

The Famine Crisis: Theological Interpretations and Implications

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The social, political and religious convulsions of the Great Famine provide a fitting and constructive interpretative framework in which to situate an analysis of mid-nineteenth-century religious interaction in Ireland. The 'hungry times' became the cockpit for much conflict as attempts were made to bring bread from heaven to the starving people. There is nothing eccentric about attempting to look at the Famine crisis through theological lens. Indeed, I shall argue that the whole tragic experience of the potato failure had a profound and permanent effect on the religious consciousness of the Irish people, those who left and those who survived, those who 'took the soup' and those who winced at 'Peel's brimstone' and 'Trevelyan's corn'.

The sociological crisis and human tragedy created by the Famine occasioned the intensification of efforts to Protestantise the Irish peasants. Their sheer vulnerability through the distress they experienced triggered in the facilitators and promoters of the new Reformation an explosion of genuine compassion, organised targeting and aggressive evangelisation. Theology impelled the mission agents, it informed the reactions of their antagonists, and helped create the sort of subversive spiritual memory from which we have not fully recovered. This brief investigation sets out to examine some of the theological interpretations which emerged in the aftermath of the Famine, and in a second layer of enquiry goes on to assess the implications of the collapse of the main source of sustenance for theological and ecclesiastical survival and co-existence.

It is useful to begin this study in the middle of the fifth decade of the century when the climate shifted from the Malthusian analysis of the 1820s to the Free Trade approach of Cobden and Peel. Sir George Graham, the Peelite Home Secretary, wrote to Peel in October 1845 on the deeper significance of the rotten potatoes in Ireland:

It is awful to observe how the Almighty humbles the pride of nations. The Sword, the Pestilence, and Famine are the instruments of His displeasure; the Cankerworm and the Locust are His armies; he gives the Word; a single crop is blighted, and we see a nation prostrate, and stretching out its hands for Bread. These are solemn warnings, and they fill me with

reverence; they proclaim with a voice not to be mistaken, that 'doubtless there is a God, who judgeth the earth'.¹

Behind this sobering Old Testament approach to an agrarian economy lay the prevailing nineteenth-century doctrine of a somewhat static order of things. Catastrophes on the scale of the Great Famine naturally excited the imagination and stretched the minds of those searching for an explanation on both sides of the Irish Sea. Providentialism had many faces within the religious and political world of the day. It sometimes flirted with a genocidal understanding of the complex Irish dilemma. At our distance from events we need to avoid too rigid a reading of the comments and statements of those who often struggled to put a tolerable interpretation on what was going on. Boyd Hilton captures the mood of the time when he writes:

Whether they stressed the evidences of design in the universe, or the fact that life was a time of probation, most early-nineteenth-century Christians saw the world as a stationary state, and lacked any dynamic conception of the economy such as that adumbrated (though perhaps not anticipated) by Adam Smith.²

We get a sense of the complexity of this doctrine of providentialism by turning to Thomas Chalmers, the benevolent Scottish divine, who had an acute sense of self-help and who made an important distinction between scarcities which were evenly spread across a nation and famines which virulently attacked one part of a nation. The Great Irish Famine fell into the latter category and in his scheme known as the 'godly commonwealth', the terrible visitation of distress 'left the task of equalization – if there be enough wisdom and mercy below for the accomplishment of the task – to the ordering of man'. Consistent with his support of Free Trade, he saw the disaster as a 'special providence' which justified interventionist political policies. This stood in contrast with a more *laissez-faire* response better suited to more prosperous times. Although an ardent Scotsman, he identified with the English ruling class, but not in an uncritical manner. Famine had also touched the Highlands and this sharpened Chalmers's understanding of what needed to be done. His theology stopped short of attributing the Famine to a recriminatory visitation of chastisement from the Almighty. For him the providential dimension was linked to the responsibility of the Christian nation to look after the victims of a terrible catastrophe. Although supporting Trevelyan, he called on the government to suspend distillation from grain because it was morally unacceptable that 'the Scotch might luxuriate in spirits, and the English in their potations of beer as usual' while Irishmen starved.

1 Peel Papers, 18 October 1845, BL MS 40451 fos 400-1.

2 Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement* (Oxford, 1988) pp. 66-7.

Relief was not the only concern in Chalmers's theological response; he more than hinted that there was redemptive significance in alleviating Ireland's need:

Now is the time for Britain to move forward ... to acquit herself generously, openly, freely, towards Ireland – and by her acts of princely but well-directed munificence to repair the accumulated wrongs of many generations ... with the guidance and guardianship of the Holy Providence above, a harvest of good will ensue from this great temporary evil; and Ireland, let us trust and pray, will emerge from her sore trial, on a bright and peaceful career to future generations.³

This optimistic note was the by-product of Chalmers's redemptive-recovery theory, which stressed that Britain's response by way of generous relief not only had corrective significance but also provided an arena of re-birth for the victims of both political neglect and natural misfortune. Such theological reasoning presents the challenge of corporate atonement as a way of making amends for past wrongs, while at the same time laying the foundation for social regeneration. It at least opened up an alternative to paternalism, the *bete noire* of Anglo-Irish relationships, and paved the way for the notion of benevolence as the inductor of self-help.

Adversarial Responses

Sir Charles Trevelyan, a moderate evangelical with a Clapham sect background, also worked assiduously for the relief of the starving people. He understood the calamity in teleological terms and worked to produce a better state of society in Ireland without interfering with property rights. He was an establishment man who held that indirect permanent advantages would accrue to Ireland following the crisis because there would be a resulting social regeneration. Yet, there are some chilling sentences in his theological interpretation of what he saw as 'the visitation'. He wrote in strident language, seeing the scarcity as:

... the judgment of God on an indolent and unself-reliant people, and as God had sent the calamity to teach the Irish a lesson, that calamity must not be too much mitigated; the selfish and indolent must learn their lesson so that a new and improved state of affairs must arise.⁴

3 Thomas Chalmers, 'Political Economy of a Famine' in *North British Review*, vii (1847), pp. 282 and 289.

4 Jenifer Hart, 'Sir Charles Trevelyan at the Treasury' in *English Historical Review* lxxv, 294 (1960), p. 99.

As we shall see, however, he was more or less at one with many of his ecclesiastical mentors and contemporaries.

A rounded reading of Famine historiography compels us to enquire into the theological impact of the Great Hunger on the main religious protagonists who inhabited the territory where the starving multitudes lived and died. This in turn compels us to consider what has become known as 'the new Reformation', sometimes called 'the Protestant Crusade', an intricate world of evangelical missionaries. It is necessary to recognize deep rivulets of practical compassion for the starving people coming out of a rigid theology and an exclusivist ecclesiology. Many of the missionaries were convinced that a substantial amount of blame for the crisis could be laid on the priests and the Roman Catholic system. It was certainly seen as a divine visitation on those who needed 'the new sound of truth to frighten away the devices of falsehood and superstition.'

One of the leading evangelical missionaries of the period was the Revd Alexander Dallas, founder of the Irish Church Missions, who set up a Fund for Temporal Relief with a view to 'relieving the temporal needs of the body in such a manner as to extend the influence for relieving the eternal wants of the soul.'⁵ His response to the Famine gives us some idea of the complex attitudes of these latter-day crusaders. Writing an anecdotal account of the Protestant colony at Castlekerke, Co. Galway, we find, for instance, an interesting twist in the theology of Famine blame. In the following extract from *The Point of Hope in Ireland's Present Crisis*, he describes a local convert suffering ostracisation:

He was a good deal persecuted because he read the Bible and taught Irish, and was on one occasion beaten by the priest. He is still taunted and called names by the neighbours, who say 'tis no wonder the crops would fail, and the land be blasted, when they act so.⁶

Dallas used colourful language when describing mission work amongst the Irish peasantry, concluding that the agents of the Irish Church Missions 'must be able to see the jewel of God in the midst of that dunghill and condescend to be a scavenger to get it.'⁷

The devastation of the Famine also had a substantial impact on the majority Irish Catholic Church. The impact was so overwhelming that the full theological implications only developed in the post-Famine era. Undoubtedly, there were distinctly Catholic interpretations of the tragedy and some trenchant comments are on record, but the immediate result was growing solidarity amongst a people who felt battered and repressed long before the potato crop failed. Dur-

⁵ A.R.C. Dallas, *The Point of Hope in Ireland's present Crisis* (London, 1849), p. 14.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ A.R.C. Dallas, *Address to City Mission at Exeter Hall* (13 January 1851), Irish Church Mission Mss.

ing the year after 'Black '47', the Irish hierarchy, in rejecting the offer of a concurrent state endowment with the Established Church, took the submissive line that 'having shared in the prosperity of their faithful flocks, the clergy of Ireland are willing to share in their privations.'⁸ Nonetheless, it should be understood that pre-Famine Catholicism was in a state of some disarray in rural Ireland. According to Miller's analysis, in 1840 only 40 per cent of the population attended church: 'by the standards of the Counter-Reformation fewer than half the Irish Catholics were practising their religion, or could be considered well schooled in its disciplines. The Catholic revival before 1840 had made its greater impact on the urban middle classes and better-off tenant farmers.'⁹ What has been termed the 'devotional revolution', allied to the Ultramontane thrust, was orchestrated to recover lost ground and to bring post-1850 Catholicism to Roman heel. One statistic which throws light on the high clericalisation of the Catholic devotional renaissance reveals that in 1845 Ireland had one priest to every 3000 people, in 1870 one priest to every 1476 people.

The shape of post-Famine society in Ireland reflected not only a demonstrable strategy of recovery but also an impressive restructuring of the social order with a traditional core – the family, the nation and the church. Such a formidable coalition paved the way for the sort of confessionalism which has been a constant factor in Irish life well into the twentieth century. Theological conformism was on of the strands of this nineteenth-century religious renaissance. Kerby Miller offers a useful analysis:

In the 'New Ireland' of the post-Famine period there were three dominant social institutions – the strong farmer type of rural family ... the Catholic Church of the 'devotional revolution' and Irish nationalism, especially in its constitutional and quasi-legal form. All three were innovative in structure and purpose and all were associated with the *embourgeoisement* of Catholic society – adopted by or imposed on Catholic smallholder and labourers.

All three upset or challenged traditional 'peasant' practices and outlooks ... all demanded absolute conformity and proscribed deviations as familial ingratitude, religious apostasy, or even national treason.¹⁰

The prolific Catholic polemical correspondent, Father James Maher of Graigue, Co. Carlow, in a letter to Richard Whately, the Church of Ireland Archbishop of Dublin, appeals to Scriptural images to scold the Established Church for neglect and carelessness:

⁸ *Freeman's Journal*, 13 October 1848.

⁹ David Miller, 'Irish Catholicism and the Great Famine' in *Journal of Social History* (1975), pp. 81–98.

¹⁰ Kerby A. Miller in *Studies*, cxxv, 300 (Winter 1986), pp. 538–9.

Prostrate Ireland bleeding at every pore – abandoned in the hour of her need – hunted to death by landlord tyranny, cheated and robbed by vicious institutions – neglected and spurned by the Priest and Levite and marked for the grave through the slow, lingering excruciating process of famine. The Scriptural type of your project, my Lord, was the man who fell into the hands of robbers, on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho, who also stripped him and having wounded him, went away leaving him half dead.¹¹

This needs to be read, however, in the context of Akenson's assessment, which suggests a populist reading of the tragedy with some folk overlay:

The initial Catholic folk-interpretation of the Famine was in terms of supernatural judgment. Studies of the Irish folk tradition have shown that the commonplace reaction was to interpret the Famine as some form of divine punishment by the Christian God for the people's sins. Alternatively, it was commonplace to explain events by invoking the action of non-Christian spirits, who, in some way, have been vexed and therefore attacked the Irish people. Whether interpreted in a Christian or a non-Christian form of Supernaturalism the Famine to the Irish people was 'beyond indignation' and was perceived as an event of cosmic significance, not as a merely human conspiracy against the Irish people.¹²

Lasting Implications

Turning our attention to the theological implications of the Famine crisis, it is helpful to investigate the theological and ecclesiological postures which arose in the middle of the nineteenth century. It is as totally unhistorical to attribute Ireland's lasting spiritual malaise to the Great Famine as it is to blame the English nation for the Famine itself. What is not in doubt, however, is the fact that the sociological upheaval experienced in the hungry times had wide theological ramifications. I am prepared to argue that Christianity in Ireland is still recovering from the trauma of the Protestant Crusade, the Catholic Revival and the social dissonance produced by the Famine.

In the first instance, there emerged following the Famine a theology with pietistic strands and sentimental tendencies. This should not surprise us given both the Irish liking for folklore and the need for a release of emotional energy during the hard times. Although it ran in tandem with a defensive, exclusive

11 James Maher, *Letters* (Dublin, 1877), p. 2.

12 D.H. Akenson, *Small Differences – Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants 1815-1922* (Dublin, 1991), pp. 144-5.

theology, this more benign form of religious experience should be recognised. Sheridan Gilley sees the period as the 'golden-age of religious self-help' characterised by a renewal of faith in the laity. He judges that 'this devotionalism was tender, romantic, sentimental; it was the outcome of the soft-centred religion pioneered by Rousseau.'¹³ It would seem that the Irish theological palate had a liking for both the hard-shelled bitter mints of severe dogma and the soft-centred creamy mints of popular devotion.

A somewhat strange bed-fellow came in the form of Victorian evangelicalism with its romantic ideas of the happy isles beyond the miseries of the present valley of the shadow of death. While the two opposing theologies have a common provenance and emphasis, they failed to cohere in the ecclesiastical atmosphere of post-Famine Ireland. This shared pious overlay operated within a Manichean framework of black and white, right and wrong, truth and error, Christ and Antichrist, perverts and converts, jumpers and faithful. In the words of George Boyce:

Catholics and Anglicans, Presbyterians and Methodists, were caught up in a new sense of religiosity, one notable for its central belief that Catholicism and Protestantism were deadly enemies, sworn foes, defenders of the right against the wrong, of truth against error. This religious fervour was not, of course, a constant factor in Irish life; other more material and secular preoccupations intervened. But the churches began to sink their roots deeply into Irish social as well as religious life.¹⁴

A second form of theological action prompted the emergence of a reactionary, defensive Catholic power bloc. S.J. Connolly has described this phenomenon:

In the period after the Famine, then, two main developments combined to give the Catholic church and its clergy the dominant position within Irish society ... the first was the growing effectiveness of Catholicism itself – Catholicism considered not just part of the structures of local power and influence, or as an auxiliary to nationalist politics, but as a religion, a system of beliefs, values and rules of behaviour supported by an appeal to supernatural realities. The second was social change, decimating those sections of the population whose behaviour had been the source of greatest concern to pre-Famine churchmen and bringing into being a new and more respectable society in which the church's discipline was from the start more readily accepted ... The triumph of the

13 Sheridan Gilley, 'The Church and the Irish Diaspora' in *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, xxxv, 2 (April 1984), p. 193.

14 George Boyce, *Nineteenth Century Ireland – the Search for Stability* (Dublin, 1990), pp. 124–5.

post-Famine Church was also the victory of one culture over another and when modern Irish Catholicism came into its inheritance it did so only by means of the destruction of a 'rival world'.¹⁵

The question must be asked – what sort of theological underpinning was used for this social and religious rejuvenation? Dipping into the language of the Cullen era, the Synod of Thurles and the whole Ultramontane crusade, we sense a theology which was dogmatic, defensive, assertive and reactionary. In the words of one commentator, it 'pinned its faith to the patterns thought up long ago at Trent, more personal, more Italian, genuinely more human, but not without some danger of sentimentality.' This brought to the foreground talk of 'godless colleges', 'perverts' and 'converts', depending on which side you were on. Strategy on the ground was organized by theological sharpshooters of the stature of Cullen and McHale, which resulted in a conservative, combative style of reasoning. The remnants of Neo-Gallicanism went to the shredder, class conflict among Irish Catholics was muted, educational and philanthropic services previously sponsored by the Protestant establishment were assiduously duplicated and, where possible, replaced.

Of special note is the growing, and in some ways, perilous link between religious belief and nationalist politics, despite the anti-clericalism of the Fenians and Land Leaguers. Nationalism and religion fused together the Irish loyalties to Faith and Fatherland and this created Ireland's unique mode of confessionalism which in the end decimated, succeeded and replaced the religious Establishment of the Anglican church. As Gilley notes, 'the essential battle was one external to the Catholic population between natives and aliens, Catholics and heretics, the state of the oppressor and the church of the oppressed.'¹⁶

Thirdly, the waning of establishment Ireland threw down a deep theological challenge to the Church of Ireland and the smaller bodies known as Protestant Dissenters. Less than twenty five years after the Famine, disestablishment coincided with Vatican I and the declaration of papal infallibility. The smaller Dissenting bodies adopted a theology of survival, buoyed at times with revivalist renewal and Victorian pulpitering. Nonetheless, a Baptist report speaks mournfully:

Our work is now for the most part confined to the North of Ireland, where the Protestant population is numerous and influential. But this has been the result of circumstances over which the Committee have had no control. The question is often asked, 'What has become of your operations in the South and West?' The answer is a mournful one: 'the awful

15 S.J. Connolly, *Priests and People in Pre-Famine Ireland, 1780-1845* (Dublin, 1982), p. 113.

16 Sheridan Gilley, 'The Church and the Irish Diaspora', p. 195.

famine of 1845-1847 swept them all away – some 3000 members of our churches and congregations were lost to us; and thus Limerick, Birr, Clonmel, Abbeyleix, Youghal and Cork have been abandoned. We have never recovered from that fatal blow. Waterford alone remains to us and it was almost extinct when Mr Douglas took up his abode there'.¹⁷

The minority Reformed churches continued to smart from the devastation of the Famine era in terms of lost ground through death and emigration, the rapid rise of Catholic power and the lingering memory of the proselytising allegations.

The triumphalism of Nicholas Wiseman's words in the *Dublin Review* reveals the mood of the post-Famine decade among many in the Catholic Church:

Away go proselytism and souperism, and the nests of pestilence which they have built amidst the neighbourhoods that they have infected and the educational strife, and the stalking missionary, and the sneaking Bible-reader and the lying apostate, and perhaps at length the unbelieving prelate, who scorns revelation and patronises bigotry.¹⁸

It is an understatement to label this a theology of confrontation. As the nineteenth century wore on, and the Roman ascendancy became more visible, the best we can expect from the minority churches is a theology tailored for survival which, on the ground, turned out to be a continuation of the polemical, confrontational, defensive theology of the famine era. It is particularly sad that the Bible, the primary source of all Christian theology, was used as a polemical blunt instrument to defend a position rather than to unfold spiritual light. It is asking too much to expect balanced theology from the poisoned atmosphere of nineteenth-century religious exchange.

Behind this denominational polarisation lay the emergence in the middle of the century of diverse cosmologies which became self-enclosed and self-referential. Energy was expended on boundary maintenance and this created the limbic regions where those outside the circle of truth were consigned in rejection. Out of this dividing of the people flowed the sort of polemical posturing which is inimical to a more wholesome apologetic. The rehabilitation of the Scriptures in the Irish Catholic community and the more rounded hermeneutic of many twentieth-century Protestant divines serves as a corrective to the bleak, negative theology which was almost as burdensome as the Famine itself.

17 *Irish Baptist Magazine* (1885), p. 119.

18 Nicholas Wiseman, *Dublin Review*, xlii (1857), pp. 225-6.

Better Ways – Brighter Times

To conclude, it may be helpful to draw out some theological lessons from the turbulent times of the Great Famine.

Firstly, it is patently obvious that gallant efforts were made by sociologists, commentators, politicians, historians and some of the plain people of Ireland to develop a theological understanding of an immense human tragedy. What is important for us is the fact that they were putting theological questions to human distress, and while perhaps coming up with wrong or incomplete answers, they deserve praise for wrestling with the issues. In the end, some of their theology was deficient, but we must never forget that professional theologians frequently serve up bad theology. From an Irish standpoint, it is appropriate to invoke and revise Metz's famous dictum: 'we cannot do theology with our backs to the Great Famine.'

Secondly, the undercurrents of ecclesiastical incivility of Victorian Ireland stultified theological reflection. Part of the contemporary task is to redeem the rich imagination, so essential for theological work, which surfaced during the Famine crisis and employ it to create what has been called a 'wayfarers theology'. The main themes for a buoyant, enlightening theology are all in place; there is a crying need to engage them productively for the benefit of current spiritual growth.

Thirdly, it is evident that a working theology with an Irish flavour must interface with the painful realities of a turbulent past and struggle to come to terms with the ancient angers of Ireland. Social, political and demographic happenings should feed into the thematic melting pot where popular theology is created. All the stories are there waiting to be tapped: agrarian agitation, the clearings, the coffin ships, the Irish diaspora, 'the fields of Athenry'. If we fail in our modern world to search for light from dark days and find bread in the hungry times we cannot escape Kavanagh's censure: 'We cannot live on memory – not all the remembered beauty of last year can compensate for the stupidity and vulgarity that is this year's harvest.'¹⁹

Fourthly, it is necessary to struggle with the tension between the two major theories surrounding the Great Hunger: tragedy and conspiracy. John Mitchel's writing of the Famine in the 1860s tells a story of a British conspiracy which 'tries to seduce the Irish from the True Faith with soup and damnable heresies.' From within the interpretation which is weighted on the side of tragedy, the note of chastisement is evident, with purgatorial resonances. Such a doleful understanding of providentialism is echoed in *The Plague* by Albert Camus. The central actor in the drama, Father Paneloux, at first rationalises the tragedy:

19 Patrick Kavanagh, 'Twenty-Three Tons of Accumulated Folk-Lore' in *Irish Times*, 18 April 1939.

'The sufferings of children were our bread of affliction, but without this bread our souls would die of spiritual hunger.'²⁰ Such a reading of tragic events fits well into much popular recounting of Famine devastation and in the end produces both a doleful theology and a dour spirituality. Paneloux later abandons his faith after a small child dies of the plague. Things are not so in the folk memory of the Irish. In theological terms, natural calamity has been seen as a necessity, a spiritual cleansing agent administered by the Deity for the benefit of His devotees. As long as this way of looking at life's exigencies consorts with the improvement theory of the human journey, a liberative genre of theological reflection remains a distant dream. At its worst it produces a fatalistic outlook redolent of Peel's chilling rhetoric in the wake of the tragic events of 1845-9:

It has pleased God to afflict us with a great calamity, which may perhaps be improved into a blessing ... let us deeply consider whether out of this nettle, danger, we may not pluck the flower, safety, and convert a grievous affliction into a means of future improvement and a source of future security.²¹

Just as the Great Famine had a permanent, irreversible effect on the demographic shape and the sociological spirit of Ireland, it also left an indelible imprint on the religious consciousness of subsequent generations. While it became the catalyst for divisive and often destructive theological reflection, it also created a religious *cul-de-sac* which strangled the emergence of a productive, dynamic native theology – which may be a good departure point for gestating a better theology for brighter times.

20 Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York, 1972), pp. 96-7.

21 *Hansard*, 30 March 1849, civ, pp. 98-101.