Some angrier voices questioned a facile evoking of providence as the cause of the catastrophe. The Cavan-born Bishop Hughes of New York had solemnly warned: 'Let us be careful not to blaspheme providence by calling this God's famine.'. Priests, eyewitnesses of the misery, also rejected that 'providential' interpretation. Already in 1846, Fr Mullins of Clarenbridge, County Galway, angrily protesting the death, in six months, of 75 of his parishioners – 55 of them from starvation – exclaimed agonisingly: 'How is all this desolation to be accounted for? Surely it was not caused by the visitation of an angry providence, but by the crying injustice of our earthly rulers'! In 1848, Fr Nicholas Coughlan, complaining of 'the unworthy death of some 800,000 honest men' declared emphatically: 'as to this heavy scourge coming from holy providence, I believe none of it; I rather believe it comes *from beyond the (Irish) channel* ...' While these angry statements may appear to discard the very notion of providence in the face of so enormous a human catastrophe, the context in which they are written indicates rather a rejection of the indiscriminate invocation of providence to cloak human responsibility. As evictions increased and their horror revealed the hand of man rather than the hand of God, by 1849, the clergy, eye-witnesses of the scenes, were horrified at the failure to protect the poor from what the Synod described as 'the most ruthless oppression that ever disgraced the annals of humanity'. Others thought the same. In horrified terms, William Bennett of the Society of Friends reported: 'they are dying like cattle off the face of the earth, from want and its kindred horrors. Is this to be regarded in the light of a Divine dispensation and punishment?' A contemporary poet, Máire Ní Dhroma, from Rinn, Co Waterford, wrote:

> Ní hé Dia 'cheap riamh an obair seo,
> Daoine bochta a chur le fuacht is le fán
> (It was never God who thought up this work,
> Of casting out poor people to wander in the cold.)

The bishops' Thurles Address can be seen as an attempt to counter the ideology of Trevelyan and of the political economists. It was on the question of culpability and the attitude to the poor that they pointed to the sharpest differences. They had already, in their memorial to the viceroy in 1847, rejected any attempt to blame the famine on 'the indolence of the peasants', laying it instead on the 'penal laws' which had deprived people of both property rights and the fruits of their labour. Now again, in the Address, they insisted that those 'flung upon the highway to perish' were not indolent, but 'virtuous and industrious families'. Behind that failure to halt evictions and protect life, they discerned an attitude which they considered alien to the Gospel – a contempt for the poor whom many of the governing class saw as a drag on the progress of the United Kingdom and 'the great nuisance of the moral world ...' The bishops reminded Christians that the poor 'were made to the image of the living God and are purchased by the blood of Calvary' and 'the special favourites and representatives of Jesus Christ'. Earlier on Fr Spratt, the founder of two relief organisations, demanded more food of the government officials for their starving fellow creatures, who were created by the same omnipotent God, and were as much entitled to live as themselves, and Fr Edward Waldron insisted that the poor, too, were 'made to God's image and likeness' and should be so treated. The contact with the poor, who formed a majority of their faithful, made clergy sensitive to their plight. It is arguable, too, that the bishops and clergy represented an older, more accepting attitude to the poor, whereas the attitude becoming prevalent in Britain reflected, in part, a more modern post-industrial revolution attitude and a different work-ethic.

Evangelical Missions

'Providence' as interpreted by some Evangelical Protestants, was the cause of another concern that agitated the Catholic clergy in the latter years of the Famine. Many Evangelicals

saw the Famine as the opportunity provided by providence for the conversion of Catholics. In the enthusiastic words of one of them, the Reverend C. Richards, 'There was never such a time as the present open in Ireland ... for the preaching ... of the light of the ... Gospel'.

Most great religions feel morally bound to propagate their message of salvation, by making converts or proselytes. Yet what one religious group regards as missionary activity, the opposing group perceives as immoral poaching; when a religious body believes that outside its church there is no salvation, enticing a person to leave it is perceived as little short of demonic. Inextricably intertwined with the spiritual dimension, are other dimensions – social, cultural and political.

All these elements were present in nineteenth century Ireland for, despite warm co-operation between religious bodies on Famine relief, this was not an ecumenical age. Since the 1820s, Evangelical Protestants had launched a zealous campaign, often referred to as the 'Second Reformation', to convert Catholics. During the Famine, they redoubled their efforts. Their efforts became more organised when, in 1849, Alexander Dallas founded the Society for Irish Church Missions to Roman Catholics, with headquarters in London and branches throughout the United Kingdom. By 1854, it had set up 125 mission stations in Ireland, an indication of the zeal of the missionaries and the generosity of their supporters. Their main motivation was to rescue the people from the darkness of popery and to bring them the pure light of the gospel which, in turn, would render them peaceful and more open to political integration.

Of critical importance in any missionary activity is the means it adopts or is perceived to adopt. There were numerous complaints that some evangelicals used food, clothing, and other material benefits to win converts. Already in 1847, the delegation of the Catholic bishops, led by Archbishops Murray and Crolly, in their respectful memorial to Clarendon, the viceroy,

had protested against 'the unchristian abuse of public and private charities evinced by the wicked attempts at proselytism'. When he failed to address their problem, they immediately renewed their protest. A few years later Clarendon, who disliked Catholicism, himself expressed concern. When the Duke of Bedford, the prime minister's brother, told Clarendon that the Mission Society had formed a branch in Bedford, the viceroy commented apprehensively that, 'A Protestant movement is going on in the Diocese of Tuam, and I hope some of the conversions may be sincere and lasting, but one cannot feel sure when food and clothing are brought in aid of the Scriptures. If a branch is established at Bedford I suppose you can hardly avoid subscribing to it. As Lord Lieutenant I should not venture to do so as its objects are proselytising and *if* it effects some good, it is at the cost of much bad blood.'

Bad blood was unfortunately created. Later, the Quaker, Alfred Webb, noted perceptively in his diary:

> A network of well-intentioned Protestant associations spread over the poorer parts of the country, which in return for soup and other help endeavoured to gather the people into their churches and schools, really believing that masses of our people wished to abandon Catholicism ... The movement left seeds of bitterness.'

Clarendon and Webb were correct as regards 'seeds of bitterness'. Catholics were convinced then and later that the Evangelicals made use of soup, food, clothing and money to persuade the starving poor to attend their services, a practice that Catholics labelled 'taking the soup' or 'souperism'.

A full assessment of this complex and sensitive question falls outside the scope of this volume which is principally concerned with the perception and experience of the Catholic clergy as it emerges from their correspondence. This correspondence reveals that, although anxiety existed from the beginning of the Famine, it increased during its closing years to

become a main topic in the bishop's letters in the early 1850s. From the beginning of the Famine, clergy in Cork, Kerry, Limerick, Mayo, Sligo and Dublin had complained increasingly about aggressive proselytism. In 1847, Michael Enright, parish priest of Castletown Beare, reported that 'a whole bevy of parsons is to be seen every hour of the day going from house to house distributing tracts and pouring the vilest calumnies on our religion'. The effectiveness of these efforts varied, he added. 'Indignation is excited in the minds of the great number. Others begin for the first time to entertain doubts of their religion and a few are seduced or prevailed on to act as if they had changed their religious opinions.' Reverend Edward Nangle had been an active Evangelical missioner in Achill for many years. Now, in 1848, Michael Gallagher, the parish priest, admitted that 'poverty ... has compelled ... the greater number of the population to send their children to Nangle's proselytising, villainous schools ... They are dying of hunger and rather than die, they have submitted to his impious tenets.' From Clifden, William Flannelly informed Archbishop Murray:

> It cannot be wonder if a starving people be perverted in shoals, especially as they go from cabin to cabin and when they find the inmates naked and starved to death, they proffer food, money and raiment, on the express condition of becoming members of their conventicle ... They are ... saying to the poor people, 'Why not go to your priests and get money from them?'

Martin Harte, parish priest of Ballycastle, in the Killala diocese, complained that the Belfast Societies had bought land to form a colony. 'They have money in abundance and many hearers on Sunday ... They have selected my parish as the most distressed, but (I) hope in God I will be able to banish them as soon as the lumpers (cheaper, but widely-used potato) makes (*sic*) their appearance.'

Fr Patrick McLoughlin, of Kiltullagh, near Castlereagh, revealed a further complication:

> We have here to contend with a Protestant clergyman named Blundell ... The principal landlords are Protestants and bigots, over whom he has a great ascendancy, and uses his influence with them or their agents in removing poor Catholics from their holdings, in order to have them to give to their Protestant neighbours. It is well understood that if they go to church, that they will not be disturbed. He is also well supplied with money, from English charities ... and the use he converts it to is to endeavour to make the poor barter their religion for a little meal or a few stones of seed potatoes.

Then, in an emotional description of many priests predicament, he added:

> You cannot imagine what an annoyance such a character must be to poor pennyless priests, who are more than over-worked in running from one end to another of a parish 14 miles in length, badly supplied with roads, at the same time often rising before the sun to prepare to proceed to a distant point of the parish, there to break the bread of life to the Children of the Faith. Our only confidence and safeguard is God's grace and the strong faith of our poor people, who if any should yield, (it) would be at the sacrifice of snapping asunder their hearts' last dearest chords. From such a sad step may the Lord protect them.

Sister Mary O'Donel of the Presentation Convent Galway, claiming that in their zeal the missioners spared no money to bring over the poor, catches the flavour of the Evangelical preaching: '*Money* is to be no obstacle, no sum will be refused to bring over the poor. "Fly from Babylon" is, I believe, the watch word. The priests are called impostors but we (the nuns) are pitied and my darkness is *awful*.'

For the priests, upset and angry at Famine, fever and evictions, this spiritual torment was worse. The cry of agony that went up from some of them sprang from the fact that prose-

lytism was an issue that touched the whole meaning of their life and work. Were they failing in their primary duty of protecting their 'flock', and would they not have to answer to God on the day of judgement? Their anger at the proselytisers was often unmeasured. 'Ill-omened birds of prey', raged Fr Maher of Killeshan. 'Cursed souperism' thundered the very moderate Archdeacon O'Sullivan, who appears to have incited an attack on the local parson, who was beaten 'within an inch of his life'. Cullen was angry at O'Sullivan for his violent action, but, in the privacy of his diary, O'Sullivan defended his conduct, not without some humour:

> Now I am no agitator ... (Yet) if souperism were to invade my parish in the morning, before evening would Fr John (himself) become the greatest agitator in the Country. He would be a Tenant Right man, a Defence Association man, a Repealer, anything, everything, to stir up and excite the people. Prayers and Rosaries and Missions and Forty Hours ... are the only weapons Dr Cullen depends on ... Rome knows very little and Dr Cullen seems to know less of what a priest on a country mission must recur to in order to meet soupers.

The strength of his reaction is an indication of the passions that proselytism aroused. In 1848, in their memorial to the viceroy, the bishops repeated their protest of 1847. In 1850, at the Synod of Thurles, they labelled proselytisers 'Sons of perdition' (*perditos homines*), who sought 'by money, gifts, and all kind of corruption to deprive the starving, afflicted poor of their most precious possession – their faith'. The Synod, however, was careful to point out that the more enlightened of their Protestant brethren were the first to condemn such proselytism.

The co-operation in relief work that had existed between all religions suffered. Relief committees, workhouses, hospitals, asylums and schools all now became religious battlefields. Bad blood was created which obscured the impressive relief

work of the Protestant community not only in Ireland but in the United States, Britain and throughout the British Empire.

The Exodus

If Clarendon censured proselytism, he took an enthusiastic view of another phenomenon of Ireland in the 1850s – the mass emigration. 'Priests and patriots howl over the "Exodus"', he exulted, 'but the departure of thousands of papist Celts must be a blessing to the country they quit ... Some English and Scots settlers have arrived.' Emigration, often regarded as the solution for getting rid of the surplus population, was to reach 7, 000 a week in 1852 and *The Times* of London was forecasting that 'in a few years more a Celtic Irishman will be as rare in Connemara as is the Red Indian on the shores of Manhattan'. The clergy grieved to see so many people go, but as that inveterate nationalist, Fr Maher, declared, he would rather see his people 'alive in Illinois than rotting in Ireland'. Archdeacon O'Sullivan told a parliamentary committee that though he hated with all his soul the loss of the best blood of Ireland, he had advised 'every man to emigrate because he believed that every man must place his own life and happiness, and (those) of his dependents before other loyalties'. 'Everyone,' Archbishop Cullen declared in 1851, 'must deplore the sad circumstances which compel the inhabitants of this fine country to emigrate from their cherished fatherland' and he hoped for some means of keeping them at home. Bishop Moriarty of Kerry commented despondently some years later: 'The exodus of the people bids fair to solve all questions. They are all going.' The emigration continued unabated.

Although the famine was easing off towards the end of 1851, there was still much distress. 'I was in Cashel on Tuesday,' wrote Archbishop Slattery to his friend Laurence Renehan of Maynooth, 'when I confirmed 1126 inmates of the poorhouses though in fact the town is but one vast poorhouse. I am not the better of it yet ... from the appalling spectacle of the place and the people – in truth my heart sank within me at the sight

– may God help them and us.' In Clare, especially, and in isolated pockets in Munster and Connacht, distress lingered on for another few years.

'Excess of Suffering'

Suffering on such a scale and for so long a period was more than most people could take. At Grosse Île, Father Taschereau experienced how numbed to horrors the victims had become: 'It had always seemed to me that the presence of a dead body in a ship must arouse some kind of feeling, but ... many... have been pointed out to me with a sort of indifference when I passed beside their beds or where we lay them while waiting for the coffins to be ready; I see this as a new mark of degradation caused by an excess of suffering ...' Apart from this numbness, what effect this 'excess of suffering' had on the people is difficult to gauge. Did it bring a sense of shame at what happened, or perhaps a deep-rooted depression and anger at the deaths? There was much heroic sacrifice by family-members, neighbours, doctors, clergymen and relief-workers, but other things had occurred that people wanted to forget. The evictions caused untold suffering. Crimes had multiplied as people strove to survive. Terrible scenes were enacted in work houses and in the indescribable holds of ships, as attendants and victims themselves became inured to the suffering around them. Not all strong farmers had been as generous as the Cullens; some had protected their crops and seed potatoes with shot-gun and trap, while others had taken the farms of the dispossessed. The Famine strengthened the strongest farmers and the graziers, who, with the extinction of the cottiers, were able to extend their holdings.

The famine and the high-level emigration it triggered had important consequences for Irish society and culture and no less for the church. The loss by Famine and emigration of some two and a half million of its faithful could not but produce a profound shock. Certainly, the countryside was forever changed as whole townlands were abandoned. 'Melancholy

starvation, heartless extermination and unexampled emigration of our people ... have rendered this poor diocese (in common with the West of Ireland) a wilderness!', Bishop French told Renehan in May 1850. Taken with that loss, the initial, and loudly-trumpeted, success of the Evangelical missions appeared, for a while, to threaten the existence of 'Catholic Ireland'. The resurgence of strident 'no-popery' in Britain sharpened this threat. Parish missions, preached by religious orders, were the means the church used to counter the Evangelicals and to strengthen the Catholic faith of their people. The decline of the Irish language and the growing knowledge of English favoured the spread of a counter-Reformation culture which, up to this, had been confined mainly to towns. These changes might not have come with the same thoroughness had the Famine not devastated the poorer classes, bearers of a more traditional Irish spirituality.

Famine emigrants created 'overseas Irish churches' which provided a distinctive Irish model for the church in all English-speaking lands. These churches were remarkably generous in their support for their kith and kin in Ireland.

Conclusion

The eyewitness accounts of priests and bishops from different parts of Ireland and from abroad, over a period of five or six years, from 1845 to 1851, provide some insight into what the Famine meant for the victims. The cumulative effect of their accounts, so similar in many ways, is to deepen one's realisation of the horror of that terrible experience.

The first reaction of the clergy – total trust in the government – gave way in the autumn of 1846 to disillusion and disbelief. This was followed by despair and hopelessness as, in the early spring of 1847, they looked on helplessly while the Famine swept away whole families, townlands, and villages. They witnessed many of the ties that bound society together come under threat as neighbours were left to lie uncoffined

and unburied in the fields and ditches, a prey to wild fowl and animals.

By 1848, evictions and assassinations and the recriminations they generated brought to the surface an anger with the government. Yet, committed to their role of counselling peace, and fearful of the evils rebellion might bring, they had opposed the ill-prepared rebellion of 1848.

When the Famine struck hard again in 1849 and government failed to take any worthwhile measures to relieve the people, this anger grew to find expression in the protest against the Queen's visit, and, in particular, in the increasing militancy of the bishop's recriminations. From 1847 on, they had criticised the inadequacy of relief, the mismanagement in the workhouses, and the misuse of relief funds for proselytism. More significantly, they had rejected the blame for the crisis which the British press and public opinion continued to cast on the peasants. The real problem, they said, was that the subordinate rights of property were given priority over the more fundamental right to life. Then, in their Address from the Synod of Thurles, they went further, fiercely denouncing the evictions taking place under the protection of the law, as no other than the 'track of the Exterminator'. At the root of this 'contempt and hard-heartedness', they identified a perception of the poor as 'a moral nuisance'. To this ideology they opposed a more compassionate one, citing the Gospel as everywhere breathing respect, love, and commiseration for the destitute as the 'special favourites and representatives of Jesus Christ'.

On the practical level, the Catholic church's worldwide relief work was a striking achievement and it reflects credit on its members, lay and clerical, Irish and foreign. On the spiritual level the priests, at deadly risk to themselves, brought the victims, in the words of Bernard O'Reilly, 'the supreme consolation of an Irish Catholic – the last rites of his church.'

Further Reading

The following list is a brief selection.

Thomas P. O'Neill, 'The Catholic Clergy and the Great Famine', *Reportorium Novum* i. (1956), 461-9; a general survey by an expert on Famine relief.

M. Coen, 'Gleanings – The Famine in Galway,' *Connaught Tribune*, March, April, May 1975. An interesting series of articles based on extensive original research.

David C. Sheehy, 'Archbishop Murray of Dublin and the Great Famine in Mayo', *Cathair na Mart*, 11 (1991) 118-28; 'Archbishop Daniel Murray of Dublin and the response of the Catholic Church to the Great Famine in Ireland', *Linkup*, December 1995, pp. 38-42; two lectures by the archivist of the Dublin Diocesan Archives based on his unrivalled knowledge of the papers of Dr Murray.

Peter Grey, 'The triumph of dogma: ideology and Famine relief', *History Ireland* (Summer 1965) pp. 26-34.

Kevin Whelan, 'Tionchar an Ghorta', Cathal Poirtéir (ed.) *Gnéithe den Ghorta* (Coiscéim, Dublin, 1995), pp 41-54.

John Cussen, 'Notes on Famine Times in Newcastle West', *Journal of the Newcastle West Historical Society*, ii (1996), 25-7.

Cormac Ó Gráda, *An Drochshaol: Béaloideas agus Amhráin* (Coiscéim, Dublin, 1994).

Donal A. Kerr, 'A Nation of Beggars?' *Priests, People, and Politics in Famine Ireland* 1846-1852 (Oxford University Press, 1995); Donal A. Kerr, *Peel, Priests, and Politics: Sir Robert Peel's Administration and the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland 1841-*