

THE REFORMATION – ITS IMPACT ON IRELAND

Address by Dr. Martin Mansergh to the Irish Association at its Dublin Summer Lunch, Wynn's Hotel, Lower Abbey Street, Saturday, 20 May 2017

I would like to thank the Irish Association for the honour of the invitation to address them. Having attended from time to time meetings of the Association since the early 1980s, I admire its history and focus. It was founded in 1938 by progressive unionists, concerned by the depth of the political divide and who were anxious, in the interests of peaceful coexistence on this island, to maintain some cultural, economic and social relations, at a time when there were no political structures for doing so. Its southern membership consisted in the main of people, probably a distinct minority at that time, prepared to respect Ulster unionist determination to remain with Britain, but keen to maintain and foster links that remained between the two parts of Ireland. My father, the historian Nicholas Mansergh, in the aftermath of the publication in 1936 of his book *The Government of Northern Ireland: A Study in Devolution*, had some correspondence on related matters with the Association's principal founder General Hugh Montgomery. Your President Chris McGimpsey has been for a long time in many ways an embodiment of the ideals of the Association. Together with his brother Michael, from the time of the New Ireland Forum in 1983-4, he ensured that there was some

genuine communication between the unionist community and the constitutional nationalist parties across the island, at a time when such communication was rare. The Forum Report did for the first time from a nationalist perspective properly address and recognize the validity and legitimacy of the unionist tradition and the rights of that community, even if it still preferred nationalist solution. In January 1995, accompanying newly elected Fianna Fáil leader Bertie Ahern to Belfast, I received a message from Chris that the lunch arranged with him had been switched to Ulster Unionist Party Headquarters in Glengall Street, where Bertie Ahern and those accompanying him had a very friendly and constructive discussion with senior members of the party. Building up that relationship was one of a number of things essential to the achievement of the Good Friday Agreement. A few weeks later, in a speech to this Association in February 1995, Bertie Ahern declared: 'Irredentism is dead'.

The southern council member Hugh Finlay, who conveyed your invitation to me, I have also known for a long time. The Coal Shipping Study in 1980 that he conducted on behalf of the National Board for Science and Technology contributed to a meeting in 1982 between trade union leaders at Harland & Wolff with then Taoiseach Charles Haughey which led to a delegation of semi-State body executives led by myself visiting the heavy industries in Belfast as well as the de Lorean plant to explore possibilities for greater trade and co-operation. My fleeting vision of Charlie Haughey becoming

the proud owner of a de Lorean gull-winged sports car mercifully remained just that.

As a political adviser, I was given the pointless mission of acting as chaperone to Brian Lenihan Senior at an Irish Association conference at the Culloden Hotel in Holywood, Co. Down. As I retired to bed at 1.30 am, Senator Trevor West called up the stairs to tell me that Brian had already said a dozen things contrary to party policy and boasting that he would happily serve Satan, if he were the leader of the Fianna Fáil party. Some had half a suspicion he was!

Despite lighter moments, the 1980s were tough times in Northern Ireland, and there could be tough discussions. Arthur Green, then Head of the NI Courts Service, made a speech in 1983 in which he referred to 'hopeless nationalities', instancing the Latvians and the Lithuanians, then still under Soviet occupation, and the Irish, with which point a senior member of the British Embassy in Dublin agreed, adding that we were clinging to an outdated nationalism which Europe had left behind. In the late 1990s, when asked to address the Association, I made the point that I did not consider the North-South bodies to be an engine for a united Ireland, but that if one eventually came about for other reasons it would be helpful to have had them in place. I had the German *Ostpolitik* example in mind.

The Reformation was one of the most important events in recorded human history, following the Renaissance, and marking a rupture in Christian civilisation and the point at which the early modern world displaced the mediaeval one.

There are two preliminary general observations to be made. The first is that nearly everyone from this part of the world, if we go back 500 years, is of Catholic stock. In the case of my own distant paternal ancestors living in Westmoreland, they regularly left bequests through the Middle Ages to the Canons of Cockersand close to Morecambe Bay. In 1529, the year the word Protestant was first used to describe dissenting princes at the Imperial Diet at Speyer, Brian Mansergh left in his will xi d to every priest that 'comes the day of my burial to sing or say mass for my soul'. Another family member took part in the Pilgrimage of Grace in revolt against the dissolution of the monasteries, and had to go to the Tower of London to give evidence to a commission of investigation. The point of this, if one thinks about it in personal terms, is that, while one may not share the beliefs and allegiances of one's ancestors, a certain respect, taking into account different times and circumstances, would be the instinctive reaction of most of us, whose families branched off at that time or since.

As a teenager on a visit to France in 1962, I went into the cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris on my own. A young priest

came up to me to offer assistance. When I explained that I was Protestant, he withdrew, saying: 'Il faut prier pour l'unité de l'Église'. While church unity is often presented as an ideal and division as a scandal, the reality is that with advances in freedom and enlightenment differences were bound to emerge which could no longer be repressed by church and state. A plurality of religious beliefs and traditions, within reason – I am not arguing for excessive fragmentation – , can be a good thing, not a bad one, but not of course the strife, death and destruction that accompanied rival attempts by different church tendencies to establish or re-establish a religious monopoly, all believing themselves to be in sole possession of the truth.

I am appalled by the Old Testament story of Elijah slaughtering the prophets of Baal so that not one would escape and its celebration in Mendelssohn's oratorio of the same name. St. Paul's 'for now, we see through a glass darkly', with occasional flashes of insight, would be much closer to my religious philosophy. It is easy to see why in the past biblical Protestantism with a heavy reliance on the Old Testament would appeal to frontier peoples in America, Southern Africa, not to mention closer to home, particularly where it speaks of a chosen people, sanctions the appropriation or expropriation of land, and, where necessary, the extermination of enemies. This is alongside deeply inspiring stories and religious texts more familiar today.

There were divisions and tensions within the Church long before the Reformation; the quarrels and heresies of the early Church, the schism between the Eastern and Western Churches from 1054, the divergent practices of the Celtic and the Roman Church, which provided one pretext for the Norman invasion, the schism which led to rival popes in Avignon for 40 years, and the Albigensians, Lollards and Hussites condemned as heretics, not to mention the fiery monk preacher and denouncer of abuses who was burnt at the stake in Florence in 1498, Savonarola. His flamboyance contributed to initial papal underestimation of the threat posed by Luther. Struggling to regain control was nothing new for the Church, but sooner or later it was bound to fail.

In the 12th century, the Norman knight William Marshal praying in a bad storm at sea in St. George's Channel promised to found an abbey, Tintern Abbey, in Co. Wexford, if he survived. The young Martin Luther caught in the open during a terrible storm on land in 1505 promised to take religious vows, if he survived. The biggest difference between past ages and now was that in those days death lurked ever-present, and beyond it eternal damnation, hence the urgent need to pray regularly, whereas today for most people long life is actuarially but deceptively calculable, and for most believers there is only Heaven, not Hell, as an ultimate destination. The anger of God, Bach's 'Grosser Herr und

scharfer König', few dare mention any more, the Day of Judgment is virtually decommissioned, and in my parish church in Tipperary only on Good Friday do we say the later verses of the *Venite*, which are God's verdict on our forebears: 'Forty years long I loathed that generation and said, It is a people who err in their hearts, for they do not know my ways; Of whom I swore in my wrath, They shall not enter my rest'. Shorn of any punitive element, religion has become unbalanced, and it means that it is often at a loss for explanations of tragedies and disasters, but I do not mean for one second that it is possible to go back in that regard.

The Reformation began in Wittenberg 500 years ago on 31 October 1517 as a revolt against the crude marketing of indulgences to fund grandiose building projects in Rome and the further ecclesiastical ambitions of a member of the Hohenzollern family. It rapidly broadened out into a questioning of papal authority and a broad range of Church practices and doctrines, greatly assisted by the new medium of printing. Many of the best stories about Martin Luther may be as much legend as fact, for instance, the pinning of his 95 Theses (effectively bullet points) against Indulgences to the church door in Wittenberg, his declaration at the Diet of Worms in 1521 before the Emperor Charles V, 'Here I stand. I can do no other', and finally throwing an ink pot at the Devil. There is no denying his intense religious faith, his tremendous moral courage, and his gifts as a writer,

theologian, and translator of the Bible into the vernacular. German is as much in his debt, as English is to the King James Bible. His emphasis on direct access to the Bible, on the importance of preaching, his approval of priests marrying, and of course his rejection of unquestioned Papal authority are among his legacies to Protestantism. He has also been credited with being a pioneer of the separation of Church and State, though the issue there is always to what degree. I read some of his works 50 years ago when learning German, but often found the ferocity of his invective off-putting.

One of my favourite places in Germany is the Wartburg, where Luther lived protected by his Elector Frederick the Wise and translated the New Testament. On our second visit there, we encountered a clerical professor from Maynooth. The Wartburg, high on a wooded rock above the town of Eisenach in Thüringen, just inside the old East Germany, is also famous for its association with Wagner's *Tannhäuser*. Equally evocative is the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt, where he was a monk, and which was visited by Pope Benedict XVI, where he had dialogue with the leaders of the German Lutheran Church. One of the successes of ecumenism was an agreed statement in 1991 on the issue of justification by faith, one of the causes of the break with Rome. Negotiations on that in the 1540s broke down. The Catholic Church did engage from the time of the Council of Trent that began in 1545 in its own vigorous and effective

internal reform process, known as the Counter-Reformation, which took it well away from the world of the Borgia papacy.

The Reformation passed quite rapidly beyond Luther's control, as his authority in turn was challenged. Many are disappointed that he did not side with the peasants in their 1524 uprising, but the German Reformation would not have survived if he had. Like the founder of Christianity, he was not a political revolutionary, but a reformer, whose effect was revolutionary. As in all revolutions, there was much destruction, and so-called wars of religion, which masked a great deal of power-politics, ravaged Europe, especially Germany, till the end of the Thirty Years' War. The wars in the Netherlands were for both political and religious independence. The founder of the House of Orange, William the Silent, who led the resistance to Philip II of Spain and the sinister Duke of Alba depicted in Breughel's *Massacre of the Innocents*, was Protestant, Catholic and Dissenter in that order, or more precisely Lutheran, Catholic and Calvinist, but married a Catholic, and was an early champion of religious liberty and toleration. Appropriately, his last wife was the daughter of Admiral Coligny, the most prominent victim of the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre of Huguenots in 1572. Unlike his great-grandson, William of Orange, he does not appear to be a hero much referred to by the Orange Order.

At college I read Max Weber's *Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism*. In this country, coincidentally or causally, it was only Ulster that experienced the industrial revolution. It would be difficult to extrapolate into modern Ireland any theory that the members of one denomination are intrinsically more entrepreneurial than any other. Industrious and Protestant versus backward, rural and Catholic were stereotypes current in the first half of the 20th century used in the north to contrast the two parts of Ireland, but have been long superseded.

Prussia owed something of its rise to the Great Elector's welcoming of Huguenot refugees from France, imitated by Frederick the Great when he welcomed the Jesuits to his domains after their expulsion from France. Some Protestant and Catholic clergy, sometimes together as in Lübeck in 1943, suffered the ultimate penalty for their opposition to Hitler. What is remarkable about the Federal Republic is the strength of Christian Democracy, which is both Catholic and Evangelical, *evangelisch* being the umbrella or federative term for many types of Protestant church. In recent years, Chancellor Merkel, daughter of an East German Lutheran pastor, and President Joachim Gauck, recently retired, himself a pastor in the heady street protests in Leipzig of October 1989, have been leading figures in a united Germany that is the dominant influence in the European Union, in some ways a late triumph of the Lutheran spirit.

Relating the English and Scottish Reformations to the Continental one is a complex matter. Henry VIII first took the side of Rome by penning a pamphlet against Luther, which affirmed the papal primacy, condemned schism and upheld the indissolubility of marriage. It earned him the Papal title 'Defender of the Faith' still to be found in the abbreviated letters FD on the new pound coin round the effigy of the Queen. Ironically, the only sovereign to renounce the title was Henry's Catholic daughter Queen Mary. The names and effigies of Henry, Thomas Cromwell and Archbishop Cranmer are not to be found on the Wall of the Reformers in Geneva. It is quite difficult to think of Henry, who had two of his six wives beheaded, as a champion of religious or any other sort of liberty. With ironic appropriateness, Henry's biographer J. J. Scarisbrick went on to become a leading light in the British Pro-Life Movement.

To be fair to him, Henry did take quite a close interest in the drafting of doctrinal documents submitted to him by Cranmer. While there was dialogue with Lutherans in the 1540s, there was no alliance with Henry or meeting of minds.

Attending a service a few years ago in commemoration of benefactors in the cathedral at Christ Church, Oxford, a college founded by Wolsey, which, though Anglican, has as its symbol a cardinal's red hat with tassels, but then re-founded

by Henry, I was glad that when asked to thank God for the life of Henry VIII the choir sang the 'Amen', relieving the congregation and myself of any responsibility in the matter.

Recently, stained glass windows hidden away for safety in Christ Church for hundreds of years were discovered. The original Banbury Cross of the nursery rhyme as explained on its 19th century replacement was destroyed by Puritans in 1602. Kenneth Clark, the art historian, complained in his BBC *Civilisation* series of the immense destruction of works of art or iconoclasm in these times.

Some commentators have drawn a connection between Henry's breach with Rome and last year's decision by the UK electorate to renounce the Treaty of Rome, with similar difficulties of disentanglement. The frequent reference in some of the post-Brexit debates to prerogative powers exercised on the advice of the Prime Minister without reference to Parliament certainly conjured up again shades of the Tudors and Stuarts.

Notwithstanding ingenious theories linking it back to St. Patrick and the Celtic Church, the Church of Ireland, the name always being more an aspiration than a reality, came into being in 1536 following the Act of Supremacy, which declared Henry VIII Head of the Church. Dissolution of the monasteries, which was of considerable interest to larger

landowners regardless of religious convictions, was the only aspect of the Reformation to make much headway in Ireland. During the reign of Mary, apart from the removal of a couple of bishops, there were no persecutions or burnings in Ireland. The Church of Ireland is in her debt, since St. Patrick's Cathedral owes its survival to her, as she rescued it from being turned into a university. Philip II was her husband, and one of the things not much dwelt on in British history is that much of the legislation issuing in her reign was in the name of Philip and Mary.

Anglicanism finally became established in England and for good under Elizabeth I. She was a statesman, not a religious zealot, and stability, security and thrift came well ahead of the mass conversion of Ireland in her priorities. Her principal cleric, Archbishop Loftus, a direct ancestor of mine, epitomized pluralism, as then understood, in terms of the number of offices held, often simultaneously, Archbishop, Lord Chancellor, Lord Justice, Dean of St. Patrick's, and first Provost of Trinity. Over 40 years, he was unable to persuade most of the Lords of the Pale, let alone the people, to conform. This is why in the 17th century the English Government fatefully resorted to fresh plantation and transplantation, having got all too used since the time of Henry VIII to confiscating and redistributing land. While the Stuarts might have wished to maintain an uneasy religious coexistence, what Catholics in Ireland experienced was a

steady deterioration in their position. English policy drove together the two nations of mediaeval Ireland with Catholicism providing the common thread. The civil wars echoed the horrors of the Thirty Years War.

Politics tied in with religion and land became a zero sum competition, with total victory or conquest going to one side post-1691, and remaining relatively undisturbed for about a century, and never seriously threatened by a Jacobite revival. 'Our glorious Constitution', as it was called, based on the Penal Laws, even if only partially enforced, had no time for civil and religious liberty in the broad sense of the term. There were many fine bishops and deans, Ussher, Bedell, Taylor, Marsh, King, Swift and Berkeley, but they were all representatives of an ecclesiastical system that had no justice about it, without the wholesale adoption of colonial assumptions. I have always enjoyed Queen Mary II's injunction to her husband King William after his victory at the battle of the Boyne to take care of the church in Ireland: 'Everybody agrees that it is the worst in Christendom'.

I once took away with me on holiday to Scotland J.S. Reid's 1840s three volume history of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. It was heavy reading in more senses than one, being mostly an account of the 17th century trials and tribulations of Ministers who kept crossing the North Channel. Presbyterians were too independent to be liked or trusted by

either royalists or parliamentarians. Those in the South-West of Scotland suffered appalling persecution towards the end of the reign of Charles II. The founder of American Presbyterianism Francis Makemie came from Donegal. Though strong supporters of William, Presbyterians were disillusioned that most of the benefits of his victory went to the Anglican Ascendancy, and there was a lot of emigration to America in the 18th century. While Bishop Berkeley was a pioneer of American third level education, with a famous university in California bearing his name, Francis Hutcheson, from Ireland, a Presbyterian who taught mainly at the University of Glasgow, had a great influence on some of the makers of the American Revolution. He taught that the ideal State was a small republic, which is of course what the United States was, to begin with. Ireland was fertile ground in the 18th century for Quakers, and the Wesley brothers visited many times. One of the finest pieces of religious music first performed in Ireland in 1742 was *The Messiah*. Its composer, a man of truly promiscuous talents, Handel, was the grandson of a Lutheran Minister, held his first post as organist in a Calvinist church, then went to Rome to compose his famous *Dixit Dominus* and cantatas for the Roman clergy and cardinals, before accepting a pension from Queen Anne and settling in England. He has another little known Irish connection. One of his oratorios of truly Lutheran inspiration is *Theodora*, about a noble woman who is martyred for refusing to bow to the Roman gods, having argued in vain

that one could be a friend of Caesar without worshipping his gods, based on a novel by the famous chemist Robert Boyle born in Lismore Castle.

Ireland's basic problem is that for so long confessional allegiance provided the principal marker, however imperfectly, for national identity, political allegiance, and eligibility for a wide range of civil rights, including the franchise, the holding of office, and the right to bear arms. Their monopoly was so complete that Protestant patriots were half-tempted to emulate the American revolutionaries, and wrested legislative independence from a weakened British Government in 1782. A decade later, middle class Protestant leaders of the United Irishmen, mainly based in the North, believed that they could dominate an independent Ireland, but swiftly drew back when the seething tensions beneath the surface after a century of dispossession erupted with devastating force in 1798 in Wexford. The 19th century historian W.E.H. Lecky regretted as a unionist that Catholic Emancipation had not been granted in 1793, enabling the Protestant landed classes to co-opt the numerically weaker Catholic ones.

Reform was slow to come and was strongly resisted along the way. At the reopening of Goldenbridge cemetery founded by Daniel O'Connell last Sunday, Professor Maurice Bric gave some credit for Catholic Emancipation also to the Duke of Wellington, Prime Minister in 1829, as did virtually the entire

Catholic hierarchy at the time calling him 'the most distinguished of Ireland's sons, a hero, and a legislator'.

While many landowners contributed funds for the building of Catholic churches and schools, inter-denominational relations were badly damaged by evangelical efforts to obtain mass conversions amongst an impoverished people, especially in the west of Ireland. John Foster, speaker of the Irish Parliament, able but reactionary, foresaw lucidly in 1801 that union combined with emancipation would lead to a mainly Catholic representation and then to separation. The gradual but steady advance of democracy created an impossible conundrum for a British connection deemed essential for strategic reasons based on minority rule. With a few exceptions, Protestant clergy were very active in their opposition to Home Rule.

The situation of unionists concentrated in north-east Ulster and unionists in the rest of Ireland was quite different. Mikhail Gorbachev was reported to have warned the Politburo in the GDR on the 40th anniversary of the State that 'life punishes those who move too late'. The Marschallin in Richard Strauss' opera *Der Rosenkavalier* issues a similar warning: 'One must be flexible... Hold and take, hold and let go. Those who don't are punished by life, and God does not pity them'. Home Rule was potentially for the island an historic compromise between separation and union, but it

was blocked for over 40 years. If a small minority stands in the way of the march of a nation, it is bound sooner or later to get hurt. Eventual Southern Unionist support for Home Rule and opposition to partition in the Irish Convention came too late. The revolutionary period was touch and go, as far as Protestant survival in the rural South was concerned, but after that the situation settled down, and loyalty by and large was given to the new State. It helped that some of the most famous Irish writers and leaders who had supported independence were Protestant.

The biggest misunderstanding, common to both traditions, was the equation of democracy with majority rule. In Northern Ireland, it meant that one third of the population had no say politically. In the island as a whole, there was a persistent view that with British participation and 'persuasion' Irish unity could be forced on the people of Northern Ireland.

As we come to the latter half of the decade of centenaries, there will be things not everyone will find easy to digest. Allied victory in the First World War did create a context for the creation of many new States, including the Irish Free State, but it would not have come about without fighting for it. The civil war, a phenomenon all too common in newly formed states that had no established institutions yet commanding legitimacy, was overkill in every sense. As has been proved again more recently, republican politics has

always been more popular than republican violence. The initial foundation of the Free State was subsequently operated by Eamon de Valera till he could change it. In all the circumstances, despite errors and vicissitudes, this State has done well in its first 100 years, and not only more recently. There are other views, but that is mine.

We are also facing into the centenary of the creation of Northern Ireland. George V's speech opening the Parliament in June 1921 was also the overture that led to the Truce. In the first 50 years of Stormont, there was also some progress and achievements, alongside all that is constantly criticized. Given Irish neutrality, Northern Ireland assumed a vital strategic position, and did contribute to the defeat of Hitler. Its industrial prowess should be admired. Unfortunately, its politics was too focused on containing by often discriminatory means the minority population, half hoping it would go away. When the system broke down 50 years on, the violence surrounding it was like a forest fire that took a long time to put out.

A fairly comprehensive peaceful accommodation has been found, but the cost of getting there in human lives was far too high. Many clergy on all sides contributed to peace, and work constantly at improved understanding and reconciliation. Even though religion is on the wane, religious affiliation, however tenuous, is still the main predictor of

identity and politics. There is a middle ground, but it remains fairly small. The identity of view of the DUP and the Catholic Church on certain socio-moral questions is surprising, but probably has no greater long-term significance than the temporary alliance of Eoghan Roe O' Neill and English parliamentary forces in the first siege of Derry in 1649, where the common enemy was the royalist Presbyterians. There is unlikely to be much effect on voting patterns. In the Republic, the remaining legacy of the confessional state is under sustained attack, even though an opinion poll in last week's *Sunday Independent* showed the Church, despite everything, as still being the most trusted institution in this State. My view is that Ireland should try to hold on to a broadened out religious identity, including both its Catholic and its Reformed heritage, but ultimately the people will decide.