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<td>Publication date</td>
<td>2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Series</td>
<td>IBIS Working Papers; 32</td>
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<tr>
<td>Publisher</td>
<td>University College Dublin. Institute for British-Irish Studies</td>
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<td>Item record/more information</td>
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<td>This paper is a draft only, and is not for citation or quotation without written permission from the author</td>
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THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS DISSENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Gladys Ganiel

IBIS working paper no. 32
THE POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS DISSENT IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Historically, the politics of dissent has been associated with Presbyterian participation in the United Irish movement. This paper argues for a broader definition of the politics of dissent based on the two dominant theological traditions in Ulster Protestantism—Calvinism and evangelicalism. It explains how these theologies have been drawn on to challenge their own assumptions, creating a politics of dissent that promises to transcend sectarianism. It is argued that this has been the case in contexts as varied as the United Irish movement, the radical evangelical wing of the early twentieth century labour movement, and the radical evangelical wing of the contemporary civil society-based peace movement. It evaluates the significance and influence of the politics of dissent in each era, and examines the reasons why the United Irish and labour movements did not transcend sectarianism. It concludes with an analysis of the prospects for the peace movement to help transcend sectarianism.

Publication information

Paper presented at Institute for British-Irish Studies Conference “Old structures, new beliefs: religion, community and politics in contemporary Ireland,” Dublin, 15 May 2003. The research was funded by the Royal Irish Academy’s Third Sector Research Programme.

Note: this paper is a draft only, and is not for citation or quotation without written permission from the author.
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INTRODUCTION

In Ulster, the politics of dissent has been associated with Presbyterianism. This is with good cause: in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Presbyterians were commonly referred to as Dissenters, and the term “Protestant” was usually reserved for adherents of the officially established Anglican church. Moreover, the politics of dissent has been associated with protesting against the political order, the most prominent example of which is the United Irish movement.

However, an exclusive focus on Dissenters obscures the historical significance of the politics of dissent for the broader Protestant community, and overlooks the importance of the politics of dissent in contemporary Protestant politics. A more complete understanding of the politics of dissent must be rooted in the two dominant religious traditions amongst Ulster Protestants: Calvinism and evangelicalism. The right, even duty, of the Christian citizen to dissent from his government (or his church) when conscience bids him do so is an essential component of Calvinism. Evangelicals, who believe that their religion should influence all aspects of their lives, have been committed social and political activists, developing a range of organizations to promote or defend their causes. These features of Calvinism and evangelicalism have contributed to seemingly diverse dissenting movements that challenge not just the political order, but the religion and political practices of the community from which the participants in the movements have come. Indeed, Calvinism and evangelicalism have formed the basis for intellectual and theological connections in contexts as varied as the United Irish movement, the radical evangelical wing of the labour movement of the early twentieth century, and the radical evangelical wing of the contemporary civil society-based peace movement.

The United Irish and labour movements are particularly significant because for the fleeting moments in which they held sway, it seemed that they would transcend the sectarian divide. Similarly, the peace movement gains praise today for cross-community groups and activities that are said to transcend sectarianism. There have of course been other manifestations of non-sectarian cooperation, such as the Tenant League of North and South (1848-1852), the Land League in the 1870s and 1880s, twentieth century groups like the New Ireland Forum, and small local groups confronting local and isolated issues. But a comparison of the United Irish, labour

1 Frank Wright (1996) examines eras when various strands of Liberalism seemed to be transcending sectarianism. He calls it a story “about the trials and tribulations of various kinds of Liberalism,” marked by “hopeful beginnings and eventual disappointments” (1996: 21). He looks at a number of incidents, not dealt with in this paper, saying that “the importance of these episodes is to look at occasions in the past when people of the two traditions have worked and hoped together” (1996: 21). For Wright, “The story of the United Irishmen brings out possibilities which existed once and then reappeared only in more diminished
and peace movements is particularly instructive because of their historical prominence, including their often idealized places in folk history. Furthermore, the diversity of these movements demonstrates the unpredictable and unexpected ways in which the politics of dissent has been manifested in Northern Ireland.

In the case of the United Irishmen, it seemed that republican ideology would transcend sectarianism. Here, the New Light Presbyterians carried the banner for the politics of dissent. Likewise, it seemed that the working class cooperation manifested in the 1907 dock strike represented an opportunity for socialism to transcend sectarianism. Here, it is said, evangelicals like Lindsay Crawford in the newly formed Independent Orange Order spoke out as dissenters. In the peace movement, it is the groups that “bring people together,” urging reconciliation and dialogue, which are said to be transcending sectarianism. Here, organizations like Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI) have been dissenting from traditional evangelical theologies and establishing themselves firmly within the peace movement. While these movements were unavoidably rooted in the particular social, religious and political configurations of the times, it is possible to discern some common characteristics. For instance:

1. Dissenters’ cooperation with others outside of their tradition, and the ability of the movements they are involved in to hold together disparate groups, is usually hailed as the transcending of sectarianism.

2. Dissenters challenge not just the established socio-political order, but the theology of their own tradition—especially the way that theology conceives of the relationship between church and state. These “new” theologies usually develop in concert with the philosophical and ideological currents of the day, both reflecting and rejecting various aspects of them.

But despite their often self-conscious non-sectarian aims, the United Irish and labour movements both descended into sectarian conflict. Of course, this can be tied to particular historical circumstances, such as the failure of the French to aid the United Irishmen, tensions surrounding the issue of home rule in the period around the 1907 Belfast dock strike, and British military intervention in both cases, amongst other things. Circumstances, however, were not the only culprits. The ultimate inability of these movements to last can be traced to the internal contradictions in the theologies, philosophies, and ideologies of the dissenters and those with whom they were temporarily allied. Moreover, tensions inevitably arose about attitudes toward Catholicism, and the related issue of the perceived Catholic threat to Protestantism. Anti-Catholicism, coupled with what seemed to be Catholic gains, played a significant role in the breakdowns of both movements.

forms” (1996: 26). He concludes that these Liberal ideals were quite thoroughly obscured after the 1880s. Wright, however, does not include analyses of how different or new theologies interacted with Liberalism—even when some of his Liberal heroes were Presbyterian ministers. His brief treatments of religion consider the continuities of the “degenerate” forms of Protestantism articulated by Cooke or Hanna, but obscure the continuities of the sort of dissenting theologies examined in this paper.
It is not clear if the theologies and philosophies that motivate participants in the peace movement will hold it together, or if it will meet a fate similar to that of the United Irish and labour movements. It is also not clear if the peace movement will ultimately have an important part to play in transcending sectarianism. Like the United Irish and labour movements, it is certain that participants in the peace movement do not share a clearly defined common philosophy. Moreover, ECONI is a group that—like the New Lights and Independent Orange Order—includes people of varying theological persuasions. One of its major areas of disagreement centres around interpretations of Catholicism. It will be argued that the tensions within the peace movement could prove problematic, although the movement is more likely to drift into irrelevance than to implode. Of ECONI, internal tensions over Catholicism will probably not prove to be as significant as challenges arising from traditional evangelicals who oppose ECONI’s new application of religion to politics. Perhaps significantly, however, these challenges often include objections to ECONI’s tolerance of Catholicism.

This paper will briefly outline Calvinist and evangelical conceptions of church and state, explaining the theological bases for these dominant traditions in Northern Ireland. It will then explain how those theologies can be drawn on to challenge their own assumptions and traditions. Next, the United Irish, labour and peace movements will be compared. It will conclude with an analysis of the prospects for the peace movement to transcend sectarianism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CALVINISM AND EVANGELICALISM IN ULSTER PROTESTANTISM

Scholarship has confirmed the significance of both Calvinism and evangelicalism for Ulster Protestants (Thomson, 2002; Akenson, 1992; Fawcett, 2000; McBride, 1998; Hempton and Hill, 1992; Bruce, 1986; Stewart, 1999; Brewer, 1998; McCaughey, 1993). Numerically, churches in the Calvinist tradition (of the Reformed or Presbyterian type) are the largest of the Protestant denominations and have been since the migration from the lowlands of Scotland began in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Calvinist conception of the covenant held particular significance for these Ulster-Scots, whose Scottish forbears had entered into a series of religious-political covenants with the English crown. In 1912 Ulster Protestants harked back to that idea of the covenant when they initiated the Solemn League and Covenant to resist home rule.  

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2 Brewer (1998) and Akenson (1992) disagree on the nature of the 1912 covenant. Brewer writes: “In his account of the covenantal culture of the Ulster Scots, Akenson (1992: 149) argues that the widespread support for the 1912 Ulster Covenant amongst Anglicans, Methodists and others of the Reformed tradition illustrated the extent to which the Presbyterians held sway. In fact, the cultural hegemony was supplied by conservative evangelicalism rather than Presbyterian theology, a more embracing and general theological position. The covenantal theology associated with Presbyterianism was entirely absent from the contents of the Ulster Covenant, which was a political declaration with secular tones rather than a theological statement of God’s agency in their affairs” (1998: 83).
Evangelicalism, an international, pan-denominational, overwhelmingly Protestant movement, was a later development than Calvinism. Its beginnings are usually dated from the mid-eighteenth century and associated with enthusiasm, revival, Wesley and Whitefield. Evangelical forms of religion spread rapidly in Ulster in the nineteenth century, forming a sort of “sacred canopy” for Protestants in nearly every denomination. Ulster evangelicals were social activists, forming Bible societies, temperance lodges, and self-improvement societies, and attempting to win souls. Moreover, the evangelicalism of this period was associated with spirited opposition to the Roman Catholic Church and the values of the British Empire. As such, evangelicalism supported the political status quo of union with Great Britain (Hempton and Hill, 1992). Today, it is estimated that about 25-33% of Ulster’s Protestants are evangelicals (Boal et al., 1997; Bruce, 1986; ECONI, 1995).

Calvinism and evangelicalism are both notoriously difficult “isms” to define or describe, and there would probably be dispute about any definition offered. Even so, outlining Calvinist and evangelical “ideal types” of conceptions of church and state can help to explain the dominance of certain theological and political ideas amongst Ulster Protestants. It can also explain how those same theologies can be used to radically challenge accepted traditions.

**Calvinist conceptions of Church and state**

The Calvinist conception of the relationship between church and state is grounded in the conviction that church and state should be separate, but that the government should also recognize and reflect God’s sovereignty. Recognizing God’s sovereignty means that the state should enter into covenants with the church and other “spheres” within civil society. These covenants are meant to define rights and responsibilities and ensure that an overarching social good is achieved (Meeter, 1990; Walzer, 1965).

Historically, Calvinists have sought to recognize God’s sovereignty by ordering church-state covenants to reflect God’s laws. For Calvin himself, recognizing God’s sovereignty meant establishing a polity like Geneva, which was envisioned as a Christian commonwealth with all citizens covenanting to uphold the Ten Commandments. For Cromwell’s English Puritans or the Puritans of New England, that meant a coercive Christian commonwealth. For the Scots who established the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643 with the English Parliament, that meant eliminating Catholicism in Scotland and extending Presbyterianism to England and Ireland. For a contemporary commentator like Stackhouse (2002:258), it means getting “religion as right as we can.”

Ulster Protestants have tended to associate recognizing the sovereignty of God with maintaining Ulster’s place in the United Kingdom, believing that political union

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3 In Calvinism, civil society is conceived of as made up of multiple spheres, including the church, family, science, art, industry, and agriculture, amongst others. There is no agreement about the exact number of spheres. All spheres are sovereign in their own domain and free from interference by the state.
with the Republic of Ireland would eliminate their ability to practice right religion. The idea of the covenant also contributes to a relatively common assumption amongst Ulster Protestants: if a state follows God’s laws, God will bless it; and if it disobeys God’s laws, God will curse it. The logic behind this assumption does not require any public or formal covenant between church and state; it works something like an immutable universal law. Accordingly, Ulster Protestants have often argued for legislation that reflects Christian morality, such as banning adult male homosexuality. Not to resist the forces of immorality is to invite God’s wrath.

Several important implications follow. For instance, the covenants insure that the church, and the Christian citizens that make up the church, have certain responsibilities—not least of which is monitoring the state. If the state is not fulfilling its part of the covenant, then the Christian citizens living within it may resort, in the first place, to legal (or constitutional) agitation for change. If that fails, violent revolution may be justified. Moreover, God may call “prophets” who, accountable not to the state but to God alone, urge these radical, even revolutionary, courses of action. Equally important are the ordinary believers, who are expected to maintain an active life of prayer, Bible study and service to others. This commitment to activism led Walzer, in his study of the Calvinist English Puritans, to conclude: “Puritanism required not only a pitch of piety, but a pitch of activism and involvement. … Puritanism, like Oscar Wilde’s socialism, took too many evenings” (1993: 223). Thus, it is the religious, and political, obligation of the Calvinist citizen to play his part in shaping society and the state—and to dissent when they take the wrong path.

However, it is possible for dissenters to reject an aspect of this “ideal type” Calvinism—the obligation of the state to recognize God’s sovereignty and to enter into covenants with the church. Believing that these conceptions are flawed, these prophets—accountable to God and their own consciences—draw on the Calvinist imperative to dissent rather than accept traditional interpretations. Significantly, McCaughey (1965: 125) interprets the actions of the New Light Presbyterians in this way:

Among Calvinists in general, a firm belief in a predestinating God who, by his ‘eternal decrees had for his own good pleasure, foreordained whatsoever comes to pass’, could and often did lead to a kind of fatalism and a political attitude which was supine. From time to time, however, it has given grit to those who, like these United Irishmen and women, could not conceive of the divine will as satisfied with things as they are.

*Evangelical conceptions of Church and state*

It could be argued that evangelicalism has not developed a conception of the relationship between church and state. Evangelicals have often been accused of being pietist or withdrawn, considering politics dirty business and rejecting social and political activism altogether. However, not only is there an implicit political theory in this pietist position, but evangelicals have often borrowed from the conceptions of church and state developed within denominational traditions. In a number of politi-
Ethics contexts, evangelicals have used these conceptions to justify social and political activism.

Evangelicalism is open to the charges of withdrawal and pietism because it is so closely linked to personal experience. For instance, three of David Bebbington’s (1989: 271-276) four characteristics of evangelicalism (conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism and activism) are more personal than social in character. Conversionism is the belief that the individual must have a life-changing or “born again” experience of God to be a true Christian. Biblicism is the belief that the Bible is the ultimate religious authority, accessible to all, without need of interpretation by a priest or the traditions of a religious community. Crucicentrism is the belief that Christ’s death and resurrection is the only way to salvation, which is usually understood as the individual’s acceptance of this in order to gain forgiveness for sins. The more social or communal aspect of evangelicalism, activism, centres on individuals’ responsibility to share their faith with others. This may include something as seemingly apolitical as handing out a gospel tract. But even if evangelicals refuse to vote or dismiss politics, preaching the gospel is an act that, for them, can be considered political. This is because some evangelicals believe that converting others is the best way to change society and politics. For instance, it is believed that when a sufficient number of the population are born again (including the politicians!), they will lead changed, holy and moral lives. This will inevitably produce a better, more just society. Crucially, in nineteenth century Ireland, the development of evangelicalism was associated with the culture and values of the British Empire, and the boundaries between conversion, Godliness, and Britishness were often confused. Spiritual conversion—even if it was supposed to be an internal matter—implied political and cultural conversion as well. The equation of “right religion” and “right politics” continues to be held by many Ulster evangelicals today.

Other evangelicals choose to be more directly involved in politics. They have often borrowed from the political conceptions developed within the denominational traditions that are prominent in their nations. This has been the case in Northern Ireland, where some evangelical Protestants borrowed Calvinist assumptions to conclude that the particular state in which they lived was “chosen” by God and in a covenantal relationship with him. Accordingly, these evangelicals in Northern Ireland might not seek to establish Christian commonwealths, but they seek to have a distinct Christian influence on their governments. They embrace the separation of church and state for the freedom it gives their churches, yet practise their dissent by agitating for legislation that upholds the “true faith.” Moreover, they might oppose the portions of the Belfast Agreement that provide for the release of prisoners, arguing that such measures are unjust and thus break God’s law. Breaking God’s law, it is to be remembered, is conceived of as resulting in God’s punishment of society. It should also be pointed out that evangelicalism shares with Calvinism a commitment to religious activism.

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4 A similar dynamic worked in the United States, where evangelicals borrowed from their Calvinist forebears to make similar arguments about the country’s special relationship with God. This is reflected in terms such as “manifest destiny” and a “city on a hill.”
Evangelicalism, then, encourages an active citizenry that is constantly seeking to influence society and politics, either through gaining converts, forming organizations, or influencing legislation. Because evangelicals are inherently active, it is not surprising that if some within the evangelical tradition become convinced that the outworking of faith in society is flawed, they will dissent from their tradition and seek to affect change. Given Ulster evangelicalism’s relationship with Calvinism, the impetus to dissent is further reinforced.

THE UNITED IRISHMEN AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT

The union of Presbyterian Dissenters with Catholics in the United Irish rebellion of 1798 has often been interpreted as the transcending of sectarianism. The Irish nationalist tradition, for instance, lauds the Dissenters who joined with their Catholic neighbours as finally having seen the light, which means realizing that throwing off the shackles of the British Empire would be the sure path to freedom. It is normally assumed that classical republican ideology, and the desire to shape politics in Ireland in such a way as to mitigate domination by Britain and the ProtestantAscendancy, was what held the United Irishmen together.

But not all Dissenters were United Irishmen. Those who were, the New Light Presbyterians and some Covenanters, held radically different theological beliefs. The New Lights challenged traditional Calvinist conceptions of church and state, and developed an alternative theology and social vision in parallel with other philosophies and ideologies of the day. The Covenanters held to traditional Calvinist conceptions of church and state, hoping that the covenant with the crown would be renewed and enforced. As such, the United Irishmen held together men and women who embraced conflicting and contradictory conceptions of the society that they wanted to create. Republican ideology was not the dominant motivating factor for every man and woman who took up arms or urged others to do so. And crucially, New Light and Covenanter participation in the United Irishmen depended to a large extent on the assumption that the Catholic Church was withering away. The unity of the United Irishmen—and the hope that they could ultimately transcend sectarianism—was more apparent than real.

It is impossible to quantify the overall influence of the politics of radical dissent on the United Irish movement, given the range of ideologies, philosophies, and theologies employed by the revolutionaries. Certainly, the New Light Presbyterians were prominent in the movement, and contemporaries associated them with the rebellion. Wolfe Tone is known to have said that the “genius of their religion” motivated Dissenter involvement. That said, the Dissenters that Tone praised, the New Lights, were not unified in their religious beliefs. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of New Light theology is the vagueness of its position. Frustrated New Light critics

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tried to brand them as heretics, but they often could not figure out just what the New Lights believed.\(^6\) As such, the implications of their beliefs must be gleaned from their actions—such as their protest against subscribing to the Westminster Confession of Faith and their involvement with the United Irishmen (McBride, 1998).

The Westminster Confession, composed by a gathering of more than 100 British and Scottish theologians and parliamentary representatives between 1645 and 1646, was intended to provide a summary of the Reformed, Calvinist faith and a guide to church-state relations in the realm. Following the lead of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, ministers were required to pledge subscription to the confession in the Synod of Ulster from 1698. The New Lights questioned this requirement on the grounds that it corrupted the principles of the Reformation and of individual conscience. Accordingly, they argued that subscription corrupted the principles of the Reformation by claiming that since Christ is the sovereign of the church, to add to his instructions in the form of a man-made confession was to flout Christ’s authority and the authority of Scripture. They argued that it infringed individual conscience by stressing the individual’s right, and ability, to make his own judgements. As McBride (1998: 51) summarizes the thought of John Abernethy:\(^7\)

According to Abernethy, matters of conscience were exempt from human jurisdiction. The moral autonomy of the individual was central to Abernethy’s understanding of the relationship between God and mankind: salvation lay not in conformity to articles of faith, but in the scrutiny of the Scriptures, and in rational persuasion, that is, ‘Assent formed upon Evidence and Attentive Reasoning’.\(^8\)

Similarly, the logic of liberty of conscience led the New Lights to question the accepted Calvinist conception of the relationship between church and state, and was crucial to New Light participation in the rebellion. This position was articulated in William Steel Dickson’s series *Three sermons on the subject of Scripture politics*, which McBride calls “a United Irish manifesto” (1998: 99). Here, Dickson argued

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\(^6\) Old Lights accused New Lights of Arminianism (the belief in man’s ability to cooperate with God in securing his own salvation, as opposed to the Calvinist doctrine of election), denying the Trinity, and denying the atonement, amongst other things. Many New Lights affirmed their commitment to orthodox doctrines, but the absence of a clear “New Light position,” left them vulnerable to critics. In 1725 the New Lights, who were often regarded with suspicion or contempt by the laity (especially those from rural areas) were expelled from the synod and gathered into a separate Presbytery of Antrim. Despite the controversies, however, New Lights were tolerated, and received the *regium donum* even after the expulsion. The requirement to subscribe to the Westminster Confession was effectively, if not formally, dropped by the 1780s (see McBride, 1998; Holmes, 2000; Stewart, 1999).

\(^7\) Abernethy was one of the founders of the Belfast Society, formed by the New Light intelligentsia in 1705. Holmes describes this as a “group of avant garde ministers and laymen” who discussed “books, sermons and ideas” (2000: 57). For more on Abernethy, see Holmes (1996).

\(^8\) In contrast, Old Lights asserted that “when a doctrine appears to be from God, we must acquiesce in it, and, though it be above our comprehension, we must believe it, because our reason finds in it the Word, which carries in it all the reasons of believing” (cited in McBride, 1998: 51).
that the idea that Christian principles should inform the conduct of the state was simply wrong. This, he said, was not the right way to recognize the sovereignty of God. Rather, the only group of individuals who were bound to associate on the basis of Christian principles were the church. Accordingly, the relationship between church and state since the time of Constantine had been flawed—the church was allowing the state to unlawfully usurp Christ’s authority and the church’s proper position as God’s people.\(^9\)

Another important influence on the theologies of some New Light ministers was a millenarian interpretation of events, and the perceived upcoming demise of the Roman Catholic Church. The French Revolution had been widely interpreted as a victory for Protestantism and Reason over Antichrist (identified with the Catholic Church), which implied that the Catholic Church would soon wither away. Thus, the unity of Dissenter and Catholic was at least partly predicated on the belief (held by some Dissenters, anyway) that Catholics would cease, as it were, being Catholic.

That said, New Lights also drew on contemporary philosophies and ideologies when developing their positions. While they appealed to Calvin’s and the Reformation’s traditional emphasis on the primacy of the Bible and its interpretation by conscience in matters of faith, they also incorporated Whig and Enlightenment ideas, classical republican ideology, Jacobinism, and the moral philosophy taught in the Scottish universities. Whig ideology, for instance, appealed to the founding principles of the English constitution and argued that the realm must return to those principles in order to be prosperous and free.\(^10\) Moreover, it was the Whig, Locke, who argued for religious toleration and liberty of conscience. Benjamin Hoadly, the Bishop of Bangor, drew on Locke’s theory of religious pluralism in his 1717 sermon *The nature of the Kingdom of the Church of Christ*; and Gilbert Kennedy of Second Belfast cited Locke’s *Second treatise* in his account of the origins of civil society (McBride, 1998: 95-97). Classical republican ideology emphasized themes like cultivating virtue and resisting corruption; while Jacobinism, derived from the writings of Thomas Paine and others in the Anglo-American tradition, scorned the elitism of whiggism and appealed to ordinary working men (McBride, 1998: 90). Scottish moral philosophy can be summed up as judging the morality of an action according as it would produce the greatest good for the greatest number. Obviously, there are

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\(^9\) The sermons date from 1781, 1792, and 1793, and examine the relationship between church (the kingdom of God) and state (the kingdom of the world), drawing on the text of John 18:36 (“My kingdom is not of this world”). As McBride writes, “Dickson set out to establish his premises that true religion was “inseparably connected” with the science of politics since they shared the same goal, “the happiness of mankind”. Although the Scriptures had not laid down any specific form of government, God had prescribed in the Bible the standards by which kings were to rule. But this assertion that Christian morality ought to be the basis of all civil association was coupled with a conception of the Church as an independent society, sovereign within its own sphere: “the Messiah’s kingdom did not originate from worldly policy, doth not affect pomp, and perishable wealth, disclaims every idea of being extended by violence, or supported by oppression”. Since Christ’s kingdom is not of this world, it follows that any attempt to regulate patterns of belief or modes of worship constitutes a usurpation of his authority as head of the Church” (McBride, 1998: 99).

\(^10\) For an insightful analysis of parallels between Whig ideology and Christianity, see Noll, Hatch and Marsden (1989: 82-85).
tensions within and between these philosophies, and their influences upon individual New Lights can only be guessed at.

But if the theology of the New Lights was informed by new and developing philosophies, concentrated amongst the urbane in Antrim, the theology of their United Irish partners—the Covenanters—harked back to the traditional ideals of a Calvinist commonwealth. The Covenanters believed that the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant was binding, and looked to that covenant and the Westminster Confession as a guide for relations between church and state. The mainstream Presbyterian church was, for them, hopelessly sold out to a civil sovereign that did not support the true religion. As such, their theology incorporated the traditional Calvinist interpretation of when a revolt against the state was justified. The Covenanters were also influenced by Jacobinism, the writings of Paine, and millenarianism, and had a more rural base than the New Lights.¹¹

In sum, the “United Irish” republic of the New Lights would have been one in which freedom of conscience and rationality reigned supreme. There would have been no established church because, McBride writes, “the non-subscribers … rejected the establishment principle itself, drawing on natural jurisprudence to develop a theory of resistance grounded on a general right to worship God freely” (1998: 110). The Catholic Church, regarded as an upholder of irrationality and superstition, could not have survived in this environment. On the other hand, the “United Irish” republic of the Covenanters would have been “a militant Calvinist state in which both civil and ecclesiastical authorities would be mobilized in the suppression of heresy and idolatry” (1998: 83). Church and state would finally be bound to uphold the Solemn League and Covenant of 1643. The Catholic Church would not have been allowed to survive in this environment. These were both positions that the Catholics in the United Irish movement, for obvious reasons, would not have been able to agree.¹² Elements within New Light theology that might have contributed to a transcending of sectarianism were not held widely enough to provide a bulwark against the military failure of the rebellion, its descent into sectarian fighting, and the resurgence of the Catholic Church in Ireland after the turn of the century.

¹¹ The prominent Covenanting minister William Stavely interpreted the French Revolution “as the first round in the final battle against Antichrist. In 1795 Stavely also set out his own thoughts on the calculation of prophetic time. The European states which had risen from the Roman Empire, he claimed, were the ten crowned horns of the beast whose destruction had been foretold in the Books of Daniel and Revelations. … France, having overthrown the House of Bourbon and humbled the Roman Catholic Church, had been chosen as God’s instrument for toppling the monarchies of Europe” (McBride, 1998: 103-104). Free Presbyterian minister Ian Paisley makes similar arguments about the European Union today.

¹² A word should be said here about the Presbyterians who did not support the United Irish movement, the Old Lights and Seceders. Both groups, obviously, were relatively comfortable with the status quo; the Seceders potentially less so than the Old Lights (the mainstream Presbyterian church in Ulster was receiving regium donum, the Seceders began receiving it in 1784). Seceders, however, began to cultivate an inward, personal spirituality at the expense of the more socio-political aspects of theology that had been so prominent amongst their covenant-constructing Scottish forefathers. For a fuller analysis, see McBride, 1998.
THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT

The early twentieth century labour movement has been celebrated as an example of non-sectarian collaboration in which Protestant and Catholic, north and south, joined together to present a socialist challenge to the capitalist British Empire. This interpretation has been put forward most forcefully by socialist and nationalist analysts, and often contains the theory that the capitalist ruling class encouraged sectarianism amongst the working class in order to consolidate its own power. Here, the 1907 Belfast dock strike is held up as the shining of example of what could have been—Protestant and Catholic together, agitating for their common good. Of particular significance to the politics of dissent was the radical evangelical portion of the movement, as exemplified by Lindsay Crawford in the Independent Orange Order (Independent Orange Order). As Foster has written: “In 1907 labour seemed ready to bring about a major crisis that would shatter the old moulds of confessional politics in Belfast” (1989: 441).

But as in the case of the United Irishmen, a complex configuration of philosophies, ideologies and theologies motivated those who took part in the labour movement. Crucially, the most visible evangelical participants in the labour movement—leaders of the newly formed Independent Orange Order—harboured different motivations and conceptions of the society they wished to create. For instance, Crawford developed a liberal vision that echoed that of the United Irishmen. Alex Boyd championed socialism. And Thomas Sloan articulated a traditional evangelical outlook that hoped to achieve a “Protestant democracy.” That socialism, or at least the same kind of socialism, was not the dominant strain of thought for all those who participated in the movement is clear. Moreover, much Protestant (including evangelical) participation in the labour movement depended to a large extent on the “absence of home rule” from the political agenda (Patterson, 1980; Gray, 1985). This meant that Protestant fears of domination by Catholic Ireland could be momentarily set aside and they could focus on the plight of the workingman. The unity of the labour movement—and the hope that socialism could ultimately transcend sectarianism—was just as tenuous as the unity of the United Irishmen.

It is as impossible to gauge the influence of evangelicalism on the labour movement as it is to gauge the influence of the New Lights on the United Irishmen. It seems, however, its influence on the overall movement was not as great. An accurate analysis of the Independent Orange Order must admit that Crawford was often a voice crying in the wilderness, and did not represent the majority of its member-

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13 Patterson says: “a major myth of the Irish labour movement … [was] … that the strike represented the possibility of a withdrawal of working class support for the two complexes of ideology which dominated Irish society, Protestant Unionism and Catholic Nationalism. … This in part stems from a continued unwillingness in the Irish labour movement to face up to the specific nature and tenacity of Protestant working-class Unionism” (1980: 66). Foster also writes: “Larkin’s reliance on sympathetic strike tactics broke down under the pressure of sectionalism: after the police mutiny, the strike became inevitably polarized along nationalist-versus-Unionist lines. … When riots developed in August 1907, they took on the old Orange-and-Green pigmentation, as well as the old territorial patterns; by autumn, the dockers had been isolated” (1989: 441). Foster’s use of the word “inevitably” here is certainly telling.
ship. Moreover, the Independent Orange Order did not initiate the 1907 dock strike, and although it gave the strikers official backing, not all of its members were enthusiastic about it (Gray, 1985: 89). A collection was taken for the strikers at an Independent Orange Order Twelfth demonstration, but the order “referred to the strike as ‘deplorable’ and the cause of ‘suffering’” (Morgan, 1991: 56-57)—despite the active participation of two of its most prominent members (Crawford and Boyd) in it.

The Independent Orange Orders participation in the dock strike and its Magheramourne Manifesto have been the main examples offered as evidence of its importance to the labour movement. The Magheramourne Manifesto of 1905, authored by Crawford (the Independent Orange Order’s first grand master), contains the oft-quoted passage:

We stand once more on the banks of the Boyne not as victors in the fight, nor to applaud the noble deeds of our ancestors, but to bridge the gulf that has long divided Ireland into camps, and to hold out the right hand of fellowship to those who, while worshipping at different shrines, are yet our countrymen … and to co-operate with all those who put Ireland first in their affections (Dawson, 2003).

That this was just one strain of thought present in the Independent Orange Order is clear, and it could be interpreted in different ways. George Dawson, the current grand master of the Independent Orange Order, makes a convincing argument that the manifesto should be interpreted as a document that assumed Ireland’s full integration in the United Kingdom—and this was the position held by Crawford at that time.14 Most scholars do recognize a change in Crawford’s thought—he later became a home ruler and worked in America for the Free State.15 However, some still departed the organization because they were dissatisfied with the manifesto. Sloan later disassociated himself from it. What the manifesto did represent was an attempt by Crawford to incorporate some of the other ideologies and philosophies that would eventually motivate disparate groups to join the labour cause. A testimony to its resonance (and Crawford’s popularity) amongst members of the rank and file was its frequent inclusion in the Independent Orange Order Twelfth speeches of 1906. Moreover, relations between the Independent Orange Order and the evangelical and anti-Catholic Belfast Protestant Association (BPA), of which Sloan was a member, were becoming strained. By 1907, Independent Orange Or-

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14 On the text of the manifesto that reads “the gulf that has long divided Ireland into camps,” Dawson (2003) writes: “The gulf which long divided Ireland in the context of this document was the refusal of Roman Catholics to enter into the benefits of the victory of the Boyne.” Calling the manifesto “a document ahead of its time,” he says that, “Had the advice of the manifesto been followed Ireland would today have been a full, equal and productive part of the United Kingdom.”

15 Gray writes: “… in the manifesto the call for a reassessment by Protestants of their position was not made dependent on the adoption of secular attitudes by Catholics although the latter development was seen as highly desirable” (1985: 49). It should be noted that some within the Independent Orange Order would have required a change in Catholic attitudes for them to become full citizens—just as some United Irishmen made that same assumption.
der men were prohibited from belonging to the BPA. Gray interprets this as a sign of Crawford’s influence in the Independent Orange Order at the time.\footnote{16}

That said, it is also crucial to recognise that the Independent Orange Order challenge, divided as it became, was a particularly important part of the labour movement because of its challenge to the evangelical tradition, which had been developing during the nineteenth century. After the United Irish rebellion\footnote{17}, evangelicalism had become a badge of identity for many Ulster Protestants, and served as an important element in transcending class differences. As Hempton and Hill (1992: 43) conclude of this period:

…evangelicalism offered the upper classes a creed which reaffirmed the old values and supplied a vigorous defence of social and political conservatism. In an age when class divisions were assuming greater significance, evangelicalism stressed the mutual interdependence of the rich and poor in a divinely ordained society, and defined the common enemy as immorality and ignorance, which were thought to be products of Roman Catholicism.

Surely it was significant if the prevailing Protestant order, which was underpinned by evangelicalism, was being challenged by the dissent of evangelicals. But it is crucial that Crawford came to dissent from an evangelicalism that promoted a Protestant democracy; Sloan dissented from an evangelicalism that was seen as failing to promote a Protestant democracy. Sloan represented traditional evangelicalism in a way similar to how Covenanters represented traditional Calvinism.\footnote{18}

\footnote{16} Gray writes: “In 1905 the BPA still acted virtually as the electoral arm of the Independent Orange Order but after the victories of Sloan and Joe Devlin [a Catholic, my note] in the 1906 General Election BPA members stoned the Independent Hall in Great Victoria Street” (1985: 52).

\footnote{17} Most evangelicals did not support the radical dissent of the New Lights or the Covenanters during the era of the United Irishmen, although they often did interpret these events in an apocalyptic light. Such themes surfaced in the preaching of evangelists during the period 1798-1810, as Presbyterians, Methodists, British and local evangelicals embarked upon extensive missionary programmes, winning numerous converts in their revivals (Hempton and Hill, 1992: 30). The Methodist itinerant preachers were, Hempton and Hill argue, “In 1799 … a direct response to the rebellion of the previous year, and reflecting the evangelical belief that Ireland’s problems required religious solutions” (1992: 31). Similarly, the founding of the Evangelical Society of Ulster “was a direct response to the crisis of 1798, and in its make-up and development can be seen the coming together of several strands of Ulster evangelicalism. The founders, five Presbyterian Seceding ministers, were copying patterns of associations formed in America and Britain. Thirteen ministers from four different Presbyterian denominations attended its first meeting in 1798” (1992: 40). Moreover, during this period evangelicalism seemed to offer simple solutions to complex social problems: conversion, rather than revolution, was the way to make society better: “In the immediate post-rebellion atmosphere, religious revival seemed a viable alternative to political reform which was now firmly linked with social and religious anarchy. Combining educational and religious principles, and with the scriptures as their major tool, the agents of voluntary societies stressed the links between morality, political loyalty and social stability” (1992: 42-43).

\footnote{18} It should be noted that Sloan, an MP for Belfast from 1902-1910, championed a number of “progressive” policies including support for old age pensions, education issues, the right for tenants to own their own houses, and an improvement of conditions in the convent laundries (through the inspections). Morgan lists Sloan’s achievements as recorded upon his retirement in the \emph{Belfast Evening Telegraph}: “expelled over convent laundries issue; introduced temperance bill twice but failed; got public houses closed earlier; helped handloom weavers’ bill; raised surgeon Anderson case; exposed plot to stop Warrenpoint orange march; got roman catholic demonstration in London stopped; helped ex-nun Moul to escape; opposed home rule; sup-
It is also important to note that Crawford once held theological and political beliefs similar to the traditional evangelical position articulated by Sloan. The BPA and the Irish Protestant, of which Crawford served as editor, both deplored the “acquiescence of the leaders of Ulster Unionism in the ‘Romanising’ policies of the Conservative administration” (Patterson, 1980: 45). The actual formation of the Independent Orange Order hinged on an event with profoundly religious overtones.\(^\text{19}\) Sloan, at that time a member of the Orange Order, challenged sitting unionist MP and County Grand Master Col. Saunderson at a 1902 Twelfth celebration about his voting record on the closure of convent laundries. Sloan would later be expelled from the Orange Order as a result of this incident, and was amongst the initial founders of the Independent Orange Order in 1903. The Independent Orange Order embodied the underlying evangelical, and indeed Calvinist, assumptions that if Protestant principles were put into practice, politics and society would inevitably improve. The Independent Orange Order initially challenged conservative unionists not because they were economically oppressing the working class, but because they were not Protestant enough.

But Crawford, whose evangelical and Anglican credentials were impeccable, began to articulate a different sort of politics. After the manifesto, his positions became ever more liberal and radical. In 1906 he attempted to link the Independent Orange Order and the Ulster Liberal Association. This could only cause division, as most members of the Independent Orange Order suspected liberals were “soft on Catholics and home rule” (Morgan, 1991: 53). Morgan contends that Crawford had “lost faith” in the Protestant democracy advocated by Sloan, and began to draw on the logic of positions that had been articulated by the United Irishmen more than 100 years before.\(^\text{20}\) Indeed, Crawford would be expelled from the Independent Orange Order in 1908.\(^\text{21}\) Another dissenting voice within the Independent Orange Order was

\[^{19}\] Today, the Independent Orange Order is associated with Ian Paisley, and he has often been credited with founding the organization—an understandable mistake, perhaps, given his penchant for founding organizations like churches and political parties. Paisley (2003) himself acknowledged the confusion at a recent one hundredth anniversary celebration of the Independent Orange Order, noting that a British journalist had recently credited him both with founding the order and writing the Westminster Confession!

\[^{20}\] Crawford emulated the United Irishmen. While serving as editor of the liberal Ulster Guardian, which was rapidly becoming dissatisfied with Crawford’s increasingly radical positions, he “received two written instructions, the first ordering him to ‘confine all Labour matters to the column “Labour World” and to insert at the top of the column a notice disclaiming any responsibility for what appeared therein’, and the second instructing him ‘to discontinue all articles relating to the ‘98 movement’” (Gray, 1985: 196).

\[^{21}\] Of Crawford after the strike, Dawson (2003) says: “What could he do? He could continue the work of pressurising on the basic principles, criticising where necessary and supporting where necessary, or he could move to oppose Unionism root and branch. Progressively the latter became his preoccupation. Did he choose this course or did it just open up to him as he opposed all of the actions of his opponents? I do not know. Both can be argued for. I rather suspect that in his zeal to oppose he simply drifted away from his moorings and found, ultimately that the tide had turned making it impossible for him to get back. By May 1908 he was completely isolated, unemployed and removed from the Order he had helped to create.” There is, however, evidence that Crawford was not completely isolated. Upon his expulsion seven lodges resigned from the Independent Orange Order, including the Manifesto Lodge from Ballycarry and the Magheramorne...
Boyd, who had more outright labour connections than Crawford or Sloan. He had been an organizer of the Municipal Employees’ Association, and he spoke not of a Protestant democracy, but of a “democracy of labour,” openly embracing “Catholics as part of the working class.” He left the Independent Orange Order in 1907, “on the grounds that protestant independence had nothing to offer the working class” (Morgan, 1991: 56-57).

Thus, the Independent Orange Order involvement in the 1907 strike was more the work of Boyd and Crawford than Sloan. And just as the New Lights had encountered and interacted with the philosophies and ideologies of their day, so Boyd and Crawford engaged with the prevailing varieties of socialist thought. These versions of socialism often contained contradictory elements. For instance, there was the thought represented by labour leaders in Dublin, such as James Larkin and James Connolly. According to Foster, Connolly’s “main contribution was to argue that a nation-state must be established in Ireland as a necessary pre-condition for social and economic progress” (1989: 439). Connolly had linked nationalism and socialism—a move that would ultimately prove fatal to the hope of any lasting cooperation with labour in Belfast. Larkin at first linked the labour cause to the labour movement in Britain, but he abandoned that tack after the strike and a clash with British labour leader James Sexton. Amongst labour leaders in Belfast there was some variance in thought, but the dominant interpretation was filtered through the perspective of the empire. Indeed, it had been written in the Belfast Labour Chronicle that “Imperialism is but the transition stage to the international system of the proletariat,” while nationalism was “dead or dying” (quoted in Foster, 1989: 443). As such, Irish nationalism was considered “irrelevant” and “reactionary,” the backward-looking Catholic church was accused of aiding and abetting nationalism, and home rule was enthusiastically opposed (Patterson, 1980: 46). A few labour sympathizers in Belfast disagreed with this position, amongst them Ramsay MacDonald, who directed the 1905 election campaign of William Walker. Like labour leaders such as Connolly, MacDonald believed that “the fears of Catholic domination, expressed in the Chronicle … were unfounded and were largely the creation of the capitalist class to divide Protestant from Catholic workers and so prevent the growth of a strong labour movement” (Patterson, 1980: 51). Walker, who collaborated on a limited basis with the BPA and leaders of the Independent Orange Order during his Lodge “which ‘cordially endorsed his public utterances on the Irish question’” (Gray, 1985: 196). According to Gray, this “suggests that even at this late stage Crawford retained considerable support, although he and those who agreed with him were now cast out or marched of their own accord into the political wilderness” (Gray, 1985: 196).

22 It should also be noted that there was a significant urban-rural divide in the Independent Orange Order. Tenant farmers in rural Antrim and working class men in Belfast joined for different reasons. As Morgan writes: “The Independent Orange Order was really two movements in one. Its urban and rural bases were described, as late as the 1914 Twelfth, by the chairman that year: there were ‘two classes represented there that day—those who, whilst staunchly Protestant had never been able to agree with Orangeism of the type they had been accustomed to, and those of Liberal stock who took exception to the old Institution becoming the tool of landlord and capitalist’” (1991: 47).
campaign, lost the election. MacDonald linked his loss to agreeing to answer a questionnaire from the Imperial Protestant Federation.23

So as was the case with the United Irishmen, there were many tensions within and between the theologies of evangelicals in the Independent Orange Order and the philosophies and ideologies of their temporary allies amongst the labour leaders. Each had a different vision of what could be accomplished by a triumph of labour. Sloan wanted a Protestant democracy that would recognise the needs of the labourers and keep the Catholic enemy at bay. Crawford, while starting from a position similar to Sloan’s, became a political liberal who challenged the basis of that Protestant democracy. Connolly and Larkin wanted a socialist Irish nation. The dominant voices of Belfast labour wanted socialism within a progressive Protestant empire. A smaller number within Belfast labour conceived of a socialism—within empire—in which the Catholicism of Catholics would not necessarily keep them from being democratic citizens. Elements within evangelicalism that might have contributed to a transcending of sectarianism were not held widely enough to be sustained in the face of the failure of the 1907 strike, and its descent into sectarian riots. Moreover, just as the United Irishmen could flourish because the Catholic Church no longer seemed a threat, labour could flourish because home rule did not seem a threat. As Patterson has pointed out, circumstances like widespread unemployment and traditional unionism’s need to regroup in the face of the Independent Orange Order challenge also favoured the labour cause.24

Gray (1985: 13-14) quotes an anonymous socialist commentator who described the deplorable conditions that seemed to demand labour organization:

Great bumptious Belfast, with its slum schools, its rotten municipal system, its ludicrous pride, its bigotry and intolerance, and its hordes of little ragged starved workers. Belfast with its palatial town hall, its tinsel virtues, and its army of little white slaves, and its big poorhouses, and lunatic asylums and prisons.

Finally, however, the home rule crisis that would move Protestant Ulster to run guns and stage a massive demonstration to resurrect the covenant—in the form of the Solemn League and Covenant of 1912—seemed to put to rest indefinitely not only the labour movement, but the politics of evangelical dissent.

23 Besides Crawford, another prominent example of an evangelical who changed his mind is Richard Braithwaite, described by Gray as “the Belfast Protestant Association stalwart and the man who secured William Walker’s sectarian answers to the BPA questionnaire in the North Belfast by-election of 1905” (Gray, 1985: 213). Braithwaite would later join Connolly at a meeting in Belfast in April 1914 to protest against excluding Ulster from home rule. He also joined the Irish Citizen Army under the name Brannigan (Gray, 1985: 213-214).

24 Traditional unionism responded to the Independent Orange Order challenge by, amongst other things, creating the Ulster Unionist Council as a forum where “local representatives of local Unionist associations and the Orange Order sat with the MPs and peers to determine the main lines of Unionist policy” (Patterson, 1980: 65). Moreover, the Liberals were returned in 1906, allaying fears of the Conservative party’s Romanising tendencies.
THE PEACE MOVEMENT AND THE POLITICS OF DISSENT

The proliferation of Peace and Conflict Reconciliation Organizations (PCROs), both secular and religious, in the last 35 years or so, has been interpreted as yet another example of Protestants and Catholics working together to transcend sectarianism. There is little agreement about how vital the PCROs have been for the peace process when compared to elite level negotiations and/or international pressure. But some researchers and journalists have credited PCROs for the role they have played, particularly in the run-up to the elite level negotiations that eventually produced the Belfast Agreement, and in the “yes” campaign (Guelke, 2002). In these accounts the peace movement is juxtaposed to the ineffectiveness of elected officials in solving problems; and the activities of the peace movement—from public marches and demonstrations to sending Catholic and Protestant children away together on summer holidays—are held up as examples of what can be accomplished when power is in the hands of the people. Participants in the peace movement, it is said, are developing a philosophy of reconciliation that is based on inclusiveness, respect for difference, and dialogic democracy.

The Christian contribution to the peace movement is not necessarily Calvinist or evangelical; indeed, the dominant ethos of Christian participants in the peace movement may be ecumenical. The Christian contribution has often been associated with the Corrymeela community and other such residential organizations (Wells, 1999). While evangelicals have supported or been involved in these communities, one of the most prominent examples of evangelical involvement in the peace movement is the political action group Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland (ECONI).25 This group is not cross-community, as such, in that its membership does not include Catholics. But like the Independent Orange Order in its early association with the labour movement, it has associated with other groups in the peace movement—including Catholic and ecumenical groups. It practices a variety of dissent that is particularly important because it challenges specific aspects of traditional evangelical and Calvinist theologies and, like the New Light Presbyterian ministers, develops alternative models of involvement in society and politics (Ganiel, 2002; Leichty and Clegg, 2001). Moreover, ECONI fits snugly in the peace movement culture, incorporating its emphasis on the importance of dialogue and toleration of difference. However, like other movements that have practised the politics of dissent, ECONI is not unified. Significantly, like the New Lights and early Independent Orange Order leaders, ECONI does not have an agreed position on Catholicism. It is not clear if the tensions within ECONI over Catholicism will hinder its efforts in a significant way.

ECONI has attempted to dissent from its evangelical tradition in its God, Land and Nation project, which critiques the way Calvinists and evangelicals in Northern Ireland have applied the concept of the covenant. Reflecting on the well-known

25 Other significant groups that collaborate with ECONI are the Evangelical Alliance, Zero28 and Christian Action Research and Education (CARE).
phrase, “For God and Ulster,” ECONI concluded that some evangelicals in Northern Ireland had put loyalty to Ulster and the UK ahead of loyalty to the kingdom of God. ECONI stated explicitly that Ulster does not have a special relationship with God, and criticised the way evangelicals have interpreted how God does justice and keeps covenants.

ECONI also has developed a position on the relationship between church and state that differs radically from traditional Calvinist models. It has been heavily influenced by Anabaptist and postliberal theology, echoing the thought of Mennonite John Howard Yoder and Methodist Stanley Hauerwas (a self-described “high-church Mennonite”). The Anabaptist approach to church and state recognizes the value of the state for providing order, but denies that the church has an interest in promoting partnered or covenantal relationships with the state. This position has parallels to the one articulated by Dickson two centuries before in his sermons on Scripture politics. Furthermore, the church’s relationship with the state and with other groups in civil society involves serving as a model, alternative socio-political order and offering an invitation to others to join it. As a model, the church is meant to be an example of forgiveness, love, servanthood, and pacifism, amongst other things. Its function is as the conscience and servant of society, voluntarily accepting powerlessness and suffering. Thus ECONI’s Forgiveness Project sought to highlight the importance and implications of forgiveness in various Christian traditions, and asked how forgiveness might be applied to the situation in Northern Ireland. The overall impression of ECONI training programmes and literature is that its politics of dissent is a theology of reconciliation.

ECONI’s theology must also be set in the context of the peace movement and its emphasis on forming groups that emphasize dialogue, relationship and reconciliation. PCROs began being formed in the mid-1960s; many more were formed after the outbreak of the Troubles. Cochrane and Dunn (2002) isolate some common characteristics of PCROs. For instance, they say that the peace movement ideology is “based firmly on a respect for difference and the need for compromise and forgiveness,” and usually incorporates a “broad left” political perspective” (2002: 34). Dixon (1997) implies that the formation and promotion of such groups is part of the logic of a “bottom-up” or “civil society approach.” This approach seeks to extend democracy to the people, favours greater cross-community contact, and assumes that the people are more moderate than their political leaders (1997: 3).

Historically, Anabaptists have argued that any sort of close partnership between churches and the state—be it medieval Christendom, the commonwealths of Cromwell’s England or Puritan Massachusetts, or the close ties between the unofficial Protestant establishment and the government of the USA—compromises the church’s ability to play its proper socio-political role. Rather a strict separation of church and state is required. Thus it was no accident that a man with the theological beliefs of Roger Williams was driven from Puritan Massachusetts to Providence, Rhode Island, where he founded the first Baptist church in America. While the separation of church and state is embraced in today’s Western democracies, this was a novel idea at the time.

Wilson and Tyrell (1995: 230) also highlight some common characteristics of people who participate in PCROs: many have had experience living and working outside of Northern Ireland, and have worked in trade
However, it is not clear how strong this commitment to democratic dialogue may be; and it seems to represent a bit of a fudge on the part of participants in the peace movement. Perhaps they know they cannot agree on certain issues (the cause of the conflict or their preference for membership in a particular political jurisdiction), so they politely agree to leave the hard questions aside. As such, the peace movement risks collapsing under internal contradictions or fading into obscurity. In the first scenario, a series of events could conspire to create circumstances in which it becomes clear that just talking about differences and problems cannot solve them. Then, participants might abandon their commitment to this process and realign in the traditional Catholic and Protestant oppositional blocs. However, the defining characteristic of the peace movement is its lack of commitment to particular philosophies in favour of a dialogic, democratic process. Participants in the peace movement know they disagree, and they are searching for ways to manage their disagreements. It is not clear that the United Irish and labour movements so frankly acknowledged their disagreements, or sought to manage them the way the peace movement does. In the second scenario, agreeing to disagree could prove paralysing to the peace movement—it could become all talk and no action. Moreover, there is evidence that after the Belfast Agreement, some groups have become less active, thinking they have played their part (Guelke, 2002). These factors could doom the peace movement to irrelevance, even as it begins to emerge that Protestants and Catholics at the grassroots have been drifting further apart since the agreement (Hayes and MacAllister, 1999). This drifting apart is a scenario that might demand more, not less, local level reconciliation efforts.

As for ECONI, it also acknowledges its disagreements—particularly about Catholicism. As Leichty and Clegg (2001: 182-183) explain:

It should be noted that ECONI has fought the sectarian implications of Protestant anti-Catholicism without demanding from evangelicals a single stance toward the Catholic Church. What might be called ECONI's left wing accepts the Catholic Church as a Christian church which one disagrees with in various ways while also accepting that one can learn from Catholicism. The right wing does not differ doctrinally from traditional anti-Catholicism: the Catholic Church is so radically flawed that cannot be considered Christian, and Catholics who become Christians should leave it. On a kind of middle ground, some evangelicals do not accept the Catholic Church as Christian, but readily accept individual Catholics as Christians. What unites the three stances within ECONI is a firm commitment that, however one evaluates Catholicism, this must not lead to destructive patterns of relating. At very least, positive, union movements, international companies, overseas development agencies, non-governmental organizations and ecumenical initiatives.

Like the New Lights, it might be said that it is difficult to isolate ECONI “positions.” ECONI members and staff come from a variety of denominations and disagree on more than just Catholicism. For instance, it is not clear how completely all members of ECONI are committed to the implications of the Anabaptist model. And like the New Lights, ECONI have a significant number of critics from within traditional evangelicalism. These critics challenge their reworkings of theology and politics as well as their “compromising” involvement with Catholics and ecumenists.
respectful relationships in civil society and civil rights and fair treatment for all are a necessary standard, regardless of one’s stance toward the Catholic Church.

This agreement to disagree, then, might make ECONI less likely to divide round the Catholic question. Moreover, when past dissenting movements divided over Catholicism, it was often because one faction had a vision of a Protestant democracy in which Catholicism would be eliminated, or in which Catholics would become like Protestants. ECONI’s Anabaptist model expressly rejects a Protestant democracy, or even a government informed by Protestant principles. This, in effect, could eliminate questions about whether Catholics could be good democratic citizens; it even could eliminate the significance of the question of Northern Ireland being part of the UK or the Republic. For the Anabaptist, political affiliation doesn’t matter—the church is the important political unit, not the state. Indeed, the Anabaptist church even relishes being a minority within the state, all the better to serve as the conscience and servant of others.

Another factor that has contributed to dissenters dividing over Catholicism is what seemed in the various circumstances to be an increased Catholic threat. Wright (1996: 520), in his analysis of times when Liberal politics came close to transcending sectarianism, argues that these movements were only possible when the weakness of Catholicism opened up enough “political space” for cooperation to occur.29 According to this logic, we should look at the present circumstances to try and ascertain if Catholicism is “weak.” Then, the increased secularisation in the Republic of Ireland and the disillusionment caused by clerical abuse scandals might seem “favourable” conditions. But for the transcending of sectarianism to rely on the weakness of one partner seems a bleak, even perverse, conclusion. As Wright realized, this sort of transcendence could only be temporary unless non-power based relationships could be established between Catholics and Protestants. And part of establishing non-power based relationships is accepting that the other is not a threat—no matter how “strong” the other may seem to be. As Wright (1996: 522) concludes:

…there is never any secure foundation upon which to build a trans-sectarian alliance, except what can be built in actual situations by Catholics and Protestants creating relationships with each other. This is what making peace in the middle of a national conflict entails.

It follows that the ability of ECONI’s politics of dissent to be influential depends on its ability to convince other evangelicals to dissent from their tradition. It is not certain how widely ECONI’s theological and political positions are held and accepted by Northern Irish evangelicals (Mitchell and Ganiel, 2002; Ganiel, 2002b; Jordan, 2001; Mitchell, 2001). There are traditional evangelical action groups30 advocating

29 As Wright concludes: “Only so long as Catholics were in a position of extreme weakness were Liberal Protestants (including United Irishmen) able to define the way forward, and to expect that in future Catholics would trust their leadership. But the moment the Catholics had any power, this space shrank”.

30 These include the Caleb Foundation, the Evangelical Protestant Society, Take Heed Ministries, the Society for the Promotion of Reformation in Government and Paisley’s European Institute for Protestant Studies.
the familiar interpretations of the relationship between church and state, and issuing dire predictions about the threat of Catholicism. Although many of these groups lack highly-developed and staffed central bodies (like ECONI has), their messages are spread through web-sites, pamphlets and tracts informally distributed at evangelical churches and gospel halls. Moreover, traditional evangelicals perhaps do not need to organize in groups like ECONI to get their message across—after all, Ian Paisley and the Democratic Unionist Party can bring their concerns to Stormont and Westminster, affirming the belief that Ulster must return to Protestant principles if it is to be delivered from the present darkness.

Finally, it seems that ECONI may be more clearly a part of the peace movement—united as it is by a commitment to dialogue and managing difference—than it is to traditional evangelicalism. The ability of its politics of dissent to ally with the peace movement to transcend sectarianism in a way that those of the New Lights and the Crawfordites could not depends on several factors. First, the wider peace movement must affirm its commitment to reconciling Catholic and Protestant, while simultaneously working to make sure it does not become irrelevant. This may mean challenging some of the consociational features of the Belfast Agreement, which institutionalise sectarian differences; and taking further halting steps toward cross-community contact at the grassroots. Furthermore, ECONI must articulate its politics of dissent in such a way that evangelicals no longer feel threatened by Catholicism. This must include building relationships with Catholics that would not be threatened by changing circumstances.

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