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Moving Beyond Sectarianism

RELIGION, CONFLICT, AND
RECONCILIATION IN NORTHERN IRELAND



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Credits

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Where Does Sectarianism Come From? Historical Perspectives

When did sectarianism begin in Ireland? While this question can legitimately be answered in various ways, we encounter some historical misconceptions that are likely to stunt contemporary understanding of sectarianism and how to deal with it. Some believe, for example, that partition was the font of all sectarianism; undo partition, therefore, and sectarianism will wither and fade. Others see sectarianism as effectively a result of the Troubles, which suggests that peace might be sought by a return to the way things were. While both partition and the Troubles did give new impetus and expression to sectarianism, all the essential elements of sectarianism already had a long history by the beginning of the twentieth century.

An account of the historical roots of sectarianism has the obvious purpose, then, of correcting a short-sightedness that can distort thinking about how to respond to sectarianism. Put positively, a longer look at the sources of sectarianism may give people new insights and new ways of seeing their responsibilities, personal and communal, for sectarianism and for moving beyond sectarianism. At very least, we intend this chapter to suggest the complexity and persistence of sectarianism's tangled roots, and therefore the sobering immensity of the task taken on by those who would find a better way.

The events and ideas discussed in this chapter do not represent anything like a comprehensive treatment of the history of sectarianism. In fact anyone interested in Irish history is likely to notice things that might have been, perhaps should have been, included. We do intend, however, that the sketch presented here should be sufficiently accurate that any additions would serve to flesh it out rather than to contradict it or to alter it in any substantial way.

The first three sections provide background. The first considers

the sometimes tense relationship between the past as interpreted by historians and as perceived by communities, while the next two look at doctrinal roots of sectarianism and the European context out of which Irish sectarianism arises. The remaining six sections are organised around key themes. 'The Barbarous Irish' recognises one of the ways in which colonialism has shaped sectarianism. 'The Role of Religion in Conflict, Violence, and Catastrophe' gives a few examples of crises, by definition exceptional events, that have nonetheless seared scars on conflicting communal memories. Situations of long-term conflict easily lead to 'Identity in Opposition' to one's opponents, the subject of the next section. 'Conversion' has been a fraught issue, shot through with religious and political implications, since the Reformation in Ireland. Sectarianism requires and sustains antagonised division, to which the Christian churches in Ireland have made a substantial contribution; 'Separation' presents one cameo, based on the difficult issue of inter-church marriage. 'Sacred Violence, Politics as Religion' examines how religion and politics, in both unionist and nationalist traditions, have sometimes combined to produce sectarianism of the most destructive kind and most enduring influence. While we might have covered much more, we hope these themes and examples will be sufficient to demonstrate how deep run the roots of sectarianism.

History and communal memory

An account of the roots of sectarianism needs to acknowledge a theme which will shape how some readers understand what we write: the complex and sometimes difficult relationship between history, that is the past as understood by professional historians, and communal memory, the past as remembered by communities – in Ireland, communities in conflict. Communal memory corresponds with myth, which the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines as a 'widely held but false notion of the past'.¹ Should we accept such a definition, it would certainly simplify the historian's task in relation to myths: correct them. The actual relationship between history and myth is more complex than such a definition allows, however, and not nearly so convenient for historians. The function of myths is to embody, in story form, truths that help us understand who we are as a community, where we came from, and where we stand in relationship to other groups. The story may or may not be historically verifiable, but this is never

the main point. What really matters with myth is the way we understand a story, the meaning we take from it, not the literal, factual truth of the story, nor even the variety of different ways the story might be interpreted. When communal myths are derived from the way communities understand the past, as is frequently the case in Ireland, and communities believe these understandings to be history, conflict is all but inevitable between communities and historians. The tension arises because historians are likely to lay out a range of possible interpretations of a given historical event, including events of great mythic significance, and these interpretations may not correspond with the primary meaning assigned to that event by a particular community. The debate about historical revisionism which flared up from time to time in the 1980s and 1990s is in part the result of this tension between the way historians and communities read the past.²

Joe, who trained as an historian, had his most direct experience of this tension while serving from 1991 to 1993 as a member of an ecumenical Working Party on Sectarianism sponsored by the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. This group managed to produce consensus documents on a range of topics. Discussions were tense at times, especially on education and security issues, and compromises meant that final positions did not suit everyone equally well. But the group achieved a working consensus on every issue except one, resulting in a publication that all were willing to stand over, even where it said less or more than some members might have wished. The single exception, and the document that generated the most explosive meeting of the Working Party, was a chapter on the history of sectarianism. On this topic, the group simply could not come to agreement. As the author of that chapter, Joe likes to think that failure to reach consensus reflects the difficulty of the topic more than the competence of the author. When it became apparent that agreement would be difficult, he met twice with some of his sharpest critics, each time bringing a revised and substantially expanded draft for consideration. Finally, however, the best efforts of all concerned came to nothing, and everyone had to accept that an agreed history was work for another day.³

Some of the most contentious issues explored occupy that ground where communal memory and academic history clash and the demarcation between past and present is elusive. Joe

came to imagine a continuum with personal identity at one end, communal memory in the middle, and formal, academic history at the other end. In most modern, western societies, personal identity might be connected with communal memory – although not necessarily, given the power of individualism – but a conscious link between personal identity and academic history would be rare indeed, at least in mainstream society.⁴ For Joe's critics, however, all of them living and working in difficult, frontline situations in Northern Ireland, the three points on the continuum were frequently related, and certain issues effectively collapsed the continuum into a single point. At this nexus of contention, the ordinary stakes of historical scholarship are raised dramatically – evaluating a reading of history as wrong is received as both an intellectual and a moral judgment, and an offending account can have the impact of an affront to both corporate and personal identity. The novelist William Faulkner had one of his characters say of the American south, 'The past is not dead and gone; it isn't even past.'⁵ Much the same applies to how some Irish people see the past, and, as a general rule, the more nearly one approaches the epicentre of conflict in Northern Ireland, the more frequently this sense of the past can be seen to operate.

This tension between communal memory and history has important implications for both historians and communities. Historians, for their part, must abandon the self-serving idea that a myth is a 'widely held but false notion of the past'. The relationship between myth and truth is much more complicated than that. Communal memory of a past event may in fact be true in every detail, in some details, or in none, but the main point to bear in mind is that communities will be searching the past for its meaning for that particular community, not for narrative accuracy or breadth of interpretation. If historians really wish to communicate with an audience, therefore, they will need to know the meaning communities attach to the events they are studying and thus how historians' work is likely to be received. They need not defer to that meaning, they may even wish to challenge it, but they cannot arrogantly assume that communal memory is false merely by being communal memory. Furthermore, in the matter of interpretation, historians must accept that they have no privileged role. They speak with authority at other levels of understanding, but when it comes to interpreting meaning, they are one voice among many.

Rendering the past truly past requires more than historians can do alone. The boundary between past and present becomes badly blurred in situations where the pressing problems of the present are easily and plausibly interpreted as just the latest manifestation of old and enduring themes, as is so often the case in Ireland. In such circumstances, an altered view of the past requires an altered view and experience of the present, a change requiring work that is primarily pastoral and political rather than historical.

Historians do have a contribution to make, however, and communities need to accept that what historians have to say may challenge their understanding of the past. The most basic historical contribution will be to foster a more complex sense of the past, especially one that can acknowledge and account for both the connections and the discontinuities between history and communal memory. Aspects of history touching on sectarianism present historians with striking challenges. No topic is more likely to trigger the collapse of the boundary between past and present than sectarianism, because its central themes are so easily understood as constants in Irish history. And so they are in many cases. Contextualising the history of Irish sectarianism may occasionally involve asserting that continuities perceived and asserted by communal memory are false, but more often it will require showing that the continuity is only partial, that the course travelled from past to present has been more tortuous than usually recognised, that the continuity is not inexorable, it is shaped in part by contingencies. Such an interpretation may challenge some communal myths, but it also holds out hope: change is genuinely possible. The past need not dictate the future, as sectarianism likes us to believe.

Historical and theological roots of sectarianism

The historical roots of sectarianism in Ireland can be traced back to the Reformation era of the 1500s and 1600s. In this period the state-established Church of Ireland, the Catholic Church, and eventually the Presbyterian Church were each closely linked with a particular political option, and these were locked in a bitter struggle for ascendancy. In this age the churches shared a combination of three doctrines which fostered sectarian attitudes and actions:

providence;

one true church, outside of which is no salvation; and error has no right.

The doctrine of *providence* is the simple, basic teaching that God is at work in the world. Building on this conviction, some believe – as was certainly commonplace in the Reformation period – that a faithful Christian observer of the world can discern God's will and purpose by reading the signs of the times in human events and the natural world. *One true church* is largely self-explanatory – our church is the only true church, the implication being that if you are outside this church, your chances of salvation are much diminished, at best. *Error has no right* is less well known. This doctrine was developed in the fourth and fifth centuries by St Augustine to justify the use of state coercion to suppress his heretical opponents, the Donatists: because they are radically in error, they have no right to express or hold their beliefs. Ever since, the doctrine has been put to similar use, whether explicitly or implicitly, as the principle behind every use of coercion, especially state coercion, for religious purposes. Error has no right is the doctrine behind penal laws, inquisitions, forced conversions, and similar episodes in Christian history.

Specifically, the origin of sectarianism lies in two combinations of these three doctrines. The first combination is *one true church* with *error has no right*. One true church is a truth claim and therefore automatically carries with it the danger of arrogance and imposition. But these are only dangers, not necessary outcomes – everything depends on how the truth claim is made, and if made consciously and humbly, it does not have to impose on others. If you believe that error has no right, however, then the chances are your truth claim will be made disastrously, because if your church is the one true church and error has no right, then it is your duty to see that error is suppressed by whatever means necessary. From this viewpoint tolerance is no virtue – tolerance is a deadly vice. Commenting on the Edict of Nantes of 1598, which granted religious liberty to French Protestants, Pope Clement VIII grumbled that it was 'the worst edict that can possibly be imagined. ... An edict that permits liberty of conscience, the worst thing in the world.'⁶ At that time Pope Clement's viewpoint was by no means peculiarly Catholic; it was widely shared by pious, zealous leaders, whether Protestants or Catholics, in church and state. The whole idea of

religious toleration was only slowly coming to be accepted, and at first acceptance was mostly a matter of pragmatic, weary bowing to ugly, pluralist reality – no matter how we try, we cannot seem to beat our enemies, so we will have to find a way to live with them. It took hundreds of years for the idea of toleration to be widely embraced as a positive principle.

The other doctrinal combination behind sectarianism begins with *one true church* and *providence*. Again, providence simply teaches that God is at work in the world, which is not necessarily a problematic doctrine. If providence is interpreted in light of one true church, however, it is very easily reduced to 'God is on our side.' If combined with *error has no right* again, 'God is on our side' is likely to mean, 'God wants us to suppress others.' The disastrous consequences are obvious, as can be observed from episodes in Irish history and elsewhere.

Several key points about sectarianism follow from these doctrines and combinations. First, in the case of both combinations, note that error has no right is the most dangerous element. For intellectual and spiritual reasons, some people may wish to object to exclusive truth claims and to over-confidence about knowing God's ways and purposes, and those who hold such beliefs may indeed do so in ways contemptuous of others. But these are not necessarily damaging positions to hold, and in cases where they are damaging, the damage can be as much to the holder as to others. In the notion of error has no right, however, imposition on others is an inherent, ineradicable element. Oppression is the natural outcome of error has no right, unless those who believe it lack the power or will to act on it.

Second, these doctrines are much more than intellectual propositions about Christian faith. For the 1500s and 1600s, we might do better to think of these not as mere doctrines but as elements of worldview – these were categories in which people thought, a mental framework, standard assumptions about how the world worked. As such, these doctrines deeply shaped Christian identity.

Third, these doctrines did not emerge from small fringe groups, they were shared by the three main churches in Ireland, first Catholic and Church of Ireland and later Presbyterian, which simply differed as to which was the true church, who was in error, and whose cause God favoured. Thus sectarianism is rooted in the Irish mainstream, not the margins.

Fourth, these doctrines were not obscure teachings from musty, neglected confessions of faith; they were actively affirmed. They come from the centre of mainstream Christian teaching, not from the fringe.

Finally, taken together these conclusions about the roots of sectarianism mean that each of the three main churches was historically either an established church or an establishment in waiting. Given the disproportionate share of power the Church of Ireland held in its traditional role as the established church until 1870, it was all but inevitable that the Church of Ireland would be responsible for a disproportionate share of actions with sectarian implications. This hard fact should not be dodged, but at the same time we must be clear that this is a question of power, not of principle – there is little reason to think Catholics or Presbyterians would have behaved any better as an establishment, because they were animated by the same principles. A striking case in point is seventeenth- and eighteenth-century France, where Protestants in a Catholic state lived under restrictions and penal laws much like those experienced by Catholics in Britain and Ireland. The Jesuit scholar Fergus O'Donoghue pithily summarises the attitude of *all* governments, whether Catholic or Protestant, in the post-Reformation era: 'when practicable, persecute.'⁷ An Irishman, the Duke of Ormond, knew as much at the time. Justifying tough actions against Presbyterians in the aftermath of a failed rebellion in 1683, the Duke of Ormond noted that Nonconformists were quick to cry persecution 'if they had not liberty to persecute others, even those that come nearest to their principles'.⁸

European context

While most of the story of sectarianism in Ireland involves the way Reformation and Counter-reformation clashed from the sixteenth century onward, we need to remember elements of context that are older in Ireland and both wider and older in Europe. In fact, searching for the roots of sectarianism involves looking at developments that occurred long before sectarianism was named or even recognised as a problem. The broad framework for interpreting the origin of sectarianism is to see it as one aspect of the break-up of medieval christendom and the working out of Reformation/Counter-reformation conflict. In medieval Europe, the doctrines of providence, one true church, and

error has no right did not cause internal conflict, with the exception of an occasional unusually large or stubborn heretical group. Applied externally to infidels and internally to Jews and dissenters – groups usually too weak and small to offer much resistance – these doctrines identified the enemy and weeded out dissent, thus promoting unity in the mainstream society. The Reformation divided Europe into mini-christendoms organised on a state-by-state basis, but once again one true church, error has no right, and providence could maintain their unifying function, only on a smaller scale, within each state. Problems arose, however, when rival contestants for ascendancy arose within a state and victory was impossible or long delayed. In these circumstances, the doctrines central to sectarianism continued to unify, but they unified factions within a single state that were themselves in conflict with each other. The potential for conflict was particularly great in Ireland, where not only did rival claimants challenge the legitimacy of the established church, but the Church of Ireland failed even to achieve the minimum requirement of a state church, that it be the church of the majority. This potential for conflict has been all too fully realised, and its legacy is sectarianism. The history of Irish sectarianism is the story of how a medieval norm became a modern problem, first a practical problem as the establishment of the Church of Ireland led not to general acceptance but to protracted conflict, and finally a problem in principle, as the old norm was rejected and replaced by new standards of religious liberty, tolerance, and related concepts.

'The barbarous Irish'

Sectarianism did not arise solely from post-Reformation divisions in Irish society, it developed in part by transmuting elements of long established conflict between Irish and Anglo-Irish into the terms of conflict between Catholic and Protestant. One such element was the 'barbarous Irish' theme enunciated so influentially by the twelfth-century Welsh-Norman priest and scholar, Giraldus Cambrensis.

In 1188 and 1189 Giraldus completed two works on Ireland and the first years of the Norman presence there, *Topographia Hibernica* and *Expugnatio Hibernica*. A prominent feature of these books was his criticism of the Irish as primitive and immoral. 'This people is, then, a barbarous people, literally barbarous. ...

Their natural qualities are excellent. But almost everything acquired is deplorable.⁹ Barbarism was the key to Giraldus' understanding of the Irish, which he applied to many aspects of their society. Ultimately he identified this supposed Irish barbarism as not merely primitive backwardness, but as a moral condition: '[t]his is a filthy people, wallowing in vice'; 'above all other peoples they always practise treachery.'¹⁰ Even a supposedly high rate of physical deformity Giraldus traced to moral perversity, saying, '[I]t is not surprising if nature sometimes produces such beings contrary to her ordinary laws when dealing with a people that is adulterous, incestuous, unlawfully conceived and born, outside the law, and shamefully abusing nature herself in spiteful and horrible practices.'¹¹

This kind of studied contempt on encountering a new and different culture is a feature of many a colonial enterprise: dehumanising, even demonising, the natives seems to be a necessary prelude to dominating them. What matters most for the history of sectarianism, however, is that these ideas became conventional wisdom in the Anglo-Irish community. According to historian Nicholas Canny, the efforts of the English interest in Ireland, right down to the eve of the Reformation, were shaped by a Giraldus-influenced conviction that 'the struggle being pursued in Ireland between Anglo-Norman and Gael was a conflict between the forces of good and evil.'¹² When most of these Anglo-Irish families eventually opted for Counter-reformation Catholicism, and recent English settlers came to dominate Irish Protestantism, the 'barbarous Irish' theme and its 'superstitious' variant survived these shifts by taking on a powerfully confessional note – now the Irish were barbarous not only because they were Irish, but because they were Catholics.

The barbarism/civility dichotomy influenced many aspects of Protestant thought. The historian Toby Barnard notes that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'clerical propagandists ... regularly contrasted ... civility in language, dress, diet and housing, with barbarism.'¹³ Some of the sharpest expressions of the barbarism/civility theme can be found in political sermons of the same period. In 1708, for example, preaching a sermon commemorating the rebellion of 1641, Ralph Lambert was particularly concise in arguing that 'a False and Idolatrous Religion, does naturally produce Bloodshed, Barbarity, Wasting, and Destruction', and specifically that 'the Doctrine

and Practice of the Church of Rome do allow and justify such Barbarous Massacres'¹⁴ as the rebellion of 1641. But the same basic idea was repeated over and over,¹⁵ along with more mundane evidences of supposed barbarism. Although twentieth-century manifestations of the barbarity theme generally pale before the ferocity of earlier years, traces are everywhere, in sources as diverse as the mainstream Protestant historiography of G. V. Jourdan and the politico-religious pronouncements of Ian Paisley.¹⁶ In 1983, Seamus Deane went so far as to argue that '[t]he language of politics in Ireland and England, especially when the subject is Northern Ireland, is still dominated by the putative division between barbarism and civilisation.'¹⁷ While Deane probably overstates the significance of the theme, anyone sensitised to it will see its ongoing influence.

The role of religion in conflict, violence, and catastrophe

From the sixteenth century onward, sectarianism has been nurtured by the influence of religion in catastrophic events of violence and death. Whether interpreting the course of events, naming sources of motivation, or justifying actions, conflicting parties turned to religion as one explanation.

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the years from 1558 to 1663 marked a significant hardening of an already troubled situation. Up to the mid-1500s, the English and Anglo-Norman perception of the native Irish as barbaric was alive and well, but it was limited – Irish culture might be barbaric, but the people themselves were reformable. About this time English attitudes began to change. Influenced by the literature spawned by increased European contact with very different cultures (the Spanish colonial experience in the Americas in particular) and by contemporary infatuation with the example of ancient Rome, some leading English adventurers and thinkers came to regard Irish culture and the Irish as so fundamentally barbaric and pagan that they could not be directly reformed. The native Irish must first be subdued by the sword and trained by the yoke of colonisation before they could accept English standards of civility (meaning a properly ordered society) and the mild precepts of the Christian faith. At the same time, the English government was coming to realise that given the intensely local nature of the Gaelic political structure, government plans to centralise authority would require military subjugation, not just the earlier, more pacific policy of surrender and regrant.

This combination of forces was a formula for a kind of total war unprecedented in Ireland: atrocities, despoliation of land, the slaughter of noncombatants, including women and children. The Irish committed counter atrocities, and there is evidence of intensified hatred of the English, an attitude which was increasingly shared by the more gaelicised of the Catholic Old English lords. In 1575 the earl of Kildare, whose ancestors had recently been pillars of the English interest in Ireland, was reported to have declared 'that if the calliogh [hag] of Englande [meaning the queen] were once dead, they in England wolde be with their horns one against another and that then the Erle of Kyldare and they his followers wolde kill all the Englisshe churles or dryve them to the sea; and that so the worlde be all theirs.'¹⁸

A good number of the architects and implementers of the new English policy were fiercely committed to Protestantism and regarded their efforts as directed to godly ends. Reflecting on an Ulster military campaign in 1574 which was marked by atrocities against Irish and Scottish inhabitants, one English officer concluded, 'how godly a dede it is to overthrowe so wicked a race the world may judge: for my part I thinke there cannot be a greater sacryfice to God.'¹⁹ In the government's repertoire of strategies for subduing the Irish, reformed religion became linked to colonisation and brutal military campaigns.

Protestants had no monopoly on linking violence and religion. From 1534, all armed resistance to the Tudors' increasing efforts to extend the crown's authority in Ireland was accompanied by some raising of the banner of religion in support of the Pope and the old religion and in opposition to the reformed religion. But according to Catholic historian Canice Mooney, it was the expedition led by James Fitzmaurice Fitzgerald in 1579 that 'partook more of the nature of a religious crusade than any other Irish movement of the century'.²⁰ Beginning in 1575 Fitzmaurice spent four years on the continent, busily negotiating with Spain, France, and Rome for support for a military expedition to Ireland. In July 1579 Fitzmaurice and an armed company finally landed in Kerry to mount a campaign against the crown in Ireland. Fitzmaurice returned to Ireland as a convinced holy warrior in the cause of the Counter-reformation. Although many of his compatriots in arms had distinctly more secular goals, and perhaps his own motives were more complex than he admitted, he protested that the 'only object' of his military efforts

was 'to secure the administration of Christ's Sacraments to a Catholic people in a Catholic rite'.²¹ Disembarking at Dingle, the first ashore were two banner-bearing Franciscans (one banner, marked by the image of Christ on the cross, had been blessed by the Pope). They were followed by a bishop in mitre and crozier, and only then by Fitzmaurice and seven hundred soldiers paid for by Pope Gregory XIII.

Fitzmaurice was also armed with a letter of support from the Pope to the bishops and faithful of Ireland. In 1570 Elizabeth had become the first post-Reformation English monarch to be excommunicated and deposed by Rome, and now Pope Gregory reminded the people of Ireland that 'these last few years we have encouraged you by our letters to regain your liberty and defend and preserve it against the heretics.' He urged people to support the Fitzmaurice campaign in whatever way possible, offering in return 'to all who confess and communicate ... the same plenary indulgence and remission of sins that those receive who fight against the Turks and for the recovery of the Holy Land'.²²

Fitzmaurice's campaign was a failure. He died in a minor skirmish in August 1579, and after the campaign had been put down, the huge Munster lands of his cousin, the earl of Desmond, who joined the cause after Fitzmaurice's death, were forfeited to the state and planted with English colonists. What might have galled Fitzmaurice most was the very limited response to the religious exhortations he presented to the Irish people. Nonetheless, the tone and content of the Pope's letter was significant: war against the heretical Protestants was couched in the concepts of the crusades.

Subsequent Irish history provided many more examples of religious links to violence, hatred, and oppression: further Elizabethan wars, plantation, the 1641 Rising, the Williamite wars, penal laws, and so on. In terms of sectarianism, what mattered as much as these events in and of themselves was the way they were incorporated into communal memory. The 1640s, as savage a decade as Ireland has ever experienced, illustrate the point.

During the first half of the seventeenth century, Europe was wracked by wars of religion, and Ireland did not escape. From the beginning of the Irish rising of 1641, one prominent Protestant line of interpretation understood it as a priest-inspired and priest-ridden rebellion, intended to exterminate Protestants. The

initial reality was very different, but religion was a factor from the beginning and soon a prominent one. Some of the atrocities suffered by Protestants had a religious motivation or aspect. The insurgents were riddled with cultural and political divisions, most fundamentally between Irish and Old English parties; they joined together under the only banner that could unite them, calling themselves the Confederate Catholics of Ireland. After three decades on the continent, the Irish leader Owen Roe O'Neill returned to Ireland bolstered by a letter of support from the Pope praising O'Neill's 'excelling fervour, that is, your constancy against the heretics and mind of true faith' and offering his blessing to all 'who would help the cause of Catholics'.²³

The bitterly sectarian disposition of the times was captured in extreme form by the exhortations of Cornelius O'Mahony, a Jesuit. Writing from Portugal in 1645, he urged the Confederate forces to 'kill your heretic adversaries.' He believed that they had killed up to 150,000 between 1641 and 1645, 'as the heretics themselves, mooing like cows, openly say and you do not deny, and I believe that more of the heretic enemy were killed, and I wish they all were.' The task before the Confederates was 'to kill the rest of the heretics or expel them from the territory of Ireland'.²⁴ When O'Mahony's book got to Ireland, it was roundly condemned by the Confederate Catholics, who had it burned by the common hangman. The source of scandal, however, seems to have been more O'Mahony's politics – he called for not only a Catholic king, but a native Catholic king, and he refused to recognise a heretical king as a legitimate sovereign – than his sectarianism. It should also be noted that O'Mahony's estimate that 150,000 or more Protestants had been killed by 1645 was wildly inaccurate. The best contemporary account estimates that 112,000 of English extraction and 504,000 Irish died from sword, plague, and famine between 1641 and 1652, so the number of Protestants killed by 1645 could not have been close to 150,000.

Such hugely exaggerated numbers were common at the time. The first exaggerations were deliberate propaganda by Protestants, designed to magnify outrage against Irish Catholics. In this they succeeded, and in the process, inflated numbers became widely circulated and widely accepted. 'At this date, towards the end of the religious wars', writes Patrick Corish, 'men were ready to believe the worst.'²⁵

The autumn of 1649 brought more savage sectarianism, as

Oliver Cromwell's blend of religious and military ferocity found expression in slaughters of Catholics at Drogheda (where a good number of English Catholics were among the victims) and Wexford. His victims were not only surrendered soldiers but civilians, including clergy, women, and children. Even Edmund Ludlow, who was for a time leader of the parliamentary army in Ireland and was not squeamish about harsh measures, judged Cromwell's actions to be 'extraordinary severity', and all resistance collapsed in the face of it. Cromwell was in Ireland to prevent a royalist resurgence and to guarantee the confiscation of Irish land he needed to pay off his army and his financial backers, but he publicly defended his deeds as godly vengeance for Catholic massacres of Protestants at the beginning of the rising, thus imparting a bloody symmetry to the decade.

The bloodshed of 1641 and 1649 exerted a long influence in Irish history. For Catholics, Cromwell's extreme violence (and confiscations) were the source of long and bitter anger, becoming not only a key component in their communal memory of domination and victimisation, but a symbol of what they saw as the genocidal intentions of the English in Ireland. Protestant memories of 1641 were equally potent. In 1662 the first restoration Irish parliament passed an act establishing 23 October, the date for a foiled conspiracy to seize Dublin at the beginning of the rising, as a national holy day. The act anathematised the plot as 'a conspiracy so generally inhumane, barbarous and cruel, as the like was never before heard of in any age or kingdom', fomented by 'many malignant and rebellious papists and Jesuits, fryers, seminary priests and other superstitious orders of the popish pretended clergy'.²⁶ For more than a century the holy day was widely observed, and in Dublin with great pomp and circumstance. The Irish administration and the House of Lords processed to Christ Church Cathedral, where they worshipped according to the form of a specially composed liturgy and heard a sermon by a Church of Ireland dignitary, usually a bishop. These sermons, which were often published, rarely strayed far from the themes of: why Catholics cannot be trusted, why the nature of Catholicism inevitably yields barbarous acts like the massacre being remembered, and why Protestants must be eternally vigilant if 1641 was not to be visited upon them again. The Protestant community understood itself as perpetually under siege.

Both sets of memories, of 1641 and of 1649, served exactly the same function for their communities, passing from generation to generation a graphic image of the true nature of the enemy. The memories were also mutually exclusive. Protestants remembered 1641 and Catholics remembered 1649, but neither community remembered the other event (except sometimes to diminish the exaggerations of the other side). In this way the purity of communal pain and the consequent righteousness of the communal cause were preserved unsullied. A divided society produced divided memories, thus widening the divisions which were their source. The Scottish poet Ian Crichton Smith writes,

The anthology of memories of the other
is a book I hadn't reckoned on ...²⁷

In Ireland, 'the anthology of memories of the other' remains a book that is rarely even opened.

Identity in opposition

Although widespread theological controversy was relatively slow to develop in Reformation-era Ireland, it was in full flow by the early 1600s. In these combative, conflictual times, theology, and even one's Christian identity, seemed to depend as much on knowing what beliefs one rejected as on what one accepted. This situation corresponds to what theologian Alan Falconer calls 'theologies-in-opposition' and rabbi Marc Gopin refers to as 'negative identity'.²⁸ To a degree this is natural and inevitable: at a basic and primitive level, a person or group always knows, in part, what it is by what it is not. Taken too far, however, negative identity quickly becomes a trap. Our group resists taking a certain stance or course of action, however apparently sensible, because it is identified with your group; our group cannot allow your group to change, or admit that it has, because our identity is locked into yours. By such misshapen logic, negative identity serves to distort identity, prevent change, and perpetuate conflict.

When Trinity College Dublin, then a Church of Ireland institution, established its chair of divinity, the holder was called Professor of Theological Controversies. The men who held the post between 1607 and 1641 lived up to the title, focusing their lectures on refuting Cardinal Bellarmine, the foremost Catholic apologist of the time, who himself once held the chair of Controversial Theology at the Jesuit college in Rome. From 1600

to 1614, the Jesuit Henry Fitzsimon and the Church of Ireland Bishop of Killaloe, John Rider, conducted a running debate that produced five publications and prefigured numerous similar contests. In *The Irish Catholic Experience*, Patrick Corish says of early-seventeenth-century Catholics, 'to be a Catholic now was to know why one was not a Protestant.'²⁹ Alan Ford's work on the Protestant Reformation in Ireland demonstrates that the same dynamic was operating in the contemporary Church of Ireland, as Protestant controversialists, '[i]n rebutting Catholicism ... helped to create for members of the church a new consciousness of their own beliefs and their distinctiveness'.³⁰ Probing the identity of the Irish churches in any post-Reformation period, including today, is likely to reveal some variation on this theme.

Alan Falconer has done particularly important work in this area, arguing that 'the role of the churches ... in the situation of conflict in Ireland has been to reinforce the alienation of the different communities by developing theologies-in-opposition'.³¹ He notes the twentieth-century survival of this mode of thinking in *The One Hundred Texts*, first published in one volume in 1939 by T. C. Hammond, a former leader of Irish Church Missions.³² Each text was accompanied by about forty questions divided into four or five sections, along with a section of comments and background information. Most of the questions were positive in orientation, but the final section was always called 'Error Condemned', and the errors were always Roman. The errors cited for Acts 4:12 – 'Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved' – were typical in content, though unusually brief:

36. What is the one necessity of salvation?
That it be in the Name of our Lord.
37. What necessity does Rome add?
Union with the Pope.
38. Of what sin is she thus guilty?
Of the sin of putting another name beside that of our Lord Jesus.
39. How does our text condemn all such teaching?
'Neither is there salvation,' etc.³³

None of this was Hammond's innovation; he was codifying the Irish Church Mission's traditional approach to teaching con-

verts, in practice at least since 1862.³⁴ Catechism involved not only what to believe, but what not to believe.

Falconer also discovered a different version of the same dynamic in a much more surprising place, a pamphlet called *Anglican and Irish: What We Believe*, published in 1976 and written by Victor Griffin, then Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, who was widely regarded during his tenure as the very image of Irish Protestant liberalism. Griffin's purpose may have been eirenic, as Falconer says,³⁵ but his method was proportionately more oppositional than Hammond's. Chapter two, 'The Bishop of Rome in the Early Church,' makes no mention of Anglicanism, but is devoted solely to proving that papal supremacy in the early church was the result of Rome's political preeminence rather than innate spiritual authority.³⁶ Chapter three, on 'The Petrine Texts,' argues that Catholic understandings of these texts are false and that 'Anglicans ... are in complete agreement with the early fathers and teachers of the church in taking these three texts plainly and obviously as referring personally to St Peter and having no bearing whatever on the claims of the Bishop of Rome';³⁷ chapter four contends that 'monarchical episcopacy', in the Anglican manner, 'is a legitimate development in the life of the church',³⁸ but that the development of the papacy is not equally legitimate. Only then, more than halfway through his pamphlet, does Griffin begin to develop an essentially positive account of an Anglican approach to the Christian faith.

It almost seems that Griffin did not so much choose this combative method as have it thrust upon him by the oppositional assumptions of Irish society. He is clearly exasperated, even angry, with a society in which a (presumably Catholic) newspaper letter-writer can blame the Troubles on Henry VIII and the Reformation, and a Catholic priest on television can 'justify the claims of the church of Rome to be the one true church by ... detailing the persecution of Roman Catholics by Protestants' but with no acknowledgement of Catholic persecution of Protestants.³⁹ 'Such ignorance of the elementary facts of history,' he says, 'would be laughable if it were not so widespread and so tragic.'⁴⁰ He rightly, and eirenicly, concludes that '[r]eligious persecution is a stain on the history of Christianity, an evil out of which no denomination should seek to make capital but for which all should be penitent before God and ask forgiveness one of another.'⁴¹

Christian identity was not always posed in oppositional terms. Historian Ian Green has discovered particularly important evidence on this matter in his work on catechesis in the Church of Ireland from 1560 to 1800. His exhaustive study leads him to conclude that the polemics of identity-in-opposition did not usually extend to catechisms themselves: 'instruction at the elementary level tended to avoid the negative, and to focus on the positive message contained in the staple items of catechetical teaching.'⁴² Green also notes occasional increases in controversial material and even some straightforward polemics, however, and one of the latter, the anonymously-written *A Protestant Catechism: Shewing the Principal Errors of the Church of Rome*, went through eleven Dublin editions between 1740 and 1785 – more Irish editions than all but one of the 75 Protestant catechisms Green identified.⁴³ With sectarianism, what is typical is not the only measure of significance.

Conversion

The conversion theme in Irish history is most often associated with the nineteenth-century evangelistic efforts known as the Second Reformation or the Protestant Crusade. While this is the period when conversion efforts were most visible and most openly contentious, an adequate understanding of how conversion came to be so explosive an issue requires that we look back to the Reformation era in Ireland.

In most of Europe, the Protestant Reformation worked on many levels of society. The state was involved; church leaders engaged in intense debate and church structures were altered; and many ordinary people participated and declared their loyalties. In Ireland, however, the Reformation was almost entirely a state phenomenon – few church leaders were committed to reform, and their efforts were largely ineffectual, while common people showed virtually no interest in or commitment to reformation. In these circumstances the concerns of the state naturally took priority, and the Irish priority of the energetic Tudor monarchs was to subdue and gain political control over the Irish people, which four centuries of English rule had notably failed to accomplish. As a result the Irish Reformation became another English method – along with colonisation, warfare, and anglicisation – for subjugating and civilising Ireland.

With the Irish Reformation labouring in this unequal yoke,

the results were sometimes quite at odds with typical Reformation values. In most places, for example, a basic Reformation method and goal was to make religious literature, especially the Bible, widely available in vernacular languages. But in Ireland one state method of gaining political control was to suppress Irish culture, in particular the Irish language. This conflict of interests was resolved very much in favour of the political needs of the state and against the religious needs of the Reformation: translation of religious literature into Irish only came in tiny quantities and late in time. By the end of the sixteenth century, the Reformation had made very little progress in Ireland, but the connection between conversion to Protestantism and the political control of the Irish had been well established.

Historians have been inclined to underestimate the potency of the conversion theme in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland. David Miller's assessment of eighteenth-century Ulster can be extended to all of Ireland for at least the period 1660-1800, and it probably expresses a rough consensus among historians: each of the three largest churches, Catholic, Church of Ireland, and Presbyterian, 'was a church ministering to a pre-assigned community - none was a sect seeking converts.'⁴⁴ This judgment has much to commend it since combinations of political circumstance and under-resourced churches meant that simply ministering to one's own community was more than an enough challenge. So sweeping a generalisation as Miller's cries out for some qualification, however, as he recognised himself without pursuing the matter - the situation he described obtained only 'generally', and the churches accepted it only 'for the time being'.⁴⁵

A collection of essays published in 1995, *As By Law Established: The Church of Ireland Since the Reformation*, begins to give shape to the necessary qualification, at least for the Church of Ireland. Whenever Protestants considered strategies for the conversion of Catholics, education and translation of religious literature into Irish were sure to figure. Throughout his essay on charity schools, David Hayton tests the waning and waxing of the conversion theme between 1690 and 1730. Ian Green, in his work on catechisms, finds that four Irish or English/Irish catechisms published between 1680 and 1722, along with separate publications of Old and New Testaments, 'remind us that concern about catechising in Irish was far from dead' - 'a not inconsiderable number of episcopalians ... still thought it best to carry the fight to the Catholic majority in their own tongue.'⁴⁶

Perhaps the most distinctive contribution of essays in *As By Law Established* is a more nuanced sense of the range of Reformation-advancing techniques, how they related to each other, and how they might ultimately connect to conversion. Working internally toward Protestant reform or externally toward conversion of Catholics might seem like opposite ideals, but while they may have been in immediate tension, they could also be sequential rather than contradictory. This sequential approach is apparent in John McCafferty's study of 'John Bramhall and the Church of Ireland in the 1630s'. The legal machinations and epic court battles conducted by Lord Deputy Wentworth and Bishop Bramhall in the 1630s do not immediately present themselves as the stuff of Reformation, but so they were conceived. Their efforts were designed to improve the finances of the church, a church on a stronger financial footing could support a resident clergy, and through these, said a petition to the king from the Convocation of 1634, 'barbarism and superstition will be expelled, and the subject shall learn his duty to God and to his Sovereign and true religion be propagated.'⁴⁷ According to McCafferty, this sequence was the internal logic of the Irish church policy of Wentworth, Bramhall, and Laud.⁴⁸

A similar sequence is apparent in David Hayton's work on Protestant charity schools from 1690 to 1730. He points out that while pietist-inspired reformers of the early 1700s directed most of their energy to charity schools for Protestant children, they were by no means 'soft' on popery. In essence they were paring the forces of Reformation to a sharper point. ... The first concern of 'reforming' initiatives ... was to haul in backsliders from the Protestant community, so that progress might be made from a sure foundation.⁴⁹

References to converting the Irish 'ran like a thread through the texture of charity-school sermons', he finds, and if this was 'a secondary consideration in reforming enterprises, an argument to catch contributions rather than an internal dynamic',⁵⁰ how interesting and significant - in an age when the Church of Ireland was supposedly a church ministering to a pre-assigned community, not a sect seeking converts - that the logic of converting Catholics should be a consistently attractive, and presumably productive, fundraising appeal! In any case, Hayton shows that the balance between reforming Protestants and converting Catholics had begun to shift toward conversion by 1711-

12. By the advent of the Protestant charter schools in 1733, the shift was complete, with proselytising taking first priority and other purposes a subordinate place.

Toby Barnard's work on 'Improving Clergymen 1660-1760' extends the range of reform efforts that can plausibly be related to advancing the Reformation. Raising clerical standards was the pivot point of the reform process. A reformed clergy would 'improve Ireland and the Irish',⁵¹ but before this could happen, material conditions needed to improve to allow a consistently resident clergy. Therefore the Reformation cause was advanced not only by parliamentary efforts to strengthen the church's finances, but by agricultural reform, which would increase the income of those clerics who farmed and of the parishioners from whom Church of Ireland clergy took a tithe, and by architectural reform, which would not only provide the clergy with suitable housing, but stand as a civilised example and suitable alternative to the 'barbaric' housing of the Irish. 'Indeed, housing and architecture were part of the English and Protestant mission in Ireland',⁵² Barnard argues. 'It was hardly chance that a cleric, determined to raise standards through the Charter School project, also schemed to publish rational house plans.'⁵³ If the culture of improvement sometimes seems to represent a mindset desiring little more than to enhance the status quo, having lowered its aims far beneath converting the nation, Barnard cautions us not to '[play] down the doubt and dismay that beset thoughtful Protestants. Some clergymen still entertained grander aspirations.'⁵⁴

If conversion in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Ireland is often remembered primarily as Protestant efforts to convert Catholics, there was also a reverse flow, though hard to quantify, of Protestants to Catholicism. Jacqueline Hill has observed that Fr Cornelius Nary, an influential Catholic priest in early eighteenth-century Dublin, retained hopes and advanced strategies for the conversion of Protestants. This may seem perfect folly in the context of an Irish Catholic Church staggering under the penal laws, but Hill argues that it made good sense in light of larger European trends, in which Protestants had fallen from about half of European population around 1600 to a northern fringe of twenty percent by 1700.⁵⁵ Observing the same trend, David Hayton comments that 'the contemporary description applied to many of the penal laws as acts "to prevent the growth

of popery" was no mere trope.'⁵⁶ Similarly complex signs of Catholic conversion hopes and Protestant defensiveness can be observed into the nineteenth century.

Larger European trends toward a numerically reduced and geographically marginalised Protestantism were not the only reason for Irish Protestant anxiety. Irish Protestants were a small minority in a nominally Protestant country, an especially worrying situation for the Church of Ireland as the established church – the only minority established church in Europe. European and Irish marginality exacerbated Irish Protestant fears that a number of Catholic religious and political doctrines made Catholics innately disloyal, and in Catholic actions during the wars of the 1640s and then in the Williamite Wars of 1689-91, Protestants saw the proof of their fears. One result was the ferocious penal laws the eighteenth-century Irish Protestant parliament enacted against Catholic land, power, and religion (and to a lesser extent against Presbyterians and other Dissenters, also, but that is a different story). Although the exact motivation for these penal laws remains a disputed topic, one reason for the penal laws was that Protestants intended to remove the problem of what they saw as Catholic treachery by removing the basis of Catholic political power and destroying the Catholic religion. The connection between Protestantism and the political control of Irish Catholics could not have been more crudely or forcibly demonstrated. At the end of the 1700s, however, despite a century of penal laws, Catholics remained a large majority. For Irish Protestants, this Catholic majority always seemed an intractable problem.

The French revolution era, beginning in 1789, was one of those periods in human history when it seemed that the world had been turned upside down and old certainties no longer counted for anything. Ireland had experienced its own local version in the rebellion of 1798, the bloodiest episode in Irish history with 30,000 people killed in three months. Among Protestants, sectarian aspects and sectarian interpretations of the rebellion reawakened or confirmed fears about the Catholic majority. Protestants were terrified by what had happened and anxious about the future, but unsure what measures could guarantee safety. In the wake of the rebellion, three forces converged to dictate one kind of Protestant attempt at a solution to the problem.

(1) The solution was certain to involve religion. One deep-

rooted political and social assumption in eighteenth-century Ireland was the necessity of subordination for a stable social order. Each person must accept his or her place in society, neither envying those above nor abusing those below. A corollary was that only sound religion could guarantee the necessary subordination. Without religion, subordination would be based only on coercion and could not last; but if people understood that God had ordained the social hierarchy and put each person in the place intended, then they would submit willingly and the social order would be secure. Protestants, certain that theirs was the only sound religion, could only conclude that a great extension of Protestantism was the necessary foundation of a peaceful Ireland.

(2) By 1800 penal laws were no longer considered a valid way of creating a Protestant society. On the issue of coercion *versus* persuasion in religion, the eighteenth century had brought a fundamental shift in mental framework. In the early part of the century, some Protestant preachers could speak of penal laws and the light of the gospel in the same breath, as if they were acceptable and compatible paths to the same destination.⁵⁷ By mid-century, however, John Wesley, on one of his frequent and long visits to Ireland, noted in his journal that it was no 'wonder that those who were born Papists generally live and die such, when the Protestants can find no better way to convert them than Penal Laws and Acts of Parliament'.⁵⁸ Others came to ask similar questions, until by 1800 all shades of Protestant opinion had come to accept Wesley's viewpoint as irrefutable conventional wisdom: coercion for religious purposes was out. Not even the horrors of 1798 could revive interest in penal laws.⁵⁹

(3) If penal laws were out, evangelical Protestantism was definitely in. In 1800 evangelicalism was still a relatively young reform movement, bursting with the kind of energy and drive that would be necessary to take on the task of extending Protestantism in Ireland. Even more important, evangelicals had nothing but contempt for the notion that compulsion could be used to establish Christianity. Instead they put their faith in evangelism and conversion. At the founding of the Evangelical Society of Ulster in 1798, George Hamilton preached from Luke 14:23, 'And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in that my house may be filled', a text that has been tragically abused in Christian history.

Hamilton, however, condemned as 'carnal' and 'antichristian' the idea that 'external force or violence' or 'the arm of civil power' could ever make Christian disciples. 'Gospel compulsion', he maintained, could only mean evangelism.⁶⁰

By 1800 these converging developments and assumptions had dovetailed tightly together. The need for social stability in Ireland (and the whole of Europe) had never been greater; sound religion was widely accepted as the necessary basis of a peaceful social order; coercion and penal laws were no longer credible as a means of establishing religion; evangelicals' conversion emphasis made them least reliant on coercion, and their energy made them most likely to act. These forces and beliefs pointed to an all but inevitable conclusion: Irish Protestants, with evangelicals prominent among them, must mount a campaign to convert Irish Catholics to Protestantism. In fact 'campaigns' may be more accurate than 'campaign', because these efforts, gradually gaining momentum until they were running at full throttle by the 1820s, came from diverse origins and had no over-all coordination, but taken together they were a formidable force.

While these events are sometimes called the Second Reformation, one contemporary participant, William Magee, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, saw things differently. 'In truth,' he said in 1825, 'with respect to Ireland, the Reformation may, strictly speaking, be truly said only now to have begun.'⁶¹ Although 'Second Reformation' remains a useful term, Magee made a valid point. Explicitly religious, even theological, conflict became a commonplace of Irish public life as never before, and the contest may justly be called a struggle for the hearts and minds of the Irish people, partly because the quest for religious supremacy was never far removed from the quest for political supremacy.

No issue was more explosive than conversion. Stories of conversions were the very lifeblood of Protestant efforts; denying the stories, or countering them with tales of death-bed returns to Catholicism, were essential for Catholic morale. Most sensitive of all were stories of priests converting. In 1827, after one huge public theological debate (some of these debates ran for days and were attended by thousands, although only a few could actually hear what was said), the Catholic priest involved, Fr Tom Maguire, claimed that the Church of Ireland Archbishop of

Tuam, Power le Poer Trench, had offered him £1000 plus £800 a year if he would convert. The archbishop, denouncing this as an absurd lie, sued Maguire and won £50 damages. As in all such cases, however, ordinary Protestants and Catholics no doubt believed what it suited them to believe.

In 1826 a satirical Catholic publication congratulated a Catholic priest who had converted to the Church of Ireland. 'I hear you have obtained a chaplaincy of £300 a year. A fine thing this – a capital price for an old "turn-coat".' But the author had some advice for the converted priest: do not bother hoping for higher or richer office.

No, no, these are fat things which good Protestants want for themselves; and though the church *endures* such apostates as you, believe me that it suspects their sincerity. ... Enjoy yourself for awhile, and never forget that, like hundreds of your predecessors, you will one day be likely to seek refuge in the church you have abandoned.⁶²

Here were the classic Catholic responses to conversions to Protestantism: the conversion was likely insincere, perhaps for reasons of material advantage, and in any case the so-called convert (sometimes called 'perverts') had probably only temporarily lapsed and would eventually return. To live a Protestant and die a Catholic, that was the best of both worlds.

In all this controversy, conversion and the political control of Catholics were unashamedly linked. Of course evangelicals were not alone in making this connection nor, as we have seen, was it a new idea, but neither were they able to see beyond this conventional wisdom of their day. 'Those who are most under the influence of the word of God,' said Peter Roe, a prominent evangelical preacher, 'are most anxious that its [government's] administration should proceed steadily and uninterrupted – while, on the contrary, those who are unacquainted with, or neglect, or oppose that word, are dissatisfied, turbulent, and rebellious.'⁶³ The implications for dissatisfied, turbulent, and rebellious Irish Catholics were obvious: they would continue in their disaffected state until brought more 'under the influence of the word of God', meaning Protestantism.

Sometimes the connection between conversion and politics could be crude and direct. In 1827, Archbishop Magee required all converts from Catholicism in his diocese to take the oaths of allegiance and supremacy. Lord Farnham, a leading lay evangelical

who founded the Cavan Association for Promoting the Reformation, argued this way:

1. The claims of Irish Catholics must be conceded if they continue in their present strength of numbers.
2. If conceded, the Church Establishment must fall.
3. The separation of Ireland and Britain would follow.⁶⁴

Because maintaining the political status quo depended, from this point of view, upon converting Catholics to Protestantism, conversion inevitably became an explosive politico-religious issue. In 1851 the respected Church of Ireland evangelical leader Henry Irwin expressed his satisfaction with a confirmation service in County Limerick for two hundred converts from Rome, who at the close of the service 'joined in singing an appropriate hymn to the air of our national anthem, which was most judiciously chosen to cast a beam of loyalty over their minds'.⁶⁵ Sound religion and sound politics had become all but indistinguishable in many Protestant minds, and Catholics bitterly resented the political intentions of evangelism. 'The Bible, without note or comment,' said one Catholic pamphleteer, 'is not less a means of Protestant dominion than the Orange Yeoman's military array.'⁶⁶

Efforts to convert Catholics to Protestantism coincided with the Irish famine of 1845-49, to tragic effect. Ironically, if the famine, viewed from a historical perspective, was to have a religious legacy, it probably ought to have been a happy one on balance, insofar as a tragedy of this magnitude can leave any positive legacy. Christians of several churches, Catholic and Protestant, worked heroically and indefatigably – and frequently cooperatively – to relieve suffering. Even though their efforts could not possibly match the scale of need, the consequences of the famine would have been worse without their work.

A conjunction of two factors ensured that cooperative efforts would not be the remembered legacy of famine. First, famine hit hardest in poor, agricultural, and overwhelmingly Catholic regions of the west which were most dependent on the potato, while more prosperous and predominantly Protestant Ulster, with its more diverse economy, was relatively unaffected. This difference in experience of the famine, coming at the same time as intense Protestant efforts to convert Catholics, ensured that service and cooperation would take second place in popular memory to 'souperism': the charge that some Protestants of-

ferred food (usually soup, hence 'souperism') or other material aid to desperate Catholics only on the condition that they convert or, more likely, fulfill some religious condition, perhaps attending a Bible class or worship service. Desmond Bowen's study, *Souperism: Myth or Reality*, demonstrates that clerical co-operation was the norm and that charges of souperism were exaggerated. But they were also extremely difficult to prove or disprove, one person's souperism being another's disinterested benevolence. In 1847 James Collins, Church of Ireland Dean of Killala and a diligent co-worker with the Catholic priest of Killala in the cause of famine relief, was accused of souperism by another Catholic priest in the area. While admitting that Catholics had joined his church, Collins denied souperism, saying that conversions were 'a consequence and not a condition of the relief afforded'.⁶⁷ Such ambiguous stories allowed whatever interpretation the interpreter was inclined to give them.

The characteristic outlook of the evangelical party among Protestants left them particularly wide open to charges of souperism. The 1847 annual report of the Baptist Irish Society affirmed that its primary work was evangelism, not famine relief, and described how the two were related.

Large numbers of the peasantry have offered to join our churches, supposing that thereby they would be provided for. In all such cases they have been told the entrance into the church of Christ is by sincere repentance and faith in Jesus Christ and in him alone. Having first corrected the mistake, the agents have not allowed these children of want to go unrelieved. And, while carefully abstaining from any effort to proselytise, they have not, through fear of misrepresentation, refrained from making known the truth as it is in Jesus, while distributing the bounty of the British churches.⁶⁸

This typically evangelical effort to distinguish between proselytising and evangelising would almost inevitably lead to charges of souperism – as the Baptists apparently realised, judging by the 'fear of misrepresentation' remark – and yet famine relief was far from being merely an occasion to make converts. British churches that gave nothing to the Baptist Irish Society for evangelism gave generously for famine relief. Grey areas abounded in both doctrine and practice.

What can be said with certainty is that resentful memories of souperism long outlived the famine era. From the Reformation

onwards, conversion to Protestantism often held the promise of some material benefit, and long before the famine Catholics were reflexively suspicious that greed was the motive for conversion. The notion of souperism summed up this tradition in an image invested with particular potency because of the total vulnerability of its victims.

The census of 1861 demonstrated that Protestant conversion efforts had failed to alter the religious demography of Ireland – after half a century of intensive labour, the denominational balance remained much as before. Why the Second Reformation failed to make more numerical difference is not clear; some converts no doubt returned to the Catholic Church, others emigrated. What is certain, however, is that conversion efforts did not fail before having considerable impact. Specifically religious conflict became a common feature of Irish public life, and conversion was more contentious than ever. Hoping to convert large numbers of Catholics, the Protestant campaigners were far more successful at revitalising their own Protestant churches; hoping to bequeath to future generations a legacy of social peace, they left behind instead an intensified sectarian animosity.

Separation

Sectarianism both creates and requires separation, to which the Christian churches have contributed greatly. One of the principal areas of separation has been marriage and family life – for the most part Catholics marry Catholics and Protestants marry Protestants. Those who marry across these boundaries have sometimes done so against the wishes of their churches and families, and some have suffered degrees of tension, rejection, and abuse for it. In Ireland, these matters have never been more in the public eye than in the aftermath of Pope Pius X's *Ne Temere* decree of 1907.

Pope Pius issued the decree in order to tidy up some inconsistencies in Catholic marriage law. Among other provisions, *Ne Temere* reaffirmed and applied universally the teaching that 'only those marriages are valid that are contracted before the parish-priest ... and at least two witnesses', and it also added that this condition of validity applied even if one partner was not Catholic. *Ne Temere* came into effect quietly enough in 1908, but it soon became the occasion for enormous sectarian controversy. 'In simple terms,' summarises Fr Eoin de Bhaldraithe in a

study of *Ne Temere*, 'a mixed marriage in Ireland would not be valid in Roman Catholic eyes after *Ne Temere* unless witnessed by the Parish Priest. In practice the Catholic clergy would not officiate unless both parties had promised that all the children would be Catholic.'⁶⁹

In 1910 the implications came to public attention in the celebrated McCann case in Belfast. Alexander McCann was Catholic, his wife Agnes a Presbyterian. They married in her Presbyterian church and had two children before he left with the children in 1910. Protestant and Catholic accounts of the situation had that much in common, but little else.

The Protestant interpretation first came to public attention through the intervention of Agnes McCann's minister, William Corkey, in November 1910. According to Corkey, a happy marriage had been ruined by a meddling priest who told the McCanns that their marriage was invalid in light of *Ne Temere* and would require a proper Catholic ceremony; when Mrs McCann refused, her husband became abusive and finally left her. This story became the subject of sermons, pamphlets, debates in Westminster, and public rallies through Ireland and Scotland. Protestants understood it as confirming their every fear about priestcraft and Romanism: the Catholic church was a domineering, manipulative institution, insinuating itself into all areas of life; since *Ne Temere* allowed for national exceptions which had been granted for Germany but not for Ireland, the McCann case represented the attempt of a hostile foreign power to undermine British law. To Protestants, the whole story provided a cautionary, prophetic parable about life in a home rule Ireland, and Presbyterian historian John Barkley argues that the McCann case was the final nail in the coffin of Presbyterian support for home rule.

Catholics disputed some of the basic facts and derived from them a totally different interpretation. According to a letter from Alexander McCann which was read out in the House of Commons by nationalist MPs, the marriage was always unhappy because Agnes McCann was a sectarian shrew who 'cursed the Pope and sang hymns all day'.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he left her of his own volition and without any prompting from any priest, a claim that gained additional credence when Mrs McCann and her supporters failed to name the priest supposedly involved. Joseph Devlin, nationalist MP for West Belfast, dismissed

Protestant hysteria not only as totally unfounded, but as the manipulation of an unfortunate event for political purposes – he claimed that election posters in his constituency read, 'Will you vote for Devlin and have your Protestant children kidnapped by the Priest?'⁷¹ All parties involved found suitable facts and interpretations, and the effect of the whole affair was to deepen pre-existing convictions and divisions.

Long after the McCann furore died down, *Ne Temere* remained a contentious issue because of its effect on Protestant numbers in the south of Ireland, where Protestants made up only 10 per cent of the population at the time of partition. It was always likely that some Protestants would want to marry Catholics, and the effect of *Ne Temere's* requirement that the Protestant partner consent to raising the children as Catholics was to reduce the Protestant population. Because several factors contributed to declining Protestant numbers, it is difficult to calculate the exact role of *Ne Temere*, but in 1974 a study by Garret FitzGerald, then Foreign Minister of the Irish government, concluded that from 1946 to 1961 the effects of the *Ne Temere* decree caused Protestant population to fall at the rate of 1 per cent per year. In 1970, however, the situation was dramatically improved when the papal decree *Matrimonia Mixta* removed any requirement that the Protestant partner promise that children would be raised Catholic. In 1983 tension was further eased, though far from eliminated, when the Irish Catholic bishops specifically applied *Matrimonia Mixta* to the Irish situation, saying, 'The religious upbringing of the children is the joint responsibility of both parents. The obligations of the Catholic do not, and cannot, cancel out, or in any way call into question, the conscientious duties of the other party.'⁷² The situation of mixed marriages remains difficult, however, both in terms of social pressures and in specifically religious areas such as sharing communion.

Sacred violence, politics as religion

Religion and politics, we have argued in chapter one, are inherently intersecting categories. That intersection need not be problematic and can, we believe, be an enormously positive force. Examples are many, but we would cite the role of religion in the US Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s as a particularly important one. Sociologist David Martin's recent book, *Does Christianity Cause War?*, analyses religion working as a positive

political force in various modes of operation and political contexts.⁷³ The intersection of religion and politics can also be destructive, however, and sectarianism typically involves such an intersection.

No matter how people may define their religion or lack of it, their effective religion is the things they give highest priority, especially those things held as non-negotiable, which will not or cannot be compromised. These commitments may or may not be formally identified as religious, but to the extent that they are non-negotiable, they effectively constitute one's 'religion' – in Christian terms, idolatrous religion, which supplants loyalty appropriately given only to God. This is how political commitments which are not inherently religious or sectarian can come, first, to take on a sacred character in the lives of adherents and, second, to be sectarian when they divide along sectarian lines. One way of measuring the strength of such political commitments is to observe whether they are backed by violence or the threat of violence. In terms of the development of sectarianism in Irish history, the significance of these reflections is that events and ideas leading to the foundation of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State involved both absolutised politics and the use or threat of violence.

For much of the nineteenth century, the political desire of most Irish nationalists had been for home rule for Ireland – effectively a local parliament for local affairs, but still within a United Kingdom framework. Irish unionists had been resisting home rule under the slogan 'Home Rule is Rome Rule.' By 1911, however, home rule legislation was inevitable. In December 1910 a tight general election left Irish nationalists holding the balance of power at Westminster, and the price they exacted for supporting the Liberals was, as always, home rule. Before home rule could be enacted, the House of Lords' veto power had to be removed, because the Lords had vetoed the second Home Rule Bill in 1893, and they certainly would have done so again. With nationalist support and the King's consent, the Lords' veto was duly abolished in August 1911. In April 1912 a third Home Rule Bill began its slow, but this time inexorable, course through parliament.

The years since 1886 and the first Home Rule Bill had done nothing to diminish Ulster unionist opposition to home rule. The issue now was, how far would they go in resisting the legal

imposition of home rule? In 1886 and 1893 the anti-home rule formula had involved an all but seamless joining of political, economic, and religious factors. In the 1910s these remained as before, but now unionists upped the stakes by declaring an absolute commitment to opposing home rule and backing it by threatening and planning for violence.

Already by the autumn of 1911, unionist leader Edward Carson announced to a wildly enthusiastic crowd of over 50,000 Ulster Protestants that he would lead them into self-government should home rule become law. Winston Churchill, then a Liberal cabinet minister, spoke for many when he disdained 'these frothings', believing that 'when the worst comes to the worst we shall find that civil war evaporates in uncivil words.'⁷⁴ As events unfolded, however, Protestant resolve to resist home rule became increasingly undeniable. In addition to providing the personnel for resistance, the Protestant churches also helped to provide legitimacy. On Easter Tuesday 1912, in anticipation of the imminent introduction of the Home Rule Bill, the Unionist Council organised another mass protest rally, this one attended by more than 100,000 people. The event began with prayers offered by the Presbyterian moderator and the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, thus blessing resistance with the support of the two largest Protestant churches. The course of events was heating popular passions, which in the summer of 1912 sometimes spilled over into the well-worn groove of sectarian antagonism. The single worst incident, at a Celtic-Linfield football match in Celtic Park, sent sixty casualties to hospital.

In addition to finding such actions personally abhorrent, Carson thought that they were a waste of energy and politically counter-productive, as they would diminish the unionist cause in the eyes of the world, especially in the eyes of British Conservatives and others whose support the unionists urgently needed. Unionist leaders sought to channel the passions behind sectarian riots by elevating and focusing home rule resistance, casting it in the rubric of the ancient Scottish covenanting tradition. The idea of covenanting enjoyed unrivalled cachet among Presbyterians, because in the 1500s and 1600s, national covenants had been the form whereby Scottish Calvinists joined together, under God, the causes of church and nation in resistance to popery and prelacy, i.e. Catholicism and Anglicanism. These covenants were central to Presbyterian memory and identity.

Now the unionists, Church of Ireland and Nonconformist alike, joined together in the astonishing Presbyterianisation of Ulster Protestantism, formulating the basis of their resistance to home rule in a Solemn League and Covenant for Ulster, which had been submitted to the Protestant churches for editing and approval. For Ulster Protestants, Covenant Day, Saturday, 28 September 1912, was essentially a holy day: work ceased, the day began with congregations meeting for worship, and many processed from worship to the centres where they signed the Covenant. About noon in Belfast City Hall, Carson was the first to sign the Covenant, followed by Lord Londonderry and church representatives. When it was all over 218,206 Ulstermen had signed the Covenant, 228,991 women had signed a parallel Declaration, and resistance to home rule was firmly cast as the cause of God and Ulster.

Seeking in part to circumvent sectarian rioting, unionist leaders had at the same time cast their entire movement in sectarian terms. In the midst of all the overt mingling of politics and religion, perhaps the most chilling element was a single phrase from the Covenant, which committed those who signed it to 'using all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland'.⁷⁵ This was not merely a commitment to the union as a high ideal, or to resisting home rule by any *lawful* means, but resistance by *all means which may be found necessary*. At one stroke, this phrase makes a particular political arrangement absolute and non-negotiable and threatens violence.

The threat was not mere words. Military drilling began spontaneously among some Orange Order lodges, but in January 1913, all the separate efforts were harnessed together in an Ulster Volunteer Force. At first, all this enthusiastic but ill-equipped drilling was the source of mirth for outsiders, but the UVF rapidly became a large, committed, and well-organised force. After April 1914, when a carefully plotted gun-running effort brought in 20,000 rifles and 2,000,000 rounds of ammunition, it was also a well-armed force.

The extent of Ulster Protestant military organisation was an innovation observed with great interest by Irish nationalists, who soon responded in kind. In the midst of a violent labour dispute in the summer of 1913, union leader James Larkin suggested that Dublin workers should follow the Ulster Protestant

example, and one of his deputies organised a UVF-inspired citizen army. The arming of Ulster coincided with Patrick Pearse's transformation from cultural and constitutional nationalist to physical force republican, and the autumn of 1913 found him enthusing about the UVF.

I am glad that the Orangemen have armed, for it is a goodly thing to see arms in Irish hands. ... I should like to see any and every body of Irish citizens armed. We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood.⁷⁶

That same autumn, a force of National Volunteers emerged, explicitly following the UVF example and soon flourishing. In the summer of 1914, the National Volunteers once again followed the UVF example, this time with their own gun-running effort into Howth harbour. In 1916 most UVF members and many from the National Volunteers fought in the British forces against Germany. The Irish Volunteers, a radical splinter group from the National Volunteers, took over the GPO and declared an Irish republic.

Consistent with the French revolution roots of Irish republicanism, the proclamation of a republic on Easter Monday 1916, drafted by Patrick Pearse, was impeccably secular and nonsectarian. On another level, however, Pearse's revolutionary thought throbbed with religious rhetoric and imagery, a heretical union of Christianity and nationalism. In Pearse's thought national freedom was 'like a divine religion' bearing 'the marks of unity, of sanctity, of catholicity, of apostolic succession'; the message of Irish republicanism was a gospel, and the four advocates he admired most – Wolfe Tone, Thomas Davis, John Mitchel, and James Fintan Lalor – were its four evangelists, prophets who spoke the word of the Lord; three deaths resulting from a gun-running episode were a national rebaptism by blood; the impending rising was the exulted 'day of the Lord'. He gave liturgical expression to the 'religion of Irish nationality' in an oath-prayer.⁷⁷

In the name of God,
By Christ His only Son,
By Mary His gentle Mother,

By Patrick the Apostle of the Irish,
 By the loyalty of Colm Cille,
 By the glory of our race,
 By the blood of our ancestors,
 By the murder of Red Hugh,
 By the sad death of Hugh O'Neill,
 By the tragic death of Owen Roe,
 By the dying wish of Sarsfield,
 By the anguished sigh of Fitzgerald,
 By the bloody wounds of Tone,
 By the Noble blood of Emmet,
 By the Famine corpses,
 By the tears of Irish exiles,
 We swear the oaths our ancestors swore,
 That we will free our race from bondage,
 Or that we will fall fighting hand to hand.
 Amen.⁷⁸

None of Pearse's compatriots matched the intensity or consistency of his revolutionary mysticism, and some had no faith at all. But a general Catholic piety – mostly more orthodox than Pearse's – was common among the idealist revolutionaries gathered in the General Post Office. One of Pearse's first acts in the GPO was to summon a priest to hear confession, and the last act of the surrendered men was to say the rosary, beads in one hand, rifles in the other. And Pearse's fusion of Christ's sacrifice and national sacrifice was seductive. Even James Connolly, always the rigorous socialist, required the Pearsean language of Calvary, blood, and redemption to express the meaning of the imminent rising. Such imagery could be applied to the trivial and the profound. In the confusion after the rising, when the mayor of Dublin, a moderate member of the Irish Parliamentary Party suffered a brief false arrest, he 'could use the incident to compare himself to Christ',⁷⁹ observes historian Roy Foster. Terence MacSwiney, the lord mayor of Cork who would die on hunger strike in 1920, reflected on the significance of those republican martyrs who preceded him in dying for the cause of Irish freedom.

[It] is because they were our best and bravest that they had to die. No lesser sacrifice would save us. Because of it our struggle is holy – our battle is sanctified by their blood, and our victory is assured by their martyrdom. We, taking up the

work they left incomplete, confident in God, offer in turn sacrifice from ourselves. It is not we who take innocent blood, but we offer it, sustained by the example of our immortal dead and that Divine example which inspires us all – for the redemption of our country.⁸⁰

No wonder that political scientist Frank Wright argued that 'nationalisms are not merely "like" religions – they are religions.'⁸¹ What might seem a startling claim is transparently plausible in light of the Pearsean tradition of Irish republicanism, and visible as well in other nationalisms. Seán Farrell Moran, author of a study of republican martyrdom, concludes that the influence of Pearse's ideas is the key to understanding IRA violence, which 'is hardly inexplicable terrorism; it functions in a tradition in Western culture which, out of a deep sense of grievance and a hope to institute a new age, will not surrender its notion of the holy and the true.'⁸² The founding events of the modern Irish state found religion, politics, and bloodshed mingled once again.

If the 1920 Government of Ireland Act divided Ireland into two political entities in 1920, it was by no means a clean split or a final settlement. A majority of Irish nationalists could accept the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty as providing a significant measure of immediate benefit and as a basis for pursuing the ideal of a 32-county republic, but a large minority refused to accept the treaty. Sinn Féin, the anti-treaty party, had first lost the treaty vote in the Dáil, then they lost an election divided along treaty/anti-treaty lines, then they lost another election, then they lost a civil war between pro- and anti-treaty forces. But still they persevered in refusing to recognise the Free State government and in maintaining a counter government which they understood as the legitimate government of Ireland. Countess Constance Markiewicz was one Sinn Féin member pragmatic enough to wonder how, despite the elections, despite the civil war, they could claim to be the real, legitimate government of Ireland. Sinn Féin leader Éamon De Valera's answer was concise: 'The people have never a right to do wrong.'⁸³ The voice of the people will matter only when they get the right answer.

This assertion is significant in at least two ways. First, De Valera was a devout and theologically well-informed Catholic, and he could hardly have failed to notice the close similarity between 'the people have never a right to do wrong' and the

doctrine that 'error has no right', the Augustinian notion at the heart of sectarianism in Irish history. Here De Valera transmuted 'error has no right' into a directly political principle. Second, by invoking 'the people have never a right to do wrong', De Valera put the goal of a thirty-two county republic beyond negotiation. The longed for republic thus became a quasi-religious object, a political commitment on equal standing with unionism's absolute rejection of home rule, 'by all means which may be found necessary'. Such a view of the republic would have a long life. If the IRA never used the words 'the people have never a right to do wrong', the logic was ever-present, behind the archaic insistence that the IRA army council is the legitimate government of Ireland and above all, until 1994, behind the maintenance of a violent campaign without a popular mandate.

'The people have never a right to do wrong', 'by all means which may be found necessary': similar and absolutist rationales for contesting political ideals, and the roots of a sectarian political culture which finds compromise a difficult skill to learn.

Conclusion

By such means – subtle and crude, direct and convoluted – were the roots of sectarianism propagated in Irish history. If an account of them suggests the weight of history, it should also suggest hope. First, an historical account shows that sectarianism, while the product of powerful forces, was not inevitable. It resulted from concrete choices people made, and which they might have made differently. We cannot undo the past, but we can make different choices now to shape a different future. Understanding those past choices can suggest what it might mean to choose differently now. Second, while one can draw links, more and less direct, between the historical roots of sectarianism and their current manifestations, in no case is the same dynamic present in precisely the same way today. In every case, in fact, the current situation is an improvement on the past cases presented here. We pointed to the poisonous influence of the doctrine that 'error has no right'; over the past century, almost all Christian churches have repudiated that doctrine. One can still see examples of 'identity in opposition', but the ecumenical movement and other vehicles for improved relations between churches have significantly undermined it. While the kind of absolutised politics that

yields nationalism-as-religion is still visible, developments in both religion and politics have pushed it off centre stage. Ordinary Catholics and Protestants are far less likely to endorse such stances than they were a century ago. These and other changes are reasons for gratitude and hope. They are also reasons to seek further what it will mean and require to move beyond sectarianism.