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Church Structure and violence in Northern Ireland

RAYMOND G. HELMICK S.J.*

AFTER ALL THESE YEARS of fighting, the Catholic community's message about their grievance in Northern Ireland has come through clearly to world opinion. People elsewhere may not sympathise with them as much as they did in the period 1968-1972, but that is because they disapprove of all the bombing and shooting, or because Northern Ireland has become tiresome and depressing old news that they would rather not hear about, not because they have forgotten the tale of second-class citizenship of Catholics in the North, of discrimination in jobs and housing, and all the rest of the sorry story.

Not so many people, whether in Northern Ireland itself or elsewhere, have grasped what the Protestant grievance is. The Protestants still look, in the world's eyes, like primitive religious bigots, and of course have some articulate spokesmen who give colour to that appearance. They carry their bad reputation undeservedly, since in fact even the most serious militants of the Protestant paramilitary organisations will tell you they distrust the colourful troglodyte spokesmen precisely *because* they see them as religious bigots. These militants are the people most engaged in resisting Catholic Republicanism or any threat of Irish reunification, and religious bigotry is no part of their make-up, however prejudiced they may be against the actual Catholic population of the North or of Ireland as a whole.

Discrimination against the Catholics has been a fact. Many Protestants of the Province try to deny that even now and can point rightly to the very poor conditions in which their own people have lived: poor housing, low wages, heavy unemployment, a grey life. But it has been much worse for the Catholics and deliberately made so. Nor has the discrimination come only from the machinations of an upper class of Protestant land-owners and mill-owners. It has expressed the will and decision of the ordinary Protestant working-class community.

But it has not been done for no reason, or, what would be much the same, just out of bigotry. The code-word for what Northern Irish Protestants are afraid of is 'Rome Rule', which has a deceptively 17th-century

sound to it. Their grievance is against something they see clearly in late 20th-century Ireland, a pattern of clerical domination of Irish Catholic life, both private and public, which frightens not only them but also Catholics from other parts of the world. This is not a question of religious doctrines or for that matter any directly religious concerns, but of a kind of clerical power which, in most countries, is no longer available to churches, Catholic or Protestant, and which the contemporary Church, Catholic or Protestant, in fact rejects as irrelevant to Christian faith and even a damaging encumbrance to it.

It is saying much to assert that such clerical power still exists in Ireland, much as it did, say, in nineteenth-century France before the loss to the Church of the proletariat and the scandal of the Dreyfus case. It is saying still more to claim that dread of this power, under the code-name 'Rome Rule', lies at the heart of Protestant resistance to a unified Catholic State in Ireland, hence at the very root of the violence there. This article will try to establish what it is that Protestants see, and how the dynamic works.

IT IS IMPORTANT to distinguish here between the appearance and the reality of this clerical domination. In Belfast there are perceptive Protestants, and not only among the academics or the professionally educated, who have measured and monitored this situation carefully, as have many Catholics too. There are far more people whose dread of Catholic clericalism is more a vague matter of folk-lore, unanalysed and para-rational, mixed up with a lot of stereotypes of a Catholic population they don't really meet or know: Catholics are dirty, lazy and have too many children, or that sort of thing. But the appearance is important, and the dread real.

They would see the system operating this way. In private life, the Catholic who falls out with his local priest is in serious trouble. It may be the unmarried mother, the couple whose marriage is rocky or irregular, the person of independent opinions, especially if those opinions are critical of the clergy or their power, the person whose interests (say, about property, or where a new petrol station is to be located) conflict in some way with clerical interests, or simply the person the local clergy do not like or disapprove of for whatever rational or

*Ray Helmick is an American Jesuit who, for the past five years, has associated closely with both Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland.

irrational reasons. Such a person has no recourse, if the offence is serious enough, no future in the local community, and no choice then but simply to move away. A great part of one's energy must therefore be devoted to keeping one's nose clean in the eyes of the clergy and nothing worse can happen to anyone than to fall under their disapproval. Now in fact, even at this level of appearances, the Protestant who views all this in the most para-rational way does know that there are a lot of Catholics who no longer go to church, and that the lightning does not strike them, or not effectively. Still the threatening character of clerical power remains.

In public life, for a politician, an academic or a professional man, as the appearances go, nothing worse can happen than to have a falling out with a bishop, or worse still with The Bishops. This could mean the end of a career, no future in public life or in one's profession. In the political and public life of the Republic this means stagnation. Instances where the bishops have actually thundered or interfered are few and far between, but they seldom need to do so because every public person knows better than to risk it. Even things the bishops might not actually object to are never attempted because of the fear that they might.

In one sense, this applies not only to Catholic politicians and public men of North and South, but even to the Protestant public figures of the North. It is assumed that they will be prejudiced against Catholics and discriminate against them (so much assumed that even a quite generous-minded Protestant public figure will have his actions interpreted that way). The bishops, like other Catholics, will deplore and object to that, though with no expectation that their complaints will make any difference in the situation. But let a Protestant infringe on an issue that affects the bishops' power, something like schools or marriage legislation, and he does so at his peril.

We are dealing here with appearances still, the way the system looks to the ordinary Protestant viewing it from Shankill Road or East Belfast. We have to measure this against the reality as well.

SURELY IN CITIES in the Republic, at least in Dublin, things are much more free than they were in rather recent memory. Take for example the typical case of the unmarried mother, whose outcast status used to give a scandalous example of heartlessness: nowadays, if she works for RTE or some comparable large organisation, she gets her medical care, three months leave, and her job is safe. There are even many caring organisations to help her through such trouble as she may encounter. Of course, one hears that this could not have happened ten years ago, and it is the far more generalised picture of ten years ago that still remains in the folk-memory, but

there has been change. Middle-class Catholics, in an urban environment, have considerable protection within their own peer groups against the disapproval of the clergy, less than would be taken for granted in other countries, but an improvement over what went before. Political figures who have opposed or criticised the clerical system get re-elected now, even with increased majorities in some cases.

All this indicates an important shift away from the clerical domination of the past, and people, even ranking clerics, point to these signs with some pride, many of them of course with some alarm. What is most lacking is a sensitivity to what the picture of clerically dominated life means to Protestants. Suggestions of such domination are not closely related in popular consciousness to the roots of the violence in the North, and are generally regarded as something to be refuted by pointing to such straws in the wind as these, not a cause that the Catholics of Ireland should urgently pursue for the good of their Church and the reconciliation of their Northern neighbours.

Within the North itself, the actuality of clerical power is still distressingly close to what we have described as the appearance, and in the crucial area of Belfast itself so extreme as to seem a bad caricature of the worst the Protestants might think. The poor are entirely without recourse if their priests disapprove of them personally, the middle class too small and too closely identified with the clergy as their familiars to afford each other the mutual protection their peers in Dublin can. Public figures are wary of any move that could bring episcopal wrath upon them. But there is another aspect of public life that is particularly important and especially vulnerable to clerical interference.

This is the community activity, not at the level of the professionally educated but at the still more important level of community associations and initiatives. A most perceptive, important Protestant leader once asked the writer, as an index to the clerical hold over Catholic community initiatives, why the original organiser had been got out of the CCDC (Central Civil Defence Committee, the local neighbourhood defence organisation that was formed during the first communal clashes of 1969). The reason was clear enough: when there is an initiative taken by the lay Catholic community that does not originate from or come under the control of the clergy, the reaction is uniformly either to co-opt it or to ruin it. There have in fact been community initiatives from the Catholic working-class neighbourhoods that have not been either co-opted or ruined, but everyone in these neighbourhoods knows that this is the first and most important battle that any such community effort will have to face.

PEOPLE LIVING IN the Northern Irish Catholic or Protestant context will surely write enough in response to this analysis to show whether it is justified or not, and it seems better in this article not to go into names and personalities. That would be needlessly abrasive, and in fact it is the hypothesis of the writer that this situation, in general, is not a matter of personal malice but of structural fault in the pattern of Irish clericalism. It is far more important to see something of the effect these structures have in producing the violence that has so grieved the two communities of Northern Ireland and shocked the rest of the Christian world, as well as scandalising the non-Christian world with the spectacle of how little the Christians love one another. It is well first to have a more generalised, comparative view of how majority/minority conflicts work.

Most of the conflict analyses that come out of Northern Ireland, and of other conflict areas like Cyprus or the Middle East, from native sufferers or from the hoards of PhD candidates that batten on to each of these conflicts, concentrate directly on the actual clash between the majority and minority communities. This is a losing game. Seen simply as a conflict between two groups in the population, the clash is understood as a quasi-commercial transaction: I get so much, you get so much; I take what I can and you get only what I can't take. Viewed in this way, the conflict always appears practically insoluble, and in Northern Ireland as in the other similar conflicts between majority and minority groups there has been no shortage of those who conclude that there is simply no solution. Any gain for either side is a new grievance for the other and embitters the conflict further.

In fact, from an experience of quite a variety of such conflict situations, one can say that there are at least four general factors that should be looked for in any one of them:

1. There is the internal state of the majority group, critical in producing the unrest if the majority itself is in internal conflict or crisis of conscience. Where there is no such conflict in the majority, even the most offensive minority is quite safe from harm. But if there is such an internal conflict, the best behaved minority is in danger. This is to say that there is typically a scapegoat element in the treatment of minorities.

2. There is the internal grievance situation in the minority, which is what we have been talking about, for both Catholics and Protestants, so far in this article.

3. There is the actual confrontation between majority and minority, the most obvious of the factors, but in fact the least tractable to solution.

4. There is a framework. This may be such a thing as the legal system of the country, as in the American inter-racial situation, where the 1954 and subsequent decisions of the Supreme Court were a vital framework factor. In other cases, as in South Africa, the legal system may be entirely under the control of one side and hence no framework factor, but there will be other framework factors in its place.*

The factors that can best be worked on to find a way out of such a conflict are the first and fourth, the internal conflict of the majority and the framework. To concentrate the ~~effect~~ on the direct community clash itself, the third factor, is practically a guarantee of failure.

IN NORTHERN IRELAND, as many observers have pointed out, there is a *double minority* problem: the Protestants being a majority in the North but a minority in Ireland as a whole, and most conscious of this double role. The Catholics, while a minority in the North, are equally conscious of their majority status in the whole of Ireland. The grievances of each community, considered as a minority, we have already seen.

Seen and sensing themselves as a majority, the Protestants find their self-identity in their commitment to *democracy*. Religion, Protestantism as such, is not nearly so basic to the way they sense their basic character as a community. The democracy that is so important to them that their commitment to it determines their sense of who they are is of a traditional 17th-century Cromwellian kind. There is a bit of a smoke-screen in the way Protestants in Northern Ireland today try to define their democracy exclusively in terms of majority rule, for they are quite aware that an essential element in this Cromwellian democracy, to which they are most sincerely committed, is the defence of the rights of dissenting non-conformist minorities.

But the Protestants are unable to put this commitment, which is so dear to them, into practice with relation to the Catholic minority because of their fear of 'Rome Rule' in the sense defined in the earlier part of this article. In consequence, they have a bad conscience about this very commitment to democracy which is so strong in them as to amount, for them, to the framework of the whole situation. There is an ambivalence about it, a wish for the thing and a shrinking away from it, and ambivalence, so long as it is buried deep in the consciousness and never admitted to oneself, is here as elsewhere

* For this general analysis of the factors operating in majority/minority conflicts, I am indebted to my good friend and colleague Richard Hauser, but for the application of it to Northern Ireland which follows I am solely responsible myself.

a potent source of violence. If one must conceal one's ambivalence, especially from oneself, then one must attack whoever represents the doubt one feels but will not admit in oneself.

Here is the internal conflict, the crisis of conscience, in the Protestant community. Not being able to implement their truly basic conviction, they can only try to ignore the minority which presents them with this bad-conscience situation; if they cannot ignore it, suppress it; and if they cannot suppress it, destroy it. There is in this situation all the potential for a genocidal level of violence. It has not happened yet, but the extreme situation of a Beirut remains, as it has been all these last nine years, implicit in the conflict.

The Catholics, seen and sensing themselves as an All-Ireland majority, find their self-identity, the framework factor, in their Catholicism itself, which they understand not so much as an institutional structure as a life-commitment to certain Christian ideals and common values, including tolerance and love of neighbour. This is important even for those who are alienated from Church practice. There is still a sense of who 'we' are, people who share common values of a very elevated sort. The writer has consulted a great many people in Ireland as to whether this assertion is really true, and the most challenging criticism of the idea that Irish Catholics identify themselves in terms of their Catholicism was the question: what about their sense of Irish nationalism?

This national-identity sense has to be given its weight, but it seems not really to outweigh the sense of being a people with common values represented by Catholicism. The Catholics of the Southern Republic have been quite able to wish the unification of Ireland would be long away, and have much preferred peace in their twenty-six county State to any realisation of the ancient dream. And in the North itself, after decades of abstention from participating in the Northern Ireland State, the Catholics gave a phenomenally clear (though eventually disappointed) demonstration of their readiness to make the Northern State work in the Civil Rights movement of the mid-1960s. The policies of the present SDLP, for which Catholics by and large do keep voting, with its hopes for an eventual unification of Ireland based never on coercion but rather on participation in the organs of the Northern State and community reconciliation, are light-years apart from the old Nationalistic Party. But the sense of shared Christian values as constitutive of the Catholic community has remained constant.

The internal conflict of the Catholics, feeling themselves as a majority, is in their realisation of how the Protestants see them, as a clerically dominated society of an outmoded sort that has no real relation to Catholic faith, and their sense, whether out of perceptive analysis or a vague, para-rational awareness, that what the

Protestants say of them is really true. The dynamics are strictly parallel to those that arise from the Protestant bad conscience. To reform their internal Church situation and its clerical power structure is hard. Failing that, they likewise have no resort but to ignore the (Protestant) minority that makes such an issue of this distortion of Catholic life, if they cannot ignore the minority, suppress it; and if they cannot suppress it, destroy it.

In the case of both communities, the dynamics of violence rises from the most decent element in them, and in both cases it has the as yet unfulfilled potential to go to the extremes of violence.

What we have said here amounts to asserting that the existing power-structure of Church life is eventually the crucial factor behind the situation of violence. The internal conflict of the Protestants and their failure to live up to their chosen ideal of democracy is also a factor that needs the greatest attention, but here the stumbling block is once again the internal power-structure of Church life. That the situation of clerically dominated life, by no means an essential of Catholic life, should be so critical a factor in the situation of violence must be of the greatest concern not only to the local but to the universal Church.

No personal ill-will is necessarily involved here. Church leaders are quite sincere in their frequent (and ecumenically common) condemnations of violence and appeals against it, and many individual churchmen go to heroic lengths in their search for a just reconciliation. They are truly representative of the sentiments of their less courageous colleagues. It is a structural problem which people in the leadership and membership of the Church either have not found the means of restructuring or have not actually recognised as playing the critical role it does. Various symptoms of this underlying problem, such as the separate schools or marriage legislation, are sometimes brought forward as if they were the problem itself, but it should be seen that they are symptoms only, and that resolving them would not in fact resolve the underlying problem.

Having said all that, we must say in conclusion that this situation has only been the fuse that has set off the explosion of violence in Northern Ireland during the last nine years. The explosive itself has been a still deeper problem, namely the decay of the whole fabric of social life in Northern Ireland. Such a statement deserves fuller treatment than this, but that will have to wait for a subsequent article. In that decay, Northern Ireland is not much different from Britain, Europe, America or almost any part of the world one cares to cite. It differs only in having a fuse that has ignited the situation sooner than in other places. Rebuilding or replacing that social fabric is ~~often~~ necessary in itself and a task to which the Church should be dedicated.

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