

Jeremy Taylor and the Irish Superstition

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The central personage of this article, Bishop Jeremy Taylor, was born in 1613 and died in 1667. Thus he saw the rise and fall and rising again of the House of Stuart in many of its crucial phases as its members reigned over England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland. He never lived in Scotland but spent significant periods in England, Wales and Ireland. Both as clergyman and as academic he was a typical "don" for a short while at Oxford but soon found himself involved at Court. He was, during the Civil War, imprisoned and then "exiled" to Wales.

Taylor's greatest importance is as a devotional writer, his theology being both "moral" and "spiritual." From time to time he entered into polemic, much against his natural inclinations, especially often being named Bishop in 1658. His English style is as amazing as it is insigne, and his content in the tradition of High Church "orthodoxy" has influenced Anglican thinkers and spiritual guides down to our own times.

When Dr Jeremy Taylor was consecrated Church of Ireland Bishop of Down and Connor on 27th January, 1661 he could not have known that less than seven years later he would be dead.¹ Nor could he, despite four years² of rather protected though interrupted ministry in the North of Ireland have known the insurmountable problems and unbearable tasks which awaited him in his Diocese. A writer of merit

¹ C.J. Stranks, *The Life and Writings of Jeremy Taylor*, London, S.P.C.K. 1952, pp. 232 & 272.

² Stranks, *op. cit.* pp. 190-191.

and renown who continued to be acknowledged as such a good two hundred years after his death, Taylor's life, though at times distinguished by a certain eminence—he was Chaplain to Charles I after having been a don at both his own University, Cambridge, and at Oxford where Laud, his protector, saw to his being conferred a Doctorate—had largely been one of forced seclusion. His was the seclusion of a High Churchman in times dominated by Puritans, of a Royalist living apart and necessarily aloof under Cromwell's Commonwealth.

Two foes stood against the local projects of the new Ordinary of Down and Connor: the Presbyterian usurpers of Crown livings whom he fairly summarily deposed and dispossessed by use of the secular arm and the Roman Catholic majority who inhabited the area of his Diocese, one both ancient and venerable over which they considered him the usurper.

Down and Connor were originally two Dioceses, each an amalgamation of more ancient (and largely forgotten) ecclesiastical jurisdictions. For both Anglicans and Roman Catholics today (as in Taylor's day) the area is the same, comprised by a line from Whitehouse on Belfast Lough due west to Caldy River then by the river to Muckamore and Lough Neagh, an area of some five hundred and seventy-six square miles. Down (which is Downpatrick) and Connor (a See founded in 480 by St. Macmuisse, now a hamlet too small to feature on any standard road maps) had been united and divided three times between the Twelfth and the Fifteenth Century, the final union taking place despite the resistance of Archbishop John Prene of Armagh in 1451.³ Nearby is the little Diocese of Dromore of which Taylor was Administrator and of which his friend, disciple and eulogizer, George Rust, was the Bishop at the time of Taylor's death.

The great trouble with the Roman Catholics in Taylor's time in this region of the rural north was simply that they would not conform to the Church by law established. They persisted in the old ways of 'Popery' in discipline, of 'mummery' in worship and worst of all in 'superstition' as regards doctrine. All three things vexed and even horrified Taylor, but it was the 'superstition' he resented and resisted most. And it is curious to see how he delineates and analyses the most rankling (to him) characteristics of a flock who point blank refused to acknowledge him as 'shepherd and bishop of their souls.'

³ I am indebted to Fr. James Kane, Parish Priest of Coonabarabran for these details of Irish ecclesiastical history and geography.

I

For a man of his fifty odd years to take on the task announced by the title of his work *A Dissuasive Against Popery* in the context and circumstances of Taylor's Irish days is perhaps no more amazing than many another task to which the author set himself in previous years and even less favourable *milieus*. Therefore any criticism of the element of 'superstition' as attacked in the *Dissuasive* must bear in mind that a man who in earlier years was open, tolerant and even willing to concede much to his opponents has become cantankerous and close to bigotry because of the force of events and persons so alien to his accustomed ways as to make argument flair into hostility and theological disagreement degenerate into a diatribe almost frantic in its attempt to reduce to absurdity and rustic fetishism what it can no longer hope to see with objective calm.

The long and weary years of living (however prolific his writing) under the tension of a persecuting power; the lack of pastoral ministry except to an effete minority after the early years following his priestly Ordination in the mid 1630's;⁴ the disappointment that (partly because of the novelty of his positions on original sin and death-bed repentance) he was not elevated to a prestigious English See rather than the forlorn and peripheral Down and Connor; all these factors together with waning health as he approached death give Taylor some excuse for his position. But they cannot give him enough. For his position is lacking both in magnanimity and in correctness of fact. Like much of Taylor's writing at all periods of his literary career from the publication of *Episcopacy Asserted* in 1642 to the *Dissuasive* in 1664 there is a jarring combination of apt and laudable turns of phrase with clumsy inaccuracy of fact and all-too-often flimsy development of thought.

Steeped as he is in both classical and patristic tradition Taylor is consistently oblivious to the exigencies of what might be called an 'extended sacramentality.' He can both perceive and analyse with a certain precision, thoroughly Anglican it is true but cogent nonetheless, the great 'major' Sacraments of Baptism and the Supper of the Lord. Weak though he may be on regeneration and any very developed doctrine of Real Presence (he abhors *Transubstantiation* but devoutly holds with many of its implications) his insight into the institution by Christ, use by the Church and effect in and for the Christian of the two

⁴ Stranks, *op. cit.* p.39 states the date as 'unknown.'

Sacraments is basically correct by an orthodox standard. What frustrates the Roman Catholic critic is that he cannot see beyond these two *Mysteria* —great and unique as they are— into how nearly any and almost all objects of material creation can be used for God's glory and man's good.

Let us turn to some of Taylor's examples and behold some things which were 'sacramentals' to Irish Catholics and mere trinkets of superstition, dangerous because any use of them would seem to be a misuse of God's creation to him.

Taylor states:

"About the year 1630, there were introduced into Ireland, by the Franciscans and Carmelite friars, three pretty propositions:

1. Whosoever shall die in the habit of St. Francis, shall never be prevented with an unhappy death.

2. Whosoever shall take the scapular of the Carmelites, and die in the same, shall never be damned.

3. Whosoever shall fast the first Saturday after they have heard of the death of Luisa, a Spanish nun of the order of St. Clare, shall have no part in the second death.

Now these external rites promise more grace than is conferred by their sacraments; for it promises a certainty of glory, and an intermediate certainty of being in the state of grace; which to them is not and cannot be done, according to their doctrine, by all the other sacraments and sacramentals of their church. Now, these things are derived to them by pretended revelations of St. Francis and St. Simon Stock. And though I know not what the priests and friars in England will think or say of this matter, yet I assure them, in Ireland they are of great account, and with much fancy, religion, and veneration, used at this day. And, not long since, visiting some of my churches, I found an old nun in the neighbourhood, a poor Clare, as I think; but missing her cord about her, which I had formerly observed her to wear, I asked the cause, and was freely answered, that a gentlewoman, who had lately died, had purchased it of her, to put about her in her grave. And of how great veneration the Saturday-fast is here, everyone knows, but the cause I knew not, till I had learned the story of St. Luisa; and that Flamming, their archbishop of Dublin, had given countenance to it by his example and credulity."⁵

⁵ J. Taylor, *op. cit. sup.* Vol II pp. 878-879.

So we see in this third section of the first book of the *Dissuasive* Taylor launching forth on a three-fold attack on the Franciscan habit—which dates in some form from before 1209—the Carmelite scapular—which, it is popularly-purported, may date from 1251—and the fast on the first Saturday after anyone's hearing of the death of 'Louissa' a supposed Spanish Poor Clare. About all three bits of devotional lore, two involving articles of clothing, one a prolonged penitential act and, thus, all three in the category of 'sacramentals' Taylor puts forth two claims: first, that these things were introduced into Ireland about 1630; second, that they have quasi-magical effects as regards death, purgatory and hell.

As against the first claim it should be noted that there have been fully organised Franciscan and Carmelite 'Provinces' in Ireland since 1230 (Franciscan) and 1305 (Carmelite), Friars of both Orders were very active in Ireland from ca 1220 in the case of the Minors and 1250 in that of the White Friars. The custom of giving the habit of a religious community or a distinctive part of it the lay persons during life or as grave clothes dates back well before the Friars' Movement. As for the redoubtable—or better 'doubtful' Louise there is not and never has been a St. Luisa de España, Poor Clare or otherwise. Taylor must be referring to Blessed Louise of Savoy (1462-1503), niece of King Louis XI of France and widow of Hugh of Orleans who on her husband's death embraced the Colettine Reform of the Poor Clares in the monastery of Orbe in Switzerland. In Taylor's time the title "Blessed" was honorific as no beatification—let alone canonisation—of this holy woman had yet taken place. Her cultus acknowledged as 'immemorable' by Gregory XVI in 1839 gained her the confirmed title of beata without need of process.⁶

There is no need to question a verisimilitude of a devotion to her, however, in seventeenth century Ireland, promoted by Franciscans as represented by this Poor Clare long since forced from her cloister and chatting now at ease with an Anglican Bishop in the court of one of 'his' churches who still considers 'hers.'

So much for the things themselves. Let us look at the doctrinal implications. We must remember that Taylor was never a 'popularist.' At times he makes us feel as if the whole human race consists of dons and undergraduates meeting after dinner at Gonville and Caius

⁶ Cf article "Bl. Louise of Savoy" by M.G. McNeil in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, N.Y. McGraw-Hill 1966, Vol. VIII, p. 1024.

College, Cambridge. So the distinction between official teaching and 'folk-religion'—though he is aware of it by implication—means nothing to him. That people are allowed (nay, encouraged) to believe what is contrary to scripture as interpreted by High Anglican divines like himself amazes, bewilders and disconcerts him to distraction. He cannot and will not abide it.

What he neglects to ascertain and what is the crux of the whole matter is that sacramentals such as cords, scapulars and fasts only *work* for Catholics in a 'state of grace.' They do not *confer* grace, but, rather they *presuppose* it. Being *ex opere operantis* their efficacy is conditioned by the recipient to the extent that actual sin can annihilate it. So one cannot *guarantee* the cord of St. Francis to ward off an unhappy death, but one can say that devoutly wearing it lessens the possibility of unhappily passing from this life. The hearing about Blessed Louise is not the cause of merit but the fasting for the sake of the banquet which Second Death cannot touch would be a perfectly normal thing to expect merit for in a Post-Tridentine theology. The wearing of the Carmelite scapular cannot wrest anyone from the fires of Hell. But the scapular can protect its wearer by its power as sign or 'sacramental' from those dispositions which might lead to presumption or despair. No Catholic theologian teaches that these dispositions (largely psychological as they are) will necessarily be attained by all scapular-wearers. The popular analysis remains that such articles 'won't do any harm' and can, rightly used, be the source of immense and surprising good.

As one contemporary author has succinctly put it, current Roman Catholic theology of sacramentals speculates:

"Although friars of other religious orders may have made similar claims, attention has focused more strongly upon the privileges claimed for the Carmelite scapular.

According to Carmelite legend, Our Lady appeared to St. Simon Stock in Cambridge in 1251 and showing him a brown scapular, declared that whoever wore it until death would be preserved from hell and on the first Saturday after his death would be taken by her to heaven. It is beyond the scope of the present article to go into the disputed question of whether this vision (or even the scapular, for that matter) was known to Carmelite friars of the mid-13th century, or whether the legend was an invention of later times.

Whatever the truth of the origin of the legend, the promises contained in it deserve attention.

With regard to either of the two promises, it should be noted that they cannot be reasonably represented as requiring merely the material fact of wearing the scapular without respect to the interior dispositions with which it is worn. To do so would be to attribute a magical efficacy to the scapular and make it out to be a more potent channel of grace than the Sacraments. Against the hypocrisy and formalism of the Pharisees, Our Lord taught that to be pleasing to God, worship of Him must be an expression of the dispositions of the heart. External acts have no value in His sight unless they are the expression of a right mind and a sincere will. The wearing of the scapular must therefore be understood to include the right and salutary interior dispositions with which it is worn; it is primarily through these, and only remotely and instrumentally through the actual carrying of the scapular, that salvation is secured.

With regard to the promise of preservation from hell or, and this comes to the same thing, the grace of final perseverance, or the grace of a good death this must always be understood in conformity with the teaching of the Church regarding the uncertainty of salvation (*Denz* 1541). At most, the wearing of the scapular cannot be more than a fallible sign of predestination, of its nature no more certain than many others, and valid only in conjunction with the right interior dispositions.”⁷

So Taylor is ‘barking up the wrong tree’ in giving an astonishing efficacy to sacramentals beyond that which they possess. But he is equally wrong to deny them their supposed ‘real’ efficacy in the eyes of his Irish neighbours of the 1660’s. Whatever their exaggeration in devotion, he is mistaken in the extent to which they would simply equate its effects with ‘salvation.’ Through lack of distinctions he has missed out on a subtle but, for them at least, valid point.

The *Dissuasive* contains, of course, a great mass of other material both anecdotal and speculative, sometimes pleasantly and at other times tediously worked out by Taylor. But I hope this one three-fold example is enough to show the tendency of his thought and emphasis and to underline (I hope not unfairly) his impatience with the Irish and their ways. Even in this inaccurate near-lampoon Taylor retains something of the charm and wit of his earlier writings from happier days, a snippet of which we shall shortly examine.

⁷ P.N. Zammit in ‘Scapulars’: *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIII pp. 1115-1116.

II

It would be a mistake to assume on basis of this glance at his appraisal of three sacramentals that because Taylor finds their use superstitious that we have discovered his whole teaching on superstition. As so often happens when we look at the Taylorian *corpus* we can easily see that the things he wrote last he did not of necessity write best. On the contrary, much of his best work was done twenty years or more before his death. It is work written in England and Wales by a man sure of an audience large in sympathy if small in number.

In a work of this earlier period, Sermon IX, part 3 on Godly fear with classical philosophic precision Taylor sees superstition as an extreme form of fear of God or gods in terms of an exactitude 'unreasonable ... unequal, disproportionable and impossible' in degree. 'The superstitious man' for Hesychius as quoted by Taylor 'is also an idolater.' And so the *object* may be undue in this case as was the *expression* (toward a rightful object wrongly understood) in the former. 'Idols' for Taylor easily become demons and whatever his seeming objective calm in this passage, Rome is 'in for' a blast:

"Concerning this part of superstition, I shall not trouble this discourse, because I know no Christians blamable in this particular but the Church of Rome, and they that communicate with her in the worshipping of images, of angels, and saints, burning lights and perfumes to them, making offerings, confidences, advocations, and vows to them; and direct and solemn Divine worshipping the symbols of bread and wine, when they are consecrated in the holy sacrament. These are direct superstition, as the word is used by all authors, profane and sacred, and are of such evil report, that wherever the word superstition does signify anything criminal, these instances must come under the definition of it."⁸

Thus we see that Taylor's anti-papalism was not new to his life on arrival to Ireland. In fact it dates back to one of his earliest publications that of the sermon on the Gunpowder Plot which he preached on 5 November 1638 in the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford.⁹ The *Sermons* from which we quote though published in 1653 probably date back to the 40's in composition.¹⁰

⁸ J. Taylor, *op. cit.* Vol. I.

⁹ A.G in *Dictionary of National Biography*, London, Oxford Univ. Press, 1917 vol. XIX.

¹⁰ Ct Stranks, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

Lest it seem strange that Taylor's hostility to Roman Catholics seems to flair up 'out of the blue' it is well to note two things. First of all, the opinions he held were by no means uncommon across the spectrum of Protestantism in his day, age and place. Secondly—and perhaps more to the point—, High Church Anglicans, being especially close to Rome in the eyes of their Low Church fellow Christians, were particularly defensive about and keen to point out whatever separated them from Rome.

Throughout his ecclesiastical career Taylor, however vehement his attacks on their beliefs, seems to have been in personal contact (sometimes quite close and socially friendly) with members of the Old Religion of both sexes. There is good reason to surmise that he took a good deal of 'ribbing' from Puritan quarters because of these intimacies and that his defensiveness is over-reaction in face of the accusation of being a 'crypto-papist.'

The interesting point of contrast between *Sermons* and *Dissuasive* is the broader basis and optimism of the former and the pettiness and sense of defeat of the latter. The *Sermons* are not really polemical in intent even if they sometimes are in partial content. But the *Dissuasive* is meant as a broadside even if its targets reject it as missing the mark of their reality.

However Taylor is looked at in any period of his literary production or Church career, we have to admit that he ever remains more a rhetorician than a metaphysician, more an ardent believer than a theologian, more a defender of heart-felt faith than a purveyor of abstract reasons. Yet it would be wrong to deny the power of his intellect, eclectic and imprecise though his use of it may all-too-often be. And I cannot claim that a short quotation—however typical of his vast homiletic tracts—gives more than a slight taste of his genius and skill.

Conclusion

Jeremy Taylor was a man of numerous misfortunes, the early deaths of his first wife, nearly all his children and many of his friends heading the list. He was imprisoned for his beliefs and ways of expressing them in the pulpit and with the pen no less than three times, perhaps more. He was never brutally treated but he was often much harassed to a point which for others would have been trying beyond endurance. In the midst of his troubles he was not only calm but happy.

A spirit of loyalty and devotion and a depth of intuitive knowing mark even his dullest works. But when he flies he soars and leaves behind in his reader a sense of glimpsed grandeur. Partly because of the editor's work—long, unmanageable and badly punctuated sentences—partly because of the content—theological controversy and religious taste both 'bankrupt' for us—he is not likely to be much read today. Still, even a small delving into his works is rewarding, and I expect the combination of forthright candour with defensive outbursts, of inner calm midst the troubles of life, of willing service even in strange and partly hostile surroundings will leave its mark on Taylor's reader as it left its mark on Taylor himself.

Much as this man admired of Coleridge and Emerson, this paragon of a bye-gone Laudian age, this preacher, this writer, this herald of a vanished stability still has something to say, I doubt if the Irish of Down and Connor would be much more impressed now than in the 1660's or if Taylor could actually move from 'superstition' his opponents of any time or place. For, as he sensed himself, his ability *was* misplaced and thus inevitably misused. Had times been different a long career at Cambridge, a country vicarage, an important if secondary English Diocese might have been his sphere. On the other hand perhaps his strength lies in his very obscurity, disappointment and frustration. Never overcome, perhaps he triumphed precisely because his obstacles were so great.

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