PETER'S PENCE: OFFICIAL CATHOLIC DISCOURSE AND IRISH NATIONALISM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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I

The intimate relationship between Catholicism and nationalism in nineteenth century Ireland is generally recognised. So well acknowledged, in fact, that the loyalty of a peasantry, the great majority of whom were oppressed and impoverished, to a Church that was growing visibly more rich and comfortable is taken for granted. The clergy managed to portray the Church as the friend of the oppressed—indeed *as* the oppressed itself—even as their public buildings trumpeted their growing wealth and power. There was a further irony. The very same church that was—through the nineteenth century—asserting itself to be emblematic of Irish culture and identity was increasingly antipathetic to actual peasant culture and, devotionally, more 'Roman' than ever before. In addition to 'civilising' the 'wild Irish' through social control (see Connolly 1982, Inglis 1987), throughout Ireland the clergy were doing what they could to eradicate distinctively Irish religious practices, and introduce—especially after the 1840s—the devotions of the Roman Church (Larkin 1972).

What is the reason for this apparent paradox? Why and how did a Church devotionally and economically increasingly remote from native Irish tradition achieve so emblematic a status in respect to Irish identity and nationalism? My intention here is to seek part of the answer in an exploration of the ways in which religious discourse contributed to the creation and maintenance of the lasting link between religion and nationalism in Ireland. The case study should illuminate not only the particular circumstances of Ireland, but also throw some light on the structural potentials of the Catholic Church in the development of nationalism generally. We may also better understand the ways in which popular discourse can resolve contradications and assert ideology in the face of logic and experience.

II

A survey of the historical and contemporary European scene reveals the Catholic Church playing a wide range of roles in respect to regionalism and nationalism. The various dimensions of the Church as an institution—belief system, devotional practice, cultural, social, and/or political authority—each

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may figure differently into the equation of nationalism. Clearly the role or roles played by the Church depend on the national or regional context as well as on the particular inclinations of the Church and its myriad representations. Where the Church is out of power, for example, but has deep roots with the populace—as in Poland—there is great potential for religion to link itself to national and personal identity and for the clergy to become national symbols as well as symbols of nationalism. The opposition between regimes on which this form of religious nationalism rests links the Church with the oppressed *vis-à-vis* those in power. If this simple binary opposition corresponds only imperfectly with other definitions of who is oppressing whom, then so much the better for the Church.

The Irish case is an interesting variation on this theme, and while there is no space here to recount in detail the rich and changing historical relation of Catholicism to Irish nationalism, in order to make sense of the particular circumstances of the mid-nineteenth century we need to first consider the general outline of the Church/nationalism dynamic preceding that period. A very brief sketch has the advantage of throwing the major structural features into relief, for it is these that may have comparative significance.

There was first of all the period of the 'Celtic Church', running from the fifth to the twelfth century, when Catholicism was represented by various locally spawned monastic groups: mother and daughter houses allied with local tribal groups—typically by kinship—and often fighting one another. Irish nationalism *per se* has no role in this drama, and Catholicism acts as a marker only between Irish and pagan (Viking) invaders. This, however, led to a discourse of binary opposition and self definition of great use later on. Irish missionaries on the continent represent a further interesting possibility in terms of national identity. Finally, this monastic organisation also resisted the desacralisation of the landscape characteristic of continental Catholicisim. The Irish monastic tradition much more retained the pagan devotional structure of pilgrimages to powerful points on the landscape—Croagh Patrick, for example. This religiously empowered landscape has had a continuing and powerful effect on the imagination of Irish nationalism and on the strength of the emotional association of religious sensibilities with Ireland as place and idea.

The period of the Anglo-Norman invasion brought a new dynamic to the relation of Catholicism to Irish identity. The twelfth century was one of general Church reform, and some of this was going on in Ireland even before the Norman invasion. But the Irish Church was seen by a reforming Rome as particularly distant devotionally as well as geographically, and the battle between ultramontane and local forces was begun. That is to say Irishness—and nationalism in the broad sense of the term—were defined as a field of dispute within the Church. Into this fray stepped the Anglo-Normans, definitely better connected to Rome and particularly so through the new, ordered clergy. Ethnic conflict between these invaders and the native Irish could thus be reinforced by the doctrinal and devotional ultramontanism on the Anglo-Norman side versus Celtic localism on the Irish. Therefore, while Catholicism *per se* was not definitive of nationalism, an opposed variant was, merging with other ethnic characteristics to distinguish the *béarla* (foreign tongue) speaking *sassanach* (saxon) from the *gaelic* speaking *erinnach* (Irish).

The Counter-reformation was the next great reorganisation of the European Catholic Church. In terms of nationalism it had several potentials and effects. Vatican centralization and bureaucratisation generally reinforced parochial and episcopal authority and power as well as spreading ultramontane devotions at the expense (it was hoped) of local heterodoxies. Indeed, the political and devotional structures were no doubt mutually reinforcing. But there were—and still are—battles over the appointment of bishops, with the Vatican, the local hierarchy, or the secular state each assuming control at various points of time and space. In Ireland, sixteenth century opposition to newly Protestant England brought Gaelic, as well as Anglo-Norman bishops, into alliance with sources of continental Catholic authority. The bishop of Raphoe, arguably the most culturally and religiously Gaelic of all Irish dioceses, attended the Council of Trent. The education of all seventeenth-century Irish bishops on the continent further enhanced their Tridentine inclinations, and they too—like their continental confreres—fought a war against local heterodoxy and attempted to relocate religious life in the parish church. But the Protestant conquest of Ireland in the second half of the seventeenth-century seriously impeded the process. While the Catholic clergy continued to function, the declining ratio of clergy to people through the eighteenth century and the relative ineffectiveness of episcopal authority outside the large towns, left local folk religious practice relatively intact. But it also left the peasantry with the possibility of seeing their local clergy not as enemies, but as friends—hunted like themselves by the invaders—and emblematic of local religious and folk culture.

The relaxation of the penal laws in the course of the eighteenth century culminated with the founding—under the auspices of the British government—of the national Catholic seminary at Maynooth in 1795. Even before Catholic emancipation in 1829, the church was growing more organised and effective. Hundreds of churches were built in the early decades of the century, and the bishops began meeting regularly in 1820 (Corish 1985: 158). But this church was to become truly authoritarian and ultramontane devotionally with the appointment in 1850 of Paul Cullen to the primacy of the see at Armagh.

III

It is on this mid-nineteenth century phase that I wish to focus. Beginning at the close of the preceding century when the British government aided in the foundation of Maynooth, the position of the Church *vis-à-vis* the State would have to be described as ambiguous. On the one hand, they certainly provided indirect aid to the rulers by fostering both a civilising offensive against the wild peasantry and a civilising process among the newly rising Catholic bourgeoisie. The former was in the form of temperance societies and general discouragement to wild behavior (with varying degrees of success), and the latter by helping to define a proper Victorian civility in Catholic guise (see Inglis 1987). However, the nationalist question in nineteenth-century Ireland was land reform and the constituency was very largely a marginal peasantry with very insecure tenure. These very same individuals were most subject to the civilising offensive of the

clergy, but did not react with the anti-clericalism common on the continent in the same period. Why not?

The simple answer is: because of the English. That is, the fact that the landowning class was foreign and largely Protestant and the Church itself not well propertied compared to Catholic Europe certainly was crucial in maintaining a basically friendly view of the clergy. But there was more involved than that. For the clergy and the church were in fact growing visibly richer through the very decades that saw horrible famine among their parishioners. And there was resentment—still expressed in interestingly muted form—of the monetary demands of the clergy and of their repression of various kinds of behavior.

One of the ways in which the peasant view of the clergy was both expressed and, ironically, repressed, was in the form of oral narratives. It is also in these narratives that one can view the role of church and religion in the construction of identity—including nationalist identity. My evidence here comes from an extensive collection of folklore from County Donegal, where stories of ethnic opposition between *na bunadh na paroiste* the people of the parish) and *na gaill* (the foreigners), meaning English and Scottish protestants, are typically resolved by the miraculous powers of what I have called 'heroic priests' (Taylor 1985). Local collective conscious memorializes both the eighteenth-century penal days, and the mid-nineteenth century priests as the protectors of the oppressed against British maltreatment or Irish collusion. The resentment against the power of the Church—certainly a repressive force in people's daily lives—was far more hidden and/or personalised in the flaws of particular priests rather than of priests as a type, (or was further displaced in beliefs concerning the shamanic power of alcoholic priests—see Taylor 1990). Moreover, a consideration of much older folk narratives makes it clear that the binary opposition has deep roots in Irish oral literature—with pagans playing the Protestant roles in more ancient tales. Indeed, I've heard them merged by storytellers—consciously or not—so that a local nineteenth century priest absorbs the feats of Columbkille in the sixth century.

This binary opposition of English protestant to Irish Catholic was certainly taken up in official Catholic Church discourse as well. The *Irish Catholic Directory* was published annually and was probably aimed at the much expanded middle classes of the period. In each issue the readership was presented with a long section entitled 'annals' in which the events of the Catholic year were to be found seriatim. While many such entries might comprise only a descriptive line or two, some took narrative form, telling in a few paragraphs the story, for example, of the desperate heroism of a parish priest fighting for his evicted parishioners. Even the mere lists had perhaps something like a narrative impact, however, for taken together they certainly told a tale as well. And the tale was not always of the oppressed. Looking through a number of years, one is struck by the increasing frequency of descriptions of new churches—sometimes even opulent ones—sometimes on pages facing those describing the ravages of impoverished evictees. Thus the Directory's discourse combined two contradictory forms: an 'idiom of empire' and 'an idiom of oppression'. These languages, in turn, correspond to two sorts of power—that of the center and that of the periphery. Catholic Ireland was at once on the edge, with respect to England, and more and

more near the center of a world Catholic empire—and at the center of their own province of that empire, extending to the mainly Irish Catholics of America and Australia.

How, however, might such an apparent contradiction be finessed? The perfect mediatory situation presented itself—and the astute Archbishop Cullen took advantage. In 1860, the Pope was under seige—attacked by the forces of Italian nationalism. There, as in much of Europe, the Catholic church was hardly the ally of progressive nationalism. But for Cullen, ironically, this Vatican crisis did not threaten to raise Irish consciousness *vis-à-vis* the Church, but rather represented an opportunity to engage in symbolic politics combining images and powers of center and periphery. The Irish masses were exhorted through harrowing accounts and numerous pastoral letters to rally to the papal cause, the forces of Italian nationalism were linked to the English Protestant ascendancy thus making the Pope—by symbolic implication—into a hunted priest of penal days Ireland. This strategy seems to have worked. 'Monster meetings' of the sort associated with O'Connell's drive for Catholic emancipation were held—and meticulously described in the pages of the *Directory*, and the peasantry contributed there and in church to 'Peter's Pence' funds in aid of their poor, beleagured Pope.

By this means was the 'Faith of Our Fathers' linked to the 'Father' in Rome and both embodied in that symbol of local national identity as well as civilising authority—the parish priest. But even where the Church *per se* is not immediately evident, the Catholicisation—in its ultramontane guise—of Irish nationalism in the nineteenth century continues to enspirit contemporary versions. Thus, as Conor Cruise O'Brien recently remarked of current IRA ideology, 'Modern Irish Republicanism—beneath its thin veneer of Enlightenment—is a product of a profoundly, and traditionally, Catholic culture' (O'Brien, 1990). The question is, which tradition?

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