

The Northern Ireland Unrest:  
Religious Sectarianism that Lurks Beneath a Fragile Peace

Dr. Melouah Asma\* University of Medea, melouah.asma@univ-medea.dz

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**Abstract:**

Northern Ireland has become the scene of civil ethno-political violence in Europe for decades. This paper explores the conflict in Northern Ireland and the peace process it has gone through in negotiating the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. The paper starts with a background on the origins of the problem in Northern Ireland putting an emphasis on religious sectarianism as a key longstanding cause that have underpinned the strife. The paper also questions the challenging nature of the peace the Good Friday Agreement sets to implement, reflecting on what might heal a deeply injured society and ensure reconciliation for the long-suffering people of Northern Ireland.

**Keywords:** Northern Ireland, conflict, sectarianism, Good Friday Agreement, peace.

**Jel Classification Codes:** XN1, XN2.

**ملخص**

أصبحت أيرلندا الشمالية في أوروبا ولعقود مسرحاً لأعمال عنف عرقية وسياسية دامية بين البروتستانت المؤيدين للاتحاد مع بريطانيا و الجمهوريين الكاثوليك الذين يتطلعون لإعادة التوحيد مع بقية أيرلندا والاستقلال عن الحكم البريطاني. يتناول هذا المقال في مقدمته لمحة عن جذور الصراع في أيرلندا الشمالية محاولاً الوقوف على أهم العوامل التي كانت سبباً في تفشي وامتداد العنف على رغم من اتفاق السلام الذي أبرم عام ألف وتسعمائة وثمان وتسعون والمعروف باتفاقية الجمعة العظيمة أو اتفاق بلفاست. كذلك ويركز المقال على الصراع الديني الطائفي كسبب رئيسي طويل المدى وراء النزاع في أيرلندا الشمالية الذي لا يزال يدفع إلى المزيد من الأعمال والاضطرابات الدامية. هذا الصراع الديني الطائفي توارث على مدى الأجيال وورث الكراهية والأحقاد بين سكان المنطقة من البروتستانت و الكاثوليك الذين يحمل كل منهم الطرف الآخر مسؤولية النزاع. وفي هذا الإطار يقوم المقال بطرح بعض التساؤلات حول عملية التسوية التي توجت باتفاقية الجمعة العظيمة محاولاً في الأخير استعراض القضايا الخلافية التي تحول دون إتمام عملية السلام وتستمر في خلق الأزمات في مجتمع عانى شعبه مطولاً.

مفاتيح البحث: أيرلندا الشمالية، الطائفية الدينية، اتفاقية الجمعة العظيمة، مسيرة السلام، صراع

\*Corresponding author: Melouah Asma

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Northern Ireland Question remained for decades one of the most conflicting problems that repeatedly appeared in headlines and caught the interest of the whole world. Different peoples followed violent events in Northern Ireland, looking to understand its nature, hoping for a change and desiring peaceful solutions to the Northern Irish endemic conflict. The conflict seems an ever-lasting struggle that defies any existing conflict resolutions. Other troubled countries in the world succeeded in reaching peaceful settlements, yet as Jeremy Smith has written “the intractability of the Northern Irish problem was thought the product of rather unique type of conflict, a battle rooted in seventeenth-century prejudice rather than grounded in the economic and political realities of the late twentieth century” (Smith, 2002, p.23). It is a conflict that reminds us of bygone blood feuds that stem from forgotten hatred, tribal quarrels or clans and ethnic disputes.

The history of the Northern Ireland conflict has been marred with centuries-old violence and deadly incidents between two rival groups: the Protestant English and Scottish settlers on the one hand, and the Catholic Irish natives on the other. The two groups, within several generations, became raven apart by deep religious sectarianism. Yet even after the partition of 1921, the rise of the Republic of Ireland afterwards in 1949, and the effete process of peace building that has remained at stake for twenty years (since the 1990s), despite that, troubles in the Six-Northern counties persist making the painful ordeal of Northern Ireland linger to present day. Continuing hatred between the majority-Protestant unionists and minority-Catholic nationalists on the issue of sovereignty over the Northern six-counties, together with religious sectarianism and ethnic strife increasingly polarise and constantly separate the two communities from each other. Durable solutions and reconciliation remain shared aspirations, although suspicion and hatred towards the other, that keep lurking beneath all features of life in Northern Ireland, make the road to peace indeed a long and thorny path, if not a myth for some sceptics.

So is there any prospect for a future peace in a religiously divided community that carries on the marks of an effete fragile peace? Put it differently, can durable solutions prevail in Northern Ireland and end up centuries of struggle and bloodshed? To what extent can mending Protestants-Catholics relationship be a quick fix to all the troubles and a way to pacification in Northern Ireland? These questions are addressed in the present paper. Moreover, it sets also to address the issue of the peace process that was supposed to be an end to an agonizing violent history and a journey towards a bright and peaceful future for the six counties. It aims also at questioning the fragile peace the two governments of London and Dublin could secure since the historic Good Friday Agreement of 1998 in an attempt to discuss what might be the remedy of the Northern Ireland disease.

## 2. Unforgotten Hatred: Religious Sectarian Origin

The Northern Ireland Question is a story of one of the longest running conflicts in Western Europe, as old as the bloody Irish history itself. It traces its roots back to when Ireland was ceded to Henry II by the Pope Adrian IV in the twelfth century. English rule over most of the land came in the sixteenth century with the Plantation of Ulster. The latter was in the form of

colonisation and confiscation of lands, and it was at that time when attempts to subjugate Catholic Ireland began to take on a more religious stance. The plantation led to an increase in English immigration and settlement in Ireland. Additionally, the process of the plantation also led to the introduction of a new Protestant community to Ireland with a different culture, different cherished traditions and another spoken language. The new settlers quickly claimed generous amounts of land and were not reluctant in driving native Catholic Irish out from the towns they established. From there on, differences grew between the two communities in terms of cultural norms, ethnicity, territories they occupied, their practiced religion and beliefs and even for political allegiance.

Protestant settlers played a dominant role in the region in comparison with the Catholics and viewed themselves as English and Scottish descendents. They were as they perceived themselves superior to the native Catholic population that descended from the Gaelic people. 'The idea of English racial superiority became ingrained' (Said, 1993, p.222) in their beliefs and Catholics were considered 'a barbarian and degenerate race' (Said, 1993, p.221). These conceptions and differences were solidified through time and led to serious divisions and deep religious sectarianism among the two communities. Consequently, a religiously rooted conflict ushered in a divided Northern Ireland at the end of the eighteenth century, a conflict fuelled by Protestants and Catholics' mutual hatred and violent sentiments towards one another.

Protestant-Catholic relationship has been marred with deep antagonism and shared suspicious outlooks of each group's ethno-religious identity and because of the supremacy the Protestants enjoyed vis-à-vis the Catholics. The two groups viewed each other as an alien threatening force, and this led not only to their separation and estrangement but also to frequent violent clashes that persist to the present time. Division and polarisation were consolidated further following the partition of 1921, when the six counties of Ulster in the North East were separated from the rest of Ireland and became an integral part of the United Kingdom. The Protestants who constitute the majority in Northern Ireland were unwilling to be part of an all-Ireland ruled by Catholic majority, and preferred union with the United Kingdom. Economically speaking, they were afraid lest the industries of Belfast, such as shipbuilding, engineering, linen and tobacco suffer and be swept away by a predominantly agrarian Ireland. Most importantly, their anti-Catholic sentiments and claimed superiority coupled with a desire to preserve their dominant political position as a majority in a state supported by Britain, led to the discrimination and oppression of the Catholics. The Catholics being also nationalists and supporters of an all-Ireland were looked at as traitors (Murray, 2000, p.1) to Northern Irish government hence excluded from political power and suffered social and economic inequality and prejudice.

Similarly, the apartheid system practised in Northern Ireland serves the interests of the Protestant unionists, while the Catholic nationalists were excluded from the slightest rights and deprived from employment, housing and electoral rights. That makes from Northern Ireland a state established for the Protestants and controlled by them as claimed by the nationalist republicans. The Catholics, however, were 'second class citizens'(Peter & Lurbe, 2006, p. 177) filled with anti-British and anti-union emotions. Many disgusted with their bleak situation and frustrated with poverty and oppression voluntarily joined the

Irish Republican Army (IRA) in an attempt to achieve the reunification and self-determination of a free Gaelic Ireland. 'The IRA has recognised the continued existence of the perceived injustices, the alleged repression and denial of the rights of the Irish people, which led them to use violence for decades' (Rogelio, 2007, p.3). The IRA also believed that reunification cannot be secured with the continuous presence of the British in Northern Ireland. Their use of violence as a means was to achieve a political end that of a one-united Ireland. The Sinn Féin, on the other hand claimed that the frequent subjugation of the nationalist Catholic community led to an only option, the armed struggle. The latter is 'seen as a legitimate part of an oppressed people's resistance to foreign oppression' (Sinn Féin, 1994), a way to secure justice, democracy and equality for a troubled community. In other words, for Sinn Féin the use of violence was first by both the loyalists and British forces against the nationalists. Moreover, the frequent subjugation of the Catholic community and the absence of a strategy to pursue national liberation made the armed struggle legitimate.

Mounting hatred and tensions between Protestants and Catholics because of religious sectarianism and Catholic discrimination led to violence and terrorist acts in an atmosphere of paranoia and anti-other (Protestant or Catholic). Nevertheless, Northern Ireland underwent attempts for pacification, although economic and political inequality, religious intolerance, distrust and ignorance of the two religious communities' practices or beliefs, and most importantly the absence of any empathy amongst its inhabitants continue to bedevil a sick society which still resides in the grip of violence.

### **3. Building a Fragile Peace in Divided Northern Ireland**

#### **3.1. The peace process**

Religious intolerance is the primary factor behind troubles in Northern Ireland. Extreme Protestants as observed by Robin Eames, the archbishop of Armagh, have been accused of encouraging anti-Romanism, and even questioning 'the very identity of the Roman Catholic faith as Christian' (Murray, 2000, p. 1). Moreover, they considered the minority Catholics a threat to their Northern Irish government and unionism with Britain, because of their national tendencies and co-operation with the IRA. Similarly, the Roman Catholics believed that the Protestant Church promotes injustice, inequality and prejudice towards Catholics. Therefore, for many people living in Northern Ireland, the conflict cannot be ended for people are doomed to killing each other for centuries (Mitchell, 2007, p.92). Their deep pessimistic perspectives shaped by unforgotten bleak experiences, and moulded by a society torn by violence and sick without order or security, continue to make peace for them so precarious and so difficult to be sustained.

Prior to the peace process, Northern Ireland underwent a state of emergency and unrest. Widespread sectarian violence, frequent attacks and rioting marked the period from the 1920s to the 1990s, during which thousands of innocent civilians, members of the two communities were shot dead. People lived in a constant fear, a phenomenon that engulfed their daily lives and deepened the segregation of the Protestants and Catholics.

In the mid-1960s violence and rioting broke in Northern Ireland when a civil rights movement started campaigning for justice, equality and cultural recognition for the Catholics. This period became known as the Troubles, a period of conflict that linger till the 1990s, and was intensified when the IRA engaged in acts of killing for the sake of what they claimed Irish national liberty raped by a foreign coloniser. The priority of the IRA demands is the reunification of Ireland which they vehemently clung to it. On the other hand, the anti-Catholic loyalists violently resisted the civil rights movement and with Britain signed the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985. They were fighting under the Royal Ulster Constabulary (henceforth RUC) and other Loyalist paramilitaries (i.e., the Ulster Freedom Fighters, the Ulster Defence Association, and the Ulster Volunteer Force) to safeguard their unionist allegiance and privileges as the leading dominant majority in Northern Ireland. The Anglo-Irish Agreement aimed to end the Troubles aimed to give the Irish government an advisory role in Northern Ireland's government but assuring no change in the position of Northern Ireland unless the majority of its citizens agreed to join the Republic.

Britain responded by sending troops to protect both Protestants and Catholics and set order. The British presence succeeded at the beginning to end violence. Yet, despite the efforts of the British security forces to end the conflict, strife between the two communities escalated further in the 1980s and 1990s leading to more instability and much larger tensions. It was estimated that 'by the mid-1990s ... 3,500 people had been killed, a significant number given Northern Ireland's small area and 1.6 million population' (Darby, 2003, p.1). This led Unionists, Irish and British political leaders to start negotiating peace as a way to resolve a centuries-old conflict.

### **3.2. Ceasefire and the Good Friday Agreement**

The peace process had begun first by the two ceasefires of the IRA and other paramilitary organizations in 1994 and 1997. Following the ceasefires, political parties in Northern Ireland and both the British and Irish governments engaged in peace talks, aiming to reach political settlement and reconciliation. The British government is responsible for Northern Ireland being a part of the UK, while the Irish government 'sees itself as trustee of the nationalists in the North and is involved in helping to shape relationships between the two parts of the island' (Quigley, 2007, p. 11).

The United States too was involved in the peace process and it was the former US Senator George Mitchell who set up the provisions underlying the framework of the Good Friday Agreement. Initially, the Agreement did not gain a wide acclaim and support. The Unionists referred to it as a purely nationalist agenda being suspicious that any resolution would mean the triumph of the nationalists. The republicans on the other hand, believed that their support of the agreement means the recognition of both Ulster and the partition of 1921.

Yet, on April 10, 1998 after a period of uncertainty, instability, and no co-operation, after difficulties in getting all the parties join the peace talks the builders of peace in Northern Ireland agreed to sign the Good Friday agreement. The agreement, also known as the Belfast Agreement, aimed at creating a power-sharing Executive in Ulster, that is, a way to end strife between the two divided communities. The Executive was made up of all political parties and both nationalist and unionist politicians who met to decide matters on the well-being of Northern Ireland. The nationalists were given full recognition and equal status,

given that the agreement 'stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between the communities... [and] explicitly repudiates the use of force or the threat of violence for any political purpose' (Mitchell, 2007, p.92). Moreover, it encourages co-operation between the North and South, and it is based on the principle that 'the future of Northern Ireland should be decided by, or with the agreement of the people of Northern Ireland' (Mitchell, 2007, p.92).

The Good Friday Agreement also set up a new structure for peaceful and democratic relationships between the two communities in the north, between the north and the south and between London and Dublin. In addition to that, it made the date of May 2000 the deadline for all paramilitary groups to disarm, although the IRA remained armed and did not cease its operations and not until September 2005 that they decommissioned their arms.

### **3.3. 1998 and beyond:**

The years following the Good Friday Agreement were characterised by violence between Protestant unionists and Catholic nationalists. Tensions continued to plague Northern Ireland and led frequently to apocalyptic clashes. This showed that the Good Friday Agreement was unravelling and that all the efforts at building peace in the territory went in vain. As Jeremy Smith noted, 'If the Good Friday Agreement was a turning point, then for many it turned the wrong way' (Smith, 2002, p.238). The reconciliations peacemakers reached were temporary that quickly were gone with the wind. The peace process held for long years ended in collapse, revealing deep-rooted unforgotten hatred the Good Friday Agreement did not succeed to heal. In other words, the long journey to peaceful settlements ultimately finished with a shaky peace for a religiously divided community. It was so fragile that post-agreement years were sullied with the same sectarian violence.

For instance, the marches of the Orange Order held annually at Portadown in Northern Ireland known as the Drumcree parade continue to separate both the two groups. The Orange Order annual parades are public manifestations held in the memory of Protestants victory at the battle of Boyne in 1690. It was fought between the armies of Protestant King William III (William of Orange) against the Catholic King James II. The Protestants unionists hold on marches on traditional routes in the area where the battle took place, although most of the routes fall within the mainly-catholic nationalists area. The Protestants consider the parades an historic symbol and thus are determined to exercise their traditional right to march. However, the Catholics are determined not to allow it to happen. It has been offensive to the Catholic community to accept Protestant celebration of victory at the Battle of Boyne. Although the battle was in 1690, generations of Catholics did not swallow it up and did not fully overcome their feelings of hatred directed towards their Protestant counterparts. More importantly, it seems intricate to be forgotten especially that all fruitless attempts to bring the strife in Northern Ireland to an end have failed since 1998. The Union flag protests in Belfast in January 2013 are one example that reflects continuing struggle and deep problems in Northern Ireland.

The Good Friday Agreement was one peaceful attempt that stayed only at the surface of the long endemic Northern Irish problem and did not dig up in search for what is hidden beneath. It failed to get to the bottom of what really causes the

troubles which still dominate the Northern Irish society and were not healed by the Agreement. And it is this inability to recognise what lies at the core of the conflict that render any attempt for a peace quite a long and thorny journey.

#### 4. The path for reconciliation in Northern Ireland

Jeremy Smith (2002, p. 233-234) pointed out in his book *Making the Peace in Ireland* that:

Leaders may sit around tables agreeing to historic bargains on behalf of their community, but on the streets and at the many hundreds of communal interfaces throughout the province the process of finding a stable, settled and permanent peace will be a slow, agonizing and painful development.

It is a long road peacemakers in Northern Ireland favoured to seek. The best they could offer to end violence and bloodshed were some temporary peaceful resolutions merely for the conflicting political parties (Unionist and Republican) on the issues of allegiance and sovereignty. One possible justification is that peacemakers did not stop to reflect on what truly led to the conflict, and were busy negotiating who is included in the peace talks and who is excluded. They cast their eyes on religious sectarianism that lies at the very heart of the Northern Irish question, permitting hatred to keep polarizing the two unionist and republican communities.

The Northern Irish question is religious in nature, and it is religion that is giving the conflict in Northern Ireland a more political dimension and hence hinders the peace process. From the sixteenth century onwards, and following the Plantation of Ulster, strife between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland became wider. What reinforced it, however, is the deep unforgotten hatred towards the other, be it a foreign coloniser taking one's own land as it is the case for the Protestants, or native Catholics who are viewed as an inferior race. These old wounds persisted to plague Protestants-Catholics relationship over many centuries, and were accentuated more by constant violence and discrimination.

Moreover, Protestants and Catholics' different political allegiance and their desire for gaining support from the two governments of London and Dublin set them apart. They view each other with suspicious outlooks. Protestants are afraid of Catholic nationalists lest they destroy the union with Britain and establish the dominance of Roman Catholicism. Catholics, on the other hand, resent unionism and Britain's ongoing intervention in Northern Ireland. This sharpened their division and unwillingness to compromise, and most importantly made any permanent peaceful settlements and stability difficult to be sustained in a fragmented society whose inhabitants do not see the benefits of working together (Gilligan & Tonge, 1997).

Durable peace requires the shared work of both politicians and ordinary people. Chris Gilligan noted that 'the exclusion of ordinary people has also meant that the peace process has not established any roots in Northern Irish society [and] that they are not engaged in it' (Gilligan & Tonge, 1997, p 167.). In other words, if only political representatives are included in the peace

talks and the two communities of Protestants and Catholics are excluded, then all negotiations are of no avail. Political parties' intentions are not directed towards the real cause underlying the conflict, that is, hatred and religious sectarianism that tore people apart, and instead had turned the wrong way towards blaming each other as responsible for the conflict as well as failure to convene to achieve peace. Thus, all attempts for settlements remained fruitless and peace has remained problematic.

Dominic Murray (2000) noted that reconciliation cannot be achieved by legislation alone, for it is necessary to reconcile people too. Put differently, a lasting peace in Northern Ireland requires more than establishing agreements and accords to ensure a positive change in a society torn by religious sectarianism and unforgotten hatred. US Senator George Mitchell explained that 'It is important [...] to recognize that the Agreement [the Good Friday Agreement] does not, by itself, provide or guarantee peace, political stability or reconciliation [...]. It stresses the need for mutual respect and tolerance between communities' (Mitchell, 2007, p.92). This means that a peace agreement is merely one element in a large peace process, an element that 'hardly alters all aspects of the conflict' (Arthur, 2007, p.150).

Yet the mutual respect the Good Friday Agreement stresses can be achieved only by putting behind all memories of discrimination and suffering. The separation of the Protestants and the Catholics, however, caused more distrust and fear. Moreover, continued ignorance of their different cultures and traditions fuelled with humiliating stereotypes and prejudices undermined all efforts of peace building. Therefore, it is of an overriding importance to recognise that religious sectarianism is responsible for the hatred that keeps dividing people in Northern Ireland. Additionally, it is the core of the centuries-old Northern Irish conflict. The latter is at the level of the Northern Irish society and therefore can only be resolved by its people learning to live together in harmony and mutual respect.

Moving beyond religious antagonism that lurks beneath all life aspects in Northern Ireland opens channels for lasting peace and reconciliation. Yet, the peace process should not stay confined merely to politics and political negotiations. It has to be generalised to society, to churches, and most importantly to schools for they play an important role in resolving the conflict. In schools children spend hours growing up and indeed they are the place where they can learn tolerance and be proud of their multiple ethno-religious identity and different cultures. Education should be promoted to teach younger generations to overcome stereotypes, to combat bias and prejudice, and to attach to similarities between the two communities and what they have in common rather than to differences which only intensify segregation and bigotry. Whether Orange (Protestant Orange Order) or Green (Irish Nationalists), which are symbolic colours in Northern Ireland. This vision on the role of education if transformed into reality would heal a deeply injured society and ensure reconciliation for the long-suffering people of Northern Ireland.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The Irish Question remained for centuries one of the most conflicting problems the United Kingdom has ever gone through. People were hoping for a pressing change and desiring peaceful solutions to the Northern Irish endemic problem, yet, the conflict appears to be an everlasting defiant struggle. The history of the Irish conflict resulted from a combination of economic and political disputes, mainly due to deep religious sectarian divisions. Consequently, a reciprocal hatred in addition to deadly incidents between two rival groups occurred: The Protestant English on the one hand, and the Catholic Irish natives on the other. The results of this direful calamity affected greatly the two groups in all fields, within several generations and continue to linger to present day.

The Northern Ireland question is undoubtedly one of the longest running conflicts. For centuries differences grew between the two religious Protestant and Catholic communities and were solidified through time. Hatred and tensions between the two fighting groups led to several violent and terrorist acts. Nevertheless, Northern Ireland underwent attempts for pacification to resolve a centuries-old conflict. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 was negotiated in an attempt to reach political settlement and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, but tensions continue to plague Northern Ireland. Religious division remains the main spirit lying at the heart of the Northern Irish question.

In a nutshell, the turmoil engulfing Northern Ireland results from failing to understand the core of the conflict itself while proposing different resolutions. Lasting peace cannot be achieved neither from speculating over what the problem actually is, nor from delay or fruitless attempts in getting London, Irish and Dublin governments discuss round the table. The sectarianism rife will die out only by moving beyond political agreements and getting the two communities of Protestants and Catholics open up and gain the confidence of one another. If this happens, Northern Ireland can achieve a transformational change and ultimately a solid peace.

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