

Important problems remain but I think that with the above considerations we are on course.

\* The substance of the paper that introduced the last in a series of 'Dominican Conversations' on St Thomas' thinking about the angels held in the University Chaplaincy, Edinburgh.

## Will there be Life before Death?

Tony Crowley

*The Demonstration*, by Fr Des Wilson, 1982, pp 126, £1.25.

When the dust from the present troubles settles, the debt to those who have consistently and courageously campaigned against injustice and violence will be clear. One of those campaigners is Fr Des Wilson, who has now written a book that covers the struggle for justice and peace (note that it is justice and peace, not peace and then justice) in N Ireland. It would be unfair to Des Wilson to attempt to review his book out of its context, so it is necessary to sketch out the background first.

In the eyes of "The Man From *The Daily Mail*," to quote the song of that title,

"Ireland is a very funny place, sir,  
It's a strange and a troubled land".

And there's no disputing that superficial observation, though it's one of the few comments from that particular source regarding the present situation in N Ireland that I could agree with. For the characteristics of the present era of troubles in the North have been horror (the violence of a bloody Monday, a bloody Tuesday, a bloody Wednesday, a bloody Thursday, a bloody Friday, a bloody Saturday, and bloody Sunday) terror (sectarian warfare, intimidation, internment, rubber and plastic bullets) anger and frustration (sit-ins, demos, barricades, riots) and the constant unemployment (Billy-now Lord-Blease of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions, said there was a "crisis in unemployment"<sup>1</sup> in 1971 when the figure

was 7% – it's now 20% and climbing). There have, however, also been the occasional glimpses of optimism (the massive growth in community groups and self-help organisations) and humour. In fact, this last shouldn't be underestimated, ranging as it does from the Rev Ian Paisley's attack on the Swiss government, after they had barred him, as a bunch of "dimwits" whose only contribution to the twentieth century had been the cuckoo clock<sup>2</sup> (actually invented in the eighteenth century), to Ms Bernadette Devlin's nomination as "Man of the Year" by *The Sunday Independent* in 1969,<sup>3</sup> and even to the decision of the N Irish government to make 1971 "Come to Ulster Year".<sup>4</sup> There were also of course, many examples of a rather darker sort of humour – such as the application of the Ex-serviceman's Association of Ardoyne for permission to form a gun club on the grounds that "the formation of a gun-club would be one of the best means of getting together socially".<sup>5</sup> There was also the remarkable performance of the Parachute Regiment in Ballymurphy on 8 April 1971, when the Paras "distributed leaflets telling the residents what the army was doing in their area"<sup>6</sup> (sic). And there was, of course, the famous graffiti on a Belfast wall – "But is there life before Death"? Such has been the recent history of N Ireland.

And what of the present? As far as British governments are concerned, the policy appears to be one of containing violence to "an acceptable level",<sup>7</sup> as Mr Maudling so infamously put it in 1971, combined with general harassment and surveillance to enforce the recent policy of "criminalisation", (this despite both Mr Maudling and Mr Brian Faulkner declaring "open war"<sup>8</sup> to exist between the "terrorists" and the "security" forces – declarations which, as far as I know, have never been rescinded). Yet just as it is true to say that British policy has been practically stagnant for the past thirteen years, it is likewise true to say that political attitudes, motives and aims in the North itself have changed rapidly and radically. And it is these sort of changes that have to be understood in order to comprehend the present situation.

The present troubles began with a monolithic Unionist party in power, opposed by a rough coalition of Civil Rights activists and social democrats. However, as the troubles developed and the violence escalated, there sprang up a number of organisations whose very appearance, in a sense, maps out the political history of the past decade or so in N Ireland. In December 1969, the Irish Republican movement was split into two wings by the withdrawal of a group of members from the Army Convention to form the Provisional Army Council – the basis of the group that became the Provisional IRA, and its political wing, Provisional Sinn Féin. The group left behind became known as the Official IRA, and later,

after its 1972 ceasefire, The Workers' Party/Republican Clubs. The WP/RC were further split in 1974 by the withdrawal of a group that opposed the ceasefire and more general policies. That group was the basis of what later became the Irish Republican Socialist Party, with its military wing the Irish National Liberation Army. The original split in the republican movement is somewhat ironic in retrospect as it was broadly a split between left (Officials) and right (Provisionals) – a split that has since been reversed, with the Provisionals becoming more actively involved in leftist issues and the WP/RC moving to the right. Back in 1970, the Alliance Party was formed, its essential characteristics being predominantly middle-class support for its liberal, Unionist policies. And later that year the Social Democratic and Labour Party was formed from a coalition of Civil Rights activists and left of centre Nationalists, with the aim of following the constitutional path to a United Ireland. In many ways the blue-eyed child of the Northern Ireland Office in the more recent past, the SDLP's role as the leading party on the Nationalist/Catholic side has been in increasing danger since the hunger-strikes.

By September 1971, the Unionist monolith had started to crack, and this was confirmed with the formation, by Mr Desmond Boal M P and the Rev Ian Paisley M P, of the Democratic Unionist Party (at first the Ulster Loyalist Party) which left the Official Unionist Party as a quite distinct political entity. In general terms, the DUP is to the right of the OUP constitutionally and by its fundamentalist Protestantism, but marginally to the left of the OUP on major social issues. This was perhaps the most crucial split – a split in the Unionist Party which had been rigidly solid for fifty years, and as Mr Aiken McClelland (Secretary of the Orange Lodge of Research) put it in January 1971, "Paisleyism is the greatest threat to Orangeism".<sup>9</sup> There also appeared in 1971, a paramilitary group closely associated with Paisley's DUP in the early years of the decade but which has since found its own political stance – the Ulster Defence Association. Mostly engaged in "very deep sectarian violence" (as one of their political spokesmen put it<sup>10</sup>) in the early years, the UDA have since become involved in attempts to find a political solution to the troubles – to the extent of setting up a political wing to contest elections (and quite probably to get round any proscription order, if one were issued) – the Ulster Loyalist Democratic Party.

In a sense, the first and last of these groups – the Provisional Republicans and the UDA – are the most interesting, and a look at their policies and attitudes can give some idea of the complexities of the present situation. The UDA has a mainly working-class membership (M Ps are specifically barred, along with clergymen),

and is centred around the Loyalist working-class areas of Belfast. In a recent interview,<sup>11</sup> Andy Tyrie (Chairman UDA) and John McMichael (Chairman ULDP) have declared that the UDA “now accepts that there can be no military solution in N Ireland. There must be a political solution. There must be political dialogue”. And the solution proposed by the UDA is an independent six-county state of Ulster – a proposal that stems from their distrust of the Westminster government, and Paisley’s opportunist politics, and their belief that in such a state, there would be “an awful lot of Catholics and Protestants . . . who would find more in common with each other than they do with the British government or even the Dublin government”. And that belief is encouraged by the continuing economic crisis – as McMichael says, “under the economic circumstances in which we live, as the N Ireland economy gets worse and worse, more and more we will be driven together”. Yet this analysis of the situation is undermined to a large extent by the UDA’s sectarian attitudes and harbouring of such groups as the Ulster Freedom Fighters, or Red Hand Commandos. To illustrate the point, in the interview cited, Andy Tyrie says that if, for example, the UFF “do bomb and shoot only active Republicans, no way would the UDA disapprove of it. We would have no objection to it whatsoever”.

The policies and attitudes of the Provisional IRA are similarly complex; in the same issue of *Marxism Today* as that previously cited,<sup>12</sup> Provisional Sinn Féin spokesman Danny Morrison says that the immediate aim of the Provisional Republican movement is “to break the back of British rule in Ireland, (to) demoralise the will of the British to stay in Ireland”, with the longer term aim of the “establishment of a democratic socialist republic in Ireland”. Morrison claims, that “because of the nature of this phase of the struggle there is not a great deal of emphasis laid on socialism. But during the process of getting the Brits out, people have become very politically conscious . . . I don’t think there can be a Capitalist United Ireland . . . we have come through an awful lot and we don’t intend to surrender just because the green of the tri-colour is flying over Belfast as well as Dublin”. This then reflects the leftward shift in the Provisional movement, in the North at least, but what of their attitude to the Protestant working-class? In some ways, it is remarkably similar to the attitude of the UDA to the Catholic working-class, since they, like the UDA, claim that the achievement of their aim will lead to a situation where both Catholic and Protestant sections of the working-class will then have an obvious common interest. Again, Morrison illustrates – “the unemployment rate in both North and South is very high, particularly in the North, and I think we believe that the process of unit-

ing Ireland will unleash a new militancy in the Protestant section of the working-class . . . Hopefully, they are going to turn round and become very militant and very left-wing, and there will be an identity of interest between them and the rest of the Irish working-class". Again, however, this analysis is undermined by the sectarian nature of many Provisional IRA attacks; attacks on the Royal Ulster Constabulary and on the Ulster Defence Regiment (the native "security" forces) are claimed by the Provisionals as attacks on the defenders of British Imperialism, not as attacks on Protestants per se. Yet, given the almost exclusively Loyalist composition of these forces, it is hardly surprising that organisations such as the UDA take a different view. Mutual distrust continues and sectarianism festers.

So what has all this to do with Des Wilson's book? Well, everything. The book is fiction, but to anyone who knows the situation, it's more of a documentary cum political analysis. The basic narrative is that state benefits are stopped in working-class areas of Belfast, which leads to a march, confrontation with the army, a demonstration of unity by Protestant and Catholic workers (or rather ex-workers given the unemployment rates in Belfast) against the benefit stoppage, the shooting of a soldier and the military backlash. And through that basic story line, the book reflects the troubles, as it portrays the horror (violence and repression) the terror ("Trouble, troubles, polite words for death") and the anger and frustration (as when the church associations choose the time of the march to give out their aid to the people, or when benefit is paid again and people are "restored to poverty"). It also portrays the humour – the police landrover which has a poster advertising the march sticking to its side as it roars on its way. And there is also, of course, the optimism – the revolutionary optimism needed to envisage *Taigs* and *Orangies* marching in unity against the callousness of a vicious government's policies: "Loyalist and Nationalist, Protestant and Catholic, unequal prosperity had divided them, but shared misery was always a powerful reconciler of our citizens. That was one ray of hope for the dark island" (p 20). Des Wilson does not, however, suffer from any naive delusions; "Not that they had much chance to stay united even in the worst of times. The men and women who in times past came out on the streets together to protest against the cruelty of the system were soon divided into their traditional camps of Loyalist and Nationalist, Protestant and Catholic, as roaring voices from pulpit and platform lashed them back into the poor ghettos where they belonged. Then when the poor turned on each other in fury, the roaring voices which had raised the demon of their anger went silent, no longer necessary, and the wringing of pious hands began" (pp 20-

21). His is the revolutionary optimism and anger that is needed in the face of violence and injustice, and as those qualities are coupled with acute political insight and practical activity (Des Wilson runs an education centre for “yoblets” – as the British Army so wittily calls them – to cope, among other things, with high expulsion rates and 25% truancy in some Belfast schools) it’s little wonder that he continues to fall foul of church and military hierarchies.

Anyone who would like to know something about the present situation in Belfast as well as the sort of struggles that Des Wilson and many others like him are involved in (and if you don’t then you should) should read this book. I’d like to be able to say that it will be available at all “good” bookshops, but no doubt, it won’t, so prospective readers will have to write direct to Des Wilson at 123 Springhill Avenue, Belfast 12, N. Ireland. The book costs £1.25. Don’t forget post and packing.

- 1 *Northern Ireland 1968–1973. A Chronology of Events. Vol 1.* 68-71 p 88.
- 2 *Ibid.* p 29.
- 3 *Ibid.* p 55.
- 4 *Ibid.* p 75.
- 5 *Ibid.* p 94.
- 6 *Ibid.* p101.
- 7 *Ibid.* p 144;
- 8 *Ibid.* p 116.
- 9 *Ibid.* p 88.
- 10 Interview in *Marxism Today*, December 1981, pp 26-30.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.* pp 30-35.