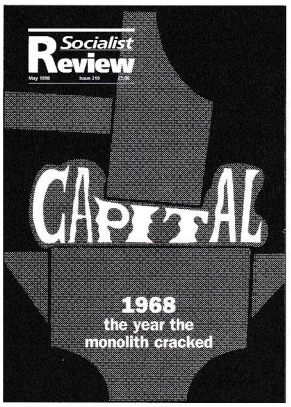
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CAPITAL

1968
the year the monolith cracked

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Brotherly love?

There are two good things to be said about Tony Blair's apology on behalf of Britain for the Irish potato famine. Firstly it infuriated right wing British opinion, which is always good fun, and secondly to some degree it cut against the new consensus emerging from revisionist historians that the famine was an unfortunate natural disaster.

Nevertheless the 'apology' is now becoming the get out clause for almost all events of the dim and distant, and indeed not so dim and distant, past.

Take, for example, the Christian Brothers. This was the religious order that dominated a not inconsiderable part of the Irish education system. Now it is issuing public apologies in the press and elsewhere for inflicting years of physical and sexual abuse on the schoolboys put in its charge.

They were always a strange lot, religious brothers, and the Christian Brothers were the strangest of the lot. Although they took vows of chastity, lived in all-male environments and dressed in religious garb, they were not priests.

They had none of the magical power of priests. They couldn't turn bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, a miracle so mundane that any priest (even an old drunk 'Father Jack' type of priest) could perform it on a daily basis. Nor could Brothers baptise the new born, bury the dead, marry the in love or give last rites to the dying. They were somehow failed priests, not to mention, in the case of many of them, failed human beings. They possessed only the power to teach, thrash and abuse, and the last of those was strictly on the QT.

The first two, however, were completely synonymous. My first encounter with the Brothers was as a young child, when my great uncle Paladamus (I know that sounds made up, but it's not) came to visit. He was a Christian Brother, and a historian of minor renown. My mother was questioning what secondary schools were best when he insisted that we had to be taught by the Christian Brothers, where 'young boys would get a good education and plenty of the stick'.

This was the whole thing about the Christian Brothers—brutality wasn't an unfortunate byproduct, it was a selling point. The use of canes, straps, rulers and belts was something to be proud of, to boast about, to advertise. Frequently they were wielded by run of the mill sadists, occasionally by out and out madmen.

'The use of canes, straps, rulers and belts was something to boast about. Frequently they were wielded by run of the mill sadists, occasionally by out and out madmen'

I famously remember the boy who was challenged to own up to something he hadn't done. He was hit repeatedly on the hands whilst the demented Brother demanded he owned up. His hands were visibly swelling before finally he falsely owned up just to stop the beating. He was then given another 12 for having lied in the first place.

This became a real scandal when three days later the same Brother was knocked unconscious by his victim's older brother on the Gaelic football pitch. Revenge like that was rare, and severely punished.

There were also the 'weirdos', as they used to be called, who would mix corporal punishment with fumbling and fondling in a way that was never quite blatant, and often only became clearer in retrospect, as it was usually reserved for younger boys.

These deeply religious men were usually fine Irish patriots, great sports enthusiasts, had intellectual pretensions and were some of the sickest by-products of a society where religion dominated (and in some cases destroyed) so many lives. Although it was hard to realise it at the time, many of them were also victims of the very religious claustrophobia of which they were so proud. My great uncle and a first cousin of mine both took a similar route to a religious order. At the age of 12 they were plucked out of their homes (in the case of my cousin that meant plucked out of poverty) and taken to train to be Brothers.

From that point on, they were removed from the outside world, denied contact with girls or women, taught religious mumbo-jumbo and set on the path of educational terrorism. It was a cruel and unnatural thing to do, the sort of thing that done in any other context would have been described as kidnapping and brainwashing. No loony religious cult today would be allowed to do it.

Therefore, just as many child abusers were themselves abused, so these sadists were also the victims of an awful religious sadism. Their childhood was stolen. Their sexuality was suppressed. Their role models were brutes. Little wonder so many of them ended up the way they did.

Their apologies, however, are not unique. They follow a succession of priests who have been exposed as child abusers. They follow nuns who have half heartedly apologised for the misery, humiliation and violence they bestowed on orphan girls in their care.

The Catholic Church in Irish society is not without power today, but it's a power that has dwindled beyond belief from the days of my childhood. Then their crimes would never have been exposed, and they certainly would never have apologised for anything. So their apologies are those of a waning church.

When those apologies come for the misery they heaped on women by denying them the right to contraception, divorce, abortion then we will know that they are well and truly ou for the count.

Pat Stack