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The Role of Christian Church Leaders, Past and Present

A RESPONSE TO ‘PULPIT TO PUBLIC: CHURCH LEADERS
ON A POST-BREXIT ISLAND’ BY GLADYS GANIEL*

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In September 2021, President of Ireland Michael D. Higgins sparked controversy by declining an invitation by the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) to attend a service in Armagh marking the centenary of partition. Higgins’s decision received copious print, online and social media coverage and added another layer to the debate around commemoration of Ireland’s past. *Irish Times* journalist Breda O’Brien spotted a nuance missed by many others in this fresh commemoration debate: the role of Christian church leaders in such a service. O’Brien highlighted the work by Dr Gladys Ganiel and Dr John Brewer for those interested in the role of the churches during the

*Read Gladys Ganiel’s article, ‘Pulpit to Public: Church Leaders on a Post-Brexit Island’, <https://doi.org/10.3318/isia.2021.32b.47>

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Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’ and beyond. Ganiel’s article for ARINS further elucidates her ideas on the church leadership’s and grassroots organisations’ role around issues such as Brexit, COVID-19 and ‘dealing with the past’ across the island.

Refreshingly for Irish scholarship, Ganiel bypasses the ‘why do religion and religious institutions matter?’ question. This point has been extensively covered elsewhere by Ganiel herself, as well as Brewer, Marianne Elliott, Dianne Kirby, Maria Power, Briege Rafferty and Nukhet Sandal. Instead, by intertwining debates about current issues, Ganiel shows that church leaders and cross-community organisations acknowledge a fundamental truth: ‘dealing with the past’ is directly related to issues of the present. However, as Ganiel notes, church-related groups’ ability to create dialogue on these issues remains hindered by their declining influence.

Ganiel focuses on the words and actions of three groups: Corrymeela; the Irish Council of Churches/Irish Inter Church Meeting (ICC/IICM); and the Church Leaders Group. Historically, high-level political actors and the media across this island positioned church leaders in a place of privilege, regularly inviting them to public and private meetings to give their thoughts on the conflict. We can debate how much influence over their communities specific church leaders and actors actually had (one draws to mind endless accusatory debates about the Catholic bishops not formally excommunicating IRA members and allowing republican funerals to go ahead). However, their perceived influence over ‘their’ communities remained key to the groups who sought their consultation. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that church leaders were, and to a lesser extent still are, asked by governments and the media to comment on Northern Ireland’s present. Today, Ganiel argues, governments treat church-related groups like any other civic actors.

Ganiel explains the different roles churches play in facilitating dialogues between religious and civic groups, as well as policy-makers, by employing John Paul Lederach’s ‘levels of action’ pyramid. She argues that church leaders must mediate between levels of these groups, ‘especially in communicating grassroots concerns to high-level political leadership’. Extending debates over ‘dealing with the past’ and the future of the island of Ireland to the Irish republic has been difficult for church leaders and groups. So much discussion around the legacy of the ‘Troubles’ has focused on Northern Ireland alone. Efforts to reach beyond Northern Ireland have been hindered by the legacy of abuse within the Catholic Church, which, as Ganiel argues, has ‘damaged the churches’ public witness more so in the Republic than in Northern Ireland’.

While Ganiel highlights the current actions of church leaders and church groups, it is difficult to judge the impact of such endeavours. To expand this study, perhaps efforts must be made to gather data on how non-church groups view church efforts on the topics listed above. As always, there remains the fear that 'outsiders' may focus more on the church-related groups' past than on their present efforts, but even in this circumstance it can act as a test on what church-related groups are likely to be able to enact today and going forward.

President Higgins's refusal to attend the Armagh church service demonstrates that efforts to use commemoration events to encourage discussion and, potentially, reconciliation still prove divisive. Yet, as Ganiel argues, 'It could be said that [church groups'] key contribution to ongoing debates has been bringing the past into the future, arguing that a better future depends on effectively addressing the past.' As the UK government has shown its desire to put 'dealing with the past' efforts back on the table in Northern Ireland, we will need to wait and see how both church leaders and grassroots church groups fit into this approach.