older popular occasions (American wakes) and even appropriation of Church forms for popular purposes (the IRA funeral). [death, Ireland, Catholicism, Europe, religion]

Introduction

Sometime during my first month of fieldwork in a fishing-farming settlement in Southwest Donegal, I became an avid listener to the Gaelic language radio station. I was expressing my enthusiasm to an older neighbor, "and *Radio na Gaeltachta*, isn't it very good . . . they play great traditional music . . ." Paddy, however, had another point of view, "Oh it is . . . I hear when someone dies in another parish in time to make it to the wake."

This, of course, is but one face of death in the rural west of Ireland, but perhaps the most striking to the ethnographer. For death seems to enjoy an almost casual pre-eminence there as both possible and actual event, and the rural wake is still the quintessential expression of communal values and relations. However, there is also the more patently religious side of Irish death, a preoccupation with the subject and event shared to some extent by the Catholic world generally—at least before Vatican II. After all, what other religion reminds believers more often of their God's, and their own, passing. Irish Catholicism is no exception, yet there is nothing like the "cult of death" common to certain Mediterranean Catholic or Orthodox cultures. Elaborate or lengthy mourning customs, for example, are absent. The families of deceased individuals rarely wear black for any length of time nor is there anything comparable to the cemetery practices of rural Greece (Danforth and Tsiaras 1982; Dubisch *infra*). Even in this relative absence of extensive rites or material representations of death and the dead, however, attention to the fact and possibility is maintained in both religious and ordinary language. But something like a "cult of death" has emerged in the political realm, where powerful symbolic performance and emotional display is—under

some circumstances—a feature of dying, wakes, and funerals. The cult of political martyrdom has a long history of its own in Ireland and has enjoyed an ambivalent relation with the Catholic Church. Currently, as world headlines attest, it plays a vital, symbolic role in the "troubles" in the North of Ireland.

These various cultural constructions of death may be either complementary or conflictual, posing an interesting problem for the interpretation of death experience in Ireland (and elsewhere), and one which would seem to demand a solution at once anthropological and historical. Anthropology has treated death principally in terms of rituals—rites of passage which respond symbolically to the challenge of death by demonstrating the continuity of the social world and reasserting the value of beliefs whose task it is to make sense of the experience. For the historian too, death customs are often seen as possible keys to the innermost character of other cultures. As Vovelle¹ (1976: 120) put it, "*Les attitudes collectives devant la mort sont devenues un des problèmes majeurs que se pose actuellement l'histoire des mentalités.*" With relatively few surviving detailed descriptions of rituals—save those of extraordinary individuals—historians have relied on surviving documents such as wills, texts of various sorts, and the material culture of memorials and cemeteries to assess these changing attitudes (see Vovelle 1970, 1976; Ariès 1981).

Each discipline, anthropology and history, has yielded important insights in its own right, but their somewhat different strengths suggest the possibility of an even more fruitful combination, in the spirit of Asad's (1983) call for attention to the role of power in religious experience. As the ethnography of death has evolved, closer attention has been paid to the complex relation between individual emotional states and

cultural enactments. One need only contrast such early descriptions of death and mourning as Radcliffe-Brown's (1948) account of the culturally prescribed weeping on the Andaman Islanders with Danforth's (Danforth and Tsiaras 1982) recent account of rural Greek death, in which the cognitive and emotional ambivalence is allowed to emerge. This greater sensitivity to meaning has also led to an appreciation of its contested and processual character (see Bloch and Parry 1982). That is to say, not everyone has the same meaning in mind, and the eventual public character meaning achieves may be negotiated—or may remain in conflicting versions. Historians need to keep these problematic aspects in mind when assessing the "mentalité" of their subjects. On the other hand, the more typically historical, as opposed to anthropological, view of long-term change places it in the larger context of regimes and allows for a clearer focus on power as well as meaning. From that perspective death is not just a problem, but also an opportunity. The historical and archaeological record clearly demonstrate that those in power and those wishing to create power have seized upon the symbolic representation of death in monument, ritual, and discourse (including the cult of memory).

For example, although Ariès (1981) explains changing death customs and attitudes mainly in terms of general cultural/psychological shifts—that is, the "rise of individualism"—his treatment of Western European death customs in the *durée* also sheds light on the long-term political ramifications of Church control of death ritual and experience.¹ In fact it is precisely because the experience of death is so powerful emotionally that its cultural organization is a source of potential political power. Anthropologists need to take this longer and larger frame into consideration in their interpretation of the local construction of meaning. Together, the ethnographic and historical perspectives can provide a rounded view of the ways in which the three principal cultural forms—rituals, texts, and objects—mediate the individual and communal experience of death (and much else). The historical view attends to the ways in which such cultural forms come into and out of existence, promulgated by different groups and institutions with varying degrees of self-consciousness. The ethnographic view explores the multifarious character of local responses to and appropriations of these forms—whether home-grown, imported, or imposed.

This combined perspective may be useful in the case at hand. By taking into account death's role both in the local world and in the historical dialectic between local and hegemonic Catholic culture—

especially in its Irish incarnation—we might better see how and why death has some of the meanings it does in Ireland today. We will begin with an ethnographic account of a particular death, that of an old man in the rural northwest of Ireland in 1986, then consider the wider context of that death through an exploration of the historical dialectic between the Church and local communities. This view makes clear that death has been one of the principal fields of experience into which the Church has extended its hegemony through the repression of certain pre-existing death customs, but also by promoting new and powerful cultural forms involving rituals, texts, and devotional objects. We will return, however, to an ethnographic focus which reveals the degree to which various sorts of communities have adapted former practices to new circumstances or appropriated the very cultural forms of the Church for their own purposes.

Conal's Death

In early October of his eighty-first year, Conny was taken off to the small nursing home/hospital in Donegal town, about thirty miles east of the cottage in which he and his father had been born, in a small hamlet on the west coast of County Donegal. Conny had been away before, traveling and working elsewhere in Ireland and England in the 1930s and '40s. Since then, however, he and his brother—two bachelors—had only rarely broken their routine, dividing between them the work of fishing, sheep, cows, garden, and house. That pattern had been lately somewhat disrupted by the arrival of their sister, home from forty years in America and now a determined presence on the domestic front. With his brother in hospital, Johnny carried on as always, doing chores and visiting around the townland. To questions posed concerning Conny, he would reply without much visible emotion, "now, he's a bit better the day," or "fairly far down now," but always intimating that it would not be long before the communal death vigil was over.

For communal it was. Any eighty-one-year-old would be well known to everyone in the parish, or indeed "the three parishes," as the larger geographic and social region is called, but Conny was far better known than most. He was an official "character"—one of the critical communal roles open to a talented bachelor—a wildly amusing man whose exploits, real and apocryphal, were favorite topics of local talk. While Conny was dying in Donegal town, the locals were recalling such stories, and many an individual

managed to visit him in the hospital, a kind of expatriate community. At any given time many people in the parish would have some relation or connection there whom they owed a call, and a visit to one was an opportunity to see others. Consequently, an afternoon in the hospital was not unlike one back home; each room or bed was a household in this micro-cosmic neighborhood and visitors spent time with one patient and then wandered on to the next. Conny was something of a local celebrity, however, and his bedside was rarely unattended. In his most weakened state he would quip for the benefit of nurse and neighbors, taking a "wee sup" from one of the many bottles—of whiskey not medicine—that crowded his bed-side table. The high point of this convivial death-bed scene came in late October, when a group of traditional musicians, learning that Conny would not be able to attend the upcoming festival near his home, stopped in at the hospital for an impromptu session at his bedside.

A week later Conny was dead. The news spread quickly; "Did you hear? . . . Conny passed away this afternoon, it was just after one o'clock. The remains are to come home after six. Are you going to meet the remains?" Many did, and thus Conny came home, only three weeks after he had left, accompanied by a cortege of neighbors and relations. Since there is no such thing as a funeral home in the region, Conny, like everybody, would be "waked" at home for two days with visits expected from hundreds of close and distant neighbors and relations, and then buried in the churchyard after a funeral mass.

The cottage, now the wake house, though fancied up a bit since the sister's arrival, retained the traditional layout: three rooms in a horizontal row, kitchen in the middle and one room on either side. The bachelor brothers had left the "west room" (see Arensberg 1968: 38ff.) little used, but the sister Agnes had turned it into something of a bedroom *cum* parlor. The front door opened into the kitchen, where on this occasion a dozen or more older men—bachelors—could be found on wooden chairs near the cast iron stove, smoking pipes or cigarettes and drinking tea. Johnny, his eyes now red and somewhat bewildered, greeted each arrival with a nod to his left, toward the brothers' bedroom in which the remains were laid out in an open coffin. Conny was dressed in a suit with a rosary entwined about his hands, and on the bedside table and bureau were crosses and candles. Each visitor entering the house would first proceed into this room, pray over the remains, bless him or herself, and then offer a simple "sorry for your trouble" to the row of near relations, predominantly women,

whose duty it was to sit in vigil through the wake. The older males, particularly the bachelors, then went back into the kitchen while others took their tea, sandwiches, cigarettes, and sweets in Agnes' parlor. In none of the rooms was the talk overtly concerned with the sadness of the occasion, though the brother's quiet grief seemed to pervade the kitchen. The men made mention of the deceased for a moment or two after each arrival, but then turned to the news of the district, for any wake—given the range of attenders—offers a unique opportunity for gathering news. As for the women, children, and younger men, in this case their society was dominated by the far less stricken sister Agnes, whose smiling "How are yez" and business-like bustle put them at ease enough to joke about "poor Conny." A young neighbor woman remembered a typical encounter,

Conny had this funny picture of himself that somebody took and he showed it to me . . . "This is going to be the picture on my Mass card [a memorial card distributed at Catholic funerals, now with a photograph of the deceased]" he said.

Everybody tittered.

The sociability of the wake was continued in the pub less than a mile up the road, where many of the men who had taken cups of tea with the brother of the deceased, or were about to, now took stronger drink as they relaxed and reminisced about Conny's escapades,

Do you mind the way he ust sit there by the door with the table pushed out near the door like, and his whiskey glass—empty but for a drop or two—at the edge of the table. And then some tourist would come in and knock the table and upset the glass . . . "Oooch," Conny would say, "didn't you spill me large whiskey," . . . and the poor tourist would buy him a double!

And so forth. "Ah well" came the coda, "He's watchin' us now from above," and the inevitable rejoinder, "You wouldn't know now, no one has come back to tell us what it's like." Even if such behavior follows a conventional pattern, the occasion—wake and bar scene—is patently communal and conversational. Prayers by the side of the bed, sacred rites though they are, do not set the tone for the general occasion which is rather marked by the general sociability of neighborly exchange. It is not an occasion for pronouncements about religious belief, certainly not more than a few vague words of reassurance. Indeed, the Church only enters the scene in the person of the priest, who arrives at the wake house at midnight to lead those who remain—usually family and close friends and neighbors—in a recitation of several decades of the rosary. He takes refreshment and remains a while, but when he leaves, the secular community reinstates

itself, and a bottle of whiskey is often produced for those who will stay the night.

The funeral is a different business entirely, for once delivered by the hearse to the chapel, the remains enter the domain of the Church, for whom death is of course the central act. The priest arrived in the purple vestments of mourning to conduct the solemn funeral Mass, reciting, at the appropriate moment, the name of the deceased: "Conal O'Beirne"—not Conny "the gap." No eulogy, indeed no singularity but rather the depersonalizing generality of one more soul joining all the others—the Church Invisible. Outside in the churchyard, young men of Conal's townland finished digging the grave and another separation—more material—took place as the priest committed the remains to the earth and the coffin was lowered into the grave. Some of the musicians who had played at Conny's bedside had hoped to "give him a proper send off" in the form of a spirited reel or jig, but the priest had not ceded place or form here, and the Church rite prevailed. As the dozens who had attended the interment turned to leave, and the men began to fill in the grave, Johnny quietly but openly wept and several men took hold of his arms, forcibly turning him away from the grave. The musicians and others who wanted to celebrate not Conal O'Beirne but "Conny the Gap," assembled at a local pub that day for a "session" whose quality ensured a place in local memory.

In most respects Conny's death, wake, and funeral followed the pattern typical for the contemporary West of Ireland.² The response to his death also seems to illustrate the usefulness of the Durkheimian view of ritual. A number of discernible social units are left bereft by his passing: the household, the family (there were two other brothers, one married with children, living nearby), the townland (a neighborhood comprised of about fifteen households), the hamlet and the more vaguely defined surrounding "community," and the body of worshipers that gather with great regularity in the local church. As a functionalist perspective would lead us to expect, the rites of passage of both wake and funeral seem to reassert—by the symbolic means described by van Gennep—the continuity threatened by loss.

Yet this view misses another striking feature of Conny's death: the element of tension between communal and Church definitions of the event. In that regard, the dissonance between wake and funeral is striking. Of course it is not unusual to have stages in a ritual which seem to contradict one another, and certain features of the wake suggest a classic liminal phase in a rite of passage, in which case the ensuing

structure of the funeral might make symbolic sense as a rite of reintegration. There seem, however, to have been two distinct deceased individuals involved—Conny the gap and Conal O'Beirne—and, more subtly, two quite different communities of both the living and the dead. In fact, the wake and funeral seem to some extent less like stages in the same rite of passage than separate rites dealing with different aspects of the deceased. This is perhaps a case of what Herzfeld (1987) calls "disemia": a tension between formalist and intimate readings of individual and event. For the most part this disjunction is handled through the separation of the two ritual processes. Although the priest comes to the wakehouse, he by no means dominates the place or the occasion. On the other hand, "a proper send off" of fiddle music was deemed inappropriate to the funeral.³

Conny's status as a "bachelor character" on the local stage lends particular poignancy to this conflict. His role in the local social world outside his household was to perform and provide subject matter for narrative—critical features of Irish sociability. Indeed the various levels of community are both celebrated and, in a sense, created in just the sort of kitchen and pub exchange in which Conny and others like him play such a crucial direct or indirect part. His death bed scene, the wake, and the associated pub sessions were, in this respect, all a natural consummation of a life-time of such occasions. In dying he moved into the "Community Invisible," as it were. He was now "poor Conny," living in memory and story in so far as he had earned both. As for the relatives, there is little in the way of official mourning behavior afterwards, the communal meal and/or drinks which follow the funeral seem to end matters. Reintegration is thus accomplished for deceased and dearly beloved.

What of the Church and its funeral? Conny was also a parishioner and, like virtually everyone in the parish, a weekly Mass attender. In common with others of his ilk, he was to be found on a Sunday in the vestibule at the back of the church, kneeling during the solemn moments of the service, but less than fully attentive otherwise. Though part of his persona as Conny, such traits were of course unspecified in the funeral service. For the Church—at least at this ritual moment—Conal O'Beirne's particularity resided only in the state of his soul. He had apparently had a "good death," having received what is now called "the Anointing of the Sick," the old sacrament of Extreme Unction, in plenty of time, and it was now the task of those who remained on earth to remember him in their prayers. Toward that end there are anniversaries, when the names of the deceased are

recited, and of course the call—at every mass—for prayers for “all our dead.” As with the secular rites described above, the Church funeral is concerned with re-establishing the unbroken character of the congregation, and more inclusively, the Church. But the funeral as text and occasion also provide an opportunity to demonstrate the mediatory monopoly of the Church, its manifest control of the long passage from this world to a final resting place.

Thus do Church and community face death, and for the individual who grieves, such as the brother Johnny, each provides a framework for making sense of the loss. The two versions of death are more than different, however. As the account suggests, there are at least possible points of confrontation, as when Conny's young friends are refused permission to play fiddle tunes at the graveside. The contested character of death is rooted in the fact that death is not only a problem, but also an opportunity to reassert a social unit and cultural framework at a particularly potent moment. In a rite of passage, as Maurice Bloch (1985: 41) recently argued, true, disorienting liminality renders particularly forceful the ensuing reassertion of social and cultural structure. To this formulation I would add that the potent emotions released in death rituals make them particularly important occasions in this regard; associated symbols and individuals may well be considerably empowered in the process.⁴ Thus, in the case at hand, Conny's death is an occasion not only for defending several social/cultural worlds, but for reinventing them. The opposition between the communal and religious perspectives is not, however, static. In the preceding ethnographic account of the events following Conny's death we glimpse a moment in a long historical process, which was by no means in all respects unique to Ireland. A consideration of the historical dialectic of Irish death throws more and different light on its present character.

Catholic Death

Death has long been a paramount concern of the Catholic Church. As Peter Brown (1981) has shown, death played a critical role in the spread of Church power in late antiquity through the cult of saints. Following the model of Christ and the apostles, the early saints were martyrs whose deaths as much as lives defined their special status. The cultural equation of decay with passage to another world reported from various ethnographic quarters (see Hertz 1960; Huntington and Metcalf 1979; Danforth and Tsiras 1982), suggests that the perceived incorruptibility of saints followed from their apparent hurtling into the

Sacred Realm. This perception explains the automatic power of relics, which is something rather different from the more prosaic notion of personal intercessor upon which most European ethnography has fastened.

But what is interesting in regard to such matters in Ireland is the absence of local martyrs. The early Celtic saints—whose cults, among the Irish saints, are still the most important—resembled Old Testament prophets: living to old or unspecified age and fading into the landscape with which they remain most closely associated. Interestingly, the Anglo-Normans, who achieved official control of the Irish church in the twelfth century, attempted to import just the sort of continental saint cult described by Brown. The Archbishop of Armagh announced the discovery of the remains of Sts. Patrick, Bridget, and Columcille—the three principal Irish saints—and their translation to the Cathedral at Downpatrick. Clearly, he hoped to generate the sort of saint cult then flourishing on the continent. Apparently, however, this hope was frustrated, for there is no record of a substantial pilgrimage to the site. Although there is evidence of much use of saints' relics for healing from the late medieval period on (Donnelly 1988), these relics were not centralized in powerful religious establishments as Brown reports for the continent, and so failed to provide a means of buttressing the power of an episcopal religious regime. Instead, the Irish peasantry seems to have used relics in the same way they used holy spots on the landscape, as means of access to curing power, without a strong development of the vertically oriented cult of patron saint intercessors familiar from more Romanized areas.

As for the death of ordinary people, the “merry” or even wild wake—famous in literature and folklore—appears to have ancient roots and is generally taken as a sign of the peculiarly Irish approach to death. Evidence seems to suggest, however, that historically such wakes were not peculiar to Ireland, but were instead to be found throughout Catholic Europe, albeit with much local variation. Historian Bossy (1970) notes that wakes were a concern of the Counter-Reformation Church, which was interested in suppressing at least some aspects of the form as one element in its campaign to extend parochial domination through the hinterlands of Europe. The reforms of the Council of Trent were felt even in the distant kingdom of Ireland; in fact a bishop of Raphoe (the diocese which encompasses most of Donegal) was a participant in that historic event. Accordingly, the decrees of Irish bishops from that point on echo their continental colleagues. There are constant rulings

against "wake abuses" as against other sorts of uncivilized religious behavior (see O'Suilleabhain 1967). This attack, in Ireland and elsewhere, had both a social and devotional aspect, for the two were intimately related. Parish priest and church hoped to dominate the local religious scene through the centrality of sacramental rather than folk-religious practice and belief. As far as death was concerned, this involved an extension of what Ariès (1982: 165-168) describes as beginning several centuries earlier: the amplification of the clergy's role in the ritualization of death, including the elaboration of the church funeral and church-centered Masses for the Dead, tied of course to the long liminal period of Purgatory (see Le Goff 1984). These newly central practices did not replace the wake, but did perhaps recontextualize it. The wake itself continued, but probably in increasingly "civilized" form.

From the perspective of Norbert Elias (1978, 1982) these transformations could be considered an aspect of the "civilizing process": with the Church acting in this instance as a regime. Following Elias's model we would expect the changing settings and compartment of death rituals to contribute to the psychological construction of a new "civilized" self. In fact, both the elimination of one type of sociability and the establishment of another are germane to this transformation. Local religious occasions like wakes or the revelries associated with Holy Well pilgrimages acted out horizontal relations with both the social and supernatural worlds. As Schneider (in press) argues, the beliefs and practices typically labeled "folk religious" tend to emphasize reciprocal, horizontal relations with social and supernatural forces, whereas the Counter-Reformation Church tried to establish clearly vertical relations in both the social and supernatural spheres. To be civilized was not only to sit properly in church, but to learn to replace one sort of mediation with another. In this process, death was a critical event, testing the degree to which the Church was seen to stand between this world and the next.

While these changes went on apace on the continent (though never with complete success), in Ireland their march was interrupted by British protestant conquest and the consequent persecution of the Catholic clergy. It was not until the nineteenth century that the process could be continued, when we find another sort of Counter-Reformation going on, although, ironically, with the support of the Protestant British state. Beginning around 1800 Ireland revamped its parochial structure, sending out better trained priests to all areas, building churches, and

trying to stamp out various forms of uncivil behavior, religious and otherwise. The wild and merry wake, and particularly its associated sexual aspects—wake games—were once again the objects of clerical wrath, but with the real presence of a better equipped clergy, the Church's campaign was now far more successful, although such behavior was resistant enough to reform to have lasted in some areas at least through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (O'Suilleabhain 1967). At the same time, the power of the priest and church aided in the establishment of the parish as the significant local social unit, which was not a given circumstance in areas of dispersed settlement such as most of the west of Ireland. Even in this process, death figured importantly, for the new insistence on the burial of the dead in solely Catholic cemeteries located next to the churches was another important aspect of this movement.

It was not just a matter of moving the dead, however, for the Irish Church was, in this period as in the Counter-Reformation, also reconstructing devotional practice. Historian Larkin (1972) has coined the term "devotional revolution" for the significant shift in Mass attendance through the middle of the nineteenth century, accompanied by an influx of Roman devotional forms: material, liturgical, and ritual. In this historic transformation of rural Irish religion, the central position of church and clergy could be considerably reified by "capturing" death, not only through suppressing the wild wake and the sexual release associated with it, but through recontextualizing death as a church centered experience, and mediating the experience with its own rituals, discourse, and objects.

In terms of ritual, there was a considerable elaboration of funeral customs and an emphasis on the significance of purgatory and hence masses for the dead—as had been done centuries earlier elsewhere in Europe. The wake remained a very significant household ritual and one still primarily in the control of family and local community, with the clergy playing only a relatively minor role in the proceedings—still the case as we saw above in the death of Conny. The community and its social relations were clearly the central concern of the wake; there was relatively little to distinguish the mourners in dress or compartment from the guests, and ritualized grief was expressed by women specialists in the form of "keening" (*caoineadh*).⁵ In the funeral, however, the focus was on the journey of the deceased.⁶ There, and in subsequent Masses, it was clearly the priest and Church which not only presided over the "separation," in van Gennep's sense of the term, but continued to

extend their jurisdiction over the fate of the dead and their memory.

The Church enters into death at an earlier point, however. "Last Rites," as the Sacrament of Extreme Unction (or lately and yet more euphemistically, "anointing of the sick") is known, begins the official ritualization of death. To be prepared for this moment is a central concern of the Church, and in my experience of Irish Catholics as well. As Ariés (1982: 297-307) argues, fragmentary continental evidence suggests that the people were always concerned with the moment of death, and were happy to avail themselves of the sacrament when it was extended from clerical to general use in the middle ages. Whether or not the Irish Church did much to simplify the death bed scene in the sixteenth century (as Ariés claims their continental colleagues did) the rich folk oral tradition from the west of Ireland indicates a deeply rooted popular pious tradition of prayers and stories concerned with the moment of death (for example, Hyde 1972). In the eighteenth century, when British penal laws forbade the open practice of Catholicism, the critical role of the priest in administering Last Rites was—to judge by the oral tradition—heightened. Many a legend can be found in the folklore archives concerning the dangerous midnight rides of priests to the dying, with either British soldiers or The Devil attempting to impede their missions. A more direct link to Church discourse can be found in the rich folk tradition of "*Caoineadh na dTri Muire*" (Lament of the Three Marys): poetic depictions of the sufferings of Mary (and her two namesakes) at the Passion of Christ (see Partridge 1983).

If, as Ariés (1981:303) says,

In the Catholic Church of the nineteenth century there was undoubtedly a return to the situation before the Counter-Reformation under the influence of popular customs that had persisted.

this was also the case in Ireland, though to what degree they had to be "returned" to there remains to be seen. Certainly that century witnessed a period of intensive interaction between "folk" or popular religion and the Church, as is most dramatically evidenced by the history of Marian apparitions in that period. The Virgin appeared to a number of people in the Irish village of Knock in 1879, in a period when the folk discourse of death, and of Mary's special role at "the hour of our death" had for some decades been much elaborated and amplified by a newly active Catholic clergy. Unlike much of the Mediterranean, where visual imagery has long been central, iconography played a very small role in structuring the

experience or expectation of death—there were few depictions of the Death of St. Joseph, for example. But language in the form of exhortations from the pulpit and, increasingly through the century, pamphlets and books, did supply clear and powerfully enunciated cultural templates.⁷

In fact, two sorts of good death were, and are, taught by the Church and both have great psychological force in Irish culture. There is the gradual and hence prepared death which permits the dying to settle affairs with God and man and hence finishes with the death bed scene: last rites and the family gathered around. This is the "good death" that Ariés depicts for an earlier period of European culture in general. The other sort of Catholic death is that of the martyr. There was of course a specifically religious model for martyrdom and mourning, in the form of Mary and Jesus—a motif which echoes through Irish folklore and literature. This sort of death may or not be sudden, but if it is, the life of the martyr and the manner of his death—for the faith—ensures a good separation from this life, and of course the best destination on the other end of the soul's journey. Both these approved deaths received strong articulation in rural Ireland in the nineteenth century not only in Church, but perhaps even more significantly in the public, but Church controlled, "National School" system, which reached even remote rural townlands by the middle of that century. Though not possessed of important local martyrs from early missionary times, the Irish were compensated for this lack by their relations with the British. Though such martyrdom began much earlier, it was not until the nineteenth century that the fusion of the Irish political and religious identity, in opposition to the ascendant British regime, attained its characteristic modern form and thus allowed each aspect to resonate with the other.

While the discourse of death—the good, domestic, prepared death and the martyr/mourning complex of Jesus and Mary—were (and are) heard on many occasions from the representatives of the Church and church-influenced schools, it was most powerful and enduring when embodied in particularly emotional ritual performances. Such occasions included the actual deaths, wakes, and funerals of those one knew, during which there was a great personal impetus to bring the emotional and conceptual framework of the Church to bear on the event. There were, however, special occasions—greatly elaborated in the course of the nineteenth century—which brought people face to face with death in general. The regular church calendar included, for example, the celebration of All

Souls as a day of special focus on the dead. Perhaps the most powerful occasion in this regard, from the perspectives of both people and Church, was the less frequent but highly dramatic parish mission, an event which most Irish Catholics experienced in the course of their lives, and which few forgot. Although parish missions began in the seventeenth century Counter-Reformation (see Delumeau 1977: 189-94), they only reached Ireland in the mid-nineteenth century, where their novelty and theatricality attracted great attention. The mission remains an important part of rural Irish religious experience today. The clear aim of the mission was (and is) to infuse the more regular Church rituals, including those concerned with the dead, with special power. This goal is achieved through the oratorical skills of a team of priests from any of a variety of religious orders (in Ireland most often the Redemptorists), who come to a parish for one or two weeks, during which they subject the people to a "total immersion" religious experience.⁸

At the center of the mission is a series of sermons that describe the dangers of sin and the salvation available through the Church. And at the center of those sermons is death. The texts show a great consistency from the mid-nineteenth through the mid-twentieth century, conjuring the fearful reality of Hell and, finally, describing the good, prepared Death as the only remedy. One's own death is not only limned for the listener's contemplation, but joined in dramatic presentation with that of the inhabitants of the church graveyard, where the missionaries lead a particularly stirring version of the Mass of the Dead. A young woman remembered how the connection was forged in her own experience.

I have this vivid memory of the missions, they always came in October and there was all the talk about death and then after it was over it would be All Souls Day and we would go up to the Church at night to do the Stations of the Cross. And then there was another ritual where we would have to go around the church at night—outside by the churchyard. I was so scared, the churchyard and the dead were so real . . .

Or "really real," as Geertz (1966: 37) might put it.

This example illustrates the contribution a particular religious form, the parish mission, made to a more general process that in Ireland gathered steam through the course of nineteenth century. The Irish Catholic Church was establishing its cultural hegemony by means of transitions in ritual and general religious conduct designed to bring about psychological as well as social transformations. A key element in these transformations was death—as it was ritualized, felt, and imagined. The Church's attempted domestication (that is, taming or controlling) of the

wild wake certainly succeeded to a degree, but left a tension perhaps even highlighted by the contrast between the wake and the highly charged ritual events surrounding burial. That tension did not detract from the Church's ability to establish moral and cultural authority over lived experience.

Thus death was, once again, not just a problem but an opportunity. Death's power to ritually invoke social units and cultural values, as we have seen, had long been recognized by the Catholic Church. While elsewhere in Europe the Church made great headway in eliminating the wild wake even as it moved its own funeral rites and discourse into the death experience, these transformations—though wished for—were not accomplished in Ireland until well into the nineteenth century. When finally and fully in power there, the Church was able to effect both social and cultural transitions. Such social units as parish and family were supported, to some degree at the expense of the older forms of association based on neighborhood, hamlet, region, and personal networks. The rise of a sizable rural middle class anxious for respectability in this period further supplied the local church with its most loyal followers. These social changes received support from a reinterpretation of death involving an interesting change in the classic format of the rite of passage. In the old style wake, separation was followed by liminal sexuality, drunkenness, and possible violence; in the Church's version liminality was both tamed and extended—purgatory for the deceased and mourning and prayers for those who remained.

In thus "capturing," or at least contextualizing death, the Catholic Church in Ireland garnered power through demonstrating its jurisdiction over the most crucial rite of passage. Those rites were symbolically linked to both the central ritual complex of the Church and individual experience through such dramatic ritual events as missions. With increasing frequency through the nineteenth and into the present century, such performances also provided occasions for a death-centered religious discourse, supplemented and extended by various written and oral texts. Of these, the private recitation of the rosary—linked to the hope of Mary's mediatory presence at the "hour of our death"—was the most common and perhaps most important example. The cumulative effect of these rites and texts was to establish the compelling character of the Church's truths by providing a model for organizing the emotions and interpreting the meaning of the event—one's own anticipated death, or the death of others.

The above description may seem to imply that religious innovation always originated in a monolithic

institutional Church and was then imposed on a passive populace by their local clergy. However, the reality has been more complex and interesting than that. Rather than a preconceived policy or strategy, the growing ecclesiastical control of death practices was more likely the result of a series of innovations and transformations which issued from a variety of quarters within the Church. Religious orders, possibly as much in competition with each other and/or secular clergy (see Bax 1987) as with "folk" religiosity, played an important role in this process. Further, it is difficult to say, given the nature of the evidence, to what degree such apparent innovations tapped local or folk practices. Whatever the success of official policy, however, local forms of association and hence culture persisted, thereby preserving and even generating their own occasions and discourse, adapting creatively to changing circumstances.⁹ Sometimes older cultural forms could be re-invigorated by application to new circumstances. On the other hand, if the Church was adept at co-opting and transforming popular ritual and attendant attitudes, various of the "people" returned the favor, adopting or adapting Church and Church-influenced rituals and conceptual models to their own ends. These two local responses to changing historical experience—adaptive re-use and creative appropriation—are, respectively, exemplified in two characteristically Irish occasions: the "American wake" and the political death and funeral.

Bás inEirinn

The "American Wake" was the term coined for the reputedly drunken and somewhat wild if tearful party that preceded the departure of the prospective emigrant. In van Gennep's terms it was a marvelous rite of separation whose ritual death aspect was clear enough to the participants to warrant the use of the term 'wake.' In evolving this form and this way of thinking about emigration, however, rural countrymen were re-adapting the ambivalent wake and using it to frame a relatively novel—in its extensiveness (since the 1830s)—and very profound experience. Emigration clearly involved a major transition for all involved and the emigrant wake supplied what every anthropologist would expect to smooth such a disturbing journey: a "rite de passage." This enacted metaphor of death recalls Loring Danforth's (1982: 74ff.) discussion of Greek laments, where the out-marrying bride is difficult to tell from the deceased—both are the dearly departed (see also Alexiou 1974). As in any metaphoric equation, one wonders to what

degree the two experiences affected each other. If emigration was like death and therefore more emphatic a separation, was death then like immigration, and thus a separation that might be overcome? The American wake might also recontextualize death as an expected event. For the emigrant, if ritual death was achieved at the separation of the American wake, could not actual death be re-figured as incorporation? This I would argue, is one sense of the famous drinking toast of Irish emigrants—*Bás inEirinn*, "to die in Ireland." For the waked immigrant, returning to die in Ireland rejoins what has been separated.

There is, however, a political as well as personal dimension to this fantasy of death as reincorporation. The immigrant toast has the connotation of dying *for* as well as *in* Ireland. Indeed the prevailing theme of nationalist Irish political discourse from independence on has been re-unification: to re-unite the politically divided island. In the pursuit of these goals, death has played a central and emotionally compelling role especially since the 1916 Easter Rising. Here the Church model of the martyr's death receives its most powerful incarnation, symbolically associating not only the political victim with Christ, but the political cause with the Church, and the mourning nation of Ireland with Mary. These equations were in fact consciously contemplated to the point of obsession by Padraic Pearse in particular, but were dramatically realized by the British execution of the leaders of the uprising. The English firing squads succeeded in ritualizing their deaths and thus framing them as religious events. Since then the IRA has availed itself at various junctures of the emotional and ideological impact of religious death. Most dramatic in recent memory were the slow deaths by starvation of hunger strikers Bobby Sands and his colleagues at the beginning of this decade. As with Pearse, these self-styled martyrs presented their own deaths as "blood sacrifices" which would "redeem Ireland." This sort of political/religious ideology is familiar enough elsewhere in the world, of course, such as in the case of Shi'ite Iran, but it is hard to imagine a cultural context in which this form has more resonance as a collective representation—from the familial and communal to the national and political.

These various levels of experience, are united as a Turnerian view would expect, at the IRA funeral, which typically achieves even more significance than dying as a public ritual. In organizing the solemn pageantry of the occasion, the IRA has learned from the Church as well as the army, reappropriating the funeral with all its pomp and adding, by dint of the menacing presence of British soldiers, the charisma of

dramatic opposition. Indeed the Church finds itself in the most awkward of positions vis-a-vis these occasions. On the one hand most clergy do not condone the methods of the IRA, and as in dealing with past insurgents, they have even gone to the extent of excommunicating them. Yet the clergy cannot fail to play their role at the funeral, maintaining—as the Church does now—that the deceased may have changed his mind at the end. In any case, the Church thus shares in the power of the occasion.

If these political appropriations of Church models of the good death have the effect, as indicated, of reversing the polarity of death itself—making incorporation of separation—then the immigrant's toast, "to die in Ireland" manages to combine the personal and political in such a way that each powerfully resonates with the other in an image of re-unification. To die is not separation but re-incorporation, for immigration is personal separation and partition is political separation, but it is hoped that both separations will be resolved by a martyr's death among one's own and burial in the soil of a United Ireland. This is not to say, of course, that such an end was in the mind of everyone, or even most, who lifted their glasses in such a toast, but rather that it was another articulation of a myth which contributes to the overall sense of death in Ireland. Yet another sign of the conjunction of the themes of religious death, political martyrdom, and emigration can be found in the application of the traditional lament, in song form, to all three. As mentioned above, there is the rich folk verse tradition associated with the Passion of Christ (*Caoineadh na dTri Muire*, Partridge 1983), and myriad nineteenth and twentieth-century songs about men lost through battle, execution (most appropriate) or emigration to America. In all cases the voice is that of the mourning mother.

The myth, as we said, receives in most important revitalization in the ritualized political death. On those occasions the appropriate sacrificial victim, one who embodies the values of the struggle, can be used symbolically to call into existence the "Catholic (or Republican) Community" of nationalist discourse. Such occasions also invoke the memories and narratives which support the cult of nationalist death and thus lend even greater sense to existence of a general *Communitas* of living and dead not unlike that embodied by The Church. Such communities—unlike the urban neighborhoods of Belfast or Derry, are in fact mere categories with no basis in daily interaction except in such extraordinary circumstances: they require conjuring and no magic is more potent than that of the funeral. The ritual center is defined by the

conjoined symbols of IRA and the Catholic Church, and its edge by the real or imagined ring of Protestants, police, and British Army.

Back across the border in Donegal, the gentle death of old Conny the Gap is an opportunity to invoke another sort of community, whose existence and cultural character are particularly well defined by such bachelors. Men like Conny are less "civilized," in Elias' sense of the term, they stand at the center of—and can thus stand for—the occasions and styles of sociability not successfully contained and tamed by the middle class Catholicism of Church and proper household. The rural wake, no longer wild, continues to express just this social world. Perhaps ironically, it is a collectivity based on the celebration of peculiar individuality. Here again is the intimate side of Herzfeld's (1987) *disemia*. When the wake is over, however, Conny will not be represented on the walls of his cottage by any image, for traditionally no such iconography mediates social memory in the rural Irish world.¹⁰ Instead he will have to struggle to survive in and through a local discourse, though such talk is often "attached" to material anchors, such as features of the landscape. Conny's memory is as much (or perhaps more so) communal as familial property, and for them his importance will continue in death, as in life, to be a function of his inherent charm and the relevance of the cultural values he can be made to exemplify. That "vernacular" discourse is, following Bakhtin (1984), potentially subversive. Already the stories of Conny's deathbed scene, music and whiskey figuring as they do, invert the exemplar version of the "good death," familiar from mission sermons.

The Church has its own notion of Conny's particularity, however, and its own ways of appropriating it. Lately, even though the world Catholic Church has entered what might be called an iconoclastic period, at least one evocative religious image—hardly new elsewhere—has made its way into the rural Irish scene. The Mass or memorial card, brings an unaccustomed, personal iconography to Irish death practices, visually conjoining the deceased with a variety of verbal and pictorial religious representations. On one side of this laminated paper card one finds a devotional image, either a favorite of the deceased or of whoever chose it, such as the Sacred Heart of Jesus, St. Theresa of Lisieux, St. Martin de Porres (each choice a testimony to the fluctuating influence in the parish of the respective promoting religious orders). On the other side of the card is a prayer or statement appropriate to the devotional image and, these days, a small photograph of the

deceased if one is available. Under that are inscribed words such as "In loving Memory of Conal O'Beirne, of . . . , Born . . . , Died . . . , and concluded with, for example, an Irish language prayer (a new home for traditional religious discourse).

This arrangement of words and images is very like a gravestone—but, in view of the photograph, one that is more likely to be encountered in southern than northern Europe. Those who receive such cards will place them either in a bureau drawer, where rosary and missal are kept, or else among the pages of the missal itself at the points appropriate to their death dates, so that the dead will come to mind and be

prayed for on their anniversaries. The selection of photographs for such memorials will necessarily be influenced by the visual and domestic context they will come to occupy, but it remains to be seen how such specifically religious representations can penetrate memories and images contained elsewhere. In any case, the potential disparity among a variety of pictorially and verbally constructed images and memories of the dead is acutely observed in Conny's own quip—remembered at the wake—concerning a comic snapshot of his characteristically far from solemn Self: "That will make a good photo for my Mass card."

NOTES

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¹At many points Ariès illustrates this historical process. Speaking, for example, of late medieval changes he writes, "When someone has died, there is no longer room for the long and violent lamentations of old; nobody declaims the regrets and eulogies in a loud voice, as was once the custom. The family and friends of the departed, now calm and silent, have ceased to be the principal actors in a scene that has been divested of its drama. The leading roles are henceforth reserved for priests . . . From the moment of his last breath, the dead man belongs no longer to his friends or family but to the Church (Ariès 1981: 165). From the thirteenth century until the eighteenth, the funeral procession was a procession of priests, monks, candle-bearers, and paupers, stiff and solemn supernumeraries; an event of religious dignity in which the singing of psalms replaced the traditional cries and gestures of mourning (p. 168).

Thus the struggle for control of meaning and emotion predates the Counter-Reformation. As far as the "individualization" of death is concerned, it should be noted that such a project is not at all antithetical to Church hegemony. It is precisely the de-communalized individual that can be most totally integrated into the Church—which becomes his community. Concern for personal survival after death, progress through purgatory for example, is also hardly inimical to Church authority.

²Another view of the Irish wake can be found in Crozier (1989), who analyzes the more restrained practices of Catholics and Protestants in a rural district of Northern Ireland. O'Crualaíoch (1987) has done an interesting structural analysis of the symbolic form of the merry wake in the Irish tradition. Dissonance and conflict between wake and funeral were not only Irish phenomena, see for example Helias' (1978: 111-112) discussion of the role of the lay

leader of wake prayers in Brittany early in this century. O'Suilleabháin (1967: 15) tells us that the rosary, traditionally recited at wakes, was led by "a schoolmaster or someone who is locally acknowledged as a leader on social occasions." Other folk beliefs and practices relevant to death include those surrounding the "banasher" (see Lysaght 1986).

³The phrase, "a proper send-off," quintessentially expressive of separation, is very interesting in its Irish usage. Whereas older connotations referred mainly to the wake—whose noisy and possibly drunken excesses exemplified the "percussive" character of rites concerned to literally "send off" a potentially dangerous ghost (or in a different reading, an unsatisfied soul), it is now more often used to refer to the grandeur of the funeral and, possibly, the subsequent dinner. The serving of food and tobacco at the wake, however, retains its symbolic sense of completing the rounds of reciprocity (see Crozier 1989 and for reciprocity at such occasions in a very different part of the world, Weiner 1988). An old man who felt generally unappreciated told me that he was not "offered a cup of tea" at a wake and subsequently dreamt that he saw the spirit of the deceased, and "him ashamed of his house's behavior."

⁴The question of when, precisely, most emotion is released or expressed is an interesting and important one. Ariès' description, cited in 1 above, implies a sublimation of spontaneous emotion, perhaps cathected into the solemn symbols of the church. In this regard it is interesting that in the ethnographic case described here the graveyard scene was the most visibly emotional. There the rites and symbols of the church conjoin with the individual person of the deceased, buried by his neighbors.

⁵Although Ariès (1981: 144) apparently understood such paid mourners to have survived antiquity into the Middle Ages and beyond only in the Mediterranean, they were a frequently reported feature of Irish wakes through the nineteenth century, where they were perceived as yet another "wake abuse." A nice account of conflict between Church and folk versions of death rites is related by O'Suilleabháin (1967: 143)

... My father told me that he attended a funeral in Tuosist, in South Kerry, at the turn of the century. As the coffin was being taken in a cart to the local graveyard at Kilmackilloge, three women keeners sat on top of it, howling and wailing at intervals. The parish priest, on horseback, met the funeral near Derreen, a few miles from the graveyard, and rode at its head along the road. As soon as he heard the three women howl loudly, he turned his horse about and trotted back until he reached them where they sat on the coffin. He started to lash them with his whip, as the cart

passed by, and ordered them to be silent. This they did, but on reaching the graveyard, they again took up their wailings, whereupon the priest forced them down from the coffin with his whip. They were afraid to enter the graveyard to howl at the graveside. This put an end to the hiring of keening women in that parish.

⁶The interestingly heterodox character of older funeral processions is indicated in the autobiographical account of Charles McGlinchey (1986: 67) who lived further north in the county.

The family of the Muirgheasans must have had something to do with the monastery, for there is a height in their farm called *Teampall Deas* [southern monastic church], and at funerals the corpse was carried round that height three times, before it was taken to the old graveyard. My grandfather was taken round the height when he died in 1840, and lots of others since then, till people stopped burying there.

Older burial grounds were often associated with monastic ruin, which were sometimes also the sites of Holy Well pilgrimages.

⁷The marian statues which can be found throughout Ireland today date mostly from the First Marian Year—1954. Several of them have been "moving" in recent years, in interesting co-incidence with another wave of Marian devotion and apparitions throughout the Catholic world. In the midst of this, Pope John Paul II declared the Second Marian Year in 1986, a dialectic of popular and official religion reminiscent in some ways of that of the nineteenth century.

⁸A discussion of the historical and contemporary character of such parish missions can be found in Taylor 1989. Comparable cases for Spain and Brittany can be found in Christian 1972 and Hélias 1978, respectively.

⁹The dialectical character of local religion in Europe is well argued by Christian (1981). I discuss various features of the process in Donegal in Taylor (1985, 1987, 1989, In press).

¹⁰In a recent paper Michael Herzfeld (1988) points out that family and individual photographic portraits of Greek peasants have the same iconic quality as saints' portraits. Individuality—even in the photographic image—fades before the conventionality of pose and arrangement.

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