

Northern Ireland has been dominated by two ideologies for 400 years, the one predominantly Puritan and the other overwhelmingly Catholic. All this is not to deny the relevance of 'practical' matters. Yet Man does not live by bread alone. He also tries to live in accordance with his system of values and his conception of social reality. Wars are fought for faith and love as well as money. When man fights he is not merely defending or extending his territory. He is also displaying devotion to his ideology, whether capitalism or socialism, fascism or democracy, unionism or nationalism.

In his essay on 'The Urge to Self-Destruction' (in *The Ghost in the Machine*) Arthur Koestler argues that the trouble with the human species is not an overdose of self-asserting aggression but an excess of self-transcending devotion. Even a cursory glance at history, says Koestler, shows that individual crimes committed for selfish motives played an insignificant role compared with the numbers massacred in unselfish love of one's tribe, nation, dynasty, church or ideology. Wars are fought out of loyalty and devotion to symbols and slogans derived from tribal lore, divine commandments or political ideologies.

The Irish Problem is in no small part the result of a protracted struggle for dominance by two tribes, each of whom has been devoted to its own ideology and therefore despises the other. Pure Unionists oppose Irish unity because they wish to maintain space for their own culture and ideology against threats of its imagined absorption into an alien ideology. Pure Nationalists want Irish unity because they seek precisely that absorption. Ireland offers tragic proof that ideas profoundly influence behaviour and that when they are fixed and exclusive – when they insist on their own absolute truth and on the absolute falsity of opposing ideas – then they become truly powerful weapons of bigotry, death and destruction.

SOURCES OF UNITY

Religion and nationalism are closely interrelated. Both are based on chimeras: the existence of a nation is just as mythical as the existence of a God. Both appeal to primitive needs: for security, simplicity, certainty, self-transcendence, belonging. Both provide a potent motivation for death and destruction. Yet that is not the whole story. Religion has performed some positive functions. It has been, in Marx's words, 'the heart of a heartless world', and the 'cry of the oppressed creature'. And it has tried to protect the spiritual aspects of our nature. Can the same be said of the myth of nationalism?

It has surely been the primary means by which the exploited and oppressed peoples of the world have stood up for themselves and asserted their human

rights, just as it has been a primary means by which the oppressors achieve their exploitation. Thus 'Don't Tread On Us' can be both the rallying cry of the potential victim and the murderous snarl of the bully. Arguably, it is only by collective action that people can become autonomous subjects. As the Italian nationalist Mazzini put it in 1851: "The nationalities which do not possess a government issuing from their innermost life, and which are subject to laws imposed upon them from outside... have become means for the purposes of others and, therefore, mere objects".

If nationalism is a form of resistance to imposed uniformity and exploitation by strong powers over the weak and if, instead, to be equal to others is the fundamental claim of nationalists for their people, then Humanists cannot object. But it is important to distinguish the manifestations of nationalism that are acceptable from those that are not.

The first criterion is already apparent. It must aim for equality, not superiority or dominance. We should therefore support the nationalism of the poor and weak and oppose the nationalism of the rich and powerful. We should totally reject the nationalism which says: "Ours is the greatest country in the world" and instead support that which says: "Our country is as good as yours and our people are entitled to equal respect".

Secondly, nationalism should be open and inclusive, not closed. Open nationalism favours the concept of a community of fellow citizens irrespective of race, religion, culture or ethnic descent. This was precisely the concept of the United Irishmen, who aimed to unite 'Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter'. Recall too their Dublin manifesto which addressed its readers as 'citizens of the world'. It is indeed a universalist concept of nationalism much closer to the idea of local democracy than to any notion of ethnic nationhood. It is, as Richard Kearney and others have argued, a 'postnationalist' view of a nation. It renders meaningless the traditional nationalist image that has dominated political thought and action throughout much of the last century. It stresses our common humanity rather than our differences. And it finds its ideal image in a future that will build bridges over the animosities and separations of the past to a happy land of brotherhood and affection.

One of the most depressing features of so many closed nationalisms is their insistence on commemorating ancient battles lost or won – The Boyne (1690) by Ulster Protestants, Blood River (1838) by Afrikaners, The Easter Rising (1916) by Irish Catholics. It is such martial glorifications which help to keep people bogged down in the hatreds and violence of the past. As Renan suggested in his lecture *What is a Nation?*, "it is good for us all to know how to forget".

Finally, we come to the third criterion of nationhood, and one which has already been stated, namely that it should be democratic. Of course, this causes problems.

Do we mean a majority of the people of the present Six Counties, or are we referring to the majority of the people in the whole island? We know only too well the endless arguments, and we know that they are never solved by appeals to history, which are usually founded on biased perspectives. So we must accept the current democratic reality, while seeking to change it.

The implication for Ireland's two nationalisms is that each has to persuade the other of the merits of its case. To convince the majority of both tribes, each has to demonstrate that it is more egalitarian and inclusive and will make our people happier than the other. There is no sane alternative to persuasion.

HUMANISTS UNITE!

In the wake of the centenary of 1916, should we hold a requiem for the republican dream of Irish nationhood? In truth, the abject failure by Humanists thus far to promote the case for Irish unity is a total betrayal of the ideals of the United Irishmen. Tone wrote: "When it comes to religion, my belief is that we should work for the overthrow of the official church, without erecting another in its place". Yet not one but two 'churches' were established to replace it. A stultifying Puritanism dominated the Northern statelet after 1921, and a Catholic ethos infused the 1916 Rising and governed the South after the Treaty. Where is the spirit today of a united Irish secular movement committed to their overthrow? Echo answers: where?

Humanist unity is non-existent because Humanists largely work only in their respective jurisdictions and fail to see the divided wood for the separated trees. Co-operation on ceremonies and chaplaincies, for example, while important for individuals in a practical sense, does not address the imperative of changing society. That requires a radical transformation of mindsets, not only of the people at large but also of Humanists themselves.

We need to look at the bigger picture and its island dimension. North and South share many of the same problems: clerical power over education; segregated schools; patriarchy and cronyism in politics; extreme anti-abortion laws; a widening gap between haves and the have nots; a lack of environmental concern; abuse of women, children and animals; and much more. To combat these deficiencies, Humanists must develop a humane secular ethic that places honesty and integrity above cunning and deviousness, community service above self-service, and the common good above personal and party advantage.

In the early 1790s North and South united in a common cause. In 1795 Wolfe Tone, Thomas Russell, Henry Joy McCracken and Samuel Neilson led a small group to the top of Cave Hill overlooking Belfast and swore an oath "never to desist in our effort until we have subverted the authority of England over our country and asserted her independence".

These 18th century Irishmen from north and south tried to show that there is a real alternative beyond Orange and Green which brings all Irish people together in pursuit of what Young Irelander Thomas Davis called 'our common secular interests'. The Irish humanist imperative is to take on the mantle of leadership in renewing this vision for this century.

In this way we can help Ireland fulfil the noble dream 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 and haunted us down the centuries.

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