

The Irish Revolution and its Aftermath

A republican humanist perspective

Daltún Ó Ceallaigh

THE Irish Revolution may be said to have begun with the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in 1916 and to have concluded with the respective establishment and confirmation of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in 1922.

The Proclamation not only asserted the freedom of Ireland, but also laid the broad ideological basis of the new dispensation that was envisaged for an autonomous State. There were two references in it to an unspecified god (although clearly intended as the christian one), but these were rhetorical and did not signify the creation of a religious polity. The body of the Proclamation was definitively democratic, liberal, and secular.

The next important document to be issued in the freedom struggle was the Declaration of Independence by the First Dáil on 21st January 1919. This affirmed the Proclamation and elaborated on it accordingly. Again, there was a rhetorical reference to a god. In the case of both the Proclamation and Declaration, the assertions made were those of human rights, both nationally and individually, and were decidedly in the humanist tradition.

The War of Independence also began on 21st January and lasted to the Truce of 11th July 1921. It had of course been preceded by the Insurrection of Easter 1916.

The question is often asked as to what mandate either the Insurrection or the War had. The allegations have been made that the insurrection had none and that the authority for the war is a dubious one.

The first allegation is ridiculous and takes no account of political reality and national rights. The political reality was that the United Kingdom of 1916 of which Ireland was a part was not a proper democracy. There was no universal suffrage: only a limited percentage of adult males had the vote according to certain criteria of privilege and no adult females were enfranchised at all. That was the basis on which the Irish Parliamentary or 'Home Rule' Party was elected to Westminster. Apart from that, when foreign forces enter one's country, people are entitled to oppose them, in arms if need be, whether or not they are joined by other fellow citizens and in the face of collaborators. That is because a fundamental right has thus been violated and this entitles evocation of the principle of justifiable resistance (for instance, although it can never be clearly established one way or the other, it is open to question whether or not the French resistance to Nazi occupation between 1941 and '44 had the support of the majority of the French people). In any case, the

myth that has been created that the revolutionary fervour subsequent to Easter week 1916 was simply due to the stupidity of a British general in executing the leading rebels is challengeable in the light of various sources. I have written elsewhere of evidence from the time that, while captured rebels may have been jeered by some, probably the relatives of soldiers for whom remittances were being received, many other citizens, particularly of the urban working class and rural lower class, displayed their positive support for them.

In regard to the War of Independence, it has been said that there was no clear democratic validity for it either. The Sinn Féin manifesto for the general election of 1918, in which that party received an overwhelming majority, stated that the independence of Ireland should be attained "by making use of any and every means available to render impotent the power of England to hold Ireland in subjection by military force or otherwise." For some people, this is insufficient to justify the war. However, is it seriously maintained that publication of a manifesto would have been permitted which explicitly called for a violent uprising? To hold such a view is either naïve or disingenuous.

The fact is that to be a humanist is not necessarily to be a pacifist

The Insurrection and the War of Independence by their very nature involved the killing and wounding of enemy soldiers, paramilitaries (such as the Black and Tans), and collaborators in the RIC. Violence of this sort is inherently terrible, but nonetheless sometimes necessary, because of being left the only choice of subjugation or emancipation. All civilised people avoid such violence, if possible. But the human tragedy throughout history has been that sometimes it is unavoidable. That is something which humanists have to face realistically and ethically. The fact is that to be a humanist is not necessarily to be a pacifist. To suggest otherwise is not philosophically sound. If we are to be honest, most people are not pacifists; they simply differ on what circumstances justify violence. The Irish Revolution has been attacked hypocritically on grounds which appear to be pacifist but are in fact often cited by those who do not eschew violence in other situations.

The Revolution was an episode of liberation and heroism. No matter how much reactionary elements, at home and abroad, may try to deprecate it, the memory will endure as an inspiration and a vision of which patriotic humanists should be proud.

The constitutional fruits of the Revolution were to be found in the Government of Ireland Act for Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State Constitution for the other 26 counties on the island. The Act in, Section 5, —>

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prohibited discriminatory laws on religious grounds. But this did not prevent de facto discrimination and what came into being in Northern Ireland was an anti-Catholic sectarian province of the residual United Kingdom. The Irish Free State Constitution also prohibited laws of a discriminatory nature against any religion. But, in contrast, that State did not become de facto sectarian in a Catholic supremacist way. The Roman Catholic Church definitely acquired a predominant influence in the State, but this was manifest in the area of moral rules and regulations (what has been termed confessionalism) rather than discrimination such as in jobs, housing, and so on, in respect of Protestants.

In fact, many Protestants do not take issue with the Roman Catholic church on matters ranging from moral censorship through contraception and divorce to abortion (not to mention homosexuality) and have often campaigned alongside it in trying to resist liberalisation in these areas. With regard specifically to theism, neither the Act nor the Constitution embodied any such references.

In 1937, a new constitution was introduced for the 26 counties. This did contain a number of theistic references in the main text regarding oaths of office, albeit not specific to a particular denomination, which are unacceptable to humanists. The preamble was moreover explicitly christian and, indeed, trinitarian. In the latter instance, this was incompatible with Unitarian Protestantism. However, it possessed no definitive legal significance. Apart from that, there was an article referring to particular religions and speaking of the "special position" of the Roman Catholic church. In fact, this was cleared beforehand with the main representatives of the Protestant churches in view of the fact that they were explicitly recognised as well in the article. The article was in fact declaratory and proved to be of no legal import. In any event, it was abolished in 1973.

The position today has seen tremendous changes in both parts of Ireland in connection with sectarianism and confessionalism. Both have been defeated in terms of laws and practices. Unfortunately, however, there is still much to be done in terms of general attitudes. At least, it can now be said that the Six Counties are no longer a Protestant State for a Protestant people and the Twenty-six Counties can no longer be characterised as Home Rule equals Rome Rule. There have also been other tremendous changes whereby Northern Ireland has sharply declined economically and the Republic has grown exponentially economically. All these developments are bound to have far-reaching implications for community relations both within the two polities and between them.

This state of religion in Ireland today may be summed up under three headings from a religio-centric point of view. These consist of fundamentalist believers, partial believers, and nonbelievers. The fundamentalists are those who

accept the overwhelming bulk or all of the teaching of their denomination. The partial believers cover a very wide spectrum ranging from only a limited rejection of church teaching to almost all of it. The non-believers are essentially humanists with either a small or a capital 'h', i.e. not all are actually in a humanist association.

It is difficult to allocate proportions to each of the three basic categories. The last referendum in the 26 counties (on abortion), however, gives some indication of the size of the fundamentalist category there as opposed to others insofar as the former achieved about 34% of the vote and the latter about 66%.

When it comes to disaggregating the others (i.e. partial believers and nonbelievers), this is much more difficult for a number of reasons. In the census returns, the non-believers may definitely be identified as ticking the box for 'no religion'. However, it might also be reasonably assumed that those who do not tick any box in relation to this question are also nonbelievers, although not explicitly so. Taking these two groups together, that gives a proportion of 10%. In the 2011 census, the figure for Northern Ireland was 17%. When it comes to partial believers, however, apart from the range in 'partial belief', one suspects that they include a certain number of closet nonbelievers who cannot bring themselves, given their background, to even clandestinely be explicitly classified as nonbelievers.

As for the future, one can only view the decline in religion on this island and the substitution of what is in effect humanism as a positive development regarding social and political reconciliation and progress. It will not of itself eliminate tensions between nationalism and unionism insofar as they never had an exclusively religious *raison d'être*, but more basically derive from imperialist and anti-colonialist roots. However, much bitterness may thus be taken out of the situation. That is a fitting epilogue for the Irish Revolution. □

