



Varieties of Irish Evangelicalism

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Much of what happened in nineteenth-century Irish Protestantism is described as ‘evangelicalism’, and over the past generation evangelicalism has become a major focus of research by students of religious history throughout the North Atlantic world. To the (considerable) extent that that literature is written by scholars who are committed evangelicals themselves, it is part of a process of social construction. David Bebbington’s typology of ‘evangelical characteristics’ — conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism — is a British example of such a construction.¹ The work of social construction takes on a more contentious character in the United States, in which ‘the evangelicals’ are major participants in what have come to be called the Culture Wars.

1 David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1989), 2–17

2 John Wesley, *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley*, 8 vols., std. edn., ed. Nehemiah Curnock (New York, 1909–16), vol. 1, 475–76

3 Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c. 1800–1850* (Oxford, 2001), 64–65

The origins of evangelicalism are usually traced to the conjunction around 1740 of *pietismus* in central Europe, the ‘great awakening’ in New England, and the career of John Wesley in England. Wesley recorded his own conversion experience on 14 May 1738 with the words ‘I felt my heart strangely warmed’, and he brought evangelicalism to Ireland in numerous visits between 1747 and 1789.² The ‘religion of the heart’, ‘vital religion’ or ‘serious religion’ that he preached seemed the very converse of the religion practised in the contemporary Church of Ireland, many of whose clergy were preoccupied with enhancing their own careers and whose leading laymen (like their counterparts in England) abhorred any religious initiative that smacked of ‘enthusiasm’. Wesley and other Wesleyan preachers were most successful in converting ordinary lay people belonging, at least nominally, to the Church of Ireland, and around the end of the eighteenth century

this religion of the heart also became very attractive to a generation of candidates for the Anglican ministry as well as a number of élite laymen and laywomen.

In his study of Anglican evangelicals throughout the British Isles, Grayson Carter argues that Irish landlords who had ‘previously opposed methodistical “enthusiasm” ... welcomed travelling preachers’ in the wake of the 1798 rebellion as a way to deal with Catholic insurgency: ‘it was hoped that the conversion of the peasantry to “vital religion” might bring about the social stability which force of arms could not achieve’.³ The standard means in the evangelical armoury for promoting vital religion was a style of preaching calculated to focus the mind upon the rewards and punishments of the afterlife and to evoke a highly emotional response understood to mark the sinner’s conversion. But, as Irene Whelan points out:

Detail:
Nathaniel Grogan
The Itinerant Preacher
1783
oil on panel
44 x 61 cm
private collection, courtesy
of Sotheby’s

Itinerant open-air preaching modelled on the system that had proved so successful in England was totally unsuited to conditions in Ireland, certainly in areas where the population was predominantly Catholic. Designed to revive religious consciousness rather than to bring about formal adhesion to a church, it was virtually useless unless reinforced by a network of scripture schools and the active involvement of local organizers.⁴

Indeed, apart from a claim by John MacHale (then Catholic coadjutor bishop of Killala) that “‘fanatic females’ fell into trances and prophesied’ during the celebrated 1826–27 commotions over alleged Catholic converts in Cavan, very little, if any, evidence has come to light that Catholics were induced to have the sort of experience understood to be conversion by evangelicals of the English, methodical, type.⁵ Presbyterian evangelicals, who were more concerned that converts have the right answers than that they have the right ecstatic experience, were subject to similar disappointments. Two decades later, at the height of the Famine, a Presbyterian missionary in Kerry, his candour perhaps enhanced by his fear that the many souls dying around him were, in his words, ‘going down to hell’, wrote: ‘We may have erred ... in going to Roman Catholics as we would have done to careless Protestants, who had some knowledge of Scripture terms and duties, and we may have wondered why the Gospel was not the power of God to their salvation.’⁶

To place the Second Reformation in context, we should remember that in the nineteenth century, the idea of converting Irish Catholics to Protestantism was not new; the Penal Laws of the preceding century had provided material incentives for propertied Catholics to conform to the Established Church, and about 5,800 did so simply by subscribing to certain oaths and a declaration. Nothing in the process was intended to warm the subscriber’s heart or

to elicit evidence that such warming had occurred. Several contributors to *Converts and Conversion in Ireland, 1650–1850*, have examined conversion ‘narratives’ by Catholics (mainly priests) who conformed. In some cases these documents do suggest that the subjects were acting on ‘conviction’, rather than mere self-interest, but it seems to be *intellectual* conviction that Protestant doctrines constitute a more rational system than Catholic teachings, not a deep, heartfelt conviction of their own sinfulness accompanied or followed by a sense of assurance of their salvation.⁷ The evidence suggests that the Second Reformation also sought not *conversion* in the sense that that word is used by evangelical historians, but *conformity* — albeit on the part of ordinary Catholics rather than the Catholic élite. For the unpropertied, a suitable inducement was not security of the family estate or admission to a profession, but might be a new suit of clothes suitable for wearing to church or even something as tenuous as the good favour of the landlord’s agent.

If the Second Reformation was not primarily a conversionist effort, as evangelicals generally understand the term ‘conversion’, perhaps its evangelical character derives from what the evangelical historians call ‘biblicism’, for ‘scripture schools’ were central to the movement’s efforts. A deeply affective devotion to the Bible is certainly another aspect of vital religion that the movement might have tried to instil in Catholics. Once again Whelan cautions us not to jump to conclusions. The movement, she writes, ‘was supported by many who were not evangelical in the sense of basing all spiritual authority on a personal interpretation of the Bible’.⁸ Indeed, the scripture schools associated with the Second Reformation of the 1820s were only part of a much larger movement on the part of élites in various parts of the North Atlantic world in the early nineteenth century to provide accessible education as a means of gaining some control over

- 4 Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The ‘Second Reformation’ and the Polarization of Protestant–Catholic Relations, 1800–1840* (Madison, 2005), 89
- 5 Stewart J. Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland, 1801–1846* (Oxford, 2001), 124
- 6 *Missionary Herald* (May 1847), 431
- 7 Thomas P. Power, “‘A Weighty, Serious Business’: The Conversion of Catholic Clergy to Anglicanism”; James Kelly, ‘The Conversion Experience: The Case of Fr James O’Farrell, OP, 1785–7’; Michael Brown, ‘Conversion Narratives in Eighteenth-Century Ireland’, in Michael Brown, Charles Ivar McGrath, and T. P. Power, eds., *Converts and Conversion in Ireland, 1650–1850* (Dublin, 2005)
- 8 Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, 139
- 9 George Browne, *The History of the British and Foreign Bible Society: From Its Institution in 1804, to the Close of Its Jubilee in 1854: Compiled at the Request of the Jubilee Committee*, 2 vols. (London, 1859), vol. 1, 3. Edward Kilsdonk, ‘Religious Groups, Benevolent Organizations, and American Pluralism’, at ‘The American Religious Experience’, <http://are.as.wvu.edu/>
- 10 M., ‘The True Method of Studying the Bible’, *Orthodox Presbyterian*, 3, 33 (1832), 320–22

The Society for Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics was founded by the Rev. Alexander Dallas (1791–1869) in March 1849. Its purpose was ‘The great work of the enlightenment of large bodies of Roman Catholics in Ireland, by the affectionate preaching of an outspoken Gospel in antagonism to Roman Dogma ...’. The map (detail shown) and large (89.9 x 117.1 cm) hand-coloured illustrations reproduced here were designed by the ICM for an exhibition on its activities c. 1858; two additional illustrations in this series are not reproduced here. National Library of Ireland.



11 John Brown and H. Cooke, *The Self-Interpreting Bible, Containing the Old and New Testaments According to the Authorized Version; with an Introduction, Marginal References and Illustrations; a Summary of the Several Books; an Analysis of Each Chapter; a Paraphrase and Evangelical Reflections Upon the Most Important Passages; and Numerous Explanatory Notes. A New Edition in which the Text is More Fully Elucidated by Upwards of Eight Thousand Explanatory and Critical Notes, and Concluding Observations on Each Book, by the Rev. Henry Cooke* (New York, 1876)

the lower classes who were increasingly being empowered by the rise of democracy. Few advocates of such education could imagine it succeeding without a religious curricular component, and for Protestants, including Irish advocates of the Second Reformation, the usual formula for that component was ‘the Bible without note or comment’. That shibboleth was not a basic principle of evangelicalism, or indeed of any other religious party. It originated as a convenient device to avoid contention among different Protestant denominations, and turned out to be especially unacceptable to Catholic clergy.⁹ In 1832, the *Orthodox Presbyterian*, the semi-official voice of Irish Presbyterian evangelicalism led by Henry Cooke, ran a letter praising an edition of the Bible with ‘marginal references’ to parallel passages elsewhere in the Bible as an alternative to the use of commentaries.¹⁰ At that moment in the political conflicts over the new national education system it was convenient to promote Bible helps that

simply referred the reader to other biblical material and could be represented as neither ‘notes’ nor ‘comments’. However, later in his career, after the education issues of the 1820s and 1830s had been largely resolved, Cooke himself devoted considerable effort to producing a new edition of *Brown’s Self-Interpreting Bible*, whose subtitle promised readers ‘a Paraphrase and Evangelical Reflections Upon the Most Important Passages’, which, upon inspection, look suspiciously like notes and comments.¹¹ ‘Without note or comment’ was a rhetorical weapon in the education wars, not a piece of pastoral advice intended for any evangelical minister’s own flock.

Of course we have long known that the Second Reformation had at most a miniscule effect on the ratio between Catholics and Protestants in the Irish population. However, its effect on the *relations* between the Catholic and Protestant communities is more contested. The issue arises because



Irish Church Mission street preachers in an Irish town, c. 1858. National Library of Ireland.

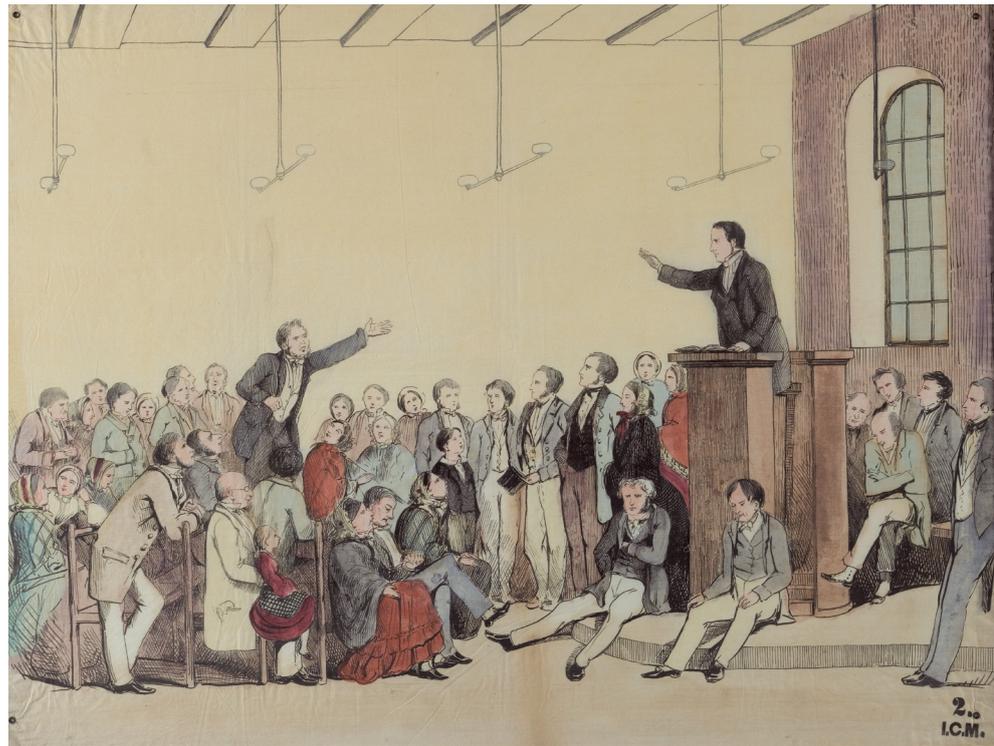
in the first two decades of the century, the Catholic bishops and respectable Catholic laymen shared the view of many Protestants that the poor should be educated, and they co-operated in the efforts of government-subsidized philanthropic associations like the Kildare Place Society to establish primary schools. Whelan takes strong exception to Desmond Bowen's suggestion that there was a 'religious peace' in Ireland between 1800 and 1822, and perhaps Bowen was a bit too ready to read accommodation between élites as an indicator of wider reconciliation.¹² Nigel Yates is closer to the mark when he writes of 'a decision on the part of the *leadership* of the three main religious groups in Ireland, the Church of Ireland, the Roman Catholics, and the Presbyterians to develop a strategy of mutual toleration and cooperation'.¹³ We should understand such developments as part of the quest by respectable Catholics to prove their *bona fides* and gain full membership within the new polity created in 1801. That process was cut short during

the 1820s when very different contenders for membership in the polity — the Catholic peasantry — were mobilized and then, in 1829, won for their respectable co-religionists the very prize that the Catholic élite had hoped to win for themselves. This sudden democratization of constitutional politics not only made the education question more urgent, but also terminated the polite interaction between Catholic and Protestant leaders that had developed in the first two decades of the century.

Yates overreaches, however, when he argues that inter-Church reconciliation was continuous for the period from 1770 to 1820 (though he does concede that the events of the 1790s 'threatened to destabilize this fragile framework of relative ecumenism'). Perhaps if he had studied the mountain of pamphlets generated by the so-called Dublin paper war of the 1780s, he would have understood that, prior to the focusing of élite minds by the events of 1798, any ecumenism was even more

- 12 Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, 132 n. 27, 270. Desmond Bowen, *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800–70: A Study of Protestant-Catholic Relations between the Act of Union and Disestablishment* (Dublin, 1978), x
- 13 Nigel Yates, *The Religious Condition of Ireland, 1770–1850* (Oxford, 2006), xx; emphasis added

A confrontation between a Protestant preacher and a Catholic priest, c. 1858. National Library of Ireland.



14 Yates, *The Religious Condition of Ireland*, 62, 270–71

15 Alan Acheson, *A History of the Church of Ireland, 1691–2001* (Blackrock, 2002), 156–57

16 Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, 157

17 Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland*, 98

18 Brown, *The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland*, 93–167

fragile than he supposes. In any event, he apportions much of the blame for the tensions from 1820 to 1850 to ‘the growth of Evangelical extremism within both the Church of Ireland and Irish Presbyterianism’ and the ‘proselytizing tendencies of the Irish Evangelicals’ which, he argues, brought about the Second Reformation.¹⁴ The launching of the Second Reformation is usually attributed to the charge that the new archbishop of Dublin, William Magee, delivered to his clergy in 1822. Magee was a high-churchman in an episcopate that had only one evangelical prelate (Archbishop Trench of Tuam) until the 1840s. Naturally evangelicals were prominent in trying to convert poverty-stricken Catholics in the 1820s and 1830s; the opulent livings in attractive locales were no doubt being awarded to clergymen whose theological leanings were more consistent with those of the bishops.¹⁵ Whelan is reading the evangelical dominance of the Church of Ireland a generation later back into the 1820s when she describes Magee’s initiative

as ‘jumping on board and taking over the reins’.¹⁶ Stewart J. Brown offers a more accurate formulation when he describes the Second Reformation as ‘a movement that united the Irish Evangelical and High Church parties in a common cause’.¹⁷

Brown considers the movement within the framework of power relationships in the whole United Kingdom polity during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ In that context, the primary dynamic was the growing willingness within the British governing classes to reconsider the confessional character of the state, not the growing evangelical component of the Irish state Church. Of the three Established Churches in the UK, the Church of Ireland was the most vulnerable to attacks on its constitutional status, and Magee’s initiative is seen as an effort to protect the Church from such attacks by, at long last, making Protestants of the native Irish. For about a year, starting in the autumn of 1826, a spate of apparent conversions in Cavan and



Rev. Alexander Dallas preaches in Sellerna, Co Galway; hostile crowds in both foreground and background, c. 1858. National Library of Ireland

a few other localities allowed supporters of the movement to believe that they had made the strategic breakthrough that would vindicate the state Church's claim to be a national Church. By the end of 1827, however, reported conversions dwindled, and whatever opportunity there may have been to dispel British doubts of the Church of Ireland's ability to play its appointed Erastian role had been lost. The Irish Protestant confessional state soon suffered two vital blows: Catholic Emancipation in 1829, at the hands of a Tory government, and the Church Temporalities Act in 1833, at the hands of its Whig successors. So the Second Reformation can reasonably be seen as a sort of epiphenomenon resulting from the high politics of reform among the British governing classes. It was carried out on the ground mostly by individuals who called themselves 'evangelicals', but at the bidding of others who definitely were not evangelicals.

At one point Whelan very discerningly observes that Catholics came to define the term 'evangelicals' as 'all those who espoused converting Irish Catholics to the Protestant faith'.¹⁹ Such a perception on the Catholics' part was understandable, but unfortunate, given that most evangelicals subsequently lost interest in converting the Catholics. For example, in the 1850s the Presbyterian General Assembly undertook a summertime programme of open-air preaching by Presbyterian ministers for the purpose of reaching lapsed members of their own communion. In 1857 a series of such open-air sermons provoked sectarian rioting in Belfast. Janice Holmes has convincingly maintained that to regard these events as merely an episode in the continuing battles over territorial dominance in Belfast is too simplistic.²⁰ As I have argued elsewhere, the assembly's larger open-air preaching campaign was not an effort either to convert or to annoy Catholics, even if that

19 Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*, 140

20 Janice Holmes, 'The Role of Open-Air Preaching in the Belfast Riots of 1857', *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, 102C (2002), 47–66

- 21 David W. Miller, 'Did Ulster Presbyterians have a Devotional Revolution?', in James H. Murphy, ed., *Evangelicals and Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2005), 47–50
- 22 David Hempton and Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740–1890* (London, 1992)
- 23 Andrew R. Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840* (Oxford, 2006)
- 24 Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, 36–39
- 25 *Oxford English Dictionary*, sub 'revival' 3.b. David W. Miller, 'Religious Commotions in the Scottish Diaspora: A Transatlantic Perspective on "Evangelicalism" in a Mainline Denomination', in David A. Wilson and Mark G. Spencer, eds., *Ulster Presbyterians in the Atlantic World: Religion, Politics and Identity* (Dublin, 2006), 22–38

is how it was perceived; its priorities were reflected in the fact that the preaching occurred primarily in areas where there was a substantial Protestant, especially Presbyterian, population.²¹

Most of the insights offered by recent treatments of the Second Reformation fit tidily into the framework provided in David Hempton and Myrtle Hill's 1992 study of Ulster evangelicalism.²² Unfortunately, Hempton and Hill failed to take sufficient account of the divergence between evangelicals of English and Scottish origin. The authors do acknowledge a difference between the religious experience of Presbyterians (53 per cent of Ulster Protestants in 1861) and that of Protestants of English descent, but their model of evangelicalism is resolutely English and methodist. Happily, Andrew Holmes has now very ably addressed these shortcomings.²³ He traces the eighteenth-century origins of two strains of Presbyterian evangelicalism. The first of these strains, developed in the Popular Party of the Church of Scotland and the 'Old Light' party in the Synod of Ulster, sought 'to promote correct views of the person and work of Christ rather than a certain conversion experience'. The second, fashioned by the Seceders in both Scotland and Ulster, was more open to a 'gospel of grace' for 'everyone as individuals and without distinction' but only in the context of 'an orthodox understanding of preaching as a means of grace animated by the Holy Spirit rather than a rejection of the Reformed understanding of limited atonement'.²⁴ These two strains both contribute to the emergence in mainstream Irish Presbyterianism of a clear evangelical identity during the period between the 1829 schism, in which ministers opposed to subscription to the Calvinistic Westminster Confession of Faith were forced out of the General Synod, and the 1840 merger of the General and Seceding synods to form the General Assembly of the Presbyterian

Church in Ireland. The result was a variety of evangelicals who valued vital religion as much as did their Anglican counterparts, but for whom confessionality — adherence to the Westminster standards — was as central as conversionism. By clarifying the distinctiveness of what Presbyterians meant by 'evangelical', Holmes has shed a flood of light on Irish Protestant history.

By the 1820s many Presbyterian clergy had reconciled in their own minds the tensions between vital religion and Calvinist orthodoxy. However, they were far from reconciled with the particular mechanism developed in America for making conversion happen: a meeting or series of meetings, often outdoors, in which one or more preachers used homiletic techniques calculated to induce highly emotional responses understood as symptoms of conversion and frequently accompanied by physical manifestations on the part of some converts. Contemporaries used various terms to describe such events — 'display of God's grace', 'surprising work of God', 'outpouring of the Holy Ghost' — but apparently the term revival was never used until the very end of the eighteenth century, except in phrases like 'revival of religion' (to distinguish it from, say, the revival of a stage play). However, around 1800 'revival' as an elliptical noun entered the language to describe such events on the American frontier; from that time forward it was possible to say, 'we need a revival', without any modifier and be understood to be making a statement about religion. It took a bit longer for the new usage to catch on in the British Isles; as late as 1818 an English traveller could write: 'The Methodists of Cincinnati are very zealous, and have what they call "a revival" in the country.'²⁵ But the next wave of American revivals, from 1824 to 1835, was widely enough reported that religious professionals in Ireland knew exactly what 'a revival' was.

During the 1820s and 1830s, Holmes finds evangelical ministers redefining 'revival'

to denote the very process of ‘reform and renewal of the church’ that they themselves were promoting in those decades; especially the 1829 purging of ministers with Unitarian tendencies, growing interest in home and foreign mission initiatives, and the 1840 merger of the two synods.²⁶ During the next two decades, Holmes finds some clergy cautiously revising their concept of ‘revival’ to correspond more closely to the word’s actual usage in general discourse. In 1859, however, ministers found themselves suddenly facing exactly such a revival as many of them had tried to define out of existence, complete with trances, convulsions and even stigmata. In the wake of that event, Holmes argues, the earlier clerical redefinition of ‘revival’, in terms of Church renewal and reform, became ‘fragmented’. Ulster Presbyterianism came to rely on outside professional revivalists, such as Dwight Moody, to provide well-orchestrated events consistent with middle-class respectability. In the long run the Presbyterian Church, failing to engage effectively the populist revivalism of 1859, would confront a serious threat from ‘non-denominational and lay evangelicalism’ in the twentieth century.

Holmes’s ability to convey the implications of these very important findings is constrained by his vague conceptualization of the relationship between official and popular religion. Throughout his book he refers to a ‘symbiotic relationship’ between clergy and laity without giving that metaphor analytic power. Yet he seems to view contemporary lay people and later scholars as simply wrong if they fail to toe the party line advocated by the clergy. For example, he disparages ‘the *mistaken* assumption’ by three different scholars ‘that the basic characteristics of revival ... are enthusiasm and an unrestrained populism, aptly expressed in sudden conversions and physical manifestations’.²⁷ Perhaps it would make more sense to recognize that in this instance the clergy had a new product called

Church reform and renewal. They tried to sell it to working-class lay people by labelling it ‘revival’, a very different product widely available and quite popular in America. Their potential customers — many of them from the poorest stratum of the Presbyterian population — simply insisted on the real thing. Faced with the sudden and massive import of a real American-style revival in 1859, the clergy moved quickly, and with some short-term success, to represent themselves as vendors of that product. In the long run, however, there was considerable leakage from Presbyterianism to Methodism and smaller evangelical sects.²⁸ The clergy chose to meet the demand by their middle-class clientele for respectable religion and thereby forfeit a significant market share of working-class customers.

Holmes illustrates this choice in a recent article demonstrating that although Irish Presbyterian clergy were slower than their Scottish counterparts to accept the findings of the higher critics, by the 1920s this new approach to scripture was no longer scandalous to most of them.²⁹ During that decade, the Irish Presbyterian Church experienced a ‘fundamentalist-modernist conflict’ comparable to the one that was causing turmoil in the (northern) Presbyterian Church, USA, and in both cases the ‘modernist’ side won (though perhaps not as decisively as appeared to be the case a generation ago). The relevance of this comparison is highlighted by the work of David Livingstone and Ronald Wells on ‘Ulster-American religion’. Between about 1860 and 1940, they persuasively argue, Irish Presbyterianism had reoriented its relationships within the Presbyterian world; Princeton Theological Seminary replaced the Scottish universities as the lodestar of Irish Presbyterian theology.³⁰ That reorientation is important because the rise of fundamentalism in the United States has created a popular evangelical culture quite different from that of Britain and arguably not found in such strength in

- 26 Holmes, *The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice*, 49–50. Andrew R. Holmes, ‘The Experience and Understanding of Religious Revival in Ulster Presbyterianism, c. 1800–1930’, *Irish Historical Studies*, 34, 136 (2005), 361–85
- 27 Holmes, ‘The Experience and Understanding of Religious Revival in Ulster Presbyterianism’, 375; emphasis added
- 28 David W. Miller, ‘Did Ulster Presbyterians have a Devotional Revolution?’, in Murphy, *Evangelicals and Catholics*, 38–54
- 29 Andrew Holmes, ‘Biblical Authority and the Impact of Higher Criticism in Irish Presbyterianism, ca. 1850–1930’, *Church History*, 75, 2 (2006), 343–73
- 30 David N. Livingstone and Ronald A. Wells, *Ulster-American Religion: Episodes in the History of a Cultural Connection* (Notre Dame, 1999)

31 George Marsden, 'Fundamentalism as an American Phenomenon: A Comparison with English Evangelicalism', *Church History*, 46, 2 (1977), 215–32

any other Protestant society today, *except*, as the distinguished historian of American evangelicalism George Marsden has observed, in Northern Ireland.³¹

Over the past generation, historians of Irish Catholicism have had the good fortune to be able to pose and offer answers to a question prompted by a striking contemporary development: If the Catholic Ireland remembered by Irish adults is saying 'Goodbye,' when did it say 'Hello'? The discovery that less than 50 per cent of Irish Catholics ordinarily attended mass on Sunday during the 1830s, together with research on various devotional innovations, have made it plain that that 'Hello' occurred sometime in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The implications of such research were resisted for a time by Catholic

denominational historians with a stake in the social construction of a timeless isle of saints, forever models of piety, but the historical profession now works with a fundamentally new paradigm for understanding Irish Catholicism. Holmes, Livingstone and Wells are dancing around a problem that has similar potential to recast our thinking on the history of Irish Protestantism. That problem is how and why the popular religious culture that has sustained the career of Ian Paisley came into being. To solve that problem, historians must adopt a trans-Atlantic perspective. They must also move beyond the theological and institutional history that dominates both of these books and, for example, treat 'non-denominational and lay evangelicalism' (that is, gospel halls and similar phenomena) not as mistakes, but as serious objects of study. ■

Books considered in this essay:

Converts and Conversion in Ireland, 1650–1850
 Edited by Michael Brown, Charles Ivar McGrath, and T. P. Power
 Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2005
 Pages 320. ISBN 1-85182-810-9

The National Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland, 1801–1846
 Stewart J. Brown
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001
 xi + 459 pages. ISBN 0-19-924235-6

Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the Via Media, c. 1800–1850
 Grayson Carter
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001
 xv + 470 pages. ISBN 0-19-827008-9

The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice, 1770–1840
 Andrew R. Holmes
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006
 xv + 374 pages. ISBN 0-19-928865-8

Ulster-American Religion: Episodes in the History of a Cultural Connection
 David N. Livingstone and Ronald A. Wells
 Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999
 x + 201 pages. ISBN 0-268-04304-3

The Bible War in Ireland: The 'Second Reformation' and the Polarization of Protestant–Catholic Relations, 1800–1840
 Irene Whelan
 Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005
 xx + 347 pages. ISBN 0-299-21550-4

The Religious Condition of Ireland, 1770–1850
 Nigel Yates
 Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006
 xxiv + 401 pages. ISBN 0-19-924238-0