

5. The Orange Order: A Reactionary Group

“The Orangemen fervently believed that as Loyalists it was their right and their duty to harass the Catholics whenever they could be provoked...and when the Government made laws to prevent them from doing so, the Orangemen felt that they had been deserted.”¹

(Tony Gray)

5.1 Introduction

The Orange Order is a religious, political and cultural fraternity founded in Ireland by 1795, partly a successor of earlier Protestant agrarian societies opposing similar ones organized by the Roman Catholic peasantry.² Although my hypothesis stresses that the Orange Order is in part a supporter of the modern sectarian divide, it should be noted that A. T. Q. Stewart has made a point in stating that its birth “was not the cause but also the consequence of prolonged sectarian strife in County Armagh where it born.”³ Their Protestant antecessors include the Peep O’Day Boys, The Orange Boys and The Boyne Society who evolved into a kind of Orange Freemasonry after plagiarizing the structure of the Masonic Order.⁴

Its name is taken from William III, “Prince of Orange, Count of Nassau, King of England, Scotland and Ireland” to whom the Protestants owe the Protestant victory when Catholic King James II was defeated in attempts to recover Ireland at the Battle of the Boyne⁵ the first of July of 1690. It was at the Battle of the Boyne when the most important Orange living myth became institutionalized. The Battle became a symbol of the triumph of the Protestant

¹ Tony Gray, *The Orange Order* (London, UK: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1972), 143.

² Hereward Senior, *Organeism in Ireland and Britain 1795-1835*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966) quoted in David A. Roberts, “The Orange Order in Ireland,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 2, no.3 (September 1971): 269.

³ Stewart, *Narrow Ground*, 128.

⁴ Kevin Haddick-Flynn, *Orangeism The Making of a Tradition* (Dublin, Ireland: Wolfhound Press, 1999), 100-129-133.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

Ascendancy over Catholic power or influence. Today, after the introduction of the Gregorian calendar to Britain, the Battle is celebrated by the Orange Order every 12 of July -referred to as the “Glorious Twelfth”- with a series of parades accompanied with drum bands, banners, Orange members dressed in full regalia and conspicuous ribbons such as the Orange sashes or *collarettes*.

5.2 Ideological Basis of the Loyal Orange Institution

Despite the ritualistic and symbolic richness of this “secret society,” the political significance of the Orange Order makes it a controversial and crucial element of the conflict in Northern Ireland. As part of the hypothesis of this work I intend to describe the importance of the Orange Order as an institution capable of transforming and creating values for the Protestant community with the specific purpose of preserving it. From the time of the creation of Northern Ireland into its appearance as a separate political constituency through partition, the Orange Order stands as one of the leading Protestant institutions in developing a sense of identity and common history amongst the Protestants.

By providing a symbolic religious framework and ideological differentiation it holds a certain leadership role in maintaining group hostilities and segregation towards Catholics and Irish nationalists. Its traditions, political ideology and religious orthodoxy contrast with more plural forms of coexistence, social assimilation, inclusiveness and democratization in today’s world. Moreover, with the end of the British Empire, and the redefinition of the world order after 9/11, the Orange Order movement today struggles to survive in its sectarian and racist form.

Although the movement’s history is traceable to the sixteenth century with the foundation of the House of Orange in the “Low Countries” (The Netherlands), most of the Order’s

expansion has taken place during the nineteenth and twentieth century. This includes the spread of the Orange Order to many parts of the Western Hemisphere, including Africa. In the latter, the movement was first seen in Nigeria followed by Togo and Ghana. The internationalization of this movement owes its inception to soldiers, missionaries and Irish immigrants throughout England, the United States, Canada, Scotland, New Zealand and other countries of the Commonwealth. It is its ritualistic, humanistic, religious appeal that has made it more accepted internationally.

5.3 The Idea of Loyalty and the Protestant Nation

The importance of the Orange movement specifically in the province of Ulster has to do with the preservation of the protestant community, protestant values, and loyalty to the British Crown.⁶ The tradition and folklore of the Orangemen represented in their principles, beliefs, practices, and rites developed into a social movement known as *Orangeism*. Because it emerged within the British Empire, symbols, ritual and political thinking are strongly associated with that of the British monarchy.

The Crown, the Royal Family, every Royal Commemoration, and the Protestant character of the monarchy are conceived a cultural form of Britishness to Irish Protestants. Orangeism, however, did not support an integrationist idea of Ulster society nor did it seek to embrace British political and cultural evolution over the years. Instead, Orangeism became associated with the idea of *Loyalism*; with the protection of the protestant establishment, i.e. the maintenance a Protestant majority over a Catholic minority in domestic affairs often referred to as the “Protestant Ascendancy.”

⁶ David A. Roberts, “The Orange Order in Ireland,” *The British Journal of Sociology* 2, no.3 (September 1971): 269.

At this point, Loyalism may be understood as the “proffering of loyalty, allegiance to a ruling political authority (the monarchy) subject to certain conditions being met.”⁷ Hence, the contractual status upon the Orange Order’s identity was constructed: “loyalty to the Crown is conditional on the Crown’s support for Protestant rights and the Protestant community against its enemies; if support is not forthcoming the community will look to its own defense.”⁸

The Orangemen live in fear of being outnumbered by the Catholics who in Ulster are almost a majority or by those republican nationalists (e.g. Eamon de Valera in the 1960s.) who wish reunification with the Republic of Ireland. It follows that it is not unusual to hear in loyalist discourse the fear of being “ethnically cleansed.”⁹ Surprisingly, in contemporary Ulster, fears have come from the British Government too. New commitments for peace, for instance the Sunningdale Agreement (1973) and the Good Friday Agreement (1998), have changed Britain’s role in Ulster politics to be more in tune with anti-terrorist, conflict resolution and Human Rights standards.

Former attempts at democratization had not gone far beyond what was perceived a British imperial duty to protect Protestants in general, usually considered a primordial given in the minds of loyalists and Orangemen.¹⁰ This belief was actually a legacy from imperial times. In the seventeenth century resentment produced by Queen Mary’s killings of Protestants, and by the spread of Spanish, and French Catholic Monarchies fostered a policy of international religious containment in England:

Viewed from the European angle, the English saw themselves as an ‘island people’ holding out against aggressively expansionist Catholic power...the foreign Protestants [were] a wall; the only wall and defense to England...the

⁷ Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The dynamics of conflict in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 41. See also 84-85.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹ Moore and Sanders, “Loyalism in Northern Ireland,” 12.

¹⁰ Easman, *Ethnic Politics*, 10-11.

protection of the Protestants abroad [was] the greatest power and security the crown of England [could] attain to...¹¹

After the Irish war of independence in 1921, followed by the process of partition, the British conservative government negotiated the permanence of an “Orange state” in the north with emphasis on the same protectionist terms:

Now when Britain was pondering Irish problems at the end of the Great War, the position of minorities -the need for protecting minorities- was always a matter of great preoccupation. In particular it was anxious about minorities of its *friends* in Ireland -Unionist-Protestants scattered in small local communities.¹²

The Protestant community in tandem with British Tories of the time assimilated in its own way English imperialism and made of it an ideological bridge with their “glorious Protestant past.” In other words, a religious link with the Protestant Crown and royal family has been primordial for Orange Order existence and provides us with one of the main reasons why William III campaigns were *assumed* to be made in the name of Protestantism. Even the location of the battlefields are highly extolled for the purpose of the Orange Order’s symbolism, and myth making.

A peculiar feeling of Britishness in religious terms allowed the Protestant community to hold a special pride for their Royal legacy and the status of “selected tribe” of the United Kingdom. Regarding this argument, David A. Roberts explains that at the end of the nineteenth century “there was an implicit pride and at times explicit arrogation by Orangemen and indeed Protestant Ulster, of the role of the chosen people, of a children of Israel, whom God has protected and guided, in history.”¹³

¹¹ Jym Smyth, *The Making of the United Kingdom* (London, UK: Longman, 2001), 62-63. emphasis mine

¹² Henry Harrison, *Ulster and the British Empire* (London, UK: Robert Hale Ltd., 1939), 78.

¹³ Roberts, “The Orange Order in Ireland,” 276.

Many researchers on Northern Ireland have agreed that protestant Ulster has developed a separate form of nationalism distant from a common bond with Great Britain other than Protestantism. This form of chauvinism has emerged as a “secondary” nationalism to British. Roberts continues arguing that the Orange Order was important in developing the consciousness of an Ulster nationalism allaying it with a religious feeling.¹⁴

Such communal new identification grew up with the territorialization of the two factions under the UK dominant state. In the years to come, after the end of colonialism the process of containment against “Papist” tyrannies continued in the name of the Empire but not by the same agent.

After partition, the system of proportional representation of Stormont gave rise to a battle to gain the majority. This fact raised the need for better forms to institutionalize supremacy, and the continuity of the Protestant status quo. It can be implied that the Orange Order was bound to cover that job with great fruition. The British retirement from the local politics of Northern Ireland fostered a battle for ideological, religious, and political hegemony carried on by Irish Protestants, Scottish immigrants, English landowners and the Orange Order.

5.4 Orangeism and Unionism

From the time of its foundation, the Orange Order has focused its efforts to fulfill a constant need of distinction: Orangeism has proved to be successful in keeping Protestantism dominant mainly through the re-conceptualization of the “Other”, the Catholics, whose fighting back has given reason enough to confirm their disloyalty, “Popery” and Republican deceitful background. Catholics are by far the antagonists of Ulster history but not the only ones. Disloyal Protestants, and at the present time moderate Unionists, have been regarded by their brethren as illegitimate fellows.

¹⁴ Ibid., 278.

Last year, on December 19 2003, the New York Times published a note on Jeffrey Donaldson, a leading Protestant critic of the 1998 peace accord, who had quit the moderate Ulster Unionist Party for the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party. His argument is revealing on the weight of the orthodox loyalist ideology: “I feel that the party has abandoned many of the *core principles* which it once held.”¹⁵ In the past Unionism was an equation of Loyalism in all its extensions (Unionism has tended to reduce its ties with the religious content of Loyalism). However, for its close relation to loyalist ideals the Ulster Unionist Party is considered to be the political wing of the Orange Order.

In the political arena Unionism is secular and reactive to the nationalist Irish idea of annexing Ulster to the republic it once belonged. To Loyalists as well as for Unionists the Sinn Fein and the IRA are responsible of this threat. Hence we consolidate the idea that a Unionist holds an “explicit defense of Protestant interests.”¹⁶ In this context we can bring up the idea of Steve Bruce that most religious movements are practically secular in goals and that some secular institutions have religious concerns. Today the Unionist party agenda is focused on secular goals, but in the end they are looking for the benefit of a Protestant community who is not completely demanding spiritual blessings. However, religious demands are made by other agents like the Orange Order, whose involvement in politics makes of it more a pressure group than a religious institution. In fact, for the most reactionary members of either the Unionist party or the Orange Order, the link between religion and politics should not be broken. What it is more, they can hardly distinguish from each other since religion and the Pro-Protestant politics are intrinsically part of the Protestant national identity which is indivisible.

¹⁵ Foreign Desk, “Critic of Ulster Peace Accord Leaves Party,” *New York Times*, December 19, 2003.

¹⁶ Ruane and Todd, *Dynamics of Conflict*, 88.

More moderate Unionist perspectives have clashed many times with ultra Loyalist's interests for the sole reason that Unionism has abandoned the security idea of Catholic containment. Now it speaks for economic progress and civil liberties for "everyone"; politically very attractive even for convinced republicans. Consequently the peculiarity of this trend is that in the last ten years it has been dividing Unionist Protestant politicians while it is has also been an open avenue of power for Ulster Catholics.

Many Catholics in Northern Ireland feel that partition is permanent and have come to perceive a British identification based on a social nationalism and modern economic values leaving behind Protestant prejudices. Here, the main question is whether Britain belongs only to Protestants? Certainly no. Besides Catholics there are also immigrant groups from other countries and with other cultural values. Formerly, keeping the Union -in Unionist minds- meant freeing themselves from a possible Irish retaliation. Today we live in a more liberal world with more liberal ideologies and behaviors that for some outsiders it is hard to believe how Unionist fears have overcome the minds of the Protestant citizens of Northern Ireland.

5.5 Between Ritual and the Sectarian Divide

During and after the Troubles the loyalist idea has been widely accepted, and kept infiltrating the social conscience and attitudes of the Province with the help of the Orange Order. From 1921 Orange loyalists' practices were institutionalized with the consent of the British Government. Until 1972 Orange "marches were granted the status of state ceremony and national holiday."¹⁷ As a symbol in itself, the Orange Order's parading tradition was and is one of the ritualistic forms of Orange power expressed in the six counties of Ulster; Down and Armagh the

¹⁷ Ibid., 108.

most representative. Dominic Bryan describes, from the anthropological perspective, that the Orange parading tradition is inspired by “hegemony and resistance.”¹⁸

Every Twelfth of July during the summer, the Orange Order and other societies such as the Apprentice Boys of Derry and the Black Royal Institution celebrate the Williamette’s campaigns in Ireland. Originally the battles were fought to expand the British kingdom but now, especially in Ulster, they are celebrated in honor of the defense of Protestantism. This fact is considered in Bryan’s words as the “appropriation of the Twelfth.”¹⁹

Parading then is more than a public ritualistic commemoration. What make its more controversial is that it must be done, according to Orange Order’s wishes, in Catholic areas or neighborhoods so their power can be heard and seen in all their paraphernalia, bands and banners. Nevertheless, marching is not an Orange prerogative, for Loyalists it is part of an Orange tradition that has to be respected because is part of their community’s essence.

The importance of parading as ritual lays in the role it plays in creating a “sense of community.”²⁰ In fact, the Orange Order can be considered a community within a community,²¹ a subsystem,²² a subculture with its own definition, identity and thus history. The Protestant community (the Ulster nation) is so deep rooted in Unionist precepts and Loyalist values that it even excludes the wider British state [or nation].²³ This is only a reflect of the rigid belief system provided by the Unionist imagery. In the next chapter I will explain how such belief system or religious framework pervades the Orange Order and the imagined Protestant nation.

¹⁸ Dominic Bryan, *Orange Parades, The Politics of Ritual, Tradition and Control* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 27.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 29. For a detailed account see Chapter 3.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Paul Rich, MPS and Guillermo De Los Reyes, “Orangeism and Community in Northern Ireland,” *the philalethes* LVI, no.4 (August 2003): 80.

²² Stanton K. Teft, *The Dialectics of Secret Society Power in States* (Atlantic Hightlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1992), 20-21.

²³ Moore and Sanders, “Loyalism in Northern Ireland,” 10.