

Beyond God And Ulster

The Movement Towards a Secular United Ireland

This article appeared in the December 2021 edition of the French Freethought quarterly review *L'Idee Libre* (Free Idea)

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THE 'Ulster Problem' originates from three main causes: economic, religious and political factors. In the early 17th century Plantation, Protestants from Scotland and England settled in the province of Ulster and stole land from the native Gaelic chiefs. To this economic appropriation was added a religious dimension because the settlers were also generally Calvinist or Puritan in outlook, which meant that, at least in religious terms, they were emotionally and intellectually anti-Catholic. In 1641 there was a Catholic uprising against the settlers in which thousands of Protestants were killed. Tensions were further heightened when Presbyterians adopted the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), which declared that the pope was the 'antichrist' and the Catholic Mass a form of idolatry.

To these economic and religious divisions was added a political strand in the 19th century. A British nationalism developed in the Protestant culture as Ulster industrialised with linen and shipbuilding, both of which depended on the link with the UK. At the same time the Catholic Church in Ireland became more conservative and centralised and the independence movement, which had a brief period of Protestant leadership in the United Irishmen of the late 18th century, became more pervasively Catholic. There was now essentially a clash of two nationalisms in Ireland: a Catholic Irish nationalism and a Protestant British nationalism.

By the beginning of the 20th century this conflict came close to civil war. The British 'solution' was to partition the country in 1921 into a majority Protestant six-county 'Northern Ireland', which remained in the UK, and a 26-county predominantly Catholic 'Irish Free State', which was granted dominion status, and later declared itself a fully independent Republic.

Thus a small island was divided on sectarian lines: the Republic became a Catholic theocracy and Northern Ireland a Puritan theocracy. Each brand of Christianity ruled its own fiefdom. This narrow equilibrium was challenged in the 1960s when a civil rights movement demanded equal rights for the minority Catholic/nationalist community in Northern Ireland. The result was state repression and the rise of the provisional IRA, which for nearly 30 years waged a military campaign to

end partition and create a united Ireland. 3,700 people were killed during this period of the 'Troubles', the vast majority by the IRA or Protestant paramilitaries. The Belfast Agreement of 1998 acknowledged that Northern Ireland would remain in the United Kingdom as long as the majority wished. So the attempt to bomb and shoot a million Protestants renowned for their stubbornness and intransigence into a united Ireland proved counterproductive.

There is no alternative to persuasion. The good life is about means as well as ends, and violent, coercive re-

publicanism robs Irish unity of its worth. Yet there are signs of peaceful change. First of all, the economic argument against unity is no longer valid. Average income in the Republic of Ireland is now higher than in the

UK, thanks in no small part to Ireland's membership of the European Union (EU).

The benefit of membership was also apparent to a majority in Northern Ireland who voted 56% in favour of remaining in the EU in the 2016 referendum. There is a strong feeling in Ulster that Brexit is an expression of narrow English nationalism which is out of kilter with a growing sense that nationalism itself is a backward and divisive ideology. This feeling is exacerbated by the decision of the British government to sell Unionists down the 'river' by agreeing with the EU to a border in the Irish Sea, thus breaking a vital link with the UK.

The economic benefits of Irish unity also include economies of scale for businesses, greater competition, lower prices and job opportunities, more investment opportunities in the North, an all-Ireland environmental policy and an integrated infrastructure for the whole island. Indeed, instead of having two policies on such matters as health, education, energy and transport, there could be one coordinated policy for the whole island, and this would greatly improve efficiency and the quality of life.

What, then, of the other obstacles to unity? The slogan that 'Home Rule means Rome Rule' has ceased to be applicable. On the contrary, the Irish Republic has liberalised more quickly than the North. The 1990s clerical sex scandals have done enormous damage to —>

the Irish Catholic Church, which was already losing its power as the population became more educated and urbanised. Most Irish people are no longer the Church's compliant slaves on social and moral issues. They voted by clear majorities against its wishes in legalising divorce, same sex marriage and abortion.

The Republic is now a richer, more vibrant, stable society which is no longer a priest-ridden theocracy but instead has become a liberal, cosmopolitan state which has transcended the narrow, closed ethnic nationalism of the past. In a united Ireland the state could not favour any religious group and would therefore be closer to being a truly secular society than the UK.

It is the North that remains backward on these matters. There are still strong Christian anti-abortion and anti-gay lobbies, and progress in these areas has had to be imposed by the UK government rather than generated within the province itself. Local politicians continue to stall on implementing abortion reform, and the DUP has consistently opposed gay rights from the days of its foundation under Paisley. These reactionary attitudes persist in the main churches. The Presbyterian Church forbids gays from becoming full members. Thus Northern Ireland has been persistently behind most other advanced societies in these issues, precisely because of the negative and decidedly 'unchristian' influence of narrow religious dogma by many of the leading politicians and the clergy.

Yet the ideologies behind these archaic attitudes are steadily eroding. The actor Peter Ustinov wisely remarked that "beliefs are what divide people; doubt unites them". Northern Ireland has suffered the tragedy of belief in the two poisonous myths of religion and nationalism for centuries. But there are clear signs that their hold over the people is eroding. A *Life and Times* survey published in June 2021 found that as many as 27% in Northern Ireland regard themselves as having no religion, a figure that has more than doubled in a decade. The figure is probably even higher, as many identify themselves as Protestant or Catholic purely for cultural reasons. Opinion polls also indicate that the majority of people fully support abortion, gay rights and integrated education, and therefore it is the politicians and the churches who are holding the society back.

Another *Life and Times* survey in 2019 found that 50% of the population now describe themselves as neither unionist nor nationalist, up from 33% in 1998. The term 'Northern Irish' has also become popular as a self-description. At the same time, support for the DUP, the extreme unionist party, is eroding and liberal parties in the middle ground, such as Alliance, are gaining support. At the 2019 general election, Alliance received 16.8% of the votes, overtaking the SDLP and UUP to come third overall. In the European election of 2019 Naomi Long, the Alliance leader, received 18.5% of first preference votes.

As a consequence of these developments, Loyalism and Unionism are at a crossroads. It is becoming apparent that what they stand for is rejected by a growing number of Protestants as being both vacuous and negative.

Loyalist 'culture' is riddled with prejudiced anti-Catholic mantras, yet more enlightened Protestants realise that they have been fighting shadows and the perceived religious differences are minor compared to their common interests. Indeed, by any rational argument, the working class Protestant on the Shankill Road ought to be uniting with his or her Catholic counterpart on the Falls to demand more rights and better living standards for both.

Humanists seek to create a unity of philosophy and outlook irrespective of borders. The Irish Freethinkers and Humanists, which is the only all-Ireland Humanist group with members from both sides of the border, aims to reach beyond the narrow ground of God and Ulster to achieve a united Ireland that would have to be secular to ensure that no religion had hegemony but instead had to reflect the diversity of culture and belief. Already, the Republic is moving in that direction: unity would hasten the process. It would ensure that our children would be educated together instead of apart. It would also ensure that faith formation would not be central to the schools' aims or ethos. Children would learn *about* religion but as part of the study of world beliefs and philosophies which would include Humanism.

At the same time this secular Ireland would reach beyond Orange and Green to bring all Irish people together in pursuit of what Thomas Davis called 'our common secular interests' and would reflect our real nature as a warm and friendly people. In this way we can help our small island fulfil the noble vision of Wolfe Tone (below) more than 200 years ago when he talked about breaking down the brazen walls of separation, abolishing the memory of all past dissensions, and substituting the common name of Irish men or Irish women in place of the divisive labels that have plagued and haunted us down the centuries. □

