

Religion Today: Balm or Bomb?

Malachai O'Doherty (journalist, Belfast Telegraph)

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If you travel abroad you will invariably meet the same remarks about Northern Ireland wherever you go. Whether in Cork or in St Alban's people say: I can't understand why you in Northern Ireland are always fighting over religion, in this day and age.

It strikes us as a superficial comment. It betrays ignorance about the complexity of the social and political problems. We may argue in return that this is a conflict about relationships, to be resolved by constitutional inventiveness, not by theology. But there is something erroneous in that too. The fact is that many people here express their contempt for their enemy primarily in terms of religion. To say that this is a conflict over identity is to imply that the passions which come into play here can be put to rest by a contract, and that the things which people hate in each other will cease to be so loathsome when that contract is signed.

To define the problem as a conflict, for the purposes of political endeavour, supposes that there is a single core issue, which if resolved will lay all other associated problems to rest; but are we dealing with a conflict or a complex, almost orgasmic, miasma of acrimony and suspicion? It is hard to believe that someone like Billy Wright so loved the Crown and was so devoted to Jesus that he simply couldn't rest unless he was killing Catholics. There was hatred there.

Did Thomas Begley toss in his bed at night worrying about whether there would ever be a negotiated settlement, or was he driven by darker more bitter passions than that? Religious people will say that if these men loved God, and obeyed Him, they would not have done what they did. If love was the only passion in religious people there would be no holy wars anywhere.

Republicans and Loyalists have both used rich religious imagery in their murals. In the early eighties, hunger strikers were depicted with rosary beads by their beds, with the Virgin Mary beside them, showering graces on them. This has almost died from Republican imagery now, though it survives in North America.

Brad Pitt played an IRA man in *The Devil's Own*. Pitt's Republican goes to mass and is deeply moved. He talks like an old woman. When he remembers "Wee Annie, killed by a plastic bullet", he says: "God rest her soul". Which I think is **not** the sort of language hard men now use - in each other's company anyway.

A UVF mural on Sandy Row expresses the Loyalist sense of mission in a quote from Deuteronomy: You shall smite them and utterly defeat them. Yet the main political spokesman of the UVF, David Ervine, sneers at those Loyalists he calls religious crackpots, the dissidents of the Orange Volunteers and the Red Hand Defenders, allegedly led by a pastor and two lay preachers. The word has not gone down to the

rank and file that this is not about religion anymore, however modern and secular Mr Irvine would like it to be.

Republicans are not religious in this period, though the two best known leaders, Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams are practising Catholics and regular mass goers. The Republican movement has clashed with the Catholic church several times, particularly at the time of the hunger strikes. In that period Republicans dictated the morality of hunger strike to the church and took the leadership of working class Catholicism, leaving the priests helpless to do anything but acknowledge martyrdom of prisoners.

The biggest fall off in support for the church has been among the young men of the working class areas who are more likely to sympathise with Republicans. Many of them were taking their moral leadership from the IRA, and believed that it had earned the right to explain the morality of sacrifice and murder and justice by investing their lives more fully than a smug priesthood had done for generations.

Catholic education had emphasised the martyr, and taught reverence for the martyr, and it was clear that Republicans were dying for their Republican faith and that Catholic clergy themselves were overawed by this. The old penny catechism had taught Catholics that it was a sin to attempt to overthrow the lawful government, but Republicans regarded themselves as a lawful government resisting oppression.

Republicanism competes with the church. Those who argue, as Ian Paisley does, that the Church of Rome provides succour to the IRA, fail to take that into account. If there is an organic relationship between Catholicism and Republicanism it is more complex than simple partnership. Cardinal Tomas O'Fiaich defined the mechanics of sectarianism in Northern Ireland for many when he said that Protestants were more sectarian in religion and Catholics were more sectarian in politics. There is an apparent truth in that.

There is no word used by Catholics for Protestants which has the same power as the abuse words used by Protestants against Catholics. Taig, Fenian, Popehead. "Prod" is a term of derision but it is not, to my ear - and perhaps I am biased - as loaded with venom as Fenian. Loyalists have also directed attacks against Catholic worship in a way which Republicans have rarely done against Protestant worship.

Now this is not just as simple as it seems. Many Protestants see the Republican campaign against the Orange Order as a concerted attack on religious expression. Catholics argue that the Orange Order's contempt for Catholicism means that their parades are not ordinary religion, respectful of other faiths. But ordinary religion is not normally respectful of other faiths. It is a very new idea to Catholics themselves that other faiths have rights, and they perhaps fail to see that Orangeism, and its One True Faith mentality, is something that has barely expired in Catholicism itself.

The Second Vatican Council pays respect to other Christian Churches and to Islam, but it sees them as holding less of the truth than it holds itself and still maintains the idea of the apostolic succession and the infallibility of the Pope in Faith and Morals. Catholic teaching is no longer that Protestants are wholly wrong, but that they are less

right. Evangelical Protestantism often discounts Catholics from consideration as Christians at all.

One True Faith evangelicalism tries by various means to counter the charge that it is sectarian. It does this by describing itself as non-denominational, by which it means, "We are not Presbyterian, We are not Methodist, we are right". They call themselves Christians, pretending that they are being magnanimous but then denying the use of the word to others.

Implied in this is the idea that evangelicalism is different from religion and that the same expectation rests on all denominationalists to stop quarrelling and rely solely on the basic truths of Christianity. It sounds like the ecumenical argument. It isn't. The new County Grand Master for Belfast, was asked on radio the other day if the Orange Order was anti-Catholic. He said this was completely untrue: "In fact we pray for Catholics and for their deliverance".

He is so right in his position that he sees it as a mercy to Catholics to try to save them from error and damnation. His faith and the faith of his neighbour are not, in his mind, comparable things, due equal respect. He is as confident of his diagnosis of the spiritual malaise of his neighbour as an electrician might be of the state of the wiring in a neighbour's house.

That one is wrong and the other right is not even debatable, Protestants will point to the INLA attack on a gospel hall in Darkley and the murders there, as an attack on Protestant theology and a contempt for Protestant forms of worship. The Enniskillen bomb killed Protestants at prayer at a Remembrance Service. A One True Faith Evangelical may see these as more sacrilegious than similar attacks on places of Catholic worship. At the same time they take comfort from a conviction that those killed were saved.

After the Enniskillen bomb, Cardinal O Fiaich gave great offence to the families of some of the dead by calling on Catholics to pray for the departed; you don't pray for the souls of the saved, unless you are trying to say that you don't actually believe that they are saved. If they are saved they don't need your prayer. Though theology may not be a conspicuous part of the motivation for the bomb, and we do not know what forms of contempt played in the mind of the bomber, it cluttered the aftermath and made complicated the efforts to mend relationships.

On the other side we have seen pickets of Catholic churches by Loyalists, and sustained attempts to disrupt Catholic worship and to intimidate Catholics into staying away from Church. At Harryville church in Ballymena, I spoke to pickets. I asked them why they were picketing that church? They said: It's not a church, it's a fenian hole. They said: what goes on in there is not the worship of God, it is blasphemy. They did not see their behaviour as being as offensive as, say, the picketing an Evangelical prayer meeting would have been. The One True Faith mentality had enabled them to discount Catholic mass from the consideration under the respect due to acts of worship.

They had also seen fit to penalise any groups of Catholics for the actions of any other. The point of the protest was to counteract protests in Dunloy against Orange parades.

Seeing all Catholics as part of one coherent obstacle to their culture, entitled them to attack any in response to the behaviour of any other. Ian Paisley junior gave me an interview for Sunday Sequence in which he said that the Catholics of Harryville and Dunloy had shown themselves to be "ethnically inferior" to those who protested against them, but when I tried to draw him out on this he didn't seem to have the intellectual wherewithal to explain what he meant. He was just being nasty.

In Portadown, I watched an Orange band gather outside the church during evening mass at the top of the Garvaghy Road. The bandmen beat their drums and blew their whistles throughout. When the doors of the church opened to mark the end of mass, they stopped play, and filed away, their job done. They had no shame about displaying anti-Catholic sectarianism. They did not mask it. Their sectarianism was not the shameful secret or embarrassment of middle class people. They were proud of it. They did not see themselves as insulting the religion of other, they saw themselves, I think, as showing due contempt for silly superstition.

Absolutist One True Faithism ended in the Catholic church with the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s. That council established the primacy of conscience. It also rules that all people struggled towards God and all conscientious expressions of that were due respect, though some more than others. Papal Catholicism retained its confidence that it was the fullest expression on earth of true faith, but this was different from saying that everyone else was simply wrong.

The wee penny catechism that was published the year I was born and which I learnt by rote in primary school, offered questions and answers on matters of dogma for easy digestion by children. "Must everyone belong to the Catholic church? Everyone must belong to the Catholic church and no one can be saved who through his own fault remains outside it". (I had no idea this little book was still being published, but I bought it in Chapel Lane in Belfast on Wednesday. We have tended to forget the magnitude of the change in Catholic attitude.) The One True Faith doctrine simply dismissed the rest of the world as wrong. The manager of the England football team, Glenn Hoddle, had to leave his post because he said that people with physical and mental handicaps were reaping the deserts of behaviour in past lives.

Catholic textbooks in Irish schools, published during the war, taught that the suffering inflicted on the peoples of Europe was a punishment for the Reformation. Father Reginald Walker wrote what he called *An Outline History of the Catholic Church*, in 1939. His theology prompted very little sympathy for the people of Europe at war, and on the brink of war. He wrote: "If men must tunnel in the earth to find themselves a shelter, it is because they have rejected their true religious home in God's plan for their lives". And he blamed the Reformation for starting the whole thing off: "The crash of ancient and majestic cities into bloodied ruins is but the outward result of the gradual inner collapse of all religious beliefs and moral standards of right and wrong in the non Catholic world since the Protestant Revolt".

One of the most respected Catholic theologians, Thomas Merton, said almost the same thing after the war, when the scale of the carnage was clear. Merton wrote in *The Seven Storey Mountain*: "... Catholics, thousands of Catholics everywhere, have the consummate audacity to weep and complain because God does not hear their prayers for peace, when they have neglected not only His will, but the ordinary

dictates of natural reason and prudence, and let their children grow up according to the standards of a civilisation of hyenas".

And: "When I reflect on all this I am overwhelmed at the thought of the tremendous weight of moral responsibility that Catholic parents accumulate upon their shoulders by not sending their children to Catholic schools".

The Second Vatican Council retained the teaching that Catholic parents had a duty to send their children to Catholic schools, but did so alongside the contradictory idea that parents should educate their children according to conscience, that state provision should be pluralist and that education should prepare Catholics for a diverse and secular world.

The council expressed a "most cordial esteem" for those Catholic schools which had many Protestant pupils. The insistence still on segregated schools appears to be a survival of the One True Faith doctrine in the Catholic church today. The doctrine is still, in that sense, a lever of social engineering in Northern Ireland, even though few really subscribe to it. Those who defend segregated education for Catholics do so on different arguments today and do not warn us if we send our children to Lagan college we are inviting war and tumult upon our heads. They say that there is a Catholic ethos in those schools which must be preserved. The idea of segregation was framed in an ideological context which was sectarian and supremacist and heartless, and it is preserved in a wholly different conceptual frame today.

There was such a thing as a Catholic ethos when I was at school. The teachers wore black robes. They enforced and perpetuated a disciplinarian culture, as bent on preserving religious faith as in training children to write and recite. Every class began and ended with a prayer to an icon of the Virgin Mary over the blackboard. The life of the church and the school were integrated. Now the orders are dying out. There is no school in Belfast with a Christian Brother for a principal. There are only a handful of nuns teaching now. The Catholic ethos or atmosphere, which the segregation of children is presumed essential to preserve, actually operates a common curriculum.

We were protected from Protestants because Protestants were wrong and their could be no collusion with error. Now that doctrine is dead, and only pale excuses remain for sustaining the institutions of separation. In the folk memory, segregation was about the preservation of Catholics against discrimination and Irish cultural annihilation. That's not what it was about for the Catholic church, it was about the protection of Catholics against their contamination by heresy and error. Yet the history of that struggle informs the Catholic sense of grievance still, as I found out when I criticised the Christian Brothers on television. It is extraordinary how people will leap to the defence of these unhappy men even decades after they have known them. I believe they are motivated not by a sense of loyalty to faith or theology but to communal identity.

To sneer at the church is to do Paisley's work for him. While sectarian Protestantism attacks Catholic faith and institutions, Catholics will defend them; that is shown now in greater commitment to the church expressed by Northern Catholics than Southern Catholics, and which will be illustrated in a survey for the Sunday Times to be published tomorrow. In Northern Ireland people will declare themselves

Catholic while asserting a belief in reincarnation or a non belief in the devil. Theologically they are not Catholic, and what they are asserting is not adherence to doctrine but allegiance with a community of people.

What we have seen in relation to education is that a custom has been preserved beyond the lifespan of the ideological context which framed it. The Catholic church no longer teaches that it is the guardian of the one true faith, outside of which there can only be grief and divine chastisement, and without that idea it is bereft of a tenable ideological defence of segregated education.

There is an analogy of this in the experience of Republicanism. Both used to share an interest in preserving Irish Catholics against British Protestantism, the one for the sake of the integrity of an Irish state, the other for that of keeping Catholics out of Hell and safe from the evils that would befall them in the world, if they lost their faith. Catholicism and Republicanism were organically related. Many Irish Catholics of a generation ago had little sense of a strict boundary between the two. The founders of the Provisional IRA were chauvinistic Catholic Republicans who expected their young gunmen to pray and confess their sins.

Paradoxically, they were happy that the Second Vatican Council, as they chose to interpret it, spared them the need to raise bloodletting with the priest in confession if it was conducted with a clear and informed conscience. Martin McGuinness took the trouble to explain this to me once. He said that an IRA man who had shot a British soldier and read *Playboy* in the same week might feel justified in confessing his prurient fantasies over *Playboy* and saying nothing about the killing of the soldier, so long as he was satisfied in his conscience that the killing was not wrong.

I wonder about the man who is satisfied in conscience that prurient fantasy isn't wrong either. Before Vatican Two, that would have been a matter for the confessor to rule on.

I have written elsewhere about the parallels between Catholicism and republicanism, the ritual, the funeral rites, the respect for the martyr, the core priesthood of the pure, the celibacy of the prisoner, the concern for personal growth, fasting and discipline. I have drawn impressionistic connections between the Provisionals and the Christian Brothers who taught all of the leading members. The joyrider, called to report to a Sinn Fein office to be shot in the knees, is like the boy sent to the headmaster's office for a caning. The respect which he is expected to maintain afterwards for the man who shoots him resonates in my mind with the relationship that must survive between teacher and boy, even after a thrashing, to preserve the integrity of the school ethos. The oppressed must never admit to being oppressed, but must invest his anger in the preservation of the institution, not in a rebellion against it. That's what taking it like a man is all about.

The most significant parallel between Catholicism and Republicanism, of course, is that Republicanism was itself a One True Faith ideology. If you thought that Ireland should be partitioned, you were wrong. If you lived on the island of Ireland and said you were British, you were wrong. There could be no truck with error, and there could be no censure of those who died insisting on the One Truth. Not only that, but their readiness to die insisting on that truth entitled them also to kill for it. Those who were

martyred for Ireland would be barely distinguishable from those who were martyred for the Catholic faith.

Republicanism is itself a religion in transition. Its most traditional adherents understood it to be a pure form of Catholicism, much as Orangemen think of themselves as even better Protestants. The Pure Land Theology of Republicanism, which looked to a future Ireland contended with a pure heart theology of Evangelicalism which looked to the Second Coming of Christ.

My sense is that modern republicanism came down to us from an ideological frame in which it was a more tenable interpretation of the world, and survived a generation beyond that frame itself and is now untenable in its traditional form. Like the Catholic church, it is painfully adapting to new circumstances.

Republicanism ceased to be a One True Faith ideology when its leaders adhered to the Good Friday Agreement. Is it just a coincidence that republicanism and Roman Catholicism are going through the same transition? Only one side of the argument is now a One True Faith ideology and that is evangelical Protestantism. A religion with its roots in the idea of the individual's right to find a personal relationship with God, through prayer and the Bible, it has become theological and dictatorial and, most peculiar of all, fixated on territory. This was the reply to Republicanism. If your God is land then our God wants us to be on that land. It is a theological counter. It is a contention between visions of God and destiny, and is therefore profoundly theological. There are changes there too.

Some evangelicals try to find their way out of sectarianism by arguing that they do not know the mind of God. They know enough to be confident that they are saved, themselves, but they would not presume to tell you that you are not saved. They will proselytise to give you a sure and certain salvation, but they will not discount you as damned if you don't accept their word. By such reasoning they are able to say that someone who votes for Sinn Fein and takes Roman communion is not necessarily damned to Hell fire and may even be a good person. That is a helpful reassessment to make if you are thinking of talking to someone like that.

Others are reading the Bibles in a new way, to find affirmation that they should not cling to ideas of nation and identity. The original challenge of God to Abraham, they find, was: "Leave your father's house". People who once read their Bible for affirmation that they should defend the union, now reason that God will love them and they will be able to love God in any territory, under any jurisdiction. David Porter of ECONI brought ideas like that back from Pakistan where he worked as a Christian missionary. Pakistani Christians didn't need to possess the nation for God, in order to be saved, so what were the Christians back home really talking about? You could use political arguments to defend the Union, but to suppose that God somehow needed Ulster was to suppose that God values Ulster more highly than He values Pakistan. I suppose some Loyalists would have no problem with that.

What I have offered here is not a comprehensive new theory of the troubles. But I have tried to show that we have been wrong to remove theology from the picture. Those who annoy us by asking: 'Why do you fight over religion', have only noticed the most obvious thing about us. We are embarrassed by that silly religion, it is such a

part of what drives us and what drives us apart. But is it not just the marker by which the paramilitary identifies the legitimate target, the person most likely to disagree with him on the constitution.

When another generation looks back at the secularising of Northern Ireland, it will ask if the end of One True Faith dogmatism had anything to do with the end of the Troubles. The connection will seem obvious to them, and children in schools will write essays on the subject.

*Malachi O'Doherty is a commentator and journalist, widely known in Northern Ireland for his column in the Belfast Telegraph, and for his work with the BBC. His major study on Republican thinking entitled *The Trouble with Guns: Republican strategy and the IRA* was published in 1998.*