

# Opinion & Analysis

## Ayatollah would have seen McQuaid as kindred spirit



**JOHN  
GIBBONS**

**E**ARLIER THIS week, Pope Benedict XVI said he was “deeply grieved” by the deaths of seven Christians in clashes with Muslims in Pakistan. These killings arose from an alleged desecration of the Koran. The pope urged Pakistani Christians to continue trying to build a

society “marked by mutual respect” among religions. Could this be the same Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who in 2000 described all non-Christians as being in a “gravely deficient situation” regarding salvation?

Such pompous nonsense about one religion or the other holding the keys to heaven/salvation is by no means the sole preserve of the Vatican. Pretty much every religion believes everyone else is, to a lesser or greater extent, damned.

Yet it’s all a simple accident of geography. Being born in Ireland in the 1960s, like almost everyone else, I was automatically baptised a Catholic. Had I been born in Iran, I would almost certainly be a Muslim.

Iran today has strong echoes of the Ireland of the 1960s, with censorship, suffocating theocracy, religious interference into people’s private lives and church domination of public institutions, especially education. Then there was the harassment (and worse) of “deviants” – single mothers, children from poor families, intellectuals or

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gays – anyone who strayed from the script of what being Irish had come to mean.

Ayatollah Khamenei would have recognised a kindred spirit in the late Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, the man who virtually ghost-wrote de Valera’s 1937 Constitution. On Vatican II, McQuaid reassured his flock: “no change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives”.

Repressive, authoritarian systems of whatever hue lend themselves to the commission of great crimes by the powerful against the weak, and so it was to prove with

the systematic abuse and brutalisation of 170,000 children over several decades by the very religious orders charged with their care. The Ryan report, published in May, laid out a black litany of clerical crimes and cover-ups. Clerical abuse is not the result of a few delinquents among the shepherds, wrote Christopher Hitchens, “but an outcome of an ideology which sought to establish clerical control by means of control of the sexual instinct, and even of the sexual organs”.

In 1967, a young film-maker, Peter Lennon, made the brilliant *Rocky Road to Dublin*, a brutally honest, unflattering portrait of Irish society that caused huge offence in official circles. Despite being accepted for the Cannes Film Festival, only one small independent Dublin cinema dared screen it in 1968. It took another 40 years before RTE (which still tolls the Angelus bells twice daily) would broadcast it.

What exactly were we so afraid of? In the film, writer, Seán O’Faoláin described Irish

society in the 1960s as being “without moral courage, observing a self-interested silence . . . and in constant alliance with a completely obscurantist, repressive, regressive and uncultivated church”.

The priest offered to the film-makers by the church was a young Fr Michael Cleary. Sex nowadays, he told the film, “is so debased, it’s tossed around”. Only much later did Lennon discover that at the time of filming, Cleary was involved with his then 17-year-old housekeeper.

Ireland of the 1960s did indeed have its heroes. Docteur James Gunnery was one. The recent RTE radio documentary, *The Runners*, told the story of a boy rescued by Gunnery from a hellhole called Ferry House in Clonmel run by the Rosminian order in 1968 – the very year Lennon’s film was offending “decent” Ireland.

“Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where no one had the smallest idea what was going on,” wrote Hitchens, who argues that it is “a babyish

attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge – as well as for comfort, reassurance and other infantile needs”.

If you think religion in Ireland has evolved beyond intellectual infancy, *Alive*, a Catholic newspaper widely distributed in churches, will set you straight. In its mindset, religious freedom equates to the freedom to discriminate, especially against liberals and the homosexual movement.

*Alive* is itself a relic of the Ireland where one parish priest had the power to have the great John McGahern dismissed from his teaching post (his crime was writing *The Dark*). Lest we forget, this same monolith controls Irish education to this day.

Thanks in no small part to 36 years of EU membership, I am privileged to live in a mostly secular, pluralist democracy – one that protects the freedom to express views even if they are at variance with the caprice of the majority faith. Unless, that is, I fall foul of Dermot Ahern’s blasphemy legislation, an ugly throwback to the 1960s.