

# Northern Ireland . . . Religious War or Not?

By Religious News Service

The collapse of the Protestant-Roman Catholic coalition government in Northern Ireland and reimposition of direct rule from London has raised the troubling question of the "religious dimension" of the conflict that has wracked the province since 1969.

Churchmen on both sides of the sectarian divide have scored interpretations of Ulster's "troubles" as a "religious war."

A letter of May 23, 1973 signed by the top leadership of the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Anglican churches in Ireland declared emphatically

"The conflict (in Northern Ireland) is not primarily religious in character. It is based rather on political and social issues with deep historical roots. Undoubtedly, again for reasons that are largely historical, the political and social divisions have religious overtones. But this is far from saying that the conflict between extremists (in the province) is anything even remotely resembling a religious war."

On the other hand, the Rev. Ian R.K. Paisley, moderator of the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster and best-known champion of Protestant supremacy in the province, sharply repudiated the statement of "the usual bunch of ecumenists," and proclaimed:

"This is a religious war — a battle between Truth and Error, Light and Darkness, Bible Protestantism and Popery."

Such a declaration is known to be distasteful and embarrassing to many Ulster Protestants, and has been criticized as expressive of a presumably naive simplism.

But the Rev. Richard J. Neuhaus, an American Lutheran pastor and editor of a monthly journal, *Worldview*, has concluded after research and first-hand study of the Ulster conflict that "the only stable factor of differentiation is religion."

In an article in the journal which is published by the Council on Religious and International Affairs, Mr. Neuhaus affirmed that "neither class conflict nor national allegiance nor settler-native antagonism nor (British) imperialism can explain the troubles in Northern Ireland."

Quoting a statement from the book, *States of Ireland*, by the respected Irish Catholic historian Conor Cruise O'Brien, Mr. Neuhaus said he was forced to agree with Dr. O'Brien:

"We are brought back, inescapably, to what so many people seek to deny: the rather obvious fact of a conflict between groups defined by religion."

"This does not mean it is a theological war. It would not even be exact to say that it is a conflict between Catholics and Protestants. It is a conflict between Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants. More immediately, of course, it is a conflict between Ulster Catholics and Ulster Protestants."

The distinction underscores one of the prime realities in Northern Ireland, where Protestants outnumber the Catholics 2 to 1.

The Protestant majority, of settler stock from Scotland and England, is Unionist, favoring union, not with the rest of Ireland, but with the United Kingdom.



## The Children's View

Give children anywhere some paints or crayons, ask them to draw their impressions of any topic, and they always seem to get to the core of the matter. Two Irish children have done so here with drawings on Northern Ireland. [RNS]

The Catholic minority, of native Gaelic stock, is Nationalist: supporting some kind of united Ireland, free of political ties to Britain.

The Government of Ireland Act of 1920, which created Northern Ireland as a subordinate part of the United Kingdom, provided for proportional representation as its electoral system to ensure protection of the rights of the religious minority.

A law abolishing proportional representation for local elections was passed by the provincial Parliament in 1922, without a protest from Britain. Proportional representation in parliamentary elections was abolished in 1929.

The upshot of these moves was to ensure, in the words of Lord Craigavon, first prime minister of Northern Ireland, "a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people."

And there matters stood, substantially, until the Catholic civil rights movement began in 1968, with demands that included restoration of proportional representation.

The movement led to negative reaction by Protestants, which, in turn, gave rise to counter-reaction by the Irish Republican Army, imposition of internment without trial of IRA militants, interposition of British troops, and a frightful spiral of intimidation, bombings, snipings and assassinations.

In 1972, Britain abolished the Protestant-dominated provincial government and imposed direct rule.

Then, in 1973, an agreement drawn up by Britain, Dublin, and moderate Northern Ireland Protestant and Catholic groups provided for a provincial assembly reflecting proportional representation, a coalition interdenominational

Executive, and a Council of (all) Ireland to consult and cooperate on certain issues.

The entire plan came crashing down on May 28, when the fledgling experiment in Protestant-Catholic power-sharing fell under the onslaught of a 15-day general strike by militant Protestants.

By all accounts, the key operating factor in the strike action that brought the province to its knees was the fear that the concession to Catholics represented by the power-sharing government and the proposed all Ireland Council were but harbingers of a reunited Ireland in which Ulster Protestants would come under the domination of the Catholic Church.

Dr. O'Brien, in his *States of Ireland*, while noting the frequent condemnations of violence voiced by Church authorities in both the North and in the Republic of Ireland, criticizes the Churches, Catholic and Protestant, for "encouraging, exalting, and extending the kind of tribal-sectarian self-righteousness which forms a culture in which violence so easily multiplies."

Irish-born journalist and author Gary MacEoin, in a new book (issued in June 1974), *Northern Ireland: Captive of History*, concurs with Dr. O'Brien's stricture.

MacEoin believes that a major factor — on the Protestant side — is the pervasive influence of the Orange Order.

He quotes the Rev. Martin Smyth, a Presbyterian minister and the grand master of the Belfast Orange Lodge, as saying that the organization is "basically religious and only coincidentally political, a fellowship of all who embrace the Reformed faith, founded to safeguard the interests of the Protestant peoples against the aggressions of the Church of Rome which historically claims to have power over princes."

The order has an estimated strength of about 100,000 in Northern Ireland. "When the flourishing satellite organizations for women and young people are added," says MacEoin, "it emerges as Northern Ireland's only all-embracing fraternal grouping, actively involving more than 90 per cent of the Protestant community in some places."

MacEoin claims that, "although not officially part of the system of government," the Orange Order "has dominated the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches."

As for the Catholic side, says Dr. O'Brien, "the thing is subtler, or slyer, as one might expect, but no less effective in inculcating the conviction that 'we' are morally superior to 'them.'"

"The 'need' insisted on by the (Catholic) hierarchy for separate schools is part of this," he adds, "but really only the tip of the iceberg."

"Over generations," he alleges, "the Irish Catholic clergy systematically fostered, not a militant, overt anti-Protestantism, but a well-enforced avoidance of social contact with Protestants, a sort of creeping freeze-out."

Yet, the record shows, the majority of Protestants and Catholics in Ulster are reasonable, decent people, who genuinely desire an end to the ancient hatreds and passions that run so deep into the bogs of antiquity, nationality, and religion.

The question is: can they overcome the burden of history?

## Church to Upgrade Migrant Services

Washington, D.C. [RNS] — The U.S. Catholic Church is taking steps to plug whatever gaps remain in its ministry to migrant farm workers, especially in terms of social services and pastoral ministry in the more remote areas through which migrants pass.

This is one task of the U.S. Catholic Conference's migrant specialist, Stephen Solis, a 30-year-old Texan who sees an immediate problem in "lack of awareness" among Catholics concerning the plight of the migrant and the "need for communication and education."

Given the assignment of formulating programs to serve

migrant farm workers, Solis is using his first few months with the USCC Division for Spanish-speaking to assess the current involvement of the Church with migrants.

One of the major problems he envisions is the implementation of social service and pastoral ministry programs in those areas through which the migrant farm workers pass rather quickly.

He said that in Florida, Texas and Southern California, where the three main streams of migrants begin their Spring and Summer harvesting odyssey, the migrants are offered the benefits

of community, Church, state and federal programs.

"But in areas, say between Texas and Michigan, the migrants are not exposed to the services and ministry they require," said Solis. "This is the area in which we are looking to develop fuller participation, not only by the institutional Church but by individual Catholics, clergy religious and laity."

He said that movements like the United Farm Workers in California receive a great deal of attention, but he observed that this is "only one effort in many" affecting the migrant farm workers.

"We want to assist dioceses and parishes in other areas in developing programs for migrants who are passing through but still in need of pastoral and social services," Solis explained. "We also want to make them aware of existing programs for migrants to which they can contribute."

Solis, who admitted that his task presents a "tremendous challenge" and may take some time to develop, said he did not know at present if his office will become involved in supporting or developing legislation in behalf of migrants.

He said he has already begun

to cultivate ecumenical contracts, especially with the National Council of Churches of New York, and the National Farmworker Ministry in Los Angeles.

A native of Port Arthur, Tex., Mr. Solis is a graduate of Lamar University, Beaumont. Before coming to the USCC Division for the Spanish-speaking, he was employed by Executive Systems Corp., Washington, D.C., where he helped set up manpower training and technical assistance programs sponsored by the U.S. Labor Department's migrant division.