



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Religion and National
Identity

Alan Ford
November 1999



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Religion and national identity are one of those natural twins, a seemingly inescapable combination wherever you look in Irish history, St Patrick and Ireland, faith and fatherland. And not just in Irish history, also in the writing of Irish history, there is a very powerful tradition of identifying certain religious and national characteristics and tracing them back in an unbroken line through right back to the arrival of St Patrick in Ireland.

As a theologian, I am acutely aware of the power and significance of such continuity, of the reassurance offered by the vertical history of a particular church, emphasising its undying loyalty to certain essential beliefs throughout the ages, tracing its apostolic succession right back through St Patrick to Christ, and of the comfort offered by the resultant sense of racial and religious identity. But as a historian, I also have to look at discontinuities as well as continuities, examining and questioning origins and the stories we tell about our origins. Much of what was believed about St Patrick for many centuries was, as we now well know, as much myth as history, as later stories were foisted on the historical figure. Continuities, even dearly held traditions, can be invented.(1)

The obvious question is when was this inseparable linkage between religion and national identity first created and how did it subsequently develop? The key period in which the link between religion and national identity was forged, when, as it were, some key stories were invented, was the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This was when the English monarchy succeeded in extending its rule to the whole of Ireland, and in imposing Protestantism as the official religion, but failed to convert the mass of the people of Ireland to the established church. As a result, there grew up in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries two separate churches, two separate religious identities, with markedly differing attitudes to the question of national identity.(2)

Historians have investigated in great detail the institutional development of these separate Catholic and protestant churches. But what I am interested in here is the intellectual response of these two churches to two key questions raised by the competitive religious and national environment in which they had then to operate: how did they view their roots; and how did they view their relationship with the Irish nation, or, in other words, how did the separate churches go about constructing their separate national and religious identities.

Something happened to Irish Catholicism in the late sixteenth century. In broad terms this can be summarised as the development of a new Counter-Reformation consciousness. The Council of Trent (1545-63) marked new Catholic determination



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

to build up an effective catholic church which could effectively combat the threat of Protestantism.

In religious terms it led to the training of Irish clergy not in England but in the Catholic centres of mainland Europe, whence they returned with a clear sense of the difference between Catholic truth and Protestant heresy and a missionary determination to make their fellow countrymen aware of this distinction.

In political terms, it led to the excommunication of Queen Elizabeth and the efforts of many Irish secular leaders and churchmen in the later sixteenth century to overthrow English rule and establish a Catholic state in Ireland.(3,4)

A sign of the new relationship between religion and identity was the fate of many of those Catholics killed in the various risings of the late sixteenth century Catholics who died in the various risings against Elizabeth, most especially in the Desmond rising of 1579. On the Catholic side they were treated as martyrs for their religion. A new genre of Irish Catholic martyrology sprang up in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries which recorded the deaths of 100 martyrs between 1575 and 1600, giving vivid details of the tortures and mistreatment they endured, their steadfastness in the Catholic faith despite all pain and inducements, and the miracles that followed their deaths. Even though the hopes of creating a Catholic state were destroyed by the defeat of Hugh O'Neill in the Nine Years War in 1603, the new religious and political consciousness of Irish Catholics survived, fuelled by the new school of Irish Catholic history, which recorded the glories of the early Celtic church, stressing its loyalty to Rome.

Moreover, this new consciousness served to unite the two disparate racial strands of Irish Catholicism, the Old English descendants of the Anglo-Norman invaders, and the Gaelic Irish. The result was the development of what has been christened the faith and fatherland mentality. But whereas in other European countries such an ideology was tied in closely to the development of national state structures, and was encouraged by monarchs and princes as a means of strengthening the allegiance of their subjects to church and state, in Ireland, Catholicism had to operate independent of such structures, indeed in the face of continuing hostility from the state.

The development of an Irish Catholic identity thus depended to a far greater extent upon the structures and personnel of the Catholic church, and upon the development of a distinctive cultural and intellectual awareness.



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

It is no coincidence that the time when this Irish Catholic national identity was being formed, the early seventeenth century, was exactly the period when Irish Catholic scholars were rediscovering the immense wealth of the history and theology of the early Irish church.

This was the time when the Franciscans in Louvain sent Micheal O Cleirigh back to Ireland from the continent with the conscious intention of rescuing the remnants of Gaelic Irish civilisation before they were destroyed by the English invaders, a journey which was to result in the Annals of the Four Masters, the classic work of Gaelic Irish history. This was the time when investigation began into the lives of St Patrick and St Brigid and all the great saints of the early Irish church. Anglo Irish families had traditionally been suspicious or even dismissive of Ireland's Gaelic past: but by the seventeenth century Anglo Irish and native Irish alike were united in their pride in the achievements of the Irish church in its golden age.(5,6)

And of course what these researches implicitly or explicitly suggested, was that the whole tradition of the Irish church was Roman Catholic. They were forging the seamless chain which bound together all Irish Catholics back to their patron and founding saint, Patrick. As the nineteenth century Irish Catholic historian MJ Brennan(7) put it in his Ecclesiastical History of Ireland:

"In unabated fidelity and veneration for the chair of St Peter the Catholics of Ireland have never been surpassed by any Christian nation on earth, and for their conscientious adherence to it no other nation has ever suffered so much."

We have then two crucial components of the development of an Irish Catholic faith and fatherland mentality: a sense of persecution and martyrdom; and an identification with the history of Ireland as a Catholic country. Irish and Catholic were synonyms, as were English and Protestant.

But the Protestants were anxious that the Catholics should not steal Irish history from them. They had, first, a very different view of history, one which, not surprisingly, validated the Protestant Reformation. Ecclesiastical history they saw a record of the struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, between Christ and Antichrist.

In the early years the church had been relatively pure (and Protestant). That church had degenerated during the middle ages, as the Papacy imposed its abuses. It was not till the reformation that the purity of the early church was restored. This schema was applied to Ireland by James Ussher the Protestant Archbishop of Armagh from 1625 till his death in 1656.



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

In his highly influential A discourse of the religion anciently professed by the Irish and British (2nd ed., London, 1631), he announced his belief that: "If... a true discovery were added of that religion which anciently was professed in this kingdom; it might prove a special motive to induce my poor countrymen to consider a little better of the old and true way from whence they have hitherto been misled."

What he set out to show was that the early Irish church was pure and uncorrupted. Only slowly as the papacy exerted ever increasing control over the Irish church were abuses and corruptions imposed, at first "...little and little, before the devil was let loose to procure that seduction which prevailed so generally in these last times".

These the Church of Ireland was now seeking to reform and remove. His conclusion was that "...the religion professed by the ancient bishops, priests, monks, and other Christians in this land, was for substance the very same with that which now by public authority is maintained therein, against the foreign doctrine brought in thither in latter times by the bishop of Rome's followers". (?8,9,10?)

This idea became fixed in the minds of Irish Protestants, right down to the middle of the twentieth century, leading to a conviction that, whatever Catholic claims, it was the Church of Ireland that was the rightful heir of the early Irish church, whose bishops could trace their succession back to Patrick. In other words, just as Counter-Reformation Catholics found that the church of St Patrick church conformed to the standards of the sixteenth century Council of Trent, so, equally surprisingly, the Protestant historians discovered that the early Irish church in effect believed in the Thirty Nine Articles.

A second strand of this Protestant identity was the belief that the Catholics, because of their loyalty to the papacy, were but half citizens. In the eyes of Protestants, church and state were indissolubly linked. Those who opposed the church also rebelled against the state. Nor were they merely inspired by political discontent: they were actively promoting the cause of Antichrist. Catholics because of their religion were therefore disloyal citizens. The pope had in 1570 excommunicated Elizabeth and absolved Catholics from their responsibility to obey her. Catholics therefore could not be trusted as part of the Irish state and had to be excluded from office and influence. They were traitors and it was as such, and not as heretics, that they were executed.

What we have here is the creation of two powerful historical traditions which fuelled the growth of two very different conceptions of Irish identity, and fixed in the minds of successive generations of Irish people long-lasting and self-fuelling sectarian frameworks. For of course these competing senses of identity were mutually



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

contradictory: both could not be true: St Patrick could not be both Catholic and Protestant.

They created, in other words, a natural tension which persisted throughout Irish history, and produced two parallel streams of religious and national history down the next four centuries, which often intersected, but nevertheless maintained a strict sectarian division between protestant and Catholic. When in 1932 the 1500th anniversary of St Patrick's arrival in Ireland was celebrated, it was no surprise that there should be two largely separate series of commemorations across Ireland, symbolised in the monuments erected at Saul in Co Down: a Protestant church on one hill had as its counterpoint a 'national and Catholic' monument on the other, providing ironic confirmation of the theories of some modern scholars that there were two St Patricks.

We have then the familiar patten of two hostile traditions. One saw Irish identity as Catholic, and as one leading Catholic martyrologist, David Rothe put it, was convinced that the very act of living on Irish soil and breathing the air of Ireland, ensured that you became and remained a good Catholic. It developed a deep attachment to faith and fatherland, where the fatherland was identified not so much with the Irish state as the Irish nation and its history and culture. The other, contrasting Protestant view contested this exclusive identification of Catholicism with Irishness, claiming that the political nation had to exclude Catholics because of their loyalty to antichrist. Only Protestants could be true citizens, only Protestants were the heirs of the true church of Ireland and could claim descent from St Patrick.

What we have been discussing is two different views of national and religious identity, and two different views about how you study and analyse them academically. One, older, rather nineteenth century approach sees essence of a nation as consisting in its soil, history, geography and genetic make-up. There is an identifiable Irish nation and people with distinct and distinctive characteristics which separates them from the French or the English, and this national identity can be traced far back into the distant past because there exists a real continuity. The other which is far more popular now amongst scholars of modern history, sees the concept of a nation as being much more fluid and literary, as something invented or imagined, a nation as a product of the stories it tells about itself, an approach summed up by the title of Benedict Anderson's seminal work: Imagined Communities

To put in more academic language, this modern school, often reacting against the racial, and in some cases racist certainties of nineteenth century nationalists, see national identity as something created, not innate: they are constructivist not essentialist. What this recent approach means is that scholars are much more



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

sceptical about the idea of innate national characteristics. There is no essence of a nation; nations are constructed, created. And historians have that seductive and sometimes dangerous power of deconstructing them.

There are also here two very different ways of looking at religious identity: one is vertical, concerned with looking at the roots of religious belief, tracing back the origins of a particular church and how it came to believe what it did. This is the traditional form of ecclesiastical history - the history of churches, all about apostolic succession and the transmission of Protestant or Catholic belief - about, "origins, title-deeds, pedigree and descent". as one writer, Partick Collinson, has put it.(11)

The other way is to examine it more horizontally - how religions interact, the role of popular religion as a whole, of religiosity, which transcends sectarian and denominational boundaries, and uses not just history, but sociology and anthropology to investigate the religious outlook of particular periods.

What we have done is to explore the roots of the vertical history of Irish national feeling, and of Irish religion, and the essentialist view of Irish identity. Both these are powerful ways of viewing the world and your place in it. And their power can still be observed today, especially in Northern Ireland. But the development of alternative ways of looking at the relation between religion and identity, which stress discontinuities more than continuities, offers a challenge to many of the assumptions of the essentialist approach.

Academics, obviously, play an important role as they begin to apply these new ways of looking at national and religious identities, and analyse and deconstruct the stories and origin myths, and reveal that St Patrick was neither Catholic nor protestant in any modern sense of those terms, dissolving the sectarian certainties and the tunnel vision of the traditional approaches to such matters. Such deconstruction can lead to major shifts in interpretation: Declan Kiberd, for instance, argues in *Inventing Ireland* (12) that the very concept of Ireland was a creation of English needs and ambitions. Institutions too have changed: the Church of Ireland no longer bases its claim to legitimacy on the apostolic succession of bishops(13). Whatever the causes, the results are that the old certainties about religion and national identity are much less certain than they used to be. I'll leave that up to you to decide whether that is a good thing.



THE IRISH ASSOCIATION
for cultural, economic and social relations

Notes

1. B.R.O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2nd ed., London, 1991)
2. Tony Claydon and Ian McBride, *Protestantism and National Identity, Britain and Ireland, c1650-c1850*, (Cambridge, 1999)
3. Alan Ford, *Standing one's Ground: Religion, Polemic and Irish History since the Reformation*, in Alan Ford, James McGuire and Kenneth Milne (ed.), *As by Law Established: The Church of Ireland since the Reformation*, (Dublin, 1995), pp 1-14
4. Alan Ford, *James Ussher and the Creation of an Irish Protestant Identity*, in B.I. Bradshaw and Peter Roberts (eds.) *British Consciousness and Identity* (Cambridge, 1998), pp 185-212
5. Micheal MacCraith *The Gaelic Reaction to the Reformation*, in S.G. Ellis and Sarah Barber (eds.) *Conquest and Union: Fashioning a British State, 1485-1725* (London, 1995), pp 139-161
6. Hiram Morgan *Faith and Fatherland in Sixteenth-century Ireland* in *History Ireland*, vol. 3, no 2 (1995), pp 13-20
7. M.J. Brennan *An Ecclesiastical History of Ireland* ii, 435f..
8. U.W., iv, 237.
9. *Ib.*, 238.
10. *Ib.*, 238f.
11. Patrick Collinson *The Vertical and the Horizontal in Religious History: internal and external integration of the subject*, in Alan Ford, James McGuire and Kenneth Milne (eds.), *As by Law Established: The Church of Ireland since the Reformation* (Dublin, 1995), pp 15-32.
12. Declan Kiberd *Inventing Ireland* (London, 1996).
13. David Tustin and Tore Furberg (eds.) *Together in Mission and Ministry: the Porvoo common statement with essays on church and ministry in northern Europe* (London, 1993).