

„THE SHAPING OF ULSTER PRESBYTERIAN BELIEF AND PRACTICE 1770-1840“

Oxford University Press, Oxford & New York, 2008, pp. 374

As history cogently informs us, one of the principal enduring trouble-spots in the world, both politically and by way of religious culture, is the context of Northern Ireland. It remains a complex and often miss-understood politico-religious embattlement that now shows some positive signs in the decline of warring sectarianism and the arrival of relatively peaceful community co-existence between Roman Catholics and Protestants in 'the Province'. Both sides are now apparently more prepared to compromise their differences and put aside their often bitter historical rivalries in order to reach a measure of political accord.

The source of the so-called political 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland hitherto resulted not just from a severe ethno-religious conflict which periodically exploded into violence between the Protestant and Catholic communities, but historically unworkable political settlements that magnified religious and cultural antagonisms. The Province was divided as a distinct sub-division of the United Kingdom in 1921, although this constitutional settlement can be traced back to the Act of Union in 1800. While Northern Ireland enjoyed a level of self-governance for over fifty difficult years, its Parliament was suspended in 1972, then abolished, as a result of the heightened antagonisms between the two communities.

In many respects the 1921 settlement and a measure of self-rule that followed proved unworkable since the Catholic minority remained largely hostile to the supreme Parliamentary power in London, while the Protestant community sustained its pride in British cultural and religious heritage and remained loyal. Catholic fears and aspirations found root in the nationalist cause to secede from the UK, while the Protestant community, in the form of Unionist and Loyalist organisations, preferred the status quo that often enhanced their political and economic dominance which, in turn, was frequently expressed in Protestant religious terms. Despite these political and religious rifts, over a decade ago the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive were established in an endeavour to return to power sharing self-government in the Province. It remains to be seen whether such self-rule and the peace that it cultivated will endure.

Given the history of discord and the significance of recent relative peace, it is advantageous to reflect on the impact of religious groups in and of themselves and their political engagement, for it is they that have helped what the Province was historically and what it has become. This is why Andrew Holmes' volume, *The*

Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian Belief and Practice 1770-1840, is so significant. One of the principal stalwarts of Protestantism, especially in its hard-line political stance and anti-Catholicism, has been Presbyterianism whose leaders and members have long supported Loyalist political parties and groupings in their erstwhile struggles for the continued unity of the UK.

Presbyterianism came to Ireland with the arrival of Scottish settlers to Ulster in the first decades of the seventeenth century. Over the next hundred years Presbyterians formed a separate and distinct ecclesiastical and political identity mostly in the regions ('counties') of Antrim, Down and Londonderry through the founding of congregations, presbyteries and a General Synod. Presbyterianism has endured and remains at the core of the Reformed, anti-Catholic tradition in the Province until this day, despite its internal divisions that have been haunted by theological controversies which themselves were forged by wider social divisions within the Protestant enclave.

As Holmes acknowledges, scholars of Presbyterianism in Northern Ireland had previously concentrated largely on such internal theological divisions, alongside its institutions, and political involvement in the Loyalist cause. This has been particularly with reference to the United Irish movement and its integral wish for Ulster to remain part of the UK, and this was evident from the bloody 1798 rebellion that led to the Act of Union until present times. Informed by the work of recent historians of religion, Holmes' volume is innovating in that it considers the unique beliefs and praxis of Presbyterianism as distinct from political involvement, especially the emphasis upon layers of private and public religiosity in the community setting. Holmes thus highlights the significance of religious motivation which underpins the Presbyterian's theology and practice at the everyday level. Tracing the roots of Presbyterianism - its theological and evangelical tradition, alongside such themes as status, gender and regional variations - he explains the frequently tortured relationship between clergy and laity which suggests that it has not always been a united and coherent denominational structure.

The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian traces the denomination's conventions and prevailing spirit in the light of its doctrinal touchstones, centrality in the Reformed tradition, the history of revivalism, and its role as a dominant force within Irish Protestantism. Rather than seeing evangelism as a product of Protestant extremism, Holmes interprets the internal dynamics of the denomination as largely responsible for its political orientations as evident in the 1859 rebellion. Earlier, the period 1770 and 1840 was particularly vital to the development of the denomination and more generally of Northern Irish history. In accounting for the Presbyterian role in evangelism Holmes analyses the three major influences that shaped it, namely, tradition, reform and revival. On the first count, Presbyterian tradition has a dual meaning. It points to the theological foundation as ensconced in the so-called Westminster standards of Protestantism that was embraced by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland between 1645 and 1648 and thereafter adopted by Presbyterians in Ireland. On the other hand, tradition indicates how those beliefs and practices, that have long been held by the laity, combine theological tenets with customary belief and socio-political objectives. In turn, these have historically reflected economic change, the capitalisation of the economy, the attempt to improve public moral standards, as well as the growing centrality of evangelicalism and revivalism.

The lengthy Introduction to the volume includes an overview of the historiography used in Holme's research, an overview of the economic and social background of the development of Presbyterianism, and the crucial period of 1770-1840 in regard of the internal reform of the movement. The volume has four subsequent parts. The first part examines, in an impressive elaboration of historical developments, the core observances of the Sabbath, that is, periods of fasting and thanksgiving. Part two overviews expressions of public worship in the Presbyterian churches, namely, psalmody, preaching, communion and discipline. The impressive third part of the volume examines the sacrament of baptism, marriage and sexual relationship, and rites of passage surrounding the death of the faithful. The concluding part dissects the nature of religious instruction, fellowship and activities outside of the church context. This entails the consideration of catechising, education, reading practices, family worship, prayer meetings and lay participation in church life. The volume is also embellished by a number of helpful maps and tables to understand the Presbyterian way of life, its geographical dispersion and demographic composition.

The Shaping of Ulster Presbyterian is an enlightening work and Holmes' elucidation of historical detail will undoubtedly delight those concerned with the study of Northern Irish religiosity and its social and political repercussions. For those who, more broadly, have struggled to comprehend the political cleavages in the Province, the volume will help provide an understanding of what constitutes one part of a complex religious and cultural environment that has great political significance. What cannot be doubted is the contribution of this fine historiography to the overall kaleidoscope of development in the Ulster Province and its long prevailing socio-political and religious discontents. Despite church attendance decline, political involvement by the major religious constituencies continues and will continue to play a part in future developments in Northern Ireland. This volume helps us understand why this is so.

Stephen J. Hunt¹

Примљено: 18.8.2009.

Прихваћено: 21.9.2009.

¹ stephen3.hunt@uwe.ac.uk; Department of Sociology & Criminology, University of the West of England, UK.