Abstract
Rarely have issues of public interest brought Ireland and Australia into everyday comparison in the way evident in contemporary responses to the scandals of child abuse. As Australia has entered into its own official inquiry into the subject, media appearances by Irish commentators on that country’s protracted engagement with the issue have become common fare. By itself this phenomenon of Irish witnessing to Irish trauma on Australian television screens demands attention. But the disruption of silence that is represented in the establishment of government inquiry is the more pressing rationale for this paper’s examination of responses to child abuse in Ireland and Australia.

Accordingly I propose to use this occasion to examine the respective political, jurisdictional and institutional arrangements in these two countries that both hinder and enable the establishment of official inquiry into behaviours and practices that have become recognised as harmful and criminal and so something other than ‘occasions of sin’. In considering what enabled such silencing to occur we will need to consider the history of two domains that have benefited from their claims to privacy in the face of demands for scrutiny – childhood and the church. Is the age of inquiry into child abuse, including sexual abuse, also the age in which we are seeing the end of the social understanding that has preserved such domains from external scrutiny?

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