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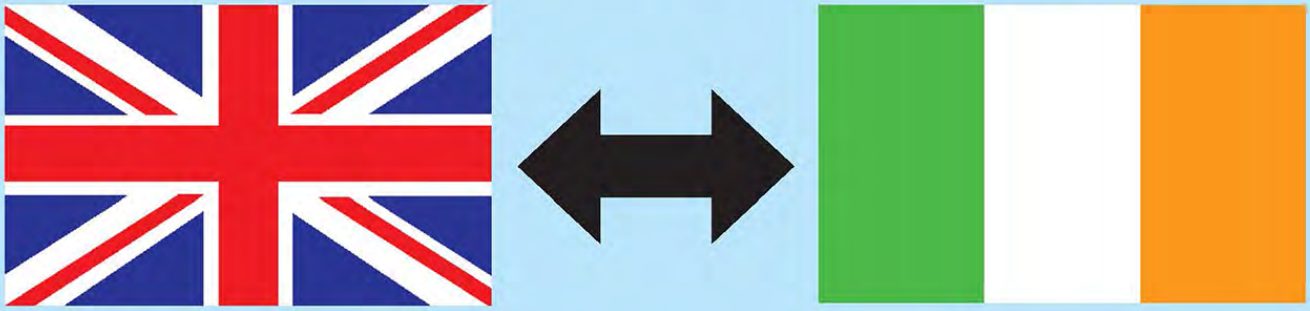

Both Sides Now

Bill Meulemans

"Bill Meulemans gets inside the heads of the Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland."

— US Senator George J. Mitchell
Chair of Northern Ireland Peace Talks

BELFAST

Both Sides Now

Bill Meulemans
PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY
& THE QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY
OF BELFAST

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Belfast: Both Sides Now highlights the limits of physical force in settling the Northern Ireland conflict. More than 3,600 were killed in a dispute that included the British army as well as paramilitaries on both sides. The book also demonstrates that partitioning the North and South actually added to the hostilities in Ireland – the border drawn across the country increased opposition and resentment on both sides. And finally this volume explains why the real, underlying causes of the conflict must be aired before there will be peace in Ireland – both sides need to start using the same history book.

Bill Meulemans is from the United States, but he served as a professor of political science at The Queen's University of Belfast for 11 years. When he wasn't in the classroom, he was out on the street in the working-class neighborhoods of Belfast where he earned the respect and trust of both Protestants and Catholics. His approach to research was to live and work among the "forgotten people" of Belfast. Meulemans tells the story of the conflict from an even-handed perspective. He provides both Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants with an equal voice inside one book.

Five companion interview videos are available on the Internet that were conducted by the author in a political science course on Northern Ireland at Portland State University. To view these videos, go to YouTube, type in "Bill Meulemans" and the following five interviews will be accessible: Peter Kelly, John Coghlan, Brian Watson, Bill Shaw and Chris Robinson. Each of these persons provides a unique view of Belfast during the conflict.

What Others Have Said About the Book

"Bill Meulemans gets inside the heads of Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland. In so doing, he contributes to the understanding needed there, and elsewhere, to end the conflict and promote reconciliation."

US Senator George J. Mitchell
(Representing Obama Admin. as Peace Envoy to the Middle East)
(Former Chair of Northern Ireland Peace Talks)

"In the Meulemans' book, I saw for the first time the similarities between their religious war and the one in the Middle East. This book should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand a conflict that is still smoldering in Ireland and could break out again."

Daniel Ellsberg, author of *The Pentagon Papers*, 1971
Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and *The Pentagon Papers,* 2006

"Only an objective outsider could have written this book. Bill Meulemans has exposed the underlying foundations of the conflict that few of us recognized before."

Alf McCreary, Author and Journalist, Belfast
Written more than 25 books about Northern Ireland

"It is clear that Bill Meulemans understands the politics of Irish nationalism and unionism. He has also shown how the churches of the North bear some responsibility for what has happened here in the past 30 years."

Father Des Wilson, Catholic Priest
Ballymurphy, West Belfast

"This is essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand why the Northern Ireland conflict has gone on this long. It is especially important for people who think that it is just a conflict about religion."

Right Reverend Samuel Poyntz, Former Bishop of Connor
Church of Ireland, Belfast

"What I especially liked were his clear definitions of basic concepts, forms, and models in which he simplifies very complex political phenomena."

Clyde D. McKee, Professor of Political Science
Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut

Dedication

To my unionist and loyalist friends in Northern Ireland who contend that working-class Protestants are not people of privilege.

To my nationalist and republican friends in the North of Ireland who say that Catholics want equality more than a united Ireland.

N
Coleraine
Derry
ANTRIM
Larne
DERRY
DONEGAL
Ballymena
Carrickfergus
Strabane
TYRONE
Donegal
Belfast
Omagh
Ballyshannon
Dungannon
Lisburn
DOWN
Enniskillen
Armagh
FERMANAGH
ARMAGH
Newry
Monaghan
Killala
Sligo
LEITRIM
Ballina
SLIGO
MONAGHAN
Cavan
MAYO
Carrick on Shannon
Dundalk
Boyle
CAVAN
LOUTH
Castlebar
Westport
ROSCOMMON
LONGFORD
MEATH
Drogheda
Longford
Athboy
Navan
Roscommon
Mullingar
Trim
Tuam
WESTMEATH
Athlone
DUBLIN
Maynooth
GALWAY
Dublin
KILDARE
Tullamore
Galway
Ballinasloe
Naas
OFFALY
Kildare
Portarlington
Birr
Athy
Wicklow
Portlaoise
WICKLOW
LAOIS
CLARE
Arklow
Ennis
Carlow
Nenagh
Thurles
Kilkenny
CARLOW
Limerick
TIPPERARY
KILKENNY
WEXFORD
Enniscorthy
Cashel
LIMERICK
Tipperary
New Ross
Wexford
Clonmel
Waterford
Tralee
WATERFORD
Dingle
Fermoy
Mallow
Lismore
Killorglin
Dungarvan
Killarney
CORK
KERRY
Youghal
Cork
Cobh
Kenmare
Bandon
Kinsale
Bantry
Skibbereen
0 10 20 30 40 50 miles
0 50 kilometers

NORTH ATLANTIC
N
Portrush
Ballycastle
Limavady
Londonderry
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
ANTRIM
Dungiven
LONDONDERRY
Ballymena
Larne
Lifford
Strabane
NORTHERN IRELAND
Magherafelt
Antrim
Carrickfergus
Donegal
Castlederg
Bangor
Cookstown
Lough Neagh
BELFAST
Hollywood
Omagh
TYRONE
Newtownards
Ballyshannon
Lisburn
Lower Lough Erne
Irvinestown
Dungannon
Lurgan
Hillsborough
Aughnacloy
Clogher
Portadown
FERMANAGH
Armagh
Downpatrick
Enniskillen
Belcoo
ARMAGH
DOWN
Newtown Butler
Monaghan
Keady
Newry
Clones
Ballyconnell
Castlebaney
Crossmaglen
Warrenpoint
Dundalk
Carrickmacross
REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Longford
Drogheda
IRISH SEA
Roscommon
Athlone
DUBLIN
0 10 20 30 miles
0 10 20 30 40 kilometers

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Acknowledgements

Throughout this book there are many quotations from people who are identified by occupation, religion, or the town in which they live, but their names have not been used. This was done for two reasons. First, many of these people did not know they were being interviewed at the time – we were just talking. It would be unethical to quote them by name in what was essentially a personal conversation. And secondly, in Northern Ireland, it could be dangerous to be identified with a particular idea. It is difficult to predict if a person's life might be threatened later for a comment quoted in this book. Most of all, I would never betray the trust of the people I know in Northern Ireland.

This self-imposed rule was followed even with some people who have been killed since I interviewed them. In all cases, I want to protect these people and their families, nearly all of whom I regard as my friends.

For the same reason I have chosen not to acknowledge 26 people by name who read early versions of several chapters, and gave me valuable comments. When in doubt, it is best not to draw attention to individuals in Northern Ireland. Confidentiality is more important here than in most other parts of the world.

One of my best friends in Belfast, who usually spoke in hushed tones, would end most conversations by reminding me, "All of this is confidential." His parting words were a quote from the poet Seamus Heaney, "And whatever you say, you say nothing!"

There are eight people in Northern Ireland who were so helpful that I wish to acknowledge their individual contributions. Donald Alexander, a retired British civil servant who served in Washington, D.C., provided the keen eye of one who has seen the North from the outside as well as the inside. Terence Bowman, Editor of *The Mourne Observer*, went through each chapter with a fine-tooth comb and made many important recommendations in both form and style. Michael Hall, Editor of *Island Publications*, supplied the insight of a 40-year activist who has written widely on the subject. The Reverend John Dunlop, Former Moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Ireland, had the judgment of a well-respected Protestant leader. David O'Longaigh, an Irish Historian born in Dublin, had an insight of one who lived in the Irish Republic and also the United States. Peter Kelly, a journalist from Belfast and London, provided the perspective of someone who has covered partisan politics. Owen Muldoon, a retired professional consultant, added the view of a person who has lived local history in his own lifetime. And finally, Chris O'Halloran, Director of The Belfast Interface Project, was a valuable resource on the attitudes of working-class Catholics and Protestants. The eight people (four from each cultural tradition) provided a vitality that helped shape the overall purpose of the book. I am in their debt.

The only persons who are named in this book are those who are historical or public figures clearly identified with a particular organization or a point of view. Also a few friends that have been killed are mentioned by name.

My home away from home was the Linen Hall Library in Belfast. I wish to thank all the staff for their help and advice. I especially want to thank Robert Bell, Yvonne Murphy, and Ciaran Crossey of the Northern Ireland Political Collection. They always

seemed to know where to find the answers to the most important questions.

In writing this book, Ms. Mary Bartley was invaluable in going through every version of the manuscript and making numerous changes – always in good humor and in proper grammatical form. She deserves a great deal of credit for maintaining a professional consistency throughout this book. Brian Linger was the person I counted on when I couldn't understand how to use my own word processor. He truly was my "computer guru." Also, special thanks go to Amanita Rosebush, a fine editor, who helped me breathe life into every section of this book. To her credit, she always asked me, "What do you really mean in this paragraph?" I am also thankful to Lowell Ludford, an old friend, who gave me valuable advice on each chapter. And finally, a sense of gratitude to my partner, Mary Holland – without her help, this book would never have been possible.

List of Abbreviations

CIRA	Continuity Irish Republican Army
DUP	Democratic Unionist Party
EMU	Education for Mutual Understanding
FEC	Fair Employment Commission
FF	Fianna Fáil – Republican Party of South, “Soldiers of Destiny”
FG	Fine Gael – Pro Treaty Party of South, “Tribe of Gaels”
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
IIDC	Independent International Decommissioning Commission
INLA	Irish National Liberation Army
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRSP	Irish Republican Socialist Party
LVF	Loyalist Volunteer Force
LOL	Loyal Orange Lodge
MP	Member of Parliament
NICRA	Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association
NILP	Northern Ireland Labor Party
NIO	Northern Ireland Office
NIUP	Northern Ireland Unionist Party
ODC	Ordinary, decent criminals (not associated with paramilitaries)
OIRA	Official Irish Republican Army
PD	People’s Democracy
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army (same as IRA)

PSNI	Police Service of Northern Ireland
PUP	Progressive Unionist Party
RHC	Red Hand Commandos
RIR	Royal Irish Regiment
RIRA	Real Irish Republican Army
RSF	Republican Sinn Fein
RTE	Radio Telefís Éireann (Radio and Television of Ireland)
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAS	Special Air Service
SF	Sinn Fein, “Ourselves Alone”
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labor Party
TD	Teachta Dála (Member of Irish Parliament)
UDA	Ulster Defense Association
UDP	Ulster Democratic Party
UDR	Ulster Defense Regiment
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UKUP	United Kingdom Unionist Party
UUC	Ulster Unionist Council
UUP	Ulster Unionist Party
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
UWC	Ulster Workers’ Council
WP	Workers’ Party

One man with beliefs is equal to a thousand with only interests.

— John Stuart Mill

We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love one another.

— Jonathan Swift

Belfast is a particularly religious community. Every man is a missionary and carries a brick.

— Mark Twain

The great enemy of truth is often not the lie – deliberate, contrived, and dishonest – but the myth – persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic.

— John F. Kennedy

Terrorism is the war of the poor, and war is the terrorism of the rich.

— Sir Peter Ustinov

The truth is seldom pure, and never simple.

— Oscar Wilde

Ballots are the rightful and peaceful successors to bullets.

— Abraham Lincoln

Two Flags – Two Peoples

Imagine you are in your own hometown standing in front of a large group of people in an auditorium. A swinging door opens in the back and a person parades down the center isle with the national flag and places it up front on display for all to see. A band strikes up the national anthem and everyone stands in respect.

If the same thing happened in Belfast, there would be a very different reaction. Half of the people might well get up and leave in disgust. The other half would stand in reverence. But on both sides, you could feel a sense of anger in the air.

In most parts of the world, flags are a sign of national unity – in Belfast they are a symbol of division. The cover of this book sums it up: it's the British Union Jack verses the Irish Tricolor. In Northern Ireland, each is an emblem of a nation within a nation. Flags clustered in opposing parts of Ulster are the most dramatic reminder that this has been a contested place for a long time. Tempers still flare on the question of how many days a year the British flag flies over Belfast City Hall. For as long as anyone can remember, this city has been a political/ethnic/cultural/religious battleground. There is no chance it will change soon, if ever.

Allegiance to one's flag is an important part of communal life in Northern Ireland. Everyone claims their national banner is a source of pride, but in practice – it is also a sign of exclusion. Raising "your flag" is a way of claiming dominance over territory. It is a way of saying, "I'm a part of this nation – you aren't!"

Flags are in great abundance in those parts of Belfast where people are most likely to reject those who are not a part of "their nation." The most blighted portions of the city have populations that are virtually 100 percent Protestant (or just a stone's throw away)

100 percent Catholic. These are voluntarily segregated sectarian enclaves (often surrounded by twenty-five foot walls) protecting residents from armed attacks. Behind these walls, flags are a rallying image for an embattled people closed off from their enemies. Neighborhoods of this kind provide a sanctuary from an outside threat.

But despite the sense of an external danger, nearly all the people are friendly and outgoing. An average person can be humorous and generous, but harbor an everlasting opposition to a neighbor (they've never met) who lives on the other side of a twenty-five foot wall. Yet the positive side of local people can be misleading because (just below the surface) there is an age-old animosity that can emerge in an instance. Peacemakers and optimists are regularly surprised by outbursts of sectarian anger that reminds everyone that life could easily slip back into open communal warfare.

There is nothing inherently dangerous about flags in Northern Ireland, but they still act as triggering devices in flashpoints where the causes of the conflict have been papered over in hopes that they will go away. Whenever a particular group feels under-represented or marginalized, they resort to waving the flag to bring out the latent prejudices that lay dormant in the body politic. A tense protest or stand-off can escalate (in a moment) into a full-fledged riot.

Flags have a way of justifying violence that otherwise would be rejected by good people. Throughout history – national, religious, cultural, racial, and patriotic symbols have been used to elevate brutality so that *good people can do bad things without feeling guilty.* The northern Irish have had centuries of practice.

Chapter 10

Culture Wars

THE SASH MY FATHER WORE
Anonymous

Sure I'm an Ulster Orangeman, from Erin's Isle I came,
To see my British Brethren all of honour and of fame,
And to tell them of my forefathers who fought in days of yore,
That I might have the right to wear, the sash my father wore!

CHORUS: *It is old but it is beautiful, and its colours they are fine,*
It was worn at Derry, Aughrim, Enniskillen, and the Boyne.
My father wore it as a youth in bygone days of yore,
And on the Twelfth I love to wear the sash my father wore.

For those brave men who crossed the Boyne have not fought or died in vain,
Our Unity, Religion, Laws, and Freedom to maintain,
If the call should come we'll follow the drum, and cross that river once more,
That tomorrow's Ulsterman may wear the sash my father wore!

CHORUS

And when some day, across the sea to Antrim's shore you come,
We'll welcome you in royal style to the sound of flute and drum,
And Ulster's hills shall echo still, from Rathlin to Dromore,
As we sing again the loyal strain of the sash my father wore!

CHORUS

A NATION ONCE AGAIN
Thomas Davis

When boyhood's fire was in my blood
I read of ancient freemen,
For Greece and Rome who bravely stood,
Three hundred men and three men;
And then I prayed I yet might see
Our fetters rent in twain,
And Ireland, long a province, be
A Nation once again!

CHORUS: A Nation once again,
A Nation once again,
And Ireland, long a province, be
A Nation once again!

And from that time, through wildest woe,
That hope has shone a far light,
Nor could love's brightest summer glow
Outshine that solemn starlight;
It seemed to watch above my head
In forum, field and fane,
Its angel voice sang round my bed,
A Nation once again!

CHORUS

It whisper'd too, that freedom's ark
And service high and holy,
Would be profaned by feelings dark
And passions vain or lowly;
For, Freedom comes from God's right hand,
And needs a godly train;
And righteous men must make our land
A Nation once again!

CHORUS

So, as I grew from boy to man,
I bent me to that bidding
My spirit of each selfish plan
And cruel passion ridding,
For, thus I hoped some day to aid,
Oh, can such hope be vain
When my dear country shall be made
A Nation once again!

CHORUS

These two pieces of music sum up the political culture of the two communities as well as any statement of purpose or set of goals. Just hearing the melodies without the words bring forth an emotional sense of mission for the faithful in either camp. The words in each song remind one of the pledges and sacrifices of past generations. The call is to continue the fight, no matter what the cost.

"The Sash My Father Wore" is perhaps the most beloved song of Ulster loyalists. The "Sash," of course, refers to the Orange sash worn in Orange parades. But the symbolism goes beyond the Orange Order; it touches the hearts of nearly all loyalists and unionists as the one piece of music that tells their story. It ties the present conflict to the great battles of the past. And most of all, it reminds Protestants that each of them follows in the religious/political footsteps of their ancestors.

The second verse says it well:

For those brave men who crossed the Boyne have not fought or died in vain,
Our Unity, Religion, Laws, and Freedom to maintain,
If the call should come we'll follow the drum, and cross that river once more,
That tomorrow's Ulsterman may wear the sash my father wore!

When the "Sash" is played, everyone's shoulders straighten a little more. It is almost always the high point of every loyalist celebration.

"A Nation Once Again" is so important to the Irish Catholic community that it is considered by some to be the second national anthem of Ireland. It seems to amplify the cause of the Irish nationalism that has been a part of this nation for hundreds of years. Each time the music is played anywhere in the world, the struggle for independence is remembered. But today it has a special meaning when heard in the North because the fight continues. At republican meetings there is an immediate response – people stand in respect and reverence.

The chorus almost automatically causes voices to rise in volume and determination:

A Nation once again,
A Nation once again,
And Ireland, long a province, be
A Nation once again!

Wherever it is played, a spontaneous cheer goes up at the end.

While both pieces of music bring smiles and pride to their own communities, the very sound of these melodies creates instant anger and resentment in the opposing camp. The singing of either song near people from the other tradition causes tempers to flare and rocks to fly.

There is a teeter-totter relationship between the two cultural traditions – the expression of one aspiration brings forth an equal determination from the other to block those ambitions. And at the heart of the issue is the knowledge (on both sides) that what makes one people proud will likely remind the other of ancient wounds that will not heal.

Both sides in Northern Ireland deny that they are responsible for the negative reaction from the other side. Each contends that the expression of their cultural heritage is only meant to be a positive act, not an insult. But nearly everyone knows exactly what provokes "others," and the depth of the reaction is surprising to an outsider.

One day I was with a Catholic woman and her two teenage children. It was a warm summer day and the windows were open in the car. We were stopped at an intersection because an Orange parade was walking through. Naturally the "Sash" was being played and people along the street were clapping to the rhythm of the music. The Catholic woman immediately rolled up the car windows and turned the radio up so none of us could hear the music outside. In a voice straining with anger, she turned and shouted at her children, "See what this is all about – it's all about triumphalism – they want to show us they can keep us down!"

A similar reaction comes from loyalists who hear Irish republican music or see the Irish Tricolor going by. I was with a group of loyalists in a pub who worked themselves into frenzy as they watched the annual republican Easter celebration on television. There were shouts throughout the pub about how great it would be to "stiff a taig" (kill a Catholic) and burn the Irish Tricolor flag.

Among working-class people, these types of negative reactions occur almost automatically. Cultural symbols of one community are a triggering device of rage for the other. Anger is immediate and intense. Spontaneous riots have started and killings have resulted by a simple display of flags and banners, or the playing of music.

But within the communities themselves, the symbols, music, and parades are a source of pride and genuine affection. When everyone present is of one tradition all is well, there is no visible anger or hostility. It is only when the two tribes come into contact that tempers begin to flare.

Most of this hostility stems from a denial that the other side has a legitimate cultural tradition, and from blocking out any understanding of why "they" act as they do.

There is a feeling of exclusiveness that negates any appreciation for the other tradition. In fact, there is a determination not to acknowledge them in any positive sense.

For example, nearly everyone knows at least some of the words to the popular songs within their own community, but people in the opposing tradition *do not want to know* one single line. The result is that *not knowing* the words to a particular song is sometimes used as a means of identifying the enemy. There are stories throughout Northern Ireland of how gangs of young people pick out an unknown person in their neighborhood. First is the obvious question. "Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?" But a stranger caught in foreign territory will lie to avoid a confrontation, so the follow-up question is: "Do you know the words to "The Sash" or "A Nation Once Again?" In some neighborhoods, this is the absolute test, and if a stranger fails it, a beating will almost certainly follow. In several cases, the beatings have been very severe and resulted in permanent physical injury. One of my friends has a son who will never recover from the consequences of *not knowing* the words to a particular song. In another case (since the power sharing began) there was an accident involving a motorcycle in West Belfast. The driver of the motorcycle was hurt so badly he could not get up off the pavement, but he was approached by a gang who asked him to sing "one" of the songs. He could not and he was beaten up more, even though he had broken bones from the motorcycle accident. This particular incident was reported on BBC and people have stayed away from that part of Belfast, not knowing what might happen if their car broke down.

Clash of Cultures

In working-class neighborhoods most people have cultural items sorted into two familiar categories – "ours and theirs." There is no confusion. Everyone knows that "our people" lead a separate life – that they appreciate different things. And at no time is this difference more apparent than during public celebrations.

There is a real contrast in the type of parade music that is favored by each tradition. At public functions Ulster loyalists are more likely to hear military-type band music with an emphasis on British imperial history, or in some cases, religious pieces, such as "Onward Christian Soldiers." Republicans are also attracted to music with a military message, but there is a difference. Irish marching songs focus on martyrdom rather than military victory. Even the official Irish national anthem, "A Soldier's Song,"

sounds more like a soulful ballad than a call to arms. Republican parades are usually somber and somewhat reflective, while loyalist marches are more inclined to reflect pride and formality. Each community has a particular "cultural personality" that reflects their sense of purpose and what they value.

Loyalist symbols tend to reflect British army traditions and history. While in prison, loyalists named their prison huts after British military battles. They also placed a greater emphasis on military-type rank and formal organization. Most of them saw themselves as defenders of the state, and they were, therefore, more influenced by the trappings of the government's military order.

Republicans have far less appreciation for formal military organizations, and their vocabulary and culture places less emphasis on military traditions. When they speak of "Irish soldiers," they are thinking of a guerrilla-type fighter dressed in street clothes rather than a person in uniform. In fact, there is almost an *anti-military* tradition among Irish republicans. This may be due in part to their long heritage of being a rebel force in opposition to the formality of the British army. It is somewhat ironic that, while physical resistance is a persistent theme in Irish culture, there is little appreciation for a regular army. As a people, Irish Catholics have no interest in conquering anyone else, only in gaining their own independence.

When on parade, the two communities have a distinctively different look as well. Loyalists try to stay in step to their marching music. Even Orangemen, in their dark suits and bowler hats, are conscious of looking sharp and keeping their rows straight. By contrast, republican parades are less concerned with formality – there are groups of young men with short-hair, wearing black leather jackets, who everyone knows represent the IRA. They seem to be totally unconcerned about staying in step or lining up in an orderly manner.

The contrast on the street is remindful of how each side sees itself in society. There is a long tradition among loyalist paramilitaries of obeying the law and respecting authority. In part, this stems from their long association with defending the state and cooperating with the government, even when they feel they are being betrayed by it. They even have a term for it: "pro-state terrorists." Herein is the dilemma for working-class loyalists who are convinced that they have been used and abused by British and

unionist politicians. They are certain that they have been taken for granted by economic, political, and religious leaders, but they also feel the pressure to fulfill their role as law-abiding, patriotic, British subjects even when they are living in a depressing, substandard house in the ghetto with no prospects for the future.

A schizophrenic condition exists among these loyalists about being "loyal" to the state, while at the same time breaking its laws and going to jail. The result is that they are very careful to separate their loyalties from their intense objections. They can hate the prime minister, the secretary of state, the chief constable of the police, members of the parades commission, leaders of all the unionist and loyalist political parties – but still be loyal to Ulster. It is a very complex attachment they maintain, and a very difficult one for outsiders to understand. Each loyalist has his or her personal definition of their "loyalty," and it takes a long time for them to explain it in a logical manner.

In addition to their feelings of loyalty, there is also a sense of pride among them of being self-reliant, and of not having to depend on someone else. Because of this, when they don't have a job, they tend to feel like personal failures. Many of them are reluctant to go on the dole because they identify, in a remote way, with a privileged class.

There is a phrase used by Ulster Protestants: "We *are* the People." It implies a feeling of deserved superiority – a destiny to be above others. There is a strong sense of being a proud and dominant. Many are convinced that they have no equals in the British Isles, or indeed in the world. With this as a backdrop, there is a cultural shame in accepting public assistance because it is an admission of not measuring up to their own traditions. I know a family on the Shankill Road that refused free food from a charitable agency because they were too proud to admit they were in need. They were willing to do without the essentials of life to avoid the embarrassment of accepting a handout.

In contrast, nationalists in the North of Ireland have no reluctance to take advantage of every benefit available from the government. They also have a strong work ethic, but going on the dole does not diminish their feelings of self-esteem. Many nationalists feel that the British have exploited Ireland for centuries, and getting a bit of it back seems to be something they deserve.

Regardless of their attitude on government assistance, during the Troubles, a large number of active republicans and loyalists were on the dole. In a real sense the

government was lending financial support to people who were involved in sectarian violence. There was a difference however – loyalists did not like to talk about getting public assistance payments, whereas republicans did not hesitate to admit it. In fact, they never let a little violence get in the way of picking up their handouts. During the 1970s, there were frequent gun battles in republican neighborhoods between the IRA and the security forces. However, on days when public assistance checks were to be delivered, there were temporary cease-fires so that the mail carriers could deliver the checks.

There was also a marked difference in how each community treated their outlaws. During the worst of the Troubles, when people were on the run, there was a saying that on the Falls Road, nine out of ten doors were open to any republican wanted by the police. On the Shankill Road, however, only four out of ten doors were said to be open to a loyalist on the run. There has always been a greater emphasis on being a law-abiding citizen in the Protestant community. For Catholics, the law has always been associated with colonialism and repression, and therefore it did not deserve respect.

There is more evidence of this divergence in attitude in other areas of behavior. In the UK every television set is expected to be licensed. The fees are used to help finance the programs on the BBC. In Catholic working-class neighborhoods, however, many people refused to admit that they had a television set so they could avoid paying the license fee. It was common knowledge that government agents did not dare enter republican neighborhoods to check on the number of illegal television sets because they were afraid of being beaten or killed. Even the police hesitated entering certain streets without an army escort so local republicans felt they could safely ignore the TV licensing rule. Protestants, in similar neighborhoods across town, were much more likely to pay their television license fees. Since power sharing began, nearly everyone pays the license fee, regardless of religious tradition.

During the Troubles, when the Patten Commission held hearings on proposed reforms for the police, there was a great difference between the response on the Falls and on the Shankill. The hearing room on the Falls Road was overflowing with people who denounced the behavior of the police and the law itself. Among the many people who testified, not one person upheld the present enforcement practices of the police. On the Shankill, there was a sharp contrast. First, the room was only partially filled, and

secondly, nearly everyone had some favorable comments about the police, often stressing that they were doing as well as could be expected under very difficult circumstances. After the hearing on the Shankill Road, I asked people I knew well why they did not voice the criticisms they had made to me in private. The response was, "As leaders of the Protestant community, we are expected to support the police and the government."

On the nationalist side, there is no such pretense. Being on the "other side of the law" is an old Irish Catholic tradition. Today one of the most popular pubs and nightspots in Belfast is "The Felon's Club" where being a former prisoner and law-breaker is a badge of honor. To add to the atmosphere, the club was located (until recently) right next door to one of the most fortified police stations in Catholic West Belfast. It was said that the police and the IRA could keep an eye on each other by just looking out the window.

By definition nearly all of the Sinn Fein leaders are convicted felons. There are only a few who have not been detained or arrested. Those who have avoided prison time mark it up to their luck in being just "one step ahead of the law."

On the loyalist/unionist side, however, former prisoners find that their outlaw past is a stigma, and people avoid them in a social setting. Loyalists (who have served time in prison) say that the average Protestant will become much less friendly after they find out a person has been in jail.

Even Protestants with paramilitary backgrounds are reluctant to vote for a person who has been in prison. Protestants are more likely to look to the middle class of their community for political leadership, not to those with a "sectarian, criminal record." This was a special problem for the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) because most of its leaders had served time in prison. Several Protestants I know expressed admiration for the leaders of the PUP as being articulate and pragmatic about the peace process, but later in the conversation, they indicated that they couldn't possibly vote for them because they had been convicted of a "paramilitary offense."

It is comparatively rare for a loyalist ex-prisoner to win a higher elected office. On the republican side, however, former republican prisoners not only lead Sinn Fein, but some have become genuine Irish folk heroes. Both Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness were known members of the IRA, and have served time in prison, yet they were both elected MPs, and have a fairly broad appeal among Irish nationalists, North

and South. There is no one of a comparable stature among Ulster Protestants.

Loyalists are plagued by a certain cultural ambivalence and confusion about the government and the northern state that is not found on the republican side. They break the law through violence against the police while still insisting that they support the state and the police. This contradiction is usually avoided in conversations because it is difficult to explain. Republicans, on the other hand, have little problem in this area because, for them, the laws of the state are something to be outwitted, if not openly violated. They feel contempt for the law because it has always been used against them.

While there is a marked contrast on how each side views the law, they share a great delight in poking fun at each other. A Protestant farmer in a thatched-roof cottage in North County Down told me that when kittens are born, they are "Catholic kittens" (because their eyes are closed and they can't see) but when their eyes open they become "Protestant kittens." I have heard the same story from Catholics with reverse application. As in the case of much humor, there is a sharp edge as well. I have never met one person who did not enjoy a good joke at the expense of the other side.

When speaking about people from the other tradition each says, "He kicks with the wrong foot," meaning he is not tuned into "our way of life." There is a built-in assumption that "those people" will never be fully accepted by us because they are inherently different. The emphasis is on "what separates us," and also feelings of opposition and competition that will always be there. Nowhere else is this more apparent then in the field of popular culture. It is not always negative, but there is a distinct underlying belief that "what they hold in their culture is different, and therefore not as worthy or valuable." While everyone does not hold this attitude, there are shades of cultural division among the great majority in both communities.

Culture is an important tool in the conflict, and a lot of time and energy is spent advancing their own entrenched way of life. Protestants marshal all their cultural characteristics in an effort to prove that Northern Ireland has a strong British identity. Catholics, of course, are trying to prove the opposite. They both use cultural icons to promote their own culture under the assumption that the more they can spread their cultural practices, the easier it is to prove "our side" is dominant.

Language is a major cultural tool. Republicans have promoted the traditional

tongue of the Irish language because it advances the idea of an island-wide, integrated Irish culture, complete with a language of its own. In many people's minds, Irish language and republicanism have always been linked together, because the British tried to stamp out both of them.

In a small booklet published by Sinn Fein, entitled, *Learning Irish*, the point is made that:

> It is our contention that each individual who masters the learning of the Irish language has made an important personal contribution towards the reconquest of Ireland … every phrase is a bullet in a freedom struggle.[1]

Sinn Fein has taken an active role in teaching and popularizing the language. They were very insistent that the Belfast Agreement of 1998 contained a section recognizing the Irish language and providing funding for Irish schools to teach the native tongue. Since power sharing began, there have been major disputes on the question of translating the official record of governmental bodies into the Irish language. To the surprise of no one, unionists have argued against the practice as a "cost-cutting measure."

Many Irish republicans did not know the language at all until they went to prison. There, they took Irish lessons and developed a deeper sense of appreciation for all of Irish culture. It also came in handy because the prisoners could communicate with each other without the guards understanding what they were saying. Knowing the language also bound the prisoners together as a political unit and strengthened their resolve to resist the British, both in jail and out on the street. In this particular situation, culture became a powerful weapon to prove to the local people (and those around the world) that they were "Irish," not "British." They felt that the more the language was in use, the stronger was the claim that the Six Counties had an "Irish heritage." The push to teach Irish is still going on despite the fact that only a few people speak it as their first language, and nearly all of them live in the remote reaches of western Ireland, far from Belfast.

Not to be outdone, Unionists have tried to promote the use of the Ulster-Scots tongue as their own language. It was spoken long ago by the people of northeast Ireland and Scotland. Unionist members of the Belfast City Council have even authorized various brochures for the public to be published in Ulster-Scots. It is a clear example of

unionists trying to gain parity with nationalists on a particular aspect of culture. But in this area (as in so many others) the unionists are far behind. Almost no one speaks "Ulster-Scots," and there is little use of the language in Northern Ireland.

Recently, unionists promoted the issue of the Ulster-Scots language in the European Parliament and had it designated as one of the "minority languages of Europe." Back home in Ulster, however, very few people recognized it as a language at all. One radio talk-show host said it was just "English/Scottish slang." In contrast, the Irish language is recognized by large numbers of people, and Irish nationalists have spent a good deal of time and effort proving that it is not just a dialect of some other language.

Both sides have insisted that some street signs be printed in "their language," but this has resulted in some confusion. Not long ago, a group of Protestant youths went around crossing out (with red paint) what they thought were signs in Irish, but they turned out to be written in Ulster-Scots. But the mistake could have been made by Catholics because neither language is read and understood by the average person on the street.

Irish nationalists are actually more insistent that street signs and radio programs be done in the Irish language because it is critical to their political/cultural self-esteem. They resent the fact that the English language was imposed on Ireland. Now it is important to demonstrate that their own ancient language has not been lost, that the Irish people still have a connection to their spoken culture and sense of nationalism. The on-going battle to expand the use of the language has powerful political implications.

Ulster loyalists are not naïve about the language issue and have tried to discourage the use of Irish whenever possible. Loyalists in the Stormont Assembly and town councils often behave discourteously and talk out loud among themselves when a Sinn Fein representative is speaking in Irish. The Reverend Ian Paisley has been known to laugh in a mocking manner during these situations and then complain later that he could not understand "one word" of what was being said.

Loyalists don't seem able to block the promotion of Irish without appearing to be insensitive to Irish culture. They may try to laugh away the Irish language as "leprechaun talk," but, in truth, it has become a kind of political/cultural glue that holds Irish nationalism together. Republicans, of course, will not admit that the language has become a political/public relations tool for Irish nationalism, but, everyone knows it.

The newspaper voice of Sinn Fein, *An Phoblacht* (Republican News) has a section each week printed in Irish. Several nationalist and/or republican newspapers in the North and South of Ireland feature articles written in Irish. Wall murals throughout the North often have political/cultural slogans in the language. The major motto of the IRA, "Our Day Will Come!" is usually expressed in Irish: *Tiocfaidh Ár Lá* (pronounced chucky are la). Members of the IRA are often called "Chuckies."

Popularizing the Irish language is a cause most republicans understand, but they seldom discuss the ramifications openly. It is the one activity that integrates Irish nationalism into mainstream popular Irish culture. Promotion of the language stirs pride in nearly every Irish heart, but some people may not be fully aware of the political implications in the language-learning process.

Irish-speaking schools have become a showplace for Sinn Fein and the entire nationalist community. The academic standards for these schools are exceptionally high, and they have become the "jewel in the crown" for nearly all nationalists. When dignitaries from the Irish Republic or the United States visit the North, there is almost always a visit to the Irish-speaking schools. Republicans seldom miss the opportunity for a photograph in front of their schools. To add to the irony of the situation, the largest Irish-speaking school in Catholic West Belfast is a former Presbyterian church. It has also become a popular place for republicans to meet and have lunch.

Community pride in cultural heritage and language is a powerful element in building a broader base for Irish nationalism. Because they do not call it "political," it is even more effective. The language appeals to a wider segment of the Irish people, both in Ireland and around the world. Unknowingly, moderate Irish people have come under the influence of the republican movement.

Sinn Fein leaders show real reverence for the language. They often begin speeches, letters, and declarations with a few words in Irish. By so doing, they create the opportunity to be viewed in a broader context throughout the domestic and international Irish community.

Throughout the past several decades, republicans have been much more successful than loyalists in using cultural icons in political affairs. They are more adept at using music, dance, language, drama, poetry, art, history, and literature to promote

their own agenda. In part, this comes from a greater emphasis on these subjects in Irish Catholic education. There has been a long-standing belief that Protestant schools are stronger in the fields of mathematics, science, and engineering, while Catholic schools are more advanced in the humanities and history. To a great extent, this is evident among republicans and loyalists of today. As it turns out, Irish republicans have become expert in using their culture to advance their political goals. Loyalists have attempted to revitalize their cultural assets, but they are divided in their strategy.

To some Ulster Protestants, the whole practice of projecting culture into the conflict is a bit distasteful. They know what they believe and hold dear, and it seems a bit too much like commercialism to be pushing their cultural icons down people's throats as though they were pieces of political propaganda. Yet, they cannot ignore how effectively republicans have promoted their message around the world. It bothers Protestants that it has come to this – that they have to compete with Catholics – and they almost instinctively hold back in the race to use culture as a tool.

Part of the problem is that Protestants are reminded that elements of the Orange culture simply do not "play well" in London or Washington, D.C. Despite this, groups of loyalists and republicans have actually attended cultural celebrations in Washington, D.C. These accounts in the United States are added to the litany of stories of how individuals from each side can drink together (without a problem) in London pubs and other places outside the sectarian atmosphere of Northern Ireland.

On the matter of public relations, it is the Protestants who are criticized most by international opinion for intrusive parades and militant wall murals. Suggestions that Ulster Protestants should be more careful are not taken well by those who are not convinced it matters what the rest of the world may think. One Orange leader told me: "I will stand up for Ulster, not because it is popular, but because it is RIGHT! My conscience would not permit me to do otherwise."

People outside of Ulster seldom see or appreciate the importance of loyalist political culture. In the world of cultural pluralism that prevails outside of Northern Ireland, nothing prepares an outsider to understand the power of culture among the Protestant people who see themselves as living in a state of siege. They combine their cultural pride with a sense of political destiny that is powered by an unstoppable

determination. It is a volatile mind-set that the outside world does not comprehend.

This mentality causes Protestants to use their culture in an aggressive manner. It is obvious that Orange parades are intentionally planned to intimidate Catholics. While Orangemen deny it vehemently, these demonstrations have become a vehicle for belligerence rather than pride. But these parades through Catholic neighborhoods have become a public relations disaster for the Orange Order. Their right to march in Catholic neighborhoods is being challenged as never before.

Orange leaders know they have a problem. They have hired a full-time media consultant to brighten their "tarnished image." Orange organizations in each county now have a press officer who attempts to present a better public image.

While loyalists are searching for ways to broaden their cultural appeal, republicans continue organizing annual festivals that feature nearly every aspect of Irish culture. Each summer, cultural activities are held in towns and neighborhoods across the North. The schedule of events for the largest one (in West Belfast) is printed in both Irish and English. People with little interest in politics, are drawn to these events because of their common theme of Irish culture, and also because they are colorful and fun. Leaders from all over Ireland visit the festivals. Performers, artists, and musicians come from around the world. The net effect is to intensify the feelings of Irishness for all who attend. The appeal is broadened by being as inclusive as possible – *everyone* is welcome.

The various festivals have been augmented in recent years by government grants and greater media attention. A local radio station in Belfast has been licensed to feature cultural programs. Flaunting its new name, "A Station Once Again," goes on the air for one month in the spring to popularize St. Patrick's Day, and also in the summer to celebrate the West Belfast Festival. Among the many features of the station are interviews with former political prisoners and community leaders. The main thrust of the programs, however, is to strengthen Irish culture and the awareness of being "Irish." All of these factors, of course, enhance the political position of Sinn Fein in the community.

Attempts by unionists to join in the celebration of Irishness have often fallen flat. *The Belfast Telegraph* (which is generally considered to be a pro-unionist newspaper) softened its cultural edge by offering a celebration of St. Patrick's Day on its Internet page. But the reference to "Paddy's Day" and jokes portraying the Irish as being heavy

drinkers (and not being very bright) caused a negative stir within the Catholic community. The *Telegraph* withdrew the segment just before St. Patrick's Day.

In recent years there has been an effort to have a cross-community celebration of St. Patrick's Day, but a cultural conflict arose as to which flags would be permitted in the parade. Protestants wanted only the flag of St. George (a red cross on a white background). But Catholics objected because that flag has been used by loyalists for many years, and they contended that it had become a loyalist symbol. Catholics requested that all flags be permitted, including the Irish Tricolor. Protestants objected by saying that too many flags would introduce politics into an otherwise neutral, religious holiday. As in everything else, there was a political issue behind all the comments.

How to observe St. Patrick's Day is a big issue every year. When it fell on a weekday, some Protestants said it should be observed on Saturday because most Protestants have jobs, and they would not be able to get off work during the week. Catholics contended that the proposal was sectarian, because it implied that Catholics were willing to celebrate on a weekday because they did not have jobs. To get even, Catholics suggested that the most important Protestant holiday – the 12th of July (Battle of the Boyne) celebration be observed *only* on Saturdays.

Loyalists and unionists who watch the promotion of St. Patrick's Day complain that Protestant contributions in the fields of art, poetry, drama, literature, and music are ignored by Catholics who schedule the major events. One Protestant musician contended that Catholics seem to think they have a monopoly on literature and the performing arts. He said: "They think they're the only ones who can compose music or write a poem." He went on to say that, "Even when they include poets like W.B. Yeats (who was of English descent) they focus only on his Irish republicanism." The claim is made again and again that Irish nationalists simply ignore the importance of Irish Protestant culture.

In response, Irish nationalists claim *all the people in Ireland are Irish*. They are quite willing to bestow an Irish identity on everyone who was born on the island, whatever their religion. Irish republicans have written songs about "The Bold Protestant Men" who favored independence and led the Rising of 1798, but most Protestants of today do not want to be recognized as cofounders of Irish republicanism. The average Ulster Protestant ignores this shared heritage. It is a part of Irish history that has been

conveniently erased from the Ulster Protestant memory.

This point was evident in the experience of a Belfast historian/librarian, John Gray, who was giving a guided tour of famous Protestants buried in a Belfast graveyard to a group of working-class Protestant youths. As he stood at the grave of Henry Joy McCracken, a Protestant leader of the 1798 Rising, he proclaimed that McCracken had been "executed by the British." One of the young Protestants asked why, and the historian replied that McCracken was one of the founders of Irish republicanism. The young man shrugged his shoulders and said, "Served the Catholic bastard right."

Until recently Protestants have ignored the fact that the rebellion against Britain began as a secular movement, and that Protestants like Wolfe Tone and McCracken were the leaders. To admit to their republican roots would violate everything they stand for. There is now a move among small groups of secular-minded Protestants to rediscover and acknowledge Presbyterian/republican radicalism, but they are quick to point out that this will not bring them any closer to Irish republicans because they oppose a united Ireland. Since the beginning of power sharing, however, more middle-class Protestants are coming around to the idea that the unification of Ireland may be inevitable.

This shared revolutionary experience within both communities could be a bridge, but both sides have expended a lot of energy in focusing on what separates the two traditions. During the Troubles, a whole different set of words was used depending on whether it was "our" side or "their" side. *They* had "blood-thirsty terrorists," *we* had "lads who sometimes got carried away." *They* sent out "murder squads," *we* had "active service units" or "battalions." *They* ran away like cowards," *we* "withdrew to safety after an action." *They* "murdered people who helped the police," *we* "executed informers." *They* were "hunted down like dogs," *our men* were "lifted by the police."

These examples illustrate again how easily the two communities glorified their actions and demeaned the other side when, in fact, they were doing the same thing. Only a few former paramilitaries on both sides have come to comprehend that they have counterparts on the other side. Most church-going, *respectable* Catholics and Protestants lack the perspective to compare themselves with people of the other tradition. For them, their side is still identified with righteousness while the other side is wrong in every respect.

Buying the Program

One of the first things the northern Irish tell a visitor is that the conflict is about politics, not religion. Even though this is a majority view, it is not entirely true. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that this is a *political conflict inspired by religion.* Despite statements from the churches that there are no theological issues at stake, it is clear that there would be no conflict if the people were not divided according to religious traditions. One community relations worker put it this way: "The churches say they aren't involved in the game, but the players are all wearing their jerseys." If it were not for these religious labels, the people of northeast Ireland would have real difficulty in describing themselves or their neighbors.

The socialization process in working-class neighborhoods is set by religious tradition. At an early age children are exposed to a world-view (ideology) that includes attitudes about nationality, religion, politics, culture (Irishness or Britishness) national aspirations, interpretations of history, allegiances to flags, national heroes, political symbols, and a whole host of beliefs about religious and community traditions.

Parents, teachers, and clergy seldom teach people in an outright manner to dislike members of the opposing community, but it soon becomes apparent that they know there are important differences between "them and us." It is often said that prejudices are "caught" not "taught." The home, school, and church may even stress the importance of non-violence, but there is a built-in hypocrisy in real-life examples.

Most of my friends, who are Protestants, grew up in households with the understanding that British institutions were somehow better than those of the Irish. They are proud that their grandfathers fought in World War I at the Battle of the Somme, and that their fathers served in the British Navy in the North Atlantic. These friends have a real affection for the Union Jack, the Queen, and the history of the British Empire. They have been taught that the Pope is the head of a church that enslaves people's minds – that Dublin has been trying to take over Northern Ireland since partition in 1921 – that the IRA is a group of evil men who are the enemies of all God-fearing people.

Friends of mine who are Catholic grew up with a pride of being Irish and a belief that the English have exploited the Irish for hundreds of years. They feel privileged to have been born into an Irish culture that has maintained its identity despite the Famine

and the domination of British colonialism. They have a real affection for the Irish Tricolor, their own language, and their Gaelic traditions. They have been taught that Protestants have fallen away from the one true church, that the police cannot be trusted, and that the northern Irish should be free of British rule.

The above ideological views are but the bare bones of a cultural indoctrination that many people encounter as they grow into adulthood. Add to that structure the emotional experience of having a member of the family killed by the paramilitaries, a father who served time in prison, or a brother who was severely beaten by a sectarian gang. At that point one can begin to understand why their life experiences have set them on a collision course with the opposing community. Being born and growing up in a working-class neighborhood supplies many with a rigid world-view that has no tolerance for the other side. It is difficult to keep an open mind about a group that has proven (again and again) that they are your mortal enemies.

Despite the contrasting content between the two ideologies, they both share the features of being nationalistic movements. Reduced to the essentials, *it is Irish nationalism versus British nationalism*. All the other issues are secondary, including religion and economics. Both movements have focused on this one goal as the answer to all of society's ills as if everything else will fall into place once this is settled. According to republicans, after the 32 counties are united, the other issues can be sorted out without much difficulty. And according to loyalists, once the Union is secure, we can attend to the other matters easily.

What neither seems to understand is that the other side has pledged to never give up and they have proven that they can't be defeated. There is an ideological blind-spot in both camps because they won't admit that the conflict cannot be resolved by one side winning and the other side losing. In the meantime other things are getting worse in the North. And as long as these two nationalistic movements are deadlocked, those "other things" like education and the quality of life have been put on hold. Poverty, drug use, unemployment, suicides, and social disorganization continue to be major problem. There have also been racist attacks on foreign workers who have come to the North. The conflict has extracted a great personal cost from many people who have had their life-chances narrowed. The sad conclusion is that many people don't care!

After some reflection, everyone recognizes that flags cannot be eaten, that nationalism does not provide jobs, and pride in institutions will not prepare a young person for a career. But while the impasse continues, whole generations are losing a chance for personal opportunity.

In surveying the deadlock between the two ideologies, it becomes apparent that republicans have always had an advantage in building and articulating their ideology. They can always go through the litany of all the injustices committed against them and argue that the remedy is to oust the British government and unite Ireland. It sounds so self-evident when viewed from their perspective.

The major problem for Ulster loyalists is that there isn't much they can say. They know they are against Irish nationalism, but they don't have a strong constructive, positive position. There are just so many ways to say "not an inch," "no surrender" and "this we will maintain," before the rest of the world begins to yawn. The actual content of their beliefs have often been criticized for being negative and lacking in appeal to people outside the Province. In fact, loyalists have had great difficulty in convincing people outside the region that they are not just a leftover from the British Empire – that they have a pre-ordained right to govern Northern Ireland.

Sinn Fein has benefited from the support of a think-tank of strategists who are known for innovative thinking. According to a journalist who spent many years in the North, he said he had trouble keeping up with the thinking of republicans, but with loyalists he had trouble finding any creative thought.[2]

There is, in fact, quite a contrast between the ability of the two groups to set out clear sets of ideas and proposals. Republicans are more adept at presenting arguments that are intellectually forceful; loyalists seldom stray from how important it is to "Keep Ulster British." Republicans have a more dramatic and passionate task in front of them – the mission to unite Ireland. Loyalists, on the other hand, are stuck with the goal of just holding the line – of maintaining the status quo. "Let's go back and make things the way they used to be" is not a very exciting rallying cry.

The one compelling issue for both sides is who controls the state and it follows, therefore, that this point overshadows all other questions in election campaigns. Nearly all of the political parties are firmly identified with only one side of the constitutional

issue. Only the Alliance Party, the Women's Coalition, and the Northern Ireland Labor Party have a significant number of members from both communities. On Election Day very few voters even consider crossing over the great divide that separates the two religious traditions. Nearly 90 percent of all the voters remain within political parties that reflect their religious tradition. There is little focus on anything except the political/cultural future of the North.

During the Troubles, all major domestic and foreign policies were established in London with little input from the average people of Northern Ireland. There was no real debate in Ulster on issues such as management versus labor, foreign policy, the environment, economics, and taxation. It was said that the only things controlled by local officials were "dust bins and gravestones" – a reference to the control of garbage collection and cemeteries.

Because of this local power vacuum, and the absence of national issues, the conduct of local elected officials during the worst years of the Troubles was remembered most of all for bad manners and sectarian symbolism. Nearly every vote in local city councils had Catholics lined up on one side and Protestants on the other. For years, Protestants would not even listen to Sinn Fein representatives during council debates. I recall attending several Belfast City Council meetings in which unionists, as a matter of practice, would all walk out of the council chamber whenever a Sinn Fein member rose to speak. Rhonda Paisley (daughter of the Reverend Ian Paisley) had the task of blowing a bugle as a signal for all unionists to leave the floor of the council. Unionists have now stopped the walking out reaction, but Belfast City Council sessions are still known for being a contentious power-play between the two religious/political traditions.

Because few of the local officials had much to do with the actual governing of the Province, they became known primarily for their determination to hold the line for their community. Loyalist and unionist elected council members drew a line in the sand to prove they would not "give in" to Irish nationalism. Sinn Fein and the SDLP made a point that they could "stand up" to the unionist/loyalist majority. The first Monday evening of every month is the regular meeting date of the Belfast Council. It is still a time of sectarian drama, but the outcome is so predictable that few people even bother to

attend. On several occasions I was the only person in the balcony overlooking the council floor.

In the Belfast City Council, hours of debate are still devoted to such issues as whether to fund a cross-community celebration of St. Patrick's Day or how to assign separate crews of Catholics and Protestants to pick up garbage in neighborhoods that are totally of one religious tradition. Finally the decision was made to have a "Green Crew" made up of all Catholics to work in their own districts, while a Protestant "Red Crew" picked up refuse in loyalist neighborhoods. Sometimes both crews work at different ends of the same street because of the sectarian divide. It is said that garbage collectors and mail carriers are among the most careful workers in the Province. They must be acutely aware of sectarian boundaries because their lives might depend on that knowledge. Friends of mine in both occupations tell me that individual workers are free to avoid streets in which they feel unsafe.

Religion as a Way of Life

Since power sharing began there has been a general relaxation of tensions where the two communities interact, but much of this new feeling is superficial. History has left a deep awareness of religious identity that lurks just below the surface. It has been this way for a long time, and there seems little chance that it will change soon, if ever.

From the seventieth century onward, Protestants were given a favored position in terms of land ownership and political authority. From the English point of view, it was simply a matter of colonizing Ireland and shifting the balance of power into the hands of *reliable* Protestants. In retrospect it is interesting to note that if these new people would have been of the same religion it would have caused only a comparatively brief division in Irish society. The conflict between settlers and natives would have lasted only a few generations because intermarriage would have blurred the differences. Within a few decades, the settlers would have been assimilated into the population very much like a long list of other invaders from the past.

But that is not the way it happened. The differences between the two religious traditions altered Irish history in nearly every respect. Religion merged with nationality, politics, social status, and economic power. For generations to come, Ireland was caught in a time-warp that maintained religious identity as the great divider of people.

So why did the division between the Protestant settlers and Catholic natives become so entrenched? First, both groups came to identify with their religious, social, political, and economic positions in daily life, and each benefited from that association. The major Protestant church (Anglican) became the pillar of society, and the people in it had a perceived favored position. On the other hand, Catholics belonged to a long-standing peasant church that also offered a great sense of security to its members, even though they were on the bottom of the social structure. Second, the two traditions were cast into the role of being opposing forces. There were daily reminders of being separated by religious faith. Everyone knew which side they were on. There was (and still is) a sense of "them and us" that seemed to be evident in nearly every walk of life. And third, church leaders inaugurated a sense of opposition that gave them legitimacy and importance in the eyes of their members. There developed a conviction in both religious traditions that this epic struggle could not be settled peaceably. To be Catholic or Protestant in Ireland was to be involved in a great cause that was much more than theology.

After four hundred years there is still a tapestry woven into each religious tradition that includes an opposition to the "other side." Being a Protestant or Catholic in Ireland is different than being a member of either faith in any other country. Religion defines more than the human relationship with God. It also sets out an absolute mission to oppose people of the other faith. While some would deny it, there has developed a core of antagonism at the heart of both religious traditions.

The clearest example of this can be seen on the Protestant side. Here the very origin of the religious faith is based on a "protest" against the Roman Catholic Church and all it stood for in the sixteenth century. Protestantism was born in opposition to the Catholic Church, and that element is still very much alive. Much of the theology of Protestantism is based on reforming the perceived ills within the Catholic faith, and so it is that to be a fundamentalist Protestant is to have anti-Catholic attitudes. Protestants define themselves, to this day, as *not* being Catholic.

Being in opposition has also shaped Irish Catholicism, but it is more covert. Traditional Catholics still speak of the "one true church," and how Protestants "fell from grace" during the Reformation. But these beliefs promote a feeling of religious

superiority rather than opposition. When it comes right down to it, devout Catholics don't even take Protestantism seriously. They seldom even bother to oppose Protestants on religious grounds. Deep down, many Catholics simply dismiss Protestant theology as something that is artificial and unimportant. Instead, their hostility is focused on British and Protestant rulers who have discriminated against them politically just because they were Irish Catholics. In their eyes, the Catholic Church has become a rallying point for "what they've done to us."

I know many Irish republicans, who have long ago stopped going to church, but they still express an outrage at what British and Protestant leaders have done to Catholics. They are "political Catholics;" by their own admission. Religious identity is a badge used to protest policies that have created an unequal society. These Catholics have come by their attitudes through informal channels rather than through the teachings of the Catholic Church. Just being an Irish Catholic exposes one to hearing about a litany of atrocities under British rule.

Modern church reformers on both sides have done much to dull the "opposition factor," but the core belief of mutual antagonism is still there, especially when religious differences are accentuated by political conflict and communal violence. Devoted church members on both sides strongly deny any feelings of opposition to the other side, but they admit sadly that there is something alive in the land that fuels a built-in hostility. Despite the changes brought about by Vatican II, and the continued efforts of the ecumenical movement, Catholics and Protestants (especially in the North) still have a sixteenth century religious/political "virus" that has infected their views of each other.

The tone of Protestant opposition has become alarming in some camps. Some not only disagree with the Catholic Church, but also see it as the institution that opposes "true Christianity." The Reverend Ian Paisley, leader of the Free Presbyterian Church, has been the foremost spokesperson for this idea. Despite Paisley's new moderate image, he has probably done more to divide the two communities than any other person in the entire Province. He has preached at length about the "Harlot of Rome," and how the Catholic Church has been responsible for the murder of "true Christians." His main church in Belfast is named Martyrs' Memorial. Inside the entryway are the busts of many sixteenth century Protestants who were killed during the Reformation by the Catholic Church.

During the Troubles, Paisley not only charged that the Catholic Church was not Christian, but he went on to say that the Pope was the anti-Christ whose main task was to oppose true Christians, especially Ulster Protestants.

I have taken many Catholics and moderate Protestants to Reverend Paisley's main church in Belfast. On one occasion I took an Irish Catholic nun (not in her habit) to hear Paisley. She was reluctant to go, and afterward she was so shaken by what she had heard that she could not drive her own car out of the parking lot. As I drove her home that evening she kept repeating, "I never realized he was that bad!" Another time I took a middle-class Protestant woman to hear Paisley; her reaction was identical to the nun. Both were born and raised in the North, and both were shocked by the ability of Paisley to wind-up his congregation with an anti-Catholic message. It was a sight to behold!

Perhaps more than any other man, Ian Paisley has been responsible for providing a religious justification for the Northern Ireland conflict in this generation. I have heard him proclaim that "Catholics will all go to hell." The implication was clear – Protestant paramilitaries could help God along by speeding up the process of bringing them into eternal damnation. In some people's minds, if Catholics are already doomed, it is all right to kill them. The former loyalist paramilitary leader, David Ervine (former head of the Progressive Unionist Party, associated with the Ulster Volunteer Force) told me that Paisley inspired anti-Catholic attitudes among paramilitaries throughout the North. But Ervine said that when things really got hot, Paisley walked away. "He went back to his church. We did the dirty deed and went to jail."

Contrary to his public reputation as a difficult man to deal with, I have always found Paisley an exceptionally friendly person to talk with. When I visited him in his office he wanted to talk about anything and everything except religion and politics. He seemed embarrassed when I quoted him and asked him to explain why Catholics were going to "go to hell." He pointed out quickly that there was still time for them to repent and that they didn't "need" to go to hell. In some respects he spoke about his public pronouncements as though they came from someone else.

On another occasion I was left alone in his office. I had about fifteen minutes to myself in his office to look around. On one wall Paisley had a picture of himself and the former American conservative, US Senator Jesse Helms of North Carolina with the

inscription, "To My Friend Ian, Keep Up the Good Work in Northern Ireland." Right next to that was his honorary doctorate from Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. Despite his unearned degree, he is nearly always referred to as "Dr. Paisley."

The public image of Reverend Paisley in Northern Ireland is still that of a stern figure that will not compromise his principles. He sees the battle for Ulster as an epic struggle between God and the Devil – Light and Darkness – Good and Evil. According to him, people on the other side are not just wrong; they are doing the work of the Devil.

On occasion, that charge has been extended to include the British government as well. Earlier Paisley branded the peace process as an important part of the Devil's conspiracy to undermine Ulster Protestantism. He attempted to prove it by combining Biblical numerology with politics. He counted the number of words in a British government communiqué of November 1995 and concluded there were 666, which proved (in his judgment) that it contained the Biblical "Mark of the Beast." To religious fundamentalists, that number is the "Sign of the Devil." It is a warning to Christians that any organization bearing that mark is under the influence of the Devil. Some newspaper reporters counted the words and came up with the number of 694, which called the charge into question.[3]

Most Ulster Protestants doubt that the conflict can be explained literally as a clash between divine and demonic forces. But deep down, many of them confess that God may have taken a side in the conflict. Some quote Paisley's comment that, "God is making his stand in Ulster against the Devil." Certainly, the underlying religious passion of these Protestants cannot be explained in ordinary terms. Many moderate Protestants criticize Ian Paisley for fanning the flames of religious/political emotions, but they still hear and remember what he says. I have asked scores of Protestants whether they believe Paisley's extreme charge that the anti-Christ leads the Catholic Church. Most say "No," but then later they say, "Who knows?"

Some may question whether most Protestants take Ian Paisley seriously, but it must be remembered that when he was a member of the European Parliament, Paisley gained more votes than any other candidate in the North. When Pope John Paul II visited the European Parliament, Paisley shouted insults at him and finally had to be forcibly ejected from the chamber where the Pope was to speak.

The “anti-Christ” views of Paisley are well known, but there is parity between the two communities on which side allegedly bears the “Mark of the Beast” with the number 666, and is therefore under the control of the Devil. Both Protestants and Catholics have told me they have proof that the “Prince of Darkness” controls the other side. They say that God has made it clear through the names of the respective leaders.

When the letters of the alphabet are given numerical values (and increased by six after each letter) a code emerges that permits individual names to be translated into numbers. I have watched people meticulously print out a code where A has the value of 6, B is 12, C is 18, D is 24 and so on up to X equaling 144, Y at 150, and finally Z at 156. Then they carefully spell out the names of well known people in a vertical format to see if their names add up to the dreaded number, “666.” Keep in mind, the following calculations came from people from opposing religious traditions to prove that the “other side” was headed up by the Devil. One of my friends (with a sense of humor) suggested that they both might be right!

I	=	54		G	= 42
A	=	6		E	= 30
N	=	84		R	= 108
				R	= 108
				Y	= 150
P	=	96			
A	=	6			
I	=	54		A	= 6
S	=	114		D	= 24
E	=	30		A	= 6
L	=	72		M	= 78
Y	=	150		S	= 114
		666			666

I have never seen this numerical theory in print, and it is highly doubtful that many people would know about it or give it much credence. But the whole question of which is the Church of God and which is the Church of the Devil demonstrates the

thought patterns of some people in the North of Ireland. There is an intensity of opposition here that deepens sectarian roots. These attitudes go right back to the churches themselves, where families and whole neighborhoods have learned their religious/ political views. Clergy on both sides deny any responsibility and blame it on peer groups and political gangs, but churches have played a dominating part in dividing the people and fanning the flames.

The religious institutions of Northern Ireland have become the beneficiaries of a divided society. Many people cling to church membership because they have a strong cultural/political identity of being either a Catholic or a Protestant. For many, church membership is tribal membership. It acts as a protective, psychological fortress for the individual who is threatened by the opposing forces of the other side.

When the issue of religion comes up in some circles, it is clear that it has little or nothing to do with God or spiritual concepts. It is instead about a sense of nationalism that uses religion as a badge of membership. If nationality ceased to matter in Northern Ireland, churches would lose much of their prominence in society. As in other pluralistic societies, they would be primarily religious bodies, and they would become much less important than they are today.

Father Des Wilson in West Belfast is an unusual person. He is an outspoken Catholic priest and he has taken a stand against merging church and state. Father Wilson contends that the Catholic and Protestant churches bear the major responsibility for the conflict because the clergy and political leaders of the North and South built societies that combined church and state – Protestant in the North and Catholic in the South. He maintains that the, “Two states in Ireland today are the result, not of Christian failure, but of Christian success – they did nearly everything they set out to do.” He goes on to say that whenever the church and state are closely aligned, the institutions of government are ultimately used for the advantage of one religious group over another. He sees a corrupting influence whenever church and state are merged. Moreover, he contends, the result is an unjust oppression of the minority, regardless of which church is in a commanding position. Father Wilson acknowledges that the conflict is complex, but he sees it as comparable to other countries where church and state are under joint control. He concludes that:

> The citizens of Northern Ireland are not victims of some weird disaster, some unaccountable going wrong of what should have gone right. They are victims of decisions and choices carefully made by their religious and political leaders. These leaders did not fail. They succeeded. There lies the tragedy of the place.[4]

Many devout Catholics and Protestants in the North would disagree with Father Wilson's analysis of the conflict, but growing numbers of secular loyalists and republicans would generally agree that the foundation of the conflict has been built and maintained by an unholy alliance between the clergy and political leaders. Some people on both sides have come to recognize that:

- church leaders have more power in a society divided by religion,
- religious identity has polarized society into warring camps,
- influence of religion gives the conflict a sacred dimension,
- positive investigation of the "other theology" is almost never encouraged,
- church attendance has been increased by threats from the "other side,"
- segregated schools perpetuate sectarianism throughout society,
- peaceful cooperation would reduce the power of the churches.

They Even Think Differently

But there are some important differences in how each religious faith has shaped the thinking process of its members. For example, Protestants are more inclined to read the Bible for religious authority, and they are more likely to cite biblical references to support their religious and political beliefs. Catholics, on the other hand, usually look to sets of beliefs pronounced by their church and political leaders, and they are less likely to question the authority of their church and political organizations. These contrasting views toward authority within each community show up in the most surprising places! As it turns out, these different approaches in accepting authority tend to influence how each side thinks and behaves politically.

Catholics tend to be organized around agreed goals that stand out as an article of religious and political faith. Seeking the unification of Ireland is a near sacred belief that is deeply rooted in their history. It is reflected in their mythology and purpose for being. The Irish Catholic commitment to unite the country has been passed down as their ultimate motivation for political involvement. Even when success seemed beyond their

reach, they have pressed on with a strong sense of religious-like behavior. Catholics have a singularity in their religious/political faith that is not easily depleted.

By comparison, Protestants are not singular at all in their religious or political dogma. Their focus on individual interpretation of the Bible has given them a strong suspicion of any central, overriding authority in either their religion or politics. They have divisions in both areas that bring about much disunity in their general behavior. They are much more likely to disagree with each other, both religiously and politically, so it is difficult for them to build an overall belief system around blocking the unification of Ireland. As a group, Ulster Protestants seem to be forever fighting just stay even. Their effort to keep Catholics under control is basically a negative goal that always seemed to be just beyond their reach. Even though it saps their energy, they have pledged to never give up. They are a very determined people.

When people are strongly influenced by religious institutions (as they are in Northern Ireland) they learn not only the beliefs, but also something about the method of reasoning and reaching a conclusion. The result is that people begin to apply the thought-process and methodologies learned in religion to their political world. This is especially true when religion and politics are so closely intertwined. Even people in the North who do not go to church consider themselves to be "cultural members" of their religions, and they pick up particular thinking patterns that are prominent within their tradition. It is this *cultural/psychological aspect* of reasoning that comes through in their politics.

The differences between the two major faiths stem from behavior patterns dating back to the Reformation. Protestants are less concerned about maintaining legitimacy as they split off from a larger body. Catholics, on the other hand, are more inclined to stay in an organization and make reforms from within rather than leave. Protestants stress the individual conscience as a source of what is right or wrong, whereas Catholics rely more on accepting standards that are set by a central institution.

The Reformation also left a mark in shaping a contrasting sense of community; Protestants are more individualistic in their approach to life, while Catholics are more inclined to combine their efforts for the sake of the entire group. This shows up in all sorts of community organizations. For example, Catholics were the first to set up credit unions in their neighborhoods rather than going through established banks that usually

refused them credit. Individual Catholics have told me that they never would have been able to buy a home if it had not been for the credit unions that "helped everyone." Protestants were slow to follow suit in this area. They are still more inclined to approach their financial problems (and other aspects of life) with no outside help. Individual Protestants seem to be more suspicious of community-wide organizations and they can think of many reasons why not to sign up to a long-term commitment. As a group, Protestants seem to always want to read the "small print of life."

Protestants and Catholics also tend to think differently about how to approach problem-solving. Catholic nationalists usually start out with broad, generalized ideas and later move toward particular issues. Protestant unionists, however, insist that specific issues must be dealt with first before they will accept any broad conclusions. In short, the two tend to approach political issues in much the same way as they do religious topics. Catholics begin with the authority of a known truth and move toward detail. Protestants bring up the details first before they agree to any expansive principles. It soon becomes clear why neither side can understand the other or work together in solving a problem.

Without fully realizing it, Catholics and Protestants of today have become heirs to different methods of thinking, and it is very apparent when they attempt to work together. I have a good friend who is involved in many cross-community meetings. She says this difference in approaching a problem comes up nearly every time Catholics and Protestants work together on a committee. "They just think differently," she says, "and it is really difficult to bring them together on problem-solving projects." As expected, nationalists begin with an assumption that a broad concept is agreeable, and then deal with specifics later. Unionists, of course, move in just the opposite direction, starting with specifics first.

To a great extent, the two religious traditions have inherited their methods of reasoning from the roots of their theology. Before the Reformation, the deductive logic of Augustine and Aquinas was prominent among early Christian philosophers. After the Reformation, Protestants were greatly influence by the inductive thinking patterns of Luther and Calvin. The following table illustrates the contrasting manner of thinking, debating, and deciding matters within a religious and political context.

Reasoning, Negotiating, and Compromising

	CATHOLIC NATIONALISTS	PROTESTANT UNIONISTS
Reasoning	Deductive approach to topic within a framework and/or broad concepts. Move from general set of principles to particular issues. Process permits a logical probing toward an agreement.	Inductive approach beginning with specific and/or individual facts, then moving to a general conclusion. If first principles are not acceptable, there will be no movement toward an agreement.
Negotiating	May include or exclude some portion of an idea without rejecting or accepting an entire concept.	More likely to reject an entire concept if any part of it is not acceptable.
Compromising	See some issues as secondary; may change positions as circumstances evolve, more willing to yield on some issues for a temporary gain.	Tend to go to the bottom line of an issue and stay there, less willing to explore alternative ideas that are developed through negotiations.
Response to other Community	Criticize unionists for being inflexible and negative.	Criticize nationalists for being changeable and casual with their positions.

A prime example of the above approaches was apparent in the negotiations for the Belfast Agreement. Nationalists began with the broad assumption that Ireland was one country and should be united. Their approach was to search for a framework or process that would move toward that general goal. Unionists, in contrast, went immediately to the details about cross-border bodies, decommissioning of weapons, the release of prisoners, the assurance that the war was over, and a host of other issues.

Throughout the negotiations, unionists were searching for an ironclad guarantee that the Union would be secure. The often repeated phrase, "The Devil is in the details," summed up their continued apprehensions. Nationalists, on the other hand, were angling for a path that would at least lead them in the right direction. They were much more willing to consider proposals that would take them part of the way.

The Reverend John Dunlop, former Moderator of the Irish Presbyterian Church, told me that, "Catholics read between the lines, and Protestants just read the lines." In practice that is true. Catholics understand circumstances and conditions that are not specified. They are willing to accept a broad idea, but they are also willing to read a lot into just a few words. For Catholics, the wink and the nod sometimes mean as much as the written word. Protestants, on the other hand, insist that the written word should be taken literally, and that nothing more should be assumed.

Protestants often accuse Catholics of having ulterior motives or hidden agendas in their negotiations. They contend that Catholics may sometimes "bend the truth" to suit their needs. Protestants see this practice as dishonorable and deceitful – Catholics just see it as a part of life.

Irish Catholics sometimes have a way of "softening the truth." For example, instead of actually accusing someone of lying, they might suggest that the person is being "economical with the truth." And rather than saying someone is lacking in religious conviction, it is said that he is not "gospel greedy."

Serious Protestants seldom laugh at this type of Irish Catholic humor. It reminds them of the so-called "Irish sliding-scale" that is used in so many areas of life. Irish Catholics see things in gradations – even sin is divided between the *mortal* and the less serious *venia*l. Protestants are not convinced that evil deeds come in increments.

In politics, Catholic nationalists often alter their stance because of changing circumstances. They may take a temporary position with a thought of moving further in that direction later. For Protestants, a commitment is forever, and they fear getting caught in what they call "the slippery slope" that may lead into a trap.

Unionists and nationalists approach the process of negotiations in a very different manner. Unionists seem to want to face the most difficult issues first because they reason that there is no point in talking about lesser matters if they cannot resolve the most

divisive questions. At the beginning of negotiations, nationalists often shy away from the big issues, and focus on less volatile questions on the assumption that an acceptable end product may fall into place down the line. Unionists see this nationalist approach as manipulative and dishonest because they place a high premium on being precise, direct, and unambiguous in every phase of discussions. On the other hand, nationalists defend their approach as being flexible, optimistic, and creative because they believe in leaving doors open to new possibilities that might evolve later. Moving two steps ahead and one back does not trouble nationalists. They do it with a sly look in their eye because they know their *real objectives* even though it is not being stated directly.

Underlying all of this, Irish Catholics seem to have almost a natural inclination to mesh humor with serious political comments. In response to friendly questions about the IRA, Gerry Adams made his often-quoted statement, "They haven't gone away you know." To this day, republicans repeat the phrase and laugh with glee, reflecting their delight at the not-so-secret meaning. However, the incident still makes unionists angry because they know the joke was on them. Adams put the velvet glove over the armed fist of the IRA, and unionists saw nothing funny about that.

The contrasting temperaments of the two communities are also evident in how they open political negotiations. Unionists are inclined to take an absolute and final position early in formal talks saying, "This has always been our position, and it will never change." Nationalists seldom make such sweeping statements.

I have a Catholic friend who says he would "love to have a Protestant friend" because he is sure he could beat him playing poker. "You know," he says, "they can't imagine anything that is not in their hand." He went on to say that unionists are not very skilled at negotiating because they "tip their hand early in the game" by starting out with their "final bid." But Protestants, of course, regard this as a strength, not a weakness. They are unwilling to hold back, and eager to get down to the final conclusion. Nationalists, however, seem to be masters at staying on course while accepting some inconsistencies they can live with for a time. Catholics seem to have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than their Protestant counterparts. In politics and religion, Catholics seem more able to accept a part of something while questioning other aspects of that whole.

In contrast, unionists seem to need clarity and consistency in their political and religious affairs. If there is any hint of backing down or compromising on an important point – alarm bells go off in the Protestant community. Every unionist leader or clergy member is seen as a potential traitor who could sell-out Ulster. No one is above suspicion.

There is an element in the unionist/loyalist community that is repelled by high sounding, vague phrases. Nationalists and republicans, on the other hand, are at their best when painting with a very broad brush. Examples include Gerry Adams' plea to "take the gun out of Irish politics," and John Hume's call to the northern Irish to "spill their sweat, not their blood." Republicans, however, have always been less comfortable when dealing with specific time-frames for destroying weapons or declaring an end to the war. They often changed the topic when details were requested.

The two communities also have contrasting methods for prioritizing issues in their minds. Nationalists are more inclined to take the initiative and probe a series of concepts for consideration. Sometimes the main issue is not stated clearly but ambiguous references are made that sound less threatening. For example, nationalists speak of an "agreed Ireland" rather than a "united Ireland." They also use a transitional strategy whereby they support an idea to advance them partway to their goal with the plan to move beyond that point at some later date. All of these vague phrases and shifting strategies strike unionists as misleading and dishonest. Unionists look for a clear, permanent settlement with no clauses that permit changes down the line. They want to settle issues once and for all with no temporary agreements that could backfire later.

The classic example of this occurred on the issue of forming the executive under the Belfast Agreement. Unionists insisted that the IRA would be required to begin decommissioning weapons before Sinn Fein could enter the cabinet executive – that some tangible disarming had to precede the formation of the government. They were adamant on this point, and would not change. The response from Sinn Fein was a rather vague pledge to encourage the IRA to begin disarming "soon after" the government was formed. It was this issue that blocked the formation of the government in the beginning stages of the process and later brought the suspension of the political administration.

There was also a widespread belief that both sides had ulterior motives behind their public positions. However, the public postures of each were typical of Ulster

Protestants and Irish Catholics. Protestants were seeking a very specific action, and they would not let go of that demand – Catholics were taking a position that gave them more latitude for possible changes in the future, and they too dug in their heels. People on both sides of the divide lined up behind their respective political parties, in part because it reflected a pattern and procedure that was so familiar to them.

When it comes to setting the agenda for ending the conflict, the two communities are not just different – they are diametrically opposed. Nationalists argued that the war would end only when the underlying problems were addressed. They focused on inequality, discrimination, mistreatment by police, and parity of cultural influence. Unionists contended that the war should be called off first with the decommissioning of weapons, and then other matters would be resolved later. Many unionists maintained that they would not even discuss other issues until all the weapons had been destroyed. Nationalists argued that they would not declare the war over until there was movement on the issues responsible for the war.

Nationalists were very distrustful of unionist demands to disarm and declare the war was over. A friend of mine who was in the IRA told me that, "If we brought every gun we ever had to the City Hall and piled them up out front, and then we said the war was over, and it was all our fault, they still wouldn't be satisfied." He went on to say, "They would just come up with some new demands, and the British government would back them up. There would never be an end to it." This point of view is very common among Catholics of all political backgrounds. Generally they feel that the so-called peace process can go for years, and when Catholics make any real gains, Protestants (and the British government) will simply think of some other reason to derail the process. British leaders, of course, deny the claim. Protestant leaders don't even bother to respond. Perhaps they know down deep that this *is* their overall strategy.

Because of these basic differences, the two sides have an entirely different political approach. What nationalists regard as being flexible, unionists see as being deceptive and insidious. When leaders of Sinn Fein or the SDLP speak optimistically of "moving forward" without going into specific areas of contention, unionists become nervous and convinced that nationalists are involved in a grand conspiracy that will end

in a united Ireland. But in the eyes of nationalists, unionists are seen as forever trying to sabotage the process.

It is tempting to say that neither side really understands the other, but in fact they do. Unionists know that the ultimate goal for nationalists will always be a united Ireland, and on this point they are correct. Nationalists, on the other hand, know that the bottom line for unionists will always be the preservation of the Union, and again the assumption is correct. Much of the rhetoric about the other side not being willing to accept democratic principles is an attempt to divert public attention away from the main political goals that are unchanging. In truth, neither side really believes in democracy unless it suits their needs at a particular moment. One of the main prerequisites of democracy is a sense of tolerance for opposing ideas. In Ulster, tolerance has never been given much value on either side.

This kind of thinking has led both sides to tell stories of the other side that makes accommodation seem like an impossible dream. People of both communities are fond of concluding that, "There is no way we can ever live in peace with them."

During a very tense time of the conflict, when people were being killed nearly every day, I recall a conversation I had with a Protestant taxi driver. He told me that the Catholic Church actually encouraged the IRA to kill people because the gunmen could always go to confession and be absolved of the sin by a priest. The taxi driver said:

> If our lads kill someone they go to hell for sure – Catholics have a second and third chance. They always have a way to wiggle out of it later. They say they are against murder, but you can't believe anything they say. To us Protestants, a sin is a sin – if it's wrong, it will always be wrong – no matter what a priest may do or say.

I have recalled that conversation many times as I watch Ulster politics. For many Protestants, a sin is a sin – the Bible is literally true – there are no changes in the rules due to new circumstances. There is a black and white quality about the world that makes everything clear. From a Protestant perspective, the whole Roman Catholic nationalist way of life appears to be contrived, menacing, and inclined toward evil deeds. They charge that Catholics say one thing, but later shift to another side of the issue. In this light, a nationalist offer to share power, to compromise, to make an agreement is never really trusted by Protestants.

But on the nationalist side, there is always the fear that unionists never really intended to ever share power because their real goal was always to rule Northern Ireland with no competition. A Catholic community worker, who is a leader in the women's movement, offered this analysis:

> They (unionists) have no intention of ever permitting Catholics to have equal rights. When it comes right down to it, they have always used intimidation to keep us down and to enforce their will. Whatever happens in the North of Ireland, we will always have to defend ourselves from the jack-boot of unionism.

From the nationalist perspective, there is a view that unionism will always use Orange parades, the police, and the British government to control the Catholic population. Only a few nationalists believe that they will ever have a life free of sectarian abuse. Because of this, the nationalist people will always be on guard. They may win concessions from the unionists, but they will never trust them, regardless of what guarantees might be on a piece of paper.

But from the unionist perspective, there is an overpowering feeling that they must always be on the alert – Sinn Fein, political leaders in the South, and the British government will always conspire against them. The threat of a united Ireland will always hang over their heads. Because of this, the unionist people must always assert their rights to be "in charge" of their own destiny because they can't trust anyone else.

No matter what the status of political cooperation may be, everyone knows that the structures may fail and that the situation may revert back to the question that really matters – who controls the North? In a real sense, this issue may go on forever.

In addition to the overriding importance of the united Ireland question, there are other inherent contrasts that seem to divide their thinking process. There are real differences in how each community recognizes legitimate authority and how they relate to their leaders. Again the point is made that each tradition has a tendency to apply familiar practices from their religion into their politics.

In the Catholic Church, there is a well-defined hierarchy from the Pope on down through the cardinals, bishops, and priests. Local parishioners have no part in choosing those who administer their parish church. Priests are responsible to those above them, and can be directed by their religious superiors outside the local congregation.

In Protestant churches, there is a real decentralization of power. In some denominations, the local congregation has complete control over who is chosen as a minister. The nation-wide leader is often selected for only a one-year term so he or she has little chance of consolidating a personalized position of power. There is an expectation within many Protestant churches that the people of the congregation will be consulted on important matters, and that ministers are accountable to them, and can be removed by them.

On the Catholic side, there is a built-in unity of Church doctrine and authority. Important decisions are made in Rome and passed down through the structures. Lay people must either accept Church doctrine or take the very serious step of disobedience. There is no legacy of local control, of disagreeing with Church leaders, or breaking away and forming a new church that is equally valid in the eyes of God. If Catholics do choose to leave their church, they feel a sense of isolation because they have been taught that the divine authority of the Church is vested in the Pope and cannot be divided.

Protestants have a very different orientation. Their source of authority is the Bible, not an institution. Lay people search the scriptures for divine inspiration. They are much less willing to accept an interpretation from a centralized authority. Disagreeing with an earthly authority is a time-honored tradition for Protestants. They feel it is a duty for every person to read the Bible and make private judgments as to the word of God. They are taught to listen to their clergy with a critical ear and to never accept anyone as being infallible. Protestants can begin a new church and feel that they have an equal, if not superior, association with God.

At one time in the early nineteenth century, there were six separate bodies that claimed to represent the Presbyterian Church of Ireland. There has always been a tendency for Presbyterians and other Protestants to divide rather than accept dissenting points of view. Some have split on the issue of whether to use candles and singing in their services. Catholics, on the other hand, have been taught that their liturgy, authority and leadership come from the top downward. For Protestants it is just the reverse. Catholics are much more cohesive in both their religious and political doctrine. They are more comfortable with centralized leadership styles.

Within the republican movement, there is almost a "group-think approach" to politics. There is a strong expectation that IRA volunteers will follow their leaders. Protestants, on the other hand, have a long tradition of rejecting both religious and political authority from the top. They are fiercely proud of their independence of spirit, both in religion and politics. One of my best friends was the main spokesperson for the UDA. He confided in me that his "biggest headache" was trying to "keep people in line." According to him, there were seven different UDA commanders in Belfast alone, and each was "basically independent" from the main organization.

According to my sources, the IRA limits its discussions to meetings behind closed doors. The army council (made up of about seven members) has wide-open deliberations far removed from public view. They almost never vote on anything, but when a consensus is reached, it is binding on the entire membership. There is a strong emphasis on building agreement at the top of the IRA that is then passed down through the ranks. Like members of the Catholic Church, IRA volunteers are expected to stay in line. Today's republican dissidents are regarded by most as people "outside the fold."

By contrast, Ulster Protestants are known for having knock-down, drag-out meetings in both their religious and political organizations. Everyone is in competition with everyone else, and they don't hesitate to turn on each other when ever there is any disagreement. This was really evident during the entire negotiation process that resulted in the Belfast Agreement and the period thereafter. The DUP refused to enter the talks, and after an agreement was reached, UUP leader, David Trimble, was strongly criticized by many unionists (within his own party) for agreeing to participate in a system that included Sinn Fein. Leading members of Trimble's own parliamentary party turned on him personally. They called him a "traitor to Ulster." Two members of Trimble's own Stormont parliamentary party (UUP) voted against his reinstatement as First Minister in 2001 – more than 70 percent of the entire assembly voted for Trimble, but he could not deliver all of his own party's leadership. And in 2007, the Reverend Ian Paisley also faced widespread criticism within his own party when he agreed to enter the government with Sinn Fein. Like Protestants breaking away during the Reformation, Ulster loyalists and unionists may be one of the few groups in the world that suffer from too much democracy.

The following table illustrates the way religion has shaped Ulster politics. There are no water-tight compartments separating religious and political behavior. In fact the political behavior of the two communities is not really understandable unless the religion factor is brought into focus.

Religious Influences in Political Behavior

	PROTESTANT UNIONISTS	CATHOLIC NATIONALISTS
General Design	More individualistic – based on specifics that are often related to religion.	More group orientated – based on general aspirations that have a secular foundation.
Selection of Leaders	Chosen by rank and file in competitive process that often involves an election.	Leaders evolve into a role because of distinctive skills and characteristics.
Continuity of Leadership	Challenged often by dissenting members, threatened by possible split.	Continued support given to leaders while they seek long-term goals.

Some observers speculated that the major reason why the Belfast Agreement has lurched through repeated internal crises is because of the inability of unionists to work together. Unionist leaders who try to establish a power-sharing relationship with Sinn Fein take the risk of being lynched by their own party members. They must always cover their own backs from their own members.

Ulster Protestants are very reluctant to share important powers with Catholics who have recently been in rebellion. The idea of what they call an “unreconstructed terrorist” sitting as a cabinet minister is something many Protestants cannot tolerate or even think about without going into a rage. Moreover, there is a fear that once Catholics get into power, they press for more and more rights in the political system. Politically, the safest course for Protestants is to throw up obstacles to any political deals.

Ulster Protestants and their political parties are not easily led. Leaders know that their position is never really secure enough to take any major risks. The Protestant practice of leadership accountability in religion has influenced their behavior in politics as well. Unlike the Catholic side of politics, where a leader can bring along the rank and file – unionist leaders are on a very short leash, and the membership will not hesitate to bring them down and replace them. Seniority and public affection count for little within the unionist movement.

The strong sense of independence and individualism within unionism is both a strength and a weakness. While they have an incredible ability to stand up to their adversaries, they find it difficult to work together for a common cause. They are seldom willing to yield to any particular authority in politics. They routinely condemn the British and Irish governments, and often each other. They even denounce leaders who are their natural allies within the movement. Often there is a religious flavor in their comments that arouses a good deal of emotion and anger.

While Irish nationalists and republicans may have major differences in political strategies, they are seldom willing to attack each other openly and denounce each other in public. There is a strong sense that nationalists and republicans share the same overall goal of seeking a united Ireland. They differ on the question of strategies. If there is a disagreement, it is not debated in public. This tendency is not unlike the Catholic Church, which tries to maintain a united front even when there are dissenting opinions within the Church.

Among unionists, however, there is an inclination to undergo a leadership selection process that brings about both competition and division. David Trimble was elected leader of the Ulster Unionists, in part, because he was a high profile leader in the Drumcree stand-off of 1995. His position as leader was challenged repeatedly by people who thought he was making too many concessions to Catholics in the peace process. Trimble's position was always uncertain. He was finally replaced by Reg Empey after Trimble lost his own seat in the Westminster Parliament. Even the strongest unionist leader of recent times, Ian Paisley, had many turn against him when he agreed to join in an administration with Catholics nationalists. Some said they had followed him for more

than 50 years, but he had now become the "biggest traitor of all time" because he was willing to share power with Sinn Fein.

While there is competition between the SDLP and Sinn Fein, it has usually been over the question of whether violence was ever justified. Whenever members of either party shared a common goal, they tended to work together. When the two parties have disagreements, they avoid dragging it through the media. Privately, members are critical of each other, but they don't call a press conference to begin a public slugging match.

The position of leadership within the SDLP and Sinn Fein is more personalized and less dependent on responding to divisions within their respective political parties. In a situation not unlike the Catholic hierarchy, both provide a level of support that is above any election process. There is a genuine fondness for John Hume (past leader of the SDLP) and for Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein. When either one of them enters a room full of the party faithful, there is spontaneous applause that is not found for *any* leaders on the unionist side. Among nationalists and republicans there is a faith in the leadership that takes them through difficult periods of change.

When Sinn Fein decided to support the Belfast Agreement, there was a serious division within the republican movement because, for the first time, the republican leadership was seeking representation in a political system that upheld the partition of Ireland. I remember hearing one well-known IRA member, Leo Green (who died later) loudly threaten Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness in a republican pub. He said if the IRA gave up "one bullet or one ounce of Semtex (explosives)" he would personally kill both of them. There was a long silence, and then a senior person within the movement intervened to tell everyone to keep their opinions to themselves. The statement shocked everyone, including myself. Many people looked down at the floor or turned away so as to avoid association with the angry threat to Adams and McGuinness. Another republican told me later that the only reason this man in the pub could "get away" with saying what the said was because of his long service to the IRA, but that he would probably be told later that this kind of statement would be "tolerated only once," and that if he did it again he would get "a visit" from the IRA. The person went on to say that "the leadership has limited patience."

In a similar vein, another former IRA man had the audacity to write articles in *The Irish News* that were very critical of Sinn Fein. He told me that one evening he opened his front door to find, what he called "a mob of republicans," from Catholic West Belfast who made threatening gestures and comments about his criticism of the republican movement. He said many of them were men he grew up with, or knew when he was an IRA prisoner. This particular person has continued his criticisms, but he says he now "looks over his shoulder more often."

In view of some disagreement within the ranks, it was remarkable how the republican community was kept in line, despite the break away of several small groups. During one particularly tense period, a group of IRA men made coordinated visits one evening to the homes of known dissenters (North and South) to warn them personally to stop their criticisms of the Adams and McGuinness strategy. According to one source, in addition to the physical threat, the point was made to "believe in the leadership" and "keep the faith." In most cases, the members did just that, despite their personal reservations.

It is difficult to imagine how loyalists or unionists could have kept their people in line during a time of comparable sweeping change in strategy. When David Trimble agreed to speak to Sinn Fein leaders in a public meeting for the first time, there was open rebellion among the unionist rank and file. By comparison, that change in strategy was far less significant than Sinn Fein's decision to support the Belfast Agreement, which of course, included the partition of Ireland. There are many Irish republicans who are not happy with their present leadership, but they keep it to themselves.

While there is a marked difference in how Catholics and Protestants interact in politics, there is one similarity that is disturbing. There is a tendency in both communities to behave in politics as though they were standing on religious principles. This type of unyielding commitment can harden positions taken in political affairs and make long-term compromise nearly impossible. Even when northern Irish political activists claim to act independently of their churches, there is still an inclination for them to fall back into something that resembles religious fervor. In the heat of the moment, political convictions can revert into the role of a crusader for a cause. In religion and in politics, there is much strength in intolerance and rigidity.

Sticking Up For Your People

A few years ago, on the morning of the 12th of July (the most important Protestant holiday of the year) I was sitting in a parked car along a street in Lisburn, Northern Ireland. A middle-aged woman came by wearing a Union Jack dress, and as we made eye contact, she leaned down to the open car window, shook her fist in my face, and shouted, "We'll show them whose boss here!"

I didn't know the woman, and I've never seen her since, but I am reasonably certain she is not a dangerous person. She was just expressing her pride in being an Ulster British Protestant, and her angry determination that northern Catholics would never be in control of her homeland.

Several months later there was a republican parade through Belfast city center. It was the first legal republican parade ever permitted near the city hall, and the security forces were out in great numbers. Several young men climbed up on the statue of Queen Victoria in front of city hall. They draped the Irish Tricolor over the head of Queen Victoria, and with clenched fists, they shouted "*Tiocfaidh* Ár *La"* (Our day will come). The police officers present went crazy with anger. The young men were pulled down and dragged away.

The woman in Lisburn and the young men in Belfast symbolize a common form of sectarian behavior in northeast Ireland. On its face, there is a pride that people defend as positive. A comment often heard is, "There's nothing wrong with sticking up for your people." But underneath that community pride, there is a group-think that is brimming over with anger. The clinched fist, the narrowing of the eyes, the deep-seated feelings – all of these have become characteristics that are seen far too often among the northern Irish on both sides.

What people in both communities call, "standing up for our people," is regarded by the other side as provocative, sectarian behavior. Working-class people in both traditions seem to get a special delight in arousing anger on the other side. Both deny any malicious intent. The usual comment is, "We were just having a bit of fun." Everyone seems so innocent when on parade, waving banners, or shouting slogans.

But the outward signs of sectarianism tell only part of the story. Behind the mask of hostility, there is a more important factor that helps explain what divides the two

religious traditions. There is an undercurrent in both working-class communities of blaming someone else for what has gone wrong. Put simply – the Protestants blame the Catholics, and the Catholics blame the Brits. In many cases, the blame is deserved, but the process of making accusations has colored nearly everyone's judgment. Blaming has become automatic throughout the Province. There is no effort to understand a problem without holding the other side accountable. Sometimes I cringe when I hear what is said, but I notice that everyone else in the group seems to think, "It's their fault!"

For example, Ulster Protestants are certain that they are unemployed and living in poverty because Catholics have been given favored status – all can be explained with this allegation. Catholics, on the other hand, assume that all discrimination and exploitation can be explained as a planned part of current British colonial policy – all can be explained with the same allegation.

There is a tendency on both sides of jumping to a predetermined conclusion that explains a situation without a need to analyze any other factors. The enemy, in both cases, is all-powerful and is cleverly engaged in a gigantic conspiracy to "control and weaken us." This kind of thinking, of course, justifies us to fight back!

Neither side acknowledges or takes responsibility for the atrocities or brutal actions performed by their own people because the other side always did something worse. The northern Irish are masters at "What about what they did to us?" They always shift the blame back to the other side. This affords many people the luxury of never assuming responsibility for a situation. In reality it is a one-sided view that makes everyone feel like a victim.

The practice of blaming others has special appeal for people who have had less satisfying private lives. It is less painful to recognize one's own personal shortcomings if another group can be targeted for blame. Scapegoating relieves some of the personal frustrations of life around the world, and Ulster is no exception.

Sectarian thinking and behavior permits people to simplify their frustrations by choosing an easily identifiable target. This practice, of course, is not unique to Northern Ireland, but it may be easier to see it here because the conflict has been so prominent in the lives of people in segregated neighborhoods. There has been an "opposition mind-set" here for a very long time.

Among working-class Protestants there is a long-standing habit of blaming the IRA and Catholics in general, for nearly everything that has gone wrong – blocking Orange parades – the demand to disband the police – political cooperation with the South of Ireland, and a host of related topics. With working-class Catholics, the blame is centered on the British government and the unionist establishment for not having a job – for the poor quality of public housing – for an unfair justice system, and nearly everything else that needs to be changed. To visit a loyalist or republican neighborhood is to hear a series of complaints on how the other side is getting more than they deserve and how "our people" are "short-changed" in every area of life.

Many of the points raised within each community are actually true. Examples and evidence abound as to why someone else is responsible for the woes on our side of town. Tales of favoritism, insensitivity, and brutality are easy to document. Both sides focus on retelling truly terrible stories about the other community.

But there is a persistent habit among many northern Irish of telling only one side of the story. It is a tendency of leaving out a part of the tale that does not favor "our side." The result, of course, is to pass on an account of events that appear to be extreme examples of how one community has completely brutalized the other and how "they" caused a lasting injury to "us."

But what has been described thus far is not unique to northeast Ireland. Telling one-sided stories is a practice that is found around the world. The important difference is that, among the northern Irish, there is a practice of *blaming an entire religious/political community for the deeds of a few.* And so it is that Protestants still hold the Catholic community accountable for IRA killings and bombs. And on the other side, Protestants are still held responsible by Catholics for the brutal acts of the police and the British army. Rather than making a distinction, people in both communities view the entire "other community" as their adversary.

Some Protestants use the words, republican, IRA, and Catholic interchangeably. It is clear that they see the entire nationalist community as probable supporters of the armed struggle. Many unionists use the term "IRA/Sinn Fein" to build the association in the public's mind. They're all grouped together – *Catholics, Dublin, republicans, Sinn Fein, and nationalists*.

On the Catholic side, it is much the same. The former Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and loyalist groups were seen as being of one mind. There are charges of documented collusion that leave the impression that they are all working together – *the Brits, loyalists, Protestants, unionists, and the police.*

There is just enough truth in these charges on both sides to cause many to believe that they are all-encompassing. Many stories have been told, and recent books have been written, to uphold the existence of conspiratorial groups in both communities. There is hard evidence (that keeps coming out) to back up many of these allegations, so in fact, these charges are often true. This has caused more fear within both traditions.

There is a widespread belief on both sides that "the other side" is extremely well-organized and capable of posing a real threat. Individual incidents of beatings or killings are not seen as isolated events, but rather as a coordinated campaign perpetuated by the enemy. Whenever an atrocity occurs, it seems to confirm the existence of a gigantic conspiracy that is in operation. And to make matters worse, it may be true.

There is no shortage of factual stories that imply a coordinated effort. There have been enough unspeakable acts to keep people talking for generations to come. But it is the interpretations of these acts that give them meaning. Both sides emphasize the sectarian motives of the entire opposing community, and present a picture in which their own people have become victims of a well-planned campaign. These accounts of "What they've done to us" are a clear justification for "What we'll do to them." Those who commit acts of revenge have no doubts in their minds. They know who they are after, and they often simplify their targets by using derogatory names. For loyalists, the target group is usually expressed in religious or ethnic terms – it is the "Taigs" or the "Fenians." The UDA scrawls the slogan on walls, "KAT," meaning "Kill All Taigs." While on the republican side, the group singled out is nearly always political – it is the "Brits" or the "Peelers," which is slang for the police.

In sectarian paramilitary targeting, loyalists did not make much of a distinction – there was a saying that, "Any Taig will do!" Republicans, on the other hand, spoke of "legitimate targets," suggesting that they chose their targets more carefully.

During the Troubles, there were many cases of so-called "representational killings" (especially by loyalists) whereby someone was killed simply because they were

of the other religion. Cars would cruise a segregated neighborhood and pick up or shoot people at random, knowing only that they were of the other religious faith. In a real sense, this was the ultimate act of sectarianism, because the person being targeted might have been completely innocent of any wrongdoing, they were chosen only because of their religious identity.

Perhaps the worst example of this was a five year period (l972-77) when the so-called "Shankill Road Butchers" terrorized the entire Catholic community by picking up people at random in nationalist neighborhoods. The loyalist gang did unspeakable things to their victims before torturing and slaughtering them with butcher knives. They killed more people than any other mass murderers in British criminal history.

These types of atrocities caused all Catholics to feel powerless and vulnerable because victims were chosen at random and therefore everyone was at risk. The threat caused nearly everyone to seek protection within their own community and associate more closely with those who could defend them.

Mass killings of this kind often put pressure on the other side to even the score. For example, when an IRA bomber killed nine Protestants in the Shankill Road fish shop bombing of October 23, 1993, everyone knew that loyalists would respond. It was a tense period for Catholics. For an entire week the nationalist community waited. The streets were empty at five o'clock each afternoon. When strangers walked in off the street into a business or store, everyone turned around in fear.

At that time I was living in a community of about 15 people in North Belfast, made up of Catholic and Protestant clergy. I was the only lay person. Because the group had a reputation for welcoming people of both faiths, we were worried we might become a target for loyalists who disapproved of that practice. Sure enough, a man called the evening of the Shankill Road killings and said, "I'm going to come and kill all of you." We had to take the threat seriously. It was the one time in Belfast that I planned what I would do in my room upstairs if I heard gunfire downstairs. There was a small closet behind the bathroom that I thought might be overlooked by a gunman who wanted to get us all. But the threat was never carried out against our group.

One week later, on October 31, loyalists walked into a Halloween party in a nationalist pub in the small village of Greysteel (north of Belfast) and shot seven people

dead, six Catholics and one Protestant. This was a tit-for-tat killing that was predictable – it was just a question of when and where.

Representational killings of this kind were more commonly performed by loyalist groups for several reasons. First, there was the mind-set that any Catholic would do. Some loyalists even boasted that they would not make up their minds who to kill until the last second. Secondly, loyalists had more difficulty finding republican paramilitaries. The IRA and INLA were secret organizations, and there was always a question of who were the real members. And thirdly, loyalists often engaged in random killings because they knew it would pressure republican paramilitaries to strike back and therefore widen the war. On the other side, republicans found it easier to identify specific targets because they could simply find out who was an off-duty member of the security forces or a person who was performing some kind of support function such as construction, food preparation, or maintenance on security bases. The IRA always insisted that their targets were chosen for strategic reasons and were, therefore, not sectarian. Loyalists, of course, never accepted the republican claim that the IRA was not motivated by religious bigotry because most victims were Protestants.

Members of the IRA would sometime lay in wait outside of a police station, waiting for an officer to come out so they could follow him or her to their homes. Police officers knew of this practice; and (as a policy) they never wore their uniforms to and from the station. They also would take different routes every day so as to avoid assassination attempts. One officer I know took me to his home and showed me how he kept his uniforms upstairs in a locked room for fear that a republican, posing as a repairman, might browse through the house and then later have him killed.

The security forces also engaged in clandestine operations to find out who might be a member of the IRA. Catholics who committed minor crimes were offered amnesty by the police if they reported on the movement of local republicans. Even though the shooting war has wound down, this practice of recruiting informers has continued.

Several years ago, British intelligence actually set up a Belfast laundry service with delivery trucks cruising republican neighborhoods, tracking the movement of IRA suspects who could be targeted. The IRA became suspicious of the laundry service because their charges were low beyond belief. As it turned out the British government

had subsidized the entire operation. IRA men also noted that the trucks had portholes built in above the cabs for agents to secretly take pictures of local republicans. The IRA raided the trucks and killed all the laundry personnel. The British-sponsored laundry services were shut down.

Despite the underhanded actions of both sides, neither admits to being guilty of targeting people because of their religious affiliation or political views. As a group, Protestants deny there has been any significant sectarian discrimination against Catholics in jobs and housing. They also contend that the security forces have never singled out Catholics for assassination or harassment. On the other side, the IRA denies that some towns were bombed simply because they had a large Protestant population. They also contend that they focused on the police for political reasons, not because their members were more than 90 percent Protestant.

Nearly all Protestants reject the republican claim that loyalists are sectarian while republicans are motivated only by politics. Loyalists are quick to point out that most of the IRA's so-called "legitimate targets" turned out to be Protestants. Republicans counter by asserting that they have killed people of both religions who they regard as enemies of Irish republicanism.

But regardless of intent, the foundations of sectarianism are evident within both communities, and in an important sense, the formal practice of religion has little to do with sectarianism. There is no focus on conventional theology or efforts to convert the other side. In fact, those who are most involved in sectarian violence are often not well informed about their own religion.

The story goes that two masked members of the IRA stopped a man at night along the Falls Road in Catholic West Belfast.

"Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?" yelled one of the masked men.

"I'm a Catholic," came the reply.

"If you are, then say the Hail Mary," was the immediate demand!

When the man finished saying the prayer, one masked man turned to the other and asked, "Did he say it right, Paddy?"

It is intriguing that so many of the active militants on both sides have only a casual relationship with their own churches, and yet they are willing to do battle in

defending the people of their own religious tradition. As it turns out, the real dimensions and motives for violence are more complex, and it cannot be explained as being simply extreme cases of religious bigotry.

Walled, working-class neighborhoods are filled with daily reminders that reinforce sectarianism and keep it foremost in people's minds. The murals, flags, music, parades, graffiti, painted curbstones, segregated schools, street signs in Irish or Ulster-Scots, opposing sports teams, paramilitary banners – all of these things and more underline the fact that nearly everything is divided by religious tradition. An older man in a pub told me, "Sectarianism sharpens the teeth of violence."

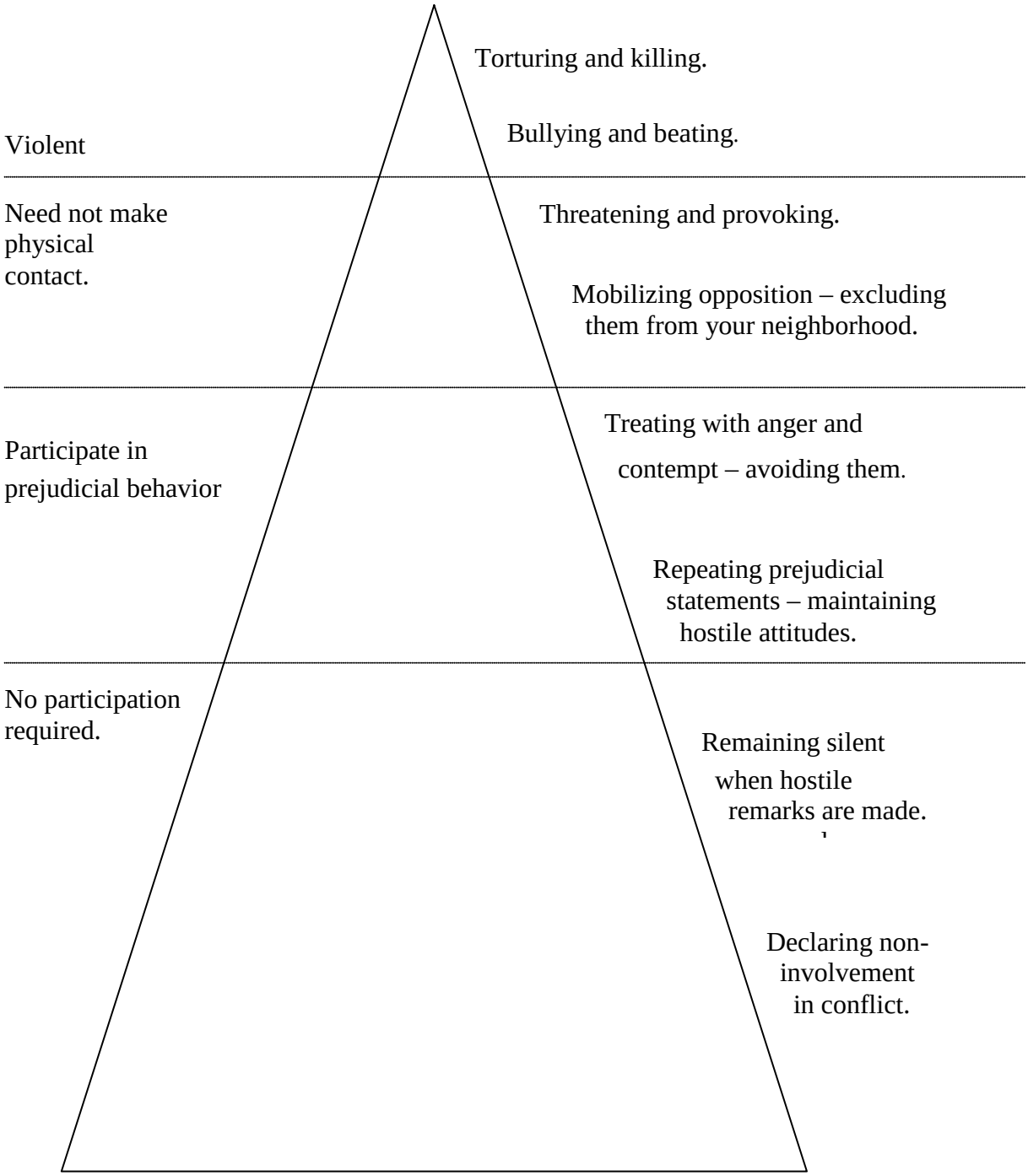
In Ulster, sectarianism is the norm – society has already channeled people into opposing camps. Growing up is a matter of learning the folkways of communal separation. The justifications for deep-seated feelings of hostility are all around people, every day of their lives. While both sides deny they are sectarian, there is compelling evidence that it goes deep into northern Irish society on both sides, and that it is not just limited to outward examples of violence. The roots of Ulster prejudices are hidden in the non-involvement of respectable citizens on both sides who maintain a polite silence when hostile remarks are made about the opposing community. Sectarianism is passed on to younger people not only by what others say and do, but also by what they *do not* say and do. It is learning by example just as much as through deeds.

Consider the typical case of a person who was raised in a segregated neighborhood, attended a segregated school, who had a relative jailed for a paramilitary offense, and who has never had a positive relationship with anyone from the other religious tradition. This person has been bombarded every day of his or her life by a sectarian message. It is reinforced again and again. It would be a minor miracle if that person did not harbor sectarian attitudes.

But only a small percentage of the Northern Irish actually act aggressive toward people in the other community. The great majority may harbor sectarian attitudes, but they generally keep their opinions to themselves. In a real sense, a sectarian society is built like a giant pyramid – at the very top are those who engage in violence, while the so-called "law abiding people" make up the broad base at the bottom. There is a critical assumption that those at the top can depend on some level of support from those below.

Paramilitaries cannot operate in Northern Ireland without the backing of their own community. There is a “blended relationship” between the gunmen, their vocal supporters, and finally the huge majority of silent people who supply passive consent. Clearly (those who say nothing) are an important part of the base in a sectarian society.

Levels of Sectarianism



But people at these lower levels often disclaim any association with those involved in physical violence. In fact, those at the middle or lower ranges of the pyramid may be critical of the violence. People in the countryside may wonder out loud about those "hooligans in Belfast." Yet they might add, "I do understand why our lads had to act." Often there is ambivalence by those who see themselves as uninvolved. But the wink and nod does not go unnoticed.

The key point is that non-involvement enables those with strong sectarian attitudes to hold sway in society. Doing nothing, or not speaking up, is in itself providing a greater opportunity for those who seek to divide society through sectarian actions. In Northern Ireland opting-out is *still* taking a side.

Beliefs and actions are related, including levels of involvement that range from passive acceptance all the way to violence and killing. As in most areas of life, there are gradations of anti-social behavior that may escalate from what is considered to be non-involvement at one end of the spectrum, to active verbal involvement, and finally to inflicting personal injury or murder. There is a clear connection between those who say little or nothing (but who give consent through silence) and those who actually attack, beat, or kill people of the other religious tradition.

Among community workers on both sides a distinction is made between being non-sectarian and anti-sectarian. They make the point that just *not* being sectarian is not enough. Racism, bigotry, sexism, and prejudice thrive in an atmosphere where "good people" keep their mouths shut. To stem the tide of sectarianism, these "good people" must speak out every time the "other side" is targeted in any way. It may be well to remember the words of Edmund Burke, an eighteenth century Irish Protestant, who said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men (people) do nothing."

There But For the Grace of God Go I

Some of my most upsetting moments in Northern Ireland have been when I discovered strong doses of sectarian attitudes among my close friends. In Ulster, it is very possible for good people to hate other good people. They have come by it honestly through their own life experiences. In an unguarded moment I could see the foundations for a divided society as something they had in them from birth and would probably never

set aside. Perhaps the most disturbing part of the experience was that I could see how and why they had developed these feelings, and I came to the conclusion that if I had been born and raised here, and lived through those experiences, I would feel and act the same.

In Northern Ireland there is a real-life application for the phrase, "There but for the grace of God go I." Just being born and raised here creates a certain level of animosity within the individual that has come to be accepted as normal. For most people it is virtually impossible to avoid or escape sectarianism. It is learned from one's parents, friends, school, church, and political leaders – it is learned from one's reaction to the other community – it has become a part of everyday life.

When one hears the personal stories of "what they did" to my father, brother, or cousin, it all becomes clear. The narrowing of the eyes, the tone of voice, and the detail of what was done – all these personal memories tell the tale that will never be forgotten. There is no "other side" to the story – it is all one-sided. It all becomes a reason to give support to those who would take action against those who have done these evil deeds.

I talked to a widow of a police officer who rejected any talk of thinking about the "future." She said, "The past is all I have. I just think about him and all we did together." For various reasons, there are hundreds (perhaps thousands) who are living in the past. It is all they have! Can you blame them for remembering those they loved?

Those who carry these memories of past atrocities may never seek revenge, but they understand why others would. It is this "understanding" etched into the communal memory that causes people to tolerate behavior that would not be permitted in other societies.

These people keep to themselves, but do nothing to combat actions that they never would perform. Average people living down the street in every neighborhood consider themselves to be non-sectarian because they have never lifted a finger against people of the other community. But they do *not* resist when sectarian jokes are told – they do *not* express outrage when people are burned-out of their homes. These silent non-sectarian people are really the foundations of a sectarian society because they permit others to go unchallenged. Northern Ireland has a huge majority of these peaceful, non-sectarian people living in every city and village.

There are many in both communities who consider themselves to be outside the conflict, and yet they cannot escape the socialization process that went along in being raised as an Irish Catholic or an Ulster Protestant. Many confess that, unconsciously, they think of reasons to antagonize the other side, or criticize opposing leaders. At other times they hold back criticism about their own leaders or about an atrocity committed by their own people. They find themselves making excuses for their own people or defending some antisocial behavior as something they do not condone, but as something they do "understand."

Most may not realize it, but sectarianism and racism are cut out of the same bolt of cloth. Both are based on an assumed sense of superiority, and a targeting of those that are perceived as inferior. Both are rampant in Ulster. The colonial mentality was built on a feeling of looking down on the native population as being of an inferior religion. The colonials had (and still do have) a sense that they have destiny to rule. Today there are spontaneous attacks against Catholics and also ethnic minorities in the North. In a strange way, hatred can make some feel proud. It can elevate those who have the least. In Ulster (and around the world) one often hears the comment, "I don't have much, but at least I'm better than them." It is this having someone *below you* that gives some a feeling of superiority. This is especially true when the targeted people are of a different race or those that have been singled out as "inferiors" by church and political leaders. Racism and sectarianism go hand and hand. Both bring a certain amount of satisfaction to those with the least prestige in society. In Ireland it is the old story of those who "have a little" can look down on those who have "even less."

To add to this tense equation, the so-called "inferior people" soon feel a profound anger because of all the discrimination and misery in their lives. Those of the "inferior" race or religion begin to dream about overthrowing the whole political/cultural system.

And in return, those with the power *need* to keep the lid on society. After decades of repression, there is a growing fear that there will be a revolution, which of course, justifies more repression. On the other side, those at the bottom of society have *more reasons* to rise up. There is a litany of injustices that seem to justify striking back. Racism and sectarianism can sow the seeds of hatred even among those who are non-violent.

The average person in the Six Counties is too polite to make abusive remarks about the opposing religious tradition, but sectarianism is bred into them at birth. As individuals, they strongly deny having any sectarian attitudes. They would also strongly disagree that their covert sympathies provide any justification or support to the gunmen, and they would certainly be repelled by mass murder.

Nearly everyone in both communities was horrified by the Omagh bomb that killed 29 innocent people. Political leaders, clergy, journalists, and other people in the street used strong language in condemning the bombers. *The Belfast Telegraph* referred to the "Evil Blast" that maimed and killed. Others questioned how any sane person could set off a bomb in the middle of busy shoppers on a sunny Saturday afternoon. Virtually everyone condemned the bombers, and it went without saying that nearly everyone disowned any mentality that could perform such a gruesome act.

In a real sense, the powerful condemnation of violence placed those acts into a category that made them unexplainable, or so terrible that it was beyond human comprehension. This utter disassociation with the killers seemed to absolve the respectable element of society. The public analysis of terrible sectarian acts was that no one could really understand why people would do such a thing. In a similar vein, the "terrorists" were also placed at that same level, beyond the understanding of the average person. "Terrorists" were said to be cowardly, brutal, and inhuman. Both the acts and those who performed them were said to be *not* a part of proper society. There was, of course, a complete denial of any association with the "evil forces" responsible for those terrible acts.

But, nothing as complex as sectarian violence, happens in a vacuum. Those who set the bomb or pulled the trigger were born and raised by local families. Everyone knows that the killers:

- lived in segregated neighborhoods that divided them at birth.
- attended religious-based schools that fostered community partition.
- celebrated anniversaries that demonized the other tradition.
- grew up in a society that glorified political/cultural martyrs.
- supported athletic teams with sectarian identities.
- learned a history that gave only one side of the story.

- listened to clergy who preached religious exclusiveness.
- participated in sectarian parades on designated holidays..
- voted for political leaders who played on the fears of their people.
- joined a paramilitary group that attacked the other community.

And after all of this – society wonders how "these terrorists" (as they are called) could set a bomb or pull a trigger? When sectarian murder occurs in Northern Ireland, political and religious leaders express shock, dismay, and utter incomprehension at how anyone could be so cowardly or cruel. No party leader or clergy person has ever greeted the grim news of another killing or bombing by saying:

> The murder of this person is understandable when one considers how we socialize our young people, raise them in segregated neighborhoods, and teach them in segregated schools. We, the leaders of society, must take a major responsibility for this killing because we have done little to promote anti-sectarianism attitudes in society. Few of us have taken personal risks to encourage trust and tolerance across the divide. Directly or indirectly, we have exploited the fears of our people to advance our own goals. In fact, many of us in leadership positions have benefited from the separateness in our culture, religion, and politics. By our combined actions, we have helped make this latest cruel act not only possible, but probable.
>
> As leaders, we have separated ourselves from the gunmen and claimed they had no support from the *respectable* part of society. In reality, the gunmen have learned their trade from us as we parade through the streets with our banners, flags, and memories of battles past. In extolling the virtues of our martyrs, we have encouraged others to join their ranks. In reality, it is we (the political and church leaders) who have taught everyone the justifications for sectarianism. *The blood is on our hands!*

Chapter 10 Notes

[1] Maírtín Ó Muilleoir, Learning Irish: A Discussion and Information Booklet (Belfast: Sinn Fein, l982), pp. 2-4.

[2] Steve Bruce, The Red Hand: Protestant Paramilitaries in Northern Ireland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 281.

[3] "Roy Garland on Monday," Irish News Online, April 6, 1998. The Reverend Ian Paisley also speculated that the European Union may be under the influence of the Anti-Christ. Paisley contended

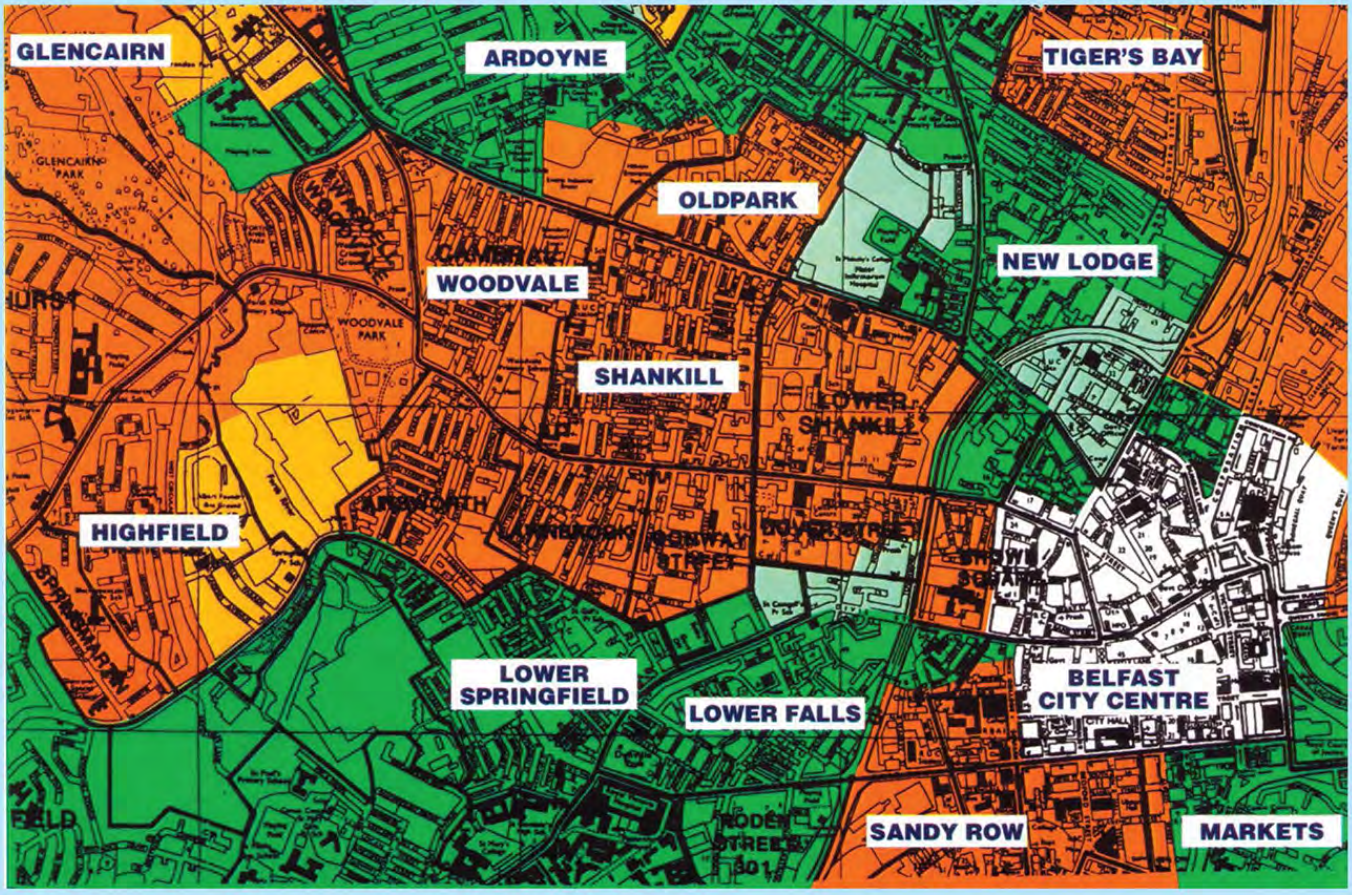
that certain images and icons in the European parliament bear a resemblance to "the infidel." He charged that biblical prophecy illustrates a connection between Satan and some European Union postage stamps, sculptures, and paintings. He also noted the seat numbered "666" is unoccupied in the European parliament, and when the anti-Christ is seated in that chair, the prophecy will be fulfilled. Irish News Online, July 23, 1999.

When Roman Catholic Church Cardinal Basil Hume died in England, a minister of the Free Presbyterian Church was interviewed on Radio Ulster where he concluded that Cardinal Hume "went to hell" because he taught that salvation could be achieved through "good works" rather than "believing in Jesus Christ as our personal savior." The implication was clear that all Catholics who agreed with the Cardinal would likely share the same fate.

[4] Des Wilson, An End to Silence (Cork: Royal Carbery Books, 1990), pp. 7-10. Father Des Wilson is one of the very few Catholic priests in the North of Ireland who is openly sympathetic to Sinn Fein. He resigned his clerical position in 1975 because he disagreed with the bishop about the use of church buildings for public meetings. He has remained very active as a priest within the republican community of Belfast and has his own group of supporters in Catholic West Belfast. I know several republicans who won't go to church unless "Father Des" is saying Mass.

The Sectarian Geography of Northwest Belfast

These neighborhoods of Belfast are voluntarily segregated by religious tradition. High metal or brick walls mark the boundary lines. Other areas are divided by bricked-in houses, or in some cases, there are no visible borderlines.



The dark Orange areas are virtually 100% Protestant while the lighter Orange regions have a substantial Protestant majority. The dark and light Green sections of the city represent the same pattern for Catholics. The white portion of the city center is considered to be neutral by both sides.

The general trend in this part of Belfast is that the Protestant population is declining and Catholics are increasing in numbers. Protestants feel they are being "out-bred" because they believe the Catholic Church encourages its members to have larger families so they can "take over the North." Catholic birthrates may have been higher in the past, but now the birthrate for both communities is declining. Perhaps the most important trend that explains this changing pattern is that Protestants, who can afford to leave, have moved out of the area, and in some cases out of the country.

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