



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

It is for a nation of martyrs to cultivate constant self-restraint.' The Irish Catholic bishops' attitude to the IRA campaign, 1919-1921

Heffernan, Brian

Citation

Heffernan, B. (2008). It is for a nation of martyrs to cultivate constant self-restraint.' The Irish Catholic bishops' attitude to the IRA campaign, 1919-1921. *Leidschrift : Historisch Terrorisme. De Ervaring Met Politiek Geweld In De Moderne Tijd*, 23(April), 151-169. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72823>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)
License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)
Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/72823>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

'It is for a nation of martyrs to cultivate constant self-restraint.' The Irish Catholic bishops' attitude to the IRA campaign, 1919-21

Brian Heffernan

Journalists writing for audiences blissfully unaware of the details of the Northern Irish conflict are often at a loss as to how to typify the two formerly belligerent camps. The terms 'republican' and 'loyalist' are not automatically recognisable as opposites for readers unfamiliar with the course of Irish history. As often as not, journalists resort to a characteristic that is universally understood: religious affiliation. As a result, the IRA and its loyalist counterparts are presented as either 'Catholic' or 'Protestant terrorist organisations'. Clearly, this view of the conflict as nothing more than a religious war is facile. Nevertheless, religion has undeniably been an important factor in the long history of Ireland's 'Troubles', and since the upsurge of public interest in religious violence since '9/11' historians as well as journalists have never been keener to analyse it.

In two essays published in the 2006 yearbook of the Dutch Institute for War Documentation (Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie NIOD), historians Annette Becker and James McMillan have identified two ways in which religion and political violence have been connected in the history of the twentieth century.¹ On the one hand religion has been an important legitimising factor for political violence, in cases where the cult of the fatherland and the service of God merged to form a single cause. On the other hand religion has provided a basis for condemning the use of violence on moral grounds and has thus served to undermine its justification. It is the purpose of this article to enquire which of these two modes best describes the attitude assumed by the Roman Catholic bishops towards the IRA campaign during an earlier outbreak of political violence in Ireland: the 1919 to 1921 War of Independence.

¹ Annette Becker, 'De terugkeer naar de altaren. Kerken en religieuze hartstochten tijdens de Eerste Wereldoorlog' in: *Religie. Godsdiens en geweld in de twintigste eeuw. Zeventiende jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (Zutphen 2006) 32-46; James McMillan, 'Writing the spiritual history of the First World War' in: *Religie. Godsdiens en geweld in de twintigste eeuw. Zeventiende jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (Zutphen 2006) 47-71.

This question may be situated in two distinct discourses in modern historiography. Firstly, it is part of ongoing research into different aspects of the revolution that brought about the Irish state. Secondly, it accords with the repertoire of questions asked by ‘religious history’, which has seen a new popularity in recent years.² Traditional political history and traditional church history shared a common focus on leaders, institutions and ideas. Both recent Irish historiography and religious history have moved away from this emphasis and have in stead concentrated on the lives and behaviour of ‘ordinary’ Irishmen and women and ‘ordinary’ Catholics and Protestants. The role played by religious leaders continues to be relevant, but must be assessed with regard to its impact on the behaviour of the members of their faith communities – the Catholic community in Ireland consisting of the great majority of the people.

This article will examine the joint declarations of the bishops, various utterances by individual senior bishops made during the course of the War of Independence and clerical and lay correspondence from the Archbishop William Walsh Papers in the Dublin diocesan archives. This evidence enables us to reach some – tentative – conclusions that will help to obtain a fuller understanding of the bishops’ attitude towards republican violence. We will start by examining the episcopate’s main joint declaration during the war, the 1920 October pastoral. Then we will analyse the bishops’ pronouncements on Ireland’s right to self-determination and on the question of the Irish republic’s legitimacy, on the morality – or rather immorality – of republican violence and, finally, on the responsibility borne by the British authorities for the conflict.

Defining the issue

Irish nationalists had advocated autonomy or even independence for Ireland ever since the late eighteenth century. However, when a ‘Home Rule’ Act providing for devolved government finally reached the statute

² For an analysis of the advent of religious history, see: Paul Luykx, ‘Wetenschap en “religie en geweld”. Ter inleiding’ in: *Religie. Godsdienst en geweld in de twintigste eeuw. Zeventiende jaarboek van het Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie* (Zutphen 2006), 11-31. For a recent example, see the handbook of Dutch religious history by Joris van Eijnatten and Fred van Lieburg, *Nederlandse religiegeschiedenis* (Hilversum 2005).

book in 1914, it encountered fierce opposition from Ulster unionists and was immediately suspended due to the outbreak of the Great War. A minority of advanced nationalists – convinced that constitutional politics were no longer sufficient to obtain their goals – staged the Easter Rising of 1916 and proclaimed an Irish republic. In the wake of their defeat, Irish public opinion turned away from Home Rule nationalism to support the more radical republicanism espoused by the rebels of 1916. When elections were held in December 1918, the republican party of Sinn Féin obtained a large majority. Its deputies decided to abstain from Westminster and set up a separate Irish assembly called Dáil Éireann, which met for the first time in January 1919. Armed republican Volunteers³ simultaneously started attacking officers of the crown, thus initiating a sequence of hostilities developing into guerrilla warfare in many parts of the country in 1920. The objective of the IRA campaign was to eliminate British presence in the country, and it was primarily directed at policemen and at the special paramilitary forces deployed by the British from the spring and summer of 1920 onwards. This War of Independence, waged to obtain the freedom of the Irish republic, came to an end in July 1921, when a truce was declared which opened the way for negotiations.

A popular conception exists that the official ecclesiastical policy during the War of Independence – as opposed to local clerical practice – was to denounce IRA violence.⁴ Some researchers have criticised this hypothesis and have downplayed the Catholic hierarchy's opposition to the IRA campaign.⁵ The bishops' most famous pronouncement during the war,

³ The Irish Volunteers, who assumed the name of Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the course of 1919, were a nationalist paramilitary corps set up in 1913 in response to the foundation of the Ulster Volunteers, a unionist corps pledged to resist the enactment of Home Rule.

⁴ For examples of this hypothesis, see: Tom Garvin, *1922. The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin 1996) 42; Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin 2002) 17, 189. It caused historian and later Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich to defend the church against the allegation that she had thwarted Ireland's struggle for independence: Tomás Ó Fiaich, 'The Catholic Clergy and the Independence Movement', *The Capuchin Annual* 37 (1970) 480-502.

⁵ Dermot Keogh has contended for instance that the 'confrontational dimension' of relations between the bishops and the republican leadership must not be overstressed, see: Dermot Keogh, *The Vatican, the Bishops and Irish Politics 1919-39* (Cambridge 1986) 29-76. I have argued recently that the hierarchy's links with the

a joint statement ‘on the present condition of the country’ issued in October 1920, was certainly more concerned with condemning British violence than republican violence. This celebrated October pastoral was a full-blown attack on British rule in Ireland, its most famous lines comparing it to ‘the horrors of Turkish atrocities, or (...) the outrages attributed to the Red Army of Bolshevist Russia’.⁶ The bishops stated that they had ‘warned the Government that the oppressive measures, which they were substituting for their professions of freedom, would lead to the most deplorable consequences’. Their line of reasoning was clear: British repression bred republican violence. The violence their country had witnessed over the last year and a half was not regular warfare between two belligerents on an equal footing. It was a matter of state coercion provoking an exasperated people into committing crime. ‘Outrage has been connived at and encouraged, if not organised, not by obscure and irresponsible individuals, but by the Government of a mighty Empire, professing the highest ideals of truth and justice’, and the result was that it had become ‘well-nigh impossible’ ‘for the Pastors of the Flock to uphold the Law of God and secure its observance.’

After this letter was published, the bishops were criticised by unionists – including some Catholics – for shifting the blame for republican violence onto the British and thus giving Volunteers a pretext for claiming that the church condoned their actions. After hearing the October pastoral read at Mass, Catholic layman E. McDonnell wrote to Archbishop William Walsh of Dublin that ‘murders of (members of the police force) are callously condoned by many Catholics and too often pass uncondemned by the Hierarchy and Priesthood’.⁷ This accusation was difficult to rebut. The bishops’ assertion that they were ‘opposed to crime, from whatever side it comes’ rang a little hollow in the context of the pastoral, which made no further mention of republican violence and called British rule ‘terrorism’. As if to stress the point, the bishops quoted from a statement made by

republican leaders did not prevent it from persisting in and even stepping up its condemnation of IRA violence during the course of the war: B.J. Heffernan, *The Churches and the Anglo-Irish War. An Appraisal of the Role of the Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland in the Anglo-Irish War, 1919-1921* (unpublished MA thesis, Leiden University, 2003).

⁶ *The Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac for 1921* (Dublin 1921) 556-561.

⁷ McDonnell to Walsh, 1 November 1920, Dublin Diocesan Archives (DDA), Walsh Papers (WP), box 392 I, folder 380/5.

Michael Cardinal Logue of Armagh condemning the recent murder of a policeman in his diocese. The passage quoted denounced the police, not the (presumably republican) perpetrators, and accused them of having turned into 'the most ardent votaries of lawlessness and disorder'. This kind of reasoning was typical of the strategy pursued by the bishops throughout the war, and it entailed a recurring dilemma that they found impossible to solve: holding the British responsible for all acts of violence inevitably undermined the credibility of denunciations of republican violence.

Such denunciations were by no means lacking in number or vehemence, but the bishops had few alternative courses of action to offer to those who were engaged in it. They showed in the October pastoral that they did not endorse the republican view that a sovereign state had been established, and that it was waging a legitimate war against foreign occupation by means of its army, the IRA. Rather, they exhorted their people to rely on God to

prosper their struggle for freedom while they remain steadfast to the ideals and requirements of Holy Faith. It is for a nation of martyrs to cultivate constant self-restraint. (...) Accordingly, 'see that none renders evil for evil to any man, but ever follow that which is good towards each other and towards all men'.⁸

Ireland was a nation of martyrs, 'a great Christian nation', being persecuted by 'the new paganism' that prevailed across the Channel. But martyrs do not fight back – at least, not then before the advent of suicide bombers. On the contrary, they must cultivate constant self-restraint and 'use well the all-powerful weapon of prayer'.

This religious language differed rather markedly from the unambiguously political terms used to characterise British rule and the need for Irish independence. 'Our relations with England have been always a terrible misfortune for us', they wrote, and they argued that the only way to settle the Irish question was for Britain to recognize 'the indefeasible right of Ireland, as of every other nation, to choose the form of Government under which its people are to live'. However, the bishops could recommend only such ascetic ideals as martyrdom, self-restraint and spiritual warfare as an alternative to the physical warfare waged by the IRA. This somewhat bland disavowal of guerrilla warfare shows no lack of conviction, but it

⁸ A biblical quotation from 1 Thessalonians 5:15.

does show that they were at a loss as to what realistic options to put forward in stead. As the bishops were meeting to draft their letter in October 1920, the republican Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, lay dying of a hunger strike in protest against his arrest on charges of sedition by the British. This episode cast a shadow over the viability of the 'passive resistance' which the bishops were urging and of which MacSwiney had become 'a sort of model'.⁹

These excerpts from the October pastoral reveal that the bishops advocated Ireland's 'indefeasible right' to choose its own form of government, that they thought it expedient not to mention the existence of an Irish republic, that they were 'opposed to crime, from whatever side it comes', but also believed that the government's 'oppressive measures (...) would lead to the most deplorable consequences' and made it impossible to secure their people's observance of the law of God. Four factors can thus be identified that form the key to understanding the bishops' attitude: support for Irish self-determination, implicit rejection of the legitimacy of the republic, condemnation of republican violence and a paradoxical simultaneous insistence on British responsibility for all hostilities committed by both sides.

'The natural right of self-government': Irish right to self-determination and Episcopal rejection of the legitimacy of the Irish republic

Bishops' public and private statements provide much evidence to suggest that they had moved from traditional support for mere Home Rule to the idea of national self-determination for Ireland by the beginning of 1919.¹⁰ Not only did they pray in the October pastoral that God would prosper the Irish people's 'struggle for freedom', but several bishops had given proof of their sympathies in this regard before. Thus, in their 1919 Lenten

⁹ David W. Miller, *Church, State, and Nation in Ireland 1898-1921* (Dublin 1973) 461-462.

¹⁰ For this evidence, see Miller, *Church, State, and Nation*, 391-425; Jérôme aan de Wiel, *The Catholic Church in Ireland 1914-1918. War and Politics* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 2003) 153-202.

pastorals,¹¹ many bishops drew attention to the hypocrisy of the British, who had ostensibly fought the Great War to safeguard the rights of small and defenceless nations, but who were now tyrannizing the people of another such nation within the very borders of their realm. Archbishop Walsh remarked ominously that 'it would be unreasonable and indeed impossible to expect that they [the Irish people] can long rest content with such a state of things'. Many bishops expressed their conviction that peace and order could not be restored unless Ireland's rights were granted.¹²

Walsh demonstrated his support for the Irish bid for independence in November 1919, when he addressed a letter to the Archbishop of Boston to announce his purchase of bonds in a loan scheme organised by Dáil Éireann and banned by the British authorities. The Dublin diocesan archives hold a draft of this letter, which differs in some important respects from the published version. In the draft, Walsh explained that he wished to subscribe 'to the Irish National Fund inaugurated under the auspices of the Dail Eireann our I.P.'¹³ In the final version, the Dáil was described as 'the elected body known as Dail Eireann, our Irish Parliament'.¹⁴ Walsh obviously thought it necessary to accentuate more clearly the importance of the Dáil by adding the observation that it was democratically elected by the people.



Afb.1 Archbishop
William Walsh

The bishops' support for Ireland's right to self-determination did not subside during the course of the war in 1920 and 1921. In his February 1920 Lenten pastoral, Archbishop John Mary Harty of Cashel and Emly wrote that 'the remedy for the Irish upheaval is obvious, since freedom is the best solvent of political disorder'. And in his pastoral, Archbishop Thomas Gilmartin of Tuam observed that the Irish people were 'engaged in a struggle for the natural right of self-

¹¹ Apart from the joint statements issued by the entire episcopate at its biannual meetings in June and October, individual bishops also issued pastoral letters for their own dioceses in the seasons of Advent and Lent.

¹² *The Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac for 1920* (Dublin 1920) 501-502.

¹³ Walsh to O'Connell (draft), 6 November 1919, DDA, WP, box 386, '1919: Bishops, Priests, Religious, Laity'. 'I.P.' stands for Irish Parliament.

¹⁴ *Morning Post*, 9 December 1919.

government'.¹⁵ Similarly, in May, a Dáil representative hosted a republican state reception in Rome on the occasion of the beatification of the seventeenth-century Irish martyr Oliver Plunkett. Several bishops attended and joined in the singing of republican songs.¹⁶

None of this, however, meant that the bishops as a body accepted the republican theory that the British government was illegal, that the presence of its forces in Ireland amounted to foreign occupation and that a sovereign republic had been established. In the same letter to the Archbishop of Boston in which Walsh described the Dáil as 'the elected body, our Irish Parliament', he described the British government as 'our present Government'. Since the Dáil had set up its own government and did not recognise the legitimacy of British administration these two designations were inconsistent with each other. The discrepancy did not initially exist in the draft, where the sentence read 'our present *de facto* Government'. This description, taken together with the reference to the Dáil as 'our I.P.', implied that legitimacy had passed from the crown to the Irish republic. This implication was avoided in the final version, where 'de facto' was omitted from the description of the British government, and the observation was added that the Dáil was an 'elected body'. Walsh thus made clear why he supported the Dáil: not because it had assumed sovereignty, but because it was elected by the people.¹⁷

Even bishops as sympathetic to republican aspirations as William Walsh were careful not to dismiss the crown's claim to legitimacy out of hand. Walsh acknowledged this in September 1920, when he was asked to comment on proposals for a settlement scheme from a Wexford solicitor. The Archbishop responded by saying that a real solution to the Irish question could only be obtained if the British government were prepared to introduce a bill for the independence demanded by the Irish people and would make 'this a reality by unequivocally pledging themselves to stand or fall by the reception given to that Bill by the two Houses of Parliament'.¹⁸ Evidently, Walsh thought that independence had not yet been established

¹⁵ *ICD 1921*, 507.

¹⁶ The incident is recounted by Dermot Keogh, *The Vatican, the Bishops*, 44-45.

¹⁷ Walsh to O'Connell, 6 November 1919, DDA, WP, box 386, '1919: Bishops, Priests, Religious, Laity'.

¹⁸ Walsh to O'Connor, 12 September 1920, DDA, WP, box 380, 'Bishops, Priests, Religious, Laity. 1920'.

and indeed would not be established until it was enshrined in British legislation.

While Walsh left it to his audience to draw its own conclusions as to the attainability of full independence as a republic, Bishop Daniel Cohalan of Cork took this argument to its logical conclusion in his 1921 Lenten pastoral. He had been criticised by republicans for a decree issued in December 1920 excommunicating active Volunteers, and his letter was a response to them. He asked whether 'the proclamation of an Irish Republic by the Sinn Fein members of Parliament after the last general election (was) sufficient to constitute Ireland a republic according to our Church teaching'.¹⁹ Cohalan's answer was clear: it was not, because a nation 'which for over three hundred years was part of a monarchy' could not declare itself 'by a simple vote of its newly elected members of parliament an independent state'. This had some serious consequences. It meant that the conflict was no war, much less a *bellum iustum*, but an illegal insurrection. From this it followed that the IRA was not a legitimate army, and that IRA actions were crime and murder.

Towards the end of 1920, as the number of casualties increased and the conflict between the IRA and the crown forces became increasingly violent, other senior bishops angered the republican leadership by publicly advocating constitutional settlements that fell short of a republic. Thus Archbishop Gilmartin acknowledged in November 1920 that a majority of the Irish people wanted a fully independent republic, but believed that 'a full measure of Home Rule, including fiscal control' would satisfy them.²⁰ He believed that Ireland should rethink its demands and try to come to an agreement with Britain. Proposals for 'Dominion Home Rule' proffered in November and December were welcomed by other bishops such as Cardinal Logue and Thomas O'Doherty of Clonfert – who had been observed singing republican songs at the Roman reception seven months previously.²¹ Although the urgency of Episcopal support for these

¹⁹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 7 February 1921.

²⁰ *ICD 1921*, 538. See Arthur Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland. Dáil Éireann 1919-22* (Dublin 1995) 219-224 for the Dáil government's response to this and similar proposals.

²¹ For O'Doherty's support see: *ICD 1921*, 540. For his presence at the reception in Rome, see Keogh, *The Vatican, the Bishops*, 44. For Logue's reaction to the proposals, see: Logue to Walsh, 7 December 1920, DDA, WP, box 380, 'Bishops, Priests, Religious, Laity. 1920'.

proposals was due to the increase in violence occurring at the time, their disregard for republican theory was not new. As early as January 1920, the bishops had insisted in a joint statement that Ireland should be granted its 'legitimate demand', and had defined that demand as being 'the right (...) to choose her own government'.²² It was the Wilsonian doctrine of self-determination to which they were committed, not the Irish republic.

'Patriotism is a noble virtue when it pursues its object by means that are in strict accordance with God's law': the immorality of republican violence

Not only had the bishops taken care to commit themselves to nothing further than support for 'Ireland's right to self-determination', they had also consistently condemned IRA violence. The fact that it was a guerrilla campaign rather than traditional open warfare, and that it therefore entailed such things as the assassination of individual policemen, civil servants and civilians deemed to be informers made it impossible for the bishops to view it as anything other than crime. Their condemnation in the October pastoral was admittedly somewhat feeble, but much more forceful pronouncements had previously been made and were yet to come, especially as the conflict became bloodier. Cardinal Logue wrote in his November 1920 Advent pastoral:

Patriotism is a noble virtue when it pursues its object by means that are sincere, honourable, just, and in strict accordance with God's law; otherwise it degenerates into blind, brutal, reckless passion, inspired not by love of country, but by Satan, 'who was a murderer from the beginning'.²³

Even before the crucial summer of 1920 with its increase in levels of violence and numbers of casualties, similar condemnations had already been made. In his February 1920 Lenten pastoral, Logue argued that it was not merely a matter of morality, but also of pragmatism to oppose the use of physical force: 'It is not only our duty but our interest to unite in a determined effort to discourage and root out lawlessness and crime from

²² *ICD 1920*, 524.

²³ *ICD 1921*, 545. Logue's characterisation of the devil is taken from John 8:44.

our midst'. He called republican acts of violence 'retaliation, lawlessness and crime such as any man guided by God's law must regret and reprobate' and added that he was certain that 'they are regretted and reprobated by the great body of our Catholic people, whatever may be otherwise their political views'.²⁴

Logue had also expressed this view on republican violence three months previously in a public letter to Bishop Thomas Dunn of Nottingham. Bishop Dunn had asked the Cardinal for his response to an article on the Irish hierarchy's role in the conflict published by a local newspaper in December 1919. The author had censured the bishops for not speaking out on republican violence while condemning only the misgovernment of the country by the British – a criticism also frequently expressed by loyalists in Ireland.

The Cardinal replied to Dunn in a public defence of the hierarchy's position on 20 December. He recognized that murders had been committed by republicans, but emphasized again that they had always been met by 'horror and reprobation' by the majority of Irishmen, whether they sympathized with Sinn Féin or not. He denied that the bishops had failed to condemn republican violence, but also asserted that crime was 'beyond their control while the state of things which gives an opportunity and some kind of pretext' for them continued. Republican acts of violence were isolated excesses, perpetrated by secret societies alien to the church. Logue also stressed that 'the wish to have an end put to misgovernment (...), gives no ground to infer that there is any sympathy with (...) the unfortunate crimes to which misgovernment leads'.²⁵

Cardinal Logue was not alone in holding these views. Eight months before his last quoted remark, and some time before the IRA campaign had gathered full steam, the episcopate as a whole had expressed similar sentiments. In their June 1919 joint statement on the political situation in Ireland they wrote: 'So long as it [British aggressive domination] lasts, our faithful people should not allow any provocation to move them to overstep the law of God'.²⁶ They added that the example of Belgium during the Great War could provide a guide as to how to respond, thus shifting

²⁴ *ICD 1921*, 506-507.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 499-500.

²⁶ *ICD 1920*, 517-519.

attention back to Britain, which in this view of the matter played the part of Germany during the First World War.

In a second joint pronouncement at the beginning of 1920, the bishops observed that government repression afforded 'a free opportunity (...) to the wicked for the perpetration of robbery and murder, forms of crime hitherto rare in Ireland'. They called on their people

to exercise patience under the terrible provocation to which they are subjected, to remember the law of God, to combine amongst themselves for the prevention of crime, to restrain the promptings of revenge, and abstain from deeds of bloodshed and outrage calculated to bring on themselves and their country shame and the anger of Heaven.²⁷

Even if we take note of the bishops' ambiguous advice to 'combine (...) for the prevention of crime' – which is exactly what the Volunteers were professing to do – this quote is a rejection of the republican notion that Ireland was involved in proper warfare. IRA activities were characterised rather as 'crime', 'revenge' and 'deeds of bloodshed and outrage' that would invoke the wrath of God.



Afb. 2 IRA flying column

²⁷ *ICD 1920*, 524-525.

Individual bishops followed suit. In September 1920, Archbishops Harty and Gilmartin spoke out against republican violence. Harty appealed to the faithful of his diocese 'to do nothing that would in the slightest degree tarnish the grand old Catholic Faith of ours'.²⁸ He entreated his people 'to do nothing and to countenance nothing that would be in violation of the Law of God'. At the same time, Gilmartin emphasized that the clergy must 'put religion above politics and all human strategy' and must preach the commandment of God to love one's neighbour, whether it was heeded or not.²⁹ He denounced republican violence in this light. 'Shooting from behind walls and the destruction of property' stood condemned by this message, as did 'the destruction of life and property by the agents of the Government'. He saw no moral distinction between acts of violence committed by republicans and those committed by agents of the government.

Gilmartin's exhortation to his clergy may well be an indication that local priests were not as hostile to republican violence as he would have liked. Correspondence from the Walsh Papers in the Dublin diocesan archives suggests that priests were divided on the issue. William MacFeely, a parish priest from Derry City and former administrator of St. Eugene's Cathedral in Derry, wrote to Walsh in September 1920 asking him whether he could advise parishioners to join the IRA. He made his own sympathies quite clear: 'It would be (...) satisfactory if we could say without reservations, that it is morally lawful to join the organisation'.³⁰ On the other hand, Walsh received a letter from prominent Donnybrook parishioners in the same month complaining about their parish priest, Monsignor James Dunne, who was also one of his vicars general.³¹ Their complaint was that Msgr. Dunne had shown many 'manifestations of hostility (...) to the National and Patriotic aspirations of our people'. They did not mention Dunne's attitude towards IRA violence specifically, but we may safely presume on the basis of this information that he opposed it.

The most outspoken critic of republican violence among the bishops proved to be Daniel Cohalan. In an address in Cork Cathedral in December

²⁸ *ICD 1921*, 531.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 533.

³⁰ MacFeely to Walsh, 28 September 1920, DDA, WP, box 391 II, folder 3, no. 380/2.

³¹ O'Connor to Walsh, 10 September 1920, DDA, WP, box 392 I, folder 380/4.

1920, he warned his audience that there could be no mistake that IRA ambushes were murder and that every life taken in an ambush was murder. Since frequent condemnations and denunciations of such activity by the bishops had not yielded any effect, Cohalan believed that there was no remedy left 'except the extreme remedy, excommunication from the Church'. He consequently decreed that

anyone who shall, within this diocese of Cork, organise or take part in an ambush or in kidnapping, or otherwise shall be guilty of murder, or attempted murder, shall incur, by the very fact, the censure of excommunication.³²

Cardinal Logue echoed Cohalan's words in his February 1921 Lenten pastoral by warning that 'lying in waiting and shooting policemen or soldiers is not an act of war. It is plain murder, and will entail the punishment of murder'. This point of view was also shared by Archbishop Gilmartin, who argued on New Year's Day 1921 that armed resistance to the British government was illegal. He warned 'the brave young men' of Ireland against 'the danger of joining secret societies,' including republican societies. He reminded his audience that 'under the new Canon Law members of secret societies that plot against the Church or State (were), *ipso facto*, excommunicated'. And in his pastoral letter, Archbishop Walsh, although observing that 'from wholly unexpected quarters lessons of violent resistance to the law have come to them [the Irish people] which they can hardly be slow to learn', also warned that these were 'lessons, (...), which, if put in practice by them, would make their last state far worse than the first'.³³ He prayed 'that our people may be strengthened to withstand every influence that would drive them, as unfortunately many have already allowed themselves to be driven, into courses forbidden by the law of God'.

'Where such a system reigns, the laws of God are set aside': British responsibility

It could be argued that Bishop Cohalan was an exception in excommunicating those actively involved in the guerrilla war, and that the

³² *The Irish Catholic Directory and Almanac for 1922* (Dublin 1922) 503-504.

³³ *ICD 1922*, 517.

other bishops held back from doing so in order to avoid alienation from the people. Historians have however questioned whether 'the people' were in fact as supportive of IRA violence as the traditional account would have.³⁴ If they were not, it is quite reasonable to expect that measures such as Cohalan's decree could have counted on popular support rather than disapproval. At any rate, the bishops' first instinct from the beginning of the war onwards had been to place the chief responsibility with the British government, not only for outrages perpetrated by crown forces, but equally so for republican acts of violence. They argued that it could only be expected that republican crime would occur, since not everyone would be able to practise the required self-restraint. The 1920 October pastoral was an eloquent example of this line of argumentation, but by no means the only one.³⁵

This strategy clearly came at a disadvantage, as it undermined the credibility of episcopal denunciations of republican violence. If British misdeeds were the cause of republican acts of violence, and if the responsibility for them rested ultimately with the British authorities, then it was not easy to see how they could be unjustified. The bishops never publicly acknowledged that their insistence on complete British responsibility could be read as a coded message not to take their condemnations of republican violence seriously. On the contrary, it is not unlikely that it was frustration with this effect that drove Cohalan to resort to formal excommunication and several other bishops to imply as much without formally stating it. It is probable that active IRA members took the self-contradictory nature of the bishops' utterances as covert acceptance of their activities. Loyalists certainly picked up on the paradox. Archbishop Walsh received many letters from Catholics loyal to the British crown complaining that the bishops were providing republicans with a pretext for continuing their campaign of violence. Thus James Fitzgerald wrote in October 1919 'that up to the present I have not heard a word in

³⁴ See Charles Townshend, 'The Irish Republican Army and the Development of Guerrilla Warfare, 1916-1921', *English Historical Review* XCIV (1979) 318-345; Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare. The Experience of Ordinary Volunteers in the Irish War of Independence, 1916-1921* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 1998) 249-334 and Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin 2004) xix.

³⁵ See for instance Walsh's 1919 Lenten pastoral, *ICD 1920*, 501-2, Logue's 1920 letter to Dunn, *ICD 1921*, 499-500; Walsh's 1921 Lenten pastoral, *ICD 1922*, 517.

condemnation of these crimes uttered by any priest in any catholic church in Dublin', and a few months later A.M. Sullivan complained about 'the silence of the pulpit'.³⁶

Bishop Thomas O'Dea of Galway and Kilmacduagh took up the gauntlet in November 1920 in a public letter to a senior official in the British administration in Dublin.³⁷ He acknowledged that the bishops had given more attention to denouncing British than republican crimes, but argued that there were good reasons for this. The first was that the number of outrages committed by the forces of the crown greatly exceeded that of crimes committed by republicans. The second was that where those appointed to enforce the law themselves proceeded 'to terrorise and murder inoffensive and unarmed civilians, the very well-springs of order are poisoned'. The final reason was that 'the root cause' of the disorder was 'the injustice of suppressing the freedom of Ireland, in spite of repeated promises and professions during the war'. Archbishop Harty had made much the same argument in February 1920, when he wrote that 'coercion and crime go hand in hand', and that 'where such a system [of repression and coercion] reigns, the laws of God are set aside'.³⁸

A second disadvantage of the bishops' strategy was that it imperilled the church's relations with the British government, which continued to have the power to threaten her interests as long as it remained in the country. Such threats were by no means imaginary, as the government's attempts to restrict clerical control over the educational system in 1919 showed.³⁹ However, in spite of the bitter words spoken by the bishops in the October pastoral and elsewhere, they remained on friendly terms with the British administration. The tone of correspondence between Archbishop Walsh and the British governor (or Lord Lieutenant) and other members of the Dublin government remained surprisingly courteous

³⁶ Fitzgerald to Walsh, 1 October 1919, DDA, WP, box 386, no. 386/8, and Sullivan to Walsh, 22 December 1919, DDA, WP, box 386, no. 386/8. See also McDonnell's letter of November 1920 quoted above. For Sullivan's letter, see also Thomas J. Morrissey, *William J. Walsh. Archbishop of Dublin 1841-1921. No Uncertain Voice* (Dublin and Portland, Oregon, 2000) 328.

³⁷ *ICD 1921*, 542.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 507.

³⁹ See Miller, *Church, State*, 435-442; E. Brian Titley, *Church, State, and the Control of Schooling in Ireland 1900-1944* (Dublin 1983) 55-69 for an account of the church's clash with the government over Ian Macpherson's Irish Education Bill.

throughout.⁴⁰ In fact, Walsh's auxiliary bishop and successor Edward Byrne turned out to entertain especially cordial relations with Lord FitzAlan of Derwent, the new Lord Lieutenant, who had taken office in April 1921 as the first Catholic to do so since the seventeenth century. Byrne appointed a private chaplain to the Viceregal court in May 1921. He also agreed to use his influence in Rome to obtain dispensation from Pope Benedict XV to build a private chapel in the Lord Lieutenant's residence.⁴¹

Although there was an increase in episcopal condemnations of republican violence from the summer of 1920 onward, it was this strategy of holding the British government responsible to which the bishops returned at the very end of the war. In a joint statement issued in June 1921, they did not mention republican violence, but concentrated entirely on British barbarity. The bishops recalled their October pastoral and observed that 'since then every horror has been intensified, and we are now threatened with even darker doings'.⁴² By this, they meant the 'sham settlement' introduced by the British government, which had in the meantime founded a separate Northern Irish state in an attempt to take the Ulster unionists out of the equation. It is the Ulster bishops' infuriation at the reduction of their community to the state of a threatened religious minority in the new northern entity that explains this renewed insistence on what had by now become a familiar argument.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the debate about the relation between religion and violence. I mentioned the position advanced by Becker and McMillan that religion can serve either as a legitimising factor for political violence or as a force to undermine its justification. In this

⁴⁰ See for instance Walsh's correspondence with the British Commander-in-Chief, General Macready, about the appointment of Catholic chaplains in the Royal Hibernian Military School in the Phoenix Park in Dublin in March 1920: Macready to Walsh, 9 March 1920, DDA, WP, box 392 I, folder 380/4.

⁴¹ For Byrne's correspondence with the Lord Lieutenant, see: FitzAlan to Byrne, 15 April 1921, DDA, box 'Government 1922-1939 – Lord Lieutenant 1921-22' and Byrne to FitzAlan, 30 May 1921, DDA, *ibid.* For the chapel in the Viceregal Lodge, see: *ICD 1922*, 27 July 1921.

⁴² *ICD 1922*, 594-596.

article, I have identified four aspects of the bishops' attitude to the IRA campaign during the 1919 to 1921 War of Independence. The first was their support for a measure of Irish independence that went beyond the Home Rule proposals discussed prior to 1916. The bishops applied President Wilson's doctrine of national self-determination to the Irish case, arguing that the country had a right to choose its own constitutional destiny. The second was their disavowal of official republican doctrine, which held that Ireland was already a sovereign republic presently engaged in combating a foreign occupying force. The third aspect was their denunciation of republican violence. Such acts of violence were understandable on account of the intense provocation which induced them, but they were nonetheless incompatible with the virtuously obedient Christianity that was the hallmark of true Irishness. The fourth issue was their insistence that the British government was ultimately responsible for all acts of violence committed in the country. This was a paradox when confronted with their condemnation of republican violence. But most bishops were prepared to accept the risk that active IRA members would take the latter assertion to discount the former.

Does this warrant the conclusion that the bishops' role was an example of the violence-inducing function of religion? It is possible to argue against this verdict by pointing out that the bishops did nothing to induce violence. They unambiguously denounced it as immoral and criminal from whatever side it came. However, they were aware that any ecclesiastical condemnation of the violence inflicted upon the Catholic community automatically provided grounds for a justification of violence perpetrated by members of that community against the crown. To the extent that the bishops accepted this consequence of their strategy of blaming Britain, they may be said to have furthered the use of physical force. But many Episcopal utterances – not in the least Bishop Cohalan's excommunication decree – indicate that they did not accept this logic at all. It is clear that the bishops' opposition to violence did not stem from any spiritually-inspired pacifism. Their commitment to the cause of Irish freedom and their identification with Irish nationalism was too strong to permit such esoteric notions to take hold of them. But their frequent invocation of 'the law of God' to criticise the use of violence by Catholic Irishmen shows that they would allow religious beliefs to contradict the demands of nationalism. To that extent, the bishops as religious leaders

served to undermine the justification for the republican physical force policy.

The bishops were faced with a situation in which a majority of the members of their community desired radical change of a political *status quo* perceived to be unjust. The demands of Catholic moral teaching – upheld by Roman authorities unfamiliar with the Irish situation – and a desire for order as the best guarantee for their own interests compelled them to condemn the use of violence by their co-religionists. The bishops were restricted in this policy, however, by the necessity of maintaining their position of authority within their own community. In order to solve this conundrum, the bishops chose to do battle on two fronts: to denounce republican terror because the law of God and the church demanded it, and to denounce British counter-terror because their flock demanded it. Their example highlights the constraints under which Catholic religious leaders laboured when confronted with political violence engaged in by their communities. A heritage of deep suspicion towards revolution and an ongoing attempt to turn Irishmen and women into ultramontane Roman Catholics clashed with that other strong claim upon the allegiance of twentieth-century people: national identity. In the event, the strategy employed by the Irish bishops succeeded beyond their own expectations – not, indeed, in putting an end to violence, but in securing for them a position of unprecedented moral power once the nationalists' objectives had been obtained.