

Bell, J. Bowyer. *The Irish Troubles: A Generation of Conflict, 1967-1992*. New York: St. Martin's, 1993.

Several years ago, while teaching at Georgetown University, I saw a student wearing a sweatshirt that read: "So many books, so little time." This slogan comes to mind immediately whenever one contemplates reading a book about the Irish Troubles; after all, as J. Bowyer Bell mentions in his introduction to *The Irish Troubles*, there are some 7,000 scholarly publications available on the crisis in Northern Ireland. So why is another book worth reading?

The answer to this question is that *The Irish Troubles* makes two valuable scholarly contributions. First, it is an *excellent* history of the troubles themselves. With respect to the troubles Bell was literally "present at the creation"; i.e. he had started his research on the Irish Republican Army in the mid-1960s, and hence has been a student of the troubles since the first incidents of civil disobedience and violence began in the late 1960s. Bell has made good use of the thirty years he has spent studying Ireland; he has conducted literally thousands of interviews with a wide spectrum of the individuals involved in the troubles. He has used these numerous interviews (plus a great deal of the written primary and secondary sources on the troubles) to put together a detailed and insightful history of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland.

In addition to being a solid history of the troubles, Bell's book is valuable for its many insights concerning a question currently confronting *all* of the world's democratic societies: how do such societies, which are committed to due process, the rule of law, and civil liberties, respond to violence by revolutionary groups? Put differently, how do democratic societies respond to violent revolutionary movements that use the very freedoms democracy upholds as instruments to destroy democratic governments?

Bell has carefully studied a number of the world's revolutionary movements, and consequently realizes that there is no easy answer to this question. Nevertheless, a careful reading of *The Irish Troubles* yields several general principles to guide democratic governments in crafting their response to revolutionary violence.

First, Bell argues persuasively that there are *grave* dangers involved whenever a democratic government uses its military as a police force. Bell is, of course, well aware that the various British governments since 1969 have kept their troops in Northern Ireland largely because they fear that a withdrawal would lead to rapid and terrible escalation of the already existing violence in that province. However, while he realizes the difficult predicament facing the British government, at the same time he is careful to point out that military force is a blunt instrument, and consequently that a military used as a police force will invariably engage in atrocities, such as the Bloody Sunday incident in January 1972, in which thirteen Catholics participating in a peaceful march were killed by British soldiers.

The Bloody Sunday incident is a good illustration of Bell's second conclusion about how democratic governments should respond to revolutionary violence. Specifically, Bell builds a cogent argument that it is most counterproductive for democratic societies to respond to terroristic violence with harsh, repressive measures. Bell notes, for example, that the upshot of such repressive measures as internment without trial in the summer of 1971, and the Bloody Sunday incident in January 1972, was that 1972 was the most violent year of the troubles. In brief, Bell's counsel to democratic governments responding to terroristic violence is to use minimum force rather than draconian repression.

Bell's third recommendation for democratic governments confronting violent revolutionary movements is to remember the warnings of a number of classic writers on democracy (such as America's Founding Fathers and France's Alexis de Tocqueville) who warned of the danger of majority tyranny. Northern Ireland's constitutional debates about some sort of devolved province-wide government are a classic illustration of how majority rule can lead to abuses of power. Specifically, the Protestants in Northern Ireland have always argued that they are loyal British subjects and hence that any provincial assembly should be a replica of the Westminster Parliament. What the Protestants do not mention is that given the polarized nature of Northern Ireland's society, a parliament such as that at Westminster (in which any party that has a solid 51 percent of the seats has 100 percent of the power) would mean that the Protestant majority would have total control of the province's political system. The fifty-year history of the Stormont Parliament (1922-72) illustrates the Protestant's abuse of their majority power; in these fifty years the Catholic Nationalist Party succeeded in introducing and passing only one bill on the unmomentous issue of protecting

wild birds.

In other words, Northern Ireland illustrates a critical lesson for democratic governments in societies with polarized ethnic, racial and religious cleavages: namely, that social peace and order in such societies require that all social groups have a voice in formulating public policy, even if the groups in question are numerical minorities. For example, one of the key reasons why divided societies such as Switzerland, the Netherlands, and Austria have avoided widespread violence in recent decades is that these nations' governments form public policy by consensus and cooperation rather than by rigid majoritarianism. As Bell points out, the Catholic Social Democrat and Labor Party (SDLP) has repeatedly called for such power-sharing; unfortunately for Northern Ireland the Protestants have never been willing to agree to power-sharing with the Catholics.

In conclusion, when the current round of the Irish troubles began in the late 1960s, there was considerable consternation and disbelief among both scholars and the laity. How could there possibly be a conflict over religion in today's world, observers demanded: after all, as the 1960s rhetoric put it, "religion is irrelevant." In the 1990s, after a generation of conflict in Northern Ireland, the world has witnessed other bloody civil wars among religious groups in countries as diverse as Sri Lanka, Lebanon, the Sudan and Bosnia. No longer is there a widespread belief that "religion is irrelevant." Thus J. Bowyer Bell's *The Irish Troubles* is worthwhile reading both for those who have a particular interest in the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland and for those who have a more general interest in religious and ethnic conflicts worldwide.

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