

Part I

Anti-Catholicism as a Sociological Process in Irish History

Anti-Catholicism is more than a theological debate about the doctrine and practice of the Roman Catholic Church concerning salvational truth, for it can also be understood as a sociological process. Describing something as a ‘sociological process’ is vacuous unless the phrase itself is defined. A sociological process is a method of doing or producing something that is identifiably social in character. Thus, for example, gender is a sociological process for producing the division of labour in the family; socialisation the sociological process for producing the transmission of culture across the generations, and social class the process for producing strata in a modern industrial society. In this way, sociological processes are resources which achieve some purpose in society, and one or more sociological processes might function simultaneously to achieve this end. In common-sense discourse, the term ‘resource’ has three meanings. The dictionary definition of the term describes a resource as a means used to expedite an end, a source of support in times of need, and as a supply of material aid or prosperity. Resources can be concrete items, such as physical objects like weapons, cars or buildings; or be more abstract, such as beauty, power or intelligence; and any particular resource can serve one or more of these functions. Money, for example, is a very concrete object, and acts as a resource in all three ways: it is a means to expedite goals, it is a support in times of need, and supplies material wealth and prosperity. Power is another resource, although more abstract, which operates in all three ways.

Anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland is a resource in the same way and with the same features: it is used to expedite goals, forms a source of support, and supplies material benefits. It operates in this way only in a definite social context, where it develops a distinctive profile. In limited social contexts it can thus be termed a sociological process – a method for producing something social. To locate a sociological process is to render its origins and use in terms of the ‘social item’ it produces, describing its character and form as they help to produce this social item. The social item can be anything from the transmission of culture between the generations, the allocation of people into economic strata or the creation of a division of labour between family members. Following this argument, anti-Catholicism in Northern Ireland is a sociological process for the production of different

rights, opportunities and material rewards between people in a society where religious labels are used to define group boundaries. It has distinct modes or types in the way it operates, and not all function as resources in this manner, but the main modes of the covenantal and secular types produce social stratification and social closure in a distinct type of society. Anti-Catholicism does not operate as a resource to produce this social item in every society, for its function to this end is demarcated by a cultural milieu in which theology can stand for and represent other sorts of differences and conflict between people.

In her account of anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century Britain, Hickman (1995) provides the only sociological profile of anti-Catholicism. Briefly put, Hickman's argument is that the sociological base of anti-Catholicism in nineteenth-century Britain lay in the need in the nineteenth century to differentiate Irish migrants from native Britons, in which it merged with anti-Irish racism; and the need to create a British national identity, where it merged with cultural nationalism, or what Hickman calls 'cultural racism' (*ibid.*: 2), which helped to reinforce the cultural superiority of the British by identifying excluded and outsider groups like the Irish Catholics. This sociological base fits nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism in Britain very well, but is not particularly fruitful for explaining sixteenth- or seventeenth-century anti-Catholicism in England, whose roots lie in political conflicts around monarchical versus parliamentary power rather than the need for social closure. But Hickman's argument usefully illustrates that the genesis, nature and purpose of anti-Catholicism can change over time, and that as a sociological process the social item it helps to produce can evolve, becoming larger or narrower as time changes, and more or less the same as in earlier times. Historians of nineteenth-century anti-Catholicism in Britain support the view that while it drew on earlier notions and ideas, its purpose in the nineteenth century was conditioned by the changed social circumstances of the time, notably the influx of Irish migrants competing for scarce socio-economic resources with the native working class and the distorted ideas about the Irish in nineteenth-century 'scientific racism' (see Hempton, 1996: 145).

What is characteristic about anti-Catholicism in Ireland compared to Britain, as Part I will demonstrate, is its timelessness. There has been continuity in its genesis, nature and purpose from plantation to partition and beyond. In Northern Ireland today, as in the whole of Ireland between plantation and partition, anti-Catholicism is used as a resource in a two-fold manner: as a mobilisation to defend the socio-economic and political position of Protestants against opposition that threatens it; and as a rationalisation to justify and legitimise both that privileged position and any conflict with those who challenge or weaken it. The 'social item' produced by this sociological process was, and is, social stratification and social closure. Anti-Catholicism in Ireland has been timeless because the patterns and structure of the conflict in Ireland have remained the same, resulting in a continuity of function for anti-Catholicism as a resource. The lines of differentiation in Ireland have always coalesced, so that theology has always accurately represented differences of race, culture, national origin, power, political participation, and economic wealth and prosperity. Exceptions to

this exist, as we shall see, especially in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, through the existence, for example, of large Catholic landowners and discrimination against Presbyterian dissenters, but these exceptions were minor and eventually obliterated. The Catholic landowners had political power, and eventually the land itself, wrested from them by the Anglicisation of politics, and Presbyterians were incorporated into a Protestant hegemony after the debacle of the United Irishmen. As Jenkins notes in his recent analysis of Northern Ireland (Jenkins, 1997: 93), whatever confessional differences existed amongst Protestants, they were subsumed under the more significant differences with Irish Catholics. The timelessness of anti-Catholicism in Ireland resides in this timelessness of the patterns of differentiation. Down the centuries Catholicism has stood for defeat in the colonial conflict, equating Catholicism with Irishness and thus cultural barbarity, economic dispossession and political disempowerment. Accordingly, anti-Catholicism has been a resource constantly used to mobilise and rationalise this social stratification and social closure. It has expedited the goal of sectarian inequality, supplied material aid and prosperity in upholding and justifying sectarian inequality to the advantage of Protestants, and been a source of support when Protestant privilege seemed to be threatened by Catholic advances or interfering British governments.

Part I will demonstrate that anti-Catholicism has been deployed as a resource to defend Protestant interests in a variety of different historical circumstances and events, of a theological, political and economic kind. Some of these circumstances and events have been theological, such as when the Roman Catholic Church seemed to progress and prosper as a church, becoming assertive and self-confident, and growing in membership. Anti-Catholic tirades at the level of ideas, or sectarian harassment of Catholics at the level of behaviour, have been provoked, for example, by Cardinal Cullen's strategy in the mid-nineteenth century of transforming Catholicism into a more 'foreign' ultramontanist version, the 'devotional revolution' following the great famine, and the activities of an untrammelled Catholic Church in the newly independent Irish Free State. It has been provoked by political circumstances, when anti-Catholicism has been mobilised as a resource to defend Protestant political interests when these seemed threatened by political events, such as an active and assertive Irish nationalism, or during the events surrounding Home Rule, partition, and civil unrest since 1969. Protestant political interests have not only been threatened by Irish nationalism but also by external forces like Irish and British governments, when anti-Catholicism merged with anti-Irishness and anti-Britishness in an attempt to defend the Union or give voice to opposition against Catholic reform, whether this be Catholic emancipation during the nineteenth century or the 'talks process' in 1997. The demand by Catholics for the full political rights of citizenship within the United Kingdom, let alone for a united Ireland, has always provoked anti-Catholicism. This is not just true for political citizenship; the British government had to force the Stormont government to introduce some welfare state measures in the 1950s because local Unionists thought they advantaged Catholics. Anti-Catholicism is also mobilised in response to economic events, when changed

economic circumstances seem to threaten the privileged access Protestants have to scarce socio-economic resources. Anti-Catholicism, for example, was used openly and blatantly by government ministers to rally co-religionists to protect the rights of Protestant unemployed in the 1930s when the economic crisis restricted the ability of the government to deploy preferential employment practices. And anti-Catholicism was used to stymie attempts to mobilise the working class on non-sectarian grounds, such as during the dock strike in 1907 and the poor law relief riots in the 1930s.

Anti-Catholicism has not only functioned as a resource to categorise ‘the other’, those people excluded by means of social closure from the privileges accorded the rest; it has also helped to define the boundaries of privilege by identifying ‘the insider’ and the bounds of similarity between them. Ethnic labels as a whole do this, and anti-Catholicism has worked to this end along with other ethnic categorisation processes in Northern Ireland, such as everyday language and political behaviour. But as Jenkins (1997: 93) notes, religion is not a residue of all that remains of the original ethnic-national conflict at the time of plantation, but *is* the boundary marker used in ethnic categorisation. Religious difference draws the boundary lines, and when ethnicity is unpacked in Northern Ireland it dissolves into religion (see *ibid.*). Anti-Catholicism is one way of drawing the lines of group identity and of reinforcing feelings of unity and similarity amongst ‘the insider’. It is used as part of the hegemonic process by which a sacred canopy is thrown around Protestants when their unity is essential to their interests. It has helped to overcome divisions between Protestants and to heal past conflicts between them, such as those arising from the Presbyterian involvement in the United Irishmen, or when the campaign to disestablish the Church of Ireland was presented as an attack on Protestantism generally. The Rev. Henry Cooke’s use of conservative evangelicalism as the sacred canopy first occurred in response to Catholic emancipation in 1829, and this helped to sustain the cross-class alliance within Protestantism for generations.

The three chapters that follow attempt to illustrate the timeless use of anti-Catholicism as a resource in social stratification and social closure, making it, in the case of Ireland at least, an important sociological process.