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Long conflict and how it ends: Protestants and Catholics in Europe and Ireland

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Abstract

Ireland's Catholic-Protestant conflict rests on multiple, overlapping differences: religious, ethnic, colonial, political. To better understand it, and in particular its religious aspect, I trace Europe's long Catholic-Protestant conflict, how it began, reproduced itself over time, and finally came to an end in the twentieth century. I then use this to generate insights into Ireland's long conflict, how it began, how it developed, why it ended in the Republic, why it has continued in Northern Ireland, and how the latter conflict might end.

Introduction

The centuries-old conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Europe finally came to an end in the twentieth century. How it began continues to attract considerable attention from historians. Why it continued for so long attracts rather less, and how it came to an end hardly any. It is not a subject that conflict theorists have shown much interest in, though there is a lot that merits attention, particularly for those who study intractable conflicts.[1] Long run conflicts pose specific questions, in particular how it is possible for a conflict to begin and so embed itself that it reproduces itself, generation after generation, century after century. And if it then ends, how is this possible? The first part of the paper looks at Europe's long religious conflict. The second part draws insights from it to better understand Ireland's long Protestant-Catholic conflict.

The comparison is complicated by the fact that Catholic-Protestant conflict in Europe was, in the main, a single-stranded religious conflict within the same nation or ethnic group,[2] whereas in Ireland it was a communal conflict based on multiple, overlapping, differences. There is no agreement about what these differences are, their relative importance, or their relationship to one another. Some put the emphasis on religion (Brewer & Higgins, 1998; Elliott, 2009; Fulton, 1991; Ganiel, 2008; Hickey, 1984; Mitchell, 2006), others on ethnicity or nationality (McGarry & O'Leary, 1995; Wright, 1987, 1996), still others on coloniality (Clayton, 1996; MacDonald, 1986; O'Leary, 2019), on the ethno-religious (Bruce, 1994) or on the colonial-religious (Akenson, 1992), and some just on the political (Bourke, 2011; McGrattan, 2010; Prince, 2018). I stress the importance of each strand, though for reasons that will become clear, give particular attention to the religious one.

Despite the difference in the form and complexity of conflict, the European experience can throw light on the Irish case, both for the manner in which conflict developed over time, and came to an end in the Republic of Ireland, while not in Northern Ireland. For Europe, I stress the role of wider market

forces and a more extended state in eroding confessional boundaries, diluting religious difference, and making it irrelevant to the conduct of everyday life. Similar processes, though of a much more complex kind, are observable in the Republic from the 1960s on. In contrast, the potential for something similar in Northern Ireland was quickly blocked when political challenge on both sides intensified difference and communalism, leaving a still more difficult challenge for today.

Europe's long Catholic-Protestant conflict

There is now a voluminous body of historical research on Europe's Catholic- Protestant conflict, but it is highly uneven. The bulk of it is on the first two centuries following the Reformation. After that it thins out, with much less on the nineteenth century, and very little on the twentieth century, except for Northern Ireland. There are overview studies that deal with the early modern or modern periods, as well as studies that cover specific topics over a much longer term.[3] No attempt has yet been made to try to grasp the conflict in a theoretically-unified way for Europe as a whole over its entire life-course.[4] What follows is a schematic overview of the existing research that stresses the interplay between religious difference, interests, power and community, and their embedding and re-embedding in slowly changing structures.[5] I deal with three periods: the construction and embed- ding of conflict, between the early sixteenth century and the end of the eighteenth century; the reconstruction, renewal and persistence of conflict, between the French Revolution and World War Two; and the undoing of conflict, between World War Two and the present.

The construction and embedding of a long-term conflict

The unity of medieval Christendom was achieved by the dominance of a single universal, though internally very diverse, church (Arnold, 2014). Its unity was still intact at the beginning of the sixteenth century, but becoming more fractious as religious and geographical tensions grew (Swanson, 2000). Martin Luther's dramatic challenge to the Church in 1517, and the defiant manner in which he expressed it, gained immediate public attention, inspired other reformers, and began a process that soon became unstoppable. Within a generation any hope of building a new unity was over (MacCulloch, 2003). The Council of Trent of 1545–1563 was the Church's acknowledgement of this. It updated and codified its traditional doctrines, and went on a spiritual and political offensive to hold onto what it still had, and recover as much lost ground as possible. It had some success, particularly in Central Europe, but by then the greater part of Northern Europe had been lost.

The Reformation was an exercise in the construction of difference on a grand scale and the result was, in Eire's description, equivalent to a 'revolutionary paradigm shift' (Eire, 2016, pp. 744–48, 754–5). It was achieved by sifting through the corpus of early Christian texts, histories, institutions and practices, deciding what had to go, what could be kept, and what should be prioritised (Gordon, 1996). It then involved building a new church, with its own distinctive doctrines, forms of worship, sacraments, institutions, sacred or less sacred vestments and music, architecture and aesthetics (Chadwick, 2001; Hsia, 2007; Karant-Nunn, 2010; Pettegree, 2000, Part V; Randall, 1999; Rublack, 2017, Part V). A small number of major churches emerged. Some – Lutheran, Anglican – were not that different from the original, others – Calvinist and, still more, Anabaptist – much more so.[6]

What was constructed was not simply a difference, but a conflict that ruled out compromise or toleration. Regardless of how close or distant the new churches were to the original, they were united in their detestation of it and their *a priori* assumption that it was grievously in error and beyond

reform (Halvorson & Spierling, 2008). For the Catholic Church, any departure from its teachings, and still more from the Church as an institution, was necessarily heretical. For all concerned, it was an existential battle between truth and error, right and wrong, God and Satan, Salvation and Damnation, a war to be waged until one or other triumphed.

From the beginning the disputes were public and as they moved into the wider society, they divided families, communities, classes, cities, dynasties, and states. In the simplest of cases the decision as to whether to embrace the new or remain with the old was made by a sovereign ruler and accepted, more or less willingly, by their subjects. But the process could be long and drawn out, rulers could lean towards one church and then another, opt for one but show tolerance to another, and a successor could change course. For an individual or group the choice they made carried a risk, because once made it could be difficult to change, and the price of getting it wrong could be high: persecution, dispossession, imprisonment, banishment, martyrdom or massacre (Davis, 1973; Greengrass, 2013, pp. 22–45, 22–23; Gregory, 2001; Pettegree, 2005; Terpstra, 2015).

With so much at stake, conflict was inevitable (Palaver, Rudolph, & Regensburger, 2016). Attacks might be non-violent: satire, parody, and mockery of the other's beliefs, rituals and symbols (Scribner, 1978). But very often they went much farther: the desecration or destruction of each other's sacred objects, spaces and buildings (Wandel, 1994), or physical attack, including the spontaneous violence of the mob (Davis, 1973) or the judicial violence of the state. Beyond this again lay armed rebellion, civil war, wars of conquest and reconquest, and interstate war. The violence was frequently savage and massacres were routine (Tulchin, 2012).

Religious minorities suffered everywhere. How much depended on the level of tolerance rulers and individuals were willing to show, but also on what was immediately at stake and the magnitude of the threat the minority was thought to pose, and this could increase at moments of economic crisis, dynastic instability, and geopolitical danger. The majority-minority question was particularly complicated in the decentralised German lands where the proportions of each religious group could vary at different levels of scale (Boyer, 1996; Murdock, 2017, pp. 105–123). There has been no comprehensive survey of relations in the mixed areas during the first period of the Reformation, but case studies suggest wide variation (Eire, 1986; Kaplan, 2007; MacCulloch, 2003, Part ll; Pettegree, 2000, Parts III & IV; Ryrie, 2006; Safley, 2011; Scribner, Porter, & Teich, 1994; Wandel, 1994).

The Thirty Years War (1618–48) brought the most turbulent and violent phase of the Reformation to a close. Europe was now religiously divided, and the divisions proved permanent. Northern Europe – Scotland, England, Scandinavia, the northern German states – was exclusively or overwhelmingly Protestant; southern and central Europe – France, Spain, Italy, Austro- Hungary, Poland and Lithuania – were overwhelmingly Catholic. In-between and flanking these was a mixed zone that stretched from Ireland in the north-west through the northern Netherlands, the Rhineland, southern Germany, Switzerland, to Transylvania in the south-east (Murdock, 2017).

Inter-state conflict was now unusual, and intra-state conflict was contained by penal regimes of varying degrees of harshness. Those in France, Austria, and Ireland were particularly severe and left a long legacy of grievance (for Austria, see Walker, 1993). Others were less so, in particular the Dutch Repub- lic and the mixed parts of the Holy Roman Empire, though here too incidents could arise (Dixon, Freist, & Greengrass, 2009; François, 1993; Kaplan, 2007, 2014; Safley, 2011).

The Protestant and Catholic parts of Europe differed in their religious cultures, but there were commonalities. In both cases, religion remained an intrinsic part of national and local life. Local communities, including everyday speech, were permeated by religious symbols and motifs, and

religious rituals and festivities were part of communal life (Briggs, 2012; Frijhoff, 2006). At a higher level, religion was viewed as foundational to social and public order, and religious unity as essential to the stability of the kingdom. The dominant church provided the ruler with legitimacy, supported the legal authorities, and carried out state administrative functions. In return, the state underwrote the dominant church's public and confessional role (Aston, 2012).

Reconstruction, renewal and persistence in first-phase modernity

The French Revolution shattered the political and religious assumptions of Europe's *ancien régime* states and societies (Aston, 2000, 2002). The Revolution's radical phase quickly passed, but its principles survived – universal rights, equality, separation of church and state, universal franchise, citizenship, the nation – and prevented any return to the old order (Caiani, 2017). Meanwhile, the diffusion of the English technological, industrial and urban revolution was undermining the old order's economic and social basis (Pilbeam, 2000). Remarkably, neither revolution did much to end the religious conflict that had been such a conspicuous part of the old order, or at least not for a long time. Instead, the conflict reproduced itself within the structures and mentalities of the new order (McLeod, 1995, 1997). The churches played a key role in this.

The Catholic Church saw the emerging forms of society as an existential threat to the very possibility of a Christian society and set its face against them (McLeod, 2000, pp. 94–118). It tried to delay them, but could not stop them, and instead concentrated on protecting its own members from their dangers by instilling in them an ever deeper faith and commitment, and putting in place a matrix of strong Catholic institutions to support them. It centralised decision-making in the Vatican and elevated the status of the pope. It increased the numbers of its clergy and improved their training, and built new churches, schools, hospitals, orphanages, and refuges for the poor and incapacitated. It insisted on church attendance, encouraged lay involvement at parish level, promoted popular devotions and Catholic newspapers, magazines, and works of Church history (Altermatt, 1994; Clark, 2003; Heilbronner, 2000; Sperber, 1984).

The response of the Protestant churches was different and they also varied among each other. The liberal churches viewed the new forms of society in positive terms, seeing them as the realisation of the principles of reason and liberty established at the Reformation and renewed at the Enlightenment, and reflected now in the greater economic dynamism of Europe's Protestant economies and societies (Nockles & Westbrook, 2014). The evangelical churches were more fearful of the danger to faith and responded with energetic public preaching, revivalist meetings, uplifting music, and marching bands (Van Molle, 2017). Both types of churches responded in a similar way at the organisational level: expanding the numbers, quality and training of their clergy, improving the religious education of their parishioners, building churches, schools and hospitals, either with state or voluntary support.

Their divergent responses provided the churches with still more reason to fear, dislike, and compete with each other (McLeod, 1997, pp. 36–53; McLeod, 2000, pp. 218–226). Liberal Protestants treated the Catholic Church's hostility to modernity with derision, seeing it as further evidence that it was still stuck in the medieval world and intrinsically opposed to rationality and progress. But they were also fearful of the Church's organisational ability and political power (for Germany, see Anderson, 1995; Blaschke, 2013; Heilbronner, 2006). The Catholic Church continued to see the reformation as destructive to the true faith, and saw the Protestant embrace of modernity as further evidence of their lack of religious depth and seriousness, and their short-sightedness in choosing a path that would inevitably end in secularism.

Intercommunal relations did not improve, or not by much. The progressive dismantling of the penal regimes softened the grievances of minorities, but the memories of past persecutions remained, along with the awareness of what had been lost (Liedtke & Wendehorst, 1999). Minorities also had continuing grievances, particularly where majorities continued to be hostile. Real challenge became possible only where the demographics changed. This could happen at the local level in industrialising cities as a result of migration or as a result of state boundary or administrative changes (Schmitt, 1992; Steinhoff, 2008). A more complex process got underway in the territories of the collapsed Holy Roman Empire as smaller territories were integrated into ever larger units. In all of these cases, there was a heightened risk of conflict (Gross, 2005; Heilbronner, 2000; McLeod, 1986).

Meanwhile, low intensity conflict continued. Attempts to contain it by rules of avoidance and politeness helped, but they did not always work, and not everyone wanted them to. Occasions for conflict were provided by religious processions, the erection of religious statues, commemorations, disputes about graveyards, aggressive church bell-ringing or disruption during the observance of saints' feast days. Conflict could be triggered by a mixed marriage and spread out from there, by the replacement of a moderate local clergyman with an aggressive one, by the arrival of street preachers or evangelical groups, the building of new churches or the requirement to share existing ones, or as a result of competition for jobs and territory as local demography changed. Local or national elections, particularly at moments of national crisis, could also provide occasions for conflict (For examples, see Anderson, 2001; Hause, 1989; Merriman, 1991; Schmitt, 1992; Tournier, 2010; Wahl, 2004).

The end of conflict in the contemporary period

Today this long conflict is over. The once commonplace polemics, maligning and mockery, practical and institutional exclusions and discriminations, are now a thing of the past. It is not because the difference has disappeared or counts for nothing.[7] What has changed is that, in the ordinary business of living, the difference is either not noticed, noticed but ignored, or acknowledged and treated with consideration and respect. The churches still cultivate their difference, and it remains important for their active members, and for believers but non-churchgoers. Non-believers may continue to identity with their historic and familial religious tradition, or as *culturally* Catholic or Protestant. The churches remain a presence in the public domain in almost all European countries. Many national and regional political party systems, cultures and identities bear witness to their religious past (Boyer, 1996). Religious affiliation influences attitudes to European integration (Nelsen, Guth, & Fraser, 2001). More than enough survives to allow for an insensitive, critical or hostile remark, and for offense to be taken. It is not usual, but if it happens, care is taken to limit its effect. To escalate would be viewed as backward and reprehensible.

Two changes have contributed to this, and behind both are wider processes of social and cultural change. The first is ecumenism, which redefined the historical divisions as occasions for dialogue rather than hostility. The second is secularisation, which diluted and privatised the difference, and limited its implications for everyday life.

The conflict between the churches did not arise simply from the emergence of disagreement. More important was the fashioning of the differences in ways that made them mutually exclusive and de-legitimating, and as differences that could not possibly be tolerated. This was then inscribed in distinct ecclesiastical traditions and institutions. Modernity was a challenge, but one the churches responded to with vigour, not simply by renewing themselves and the faith of their members, but by renewing their differences and their reasons for mutual dislike and rivalry. It took the wars and unprecedented

destruction of the first half of the twentieth century, and the deepening threat of secularism, to force a re-think (for the role of the Catholic Church in this, see Chappel, 2018; Conway, 1997).

The Catholic Church emerged from the crisis years with a more realistic grasp of what it could achieve in a radically changed world and a more acute awareness of the cost of divisions within Christianity in general (Bank & Gevers, 2016; Chappel, 2018). The Second Vatican Council of 1963–65 was its new realism in action, providing it with the occasion to announce the end of its war on modernity and its even longer war against the Protestant churches. It invited them to attend the Council as observers, and their positive response opened the way to ecumenism. Differences that for centuries had been considered impossible to tolerate were now reconceived (with some qualification and fudging) as different approaches to the same ultimate truth and, as such, worthy of respect and dialogue. In what still seems a remark- ably short time, a centuries-long conflict had come to an end.

The inter-communal conflict was a different matter. It grew out of the inter-church one, but soon acquired its own social basis, its own mechanisms of reproduction, and its own forms of embeddedness. It was an inter-group rather than inter-institutional conflict, with many of the same properties as an ethnic one and the same ability to reproduce itself. It was about difference and identity in the social sense, about access to resources, rights, and political power, about inclusion and exclusion, all of which became cumulative over time. It came to an end when its mechanisms of social reproduction eventually ceased to operate. This happened when wider societal changes – in particular, intensified market forces and the extended role of the state – eroded confessional boundaries, diluted the extent of the difference, disconnected religious difference from inequality and life chances, and made it generally irrelevant in the conduct of everyday life (Butler & Ruane, 2009; Ruane, 2014a, 2014b, 2019; Ruane & Butler, 2007; see also Wahl, 2004).

Three institutions were crucial to the reproduction of religious difference and the broader cultural differences associated with it: the family, the church and the local confessional community. The family imprinted the difference and the identity from the earliest age. The church reinforced and elaborated on this through its ceremonials, communal worship, religious instruction, and church-based social activities. The local confessional community provided a wider group for interaction, norms for public behaviour, useful economic contacts, and the marriage partners necessary for the cycle to repeat itself.

In religiously mixed areas, the normal operation of these mechanisms led to confessionalised local societies, with significant contacts limited to co-religionists met through family and kin relations, the church, and the wider confessional community. This had an economic dimension and implications for life chances. Many owners of local farms and businesses combined a strong confessional identity with support for the church and co-religionists. Shops and small businesses drew their clientele disproportionately from among their co-religionists. Confessionalised local institutions – schools, hospitals, care homes, social services – met the needs of their own community and offered employment opportunities accordingly. Where the different confessions had equal access to resources, there were no material reasons for conflict. But very often there was inequality, with grievances that had accumulated over time, and conflicting explanations as to why it existed.

Wider economic change and the increasing importance of the state from the 1960s undermined this. The traditional confessionalised sector – farms, businesses, schools, service organisations – struggled to survive in a more competitive setting, and did so only by professionalising their operations. The new arrivals – private companies, the state sector – did not operate on confessional principles. As the local economy de-confessionalised, and new educational and employment opportunities opened up, life chances ceased to be based on religious affiliation. Inequality might persist, and still have a

confessional dimension, but this was now due to family upbringing and inheritance, not to group closure. The end of confessionalised economies deprived the wider confessional community of its economic role, and this at a time when new forms of entertainment and leisure were ending the role of the churches as social centres.

If the traditional religious difference was to survive, everything now depended on the family. Even if parents wanted to transmit it to the next generation – and not all did – it was becoming more difficult. The younger generation was being exposed to multiple new influences, and being encour- aged to make their own decisions on religion and other matters. With each passing generation, less was transmitted. At this stage, all of the traditional mechanisms for reproducing the traditional difference had stopped working, and a culture and identity that had once gone deep was now lightly held. With the difference diluted, and no longer relevant to resources and life chances, there was not much left to fight over.

Ireland's long multi-stranded conflict

Examples of virtually all the processes just described for Europe can be found in Ireland. But the way in which they happened was different. The roots of this lie in the fact that the Reformation came to Ireland as part of a wider programme of religious, economic, political, legal, cultural and ethnic, change that was being advanced by conquest and colonisation (Canny, 2003; Connolly, 2007; Lenihan, 2007; Montaño, 2011). One of the abiding questions in Irish historiography is how to characterise that process and the society that emerged out of it (for discussion, see Connolly, 2017; Howe, 2014; Morgan, 1991/92; Murphy, 2019; Ohlmeyer, 2004).

The interpretations vary, but they can be placed on a continuum between two poles, one emphasising European state-building, the other Atlantic empire-building. Viewed as European state-building, Ireland was integrated as a periphery into the expanding English core; viewed as Atlan- tic empire-building, it was integrated as a colony into the emerging British Atlantic empire. Viewed in European terms, eighteenth century Ireland was a religiously-divided, *ancien régime* kingdom within the composite British state (Connolly, 2008; Ellis, 2014; Leighton, 1994; McBride, 2009). Viewed in Atlantic terms, it was a settler colony of the British empire (Canny, 2003; Crotty, 2001; O'Leary, 2019; Smyth, 2006). For the nineteenth century, the contrast is between an Ireland dealing with the challenges of agricultural adjustment, industrialisation, democratisation, and linguistic standardisation as an integral part of the United Kingdom (Foster, 1988; Hoppen, 2013; Jackson, 2010), and an Ireland that is still a colony facing recurring social, economic and cultural crises in a context of imperial neglect and misrule (Carroll & King, 2002; Kinealy, 2006; Lloyd, 2011; McDonough, 2005).

Most historians locate Ireland somewhere between the two poles, while tilting towards one or the other: either as mainly European, but with a colonial dimension of some kind, or as mainly colonial, but moderated by its closeness to the metropolis, the absence of a racial difference, and later integration into the Union (for a general overview of the positions, see Howe, 2000). There is a third possibility, one that stresses the inconsistencies in the policies and processes, and the indeterminacy and ambiguity of the outcome, with indeterminacy and ambiguity viewed alternately as a problem to be solved, and a resource to exploit. This is the approach adopted here.

Overcoming indeterminacy and embedding division

Ireland's early eighteenth century, post-conquest condition posed key questions of order and definition for its new rulers. There had been close to two centuries of turbulence and conflict. Central rule had been imposed on a long decentralised polity, a centuries-old legal order had been replaced by a completely different one, a native ruling class had been violently displaced and replaced by a settler one, an attempt to impose the Reformation had failed and the country was now religiously divided between a Catholic majority and a ruling Protestant minority, wars and massacres had left bitter memories (Connolly, 2008). Key decisions had to be made: what form its land tenurial relations would take; what the basis of political loyalty would be; how the settler-native distinction was to be handled; how the religious difference was to be managed; what form its national life would take; what its geo-political status would be; in short, what kind of society it was to become.

This was the context in which religion became the distinction on which everything else would turn. It would determine who the dominant group was, who would be defined as winners and losers, loyal and disloyal, who would have rights and who would not, who would be supported and who kept underfoot. Foregrounding the religious distinction brought political clarity and moral certainty. It also gave Ireland the form and – to a degree – the legitimacy of a European *ancien régime* form of rule. But it did not give it an *ancien régime* confessional order, or at least not a typical one. Elsewhere the established religion was that of the majority, and its privileging was a way of ensuring the unity of the kingdom, its independence, and the legitimacy of its ruler. In Ireland the established religion was that of just one of the settler groups, its privileging added to the disunity of the kingdom, underpinned external rule, and ensured that its ruler did not achieve legitimacy in the minds of the majority. Indeed, its role was not unlike that of race in a settler colony.[8] Ambiguity had been displaced, not resolved.

The political and geopolitical function assigned to religion further enhanced the power of the churches. The Church of Ireland was now the religious arm of the state, membership was proof of loyalty, a means to social and political advance, and the glue that bonded small and potentially vulnerable communities into a single island-wide confessional one (Connolly, 2007; Hill, 2002). The relationship between dissenters and the state was more contentious, but local churches provided valuable economic and social networks, and assured communal support in the frontier areas in the face of potential Catholic threat (Hempton & Hill, 1992). The Catholic Church was in organisational disarray and politically powerless, but even it benefited as the only national institution Catholics could identify with and unconditionally give their loyalty to (Whelan & Power, 1990).

The centrality of religion to the new order and to public life assured it of a role in post-conquest ethnogenesis. While some Protestants were of Irish extraction, most came from England or Scotland. Holding onto their original identities was not an option, and the question now was what they would become. Some were open to inserting themselves into the long history of the island, but there were barriers to doing so: the recency of the conquest, the religious divide, and the fact that in English minds the Irish were inherently treacherous, disloyal and backward (Leerssen, 1996). What emerged was an identity as *Protestant* Irish. It was based on religion, Irish birth and residence, the history of their maltreatment at Irish Catholic hands, their achievement in bringing order and progress to the island, their hostility to Catholicism, their loyalty to the Crown, and an openness to English or (in Ulster) Scottish culture and to the wider English-speaking world. It was Irish, but a new variant, and one not to be confused with the original (Hill, 1988).

From the outset, the Irish nationality of Catholics was inescapable and unquestionable. What this would mean was still to be determined. The social basis of the inherited ethnic identities – Old English and Gaelic Irish - had been destroyed. The Old English had lost their preeminent public role, their earlier relationship with the Crown, and their presumption of being the advanced culture on the island. The Gaelic world survived for another century, but at the lower levels of society, and its

potential to develop into a modern national culture was gone. What emerged was an English-speaking Catholic Irish culture and identity, that drew culturally on the older ethnic identities, politically on narratives of defeat and dispossession, and – for its civic and modernising aspects – on Protestant and English models (Bartlett, 1992). As a national culture it was weak and thin, and struggled to compete with the politically dominant, better resourced, and more self-confident, Protestant ones.

Religion was important in its own right, a source of power, a component of ethnicity, and came with its own colonial meanings. But this did not make it the sole or even primary basis of conflict: from the beginning this was and remained a fully multi-stranded conflict. It was also as a multi-stranded conflict that it was – similar to religious difference elsewhere in Europe – inscribed in the landscape and embedded in society: in settlement patterns, the layout of cities and towns, public architecture, cathedrals and churches and graveyards, the different sectors of the economy, in social class, the forms of associational life, social and economic networks, education, hospitals, learned societies, personal and family names, and place names (Walsham, 2012; Whelan, 2018). Indeed, the multi-stranded nature of the difference was all the more visible given the rapid and violent nature of Ireland's transition from late medieval to early modern society (Cullen, 1981).

Two aspects of Europe's changing religious landscape in the nineteenth century had particularly far-reaching consequences in Ireland. One was emancipation, which in the Irish context meant the emancipation of a majority rather than a minority, its impact made all the greater by the manner in which it was achieved (Bew, 2007, p. 122). The other was church and religious renewal. In the Catholic case, it transformed a fragmented, localised and fearful church into one that was well-resourced, well-staffed, well-organised, and self-confident, its members well-catechised and church-attending (Rafferty, 2008). The Protestant evangelical revival was equally impressive in its mobilising power, particularly in Ulster, where it was further reinforced by the Orange Order. Both mobilisations increased religious tensions on the island, and where they were in close proximity, as in industrialising and urbanising Belfast, the effect could be explosive (Dickson, 2007; Farrell, 2000; Gibbon, 1975).

Developments in the other strands were also contributing to tension. The Union had brought benefits to the north-east of the island, but not much to the rest where it was fuelling a demand for self-rule (Ó Gráda, 1995). It was a time when national and proto-national cultures were being recovered, invented, and/or developed everywhere in Europe, and it brought into sharp focus the cost of Ireland's colonisation and its divisions for developing an Irish national culture of equivalent depth (Boyce, 1995). This coincided with greater awareness of the contradictory role Ireland had played and was playing in the expansion of the British empire, at a time when British imperial pride was growing, and developing a stronger racial dimension, one that was also being extended to the Irish (Hall, 2002; Nelson, 2012).

As the new century began, the overlapping differences – religious, ethnic, cultural, political, and imperial-colonial – fused into two composite identities on each side of a nationalist/unionist political divide. Not every Catholic or Protestant got drawn into this or the politics based on it. But the majority on each side went along with it, and there was a militant core that drove the political process. As armed mobilisation began, the potential for an island-wide civil war was real. It was avoided by the British and unionist imposition of partition.

Conflict ending, conflict continuing

The fusion of differences that produced partition was institutionalised in each of the new states. The intensity of division was greater in the North, but its form was the same in both cases. In the South,

nationalists had to build a new state and nation in the face of Protestant and British disdain and presumption that 'British' was superior to 'Irish', while Protestants felt beleaguered in a society imbued with anti-British nationalism and a strong Catholicity.[9] In the North, unionists built a state to copperfasten the Union in the face of Northern nationalist and Southern hostility, while Northern Catholics and nationalists endured new and more severe forms of discrimination. In neither state was the majority or minority willing to concede any- thing at the level of identity, though the Southern minority was much more open to practical accommodation than its Northern equivalent.

Today the historic conflict is over in the Republic. The same cannot be said for Northern Ireland. What explains the difference, and does the manner in which religious conflict came to an end in Europe throw light on it? In the European case, wider market forces and the national state played a key role in eroding confessional boundaries and diluting confessional identities. Similar processes can be observed in the Republic, though in a different context, at multiple levels, and operating along each of the strands rather than simply the religious one. In contrast, the attempt to set some of this in motion in Northern Ireland led to an intensified communalism that pushed the society onto a different path.

What happened in the South was the product of international changes and a revised development project. By the end of the 1950s the limited achievements of independence were clear. There was pride in nationhood, but the country was still in Britain's shadow, living standards were low, emigration levels high, and the population was declining. At a time of booming economies in the Western world, expectations were rising – for better jobs, more education, better health and welfare benefits, a less controlling church, and life-styles closer to what were available elsewhere. The new policies were much more outward-looking: joining the Common Market, targeting foreign investment, adopting more liberal social and cultural policies. The outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland made everything more difficult, but did not deflect from the South's own development project.

When – three decades later – the project had borne fruit, the society had been transformed. It was prosperous (if unevenly so), economically dynamic, socially and religiously liberal, ethnically and (to a degree) racially diverse, its people well-educated and well-travelled. Its economy was globally integrated and its still close relationship to Britain was now balanced by its relationship to the US and the EU. The state had been re-imagined: no longer that of a revived Gaelic-Irish nation, but of a modern, pluralist, one, with responsibility to all its citizens, regardless of their origins or ethnicity. Not all institutions adapted successfully to the changes, in particular the Catholic Church, already weakened politically by a growing secularism and anticlericalism, its moral authority fatally damaged from the 1990s by episcopal and clerical scandals (Ó Corráin, 2018).

Protestants played their part in these changes as ordinary citizens. But early on they also effected a specific change of their own – opening their protected sectors to Catholic entry and entering in greater numbers into spaces that had been almost exclusively Catholic (Bowen, 1983; Ruane, 2019). More important, they took advantage of the new opportunities opening up as the economy expanded and the public sphere became more diverse. The tight communal boundaries of the earlier period were becoming more porous, contact was becoming routine, and there was convergence in education, wealth, cultural style and values (Butler & Ruane, 2009; Fahey, Hayes, & Sinnott, 2006).

It was a long process, in the course of which each side, slowly and incrementally, reassessed its relationship to its inherited tradition, Catholics publicly, Protestants privately (Ruane, 2019). The differences became less marked and oppositional, but they did not disappear. Religion remains their bedrock, but there is also a different historical memory, cultural meanings and reference points. Today, issues can still arise, not least at times of commemoration. There can be awkwardness and

unease, and sometimes more (see Crawford, 2017; Todd, 2014). But for most purposes and in most situations the differences remain in the background, and any risk of conflict is quickly contained. Today the situation is not fundamentally different from equivalent parts of Europe.

What explains the change? The Irish context was different to the European one – it involved the society as a whole and multiple strands of difference – but the same kinds of mechanisms were involved. Post-independence Southern Ireland was communalist at each level: national, confessional, regional, familial, local. The new economic dynamic impacted on all of them, making boundaries more porous and the society more individualist, rights-centred, commoditised, and market-driven in its values. The old values did not completely disappear, and have been more resilient in Ireland than in other European societies (Roy, 2019). But the general tendencies have been the same, with religious and cultural differences increasingly viewed either with indifference or as private matters, and relationships and identities shaped by modern norms and values much more than by inherited cultural traditions.

If the Republic shows the triumph of the systemic forces of advanced modernity over those of tradition and community, Northern Ireland shows the opposite. Post-partition Northern Ireland was at once more communalist than the South and less so: more of its divisions, less so because of its majority Protestant and industrial heritage. In the 1960s, Terence O'Neill's government attempted to build on the latter with an outward-looking, modernising, and – in principle – non-sectarian, project (Mulholland, 2000). However, the challenge it posed to the established politi- cal order exacerbated rather than moderated communal divisions. It unsettled and divided unionism, triggered loyalist fears, and led to the political rise of the Rev Ian Paisley. At the same time, it aggravated the Catholic sense of grievance at a time when their expectations were rising. The chal- lenge of the civil rights movement and the crisis of August 1969 led to a hardening of unionist attitudes and the return of the British army to the streets of Northern Ireland, creating the conditions for a prolonged and violent conflict. The outbreak of the Troubles and their persistence ended any possibility of Northern Ireland being transformed by the kinds of processes that were re- shaping the Republic. The primacy and all-pervasiveness of the communal division was inescapable and the priority now was to find some way of recovering political stability. The political formula was to be power-sharing and equality legislation, politically overseen, and economically buttressed, by the British government. From 1985 the Irish government was also given a role. In 1998, the Good Friday Agreement put in place an elaborate system of power-sharing, with further equality legislation, North–South institutional bodies, and the conditions set out for how constitutional change might take place.

The peace has held for over 20 years, and during that time much work has been done by individuals, groups and organisations to improve intercommunal relations (Brewer, Higgins, & Teeney, 2011; Ganiel, 2016). There is a now a significant middle ground where opinions are moderate and the difference is handled with tact and ease (Coakley, this volume; Dornschneider & Todd, 2020; Hayes & McAllister, 2013). At the same time, there is still a solid majority on each side based on the old fusion of differences and the old antagonisms. Religion remains at the heart of the division, but it is also about cultural and political identity, inequality and power, and about the constitution. As long as the balance of power remains stable and – above all – Irish unity remains off the agenda, the tensions are manageable. Should Irish unity become a real possibility, the opposing blocs will immediately come into play, along with the risk of a wider de-stabilisation.

Conclusion

The manner in which religious conflict ended in Europe throws light on so because of the depth why Ireland's multi-stranded conflict ended in the Republic, and why it persists in Northern Ireland. Does it point to how the latter might end? Logically – what- ever about practically – there are two possibilities. The first is that the present constitutional position of Northern Ireland becomes more or less permanent, the middle ground grows at the expense of the two opposing blocs, and the economy and society become more dynamic and expansionary. The difference would continue to matter, but increasing numbers would accept it, become adept at managing it, and new situations and opportunities would emerge where it would matter less and less.

The second possibility is some form of united Ireland, coming either because a substantial majority in Northern Ireland desired it, or because a smaller majority insisted on it. If it could be achieved without creating still deeper divisions, it would open two options. One would be an island-wide version of the current Northern Ireland binary model, with the differences publicly foregrounded and provision made for power-sharing and equality. The other would be an island-wide version of the European and Republic of Ireland model, where a still larger economy and more diverse society would create the conditions for the historic differences to dilute and to cease to matter in a public realm that was now a fully shared social space.

Notes

1. There is a rich literature on intractable conflicts, but its focus is on the present (see Bar-Tal, 2013).
2. Exceptions include parts of Switzerland and the mixed Prussian-Polish terri- tories (Alvis, 2005).
3. For example, the subject of anti-Catholicism (Werner & Harvard, 2013), or Pro- testant good works (Borello, 2013).
4. Wolffe (2013) outlines the questions a long run study needs to address and pro- vides valuable case studies.
5. See Ruane (2012, pp. 634–635).
6. In what follows the terms 'reformed' and 'Protestant' will be used as collective terms to refer to these churches.
7. The Pew (2017) survey stresses the fading of the difference, but the questions asked and the figures reported suggest substantial persistence.
8. To add to the ambiguity, ethnological speculation of a racializing kind was also present (Nelson, 2012, chapters 1 and 2).
9. For different views of how Protestants fared in independent Ireland, see Bowen (1983), Kennedy (1988), Walker (2012), Bury (2016), d'Alton and Milne (2019), Nuttall (2020).

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