When we look at nineteenth-century Ireland we cannot avoid the catastrophic Great Hunger of 1845–49. Out of eight and a quarter million, the famine killed up to a million and a half people and drove another million into exile. (For the most recent estimate of fatalities, see Mokyr, 1983: chapter 9.) To understand that tragedy we must understand the society that suffered through it. Both the family system and the religious beliefs and practices of the majority of rural Ireland’s people changed dramatically in the decades before and after the famine. In this paper I will describe these changes in the family and religion, and show how they were related to each other. It will be necessary first to sketch the economic and class structure of the society.

Pre-famine Irish society was overwhelmingly rural. Although its social structure was complex, general contours are evident. Landlords were at the apex of the class system; they owned but rarely worked the land. Beneath them were farmers who rented. The farmers’ tenure was secure as long as they paid the rent. These farmers produced grain, dairy products, or beef for the market and potatoes for their own use. But not everyone could be a farmer; land supply was limited, and rising population intensified competition for land, driving rents upward. However, a growing export trade in foodstuffs (a result of the growing British market and improvements in transportation) enabled the farmers to pay their rents.

Lower than the farmers were the landless, conventionally divided into two groups: laborers and cottiers. Both groups worked for farmers. The laborers were hired when the workload on the farms demanded extra hands. Cottiers, on the other hand, held one-season leases on small patches of the farmers’ land. On these patches they built their cabins and grew potatoes. They paid their rent by laboring for the farmer. Both cottiers and laborers relied on the potato—a food with a high return per acre—as their staple. However, as their living conditions worsened through the pre-famine decades, they were forced to adopt varieties of potatoes that were more prolific but were also more prone to disease. From east to west within the country, the size of farm-holdings declined so that in western areas, and especially along the seaboard, the distinction between farmers and cottiers/laborers began to blur. Small farmers, or members of their families, were simultaneously laborers, or rented land by the season like cottiers. In these small-holding areas the sharp distinction between the farmers and the landless began to disappear.

As evidenced by better diet, clothing and housing and wider use of consumer goods, in the decades before the famine the farmer class improved their living standard (see Cullen, 1980: 202). With the change they also adopted a new set of values. Historians have characterized them variously as “peasant capitalists,” a “rural middle class,” a “bourgeois” class that was espousing new standards of propriety and respectability (see Hynes, 1978: 141, for references; Smyth, 1983: 27–28; and Connolly, 1983: 276). Though a minority before the famine, the farmers, partly because the famine killed mainly the landless and small farmers, became the numerically dominant, and socially most powerful, stratum of rural society (Hynes, 1978: 144–45). To understand their values regarding religion and family life and how they changed, we must understand this farmer class.

The Devotional Revolution

In the 1830s only about a third of rural Irish Catholics regularly attended mass. By the 1870s well over 90 percent attended and have done so until recently. (Larkin, 1972; Miller, 1975; Hynes, 1978; Connolly, 1982.) This “devotional revolution” involved more than an increase in regular attendance at mass. For example, within the Catholic church, bishops increased their authority and cooperated more fully with each other to promote ecclesiastical discipline. The ratio of priests to lay people was one in 2,676 in 1800 and one in 2,996 in 1840, but it increased to one in 1,560 in 1871 (Connolly, 1983: 33). Also, the poor, undressed church buildings of pre-famine days and the virtual lack of ceremonial ritual such as singing and the use of incense at church services, now gave way to displays of elaborate ceremony in ostentatious buildings. Another contributing factor to the devotional revolution was the institution of confraternities,
The increasing separation of the sexes implied a rigid sex-role division stressing sex roles in labor and socialization patterns. Within the language of Irish Catholics, meant sexual purity. As a result, "prudery seeped through Irish society and came close to being shared the available resources (see Connolly, 1983: 215). As a result, the Irish were receptive to the puritanical, anti-sex elements that the church's teaching. The farmers' situation in society explains their receptivity. Elsewhere, I have argued that the farmers' situations made control of land increasingly crucial and that efforts to attain such control required each family to discipline its individual members (Hynes, 1978: 147).

The "stem family system" that resulted has been widely described and investigated. This system is perhaps best known to those social scientists who are not Irish specialists, through the ethnographic reports of Arensberg and Kimball, based on fieldwork in the early 1930s. (Arensberg, 1937; Arensberg and Kimball, 1940, 1968.) The essence of the system was that one heir, typically a son, inherited the farm. This son's marriage was arranged with the daughter of some similarly placed farmer family. This matchmaking occasioned intense bargaining between the families, with the man's inheritance balanced by the woman's dowry. In other words, the greater the value of the land the bigger the dowry. (Connell, 1968; Jackson, 1984.) Normally the dowry of the wife was used to marry the groom's sister or to provide in some way for other siblings. Men couldn't marry without land; women couldn't marry without dowries. These marriages typically took place at late ages and many never married. (Kennedy, 1973; Carney, 1980.) Those without prospects of marriage either emigrated or remained lifelong celibates. Marital fertility was high but there was little premarital or extramarital sexual activity.

The stem family system was a response of the farmer class to the economic situation. In turn, it explains its receptivity to the official Catholic teachings that resulted in the devotional revolution. Wallerstein, et al., have argued that households as income-pooling units "are not primordial entities which exist and somehow participate in a larger economic system" but instead are "created by the operations of the capitalist world economy" (1982: 438; see also Review, 1983). With this perspective, we notice that the growing market for food in Britain made the export of Irish foodstuffs more profitable for those who had land. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, demand for grain to feed the army dropped sharply. As a result, it became more profitable to use land to graze livestock rather than for tillage. This meant, however, that a family needed more acres to make a living and required fewer people to work those acres. Those who could do so held onto the land they controlled. The stem family was adopted therefore as a strategy to keep enough land in the family's hands. When possible, families increased their holdings, often at the expense of their neighbors. (Smyth, 1983: 27–28.) Under the system the farm was inherited by one heir and kept intact rather than being subdivided in each generation. This way men controlled the land, and fathers could usually postpone retirement until very late in life. Thus, farmers' sons married late, if at all. The high proportion of people who never married acted as a control on the number of mouths that could become dependent on a given farm. This stem family system was already widespread among the farmer class before the famine (see Hynes, 1978: 143 for references) and after the famine became more rigid and more widespread. (Connolly, 1983: 276; Jackson, 1984; Fitzpatrick, 1982: 62–67; 1983: 369.)

Family and Religion

To understand the connection between the stem family and the Catholicism that resulted from the devotional revolution, let's consider some patterns of social life inside and outside the family. The late ages at which most married and the high proportions of never-marrieds meant that usually a large number of single adults lived in the community. Because of this, one might expect rampant illicit sexual activity, but the evidence we have shows very low levels of pre- or extramarital sex (Jackson, 1984: 1013). I suggest that one reason for this was that the people themselves were fully aware of the threat to the entire family should illegitimate mouths have to share the available resources (see Connolly, 1983: 215). As a result, the Irish were receptive to the puritanical, anti-sex elements that the official Catholic church propagated. The Catholicism that grew to dominance was, in fact, an extremely puritanical version (among many writers see Whyte, 1971; Messenger, 1969; Lee, 1979). For example, an increasing separation of the sexes occurred in all areas of life. The pre-famine clergy also launched "all-out attacks" on only a few traditional observances such as wakes and patterns, "both of which . . . were opposed partly as examples of popular magic, but primarily as threats to popular morals." (Connolly, 192: 115.) "Morals," in the language of Irish Catholics, meant sexual purity. As a result, "prudery seeped through Irish society and came close to being equated with morality itself." (Lee, 1979: 40.)

The increasing separation of the sexes implied a rigid sex-role division stressing sex roles in labor and socialization patterns. Within the
Women's status dropped compared to men's in the society (Lee, 1979; Jackson, 1984). Perhaps the most important causes were related to the operation of the stem family system. First, since all the single women in a community (but only the inheriting single males) were in the marriage market, the law of supply and demand reduced the value of any particular woman. Plus, she needed a dowry, for which she had to rely on her father or brother. Second, she had to "keep her reputation." This further increased her receptivity to the puritanical elements in Catholicism already discussed. Third, even when married, the woman was still subordinate to the man because he controlled the land. The widening gulf between males and females would foster receptivity to beliefs stressing male authority and the different and subordinate position of women in the society. (Hynes, 1978: 149.) Post-famine Catholicism was indeed male chauvinist, but whether it was more so than Catholicism in other places is difficult to decide. My impressions are that it was. (See, e.g., Rose, 1975.) Certainly it was more sexist than earlier in Ireland (Lee, 1979; Jackson, 1984).

The problem the farmer family faced was one of personnel management—how to mobilize the labor of all its members while subordinating their interests to the long-term ability of the farm to support them all. To mitigate the problem it was necessary that all family members accept the authority of the father and acknowledge the unity of the family. The farmer class absorbed Catholic teachings which emphasized the sanctity of the family and also the necessity of unquestioning obedience to those in authority. In schools that the Catholic church controlled, increasing numbers of dutiful teachers stressed docility and acceptance of the existing patriarchal system. (Lee, 1979: 41–42.)

Smyth describes the development of a "specific historical consciousness which stressed the centrality of the family farm" (1983: 28) in Irish society and shows how people competed for land as families rather than by aggressive individualism. Similarly, Knott (1984) has described the immense social and cultural significance of a family's ties to a particular piece of land. It might be said that the family and its particular farm came to be united symbolically and that this identification was the reason why in arranging marriages for heirs it was vitally important to "keep the family name on the land."

Among the most important, pervasive, and visible elements woven into the Catholicism that we have examined are the puritanical thread, the patriarchal authoritarian strand, and familialism. We can see how each of them was particularly acceptable to those who adopted the stem family system. If we could examine the psychosocial interior of those families, we would find ways in which the family and religion systems both reinforced and undermined each other. For example, Connor (1976) has argued that where there is a strong familial bond, together with emotional closeness between children and their mother, there is likely to be general suppression of sexuality. And Slater has further suggested that where women are considered inferior, they treat their sons in ways that tend to perpetuate sexism and promote a "need to dominate and control women and to flee from their emotionality" (1977: 88). From a psychoanalytical perspective, Russell (1984) has argued that the constellation of factors found in the rural Irish family—problematic family unity, close mother–son ties, an aloof father, and the suppression of sexuality—motivates religious beliefs that stress the Holy Family, Jesus as an obedient son, and the asexual nature of Mary and de-emphasize God the Father. Using the theories of Foucault and Elias, Inglis has argued that mothers' overwhelming responsibility for child-rearing, a result of the separation of spouses' roles, together with their lack of public economic power, led them to emphasize their moral qualities and that, in alliance with the church, mothers were thus the principal agents of reproducing successive generations of obedient Catholics (Inglis, 1984).

In the small-holding regions of the west, the "family economy" of the farmers made them receptive to authoritarian and puritanical Catholicism. As already noted, even though Irish farms there were smaller and poorer than elsewhere in Ireland and there were few farmers pure and simple, a "family economy" showed itself in several ways that we could predict from our analysis of the wider picture. Two points about western Ireland are worth noting. First, illegitimacy rates, though low throughout the country, were lowest there. I suspect these low rates were due to the importance (for nearly the entire population in those areas) of the family economy. Almost everyone who lived and worked on a small family farm, to help make ends meet also engaged in other economic activity such as illicit distilling, domestic spinning and weaving, etc. (See references in Hynes, 1978: 153, note 10.) It is noteworthy that these lowest illegitimacy rates were found precisely in those areas of the country, the poor west, where the devotional revolution was latest in arriving (Connolly, 1983: 215). The family economy preceded its religious legitimation. The highest illegitimacy rates were found in areas where the farmer class was stronger, commercial agriculture more developed, and the "devotional revolution" came earlier. It is plausible to suggest that the illegitimate children were produced not by the farmer class but by laborers/cottiers where they formed a separate landless stratum.

The second notable point about the western small-farm areas relates to the practice of seasonal migration to do harvest work elsewhere in Ireland or in Britain. O'Grada (1973, 1980) has examined this issue and concludes that temporary migration or emigration was not used to escape poverty but as a "means of consolidating peasant property, at least temporarily" (1980: 189). In other words, migration (and emigration) was a practice designed to maintain a family farm even when it was too small and poor to support a family. Smyth’s (1983: 33) evidence also supports this interpretation.

That this family-centered belief system was strongly entrenched is seen also in the behavior of Irish women who emigrated. Women responded to their falling power and status by leaving in greater numbers than men. (Ireland was the only country in which this was the case.) Jackson (1984: 1018) sees this as women’s refusal to accept their servile role in a patriarchal society. While their actions may seem to indicate autonomy, Diner, who has studied these women in the U.S., concludes that they do not. Their leaving Ireland and their work in America “stemmed from family loyalties,” enabling them to better support and succor parents and siblings than if they had stayed in Ireland. (Diner, 1983: xiv.) Even in America these women postponed marriage because children would reduce their capacity to send money to their family in Ireland.
The stem family system and its associated authoritarian and puritanical Catholicism were not perfectly compatible and mutually supportive. But it is important to realize that the needs of the family system took priority. And where Catholicism offered supportive teaching, the people accepted it. But Catholic teaching that ran counter to behavior involved in the family system was ignored. For example, clergymen fulminated against the abuse of alcohol, but did so in vain; drinking was one of the major activities of the large numbers of the unmarried men who were the product of the stem family system. The church preachings fall on deaf ears in other areas too: favoring of early marriage, hostility towards emigration, condemnation of certain social movements (especially those in the later part of the nineteenth century, when farmers organized against landlords to get a “firmer grip on their farms”). (See Hynes, 1978: 147–48 for supporting references.)

Discussion

The world-systems perspective reduces the danger of provincialism in analyses of social phenomena but it carries with it the danger of economic reduction-ism. (For a world-systems treatment of religion in core societies, see Smith, 1986.) In the case examined in this paper it is clear that we cannot understand the changes that occurred in the family system and in religion without being conscious of local realities and the constraints these imposed on the options people would choose. It was the interaction between local circumstances and trans-national economic change that shaped the more immediate context within which people lived their lives. [5]

The people selectively adopted official Catholic teachings and by looking at their circumstances we can plausibly explain why they accepted some teachings and rejected or ignored others. If economic considerations were of crucial importance to nineteenth-century Irish farmers, which is understandable in a society where quite literally “land was life,” it does not follow that economic factors would in other places and at other times carry such overwhelming weight. In the Irish case, however, the claim that circumstances were more important than religious beliefs in shaping behavior is strongly supported by Eversley’s (1981) findings that Irish Quakers’ demographic behavior was much more similar to that of the Irish Catholics, among whom they lived as a small minority, than to that of their English co-religionists whom they “resembled closely in socioeconomic composition and life-style” (1981: 86).

The Irish case illuminates the connection between the spread of a commercially oriented agriculture where the farms were controlled by those who worked them and a distinctive family system, which included the agricultural class adopting a particularly authoritarian and puritanical version of Catholicism. Examining this case, however, does more than enable us to better understand one society—albeit fascinating—at one point in time. By placing it in the context of a worldwide economic system, we can notice unseen connections, discover instructive parallel developments elsewhere, and understand the genesis of the drama’s structure within which people acted their roles. For example, rather than just asking how sons fit into the stem family system (see Park, 1963: 442), we can understand the development of the system. Most of the “new social history of the family,” written from the “modernization” perspective, has concerned itself with case studies of countries or communities as they “modernized” (see Cherlin, 1983), and focused on internal processes rather than on external connections. As a result, we lack a sense of understanding of the interconnections between diverse phenomena around the world. In fact, in the numerous detailed studies of specific communities or issues that have been published, we lack a framework in which all of the various bits of the puzzle might fit. So the world-systems theory is here used because it promises to provide such a framework. Against its standard we can evaluate the significance and importance of any individual piece of research.

Irish family and religious patterns, in light of the country’s peripheral position in the world market, suggest that there may be parallels in other peripheral countries undergoing commercialization of agriculture. Our perspective helps us to realize that the 1845–48 famine, which historians conventionally call “the last great European subsistence crisis” (Mokyr, 1983: 262,275), is also quite possibly the first great “modern” famine (see Gibbon, 1975; Perleman, 1977; Franke and Chasin, 1980: part 1).

But comparisons do not have to be limited to such a general level of analysis. Let’s take one example: Brazil. Examining this country provides a wealth of instructive parallels, and differences, with the Irish situation. There, too, the spread of agrarian capitalism involved class conflict. As in Ireland, the winners adopted a variety of Catholic principles that stressed the spirit of obedience, submission to authority figures, and love of the family. (Ribeiro de Oliveira, 1979a: 321–22.) And in both cases we find similar a “religious” response among those classes who were to lose the war: “messianism.” (Ribeiro de Oliveira, 1979a: 316; Connolly, 1983: 13,109; O’Farrell, 1976; Donnelly, 1983.) Also, as had happened in Ireland, the clergy in Brazil opposed “popular superstitions” and traditional religious leaders and practices and attempted to substitute new devotional practices, feasts and associations they would control. As a result of this conflict “official Catholicism” was shaped and molded by those who adopted and adapted it to their own life circumstances. Because local circumstances differed between the two countries, so did the resultant Catholicism. Where Irish Catholicism emphasized the Holy Family, for example, in Brazil nobles maintained control of slaves partly through ties of godfather- hood to children that created a “spiritual family” (Ribeiro de Oliveira, 1979a: 314; 1979b); godparenthood, an aspect of Catholicism virtually ignored in Ireland, thus came to be stressed in Brazil.

Bibliography


Notes

[1] Most of the claims made in this paper about Irish society are not controversial among Irish historians; fuller documentation for many of them is found in Hynes (1978). Debate over the prevalence of the stem family system is reviewed later.


[3] Major changes also occurred in denominations other than Catholicism but space precludes dealing with these here. Connolly (1985) reviews the relevant studies.

[4] Gibbon and Curtin (Gibbon, 1973; Gibbon and Curtin, 1978; 1983a; 1983b) have questioned the widespread assumption that the stem family became predominant in rural Ireland in the nineteenth century and have also questioned the accuracy of Arensberg and Kimball’s ethnography. It is well known that because of family life-cycle changes, even if stem family practices were universal in a society, only a minority of households would have three generations present at any one census date. Gibbon and Curtin (1978) found that between 12 and 13 percent of households were three generational in a sample of 1911 census returns. They accept Laslett’s suggestion that 25 percent of households would be three generational in a pure stem system and thus argue that their data point to about half the population following stem practices.

Assuming, however, as I do for this paper, that the key feature of the stem family was impartible inheritance by one heir, a large number of variables influence the proportion of three-generational households at any given time. If the marriage of the heir took place after his parents’ death, or if the older parents) moved to a separate residence on the succession of the heir or his marriage, there would be no three-generation phase. I cite these two cases not as hypothetical possibilities but as actual patterns described by historians and ethnographers of rural Ireland. (See Varley, 1983: 387 for references.) Without a full understanding of the precise patterning of the events comprising the replacement of one family head by another (inheritance, marriage, residential arrangements, deaths, births, etc.) it is impossible to specify what percentage of households we would expect to be three generational in structure on a given census date. A figure of 12 to 13 percent is meaningless until interpreted. Fitzpatrick (1983) interprets very similar findings to support his claim that stem practices were very widespread. He also reconstructs household histories to show that in the first decade of this century succession to household head was by stem family practices in 74 percent of the known cases in two western areas studied. (1983: Table 9.) Hannan (1982) also disagrees with Gibbon and Curtin. Arguing that a system can be said to be viable if it reproduces itself Hannan used aggregate census data to examine succession rates, that is, the ratio between married farmers and farmers’ sons, and how these rates changed over time. His data show stability in the system up to the end of World War II followed by a precipitous decline afterward.

For a quick though slightly dated guide to the literature on Irish family life in the last century, including conflicting interpretations by K.
H. Connell (1968) and Kennedy (1973) on the impact of Catholicism, see Clarkson (1981).

[5] International economic changes that crucially impacted rural Ireland included not only the changing market for food in Britain but, very important, the growing markets for labor in core societies that facilitated emigration and the development of British textile factories which undermined Irish cottage-based spinning and weaving, thereby removing an important source of income and power for rural Irish women (Hynes, 1978).