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How Could They Do It? : The Bombing Of Omagh, 1998

by

James Dingley and Michael Kirk-Smith

THE INCIDENT AND THE REACTION

On 15 Saturday August 1998, the "Real" IRA set off a bomb in the centre of Omagh, a small, mixed Catholic and Protestant market town in Northern Ireland. Twenty-nine people were killed and over 200 injured, many critically and many of them children. Considered significant, for a Catholic Republican movement like the IRA in all its guises, was that the majority of deaths and casualties appeared to be Catholics and some were even republicans. This was the worst single incident in 30 years of the Northern Ireland "Troubles," and came at a time when the vast majority of the population of Ireland, both North and South, had voted for a political settlement to the conflict: the "Good Friday Agreement" of 1998.[1]

The Real IRA (RIRA) are a Catholic and Nationalist extremist group opposed to the political settlement.[2] All of Ireland, North and South, Nationalist and Unionist, Republican and Loyalist, was shocked. The bombing was unequivocally condemned by all political groupings, including those associated with other republican paramilitary groups who had engaged in bombings prior to the political settlement. Political spokesmen for the Continuity IRA, another splinter group, condemned it. A spokesman for the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), another faction which has killed many people over the past 20 years, called on its members to accept that popular support for the Good Friday Agreement left no justification for violence - the usual prelude to a ceasefire announcement.[3] However, the condemnation of other groups, such as INLA and the Provisional IRA, may be viewed with some reservation as they have carried out similar acts themselves for nearly 30 years. Plausibly their condemnations may be seen as tactical ploys in their then current situation vis-ˆ-vis the "peace process."

All the towns previously bombed by the Real IRA, such as Banbridge (1/8/98), were mainly Protestant. But Omagh has a small Catholic majority and a Sinn Fein council chairman. The countryside has pockets of strong Sinn Fein (the political wing of the Provisional IRA) support, from which several of the dead came. People there already supported Sinn Fein's "peace" policy (perhaps this was significant). This time Republicans killed Republicans. Even if this was by mistake, it is assumed that the families and friends of the victims would be even more likely to reject anti-settlement splinter groups.[4]

The RIRA, according to the press, seemed totally disoriented by the adverse reaction. First, they issued a statement confirming that they had planted the bomb, but insisted that they had not given a misleading warning, as the media and police claimed. The bomb was meant for the local courthouse, not civilians, they said, and apologized for the deaths.

Then after everyone scorned this, and it was disproved by the news organization and the charity which had received the warnings, the RIRA announced a suspension of paramilitary operations, i.e., a ceasefire, during "consultations over our future direction." This too was met by contempt and disbelief.[5]

The impression given by much of the media was that this was an unique case, an exceptional event whose affects could be cathartic in the "Troubles" of Northern Ireland. By implication, and sometimes by overt assertion, it was also assumed that these bombers were different, they were not "normal" terrorists. The RIRA was different. This assumption was influenced heavily by the proclamations of condemnation by Sinn Fein and other Republican groups who could normally be expected to "understand the reasons" for such bombings.[6]

Aim of the Article

However, this article argues that such a view is false, that there is little difference between the Real IRA and the Provisional IRA, or any other nationalist-separatist terrorist group and their acts. Consequently differences in motives, personnel and other characteristics are grossly exaggerated. The only difference was in the number of people killed and injured among the wrong target population. Otherwise these are simply terrorists who were nearly all previously in the Provisional IRA and carrying out exactly the same acts for exactly the same reasons.

"Why did they do it?" is a question that is virtually impossible to answer exactly. However, the purpose of this article is to attempt an explanation for the bombing of Omagh, and of why terrorists, in particular ethnic separatists such as the IRA or ETA, the Basque insurgent movement, would carry out such apparently purposeless acts of violence, and why they continue to do so.

We argue here that rational, deductive logic is not a sufficient means of explanation for all terrorist acts. What is required is an understanding of the kind of reasoning that reflects the way terrorists might think; where visions, images, emotional states and experiences overlap and induce each other. Causality may be only subliminal, and originates or emerges from the type of culture they represent and are part of. This aspect of ethnic separatist violence appears to have been overlooked in much of the literature.

Other literature in this area focuses on the rational reasons behind terrorism. This article, in contrast, concentrates on the emotional and symbolic dimension of terrorist activity. There is an interaction between the rational and the irrational and they cannot be easily separated. Rational means are often used to achieve irrational ends, such as climbing Mount Everest. Conversely, it is not unknown for politicians to use emotional appeals to achieve rational goals. It is not our aim to deny the rational element in either terrorism or nationalism, merely to elaborate on the irrational elements associated with them.

The premise behind our argument is that much terrorist violence must be understood as a symbolic act, rather than as a rational "means-end" calculation. The nature of this

symbolic act requires an understanding of the interaction of various elements, namely, the terrorists' social backgrounds, their religion and their ethnic nationalism and the importance of sentiment and emotion in their belief systems. These interactions will be discussed and then synthesized to give a possible understanding as to why such acts can be committed.

As outlined above, our argument will be guided by, first, the terrorists' social and religious backgrounds; second, their symbiotic relationship with their community; third, the interaction between nationalism and religion; fourth, terrorism and religion; and finally, religion and emotion. Each of these five elements will then be discussed after briefly reviewing the background to the bombing and the IRA.

It should also be added, that while not the primary purpose of this article, it may be possible to apply a similar analysis to the other end of the sectarian spectrum (in Northern Ireland) - the Loyalists. Their cultural background, symbols and icons are different; they are Protestants and their purpose is "pro-State." However, the relatively indiscriminate nature of their attacks on ordinary Catholics may indicate similar roots in Christian sacrifice.

The Background

The Real IRA are a splinter group from the Provisional IRA, just as the Provisionals were a splinter from the Official IRA in the early 1970s.[7] In both cases the issue was to continue, or not, with a campaign of violence. The Provisionals, who wanted to continue the violence, broke away from and then completely eclipsed, the Officials. No doubt the RIRA are very conscious of this historical continuity, as symbolized in another splinter group calling itself "Continuity IRA." Equally, they are also just as conscious that minority support, even among Northern Ireland Catholics, was no inhibition to nearly 30 years of Provisional IRA violence.

Most terrorist campaigns are conspicuous for their lack of mass support and this is a major reason why so many fail. Rarely is mass support regarded as the terrorists' source of legitimacy. Legitimacy is usually premised on the basis of some ideology that may, or may not, attract mass support or sympathy. What the majority think is regarded as irrelevant to the ideological correctness of the cause that legitimates the acts. However, mass support can make a big difference to operational effectiveness; in this sense if the terrorist cause has some popular resonance it stands a greater chance of success.

Also, one has to distinguish lack of mass support among a terrorists' client population, such as the ethnic minority on whose behalf they purport to act, from lack of support among a nation/society as a whole. Also, support has to be separated out from a tolerance of the terrorist or a sympathy for the cause which permits the terrorist to operate safely in a domain. While overt support may be lacking it is just as important, for the terrorist, that a population does not openly side with the authorities, thus allowing them to operate in relative safety.

As Robert Clark has indicated it was a basic level of sympathy among the local population (often only in the specific areas of operation) that enabled ETA to act effectively.[8] Even then most local Basques claimed not to actively support ETA, merely "understood" their reasons. In the Basque region as a whole, the majority of the population strongly disapproved of the ETA's activities. Similar attitudes are expressed in the memoirs of several ex-IRA men when operating in Northern Ireland.[9] This appears to be a paradox in many ethnic separatist terrorist campaigns; an ambivalence on the part of large sections of a population toward the use of violence "on their behalf." This is also a theme to be addressed through this article and is also illustrated through the IRA's own history.

There is an historical continuity in Irish Republican groups splitting and then turning on each other. The 1921-23 civil war in Ireland was fought between pro- and anti-Treaty forces. The Treaty with the UK provided all the substance of independence in the South of Ireland but retained the old British symbols. This led to a fratricidal turning of majority (pro-Treaty) Republicans against minority (de Valera's anti-Treaty) Republicans, despite a clear acceptance of the Treaty by the vast majority of the entire population of Ireland.

The civil war involved only Catholics against Catholics and resulted in far more deaths than did the insurrection against the UK government (often referred to as the Anglo-Irish war). The civil war was about surrendering the "pure" ideal of Irish Republicanism for a compromise based on realism (that had mass support). Because the Treaty did not deliver the pure ideal, no matter how unrealistic, it was opposed by purist Republicans who saw pro-Treaty supporters as betrayers of the cause. Pro-Treaty supporters, the majority, now became legitimate targets, the most famous of whom was Michael Collins. Anti-Treaty (minority) supporters deemed Pro-Treaty supporters to have sold-out.[10] To this day the Provisional-IRA claims its legitimacy by asserting its direct descent from the anti-Treaty faction. Similarly, in the early 1970s the IRA split into the Officials and Provisionals. The Officials, guided by a Marxist materialist analysis, saw the IRA's terrorist campaign as unrealistic and counter-productive (largely because of its lack of popular support, even among Catholics in the North) and wanted to call the violent campaign off. This led to the formation of the Provisionals, with their commitment to an all-Ireland Republic, who now started to see the Officials as betrayers. Once again this led to fratricidal feuds between Catholic Republicans; for the "pure" ideal as against a "realist" compromise.[11]

Was Omagh Any Different?

Irish Republicans have a long history of defying public opinion and turning terror tactics against fellow Catholics, even Republican ones. The bomb in Omagh was not unusually big by IRA standards. It was not unusual to kill civilians (either Catholic or Protestants) and the whole of its campaign of the last 30 years has been marked by minority support. The IRA is used to having public scorn and vilification heaped upon it. The people who carried out the bombing, as a splinter group from the Provisionals, would be well used to such reactions; after all, they were only continuing what they normally did. In real terms the only difference may well have been a miscalculation in terms of the number of

casualties and the proportion of Catholic and Republican victims - not what they did but, rather, overdoing it.

There was nothing new in the Omagh atrocity; it fitted into established historical and contemporary patterns and was carried out by the same people for the same reasons. It was the purists' reaction to a compromise (the Good Friday Agreement) that patently failed to realize the ideal for which they had engaged in their violence in the first place and it addressed the same constituency. The major question is: why did the Real IRA resort to violence when alternative avenues of peaceful political activity appeared open?

Why Did They Do It?

No doubt many people in Omagh are asking the same question. This question goes right to the heart of so much political violence and links the people of Omagh with with most victims of terrorism, the wider community and their governments.

Once the heat of media attention is removed, will we look back in retrospect at an incident that was "cathartic"? That is, will the terrorists' remorse at killing so many innocent victims cause them to renounce violence? Or will it be just like the other "cathartic" events in Northern Ireland, such as the Enniskillen Remembrance Day bombing in 1987 or the Mountbatten bombing in 1979? All at the time heralded a new level of atrocity, all were condemned and all seemed to be pointless. The answer may well lie in the elements previously mentioned.

Social and Religious Backgrounds

Numerous studies of the IRA have pointed to a parochial and mainly working and lower-middle class origins of its members, both now and historically.[12] They are less intellectual and less educated than contemporary European terrorist groups and, in comparison, their political rhetoric, while quite sophisticated, is often devoid of objective rational analysis.[13] They tend to have their main support in small rural areas such as South Armagh or Mid Tyrone, or in inner city ghettos such as the Falls Road or Short Strand in Belfast.[14]

Two features characterize these communities. First, they are small and intimate, and are also relatively isolated and self-sustaining. These factors facilitate internal control and support. Second, they are overwhelmingly Catholic and most IRA members are practising Catholics. Catholicism is an essential part of their social identity and political idealism, and it dominates their everyday lives and much of their consciousness. One local commentator (the journalist Malachi O'Doherty) even goes as far as to directly conflate IRA language and ideas with a Catholic education:

What has amazed me over the years about the boys who joined the IRA was that the influence of the Christian Brothers seemed to be all over their language and ideas.[15]

It may be argued that small homogeneous, isolated, Catholic communities, with little exchange with the outside world, are not environments conducive to a rational intellectual analysis of complex political situations, especially among people with relatively lesser education. Rather, such an environment is likely to induce introspection and self-defence mechanisms.[16]

Thus, we argue that Catholic and parochial attitudes dominate the terrorists' social milieu. This, in turn, leads to an introspection and a defensiveness again the external environment and also a culture dominated by religion. Consequently, a simple religious type message is better received and understood than a complex political analysis.

The Community and the Terrorist

These small, homogeneous, isolated, Catholic communities are characterized by large and inter-linked matriarchal families, with an highly traditional peasant way of life. This is precisely what the nationalist (ethnic) separatist terrorists are fighting to preserve.[17] Hence, while the community may formally disapprove of the IRA's methods, it will approve of its aims.

The victims of Omagh were killed by people who, like them, were practising Catholics, and many in the local community knew and liked both the victims and the murderers.[18] But for all that, none of them informed on the terrorists, even though the bomb was roundly condemned by all the other terrorist groups. By this, they indicated, at least in part, an understanding and even an acceptance of the atrocity. The community and the terrorists are part of the same culture and cannot be disentangled. By their reaction, the community, despite being the victims, are still giving implicit support to the terrorists and this allows the terrorists to attribute meaning to their acts.

Sinn Fein, as representatives of a large proportion of the community, had condemned the bombing, but they were still reluctant to cooperate with the security forces in apprehending the terrorists. Condemnation still mingled with an "understanding" of the perpetrators. This is why the Provisional IRA have lasted so much longer (30 years) than the average western terrorist group (about six years).[19]

Here we argue that the terrorist is both a product of, and typical of, their community. The terrorist cause reflects the wider communal fears. Thus, what they do is understood and has meaning in their community, even if the acts are regretted. The terrorist and the community have the same orientation and subjective interpretation of the outside world and its relationship to their community.

Nationalism and Religion

Religious violence and nationalist violence are often separated out in the literature on terrorism as two separate categories, implying separate analysis and explanation. We suggest here that this separation may limit an understanding of the "world view" or rationale of many terrorist groups. Much of the literature on nationalism, particularly its

ethnic separatist variant, goes to great length to stress its religious dimension.[20] As Anthony Smith observes, most ethnic groups appear to evolve around a religious core.[21] The background and consequences of this relationship will now be examined.

Ever since its origins in the eighteenth century, ethnic nationalism has been imbued with a religious dimension. Herder, Fichte and Hegel (the Romantic German philosophers most responsible for formulating the ideas of ethnic nationalism) all regarded the existence of separate ethnic nations as part of God's divine plan.[22] They were not only nationalists but also philosophers strongly imbued with the ideals of Lutheran Pietism, as was their philosophy. The nation was seen as part of God's revelation on earth and a means to earthly salvation. The national will was God's will and God's will was not revealed in a head-count, i.e., a popular mandate, but in experiential revelations that came not to all but only to those involved in "the struggle."

Part of God's revelation was a result of inner experience and knowing, which came through involvement in the struggle. "Sturm und Drang" was an important aspect of romantic nationalism. It led to heightened experience and awareness of being closer to divine forces, but inevitably further removed from material realities. The ethnic group was conceived of as something pure and uncontaminated, natural and primordial with none of the falseness and superficiality of civilization. So too was struggle and violence, action, not politics. Politics was crafty and manipulated, false and deceitful, while action was pure and the purest act was violence. Violence brought man back to nature, his inner self unmediated by calculation with a return to contact with his pure emotion, thus "propaganda by deed."[23]

While this was not the explicit philosophy of Hegel, Fichte or Kant, it was how their ideas later were used and reinterpreted by Romantic nationalists. Kant's moral imperative that invoked the concept of inner states of knowing and being was originally addressed to quite different ends, but taken up by the Romantics and perverted into an eulogy of peasant life. Equally, Hegel's advocacy of the nation state was used to legitimate the existence of different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups were to be identified in a primordial existence of pre-civilization, of naturalness and back to nature. A peasant life-style and values, culture and language which had local colour, was eulogized at the expense of "artificial" civilization, with its restraint and discipline and its cosmopolitan and industrial, i.e., "unnatural" ways.[24]

It is precisely the above clash that is found in the ethnic terrorist violence of Northern Ireland. Using this background, we can now start to interpret a cause of nationalist separatist violence. The ethnic experience of being Irish against the national civic identity of being British is couched in terms of traditional peasant culture against an encroaching industrial culture.[25] A devout Catholicism is opposed to an encroaching Protestantism and/or secularization. Ever since the days of Durkheim and Weber this has implied a metaphor: for pre-industrial society as opposed to industrial, mystical as opposed to rational culture, and emotion as against calculation.

Much literature on religion stresses its emotional impact and role in individual's lives.[26] Emotions are a strong element in religion, and also in ethnic identity. Emotions are regarded as natural and spontaneous, and by analogy similar to the ethnic group, and therefore eulogized by ethnic nationalists. Consequently, it is not surprising to find religion and ethnic nationalism strongly entwined, where the emotional rewards of a mystic salvation can be opposed to the threats posed by a rationalizing civilization that threatens to undermine a traditional peasant culture and economy.

This is not only the case in Ireland, but may also be seen in the Basque lands, Algeria and Egypt, regions that have attempted to "modernize." Here modernization failed to provide the material rewards, at least for important sections of the population, and physical stability, and hence emotional stability, promised. Hence men resort to what they know will provide them with emotional stability and react violently (emotionally) to that which disturbs their emotions (profaned their sacred).

As George Boyce and F.S.L. Lyons on the Irish have consistently shown, it is an ethnic separatism that espouses peasant values, first given a political form by the German Romantics of the late eighteenth century, that is the essence of their nationalism. There is a fundamental clash between peasant and industrial cultures, of a life in which religion is a core feature and of a life in which rationalism is a core feature.[27] While Irish nationalists proclaimed themselves to be noble peasants, Ulster Unionists proclaimed themselves industrial workers.[28]

Nationalism contains many of the same features as organized religion, with icons and symbols, ceremony and ritual, myth and mystery being used to create a sense of oneness, of inclusion, of all being part of the same communion. There is a spiritual oneness that is replicated in "us" all being of "the one God," a sense of collective being and sharing that excludes all unbelievers. Above all, an inner and emotional experience of "being," not a calculated and rational one, is what is valued. And both involve major elements of sacrifice and suffering at the core of their experience.[29] This is especially emphasized in ethnic nationalism - the normal separatist kind as against the more rationalist civic nationalisms.

As many authors have observed, ethnic nationalism has a great appeal for non-intellectual activists and where a simple communal life-style is prevalent. It is a philosophy that appeals to societies fearing the encroachment of modern (industrial) civilization, where religion is also a dominant feature of life and where the more violent nature of rural life, such as hunting and animal slaughtering, generates a more sanguine attitude to shedding blood. Such societies are also dominated by formal religion and religious observance, such as Ireland and the Basque country.[30]

The (ethnic) nationalism associated with separatist terrorism is, we argue, also a religious kind of experience whose core values of mystery, emotion and purity reflect a peasant way of life. Peasant and religious values are being threatened by the modern rational values that denigrate emotion and experience for rational calculation. Such a peasant

society and values are also part of a culture that utilizes images of violence, sacrifice and suffering which reflect key aspects of peasant life.

Terrorism and Religion

There is a long-standing relationship between terrorist violence and religion. This involves the traditional nature of the community, the symbolic importance of religion, and the impact of the emotive and sacrificial aspects of religion. These elements will now be examined.

Historical Context It is useful to begin by recalling that the founding fathers of sociology, notably Durkheim, Weber and Marx, witnessed the first wave of modern industrialization encroaching upon traditional society.[31] In both Germany and France they noted the phenomenon of small peasant societies being disrupted by rationalizing modernity. Tonnies famous thesis on Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft was a direct reflection of this, of how close knit, small communities were being replaced by large loose associations, or societies based on extended but not close relationships.[32] The often violent nature of peasant society and the central role religion played in them was also highlighted and contrasted with the increasingly rational and ordered nature of industrial life. Thus, they too witnessed the type of events seen in Irish nationalism.

One of Durkheim's great contributions to sociology was to draw attention to the holy nature of the collective and to the role that suffering and sacrifice played in religion and collective affirmation. Durkheim, Weber and Marx were acutely aware of the central role of religion in all social life, particularly peasant culture, and the demands and attacks that modern civilization made on traditional societies and spiritual values. One example of this was Marx's reference to the idiocy of rural life, where he explicitly equates simple peasant lifestyle as antipathetical to modern, i.e., industrial, values and to the predominance of religion in such societies. This point has also been made by several observers in reference to the break-up of Yugoslavia and the ethnic conflicts ensuing there.[33]

Ethnic Violence and Religion

It is still the case that many modern ethnic conflicts appear where modernity and traditional society meet and clash, and where secularizing civilization confronts religious traditionalism. And this is precisely the point made by many observers of the Irish conflict.[34] Religion, in this context, is closely aligned, almost synonymous, with the ethnic group, its culture and traditions. Ethnic conflicts may thus be seen as a conflict between religious based traditional societies and modernizing rational ones, there are two different cultural imperatives.

Most of the greatest acts of violence and war have been carried out in God's name, such as the Crusades and the Thirty Years War (1618-48). Many modern commentators remind us that some of the earliest acts of terrorism were religion-based.[35] Also, many of the most violent and lethal modern terrorist groups are religious, such as the Islamic

fundamentalist groups or the Punjabi Sikhs. "Jihad" is an extreme example of a common phenomenon, since most religions instruct against profanity, that which desecrates the sacred. Religion gains its authority by reference to a transcendental being, consequently the right to act on religious grounds implies a reference to transcendental legitimation, not an earthly calculation.[36]

Symbolism, Republicans and Religion

The Irish Republican tradition is heavily conflated with Catholicism and the crux of division within Ireland is the divide between Protestant and Catholic. In concrete terms, one has only to look at the graffiti and wall paintings of Republican areas in Northern Ireland to see the daily conflation of Republican nationalism and Catholicism.[37] The imagery and symbols of "oppressed" Ireland utilize Catholic imagery and symbols, such as Mother Ireland and the Virgin Mary, suffering and supplicant.

The memoirs of many ex-IRA operatives are replete with reference to the heavy conflation of Irish Republican ideals and Catholicism. As one "informer" (Sean O'Callaghan) recalled of his school days:

The Virgin Mary was an Irish colleen. Padraig Pearse and the other rebel leaders executed by the British after the Easter Rising of 1916 were painstakingly interwoven with images of Christ and catholic martyrs into a seamless mix of blood sacrifice for faith and fatherland.[38]

No wonder that when he later became an IRA terrorist he could recall:

the Provisional IRA used a parochial house to induct local men into the IRA. Young, largely uneducated country lads were brought to their priest's house at night to be sworn in . . .. The local priest was more than likely the same priest who heard their confession, whose Mass they attended, and all the while they knew that their priest actively supported the IRA.[39]

It is the symbolic relations between the two that are more striking than the concrete representations. The Leader of the 1916 Easter rising, Patrick Pearse, from whom the modern IRA claims direct descent and legitimacy, totally conflated his nationalism with his Catholicism. Indeed, the 1916 rising, the most significant event in modern Irish Republicanism, was conceived almost totally in sacrificial and symbolic terms. As Oliver MacDonagh, a noted historian of Irish nationalism, commented on Pearse: "we must also attribute to him much of the romanticism of bloody death, almost as its own end, in later Irish revolutionism."[40]

In this interpretation, the act was what counted, pure and undefiled, an image that could not be erased, an image implanted in peoples' minds that carried its own message. It was a statement in itself and not to be rationalized into any cunning scheme of political calculation - the classic case of "propaganda of the deed." The act was its own revelation,

an heroic gesture that offered roles for actors and an image of salvation, as MacDonagh further noted:

He really did see rebellion as drama. It was - or should be - the re-enactment of a classical tragedy by each generation, successively. It was meaningful as an heroic gesture rather than as an effective act. It embodied roles to play.[41]

Such emotive and histrionic interpretations are likely to be carried into a "role model" for the motivations behind Omagh, and the many other previous republican terrorist acts (Pearce once gave a rifle as a school prize at St. Edna's, a Catholic school established by him). Parallelling this IRA formulation, in his analysis of the terrorist campaign in the Basque lands, Zulaika continually returns to the religious nature of the violence and the symbolic and ritualized nature of the murders. These acts are incomprehensible in purely rational terms of "means-end" analyses, but are redolent of cultural imagery, expressing things that could not be spoken.[42]

Emotion and Religion

Durkheim emphasized the role of ceremony, of communal acts, of real and symbolic sacrifices, that heightened peoples' sense of being and awareness and actually induced, in his analysis, a mass hysteria that transformed the individual.[43] Emotional involvement and commitment are central features of religion and most religions evolve around them. They involve invoking strong images of a transcendental order, emotions and feeling states that defy earthly rational explanation. The "mystery" of trans-substantiation in the Catholic mass is not to be explained, but the experience transforms the individual.

Religion, through story, ceremony and ritual, helps set up an emotionally orientated approach to significant aspects of a person's place in the world, i.e., including his national identity. This integration of emotion and symbolism (since much religion and national identity are symbolic in nature), may be formative in giving terrorists non-rational causal grounds to channel their resentment of loss, or impending threat of loss, of a traditional way of life that offers them a place and meaning in the world. As noted above, a fundamental aspect of Irish nationalism is the preservation of traditional culture, and the rejection of modernizing influences, as represented by "Britishness."

Religion helps to recall images and states of mind. Via the role of ritual and ceremony, icons and symbols, it helps to induce an intensely emotional experience. As Marett puts it "savage religion is not something that is so much thought out as danced out."[44] The ceremonial act, such as dancing, induces an emotional state that is a religious experience. And as dancing implies a rhythm and order, a transcendent structure to movement and act, so that transcendence becomes a metaphor for a transcendent being, a God and religious laws. Durkheim specifically equated religion and society (i.e., nation or ethnic group), the implication of which is that religion is the symbolic representation of society. Thus, religious acts become emotional responses to social demands, recalling individuals to their social obligations and social values. Thus, also, do national acts and ceremonies parallel those of religion, recalling individuals to their national duties.

Marett's dancing out is an "act," inducing an emotional state which, when carried out in company with others, intensifies the emotional experience. The worship of images, or icons, plays a similar function, by concentrating the mind on an image that has emotional connotations. By inducing the emotional state one is able to make the shift from the rational to the non-rational world in which ordinary explanation and legitimation is no longer required. Emotional states are induced and emotions satisfied via religion. In both Irish and Basque nationalism religion plays a central role in defining the national experience, so just as religion is acted out so one's ethnic identity is acted out. Just as sacrifices and rituals to the Gods are an acted out commitment and affirmation so too are terrorist acts on behalf of the ethnic nation.

Durkheim described religious ceremony and communal worship as a kind of mass emotional experience that transformed the individual and thus placed him on a different emotional level.[45] Similarly, Zulaika observes that massive political demonstrations may also reach a climax in which the participants are "transformed" into a different psychic state as manifested in singing, shouting, or facial expressions. These, too, are ritual occasions on which the purely conventional is surpassed by the enhanced emotional and psychological states.[46]

In summary, religion, while about many things, is also about emotion and non-rational behavior; explanation that goes beyond rational calculation and satisfies at an emotional level. Acts are to be understood on that emotional level, with symbols and images evoking an emotional experience in others, creating feelings of emotional understanding and not rational analysis.

Image and Sacrifice

Image, as Zulaika reminds us,[47] is important in the essentially peasant societies from which the IRA and ETA recruit. These are non-intellectual communities where rationalizing intellectualism is not a feature of life; indeed it is part of what they are against. In such societies men tend to conceptualize in images and a series of images that overlay each other, as evidenced by the use and worship of icons and statues which is particularly strong in their religions.

Within the imagery and symbolism of religion, the notion of sacrifice requires special attention in the context of terrorist violence. Nearly all religion involves the elements of sacrifice and suffering,[48] and this is also the case with Catholicism. The suffering of Christ on the cross and His sacrifice for man's sins are central features in Catholicism. The blood sacrifice, recalled via the ceremony and ritual of the symbolic drinking of Christ's blood and the eating of His body in the sacraments and in a collective act of worship, is central to the Catholic experience. Redemption via the blood sacrifice is a major and compelling image in the mind of Irish Catholics, who also attend Catholic schools and who mostly live in exclusively Catholic neighbourhoods.

We suggest that the relation of the religious blood sacrifice may, in certain aberrant and pathological situations, be related by the terrorists to their own violent acts. This may

occur via a process akin to that of psychoanalytical transference,[49] whereby strong emotions are transfered from one object to another, or via a more cognitive route whereby the religious sacrifice and terrorist violence are recognized, consciously or unconsciously, to have similar affect-laden underlying schema.[50]

Schemata are powerful memory structures (similar in form to labelling theory in sociology) that affect our perceptions of objects, our memory for events and even our thought processes. The simple idea behind schemata theory is that our mental representation of the world is arranged in discrete memory packets. It has been shown that whenever people witness events or read a story, schemata cause them to misperceive or mis-remember events; even children as young as three years old are subject to schemata. Thus, schemata color our whole perception of the world. They are memory structures used for determining our perception, memory and action. What gives schemata added power is that they are outside of our conscious control, they are automatically invoked by cues in the world. The mere mention of a term or sight of an object will automatically evoke a whole associated scenario in recipient's memories.[51]

If one equates the nation with religion, as ethnic nationalists and terrorists tend to do, then the nation too demands its sacrifices (as the First World War and, more recently, Bosnia have shown). The sacrifice heightens tension and awareness. It focusses attention and recalls greater transcendental forces that make demands of mortal men; blood sacrifice is the overall schemata. The greater the sacrifice, the more sanctified and holy the cause, the more intense the experience, the more it recalled its people to the cause. And as Zulaika and Douglass observe it is invariably the sacrifice of innocents, the victims, that sanctifies.[52] Images of passion and suffering are central to most national myths - the long struggle and sacrifices made for independence. Icons and images operate via schemata.

It is plausible that images from religion and nationhood become conflated in the terrorists mind and form an emotive message based on association, not logical cause-effect relations. Images of Christ's sacrifice, suffering and passion may mix with images of "our suffering people" and need no causal analysis to imply the act. Terrorists and their community both understand the analogy directly through their common culture and shared schema. Terrorists and their community both understand the sacrifice analogy directly through their common culture and shared schema. This understood symbolism may lie behind the community's implicit acceptance of terrorist violence and provide the terrorists with an emotive, if not rational, rationale for violence.

We now argue that acts of terrorist violence can be seen as symbolic acts that recall images, or schemata, that in turn recall ideas of a culture or way of life under threat. It is an emotional recall of conflated images, a symbolic representation of transcendental forces (a social order or culture above the individual). The social order itself is not clearly enunciated but rather a felt experience, a rhythm of life, an emotional state of oneness between individual and community. Such a state is felt as part of a natural transcendent order (the religious experience) and utilizes the religious symbols it knows to recall its members to defence of that order. Sacrifice and suffering are major symbols linking the

individual to the community and the message is understood by all members of the community. As Levi-Strauss has observed:

Sacrifice seeks to establish a desired connection between two initially separate domains. As language so well expresses it, its object is to bring to pass the fulfillment of human prayers by a distant deity. It claims to achieve this by first bringing together the two domains through a sacralized victim (an ambiguous object, in effect attaching to both), and then eliminating this connecting term. The sacrifice thus creates a lack of contiguity, and by the purposive nature of the prayer, it induces (or is supposed to induce) a compensating continuity to arise on the plane where the initial deficiency experienced by the sacrificer traced the path which leads to the deity, in advance and, as it were, by a dotted line.[53]

Thus, the terrorist act is the sacrifice linking terrorist and community in the distant prayer for the god of ethnic nationalist separation and unified purity.

A SYNTHESIS

Implicit and explicit in much of the text so far has been the idea that terrorists only operate successfully because they have a certain level of community support. Indeed both terrorist and community seek to defend the same interests, experience the same transcendent order and recognize the same symbols. They experience the same things in the same way and share the same emotions.

Specifically what terrorist and community share is a religious and parochial outlook that creates a distrust, even fear, of the outside world and change, and this is felt on an emotional rather than an analytical level. These are also common themes in separatist nationalisms, and religious fundamentalism. Consequently, change may be felt as a kind of emotional suffering and loss that is symbolically recalled via sacrificial acts. Some of the most important sacrificial acts are those of violence, which symbolically strike out at the "forces of profanity that defile the sacred way of life," and which constitute a blood cleansing. In this way, acts transcend normal, i.e., rational interpretation, as they are there to recall believers to the "holy" cause, the unthought-out rhythms of natural peasant life. The question raised in the introduction was how could terrorists do what they do, and how would they "feel" about incidents such as the Omagh bombing. Drawing together the discussions on the elements above, we are now in a position to give a plausible, if partial, explanation for the motivations behind such terrorist violence.

Taking together the key elements of their backgrounds and belief systems, we suggest that a self-supporting interpretation of their acts is generated, which allows them to justify past, present and future violent actions. As already noted, mass support is not associated with the typical terrorist campaign, although some degree of community toleration is essential for it.

What might be the basis of such an interpretation? Each violent act would give an experience of being responsible for the deaths and maiming of innocent people, the

opprobrium of the community at large, and an isolation from external societal norms. These may lead to an high level of emotional turmoil and concentration. Within Republican thought, Irish freedom and Catholic faith are inextricably linked.[54] Therefore, a plausible channel for this re-interpretation is the highly emotionally-charged symbolism provided by Catholicism relating to the suffering and sacrifice necessary for redemption.

Using this readily available model as a metaphor, they may reinterpret their actions as related to the three forms of suffering and sacrifice necessary to achieve their goal. First, they endure their own "self-sacrifice," by incurring society's rejection of them. Second, they experience emotional suffering for causing the deaths and physical and emotional suffering of innocent others. Third, the death and suffering of innocent others may be reinterpreted as a necessary "blood sacrifice" to achieve Irish unity, i.e., an effective rejection of "modernizing Britishness" from the island of Ireland (a rejection not achievable through the Good Friday Agreement).

In summary, the heightened emotions caused by the aftermath of their actions may be channelled into a religious-type experience, from which they can draw, through a process of analogy or transference, the justifications for their actions. Further, they may even still retain a degree of community understanding from their own ethnic group, being blamed at a tactical level only and not at the level of causal responsibility.

CONCLUSION The IRA are not advancing an argument based on wholly quantifiable rewards and benefits; ethnic separatist movements are notable, as groups seeking political autonomy, for their lack of analysis of the real cost (especially economic) of their nationalism. While there are objective and material interests involved, nationalism and identity have always been, in part, at least, subjective and emotional problems. Nationalism involves an holy "war," similar to that of the Islamic fundamentalists, except that paradise is brought down to earth in the form of a nation uncorrupted by alien impurities and oppression. It is not solely about rationally quantifiable and calculable rewards. Thus, as John Whyte observes about Northern Ireland:

. . . the conflict is so intractable because it is not economic. Economic conflicts about the share-out of material benefits are bargainable: conflicts about religion and nationality are non-bargainable and therefore much harder to resolve.[55]

A "common sense" expectation is that, in the face of the popular opinion of their community and their peers, terrorists will feel remorse for their actions and reject violence. The argument in this article is, on the contrary, that they may not feel remorse and they may not call off their campaign, at least not for these reasons. They may recognize that a certain amount of opprobrium has attached to their organization and try to change its name or image, or even start a new organization with none of the popular connotations. However, their attitudes to violence and the suffering they cause will not be affected.

Many attempts at explaining terrorist behavior concentrate on purely rational explanations. In contrast, we have attempted to explain their behavior as, at least in part,

non-rational. Separatist terrorism is itself representative of separatist (ethnic) nationalism, which, in turn, is representative of a reaction against the rationalizing tendencies of modernization. Their political agenda is partly a rejection of modernizing rationalism and their acts are symbolic expressions of the non-rational. Violence is to be understood as much as a symbolic statement as a rational course of action; it can be either or both at the same time. Such an appreciation of symbolic violence requires not so much deductive reasoning as intuitive understanding, as there may be no obvious logical connection between act and outcome.

Thus, we proffer an explanation for why such seemingly senseless acts take place, even when to outsiders they appear counter-productive. "Why did they do it?" is a frequently asked question after such outrages. The purpose, we assert, is that such acts of defiance constitute a statement of rejection, and are also acts of sacrifice and ritual cleansing. These are symbolic acts and are not to be analysed according to normal political behavior. Their aim is to make a statement and to become a focus of people's attention and to affect emotional states, to recall people to their cultural and religious origins, just as acts of sacrifice in religion do. As such, it implies a sympathetic relationship between act, actor and audience; that the audience knows what the symbols mean and how they should respond.

The idea of a sympathetic audience lies behind the fact that local inhabitants in Omagh regretted the killings but so far, no one has informed. Indeed, even though the bombing was in clear violation of the Provisional IRA's own "Green Book," for which the penalty is death, no one has yet been so disciplined, merely warned about their future conduct.[56] Part of the paradox in the question of "why did they do it?" lies in their own toleration of an act they regretted. For all the condemnation of the bomb, no one, especially Republicans, thought of informing on the bombers, even though their identities are reliably rumored to be known.[57] Sinn Fein was very equivocal when asked if any information it had on the bombers would be passed on to the security forces. The act was "understood," even by many of its victims. Thus, the act could be justified, even legitimated, while at the same time condemned.

In this appreciation may lie part of the key to a successful anti-terrorist strategy - to break the sympathetic understanding of acts of violence. Such a strategy would have to create a situation in which no one in the target audience can "understand" the act or actors, which implies breaking the cultural and emotional link between terrorist and audience. This, in turn, implies changing the emotive and subjective orientations of the target audience, even those of the terrorists, and would require a program of social and cultural change in the community.

Although not the purpose of this present article, we note that in order to develop a strategy for change, more than political and constitutional measures will be required. For example, any strategy would involve identifying the different groups involved; from the terrorist, through the supporting levels of "calculator," "kids on the block" and supporting community. Any program will require definition of first, the scheduling of interventions, and second, the nature of the interventions. The different groups will require different

interventions, but all will involve addressing how to change the emotional and subjective evaluations of audience populations. These techniques, for changing behavior, are well established in social psychology,[58] but are complex and thus reserved as a topic for a future paper.

This, in turn, may bring one back to the origins of the conflict in separatist (and religious) campaigns, i.e., the threat to the known culture that leads to the violence and its understanding in the first place. One has to take cognizance of the wider political and social causes and implications of violence if one is to do anything more than call a temporary halt to it.

Relevance to the Ceasefire

Given this analysis, how can the current political situation be viewed? The Good Friday Agreement relies on compromise and bargain. As Whyte points out, the conflict in Northern Ireland is about religion and nationality, and these are non-bargainable in the activist and terrorist mind.[59] This should be clear from the foregoing analysis. The agreement, therefore was brokered on false premises by, on the one hand, constitutional politicians (such a the prime ministers of the UK and Eire) who are working on the basis of rational and calculable political compromise, and on the other hand, by activists whose politics are based on non-bargainable emotive and cultural beliefs. We may note that this point has already been well made by historians, when looking at previous episodes of British-Irish relations.[60] One can learn from history.

Relevance of the Present Approach Much current research on terrorism and political violence views terrorist acts as strategic choices emphasizing ideas such as the "long war" strategy of the IRA.[61] While this is pertinent to understanding much of the behavior of terrorist organizations, it tends to overlook the emotive, cultural and subjective aspects that also drive terrorist behavior. Thus, in a major work on the IRA's strategy, M.L.R. Smith ends up wondering at the naivety of much of the IRA's strategic thinking and its lack of clear strategic perspective.[62] Smith's own perplexity is a result of trying to understand the thinking of the IRA in purely rational means-end calculus. Indeed, even the IRA may have persuaded themselves that they have a purely rational strategy.

While there may be attempts to develop a strategy, and part of the terrorist groups' violence may be understood within that strategic thinking, it need not explain all. Given the disparity of force between the state and the terrorist group it rarely appears a rational course of action to engage the state in the first instance. Thus, we should be very wary of taking terrorist claims of a strategy at face value. On top of this the contradictions in so-called strategy for groups like the IRA are often glaring. The "armalite and the ballot box," or, both a terrorist and a constitutional political organization, is a contradiction for which Sinn Fein is being exposed in the current setting up of a power sharing executive in Northern Ireland.

Strategy, or attempts at it, may exist and may explain certain levels or aspects of the violence. A naive and unrealistic appraisal of the efficacy of force may lead certain rather

"parochial" and "uneducated" men to evolve a strategy of violence that is itself unrealistic. But such men are quite likely to be prone to an emotive and image-laden analysis in which symbolism and sacrifice play an important, even if subconscious role. Many symbolic acts are often not perceived as symbolic by the actor; they may well be regarded as literal by them and only external analysis reveals the acts as symbolic. Hence, terrorists' ideas of strategy may be strongly imbued with a symbolic dimension that the rationally trained mind of a military strategist does not fully appreciate. Trained to analyze rationally, as the military man is, he becomes the victim of his own rationality, itself symbolic of what the terrorist may well be in revolt against. Equally, the terrorist may also be in revolt against the rationalizing analysis of the (anthropological or sociological) academic observer.

Also, much current research tends to be narrative and empirical in nature, and looks for patterns of behavior. Such an approach is essentially atheoretical, and therefore by itself can lead only partially to effective interventions. In this study we attempt to develop an alternative and complementary approach by suggesting a theoretical explanation for political violence, and so move from studying "what" happens to "why" it happens by trying to understand the mind-sets of terrorists and their motivations.

This present approach requires an application of cultural, social and psychological theory to the way in which violent (political) organizations and their members interpret the world, e.g., in the role of emotion in simplified political ideologies or schema. By understanding the terrorists' world view in a culturally and psychologically-grounded way one is more likely to be able to develop methods to design intervention strategies to influence, negotiate with and counter them.

Endnotes

1. "Omagh's Terrible Sacrifice," The Economist, 22 August 1998, pp. 21-22.

2. According to security briefings, the appellation "Real" was given by the press. The group consider themselves to be simply the IRA, and as such, the authentic voice of republicanism.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. For nearly a week after the bombing most of the major daily UK and Irish papers, e.g. The Independent, (London), The Times, (London), or, The Irish Times, (Dublin) carried this as a main story. For several weeks after it continued to attract analysis.

6. Ibid.

7. Thomas Hennessy, A History of Northern Ireland (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1997); Sabine Wichert, Northern Ireland Since 1945 (London: Longman, 1994); J Bowyer Bell,

The Secret Army, The IRA 1916-1979 (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1989); or Patrick Bishop and Eamonn Mallie, The Provisional IRA (London: Corgi, 1987).

8. Robert Clark, The Basque Insurgents (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), pp. 166-84.

9. Eamon Collins, Killing Rage (London: Granta, 1998); or Sean O'Callaghan, The Informer (London: Corgi, 1999).

10. D. George Boyce, Nationalism in Ireland (London: Routledge, 1991); R.F. Foster, Modern Ireland (London: Penguin, 1989).

11. Hennessey, A History of Northern Ireland, pp.171-78.

12. Maxwell Taylor, The Terrorist (London: Brassey's, 1988); or C.A. Russell and B.H. Miller, "Profile of a Terrorist," Terrorism 1, no. 1 (1977), pp. 26-27.

13. Henry Patterson, The Politics of Illusion (London: Hutchison Radius, 1989); or Walter Laqueur, The Age of Terrorism (London: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1988).

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18. "Real IRA ends its deadly campaign," The Independent (London), 9 September 1998, p. 1. These points also were made available to the authors in briefings by security officials.

19. Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), p. 170.

20. Anthony Smith, National Identity (London: Penguin, 1991); Elie Kedourie, Nationalism (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1993); Liah Greenfeld, Nationalism, Five Roads to Modernity (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993); or Adrian Hastings, The Construction of Nationhood (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

21. Smith, National Identity.

22. On this, see especially Kedourie, Nationalism.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

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26. For an introduction to the literature, see Malcolm Hamilton, The Sociology of Religion (London: Routledge, 1995); or Brian Morris, Anthropological Studies of Religion (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

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28. Lyons, Culture and Anarchy; Peter Gibbon, The Origins of Ulster Unionism (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1975); or Patrick Buckland, A History of Northern Ireland (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1981); and Irish Unionism, 1885-1923 (Belfast: HMSO, 1973).

29. See E.J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism (Cambridge, UK: Canto, 1992); or James Kellas, The Politics of Nationalism and Ethnicity (London: Macmillan, 1991). Specifically on Ireland, see Tom Garvin, Nationalist Revolutionaries in Ireland, 1858-1928 (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1987).

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47. Ibid.

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