4 The Modes of Contemporary Anti-Catholicism

Introduction

This chapter will address the three modes of active anti-Catholicism, since they constitute the forms and nature of contemporary anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland. However, each mode can itself be sociologically unpacked, and this chapter identifies the character of each mode, focusing on four themes which define their nature: their foundational ideas, the form of rhetoric deployed, the content of the articulation, and their primary constituency. The chapter also addresses the implications of each mode for Protestant–Catholic relations, and identifies the main challenges that can be made to its foundational ideas. The covenental mode is considered first, followed by the secular and Pharisaic modes. The latter has no implications at the social structural level and is not used as a resource in social stratification and social closure, but it none the less constitutes an important type of active anti-Catholicism.

The Foundational Ideas of the Covenental Mode

The defining ideas of the covenental mode of anti-Catholicism are found in the biblical notion of covenant, and its reformulation by Ulster Scots to describe a political contract between ruler and ruled. In Scripture, God makes a binding contract with His ‘chosen people’ to give them land so long as they show unstinting loyalty to Him. Both parties are obligated by the terms of the covenant, including God, who promises undreamt of blessings for those who love Him, but the loss of land and prosperity for those who renege. Israelites kept their covenantal terms by following the Judaic Law established by Moses as God’s Commandments; God kept His covenantal terms by continuing to bless His people by tying them to the land of Israel. As reformulated by Scottish Presbyterians and Ulster Scots in the sixteenth century, covenants are as much political contracts as theological ones, for they underwrite a set of social and political arrangements which are seen as God-given and which are said to reflect loyalty to Him. These notions shape the foundational ideas of the covenental mode of anti-Catholicism.

The following beliefs define the foundational ideas of the covenental mode: Protestants in Ulster are modern Israelites, a (but not the) chosen people; Ulster is God’s gift of land and prosperity to Protestants; Scripture is replete with allegories and prophecies relevant to Ulster; Ulster’s social and political arrangements are God-given; reform of these arrangements is a breach of loyalty to God; since covenants are theological and political contracts, there can be no separation of politics and...
religion; covenants are unchanging, unless ordained to do so by God, so that historical continuity with the past is essential; covenantal terms are difficult to maintain against the threat posed by faithless outsiders and the backsliding ‘enemy within’, but a ‘holy remnant’ remains loyal to the covenant and has strong and defiant watchmen or shepherds to protect them.

The notion that Ulster Protestants are modern-day Israelites, the ‘loyal sons of Judah’, as the Rev. Thomas Ellis put it in 1885, expresses itself in direct analogies with biblical Jews, as well as in references to Ulster Protestants as a chosen people. The Protestant Telegraph thus wrote in its Christmas edition in 1968: ‘the Almighty does not make mistakes. Our presence in Ulster is no accident ... We have a historic and divine commission ... we are a special people, not of ourselves but of our divine mission.’ Free Presbyterians, for example, are frequently told by Paisley that ‘God has chosen Ulster’ (Taylor, 1983: 12). It follows, therefore, that Ulster is a modern Israel, God’s gift of land to His people as their source of prosperity. In biblical times Israel had to be fought for and protected from the faithless Hittites and Canaanites, who were evil, in order to be given to the chosen, the elect, to whom God had promised it. Despite the opposition of incumbent natives, Israel was given to the Jews because it was His blessing to a special people. The same applies to Ulster (those who recognise that some Protestants appropriate this to themselves include Holmes, 1985: 9; Bruce, 1986: 10; Akenson, 1992: 119). Ulster is for Protestants: fewer people believe this than they did in the eighteenth century, but some still do. As one said, when describing what the phrase ‘for God and Ulster’ meant for him: ‘Ulster is worth living and dying for. Such patriotism could not survive without the strength of God’s love’ (collected by the Evangelical Contribution on Northern Ireland in Thomson, 1996: 43). Thus, Pastor McConaghie, in defining the same phrase, remarked: ‘as a Bible-believing Protestant, I am for Ulster. I am for her continued enjoyment of her God-given blessings, which are protected in the United Kingdom, but which are at best only tolerated where Rome’s influence is felt. I gladly take to myself the label, “for God and Ulster”’ (ibid.: 85). It follows further that these ideas legitimise the dominance of the chosen elect. The Irish natives were the heathen, the evil Canaanites, those whom God has not called to salvation (on the application of this idea to Ulster Protestants see Wallis and Bruce, 1986: 273). If Ulster prospered materially and economically, it was because it was Protestant, and, as Bruce argues, if Protestants prospered ‘it was because it pleased God to let them prosper; if Catholics were poor, it was because they had not been saved’ (Bruce, 1994: 27). Scripture is therefore said to be replete with allegories and prophecies relevant to Ulster, which confirm both its sacred position and Protestants’ divine blessing. Some Protestants thus believe that Scripture contains direct advice on how Ulster should act, has many parallels to experience in Northern Ireland, and numerous analogies applicable to a myriad of situations (on this point see Akenson, 1992: 118). As one example, a daily prayer for deliverance was printed in the church page of the Belfast Telegraph during the furore over the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, invoking a verse from Isaiah 14, that no weapon could prosper against those to whom