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George Sweeney

Irish Hunger Strikes and the Cult of Self-Sacrifice

Hunger striking as a means of obtaining social or economic redress, or as a method of political confrontation has a plotted, yet discernible, history in Ireland. While the phenomenon is not peculiar to Irish politics, the country did witness one of the largest hunger strike protests of the twentieth century. In October 1923, more than 8000 political prisoners, opposed to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, went on hunger strike[1]. Two prisoners died before the protest was called to a halt.

The use of this method of protest has been reported in the five geographical areas used by Amnesty International to compile its annual reports. Nearly 200 hunger strikes, almost all of them political, have been recorded in fifty-two countries in these regions for the period 1970–84.[2]

Although it can be demonstrated that the phenomenon of hunger striking is widely used as a means of political protest, particularly so within the last twenty-five years, it is equally valid to suggest that the hunger strike is an integral part of Irish history and mythology. Thus for the Irish, especially the northern Catholic republicans, the hunger strike, linked as it is to religio-political martyrdom and the pantheon of Irish heroes, is another means, possibly a weapon of last resort, of those nurturing a sense of oppression and frustrated in their attempts to resist.

Hunger striking as a method of protest in Ireland can be traced to the island's pre-Christian era when there was a strong tradition of oral legal codes. These codes were known as the Brehon laws (derived from the Gaelic *brithem* meaning 'judge').[3]

For the people of ancient Ireland, self-help was the only means to enforce a claim or right a wrong within the context of the Brehon laws. A frequent method of redress was for the aggrieved party to

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seize certain items of personal property of the offender and hold onto these until the offender had discharged his obligations.

For many people, and in many instances, this method was neither a realistic option nor a practical solution. Another method was for the aggrieved to 'fast against' his debtor by taking up a place close to the debtor's dwelling and going on hunger strike. This method of drawing attention to both one's grievance and one's debtor was a tactic usually employed by the powerless against the powerful. Death itself rarely occurred as a result of these hunger strikes. If the defendant allowed the plaintiff to die of starvation near his dwelling he would not only have to compensate the plaintiff's kin but he would also be in a polluted state and would be fearful of the magical consequences that might result from the protestor's death.

With the establishment of Christianity in Ireland, this means of protest remained in force until it had been conventionalized into a ritual hunger strike which began at sundown and ended at sunrise.[4] Fasting quickly established itself within Christianity in Ireland as a purely symbolic gesture. Fasting and self-sacrifice in general began to have a special value in the development of Irish-Christian traditions, more particularly so if it was linked to or offered up to God in unison with the suffering and self-sacrifice of Christ.

The introduction of Christianity and, later, the Norman invasion and plantations of large parts of Ireland was to integrate and transform both Irish Catholicism and Irish nationalism. At the dawn of the twentieth century in particular, a revival of Gaelic traditions and culture and a devotional revolution within Catholicism was to metamorphose Ireland from a society engulfed by self-doubt to one which nurtured a cult of self-sacrifice.

In the pre-famine period, about one-third of Ireland's Catholic population of just under four million attended Mass regularly. In the period 1850–75, there was a transformation, resulting in the Irish becoming more regularly practising Catholics. During this time the Protestant churches experienced a remarkable revival. This was a transitory period in which fervent religious practice and religious ideology dominated Irish society.[5]

Post-famine Ireland experienced what many believed to be a devotional revolution. The socially and economically devastating famine was also a huge psychological blow to its people. The population of almost seven million in 1846 was reduced by an estimated two million within two years. Larkin rightly suggests that devotional needs appear to have been present and growing prior to

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the famine and contends that the famine was as much the occasion for as it was a cause of the consolidation of the devotional revolution in Ireland.[6]

Larkin suggests that what he has called the devotional revolution provided the Irish with a substitute symbolic language and offered them a new cultural heritage with which they could identify and through which they could be identified.[7] That is why Irish and Catholic have become almost interchangeable terms in Ireland, despite attempts by nationalists to make Irish rather than Catholic an inclusive term.[8]

At the turn of the century, the wake of the cataclysmic social and economic upheaval of the famine was still evident. Irish society was still nurturing the resentment of a crippling exploitation and the gradual peeling away of its cultural heritage. There was a reawakening of both religious practice and nationalism together with a militant republicanism. One manifestation of this religio-political fusion was the satisfying of societal and psychic needs through self-sacrifice.

The Irish literary revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed to legitimizing the sacrificial motif. While the Gaelic cultural renaissance stressed Irish identity and roots and revived the learning of the Irish language and the playing of Irish sports and music, it also helped to resurrect the indigenous folklore and rich Gaelic literary heritage that existed before the English invasions.[9]

With the unearthing of the old Gaelic cultural traditions, special attention and a place of importance was given to the folk hero Cuchulain. The exploits of this mythological chieftain, who not only accomplished remarkable feats of bravery but is considered to have sacrificed his life to allow fellow warriors to escape capture and death, were retold, popularized and incorporated into the literary productions of poets and writers at the beginning of the century. Sacrificial themes similar to that of Cuchulain and other mythological figures can be found in the works of Yeats and Pearse.

The sacrificial theme was fostered in the poems and plays published in Ireland in the early years of the twentieth century, arousing patriotic fervour. The theme of self-sacrifice was to explode onto the arena of Anglo-Irish politics with the 1916 Easter Rising, which acted as a catalyst for the Anglo-Irish War and the establishment of the Irish Free State.

It was during the first quarter of the twentieth century that the hunger strike was to reappear and become an essential ingredient

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both of the cult of self-sacrifice and the arsenal of militant republicanism.

In the ten-year period 1913–23 there were at least fifty hunger strikes involving both male and female prisoners in Ireland. During the nine years 1913–22, around 1000 prisoners took part in hunger strikes and in 1923 almost 8000 political prisoners participated in this form of political confrontation, in a protest which lasted several weeks.[10]

The hunger strikes were directed against both the British government (1913–22) and the Irish Free State authorities (1923). Many of these hunger strikes were protests against prison conditions and the treatment of prisoners. Other protests were more politically organized and centred on demands for political status or were means of dissent against perceived unjust imprisonment. In general the protests lasted for a few days but many, particularly the politically motivated, lasted for much longer. Some went on for seventy-six days, and while many prisoners negotiated settlements with the authorities or were unconditionally released, others, more determined, were forcibly fed. Seven prisoners died as a result of hunger strikes during this period.

The earliest hunger strikes involved women from the Irish suffragette movement. Up to twenty-two imprisoned women participated in hunger strikes between 1912 and 1914.[11] English suffragette Lizzie Barker, who had come to Dublin to disrupt the visit of Prime Minister Asquith, was the first woman to use the hunger strike as a means of political confrontation in Ireland.[12] She was released from prison on health grounds within days of embarking on her fast.

There were several non-suffragette hunger strikes in Ireland prior to the 1916 Rising. James Connolly, executed in Kilmainham Jail for his part in the Rising, went on hunger strike for eight days in September 1913 as a protest against his imprisonment. Connolly's hunger strike, although not presented as part of his historical image, began in prison following his arrest in Dublin on 29 August, after he had addressed a meeting at which he called for support at a banned demonstration to take place a few days later. At his court appearance, Connolly refused to recognize the validity of the ban on the demonstration and further refused to recognize the authority of the British in Ireland. Connolly was sentenced to three months' imprisonment and immediately began a hunger strike on arrival at Mountjoy Jail on 7 September. Connolly's eight-day fast ended on his release when the British Viceroy, with whom Connolly's wife Lillie pleaded for her husband's release, intervened.

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The events of the Easter Rising proved to be a watershed for Anglo-Irish politics and for the tradition of militant republicanism. The Rising, coinciding with the Catholic Church's 'Holy Week' and the honouring of the resurrection of Christ, has been described as 'a bloody protest'.[13] Believing it ill-conceived and militarily unrealistic, Connolly, a leader of the revolt, confided to a colleague: 'We are going to be slaughtered'.[14]

The rebels of 1916, immersed in the tradition of nationalistic martyrology, challenged the British authorities, despite overwhelming odds against success. The subsequent executions of their leaders transformed them into secular saints and gave them immortality.

Mass followed Mass for the executed leaders, linking them with the sacrifice of Christ, the ancient martyrs and dead rebels from previous revolts, and merging their self-sacrifice into the Irish Catholic psyche: a theme to be dramatically repeated when ten republicans died on hunger strike in the Maze prison in 1981. The sacrificial motif provided a rationalization for the 1916 Rising, despite its slim chance of success, which in turn reinforced and legitimized that rationalization:[15]

> Arguments about lack of support, polls, elections, and majority satisfaction carry little weight with those who follow this tradition. Nor do arguments about danger, cost, and ramifications convince. The would-be martyr is a gnostic who possesses a truth and destiny denied the masses.[16]

It was against the setting of the now immortal and near-mythical 1916 Rising that the hunger strike became a weapon of extraordinary potency in Ireland. It was to become linked to militant republicanism along with Arthur Griffith's Sinn Fein party, a movement opposed to the use of physical force prior to 1916, which was deliberately and wrongfully blamed by the British for what was officially called 'the Sinn Fein rebellion'.[17]

In May 1916, sixty-five Irishmen, including de Valera, who had been convicted as rebels, were imprisoned in Dartmoor. For disobeying prison rules the Irish prisoners were given extra punishment. De Valera went on hunger strike against this punishment, ending it when the punishment was withdrawn.

Despite his participation in a hunger strike, de Valera was uncertain of its propaganda value against the on-going drama provided by the first world war. In a letter to fellow prisoners, de Valera, writing from his Dartmoor cell early in 1917, said:

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> You may be tempted to hunger strike. As a body do not attempt it whilst the war lasts unless you were assured from the outside that the death of two or three of you would help the cause. As soldiers I know you would not shrink from the sacrifice, but remember how precious a human life is.[18]

Before the year was through, and after the release of Irish rebels from British jails, the propaganda value of death by hunger strike became very clear to the republican movement.

In September 1917, a republican, Thomas Ashe, was arrested in Longford for delivering a seditious speech. Ashe immediately went on hunger strike against his arrest and detention. In an attempt to prevent his death and provide yet another republican martyr in the wake of the 1916 executions, the British authorities decided to forcibly feed Ashe using a tube. Within a day of the first attempt at forcible feeding Ashe died, probably from aspiration pneumonia, and the long tradition and irrefutable power of hunger striking produced another martyr for the Irish pantheon of heroes.

Ashe's funeral procession was attended by 3000 uniformed members of the Irish Volunteers and watched by tens of thousands of people as it made its way through the streets of Dublin.[19]

The death of Ashe and other hunger strikes at Cork, Dundalk and Mountjoy jails by Sinn Fein prisoners did not escape theological debate within the Catholic Church. A number of articles debating the morality of the hunger strike appeared during 1918 and 1919 in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record.* The first public debate on hunger striking was an article published by Canon John Waters,[20] who was the Catholic chaplain at Mountjoy Jail and a Professor of Theology at Clonliffe College, the seminary for the diocese of Dublin.

In the course of debating the moral issues surrounding the use of the hunger strike, Waters acknowledged that this means of protest and confrontation had proved to be an 'efficient political weapon'.[21] It is interesting to quote at length a passage from this same article in which we can detect the subtle meshing of Irish Catholicism and nationalism with the sacrificial theme in the attitude of the republican prisoners:

> Though I could never see any reason to doubt that the hunger strike was suicide, I am bound to say that I had but very little success in inducing the strikers to adopt my views. Their resolution was, as a rule, invincible, being proof against argument and persuasion alike. This obstinacy did not arise altogether from attachment to the leaders to whom they had submitted, and who made no account of my

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> representations; their strength of purpose was, in great part, derived from their conviction that they had in support of their action sufficient theological authority.[22]

A debate developed between Waters and a Professor of Theology at Maynooth College, the Reverend Patrick Cleary, on the morality of hunger strikes in general. The positions taken may have had more to do with political and ideological beliefs than with theological ones held by the protagonists. In the meantime, the hunger strikes continued. Eight republican hunger strikes were begun in 1919, one of the most significant of which involved fifty Sinn Fein prisoners at Mountjoy.

The prisoners demanded prisoner-of-war treatment from the British authorities and began a protest by blocking themselves in their cells with barricades made from cell furniture. Water-hoses were used to gain entry to the cells and the prisoners were put in irons. It was then that they announced they were going on hunger strike. The prison governor and his medical advisers, not knowing how long starvation took to kill a healthy person, were afraid of the political consequences of any of the prisoners dying. Another death by hunger strike would produce another martyr and provide the republicans with another propaganda victory. To avert the possibility of this, the authorities released the prisoners.

The most noted hunger strike of the first quarter of the twentieth century was that of Alderman Terence Mac Swiney, Lord Mayor of Cork and Commandant of Cork Number 1 Brigade Irish Volunteers, who died in Brixton prison in October 1920, three and a half years after the death of Thomas Ashe. Mac Swiney had been elected to the mayoral office following the murder of the previous Lord Mayor, Thomas Mac Curtain, by the Black and Tans.

Mac Swiney was arrested on 12 August while presiding over an arbitration court in the City Hall, Cork. He was court-martialled on three minor charges and sentenced to two years' imprisonment. Mac Swiney began a hunger strike and on 22 August was transferred to Brixton prison where, despite attempts at forcible feeding, he died seventy-four days later on 25 October.

Mac Swiney's hunger strike received much public attention and sympathy including a report in *The Times* on 2 September, almost certainly written by a unionist sympathizer, which read:

> Despite the Government, the Lord Mayor of Cork has stirred imagination and pity. Argument on the merits of his case has become subordinate to those sentiments which the dramatic spectacle of a man confronting death for the sake of

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> an ideal was certain to evoke among Christian people. Alderman Mac Swiney, a man whose name was unknown outside his own city, will, if he dies, take rank with Fitzgerald, with Emmet, and with Tone in the martyrology of Ireland — his memory infinitely more eloquent and infinitely more subversive of peace than he himself could ever be.

This proved an accurate assessment of world attention and public opinion which was focused on the lonely defiance and self-sacrifice of Mac Swiney, who became a symbol of Irish resistance to British rule.

Mac Swiney's sacrificial death was represented as having transfigured the life it ended. A former republican comrade and friend, Daniel Corkery, writing an obituary in the influential Irish Jesuit periodical, *Studies*, explained that:

> men like Terence Mac Swiney act out the desires of their souls, express those desires in living matter, the dearest this is, flesh and blood. Such men we speak of as master-spirits, master-minds, outstanding figures, commanding personalities — all good words, if none be quite the right word.[23]

Mac Swiney's death by starvation escaped public condemnation by the Catholic clergy. In the same issue of *Studies*, the Jesuit theologian the Reverend P.J. Gannon refused to condemn Mac Swiney's fast to death, stating that, although suicide was unlawful according to the Catholic Church's teaching, we must consider that:

> no hungerstriker aims at death. Quite the contrary; he desires to live. He aims at escaping from unjust detention, and, to do this is willing to run the risk of death, of which he has no desire, not even as a means. His object is to bring the pressure of public opinion to bear upon an unjust aggressor to secure his release, and advance a cause for which he might face certain death in the field. There is nothing here of the mentality of suicide, whose object is to escape from a life that has grown hateful to him.[24]

Irish deaths by hunger strike transfigured not only the perceived sacrificial victims but, in the eyes of many ordinary people, the cause for which they died.[25] The British government's intransigence during Mac Swiney's hunger strike provided those asserting independence from British rule with yet another legitimacy and credibility propaganda victory.

The memory of Mac Swiney's death was rekindled in Ireland when his sister Mary was arrested in Dublin on 4 November 1922 under the Emergency Powers Act and imprisoned without trial in Mountjoy. A Cumann na mBan member and a leading Sinn Fein spokesperson, she

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had been touring the country delivering inflammatory speeches denouncing the Anglo-Irish Treaty. On arrival at Mountjoy, Mac Swiney announced that she was going on hunger strike as a protest against British domination in Ireland. Her hunger strike was to prove politically significant and it would also be a challenge to the resolve of the Irish Free State government not to release any hunger striking prisoners.

Mary Mac Swiney's hunger strike, as a political and propaganda asset, was quickly realized and exploited by Cumann na mBan, which organized huge rallies, meetings of protest and marches on Mountjoy jail and government offices. Hundreds of women gathered nightly outside Mountjoy for a vigil and recited the rosary while Free State soldiers turned water-hoses on them. The soldiers also fired shots over the heads of demonstrators and marchers.[26]

Pleas for Mac Swiney's release came from all over Ireland and many other countries. Irish-American associations in the United States deluged President Cosgrave with cables demanding he release Mac Swiney. Archbishop Mannix of Australia called on Irish Catholics to support Mac Swiney's 'heroic struggle' for an Irish Republic, thus exerting pressure on the Cosgrave government to release her.

The Cosgrave government further cast itself into the role of arch-villain in the eyes of the public when Mac Swiney's sister Annie was denied permission to visit her. In the tradition of the ancient Brehon laws, Annie Mac Swiney camped outside the gates of Mountjoy and began a hunger strike.

Mary Mac Swiney's condition deteriorated dramatically on the twentieth day of her fast. A priest was called by the prison authorities to administer the Catholic Church's last rites to her. Four days later, on 28 November, she was unexpectedly and unconditionally released from prison. The government had capitulated in the face of Mac Swiney's death by hunger strike and had lost credibility at this most fragile time of its existence.

The hunger strikes continued at intervals throughout 1922 and 1923 with fasts involving both male and female prisoners being held in jails as far apart as Derry, Dublin and Larne. Protesting prisoners were either granted their demands or released. The last hunger strike of the Civil War period was a huge affair. More than 8000 political prisoners and internees participated in a hunger strike which began on 14 October and was continued, by some prisoners, for forty-one days until 23 November 1923.[27]

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The hunger strike, which was to spread throughout ten prisons and internment camps, was begun in Mountjoy by republicans opposed to the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. They protested against their unlawful imprisonment and demanded the immediate release of all political prisoners.

Thousands of prisoners began to refuse food after being 'invited' by the republican leadership, and especially the influential Frank Aiken, to support the action at Mountjoy. It was hoped that the mass hunger strike would rally the republican cause outside the prisons. Sinn Fein, however, failed to gain support from the labour leader James Larkin in their call for a general strike in sympathy with the prisoners.

Within the first month of the protest, 7800 hunger strikers, either individually or in groups, ended their fast. Two hundred continued with the protest and two of these died on their fortieth day without either food or water. The next day, 23 November, the hunger strike was called off. A large number of prisoners had accepted conditional release on pledging loyalty to the Irish Free State. The one hundred or so prisoners who refused to accept this settlement spent another year in detention.

The morality of the hunger strike was again brought into the public arena when the remains of Denis Barry, one of the two men to die, were brought to his native Cork for burial. While Barry was dying in detention in the Curragh prison hospital on 20 November, after thirty-four days of fasting, a Catholic prison chaplain refused a request to attend him and administer to him the Church's rite of anointing the sick. The other fatality, Andrew Sullivan, died of starvation at Mountjoy after fasting for forty days. The Bishop of Cork, Dr Cohalan, added to the controversy when he said that Barry's body would not be allowed into any Catholic church in his diocese. His remains were taken to the Cork Sinn Fein executive offices where they lay in state. In a statement Bishop Cohalan said:

> I am not allowing religious exercises which constitute Christian burial to take place at the burial of Denis Barry . . . Anyone who deliberately takes his own life, is deprived of a Christian burial.[28]

Healy takes up this seemingly contradictory action by members of the Catholic hierarchy who, less than three years earlier, had arranged an elaborate funeral for the remains of hunger-striker Terence Mac Swiney in Barry's home town of Cork. Bishop Cohalan along with

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seven other bishops had celebrated Mass for Mac Swiney who was accorded the most solemn Catholic burial. Healy suggests that Bishop Cohalan had not changed his attitude towards the morality of hunger striking but rather considered some hunger strikes 'good' and therefore more honourable than others. Some hunger strikes, considered 'bad', are spoken of in the condemnatory language used of suicides. Healy does not elaborate on this 'explanation', ending his discussion by saying that 'however one explains them, both funerals belong to the religious context of the 1923 Irish hungerstrike'.[29]

In essence, Healy's closing statement captures the subtlety among sections of the Irish Catholic hierarchy in their respective opposition to and support of the British and Irish Free State authorities. In the pre-treaty, War of Independence era, the Catholic Church was preoccupied with the problem of legitimacy. It was being forced to decide what attitudes to adopt towards competing political systems.[30]

In the pre-treaty period, there was an unspoken consensus between clergy and people towards acts of insurrection and violence. It involved an understanding of why they occurred and what and who provoked them. The Catholic Church at this time had little influence in political matters and chose not to alienate itself from its people by emphatically and unequivocally condemning nationalist aspirations and militant republicanism.[31]

The Catholic Church of the Irish Civil War period was, however, more confident and condemnatory. Refusal of a Christian burial to republican hunger-striker Denis Barry underscored this new position of the hierarchy. The Irish Catholic Church had become involved in a complex relationship with the Irish Free State government of Cosgrave and his Fine Gael party. Whyte described Fine Gael as 'clerical' in nature, saying that 'Fine Gael veterans take pride in the loyalty with which they accepted the hierarchy's decisions'.[32] In return for the Church's support, Cosgrave's government agreed to abide by the decisions of the Catholic Church on matters of morality and not to interfere with the hierarchy's control of education. For both sides this was a comfortable arrangement and one which would have helped Bishop Cohalan to perceive Barry's hunger strike as a 'bad' one and refuse him a Christian burial.

Hunger strikes in Ireland have rarely achieved their immediate objective. But, as the history of the phenomenon demonstrates, the long-term effects of Irish hunger strikes have been incalculable. The immediate responses of many ordinary Irish people are feelings of shame and outrage when they hear of death by self-immolation. In

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some way the dying or dead hunger-striker has a kind of moral advantage over them. By the end of the Irish Civil War period, the hunger strike phenomenon had become fully incorporated into the weaponry of militant republicanism, culminating in the hunger strikes and deaths of ten republicans at the Maze prison in 1981 and the subsequent far-reaching changes in the policy of both the British and Irish governments toward Northern Ireland.[33]

The participants in the Easter Rising and Pearse in particular promoted an archetype of Irish republican martyrdom in which the Irish patriot's willingness for self-immolation re-enacts a redemptive and sanctifying myth, bringing glorification to both the martyr and his country. The begging question remains unanswered in conventional expositions of the sacrificial motif in Irish republicanism. Why do so many republicans choose a death of self-sacrifice? An examination of the socio-historical context and development of the cult of self-sacrifice in Ireland will contribute towards an explanation of the use of hunger strikes as a means of political confrontation.

The cult of self-sacrifice manifested itself in many emerging nations throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A feature of this manifestation was the legacy of 'invulnerability' associated with the cult; in many societies small ill-equipped groups or even masses of people challenged overwhelming odds and firepower in the pursuit of independence and nationhood. In Europe, the cult's development was multi-dimensional. The European Romantic era of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, for example, contributed to the development of the cult of self-sacrifice. This was achieved through its emphasis on cultural traditions and folklore coupled with the veneration of the heroic individual and the rejection of modernity. The Great War (1914–18), with its emphasis on the efficacy of patriotic martyrdom, also encouraged the widespread growth of the cult and resulted in a horrendous loss of life.

Because of its geographical and social position, Ireland was a harbinger of Third World evolution.[34] While it was much more developed than other Third World countries, and linked to Britain and Western Europe, by the beginning of the twentieth century Ireland had a deeply rooted tradition of exploitation, colonization and cultural destruction.

The minor insurrections of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the penalization of Irish Catholicism, the devotional revolution and Gaelic cultural revitalization all contributed to the growth of the cult of self-sacrifice in twentieth-century Irish society. Such developments

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convinced Pearse and others that Ireland's threatened culture could be saved only through achieving independence from British domination. Pearse's writings promoted this revolutionary vision, dignifying the sacrificial cult and endowing it with mystical justification. The sacrificial motif was to provide a rationalization for the Easter Rising, and the event itself, while reinforcing and legitimizing the rationalization for the rebellion, was also successful in arousing the country to the aspiration and eventual reality of independence.[35]

Against this backdrop, O'Neill puts forward a tentative model to account for the cult of self-sacrifice in Irish society in general.[36] The Irish case, he contends, suggests a rationale for a sacrificial cult based on need.[37] The cult catered for certain needs in Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century.

O'Neill suggests five societal and individual needs that appear to have fomented the cult. Collectively these make the cult of self-sacrifice intelligible. The cult as found in Irish society:

1. makes a virtue of necessity. It may be the only alternative for a movement lacking manpower, resources and popular support;
2. it can demonstrate legitimacy. Through the act of self-sacrifice the importance and truth of a cause can be established;
3. the cult provides models of emulation for contemporaries and subsequent generations. It venerates secular saints who inspire the less heroic;
4. it flatters the followers of a cause by linking them with the heroic. Members of a movement are linked with their martyrs and can share in their glory;
5. the cult caters for the needs of machismo and masochism. The spirit that motivated the Irish ascetic tradition and encouraged deprivation and suffering in Irish Catholicism can manifest itself in unorthodox events.

O'Neill's first proposition that the cult makes a virtue of necessity is evident in the early hunger strikes in pre-Christian Ireland. As discussed earlier, the powerless in ancient Irish society in seeking to enforce a claim or right a wrong would embark on a hunger strike near the dwelling of the offending party. For commoners in particular, lacking any other resources or strategic options, going on hunger strike presented the only course of action available to them.

The minor insurrections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to the development of the sacrificial rite in Ireland.

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Events of the early decades of the twentieth century facilitated its growth with predominance being given to the cult of self-sacrifice. O'Neill has demonstrated how the Rising of Easter 1916 became the pinnacle in a virtue being made of necessity.[38]

Not all self-sacrificial heroics, however, called for an event of such magnitude and symbolic importance as 1916. Although the Easter Rising became a catalyst for the War of Independence and the Civil War, another expression of the cult, the hunger strike, was smouldering in the shadows.

The hunger-strikers of the suffragette movements and Connolly's hunger strike demonstrated that this kind of defiance acquired both an audience and a degree of deference. While these hunger strikes may have lacked popular support, they also escaped public condemnation. The hunger strike became an irrefutable weapon of political confrontation for the powerless who held aspirations of establishing an Irish Republic.

The demonstration of legitimacy is vital for the propagation of any cause and it is an important concept in O'Neill's general model of self-sacrifice. Because the Irish separatists and revolutionaries encountered legitimacy problems, the cult of self-sacrifice was utilized to demonstrate the importance and truth of the cause.[39] The 1916 Rising aroused nationalist aspirations in Irish Catholics and provided Sinn Fein with a landslide election victory in 1918. The republican cause was thus accorded authenticity and legitimacy.

The potency of the hunger strike as an instrument of political confrontation was demonstrated by its successful use between 1912 and 1923. Several factors contributed to the hunger strike receiving legitimacy as a means of protest during this period. It was perceived as a passive means of defiance and this lent legitimacy to those who participated in its use and the cause to which they aspired. The hunger strike proved to be an effective method of confrontation. When faced with a hunger strike, the authorities sought a quick compromise and settlement, often conceding to the demands of the prisoners or unconditionally releasing them.

Until 1920 there was a lack of medical knowledge concerning the length of time a person could survive a hunger strike and this also contributed to a seeking of a quick end to hunger strikes. Ethical debate within the Catholic Church about the use of hunger striking raised its public profile. The lack of consensus among Catholic theologians on the morality of the hunger strike, due to political and ideological division among the clergy in general, provided participants

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and their cause with credibility. Added to these were the fears of the authorities of creating martyrs and destabilizing the political status quo.

The cult of self-sacrifice can provide models of emulation for contemporaries and subsequent generations.[40] The successful use of the hunger strike and the sacrificial deaths of Ashe and Mac Swiney encouraged others, sometimes less heroic, to engage in this method of political protest. Mac Swiney's sister faced down the Irish Free State government and more than 8000 republican prisoners emulated their secular saints by going on hunger strike against the Anglo-Irish Treaty and their imprisonment during the Civil War. The hunger strike was successfully incorporated into the Irish cult of self-sacrifice and its early martyrs provided role models in the 1970s and 1980s for republicans who sought an end to British rule in Northern Ireland.

A fourth ingredient of the cult is that it links the followers of a cause to their past heroes. Followers of the present republican cause in Northern Ireland perceive themselves as continuing the past struggles and they tend to link Wolfe Tone, Emmet, Connolly, Pearse and Mac Swiney to present political violence.

O'Neill suggests that 'there is perchance some catering by the cult of self-sacrifice to the needs of machismo and masochism in certain individuals and certain societies'.[41] Psychological research into and debate on this and its pathological relationship to the sacrificial motif and political violence in twentieth-century Ireland has failed to demonstrate the possibility of psychopathological explanations to support this proposition.[42] We can, however, concur with O'Neill that Ireland possessed a rich ascetic tradition that encouraged deprivation and suffering and that the severity of this ascetic practice in the Celtic period found expression in Irish Catholicism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In conclusion, while it can be demonstrated that the hunger strike is not peculiar to Irish society, the phenomenon has developed both historical and mythological importance in Irish Christian traditions. The use of self-immolation in the first quarter of the twentieth century confirmed the dogmatic theology of violence held by the republican tradition in Irish politics. The righteousness of this credo was articulated by poets and writers of this period, no more so than by Pearse, and reached a climactic stage with the 'bloody protest' of Easter 1916. The hunger strike, perhaps a less dramatic continuance of the blood sacrifice, is best understood within the context of the

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Irish cult of self-sacrifice; its latest legacy being the 1981 hunger strikes and deaths of ten republican prisoners in the Maze prison.

Notes

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