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**New Scriptures Needed**

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My title does not refer directly to the canonical texts of the Judaeo-Christian tradition - the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Scriptures, and the Rabbinical corpus. But they are on my mind, since I have just taken five years off from doing purely Irish history to write a book on the invention of the Bible and the Talmuds and one on the use of Paul's letters as sources for the historical Jesus. What comes out of those exercises is a consciousness that every person, and more importantly every social group, write their own scriptures. Not the canonical scriptures, but their own combination of fact, fancy, theory, myth, belief, antipathy.

According to the contours of each group's scriptures arises that groups social possibilities: is a social contract possible among individuals in this group? If so, what is its grammar? and, are the borders of the social contract permeable; or impermeable, and, therefore, the borders are Berlin Walls? Fuerbach was wrong: we are not what we eat. We are what we believe. Permit me to revisit with you briefly some observations I made several years ago in a book entitled God's Peoples.

That book contained an argument that North Americans had not heard of then, and a very simple one: that the Protestants of Northern Ireland were not crazy. Difficult, yes, but hard-wired into a cultural matrix that, once understood, made their history understandable and remarkably sane. Specifically, the hegemonic group among the Protestants (forgive that horrible word, "hegemonic" but it fits)--the Presbyterians--acted between the years 1613 (when the first Presbyterian clergyman arrived) and the mid 1970s according to a set of core beliefs and attitudes that had been set down long before the birth of Yeshua of Nazareth.

The Presbyterian re-enacted the covenant between Yahweh and the Chosen People more than 2,500 years after that primordial template was set down. They defined themselves as a people apart, one highly favoured by God. Like the Chosen People in Eretz Israel, they attached themselves passionately to specific pieces of land. They adopted unusually sharp distinctions between the sacred and profane and, correspondingly sharp differentiations between "them" and "us".

One can accept for Presbyterians the words of the great Talmudic scholar Louis Ginzberg. "'Love your enemies' is not a Jewish concept." Nor was it a Presbyterian one in the high era of that faith. Social law, whenever possible, was enforced by religious congregations, rather than by civil jurisdictions. And the social contract was only for those inside: up to roughly 1870, only Presbyterians, and thereafter, grudgingly, for all Protestants.



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This was not crazy. The covenantal paradigm of the Ulster Presbyterians ultimately gave them a Protestant state for a Protestant people. It was not a state they had originally wanted. But when given the choice of inclusion with the mephitic Other, they founded a semisacralized entity: based on the moral authority of the Ulster Covenant, a document that could have been dictated by the putative author of the Torah, Moses himself.

It worked. We too often forget that. However much we may individually find--and have found--repugnant morally many aspects of that political entity, the Protestant state existed longer than have most countries that are now part of the United Nations.

However, a covenantal state can easily come unlocked, and when, in 1972, the Ulster Protestants lost control over their own state, they automatically surrendered control over the construction of laws. Law-making is one of the most important prerogatives of any covenantal society and loss of lawmaking powers sharply reduces the ability of the society to draw clear lines between tribal member and outsider, and between sacred and profane.

It is no news to any of you that the Ulster Protestants are in the middle of what (I devoutly hope) is not forty years of wandering in the wilderness. They have no usable scriptures and desperately need them. Here I hope I am not engaged in an exercise I once heard denounced a by Russian Stalinist. He warned of the danger of "losing one's wholesome sense of reality by paying excessive attention to the BBC".

Now, much less commented on is a parallel loss of an agreed cultural-political matrix in the Republic of Ireland. We all know that politics and society in the south are "subtler". There are other words I won't use in a polite gathering. But it is true that southern society had shifted radically in the second half of this century, well before all but a few observers caught on.

Looking back on the tectonic shifts in the Republic, beginning in the early 1960s, and upon our own impercience, most of us should feel like a female friend of mine who told me: "I think my marriage began to crumble when I found a baby seat in the back of my husband's Volvo." The southern state was not a covenantal society in the Old Testament sense. Rather, up to the end of the de Valera era (roughly) it was an Imperium and very close to being a theocracy. I only vaguely understood this when writing my first book, a history of the national school system in the nineteenth century and watching with fascination a law case in the mid-1960s. It was brought in Dublin against the Christian Brothers by the parents of a boy who had been rendered permanently deaf by being thumped by the Christian Brothers. The parents did the



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unthinkable and sued. And won. And were awarded damages on behalf of their son. The damages were set at one shilling. Lesson learned.

This Imperium, which one did not challenge, traced its lineage not to the God of the Old Testament (as in the Presbyterian case) but to Constantine the Great. That extraordinary magus was responsible for one of the most formative conjuring tricks in world history. While convincing the ranks of Christian ecclesiastics that he was converting the Roman Empire to Christianity, he had turned the glove inside out: he had converted the Christian church into the Roman Empire. Constantine would have been amazed by how long his empire lasted.

Yet we are rightly amazed at how quickly it decamped in this island. The only Christian society that has reduced its religiously-framed social compact as quickly as has that of the Republic of Ireland is Quebec. There the so-called Quiet Revolution, begun with the provincial election of 1960, ushered in a period of secularisation that surprised even its warmed advocates. To a considerable degree, however, Quebec possessed an analgesic that made this process less painful than it might have been: religion was largely replaced by cultural and political nationalism. And thus nationalism acted as the midwife of secularisation.

This has not been the case in the Republic. Cultural nationalism and political nationalism (at least at the level of official cult) have declined almost as swiftly as has the theologically-derived social compact. The process is still in train, and it would be a fool who would tell you how it will end.

The benefits are seemingly obvious. At the most specific level getting the 'Special Position' of the Catholic church out of the Constitution can only be helpful. And so too the promised removal of the only constitutionally sanctioned irredentist claim in Europe.

But it is easy to interpret drift as progress. I find it hard to detect any new social consensus, any sense of shared mission, to replace the old Imperium of de Valera's Ireland. The Celtic Tiger is a thoroughly amoral beast, random in its ravings and nasty in its boastfulness. It's a fun beast for a while, but not housebroken. Dev would have found in today's Republic everything he hated: the cultural triumph of the Returned Yank.

Some new scriptures might help. Permit me to perform the ritual necessity and make two swift Millennial Predictions. The first is that the line of cultural and political sympathy between the southern polity and the northern Catholic minority will continue to diminish rapidly. The south really does not care. It will abandon the northern Catholics as readily as the British will abandon the northern Protestants.





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In each case, only the opportunity is required. This leaves the northern minority on its own. It is a remarkably durable and assertive community, but in the long run one wonders if (to adapt Ian Burumalls words) a successful social compact can survive within any group that bases its communal identity almost entirely on the sentimental solidarity of remembered victimhood.

The second prediction is related: that it will become increasingly clear in the coming months and years that the North American interest in the Irish Question is dropping. Boredom and impatience have set in. As is the case with Ireland is closest parallel in North American political circles--namely Israel--the old lobby groups are diminishing, the larger polity has grown skeptical, and the political establishment now can reserve the Irish Question for minor bits of international theatre, and nothing more.

So, both the major groups in Northern Ireland are on their own in the Third Millennium. And nowhere in Ireland does the centre hold.

Yet, I have faith--it is blind faith--that in this culture, in the north of Ireland in particular, a new set of scriptures can be written. (The faith is blind because all real faith must be: otherwise it is mere calculation.)

But I believe:

that the people of the north of Ireland Ireland are capable of forgetting the savage truths each side knows about the other and of replacing them by agreed and agreeable lies.

that the people of Northern Ireland are capable of surrendering their two versions of the collective tribal unconscious and substituting the benison of conscious and reasoned discourse.

that eventually, in a century or so, the north of Ireland, while never aspiring to be a state, will become one of those awkward and prickly entity so beloved of French theorists: the thing they call a nation.

Of course, as the region's new and pacific scriptures are written, there will be moments of horror. I hope, however, they will be limited to the cultural terrorism that Mordacai Richler recently noted in my own country, Canada. There, in Montreal, a French-Canadian woman walked into the Ritz Carlton hotel and asked the barman, an English-speaker, for a double entendre. So he gave her one. Incroyable!

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on ancient Hebrew and Old Testament scriptures (Surpassing Wonder, The Invention of the Bible and the Talmuds 1998), and on the life of St Paul (Saint Saul 2000).