

Untangling the 'Irish Question'

Ulster is a pluralistic, Christian-inspired society in dire need of updated structures that represent and respect its complex nature

In the news about Northern Ireland, one hears of confrontations between the Irish Republican Army and the British Army. While the latter is identified with the Protestant side, the former is taken to represent the military expression of the Catholic desire for an independent, united Irish republic. Because it is expressed in religious terms, the situation seems medieval, even tribal, to the average American reader.

While journalism must condense news, simplification of issues can lead to serious distortion. Unfortunately, the word "Catholic" is often used as a blanket expression for a range of unrelated attitudes. For instance, it is used to describe the activities of the Civil Rights Movement, whose leaders insist that their Socialist cause is that of all the proletariat. They disclaim any "sectarian" interpretation or solution to Northern Ireland's problems.

The Peoples' Democracy is another movement. This is also nonsectarian, but recognizes that at the moment it is the Catholic minority which is treated the most undemocratically. This does not make it a Catholic movement.

Neither can the I.R.A. be held to be a Catholic army. Though split by a bitter internal feud, both factions seek an all-Ireland republic. While the "Official" wing wants to achieve this along classical Marxist lines, the "Provisionals" want to achieve this through proven Irish guerrilla tactics aimed at forcing action by British statesmen whose political careers are at stake. Irrespective of which wing of the I.R.A. we talk about, the practice of,

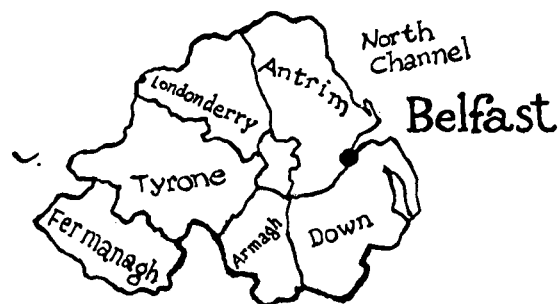
or belief in, Catholicism is not an essential factor.

Admittedly, there are Northerners who regard the entire struggle as a fight for the survival of Catholicism in a Protestant state. These would include such diverse types as right-wing members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, many other Roman Catholics—eager for peace—who would like to live with Protestants on condition that their children are given equal opportunities with all other children, and a large number of practising Catholics who do not want to belong to the Republic of Ireland.

What of the elastic meaning attributed to the word "Protestant"? At one and the same time it is used to describe aloof, landlord types like the two previous Prime Ministers, Chichester-Clarke and Terence O'Neill, and the fundamentalist dock workers of Belfast. Now it is used to describe the comfortable, middle-class civil service types who work the system, as well as the followers of the strange, fevered religion preached by the Rev.

Ian Paisley's Free Presbyterians. In reality, the root of all these groups is not Protestantism as much as an allegiance to the British crown and the benefits this brings.

To further understand the complexity of Northern Ireland one must study the tensions flowing from: 1) the antagonism between a dour "no-nonsense" Scottish community of planters and the less serious Celts indigenous to the region; 2) the Industrial Revolution, generally considered by most native Irishmen to be of British origin; and 3) a colonial system in which such industries as rope manufacture, shipbuilding and aircraft assembly were seen to contribute more to the defense and prosperity of Great Britain than to Northern Ireland itself. Many reflective Northern Irish Catholics resented being silent accomplices in the support of a widespread empire that restricted freedom and self-determination at home as well as in other areas of the world. This explains in great part why the Catholic population had earlier opted out of the increased industrialization and prosperity of the North, thus ending up with a lower standard of living and less par-



ticipation in the social and political life. As the British Empire diminished after World War II, its industries in the North began to wither. Ironically, this did not produce any sense of satisfaction among the Catholics. Why? Because at that very moment they themselves were not only beginning to question the wisdom of their "cop-out" status, but also of becoming involved in the political, social and industrial life of the region. At this point, anti-British and pro-Catholic feelings became intertwined with complex issues of a nonreligious nature.

Confessional differences and historical grievances apart, the Northern Ireland Catholic community confronts depressing economic and social indicators with no immediate relief in sight. The high rate of unemployment (almost 8 per cent) must be credited with playing a part in the undeniable vandalism that is currently rampant. Moreover, a Special Powers Act allows imprisonment without trial, thus creating acute feelings of anger that erupt periodically. And biased reporting in England is no help toward an amelioration of the present critical situation.

Is there any hope in the present impasse between two Christian-inspired factions? Only if proposed solutions are predicated on a dispassionate study of how religious influence has been overlarded by political, economic, social and legal factors to make up the present tragic situation. While this web of causes can neither be ignored nor exaggerated by obsessive partisanship, the weight of Northern Ireland's past points to one conclusion—the region is a pluralistic society in dire need of an updated socio-legal structure that represents and respects its complex character. It is futile to resort to emotional escapism by shouting either "Love it or leave it" or "We want a united Ireland and we want it now." These slogans can only lead to further bloodshed and the spiraling of hatred.

There are two realistic possibilities for peace. One is to change the electoral system in order to guarantee

fairer representation. At present, Ulster's straight vote system, together with arbitrary constituency boundaries, conspires to deny to minority groups the capacity to effect structural change by legislation. Proportional representation and a more equitable system of constituency boundaries would allow local and national assemblies to reflect more accurately the variety in Northern Ireland's social structure.

While this would help to solve some internal grievances, another measure would be needed to harmonize the divergent allegiances of people such as the Loyalists and the Republicans who reside side by side in this tiny state. As for British statesmen who support the Loyalists, they have been traditionally wary of the "Irish Question." It has been the graveyard of too many reputations. But as long as it is claimed that Ulster is British, it will not be enough to grant subsidies and station English troops in the North to handle uprisings. This "carrot and stick" policy is inadequate.

And what can realistically be done to satisfy those Northern Irishmen who refuse to accept the Irish Republic's claim that it has jurisdiction over the whole island? A federal relationship between North and South has been suggested. A look at Canada's dominion status had been proposed in the 1950's by the late Cardinal Dalton as a possible solution in a pluralist situation. It should be studied again. Is a mini-commonwealth relationship possible between Britain, Northern Ireland and the South? The issue of sovereignty in the North and the South would have to be determined.

The need is manifest; the talent is abundant; solutions are imminent. The critical question: Is there a will among the contending parties? Any solution need address itself only to today's Ireland, with today's varying allegiances. It need say nothing about the structures that tomorrow's evolved Ireland may require. The leverage of reason from outside Ireland and Britain would help immensely. In a shrinking world, Ireland's troubles are those of all of us and *Sinn Fein* ("We Ourselves") takes on a new meaning.

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MICHAEL A. FAHEY

Ecumenists Meet in Dublin

Dublin celebrated the feast of the Assumption this year with its usual fervor and solemnity. Down the center of the main thoroughfare, O'Connell St., taxi drivers, students and senior citizens gathered to recite the rosary for their own needs and for the alleviation of the "troubles" on their island. The "troubles in the North" were simultaneously reflected in downtown Dublin where, besides signs for shamrock seeds and Irish delicacies, one could also see men collecting money to buy guns for the Irish Republican Army or even passing out Marxist-Leninist literature—endorsed, to be sure, by some unknown Irish Catholic.

That weekend, more Roman collars appeared in Dublin's streets than usual, as Jesuits began to gather in the Irish capital. It was here that a group of some 120 Jesuit priests convened, August 16-20, for the Fourth International Congress of Jesuit Ecumenists at Milltown Park, the local Jesuit theological seminary.

Host of the meeting was Michael Hurley, director of Dublin's new Irish School of Ecumenics, an institute whose goals are appropriately embodied in the motto *floreat ut pereat* ("may it flourish in order to perish"). From some 30 countries stretching from the Philippines to the Cameroons and north to Denmark, Jesuits came to take stock of ecumenism and Church life since Vatican II. Most of the Jesuit divinity schools—from Kurseong in India to Woodstock in New York (with some notable absences from the U.S.A.)—sent professors, as did the order's schools in Rome, the Gregorian University and

