History and the Shaping of Irish Protestantism

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'History has mauled Ireland, but if we can prove ourselves able to learn from it, we may once again find ourselves in a position to teach'.
James Downey, *Them and Us: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Question, 1969-1982*, (Dublin, 1983)

The History

In a world filled with insurgent ethnic groups the importance of the role of 'peoples' in world development is being increasingly recognized in our day, and Arnold Toynbee has gone so far as to argue "it is the only intelligible unit of historical study".[1] The Protestants of Ireland have until now formed a people unit with a strong sense of identity based on a configuration of political and religious symbols by which they explain their history. The social orders in both north and south which have long nurtured them are changing rapidly, however, and as a people they are now suffering from what in modern jargon is called 'an identity crisis'. They are confused with their self-image, the understanding of themselves historically, and their relationship with other peoples, which has traditionally given them their identity. This paper addresses itself to this crisis, suggesting that a new consideration of Irish Protestant historical development might be of value to them in both self-understanding, and in terms of what they might contribute to the world as a consequence of their unique historical experience.

History has so shaped Irish Protestantism that to many outside observers its religious expression seems fossilized, caught up in passions that seem more appropriate to the seventeenth century, the age of religious wars in European history. In the face of such criticism the usual Irish Protestant response is to argue that though historical experience has shaped their own or any other presentation of the Christian faith, yet their cultural expression is based on the theology of the early church and the fathers of the Reformation era. They would agree with Paul Ricoeur that: "Religion is the 'ideological' side of faith in an absolutely primitive, foundational and fundamental sense of the word"[2] and they would not take kindly to suggestions of the need for religious or ideological reconsideration of their faith.

Lack of appreciation of the particularist presentation of the Christian

faith found in Ireland is nothing new, however. Following the golden age of the Celtic Church, the time when the teaching of Ireland's 'saints and scholars' gave so much to the western world, Irish churchmen tended to withdraw from the universal mission of the church. In fact, following the Danish and Norman invasions they became socially and culturally xenophobic, far removed in their religious practice from the mainstream of European development. Ideas of universal mission under the Providence of God were long forgotten, and the church seemed threatened with assimilation by the barbaric culture of the eternally warring tribal people on the island. So real was this danger that from the twelfth century onward reformers like Malachy and members of new religious orders devoted themselves to trying to bring a spirit of revival among Irish Christians, and to having them once more support the mission of the universal church.

This did not mean that the retrograde expression of the Christian faith which was accepted by the people of medieval Ireland was lacking in vitality. In fact the opposite was true, and only too easily the reforming ideals of Cluny, or the Cistercians, or the mendicant orders were assimilated by the Irish, absorbed into their primitive insular religious expression, without significantly changing the symbiotic relationship the church had with the barbarian culture in which it existed. The result of this was that Irish churchmen in the middle ages showed remarkably little interest in religious, political, social, legal, scientific or any other kind of cultural development. Ireland did not boast a university, the Renaissance had almost no influence, and by the time of the Reformation the church in Ireland was one of the most decadent in Europe. Perhaps its most significant feature was the deep division between the descendants of the Celts and those of the Anglo-Irish, both of whom strove for supremacy in church and society, caught up in tribal struggles and oblivious to what was developing in the universal church: "if the Irish mind was dwelling in the ninth century, the Anglo-Irish mind was still in the thirteenth or fourteenth".[3]

Neither of the Irish peoples were to be left in their state of atavistic isolation, however, for the focus of the great European power struggle in the Reformation period shifted from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic world. In strategic terms, Ireland, which had been freshly garrisoned by the Tudors was looked upon as the far western bastion of the nothern and Protestant line of battle. Spanish Catholic power could not resist trying to invade Ireland, to turn the flank of the Reformation, and both English and Scottish authorities determined to resist this threat by increasing their garrisons on the island. There had been Irish friars and a bishop with Fitzmaurice when he came from Spain to Dingle in 1579 "to deliver Ireland from both heresy and tyranny",[4] and there had been Irish priests aboard the Armada ships. By the time of the O'Neill rebellion it was clear to the authorities in London and Dublin that Roman Catholicism was not only of value to the 'wilde Irish' because it brought them continental reinforcement politically, but also because it united them with those of the old Anglo-Irish who resented the adventurers and planters who were coming

to the island.

The age when continental involvement in Irish affairs was greatest was the seventeenth century, when the ferocious spirit of Europe's religious struggle was added to the already bitter division between the majority Roman Catholic Irish and the minority Protestant new settlers. From the time of the papal nuncio Rinuccini who came to organize the Roman Catholic Irish following the massacres of 1641, until the coming of Protestant and Catholic generals who had fought in Europe's Thirty Years' War, followed then by Cromwell's army, the land was devastated and the people more and more bitterly divided as soldiers caught up in the political/religious hysteria of the time displayed little of Christian justice or mercy.

The Catholic historian Daniel-Rops has admitted that the spirit of the mid-seventeenth century Counter-Reformation can "hardly claim our admiration":

> Up to the end of the century, and even beyond, the old ideal of fighting heresy with every possible weapon was maintained . . . Under an imperial·edict of 1 February, 1650, any non-Catholic discovered in Bohemia after 15 March of that year was liable to death or life imprisonment.[5]

One Protestant body which was decimated by the armies of the Duke of Savoy, reportedly with the aid of Irish Catholic soldiers, was the Waldenses who tried to survive a thirty-year campaign of extermination by taking refuge in the upper valleys of the Alps. News of their suffering reached Cromwell's soldiers in Ireland, who raised a fund for the refugees, many of whom were offered land in Ireland.[6] Though the Waldenses did not come, two groups of refugees from continental Catholic persecution, the French Huguenots and German Palatines came to Ireland only to find themselves confronted with Catholic enemies whom even the nuncio Rinuccini had found to be singularly barbarous and cruel.[7]

The European dimension of Ireland's seventeenth century political/religious struggle was most clearly revealed when the battles of the Boyne and Aughrim were fought by international Roman Catholic and Protestant armies. Among the Danish, Dutch, German and French soldiers who fought for William of Orange was a terrible hatred of Roman Catholicism which had done so much to reinforce the oppression of Spanish and French armies during and after the Thirty Years' War. Many of them settled in Ireland and it was not to be expected that the descendants of these people, men like Jacques Labadie who was acting as chaplain to Marshal Schomberg when the old Huguenot general died at the Boyne, would show understanding or toleration of Roman Catholicism. Labadie himself became Dean of Killaloe, and wherever a Labadie, a Crommelin, a Dubourdieu, a La Touche, a Barré, a Lefanu, a Lefroy or a Maturin served the Protestant establishment of church or state in Ireland his religious and political views were shaped by the stories of Huguenot persecution upon which he had been nurtured as a child. Descendants of the powerful seventeenth century

Huguenot preacher, Jacques Saurin, included James Saurin, Bishop of Dromore from 1819-1842, and William Saurin, Attorney General for Ireland from 1807-1822. These bigoted men represented only a minority in Irish Protestantism, but they influenced others when they served the Church of Ireland in Dublin, Cork, Waterford, Carlow, Kilkenny, Portarlington and Lisburn. The Irish Huguenots were as important ideologically in Protestantism as they were socially when they produced the first literary journal in the land, or economically when they encouraged silk and linen manufacturing.[8]

Although the remnant of Huguenots who remained behind in France continued to suffer persecution in the eighteenth century, the advocacy of religious toleration by Voltaire and the other philosophers of the Enlightenment had considerable influence throughout Europe, and even in Ireland. The effect of this religious latitudinarianism was considerable. The Irish Roman Catholics remained loyal during the Jacobite rising of 1745, and after the death of the Old Pretender the political and religious animosities of the preceding century seemed to be disappearing. Even among the Palatines, who had suffered so much at the hands of the Catholics, indifferentism grew in their settlements around Limerick. Assimilation into the local population increased, and only the Palatine responsiveness to the preaching of the first Wesleyan missionaries, which reinforced their earlier Calvinist faith, held up this social process.[9] Bigotry also began to wane among the Roman Catholics when it was clear that in religious affairs, at least, no more than lip service was paid to the Penal Laws. By the end of the century, as democratic and liberal ideas were brought in from America and France, it seemed as if the concept of religious toleration characteristic of the Age of Reason was about to put an end to the traditional and bitter political and religious struggle between Ireland's Catholics and Protestants. Even in Protestant Ulster influential voices were raised among churchmen to advocate full Roman Catholic emancipation. No one objected to Catholic clergy marching in siege of Derry anniversary processions, nor to their joining in thanksgiving for the blessings of the Protestant constitution which had delivered them from tyranny.[10]

This is not to imply that toleration of Roman Catholicism, or sympathy for the plight of the majority people was anything more than an indication that ideological latitudinarianism had at least some influence among Irish Protestants. Though the Presbyterians during the eighteenth century continually resented the prerogatives of the Church of Ireland, its leaders were loathe to press their differences far enough for a real division to take place among Protestants. They were never happy about the policy of preaching in Irish promoted by Narcissus Marsh, or Benjamin Pratt, Provost of Trinity College and then Dean of Down. Not only was it "a means to convert the natives and bring them over to the Established Church"[11], but it implied a lessening of the traditional 'apartheid' between the Catholic and Protestant peoples. As Rev. John Abernethy, Minister of Antrim warned the bishops, Presbyterians and Anglicans had to avoid

anything contentious which would "weaken the Protestant interest in a country where the Papists are vastly superior in strength and numbers to Protestants of all persuasions".[12]

Liberal Protestants could indicate that Roman Catholicism was no more than a medieval expression of the faith that had no authority in the age of Reason, popish doctrines were silly and erroneous, and nothing was to be feared from the papacy politically. Yet whenever talk of toleration was pushed too far in Ireland the parliament echoed with "mighty noise" about the threat to the Williamite settlement posed by "tories and rapparees".[13] Commissioner John Beresford reminded Isaac Barré in 1782 that Ireland "with a majority of popish inhabitants" lay near several popish countries, and the Protestants could never relax their anxious vigilance when Irish Roman Catholics might once more become insurgent.[14] Enlightened landlords, even in Ulster, on occasion helped with the building of chapels and schools for the majority people but by the end of the eighteenth century, even before news of the atrocities in Wexford in '98, it was clear that only a minority of Protestants were willing to share their political and ecclesiastical blessings with the Roman Catholics.[15]

Catholic Emancipation was one significant sign of the spirit of reform which influenced Westminster legislation, and during the early years of the nineteenth century the Irish Protestants became aware of how little protection was really offered to them by the Act of Union. By the time of the tithe war in the 1830's they had begun to consider themselves a people under siege. The government seemed unable to contain violence in the countryside, while at the same time it was willing to grant ever more concessions to Daniel O'Connell and his followers, like the Church Temporalities Act of 1833 which began the dismemberment of the Established Church. Their anxiety increased even more during the Repeal Years when O'Connell's policy of threatening violence in the age of his monster meetings won more and more concessions from the government in London.

During the mid-century years, especially the decade immediately following the Famine, English Evangelicalism provided largely unasked for ideological and financial reinforcement of a new policy of proselytizing among the Roman Catholics.[16] Few Protestants any longer shared in the old belief that the Church of Ireland could have a civilizing role in Irish society as a whole, however, and no one was greatly surprised when the census of 1861 indicated that there had been no dramatic increase in the number of Protestants in either the Established Church or in Nonconformity. The Protestants in both church and state knew well that Irish Roman Catholicism, inspired by the Ultramontanist spirit brought to Ireland by Paul Cullen, who became Ireland's first cardinal, was winning the cultural battle between the two political/religious traditions. Supported indirectly by reformers in the British government, especially representatives of English Nonconformity at the time of Disestablishment, Cullen was to keep up the pressure initiated by O'Connell earlier in the century. Slowly

the social and cultural positions of the two peoples began to change. Gone now was the old confidence that the superior culture of the Protestants could absorb the masses set free from "Romish corruptions" and the "errors of popery".[17] Cullen's great victory was the disestablishment and disendowment of the Church of Ireland, and a dramatic retreat by Irish Protestants from public life which was now left to the nurturing authority of resurgent Roman Catholicism.

After 1870 the withdrawal of Irish Protestantism into a religious and cultural ghetto was general, except in Ulster where the majority of the people in the north-east counties supported reformed churches. It still contributed creative leadership through individuals who chose to transcend the values of the Protestant political/religious tradition, yet by the end of the century a movement like Home Rule had become anathema to most Protestants who, in the words of Douglas Hyde were "ceasing to be Irish without becoming English".[18] At the same time as they carried out this cultural withdrawal their religious formularies, even in the Church of Ireland, increasingly promoted ideas redolent of the seventeenth rather than the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The new constitution of the post-Disestablishment voluntary Church of Ireland, for example, stated:

> *The Church of Ireland as a reformed and Protestant church doth hereby re-affirm its constant witness against all those innovations in doctrine and worship whereby the Primitive faith hath been from time to time defaded or overlaid, and which at the Reformation this church did disown and reject.*[19]

In the last decades of the nineteenth century most Protestants were united, in varying degrees, to a defence of what was left of their increasingly threatened ascendancy culture.

Henry Cooke had prepared Irish Nonconformity to welcome the adherents of the Church of Ireland into a Protestant political and religious alliance, based on the strong reformed church culture found in Ulster, and in the post-Disestablishment era more and more Protestant energy was dissipated in strident condemnation of politically resurgent Roman Catholicism. It was, Protestants believed, directed by the priests who were intent upon seeking a new Gaelic and Vatican controlled ascendancy in the land. The free church of Ireland produced brilliant minds during the post-Disestablishment period of Protestant reorganization, but a disproportionate amount of their time and energy was spent decrying the external evil of the Roman Church and its intentions in Ireland. George Salmon, the talented Provost of Trinity College, produced in 1888 his best known work, *Infallibility of the Church*, which was a defence of Protestant principles against Roman Catholic triumphalist claims. John Henry Bernard who guided the Church of Ireland as both Archbishop of Dublin and Provost of Trinity College during the difficult years when the new state was being created in the south also wasted much of his creative energies on sterile ecclesiastical apologetic. The very gifted Archbishop of Dublin, J. A. F. Gregg, continued this passionate interest in defending the spiritual

prerogatives of the Church of Ireland, endeavouring to assert its authority in terms that belonged to an age that was long past. Little concern was shown for affairs outside of Ireland, apart from a promotion of reformed churches in Iberia, and even the theology of the Irish Protestants was presented in very traditional terms. It is interesting to note that when a centenary volume praising Church of Ireland achievements since Disestablishment was published recently by a group of Irish ecumenists none of the essays was concerned with the theological thought of the last hundred years.[20]

This inward-looking tendency was also found in Irish Nonconformity,[21] especially the Presbyterians whose territorial base in north-east Ulster was so close to Calvinist Scotland from which their anscestors had first come. Scotland in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was filled with theological controversy and Scottish Presbyterian disputes only too often were imported into Ireland. There the various groups of Presbyterians spent an inordinate amount of time and energy "maintaining their distinctness from one another and from everybody else".[22] Apart from such theological party in-fighting, the chief connection the Presbyterians seemed to have with other Protestant bodies outside Ireland was their enthusiasm to welcome the kind of religious revivalism which appeared in Ulster in 1859. This was a phenomenon which appeared simultaneously among reformed churchmen as widely disparate as Protestants in North America and Hutterites in the Ukraine. This revivalism when it manifested itself in Ireland was welcomed as a sign of spiritual renewal in a community which was increasingly defensive as the power of Roman Catholicism continued to grow. Ireland, for example, excitedly welcomed evangelical preachers like Dwight Moody and Ira Sankey in 1870, at a time when Cardinal Cullen, in an outburst of triumphalism following Disestablishment was holding "a *Te Deum* for the downfall of the old church of Elizabeth".[23]

On one level, because of their Ulster territorial land-base, the Presbyterians were less anxious about the coming Roman Catholic ascendancy than were their southern counterparts who felt culturally and religiously besieged by the indifferent or resentful majority people in southern Ireland. After all they had chased Daniel O'Connell out of the north and kept out agitators like Jack Lawless, the political/religious conservatism of Henry Cooke had overcome the liberalism of Henry Montgomery and his followers, and there was almost no Ulster enthusiasm for Home Rule. The kind of intransigence associated with the Orange Order came to its height in the years immediately before World War 1, and cries of 'No Surrender' and 'Not an inch' seemed equally applicable to ideas of political as they were to issues of religious principle.

The result of the Pan-Protestant anti-Roman Catholic political/religious alliance in Ulster after partition was the growth of a kind of cultural 'apartheid' which became a way of life. Protestants bred separately from their Catholic neighbours, worked separately, and developed a culture filled

with religious symbolism which expressed a very particular interpretation of their historical development. On every level they competed with their ever-increasing non-Protestant neighbours, and argued that if they did not maintain their cultural ascendancy then Ulster Protestants would suffer the fate of their southern counterparts who were being assimilated into the Roman Catholic society in the Republic at the rate of about 25% a generation.[24] By the middle decades of the twentieth century less and less time was being spent on theological disputation, comparatively little interest was shown in the growth of a social gospel which was so important to churchmen outside Ireland, ecumenism was largely ignored, and more and more Protestant energy was poured into supporting the survival of a culture which seemed particularly enamoured of the religious outlook of past generations.

Unfortunately for Irish Protestantism, churchmen outside Ireland, especially in the present day, have been prone to ignore the exemplary witness to Christian life presented by most of its people. Both within Ireland, in the midst of terrible violent provocation, and without, in terms of missionary witness by medical doctors, teachers and others, the Irish Protestant contribution to the spiritual work of the universal church has been magnificent. This has been overlooked only too often however as the horror of the religious and political struggle in Ulster continues and some Protestant political leaders have been presented to the outside world by the media as demagogues whose reactions seem characteristic of the seventeenth rather than the twentieth century. The threat of southern Irish Catholic and cultural imperialism, which is so real to the northern Protestants is not appreciated, nor is their patient bearing of terrible affliction at the hands of terrorists. Irish Protestants are commonly dismissed as a tenaciously conservative people, living in a religious and cultural ghetto of their own making, and delighting in the sectarian strife of other ages. The themes displayed by their banners during the marching season, and the militant hectoring presentation of their case made by some of their spokesmen contribute to the impression that they are a people willing to resort to every secular weapon in their struggle to give substance to the cry 'what we have we hold'. At worst, the world's press presents them as an arrogant ascendancy people still trying to bully the native Irish whom their ancestors first dispossessed in the age of Europe's religious wars. When Gordon McMullen, the present day Church of Ireland Bishop of Clougher attended an international colloquium on Northern Ireland in the summer of 1982 he was greatly disturbed to find that many representatives of the Reformed and other churches at the conference viewed Irish Protestants as unreasonable, intolerant and aggressive to a marked degree, as they perpetuated civil and religious oppression in Ulster.[25]

However misguided may be this outside opinion on the part of people who know nothing of Irish history and are apt to dismiss Irish Protestants as misguided bigots, it needs to be reckoned with, and a way forward found to present a truer picture of the religious life of Ireland's reformed

churchmen. We must now consider how, in terms of Protestant thought, they have arrived at this point in history, and how their churches may out of their historical experience make a spiritual contribution of hope that is so needed in our fear-ridden and despairing world.

The Shaping

The immediate reaction of Irish Protestants to outside criticism of their expression of the Christian faith is usually a shrug of the shoulders, and a reply which indicates their belief that few people understand the unrelenting nature of the attack made upon them by Roman Catholic cultural imperialists and their nationalist allies. It has existed since the seventeenth century and Irish Protestants have no intention of giving up what to them is a justified struggle for liberty of religious and cultural expression. As for the charge that at least the political aspect of their intransigent expression of Protestantism is not even Christian they are apt to appeal to what Paul Tillich has called "the Protestant principle"; a protest against any human judgment which seeks to limit, circumscribe, or even define the will of God for others.[26]

Yet behind this xenophobic rejection of criticism from other churchmen is a deep quiet anxiety among many Irish Protestants for they know now that they seem particularly outside the mainstream of Christian development. Their religious life and culture is judged as insular, peculiarly introverted, and is misunderstood by most other churchmen. They are concerned that if there is even partial truth in what is said by their critics then their political/religious ideology may truly be a distortion of the faith of their fathers. It is this lingering doubt that is encouraging an identity crisis in Irish Protestantism.

Obsessive concern with religious, ecclesiastical, and cultural survival by groups of Christians is nothing new in the history of the church. Some of the Old Testament prophets had protested against Israel's tendency to view God as a tribal deity, and one of the strengths of the early church was its universalism which rejected old ideas of Jewish particularism. When particularism arose in the church among people like the Donatists, St. Augustine and others protested the attempt by these rigorist Christians to withdraw from the mainstream of development of the church, and to proclaim God's peculiar interest only in their religious and cultural expression of the faith.

This is not to deny any value to particularism in religious expression, for surely the assertion of a singular interpretation of the faith lies at the very heart of Protestantism. The spiritual vitality of the parts of the church must be encouraged,as much as the well-being of the whole. Yet there is always the danger, as the history of the church reveals, that a particular religious expression can evolve into a form which is so far removed from the mainstream of development that it distorts the essence of the faith which first encouraged it.

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The seventeenth century which has been so important in the shaping of Irish Protestantism also encouraged idealistic Calvinists to leave the Low Counties, France and Germany to found their version of the Kingdom of God upon earth in distant South Africa. When they settled in South Africa these Afrikaner people believed themselves to be in particular covenant with God. Their descendants made their Great Trek into the wilderness to ensure their religious and cultural survival believing that the Providence of God was peculiarly with them, even as it was when they won their great victory over the Zulus at Blood River in 1838. Similarly, when John Winthrop and his English followers sailed to Massachusetts on the *Arbella* in 1630 they were convinced their 'Errand Into the Wilderness' was at God's command. They were particularly in covenant with the deity and in a remarkable sermon on board the ship Winthrop told them they must not fail in their attempt to build a visibly Christian settlement in the New World, or they would become: "a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speak evill of the wayes of God and all professours for God's sake".[27]

The church universal, however, has not been uncritical of what these zealous Protestant people encouraged in their particular expressions of the Christian faith. They had peculiar ideas of justice and mercy, like most seventeenth century Christians, and they never doubted that the Providence of God was for the Afrikaner rather than the Zulu, or the Puritan rather than the Indian—just as their Calvinist cousins in Ireland had no doubt God was with the Protestant planter rather than the papist Irishman he dispossessed.

Whatever the temptation to interpret the Providence of God in tribal deity terms most Christians accept that scripture, on the whole, does not allow such an accommodation. The New Testament insists that the first fruits of the coming Kingdom are not to be revealed to any one historical people. Rather the good news is to be brought to the blind, comfort to the fearful, and challenge to the rich. There seems to be in the New Testament a bias towards those who lose out in history, and Jesus had much to say about God's Providence for the poor, the meek, the mourners, the merciful, the peacemakers, the persecuted, and those who long for righteousness in an unjust world.

St. Augustine in his *De Civitate Dei* understood this universal view of God's Providence which was accepted by the faithful, those who sojourned in this world yet were citizens of the Heavenly City. Resident aliens in time and space, set apart from their fellow men by their 'holy yearning', they live in hope, fighting despair as they try to exercise the whole range of loves of which men are capable in their period of history. They do not seek to create any utopia or purely earthly fulfillment in history, nor to reverence any human cause or worldly culture. They serve a higher loyalty, the Providence of God, and they accept that as they live in the City of God they will have continuing conflict with those who manage the affairs of this world. Their trials will continue until the return of Christ whose judgment

will bring to an end the mingling of the citizens of the City of God and the City of Man in history. Until then the Christian lives proleptically in the Kingdom in history "happy in the present time by hope".[28]

This idea of the universal Providence of God has not been understood, nor easily accepted by many religious people. They have tended to identify the Providence of God with the needs of the particular people to whom they belong, and to invoke the blessing of the deity upon whatever earthly Zion they themselves have created in history. In fervent piety they have praised the Almighty who is redeeming the world through the agency of their political, religious, ecclesiastical or cultural creation. They have also joined in their criticism of metaphysical thought, such as that of St. Augustine, offered by secular thinkers since the time of Voltaire and the Marquis de Condorcet. Eschatological ideas of God's Providence being with all men in their pilgrim history have been replaced by faith in the perfectibility and progress of men—usually of one tribe or folk, at the expense of others.

In our own age, however, we are being compelled to consider the historical fate of all men, as more and more thinkers consider the progress of mankind in apocalyptic or eschatological terms. They share the pessimism of the great prophet of Nihilism, Friederich Nietzsche, who proclaimed a hundred years ago that there was little to be hoped for, even from the churches:

The waters of religion retreat and leave behind pools and bogs.
Never was the world worldlier, never was it emptier of love and
goodness . . . everything prepares us for the coming barbarism.[29]

Professional historians, political scientists, economists, sociologists and others looking at the world see a nuclear arms race by the superpowers, an ever increasing world population, diminishing natural resources, and no human agency able to control an economic order which is encouraging a desperate struggle for survival among peoples. Everywhere men's hearts are failing them for fear.

Yet hope is now being expressed once more by some churchmen who again are proclaiming that the God of the Bible is very much the God of history. American Catholic bishops, presenting the church as a Christian community of moral discourse, concerned with the affairs of all men, have joined in a growing Christian protest over the drift to nuclear war.[30] The New Year's message of the Canadian Catholic bishops in 1983 has criticized the economic policies of their civil government which does not recognize that: "the cries of the poor and powerless are the voice of Christ, the Lord of History in our midst".[31] In South Africa dissident white Afrikaner churchmen have protested the too close identification of the White Dutch Reformed Church with nationalist culture, and have called for repentance which will lead the church to show forth the Kingdom of God to all men in history: "The church has a wonderful opportunity to be God's experimental garden in the world."[32] The true mission of the church is to proclaim in history, to 'make manifest' in time, the Kingdom of God which is coming into being in the midst of a world filled with despair.[33]

At a time when the threat of 'omnicide' is very real there is less interest now being shown in the anti-historical theologies of thinkers like Karl Barth who were criticized for not taking seriously the implications of the Incarnation.[34] Once more the churches are talking about the Providence of God, the assurance that men in despair hunger for; the conviction that with them in history is "some eternal greatness incarnate in the passage of temporal fact".[35] They can only hope to advance into an open-ended future where there will be creativity and not destruction, love and not hate, when they know that God is with them: "the great companion—the fellow sufferer who understands".[36] The task of the church is neither to lose its soul by merging its cause with some secular ideology, nor to encourage the faithful to look out from this world in pseudo-piety. The church is to give man hope by showing forth for all men the first fruits of the coming Kingdom.

This eschatological presentation of the Gospel is a far more sophisticated theology than the nineteenth century European faith in the Providence of God which was so easily accepted by some intellectuals. The historian Leopold Von Ranke was so sure of the role of the deity in history that he could say: "in all history God dwells, lives, is to be seen. Every deed demonstrates Him, every moment preaches his name".[37] After Auschwitz, Hiroshima, or the continuing agony in Ulster, however, this sanguine belief is difficult to accept. On the other hand modern man can relate to the idea of what Herbert Butterfield called "the subtle in history".[38] When there are too many human inner contradictions in history Providence will intervene; regardless of the nature of tragic human conflict, or catclysm which drives men to despair, a new creative complexity can emerge other than what men had expected. Good will can be brought out of evil, reconciliation out of tragic hatred, deliverance out of hopelessness. People who think in these terms are, on the one hand, reverently agnostic about the capacities of the human mind to encompass all factors, command all complexities, manage all human miscalculations, cope with the unforeseen, or handle uncontrollable change. On the other hand they have faith that God's Providence is operative in the historical process, that there is:

> . . . that kind of history making which goes on, so to speak, over our heads, now deflecting the results of our actions, now taking our purposes out of our hands, and now turning our endeavours to ends not yet realized.[39]

The history of the church is full of examples where what Christians would call the Providence of God has persuaded men to rediscover hope in the midst of despair, to become in their generation part of "a many-sided effort to answer certain existential predicaments which confront every human being".[40] During the ferocious European religious wars of the seventeenth century 30,000 out of 35,000 villages in Bohemia were destroyed, the population of Wurtemberg was reduced from 400,000 to 48,000 and even the zealots of the age were silent before the sheer savagery of Johann Tilly's sacking of Magdeburg in 1631. By the last years of the

Thirty Years' War marching and counter-marching Catholic and Protestant armies had reduced by half the popualtion of much of Europe. It seemed beyond hope that this age of passion could ever be succeeded by one of increasing religious toleration. Yet it was. On one level historians can say this was a natural reaction, but it came about because throughout Europe 'like a seed growing secretly' ordinary men and women who otherwise were historically unimportant began to respond to some inner 'subtle influence' and to practice religious toleration. *Sub specie aeternitatis* these unknown saints were much more important in history than the princes and prelates who were swept up in the savagery of the age. The age of religious wars passed only when more and more people began to live proleptically in the state of peace which in their hearts they knew was coming. They began to view history as a process where Providence would encounter human aberration and overcome man's disorder.

Ireland's tragedy was that because of its insularity, and its prolonged time of religious warfare, it was not easy for people to respond to ideas of religious toleration which appeared in so many parts of the continent and in England in the eighteenth century. Recognition that deliverance from bigotry was possible by a response to the 'subtle in history' was not easily accepted by a conservative people who refused to believe that the Providence of God was concerned for the development of all men, not just those who belonged to a particular political/religious culture. People in Ireland were simply unable to shake off the atavistic religious passions of the seventeenth century which still had the power of resurrecting suspicion and hatred when any time of crisis brought Catholics and Protestants into confrontation. To the wonder of so many Christians outside Ireland this state of political/religious bondage is still found among some Catholics and Protestants alike, effectively denying them hope of spiritual evolution.

The Way Forward

As Irish Protestants increasingly find themselves isolated from the concerns of the rest of the Christian church, they find it difficult to apologize for what is dismissed as a fossilized version of the faith by impatient critics who know little of their history—even during the last fourteen years of siege. Some culturally xenophobic members of their churches can reject such judgments as based solely on ignorance, but other Irish Protestants are going through thoughtful re-appraisal as they question the value of some of their seventeenth century attitudes. The basis of their political and cultural power is steadily being eroded, and this, coupled with unease about how their religious outlook can be justified, has brought upon them a major questioning of much of their religious life.

I would suggest that a new identity can be found by Irish Protestants through recognition that the Providence of God can once more give them hope of moving out of their religious and cultural isolation, to become a seminal element in the mainstream of Christian development—the

movement towards the coming Kingdom. To accomplish this they need theological persuasion, however, and perhaps that can be provided through a renewed interest in a neglected teaching of the great father of the Reformation whose concepts have been so important in the shaping of Irish Protestant thought. This is John Calvin, parts of whose theology have been used in seventeenth century fashion to justify Irish Protestant isolationism and sectarianism. Often Calvin's thought has been interpreted solely in terms of the particularist ideas found in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* which were written when he was still a young man. A fuller insight into his mature thought is provided in his later biblical commentaries, however, as these were composed during the years of struggle he spent in Geneva trying to establish what was to him a godly order, for the ultimate benefit of all men. It is in these writings that Calvin had much to say about the Providence of God, historical development and eschatological hope.

Luther had recognized God as Lord of History, but had insisted that the deity was concealed behind his "play", his "mummery", his "joust and tourney", and man had a hard time to recognize his Providence. Calvin on the other hand stressed the role of God's Providence in man's history. Even in the *Institutes* he stressed that God was not "the empty, idle" God of the medieval scholastics, one who "reposes idly as in a watchtower". Rather he was "watchful, effective, active" and engaged in "ceaseless activity". He regulated everything on earth by his Providence, and "nothing takes place without His deliberation". His power was "constantly exerted on every distinct and particular movement".[41] Just as the ancient Hebrews and other people of God had been delivered in times past so God was now with the faithful as they sought to serve Him in their history. It was this conviction of the abiding Providence of God with them that enabled the sturdy Calvinist frontiersmen of the seventeenth century in South Africa, America or Ireland to persevere in their attempts to build godly 'plantations' which would influence the very direction of historical development.[42]

In a well-known letter to Cardinal Sadoleto in 1539 Calvin specifically dismissed the erroneous interpretation which was to become so prevalent — the idea that Christian life was to be concerned only with individual salvation. God was not only with his people, said Calvin, but he wished to use them to build his Kingdom here on earth. They were not to be caught up in the worldly affairs of men, but rather they were to have 'contempt' for the values of this world. This 'contempt' was not of value in itself, as the teaching of Thomas à Kempis or other medieval pietists had suggested, but it was to be a discipline, a means of living in the Kingdom now, to show forth in history what was coming. They were to live on the spiritual frontiers of man's religious and cultural development, until the end of history and the return of Christ. Calvin bluntly told Sadoleto that the Christian must "ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul".[43] In the words of a contemporary writer, Calvin wished his followers to adopt:

. . . a dynamic approach which sees the Church waging war to
transform the realm of historical existence more into the likeness
of the Father's will in Christ; God is building his Kingdom in this
world and through the history of this world.[44]

R. H. Tawney believed that it was this religious ideology which made
the Calvinists as much a revolutionary force in earlier times as Marxists have
been in the twentieth century.[45] Theirs was, in the words of Ernst
Troeltsch, an "heroic faith",[46] as they overcame evil in this world, and
promoted the coming of the Kingdom of God upon earth—the Kingdom
that was coming for all men. In Calvin's own words:

We now begin to be reformed in the image of God by his spirit so
that the complete renewal of ourselves and the whole world may
follow in its own time.[47]

In Marxist terminology Calvin calls the faithful to the exercise of Christian
praxis. They are to live lives of sacrificial love in history refusing to accept
as ultimate the authorities and values of the culture in which they pass their
earthly sojourn. Their spiritual struggle to overcome in this world is part
of a cosmic process:

The conflict of God's Kingdom and the struggle with daemonic
powers which occurs within the dimensions of the theatre of history
is mirrored in the spiritual experience of every single Christian.[48]

The 'heroism' of the early Calvinists reflected their acceptance that they
would always be in a state of tension with the world around them, an
inevitable consequence of not coming to terms with the political, religious
or cultural values of the society in which they lived.[49] This tension almost
invariably brought upon them suffering, the bearing of the Cross, and this
they accepted as the cost of naming the Kingdom in history. There was no
way to hurry the return of Christ, so this process of living in a state of
tension in the world would be theirs until the parousia. Nor were they to
try to redeem the world by some theocratic exercise, for only God could
do this. The early Calvinists would have understood what Dietrich
Bonhoeffer later referred to when he reminded his contemporaries in the
World War II era, that they were not "lords but instruments in the hand
of the Lord of history".[50] As they bore the cross the faithful were to be
sustained only by their eschatological hope which was to strengthen them
in the midst of despair. They took for granted that the more they advanced
the coming of the Kingdom through the exercise of sacrificial love the harder
would the attacks of their enemies increase, nor would they cease until the
end of time.[51] Time and again Calvin told his followers that it would not
be easy to lead "a heavenly life in the world".[52]

This was how the early Protestants in Ireland, who were all some kind
of Calvinist, looked upon their hard frontier life where they were always
under potential attack by their Roman Catholic neighbours. They were a
people at war, their political/religious settlements centres of civilization as
well as communities where the reformed faith could be preached. Their
mission, in the words of Calvin, was to "reduce the whole world to his order,

and subject it to his government",[53] and they looked upon their churches and communities as places where the overcoming of this world had begun, where the Kingdom was being shown forth. Though they had ecclesiastical tensions, members of the Church of Ireland and the Nonconformists were united in common resolve to overcome the spiritual evil of Roman Catholicism and the barbarity of the majority people. They expected no peace when they had to contend in the words of Robert Blair, minister of Bangor between 1623 and 1634, with a people "not only obdured in Popish superstition and idolatry, but also in their idleness and incivility".[54]

One aspect of Reformation theology which had particular appeal to the hard-pressed Protestants of seventeenth century Ireland was the concept of the Antichrist, mentioned in the Johannine epistles. Sometimes the Antichrist was identified with the 'man of sin' referred to in 2 Thessalonians, who was to appear during a time of great apostasy before the promised 'day of the Lord', Luther, as might be expected, identified the pope as "the right Antichrist" as did other reformers like William Tyndale. Calvin usually chose to describe the papacy as this evil agent, and thus it is described in the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible.[55] In the *Institutes*, however, Calvin castigates the pope as the Antichrist:

> . . . [Paul] *designates Antichrist by this mark, that he will deprive God of his honour in order to take it upon himself . . . Since therefore, it is clear that the Roman Pontiff has shamelessly transferred to himself what belonged to God alone and especially to Christ, we should have no doubt that he is the leader and standard-bearer of that impious and hateful kingdom.*[56]

In Calvin's theology the Reformation was an eschatological event, part of the great struggle against the power of Antichrist in history as the saints strove to prepare on earth the beginning of the Kingdom.[57] The battle of Armageddon referred to in the book of Revelation was now taking place in history, each victory over the Antichrist bringing the Kingdom that much closer, but "the more pressingly God offers Himself to the world in the Gospel, and invites men into His Kingdom, the more boldly will wicked men belch forth the poison of their impiety".[58] This viewpoint was easily understood by the Scots settlers in Ulster, who knew that John Knox had identified the Antichrist with the pope in his *Second Book of Discipline* of 1578, and could easily identify him as the leader of the barbarous people who refused to allow them to occupy the land in peace. This thinking was also prevalent among strong Calvinists in the Church of Ireland such as Walter Travers, the first Provost of Trinity College, Dublin, Adam Loftus, the Archbishop of Dublin, or James Ussher, the scholarly Archbishop of Armagh. The latter compiled the Calvinist inspired *Articles of Religion* adopted by the Irish church in its first convocation of 1615, and in them the pope was identified as "that man of sin",[59] The authority of this statement of reformed faith was such that these articles were the basis for the later *Westminster Confession of Faith* which has been so important in the development of Irish Presbyterianism.

History in Ireland has always been dominated by political/religious warfare, and it has not been difficult for Irish Protestants in times of peril to feel that some cosmic evil power directs the relentless attack upon them. In one form or another the identification of the pope or the papacy with the Antichrist has remained in their thinking since the seventeenth century. Whereas English Protestants by the end of that century were considering Antichrist in a more sophisticated way, as the evil latent within all men, the besieged Irish Protestants never had the feeling of security which would allow them to transcend the limitations of thought which had come out of the age of religious wars. One has only to look at the banners during Orange Order parades to see how old passions are kept alive by depiction of events like the burning of Ridley and Latimer, or the drowning of Protestants in the river Bann. They still tend to identify with John Foxe's view of the Reformation: "the brightness of God's word was set up to confound the dark and false-vizored kingdom of Antichrist".[60]

It is loyalty to this reformation age ideology which bedevils Irish Protestants so that they sometimes present to the world an expression of political/religious particularism which few people can appreciate. It effectively ensures that so long as it governs their thinking they will not be able to play their part in the universal mission of the church. They seem to show interest in only their atavistic culture on the edge of Europe, fighting an ideological battle that has little or no relevance in terms of historical development in the last years of the twentieth century. To anyone acquainted with Irish history such a fossilization of Irish Protestantism is, of course, understandable, yet at the same time it is a spiritual tragedy. Obsessed with political and religious survival Irish Protestants have, at times, turned their backs on a world filled with apocalyptic despair—at a time when they have so much to give to that world in its agony.

This spiritual 'silence' on the part of Irish Protestants, and sometimes their failure to show forth the redeeming, reconciling power of love rather than discord, is what leads the outside world to doubt them. They receive the kind of opprobrium visited upon the papacy because of its failure to make loving sacrificial witness against the evil which beset so much of Europe during the last war. One the of the critics of the papacy immediately after the war was Albert Camus who told the Dominicans of Latour-Marbourg in 1948:

For a long time during those frightful years I waited for a great voice to speak up in Rome. I, an unbeliever? Precisely. For I knew that the spirit would be lost if it did not utter a cry of condemnation when faced with force. It seems that that voice did speak up. But I assure you that millions of men like me did not hear it and that at that time believers and unbelievers alike shared a solitude that continued to spread as the days went by and the executioners multiplied.

It has been explained to me since that the condemnation was indeed voiced. But that it was in the style of the encyclicals which

is not at all clear. The condemnation was voiced, and it was not understood. Who could fail to feel where the true condemnation lies in this case, and to see that this example by itself gives part of the reply, perhaps the whole reply that you ask of me. What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak up loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt could rise in the heart of the simplest man. That they should get away from abstractions, and confront the bloodstained face history has taken in our day.[61]

How loudly and clearly have Irish Protestants spiritually transcended their symbiotic relationship with their culture, and "confronted the bloodstained face history has taken in our day"? In an age when the march of the executioners, and the growth of urban terrorism threatens civilisation, what examples of heroic love in the face of terrible adversity have Irish Protestants presented to the world—showing forth the redemptive, reconciling power of the Kingdom? Darkly has been one such epiphany, but at other times the Protestants of Ireland have been seen as a people enthralled by the passions of by-gone ages—as the Bishop of Clogher, and so many others have discovered.

What is particularly sad is that the Irish Protestants sometimes deny much of the best in the theological thought of the Reformation era they revere. John Calvin continuously had to battle depression of the spirit as he struggled to bring godly order to Geneva, and he told Johann Bullinger, the chief pastor of Zurich, how often he had wanted to retire from the conflict. Yet his eschatological vision of Geneva showing forth the Kingdom in history would not allow him to rest: "When I consider how important this corner of the world is for the spread of God's Kingdom I have reason to be concerned about protecting it".[62] This eschatological hope also influenced some of his followers. When John Winthrop preached his famous sermon, 'A Modell of Christian Charity' to the saints on board the *Arbella* in 1630 he told them how important in terms of showing forth the Kingdom was to be their settlement at Salem: "we must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us".[63] Though the particular expressions of Christianity advocated by either Calvin or the American Puritans may not be completely appreciated in our age, the universalism in their thought is something we need to rediscover—the eschatological concept that over and against the values of a cruel and despairing world, a revelation of the coming Kingdom can be offered for the blessing of all men.

Perhaps if Irish Protestantism could transcend the spiritually inhibiting particularism of religious expression which its history has sometimes nurtured, it can give forth to the world hope that 'the march of the executioners' can be overcome. If its people show forth to the despairing world by their love the coming of the Kingdom, then their land too could be 'a city upon a hill' for the benefit of all men. Thomas Munzer in his Prague

Manifesto during the Reformation wars spoke of the "bitter" as well as the "sweet" Christ, the Christ with man as he bore the cross, as well as Christ with man in times of peace.[64] No one would deny that Irish Protestants have known the 'bitter' Christ—now an anxious world waits for them in the midst of their agony to show forth a proleptic revelation of God's Shalom.

To write in this fashion is not just an exercise in religious rhetoric. It is often only in the face of such prolonged evil as that visited upon Irish Protestants that a genuine Christian voice of protesting love can be raised, however uncertain or even timid it may sound beside the loud assertions of the executioners of our day. After the fall of the Nazis one of the leading members of the party explained to his captors what finally defeated them:

The enemy we could not buy or break was the aristocratic individualism of the ordinary citizen of the West. If only we had hanged—as Himmler was always itching to do—all those outdated legalists with their squawks about moral dignity—then our movement would have swept the world.[65]

In the same way it is possible for Irish Protestants, in spite of how they have been shaped by centuries of political/religious warfare, to resist sacralizing their tribal history and to continue to 'squawk loudly' about matters like 'moral dignity' and the coming of the Kingdom. They can spiritually transcend what Gladstone once described to Queen Victoria as "the perverseness of centuries" in Ireland.[66] They can show forth restraint in the midst of terrible provocation, reason in the midst of passion, love in the midst of hate, hope in the midst of depair. In a world which is everywhere threatened by the dreadful power of mindless terrorism, and thinks more and more in apocalyptic terms, the kind of witness made by Irish Protestants after the Darkly atrocity can give great hope. If through Grace and through their bearing of the Cross in their present trial the Protestants of Ireland are able to transcend the determining forces of their history, and help build a new civilization of love in Ireland, then the Kingdom will be brought that much closer for all men. They will look to Ireland and see in the new creation which its Protestants, and others, have created, a hope-giving 'City upon a Hill'.

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