

Ireland's Multi-Ethnic Immigration Challenge: An Irish Bahá'í View by Eamonn Moane

Abstract

Ireland's dramatic economic success in recent years has led to a new phenomenon in Irish life, that of immigrants from outside the EU or USA wanting to come and live here. In view of Ireland's own experience of mass emigration over the past two centuries, the country's reaction to multi-ethnic immigration has been disappointing. Ireland should adopt policies that are generous, fair, and transparent. Its approach should be based on moral principal, an understanding of the processes at work in the world, and recognition of the potentially enriching effects of immigration. It is essential that there be open and honest debate on the immigration issue, free of the one-sided ideology of "political correctness" which some lobby groups seek to impose on the debate of, and solutions to, the challenge. Adopting the Bahá'í approach to consultation and race relations would, alone, be a major contribution to dealing with the issue.

Introduction

In the seven years from 1994 to 2000, Ireland experienced an economic transformation unprecedented in its history. The economy grew at 8% per annum by conservative calculations, a cumulative growth of some 70%. The defining feature of this economic transformation has been the phenomenal increase of almost 50% in the numbers at work in the country. Gross national product per person, a crude measure of economic well-being, increased from 70% of the EU average to about 100%. Although the growth rate has slowed appreciably since the middle of 2001, reflecting the world economic slowdown, it is still higher than in most countries and the numbers at work in Ireland have continued to increase.¹

The vastly improved economic and employment situation has brought about something totally new to Ireland. Firstly, tens of thousands of diverse peoples from poor non-EU countries have come to work here with work permits for specific periods obtained in advance by their employers. Secondly, and more controversially, tens of thousands more have come here as economic migrants and asylum-seekers without such work permits, and have applied for asylum. It is mainly with the second group that this paper deals.

Historical Perspective

For most of the two centuries or so from the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 to the early 1990s, Ireland's agriculturally based economy was unable to provide sufficient jobs for its people. Involuntary mass emigration became a permanent feature of Irish life and culture. The calamitous Potato Famine of the 1840s and the mass emigration in its aftermath were particularly traumatic. Several million emigrated during the 19th century, and over 1 million emigrated between independence in the early 1920s, and the early 1990s, particularly in the 1950s (when 400,000 left) and the 1980s (when 250,000 left). The population of the area now constituting the Republic in the early 1840s was about 6.5 million, but at independence in the early 1920s, it was only just over 3.0 million. The 1961 census showed the population had fallen to a modern historic low of 2.8 million, although by 1991, it had recovered to some 3.5 million. By 2001, it had reached over 3.8 million.²

In the early 1920s, the number at work in Ireland was about 1.2 million. 70 years later in the early 1990s, it was virtually unchanged. Yet by the end of 2001, almost 1.8 million were at work. Such a 50% increase in eight years is almost unprecedented anywhere during normal peacetime.

This caused unemployment to fall from over 15% in the early 1990s to less than 4% in early 2001, although it has edged up slightly in the last year.³ It resulted in the – hopefully

permanent – ending of mass unemployment and involuntary emigration that has been a feature of Irish society and culture for much of the past two centuries.

Since the mid-1990s, the country has changed from one of substantial net emigration to substantial net immigration. The greatest component of immigrants was returning Irish emigrants. In the past few years, tens of thousands of short-term work permits were issued to nationals of many countries where Irish employers showed they were not able to recruit EU workers. In addition, in a new development, over the six years from 1996 to 2001, some 37,000 applications for asylum and residence were received from persons outside the EU or USA, mainly from such countries as Nigeria, Rumania, the Congo and Algeria.⁴

Up to then, Ireland's experience of asylum applications was limited to numbers in the hundreds – Hungarians in 1956, Vietnamese in the 1970s, Iranian Bahá'ís in 1985, and Bosnians in the 1990s. It granted these people refugee status due to its obligations under the 1951 International Convention on Refugees. This defined refugees in "political" terms, as those fleeing persecution on grounds of race, nationality, religion, social group or political opinion. It did not include "economic" refugees fleeing poverty, famine, natural disaster or war. The State has always adhered to the strict 1951 definition of a refugee.

Of course, mass movement and migration of large numbers of people, voluntary or involuntary, has been a dominant feature of human history. Present-day North and South America and Australia have been built by mass immigration in recent centuries, but at terrible cost to their indigenous populations. However, relative to its home population, the sheer scale of Ireland's emigration and resulting population decline throughout much of the last two centuries has been almost unprecedented in the world. This is particularly so if one bears in mind that, since the second half of the nineteenth century, Ireland has usually ranked

economically among the world's rich countries, even if the poorest of those rich. A huge Irish diaspora of tens of millions exists, mainly in North America, Australia and England. Except perhaps for England, the Irish abroad have been very successful materially and have made enormous contributions to their adopted countries.

Ireland's Response to Multi-Ethnic Immigration

In view of this unique historical experience of emigration, and the recent dramatic improvement in our economic fortunes, one might expect that we in Ireland would be particularly sensitive and compassionate to multi-ethnic, non-EU immigrants, other than those coming on a work permit, wanting to come here. One might assume that as a people we would openly and unhesitatingly accept that we were faced with a grave moral and practical dilemma, and would be openly engaging with and debating the issue in a soul-searching manner. After all, the 37,000 applying for asylum and residence here between 1996 and 2001 amounted to one per cent of the existing population, lower than in many other countries. As recently as the late 1980s, Irish Government ministers and officials were pleading with the United States to relax its immigration regulations and to legalise the situation of the tens of thousands of illegal Irish immigrants into the States during the 1980s.

To be fair, the Irish reaction to the new immigrants has not been ugly, let alone violent. Neither has it been, until the introduction of "direct provision" in 2001, humiliating financially. In fact, immigrants want to apply for asylum here precisely because of the relatively generous social welfare and safety net provided, and the fact that Ireland is one of the few countries that automatically grant citizenship to all children born here, irrespective of the circumstances. The response from the religious leaders, sections of the media, and various organisations, has been compassionate and generous.

However, the response from the generality of Irish people can be described as small-minded and mean-spirited,

ambivalent and hesitant, but above all, largely devoid of moral principal or historical perspective. This is particularly true of the political leadership, which, of course, merely reflects popular opinion. Any moves towards accepting immigrants and allowing them to work here have been dictated mainly by expediency and the labour needs of a rapidly growing economy. In view of our own recent past, our reaction to the immigration issue is a shameful reflection of the moral and intellectual wasteland into which the society has been heading in the unprecedented material prosperity of the last eight years.

Surely as a society of mass emigration for two centuries we should regard immigration as a positive compliment reflecting Ireland's changed fortunes, and be pleased that it will enrich and diversify us, as elsewhere, in the very same way that the millions of Irish emigrants have enriched their host countries. Instead, we appear to be fearful of even very limited multicultural immigration as a threat to our economic well-being and cultural identity. Indeed, could one reason for the changing sentiment to the EU and its enlargement, as evidenced in the rejection of the Nice referendum proposals in June 2001, be the prospect of large numbers of East European immigrants eventually coming here?

There are reasons for Ireland's disappointing response to the immigration issue. First, because of history and geography, the Republic of Ireland since independence has been, ethnically, religiously and culturally, an unusually homogeneous society, unused to genuine diversity. It has been a society of conservative thinking, and of consensus and conformity, lacking a tradition of intellectual discourse and mature debate. From the mid-19th century until at least the 1960s, as part of asserting our national identity, we chose as the dominant ethos of society a dogmatic, triumphalist and authoritarian form of Roman Catholicism which discouraged independent thinking and initiative. In the closing decades of the 20th century, the dominant ethos has been an equally dogmatic, if not intolerant, politically correct secular liberalism

devoid of any true spiritual vision, which, as elsewhere, seeks to exclude all aspects of religion, transcendence and spiritual values from the public discourse.

Second, continuing mass emigration over the generations had a deadening affect on the country's social and intellectual life and made Irish people wary of foreign people taking scarce jobs. The resulting conservative ethos perpetuated a conservative, somewhat ossified society where, until recent decades, one's possessions rather than ability determined one's social status.

Third, it is an unfortunate widespread phenomenon that people who have been the underdog for much of their history, when they cease to be so, do not show much sympathy to other underprivileged people. Excluding the core of missionaries and aid workers, the record of the Irish diaspora abroad, in their attitudes to race and to underprivileged peoples, has frequently been far from honourable.

A Broad Bahá'í Perspective

A Bahá'í approach to Ireland's multi-ethnic immigration issue would be based on moral and spiritual principle, and on a global perspective. It would be based on the acceptance that the unity and interdependence of the human race – the pivotal social teaching of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation – is now being established as the result of divinely ordained historical processes at work in the world. These are pushing its peoples inevitably towards world unity and a world commonwealth. Abdu'l-Bahá stated that in this age, the unity of mankind could, for the first time in history, be achieved, and he envisaged that one stage of this, the unity of nations or peoples, would be established in the 20th century:

... The fifth candle is the unity of nations – a unity which in this century will be securely established, causing all the peoples of the world to regard themselves as citizens of one common fatherland.⁵

Shoghi Effendi wrote in 1936:

Unification of the whole of mankind is the hall-mark of the stage which human society is now approaching. Unity of family, of tribe, of city-state, and nation have been successfully attempted and fully established. World unity is the goal to which a harassed humanity is striving.⁶

It would also emphasise the concept of global citizenship, and the common equality and dignity of all peoples, with its implications for human rights, as exemplified in the following Hidden Word of Bahá'u'lláh:

O Children of Men! Know ye not why We created ye all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how you were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.⁷

Advocating race harmony and unity, and working to overcome racism, follow from the above. As the Bahá'í International Community stated in 2001:

Racism originates not in the skin but in the human mind ... At the root of all forms of discrimination and intolerance is the erroneous idea that humankind is somehow composed of separate and distinct races, peoples or castes, and that these sub-groups innately possess varying intellectual, moral, and/or physical capacities, which in turn justify different forms of treatment. The reality is that there is only one human

race. We are a single people, inhabiting the planet earth, one human family bound together in a common destiny, a single entity created from the one same substance, obligated to “be even as one soul.”

The reality of human oneness is fully endorsed by science. Anthropology, physiology, sociology and, most recently, genetics, in its decoding of the human genome, demonstrate that there is only one human species, albeit infinitely varied in the secondary aspects of life.⁸

A Bahá’í approach would also would advocate global economic and social policies aimed at removing the underlying causes of involuntary mass migration that have resulted in 150 million migrant workers with immediate dependants,⁹ and some 22 million officially recognised refugees,¹⁰ in the world. This would obviously include working for world peace and for an end to conflict, and for a minimum code of human rights to be applied everywhere. It would also include economic policies aimed at eliminating the extremes of wealth and poverty, and the endemic hopeless poverty afflicting huge masses of people globally. The mass migration in today’s world is one of the symptoms of the wider crisis of intolerable economic inequality and poverty destabilising the world.

A Practical Bahá’í Approach

As recommended by the Roman Catholic hierarchy in 2000, Ireland should give an amnesty to, and regularise the situation of, asylum-seeker immigrants already here, unless they have committed serious offences. It should then adopt a quota-based immigration system with open and transparent regulations and procedures. This should accept a generous and fair number of immigrants into the country, allow them work as their application is considered, give them full citizenship, and develop systematic programmes for their reception and integration. The USA is a good example. Whatever the numbers it accepts, the procedures for residency, work, and

eventual full citizenship, are clear and transparent, even if rigorously enforced. The same standards and procedures apply to all. Immigrants should then be expected to obey the law of the land – an important Bahá'í principle. Ireland should do these things for a number of reasons.

First, it is the right thing to do. Because of our historical experience with emigration, we have a moral obligation, now that we have become materially successful, to be generous to others seeking a materially better life.

Second, humanity is moving towards a world commonwealth and a global civilisation and culture, based on unity in diversity, and Ireland cannot escape the implications of this.

Third, our homogeneous insular society would benefit from an influx of culturally diverse peoples. Here it is perhaps worth remembering that the acceptance in 1985 of Bahá'í refugees from the persecutions in Iran greatly enriched both the Irish Bahá'í community and the wider Irish communities in which they settled. Experience worldwide shows that, in the long run, immigrants enrich the societies that accept them. The enriching effects of human diversity are vividly depicted by 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Consider the flowers of a garden: though differing in kind, colour, form and shape, yet inasmuch as they are refreshed by the water of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm, and addeth unto their beauty ... How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruits and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and colour! Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when diverse shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty

and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth all things, is capable of harmonising the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men.¹¹

In light of the above, we should not merely tolerate or accept or even welcome diversity; we should celebrate it as one of the major signs of God in the world. However, it is also clear from the last sentence above that it is only the Word of God that can, in the long run, provide the overarching value system necessary to allow genuine diversity to flourish.

Finally, even on the most pragmatic grounds, immigrants have helped, and would continue to help, the economy to function more smoothly.

Ireland, as a rich country that was not a coloniser, still enjoys a measure of prestige and goodwill in the international community that is out of proportion to its real economic or political or even military power. It should use its influence in world affairs to advocate radical structural solutions that will mitigate and eliminate the poverty, conflict and human rights violations that are the root causes of involuntary mass movement of peoples. It should advocate the concepts of global citizenship, consciousness and identity that will bring this about. In the meantime, until the long-term problem is resolved, it could also propose adopting an international code of policy and conduct on immigration whereby countries would agree to accept generous but just quotas of immigrants depending on their population size and economic wealth. Indeed, such policies could be regarded as a form of international economic aid and assistance.

Political, religious and social leaders should initiate and foster a process of genuine consultation, discussion and debate on the immigrant issue, devoid of ideological polemics, the pre-set agendas of vested interest groups, and the adversarial method of policy and decision-making. This should be based

on ascertaining the facts, identifying the principles and coming up with a correct solution. In fact, this is arguably the most difficult step, and is dealt with below.

There should be agreement not to stir up the immigration issue in a sensational, scare-mongering manner for partisan political reasons. The apparent tacit acceptance of this in the 2002 general election campaign underway in Ireland at the time of this writing, in which immigration has been hardly mentioned, is welcome. While less preferable than dealing with our immigration challenge in an open, mature and principled manner, it is certainly preferable to making it a divisive, ugly and indeed dangerous political issue.

In immediate practical terms, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has set forth the Bahá’í standard in our attitude and reactions to individual immigrants and asylum-seekers – that of loving– kindness while giving them the benefit of any doubts or reservations we may have:

I ask you not to think only of yourselves. Be kind to the strangers, whether they come from Turkey, Japan, Persia, Russia, China or any other country in the world. Help to make them feel at home; find out where they are staying, ask if you may render them any service; try to make their lives a little happier. In this way, even if, sometimes, what you first suspected should be true, still go out of your way to be kind to them – this kindness will help them to become better. After all, why should foreign people be treated as strangers?

Let those who meet you know, without your proclaiming the fact, that you are indeed a Bahá’í. Put into practice the teaching of Bahá’u’lláh, that of kindness to all nations. Do not be content with showing friendship in words alone, let your heart burn with loving kindness for all who may cross your path.¹²

Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to see in the face of the vulnerable His own face:

O Son of Man! Deny not My servant should he ask anything from thee, for his face is My face; be then abashed before Me.¹³

From Political Correctness to True Consultation

Unfortunately, as with the Traveller issue, the “Refugee and Asylum-Seeker” issue tends to be hijacked by vociferous though well-meaning individuals and groups who seek to impose a “politically correct” victim culture approach to the problem. By labelling as “racist” those who raise certain questions, use certain words, or suggest that immigrants (and Travellers) also have to play their part in resolving the problems arising, they prevent a proper discussion of the challenge. In that sense they actually contribute to the problem. They create an atmosphere in which the issues cannot be frankly debated and in which people feel embarrassed and intimidated about talking freely. This has the effect of repressing the problem and contributing to the growth of negative and racist sentiment directed against these vulnerable groups. In this regard, the growing level of support in Europe for political parties advocating such views (as in France) should be a warning.

An example of the effects of political correctness is the misuse of the very expressions, “refugee” and “asylum-seeker.” Those coming here from poor countries without work permits have little choice but to apply for asylum and refugee status. Yet the majority of such applicants are in fact economic migrants seeking to better their material lives, in the same way as countless millions, including millions of Irish people, have done in recent centuries. Therefore from the time of their arrival and dealing with officialdom here, pretence, confusion and ambiguity exist on both sides, which can lead only to future problems. Truth and honesty in words, and fair and

open policies and procedures, would go a long way towards resolving the issue. Hence the deliberate use of the word “immigration” in the title of this paper.

Another example of political correctness is the frequent reaction when the question of limiting the numbers of asylum-seeking immigrants is raised. Even hinting at this very immediate and legitimate question can be deemed “racist.” Yet can anybody seriously and credibly advocate such uncontrolled immigration? Certainly the Republic of Ireland, with a population of 3.8 million and with 1.8 million people at work, could accept something of the order of, say, 10,000 asylum seekers per annum. But 100,000, or 1 million, per annum? Merely phrasing the question like this shows how absurd it is to advocate unlimited immigration, and to denounce as “racist” those who disagree.

Yet another example is the chorus of accusations of “racism” when sensitive issues are raised, or when the law or common sense standards are applied to immigrants or Travellers in the same way as to the general population. In fact, words like “racism” and “racist” are now amongst the most used, misused and abused words in public discourse. Yet racism is essentially the belief that certain groups of people of different ethnic backgrounds are inherently inferior to others. Prejudice means pre-judging, holding unjustified views about others without informed thought. These words should not be used to automatically label justified, well-informed concerns, questions or opinions that one may have about others.

For example, is it “racist xenophobia” if residents express concern when relatively large numbers of immigrants are settled in their area? Is it “racial discrimination” to express concern about the numbers of women arriving in Ireland in advanced states of pregnancy to ensure that their babies born here can obtain Irish citizenship? Is it blind “racist prejudice” if parents, perhaps misguided, express their concern that their children’s education might be adversely affected by the

presence of relatively large numbers of immigrants, or Travellers, in certain classes?

Like it or not, issues such as these have to be discussed and resolved in any society that wants to manage multi-ethnic immigration and cultural diversity successfully. Dealing with these sensitive and complex issues demands a high level of moral maturity, courage, tact and sympathy. Perhaps a major contribution that the Bahá'ís, despite their small numbers, can make to the multi-ethnic challenge is the Bahá'í process of genuine consultation, based on spiritual principles and the sincere desire to find the correct solution. This involves being frank but cordial in the consultation, regarding ideas as belonging to the group and not to the individual who first proposes them, and the participation of those affected by any decisions arrived at. The Bahá'í International Community elaborated on this process in 1994:

The standard of truth seeking this process demands is far beyond the patterns of negotiation and compromise that tend to characterize the present-day discussion of human affairs. It cannot be achieved – indeed, its attainment is severely handicapped – by the culture that is another widely prevailing feature of contemporary society. Debate, propaganda, the adversarial method, the entire apparatus of partisanship that have long been such familiar features of collective action, are all fundamentally harmful to its purpose: that is, arriving at a consensus about the truth of a given situation and the wisest choice of action among the options at any given moment.

What Bahá'u'lláh is calling for is a consultative process in which the individual participants strive to transcend their respective points of view, in order to function as members of a body with its own interests and goals. In such an atmosphere, characterised by both candour and courtesy, ideas belong not to the individual

to whom they occur during the discussion but to the group as a whole, to take up, discard or revise as seems to best serve the goal pursued ...

Viewed in such a light, consultation is the operating expression of justice in human affairs. So vital is it to the success of collective endeavour that it must constitute a basic feature of a viable strategy of social and economic development. Indeed, the participation of the people on whose commitment and efforts the success of such a strategy depends becomes effective only as consultation is made the organising principle of every project.¹⁴

The Bahá'í writings are clear that both sides must play their part in solving the problems arising from racial and ethnic discrimination and prejudice. What Shoghi Effendi wrote to the American Bahá'í community in 1938 about the challenge of racial prejudice is apt today:

Let neither think that the solution of so vast a problem is a matter that exclusively concerns the other. Let neither think that such a problem can either easily or immediately be resolved ... Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left ...¹⁵

Recent Developments

Two recent developments give further cause for concern on the immigration issue. The first is the systematic application, in 2001, of “direct provision” for immigrants claiming to be asylum-seekers. The new system supersedes the previous system of social welfare payments and benefits, and rent supplements, available for all Irish citizens. It provides the immigrants with free full-board accommodation in hostels and bed and breakfast places, together with very modest pocket

money for personal items, of £20 (€25.39 cent) per week for adults and £10 (€12.70 cent) for children. This arrangement holds when the immigrants' application for refugee status is being considered, and they are not allowed to work in the meantime. Such a system is demoralising, humiliating and distressing for the immigrants, and this appears to be its intention. Sadly, Irish public opinion as a whole is not unduly concerned. Imagine the reaction here if this approach was applied to illegal Irish emigrants in the USA or any other country!

Second, over the past year it has become clear that the exceptional era of the Celtic Tiger economic boom has ended, with the economic growth rate slowing down considerably from 10% to 3–4%, and the public finances deteriorating rapidly. Unemployment has risen marginally from 3.7% to 4.3%, and is expected to rise further, although the numbers at work are expected to hold up. There is little now of the kind of talk heard in 2000 about the need for 200,000 immigrant workers between 2000 and 2006 to meet the needs of the economy, half of whom would not be returning Irish emigrants! This poses the challenge of preventing an increase in anti-immigrant sentiment.

Another issue in particular poses a further challenge to our attitude to all non-EU immigrants. Are we to regard them in the same way as Irish workers, or just pragmatically as a “safety valve” for the economy, with work permits granted and withdrawn at the dictates of the economic cycle and the forces of economic globalisation? Are we to systematically discriminate between those immigrants with the skills needed by the economy, and the more vulnerable economic migrants and asylum-seekers without such skills? There are disturbing signs that we are opting for the purely pragmatic and discriminatory approach. Besides being utterly cynical and immoral, such a policy of discrimination would do irreparable damage to Ireland's international reputation.

Conclusion

Multi-ethnic immigration has provided a special challenge to Ireland, and its response has been disappointing, if not disturbing. Most worrying, perhaps, has been not so much our response to the challenge, but the shameless lack of moral principle and historical perspective in our attitude. Our response, given our history, has been that of a people who are insecure, afraid of diversity, and ruthlessly determined to hold onto our new-found economic wealth. This is despite the admirable record of Irish missionaries and aid workers broad, and the notable generosity of Irish people in contributing to international Irish aid agencies and charities.

To face this challenge, Ireland needs the moral vision and global historical perspective to foster the correct attitude and implement just and transparent policies. The Bahá'í view of this issue, and the consultative approach it offers to finding a solution, can provide the Irish people with the vision, perspective and courage to face up to the multi-ethnic immigration challenge in a generous, just and exemplary manner in the years ahead.

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