

# RECONCILIATION IN AN IRISH CONTEXT

By DAVID ARMSTRONG

IRELAND THE EMERALD ISLE has also been called the 'Western Isle'. This splendid isolationism has been important in its history. Ireland has been said to be the only pure Celtic country in the world. The nomadic Celts settled in Ireland around the third century B.C. although I have heard some argue for a date five hundred years earlier. At any rate Celtic influence on the island was almost complete. English culture may have been affected by Roman, Viking and Norman invasions but their influence on Ireland had been minimal in comparison to the conquest by the Celts.

Early Celtic history is veiled in mystery. Here oral tradition was superior to written word. We learn of gods dying and returning, semi-divine warriors in their battles, magic salmon in the waters, giants lifting hills and by casting them into the sea creating islands; the sun god features strongly, death is everywhere and even welcomed. Celts were in harmony with the natural world, at home with beautiful scenery and the elements. Never would exploitation of nature figure strongly in their thinking.

The coming of Christianity did not bring the same confrontation that existed in other lands. Ireland's early Christian martyrs were few. Celtic philosophy was open to Christian theology of the incarnation, the passion and resurrection of Christ. A supernatural miraculous faith found a ready-made home in Celtic Ireland. On the hill of Tara, the throne of the ancient high king, stands a statue of Patrick and a huge phallic stone illustrating the marriage of the two worlds. Shrines and Christian wells still abound in rural Ireland.

It has been said to me that the Irish are non-progressive. If so, please do not think that this makes them inferior. Harmony with the land was important. True they have been called a 'people drunk with war and adventure', but warmth, hospitality and kindness were always evident. The beauty of nature would cause many Celtic minds to reject the 'total depravity of man'. The

Protestant preacher speaking of man as 'having no health in him', would be certain of a poor hearing.

In the early seventeenth century, Elizabethan England poured many thousands of English Anglicans and Scots Presbyterians into North Ireland. They were Protestants. They were progressive, politically ambitious and financially astute. They had a pride in being God's chosen people, a deep reverence for the scriptures and, like Calvin, little time for tales told of miraculous Christianity. Clearly confrontation stared Ireland in the face.

The native Irish began to see the exploitation of nature. Raw materials would be gathered in for the industrial wheels to roll. Would they be expected also to live in towns, behind walls which would blot out the beauty of nature? The Reformation Christians felt superior. The native peasants were laid back, their land was taken, for they were said to be lazy and rebellious. More truthful however was the fact that they did not want to be part of a world which was alien to their way of thinking. Contentment was more important than wealth.

Cromwell would insist that Ireland would not be a base for foreign opposition and rebellion. In 1649, before embarking at Bristol with his troops to make Ireland 'a more profitable part of the Commonwealth', he told his followers that they were Israelites about to enter Canaan to kill the idol worshippers. At Drogheda the garrison were massacred. At Wexford we let Cromwell speak for himself: 'The enemy were about three thousand strong. I do not think more than thirty townfolk escaped with their lives. All honest hearts may give the glory of this to God'. I find no evidence of rebuke from Reverend Doctor John Owen, Chancellor of Oxford and England's most learned bible scholar.

For many years contempt for the Irish would abound. The nineteenth-century physician John Beddoe was to write that the Irish were close in appearance to aborigines. Matthew Arnold said that Europe was divided into male and female countries. Roman Catholic Italy and Ireland were female! Charles Kingsley wrote in 1860 from Ireland to his wife, 'I am haunted by human chimpanzees. To see white chimpanzees is dreadful'. The English Church has not a great record in the ecclesiastical management of Ireland. Absentee bishops were known, while some troublesome clerics could be found a post in Ireland, well out of the road. Some societies even saw the famine of 1845 as a blessing for they were able to offer food in exchange for an evangelical decision to join a

Protestant Church. Today the subject of Ireland and reconciliation is treated with a great deal more sympathy due to men like Lord Coggan and Bishop Baker of Salisbury.

Ireland's response towards British mismanagement has taken different forms. O'Connell was committed to peace and justice and abhorred the shedding of blood. He said, 'The freedom of Ireland is not worth the shedding of one drop of human blood'. Again, 'Human blood is no cement for the temple of liberty'. Once more, 'In my struggle I do not recognize a distinction of creed or party'. He was not anti-British and had much respect for the royal family. William Johnston writes, 'I like to think of him as the Gandhi of Ireland. Like Gandhi he wanted non-violence, like Gandhi he was profoundly religious, like Gandhi he had flagrant defects, like Gandhi he died broken and disappointed'. My wife and I have over the years received many thousands of Irish Catholic letters. Almost one hundred per cent of the writers want a reconciliation without bloodshed.

The poet W. B. Yeats spoke of the other response. 'A terrible beauty is born', he was to write. It was terrible because blood, hatred, fear and revenge would flow. To the men of violence it was beautiful because it was full of heroism, self-dedication, sacrifice and love of one's country. Patrick Pearce would convey this opinion, when just before execution he wrote to his mother, 'I have just received Holy Communion. This is the death I would have asked for if God had given me a choice. To die a soldier's death for Ireland'. As a former Ulster prison chaplain I am aware of these violent views. I have heard many prisoners tell me that in their moral theology their bombing campaign was more worthy than the annihilation of women and children in Dresden and Düsseldorf. I simply cannot accept that the 'last resort' policy is justification for Ulster's Holy War.

Now please spare a thought for the beleaguered Ulster Protestant. He has no real national identity. He does not want to belong to a Celtic country. Today he sees himself unwanted by Britain. His problem is that he does not know where his roots belong. This has planted fear, panic and a laager mentality.

When William Gladstone introduced a Bill to give Ireland Home Rule in 1886, Randolph Churchill, father of Winston, cried out, 'Ulster will fight, Ulster will be right!' Many fundamentalist Orange clergymen joined in the opposition. Robert Kee quotes one: 'We will fight as men alone can fight, with the bible in one

hand and the sword in the other'. Certainly under Gladstone, Ulstermen turned for refuge to the fundamentalist preachers like Drew and Roaring Hanna. After Lloyd George finally isolated the six counties of North Ireland the compulsive preaching of W. P. Nicholson drew vast crowds. He was not one for sharing a pulpit with a priest. Nicholson evangelized Basher Nash, founder of public schoolboy evangelism so much in evidence in Cambridge. Today Rev Ian Paisley looks to W. P. Nicholson as a religious hero. Professor Wright states, 'Ulstermen are without identity and have seceded to Ian Paisley because he embodies the traditional virtues and values of fundamentalist preaching and resistance politics'.

Belfast is heavily exposed to fundamentalism with its many churches and gospel halls. Many Protestants, if they do not attend worship, send their children there. Professor Wright says, 'It seems these people want their children to learn the Protestant religion'. Political Protestantism not only promises to defend their present position but also strikes a harmony with their childhood religious experience, an experience formed in the context of an Ulster society, governed for fifty years at Stormont, defended by the 'B Specials', an Ulster society in which Protestantism was secure and on which they can look back with nostalgia. Dr Clifford Smith points out, 'Protestant rallies for more than two centuries had bands, flags and marching columns. Paisley adopts this style of loyalist demonstration and this reinforces the impression that he embodies Ulster's traditional political stance'.

Ulster has well over one thousand Orange lodges in the province. In some parts of Ulster one in three men are in the lodge. The structure is hierarchical, which accounts to a great extent for the high degree of control which its leaders exert over the membership. The religious character of the institution is often maintained by the presence of a chaplain whose influence is considerable. In this respect the order often provides Protestant clergy with a means of enjoying political influence without having to belong to a political party as English clergy would today. Orange membership, especially in the days of the old Stormont regime, included the top of the ecclesiastical, political and economic elite. This enabled the humbler working-class Protestant to feel very much part of the power structure. While Ulster Protestants now possess only slight advantages in respect of occupational placement and other material considerations, they still have many other benefits from prevailing circumstances. Their norms, values and symbols have been given

prominence in public display. True Protestant clergy in wealthy upper-class Ulster will see their congregation willing to forego the advantages of public demonstrations and triumphalism. Their class and status already ensure them a superiority which a bowler hat and sash will not improve. 'Songs of praise' from these parishes on BBC television will supply English viewers with religious valium. Middle and lower-class Protestants feel that they would lose that privilege of symbolic domination in any union with Catholics. These Protestants, the majority, seek to maintain the dominance of their ethnic group. Power sharing and Ulster says 'no'. Professor Williams states, 'The safest legitimate safeguard to keep Catholic union at bay is evangelical Christianity'. Ulster evangelical Christianity is a living reality and a combat to any erosion of Protestant dominance in Northern Ireland. Professor John Hickey tells us that a politician in Ulster must be aware that he will only retain the support of his constituents if he interprets his politics according to their religious-political light. Many Protestant clergy too, know that they can only maintain the support of their congregation by keeping certain liberal views to acceptable company. Professor Hickey is right when he states, 'Politics in the North is not politics exploiting religion. In the case of Northern Ireland the relationship is more complex. It is more a question of religion inspiring politics than politics making use of religion. The situation is more akin to the first half of seventeenth-century England'.

I have heard Ulster clergy put the blame on politicians and British Secretaries of State. This for me will simply not do. Ulster clergy are in a position of local power that English clergy know absolutely nothing about. Speaking as a former Ulster Protestant clergyman, I know vast numbers of former colleagues who believe that the Pope is the anti-Christ. For them it is not possible to be a Christian and remain a Roman Catholic. While I totally and absolutely disagree with this point of view, I do respect their honesty. What I do know is that there are many others who do not hold these views. Where is their voice? Why can they not invite their local priest to convey his greetings to their congregation? 'David', they tell me, 'I must take my congregation at the state they are at!' Well then, are we to go along for another three hundred years of bigotry? If you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem. Surely Ulster needs genuine Christianity with a backbone. There needs to be a conversion of heart in Westminster, Dublin, the Orange lodge and Provisional

IRA. This may appear foolish. However, St Paul said that anyone who believes the gospel may appear a fool. I believe that a Church in Ulster that has nothing to say about reconciliation has nothing to say at all.

Demilo describes a press conference with Krushchev. Krushchev spoke of the evils of the Stalin regime in which many fellow Russians were killed and imprisoned. One young reporter shouted, 'Why did you not speak out?' Krushchev banged the table. 'Who said that?' His look was angry and fierce. No one spoke. There was silence and a minute later Krushchev said, 'Now you know why I did not speak out!'

McKeown in his book *Passion for peace* describes an old bee keeper who was about to put a quantity of new bees into a hive with old bees. Clearly there would be warfare. He in his wisdom divided the bees with a sheet of paper which they attacked from both sides. When they had eaten through the paper they flew happily around the hive together. People who believe in peace with all their hearts may have to accept the bearing of that piece of paper. This is uncomfortable Christianity, but then our Lord did talk about carrying the cross. Ulster Christians, Protestant and Roman Catholic, must stand their ground against bigotry in all towns and villages of the province and not just where the company is acceptable.

Kierkegaard said, 'People who speak of Christianity without nails have a religion where the Church becomes a theatre!' We may not be able to turn water into wine, but it has been sad for the world to see Christianity in Ulster turn wine into water.