

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Cost of Democracy: The Church of Ireland and Its Ritual Canons, 1871–1974

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In 1870, disestablishment suddenly turned the Church of Ireland from a state church into a democracy, governed by its “parliament,” the General Synod. The empowerment of the laity left it with a distinctive, indeed unique, feature among the churches of the Anglican communion—a set of disciplinary canons designed to exclude high-church ritualism from its worship. Passed in 1871, these canons, the most radical of which included a ban on the use of the cross, were used by evangelical pressure-groups to prosecute high-church clergy in the church courts. For the dominant low-church lay party, determined to defend the “Reformation heritage” of the Church of Ireland, they represented an essential bulwark against the threat of English high-church ritualism and a “slide towards Rome.” For many clergy and bishops, anxious to allow for a broader range of Anglican churchmanship, the canons unduly narrowed and impoverished the worship of the Church of Ireland. Because of the General Synod’s majority voting mechanism, efforts to amend the canons proved fruitless. It was only in 1964 that the ban on the cross was removed, and not until 1974 that the canons as a whole were revised, ending over a hundred years of contention and division.

Keywords: Church of Ireland; Anglican history; ritualism; anti-Catholicism; evangelicalism

I. Introduction

Christian churches struggle with democracy. Their core beliefs are, of course, seen as eternal verities, not a matter for voters’ whims. Church structures are supposed to evolve slowly, if at all, over time, always maintaining the precious link with the first Christian church. Democracy is, it is true, sometimes tolerated, as in early church councils, but only when their preferably clerical members are, they trust, closely guided by the holy spirit. Even today, democracy within churches is often regarded with suspicion

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and tempered by oligarchy or even autocracy. As a blog in the *National Catholic Reporter* put it: “Democracy in the church seems like a fine idea—in theory.”¹

The Church of Ireland provides a classic case study. In 1870 it was suddenly turned, through its disestablishment, from a state church—with no hint of representative assemblies—into a democracy, governed by its “parliament,” the General Synod. The resultant empowerment of the laity left it with a distinctive, indeed unique, feature among the churches of the Anglican communion—a set of disciplinary canons designed to exclude high-church ritualism from its worship. The legacy of this democratic decision proved to be deeply divisive, and it took over one hundred years for the church to work through and resolve the problems that it created.

II. Disestablishment

As an established church, ultimate authority in the nineteenth-century Church of Ireland rested with the supreme governor, the English monarch, and with the English parliament. In practice, the church was run by its bishops, under the leadership of the archbishop of Armagh, operating under the guidance of the archbishop of Canterbury and the United Kingdom government.² Ecclesial democracy was notable only by its complete absence. Convocation—the democratic gathering of Irish bishops and clergy—had withered away after its last meeting in 1714.³ But disestablishment changed the situation dramatically. The British Parliament, exercising its right to decide the church settlement, in 1869 cut the Church of Ireland loose from the state, leaving it free—very reluctantly free—to decide how it was to be governed, what it was to believe, and how it was to worship.⁴

Since disestablishment was to come into effect on January 1, 1871, this posed some urgent questions. Not to put too fine a point on it: power was up for grabs—who was going to seize it, and how were they going to use it? Reverting to the previous cozy coterie of bishops and archbishops was impossible. Prime Minister Gladstone’s financial settlement for the Church of Ireland was not generous. The Church was going to be largely dependent on the generosity of its laity if it was to survive.⁵ A Sustainment

¹Michael Sean Winters, “Democracy in the Church Seems Like a Fine Idea—In Theory,” *Distinctly Catholic* (blog), *National Catholic Reporter*, June 21, 2017, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/democracy-church-seems-fine-idea-theory>.

²The best analysis of the nineteenth-century established church remains Donald Akenson, *The Church of Ireland: Ecclesiastical Reform and Revolution, 1800–1885* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1971); see also R. B. McDowell, *The Church of Ireland 1869–1969* (London: Routledge, 1975); Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland, 1691–1996* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1997); Alan Megahey, *The Irish Protestant Churches in the Twentieth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000); Nigel Yates, *The Religious Condition of Ireland, 1770–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Ciara Boylan, *The Life and Career of Archbishop Richard Whately: Ireland, Religion and Reform* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2018).

³Gerald Bray, ed., *Records of Convocation, xviii, Ireland 1690–1869 Part I* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 5–24.

⁴Hugh Shearman, *How the Church of Ireland Was Disestablished* (Belfast: Church of Ireland Disestablishment Centenary Committee, 1970); Hugh Shearman, *Privatising a Church: The Disestablishment and Disendowment of the Church of Ireland* (Armagh: Ulster Society, 1995); P. M. H. Bell, *Disestablishment in Ireland and Wales* (London: SPCK, 1969); James Golden, “Protestantism and Public Life: the Church of Ireland, Disestablishment and Home Rule, 1868–1874” (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2011).

⁵*The National Synod of the Church of Ireland* (Dublin: Hodges, Foster, 1869), 15, 23; Hugh Shearman, “The Economic Results of the Disestablishment of the Irish Church” (PhD diss., University of Dublin, 1944).

Fund was established, designed to supplement the endowment of the disestablished church, and the landowning and professional classes contributed generously. But they repeatedly made it clear that they would not give monetary support unless they were given power within the church.⁶ This created tensions between the two models of church government—looming religious democracy and the previous episcopal oligarchy. Issues of doctrine, liturgy, and discipline, involving complex theological and canon law questions were, bishops assumed, best settled by those accustomed to dealing with such matters—themselves. As the decidedly aristocratic Archbishop Beresford of Armagh explained to his clergy in 1871: “[P]opular assemblies are not well adapted to the discussion of religious questions. . . . Differences of opinion. . . exist in every Church, and public discussions are much more likely to increase than to reconcile them.”⁷ On the other hand, the laity were, unsurprisingly, strongly in favor of democracy. After centuries of torpor and powerlessness, disestablishment gave them an opportunity that they were determined to grasp.⁸ And they had, moreover, some very decided views—usually of an evangelical, low-church nature—which were, to put it mildly, not always in harmony with those of the bishops.⁹ This new lay activism can be seen in the outpouring of motions and resolutions passed by the parish select vestries around the time of disestablishment.¹⁰

The new emphasis on elections to vestries and to diocesan and general synods, and the more representative process for selecting bishops and parish clergy, accentuated the already existing tensions between the different “parties” in the church. Though rarely more than diffuse and changing alliances, three groups can be identified. First were the high-churchmen who, though small in number, were often intellectually formidable and respected for their learning and spirituality as, for instance, in the cases of Archbishops Trench of Dublin and Alexander of Armagh. At the other extreme were the evangelicals, dominant in the northeast of Ireland, whose low-church views were greatly strengthened in the twentieth century by the spread of fundamentalism. In between there was an amorphous broad-church party, often from the south, who were committed to the liberal Anglican idea of an inclusive and tolerant *via media*. These tensions were fully evident both in the representative Convention of bishops, clergy, and laity, which met between April and November 1870, and in the Church’s first General Synod, which convened on April 13, 1871. These bodies had to make decisions on four key issues: governance, doctrine, liturgy, and discipline. The result was, perhaps inevitably, a series of compromises, but, generally speaking, compromises

⁶Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette, March 20, 1871, 56; H. E. Patton, *Fifty Years of Disestablishment* (Dublin: APCK, 1922), 31; *The Suppressed Debate on Proposed Canon No. 101* (Dublin, William McGee, 1871), 11.

⁷Report of the Visitation by of the Archdiocese of Armagh, September 27, 1871, Representative Church Body Library, Dublin (hereafter cited as RCBL) Pamphlet Series, Irish Church Miscellaneous 1868–74 (hereafter cited as RCBL Pamphlet), L31, 153.

⁸The arrival of democracy in the Church of Ireland coincided with the extension of the political franchise and the broadening of democratic politics in Ireland: Michael Hurst, “Ireland and the Ballot Act of 1872,” *Historical Journal* 8, no. 3 (1965): 326–352, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X00027114>.

⁹Some vestry books remain in local parish custody; the majority of those in public repositories are either in the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, or in the RCBL. See RCBL, “A Handlist of Church of Ireland Vestry Minute Books in the Representative Church Body Library, Dublin,” <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/cmsfiles/pdf/AboutUs/library/vestrybooks.pdf>.

¹⁰See the series of thirty-two articles by Robert Marshall, “Charting Disestablishment,” *The Church Review: The Diocesan Magazine of Dublin and Glendalough*, from March 2019 to February 2022.

where the bishops, having sought initially to preserve their control, were forced to concede substantial ground to the demands of the now-emboldened laity.¹¹

The Convention laid down the new constitution of the Church of Ireland.¹² The General Synod—the governing body—was to consist of all the bishops and representatives of the clergy and laity. The bishops had an early setback when the ratio of lay to clerical representatives was increased from their preferred 1.5:1 to 2:1, giving rise to fears of what Archbishop Beresford termed excessive “democratic tendencies.”¹³ But the threat of lay dictatorship was offset by a further provision that voting on important issues could be by order, and that for a measure to pass it had to have two-thirds majority support among the clergy and the laity. This requirement proved to be of enduring importance in the Church of Ireland, making it much more difficult to pass contentious or divisive legislation.¹⁴ In Donald Akenson’s words, it represented a “middle ground between congregationalism and hierarchical authoritarianism.”¹⁵ More succinctly, it was democracy with a handbrake. Underneath the General Synod were the diocesan synods: here democracy was balanced by autocracy—the bishop had the power of veto.¹⁶ These synods elected the clergy and lay people to serve on the General Vestries; diocesan synod representatives themselves were elected by the General Vestries—the parishioners of each parish. General Vestries met each Easter and elected the twelve-man (and it was men) Select Vestry, which included two church wardens, balanced between one chosen by the incumbent and another elected by the General Vestry.

The Convention then moved on to the remaining three issues: doctrine, liturgy, and discipline. The church retained the Thirty-Nine Articles as its confession, which was not especially doctrinally revealing given the variety of interpretation to which the articles were susceptible. The constitution passed by the Convention offered some further definition, though, describing the Church of Ireland as “a reformed and Protestant Church”—tying it to the Reformation in a way that greatly pleased evangelicals, who regularly quoted this phrase in later controversies; but the constitution also characterized the Church as “Catholic and Apostolic,” thus linking it to the wider catholic and pre-Reformation church, a description cited with equal frequency and approval by those of a broad- or high-church predisposition.¹⁷

¹¹See the discussion on the bishops’ veto and the Abercorn compromise: G. O. Fitzsimons, “The Church of Ireland and Disestablishment 1870–1880” (MA diss., National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1997), 21.

¹²Robert Marshall, “The Constitution of the Church of Ireland in Action: Ritualist Legislation in a Disestablished Church, 1871–1937,” in *Law and Religion in Ireland, 1700–1970*, ed. Kevin Costello and Niamh Howlin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 291–295.

¹³Report of the Visitation of the Archdiocese of Armagh, September 27, 1871, RCBL Pamphlet, L31, 153; Akenson, *The Church of Ireland*, 287.

¹⁴The bishops also had a power of veto, though this was never used: Marshall, “The Constitution,” 294.

¹⁵Akenson, *The Church of Ireland*, 290.

¹⁶The veto was ultimately over-rideable by the House of Bishops: A. T. Lee, ed., *Journal of the General Convention of the Church of Ireland 1870* (Dublin: Hodges and Foster, 1871), 63.

¹⁷Alan Ford, “One Church, Two Histories: The Jacobean and Caroline Traditions in the Church of Ireland, 1600–2000,” in *The Church of Ireland and Its Past: History, Interpretation and Identity*, ed. Mark Empsey, Alan Ford, and Miriam Moffitt (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 286–305; for just one of many possible examples of the popular appreciation of this distinction, see the interchange of anonymous letters in the *Northern Whig* in 1927: “Our Church Is Not Protestant, but Catholic,” May 16, 5; the Church of Ireland is “Reformed and Protestant,” May 25, 8.

III. Ritualism and the 1871 Canons

This left liturgy and discipline. During the second half of the nineteenth century, these had become highly emotive issues thanks to the tensions that had grown in the churches of England and Ireland since the rise of the Oxford Movement.¹⁸ The high-church tradition aroused the ire of Irish evangelicals on three counts.¹⁹ First, they feared being outflanked by Irish Presbyterians—the majority Protestant church in the north—who were always willing to complain about, and profit from, the “Romeward trend” of the “backsliding” Church of Ireland.²⁰ Second, following disestablishment there was considerable resentment at what was seen as the “betrayal” of its sister church by the Church of England, and this fueled hostility to the Church of England, which was seen as “polluting” the Church of Ireland by exporting ritualism.²¹ And finally, the innate hostility of the Church of Ireland to the papal church—as one seventeenth-century bishop put it, they were like little children who so much dread the fire that they can never be far enough from their fear—meant that any hints of “Catholicism” were anathema.²² Even a high-churchman like Henry Jellett believed that the liturgy had to distance itself from Roman Catholicism: “The poor half-educated laborer or tradesman will make a struggle to maintain his faith so long as he feels it is for principle he is contending, but if the service in the church appears to his untutored mind very like that in the Roman Catholic chapel . . . he will be much more easily persuaded to leave the church and go with his neighbors to the Roman Catholic chapel.”²³ In sum, the strength of the Irish Catholic Church, together with the rise of evangelicalism among clergy and laity, copperfastened this anti-Catholicism as an existential trait of the Church of Ireland: being Protestant meant not being Catholic.²⁴

The fear of high-church infiltration had reached a head in the decade before disestablishment, fueled by the controversy over ritualist trials in England and two notable incidents in Dublin.²⁵ First, the efforts of the rector of St. Bride’s in Dublin in 1866 to introduce a choral service resulted in repeated riots. As mobs in the church howled “No Popery” and “No Puseyism,” policemen had to form a protective cordon around the communion table.²⁶ And then, just before the Convention, there were more popular protests in the diocese of Dublin following the refusal of that evangelical *bête noire* Archbishop Richard Chenevix Trench to condemn a high-church pamphlet seen as

¹⁸See here the detailed discussions in James Whisenant, *A Fragile Unity: Anti-Ritualism and the Division of Anglican Evangelicalism in the Nineteenth Century* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003); and in Nigel Yates, *Anglican Ritualism in Victorian Britain 1830–1910* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁹Peter Nockles, “Church or Protestant Sect? The Church of Ireland, High Churchmanship, and the Oxford Movement, 1822–1869,” *Historical Journal* 41, no. 2 (1998): 457–493, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X98007821>.

²⁰Yates, *Anglican Ritualism*, 137–138.

²¹See, for example, *Cork Constitution*, December 17, 1894, 6; *The Times*, October 5, 1898, 9.

²²John Vesey, *The Life of Primate Bramhall* (Dublin, 1676), sig. 12r.

²³*Authorized Report of the Church Congress Held at Dublin* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith and Foster, 1868), 123.

²⁴Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800–70* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1978), 67–78; Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland*, 119–121, 155–160; Yates, *The Religious Condition of Ireland*, 260–279; Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005), 53–75; Andrew Holmes, *The Irish Presbyterian Mind: Conservative Theology, Evangelical Experience, and Modern Criticism, 1830–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 15–16, 24–25.

²⁵Yates, *Anglican Ritualism*, 137–43; Whisenant, *A Fragile Unity*, chaps 3–5; Bell, *Disestablishment*, 185–189.

²⁶James Golden, “Irishness, Foreignness and National Identity: Apostolic Succession in Disestablishment Historiography,” in *The Church of Ireland and Its Past: History, Interpretation and Identity*, ed. Mark Empey, Alan Ford, and Miriam Moffitt (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2017), 155.

advocating real presence in the eucharist, baptismal regeneration, and priestly absolution.²⁷ “Ritualism” thus became for many church members both a rallying cry and a source of acute anxiety. Its seemingly unstoppable spread in the Church of England was held up as a terrible warning. If this dangerous foreign contagion was allowed to infect Ireland—the phrases “thin end of the wedge” and “slippery slope” were in regular use—it would result in mass defections to “Romanism” and “dissent.”²⁸

The rewriting of the church’s constitution thus came at a difficult time, when passions were running high. The result was a rousing introduction to democracy, as the selection of parochial delegates for the Convention gave rise to that most unfamiliar feature of church life, raucous electioneering. In All Saints Grangegorman, one of the centers of Dublin high-churchmanship, the meetings to elect representatives for the Convention attracted the largest and probably the liveliest gatherings in the parish’s history. Amid cries of “Down with Ritualism,” the electors denounced the worship in Grangegorman and proceeded to choose delegates to the Convention who were uniformly hostile to ritualism.²⁹ As one unsympathetic high-churchman later put it: “A worse hour for ecclesiastical reorganization could hardly have been chosen.”³⁰

Unsurprisingly, such delegates arrived at the Convention and the first General Synod determined to use these assemblies to banish ritualism. There were two main fronts in this battle: the Prayer Book and the canons. The story of the evangelical efforts to rewrite the Prayer Book in a firmly Protestant way has already been told. Briefly, a tenacious rearguard action by moderate clergy ensured that radical change was avoided in the Prayer Book that was finally agreed upon, after much contention, in 1878.³¹ More immediate and striking success was, however, gained on the disciplinary front. Disestablishment meant that the Church of Ireland was now free to draw up its own canons, having since the Act of Union been bound by those of the Church of England. Irish churchmen and women were concerned at the vagueness of the existing ornaments rubric, and the way in which ritualist clergy in the Church of England had flouted it.³² They thus drew up a new code that defined precisely (and, they hoped, inescapably) church ornamentation and clerical dress and behavior in a way that ruled out high-church practices.

In April 1870 the Convention appointed a Judicature Committee to revise the old Irish canons of 1634.³³ The strength of lay and clerical feeling was soon apparent. A “Memorial,” signed by over four thousand clergymen and vestrymen was presented to the Convention, calling on it “to prevent any departure from the pure simplicity

²⁷Yates, *Anglican Ritualism*, 140.

²⁸See, for example, *Church of Ireland Gazette (CIG)*, April 25, 1930, 227; *CIG*, October 11, 1940, 513; *Portadown Times*, June 4, 1955, 4; and *Belfast Telegraph*, May 19, 1964, 5.

²⁹*Irish Times*, November 11, 1869, 4; and *Dublin Daily Express*, November 11, 1869, 2. A similar electoral result in another high-church stronghold, St. John’s Sandymount, suggests that even in the churches where it flourished, ritualism was, in terms of the wider parish, a minority interest: *Dublin Daily Express*, November 11, 1869, 4. I am grateful to Robert Marshall for drawing my attention to these reports.

³⁰Letter, Archbishop John Gregg to F. R. Bolton, November 12, 1947, RCBL, MS 1064/3.2.3.

³¹Akenson, *The Church of Ireland*, 302–309; and Richard Clarke, “The Disestablishment Revision of the Irish Book of Common Prayer” (PhD diss., University of Dublin, 1989); and McDowell, *The Church of Ireland*, 60–65.

³²For pre-disestablishment vestments: E. A. Stopford, *A Hand-Book of Ecclesiastical Law and Duty, for the Use of the Irish Clergy* (Dublin: Hodges, Smith, 1861), 291–297.

³³*Report of the Judicature Committee* (Dublin: Hodges and Foster, 1871), 3; Gerald Bray, ed. *The Anglican Canons 1529–1947* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1998).

of our worship, and to guard against the introduction of superstitious novelties tending to assimilate any of our services to those of the Church of Rome.”³⁴ Parish vestries and diocesan gatherings made their feeling known. In Sligo, in May 1870, the parish of Emlaghfad passed a blunt motion that “we have no sympathy with the Ritualistic teaching of some members of our own Church.”³⁵ The Ferns diocesan synod in December 1869 mandated its representatives at the Convention “to use all means in their power to effect the establishment of a code of laws so simple in detail and ease of access as to render it impossible that any clergyman with any tinge of Ritualistic proclivities should remain or hold office in . . . the Protestant Church of Ireland.”³⁶

The Church was in no mood to resist such pressure. New “ritual canons” were drawn up by the Committee and debated by Synod between April and May 1871. Canon 4 defined what clergy were to wear: “a plain white surplice” with “the customary scarf of plain black silk.” At communion, Canon 5 required that the minister to say the prayer of consecration while standing at the north of the table—this was directed against ritualists who prayed facing the altar with their backs to the congregation. It also forbade the minister bowing to the table or making the sign of the cross during service. Canon 35 prohibited lit candles during service, unless needed for light. Canon 37 banned the elevation of the host during communion, 38 incense, and 39 processions. Canon 40 made changes to church ornaments dependent on the consent of incumbent, select vestry, and bishop, with provision for aggrieved parties to appeal to the diocesan court.³⁷

The most startling of the canons was that banning the cross—Canon 36: “That there shall not be any cross, ornamental or otherwise, on the communion table, or on the covering thereof, nor shall a cross be erected or depicted on the wall or other structure behind the communion table, in any of the churches or other places of worship of the Church of Ireland.”³⁸ This had not appeared in the draft prepared for the Synod but had been proposed late in the day by a Clogher clergyman, George Finlay.³⁹ The sparse minutes of the Synod simply record it as having passed; the account in a contemporary Protestant newspaper stated that it was “adopted by an overwhelming majority.”⁴⁰ The fact that the bishops did not oppose it affords further proof of the resolute Protestant tone of the assembly and the strength of popular feeling on this issue. Conservatives were also happy to concede firm actions on the canons in the hope that it would head off demands for changes to the Prayer Book. As the *Gazette* put it: “We find no fault with any of the Canons suggested. We have all along held it as an indisputable principle that the best way to suppress ritualism was to leave ‘our beautiful and Scriptural Liturgy’ alone, but to deal with the offence by the enactment of the most stringent Canons.”⁴¹

Canon 36 certainly marked an unusual, indeed unprecedented step for a church in the Anglican communion: banning a central symbol of Christianity. The reasoning was

³⁴RCBL Pamphlet, L29, 1–4; *Saunders’s News-Letter*, October 20, 1870, 1.

³⁵RCBL, Emlaghfad Vestry Book, 203/5/4 (unpaginated).

³⁶*Dublin Daily Express*, December 8, 1869, 3.

³⁷*The Statutes Passed in the General Synod of the Church of Ireland 1871* (Dublin: Edward Purdon, 1874), 8–9, 18–19; Bray, *The Anglican Canons*, lxxviii, 838–856.

³⁸*Statutes Passed in the General Synod*, 18.

³⁹J. B. Leslie, *Clogher Clergy and Parishes* (Enniskillen: the author, 1929), 49, 95.

⁴⁰*Journal of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland . . . Session of 1871* (Dublin: Edward Purdon, 1872), 72; *Dublin Daily Express*, May 13, 1871, 2.

⁴¹*Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, April 22, 1871, 80.

reactive. The cross embodied what Church of Ireland members saw as two existential threats—Roman Catholicism and high-church ritualism. Concerned at the “idolatry” of Catholic adoration of the crucifix, and at high-church reverence for the cross as a symbol of Christ’s real and sacrificial presence in the eucharist, Synod united behind the Canon, rendering pointless any call for a majority vote by orders.⁴²

Finally came enforcement: the Convention had established diocesan courts, with appeals to the Court of the General Synod. Concerned that courts would, as Archbishop Trench put it, be used “for the more prompt and easy worrying of clergy with ritualistic . . . proclivities,” the bishops had proposed that they sit alone in judgment in their diocesan courts along with their Chancellor as assessor (legal adviser); appeals would be to the General Synod Court, made up of both the Archbishops, one other bishop and two lay people who had served as judges in the civil courts.⁴³ Again, though, the bishops were forced to compromise, as two further members, one lay, the other clerical, were added to the diocesan courts, while the General Synod court had three episcopal and four lay members.⁴⁴

IV. Enforcing the Canons

Though the legislation passed with ease, enforcement remained a challenge. The supporters of the canons had sought to outlaw all the high-church practices to which they objected. But, as was all too evident in England, legal prohibition merely invited ingenious circumvention. If it did, how effective would the resort to the legal procedures outlined in Canon 40 prove to be in settling matters? And finally, what would be the cost to the unity and comprehensiveness of the Church?

Much clearly depended on the politics of the newly independent church, and whether the antiritualists could maintain the momentum and the engagement created during the excitement of disestablishment. The structure of select vestries and diocesan and general synods, with regular elections, together with the new methods for the appointment of parish clergy and bishops, greatly enhanced lay involvement and power.⁴⁵ Over time, the decline in the Protestant aristocracy and landholding class created a less deferential church, while a further stimulus to popular involvement was provided by the development of lay pressure groups, such as the Protestant Defence Association (PDA) of Ireland. Founded in 1868 to campaign against disestablishment, the PDA organized rallies and public meetings, writing letters to newspapers, publishing pamphlets, and stirring up popular feeling against the measure.⁴⁶ During the three decades after disestablishment, the PDA seamlessly transferred these methods to the battle against ritualism within the Church of Ireland.⁴⁷

Apart from an abortive attempt to prosecute William Maturin, perpetual curate of All Saints’ Grangegorman in 1872, most of the efforts of the evangelicals in the

⁴²The General Synod did not record the content of debates: *Dublin Daily Express*, May 13, 1871, 4.

⁴³[Maria Trench], ed., *Richard Chenevix Trench Archbishop: Memorials*, 2 vols (London: Kegan, Paul, 1888), ii, 115.

⁴⁴Akenson, *The Church of Ireland*, 285–286; Marshall, “The Constitution,” 297–298.

⁴⁵Bell, *Disestablishment*, 210–211. For an account of the way in which Disestablishment led to local lay engagement in Waterford, see Eugene Broderick, *Waterford’s Anglicans: Religion and Politics, 1819–1872* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), 340–345.

⁴⁶*Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, February 20, 1868, 37; Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798–1998*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1999, 221.

⁴⁷For a summary of its aims in 1894 see *Irish Times*, June 15, 1894, 6.

1870s were focused on the new Prayer Book.⁴⁸ When that was agreed in 1878, they turned to the enforcement of the canons, especially in Dublin, where they claimed ritualism was spreading with dangerous speed.⁴⁹ Their concerns centered on Richard Travers Smith, incumbent of St. Bartholomew's from 1871 to 1905.⁵⁰ This was a recently built church that, even when you enter it today, still clearly indicates through its architecture and elaborate ornamentation its disdain for the "plain and low" tradition of Irish churchmanship.⁵¹ Intellectually able and confident, Canon Smith took on the dual role as leader of the high-church party and antiritualist hate-figure.⁵²

Battle began in 1892, when Colonel Fox Grant, the PDA secretary, charged Smith in the Dublin Diocesan Court with erecting a cross on the communion table.⁵³ The result was revealing. Though himself an evangelical, Archbishop William Plunket of Dublin was clearly unhappy with the idea of prosecuting one of his own clergy. In fact, when the case came before him, he ignored the letter of the law and bent over backward to exonerate Smith. The PDA immediately appealed from the diocesan to the General Synod Court, and there, rightly, Smith was found guilty of having a cross behind the table, contrary to Canon 36, and ordered to remove it. Again though, there was a contrast between the attitudes of the bishops and the laity on the General Synod Court: while the lay members voted to convict, two of the bishops involved, Archbishop Beresford and Bishop Alexander of Derry issued a dissenting minority judgment.⁵⁴ Smith then placed the cross *before* the communion table (exactly the kind of high-church slipperiness that antiritualists feared), and there it remained.⁵⁵ Efforts were made by the PDA at General Synod to change the wording of Canon 36 to exclude crosses placed before the altar, but they ran into the inevitable roadblock of the voting system.⁵⁶ This set the pattern for repeated conflict and argument, extending down to the early 1940s, with complaints from low-church pressure groups being followed by extensive debate at diocesan synods and motions at General Synod, punctuated periodically by legal cases attempting to push reluctant bishops to take action against offenders.

Three things, though, changed over time. First, after the conviction for offenses against the canons of Smith's successor, Walter Simpson, in General Synod Court in 1928, the initial focus on St. Bartholomew's shifted to another ritualist church in Dublin, St. John's Sandymount.⁵⁷ Its incumbent, Samuel Colquhoun, over a lengthy tenure from 1930 to 1960, appeared before the General Synod Court on four occasions, in 1935, 1937, 1939, and 1940. Though bishops were often reluctant to initiate

⁴⁸Marshall, "The Constitution," 302, 305–310.

⁴⁹Catholicus, *Ritualistic Prospects in Dublin as Seen in Churches, Trinity College and the Press: In Two Letters from an English Visitor to a Friend at Oxford*, 2nd ed. (Dublin: Falconer, 1888); for a refutation of some of the claims, see *Irish Ecclesiastical Gazette*, November 2, 1888, 925.

⁵⁰Ronnie Wallace, *Clergy of Dublin and Glendalough* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2001), 1064.

⁵¹Kenneth Milne and Alistair Rowan, *St. Bartholomew's: A History of the Dublin Parish* (Dublin: Hinds, 2019).

⁵²Smith published over twenty books on the Bible and church history; the extensive papers he collected on the ritual controversies during his time in St. Bartholomew's are preserved in the RCBL Pamphlet Collection.

⁵³*Dublin Daily Express*, February 9, 1894, 1.

⁵⁴*Irish Times*, August 6, 1892, 5.

⁵⁵Milne and Rowan, *St. Bartholomew's*, 21.

⁵⁶Frederick How, *William Conyngham Plunket: A Memoir* (London: Isbister, 1900), chap. 21; Marshall, "The Constitution," 310–312.

⁵⁷Marshall, "The Constitution," 313–316.

proceedings or to punish infractions of the canons severely, Colquhoun's recidivism tested their patience. Archbishop Gregg (of Dublin 1920–1939, of Armagh 1939–1959), though he privately voiced his distaste for the canons, publicly insisted that Colquhoun abide by them.⁵⁸ Colquhoun did not. In 1937 he was convicted by the General Synod Court of bowing to the communion table, making the sign of the cross during service, and setting up stations of the cross in the church. His punishment—suspension for six months and payment of substantial costs—was a clear signal that episcopal tolerance had reached its limit.⁵⁹ High-church clergy had, as a result, to rein in their liturgical excesses and remain within the bounds of the canons—at least when “outsiders” were present at the service.⁶⁰

The second change was the most important. As the PDA faded from view in the first decade of the twentieth century, it was replaced by a new pressure group, the Irish Church Union (ICU). Founded around 1910, the ICU's object was “the promotion and defence of the Reformed Faith of the Church of Ireland.”⁶¹ Though it broadened its platform over time to encompass other concerns, its primary focus was always campaigning against ritualism.⁶² For over forty years, it was a thorn in the side of any (even slightly) ritualistic Irish churchman, regularly complaining about unlawful vestments, uncanonical gestures, the use of candles and incense, genuflection, and failure to stand at the north side of the altar. Given added bite by the percolation of fundamentalism through the Church of Ireland in the early twentieth century, provided with a strong theological underpinning by the combative Dublin clergyman and popular theologian T. C. Hammond, and vigorously led from Belfast by its secretary, Frederick William Christie, a wine-merchant's bookkeeper, the ICU developed a well-honed *modus operandi*.⁶³ It identified churches where the clergy were not observing the canons, sent in observers to witness the infractions, and then widely publicized them through letters to newspapers and public meetings in Dublin and Belfast. Through their many synodsmen, the ICU raised these issues at the diocesan and general synods and then, with help of their legally qualified members and regular public appeals for financial support to cover the often considerable costs, they initiated action in diocesan courts and, if necessary, appeals to General Synod. This highly effective approach

⁵⁸Letter, Archbishop Gregg to Frederic Bolton, November 12, 1947, RCBL MS 1064.3.2/3; George Seaver, *John Allen Fitzgerald Gregg Archbishop* (London: Faith Press, 1963), chap. 9, quotes extensively from letters since destroyed.

⁵⁹*Irish Times*, November 6, 1937, 6; Marshall, “The Constitution,” 318–323.

⁶⁰Eric Earle, who was a server in St. John's Sandymount under Colquhoun from 1940 to 1948, recalled that one of his duties before each Sunday service, was to check whether there were any “strangers” in the congregation: if there were, the candles on the altar remained unlit, and the minister refrained from practices that breached the canons. Eric Earle to author, May 3, 2020.

⁶¹*Belfast News-Letter*, November 17, 1933, 13; for a fuller statement of the ICU's aims, see *Belfast News-Letter*, March 5, 1931, 9. The precise date of the founding of the ICU is unclear; the earliest date in its membership register is January 1910. RCBL, MS 450, 1; Phineas Hunt in October 1915 referred to it as having been founded “within the last few years” *CIG*, October 6, 1915, 8.

⁶²*Northern Whig*, April 9, 1931, 5; *Portadown News*, April 30, 1932, 8.

⁶³T. C. Hammond, “The Fascination of the Church of Rome—A Reply,” *The Irish Church Quarterly* 8 (1915): 60–69; Warren Nelson, *T. C. Hammond, Irish Christian: His Life and Legacy in Ireland and Australia* (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth Trust, 1994); John McIntosh, *Anglican Evangelicalism in Sydney 1897 to 1953: Nathaniel Jones, D. J. Davies and T. C. Hammond* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018), 196–240. See Frederick William Christie, 75 Cheviot Street, Belfast in the 1911 Irish census. “Census of Ireland 1901/1911 and Census Fragments and Substitutes, 1821–51,” *The National Archives of Ireland*, <http://census.nationalarchives.ie/>.

ensured that ritualism remained a live and bitterly divisive issue in the Church of Ireland when it had long since faded into the background in the Church of England.⁶⁴

The third change was a geographical one. Though the ICU had many southern members, widely representative of all sections of Protestant society from railwaymen to justices of the peace, it was in the north, particularly in Belfast where its leadership was based, that it flourished.⁶⁵ Thus, while Dublin remained the stronghold of Irish ritualism, in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century the main focus for agitation moved north. This reflected the changing center of gravity in Irish Anglicanism. As Protestant numbers in the south declined after partition, and Belfast in particular experienced significant growth, the northeast became the Church of Ireland's "Bible belt"—the home of a popular, anti-Catholic, strongly political fundamentalism that was forged in the early part of the century through unionist opposition to home rule and closely connected with Protestant politics and organizations such as the Orange Order and the Freemasons, most notably symbolized in the enthusiastic Church of Ireland participation in the signing of the Covenant in 1912.⁶⁶ As southern clergy and laity adapted to the new southern state, and slowly abandoned their instinctive anti-Catholicism, tensions grew up in the Church of Ireland between north and south, especially over the subject of ritualism and how it was to be tackled.⁶⁷

The shift was most evident in relation to Canon 36. Opponents, generally southern and clerical, made periodic attempts to amend or abolish it, repeatedly claiming that opinion had changed since the original passing of the canons in 1871. And there was a shift away from the earlier blanket hostility to ritualism. During World War I, Warre Wells, the editor of the church's newspaper, *The Church of Ireland Gazette*, led a campaign to repeal "that insult to Christendom, commonly called the 36th Canon." Ex-soldiers wrote to the editor, pointedly telling how they had been moved by the crosses on the graves of fallen comrades in France: "How could we endure the awful times we are passing through but for what the Cross symbolizes?"⁶⁸ The campaign got nowhere. After strenuous ICU protests, the proposal did not even make it to General Synod.⁶⁹

A concerted effort by Bishops Day of Ossory and Orr of Meath to repeal Canon 36 reached General Synod in 1930. They secured majority support from the clergy—83 to 32—for a motion to appoint a committee to consider the matter, but lost overwhelmingly

⁶⁴See the series of annual reports of the ICU in RCBL, MS 450.

⁶⁵Only the southern membership list, from 1910 to approximately 1950, has survived: RCBL, MS 450. Most of the members listed can be identified through the 1911 census.

⁶⁶Andrew Scholes, *The Church of Ireland and the Third Home Rule Crisis* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010); David Fitzpatrick, *Descendancy: Irish Protestant Histories Since 1795* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), chap. 6; and John Wolffe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland 1843–1945* (London: Routledge, 1994), 147–149.

⁶⁷Daithí Ó Corráin, *Rendering to God and Caesar: The Irish Churches and the Two States in Ireland, 1949–73* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), chaps 1 and 3; on the process of southern change and adaptation, the standard account is now Ian d'Alton and Ida Milne, ed., *Protestant and Irish: The Minority's Search for Place in Independent Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2019).

⁶⁸*CIG*, August 17, 1917, 578; *CIG*, August 24, 1917, 593–594; *CIG*, September 2, 1917, 616; *CIG*, September 21, 1917, 657; and *CIG*, October 26, 1917, 732. For the attitude of the *Gazette* to the ICU, see the editorial of October 26, 1917, 738; on the shift in attitudes during World War I, see Megahey, *The Irish Protestant Churches*, 73.

⁶⁹*Irish Times*, October 22, 1917, 7; *Belfast Telegraph*, October 23, 1917, 7; *CIG*, October 26, 1917, 738; *Northern Whig*, January 30, 1918, 6; *Irish Times*, May 16, 1918, 4.

among the laity—32 in favor, 136 against. Bishop Day claimed that there was “a very large body, a growing body, both of the clergy and the laity, who feel very strongly that Canon 36 is a blot on our Canons.” But he accepted that any attempt to change the canon would be harmful: it would be “misunderstood, especially in the North of Ireland.”⁷⁰ Certainly, a leading Church of Ireland layman, Lord Glenavy, was outspoken in his criticism of the bishops’ motion: “I believe nothing has done so much harm to our Church since Disestablishment.”⁷¹ As an “Old Fashioned Churchwoman” put it in an engagingly frank letter to the *Gazette*, the clergy, with a few exceptions, were for repeal; the laity, with still fewer exceptions, were against:

Doubtless the viewpoint of the clergy is the broader and more cultured. They have studied history and ecclesiastical law . . . and give it as their opinion that the time is now ripe for the repeal of a Canon framed nearly 50 years ago. We laity take our stand rather upon personal prejudice and family tradition. Our fathers and forefathers regarded Canon 36 as the bulwark of their Protestantism, and we see no reason to alter that opinion. Today we see the Cross blazoned on the forefront of all Roman Catholic observances, and in the form of a crucifix used as an object of adoration. We regard it as the hall-mark of ritualism in this country, and we fear its introduction into our churches will prove to be the thin end of a wedge that may ultimately divide our church, as ritualism has divided the Church of England.⁷²

As Archbishop Gregg acknowledged, the canons evoked considerable unease. They would never, he felt, have been passed if brought before the church in 1930. Yet, at the same time, he recognized that because of the weighted voting in Synod and the strength of opinion among the laity it would not be possible to repeal them. The result was, he lamented, a “stalemate.”⁷³

V. Arguments over the Canons

Much of the early debate over the canons in the Church of Ireland had been historical and theological, as evangelicals sought to rebut the scholarly claims of Canon Smith.⁷⁴ But as the ICU campaigned over the issue in the 1920s and 1930s, the argument took on a sharper, more pragmatic and combative tone. The ICU argued that the Church of Ireland was a Protestant reformed church that had, through its constitution and canons, rejected any form of ritualism. Knowing the reluctance of bishops to prosecute their own clergy, the ICU took on the role of police and prosecutors. Legally, their case was a strong one. As they put it in 1931 in the columns of the (usually hostile) *Gazette*: “What the members of the Irish Church Union plead for is that the laws and constitutions of the Church of Ireland should be carried out in their entirety.”⁷⁵

⁷⁰*CIG*, May 23, 1930, 288.

⁷¹*Ibid.*

⁷²*CIG*, April 25, 1930, 227; Richard Hartford, *Godfrey Day: Missionary, Pastor and Primate* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1940), 235.

⁷³*CIG*, May 23, 1930, 288.

⁷⁴See the learned discussions on whether or not the cross was used as a symbol in the early church: Richard Travers Smith, *The Cross: The Substance of a Sermon Preached in the Church of St Bartholomew, Dublin* (Dublin: Hodges Figgis, 1892); Timothy Clifford O’Connor, *The Image of a Cross: In Pagan, Christian, and Anti-Christian Symbolism* (Dublin: Evening Echo, 1895).

⁷⁵*Belfast News-Letter*, March 2, 1931, 10.

One anonymous churchwoman put it bluntly: ministers shouldn't join a church unless they are prepared to abide by its rules.⁷⁶ This argument gained academic support from the austere Trinity philosopher A. A. Luce, who condemned the "celebrant who strews the sanctuary with broken rubrics." The Canons were the law of the Church—he who breaks them "despises religious unity and the bond of faith."⁷⁷

The difficulty, of course, comes back to that classic problem of democracy: minority rights. When a vote has decided an issue, how should a minority that refuses to abide by that decision be treated? Should laws rejected by a minority be enforced by the majority? Broad churchmen wriggled to evade the legal requirement. Douglas Dunlop, a Tuam cleric with extensive experience of the Anglican church in England and India, argued in 1938 that, while conformity in doctrine was essential, in matters of ritual and ceremony "loyalty cannot be forced." The ritual canons were so restrictive, he claimed, that all clergy, evangelical or high, inevitably break them: "It is impossible to keep the letter of the law and, alas! it is by the letter of the law that they are judged and condemned." His answer was to relax the canons and trust to the good sense of the clergy.⁷⁸

Anglicanism, as it defined itself in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, made a theoretical virtue of its inescapable divisions between high and low, liberal and conservative, by lauding its own comprehensiveness.⁷⁹ When the ICU and their allies sought to limit Anglicanism to its "Protestant" heritage, their opponents criticized this as an unjustifiable narrowing of its breadth and tolerance. As Bishop Day put it: "True unity is not the same thing as rigid uniformity. . . our aim and ideal [should] be a deeper and truer unity. . . a unity which is held together, not so much by restriction and repression as by mutual trust and love."⁸⁰ Or, as one letter to the editor of the *Church of Ireland Gazette* summed up this point of view: "heaven is big enough to contain both high and low churchmen."⁸¹

For some critics the ICU was, by focusing on liturgical inessentials, dividing the church unnecessarily and weakening it in the face of much more serious contemporary challenges. Bishop Frederick MacNeice of Down, Connor and Dromore, responded bluntly to a letter from Frederick Christie in 1935 complaining about Romanist ritualism in his dioceses: "The issues which divide mankind today are far removed from those which seem to have most interest to you," pointing to secularism, communism, and paganism as the "real enemy at our doors."⁸²

The debates between the ICU and their opponents were often bitter. The former righteously complained about the hypocrisy of ministers who accepted ordination in a church whose rules they refused to obey. The ICU, in turn, was accused of being a secret society whose methods included espionage—sending spies into churches to report on services. Canon Thomas Drury of St. Patrick's Cathedral Dublin, a persistent critic, complained in 1938: "It is the Inquisition in a new form. People must be

⁷⁶*CIG*, May 20, 1938, 304.

⁷⁷*CIG*, April 29, 1938, 259.

⁷⁸*CIG*, May 27, 1938, 327.

⁷⁹The classic text is P. E. More and F. L. Cross, ed., *Anglicanism* (London: S.P.C.K., 1935; 2nd ed. Cambridge: James Clarke, 2008); Mark Chapman, *Anglican Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2012); Diarmaid MacCullough, *All Things Made New: Writings on the Reformation* (London: Penguin Random House, 2017), part III; Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 22–30.

⁸⁰*CIG*, May 23, 1930, 286.

⁸¹*CIG*, May 13, 1938, 290.

⁸²Quoted in David Fitzpatrick, *Solitary and Wild: Frederick MacNeice and the Salvation of Ireland* (Dublin: Lilliput, 2012), 223; see also *CIG*, May 13, 1938, 290.

dragooned into worshipping their Maker according to certain fixed rules. There is to be no relaxation in favour of those who are helped in their worship by symbolism.”⁸³ Another correspondent pointed acidly to the parallel development in Germany where the Nazis removed the cross from all church buildings: “This will be very gratifying news for Mr Christie and his friends, but very grave news for those who love and profess the faith.”⁸⁴

VI. Changing the Canons

By the 1940s the power of the ICU was declining. The last appeal concerning a ritual canons case was heard by the Court of the General Synod in 1941, when a charge against the dean of St. Patrick’s was dismissed with costs.⁸⁵ In the same year, the ICU Annual Report, after noting that many staunch supporters had died in recent years, lamented that the young men of the Church of Ireland “are being drawn away from the old evangelical faith.”⁸⁶ The ICU attempted to renew the legal battle against the long-lived and persistent Samuel Colquhoun into the 1950s, threatening legal action against him and the Archbishop of Dublin in 1951, but nothing came of it.⁸⁷ They continued to meet and try to secure the election of supporters to General Synod, but their public profile gradually diminished. The year 1953 marked the end of an era—Frederick Christie, the driving force behind the ICU for the past twenty-three years, resigned as Secretary at the age of seventy-five.⁸⁸ By May 1959 a correspondent to the *Belfast Telegraph* could express surprise at a reference to the organization: “I thought it had died a natural death years ago. There was a time when it was the plague of many a decent parish priest and his select vestry—those dreaded letters—I.C.U.!”⁸⁹

As complaints to newspapers and delations to bishops dried up, the Church of Ireland had more freedom of maneuver to rethink its approach to the canons. It was not, though, a rapid process. Attitudes still differed markedly between Belfast and Dublin. In the north, Bishop Day’s warning about the dangers of “misunderstanding” still applied—any changes to the canons must not alienate the church’s Bible belt. But in the south, as ecumenism gained ground in the 1960s and church and society grew more tolerant, Canon 36 began to appear not as an essential bulwark of Protestantism but as a step too far, outlawing practices common in almost every other Anglican church in the world.⁹⁰ Finally, in 1964 a motion to revise Canon 36 came before the General Synod. Beforehand, letters of protest were indeed written to the *Gazette* and to newspapers. But what in the 1920s or 1930s would have produced a torrent of protest and public meetings had, by the 1960s, been reduced to a trickle.⁹¹ The *Gazette* concluded, “[N]either

⁸³ *CIG*, April 22, 1938, 246.

⁸⁴ *CIG*, June 3, 1938, 327.

⁸⁵ *CIG*, January 31, 1941, 46; *Weekly Irish Times*, January 3, 1941, 4; *Journal of Proceedings of the General Synod of the Church of Ireland* (Dublin: Church of Ireland, 1947), 330.

⁸⁶ ICU AGM, March 18, 1941, RCBL MS 450; *Northern Whig*, March 15, 1941, 6.

⁸⁷ *Northern Whig*, March 5, 1951, 1; *Irish Times*, March 5, 1951, 1.

⁸⁸ *Belfast Telegraph*, March 25, 1953, 9; at the time of the 1911 Census, Christie was thirty-three years old.

⁸⁹ *Belfast Telegraph*, May 27, 1959, 9.

⁹⁰ I. M. Ellis, *Vision and Reality: A Survey of Twentieth-Century Irish Inter-Church Relations* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1992), chaps 5 and 6; see the changing tone of the lengthy correspondence on Canon 36 in the *CIG* from April 1 to July 15, 1955.

⁹¹ *Irish Times*, May 7, 1964, 11; *Irish Times*, May 13, 1964, 7; *Irish Times*, May 15, 1964, 15; *Irish Times*, May 16, 1964, 9.

its acceptance nor its rejection will be accompanied with the same degree of feeling as might have been the case some years ago.”⁹² In what was clearly a carefully choreographed plan, two laymen, one from the north, the other from the south, proposed a motion to allow the placing of a cross on the communion table or behind it, providing that the incumbent and the select vestry obtained the permission of the bishop.⁹³ The proposer, William Milner, a Carrickfergus justice of the peace, made a learned plea for the cross as an essential symbol of Christianity. The Church of Ireland was alone among the twenty churches in the Anglican communion in banning it. There was, he complained, embarrassment at even mentioning it, as in the case of the hymn “Onward Christian Soldiers” where the replacement of “With the cross of Jesus going on before” by “Looking on to Jesus, who is gone before” was mocked by Milner as “Onward Christian Soldiers marching as to war, with the Cross of Jesus locked behind a door.”⁹⁴ He concluded: “Today I ask the Synod to have courage. Courage to change what should be changed. To unlock the door, to bring out the Cross and place it in the very center of the Church’s life and worship.”⁹⁵ Symbolically, the motion was supported by a Dublin minister, the Treasurer of St. Patrick’s, Canon William Harvey, and strongly opposed by the northern venereologist and lay preacher Dr. Sidney McCann.⁹⁶ It was passed by the clergy by 153 votes to 10, and by the laity by 120 votes to 53.⁹⁷

The revision of Canon 36 was followed by a flurry of Select Vestry meetings to decide whether the cross should be restored to the chancel.⁹⁸ In March 1965, the Emlaghfad Select Vestry in Sligo, which in 1870 had condemned ritualism, agreed unanimously to erect a cross in the church.⁹⁹ But clergy and bishops were understandably cautious.¹⁰⁰ In the parish of St. Thomas, Mount Merrion, the rector, Trevor Hipwell, notified the Select Vestry that he intended to ask for permission to place a cross on the altar. Having gained their support, he put the proposal to the annual General Vestry meeting at Easter 1965: the minutes convey both the mixed views and eventual willingness to change:

Mrs Scott felt that the Church should be kept as simple as possible. . . . The Rector pointed out that the cross is to be seen in the Presbyterian Church. And went on to say that the cross is a symbol of hope. Mr J Burgess expressed the view that the cross should be used. Mr Hunt was not in favour as there was a feeling of Roman Catholicism.

⁹²CIG, May 8, 1964, 2.

⁹³Michael Kennedy, *The Study of Liturgy: The Eucharist in the Book of Common Prayer 2004: Commentary*, 14 (copy in RCBL); William Shaw Milner, *The Revision of Canon 36: A Personal Account* ([Carrickfergus]: the author, 1967)], 5–6.

⁹⁴Milner, *Revision of Canon*, 36, 10.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

⁹⁶CIG, May 22, 1964, 1; for McCann, see *Belfast Telegraph*, February 5, 1955, December 6, 1962, and December 10, 1962, 7; *Lisburn Herald, and Antrim and Down Advertiser*, August 14, 1954, 2; *Portadown Times*, May 23, 1952, 2.

⁹⁷CIG, May 22, 1964, 1.

⁹⁸*Belfast Telegraph*, May 16, 1964, 1.

⁹⁹RCB P203/5/6, Minute Book of the Parish of Emlaghfad, Select Vestry Meeting, Mar. 4, 1965.

¹⁰⁰CIG, April 30, 1965, 4.

The Rector replied saying that there is a vast difference between the Cross and a Crucifix. . . . Mr Mellon as senior member of the Vestry felt that the silence of the meeting must be taken as assent, and that the Cross is with us as a symbol of our faith.

In conclusion the Rector expressed his view that the majority of our churches would have a Cross on the Holy Table within the next ten years[;] he then asked for and received the consent of the meeting, there being no contrary votes.¹⁰¹

Though some of the old attitudes clearly remained, what is most notable about the decade after the revision of Canon 36 is the lack of controversy and protest—the new Canon, by requiring the permission of clergy, laity, and the bishop, was effective in allowing matters to proceed by local consensus, and the cross slowly became an accepted part of the ornamentation of parish churches, even in the north.¹⁰²

In 1971 the Church finally took appointed a committee to revise the canons. Meeting repeatedly from 1971 to 1974, it drew up a new set of canons, finally approved by General Synod in 1974. The revision was of course a necessary response to the passage of time—the canons in general urgently needed rewriting to deal with the problems facing a modern church. But the main focus of the Committee and the debates in General Synod were on the ritual canons and how to reform them. The committee was chaired for its first two years by the new Bishop of Clogher, Richard Hanson. Though from an Irish family and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, Hanson had made his career in the Church of England and, before his appointment to Clogher, had been a university professor at Nottingham. He was, therefore, an outsider—a distinctly critical outsider—who did not share the church's visceral fear of Catholicism. Rather, he was a committed ecumenist and, indeed, it was this trait, along with his opposition to the Orange Order, which made him decidedly unpopular among more traditionally minded northern Protestants, who drove him out of his diocese in 1973.¹⁰³ As early as 1964 he had spoken out against the "stifling legalism" of the Church of Ireland and its commitment to "the impossible task of controlling by law every movement of the celebrating priest."¹⁰⁴ The principle with which he approached the task of revision was that the life of the Christian church should be governed "by freedom of the gospel and not by yoke of law."¹⁰⁵

As the Committee examined the ritual canons and reported to General Synod, two things became clear. There was a willingness to remove many of the prohibitions, but that was tempered by the desire, particularly strong in the north of Ireland, to preserve the "Protestant" character of the Church of Ireland. The tensions are evident in the

¹⁰¹RCBL, Minute Book of the Parish of St Thomas, Mount Merrion, 1956–73, P514.5.3 (unpaginated), Select Vestry Meeting, April 14, 1965 and Easter Vestry Meeting, April 23, 1965.

¹⁰²On the pace of change, see Megahey, *The Irish Protestant Churches*, 75.

¹⁰³Alan Ford, "Calling a Spade a Spade: Richard Hanson as Bishop of Clogher 1970–73," *Search* 42, no. 1 (2019): 27–33.

¹⁰⁴Richard Hanson, Review of George Seaver, John Allen Fitzgerald Gregg, *Irish Times*, December 19, 1963, 8.

¹⁰⁵Benjamin Drewery, "Richard Hanson: A Short Biographical Memoir," in *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason . . . Essays in Honour of Richard P. C. Hanson*, ed. Richard Bauckham and Benjamin Drewery (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 6.

working of the Committee, in the debates in General Synod, and in the new canons themselves.¹⁰⁶

Some provisions of the 1871 canons were removed, such as the ban on the sign of the cross at communion and on bowing to the table. Processions were allowed at the beginning and end of service. Other prohibitions, however, on the use of incense, candles on the altar, and the elevation of the host, were retained. But the most contentious issue was that hoary chestnut, dating right back to the reign of Edward VI, of clerical vestments.¹⁰⁷ Evangelical concerns were focused on the stole, which was viewed as a “popish” garment, a remnant of the pre-Reformation papal church. The Committee had lengthy and learned discussions about its origin and history.¹⁰⁸ The final version stated that clergy might wear a cassock, and should wear a white surplice and a black scarf or colored stole.¹⁰⁹ The bishops, frustrated by the endless debates, sought to end further discussion by issuing a statement, adapted from the Church of England canons, stating, “The Church does not attach any doctrinal significance to the diversities of apparel permitted by this Canon, and the apparel worn by members of the clergy in accordance with the provisions of this Canon is not to be understood as implying any doctrines other than those contained in the formularies of the Church.”¹¹⁰ It had limited effect, as the colored stole remained an issue of contention between evangelicals and liberals, north and south, even into the twenty-first century.¹¹¹

The revision of the canons in 1974 represented a major shift in the church’s approach to regulating liturgical practice. It gave up trying to control precisely what clergy did during services and allowed greater freedom. And, indeed, as the laity grew more tolerant of diversity, the caution of the 1974 revision was superseded. In May 1984 the ban on candles on the altar was removed by General Synod.¹¹² And by the end of the twentieth century, even practices that were still prohibited, such as the use of incense, were silently winked at. Churches such as St. George’s in Belfast, and St. Bartholomew’s in Dublin could, as a result, worship in a way that would have been unthinkable in the decades after 1871.¹¹³

VII. Conclusion

The 1871 ritual canons were a unique experiment in the Anglican communion, seeking to use ecclesiastical democracy to regulate liturgical practice and church ornamentation.

¹⁰⁶See the unpaginated minutes of the Committee meetings, RCBL GS/2/40.1, Miscellaneous Minute Book II, Select Committee on the Canons, Minutes and papers, 1971–1973.

¹⁰⁷J. H. Primus, *The Vestments Controversy* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1960); Nigel Scotland, “Evangelicals, Anglicans and Ritualism in Victorian England,” *The Churchman* 111, no. 3 (1997): 249–265.

¹⁰⁸See the two papers at the start of RCBL GS/2/40.1: Edgar Turner, “Scarves and Stoles,” June 1973; and W. G. Wilson, “Notes on the Origin and Use of the Stole in Church.” And see the subsequent discussions in *ibid.*: Minutes of the meeting of December 6, 1971, Minutes of January 10, 1972, Minutes of November 13, 1972, Minutes of June 18, 1973, and Minutes of December 5, 1973.

¹⁰⁹Canon 12: Ecclesiastical Apparel, Canons of the Church of Ireland, <https://www.ireland.anglican.org/our-faith/the-canons>.

¹¹⁰Committee on the Canons, Amendment to Canon 12.

¹¹¹Some candidates at ordination in the Church of Ireland in the north to this day refuse to wear a colored stole (private information).

¹¹²CIG, June 1, 1984, 4. I am grateful to Michael Burrows for drawing my attention to this.

¹¹³Brian Walker, *A History of St. George’s Church Belfast: Two Centuries of Faith, Worship and Music* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2016); Milne, *St Bartholomew’s*.

Passed by an overwhelming majority amid a wave of antiritualist excitement in the 1860s and 1870s, the canons proved to be deeply divisive within the church, exacerbating tensions between clergy and laity, low- and high-churchmen, north and south. Godly pressure groups sought to uncover infractions and prosecute clergy, secure in the knowledge that a firmly evangelical laity would support their desire to see the laws of the church enforced. Broad- and high-church clergy complained about the rigidity of the canons, the pointlessness of seeking to control liturgical dress and gesture, and the desire for different styles of worship. But once passed in 1871, efforts by either side to change them were repeatedly stymied by the voting rules of the General Synod. Democracy had landed the church with the canons in 1870, and democracy—or the Church of Ireland’s version of it—ensured that bishops, clergy, and laity had to live with them for over one hundred years.

The impact of this stalemate on the church was considerable. Its reputation among Anglicans abroad was tarnished. The ritual canons, according to Anthony Hanson, the Irish-born professor of theology in the University of Hull, marked the Church of Ireland as “the laughing-stock of the Anglican communion.”¹¹⁴ In Ireland, the church invested significant time and money in fighting the political and legal battles over enforcement—energy that, as Frederick MacNeice argued, could have been devoted to more spiritually profitable activities. There can be little doubt that the church’s approach to worship was narrowed by the canons. Efforts to rewrite the Prayer Book as a wholly Protestant liturgy had failed. But the 1871 canons succeeded in pushing the worshipping practice of the Church of Ireland toward the strongly Protestant end of the Anglican liturgical spectrum. This created problems for those of a catholic inclination. As Bishop Henry Patton of Killaloe put it in 1930: “There were really a great many Church people who would like to express the beauty of holiness with a little more light and colouring.”¹¹⁵

Many observers have commented on the modern Church of Ireland’s “low” approach to worship, a minimalism that, depending on one’s perspective, fully respected the purity of biblically based worship or, alternatively, bordered on impoverishment. High churchmen and other critics were certainly not reticent in expressing their views. George Stokes referred to the “howling wastes” of unadorned Irish churches.¹¹⁶ Frederick MacNeice’s son Louis remembered his childhood services as “stony, joyless,” without “music and movement.”¹¹⁷ Lewis Moore, a Royal Air Force chaplain, complained in 1955: “Your churches are bare and unlovely. . . there is no sense of the ‘numinous’ within them.”¹¹⁸ The Church of Ireland was in danger of becoming “fossilized,” because of the “downright dullness of its worship,” according to D. C. Dunwoody, the Bishop’s Vicar in St. Canice’s Cathedral, as late as 1965.¹¹⁹ Behind this there undoubtedly lay the strong Church of Ireland attachment to the Reformation. Barry Sloane’s comment on the Calvinist influence in Irish

¹¹⁴*Irish Times*, January 10, 1970, 8.

¹¹⁵*CIG*, May 23, 1930, 288.

¹¹⁶Report of lecture by George Stokes, Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Trinity College Dublin, *Irish Times*, November 12, 1890, 8; for similar views, see Megahey, *The Irish Protestant churches*, 68–69.

¹¹⁷Quoted in Dillon Johnston, *Irish Poetry after Joyce* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997), 335–336.

¹¹⁸*CIG*, April 29, 1955, 8.

¹¹⁹*CIG*, September 3, 1965, 4. Dunwoody emigrated to Canada in 1967. J. B. Leslie and D. W. T. Crooks, *Clergy of Ossory* (s.l., 2015), 235.

Presbyterianism is equally applicable to its shaping of evangelical attitudes within the Church of Ireland:

[O]rnat decoration and the use of liturgy have often been regarded as dangerously Catholic in tendency, whereas austerity has been accounted a positive value in itself. This lies behind the bitter words of the narrator in R. S. Thomas's poem, 'The Minster', who dubs Protestantism:

. . . the adroit castrator
Of art; the bitter negation
Of song and dance and the heart's innocent joy.¹²⁰

Whatever the causes, there is no doubt that after 1871, in terms of liturgy and churchmanship, the Church of Ireland failed to embody Anglicanism in anything like its fulness.

From the point of view of the ICU, of course, this narrowing was justified because it ensured that the church remained committed to the Reformation and did not leak disaffected members to the Presbyterians on its left or the Catholic Church on its right. But that just raises the obvious question: was the ICU right to claim that such rigidity was essential for maintaining loyalty? Though Protestant numbers in the south declined precipitously after independence, this was mainly a product of emigration and other factors, and was certainly not a result of mass conversion to Catholicism. In the north, the Church of Ireland's numbers held up well during the twentieth century, with little movement toward Presbyterianism.¹²¹ But it is not clear that this maintenance of Protestant loyalty was in any way connected to the efforts to keep the church free from ritualism. It is difficult to find supporting evidence for the claims that firm action against ritualism was necessary to keep the Church of Ireland from sliding down the slippery slope to Rome. The size of the Irish high-church movement was too small, the fear of Catholicism in the Church of Ireland too great, and the attachment of clergy and laity to Protestant principles too strong to imagine that the dire predictions of the PDA and ICU could have come true had the ritual canons not been passed.¹²²

The Dublin ritualist churches were not part of growing vanguard of Catholic-minded clergy and laity who posed a threat to the very existence of the Protestant church.¹²³ In St. John's Sandymount in the 1940s, double figures at the main Sunday service was seen as a good congregation.¹²⁴ At the time of disestablishment, All Saints returned antiritualists to the General Synod—high-church supporters were a minority in their own

¹²⁰Barry Sloan, *Writers and Protestantism in the North of Ireland: Heirs to a Damnation* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), 3–4; for the Calvinist influence on the Church of Ireland, see Alan Ford, "High or Low? Writing the Irish Reformation in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 90, no. 1 (2014): 93–112, <https://doi.org/10.7227/BJRL.90.1.5>; and Alan Ford, "The Calvinist Legacy in the Church of Ireland," *Search* 32, no. 2 (2009): 83–91.

¹²¹Malcolm Macourt, *Counting the People of God? The Census of Population and the Church of Ireland* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Publishing, 2008), chaps 5–7.

¹²²Yates, *Anglican Ritualism*, 140.

¹²³Marshall, "The Constitution," 301–302.

¹²⁴Eric Earle to author, May 3, 2020; and *Irish Times*, March 5, 1951, 1.

parish.¹²⁵ In other words, with the benefit of hindsight, the threat posed by ritualism to the Church of Ireland after disestablishment looks more like a *grande peur* or a moral panic than a genuine danger to the existence of the church—part of the traditional British, and even longer-lasting Irish Protestant fear of Catholicism.¹²⁶ As one English high-church observer commented in 1964, “The Irish Church has been marked, perhaps permanently, by the fact that she was disestablished at the height of the ‘anti-ritualist’ clamour in the second phase of the Oxford Movement.”¹²⁷

So what is the verdict on the ritual canons? Disestablishment greatly enhanced the power of the Irish laity.¹²⁸ As Frederick Christie commented in 1934, with pardonable exaggeration: “There is no church in Christendom where the laity have more power than in the Irish Church.”¹²⁹ The power of this associational culture was, however, limited by the democratic “brake” requiring two-third majorities in each order for key measures to pass in the General Synod. Generally, this worked well in keeping the church together when faced with difficult issues over the 150 years after disestablishment.¹³⁰ But more specifically, in the case of the ritual canons, it did not. Passed overwhelmingly on a wave of popular fear in 1871, the voting mechanism subsequently prevented any change in the canons, either tightening them in the 1890s, or relaxing them, as was subsequently attempted during World War I and in 1930. Even in the 1950s and 1960s, when opinion was moving in favor of abolition, caution prevailed. Archbishop McCann of Armagh hailed the decision to alter Canon 36 in 1964 as “a magnificent and significant example of Christian democracy in action.”¹³¹ That may or may not be true. More immediately obvious was the fact that the democratic process had been a decidedly slow one.

Let us leave the last word on this episode to a high-churchman, William Alexander, then Bishop of Derry. In 1894 he asked, in his usual mellifluous style, the following leading, not to mention mischievous, question of his fellow churchmen:

It was sometimes said that disendowment of the Church had a compensation in the freedom given to the Church. That freedom brought with it great responsibility. The freedom to do right meant freedom to do wrong. And the question came to every one of them, it had come to himself a hundred times over, were they using their liberty well, were the echoes of the Synod, so far as they awakened them, the

¹²⁵See n. 26.

¹²⁶Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in Eighteenth-Century England, a Political and Social Study* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993); Denis Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992); John Wolffe, “Change and Continuity in British Anti-Catholicism, 1829–1982,” in *Catholicism in Britain and France since 1789*, ed. Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett (London: Hambledon, 1996), 67–86; John Brewer, and Gareth Higgins, *Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland, 1600–1998: The Mote and the Beam* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Charles Krinsky, “Introduction: the Moral Panic Concept,” in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Moral Panics*, ed. Charles Krinsky (New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–16.

¹²⁷A. W. Campbell, “Letter from Britain,” *The Dominion*, February 1964, RCBL, MS 123.5.2.3.

¹²⁸This was also the case in disestablished churches elsewhere. Mark Noll, “National Churches, Gathered Churches, and Varieties of Lay Evangelicalism, 1735–1859,” in *The Rise of the Laity in Evangelical Protestantism*, ed. Deryck Lovegrove (London: Routledge, 2002), chap. 9.

¹²⁹*Northern Whig*, December 19, 1934, 9.

¹³⁰Robin Bantry White, George Davison, Gillian Wharton, Ken Gibson, Hazel Corrigan, and Adrian Clements, “Changing Structures of the Church,” in *Irish Anglicanism, 1969–2019*, ed. Kenneth Milne and Paul Harron (Dublin: Four Courts, 2019), 188.

¹³¹Milner, *Revision of Canon*, 36, 14. The quotation is slightly different in *CIG*, May 22, 1964, 1.

echoes of justice, of goodness, of truth, of candour, of sweetness, of kind consideration; or were they angry, censorious, snarling, bitter, sectarian—were they so or were they not?¹³²

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¹³²Sermon preached by Bishop Alexander of Derry at the General Synod service in St. Patrick's Cathedral, *Dublin Daily Express*, April 3, 1894, 5.

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