

PAUL GILFILLAN

# Catholics and the 2014 Referendum

As a sociologist interested in the question whether Scottish Catholics have a preferential constitutional option for their nation, I undertook some empirical research before the 2014 Referendum among older working-class Catholics in a Fife parish within the Archdiocese of St Andrews and Edinburgh to gain some answers to a series of questions:

- Do Catholics see any religious or spiritual significance in the Independence Referendum?
- Insofar as history involves a relationship between God and humanity, do Catholics have a particular historical consciousness which informs their answer to the question, should Scotland be an independent country?
- Do Catholics understand themselves as the 'cradle' of the nation?
- What are the alignments, if any, between social class, Christianity and the constitutional debate?

## **Deus Absconditus: Godless Catholics**

My research involved conducting semi-structured interviews in the Spring of 2013 and re-interviewing informants again in the Summer of 2014. Prior to the referendum campaigns beginning in earnest, most of my informants told me they were not in favour of independence, and when exploring the question whether the referendum had any spiritual significance, informants not only answered no, but frankly asserted that they do not see God at work in their local parish and nor in Scotland, so that in terms of politics and the present historical moment, informants could be fairly characterised by a certain alienation from the 'cut and thrust' of the times as they seemed estranged from the constitutional ferment through which they were objectively living.

During the course of long and wide-ranging interviews, informants spoke freely and honestly about the decline they saw themselves stuck in, and when I asked them where they saw God at work they seemed to have no other recourse but to revert to a vague nod in the direction of God being at work in hearts and

minds, as when one informant advised: 'It's just a personal, internal thing' when commenting on her less-than-convincing belief that God is operative in history. Somewhat embarrassingly, then, for my contribution to a book with the title *Is God Back? Reconsidering the New Visibility of Religion* (2015) and which reports from a number of international and inter-continental contexts. The 'report from Scotland' (a ridiculous inflation of course) was that an older generation of Catholics *at a crucial point in their national story* did not see God as part of that story or at work in their history, and that *the nation* is not a category that informs their imagination or historical consciousness. Reviewing my interview transcripts, it is clear that Scotland's history plays little or no part in my informants' self-understanding *as Catholics*, and that they have no consciousness of belonging to a coherent or self-aware *Scottish* Catholicism, so that this generation's Catholicism is *not in any conscious relationship* to the on-going constitutional ferment that has characterised Scotland since the nineteen-seventies.

When first interviewing my informants in 2013, only two out of eight told me they were in favour of independence, but a year later when interviewing them again all but two were in favour of independence. However, the dominating narrative of both Yes and No-minded informants was that God was not at work in contemporary Scotland, so that my conclusion was *not* that Yes-minded Catholics, for example, have developed the socially engaged Catholicism Vatican II called for while No-minded Catholics were stuck in a pre-Conciliar supernaturalism, but that all of my informants shared in a *stateless Christianity* or a non-national form of Christianity insofar as they have invented a Catholicism that has been de-historicised, de-nationalised and de-politicised.

## **Decontextualised Catholics**

If it was clear that the nation did not inform informants' thinking, I also wanted to explore whether informants brought

their Catholic and *class identities* into some kind of conscious relationship, and in this regard I would propose that my informants were *not* even aware of the traditional alignment of their politics with their faith i.e. their traditional politicisation of class as being more or less aligned with their Catholicism via voting for the Labour Party. While most voted Labour and obviously knew why they voted Labour, they did not articulate any Christian basis for this political option when I discussed with each informant whether their faith and politics mixed. If the normal democratic process means informants are familiar with deciding between the different social policies of political parties but not particularly relating these political choices to their Christian faith, when we discussed the question whether 'the nation' or the constitutional question had any religious or spiritual significance, my informants were more or less at a loss as to how they might begin to answer this question.

My research question, then, was not whether informants would vote Yes or No in the Referendum but whether their Catholicism was *in any kind of relationship to their mundane lives*: whether it is socialised, contextualised or acculturated. I was interested in whether, for example, their Catholicism acted as a leaven in their lives to transcend or resist their social and geo-political reality; or whether their Catholicism has helped them accept their social and political subordination and accommodate themselves to established power and the status quo. Upon the basis of my informants being at a loss to even understand the sense of my asking them whether the Referendum had any religious or spiritual significance, I presumed they would have similarly been at a loss if I had asked them if being working-class had any religious or spiritual significance for them. My conclusion was that as a consequence of Scotland having been a stateless nation for so long, my informants were immersed in a thoroughly privatised, constitutionally subservient and a 'well-behaved' Catholicism that 'knew its place.'

Viewed objectively, then, the Church in Scotland has not prevented a Nietzschean 'religion of slaves' from arising in light of the fact that articulating the relation between transcendence and the present historic moment has little existential purchase upon an older generation of Catholics. It seems my informants have no specifically Catholic historical or national consciousness that is any different from that of Scots of no faith, and they did not represent themselves to me as being tasked with the work of evangelization that has conscientised or politicized them as a result of having brought their faith into contact and conflict with social and economic and cultural realities. Instead of any politicisation of religion or a religious-based politicisation of the 'social structure' or 'the nation,' for instance, my informants can be fairly represented as being entirely innocent of the question of the relation of the supernatural and Scotland. As one of my informants, retired construction worker Jim (born 1940), told me when I asked whether the 2014 Referendum had any spiritual or religious significance: 'Well it's never been mentioned!'

Unsurprisingly, then, when asked whether they would describe themselves as a Scottish Catholic or whether God uses nations to mediate or work out the 'salvation of souls,' the answer of informants was a clear 'no' on both counts. Both Yes and No-minded voters neither articulated nor adverted to the existence elsewhere of any relationship between their faith and their Scottish context, and even those informants in favour of independence did not give any indication that deciding upon the proper or desirable constitutional form of their nation was in any way an exigence of being Christian, so that their politicisation of the nation or national

identity was not the result of pressure exerted from their 'being Catholic'. What emerged quite clearly is that most informants have a weak theological consciousness and a weak political and historical consciousness, and these weaknesses are aligned with each other so that the compound effect was that the constitutional crisis was not being lived through in a profound way where informants' deepest identities were being brought to bear upon the great question of the day.

Despite this lack of awareness of any relationship between Catholicism and the movement towards Scottish independence, however, at the level of political practice there is well-established evidence that an alignment between Catholicism and the independence movement is on-going, so that if both Yes and No-voting elderly informants share in their non-alignment with their national context, it seems a common cause among both Yes and No-voting members of the younger post-conciliar generation is to overcome this non-relationship and develop a post-conciliar Scottish Catholicism that is self-aware and consciously part of the on-going cultural and political ferment characterising Scotland today. In a future article, then, I hope to address the question of a younger generation of Catholics raising their de facto alignment with the independence movement to explicit awareness as part of the wider post-Conciliar task of developing and renewing a Scottish Catholicism.

*Dr Paul Gilfillan is a senior lecturer in sociology at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh. His book, A Sociological Phenomenology of Christian Redemption (2014) is reviewed on page 15.*

IAN CAMPBELL

## Joy

After the death of my nine-year old younger son, Hugh, in the year 2000, I had to square my belief in an all-loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing God, with the knowledge that this God did not intervene to save Hugh. I have shared how I found, peace, hope, and a deeper faith, in three previous pieces. I've wanted to finish the sequence with a piece on joy, which I've been tinkering with for years. It was almost there in time for his anniversary in autumn 2011, but I couldn't quite let it go. I tried very hard again last autumn, but, ironically, I was overcome with grief around his anniversary, more so than for several years, and found myself trying to write about joy, while looking at the text on a computer screen through a veil of tears. It was a timely reminder that for those on the road back to life after their children's death, there will always be the odd pothole. And it was a perfect illustration of what I am trying to say below.

It was only after Hugh's death that I began to discover what 'joy' really meant. I doubt if I ever gave the word much thought before I began to think about becoming a practising Christian in my twenties. The only occasion I was likely to utter the word was singing Christmas carols – 'tidings of comfort and joy', etc. I

Open House lecture

## Key moments in Scottish history: the Catholic response

Professor Gerard Carruthers  
Francis Hutcheson Chair of Scottish Literature,  
University of Glasgow



Saturday 24th October 2015, Dundee (venue tbc)

Professor Carruthers is a distinguished scholar and contributor to the study of Scottish literature. He is currently Principal Investigator on the Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project, 'Editing Robert Burns for the 21st Century', which underpins the first phase of the new Oxford University Press edition of the Works of Robert Burns, for which he is General Editor. He was Principal Investigator of a major project which produced an online edition of the letters of James Currie, Robert Burns's first editor. He is Convenor of the 'Burns Scotland' partnership (the National Burns Collection), a member of the Abbotsford Library Joint Advisory Committee and he played a major part in re-establishing the Universities' Committee for the Teaching of Scottish Literature in 2008. He serves on the council of the Scottish Catholic Historical Association.