

## BEYOND GOD AND ULSTER

I WAS BORN on the Shankill Road. In Esmond Street to be exact. It was directly opposite the graveyard. Esmond Street no longer exists and neither does the graveyard. 11 months of the year I looked over at a drab row of terraced houses, with outdoor toilets like our own, and walked past the cemetery every day. But the month of August was different. Then I looked out the window and saw an island on the left and a harbour and a lighthouse on the right, and I thought I was in paradise.

Well, actually of course it was Donaghadee where my grandmother and then my mother rented a house on the sea front every year and the owner lived in a shack in the back garden. I loved that place, and I loved the boats and got to know their names and the navy-sweatered fisherman who owned them: there was The Brothers, the Miss Dorothy, the Miss Josephine, the Laura, the White Heather, the Carpathian, the Lady Franklin, and so on. What a beautiful place, I thought! But it was, as they say, a wee Prodig town. Wasn't it a great pity that so many of our people in this small area of land have for so long failed to get along and enjoy it together.

I attended Mayo Street Primary School, in the next street, and passed the 11+, thanks to the determination of my mother that her sons would 'get on' and get out to a better life. My father's attitude was: "School's a waste of time. Let them get out to work". My mother stubbornly ignored his advice, and my brothers and I are eternally grateful for her superior wisdom. When I was about 14, my family 'got out' of the Shankill and moved up the road to Hesketh. Then, before the Troubles, it was a haven of peace and tranquillity.

I suppose at this time I was a 'loyalist'. What precisely this meant I don't think I was quite sure, but much of it seemed to comprise an anti-Catholic perspective. I remember my father watching Paisley on the TV in the sixties and shouting 'hear, hear' at some anti-Catholic rant from the 'Big Man'. Yet my father had no religion in him at all, and I found his attitude puzzling.

As for myself, I found that I was becoming increasingly anti-religious and when I told my parents at 17 that I was leaving the Boys' Brigade because I didn't believe it any more, to my surprise, they accepted my decision without demure. Curiously, or not, this growing atheism made me even more anti-Catholic, I suppose because I believed it was more oppressive and totalitarian than Protestantism. I have since realised that in some matters, like evolution and tolerance, it is far more progressive than fundamentalist Protestantism.

More than 50 years on, I feel that religion is a major ingredient of our quarrel. It is an essential part of the lethal cocktail that is produced by a clash of religions, ethnicities and nationalisms. The 19th century Irish historian Leakey summed up the religious factor very well: "If the characteristic mark of a healthy Christianity be to unite its members by a bond of fraternity and love, then there is no country where Christianity has more completely failed than in Ireland".

On the question of partition, as I was growing up I never seemed to have any firm views, despite being surrounded by unionists/loyalists. The issue wasn't discussed much in any case. There was widespread ignorance of the South and of Irish nationalism in general. I didn't have a single Catholic friend. At school (The Boys' Model and Inst.) it was 'British' history – Clive of India, Nelson and Churchill's Duke of Marlborough (what an awful bore!), and the only flavour of republicanism that entered my consciousness were the 'rebel' songs I played at my aunt's in the country when I visited there every July – songs like Kevin Barry and Noreen Bawn. My aunt was a bit of a rebel herself and I discovered later that, although brought up as a Protestant, she was the daughter of a mixed marriage.

I'm not entirely certain on reflection why I wanted to go to Trinity College, Dublin. One reason, certainly, was a desire for some sort of independence. I remember standing in the front porch on the first night and feeling the loneliest person in the world. What had I done, a working class Ulster Prod arriving to mix with the Anglo-Irish gentry and the failed Oxbridge English students? Yet I also remember crying on my last day, four years later. For I grew to love the place and to love Dublin. If the Northern statelet had recognised the Trinity Dip. Ed. I would certainly have taken the grant and stayed there.

I also became a republican at Trinity, a republican in the tradition of Trinity republicans like Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, Thomas Davis and John Mitchel. It wasn't a sudden process, and indeed with my Dublin and English friends (Irish parents) I at first played devil's advocate and argued a unionist position. But increasingly I realised that unionism was an empty, reactionary creed, which simply didn't fit my naturally left-liberal stance on other issues. After all, I bought *The Guardian* regularly from my Upper Sixth year. Left-liberal unionism simply had no coherence whatsoever, and still doesn't.

I remember three of us – an ex-Catholic, an ex-Jew and myself an ex-Protestant – writing an irate letter to the *Irish Times* in 1966, the year of the 50th anniversary of

the Easter Rising, complaining that Father Xavier Martin had misrepresented James Connolly by saying that he was not a Marxist, though he used Marxist terminology.

It was in this period that I realised the stupidity of a partitioned Ireland. A small island divided largely on sectarian lines made no sense to an atheist, for each sect could dominate its own bit and impose its will on the people, and that is precisely what happened. The Republic was a Catholic theocracy and the North a Puritan theocracy. In a united Ireland the state and the laws would have to be secular, and this is how I still see it, 40 years on.

But there is no alternative to persuasion. Attempting to coerce a people renowned for their stubbornness and intransigence is pure madness and entirely counterproductive. The tragedy of the Troubles is that persuasion and argument might have succeeded far better than murder and mayhem ever could. For the argument is not really that difficult at all.

It has two parts. The first is to indicate the economic benefits to ordinary working class Protestants of living in a united country: benefits in terms of economies of scale for firms, greater competition and lower prices, job opportunities throughout the island, more investment in this part of the country, an all-Ireland environmental policy and an integrated infrastructure for the whole island. Average income in the Republic is now higher than in the UK and no sane person can ignore this rational pull in favour of unity.

The second part is more difficult because opposition to unity among Loyalists is not rational at all. It is based on an empty, emotional love for a narrow and destructive vision in which the ordinary working class Protestant betrays his or her basic decency. We can see this when we consider the actual characteristic of Loyalism. It has three basic ingredients: militarism, sectarianism and racism.

The militarism was evident in the killings, the plethora of paramilitary groupings, the blatant glorification of violence, the preference for murals of uniformed, masked gunmen, and the entire macho 'hard men' culture. It is a culture which is inherently against civilisation, against education, against modernisation and against women. It is a poison which eats away at the soul of the Protestant working class, depriving them of any decency, refinement, manners or good sense. It has absolutely nothing to commend it.

As if that weren't bad enough, we have to add large doses of sectarianism and racism into this obnoxious mix for good measure. The sectarianism is evident in

the murders of Catholics, the threats to kill 'Taigs', the burning of Catholic churches, the vandalising of Catholic graves and threats to 'piss on them', the throwing of bags of urine at four-year-old Catholic girls, and the 'kick the Pope' marching bands with militaristic names like the Young Guns, the Battalion or the Armagh Brigade. It is indeed a pathetic but nasty litany of verbal and physical abuse.

Finally, there is the racism inherent in Loyalism. It is not only anti-Catholic but also 'anti-foreign' and anti-Black. Many of the current Loyalist groupings came together as teenage neo-Nazi skinheads in the 1970s, with connections to the National Front. Their extreme right-wing ideology encompasses belief in the 'Empire', the monarchy, 'repatriation' of Blacks, Brexit, the return of capital punishment and the beating of children.

When you look at the components of the Loyalist world view, you have to ask yourself, How could anyone with a modicum of intelligence believe that a cause with such a cancerous collection of hateful thoughts would ever find acceptance beyond the lunatic fringe in any sane society?

This is the sorry state to which Loyalism has brought 'its' people. If there is widespread Protestant alienation from the 'peace process', as many loyalists claim, then they have only themselves to blame. Such a contemptible philosophy would and should alienate and disgust most reasonable people.

There is much talk of social losses. Deindustrialisation, demographic decline, the tendency of the more enterprising or successful to move out, low rates of educational achievement and very high ones of family breakdown, domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse".

Take the lower educational achievement of the Protestant working class. Yes, 11+ selection is part of the cause, but it is not the whole cause. So are chaotic and dysfunctional families. But Loyalist culture is also a vital factor. Education is generally seen as not cool, and school is regarded as a bit of a lark. Conscientious or clever kids are mocked and bullied. The whole mindset needs to change.

The features I outlined in the poorer Protestant districts of Belfast, Portadown or Ballymoney are shared with those of Liverpool or Glasgow or West Belfast. So we are back with this identity crisis in which Loyalists, faced with a declining enemy within and a declining Britishness without, no longer know who they are. Withdraw the 'lifeline' of the IRA and Loyalists have actually very little to feed on.

In the end, loyalism comes down to a pathological hatred of Catholics. And how does this prejudice arise? To be sure, it does have an economic dimension. Working class racism and xenophobia are often at least partly based on fear that the Black or the foreigner will 'steal' their job and their livelihood. And certainly the growing confidence of Catholics in Northern Ireland convinces many working class Protestants that they will suffer in some way as a result. But this is an outdated argument. Unemployment in Northern Ireland is at its lowest for decades and, anyway, as we have already implied, loyalists ought to embrace a united Ireland with open arms because of the highest standard of living across the border.

In any case, as any self-styled Marxist knows, the real enemy of the working class is not their fellow working class but the capitalist bosses and their political stooges. They are the real exploiters of the poor, irrespective of their religion or national allegiance. Rationally, the working class Prod on the Shankill ought to be uniting with his Falls counterpart to demand more rights and living standards for both.

No, the toxin of anti-Catholic prejudice originates in ideological group-think. It is perhaps summed up in the complaint of the indignant woman who claimed that holy water had been spilt on her father's grave in Carnmoney cemetery. Was this so outrageous, she was asked? Of course it was, she replied furiously: "My father was a loyalist".

This loyalist sense that everything to do with the Catholic faith – from holy water, to rosary beads, to Mariolatry, to Pope worship – is anathema is hardly a natural prejudice. It must have been 'learned' somewhere. The notion that the Catholic faith is infused with primitive mumbo jumbo is a strong Puritan belief and has been 'taught' by many Protestant clerics over the years. In other words, working class Protestants are the dupes of a fundamentalist dogma which 'informs' them that any member of the Catholic Church is not a true Christian but instead a primitive worshipper of satanic idols.

Let me be absolutely clear. From a secular perspective, there is nothing wrong with criticisms of any religion or sect. As someone from this loyalist background, I find it easy to mock the Catholic faith and its totalitarian inclinations. But I have grown to realise that the Puritan alternative which loyalists tend to embrace, or at least to which they pay lip service, is in many respects a mirror image of its Catholic counterpart and just as questionable.

Loyalists must realise that there are other alternatives to Protestant and Catholic, Orange and Green. Humanism offers a genuine Third Way and others are taking up

the baton we have raised. According to a Life and Times survey, 37% of the population of Northern Ireland don't really support the unionist or nationalist parties. This allows a real potential for a 'third discourse' on politics to develop. At present, it is not given adequate expression in existing political dialogue and ways need to be found to achieve more publicity and media attention.

With the decline in power of the Catholic Church in Ireland, as clearly demonstrated by the referendum on same-sex marriage, and the vociferousness of Ulster Protestants, 'Loyalists' need have no fear of being 'swamped' in a Catholic state. An all-Ireland polity would have to be pluralist and secular. They should therefore abandon their poisonous hate and join with those of us who wish to take Ireland on a Third way towards a more tolerant, open and inclusive future.

What must be done? It is really rather obvious, isn't it? The Protestant class must find common cause with their Catholic counterparts, and if that means joining or supporting united Ireland parties, then why not? To this end, some of us have formed a new group, the Irish Freethinkers and Humanists. It is not necessary to believe in a united Ireland to be a member. There are many all-Ireland issues, such as religious control of education, women's rights, green issues, and LGBT rights on which humanists throughout the island can work together. Yes, many of us want to see Ireland united politically and peacefully, but Humanists seek a unity of philosophy and outlook irrespective of borders.

Nevertheless, many of us believe that we can show that there is a real alternative beyond Orange and Green which brings all Irish people together in pursuit of our common secular interests and reflects our real nature as a warm and friendly people. In this way we can help our small Ireland fulfil the noble vision of Wolfe Tone 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 us down the centuries.

A talk by Brian McClinton to the Green Party, December 2016