
THE CULTURAL CLASH IN NORTHERN IRELAND

FR. OLIVER BRENNAN
St. Patrick's College

GERALD M. CATTARO
Fordham University

This paper sets out to demonstrate that the religious, political, and socio-economic elements of the conflict in Northern Ireland should be considered as manifestations of a basic cultural divide between the two groups comprising the society of Northern Ireland. To date, insufficient attention has been paid to this cultural divide, which must be bridged if lasting peace is to be achieved. This paper will detail the important role of the educational establishment, particularly Catholic schools, in this reconciliation process.

Northern Ireland is a society which encompasses two distinct cultures—Unionism and Nationalism—each with its own story, myths, rituals, and symbolism. The Unionists, whose ancestors were “planted” here more than 300 years ago, regard themselves as British and want to continue to be part of the United Kingdom. The Nationalists are descended from the native Irish and want to be part of a United Ireland. These two culturally different groups have become increasingly polarized over the last three decades of political and sectarian violence and strife.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE

The origin of the cultural clash in Northern Ireland goes back to the post-Elizabethan Plantation of Ulster following “The Flight of the Earls” in 1607. This resulted in the disenfranchisement of the native Irish. The Catholic Irish were relegated to near-poverty, on the smallest, poorest farms, as agricultur-

al or small-industry laborers, or as peripheral slum dwellers in the cities and towns. Without money, without access to education or to political power, there was no way for them to escape their lot. Many of the men had to work part-time in England and Scotland to support their families in Ulster. A fortunate few could do this by emigrating to North America.

A rebellion in 1641 by the remaining Catholic Earls of Tyrone was quickly put down. But the final blow came in 1690 when the Protestant King, William of Orange, defeated the Catholic King, James II, at the Battle of the Boyne. Following this landmark event, sectarian tensions became evident and, in the aftermath of the 1690-92 war, the Penal Laws were introduced. These laws deprived Catholics of all civil rights. They were forbidden to hold public office and they could not sit in Parliament, bear arms, or own land. The triumph of Protestantism was complete, annually expressed symbolically by the Orange Order marches that celebrate the Battle of the Boyne.

The "Old" Protestant ascendancy throughout Ireland had become "more Irish than the Irish themselves." This was not to be the case in Ulster, where assimilation meant personal, social, political, and economic ostracism. The tendency here was to be "more British than the English." The magnitude of the Protestant supremacy and control in Ulster was illustrated by the ability to preserve six of the nine counties of this province as part of Britain, separate from the Irish Free State established in 1922.

The formation of Northern Ireland as a British province, with a numerical Protestant majority, culturally different from Protestants in the rest of Ireland, seemed to guarantee forever the continuation of the status quo. However, many factors have worked insidiously over the past 70 years to alter this fundamental structure. The Catholic population grew to over 40% of the total, enabling it to have an increasingly significant voice in politics—local, provincial and parliamentary. Above all, the Catholic school system flourished, providing both secondary and tertiary education, enabling a Catholic professional class to emerge. With the larger number of Catholics providing an expanding market, small Catholic businesses became an important commercial factor.

Despite improvements in the lot of the Nationalist community, there was still massive discrimination against it, especially in the areas of housing and work opportunity. The civil rights movement of the late 1960s proved to be the catalyst that brought significant change. These peaceful marches and demonstrations were often brutally suppressed by the police force and British army; in one instance, many innocent people were killed by bullets. The dormant Provisional Irish Republican Army, a paramilitary organization, seized upon the opportunity and its strength grew rapidly. Eventually, the Stormont (local) government collapsed, and Northern Ireland has been ruled from London since then. Following the Good Friday 1998 Peace Accord and subsequent elections to a new Assembly, local government is to be restored.

The euphoria which greeted the signing of the historic Peace Accord needs to be tempered by the realization that the agreement in itself will not lead to genuine reconciliation. While it provides the basis for a new political and social reality in Northern Ireland, it will not promote intercultural understanding, tolerance, and mutual appreciation. School communities, while they should not be expected to bear the whole burden of promoting mutual understanding and intercultural appreciation, nevertheless can make a significant contribution. Starratt (1995), a leading American educator, writes that "communities can promote forgiveness and the asking for forgiveness, and the understanding that both are among the primary presuppositions of social life. These are lessons to be learned and taught by school communities" (p. 30).

The cultural clash, which has, ironically, increasingly shown its face since the paramilitary ceasefires, provides a major challenge to the religious and political leaders, as well as to one of the most influential institutions of the society, the school. Since the majority of the Nationalist community attend Catholic schools from childhood through adolescence, attention is focused on the challenge which the cultural polarization presents to the Catholic school system. The task facing Catholic school communities is, on the one hand, to be the purveyor of the Christian traditions, history, beliefs, values, myths, symbols, rituals, and very essence and, on the other hand, to lead a new generation to appreciate a distinctively different tradition with which it shares this part of Ireland. Eliot (1948) writes that "we become more and more aware of the extent to which the baffling problem of 'culture' underlies the problem of the relation of every part of the world to every other" (p. 27).

UNDERSTANDING CULTURE

Schineller (1990) states that "the very word culture is problematic, with no fixed, agreed-upon definition" (p. 22). In fact, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1963) list 164 definitions of this word. The understanding of the concept of culture has changed very significantly since the traditional, classical conception expressed by Arnold, who viewed culture as the preserve of the elite, of those who leaned toward the aesthetic and toward excellence. Even though this notion of culture was expanded by his contemporary, the British anthropologist Tylor (1871), to include "knowledge, belief, art, morals, laws, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (p. 1), it was not until the first half of the 20th century that Tylor's approach was given a much wider meaning by anthropologists and sociologists. The focus of culture shifted from the world of thought and art and gradually became synonymous with a way of life. In Gallagher's (1997) view, it is accepted that "culture constitutes a total context that shapes us all" (p. 13).

Geertz (1973) emphasizes the crucial role of symbols as carriers of culture:

Culture denotes an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men [sic] communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. (p. 89)

This description of culture is very helpful in understanding the clash of cultures in Northern Ireland. Both the Unionist and Nationalist cultures embody "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89), the Unionist spanning a period of 300 years and the Nationalist 2000 years. Each has a "system of inherited conceptions" (p. 89) which is expressed symbolically. Indeed, there are few places where culture is more symbolically expressed than in Northern Ireland, and it is this expression which not only communicates, perpetuates, and develops knowledge about and attitudes toward life, but is the cause of intense polarization between two social groups.

The culture of any particular group is never entirely solidified but rather is continually being produced. According to Williams (1981),

..."cultural practice" and "cultural production"...are not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in its constitution.... It sees culture as the signifying system through which necessarily (though among other means) a social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced and explored. (p.13)

Within this framework, the social actor plays a very important role in the articulation of what culture is and how it is produced and communicated. This, says McCarthy (1996) "is because contemporary understanding of culture seeks to join the idea of structural determinism with that of contingency: cultural production is a process involving social actors: therefore, it is neither inevitable nor entirely predictable in its outcomes" (p. 24). This is indeed heartening in the face of the fatalism which so often accompanies any discussion of the clashing cultures in Northern Ireland. It informs us that individual cultures are not entirely written in stone, but are capable of new orientation through the activity of individual or group agency. Green shoots can, and often do, appear on a burned-out landscape.

IDEOLOGY AS CULTURE

An understanding of ideology as culture helps one to appreciate the polarization in Northern Ireland. McCarthy (1996) notes that "ideologies appear to be everywhere on our national and global landscapes in the form of racial

and ethnic conflicts" (p. 30). There exists a good basis for understanding the cultural conflict under discussion as an ideological one, in the sense that it represents the ideas and strategies of two culturally different groups, whose interests and aspirations are opposed. Furthermore, each of these socio-political groups has a pressing agenda: one to continue union with Britain while preserving a Protestant religion and culture, the other to achieve a united Ireland while maintaining a Catholic heritage. Each group embraces, expresses, and asserts its ideology in multi-coded ways.

As Arendt (1968) puts it, ideologies "pretend to know the history of the whole historical process" (p. 167). The danger stems from the fact that these are totalizing visions, whereby a single idea, whether that of a united Ireland or union with Britain, controls all other thoughts and observations. This brings us to another special mark of ideologies. McCarthy states:

Ideologies belong to the category of beliefs. But they are not just any kind of belief; they are contentious beliefs that become fully articulated and asserted in situations involving conflicts and interests, struggles over right and power. In other words, ideas and beliefs in themselves are not ideological, but they can become so in practices of different kinds. (1996, p. 30)

The beliefs held by each of the two distinct cultural groups in Northern Ireland are clearly "contentious beliefs that become fully articulated and asserted in situations involving conflicts" (McCarthy, 1996, p. 30), and are often expressed violently. An extreme example of this occurred in July 1998 when violence, including the deaths of three Catholic children, followed the ban on an Orange (Protestant) march through a Catholic area.

The danger in the Northern Ireland context is that the Unionist and Nationalist ideologies distort and mystify reality. With this influence of ideology (often unconscious), particular perceptions of reality come to exist in opposition. Ideology, then, is culture in the sense that, as McCarthy says, "ideologies provide the most fundamental frameworks through which people interpret experience and 'live' the conditions available to them" (1996, p. 42). While ideologies, as cultural phenomena, may integrate as much as they distort, nevertheless it is the task of educators to develop people's consciousness of their contradictions and incoherencies. In this, Catholic school communities can make a significant contribution. In the words of McCarthy, they need to seek out ideology's operations, "to learn (and to teach) how to recognize its forms and its idioms, to discern political interests and the effects they generate" (1996, p. 46).

THE CONTRIBUTION OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS: PRESENT REALITY AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

To examine whether school communities have an important role in promoting intercultural tolerance and appreciation, questionnaires were sent to all of the Catholic schools in Northern Ireland during the spring of 1998. The purposes of this survey were: (a) to discover what programs are in place for the promotion of intercultural understanding and greater awareness of justice and peace issues; (b) to discern if teachers place significant value on the effectiveness of such programs; and (c) to establish if schools would benefit from the creation of a new comprehensive program focusing on intercultural understanding and reconciliation.

The schools which responded to the questionnaire were representative of all sections of Northern Ireland society, urban and rural. Most of these schools have some program which covers justice, peace, and reconciliation, either as a formal, distinct subject or as an integrated element in the religious education course. The small number of schools which do not address this issue are located in very politically sensitive areas.

A new element has been incorporated into the Northern Ireland educational system. Since the beginning of this decade, schools are obliged to pursue a program entitled Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). Following the Education Reform Act of 1989, EMU became part of the statutory curriculum. It is not taught as a subject but, rather, is a curricular theme; consequently, it may be incorporated into any subject. Students are encouraged to respect each other's views, academic skills, and differences. Prejudice is dealt with and case studies are used to focus on various aspects of life, to develop and promote mutual respect and understanding. A particular class period is not devoted to EMU; rather, it is intended to be an ongoing part of everyday life in the classroom, both at primary and secondary levels.

Results of the questionnaire indicated that EMU is implemented in varying degrees throughout the Catholic school communities in Northern Ireland. Some schools use it very effectively, not only within their own classrooms, but also in cross-community activities. Other schools are less committed for various reasons, including geographical location. The Department of Education provides much encouragement, as well as personal and financial aid for those school communities which "twin" with a school of another denomination. This is an optional element of EMU; it may be pursued at the discretion of the principal and board of governors of each school. Those schools that choose to embark on cross-community activities are grant-aided to cover staffing requirements, transportation, and other related costs. Cross-community activities may include inter-school debates, sporting events, and visits to places of interest. Commenting on the success of these cross-

community encounters, teachers remarked that on an outward journey each school group segregates, whereas on the return journey the students voluntarily intermingle. In some instances, when they do not live in strongly Unionist and Nationalist areas, students from each side of the cultural divide continue to maintain contact after this single encounter. Even though this outcome may not be very common, it indicates the significant potential which exists in the use of school-based programs aimed at crossing the cultural ravine.

All Catholic schools in Northern Ireland follow a religious studies course, leading to a State examination, a part of the General Certificate in Secondary Education. The Northern Ireland Council for Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment provides a syllabus with a specific section focusing on an exploration of the Christian Church through contrasting traditions. Students are encouraged to develop a growing awareness of the meaning of belonging to a particular Christian denomination and a sensitivity toward the beliefs and practices of others. They are provided with opportunities to investigate inter-denominational contacts: initiatives which develop understanding and promote encounter between the Protestant and Catholic traditions. According to one respondent to the questionnaire, most Catholic schools do not follow this syllabus. Instead, they opt for an alternative syllabus (used in England), which does not include a section dealing with mutual understanding and appreciation between people from different religions and cultural backgrounds.

From the schools that use a specific justice and peace program, teachers reported that "it clearly gives pupils a respect for others and a concern for people in need" and that it has led some pupils to involvement in organizations such as Amnesty International. While this is to be applauded, it points to weakness in approaches which find it easier to discuss peace, justice, reconciliation, and intercultural appreciation on a global scale than to focus on the cultural divide in Northern Ireland. In a school with a program titled *The Power to Heal* (devised by the Churches Peace Education Committee), teachers reported that success requires that students be "good at discussion and group work." Ironically, those who might benefit most from such a program tend to be weak in these skills.

One school involved in a cross-community contact scheme reported that "these programs are of particular value to our students, who gain greatly from their involvement." Another school, which provides a specific five-week module on justice, drawing on various resources such as Community Conflict Skills and material from the Irish Commission for Justice and Peace, stated that this module, which is part of the general religious education course for senior students, focuses on raising awareness, and that it is difficult to judge its effectiveness as there are no formal evaluations or examinations. Despite these comments, the results of the questionnaire indicate that,

in general, there is a "real openness and responsiveness on the part of students to programs based on justice, peace, and reconciliation themes." This is indeed encouraging for the future development of programs leading to healing, reconciliation, and intercultural appreciation.

When those schools that do not currently use a peace and reconciliation program as a formal, separate element in religious studies were asked if they would consider a course of this nature to be of value in the present climate in Northern Ireland, there was an overwhelming "yes" response. Reasons given for the positive reaction varied. Some teachers said that "it would reflect to students the importance of the issue and ensure the topic is covered, and that, while justice and peace are dealt with fairly well in religious education at all levels, reconciliation is not emphasized sufficiently. Furthermore, cultural difference is hardly mentioned." A teacher whose school is in a politically volatile area, having "some students with very hard-line attitudes," felt that a program emphasizing reconciliation and intercultural appreciation would need to "start off on a small basis." Others said that teachers would need to be willing, enthusiastic, and trained in order to handle this very sensitive topic, particularly in Nationalist areas, "where our young boys find 'warfare' a little exciting and are fired with the 'Our day will come' syndrome."

Teachers were asked if they would consider it to be of value for the churches, or a religious publishing company, to develop a new program, or at least provide a significant amount of resources, centering on healing and reconciliation. There was an almost-unanimous positive response. It was believed that it would be best if this new catechetical material was developed through cooperation between the churches and other appropriate and interested bodies, so that it could be offered in all schools in Northern Ireland and provide opportunity for interdenominational and intercultural contact. The results of the questionnaire demonstrated that Catholic teachers are calling for a comprehensive program, aimed at the 11- to 19-year-olds, which could be used throughout the seven years of post-primary schooling. It was further stressed that this should have a "clear Northern Ireland context," in contrast to the more general treatment of peace and reconciliation issues which are currently available.

The referendum which was held throughout Ireland in May 1998 to ratify the Good Friday Peace Agreement gave overwhelming support to a plan that could fundamentally transform Northern Ireland's political and social structure, and open the way for lasting peace and reconciliation. While the results provide evidence that people are turning away from a culture of debilitating political and sectarian violence, and what appeared to be irremediable distrust, there is still a wide intercultural bridge to be built. Apart from political settlements, there is a deep need for healing, reconciliation, and intercultural appreciation between both traditions. This will not be brought about automatically by new political structures. Since most of the population is

affiliated to one or other Christian denomination, the churches will have a crucial role. Catholic school communities, while they should not, as one teacher put it, “be expected to provide the panacea for all difficulties,” are ready and willing to play their part, as the results of the questionnaire indicated. Indeed, in the words of one respondent, “If nothing had been done in Catholic schools for the past 30 years, the situation in Northern Ireland might have been much worse.”

A major issue to be dealt with in whatever program is produced is that of culture/ideology. Students need to be led to understand what culture is—how it is produced, transmitted, and symbolically expressed. They need to be sensitized to the ways in which a particular symbolic expression by one social group can be deeply offensive and oppressive to another group which has a different cultural inheritance. A program of this nature should develop students’ awareness of how parents and other significant adults play a very important role in both the articulation and communication of the cultural story, and how this can lead to negative and violent activity, directed toward another cultural group which shares the same city, town, or village. A program designed to improve intercultural tolerance, trust, and appreciation should consider ideology as culture and how the particular ideologies, embedded in Unionism and Nationalism, add to the conflict which exists between the two cultural traditions in Northern Ireland. Young people must understand the unconscious influence of ideology.

CONCLUSION

The Catholic school system in Northern Ireland has made an enormous contribution toward the development of a healthy self-image among the entire Catholic population. This is very important for growth of intercultural tolerance and appreciation, since a poor self-identity may lead to aggressiveness toward those who are different. By inculcating values of tolerance and appreciation of difference, Catholic school communities have lessened the possibility of even greater violence and destruction than has been witnessed over the past three decades. Dunne states: “schooling itself might be said to be the only true universal church of the modern age” (1996, p. 123). Therefore, Catholic school communities must strive to impart to a new generation the message of love, compassion, and inclusiveness which is at the heart of the Gospel and which the Christian church embodies. Though culture is inherited largely from the past, it can be influenced to change and adapt, in order to accommodate itself to different moments in history. In doing so, it need not lose any of the truth, goodness, and beauty of its ancient story.

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Fr. Oliver Brennan, a priest of the Archdiocese of Armagh, is director of pastoral studies at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland. Gerald M. Cattaro is director of the Center for Non-Public Education and associate professor in the Graduate School of Education at Fordham University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Fr. Oliver Brennan, Director of Pastoral Studies, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland.

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