



Ethical and Shared Remembering: Commemoration in a New Context

Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation The Shared Values of Religio-Political Documents



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in partnership with
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Holywell Trust



The Junction

Ethical and Shared Remembering Project



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Introduction

The Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation are, for many, sacred texts. They represent the respective foundational documents of two parts of Ireland. They have in the minds of many a constitutional status. During the decade of commemoration these 'sacred' texts will be invoked, repeated, and distributed as well as celebrated. Another generation will become familiar with Covenant and Proclamation. Much of this will be out of context and uncritical. The chances are that any critical appraisal will be branded betrayal and even heretical, if the religious overtones are recognised. Yet no literary text is beyond critical analysis, not even the Bible, which is alluded to in both Covenant and Proclamation.

There are still framed copies of the Proclamation on house or office walls, put there by those for whom this document has special and ultimate significance for their identity. There may be less copies of the Covenant hanging around, but it has recently been invoked by a leading Unionist politician. It was claimed that the Covenant ensured partition and that it was the basis of the Northern Ireland that emerged and remains. That is a very large historical claim, and whether or not it can carry such weight of interpretation may be open to question. Yet it is believed, and the politician was appealing to a Unionist constituency for continuing support for his party, the DUP, and another century of Unionism. Both of these documents carry great historical weight. Can they sustain the weight they are being asked to carry?

Many years ago I heard the story of a Presbyterian minister in Donegal, who had signed the Ulster Covenant and had been part of a Donegal Protestant deputation who came to Belfast to meet Edward Carson. They were deeply worried and concerned that Donegal was going to be excluded from the new political entity that would emerge from the partition of Ireland. They saw their future with the North or what would become Northern Ireland. They were shattered, even traumatised, when Carson told them *'Sorry, you are on your own'*. The Presbyterian minister returned to his home in Donegal, ripped his copy of the Ulster Covenant in two and framed it. It hung above the fireplace, a framed, ripped up copy of the Covenant, for the rest of his life, his loyalty betrayed. One has also heard an older generation

from Cavan say the same thing. The Northern unionists while claiming to be Ulster unionists betrayed them. Northern nationalists felt the same about Dublin, having ended up on the wrong side of the border, in what they saw as a hostile state, and the feeling that in the end Dublin didn't really care. So much for the Proclamation!

There may be those for whom the Covenant and Proclamation mean little a century on, or are just historical documents that represent the betrayed promises of history. The implicit or explicit social vision remains unfulfilled. It might surprise some that both documents contain parallel language and parallel themes.

The Ulster Solemn League and Covenant had its roots in earlier Scottish Covenants, all of which were religio-political documents. The Ulster Covenant was drafted by Thomas Sinclair, a Belfast Presbyterian, and like the Scottish documents, had its deepest roots in the earlier Jewish or Biblical covenant. The Ulster Covenant is rooted in the Presbyterian Reformed tradition, covenant being central to the theology of John Calvin and the Presbyterian model of the Reformation.

The Proclamation was read in public to bring into being the Irish Republic. Ever since Wolf Tone, that had been the goal of militant nationalism. The architects of the document were probably Padraic Pearse assisted by Thomas MacDonagh. Like the Covenant, the Proclamation saw itself rooted in the past, both documents appealing to *'our fathers'* or *'dead generations'*. Each document had a sense of history, or perhaps on closer examination, an interpretation of history, history read from a particular standpoint. But then the trouble with history is that it is mostly interpretation, and always provisional at that.

1. Covenant Theology and Politics

The Covenant is a religio-political document, in it theology and politics are inseparable. This was 1912 and it would have been impossible in any part of Ireland and Europe to separate religion and politics. That dualism or dichotomy became more obvious after the First World War and was a part of life after the Second World War. Two World wars ensured the collapse of Christendom and the marginalisation of Christian churches. Churches complain about it now as secularism. But in 1912 churches were closely connected to political power and in Ireland the Protestant churches were unionism at prayer and the Catholic church, nationalism at prayer. All were totally involved for or against Home Rule.

1.1. The Invocation of God

There is therefore no surprise that God is invoked in Covenant and Proclamation. One is rooted in Presbyterian theology and the other in Catholic theology. Unionists already had the slogan, '*For God and Ulster*' and had no doubt that God was on their side. In the language of the Covenant, they had '*sure confidence that God will defend the right*' to use whatever means necessary to defeat Home Rule. Earlier in the text Home Rule was believed to be '*perilous to the unity of the Empire*'. The middle class business people of Belfast, who were the Presbyterians behind the Covenant, were very conscious of their place in the British Empire. The north-east was the industrial part of Ireland, thanks to its connections with the imperial ports of Glasgow and Liverpool and it not only had economic prosperity, but a pride and sense of belonging to the greatest Empire ever. Theology reflected this and was imperial theology. The British motto was and remains, '*For God and the Empire*'. A Methodist Church editorial during the 2nd Home Rule Bill declared that the '*Crown rights of the Empire and the Crown Rights of Christ are the same*'. On 28th September, 1912 when the Covenant was signed, religious services were held at which clergy preached very politicised sermons and free Bibles were distributed. Some Orange Banners still show Queen Victoria seated on her throne with an African chief bowing before her and receiving a Bible. Under this imperial image is the slogan in relation to the Bible, 'The secret of England's greatness'.

Imperial or empire theology had God on its side and believed that God was totally identified with its cause. Identifying itself with the Bible story of Israel as chosen people and believing itself to be God's Israel or chosen people in the present,

there was a sure confidence in the divine right of empire. God therefore in imperial theology was a God of might, ultimate power, domination and conquest, and sure to defend the rights of the empire and its Ulster Protestant citizens. Might is right and God is on the side of might. This was the imperial theology that underpinned the Covenant. But ultimately was this the theology of an insecure people, a God invented in an imperial image as an attempt to justify and prop up the imperial insecurities and paranoia, characteristic of every empire in human history? Was the imperial God an ethical God? If, as Christian faith believes or chooses to believe that Jesus is the clearest vision we have of God, was the imperial God and the God of the Covenant the God of Jesus? I would like to come back to that when we come to the God of the Proclamation.

1.2 The Militarisation of Politics

Those who signed the Covenant pledged '*to use all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule parliament in Ireland*'. The role of the churches is significant, since among the first seven signatories were the leaders of the three larger Protestant churches. Everyone knew since at least 1910 that '*all means necessary*' meant guns. Plans were in place from 1910, Frederick Crawford having negotiated with Berlin and a budget in place for the arming of Ulster Protestants. Even in 1910 this was not a new idea. Protestants and arms were being talked about in 1893 when the second Home Rule Bill was introduced. The Covenant, therefore, was about re-introducing the gun into Irish politics. This was about the militarization of politics, the use of violence to deal with political questions, and Protestant church leaders signed up to it.

The Irish historian, Joseph Lee, in the most recent edition of a book on Irish history (The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1884-1918, 2008 Edition), revised his opinion from the first edition. Then, he had suggested that the unionists had introduced the gun into Irish politics, at least in the 20th century. He modified that view in the later edition suggesting that the Unionists took the gun in politics to another dimension, the British having introduced the gun into politics here. Unionists were doing nothing new, the gun was already here, now the gun was being introduced into civil resistance. That may make what the Unionists did even more dangerous. It militarised politics as political resistance. Not surprisingly, after the Ulster Volunteer



Force (UVF) was formed and armed, the Irish Volunteers were formed and also armed. Irish nationalists saw what the unionists did and that they got away with it. That is why Eoin McNeill, when asked what inspired and shaped the 1916 Rising, replied 'Carson'.

It is also significant that the militarization of politics by both sides was sourced by Germany. Not only did the men of 1916 obtain illegal German arms, and negotiate for German help with the Rising, including the possibility of a German monarch in Ireland, the Unionists in the context of growing tension and conflict between Kaiser Bill and George V, bought their illegal arms from 'enemy' sources. In the same year that the war began the German arms and ammunition were landed in Larne, Carrickfergus and Donaghadee. History is always full of bizarre twists and ironies.

1.3 Equality of Citizenship

As well as joining together God, violence and guns, the Covenant claimed equal citizenship in the United Kingdom. Now the United Kingdom had only been around since 1801 when the King signed the Act of Union into law. The Orangemen of Ulster had been strongly opposed to the Act on the basis of fear that it would lead to Catholic Emancipation. The Orangemen may well have read the Act correctly, it was intended to lead to the emancipation of Catholics in Ireland, and that would destroy Protestant ascendancy and power. Catholics were legally emancipated in 1829 and as the 19th century progressed, the Church of Ireland was disestablished in 1869 and the first Home Rule Bill was introduced by Gladstone, the British Prime Minister in 1886. Militant Protestants were now Unionists and pro-union. Belfast had grown in the 19th century into an industrial city with its economic success and prosperity in the hands of Unionists, especially Presbyterians. Not surprisingly the first and perhaps primary fear expressed in the opening line of the Covenant was the disastrous consequences of Home Rule to 'the material wellbeing of Ulster'. Home Rule would mean economic loss but for whom? Remember in 1912 we are in the world of upstairs, downstairs, the wealthy upstairs and the underclass as servants and maids downstairs. This was the world of deep class divisions where the majority were underclass. In 1907 Belfast had its strikes and lockouts which affected dock workers, carters and coalmen. Jim Larkin's efforts in Belfast for better wages and workers protection failed and although the carters and coalmen did have a wage increase, all workers had to go back on employer's terms. In 1912

it was the employers as economically successful, the minority who feared for their material wellbeing if Home Rule became a reality. It was the wealthy elite who wrote the Covenant, which no doubt many of the carters and coalmen signed. It was the same underclass who went off two years later to fight for King and Empire and be slaughtered in the senseless killing of the Somme and other battles.

So when the Covenant claimed equal citizenship, it wasn't really about social and economic equality, it was the rich and poor in their respective places, an arrangement which Derry's most famous hymn writer, Mrs Cecil Francis Alexander believed, as the privileged all believed at the time, was ordained by God.

Equal citizenship was not for Catholics either. The issue was not equality but superiority, which in 1912 was religious, social and cultural. Protestants were a superior breed and no doubt God had a hand in that as well!

1.4 Civil and Religious Freedom

Home Rule, it was feared, would be 'subversive of our civil and religious freedom'. Were these fears justified? The slogan of the time was 'Home Rule is Rome Rule' and the fear was that there would be no civil and religious freedom under Rome Rule. Isabella Tod, the Liberal Unionist Presbyterian activist at the end of the 19th century, for the voting, welfare and educational rights of women, saw Catholicism in terms of social consequences. She never made any sectarian attack on Catholic beliefs, but saw a close connection in Ireland between Catholicism, ignorance and poverty. It was this social reality of dominant Catholicism that she believed would be detrimental to women's rights in Ireland. Partly on this basis, she opposed Home Rule. The continuation of Catholicism, ignorance and poverty was what she feared in the slogan, 'Home Rule is Rome Rule'.

When Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, achieved Catholic Emancipation in 1829 through non-violent, constitutional means, he also put in motion the democratization of the Catholics of Ireland. The rest of the 19th century saw an increasingly confident Irish Catholicism. Cardinal Paul Cullen led the restructuring of the Irish Catholic Church, introduced continental devotional practices and oversaw a massive church building project. By the end of the 19th century Irish Catholicism was so confident that there were those saying publically that now was the time for a big campaign



to bring the Protestants of Ireland back to the true church. With the disestablishment of the Church of Ireland and the introduction of Home Rule Bills at the end of the 19th century, Irish Protestants were becoming less confident and more insecure. When the Vatican issued the *Ne Temere* Decree in 1907, which made a mixed marriage not conducted by a parish priest void, and that children of such a marriage must be brought up as Catholics, Ulster Protestants were outraged. The reaction may have been disproportionate but a nervous and threatened community was now certain that Home Rule was Rome Rule and there would be no place in a Catholic dominated Ireland for Protestants and civil and religious freedom. Protestants therefore did see grounds for resisting Home Rule, though the militarization of politics was not an ethical way to deal with it. The stress on civil and religious freedom in the Covenant was not inclusive. It was an exclusive civil and religious freedom in the United Kingdom, which in the imperial thinking of the time was a Protestant United Kingdom. It was not civil and religious freedom for Catholics. By 1916 when the same language appeared in the Proclamation, Protestants did not see a place for themselves in a Catholic dominated Ireland, ruled by an imperialistic Church of Rome. But what did the Judeo-Christian biblical covenant really stand for and did the Ulster Covenant reflect any of it?

Though the Protestant churches approved of the Covenant text, the Presbyterians insisted that it represented only an obligation for the current crisis. No one could read the future when other responses might be required. The Covenant was, therefore, not binding for all time and circumstances. Historic and iconic it may be, but it was a time restricted pledge, the present crisis, 1912. It was unlikely that the authors of the later Proclamation realised this, or even how relevant it would have been to them. It is also unclear if the signatories to the Covenant realised its limited application. Later, the Covenant was being read in different ways, the unionist leader in the border counties, Lord Farnham, complained bitterly in a letter to the Belfast unionists, in relation to a six county partition, that border county unionists were being betrayed and deserted and that the Covenant was being violated. A response to Farnham did argue that the Covenant was not binding for all time.

God, guns and violence, as well as militarised politics of the Covenant lived on to the end of the 20th century. Once the genie was out of the bottle it was, and remains, difficult to return it. The proposed military style commemorations for 2012 bear this out.

It could be argued that not only was Ireland partitioned in 1921 but that the unionist activity had also partitioned the historic province of Ulster. Nevertheless, a century on from 1912 and 1916, we are in a completely different world.

2. Proclamation Theology and Politics

If the Ulster Covenant was a very Presbyterian document, the Easter Proclamation was a very Catholic document. This was an age when institutional religion had high profile and there was no dichotomy between faith and politics. Even faith and violence were closely linked in both documents. When we reflect on these historic documents in context, we quickly realise that the world of 2012 and 2016 are poles apart from 1912 and 1916. That in itself calls for a critical and ethical approach.

2.1 The Invocation of God

The Proclamation began, *'In the name of God and of the dead generations'*, and the final paragraph began by placing the 'cause of the Irish Republic under the protection of the most High God'. In a sense the Proclamation was a somewhat more religious document than the Covenant. God had a little more profile in the Proclamation. God's blessing was invoked on arms and violence was in the name of God. God was on the side of militant, violent nationalism. In the covenant God would defend the Ulster Protestant Unionists and in the Proclamation God would liberate the Irish Catholic Nationalists. And in both cases God and guns were combined. It all sounds very confusing for God! How did they know God was their defender and liberator? How did they know God was with their respective causes and guns? Can anybody be so sure of God?

Jurgen Moltmann, a German theologian has asked 'who is the God in the German Constitution?' A few years ago there was strong religious reaction to the proposed European Constitution which had no reference to God. But in a political context and in national constitutions, who is the God who is named or invoked? When De Valera produced his 1937 Irish Constitution, he built God as Trinity into the preamble, and in a separate line invoked Christ. But who is the God of the Irish Constitution, and as for Christ, he looks suspiciously like a 1916 hero.



Christians claim that for them Jesus is the supreme clue to God. The God Jesus disclosed was non-violent, all-inclusive and all-embracing, all compassionate, love and justice, and a vulnerable, suffering God of peace. But the God of the Covenant and Proclamation bore no resemblance to the God disclosed by Jesus. It may be that in constitutions and historic national documents, the authors invent God, make God up and create a God in an imperialistic or nationalistic image. If this is true then the men of 1912 and 1916 were inventing God and deluding themselves. Could it be that the Covenant and Proclamation were based on delusions?

Then again, why the need to claim some higher authority for violence and guns? Perhaps it's a way of trying to make violence, killing and militarized politics right. But this God has no moral character and is ethically deficient.

The Proclamation ended asserting the '*readiness of its children to sacrifice themselves for the common good*'. This is another religious allusion, and here we see the language and ideology of Pearse, the main author of this document. Pearse was big into the idea of blood sacrifice and redemptive violence. '*Without the shedding of blood, there is no redemption of Ireland*' he said, quoting a verse from the Christian Bible's Letter to the Hebrews, with the addition of the word Ireland. Pearse believed that the blood shed for Ireland and in the Great War was a cleansing and sanctifying thing. Pearse ensured that the mystique of the gun and violence were well established by 1916. He was the High Priest of the Rising and provided its spiritual and mystical dimension.

Pearse's ideas were based on particular sacrificial interpretations of Jesus' death, expressed in Catholic Eucharistic Theology and differently nuanced, but essentially the same in Protestant Atonement Theology. Pearse merged the Christ sacrifice with the story of the sacrificial hero, Cuchulainn. Indeed Cuchulainn was a pre-Christian Christ figure, a blood sacrifice for a cause. Serious and critical questions are now being asked of this medieval Christian theology of blood sacrifice, mainly on ethical grounds since it portrays God as a violent God, which makes for joining God and guns easy and divine authorisation of violence inevitable. A century on, the God of the Covenant and Proclamation may have no credibility. Perhaps the whole thing really was delusional.

2.2 Militarised Politics

Violence and guns also dominated the Proclamation text. The '*full confidence of victory*' was not a victory for moral force or moral persuasion. It was the victory of militarism and violence. By 1916 neither the Unionists nor Nationalists knew of any other way to resolve conflict except through violence, guns and killing. All sides were possessed by blood lust. The thread of violence ran from 1912 through to 1922, and it carried into the latter half of the 20th century with tragic and destructive consequences. During this decade of commemoration we cannot avoid a radical and critical reappraisal of the role of violence in dealing with political conflict. The acknowledgement of brutal sectarian violence needs to be part of our commemoration, but so too is the commitment to take the gun forever out of Irish politics and that never again will we resort to violence and militarism to deal with differences.

2.3 A Fictionalised Vision of Nationalism

The Proclamation asserted a tradition of nationhood from dead generations and that every generation had asserted the right to national freedom and sovereignty, six times in the past 300 years in arms. But Nationalism was not around since primeval times, or from the Garden of Eden. Nationalism was only a 19th century idea, late 18th century with roots in the French Revolution. That there was some tradition of nationhood going back centuries had no basis in any historical fact. From earliest Celtic times, Ireland had a decentralised political structure. There was no unity and the irony was that the only time Ireland was united was when the British created it through the Act of Union in 1801. The idea of a British nation through the creation of the United Kingdom was also a fiction. In the 19th century nations, with flags, emblems and dying for the nation as the supreme sacrifice were being invented all across Europe. These were '*imagined communities*' many of them based on historical falsehoods. Ireland, like Britain and other invented nations, was caught up in this nationalistic fervour. But it was invention, a fictionalised nationalism. It caused huge bloodshed and bloodletting across Europe, and Ireland was no different.

At the beginning of the 21st century, we again are in a different world. Absolute sovereignty like the religious idea of monotheism, only one God, leads to exclusivity, violence, conquest and an inability to live with differences.



2.4 Equality and Social Inclusion

We see the hand of socialist James Connolly in the Proclamation when *'The Republic guarantees religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens... cherishing all the children of the nation equally'*. This was an era of acute class divisions, with a large underclass. Trade union activists were in violent conflict with employers and Jim Larkin had established the Irish Transport and General Workers Union (ITGWU). In 1911 a lock-out occurred in Wexford when foundrymen attempted to join the union. The Dublin lock-out took place in 1913 when William Martin Murphy, owner of newspapers and hotel, along with four hundred other employers, set out to crush the ITGWU. It was a complete lock-out and characterised by serious violence. Workers were attacked by police and by members of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the latter the mirror image of the Orange Order and very much on the side of the employers. The workers responded to the violence of the employers when Connolly set up a Citizen Army to protect those without work. After sixteen months without pay and starving, the workers had to accept the harsh conditions of the employers and return to work. Connolly's Citizen Army was still active in 1916.

In this context of class divisions and of the crushing power of employers, the Proclamation contained a large vision of equality and social inclusion. It was reaffirmed again when the first Dail met, but it was overtaken by the struggle for independence. It was also diminished because of a middle class Dail without any real Labour influence. Connolly was dead by this time and the social vision was also diminished by violence, the continuation of the bloodlust. Much of this remains as the unfulfilled promises of history, even a betrayed future. Politics became less social vision and more about power and holding onto power. Two confessional states in Ireland ensured the civil and religious liberty for all did not exist. Equal rights and equal opportunities did not extend to all, neither in society nor church. Women's rights were left marking time and have still not been fully realised in church or society.

Commemoration may mean ensuring that the vision remains, that we still want to build a society, north and south, where equality and social inclusion are key. But this cannot ultimately be legislated, at the end of the day equality and social inclusion are rooted in reconciled relationships.

In the 21st century, who are the children of the nation? A more pluralistic Ireland expands the identity of the children to become even more radical and inclusive. And in the 21st century what is the nation and what do we mean by state, and are nation and state the same?

3. A New Vision

The Covenant and Proclamation are historic documents. Like all historical documents they need analysis in context, the context of the early 20th century. Each in their own way contained particular social visions, but even then they were social visions with serious limitations. Neither is adequate for the 21st century. Is it time for a new covenant, a new proclamation, a new charter or new vision for a common good which can transcend the older visions and go beyond the old political models. Civil and religious liberty was asked for in both Covenant and Proclamation. Whatever else civil and religious liberty is now, it is civil and religious freedom from violence. Equal rights and opportunities and active citizenship and civic responsibility are still needed. More explicit in the Proclamation, these and other values were implicit in the Covenant, though the focus needs to go back to the original covenant in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Belfast Presbyterians did not go back to these radical covenantal roots and that is why the 1912 Ulster Covenant was and is inadequate as social vision. The equal rights and opportunities of the Proclamation were closer to the Judeo-Christian covenant than the actual Ulster Covenant was, but the latter had the potential to be more radical. There is a biblical covenant lurking beneath the surface in both documents. The biblical covenant is a vision of inclusion and equality and it is political.

In the Ancient New East all of ancient Israel's neighbours had covenants between political leaders and people. They were hierarchical, elitist and patriarchal. Ancient Israel's covenant was different. It was non-violent, centred on egalitarian, social relationships. It was essentially relational and about relationships. It was characterised by a cluster of four indivisible and interrelated, relational ideas

- Justice
- Peace

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- 
- 
- Mercy/compassion or social solidarity
 - Right relations

These are the four core covenantal values.

For Ancient Israel and for Jesus, covenant was a radically alternative and different socio-economic and political vision. It was a vision of society built around non-violence, justice, peace, mercy or compassion which is social solidarity, and right relations.

The covenantal ethic is expressed by a Hebrew poet as mercy, truth, justice and peace (Psalm 85). In this ethical vision there are no hierarchies, elites or patriarchy. The community of ancient Israel and community of faith following Jesus did not always live up to or live out of this radical social vision, but in every generation they were called back to a renewed covenant, in a different context. The social vision never died. The Ulster Covenant failed to grasp or understand, or imagine this radical covenant vision. Had the Presbyterian author been more rooted in the radical social vision of the Judeo-Christian Covenant, the decade might have been different and so would the legacy. Had the Catholic author of the Proclamation been more open to the non-violent practice at the heart of the covenant faith, the vision might not have ended up as an unfulfilled dream of history. The decade might have been different and so would the legacy. If only! But in the decade of Commemoration, 2012-2022, we have another chance.