

Angliores Anglis Ipsis

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I start with a quotation from the "Point of View" of the Church of Ireland Gazette for August 19th.

"The General Synod of the Church of England ... will consider 'The Irish Problem and Ourselves' published on behalf of the Board of Social Responsibility. Since one of its two authors, Canon Eric Elliott, is a prominent member of the (Irish) Committee on the Role of the Church, and since the document itself draws freely from the reports of that Committee, it might be said that the English Synod is being presented with a Church of Ireland viewpoint".

In this article I shall take the Gazette's language and speak of the English "document" and the Irish "report" to avoid confusion. The Document appears to agree with Dr. Palley former Professor of Public Law in Queen's University, Belfast. She contrasts the "majority of Protestants" who are "descendants of the settlers" with "the majority of Irishmen, for the most part Roman Catholics". Possibly Professor Beckett, who has recently retired from a history chair in the same university may be rather more reliable. I quote from the Appendix he supplied to the Irish Report of 1975.

"It is often asserted or assumed that Protestants represent a colonial population while the Roman Catholics are the native Irish. This is at best a dangerous half-truth. It is probably the case that most Protestants are descended in the direct line from English or Scottish ancestors, who entered the country at various times from the later sixteenth century onwards. But such families have commonly inter-married with the earlier layers of population. And besides this there is a very substantial number of Protestants whose direct Irish ancestry goes back to Medieval times and earlier. As for the Roman Catholic population, it contains such a very large inter-mixture of English and Scottish, that it cannot possibly be regarded as representing any single strain".

Both these dons use "Protestant" in the customary Irish fashion as meaning Christians separate from Rome, and it should not be given any further theological or ecclesiological interpretation. The same terminology was employed by Dr. FitzGerald, then our Foreign Minister and now the leader of the main Opposition Party, in a remarkable address he delivered to the School of Ecumenics' Consultation which was commended in the Irish Role of the Church Committee's Report of 1976.

“Despite the absence of any clearly-marked physical differences between them, the two sections of the community in Northern Ireland ... have largely retained their separate ... identities because of the religious barrier to inter-marriage.... The question I want to pose therefore is whether the deep and for many people, fatal division of the community in Northern Ireland, and the mutual antipathy of the Roman Catholic and Protestant sections of that community, is not in some degree at least attributable to past and present ecclesiastical legislation with respect to mixed marriages, and whether if this is so, the problem is not one of which theology must take cognisance”.

Dr. FitzGerald thinks that the “Protestant demographic decline” in the Republic, though clearly caused by the “Roman Catholic Church’s policy with respect to mixed marriages” has “confirmed the Northern Protestants in their fears and prejudices”; so that we have the “paradox” that the mixed marriage rules “though presumably having the intended effect of maximising the Roman Catholic population in ‘the Republic’, has the effect of helping to threaten the very existence of the Roman Catholic population in parts of Northern Ireland”.

We turn now to the political problems of the North. The Irish Committee said in 1976:-

“There was agreement on the need for devolved structures of accepted and effective Government in Northern Ireland ... some form of agreement must be reached, which inevitably must mean all parties accepting less than their total ideals”. Presumably the minority gives up power sharing and the majority gives them some rather empty honours on Parliamentary Committees! Indeed this is more or less spelled out in the English Document.

“It would be ironic if the concept of power sharing, intended as a means of demonstrating the confidence of all parties in a Northern Ireland administration, were to become instead a stone of stumbling, an obstacle to any political evolution”. In the light of this the encouragement of “British Christians” to lobby their MPs and Government “to start political talks once again” is really frightening. We have half a century’s experience of what can happen in Northern Ireland. At the end of it the Cameron Committee agreed that there was substance in the complaints of the minority “as regards houses, jobs and electoral boundaries”. During that period any attempt to raise these injustices in the British House of Commons was ruled out of order by the Speaker because there was a Parliament in Belfast. Yet when Dr. Hillery as Irish Foreign Minister sought a UN Peace-keeping force at the beginning of the violence; the British objected on the grounds that Northern Ireland belonged to the UK and when it suited them

they suspended the Northern Parliament literally overnight. Why then could not the Parliament that claimed "suzerainty" exercise it in the years of peace? Once trouble broke out it did indeed do so, thus teaching the Northern minority the old lesson that "England will concede to force what she will deny to justice"! Now, we have this hint that the solution of "power sharing" should be placed in cold storage. In the light of the history of the Province can anyone really believe that in that event it will ever be thawed out and served up afresh? Remember this advice is not just being given to Anglicans but to all "British Christians". Happily an American Baptist President seems more realistic. I think wisely Mr. Carter avoided the emotive term "power sharing" but he has made his offer of financial aid depend on agreement between the communities. Though his carefulness has been subjected to rather severe criticism, I think he was extremely well-advised. I do not believe that the Northern Minority will accept anything less than power-sharing though they might allow it to be given some other name!

The English Document, evidently anxious to show how Christian its ideas were, suggested that there should be an "explicit and symbolic expression of repentance on our part for what has been done in the past". Does not this have the scent of "unhappy far-off things and battles long ago". Indeed there were some of these, but might it not be more practicable to repent for the way it white-washed the worst doings of Stormont during the half-century before the outbreak of violence? We must not indeed impute to the British any desire to be unfair, all they wanted was not to be bothered with the crude details of what was taking place in Northern Ireland. I leave it to the reader to decide which attitude is more reprehensible.

Recently Queen Elizabeth visited Northern Ireland and some comment was expressed about the rather negative reaction of the Minority to the lady who is, at any rate technically, their monarch. Perhaps the best comment on this might be to quote from "Violence in Ireland, A Report to the Churches" produced by a Working Party set up by the "Irish Council of Churches and the Roman Catholic Church". Speaking about Internment, this book said:

"The measure was regarded by the Catholic community as being aimed exclusively at one section of the population, a belief given credence by the fact that the first 300 'lifted' on August 9th 1971 were almost all drawn from what could generally be called 'the Catholic community'."

Since then evidence has been produced in an international Court that torture, or something very like it, was applied to the internees. In view of all this the timing of the Royal visit to include the anniversary of Internment and a well-known Orange or rather "blackman's" celebration, was hardly designed to create a feeling of loyalty or even friendliness in the minority! It should be point-

ed out that the proceedings brought by the Irish against the British Government before the Court of Human Rights has established that the conditions under which the internees were held and the way in which they were treated was not disposed to make this a particularly happy anniversary for members of their community. In saying this I am not bringing up again “unhappy” but not so “far off things” for the fun of it. Rather I am seeking to indicate that it is unreasonable to castigate the Minority for not paying respect to the head of the State they live in. It may indeed be a dominical injunction “to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s” but surely even Caesar should display a certain degree of common sense.

Understandably enough, the English Document presents a picture of the Republic based on a number of quotations; here is one from the BCC/ICC Consultation of 1975.

“The aspiration to a United Ireland has been expressed primarily in political, constitutional and territorial terms and as an extension of the present Republic over the whole island”.

Even the late President de Valera stated that in the event of unity the Northern Parliament would have the same powers it then seemed to have in the United Kingdom, and it has been clearly stated by Fianna Fail that in terms of Unity a new Constitution would have to be drafted. To refer to “a more realistic attitude ... on the part of a growing number of politicians in the Republic” as if it was completely new is surely unwarranted. Again, the Document quotes a speech of Dr. FitzGerald’s criticising the “law banning the sale of contraceptives” as being based on a “particular set of denominational beliefs”. It is quite extraordinary that no mention is made of the decision of the Supreme Court legalising the importation of these articles. Undoubtedly the decision of the Court will sooner or later be followed by certain legislative regulations but it seems either ill-informed or worse to suppress any reference to this important event. The English reader will not realise unless he is informed that in the Republic the Constitution is above other legislation. So the decision of the Supreme Court in the Magee Case could only be altered by a bill followed by a referendum.

Now I turn to some of the quotations from the Report of the Role of the Church Committee submitted to the Irish General Synod this year.

“Responsibility for taking political initiative lies collectively with the British Government as the Sovereign power in Northern Ireland and also with the politicians and political parties in Northern Ireland and with the Irish Government”.

This is an almost supreme example of the double-think. Our Document does not mention the idea of an Irish Dimension agreed on at the Sunningdale Conference, although it has a chapter entitled

“Many Dimensions: Ireland, past, present and future”. Yet it is difficult to see how it can be acknowledged that the Irish Government has responsibility for the Northern situation without acknowledging an Irish dimension of some kind. This brings me to the way in which the Irish Church Report tried to justify its view of our Government’s responsibility.

“While a grave responsibility rests upon the British Government, and on all sections of the Northern community, an equally serious and urgent obligation lies with the Government of the Republic of Ireland. Its contribution to creating a climate in which this partnership can develop and flourish can best be made by a determined effort to create a more free and open society in its own country”.

The last three words are the most important ones. If the present area of the Republic is “its own country” then Northern Ireland must also be either a country or a part of a country and a border separating the two countries is both natural and permanent. As an Irishman I have never thought of any “country” to which I belonged other than the island of Ireland, even if it was divided between two different States. However, this is a Report to one Anglican Synod incorporated in a Document for another one. Now the Anglican Communion is a family of equal National Churches, so it is a principle of our ecclesiology that Churches should be organised on this basis. It follows that if the Republic of Ireland is a separate nation, then it ought to have a separate National Church. Certain practical problems would inevitably arise. A good deal of our Church’s money has been used in developing Church work in the Northern area, where we have a good many Anglicans. The best in this case that could be done would be to treat Northern Ireland as a Foreign Mission! And indeed it may be as much in need of missionary work as any part of Africa! Elsewhere however, the English Document seems to value the fact that “the British Churches have links with their Irish sister-churches which in all cases comprehend the whole of Ireland”. I should like to suggest that not even a Christian Church can have its cake and eat it at the same time. If it is a good thing that these Churches are National, then presumably the whole island is the Nation in question.

We started with the suggestion that the English Synod was going to be presented with “a Church of Ireland viewpoint”. I should not venture to deny that this is so. In the difficult situation in the North of Ireland, Canon Elliott has shown a remarkable degree of independence. All I am trying to say is that his is “a” and quite definitely not “the” Church of Ireland viewpoint. The fact that he is living and working in the difficult Northern situation may have influenced his opinion in certain ways and so I have ventured to seek the hospitality of *New Blackfriars* to put another Church

of Ireland viewpoint from the peace and quiet of the deep South. In a very interesting sociological work "Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland" Fr. M. MacGreil tells us that his Dublin respondents held by an 85 per cent majority "that Protestants in the Republic had more in common with Roman Catholics in the Republic than they had with their fellow Protestants in Northern Ireland". Even if there is a slight exaggeration here, it may illustrate that I am writing from a very different background to the good Canon. On the other hand I grew up in the North and hope therefore that I am not altogether unfit to balance one part of Ireland with, but not I hope against, the other.

References

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