My mother didn't care if I wore green on St. Patrick's Day, but my grandmother McWilliams did. Her position was serenely logical: We were Protestants, and our color was orange. Grandmother persuaded me, at any rate, though I wore green once or twice out of a combination of conformity and spite. When I read Irish history many years later, I knew that our side won at Enniskillen and the Boyne, and for some fine I have made a point of wearing an orangec tie on March 17. But where my daughters want to wear green this St. Patrick's Day (and they will), my response is more likely to be my mother's: Why not?

After all, my secular voice reminds me, we use Yiddish terms and eat pasta. "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's," the ad reminds us, so why should you have to be Catholic to wear the green? Why should St. Patrick's Day be any different from other ethnic traditions and holidays?

Historically, the distinction is clear enough. Holidays like San Gennaro, Yom Kippur, and Chinese New Year are not defined by the presence of an enemy. But in its modern form St. Patrick's Day—and especially the wearing of the green—grew up as an expression of opposition to British rule and the Protestant presence in Ireland. It was, in other words, a partisan festival, as inappropriate for Protestants to celebrate as it is for Republicans to attend a Jackson Day dinner.

The liberal and secular objection is obvious: Can't we leave all the old conflicts and sectarian struggles in the past and in the Old World? Today, only a few fanatics even introduce Northern Ireland into the festivities. Why can't St. Patrick's Day simply celebrate the things we all admire about the Irish heritage? Democrats celebrate Lincoln's birthday: Why can't St. Patrick's Day be something for all of us?

It can, but only in a special way. To respect and admire the Irish—Catholic and Protestant—is to understand and appreciate all of the aspects of Irish life and history that have made Ireland's people what they are. The heritage of Catholic Ireland is made up of more than quaintness, whimsy, and drink; it was fired by hard times and great passions, memories of blood and humiliation, and the secret councils of revenge and hope. The Irish of both parties value families and friends with a devotion that is savage and desperate as well as kind. In Irish tradition, community is the bread of life and religion is its leaven. In this sense the Green and the Orange go together. As the flag of the Irish Republic blazons, each presumes the presence of the other.

Contemporary Americans feel uncomfortable with both Irish traditions. Liberalism, the creed of the Framers, was born in a desire for civil peace and a hatred for religious strife. Carried to its logical extreme, that secular teaching created a taboo on whatever might give offense. That aspect of our culture urges Americans to limit the bards to small-talk, dwindling Ireland's story down to a pleasantry. From this comes St. Patrick's Day in its present American form.

The great test of a pluralistic society, however, goes beyond so negative a peace. It consists in the challenge to learn and profit from the heritage of others without sacrificing our own. Civility does not require that I adopt your manners, your creed, or your costume. It does demand the empathic effort to understand you and your ways as you understand them yourself. Civility, like equality, is a sameness of spirit that does not require us to deny our differences. In fact, when civility is strongest, we can argue with some heat—confiding in our political commonality. Only diplomats are always polite; a political society requires stronger sentiments.

Northern Ireland is as intractable as it is, I think, partly because both sides believe that a genuinely pluralistic society is impossible and that war is better than the slow loss of one's birthright. Too often American society confirms Ulster's worst fear; more and more of us have nothing but a mess of potage. Evidence to the contrary would be a major contribution to the future of Northern Ireland. In that sense, Protestants can show St. Patrick their best love and respect by the wearing of the orange. As it seems to me, my grandmother was right after all.

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