Mormons on the Warfront: The Protestant Mormons and Catholic Mormons of Northern Ireland

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Although being Mormon sets members apart from their neighbors nearly anywhere in the world, in Northern Ireland that separation frequently creates unique problems for members of the embattled ward and branches. Without exception, Mormonism is scorned by all religious groups there. The Church is characterized as an oddity, as a non-Christian cult, as a polygamist group still sending young men out seeking brides for Utah harems. Ian Paisley hates Mormons more than he hates Catholics, if that is possible. Missionaries have repeatedly told me that whenever they encounter Paisley’s FreePresbyterians they quickly excuse themselves because they are well acquainted with the invective which will soon follow. But knocking on any door in Northern Ireland could bring a decidedly unwelcome surprise. And to open that door to a stranger could be just as fearful. Many communities in Northern Ireland are no go areas for the missionaries just as they are for the security forces.

Irish Mormons suffer from the same problems their non-Mormon neighbors must endure—poverty, inadequate housing, twenty-five percent unemployment, and continual emigration of their youngest and brightest; but nothing else has as much impact as the conflict. In fact, social problems in the North have worsened during the last twenty years as a direct result of the ongoing conflict. Certainly the civil rights movement of the late 1960s brought fairer elections, better employment practices, and improved educational opportunities. But repressive police tactics against an initially nonviolent movement marginalized a large segment of society. Paramilitaries I’ve talked to were literally beaten into the belief that nonviolence doesn’t work. And now Northern Ireland has the highest percentage of prisoners in Western Europe. Bombings of businesses and factories

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and kidnappings of CEOs have decreased foreign investment and destroyed jobs, thus impairing further an already depressed economy. Despite the many difficulties, however, the Church is growing much more rapidly in the North than it is in the predominantly Catholic South, where religion and patriotism—being Catholic and being Irish—are intertwined, where leaving the Catholic Church is almost synonymous with defecting.

But it is not only in Southern Ireland where Church members are strangely at odds with their culture. The Church develops in its adherents attitudes about patriotism, law, and order, and individual rights that cause Northern members to stand out dangerously on the warfront. Since a high percentage of Northern Irish Mormons are members of the various security forces, they and their families are therefore prime paramilitary targets. Many Mormon names appear on the various death lists. Many Mormons are unable to reveal their addresses in ward and branch lists and must be home taught at the Church. Many Mormons must move house frequently, and sometimes only the very closest family members will know the new address. I have made it a practice not to record the address of anyone who could be a likely target; I also do not publish the name of any Irish person who is not already a public figure.

During each of my four extended research trips, spanning the seven years since the fall of 1983, I have stayed with members of the Church, North and South. Many enterprising Mormons participate in the healthy bed and breakfast industry in Ireland. My practice of staying with Mormons, which, incidentally, was suggested to me by a nonmember Atlanta friend, has not only lent depth to my research but has also given me ready access to individuals who have proven invaluable to my study of the interrelationship of theater to politics in Northern Ireland. Members of the Church have frequently provided me a useful but unexpected entry into the many political arenas on the island.

In Northern Ireland where the divisions among the often warring groups are particularly pronounced, the Mormon Church is a bright spot and one of the few institutions demonstrating any success in bridging the cultural divide. Even though a politically united Ireland might prove impossible, the Church united Ireland ecclesiastically in the spring of 1983 by creating only one mission on the island. That move brought members from the North and the South together in regional and area meetings which helped to decrease stereotyping and to increase understanding. Still very few friendships have developed between members of the North and South. Cultural differences continue to outweigh the similarities that Church membership fosters.
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But alliances are more confusing outside the Church. Even a clear definition of the Northern Irish problem itself is elusive. Over the years, I have become quite suspicious of simple solutions, such as “Brits out!” Catholics claim that the frequently shouted expletive is merely a call to the British Army to leave the island, but Protestants interpret the statement as a demand that they leave as well, that they leave a country where they and their families have lived for generations.

What to call the place is also an issue. Northern Ireland is not recognized officially as a political entity by the majority on the island; in fact, the six counties that make up the North are included under the Southern constitution, although changing that aspect of the constitution is now hotly debated in the South. Knowing what to call the participants is even more difficult. Whether Protestant or Catholic, unionist or nationalist, loyalist or republican, or even British or Irish—any of these efforts to categorize also polarizes. The population in the North does not fall into these neat categories. The usual practice of identifying two distinct warring populations only describes the extremes and alienates the majority. Many Northern residents now reject all labels as being inappropriate descriptions, but still they frequently use Catholic or Protestant, as I do, to indicate background or culture or ethnicity rather than religion. Sometimes I wonder how I ever chose to study a place I cannot appropriately designate which has a problem I cannot clearly identify and which has participants I cannot adequately name.

In the North, Mormons are primarily converted Protestants while in the South, Mormons are virtually all converted Catholics. On my first trip to Ireland, I was frequently surprised to learn that members I knew well who were living very near one another on opposite sides of the border had never met. I am no longer surprised by the divisions, and my well-meaning attempts to bring my Northern and Southern Mormon friends together have proven fruitless so far. Mormon unity is far from perfect. Despite the obvious love and caring within the Irish Church, there are Protestant Mormons and Catholic Mormons; Irish members can readily recite the cultural roots of everyone in their congregation.

In addition, political divisions sometimes divide the Church just as they divide the country. The Derry branch met frequently in a hotel on the Protestant Waterside because of the repeated vandalism the building on the Catholic Bogside suffered. Bombs have been placed under cars in the parking lot, not randomly, but to target present or former members of the security forces who are also members of the Church. Derry, which is mostly Catholic, is on the western border of Northern Ireland. Catholics have now taken over
the walled city or Bogside, and Protestants have congregated primarily across the river on the Waterside. For a time, the Derry branch met alternately on each side of the River Foyle. When the meeting was in the church building on the Bogside, many Protestant Mormons didn’t feel safe in attending. And when the meeting was in the hotel on the Waterside, the Catholic Mormons feared for their lives. And a thriving congregation of two hundred dwindled to twenty.

One Saturday morning during the 1981 hunger strike period, the Derry branch president went to the chapel to prepare for the next day’s meetings; his wife went with him to practice the organ. To their horror they found feces spread on the walls, benches, and carpets, reminiscent of the dirty protest then taking place in the prison. During the dirty protest, the protesting H-Block prisoners emphasized their political status by refusing to wear clothing other than their own and wrapping themselves in blankets instead of dressing in the prison jumpsuit. In the ensuing battle of wills with the warders, other privileges were eliminated, even the chance to slop out the cells, so the prisoners spread feces on the walls of their cells. The individuals who broke into the Derry church building were evidently imitating the prison protest. On Sunday, the next day, Derry branch members met in the building which they had cleaned late into the night. Somehow word of the desecration had spread, and members they hadn’t seen for years came to help scrub the walls, pews, and carpet. But that renewed spirit in the branch didn’t survive. After several more, although less spectacular, break-ins, the branch boarded up the building and met continually on the Waterside.

The debate about what to do with the building became heated. Plans were made to sell it to a Catholic congregation, but at the final meeting, the new Protestant Mormon branch president decided to call off the sale. He told me he felt inspired that the branch should stay on the Catholic Bogside; he believed new members would come from the Catholic part of the community. Members who refused to continue to attend Church in the building were allowed to transfer to other branches. The branch president went to an excommunicated Mormon who had ties to the IRA; he asked him to find out what the IRA wanted the Mormons to do—sell the building or stay and repair it. The man reported back that the IRA had no problem with the Mormons, saying, instead, that it was the Catholic hierarchy the IRA had difficulty with. The branch president then asked for IRA help to eliminate the vandalism. Since that time the mischief has stopped, and the renovated Derry building is one of the nicest in Ireland. But unfortunately, the congregation hasn’t grown appreciably and remains at approximately thirty active members.
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And yet, members sacrifice to send their children to BYU and rejoice if opportunities develop which allow the young people to settle in America, thus adding to the sad emigration statistics.

Politics encroaches on church affiliation in Belfast as well as in Derry. These two cities are the main population centers of the North. Derry with 90,000 residents is now 72 percent Catholic, an increase of 8 percent during the past ten years. Belfast with 330,000 residents is now only 62 percent Protestant, a decrease of 4 percent over ten years. Both cities were Protestant strongholds during the centuries of struggle for territory. In fact, the overall Protestant population in the North has decreased 1.5 percent where the Catholic population has increased 9 percent during the last ten years. A Catholic majority is a clear possibility early next century since 40 percent of the total population of Northern Ireland is now Catholic. So where Derry on the far western border has become predominantly Catholic, Belfast on the far eastern border remains predominantly Protestant, although the percentage has decreased.

Working in the security forces as prison warders, policemen, and part-time British soldiers causes special difficulties for Church members. A Catholic Mormon on the police force was warned by a former Catholic schoolmate that he was on an IRA death list. (Catholic judges and Catholic police officers and Catholic British soldiers are particularly targeted by the IRA; they are viewed as traitors who are participating in the British occupation of Northern Ireland.) This member and his pregnant wife sold their new home and moved to an outlying neighborhood; the wife quit her nursing job at the main Belfast hospital to further limit knowledge of their whereabouts. He continues on the force, however, and promotions have made him an even likelier target.

Why this man and others continue to risk their lives can be answered in several ways. Jobs, especially such high-paying jobs such as those in the security forces, are scarce in Northern Ireland. Also, Mormonism promotes support for government and law and order; Mormonism is in opposition to anarchy; in fact, a basic tenet of Mormonism is a belief in “order in all things.” But the answer could be less obvious and more allusive than this. A basic paradigm for the Irish as well as for Mormons is sacrifice. Victor Turner in From Ritual to Theatre says, “Paradigms of this type, cultural root paradigms, so to speak, reach down to irreducible life stances of individuals, passing beneath conscious prehension to a fiduciary hold on what they sense to be axiomatic values, matters literally of life and death.” In my study of Ireland, I demonstrated martyr wish to be a cultural root paradigm there. Cloaked in allusiveness, charged with emotion, martyrdom passes beneath Irish consciousness to
that cultural value of a type of death which gives meaning to life. To risk their lives in what they believe to be the service of others would seem to be a natural role for these Irish Mormons in the security forces.

But Mormons find themselves in paradoxical positions; to love others and not to judge are values constantly confronted by the conflict. An especially difficult time was the hunger strike period. Here were young men using Christ as their model, and yet many Mormons believed the hunger strike to be a perversion of martyrdom. These dying hunger strikers had been convicted of killing their friends, neighbors, and co-workers. To treat the starving men or the other protesting prisoners as martyrs instead of criminals would have been impossible for an Irish Protestant Mormon. For an Irish Catholic Mormon, however, the issue is less clear-cut. I listened many times as friends tried to reconcile their sympathy for the hunger strikers with their belief in law and order and their abhorrence of violence.

Mormons are involved in varying degrees on all sides of the conflict, and frequently their behavior does not harmonize well with their Mormon beliefs. For instance, a Belfast Mormon prison warder was on a ward temple trip to London during the time of a spectacular prison breakout in September 1983 when thirty-seven men escaped from the H-Blocks. Soon after his return from London, the man told me in a matter-of-fact tone that if he’d been at the prison instead of the temple, he would surely have been involved in the beatings the eighteen recaptured prisoners received. He said the prisoners expected the treatment and even asked for it; in fact, they liked being beaten because it reinforced their view of themselves as persecuted. He claimed to be merely fulfilling his prescribed role in the symbiotic relationship between the prisoners and the warders. Resistance followed by punishment, he asserted, was simply the natural relationship between the guarded and the guards. He was elders quorum president at the time.

The beatings are well documented, but prisoners would dispute the claim that they ask to be beaten. On 16 May 1990, the court awarded Joseph Simpson £7,500 in damages from the British Government Northern Ireland Office. Simpson is a thirty-eight-year-old H-Block prisoner from Andersonstown in Catholic West Belfast. He claimed that prison officers had assaulted him when he was recaptured after the 1983 prison escape. His suit is one of many cases documenting abusive treatment. Stories of brutality are frequently recited for me by prisoners’ families and recently released prisoners from both sides of the cultural divide. One young man’s monotone recitation of sleep deprivation and systematic beatings was especially poignant because it was completely devoid of any
emotion. His mother explained that even then, six months after his release, his sleep was still disturbed, and he apparently had suffered permanent hearing impairment.

When I asked the Mormon prison warder if he did not at least respect the dedication of the hunger strikers, the singleness of purpose that had led them to die for a cause, he scoffed at the idea and told me that they hadn’t really fasted but had sneaked food. Despite the deaths of ten hunger strikers, he clung to his belief that they had eaten and not truly fasted. Discounting the sacrificial imagery became more important than reality. Now that the man is older and has been a bishop, he has softened somewhat. He insists that he no longer participates in the beatings.

Life in the H-Blocks has calmed considerably since the turbulent protest period of the late 70s and early 80s. Prisoners are quietly permitted the concessions that were the basis for the hunger strikes, and the present relationship between the warders and the prisoners is usually one of wary caution. Warders tell me that the job is now easy but dull, and since the prisoners are more content and cooperative, few beatings occur.

One stake conference in 1983, the large house where I was staying was full of members who lived some distance from Belfast. My generous hosts had invited them to stay over after the Saturday night conference meetings to save them the long trip home that night and the return to Belfast the next morning. On Sunday morning they treated me as a curiosity; everyone wanted to meet the American. Here they all were, ready for Church and yet talking about the conflict and how to solve it. But their solution was killing people. The discussion was a strange experience because I had met many of the people they thought should be done away with. But knowing and even liking the individuals these Mormons thought should be eliminated gave me an advantage. I could sit there and listen to these active Mormons talk about the benefits of dictatorships, of imprisonment without trial, and of shooting on suspicion alone, and not judge. I could appreciate the frustration of living in such lawless surroundings. And yet the killing is abhorrent to me, whoever does it—security force or paramilitary. The end can never fully justify the means.

A Mormon who had been an officer in the B-Specials, a now-disbanded, notoriously brutal branch of the British Army, berated me for an hour one afternoon. He was angry about Irish American support for the IRA and wanted me to tell America to stop paying for guns and bombs. He pointed out that only Northern Ireland had allowed American bases during World War II. (In contrast, the South had maintained a shaky neutrality which hid much covert
support for the Germans.) He told me that he had instructed the young men in his special unit not to attack the common Catholic but to go for the leaders, not to shoot just anyone but to kill John Hume. Again I had to remind myself that I was talking to a Mormon who supposedly shared my values.

Such discussions are the exception, however. For the most part, Irish Mormons are noted for their warmth and good-ness. But the Irish often cynically dismiss this celebrated warmth as only overcompensation, as a surface effort to counteract all the bad press, or as a calculated effort to deceive. However, I do not find the Irish insincere; I experience the Mormons, at least, as quite genuine. And I have never participated in friendlier congregations. But then, the Irish do not generally see it as paradoxical that warmth can coexist with violence. In fact, my bringing up the issue that first trip in 1983 was greeted with laughter, especially from those who knew I was from Atlanta. How could I talk about murder and mayhem! When I tried to explain that what went on in Atlanta was either crimes for gain or crimes of passion, our situation was deplored: “But that’s awful, people dying for no purpose!”

My own views are constantly bombarded in Ireland with varying but compelling perspectives. I never feel physically threatened there although my beliefs and emotions suffer an onslaught. Overall the experience has been positive. The Irish resilience when faced with frequent and severe difficulty has taught me how to better deal with my own challenges. On each trip to Ireland, I develop a renewed appreciation for the value of life.

If objective truth were what I sought in Ireland, I would have been misled and frustrated. The incidents I’ve mentioned are stories my Irish friends have told me over the years; these are also the stories they tell themselves about themselves. Although customarily told with a rectitude and assurance that is uniquely Irish, the stories generally conflict with each other and meander in the telling and embellish the events. Despite the variations, most narrators insist vigorously that they have the facts, that their particular approach is the definitive truth. Luckily, I wanted to hear the commentary, to know how the Irish see themselves, to listen to the Irish presentation of self. Experiencing the differing views has usually been enjoyable and has always been instructive even though I might be aware of certain biases.

In A Colder Eye, Hugh Kenner discusses the illusiveness of the “Irish Fact” and compares Ireland to Homeric Greece: “Could it possibly occur to anyone to reject a narrative because it was inaccurate? For what could accuracy mean? Not only is what they’d need to match the tale against no longer there; the tale itself, once
told, is no longer there either; and as recent a past as yesterday afternoon is no more than what the speaker of the moment says it was, and only so long as he’s talking. Three different talkers, three different evanescing yesterdays, each one paced by a different sequencing of spoken flowers.” Kenner captures the embroidered Irish speech with his phrase *spoken flowers.*

But then accuracy in any setting is an illusion. In *Love’s Executioner,* psychiatrist Irvin D. Yalom explores the prevailing view that a life can somehow be reconstructed through long ago events which a person might choose to reveal. Instead, Yalom demonstrates experimentally the impossibility of recapturing and recording the definitive history of even a single therapy hour. He asks, “Can therapists or historians or biographers reconstruct a life with any degree of accuracy if the reality of even a single hour cannot be captured?” While longing for an umpire or a sharp-imaged snapshot of reality, he exclaims, “How disquieting to realize that reality is illusion, at best a democratization of perception based on participant consensus.” Margaret Atwood in *The Handmaid’s Tale* deals eloquently with the same issue: “It’s impossible to say a thing exactly the way it was, because what you say can never be exact, you always have to leave something out, there are too many parts, sides, crosscurrents, nuances; too many gestures, which could mean this or that, too many shapes which can never be fully described, too many flavors, in the air or on the tongue, half-colors, too many.”

Truth is cumulative, however; once all the stories are told and heard, a truer understanding of the culture is possible since metacommentary has developed. *Metacommentary* is the term Clifford Geertz uses for the story a group tells itself about itself, its presentation of self. Or in Yalom’s words, metacommentary is “a democratization of perception based on participant consensus.” But what is missing in Ireland is consensus; the narratives of Catholic and Protestant often dismiss important aspects of the other group’s presentation of self. Of course, the story or metacommentary will never really be completed; each era has the responsibility of retelling its own story. And as an audience for these narratives, I play a small role in the Irish process of metacommentary. Because I am from outside, I can talk to all of the various groups and they, in turn, can communicate with each other through me since they would not generally be able to approach each other directly. I become a useful conduit for ideas and questions back and forth, and when I share the various stories with an individual or a group, I can open a window onto the viewpoints of the opposing groups. Just listening to the competing Catholic and Protestant narratives has helped me understand what at first seemed inexplicable. This essay,
then, is yet another version of the Irish presentation of self, yet another version of the metacommentary, but from my own participant-observer viewpoint. Because it brings together many of the competing stories, this discussion can dispute erroneous ideas and can add to the cumulative truth. I have learned, for example, that what I might see as paradoxical in Irish culture, the Irish often see as a thoroughly reasonable approach. And Mormonism adds a rich gloss to the Irish experience; the aspiration to be as one in the gospel is continually frustrated by age-old animosities. What is Irish and what is Mormon or what is not Irish and what is not Mormon is confusing. So even though converted Irish Mormons develop a new presentation of self, old attitudes frequently surface when the conflict exposes cultural root paradigms; then the Irish metacommentary takes precedence over the newer Mormon metacommentary.

The story of a Southern Irish Church member who lives in Dublin demonstrates the struggle to develop a new unified Irish-Mormon metacommentary. When we talked in 1989, I had already known her for six years and had observed her increasing involvement in the Church against what seemed to me to be great odds. She lives on a public housing estate some distance from the chapel so just getting to meetings regularly is a triumph since she has many children but no car. Her husband is a nonmember as is her extended family. By 1989 she was teaching the Gospel Doctrine class in a humble but powerful manner. She talked glowingly of her experiences at the London Temple where had she gone recently for her endowment.

The incident that triggered our conversation was a letter she had received from my Dublin landlady, who was then working in Bagshot, England, which is near a large British Army base. The letter took over a month to arrive and had been opened and one page was missing. My landlady had innocently asked this woman, a neighbor, to get her house ready for my arrival. Coming from Bagshot to a woman whose family is sympathetic to the IRA, the letter apparently aroused suspicion, hence the censoring and delay until after I had already arrived. One Sunday when I gave her a ride home from Church, we sat in my car in front of her house and she told me in her soft voice how hard it had been for her to learn to love everyone, even the British. Like all politically involved Irish Mormons, she struggled against the feeling that she was deserting her country and her family by joining the Church. Although she has ceased any active role in the conflict, she understands and even applauds her family’s continued involvement and would naturally protect them if necessary. She is well aware of the ambiguity inherent in her situation.
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When she was first being taught by the missionaries, she passed through central Dublin on her way to a Church meeting, and one of her friends gave her a silencer to pass on to another friend. She had thought nothing of taking that silencer out of her bag in Church when she was rummaging for a pencil. She said the missionaries had nearly fallen off the bench when they saw it. Even now when a member of the IRA is killed she becomes quite angry, "How could they!" But she is also saddened now when a British soldier is shot, "Oh, the poor love!" She recognizes that the gospel has changed her outlook on the conflict; however, she also recognizes that her politics often sets her apart from other branch members who are somewhat suspicious of her motives and her companions. My landlady confirmed this perception; they are neighbors and good friends and yet my landlady will not talk about the conflict with her, worrying lest she become involved unintentionally. With each new bombing, my landlady is ashamed she is Irish and apologizes to anyone she knows who is British. The differing reactions of these two women demonstrates the range in Catholic Mormon response to the conflict. Protestant Mormon reactions are also diverse, which shows the impossibility of clearly delineating the cultures.

But my own response has not been easy to resolve, either. In 1983, when I visited the Derry Branch the very first Sunday I was in the North, I was confronted by my own lack of understanding. The adult Sunday School class had five members that October morning; apparently, only five had dared to come to Church. We huddled together in the unheated hotel in one of the semicircular booths in the restaurant. The subject of the lesson was Section 134 of the Doctrine and Covenants—the often-quoted declaration of the Mormon attitude toward government which Oliver Cowdery prepared in the Prophet's absence for inclusion in the first edition of the Doctrine and Covenants. Cowdery was attempting to counteract the characterization of Mormons as lawless. The teacher in Derry asked me to do most of the reading because the class enjoyed my accent. As I read aloud those words which I had heard so many times before, they suddenly took on a reality that made it almost impossible for me to continue. My usual calm, unflappable demeanor dissolved; my eyes filled with tears; and I had trouble breathing. In every way Northern Ireland is the antithesis of the ideal government outlined in Section 134. Even the most basic expectations of society are missing in Northern Ireland—government for all the people, courts which are fair, police you can trust, lawfulness as a principal value. I became aware that morning during the class discussion one reason why the missionaries are successful in the North: the people there yearn for the perfect organization prescribed by the Church.
The warm, loving nature and the spirituality of the Irish Latter-day Saints not only sets them apart from the larger Irish population but also gives them a unique position among other Mormons. The Mormon Church in Ireland has a distinctive charismatic flavor which permeates the membership. One elderly, recent convert believes that the Holy Ghost has unlocked his creativity; since joining the Church, he is now able to write poetry and plays, thereby fulfilling his lifetime dream at last. In Ireland, members seek for blessings; they revere their leaders; there is a trust and simplicity and willingness to do what is asked that is missing in many Mormon congregations. I once noted to a branch president there that, unlike American congregations, the Irish sing all the verses of the hymns, even if the meeting is running long; he looked at me with wonder and said, “The prophet told us to!”

The majority of Irish members fully dedicate themselves, making great sacrifices of time and money to the Church. When they were still on the old schedule of two separate meetings on Sunday, one of my Northern Irish woman friends would walk twenty miles back and forth each Sunday, pushing a baby in a pram. And her nonmember husband would walk with her, pushing a second pram. She has missed meetings only one Sunday in her twenty-five years as a member, the Sunday her father died during breakfast at her house. And her level of dedication could be echoed in thousands of different stories of other Irish saints. Some of the best examples of sacrifice as a cultural root paradigm are the lives of Irish Mormons. Many aspects of Mormonism fit easily within the overall Irish metacommentary.

Many Irish members view Mormonism as the only beacon of hope, as the only way to bring to an end the six-hundred-year undeclared war in Ireland. Truly the Church often seems to be the only organization there which is successfully bridging the cultural divide. And the struggle to develop a new all-encompassing meta-commentary, to create a unique Mormon Irish presentation of self which could include all groups on the island in fellowship, that struggle is, for the most part, the primary concern of the Church members in Ireland. There may be Protestant Mormons and Catholic Mormons in Northern Ireland, but they meet peacefully in the numerous congregations and work together for common goals.
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NOTES

3Kenner, 4.
7Yalom, 172.