

Political and Religious Ideas during the Irish Revolution

Richard Bourke

The political thought of the Irish Revolution is a conspicuously neglected subject.¹ This has to count as a highly curious situation. The Revolution was clearly a political event, promoted on all sides by writers, educationalists and propagandists, many with a commitment to intellectual innovation. New values, which presuppose an engagement with the legitimacy of older values, pervaded the scene. So surely fresh ideas played a major role in the transformations of early twentieth-century Ireland? In some sense, it has always been recognised that the Revolution of 1912 to 1923 was nothing if not an event in intellectual history. Yet it has also been automatically assumed that other factors played a decisive role, above all developments in social, economic, military, political and constitutional history. If the period is viewed in the context of the preceding fifty years, then it is clear that it was marked by considerable social and economic upheaval.² Equally obvious is the impact of the military situation – above all the establishment of the Volunteers, and the advent of the First World War. No less apparent is the scale of constitutional and political change, beginning in the 1880s. In that sense the history of ideas can enjoy no privileged status in explaining the events of early twentieth-century Ireland. However, we need to remember that social developments were partly shaped by conceptual change.³ The very categories in terms of which social arrangements came to be understood were subject to invention and revision. The same applies to military, political and constitutional history. At every level, therefore, new forms of understanding affected the course of history.⁴

¹ Though see now Richard Bourke, Senia Pašeta and Colin Reid's contributions to *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Sixth Series, 27 (2017), pp. 175–232. For important earlier treatments of the period that took belief and ideology seriously, see Nicholas Mansergh, *Ireland in the Age of Reform and Revolution* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940) revised as *The Irish Question, 1840–1921* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1965); E. Rumpf and A. C. Hepburn, *Nationalism and Socialism in Twentieth-Century Ireland* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1977); Tom Garvin, *Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858–1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Paul Bew, *Ideology and the Irish Question: Ulster Unionism and Irish Nationalism, 1912–1916* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); Patrick Maume, *The Long Gestation: Irish Nationalist Life, 1891–1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1999).

² Standard accounts covering the period include Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1973); D. G. Boyce ed., *The Revolution in Ireland, 1879–1923* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988); David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands, 1912–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter Hart, *The IRA at War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Maurice Walsh, *Bitter Freedom: Ireland in a Revolutionary World, 1918–1923* (London: Faber and Faber, 2015); Eugenio F. Biagini and Mary E. Daly, *The Cambridge History of Modern Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Fearghal McGarry, 'Revolution, 1916–1923' in Thomas Bartlett ed., *The Cambridge History of Ireland, 1880–Present*, IV (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 258–95.

³ For a pathbreaking treatment of European history from 1890 to the 1920s in these terms, see the classic study by H. Stuart Hughes, *Consciousness and Society* (1958) (London and New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁴ This was of course the basic contention of German cultural history (*Geistesgeschichte*) from Hegel to Weber. On this see Frederick H. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

Yet, accepting this fact, intellectual life played a still more significant role in the Revolution insofar as it operated as an independent force.⁵ I have already acknowledged that in some general sense, this has long been recognised. After all, W. B. Yeats, for one, notoriously referred to the ‘great stir of thought’ that began in the 1890s as having effectively driven subsequent events.⁶ Now, no one thinks that modes of thinking actually *drove* developments on their own; yet we can all accept that they played some kind of role. What was that role? There is no time here to reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of the Yeatsian account. On the one hand, it has been decisive for the interpretation of the period. Remarkably, the poet’s impact on perceptions of the crucible of 1916, as well as his influence on how we think about the wider collisions of the period, has been decisive from F. S. L. Lyons to R. F. Foster.⁷ On the other hand, his ‘stir of thought’ has largely been viewed as referring to the constituent elements of various movements for cultural renaissance – from the Gaelic League to the Literary Revival.⁸ It is perhaps right that intellectual ferment was concentrated in these cultural movements, but it remains the case that the world of culture has been viewed in literary or sociological terms with the actual content of intellectual experiment receiving comparatively little treatment. I want to claim that content matters – that in an era of disputatiousness, the terms of dispute are significant; that faced with debates that generated conflict, we need to know what the quarrel was about. We need to know the debates in detail, and not in general outline, and we need to know how they interacted with habitual modes of thought. This amounts to saying that, when it comes to studying past beliefs, while the historian might usefully describe a sensibility or ‘consciousness’, they must also analyse the substance and structure of argument.⁹

⁵ This raises complicated issues about the workings of individual motivation and social causation in the human sciences that are beyond the scope of this article, though the general point was accepted by even Lewis Namier, *1848: The Revolution of the Intellectuals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1946).

⁶ W. B. Yeats, ‘The Irish Dramatic Movement’ (Nobel Lecture, 15 December 1923) in *idem, Dramatis Personae: Autobiographies* (London, 1936), 177. Given the origins of the claim, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has been taken more seriously by literary critics. See Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 1–2.

⁷ F. S. L. Lyons, *Ireland since the Famine: 1850 to the Present* (1971, 1973, 1990); Roy Foster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London, 2014).

⁸ For discussion, see G. J. Watson, *Irish Identity and the Literary Revival: Synge, Yeats, Joyce, and O’Casey* (London: 1979); John Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation State* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1987); R. F. Foster, ‘Thinking from Hand to Mouth: Anglo-Irish Literature, Gaelic Nationalism and Irish Politics in the 1890s’ in *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993); R. F. Foster, ‘The Irish Literary Revival’ in Thomas Bartlett ed., *The Cambridge History of Ireland: Volume IV: 1880 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁹ On the relevant distinctions, see Eric Nelson, ‘What Kind of Book is *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution?*’, *The New England Quarterly*, 91:1 (2018), pp. 147–71.

The avoidance of studying the substance of argument is a common failing of mainstream history. Some of this is a direct result of habits of research, largely geared towards collecting and synthesising material. Still more it is a consequence of an underlying theory that privileges power and politics over principles and precepts. The assumed primacy of social structures and institutional arrangements is also a function of the inherited protocols of historical research. In the Irish case this largely derives from the widespread cult of the archive – the new fact added to the heap of data, originally fostered by T. W. Moody and R. D. Edwards.¹⁰ Given the Revolutionary origins of modern Irish history, there has of course been some interest in the culture of insurgency, and consequently in the mindsets that polarised opinion. Yet here again, the use of principles and precepts have rarely been anatomised. The focus on sensibility at the expense of argument is evident in Roy Foster’s recent study of the period, *Vivid Faces*. The book is avowedly an account of shifting attitudes, named ‘mentalities’.¹¹ Yet much of the cultural production of the period involved more than simple ‘attitudes’. The interventions of Horace Plunkett, T. M. Kettle, AE, John Eglinton, Robert Lynd, Arthur Griffith, James Connolly, Alice Stopford Green, Ronald McNeill, Eoin MacNeill, Helena Molony, Louie Bennett, Hannah Sheehy-Skiffington and Patrick Pearse are not well captured by packaging them as dispositions or habits of mind. The problem is even more evident in Diarmaid Ferriter’s recent claim that conceptual innovation is nowhere to be found in the era of the Irish Revolution.¹² This assertion sits uncomfortably with an earlier statement by Ferriter to the effect that the period was marked by a ‘fermentation of ideas’.¹³ So in Foster ideas are looked upon as a frame of mind, while in Ferriter they are thought to exist both everywhere and nowhere, at the same time shaping everything and nothing. And, in both cases, concepts themselves are rarely analysed.

Who can doubt the role of mentalities in shaping the course of histories? For example: the abhorrence of superstition played a major role in the Reformation.¹⁴ The attitude of suspicion in pre-Revolutionary America had a decisive impact on the events of the 1770s.¹⁵

¹⁰ Ciaran Brady ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1994), Richard Bourke, ‘Historiography’ in *The Princeton History of Modern Ireland*, eds. Richard Bourke and Ian McBride (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016), pp. 271–91.

¹¹ R. F. Forster, *Vivid Faces: The Revolutionary Generation in Ireland, 1890–1923* (London, 2014), p. xviii.

¹² Diarmaid Ferriter, *A Nation and Not a Rabble: The Irish Revolution, 1913–1923* (2015), p. 9.

¹³ Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* (London: Profile, 2004), p. 111.

¹⁴ See Helen Parish and William G. Naphy eds., *Religion and Superstition in Reformation Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).

¹⁵ See Richard J. Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (1952) (New York: Vintage, 2008).

And anti-clericalism had a major influence on the early phases of the French Revolution.¹⁶ Yet while all of this is true, presumably no one would want to deny the significance of concepts as well as mentalities in giving direction to these developments? For example: argumentation about theological precepts was integral to the religious crises of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹⁷ Similarly: divergent conceptions of popular sovereignty were fundamentally significant in triggering the American and French Revolutions.¹⁸ In each case, attitudes were important, but they fed on new ideas.

The Irish case does not differ from general historical experience: habits of distrust towards British authority were common among sections of the Irish Catholic population throughout the seventy years between the famine and the Easter Rising. In *Modern Ireland*, Roy Foster sought to capture this mindset with the term ‘Anglophobia’.¹⁹ This diagnosis picks up on a long-established preoccupation with the progress of Irish hostility to England and the Empire. W. E. H. Lecky, in 1903, conveyed his consternation at what he dubbed ‘the most passionate hatred of the British Empire’ that had emerged in the generation of Mitchell and Lalor.²⁰ The French commentator, L. Paul-Dubois, in his *Contemporary Ireland* of 1908, included a chapter on ‘Anti-English Feeling’. ‘Hatred of England still exists in Ireland’, he wrote. ‘At the commencement of the twentieth century the nation is still rebellious and indomitable’.²¹ In this same vein, disaffection, Foster wanted to argue, was driven by a ‘phobia’ against England.²²

However, this blanket description might reasonably be said to be excessively loaded in its implications. Arguably legitimate mistrust is presented as irrational fear, or even as raw prejudicial disdain. But if the Anglophobia-thesis is starkly simplifying and moralising, it has

¹⁶ See Charles A. Gliozzo, ‘The Philosophes and Religion: Intellectual Origins of the Dechristianization Movement in the French Revolution’, *Church History*, 40: 3 (September 1971), pp. 273–83.

¹⁷ Quentin Skinner, *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought: Volume Two, the Age of the Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

¹⁸ Friedrich von Gentz, *The Origin and Principles of the American Revolution Compared with the Origin and Principles of the French Revolution* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 2010); Edmund S. Morgan, *Inventing the People: The Rise of Popular Sovereignty in England and America* (New York: Norton, 1988); Richard Bourke and Quentin Skinner eds., *Popular Sovereignty in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Richard Tuck, *The Sleeping Sovereign: The Invention of Modern Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹⁹ R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988, 1989). The subject index has fourteen references under the term.

²⁰ W. E. H. Lecky, Preface (1903) to *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland* (1861) (London: Longmans, 1912), 2 vols., I, p. xv.

²¹ L. Paul-Dubois, *Contemporary Ireland* (Dublin: Maunsel and Company, 1908), p. 173.

²² Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 449: ‘Anti-materialism was often a code for anti-Englishness’. The reverse, of course, might equally be the case. See Paul-Dubois, *Contemporary Ireland*, p. 181: ‘Behind Ireland’s historic hatred of England there is a profound mental and moral antagonism’.

a grain of truth: sensibility was indeed important in structuring Anglo-Irish relations. The insight is prone to bogus adaptation, exemplified by Matthew Arnold's quirky musings on the conflict between Celtic mysticism and Anglo-Norman pragmatism.²³ The crudity of the Arnoldian message has survived down to our own times, exemplified by Charles Townshend's book on *Easter 1916*, where (remarkably) the contrast between the coolly calculating English and the passionate Irish survives.²⁴ Arnold's ideas about Irish sentimentalism drew on Ernest Renan's 1857 *Poetry of the Celtic Races*, and by the end of the century the Arnoldian strain of cultural commentary had spawned a succession of cognate imitators.²⁵ The liberal parliamentarian and publicist, J. M. Robertson, published his *The Saxon and the Celt* in 1897.²⁶ In the same year, the mathematician and feminist, Sophie Bryant, penned an article on 'The Celtic Mind'.²⁷ Cumulatively, treatments of the kind induce a healthy scepticism about the very idea of national character, and the theory of cultural dispositions that underlies it. But while popular opinion might be questionably represented (as with Foster), or subject to implausible generalisation (as with Arnold), social attitudes are still obvious facts of life that motivate human behaviour. In the absence of distrust of imperial government measures, the Irish Revolution would be inconceivable. However, distrust was also structured in terms of principles. These principles were populated by ideas, and embedded in arguments. These too, in their way, were motivating – or at least they guided and gave meaning to underlying dispositions.

One could view the epic struggles of 1912 to 1923 in brutally reductive terms as merely a change in personnel: one class of rulers in Ireland was simply replaced by another. Looked at this way, ideas may have swirled around, but they played no role in shaping the future.²⁸ Yet such a model presupposes two things: first, that the change of leadership was not accompanied

²³ Matthew Arnold, *English Literature and Irish Politics* in R. H. Super ed., *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* (Ann Arbor, 1968–76): IX, pp. 277 ff. Cf. Philippe Daryl, *Les Anglais en Irlande: Notes et Impressions* (Paris: J. Hetzel, 1888), p. 109; William O'Brien, 'The Irish National Idea' in idem, *Irish Ideas* (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1893), p. 10. For discussion of this theme, see Seamus Deane, 'Arnold, Burke and the Celts' in idem, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985); David Dwan, *The Great Community: Culture and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008).

²⁴ Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 34: 'the characteristic British values of reasonableness, compromise and non-violence seemed unable to cope with the passions evoked by the threat of Home Rule'.

²⁵ Ernest Renan, 'The Poetry of the Celtic Races' (1857) in *Poetry of the Celtic Races and Other Essays* (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1896).

²⁶ J. M. Robertson, *The Saxon and the Celt: A Study in Sociology* (London: University Press, 1897).

²⁷ Sophie Bryant, 'The Celtic Mind', *Contemporary Review*, 72 (July–December 1897). Cf. idem, *Sophie Bryant Celtic Ireland* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co, 1889); idem, *The Genius of the Gael: A Study in Celtic Psychology and Its Manifestations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1913).

²⁸ Ronan Fanning, *Fatal Path: British Government and Irish Revolution, 1910–1922* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013).

by changes in opinion; and second, that perceptions of legitimacy stood still. However, in fact, as we all know, opinion altered radically, and ideas of legitimacy were dramatically reformulated.²⁹ This amounts to saying, first, that dispositions changed – the incidence of distrust after all increased. And, second, it forces us to conclude that principles were revised, giving rise to serious intellectual disputes. The history of political ideas might look at either or both of these vectors: at prevailing opinions, seen as conventional beliefs, or at the principles that were used to confer legitimacy on actions and values. In other words, it might examine intellectual innovation or established ideology. The study of how, and at what rate, entrenched beliefs are modified by the introduction of new conceptions of legitimacy amounts to accounting for dissemination and uptake. Each of these tasks poses peculiar demands, and individual historians tend to focus on one or two of these projects rather than taking on all three at once. Despite this division of labour, I suggest that a complete picture requires an account of each of these processes – of established political consciousness, new theoretical principles, and the ways in which the latter succeeded in modifying the former over time.

Theoretical principles are usually formulated in argument, and so, as I have already argued, the historian of such doctrines is obliged to engage in analysis. The demands of analysis might vary – as between reconstructing the precepts of (say) John Locke, and the arguments developed by (say) Thomas Carlyle. In each case, the level of philosophical concentration will vary – which does not, of course, necessarily mean that interpretative complexity tracks philosophical sophistication. As far as material relevant to my discussion today goes, it is clear that the writings of James Connolly are not as conceptually taxing as those of Marx. But they involve concentrated argument nonetheless, and a proper understanding of what Connolly is doing requires an appropriate level of attention. I am arguing that there has been a lack of attention focussed on the political thought of the Irish Revolution. Instead of scrutinising the relevant primary sources, Irish historical literature has too often explored attitudes and ideas in terms of imported frameworks of interpretation. Prominent amongst these interpretative schemes is notion that Irish nationalism was a political religion. The thesis was first popularised by Conor Cruise O’Brien, and later recycled derivatively by Richard English.³⁰ It is also dotted

²⁹ Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: Two Centuries of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983).

³⁰ Conor Cruise O’Brien, *States of Ireland* (London: Hutchinson, 1972), Epilogue; idem, *Religion and Politics* (Coleraine: The New University of Ulster, 1984), passim; idem, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1994), passim; Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2006), p. 274: ‘The Rising represented a moving and excluding intertwining of religion and politics, in an expressly Catholic version’.

around the work of Ronan Fanning, Roy Foster, Tom Garvin, Marianne Elliott and Charles Townshend.³¹ But is it valid?

The theory of political religions pre-dates O'Brien, having a European genealogy stretching back from Raymond Aron to Tocqueville and then to Burke.³² The theory was originally intended as a way of thinking about the transition from conflicts characteristic of the wars of religion to modern ideological struggle. By the time O'Brien stumbled upon the thesis in the 1950s, he was led to associate extreme ideologies with the kinds of fanaticism reminiscent of religious enthusiasm.³³ From here it was but a short step to associating nationalism, and still more republicanism, with an array of superstitious proclivities from piety to mysticism to dogmatism and sacralism. The main problem with the claim is that the primary documents of the period rarely support the thesis. If one surveys the range of literature from Home Rulers to separatists, arguments are rarely supported by appeal to religion. This generalisation applies to Casement, Kettle, Childers, Connolly, Griffith and Alice Stopford Green. Figures such as these certainly had religious commitments, but their political thinking revolved around allegiance, accountability, constitutionalism and the state.³⁴ What role, then, did religion play in the debate?

From a Unionist point of view, religion was the crux of Protestant alarm about Irish nationalism. In 1914, in addressing Ulster grievances in the face of impending devolution, Horace Plunkett addressed the challenge that Home Rule would mean Rome Rule. 'Catholic laymen' throughout Ireland, he suggested, would be led by the experience of political responsibility to separate the 'ecclesiastical' from the 'political' sphere in a way that had been impossible under the Union. The Catholic populace would gradually 'relieve' its priesthood of its quasi-political functions, practice the virtue of toleration towards their neighbours, and

³¹See Charles Townshend, 'Religion, War and Identity in Ireland', *The Journal of Modern History*, 76: 4 (December 2004), pp. 882–902. For a more focussed account, see Marianne Elliott, *When God Took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland – Unfinished History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

³² Edmund Burke, *Second Letter on a Regicide Peace* (1796) in *The Writings and Speeches of Edmund Burke*, ed. Paul Langford (Oxford, 1970–2015), 9 vols., IX, 278; Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Old Regime and the Revolution* (1856), trans. Alan S. Kahan (Chicago, IL, 1998–2001), 2 vols, I, 99–101; Raymond Aron, 'L'avenir des religions séculières' (1944), *Commentaire*, 8:28–29 (1985), pp. 369–83.

³³ Donat O'Donnell [Conor Cruise O'Brien], *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 57,

³⁴ Roger Casement, *The Crime Against Ireland and How the War May Right It* (New York: N.P., 1914); Thomas M. Kettle, *Home Rule Finance: An Experiment in Justice* (Dublin, Maunsel, 1911); Erskine Childers, *Military Rule in Ireland* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1920); Conor McCarthy ed., *The Revolutionary and Anti-Imperialist Writings of James Connolly, 1893–1916* (Edinburgh, 2016); Arthur Griffith, *The Resurrection of Hungary: A Parallel; for Ireland* (Dublin: Whelan & Son, 1918); Alice Stopford Green, *Loyalty and Disloyalty: What It Means in Ireland* (Dublin: Maunsel, 1918).

secure the independence of politics from their church.³⁵ When Plunkett wrote, this view was already a common nationalist refrain. In 1911, Francis Cruise O'Brien, father of Conor Cruise O'Brien, and one-time journalist on the *Freeman's Journal*, conspired with W. E. G. Lloyd to reissue the concluding chapter of W. E. H. Lecky's 1861 *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, to which they added an Introduction. There they declared that 'the establishment of National Self-Government in Ireland is the surest means of destroying sectarian ill-feeling'.³⁶ Given the context in which this sentence appeared, it is clear that Lloyd and O'Brien were attempting to co-opt Lecky to the cause of Home Rule. The effort carried a certain superficial credibility since Lecky, latterly a powerful advocate of the unionist cause, had begun his career celebrating the rise of self-government in the eighteenth century, culminating in the virtues of Grattan's parliament.

The first edition of Lecky's 1861 study traced the progress of what he termed 'public opinion' in Ireland. This began with the establishment of constitutional monarchy on the island during the period 1688–91, and was secured by the allegiance which that settlement gradually generated. What Lecky had in mind here was the advent of civic consciousness, or patriotism, which he contrasted with divisive sentiments. Patriotism was subsequently dismantled under the Union as civic-mindedness was deprived of an immediate object of allegiance. With the rise of Daniel O'Connell, Lecky argued, national sentiment became more narrowly denominational. Consequently, in the years before the Second Reform Bill was contemplated, it seemed to Lecky that the best means of restoring a broad-based allegiance would involve the restoration of devolved political authority in Ireland. The alternative was factionalism inspired by religious difference: 'Sectarian animosity', Lecky insisted, 'has completely taken the place of purely political feeling, and paralyses all the energies of the people'.³⁷ Lecky's argument did not only resonate with Lloyd and O'Brien, it also inspired Erskine Childers in the period when he was advocating a Home Rule solution for Ireland. Likewise in 1911, in the *Framework of Home Rule*, Childers cited Lecky's plea for a restoration of the Irish parliament: 'We maintain... that no truth is more clearly stamped upon the page of history, and more distinctly deducible from the constitution of the human mind, than that a national feeling is the only check to sectarian passions'.³⁸ Childers recognised that Lecky later converted to the unionist

³⁵ Horace Plunkett, *A Better Way: An Appeal to Ulster Not to Desert Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis & Co, 1914), pp. 31 ff.

³⁶ W. E. H. Lecky, *Clerical Influences*, ed. with an Introduction by W. E. G. Lloyd and F. Cruise O'Brien (Dublin: Maunsel and Co., 1911), p. 13.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5.

³⁸ Erskine Childers, *The Framework of Home Rule* (London: John Arnold, 1911), p. 183.

cause, yet still, Childers thought, the commitment to nationalism remained a constant in his writings. However, we need to be clear that nationalism for Lecky was a term for patriotism, and that this meant civic engagement, or politicised allegiance embracing the population at large. These principles were not to be confused with democratisation, which Lecky avidly opposed in his later career.

Childers claimed that it was ‘impossible to make out a historical case for the religious intolerance of Roman Catholics in Ireland’.³⁹ However, his point was in fact that intolerance was already at hand, fomented by a Romanised priesthood and foisted on a supine population. The only hope for this diseased condition was to deprive the Catholic clergy of their political influence, and deflect the loyalty of their parishioners onto the larger civic domain. Childers also argued that there was no basis for expecting ‘a Catholic tyranny in the future’.⁴⁰ Yet here too, in the decades following 1861, Lecky came to dissent from this prognosis. After the publication of his *History of the Rise of Rationalism in Europe* in 1865, Lecky set about revising *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*. The new edition appeared in 1871, to which he had added a new Introduction. The revised work was now appearing under utterly new circumstances. The Church of Ireland had been disestablished in 1869, and the first Land Act had been carried in 1870. The Fenian outrages of 1867 had been contained, yet the ensuing vitriol of the separatist press, along with the election of O’Donovan Rossa, pointed to escalating antipathy. The recrudescence of agrarian violence further alarmed Lecky. He wrote, accordingly, that ‘the public opinion of Ireland has palpably deteriorated’.⁴¹ What he meant was that civic consciousness had declined. Public opinion, for Lecky, involved an ethically charged vision of political life. It implied an engaged investment in affairs on the part of the population, loyal to one another and to the political class – with the latter populated by the professions and propertied gentlemen. Powerful clericalism, mass politics, sectarian sentiment, violent dissent, and hostility to landed wealth all militated against genuinely ‘public’ attitudes. The extension of the franchise in 1884, the introduction of the Home Rule bill in 1886, the conduct of the Irish Party in the imperial parliament, and agitation over land reform culminating in a full-blooded assault on landlordism, all served to increase Lecky’s dismay.

With the publication of his Preface to the 1903 edition of *Leaders of Public Opinion in Ireland*, Lecky’s disappointment was complete. In the 1880s, as Gladstone began to cite the historian to explain his own conversion to the reintroduction of an Irish parliament, Lecky’s

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Cited in Lecky, Preface to *Leaders of Public Opinion*, I, p. viii.

commitment to unionism deepened. Already in 1871 he had paraded his scepticism about Isaac Butt's scheme for a devolved government in Ireland: 'it is only by slow, cautious and gradual steps that self-government can be in some degree restored'.⁴² These steps would be incremental indeed, conditioned by what Lecky termed 'the secularising intellectual tendencies of the age' against a background of rising material prosperity.⁴³ The best, nearest possible concrete result of this trajectory would be a system of 'united education' in Ireland, subjecting the denominations to shared institutions and a common curriculum.⁴⁴ With the ensuing reduction in sectarian animosity, the sphere of local government might be expanded, granting opportunities to political talent in the country, and establishing a framework for civic allegiance. Thus, whatever devolutionary programme his ardour in 1861 might have heralded, already by 1871 the larger-scale repeal plans of Butt looked grandiose to Lecky. By the end of the decade they seemed utterly chimerical. In the age of Davitt and Parnell, under the sway of Proudhonism and mass democracy, patriotism in Ireland had inevitably been succeeded by separatist sentiment infused with sectarianism.

Lecky remains one of the most astute political intelligences among the pre-Revolutionary generation of unionists in Ireland. A student of Burke, with wide interests in European intellectual culture, he evolved an account of the intricate relations between religion, national allegiance, and constitutionalism on the smaller island.⁴⁵ But, as a defender of the sanctity of property and the virtues of quasi-aristocratic government, he was swimming against the current. This forced him, for most of his mature life, to direct his fire against the assumptions of his earliest political ideals.⁴⁶ Yet some among the Revolutionary generation that succeeded him in time were seduced by his original doctrinal commitments. For many in the ranks of advanced nationalist sentiment, it was Lecky who offered the most cogent arguments against the enemies of Home Rule. As is well known, among the most dedicated opponents of self-government in Ireland were the members of the Protestant community in the north-east of the island. For them, it was Lecky after his conversion who supplied much-needed

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See Lecky's Speech at the centenary of Burke's death cited in *A Memoir of the Right Hon. William Edward Hartpole Lecky, by His Wife* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1909). For general accounts of Lecky, see Benjamin Evans Lippincott, *Victorian Critics of Democracy: Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Stephen, Maine, Lecky* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1938); Donal McCartney, *W. E. H. Lecky, Historian and Politician, 1838–1903* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1994); Benedikt Stuchtey, *W. E. H. Lecky (1838–1903): Historisches Denken und politisches Urteilen eines anglo-irischen Gelehrten* (Göttingen and Zurich: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997).

⁴⁶ W. E. H. Lecky, 'Ireland in the Light of History' (1891) in *idem, Historical and Political Essays* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1910); W. E. H. Lecky, *Democracy and Liberty* (1896) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1981), 2 vols.

ammunition, although much of their case was based on plain sociological observation. The Rt. Rev. Charles Frederick D’Arcy, the Bishop of Down, spoke for many when he wrote on ‘The Religious Difficulty under Home Rule’ in Simon Rosenbaum’s 1912 compilation, *Against Home Rule: The Case for the Union*. There D’Arcy proposed that among the deepest convictions of the unionist population was the view that, with ‘the establishment of a separate legislature and executive in Ireland, the religious difficulty, which is ever with us here, would be increased enormously’.⁴⁷

The piety of Irish Catholics was accepted on all sides. Controversy surrounded the implications of this shared assumption. For D’Arcy, lay devotion left the hierarchy unchallenged, enabling the church to pursue its age-old aversion to toleration. He commented: ‘the Roman Church still formally claims the power to control states, to depose princes, to absolve subjects from their allegiance, to extirpate heresy’.⁴⁸ In case these antique provisions seemed superannuated in practice, D’Arcy reminded his audience of the more pressing challenges that affected the Protestant faithful faced with the prospect of an Irish parliament. Key here, in the first instance, was the 1907 *Ne Temere* decree, adversely affecting Protestants in matrimonial union with Catholics. Also disquieting was the prospect of ecclesiastical sites, along with the endowments of the Church of Ireland, being claimed as a matter of prescriptive right by the Catholic clergy, and supported by an Irish legislature. What D’Arcy feared was that superstition might combine with vengeance when political authority on the island fell to the majority population. D’Arcy chided English Liberals for their patent naivete in contending that legislative autonomy in Ireland would be accompanied by independence of spirit. Sectarianism, on the contrary, would proliferate under Home Rule – fuelled by the resurgent zeal of a politically empowered Romanism.⁴⁹ This apprehension was seconded by Rev. Samuel Prenter, the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church. Prenter observed that the principles of Ultramontanism had been stronger in Ireland than on the continent, pointing to the tenacity of the Irish brigade dispatched to support the Pope against Italian nationalism. ‘Irishmen are’, he concluded, ‘more Roman than Rome itself’.⁵⁰ Self-government could only entrench such bigotry. It could hardly be expected to mollify it.

⁴⁷ C. F. D’Arcy, ‘The Religious Difficulty under Home Rule: (i) The Church View’ in S. Rosenbaum ed., *Against Home Rule: The Case for the Union* (London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1912), p. 204.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 211 ff.

⁵⁰ Samuel Prenter, ‘The Religious Difficulty under Home Rule: (i) The Nonconformist View’ in *ibid.*, p. 215. Cf. Anon., *Is Ulster Right?* (London: John Murray, 1913): ‘the great line of cleavage is religion’.

There was of course a nationalist response to such accusations. The year in which Simon Rosenbaum's *Against Home Rule* appeared, the Professor of Constitutional Law at University College London, J. H. Morgan, put together a pro-devolution collection on *The New Constitution of Ireland*. This included a number of entries on the question of religion, covering Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian and Methodist perspectives. The most orthodox contribution defended Catholic intolerance in the following terms: unflinching commitment to credal dogma was usually modified in practice by Catholics through inter-personal accommodation, or charity.⁵¹ In effect they blamed the sin but forgave the sinner. The Church of Ireland contribution to the Morgan collection was scarcely more encouraging: might not the gift of self-government inspire kindness among Catholics, inquired the prelate?⁵² Beyond these unsettlingly hazy expectations, more robust arguments for the probable demise of sectarian attitudes in a self-governing Ireland were to be found among proponents of Home Rule. Among the more convincing accounts was the intervention by the Rev. James O. Hannay, a Church of Ireland Gaelic Leaguer, writing on 'The Religious Problem in Ireland' in Basil Williams's collaborative volume on devolution, published in the year of the Parliament Act. Hannay saw the basis for Protestant suspicion. He agreed that constitutional guarantees were practically useless. But he also believed that the Union likewise threatened minority rights. After all, as things stood, the Catholic majority secured its interests via the metropolitan government. By comparison, under Home Rule, Protestants enjoyed a certain strength in numbers. With a strong numerical presence across the island, they could not be pushed around. This was particularly the case because shared interests would cut across any denominational antagonism in the practical workings of any Home Rule parliament. Finally, Hannay believed that 'the political power of the priests [was] steadily diminishing in Ireland'.⁵³ Ultimately, he proposed, this would mean combination across the divide such that the 'lay democracy' of the country could be roused against the forces of religious polarisation.⁵⁴ So Protestants did not have to count on promises or pledges. The likely cast of politics and the development of society would secure them against persecution.

It was rare for representatives of the Protestant churches in Ireland to look with equanimity on the promise of devolution. The prospect of self-government was divisive, and it

⁵¹ Monsignor O'Riordan, 'Contemporary Ireland and the Religious Question' in J. H. Morgan ed., *The New Constitution: An Exposition and Some Arguments* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1912).

⁵² Courtenay Moore, 'The Church of Ireland' in *ibid.*

⁵³ James O. Hannay, 'The Religious Problem in Ireland' in Basil Williams ed., *Home Rule Problems* (London: P. S. King & Son 1911), p. 104.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

polarised along denominational lines. The character of the polarity is itself interesting. Broadly speaking, Protestants feared the advent of a Catholic democracy, under which politics would operate as an arm of the church. Catholics, for their part, construed their panic as a posture – as political intransigence masquerading as devotional principle. Nationalism in its various forms was a political project for the majority, whereas it threatened spiritual tyranny for the minority. This situation was well captured by Paul-Dubois in 1908. Catholics, he wrote, ‘are rather anti-English than anti-Protestant’. ‘No one’, he went on, is more popular [with the majority] than a Protestant who is also a Nationalist’. The reverse proclivity was to be found on the other side: ‘The anti-Catholicism of Irish Protestants... equals and sometimes surpasses their anti-Nationalism’.⁵⁵ These divergent perceptions were a product of the nineteenth century, the scene of the astonishing recovery of Catholic fortunes. Of the 2,418 Catholic churches in Ireland, ‘there is probably not one which was not built during the last century’, Paul-Dubois observed.⁵⁶ This ecclesiastical rebirth was matched by the rise of the priesthood to political prominence. At every election, and on every platform, the figure of the cleric held pride of place. Most conspicuously in the 1880s, preachers emerged as popular tribunes.⁵⁷

Given this state of affairs, it is of course unsurprising that the political prominence of the Catholic hierarchy gave nationalism the appearance of a religious project. Equally, given the situation on the Catholic side, it makes sense that the church would be viewed by its members as offering temporary political leverage. With the triumph democratic politics, exemplified by self-government, the divines were often expected to resume their spiritual vocation. Their leadership was commonly construed a temporary expedient, awaiting the rise of a more educated middle class, and the repatriation of constitutional power. It is against this background that we need to understand the extent to which nationalist and republican ideas were viewed by their advocates in Ireland as political, not religious, ideologies. If you scrutinise the texts and pamphlets of the period, the core issue examined by participants in the debates was that of political legitimacy. Positions on the issue diverged, variously orientating adherents, giving shape and purpose to pre-existing inclinations.

I began this article by arguing that such controversies are not reducible to mere ‘attitudes’ or ‘dispositions’. In what followed, I hope I managed to show that an argument is not a mentality – not just a mental state, but rather a series of mental operations. A political theory should not be confused with a predisposition or propensity. For example, a posture of

⁵⁵ Paul-Dubois, *Contemporary Ireland*, pp. 463–4.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 477.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 481 ff.

piety, such as one might expect to discover among Catholics, cannot solely account for a commitment to determinate doctrines like dual monarchy, or federal self-government, or separatist republicanism. This poses a problem for historians who regard nationalist rhetoric as channelling a political religion, depicting the enterprise as a species of ‘sacral nationalism’.⁵⁸ The motives for this rendition have usually been propagandistic, giving rise to a particular problem: such a reading substitutes an historiographical construction for doctrines that contemporaries actually employed. It is this approach that excuses the need to examine the content of the political thought, freeing commentators to conjure with suggestive mentalities. Suggestiveness, however, risks distortion. While historians since the 1970s have spent much time branding nationalism and republicanism with religious epithets, there has often been a reluctance to elucidate the precise meaning of the adjectives deployed. So, for example, republicanism in particular has been condemned as mystical, sacral, pious, and messianic, without bestowing much attention on the implications of these words.⁵⁹

Patrick Pearse is perhaps the most obvious beneficiary of such descriptions, so I might usefully draw this article to a close with an example from his writings. Pearse, in many respects, proves my larger case. He has been the object of voluminous critical commentary, the character of which extends from hagiography to demonology, with little sober analysis in between.⁶⁰ Much of his work has been subject to psycho-biographical speculation, with comparatively little effort dedicated to the explication of his thought.⁶¹ His ideas have been explained in terms of underlying attitudes without his doctrines being closely analysed. Pearse’s project is regularly described as mystical and messianic, rendering him a seemingly obvious example of the larger phenomenon of political religion.⁶² But what did this messianism consist in? In

⁵⁸ See Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘A Global Letter’ in idem, *Herod: Reflections on Political Violence* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), p. 18; Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Religion and Politics* (Coleraine: The New University of Ulster, 1984), p. 5; Conor Cruise O’Brien, *God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), passim.

⁵⁹ Foster, *Modern Ireland*, pp. 477, 479, 483, 491, 493; English, *Irish Freedom*, pp. 294, 295–6, 357, 372.

⁶⁰ Aspects of Pearse’s reception are treated in Dáire Keogh, ‘Patrick Pearse, *Studies*, and the Birth of Revisionism’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 100: 400 (Winter 2011), pp. 421–32. For important interventions see, influentially, Francis Shaw, ‘The Canon of Irish History – A Challenge’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 61: 242 (Summer 1972), pp. 17–53; Conor Cruise O’Brien, ‘The Embers of Easter’, *The Massachusetts Review*, 7: 4, (Autumn 1966), pp. 621–37; Conor Cruise O’Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1994), pp. 159–60; Oliver MacDonagh, *States of Mind: Two Centuries of Anglo-Irish Conflict, 1780–1980* (1983) (London: Pimlico, 1992), pp. 84–9.

⁶¹ Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London: Gollancz, 1977); Sean Farrell Moran, *Patrick Pearse and the Politics of Redemption: The Mind of the Easter Rising, 1916* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1994). See, however, Joost Augsteijn, *Patrick Pearse: The Making of a Revolutionary* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2010).

⁶² John Marsden, ‘Religion and the Nationalist Cause in the Thought of Patrick Pearse’, *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 84: 333 (Spring 1995), pp. 28–37.

November 1913, in ‘The Coming Revolution’, Pearse predicted an imminent national redemption. He did so by resort to powerful religious imagery. The Gaelic League, he argued, had been an augury of imminent transformation, but it was not the final prophet of deliverance. Nonetheless, a political reckoning was at hand, to be shaped by a spiritually renewed people.

‘I do not know’, Pearse wrote, ‘if the Messiah has yet come, and I am not sure that there will be any visible and personal Messiah: the people itself will perhaps be its own Messiah’.⁶³ Pearse was projecting an imminent cleansing rebirth as a prelude to political redemption. The first thing to say about this is that, among the political languages in circulation in early twentieth-century Ireland, this idiom is exceptional, and was never a template for either nationalist or republican ideology. It is, of course, our best candidate for a political religion in the period, in much the same way that Carlyle, Ruskin or Gandhi might be depicted in those terms.⁶⁴ But what kind of politics, and what type of religion? And how are the two brought together by Pearse? Remarkably, no one has put any serious effort into answering this question. Allow me to make one final point about Pearse’s ‘messianic’ pronouncement. That is that it is strangely unorthodox in nature, and therefore hardly a product of Catholic piety. ‘[P]eoples are divine’, Pearse went on, ‘and are the only things that can properly be spoken of under figures drawn from the divine epos’.⁶⁵ From wherever this conception is drawn, it is not from Catholic teaching. To date, instead of unpacking its syntax, tracing its sources, and contextualizing its meaning, historians have been content to brandish it as a mentality. To understand the significance of the Irish Revolution, in which Pearsean ideology played some kind of legitimating role, historians will have to do better in the future.

⁶³ Patrick H. Pearse, *The Coming Revolution* (1913) in *Collected Works of Pádraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches* (Dublin, Cork and Belfast, 1924), pp. 91–2.

⁶⁴ On this see Eric Voegelin, *Die Politische Religionen* (Vienna: Bermann-Fischen Verlag, 1938); Jacob Talmon, *Political Messianism: The Romantic Phase* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1960). For an overview, see Emilio Gentile, ‘Political Religion: A Concept and its Critics – A Critical Survey’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6: 1 (2005), pp. 19–32.

⁶⁵ Pearse, *The Coming Revolution*, p. 92.