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CONFLICT IN THE NORTH OF IRELAND

The latest wall inscription in Nationalist Belfast is a number: 3000. It is the number of people who have died in the latest round of the 'troubles'; 3000 out of a population of 1.5 million. In India, the same percentage of the population would be 160 lakhs.

For 20 of the past 24 years, Northern Ireland was in the world's eye. The media chronicled the bombs and the bullets, the death and the destruction, with sickening regularity. But for the past few years, the Northern Ireland question has almost been forgotten. The focus of attention, at the time of writing, is on places like Serbia, Bosnia, Herzegovina, South Africa and Afghanistan.

It is probably not unfair to say that most of the people who read about or see these places on T.V., do not consider the issues too complicated. The problem in the former Yugoslavia is seen as a fight between Orthodox and Catholics and Muslims. In South Africa, it is a question of white versus black. In Afghanistan, it is inter-tribal warfare. Similarly, in Northern Ireland, it is seen as a straightforward struggle between Protestants and Catholics. Such simplistic analyses which do not identify the hidden forces that are responsible for the periodic outbursts of conflict, will do nothing to halt the violence or prevent its outbreak in other places. An understanding of the causes of the centuries-old conflict in Northern Ireland will not only help towards an ultimate settlement, but will also be of help in resolving conflicts in other countries. In 1622, the Venetian Ambassador to England made a remark to which not a few in the England of today would breathe a fervent 'Amen'. He said, "Ireland is such that it would be better for the king if it did not exist and the sea alone rolled there." By the beginning of the 17th century, Ireland had become a painful thorn in England's side. Relations between the two countries had never been all that cordial, but the 16th century had seen dramatic changes in England and the continent of Europe, as the reformation spread. New political alliances formed among those who had rejected the authority of Rome and among the Catholic states.

By the beginning of the 17th century, the reformation in England had been consolidated under Elizabeth. James the 1st was on the throne. As he had previously been king of Scotland, he was able to bring the unruly Celts, north of the border, in line. He had been helped by the success of the reformation in Scotland. The catholic Mary Queen of Scots had been executed by Elizabeth.

But despite the unrelenting barbarity of her minions, Elizabeth wasn't able to force the Irish to give up their faith in the Catholic religion. And this was a problem for the English. France, Portugal and Spain to the East, were firmly in the Catholic camp. For them to have a sympathetic country to the West, was worrying. Something had to be done.

While the politicians were thinking along these lines, merchants and men of finance were casting greedy eyes on the land next door. One solution satisfied all. They would colonise the unruly country with solid protestants who would be ready to take up arms for the king and who would pay taxes and send the produce of their land to England. They need worry no longer about the landless Irish.

The idea of 'planting' loyal subjects on Irish soil was not a new one. It had been tried before in the southern part of the island without much success. But the English learned from their mistakes. This time they would concentrate on the northern part of the island. It would be planned thoroughly and the City of London would help to finance it. It would be an excellent investment. And so began what has become known in history as the plantation of Ulster.

A golden opportunity to get going with the project presented itself in 1607, when the last of the Irish catholic chieftains, weary of fighting a losing war with the invaders, fled the country. The following year, an official survey declared that most of the land in six of the nine Ulster countries, belonged to the king. In all, about 40 lakh acres were confiscated. A huge amount, considering the small area involved. This flagrant violation of justice, despoiled all the Irish catholic landowners of the ownership of their land.

Immediately, a committee was set up to work out the mechanics of the plantation. It did a very thorough job. By 1610 applications from rich farmers in Scotland and England had been accepted. These were

called 'Undertakers' because they undertook to abide by the conditions laid down. The most important of these were that they themselves had to be Protestant and loyal to the English crown, that they would bring their own tenants with them, who must also be loyal Protestants, and that these tenants would be available to fight for the king whenever the need arose.

The objectives of the plantation were well worked out. As Dr. Aidan Clarke, of Trinity College, Dublin, says, 'The basic principle of the scheme was segregation. In the greater part of the area, communities composed of English or Scottish undertakers with their imported tenants, were to be settled on land completely cleared of its native inhabitants. An important word here is segregation. From the very beginning, the settlers had to be non-Irish and non-catholic, with unquestioning loyalty to the British crown. They were left without a specific identity.

On the other hand, the plight of the Irish Catholics was pathetic. Part of the plan was to transport landless Irish to Sweden. Those who could afford to take leases from the new landowners were charged exorbitant rents for short leases so that they could not benefit and would be in a perpetual state of insecurity. So the landless and ex-soldiers took to the woods and bogs. We can imagine the tremendous hostility that burned in the hearts of these outcasts in their own land. And the fear in the hearts of the settlers. One of them wrote at the time, 'although there be no apparent enemy, nor any visible main force, yet the wood-kern and many other do threaten every house, if opportunity of time and place doth serve. Dr. Clarke observes, 'The image of the colonist at work as it were with the sword in one hand and the axe in the other was a universal one.

The Irish Catholic had to suffer much more than the loss of his land and livelihood. From 1641 to 1658, the persecution of Catholics in Ireland has few parallels in the history of the Church. On the 8th Dec. 1641, an act was passed in the English parliament to the effect that the Catholic religion should never be tolerated in Ireland. All Catholics were to be regarded as rebels and the Lord Justices sent this order to the commander of the forces in Ireland. 'It is resolved, that it is fit his Lordship do endeavour, with his majesty's forces, to slay and destroy all the said rebels, and their adherents. . by all the ways and means he may; and burn, destroy, spoil, waste, consume and

demolish all the places, towns and houses where the said rebels are or have been relieved and harboured, and all the hay and corn there, and kill and destroy all the men there inhabiting able to bear arms. On the 24th Oct. 1644, the Lords and Commons of England enacted, 'that no quarter shall be given to any Irishman, or to any papist born in Ireland. Without going into gory details about the implementation of these instructions, especially by Cromwell, we can quote the Protestant historian, Borlase, who wrote, 'The orders of parliament were excellently well executed.'

One of the main objectives of the plantation was segregation. This succeeded better than could have been foreseen. The treatment of the Irish, far from destroying them, bred in them a fervent desire for political freedom and for the freedom to live according to their own culture. This growth of national identity struck fear into the hearts of the Protestant settlers. They themselves had no national identity to strive for. They could not bear to imagine what would happen if Irish Catholics controlled the country.

Lack of national identity and fear; if we can understand the power of these two experiences, we will have gone a long way in understanding the Ulster Protestant of today.

Descendants of the settlers have written of the experience of this lack of national identity. Among them, one of the most poignant is John Hewitt who was born in Belfast at the beginning of the century. In an essay titled, significantly, 'No rootless Colonist', he wrote, "In my experience, people of Planter stock often suffer from some crisis of identity, of not knowing where they belong. Among us you will find some who call themselves British, some Irish, some Ulstermen, usually with a degree of mental fumbling William Allingham, the poet, himself of Planter breed, and a man who suffered most sharply from this crisis, once declared: 'I love Ireland: were she only not Catholic; but would she be Ireland otherwise?' Although born in and deeply involved with Country Donegal, Allingham never to my knowledge described himself as an Ulsterman. The horns of his dilemma were Ireland and England. His friend, Alfred Tennyson, once remarked to him: 'You don't care a pin about the grand Empire of England. You ought to be proud surely to be part of it. There you are with an English name, English in every way, but you happened

to be born in Ireland, therefore you are for it," John Hewitt concludes his essay with words which must surely echo deep within the heart of every thinking Northern Protestant: "I have experienced a deep enduring sense of our human past before the Lion-Gate of Mycenae and among the Rolright Stones of the Oxfordshire border, but it is in the north-eastern corner of Ireland where I was born and lived until my fiftieth year, where the only ancestors I can name are buried:

Grain of my timber, how I grew,
my syntax, cadence, rhetoric,
grammar of my dialect."

Perhaps one of the consequences of this lack of a national identity was a total commitment to the one sure identity they had, their Protestant faith. When, towards the end of the 18th century, a group of Presbyterians formed a society, The United Irishmen, to struggle for a united Ireland, free of sectarianism and injustice, they received considerable support from liberal Protestants and Catholics. At about the same time, a militant Protestant group, calling itself the Orange Society was formed. When the United Irishmen were provoked into an armed revolt in 1798, the movement was savagely repressed by the government. Alarmed by the turn of events, the Protestants joined the new Orange Society, now called the Orange Order. The Orange Order had three principal aims: protection of Protestants from Catholics, support for the Protestant religion, and the maintenance of the monarchy and the constitution, taking the oath, 'I . . . do solemnly swear that I will, to the utmost of my power, support and defend the King and his heirs as long as he or they support the Protestant ascendancy. 'So, here we are, nearly 200 years after the plantation, with the settlers manning the ramparts, as it were, ready to defend to the death, their Protestantism and their loyalty to the English monarchy, with no other identity or ideal to strive for.

But with the fear of Catholics came an almost insane hatred of everything to do with the Catholic Church. And a readiness to believe the most incredible stories about Catholics. Robert Lynd, a Protestant essayist from Belfast, wrote about his nurse: 'There was a woman - I knew her well, for she helped to nurse me - who believed in her heart that God was an Orangeman. She also believed that a strong family likeness existed between Satan and the Pope of Rome. . . .

She dreamed from morning till night of an Ireland out of which all the Catholics had been driven, and in which Protestants would be able to live without the fear that at any hour evil-eyed people might sweep down upon them and cut their throats. So far as I could gather, Catholics – or Papishes, as she preferred to call them – had no definite object in life but to cut the throats of Protestants. Being a Protestant, I naturally went about the streets in a state of considerable trepidation. Everyone whom I met and who had at all a doubtful cast of face, I put down at once as a Papist and hurried past, with a horrified, dried feeling at the back of my mouth She loved no song so well as 'The Protestant Boys', and the version she sang of it – a version very common in the North of Ireland – ran like this:

Slitter, slaughter,
 Holy Water!
 Sprinkle the Papishes every one!
 And that's what we'll do,
 And well cut them in two,
 And the Protestant boys'll carry the drum.

I was trained up in this song, an infant Hannibal, pledged to eternal enmity towards Rome Like nearly all Protestant children brought up in an Ulster town, I came to look on Catholics as a kind of wild beasts to be avoided, if not exterminated." The poet, Louis MacNeice, son of a clergyman, wrote: "Few of the Protestants or Presbyterians can see the Cross merely as a cross. Like a man looking into the sun through half-shut eyes, they see it shoot out rays, blossom in the Union Jack. And the Son of God goes forth to war in orange."

It is noteworthy that these quotations are from educated and liberal-minded Protestants. They illustrate the depth of prejudice that could be encountered among Protestants. And this prejudice is there today, at the heart of the Ulster problem. But it is a prejudice and, at times, even hatred, that has been carefully nourished by cynical politicians and power-seeking church-men. Lord Randolph Churchill is credited with first talking about playing 'the Orange card'. At the turn of the present century, when the Liberal party was bringing the bill to give "home rule" to Ireland, Churchill saw the possibility of making political capital from stirring up centuries-old fears in the minds of Orangemen, that home rule would mean rule by the feared Irish Catholics from Dublin.

Crossing to Belfast, he roused the passions of the Orangemen in a famous speech in Belfast. Commenting on this speech, Andrew Boyd says: 'Almost every word was seditious.' Referring to the Prime Minister's plan to introduce the Home Rule bill, Churchill dramatically compared him to the assassin Macbeth: "Mr Gladstone asks for time before he plunges the knife into the heart of the British Empire But now may be the time to show whether all those ceremonies and forms which are practised in your Orange lodges are really living symbols or idle and meaningless shibboleths." He ended with an adaptation of Thomas Campbell's war poem:

The combat deepens, on ye brave!
Who rush to glory or the grave!
Wave Ulster – all thy banners wave
And charge with all thy chivalry.

Commenting on this speech in his memoirs, Randolph's son, Winston, wrote: "From that moment the excitement in Belfast did not subside. Eventually, dangerous riots, increasing in fury until they almost amounted to warfare, occurred in the streets between the factions of Orange and Green. Firearms were freely used by the police and combatants. Houses were sacked and men and women killed. The disturbances were savage, repeated and prolonged.

Some say that Randolph Churchill was already affected by the insanity that would be one of the symptoms of his final illness, nine years later. But what he did on that fateful day was to fan into flame ages-old fears that the dis-possessed Irish Catholics were about to seek revenge. But if Churchill can be excused because of madness, the succession of politicians who followed him and some church ministers stand condemned for the blatant way they played on the peoples' fears of the 'Church of Rome'.

To some this may seem one-sided. It is not meant to be an indictment of the Ulster Protestant. It is meant to explain what appears to be inexplicable to an outsider. The Protestant Ulsterman has been a victim of exploitation. The Catholic Ulsterman has also been the victim of exploitation. What the Catholic wants is his birthright . . . to be an Irishman in his own country, free to enjoy his rich cultural heritage, under a democratic, non-sectarian administration. He has no difficulty in accepting

the Ulster Protestant as his fellow countryman with equal rights. Under no circumstances will he allow a return to the 50 years before 1970, when he was a third class citizen in his own country.

Some commentators refer to the Ulster question as one of a divided community. It is nothing of the sort. The Ulster planters and the Irish Catholics were never one community. It was the express purpose of the English government to keep the communities segregated. Both communities profess to follow the teachings of Christ. Both share a strong, stubborn Celtic faith. If reason and Christian charity prevails and the people of Ireland can lay the axe to the root of the evils that divide them, the new Ireland could be a strong force for peace in an increasingly troubled world.