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“A City upon a Hill”: The “Dingle Colony” of Converts and the Disruption of Traditional Communities in Mid-19th-Century Ireland

Abstract: In 19th-century Ireland, Protestant societies disrupted the traditional demarcations of religious affiliations by promoting self-determination and individual discernment. This paper wishes to examine, in light of Ferdinand Tönnies’s concepts and the case of the “Dingle Colony”, how the increasing amount of conversions led to the creation of new communities of converts identified as “colonies” and a Catholic counteraction which crystallised the intensifying opposition to the British state and the catholicisation of Irish nationalism.

Keywords: mission, conversion, charity, territoriality, community, identity.

Résumé: Au XIX^e siècle en Irlande, les sociétés protestantes bouleversèrent les frontières traditionnelles de l’affiliation religieuse par leur promotion de l’auto-détermination et du discernement individuel. Cet article propose d’examiner, à la lumière des concepts de Ferdinand Tönnies et du cas de la « Dingle Colony », comment le nombre croissant de conversions conduisit à la création de nouvelles communautés de convertis qualifiées de « colonies », et à une contre-attaque catholique qui cristallisa l’opposition croissante à l’État britannique et la catholicisation du nationalisme irlandais.

Mots clés: mission, conversion, charité, territorialité, communauté, identité.

In the decades preceding the creation of the National School system in Ireland¹, several Protestant societies were founded to develop permanent and itinerant schools for the poor. Established mainly in the South and West of Ireland with the support of landlords and clergymen, they claimed to promote self-determination and individual discernment through education but were often seconded by auxiliary societies sending missionaries. Their agents soon boasted to have gained thousands of converts during fund-raising tours in Ireland and England in the early 1840s. This stirred strong opposition from the Catholic clergy and elite, who accused them of corrupting the souls of the poor in times of crisis. Violent counteractions such as ostracism, denunciations from the altar, and murders led to the creation of new social entities identified as “colonies” to protect the converts (Achill and Dingle). The work of “souters” – or missionaries – was then presented as merciless proselytism in local newspapers. Local articles displaying “truthful accounts” of “souperism” were followed by accusations of calumny. This was soon amplified

1. The system was outlined by Lord Stanley (Chief Secretary)’s letter to the president of the Board of Education, the Duke of Leinster, and established by the state in 1831.

in the regional and national press, before reaching Westminster. The “Bible War”, coined by Irene Whelan², resurfaced in a war for souls – the press, and then the courts, converted into battlefields.

The “Dingle Colony” happened to be a frequent target in articles which expressed a concern for preserving the community from the danger of “unnatural” doings³, thus reflecting Ferdinand Tönnies’s definition of two opposite types of social bonds – first, the “natural” gathering of individuals motivated by an organic will (*Wesenswille*) within a community (*Gemeinschaft*), a group inherited from tradition and “bound together by ties of kinship”⁴; then society (*Gesellschaft*), a mechanical entity “where free-standing individuals interacted with each other through self-interest, commercial contracts, [...] and [...] the external constraints”⁵, motivated by rational will (*Kürwille*). Within this framework, religious conversion appeared as a disrupting force threatening the precarious stability maintained by the traditional demarcations of communities in a country where most of the population did not belong to the Established Church and shared vivid memories of former outcast citizens. The Dingle Colony thus presents us with an interesting case to examine the impact of conversion on traditional communities. To do so, this article relies on a work in progress on the Irish Society for Promoting the Education of the Irish through the Medium of their own Language, founded in Dublin in 1818, which was one of the first to be accused of “souperism” in the early 1840s.

A century later, Bishop Patrick Foley, aligning himself with contemporary allegations, defined the phenomenon as a hypocritical change:

By the expression “Souperism” the author has no intention of giving offence to one’s religion, but the word having the sanction of usage, it enabled him to distinguish that class of Roman Catholics who, still believing in their former religion, went over to the Protestant Church under the colour and pretence of converts⁶.

Academic studies were then initiated by Desmond Bowen’s landmark studies, *Souperism: Myth or Reality. A Study in Souperism* (1970), followed by *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70* (1978)⁷. His detailed works however did not really deconstruct the social phenomenon, but rather tried to explain it through the paradigm of a culture war for ascendancy in which Evangelical proselytism was

2. Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland: The “Second Reformation” and the Polarization of Protestant-Catholic Relations, 1800-1840*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 2005.

3. “Doings about Dingle”, *The Kerry Examiner*, 14 September 1843.

4. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, Jose Harris (ed. and trans.), Margaret Hollis (trans.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought), 2001, p. xvii-xviii.

5. *Ibid.*, p. xviii.

6. Patrick Foley, *History of the Natural, Civil, Military and Ecclesiastical State of County Kerry*, Dublin, Sealey, Bryers and Walker, 1907, p. viii.

7. Desmond Bowen, *Souperism: Myth or Reality. A Study in Souperism*, Cork, Mercier Press, 1970; *The Protestant Crusade in Ireland, 1800-70. A Study of Protestant-Catholic Relations between the Act of Union and Disestablishment*, Dublin, Gill & Macmillan, 1978.

mainly to blame. Recently, Miriam Moffitt and Christine Kinealy distanced their own approach from contemporary polemical charges against missionary strategies in their respective studies *The Society for Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics* (2010) and *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland* (2013)⁸. Kinealy indeed refers to "relief with overt missionary objectives"⁹, a definition which could apply indifferently to Protestant or Catholic societies operating in Ireland. Likewise, Moffitt remarks that these strategies resembled those of Catholic missions throughout the world at the same period.

However, the challenge of individual conversion for communities still needs to be explored to better understand the dynamics at work in souperism as a social Irish phenomenon. In this article, it will be argued that it partly originated from opposite views on the individual and its status within the community, which contributed to the intensifying opposition to the British state and the catholicisation of Irish nationalism. To do so, it is necessary, as Jean-Paul Willaime reminds us, to beware of an "ultramodernist and secularist vision" that tends to favour the explanation of conversion as the result of someone else's malevolent manipulation¹⁰. Thus, through an interdisciplinary approach combining history and sociology, this article will first examine the "City upon a Hill" established for converts by agents of the Irish Society in the Dingle peninsula, before exploring how its dynamic process trespassed the traditional borders of religious communities. The study of the evolving forms of community resistance it triggered in the 1840s and 50s may finally bring new light on the limits of Tönnies's concepts in a context of emerging religious pluralism.

A "City upon a Hill" beyond the borders of traditional communities

According to the 1831 census, the population of the Dingle peninsula amounted to more than 12,000 people, almost all Catholics. This local community could fit the description of the "bounded community" or *Gemeinschaft* defined by Tönnies, "[its] boundaries being governed by a strong cultural sense of insider / outsider, native / foreigner"¹¹. Indeed, they shared strong family ties, the Irish language, common memories of dispossessions and religious discriminations, but also a long history of shared existence and culture. They coexisted with a Protestant and English-speaking vis-à-vis mainly composed of coast guards and landed aristocrats, who shared close ties with London. The latter rather embodied what Tönnies

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8. Miriam Moffitt, *The Society for Irish Church Missions to the Roman Catholics, 1949-1950*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2010; Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland: The Kindness of Strangers*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.
 9. Christine Kinealy, *Charity and the Great Hunger in Ireland...*, p. 266.
 10. Jean-Paul Willaime, "Le statut et les effets de la conversion dans le protestantisme évangélique", in *Le protestantisme évangélique, un christianisme de conversion. Entre ruptures et filiations*, Sébastien Fath (ed.), Turnhout, Brepols, 2004, p. 176 (our translation).
 11. David Inglis, "Cosmopolitan Sociology and the Classical Canon: Ferdinand Tönnies and the Emergence of Glocal *Gesellschaft*", *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2009, p. 819.

identifies as *Gesellschaft*, since they were either sent to serve the state or were its local representatives. Prominent members of what was to become the “Dingle Mission” fit the description – Captain Forbes, half-pay officer of the 45th, Lieutenant Herbert Clifford of the Royal Navy and Lady Ventry¹². Besides, Charles Gayer, Lord Ventry’s chaplain, and all the missionaries of the Irish Society were supported nationally by the whole “machinery” of the Irish Society among which were Ultra-Protestants such as Lord Roden, but also supporters of Catholic Emancipation such as Maurice FitzGerald, 18th Knight of Kerry. Anglo-Irish landowners could be born in the locality, but were still considered as outsiders or foreigners, distinguished, and distinguishing themselves, from the “native Irish” because of their origins and connections, and remained associated with “[t]he Protestantism of England,” which for many, “ha[d] always been the pest of Ireland [...]”¹³. Even if they protested against such prejudices at the beginning of their enterprise, they must have convinced members of the highest echelons of the state apparatus and the Royal family of their educative goals, as the Queen Dowager¹⁴ was a member for life of the Dingle Mission¹⁵. Besides, the letter below from Lady Maria Meath, inserted in the Duchess of Kent’s account book, reveals the confidential support of Queen Victoria’s mother¹⁶ (fig. 1).

These two different communities were interacting, mainly for economic reasons, but kept separated by strict religious and linguistic boundaries. The “living organism” of the local community was indeed inherited from tradition and deeply rooted in their religion. This both imagined and experienced conception of the community was so strongly cohesive in its opposition to the local representatives of the British state – who were mostly Protestants yet counted Catholics too – that it tended to ignore social differences between Catholics in the pre-Famine period. In between these two identifiable communities, the establishment of a Protestant settlement of converts in Dingle would bring about major change. In the early 1830s, the arrival of three Protestant clergymen, connected with the Irish Society, would threaten these tacitly accepted boundaries. The Irish Society was founded in 1818 in Dublin by several members of the Dublin elite¹⁷ and Anglican clergymen¹⁸ under the presidency of the Anglican Archbishop

12. *Report of the Dingle Colony*, 1844, Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 24,445, p. 1.

13. “Irish Paupers and British Christians”, *The Kerry Examiner*, 13 January 1847.

14. Adelaide of Saxe-Meiningen (1792-1849).

15. *Report of the Dingle Colony*, 1844, p. 8.

16. Letter from Lady Maria Meath, 3 October 1849, Royal Archives, RA VIC/MAIN/Y/175/184 (“Dear Anna Maria, I beg you will thank her R.H. for her very generous donation of £5 to the Irish Society which will remain on that card, as her R.H.’s wishes [...]”), and account of “a second donation of £5” on 8 October 1849; the permission of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

17. R.H. (Right Honourable) Colonel Charles Gore (1793-1869), R.H. John Foster (1740-1828), R.H. Colonel John Maxwell Barry (1767-1838), Sergeant Thomas Lefroy (1776-1869), and William Shaw Mason (1774-1853).

18. The most active being Rev. Robert Daly (1783-1872), Rev. Dr. Sadlier (1775-1851), Fellow of Trinity College Dublin; and Rev. Joseph D’Arcy Sirr (1794-1868).

1844
Oct 3rd

Dear Lady Anna Maria
 I beg you will thank
 her Mr H. for her very
 generous donation of
 the Irish Society which
 will remain in that
 land, as Mr H. wishes
 I am most truly
 Obedt to you
 A. Meath

Fig. 1 – Letter from Lady Maria Meath to Lady Anna-Maria (probably Dawson, Lady of the Bedchamber to H.R.H. the Duchess of Kent), 3 October 1849.

Royal Archives, RA VIC/MAIN/Y/175/184. © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 2019.

of Tuam¹⁹, with the support of members of the landed elite²⁰. They had started opening schools in the district of Dingle after the arrival of Gayer in 1831. Former Catholics, among which the most famous was Thomas Moriarty, soon seconded him and started schools for children and adults in the different villages.

Contrary to what Michael Brown, Charles J. McGrath and Thomas P. Power observed in their study on converts and conversion in the 18th century, “denominational and ethnic allegiance, reinforced by traditions of history”²¹ does not appear to have been an effective refraining factor in the decision of many converts in the 1830s and early 40s. Indeed, conversions started to increase in the peninsula, even if their defections often tore families apart. In 1839, the “Dingle Colony” was founded as another “Refuge” for the “cast off” converts²² and from its promontory, they wished to share the light of the Divine truth to all the country²³. In 1841, this station, ambiguously christened “the colony” by the local agents, comprised 86 individuals, from which more than 60 adults attended Sunday schools and more than 100 children weekly schools. The sketch inserted in Gayer’s 1839 circular letter (fig. 2) represented its establishment on a virgin territory, thus illustrating Michael Brown’s assertion that, “rather than integration, much of the Irish conversion experience suggests the creation of a hybrid group in society [...]”²⁴.

Therefore, the foundation of a new and territorially identifiable community, while promoting crossovers from one religious community to another, clearly separated the converts from the rest of the inhabitants. Whether due to ostracism or to a new experiment of “a City upon a Hill”²⁵, it proved religious plurality to be impossible. Besides, as it provided work and lodging in one of the poorest areas with the help of the landed gentry, its foundation thanks to a large campaign of fund-raising in Ireland and in England rose suspicions of corruption. The name itself was perceived by contemporaries as a further proof of colonising intentions to eradicate Catholicism from Ireland. The Dingle colony, settled in the interstices of the traditional communities, was perceived as transgressing the borders inherited

19. William Beresford, Baron Decies (1743-1819).

20. Robert Jocelyn (1788-1870), future 3rd Earl of Roden (1820) and leader of the Orange Order.

21. Michael Brown, Charles J. McGrath, Thomas P. Power, “Introduction”, in *Converts and Conversion in Ireland, 1650-1850*, Michael Brown, Charles J. McGrath, Thomas P. Power (eds.), Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2005, p. 22.

22. *Report of the Dingle Colony*, 1841, Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 24,445.

23. Charles Gayer, lithograph circular letter, Dingle, 26 September 1839, Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 24,445.

24. Michael Brown, Charles J. McGrath, Thomas P. Power, “Introduction”, in *Converts and Conversion in Ireland, 1650-1850*, p. 30. In an ironic twist, it is now all memory of this hybrid group that has been erased, and the only remaining traces are the houses of former Saint-John Street, renamed “Colony Street”.

25. Beyond the reference to John Winthrop’s lecture “A Model of Christian Charity” (1630), the expression comes from the Sermon on the Mountain in Matt. 5:14-16 (King James Version), frequently referred to by Christian missions: “Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an [sic] hill cannot be hid. / Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. / Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven”.

Fig. 2 – Charles Gayer, “A View of the Irish Settlement at Ventry”, lithograph circular letter, Dingle, 26 September 1839.

Dublin, National Library of Ireland, MS 24,445.

from the status quo. Patrick Robert Byrne, the proprietor and editor of *The Kerry Examiner*, soon published articles to “instruct the community” (i.e. his middle-class readers) by exposing “the various circumstances which combine[d] in upholding so ‘unnatural’ a state of things”²⁶. The colony thus seemed to fit all the characteristics of *Gesellschaft*: a new, unnatural and mechanical aggregate into which one goes out “as if into a foreign land”²⁷.

A dynamic process of transgression

Composed of local labourers who changed religion – and not of foreigners – the Dingle colony questions the definition of *Gesellschaft*. Indeed, David Inglis explains that “just as *Gemeinschaft* is by definition about locality, *Gesellschaft*, its ideal-typical opposite, is non-local”²⁸. Besides, though it did not fit Tönnies’s definition of an organic community, the converts’ community underwent a sort of organic development – after the first seeds were sown, it grew slowly, blossomed in the early forties, before gradually withering after the Famine. As it would be impossible to describe and analyse all these stages in this article, I will briefly sketch the different steps that led to the establishment of the colony.

The Dingle colony partook in the transnational Evangelical movement of religious and moral reforms. Directly influenced by the Methodist revival of the mid-18th century initiated by John Wesley, the Irish Society of Dublin and then the Irish Society of London established in 1822²⁹ were founded and supported by persons who had experienced a spiritual conversion, among whom were William Wilberforce and other members of the Clapham sect³⁰. For Evangelicals, “[a]bove all else, religious enthusiasm implied a personal and emotional response to the demands of biblical truth”³¹. Hence, religious conversion was considered the initial step of a moral and social reform, the transformation of the individual triggering the improvement of society. To open the way to such a widespread individual response, promoting education was paramount. The Irish Society therefore relied on itinerant readers and teachers to promote education and Bible reading in Irish to allow “the simple efficacy of the divine truth”³² to perform. According to Whelan, “nothing but revolutionary fervour can explain the number of miles travelled and

26. Patrick Robert Byrne, “Doings about Dingle”, *The Kerry Examiner*, 14 September 1843.

27. Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Civil Society*, p. 18.

28. David Inglis, “Cosmopolitan Sociology...”, p. 824.

29. The Irish Society of London was founded in 1822 to support the Irish Society of Dublin. Among its most eminent members were William Wilberforce (1759-1833), Henry Thornton (1760-1815) and Lord Teignmouth (1751-1834), the first president of the British and Foreign Bible Society.

30. *5th Report of the Irish Society of Dublin*, Dublin, Goodwin, 1823, p. 1; *Irish Society of London*, London, Wilson, 1822, p. 2.

31. Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland...*, p. 329-330.

32. David Hempton, Myrtle Hill, *Evangelical Protestantism in Ulster Society, 1740-1890*, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 55.

countries visited by evangelical missionaries and itinerant preachers"³³. With this circulatory strategy, they dared to enter Catholic homes, which was perceived by the Catholic clergy as "a Protestant assault"³⁴, through which

[...] even the noble women go from house to house among the uncivilized people, Bible in hand, to render them dependent on them [...], to enlighten so many and make them autonomous readers of the Sacred Scriptures³⁵.

Indeed, Mrs. Thompson, the wife of Lord Ventry's agent, wrote in her account of the mission that the ministers of the peninsula "were not among those who consider Protestants only to be their parishioners"³⁶, thus disregarding the status quo. This perception of territorial intrusion within the Catholic community was emphasised by the implementation of Protestant schools in Catholic parishes without Anglican churches. However, for Catholics, worst of all was the convert missionary, "[t]he hired man of texts who has no place between the Government officer, who gives, and the famished peasant, who receives. He cannot be grouped with them in the picture; he is an intruder, a deformity, and an excrescence"³⁷.

Letters from the Catholic clergy and laity show that the missionaries' trespassing of symbolic borders was reinforced by their disregard of the ban instituted by Henry VIII when he identified the use of Irish with an act of treachery³⁸. Despite its compliance with the Protestant principle of individual access to the Bible in the vernacular tongue, the Irish Society Committee was conscious of the revolutionary nature of its medium for Britain and Ireland. Since the experience had proved a success in Scotland³⁹, they were convinced that the vernacular could become a bridge between the uneducated Irish and the missionaries. Therefore, they first needed to reverse previous attitudes towards the vernacular and convince the Church hierarchy and their British supporters that it was the best means to touch the hearts of the Irish, as shown by the report of the Irish Society of London in 1842:

33. Irene Whelan, *The Bible War in Ireland*..., p. 337-338.

34. "Irish Paupers and British Christians".

35. Letter from Giacomo Young to the Propaganda, Bray, 11 September 1823, Archivio Storico de Propaganda Fide, SC Irlanda, vol. 24/1, f. 135-136: "[...] *le Dame anche nobili, la Bibbia in mano, vanno da casa in casa fra la rozza gente, da loro dipendente [...], per farli altre tantti Illuminati e da se sufficienti Interpreti della Sagra Scrittura*" (translation by Stefano Molino).

36. A. M. Thompson, *A Brief Account of the Rise and Progress of the Change in Religious Opinion Now Taking Place in Dingle, and the West of the County of Kerry*, London, Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1846, p. 9.

37. "Irish Paupers and British Christians".

38. *The Statutes at Large Passed in the Parliaments Held in Ireland*, Dublin, George Grierson, 1786-1801, 28 H 8, C.xv; quoted in Tony Crowley, *Wars of Words: The Politics of Language in Ireland, 1537-2004*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 14.

39. The Irish Society was inspired and supported by Charles Anderson, a Baptist minister and member of the Society in Edinburgh for promoting Gaelic Schools in the Highlands and the Islands of Scotland, who advocated the use of the Irish language and character (Irish Society, proceedings of the Committee, 1818-1824, Trinity College Dublin, MS 7644, p. 5-6).

The very efforts that have been made to root out the vernacular language, have only served to bind it still closer to the hearts of the people; it speaks to them with winning power, and arouses no prejudices: the pleasing sound delights their ear, for it is the language of their homes, and of their hearts⁴⁰.

Donald Akenson asserts that the Irish Society had “[n]o interest in preserving the language” and saw it as “[the] quickest vehicle for reaching the souls of the peasants”⁴¹. Though some arguments in their reports are indeed ambiguous and their first rule states that the native Irish may employ their instruction in the vernacular as “a means for obtaining an accurate knowledge of English”⁴², evidence demonstrates that their consideration for the language definitely contrasted from contemporary social prejudices, broadly shared by Irish upper and middle classes. Even Daniel O’Connell considered that he could “witness without a sigh the gradual disuse of the Irish”⁴³. Conversely, the Irish Society saw the Irish language as “an original language, the purest dialect of the Celtic [...] better suited to convey abstract truths to the mind of the unlearned than the English or any compounded tongue”⁴⁴. The proceedings of the Committee also show that not only did they defend the use of the language, but they even advocated the use of the Irish character for printed books. Hence, the supposed agents of the political centre (*i.e.* the Protestant missions) were enhancing a peripheral element, instead of neglecting it, contrary to the common tendency⁴⁵.

In fact, for the Irish Society, the use of the vernacular opened a direct access to the hearts of the Irish and kindled new desires for learning and reading the Bible:

An English Bible they would scarcely dare to touch, much less read and study: for it has been denounced by the Priest as heretical: but let them hear its truths in their own loved tongue, they are so charmed by the sound, that they imagine it impossible for anything heretical to be conveyed in that language, their affections are warmed, they long to hear more: and at length are willing to learn to read, that they may peruse the Scriptures for themselves⁴⁶.

A *Kerry Examiner* article of 13 January 1847 shows that in the eyes of the local Catholic elite, these schools were tearing souls off their natural ground. These intrusions were described as “a theological declaration of war”, the Bible being “the

40. Irish Society of London, *Report [...]*, London, Varty, 1842, p. 9.

41. Donald Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment: The National System of Education in the Nineteenth Century*, London, Routledge, 1970, p. 85.

42. Irish Society, proceedings of the Committee, p. 3.

43. Janet Muller, “Aspects politiques et historiques de la langue irlandaise aux XIX^e et XX^e siècles”, *Bulletin d’histoire politique*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2012, p. 108.

44. Irish Society of London, *Report [...]*, p. 16.

45. In 1817, a query respecting the state of the Irish language had been proposed by the Association for the Discountenancing of Vice to members of the Anglican clergy. Out of the thirty-three answers, nineteen saw no benefit in publications in Irish and only five considered education in Irish to be important (Irish Society, proceedings of the Committee, p. 7).

46. Irish Society of London, *Report [...]*, p. 9.

artillery of the new reformation", with which they were "bothering the Irish"⁴⁷. In a way, by resorting to the love for the native language, they subverted a crucial element of *Gemeinschaft* and established a bridge between one characteristic of Irishness and a field of common affiliation, or at least affections. These territorial and linguistic transgressions did not remain unanswered and soon prompted organised Catholic counteractions, which evolved throughout the decades under study.

Evolving forms of community resistance

Though denunciations of souperism are usually associated with the Famine in the historiography, they appeared long before, without being highly publicised. One explanation may be that the society professed to avoid controversy and aggressive methods of evangelism, preferring to simply afford access to the Scriptures through basic instruction and reprimanding teachers who did not respect their principles⁴⁸. Priests often supported them by sharing their advertisements⁴⁹ or suggesting schoolmasters⁵⁰, even if some vehemently opposed the opening of schools. These diverging responses paralleled the internal divisions of the Catholic clergy regarding their involvement in the national system of education⁵¹.

However, things seemed to have changed when the Dingle Mission started to advertise its success. In September 1839, Gayer stated in a circular letter that "our congregation has increased to 220, and the spirit of inquiry is still unabated. Our school numbers 74 children"⁵². Then, in 1844, the *Belfast Chronicle* reported that Gayer had claimed 800 converts in the Dingle peninsula on a tour of fund-raising in Dublin, highlighting the well-received letters from the local converted priest, Rev. Brasbie. As a response, Byrne, a well-known supporter of O'Connell's who had attended the meeting, published a series of inflammatory articles to denounce an "abominable system of lying"⁵³ and "infamous perversion"⁵⁴. Paradoxically, he

47. "Irish Paupers and British Christians".

48. Such a warning was given to the teacher operating on Colonel Jackson's estate, reminding him that "[schoolmasters] s^d show their desire in the first place to relieve the people from ignorance in w^h they are involved, rather than introduce them while so benighted to those mysterious points by w^h the church has been divided & w^h might give offence either to one Party or the other" (Irish Society, proceedings of the Committee, p. 33, our emphasis).

49. Letter from McMahon to Burton, Milltown, co. Kerry, 25 June 1819 (Irish Society, proceedings of the Committee, p. 23).

50. Initially, many schoolmasters were Catholics. In 1857, Thomas Moriarty would even suggest to the Committee that "every teacher be as far as practicable respectable Irish-speaking Roman Catholics" (Irish Church Missions, Irish Papers, proceedings of the Committee of the Irish Society, ICM/GA/0184, vol. G (1856-1859), p. 46).

51. See Donald Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment...*, p. 202-224.

52. Charles Gayer, lithograph circular letter.

53. Patrick Robert Byrne, "The Dingle 'Mission' - An itinerant impostor", *The Kerry Examiner*, 26 November 1844.

54. Patrick Robert Byrne, "Infamous Perversion or Facts as well as of Persons in Dingle", *The Kerry Examiner*, 22 November 1844.

also rebuked the mission for providing Bibles instead of soup to the Catholic poor. To strike a stronger blow, in November 1844 he added a pastiche of the popular folk song “The Girl I Left behind Me”, entitled “The Souper’s Lamentation”:

As oft I rove on Ventry’s shore,
Where Manhood’s years came on me,
Ere I left my parents’ blissful home,
And friends who loved me dearly;
I think upon those mirthful hours
Ere Satan’s sons allured me –
The dupe of Mammon’s sordid powers,
Which cast some spell around me. [...]

Alas! My creed I have disgraced!
Alas! That I’ve been faithless!
Alas! My soul by vice debased!
Alas! How pelfeg⁵⁵ snares us,
My adopted creed, what has it brought?
But mortal aberration...
In my dreams at night, hell is my thought,
A hypocrite I waken! [...]

Disgrac’d we are, a hopeless few!
Despis’d by all as “Soupers,”
Dependant on a scheming crew,
The breed of Cromwell’s troopers.
No longer, then, I’ll bear the darts
Of a pervert mind in patience,
‘Midst those who pounce on rotten hearts
Like carrion-loving ravens⁵⁶.

Conversion is here presented as a betrayal of family and friends for an “adopted creed”, while references to eternal damnation express regrets to have succumbed to a diabolical corruption. He thus pitied “these unfortunate ‘converts’, of whose temporal necessities or total abandonment of all sense of religion and morality these reverend worthies ha[d] taken every advantage”⁵⁷. Detailed descriptions of the mission’s organisation were published to demonstrate its “perversion”, insisting on its various layers – Bible-readers visiting families from house to house, pupils attending schools and adults attending Sunday schools, schoolmasters and mistresses, inspectors, superintendents and at the top, the national committee. Byrne’s argument was that “religion had but little to do with [conversions]; and that gold it was which acted, as it were, the pioneer, and cut a path by which conversion

55. The term was difficult to identify. It may be related to the word *perf*, which means *lucre*.

56. Patrick Robert Byrne, “The Souper’s Lamentation”, *The Kerry Examiner*, 26 November 1844.

57. Patrick Robert Byrne, “The Dingle ‘Saints’”, *The Kerry Examiner*, 20 September 1842.

entered"⁵⁸. This series of articles led to his prosecution for libel, with a consequent trial that was highly publicised. After his condemnation to a £50 fine by a divided jury, the local Catholic community mobilised by the priests and supported by the Catholic political elite, launched a provincial campaign for subscriptions to help paying the fine. This soon turned into a national campaign to counteract the Dingle Mission by reactivating the Catholic committees of O'Connell's movement for Emancipation and Repeal. The Catholic Bishop of Kerry, Dr. Egan, and Daniel O'Connell's son Maurice, MP for Tralee, figured among the prominent members of the fund-raising committee, along with several priests⁵⁹. A letter from Sir Robert Peel to Lord Clare suggests that the effects of Byrne's press campaign also concerned the ministers and the Queen:

Notwithstanding the hard name justly applied to the editor of the Kerry Examiner, [...] I could not resist sewing your letter to her Majesty to prove to her that the said James [McMahon] had anticipated her Royal Recommendation from the throne and had exerted his influence and authority to discourage a system of pernicious agitation. By calling the editor directly and the Priest indirectly, a liar⁶⁰.

Regarding corruption, particularly during the Famine years, more evidence is needed, since testimonies often appear to be contradictory or biased. For example, the parish priest Eugene O'Sullivan, later rewarded by Rome for his active opposition to the mission⁶¹, declared that free rents were offered in the colony during the meeting mentioned before. Yet, Fr. Thomas McNamara, a Vincentian priest sent to Dingle on a mission, denounced in his *Memoirs* the fact that converts "contracted a legal obligation to pay a certain amount of rent"⁶². In her account, Mrs. Thompson claimed that the houses of the colony had been built in 1839 by the converts, who were paid for their work and then paid similar rents than others in the district. However, even if she asserted that "*we admit no persons into them who have not been tried, and of whose sincerity there can be no reasonable doubt*"⁶³, the provision of work and lodging in a poor area, and on properties bought with the support of the gentry and English funds, undeniably represented strong and controversial incentives for the local labourers.

While things seem to have been somehow put on hold during the first years of the Famine in Dingle, various sources mention O'Sullivan's endeavours to bring

58. Patrick Robert Byrne, "The Dingle Mission", *The Kerry Examiner*, 18 March 1845.

59. "The Late trial", *The Kerry Examiner*, 4 April 1845.

60. Letter from Robert Peel to Lord Clare, 28 August 1843, Belfast, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, T3229/4/10.

61. Letters from Bishop David Moriarty to Tobias Kirby, Rector of the Irish College, about a Doctoral degree for O'Sullivan, 22 August 1854, Rome, Pontifical Irish College, Kirby collection, SC Irlanda, KIR/1836-1861/1460.

62. Fr. Thomas McNamara, *Memoirs of the Congregation of the Mission in England and Scotland*, 1867, Appendix I, p. 317, Dublin, Vincentian Archives.

63. A. M. Thompson, *A Brief Account of the Rise and Progress of the Change in Religious Opinion...*, p. 136 (her emphasis).

back converts' families under clerical guidance from 1850 onward⁶⁴. Besides, increasing acts of violence against converts in the Dingle community led to other controversial prosecutions, involving mainly young people. With the Catholic elite, O'Sullivan reactivated the former mobilisation against the mission in defence of the accused, but this time the campaign converged with the Tenant Right movement. In a letter to Archbishop Daniel Cullen, Frederick Lucas, an English convert to Catholicism and founder of the Catholic newspaper *The Tablet*, thus referred to a banquet in Cashel leading to a demonstration for tenants' rights that manifested the "change of spirit" among the people⁶⁵. A few months earlier, the *Cork Examiner* had indeed reported that a banquet was held after a trial opposing O'Sullivan and the new Anglican minister, Samuel H. Lewis. During this banquet, lawyers, curates and the local political elite organised a meeting in Dingle that took place a few days later and where, according to the newspaper, "9 to 10 thousand persons assembled"⁶⁶. This convergence was not fortuitous, since the Tenant League was considered by some of the Catholic elite as an opportunity to serve the defence of catholicity. At least, this argument could be a means of gaining the support of the Catholic hierarchy and Rome, or their confidence. Indeed, Lucas, whose status of convert could raise suspicions, thus sought Cullen's approval for his endeavours:

I hope your Grace does not look with disfavour on my connexion with the Tenant League especially since the practical course of agreeing with Sharman Crawford has been adopted. I never was more fully convinced of anything than of this, that the questions of catholicity & tenant protection run together & may be made to give each other mutual aid⁶⁷.

This collusion between the opposition to the missions and political movements shows that denunciations of souperism in the press cannot be analysed without considering the commitments of their authors, who appeared to be operating for the defence of political interests within a *Gesellschaft* model. The organised counteractions may therefore be perceived not only as attempts to counter conversions, but also to maintain the Catholic basis of the movement and the promotion of Catholic interests intact.

Protestant missions' violation of clerical prerogatives may also explain the convergence of interests between Catholic political movements and the Catholic clergy. Opposition to the Protestant emphasis on the autonomy of the individual in Bible readings should not be overlooked, since access to the Bible was at best advised against by the priests and the bishops, at worst forbidden under threat of excommunication. This proceeded from an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XII in 1824, in which he condemned Bible societies – with a caustic paronomasia in the original – because they strove, "by all means, to translate, or rather to counterfeit

64. For example, see Bishop David Moriarty's letter to Kirby, 22 August 1854 (see note 61).

65. Letter from Frederick Lucas to Archbishop Daniel Cullen, 20 september 1851, Dublin Diocesan Archives, Cullen Papers, Laity, 39/2/X/31, p. 2-3.

66. "Tenant Right – An Important Meeting in Dingle", *Cork Examiner*, 6 March 1850.

67. Letter from Frederick Lucas to Archbishop Daniel Cullen, 20 september 1850, p. 2-3.

the Holy Scriptures in all national languages"⁶⁸. This doctrine, confirmed by other encyclicals that forbade unguided readings of the Bible⁶⁹, clearly drew what Durkheim defines as a prohibiting line between the sacred and the profane⁷⁰. It is to be reminded that "[the] clergy and bishops [were] accorded greater reverence" in the Catholic Church and "salvation for the individual lay not so much in an internalized personal conversion as in faithful participation in the rites of the Church and in the deference to its authority"⁷¹. Therefore, individual conversions could only be considered as defections from the flock and a questioning of the priests' sacred guidance.

The links, whether direct or indirect, between the Dingle converts' community and the state prompted a local opposition to the mission that converged with nationalist opposition to the British state. The organised response of the Catholic clergy and laity, instead of fitting into the *Gemeinschaft* model, clearly demonstrated aspects of *Gesellschaft*. Conversely, conversion to Protestantism brought about emancipation from the vertical supervision of the Church and established a horizontal community based on equal status, if not educational or social, at least of universal priesthood. Yet, while the Dingle Mission professed to establish a family of enlightened individuals, and pitied the desperate situation of the ostracised converts, its members never went so far in their declared modernity as contesting social inequalities.

Conclusion

When studying religious tensions in 19th-century Ireland, one should not forget that, similarly to other European countries, Britain and Ireland were not yet secularised. Furthermore, even if Irish nationalism was influenced by the ideals of the American and French revolutions, religious plurality and the secularisation of politics were not consensual⁷². Previous academic studies have demonstrated the entanglement that existed between missions and the Protestant ascendancy, yet the fact that no society or political system at that time separated political power from religion tends to be overlooked. If the English regarded their Church establishment "as the foundation of their whole constitution with which, and with every part of

68. Bullarii Romani Continuatio, XXXI, 1854, Vatican City, Archivio Segreto Vaticano, D16, p. 48: "*ac modis omnibus intendit, ut in vulgares linguas nationem omnia sacra vertantur, vel potius pervertantur Biblia*" (our translation).

69. "Inter Præcipuas", 8 May 1844; "Qui Pluribus", 9 November 1846.

70. "*Les choses sacrées sont celles que les interdits protègent et isolent; les choses profanes, celles auxquelles ces interdits s'appliquent et qui doivent rester à distance des premières*" (Émile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* [1912], Paris, Presses universitaires de France (Quadrige), 2013, p. 50).

71. John Wolfe, *God and Greater Britain: Religion and National Life in Britain and Ireland, 1843-1945*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 30.

72. Divergences of opinion existed within the Catholic Repeal Association regarding the emphasis on catholicity (see the letter from John O'Connell, 11 February 1851, Dublin Diocesan Archives, Cullen Papers, 39/2/IX/18/1). This had also contributed to the secession of the Young Irishlanders such as Thomas Davis who was in favour of a more inclusive cultural Irish identity.

which, it holds an indissoluble union”⁷³, Catholics did not favour a secularised society either. Thus, Donald Akenson warns us that “it is important to realize that when we are discussing Irish clerics of the last century – and most especially the prelates of the Roman Catholic church – we are not dealing with men devoid of secular power [...]” and that “it might be argued that what cabinet members were to England, the Irish Catholic bishops were to Ireland”⁷⁴.

The catholicisation of Irish nationalism has been studied elsewhere⁷⁵, but the way transgressions of religious territoriality and defections were resented and opposed by Catholics and Nationalists shows that for many the sense of belonging to the community was associated with religious affiliation. Converts were not only seen as apostates, but also as political traitors to their fellowmen. Conversely, British people, who claimed to promote individual discernment through Bible reading, mistrusted Catholics because of their collective reliance on the priests’ spiritual guidance and their obedience to the Pope.

So far, the question of an effective plan of the Protestant missions to use conversion as a strategy of colonisation remains open and is as complex to determine as for any other Christian mission, home or foreign, especially when accusations are professed by competitors. Indeed, the Congregation of the Propaganda Fide was juridically supervising both the itinerant missions that counteracted Protestant activism in Ireland and missions in Africa. There, it claimed the Church’s universal rights of property and spiritual responsibilities, with circulating missionaries of the Society of Jesus to evangelise the population and establish stations with residences for converts. As Jean-Michel Vasquez reminds us, before Vatican II, Catholic theology considered the whole world as the property of the Church⁷⁶.

The study of the Dingle Mission controversy thus leads to question Tönnies’s definition of *Gemeinschaft* as an organic society and blurs the lines separating the two models of communities. Indeed, it is worth reminding Willaime’s assertion in *Sociologie du protestantisme*:

The Evangelical movement especially attests to the dissolution of Christianity as an all-encompassing culture by its insistence on the fact that the church is not a geographical space, nor a filiation inherited from tradition, but the local gathering of converts periodically summoned⁷⁷.

73. David Hempton, *Religion and Political Culture in Britain and Ireland: From the Glorious Revolution to the Decline of Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 4.

74. Donald Akenson, *The Irish Education Experiment...*, p. 2.

75. Donal Kerr, “The Catholic Church in the Age of O’Connell”, in *Christianity in Ireland: Revisiting the Story*, Brendan Bradshaw, Dáire Keogh (eds.), Dublin, Columba Press, 2002, p. 164-185; Oliver MacDonagh, “The Politicization of the Irish Catholic Bishops, 1800-1850”, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 18, no. 1, 1975, p. 37-53.

76. Jean-Michel Vasquez, “Pour une approche spatiale de la mission”, *Chrétiens et sociétés*, no. 15, 2008, p. 65.

77. “En insistant sur le fait que l’Église n’est ni un espace géographique, ni une filiation reçue par la tradition, mais le rassemblement local et périodiquement reconvoqué des convertis, la mouvance du protestantisme évangélique atteste particulièrement la dissolution du christianisme comme culture

Therefore, by disrupting the religious affiliation inherited from one's community, conversion shifts the issue of affiliation from the group to the individual. As Durkheim argued,

Beyond purely individual actions there is in our contemporary societies a type of collective activity which is as natural as that of the less extended societies of former days⁷⁸.

In the end, the individual may belong to several forms of communities, whether spiritual, cultural, or political, that overlap in one's own experience. Thus, while conversion gives rise to a form of religious plurality in society, it also leads the individual to experience a plurality of affiliations⁷⁹.

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englobante" (Jean-Paul Willaime, *Sociologie du protestantisme*, Paris, Presses universitaires de France (Que sais-je?), 2005, p. 119-120, our translation).

78. Joan Aldous, Émile Durkheim, Ferdinand Tönnies, "An Exchange between Durkheim and Tönnies on the Nature of Social Relations, with an Introduction by Joan Aldous", *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 77, no. 6, May 1972, p. 1198.
79. I refer here to Hélène Bézille's assertion that Durkheim first implicitly offered a sociological definition of the notion, pointing out the complexification of social ties in modern societies, the individual being condemned to experience complex and fragile affiliations to a "we" that has become plural (Hélène Bézille, "Formation du sujet, apprentissages et dynamique des affiliations", *Éducation et francophonie*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2010, p. 127). Interestingly, the notion has undergone sociological and ethnological developments in the study of social deviances and educational studies.