

THE CHURCH OF IRELAND COMMUNITY AS A CULTURE:
MAKING SENSE OF RELIGION IN AN EARTHBOUND CONTEXT.

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It may be desirable to create an objective, scientifically proven, observation of social life. In most instances however, particularly when the novice student is the creator of the work in question, all is subjective.

'The only true reality is the one contained within us'
(Hermann Hesse 1965).

Furthermore, this early and unquestioned reality does not stem from the divine seed of nature within us. It is an inherited, learned perception of reality. Socialisation, home environment and the influence of our parents all pattern our behaviour and bestow certain opinions and attitudes upon us, often determining our social destiny. According to psychological enquiry, our parents shall shape our perception of the gods; authoritarian parents shape a rigid concept of the godhead.

In the context of a creative work the concept of subjectivity is important. We confine ourselves to what we ourselves see, and our perceptions shall have been programmed, more than likely, by externally imposed past experiences. Our attempts to understand a given subject will bear the influence of the time and place in which the work is undertaken. This particular paper, an attempt to explore the taken for granted world of the Irish Protestant, is an effort in subjective self-expression. Its views and biases are the influence of a particular time period of my own life. The study merely scratches the surface of the issues in question. It represents a tentative, initial step into the world of cultural analysis; an effort to understand just what it is that makes me different to my peers. This question was the outcome of a gradual realisation that the vicious competition between groups, in Ireland between Catholics and Protestants, was beyond my comprehension. In my own life experience I related to other individuals in different ways, I could feel comfortable with some but not with others. To classify a whole population under a single label, implying homogeneity, seemed to me an aberration of the solitary individual's integrity and independence. To unleash hostility upon an entire population seemed brutal and shocking, almost naive.

Over a long period I had grown aware of myself, more aptly, my 'self' and how my understanding of 'self' 'fellowman' and 'god-figure' had to proceed in a large part from my own solitary exploration. In short I had come to rebel, albeit silently, gradually, and inwardly, against my inherited belief system, my externally and socially derived views of reality, and the classification of 'me' as a member of one, single, unchosen collective. I wished to strip down my religious and sexual assumptions, to aspire towards truer integrity and to allow the dormant seed of nature to unfold freely within me. By continuing to adhere to an inherited mode of perception and a Catholic belief system I would continue to identify with a collectivity which prescribed a single world vision.

This suggests that a right and wrong world view exists, creating the notion of ingroup and outgroup - in an age of dangerous global competition between groups I felt that I could contribute towards the dilution of competition (though silent save for my immediate circle) by highlighting the social origins of all belief. I could realise a personal aspiration by contributing to the process of dismantling the world of 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' in order to expose their earthbound, socially-derived constructs and lifestyles. Exploring this geographically or spatially would mean gaining an understanding of what makes the 'Protestant' (more specifically the Church of Ireland Protestant) and the cultural world; the symbols, rituals and lifestyles involved in their social creation. This approach rests upon the premise that 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are often largely material and social concepts, lifestyles and assumptions that are learned and inherited.

The starting point for my work was as follows, that all socio-cultural worlds, including those of Catholic and Protestant, are an assemblage of perceptions. This introduces the notion of the social construction of reality: Reality, the taken-for-granted world, is created continually, when sets of beliefs, convictions and behaviour are sorted, processed, dispensed with, criminalised or encouraged. These views of reality are routinised, habitualised and institutionalised. Lifestyles & landscapes, particular to a specific group, then emerge. In my view the terms 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' began to represent such social worlds.

At the centre of such 'religious worlds' is the dominant, ever-present question concerning human life and it's meaning. Thus, a religious system is a social system, developed around the question of man's reason for existence. These worlds of belief provide an identity, and a world of stability, for the individual: the world and Universe can be frightfully dark and intimidating: the earthplane is insecure and ever changing. Individuals thus combine to form a collective representing a world view, and so evolve differing belief systems, each group claiming to answer the question of the meaning of human existence.

These beliefs may aspire towards something sacred and intangible, and some individuals may 'leap' beyond the bounds of tangible reality, into the "Astral plane", but most remain firmly earthbound. In this realm is contained what can be termed 'sacred culture'. 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' are therefore social systems, more specifically, socially produced 'sacred cultures' which contain highly revered answers to the question of human existence. They are tangible cultural systems with specific laws, territorial structures, methods of manifesting their respective beliefs and perpetuating it through class symbols, education and building methods among others. The individual is absorbed and here receives a particular identity tag. Groups then develop. Danger arises when groups come into conflict with each other. In most instances competition between groups is based upon material interests.

In Ireland the conflict between Catholics and Protestants, which has continued into the twentieth century, was based upon a power struggle and unequal access to the Mode of Production. While Catholics and Protestants inhabited all levels of the socio-economic spectrum, Protestants along with other religious minorities, the descendants of later English Colonists, displaced the Catholic

population after 1600, and for the most part formed the wealthy landed classes. In the nineteenth century sixty per cent of all landlords were of Protestant/New English descent and Protestant estates were more extensive. In addition to this the highest political positions were also held by those Protestants or New English. Distinguished by descent, power and status, a separate Anglo-Irish cultural group emerged.

If ideological interests were subordinate, this does not negate the concept of 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' as distinct cultural systems in the struggle. Competition may have been encouraged by wholly materialistic considerations but two distinct material cultures did exist and amongst the myths and generalizations which emerged were, nevertheless, the realities of separate cultures and lifestyles adhered to by the Protestant Anglo-Irish and the Catholic and Old English.

The 'New Ascendancy' of the early colonial period was determined to remain in Ireland, and when order was restored to the countryside the embryonic ascendancy asserted itself through to a newer and surer classical architecture inspired by styles in England and Europe. This architectural style and new modes of shaping the landscape contrasted radically with the traditional prosperity, and in part, modernity. Ostentation was more commonplace, and in time the nostalgia and sentimentality of the 'typical English landscape', much in vogue, became a feature of the Pale.

A distinctive Anglo-Irish consciousness existed in the nineteenth century associated, in large part, with class and status. The ascendancy

'enjoyed the full sense of superiority that arose from the possession of a settled power, unthreatened by anything more serious than sporadic unrest among a leaderless (Catholic) peasantry'

(Beckett 1976).

The devotional revolution in the early nineteenth century and the re-emergence of a socio-economically powerful Catholic population, dedicated to self-improvement, thrift and Middle class values, encouraged competition between its strong Middle class element and the pre-existing bastion of Protestant, Anglo-Irish superiority. Catholics and Protestants became firmly divided; mixed marriages were discouraged and education became denominational. Thus Catholics and Protestants came to live in their own separate social world.

'Everything in Ireland was either Catholic or Protestant - newspapers, colleges, hospitals, banks, shops, professional advisors. The distinction was not applied to horses but to almost everything else

(De Vere White 1972).

Beyond cultural ambiguity, the nature of Anglo-Irish culture was clear. It was advanced, modern, civilized and often materialistic. This generated a sense of superiority, protected behind a haughty veneer of snobbery.

'Irish Protestantism was not then a religion: it was a side in political faction, a class prejudice, a conviction that Roman Catholics are socially inferior people who will go to hell when they die, and leave Heaven in the exclusive possession of the Protestant ladies and gentlemen'

(Robinson 1980).

The effete side of the Anglo-Irish lifestyle is symbolised by the experience of living in the Big House. As Violet Martin Ross writes of her cousin Edith Somerville's family in West Cork, focussing upon the more active pursuits of the Big House culture:

'They were a law unto themselves, in the isolated, idyllic corner of Castletownsend; pictures, tennis, boating, bathing, riding, choir practice, cards, sketching, painting, photography and spiritualism were largely and even passionately enjoyed'

(In Robinson p.12).

This civilised society was impressed into the landscape. The environs of Douglas, Cork, were described in old records of 1975 as:

'Very pleasant, and the scenery diversified; being embellished with numerous elegant seats and residences'

(Mc Cutcheon 1983 p.16).

Competition between a rising Catholic Middleclass and the pre-existing Anglo-Irish ascendancy created the partial reality and partial myth of the dual society, of privileged Protestant and deprived Catholic. This dualistic image was strengthened, but in truth, competition for power and wealth was most immediate between the ascendancy and a strengthened Catholic Middleclass. The latter eagerly aspired towards adopting the privileged lifestyle of the ascendancy. As William Wilde observed in 1849.

'The tone of society in Ireland is becoming more and more 'Protestant' every year; the literature is a 'Protestant' one and even the Priests are becoming more 'Protestant' in their conversation and manners' (In Connolly 1985 p.53).

This cultural dichotomy is experienced in An Irish Cousin by Somerville and Ross, when the daughter of an Anglo-Irish family attends a party held by local tenants. There is no Corelli or Schubert being played, on a piano or violin. Instead, there is a hunchback, perched upon a donkey, playing jigs upon his bagpipes. They create a sound that is alien and strange to Anglo-Irish ears. Amidst the drinking of porter and tenants clad in tails and knee breeches, she feels she has stumbled into alien territory.

'In spite of my Sarsfield blood, a stranger in a strange land'

(In Robinson p. 6).

This cultural separateness arose from the cultural proximity of the Anglo-Irish to the English, in education and in outlook. An English education was desirable in the nineteenth century.

'Upperclass parents thought it right to beggar themselves if necessary to send their sons to English public schools, where they might acquire the outlook, the manners and above all the accent of the English gentleman'

(De Vere White 1972 p. 55).

This proximity to England despite residence in Ireland, often created a hybrid consciousness;

'I myself feel Irish in England but often quite foreign in Ireland; no doubt having gone to school in England.....has helped to strengthen that feeling of alienation'

(In Robinson p. 118).

This hybrid consciousness was also experienced among artists and writers of Anglo-Irish origin. No doubt as a result of their segregated education and upbringing they lacked a sense of gaelic history, or if you like, a history in Ireland. Kiberd sums this up when he says of Beckett;

'Embarrassed like so many other Protestant artists by the accusing patterns of Irish history he preferred to express his patriotism in a passionate enjoyment with the nation's geography following Yeats who recalled a childhood "without those memoreies of Limerick and the yellow ford which would have strenghtened an Irish Catholic and who instead thought of mountain and lake, of my grandmother and of ships"!

He goes on to say that;

'The energies which Roman Catholic Schoolchildren derived from folk mythology, peasant faith and the memory of Sarsfield and O'Neill had to be discovered by the young Protestant writers simply and solely in the landscape'.

(Kiberd 1987).

In the early twentieth century the demise of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy threatened to erode its 'Protestant' lifestyle. Despite a decline in the total numbers of Church of Ireland (C.O.I) members between 1871 and 1911, C.O.I. members as a percentage of the total population of Ireland had risen from 12.3% in 1871 to 13.1% in 1911. Regionally trends differed. Decline was greatest in the West while an increase occurred in the stronger C.O.I. areas of Dublin, Wicklow and Kildare. Cork city experienced a constant decline in its C.O.I. population falling from 13% in 1861 to 8.5% in 1911. The greatest decline occurred during the period 1911 to 1926, which may be attributed to both war losses and Anglo-Irish emigration, in the wake of the land acts which caused the breakup of their large estates. In Cork city the percentage of C.O.I. members fell from 8.5% to 4% of the population by 1926. By 1961 only 3.7% of the national population was C.O.I., with 104,000 members. Demographic decline persisted into the 1960's and 1970's so that an ESRI report in the 1960's predicted the possible extinction of the C.O.I. Anglo-Irish population by 2001. Between 1971 and 1981 the C.O.I. population declined by a massive 28% in Cork city leaving a total of 1,780 members remaining by 1981. Despite such large population decline the Anglo-Irish often remained separate and distinct, sometimes ignoring the newly independent Irish State, remaining loyal to the 'Union Jack' and 'God save the King' as their National Anthem.

The present C.O.I. population of Cork city is static and ageing, with a majority of elderly females. In the future the C.O.I. population may well become very sparse, except for those living in institutions such as retirement homes. The state of the population is more healthy in Cork county where it is relatively stable. The C.O.I. population is suburbanising: between 1971 and 1981 major increases occurred in the C.O.I. population in the area broadly known as the 'Commuting belt'. Cork rural district experienced a 26.3% increase in population during this decade. Moving beyond this zone, the population is static; towards the margins of the county, population is falling, particularly in the extreme South-west.

In 1986 a survey was carried out, as part of my B.A. dissertation in Geography, to discover the present state of the Church of Ireland Community in Cork city. This survey was based on the response of those approached at Sunday services, as lists of C.O.I. members were not available. Results revealed that interaction between Church of Ireland members and Catholics is not restricted. Intimate friendships did exist between these groups. Any absence of frequent, intimate interaction between Catholic and C.O.I. members seemed to be a result of social circumstances: C.O.I. members often went to denominational schools and also mixed with other C.O.I. members through involvement with church social groups. Apart from a few exceptions, C.O.I. members were not an enclosed, isolated, group, but were well integrated within local social networks.

Separate 'Protestant' symbols remain however, most overtly in the absence of saints names amongst school children's christian names. With regard to surnames; Beamish, Appelby, Godsil, Roycroft, Suske, and Whitting might replace Murphy and O'Mahony. Some respondents spoke of a British connection: that an affinity remained but was weakening across generation boundaries. Two features remaining as important indicators of 'Protestant culture' were, a high Irish Times readership, (now no longer the sole preserve of the Protestant gentlemen, however) and several respondents listened regularly to BBC Radio Four. One suburban Protestant Primary School revealed its

high status orientation with a list of parent's occupations including that of architect, bank official, company director, doctor, manager and University lecturer (McCutcheon 1983).

At a Sunday service in a suburban church the congregation was large, as groups gathered for a ceremony of initiation for new members of the Boys Brigade. This remarkably polished and formal group showed a large number of blond heads. Though trying to avoid imaginative bias, the group of youngsters were unlike anything beheld in a Catholic Church: there was a subtle English quality. The choir were dressed in red robes, adding to the formality and dignity of the occasion. Outside, a lady in furs was talking about the ladies club. Her accent was 'posh' and 'civilised'. A C.O.I. companion described it as a typically 'Prod' accent. The scene in the suburban churchyard differed greatly to the scene described by White when he described, as a protestant, the mystery of the Catholic church - flickering candles, ornate symbolism and the smell of incense and poor people (White 1975).

The red gowns and the 'real Prods' accent both symbolised formality and high status and constitute those orthodox manifestations of what Wilde observed in 1849 as a 'very Protestant society' (In Connolly 1985). This is the ideal type of 'Protestant culture'. It reflects civility, just as the Big House once acted as the chief source of reference for the 'superior and genteel' Protestant. The Big House, a powerful symbol, no longer remains, replaced by more subtle features of Protestant identity. My C.O.I. companions speak as I do, think and act as I do, read books similar to those that I read and receive the same newspapers. It is becoming more and more apparent that the 'Ideal Protestant type' is a little more than an anachronistic label for a high status lifestyle. Some Protestants may exist as part of this socio-cultural world, others may not.

The high status symbols of the ideal Protestant culture are no longer solely Protestant preserves. Such symbols reflect a high status lifestyle, the contemporary equivalent to the former Ascendancy lifestyle. Catholics are eager to adopt similar behaviour. One primary school headmistress claimed that a threefold increase could occur in school membership if all Catholic applicants were accepted. There is a desire to allow children to mix in the 'right' circles. The situation resembles that of the nineteenth century Catholic merchants who eagerly adopted Protestant i.e. upperclass manners and habits.

Surnames remain the distinguishing feature between authentic Anglo-Irish Protestant and newly-anglicized Catholic. Otherwise, little difference remains between 'Catholic' and 'Protestant' in the 'contemporary ascendancy'. It was observed that the so-called ideal Protestant culture is a secular "yuppie" culture in the contemporary period; particularly in Dublin, and increasingly in Cork. The Anglo-Irish lifestyle disappeared with the Big House. In its wake is a high status lifestyle, subscribed to by many Protestants but outnumbered now by Catholics. The Protestant culture survives, albeit weakly, and close to dilution, as increasingly secular elements combine to form the new, somewhat de-Anglicized high-status lifestyle of Ireland. If generalisations regarding 'Protestant' and 'Catholic' were too vague in the past, they are even more vague in the contemporary period. The ascendancy has

moved to suburbia and Protestants reside harmoniously with Catholic counterparts, save for some vague murmurings of a troubled and divided history, both groups are losing their genealogical biases and increasingly their religious labels.

'Protestant' and 'Catholic' are socially created, and socially manifested, labels. They represent assemblages of socially derived perceptions and opinions. This is not to imply that such labels ought to be negated. In fact, their elimination would not only impoverish, but would also symbolize the annihilation of social identity leaving an anomic, normless, cultural vacuum in its wake. Rather, such inherited belief systems; if the bearer decides to retain them, must be stripped bare and revealed as diverse human responses to a single question at the centre of human existence. Only then can we develop a mature understanding and acceptance of these belief systems as culturally different methods to aid us along a universal path. These identities can continue to provide an anchor in a rather diffuse state of confusion, and a harsh reality. They are necessary for the naked human organism, clothing it with an identity. These beliefs are not divine or God given however, therefore they need not represent a barrier between peoples. This is an especially necessary realisation for achieving the transition to a more global cultural system. It could preach co-operation and not competition.

The reality remains that man has not responded to the call of the Godheads, Jesus, Allah, Buddha and others. Different truths are developed and bolstered, leading to competition and destruction. Man has not responded to universal co-operation in the past, and is unlikely to do so in the future. It may ultimately lead to nuclear destruction. This may be a pre-requisite for the 'Dawning of the age of Aquarius', the 'Second Coming', or the 'New Age': in brief, better world. Perhaps these glimpses of Utopia are themselves but socially derived consolations in the face of impending destruction. The only objective reality may be the hard fact of the solitary human individual evolving a social self, developing new collectivities of belief, competing and destructing. Thereafter, the process of evolution and organisation simply recommence and each evolves and adapts to a new mould. This may be the sole reality. It is possible that the solitary individual's attempt to come to terms with the prison of his own uniqueness and vulnerability, in a dynamic earth plane, is the only means of release and freedom: Perhaps this is the answer to man's dilemma, making peace with one's solitude and basic insecurity. Can this be called God?

Geography was a vehicle to assist me as I first came to ponder these questions. The motivation may be too far removed from Geography and more at home in the Philosophical, Sociological or Theological realms. However, our basic reality is our humanity, and our need to etch out our space so that we might exist in a current 'lifetime' may represent one method of surviving. Ignoring the question of existence and concentrating solely upon the details of an entirely material discipline, adhering to a single world view, and system of analysis, is at least too one-sided and restrictive for the soul's need for expansion and journey. At worst it is a possible pre-requisite for competition and destruction.

We dwell within a dimension of human evolution and development where some will ask the question of life's meaning, few will seek the answer. This project, examining the Protestant/Catholic dichotomy represents the initial step of my questioning, and Geography acted as my means to begin to question life and the Universe, aspiring towards understanding the significance of my own solitary existence.

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