Belfast Blues
... And the hope for a "New Ireland"

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Take or leave a few lives, about 865 people have been killed by political violence in Northern Ireland since the troubles broke out afresh in 1969. It is not improbable that the toll will reach a thousand by March, 1974. The outsider is inclined to view March, 1974, as a kind of moment of truth for Northern Ireland, for that is the date by which, according to the British "White Paper" of March, 1973, the people of Northern Ireland are to get themselves together around an elected Assembly. What happens if they don't get themselves together by then is unclear, but the alternatives now under discussion are not pleasant to contemplate.

An outsider, such as I, might view March, 1974, as the fast approaching moment of truth, but as one Protestant leader there remarked: "Ireland has been undergoing 'moments of truth,' 'definitive crises' and 'once-and-for-all decisions' for several hundred years now. We've grown quite accustomed to them, and we'll survive March, 1974, as well, come what may." Whether his remark reflects realism, cynicism, escapism, resignation or all these combined is the subject of these impressions gained during two weeks of intensive conversation with parties on all sides of the madness that is Northern Ireland.

The story is told that as the BEA flight takes off from London for Belfast, the pilot announces: "Welcome to Flight 6508. Please fasten your seat belts, put your seat backs in the upright position and set your watches back three hundred years." The idea that the troubles in Northern Ireland are a bizarre leftover from the religious wars of past centuries is, however, somewhat misleading. While it is clever to say the Irish would benefit from an onslaught of collective amnesia, and while the atavisms of Orange Day parades and the celebration of enmities long since deserving decent burial are quaint enough, the conflict in Northern Ireland has its depressingly modern side. Like Biafra and Bangladesh, like Croats and Québécois, like the Basques and the Flemish, the people of Northern Ireland are engaged in a nationalist struggle of conflicting identities. Those who argue that nationalism is a distinctly premodern passion have everything on their side except the evidence of the modern world. If the conflicting identities are shaped by religion rather than by language or by that amorphous creature called culture, it does not make the conflict any less "modern." The dilemma of the Irish must be understood in terms that ought to be painfully familiar to us from the history of the twentieth century.

The initial and abiding impression of Northern Ireland, notably of Belfast and Derry, is that things are much worse than one was prepared to believe. I am sorry to have to say...
this, for both here and in Northern Ireland British officials and representatives of the interim administration at Stormont are touchingly hospitable in their efforts to persuade visitors that things are not so bad. Giving a positive impression helps to attract urgently needed foreign investment, and, let it be admitted, the economic picture is indeed not as grim as one might expect in a situation of political chaos and daily terror. I, for one, was ready to believe that things are not so bad. But guns and bombs and searches and ubiquitous suspicions and seemingly perpetual funeral processions all made the illusion exceedingly difficult to sustain.

Because of the number of cars that have blown up, no unattended vehicle may be parked in downtown Belfast. Barbed wire is everywhere, whole blocks are devastated, and no block is without at least a few buildings bombed out. Tense soldiers in camouflage uniform, with rifle or machine gun at the ready, ride through the streets in armored vehicles or crouch behind bushes. One gets accustomed, I am told, to having guns pointed at you. At street corners in the business section large steel gates have been erected, and armed soldiers frisk everyone and their belongings. In the course of an hour’s shopping one expects to have his person searched four or more times. When walking downtown it becomes a reflex action for a man to raise his arms in order to facilitate the frisking.

In the Ardoyne section, where 194 Catholic homes were burned out one night in August, 1971, I am sitting in the small living room talking with the family when my attention is casually directed to two soldiers kneeling behind the hedge less than twenty feet away with their guns rather disquietingly pointed in our direction. On a lovely June afternoon our discussion in a union office is interrupted by a bomb blast three doors away. Windows in the office are shattered, perhaps others join me in a brief, silent prayer, the discussion resumes. Two people are killed in that blast. Within minutes a lorry comes by with the lumber to board up yet another building in Belfast’s version of normalcy. So routine has the procedure become. I am told that after one of the customary pub bombings an old man was to be seen through the dust still standing at the bar, whiskey in hand. He turns to remark to no one in particular: “Well, all I can say is you get this from time to time.”

In the mid-sixties, here in black Brooklyn, I experienced the riotous insurrections that brought in the police and National Guard, who imposed a nightmarish day or three of curfews, searches and martial law. After Northern Ireland I have an inkling of what it would be like had the nightmare continued for four years without reprieve. Still, one encounters in Ulster the obdurate refrain that things aren’t so bad. The people of Belfast talk a lot about what you can get used to. You can no doubt get used to Belfast or Derry if you can forget what civilization is supposed to be about.

Not everyone pretends things are not so bad. Partisans of the Provisional wing of the Irish Republican Army boast of the toll they are exacting and assure you the British cannot hold out much longer. The Catholic working men along Falls Road and Divis Streets evidence the fears and resentments appropriate to people victimized by an occupying power and distrustful of their would-be IRA liberators. The Protestant factory hand will not tell you things are not so bad; he looks to Ian Paisley or Bill Craig or to various vigilante-style defense organizations to save whatever remnants of security he once knew as a member of a minority embattled by a raging anti-Protestant Irish sea. At least that is how he sees it, despite the foreigner’s perception of him as a member of the majority that is oppressing the poor Catholics. But these are the little people, who know things are not “not so bad” in Northern Ireland. Like little people most everyone, where, no doubt, the great majority simply want to be left alone. One is reminded of President Eisenhower’s statement to the effect that the people want peace, and one day the politicians will just have to get out of the way and let them have it. The trouble, of course, is that once lines are drawn—and they always are—the little people on one side will not permit their politicians to abandon them lest the politicians on the other side gain the advantage. In Northern Ireland the sighs of weariness with it all are more than matched by declarations of suspicion about what “they” will do if “we” let up even for a minute (“they” and “we” being entirely interchangeable, depending on which side one is on).

The visitor’s psyche is stunned by the mare’s nest of politics and violence. Knowing how long and intense the struggle has been, and aware of the international attention it attracts, especially here in the United States, it takes an effort to remember that the whole of the population of Northern Ireland is about half that of Brooklyn. According to a former minister in the government of Brian Faulkner, one source of the troubles is symbolized by the ludicrously pretentious parliament building at Stormont. The buildings and grounds do indeed give the impression of being the seat of government of some great national entity, comparable to perhaps Canada or Australia, and this, he says, has given an inflated sense of importance to little
men engaged in petty borough politics. It was, therefore, inevitable that when Britain "prorogued" Stormont in March, 1972, and imposed direct rule from Westminster, many observers felt that Northern Ireland was being put in its place, or at least put into more reasonable perspective. In talking with recent and former leaders of the Unionist Party, the party that for fifty years controlled Stormont on behalf of the Protestant majority, it becomes apparent that much of their current resentment stems from a deep sense of injured pride. The spectacle of the top-hatted man slipping on the banana peel is amusing to all but the man who wears the top hat.

The man whom the British sent into the crossfire as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, William Whitelaw, surely has one of the world's least enviable jobs. The Mayor of New York aside, it is doubtful that anyone has to listen so respectfully to so much nonsense from so many volatile and volatile groups. The White Paper of March, 1973, is in large part a tribute to the patience and delicacy of Whitelaw and his staff. This is the paper that makes March, 1974, such an important deadline for Northern Ireland. By that date an elected Assembly of about eighty members is to compose an "Executive" formed by the principle of "power sharing." This is the fatal blow to the old Unionist monopoly, for it means the Executive cannot be made up of representatives from any "one section of a divided community." It is also mandated that "the British connection" will be maintained unless the majority of voters in Northern Ireland opt to leave the United Kingdom.

Protestant "loyalists" find this section of the paper—which is, of course, anathema to the Provisionals and to what one gathers is their small minority of supporters in the Catholic community—altogether too weak and equivocal. They feel Westminster is paying little more than lip service to the connection and will shortly find an excuse to withdraw and "leave us to the tender mercies of the Republic." In a way that they perhaps cannot help, the loyalists are, by obstruction and violence, strengthening among the British precisely that spirit of weariness and withdrawal they fear. The grubbiness of it all may discourage comparison with Greek tragic drama, but, if one is inclined to a determinist view of history, Northern Ireland provides strong supportive evidence. Yet a further provision of the White Paper calls for a Council of Ireland. The Council is to facilitate cooperation between the Republic and Ulster, first in such relatively uncontroversial fields as "tourism, regional development, electricity and transport," but quickly moving—the proponents of a united Ireland hope—to more substantive questions of political and economic integration.

The Assembly election earlier this summer divided, of course, along religious lines, but also, more notably, between pro- and anti-White Paper forces. Of the 78 members, 22 are official Unionists who, with varying degrees of enthusiasm, support the White Paper. Eleven are Unionists publicly opposed, and 16 belong to a "Loyalist Coalition" made up of former Unionists who broke with the party to fight the White Paper proposals. The Social Democratic and Labor Party, which finds its chief support in the Catholic community, won nineteen seats, and the Alliance Party, the putative party of reconciliation across religious lines, gained eight. No one pretends that the election broke the pattern of sectarian politics, but neither can it be denied that the result is the most broadly based parliamentary representation in the history of Northern Ireland.

Precisely because it is so successfully representative, the new Assembly has not yet been able to get down to business. No Executive has been formed, although it is hoped that Brian Faulkner or somebody else will be able to put together a coalition of the official Unionist, SDLP and, maybe, Alliance members. The loyalists make no secret of their intention to wreck the Assembly, and the Provisionals, for whom the election was one more in a long series of popular repudiations, have renewed their declaration of escalated warfare.

Coming over from letter-bombèd London at the end of August, Prime Minister Heath betrayed his exasperation with efforts to get the Assembly under way. "Let us go to it," he urged the party leaderships. Then, more ominously: "I must tell you quite frankly that, having taken the necessary steps to enable a resumption of the political life of Northern Ireland, the people of Britain will not understand any reluctance to take full advantage of it." Heath no doubt has in mind the prospect of 1974 elections in Britain, elections in which it seems likely the Labor Party will end bipartisan cooperation on Irish policy and plump for something like immediate withdrawal. In bitter truth, the people of Northern Ireland are "taking full advantage" of the opportunity "to resume their political life." To resume means to pick up from the past, and of such dementia is the political life of Northern Ireland composed. A feeling common among observers is that the Assembly will organize itself, if at all, only weeks or days before the March, 1974, deadline, resolving no conflicts, but granting a short reprieve from major new initiative by Westminster until the hasty paste-and-tape job gives way, thus forcing some quite different directions.
Before considering the possible scenarios for the future, it is necessary to ask some more elementary questions about the nature of the troubles in Northern Ireland and to hear some of the spokesmen for conflicting positions. Among the most elementary questions an observer brings with him to Northern Ireland is whether it is indeed a religious conflict. Although the media regularly report it as a contest between Protestants and Catholics, a majority of the people I talked with challenge the concept with their counterarguments, alternative metaphors and frequently elusive modifications. Father Padraic Murphy, a prominent Roman priest in Falls Road, almost explodes in disgust: “What do they mean when they talk about ‘extreme Catholics’? Catholics who go to Mass three times a day? Or, for that matter, what’s an ‘extreme Protestant’? Does he read two Bibles simultaneously? No, this is a struggle between the privileged and the underprivileged.” The same priest quickly adds that the Irish are a conservative people, and the socialists who see a revolutionary potential in the situation are “whistling Dixie, as you Americans say.”

That it is a class conflict, with only a religious facade, is the favored theme of many socialists in Northern Ireland and of their sympathizers elsewhere. The theme received some public attention through the efforts of the former Bernadette Devlin (whom one Marxist leader of a small trade union dismissed as “a publicity-hungry Trotskyite who’s broken faith with her own people,” and it is true that there seem to be few people taking her seriously anymore). While the class conflict metaphor has a certain theoretical plausibility, and while I was touched by an elderly socialist’s recounting of the long history in which the bosses have successfully “conspired to divide the working people’s power” by the false issue of religion, the notion that the violence in Ireland is attributable to class conflict (or to a struggle between the “privileged” and the “underprivileged”) just does not square with the facts. Class stratification is essentially the same on both sides of the conflict, the only stable factor of differentiation is religion. The best arguments and data on this score are offered in Richard Rose’s Governing Without Consensus and Conor Cruise O’Brien’s States of Ireland. On this point my impressions confirm O’Brien’s conclusion that the “class struggle” explanation is an ideological imposition that distorts reality. The real conflict is between Protestants and Catholics. “Reality here stood classical Marxist theory on its head: the ‘false consciousness’ fabricated here was class consciousness.”

A minister of home affairs in the late Stormont government told me that the trouble was “at its heart a conflict between two loyalties, British and Irish.” While this explanation has many adherents, and is sometimes offered with the intent of defusing sectarian religious passions, it is hard to believe this is the primary source of conflict. For one thing, it is not at all clear that the majority of Catholics in the North are passionately committed to the unification of Ireland. There are, not so incidentally, some sound economic reasons for not breaking with the welfare system of the United Kingdom and joining up with the more economically depressed Republic. My impressions about the majority feeling among Catholics are based not on the dubious polls conducted by the British government, but on conversations with Catholic leaders and common folk, almost all of whom reflect a distinctly relaxed attitude toward the prospect of unification. In part, perhaps, because they consider it inevitable some day; in larger part, because they want no hasty moves that would either provoke a more wholesale civil war with Protestants or deprive those living in the North of the admitted economic benefits of “the British connection.” Only in talking with the Provisionals and their loyalists does one encounter a devotion to Irish unity as a sacred struggle to vindicate the blood of the fathers.

Nor does the explanation of the conflict in terms of “two allegiances” take into account the surprising (to me) depth of “Irish feeling” among Ulster Protestants. This is not only professed again and again, but is evident enough in attitudes and behavior. I was struck by upper-class Protestants who, in their handsome manors outside Belfast, consistently and quite unself-consciously spoke of Belfast as the town of grubby moneymaking (and it would be a notably ugly city even without the barbed wire) but of Dublin as the capital. London followed Dublin as a preferred place to get away for weekends and “get back in touch with the real world for a change.” When England and Ireland compete in rugby or other sports, Ulster Protestants, from the prime minister to the factory hand, unquestionably cheer the Irish side. Again, religion and not some elusive idea of “allegiance” seems to be the key. The symbolic importance of the ritual celebration by Protestants of the Battle of the Boyne should not be underestimated. The Boyne is not important because an English king beat an Irish one, but because in 1690 a Protestant whipped a Catholic. Irish Catholics were loyal enough to the English King James II, a Catholic. Ulster Protestants backed the Protestant King Billy, who was not English but Dutch. Not English versus Irish, but Protestant versus Catholic remains the most useful metaphor for understanding what is going on in Ulster.

Another, although less common, explanation is that the conflict is between “natives” and “settlers.” But here too it all comes back to religious difference as the one constant. Closely related is the contention that Ulster Protestants are really pawns of British imperialism, the hooks by which England hopes to “keep its grip on
Ireland." The Sinn Fein in the South and both wings of the IRA in the North wax eloquent on this theme, but it takes more than eloquence to make this explanation plausible. Although it is hard to get some of the pertinent data in this connection, it is obvious that Northern Ireland is not a paying proposition for England. The economic burden of numerous welfare grants, development aid and tax favors, plus the economic, political and human burden of the apparently open-ended military operation, all stimulate a growing British feeling that they should finally wash their hands of the whole mess. British government people are well aware of these realities and seem eager to play down the actual costs to the United Kingdom of maintaining the British presence in Ulster. The Irish patriot who waves the bloody shirt against British imperialism is mightily outraged by the alleged exploitation of Ireland by England; indeed, the only thing that outrages him more is the growing English opinion that Britain would be better off were Ireland to sink back quietly into the sea.

Neither class conflict nor national allegiance nor settler-native antagonism nor imperialism can explain the troubles in Northern Ireland. I am forced to agree with 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 important to say it is not a theological war. Of course Father Murphy is right to ridicule the idea of opposing "extremists" exhibiting excessive religious devotion, whether to the Mass or to the King James Version. Especially among Protestants secularization has taken its toll, and the passions expressed often have little to do with any explicit commitment to belief system or church connection. Among educated Protestants there is less talk about defending the Reformation faith than about protecting civil liberties against the tyranny of Rome's minions. But whether the language is explicitly religious or more secularized, the thrust is still anti-Catholicism, and in Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, anti-Catholicism is accepted as proof enough of one's identity as a Protestant.

By this definition no one is more Protestant than the Reverend Dr. Ian Paisley, often described as the most colorful public figure in Northern Ireland. His detractors gossip about where he got the million dollars or more to build the new Martyrs Memorial Presbyterian Church, to which he removed himself from a hall in a seamiest section of Belfast. The building is in fact no more than any Oklahoma Baptist would think a fitting adornment to a ministry of more than moderate success. And to judge from the large crowd at a service one Sunday evening in June, I have no reason to doubt that all or most of the money came from Paisley's own people. Their generosity is no doubt commensurate with their gratitude for this champion who, he and they say, stands almost alone as the sure bulwark against the onslaught of popish conspiracy.

Mr. Ian, as he is called, is a huge man; he hulks and prowls about in a huge pulpit equipped with three microphones, lest one word be lost. His speech is best described as a growl ranging between loud and fulminating, relieved occasionally by the delivery of rasping confidences about the more nefarious elements of the Pope's designs to seize Ireland for himself. Ian Paisley is a most unpleasant man.

The week before the service the more established Protestant leaders (Paisley has his own denomination) had agreed to a new phase of ecumenical discussion with the Roman Catholics. Right arm raised high, waving a nineteenth-century antipapal tract from which he cites "proof" of Rome's strategy, Paisley fulminates: "They tell me the Protestant will sit on this side and the Catholic on that, and then the Protestant will strike a bargain with the Devil about what the Gospel means. No, I tell you I'd rather treat with the Devil than treat with the Pope! I'm quoting Charles Spurgeon [d. 1892] when I say that, that great man of God. You know me [a theatrically sly smile], I wouldn't say it that way, for I am a moderate man [chuckles from the audience]."

Then Mr. Ian begins to warm to his subject. "This morning in our own land in thousands of churches
a popish priest stood at an unholy altar and lifted a pancake above his head and said, 'Behold the Lamb of God.' A blasphemy against our Lord Jesus! And Irish people steeped in superstition fell to their knees and worshiped a pancake. . . . They believe a priest is equal to Jesus. I don't say that, they say it right here! [Again waving his "documentation." ] . . . They are told they'll go to hell unless absolved by priests who claim they can forgive sins [Protestant polemicists make much of the familiar scene of priests rushing to the side of victims of bombings and gun battles]. . . . Our land is stained by superstition and blasphemy, and they'll not be content until they force our land to bow the knee to idols.” Paisley ends on the note that some Catholics will condone a bloodbath against the Catholics. Ulster is not big enough for him. He needs the arena of the United Kingdom or, maybe even better, the arena of a united Ireland with the Reverend Dr. Ian Paisley as the Ruler of the North. In fairness to Paisley, it should be reported that several people told me of acts of personal and pastoral kindness done by the man. I am also open to the possibility, although no one suggested this, that that evening’s service at Martyrs Memorial was not typical. In any case, only a fool would count Mr. Ian out in any of the possible futures of Northern Ireland.

The little town of Armagh, about an hour and a half southwest of Belfast, is, I was told, the heart of Irish Catholicism, for it is the seat of William Cardinal Conway, Primate of All Ireland. Later, in Maynooth near Dublin, I was told that the seminary there had long established Maynooth as the intellectual center and heart of Irish Catholicism. Throughout Ireland there are as many ancient ruins as traffic lights—churches and abbeys a thousand years old or more, each making claim to being the heart of Irish Catholicism. One can only conclude that Ireland is the heart of Irish Catholicism. But the Primate is in Armagh, which is, not so incidentally, in Northern Ireland. (The Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist churches also encompass the whole of the island, but of course their constituencies in the Republic are small indeed.)

The cathedral church sits high on a windblown hill overlooking Armagh. It is as big and impressive as some of the parish churches of Brooklyn. Behind it is the episcopal palace, the equal of some of the country homes of Ulster’s business elite. The Cardinal must be in his mid-fifties. Ruddy complexioned, big, he strikes one as an agreeable man. I suppose affable is the word, very much like a heavieset Barry Fitzgerald in old Bing Crosby movies. In any case, not pompous, despite the cardinal red socks and the cassock with cardinal red piping. Offsetting these are the mod sandals, fumbling efforts to keep his pipe lit and an earthiness of manner reflecting his origins among the working-class Catholics of Falls Road.

In the interest of candor, it was agreed that the Cardinal was not speaking for direct attribution. The interview with the Cardinal was one of several with men of influence in Irish Catholicism.

First, I was assured, Irish Catholics in general, and the bishops least of all, are not excessively worked up about reunification of Ireland. It must be remembered that the Sinn Fein tradition of Irish mythification has always been viewed by the Church with considerable suspicion. The violence of Irish patriots has historically contained a strong anticlerical strain. It is nonsense to think the Church can compel the Provisionals, for example, to lay down their arms. The bishops have condemned the violence persis-
tently and unequivocally, but among the IRA madmen it is a veritable dogma that the Church's writ does not run to matters political.

Should there be a united Ireland? Of course that is something that all Catholics and, it might be supposed, most Protestants desire. If Protestants are nervous about the terms "unification" or "reunification," fearing that it means absorption into the Republic, then indeed there can be a genuinely "New Ireland" on the basis of mutual respect and partnership between North and South. Nor would there be a problem with devising a new flag, a new national anthem, a new constitution or anything else that might symbolize a genuine new beginning. But there cannot be even one little crown on the flag. Catholic families would fight to the death over that, too many fathers and brothers have died over that. And the national anthem should be a real Irish tune, not a dragged-out Irish version of the Queen.

Why do the bishops still insist upon the pre-ecumenical regulation that Protestant partners in mixed marriages must vow to relinquish their religious rights? The answer is simple: The bishops don't insist upon it, except maybe for one diocese, and the other bishops are talking to the good brother there. It is said the Irish hierarchy is out of step with the reforms of the post-Vatican II Church. With whom are they out of step? On mixed marriages and most every other question the Irish hierarchy is in line with the hierarchies of Germany, England, Canada, the United States and almost any other country you might name. No doubt the Irish are out of step with Holland, but that might not be such a bad idea. It's the people who claim the Irish hierarchy is out of step who are out of step.

Contraception need be no insurmountable problem. The position of the Catholic Church is clear enough on that, and of course the bishops wish everyone shared their view. But if in a New Ireland the Protestants want various contraceptive devices legalized, well, then, the law will just have to allow for that. That is their right, and the Catholic majority would not deprive them of it. The claim made by some Ulster Protestants that there are sixty or more Catholic priests in the IRA is absolute nonsense. To be sure, there's one priest in jail in England for his connection with the IRA, but that's a sad and completely untypical case. He's both an Englishman and a convert from Protestantism, and that's a most dangerous combination. They're the ones that come over and get bitten by the mystique of Ireland and then get entirely carried away with it all.

Now if one wants to talk about sympathy with the political goals of the IRA, that's a different matter altogether. Any priest with a pastoral heart cannot help but be moved by the grief and anger of his families when their sons are brought home filled with British bullets. There may be sixty priests in sympathy with the IRA's political goals, but it is very unlikely that there is even one who would condone the violence, to say nothing of being actively involved in it. If such a priest were ever found out, you can be sure the Church would come down on him like a ton of bricks.

The Catholic people are overwhelmingly with their bishops on the question of IRA violence. In Armagh recently there was a funeral for a Catholic boy killed by the British army. Over seven thousand people, more than the population of Armagh, turned out for the funeral. An observer might have thought, this showed the mass support the IRA is always claiming. But when the local IRA leader stood for election from the Republican club, he received only sixty-eight votes.

In no way should the New Ireland be proclaimed a Catholic country. There is really no such thing as a Catholic society, although there might be a society in which the majority is Catholic. One would hope it would be a Christian country, but even then Jews and agnostics must be guaranteed a full and first-rate place in it. So it isn't even too helpful to talk about a Christian country. There is, of course, a common concern for public morality; that is not peculiar to Ireland. In England, for example, one has to be at least sixteen years of age to get contraceptive devices. In a New Ireland there is no reason why the pill wouldn't be available on the same basis it is now available in the North, by prescription. But to pretend that such matters are purely sectarian concerns and have no bearing upon public morality shows a lack of insight. The same things can be said of divorce. In fact, many Protestants agree with the bishops on divorce; they have no less concern for the stability of family life than do the Catholic bishops. The question of divorce would have to be democratically negotiated. On the one hand, no one should be denied his or her rights just because there is a Catholic majority; on the other, a society has a legitimate interest in encouraging stable family life.

Too many Protestants are nearly paranoid about the alleged designs of the Catholic Church. For years some Protestants carried on about the clause in the
Republic's constitution that acknowledged the special status of the Catholic Church. When Catholic leaders indicated they had no special attachment to the clause and it was finally dropped from the constitution, you would think some Protestants would have taken note. But not at all. They just found something else to feed their paranoia. (When Conway was asked about it by a reporter, he indicated that he "would not shed a tear" over the clause's being dropped. He described it to me as "the most reported unshed tear in history.") In any case, Catholic bishops have more important things to do than spend all their time answering every complaint, fear and distortion that politically inspired people raise about the role and aspirations of the Church.

Of course there is a Catholic majority in the South, and there would be a smaller Catholic majority in a united Ireland. What are the bishops supposed to do? Tell their people they should stop being Catholics? It is not true that the bishops killed a recent effort in Dublin to legalize contraception. They simply issued a two-sentence statement urging that the members of the Dail should consult the sentiments of their constituents. As bishops they can hardly deplore the fact that they and their people agree on this issue. What some Protestants in the North are in effect demanding is that the Catholic Church go out of business before there can be a united Ireland. The bishops want to be reasonable, but no one should be surprised if they decline the invitation to close the Church in Ireland.

Such then were sentiments expressed at high levels of Catholic Church leadership. It is impossible to evaluate all the claims without much longer experience in Ireland, and even then much ambiguity would remain. When, for example, a Church of Ireland (Anglican) leader tells me that all Protestant partners in mixed marriages are still required to take the pre-Vatican II vow, I am reasonably sure he is wrong. But that there are enormous social pressures upon Protestants to convert, or at least have their children raised as Roman Catholics, seems more than likely. He is also no doubt accurate in thinking mixed marriages are hastening "the suicide of Protestantism in the South," since Protestants now make up only 4 or 5 per cent of the Republic's population. But what are the Catholic bishops to do beyond their present public affirmation of the religious rights of the Protestant partner? They can hardly discourage their people from wanting to share what they and their people view as the truer version of Christianity. Even if the bishops and parish pastors tried such discouragement, it would likely have little effect upon a people who have frequently asserted their confidence that they need neither bishop nor priest to tell them what it means to be a Catholic. The truth—which cannot help but seem a dismal truth to Northern Protestants—is that in the Republic the social dynamics of Catholicism are ever so much more vital than those of Protestantism. The Catholic bishops cannot be expected, nor asked, to try to change that circumstance.

The bishops do seem somewhat vague when they speak about the difference between a Christian society and a society that upholds Christian values. It is unthinkable, for example, that they would take the same relatively relaxed attitude toward abortion as they do toward contraception. But then, neither is the Ulster Protestant noted for his indifference to ethical considerations, and it thus seems extremely improbable that abortion would become an issue in the near future. In this sense the bishops' intuition that they have many Protestant allies when it comes to regulating sexual and marital behavior may well prove to be sound. In any case, the problems of working out a Christian public ethic in a formally secularized society are not peculiar to Ireland—although, one hastens to add, in this as in everything the problems assume a peculiarly Irish shape. I was told by some that the bishops are less than sincere, really only mouthing platitudes, when they speak of the rights of non-Catholics, that Catholic theologians have not even begun to think through the theological implications of nonsectarian society. Such complaints are hardly justified, however, if one but takes the time to talk with the theologians at Maynooth, for example, or to read their estimable Irish Theological Quarterly, or to study the several draft constitutions for a united Ireland that have been drawn up, in some cases in collaboration with Protestant churchmen and politicians. Some theologians, to be sure, complain that the bishops are indifferent to their efforts, if not actively hostile. A stranger wandering in the midst of mutual recriminations so articulate in expression and so refined by time cannot be expected to discover the facts, but he keeps in mind that the Irish have turned suspicion into an art form. My own impression is that the bishops are appreciative of the theologians' efforts, but far from satisfied, which, if I may say so without seeming ungracious, is roughly my own judgment of their work. Be that as it may, Irish Catholicism is still waiting for its John Courtney Murray who can theologically—and, perhaps more difficult, sociologically—make sense of whatever comes after the end of Christendom.

There remains the question of whether the Roman Catholic hierarchy is doing everything possible to combat the violence of the IRA. O'Brien, now Minister of Post and Telegraph for the Republic, says: "The Fenians [IRA, Sinn Fein et al.] can neither subvert the Church (nor do most of them wish to), nor can the Church quell the Fenians. When the Church condemns patriotic violence the Church becomes inaudible, without losing its authority in other spheres, such as . . . . The
Pfenians and the Church never really meet head on. This is because they are involved in different sections of the 'Irish Catholic religion.'" The Church takes care of the Catholic end of Irish Catholicism, and the Pfenians tend the Irish end.

Yet many Protestants persist in believing that, if the hierarchy is not actually sponsoring the violence, neither is it exercising its power to squelch the IRA. An English journalist and at least one Ulster Protestant told me the Pope could declare all of Ireland under interdict until the IRA violence ended. The idea is that the devout masses of Ireland, deprived of the sacraments and the Church's ministrations, would soon turn upon the IRA terrorists responsible for their plight. Aside from the questions of justice involved, however, Paul VI is not likely to unsheathe a sword last used more than eight hundred years ago by Innocent III against John of England, even if the sword of interdict could still be located in the arsenal of today's Vatican.

More sober minds wonder if a judicious use of individual excommunication might not have an inhibiting effect upon terrorists. After all, Conway and other leaders have termed the perpetrators of some terrorist acts "murderers," and it does not seem entirely appropriate to Protestant eyes to be welcoming murderers to Mass. Several priests acknowledged that they know, or could find out, who the IRA militants are in their parishes. "But excommunication?" said one. "That's not possible. Maybe in the old days when we had more authority, but Vatican II changed all that." This older priest's suggestion that the "liberals in the modern-day Church" prevent the effective use of ecclesiastical discipline is, however, not very persuasive in view of the fact that the present policy predates by far Pope John's opening of any windows. Closer to the facts is another priest's statement that excommunication would not make much difference, since the IRA relies increasingly upon "the young hooligans who don't give half a damn about the Church on Sunday or any other day of the week."

In truth, and as one Catholic leader pointed out, such a political use of excommunication on an individual basis has little precedent, perhaps no precedent that is really pertinent to the Irish situation. As teachers of the Church, the bishops must condemn evil, but, were they to follow the advice of some of their critics, they would have to establish an intelligence, police and court system, all of which is properly the work of the civil authorities. "If we did follow their advice, you could just imagine the screams of the anti-Catholics about the return of the Inquisition!" There is, it seemed to me, an inevitable and perhaps wise ambivalence in the long history of the Church's posture toward patriotic violence in Ireland. It is a mix of clear condemnation, pastoral empathy and a keen sense of the Church's limitations. Even were there uncontested moral rules for Christian behavior in times of civil conflict, the Irish Church would be unable to apply them with much political effect. It is probably the lot of the bishops and pastors to preside over the continuing agony of Ireland, to be "patient in tribulation, constant in prayer; weeping with those who weep, rejoicing with those who rejoice; and, so far as it depends upon them, living peaceably with all" (Romans 12).

I do not intend to suggest that Catholic Church leadership is doing all it can, for that was certainly not my impression. In some quarters the atmosphere of business-as-usual is pervasive, combined with a penchant for taking refuge in the soporific "this too shall pass." I am told that even in the North many priests have still not had the slightest active involvement in any kind of ecumenical exchange with their Protestant counterparts. And among those who have been most actively involved one sometimes detects an understandable but troubling impatience with it all, a feeling that maybe it isn't worth the candle to answer all the anti-Catholic carping or try to relieve every Protestant suspicion. There was also a disturbing condescension, only a bare tolerance, shown toward what struck me as some rather splendid efforts to bring Catholic and Protestant lay people, children and adults, together in common work and prayer. In addition to indigenous efforts along these lines, Christians in Europe and America (here through the National Council of Churches) have played an important role in several projects. Church leaders with whom I spoke, both Protestant and Catholic, were understandably impressed by elements of naiveté in some of these efforts but perhaps not impressed enough by the importance of symbolic actions that can have, as history amply testifies, powerful effect upon "the real world." Beneath the condescending remarks one occasionally discerns the speaker's excessive preoccupation with resisting encroachments, real or imagined, upon his ecclesiastical turf. The ministry of reconciliation, I should think, needs all the help it can get.

Some of the more thoughtful Protestant church leaders with whom I spoke at length would not, I think, contest most of what I have said about the Catholic bishops. On the particular point of whether the bishops have done their duty in opposing IRA violence, there was ready agreement. A less sympathetic observer might suspect Protestant leaders of not judging the Catholic bishops too harshly on this score lest the Protestant divines be held accountable for not restraining the Ulster Defense Association and the patriotic murderers in their spiritual care. I believe such a suspicion unwarranted, although, to be sure, no one is exempt from the temptation to confuse lack of courage with absence of opportunity or to evade responsibility by pleading impotence. But now we must turn briefly to the problems of Northern Ireland as seen through the eyes of some key Protestant church leaders.

(This is the first part of a two-part article)