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NORTHERN IRELAND

By D. B. Knox

THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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The troubles in Northern Ireland have been very much in the papers recently. Our Sydney newspapers seem to think it is a religious quarrel and they speak about protestant and Roman Catholic extremists, as though religious controversy was the problem. But there is no religious discrimination in Northern Ireland. All citizens are treated exactly the same by the law. The problem, however, is a political one. I cannot do better than read you a letter written by a Dutch woman living in Dublin for many years but who has recently gone as a missionary to East Africa. Her name is Miss Jenny Van der Klis. She was Secretary of the Evangelical Protestant Society in Ireland and her letter is published in the Dutch magazine "On the Damascus Road". She writes:

" Ulster has been much in the news during these past months. Explosions, shootings, petrol bombs and riots have been mentioned frequently in connection with the struggle in the Province. T.V., radio and newspapers told of the confrontations between Roman Catholics and Protestants with the inevitable and terrible results. Public opinion in Britain and around the world favoured either one side or the other. To most it looked a very confusing issue.

What is happening in Northern Ireland today? Is it true that Roman Catholics living in the Province are the underdogs of society and the Protestants the supreme rulers? Is it right to say that the two sections of the community are so violently opposed that they cannot live together peacefully. Is this bitter strife a religious war; a fight of Protestants for Protestantism and of Roman Catholics for Roman Catholicism?

The issues at stake are not new. A look into the history of Northern Ireland will soon prove this.

In 1921, after a long struggle, predominantly Roman Catholic Southern Ireland entered into a Treaty with Great Britain and became a Dominion. Northern Ireland, predominantly Protestant and with inhabitants of Scots descent, was given a period within which to choose whether to remain linked with Great Britain or join the newly created Irish Free State. Provision was made for a Commission to be set up to determine the boundary between North and South "in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as may be compatible with economic and geographic conditions".

The Northern part of Ireland did choose and became an integral part of the United Kingdom with its own Constitution and Parliament. The Roman Catholic Southern neighbours deeply regretted this and opposed the new settlement bitterly. Fierce fighting broke out. An organisation called the Irish Republican Army (now illegal but still very active) fought the men of Ulster hard. There were heavy casualties on both sides and many valiant men lost their lives in these days. Southern Ireland, looking upon the North as part of "her country" has refused to recognize the Constitution of Northern Ireland. The Province is always referred to as "the six counties" and the South, realizing the significance of Ulster for her economy, has quietly pledged herself to regain Ulster one day.

Northern Ireland has made great progress during the past fifty years of her existence. Industry and commerce have been stimulated and since the end of the last World War, the economic structure has been strengthened by the development of many new forms of manufacture, giving employment to thousands of workers. Agriculture has been placed on a firm basis, with assured markets and guaranteed prices for the farmers. Social services have been expanded and maintained in parity with those existing in

other parts of the United Kingdom. A comprehensive health and hospital service is in operation and the education system has been completely overhauled and modernised.

In contrast, Southern Ireland has not been so prosperous. The Roman Catholic Church is still very much at the head of the State and as in all Roman Catholic countries, the people have been kept poor. Wages are lower and social benefits less advantageous. With such conditions prevailing, it is little wonder that many inhabitants of Eire have moved to the North. In Londonderry alone, thousands have come from the Republic of Ireland during recent years. They enjoy the same benefits as any other citizen of the Province and over the whole, have been quite content to live in a country of which they do not recognize the Constitution. Ever since the formation of Northern Ireland, attempts have been made by the Irish Republican Army to disturb the peace of the country and make it ripe for the take-over by the South. These attempts have failed and were quickly crushed by an excellent police force and a voluntary force, The Ulster Constabulary. But with the increase of the Roman Catholic population in Northern Ireland, other tactics were adopted. Ardent Republicans from the South, socialists and communists have infiltrated the country. They have taken advantage of the situation and made the Roman Catholic minority their 'missionfield'. They stirred up discontent and agitated strife. They told the people that they should demand better housing conditions, higher wages and call for civil rights.

At first, few people listened, but the agitators kept pouring in lies and sowing discontent until people began to believe them. Housing, employment and voting were the three main issues. The press took up the story and made it almost appear as if

Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland had nowhere to live, had no jobs and no vote. Nothing is further from the truth. More than 100,000 houses have been built in Northern Ireland by public authorities since World War II.

Overall, some 52% of this 'public' housing has gone to Roman Catholics, who comprise about one third of the population. The vast majority of employers in Ulster are Protestant. With few exceptions, they employ Roman Catholics, while the reverse, especially in the city of Londonderry, is not so. As far as voting is concerned: every citizen over the age of 18, whether Catholic or Protestant, is entitled to vote for the Westminster and Stormont elections. It is only in local government that the traditional British policy was followed. Ratepayers only voted in Council elections, but irrespective of religion, class or creed. No, the issue is not civil rights, but what the agitators are aiming at is the overthrow of Ulster. One voice for civil rights is Miss Bernadette Devlin, Westminster M.P. for Mid-Ulster. She stated openly in Sweden recently that she is fighting for a united socialist Ireland.

The issue which has taken people to the streets is not religious, but political. It is a clash between the loyal Ulsterman, who loves his country and is proud to be British, and the nationalist Irishman who wants to see Ulster become part of the Eire Republic. But the battle is not fought in the name of religion. There are many Roman Catholics and Protestants who deplore the recent happenings and oppose violence. Only the extreme elements on both sides took matters to the street with disastrous results.

It is to be much regretted that the Roman Catholic Hierarchy in Northern Ireland, although not condoning the violence, has never spoken out against

the blatant lies about the country and the government. No one knows better than the Church of Rome that Roman Catholics in the North are much better cared for than those in the South and that all who have come to Northern Ireland to live would never want to return to the Republic. Yet the Church remains silent. The reason is obvious.

Ulster's problems are not unique. Washington, Trinidad, Paris, Japan, they all reflect the same story. Restlessness and discontent, violence and disorder are common words in our age.

The answer to Ulster's dilemma as indeed to the problems across the world will be found nowhere else but in God alone, Who in Christ Jesus offers peace and true satisfaction to the human heart".

Well, that was Miss van der Klis' letter which sets out the position very truly, as seen by someone of another country living on the spot.

We in Australia must pray that a just settlement should speedily be reached. Yet we must be realists. My own view is that Mr. Paisley, who is sometimes described as a protestant extremist is better described as a protestant realist. The situation is a very difficult one and can only be settled by those on the spot. We in Australia must pray earnestly for those both Protestant and Roman Catholics who are seeking a just and peaceful settlement.

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