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Religious Violence and the 1641 Rebellion: Divided Communities in Seventeenth-Century Cavan

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The religious nature of the 1641 rebellion has long dominated its history, from contemporary times to the present. Given the supposedly religious motivation for the events of that rebellion, it is important to examine the nature of the violence that is appearing in the 1641 Depositions, the chief source for “what really happened in Ireland in 1641”.¹ What can these incidents of conflict begin to tell us about the patterns of behaviour and, ultimately, motives for the rebellion? Can they help to answer questions about seventeenth-century Irish society more generally? The religious attacks contained in the depositions must be viewed as part of wider context that was ‘saturated’ in religion.² The Scottish Covenant of 1637 had deplored the perceived introduction of “popish religion and tyranny” in the form of the Book of Common Prayer into Scotland.³ The English Parliament, once summoned by King Charles I, was also vocally anti-Catholic, and similarly attacked the Laudian Church reforms and the “ill counsel” the King had accepted in implementing his political and religious policies.⁴ Thus a feeling of instability, and fear for the future of their faith, must have pervaded Ireland and Irish minds at this time; with political discourse anchored in such religious language, it is perhaps

¹Nicholas Canny, ‘What Really Happened in Ireland in 1641?’ in Jane Ohlmeyer (ed.), *Ireland from Independence to Occupation* (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 24-42.

²John Morrill, ‘The Religious Context of the English Civil War’ in *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Fifth Series*, Vol. 34 (1984), www.jstor.org/stable/3679130 (accessed 28 September 2010), p. 164.

³*The Scottish National Covenant, 1638*, in Samuel Rawson Gardiner (ed.), *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution, 1625-1660* (Oxford, 1899), p. 132.

⁴David L. Smith, *A History of the Modern British Isles, 1603-1707: The Double Crown* (Oxford, 1998), p. 113.

not too surprising that once conflict erupted in 1641, behaviour took on a sectarian undertone. Using County Cavan as a case study, incidents of religious violence will be examined, both for the nature of the violence itself and its wider functionality in Irish society.

Early modern popular religious culture, especially Catholic culture, has been described as strongly materialistic: that is, an attachment to physical objects that demonstrated holiness in what were largely illiterate societies. Ireland was certainly no different in this regard. Studies have found that religious statues, relics, rosary beads, crucifixes and particularly Irish symbols like the St. Brigid's cross, were common in houses of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁵ With such deep-seated ideas about holy objects and their powers, it is perhaps unsurprising that many attacks on Protestants in the Depositions took the form of violence against items deemed to be particularly 'Protestant'. The most obvious and thus, most frequent, target was the Bible. Central to Protestant services and worship, assaults upon the Bible included both ridicule and destruction. Adam Glouer reported that rebels took up Bibles and "wetting them on the dirty water did 5 or 6 seuerall tymes dash the same on the face of the deponent and other protestants".⁶ The intention was clearly to desecrate an item revered by the Protestant community as the true Word of God; furthermore, by attacking them with such an important symbol of their own faith, the rebels were simultaneously demonstrating their contempt of both Protestantism and Protestants. The Bibles they used were the chief source of the 'pollution' of heresy in the community, and they propagated wrongful teachings that were damaging to society.⁷ They were therefore legitimate targets to be polluted in turn.⁸ Other deponents claimed the rebels went much further than merely demeaning Bibles. John Anderson stated that "the souldiers (meaning the Rebells at Belturbett) burnt the bible and other Church books".⁹ Burning and fire were considered purgatives, both of the body and of society; thus the traditional punishment for heresy was burning, as the 'infection' was annihilated by the flames, and thus the body social could be healed.¹⁰ That the rebels burned the Bible can be interpreted as kind of rite of purification: removing the source of division and religious error from the world, for the greater good. A further explanation is akin to a rite of execution: the Bible was 'killed' as a heretical object, and in the fashion reserved for heretical persons. The attacks on the Bible clearly demonstrated an awareness of and revulsion for the presence of 'heresy' in Irish society; it also shows there was a knowledge of some of the core tenets of Protestantism, including the centrality of the Word.

⁵Raymond Gillespie, *Devoted People: Belief and Religion in Early Modern Ireland* (Manchester, 1997), pp. 20-21.

⁶Trinity College Dublin, *Maunscript 833: 1641 Depositions, 'Cavan II', fol. 1v*. All manuscript citations are taken from the digitised versions, accessed on www.1641.tcd.ie.

⁷Brian Mac Cuarta, 'Religious Violence Against Settlers in South Ulster' in David Edwards, Pádraig Lenihan and Clodagh Tait (eds.), *Age of Atrocity: Violence and Political Conflict in Early Modern Ireland* (Dublin, 2007), p. 171.

⁸Margaret Aston, *Faith and Fire: Popular and Unpopular Religion 1350-1600* (London, 1993), p. 295.

⁹TCD MS 833, fol. 99r.

¹⁰Aston, *Faith and Fire*, p. 296, 300.

Related to this attack on the Word, deponents also told of ridicule and mockery of Protestant sermons by rebels. Glouer related how, while the rebels beat Protestants with Bibles, they also scorned the importance Protestantism attached to the sermon and exposition of the Bible: “come I know you love a good lesson” they said.¹¹ He also stated that some rebels attacked Protestants while they were on their way to church, in a “cruell manner... dragging them into church, there stript and robbed and whipped”. They did this, it appears, as a kind of inversion of the sermon, a source of punishment rather than enlightenment: “come tomorrow and you shall have as good a sermon as this” they taunted.¹² That the Catholic rebels believed that Protestant services were a source of evil and spiritual discord is ably demonstrated by William Murdoghe’s deposition. He described how a group of Protestants were surprised while at a service by a band of rebels; they branded it a “divils service” and then ominously stated that “it was a good deed to burne the house over their heads”.¹³ Protestant services were the work of the devil, and the devil’s work was to be punished by fire, just like the Bibles discussed previously. However, Murdoghe’s testimony indicated that the rebels did not actually burn down the meeting-house, though extrapolating reasons why is difficult from the evidence given. Some rebels, notably Philip McHugh McShane O’Reilly, seemed to dislike the violent tactics being used against the Protestant settlers: Marmaduke Batemanson reported that he stayed the violent hand of his wife Rose O’Neill, claiming he would be “denyed to suffer it... if she did he would forsake and never come neere her”.¹⁴ Stories such as this are proof that not all rebels accepted the physical violence committed against the Protestant community, which ought to give rise to caution when generalising about relationships between the two religious groups.

If two interrelated core ideas of Protestantism, the Bible and preaching the Word of God, came under attack in 1641, the depositions also indicate that churches themselves were often damaged or destroyed during the rebellion. A potentially interesting question concerns the targeting of different types of churches. For example, John Anderson recounts how the Protestant church in Belturbet was attacked, and that he “knoweth that the Rebels have burned all the seates in the said church... and blackened the said Church with fyer”.¹⁵ The rebels, like with their treatment of the Bible, are defiling a space sacred to the community that is loathsome to them. The church at Belturbet was eventually completely destroyed: Thomas Smith reported “that about Ester... set fyre on the Church Castle and towne there”.¹⁶ This is corroborated by Audrey Carington, who described how on Easter Sunday 1642 the rebels “as they came from Masse, sett fyre on, and burned the most part of the towne of Belturbett aforesaid together with the Church there”.¹⁷ The choice of Easter to attack the church was significant, for Easter, with its triumphal symbolism of Paschal flame, was the

¹¹TCD MS 833, fol. 1v.

¹²Ibid.

¹³TCD MS 833, fol. 175r.

¹⁴Trinity College Dublin, Manuscript 832: 1641 Depositions, ‘Cavan I’, fol. 80r.

¹⁵TCD MS 833, fol. 99r.

¹⁶TCD MS 833, fol. 265v.

¹⁷TCD MS 833, fol. 282v.

highpoint of the spiritual year. Heightened emotions and competing celebrations contributed to an assault on yet another embodiment of Protestantism. What is interesting to note, however, is that the Protestant church in Belturbet was purpose-built as part of the plantation of the county: it was, in fact, constructed in the 1630s.¹⁸ In contrast, many formerly Catholic churches like the Franciscan abbey of St. Mary were simply appropriated for Protestant worship; it is difficult to tell if these churches were also destroyed by the rebels.¹⁹ Possibly they were ‘cleansed’ of their Protestant associations and restored to Catholic hands, thus not subjected to the same treatment as the ‘new’ churches because they had, once, served the true faith and were not completely tainted by it, though further investigation of this is needed. Certainly the Franciscans were accommodated in the house of one Thomas Crant, a Protestant settler, without mention being made of them returning to St. Mary’s: he claimed that Philip McHugh McShane O’Reilly “and his Mother seized my house... and ther are now placed a Colladge of friars”.²⁰

If a Protestant church was considered an open wound upon the spiritual landscape, such thinking also extended to the bodies of Protestant persons. The depositions are full of accounts of Protestants being refused burial in holy ground, or even at all. Such behaviour has clear religious undertones, for extending back as far as the Middle Ages it was customary to refuse burial to a heretic in holy ground: even the dead could be contaminated by the presence of such a person in their midst.²¹ The importance attached to a proper burial is betrayed by Adam Glouer, who recounted the harrowing story of Protestant parents forced to carry dead children for miles along the road, as they could not bury them, but they refused to abandon their bodies.²² Jane Cuthbertson narrated the murder of a group of settlers by the rebels, and further stated that “she was an eyewitnesse of their burials insoemuch as which was”, for the “Irishe natives there would not suffer any of the britishe nation to be buried in Church or Churche yaird”.²³ Interestingly, there is an explicit identification of ethnicity with religion: Jane’s deposition gives an insight into identity formation in this mixed community, with ‘Britishness’ and Protestantism seen as one and the same, which prompts some questions on the position of Irish Protestants. The justification for refusing Protestants burial alongside other Christians was that they were, in fact, not Christian at all. John Sharpe described the same massacre witnessed by Jane Cuthbertson, again saying that “the Rebelles would not suffer them to be buried in the Churchyairde but in the open feildes, for that... the protestantes were heretickes and no Christianes”.²⁴ Symon Ghranne’s deposition reiterated that position: “becowse they said they were not Christians nor worthie to be buried amongst Christians”.²⁵ On the grounds that anyone who

¹⁸Brendan Scott, Cavan, 1609-1653: Plantation, War and Religion (*Dublin, 2007*), p. 17.

¹⁹Scott, Cavan 1609-1653, p. 19.

²⁰TCD MS 832, fol. 219r.

²¹MacCuarta, ‘Religious violence against settlers’, p. 168.

²²TCD MS 833, fol. 1r.

²³TCD MS 833, fol. 243r.

²⁴TCD MS 833, fol. 183r.

²⁵TCD MSS 833, fol. 151v.

was not Catholic had to be separated from ‘true’ believers, both living and dead, Protestants were refused burial in consecrated ground; this kind of ritual exclusion indicates yet again an awareness of division along religious-confessional lines, and how violence directed against a seemingly ethno-religious group in this period adopted religious language and procedures as justification.

Moving away from strictly violence, many of the depositions feature miracles and wonders that also betray a religious conviction. Providence in the early modern period was a powerful force that could affect entire societies: the behaviour of the people would bring about either blessing or damnation from God.²⁶ In the chaos of 1641, providence took on a dramatically new significance, as each side appealed to God to demonstrate His favour of their cause. The rebels fought “for religion as their only objective of warfare”; conversely, Sir John Temple laid the blame for their misfortune at the feet of Protestants themselves, for they had shown a laxity in allowing Catholicism to survive in their midst.²⁷ The depositions themselves feature many instances of miraculous happenings that, perhaps unsurprisingly given the provenance of the source, seemed to reveal God’s anger towards the rebels. An oft-repeated example occurred following the mass drowning of Protestants at Belturbet Bridge: there were reports that the bodies of those killed followed their murderers around. For example, John Anderson reported that “many of the drownd Carkasses very often appeareing at or nere the same place to the Rebels severall dayes after, to their astonishment”; Arthur Culme recounted a similar occurrence, though this time the bodies appeared when Philip O’Reilly visited Belturbet.²⁸ Similarly, though with an even greater religious significance, is Henry Baxter’s tale of “apparitions” and “visions” accompanied by “a strong noise... and divers voics heard as it were singing of Psalmes”.²⁹ Psalm-singing was associated with Protestantism across Europe from the sixteenth century, and formed a central part of services; in France psalm-singing even prompted violent riots between Catholics and Huguenots in the battle for liberty of worship.³⁰ The specific mention of them here indicates an awareness of the comforting effect such a wonder would have had upon the traumatised Protestant community: if the dead were singing the psalms, surely God had not forsaken them.

The very position of the Protestant community has long been a source for debate, as Ireland is often remarked upon for its unique situation in having a majority population professing a different

²⁶Gillespie, *Devoted People*, p. 46.

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 51, 54.

²⁸TCD MS 833, fol. 98v; TCD MS 833, fol. 129v.

²⁹TCD MS 833, fol. 217v.

³⁰Graeme Murdock, *Beyond Calvin: The Intellectual, Political and Cultural World of Europe’s Reformed Churches, c. 1540-1620* (Basingstoke, 2004), pp. 110-12.

religion to that of their sovereign: a contradiction of *cuius regio eius religio*.³¹ However, a brief comparison with the similarly violent situation of sixteenth-century France can shed light on many of the types of behaviour visible in the depositions. Natalie Zemon Davis has argued that crowd violence was not random, but took a definite form against a definite target.³² She contends that religious violence tended to occur when two religious groups were forced to share the same sacred space, for example during baptisms and funerals; in the depositions' case, the attack on the church in Belturbet on Easter Sunday is a potential comparison, for both communities held rival celebrations on this holiest of feast days.³³ She further argues that the behaviour of those involved took definite patterns, often dictated by religious custom: for example, the rite of fire as purification, and drowning as mimicking both baptism and exorcism.³⁴ The evidence of the depositions indicates that ritualistic behaviour was certainly present in the violent acts committed, from burning Bibles to refusing burial, focused on the "extirpation" of heresy from the community.³⁵ Davis further emphasises the didactic quality of early modern Catholic violence: it was intended to convey "the powerlessness of Scripture alone, the vulnerability of those not protected by the mass or the parish".³⁶ France also raises many questions that can be applied to the Irish context, but with interesting differences. Both Davis and Janine Estebe have emphasised how in France, the Protestant community placed themselves on the margins of society through their religious choice; in Ireland it was the Catholic community, despite its majority status, that found itself in that position, and certainly not out of choice.³⁷ That the settlers espoused a minority faith and were rewarded for it with land and political influence only further highlighted the differences between the two communities, lending relations, and their eventual breakdown, a sectarian aspect.

Despite the importance of religious motives in the depositions, there is a danger of overemphasising

³¹*Diarmaid MacCulloch*, *Reformation: Europe's House Divided, 1490-1700* (London, 2004), p. 394. *In fact, Karl Bottigheimer contends that it was precisely the association of Protestantism with governmental authority that was a chief factor in the downfall of the Protestant Reformation in Ireland. It was seen as an external intrusion to be resisted; Nicholas Canny, though disagreeing with this interpretation, also emphasises the attempts to create an Irish Church 'identity' by rooting it in the ancient Church and rejecting the 'new' Protestant Church; Karl Bottigheimer, 'The Failure of the Reformation in Ireland: Une Question Bien Posée' in The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Apr., 1985), pp. 196-207; Nicholas Canny, 'Why the Reformation Failed in Ireland: Une Question Mal Posée' in The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Oct., 1979), pp. 423-50.*

³²Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Rites of Violence* in *idem.*, *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, p. 154.

³³*Ibid.*, pp. 170-1.

³⁴*Ibid.*, p. 174, 186.

³⁵TCD MS 833, fol. 98r.

³⁶Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France: A Rejoinder* in *Past and Present*, No. 67 (May, 1975), www.jstor.org/stable/650236 (accessed 11 November 2010), p. 135.

³⁷Janine Estebe, *The Rites of Violence: Religious Riot in Sixteenth-Century France: A Comment* in *Past and Present*, No. 67 (May, 1975), www.jstor.org/stable/650235 (accessed 11 November 2010), p. 130.

the degree of such violence in the evidence.³⁸ ‘Motive’ is a fluid concept, and the heavy overlap of religion and politics only further complicated the situation. Thomas Crant in his deposition stated that “the Puritaine Parliament of England was the Cause of all this”, which indicated the rebels’ hatred of the anti-Catholic stance of the Parliament; however, they complained of the “tirayne and slavery of the English Government”, which had oppressed their religion and its free practice, and they hoped through the insurrection to make the “English... conformable with the Roman Catholick Religion”.³⁹ Here politics and religion were interlocked, for the enjoyment of political ‘freedom’ meant religious freedom. To that end the rebels believed that if an Irish governor was appointed, instead of the succession of English deputies prior to the outbreak of rebellion, Catholicism would become acceptable. Symon Ghranne’s deposition baldly reported that the rebels declared “they would have an Irishman to be Cheefe Governor in this kingDome”, not “under the English Government as it was”.⁴⁰ Yet, the rebels loudly proclaimed their loyalty to the King, indicating they did not reject his rule of Ireland, merely how it had been implemented by his deputies; Canny has argued that what the rebels sought above all was “a Catholic kingdom under the jurisdiction of Charles I”, rather than complete separation⁴¹. The Confederate Oath of Association of October 1642 similarly promised “Allegiance to my Sovereigne Lord King Charles”; it also upheld the “the free exercise of the said Religion [Catholicism] through this Kingdom”, demonstrating once again how religion and politics could and did overlap.⁴²

The extensive lists of property seized from the deponents also indicated underlying economic jealousies, arising from the policy of plantation and dispossession, especially in Ulster: Ghranne chronicled his “forceable and feloniouslie” losses at the hands of rebels.⁴³ Ethnic factors also cannot be discounted, and were complex and uncertain even at the time; this point is well illustrated by cases involving native Irish Protestants. They, like the English and Scottish settlers, had their property taken from them and suffered much verbal abuse and threats; but they remained simply threats. Richard Parsons, a minister, said that his wife would have been killed “but for her kinned sake”, for she was part of the O’Reilly family; however, they “becowse she was a Protestant bore

³⁸Mark Greengrass has made this point with relation to France, outlining the danger of attributing a ritualistic function to every act; he argues that strategies like dumping bodies in rivers and burning houses, while possibly religiously significant, were also part of the strategies of warfare, especially in urban environments; Mark Greengrass, ‘The Anatomy of a Religious Riot in Toulouse in May 1562’ in *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (July 1983), pp. 367-391.

³⁹TCD MS 832, fol. 212v, 213v.

⁴⁰TCD MS 833, fol. 151r.

⁴¹Canny, ‘What Really Happened in Ireland’, p. 29.

⁴²‘The Rebels Oath of Association’ in *The impudence of the Romish Whore: continued, and improved in her shamelesse and barbarous Brood of the Irish Rebels: Calling themselves His Majesties Catholicke Subjects (London, 1644)*, http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-2003&res_id=xri:eebo&rft_id=xri:eebo:image:154474:6 (accessed 3 November 2010).

⁴³TCD MS 833, fol. 151r.

extreme hatred unto her” nevertheless.⁴⁴ Despite this, she was spared because she was Irish. Similarly Robert Dillon’s livestock was culled by his own tenants, the reason given being that “though he is an Irish man yett he was a protestant”, and furthermore he kept a “nest of English” about him. Once again mixed motives were apparent: economic, ethnic and religious. Yet Dillon did not, at least according to the deponent Crant, suffer any physical violence.⁴⁵ His ethnicity, like Richard Parsons’s wife, protected him from the worst excesses, proving that religion and ethnicity were both trigger and restraint for the rebels. Thus while religion was a strong motive for many, and religious violence was extremely apparent, it is important not to exclude other reasons for violence. Future investigation will render clearer the interlocking motives of both rebels and deponents in the telling of these stories.

The 1641 Depositions are an unparalleled source for the study of early modern Ireland, and at a time of particular crisis. They are only beginning to reveal the structures of Irish society at a popular level, where the results of nearly forty years of plantation in Ulster became clear with horrific consequences. Religion was undoubtedly hugely significant in delineating two opposing groups within the community: the resulting violence is very apparent from the stories of the deponents. Attacks on the Bible, on churches and on Protestant persons demonstrated that social and religious divisions caused neighbour to turn on neighbour. These attacks focused on very specific icons of Protestantism, with destruction and ridicule of the Bible and of the sermon mentioned by many deponents, the aim being to desecrate an object that was the source of religious division and, for Catholics, religious error. The rebels’ attacks on churches also demonstrated a hatred for the heretical community living in their midst, with fire annihilating any traces of spiritual pollution. Protestant persons were not left unmolested, as the refusal of the rebels to allow burial in consecrated ground showed the belief that even the dead could damage spiritual life. Thus religion provided both the ritual and the justification for the rebels’ behaviour, as old tensions flared into outright conflict. However, the strength of the Depositions is in their revealing of manifold motivations for violence, of which religion was only one; however, religion provides the subconscious force for even seemingly political actions, as religion and politics blended together in the turmoil of the Wars of the Three Kingdoms. Thus the religious violence in the Depositions deserves close study for what it can reveal about groups within the community, and how they related to the outside world.

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⁴⁴TCD MS 833, fol. 275v.

⁴⁵TCD MS 832, fol. 215v.

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