



Early Protestant Missions to Jews, Muslims and Pagans: A Dangerous Model Professor Alec Ryrie 1st December 2021

The story went something like this. In the time of Christ, when the first apostles had fanned out across the known world to preach the new Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, most of Europe was sunk in the darkness of paganism, bowing down before false gods of wood and stone. And yet by God's astonishing providence, out of this dauntingly unpromising soil a Christian continent had slowly grown up and spread its limbs. When you looked back on this from your own time, from the age of the Reformation, you recalled with wonder how the miracles of the apostles, the peaceful witness of the martyrs, the brilliance of the apologists, the invincible virtues of the early Christians, and at last the decisive conversion of the emperor Constantine had turned pagan Rome into Christian Rome. You remembered the dying words of the last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, in the year 361: *Vicisti, Galilaeae*: 'you have triumphed, Galilean'. And even when the Roman empire itself crumbled, the true faith endured and prospered, spreading beyond Rome's old bounds. The wild Irish, those ungovernable savages whose country Rome's legions had never dared invade, were pacified by the sweet milk of the Gospel and in the fifth century became Christendom's greatest monks. The Saxons were not so easily converted, and Charlemagne had to take Christ to them on the point of a spear, but they too accepted the mild yoke, as in the end did the Vikings. The conversion of the last pagans was a drawn-out affair, as the Teutonic Knights and others slowly carried the light north and east to the far coasts of the Baltic, but it was done. And so now, in the sixteenth century, you as a European Christian could look back with shame and pride at your distant past. Shame, for you were descended from idolaters and savages who had served demons and lived in filth and ignorance. And pride, that your forefathers had accepted the Gospel when it was preached to them. This was who you were.

But what did this story mean for the people who came to be called Protestants: Christians who had accepted another new Gospel, or, as they believed, who had returned to the truth and purity of that Gospel as it had first been preached? Martin Luther and his first followers were, they admitted, not unlike the first apostles: a few preachers of the truth in a continent that had once again decayed into pagan idolatry, or, as we would call it, Catholicism. As they started to preach, they faced persecution just as the early church had done, and yet they also won supporters in just the same way, up to and including new Constantines like Elector Frederick of Saxony, King Gustav Vasa of Sweden and King Henry VIII of England. But unlike in the early church, these princes did not – or they had not yet – swept all before them. King Henry IV of France abandoned his Protestantism to keep his throne just as Julian the Apostate had renounced his Christianity, but Henry IV did not follow Julian's script, and die accepting that the Catholic cause died with him. Indeed, in the early seventeenth century, the Counter-Reformation was in full spate and the old faith was surging back. So, what did those ancient lessons mean?

Protestantism was from its first inception a missionary religion. But its mission was, at least initially, almost single-minded: to defeat the false church of the Romish Antichrist, and to win over the poor deluded people who had been ensnared in that church's diabolical lies. When John Calvin in Geneva began sending out hundreds of missionary pastors in the late 1550s, that was the mission field to which almost all of them went, to the neighbouring kingdom of France. Almost all: we'll meet the exceptions next time. But even in the first generation of Protestants they were well aware that there was a wider religious world out there. There were the people whom Protestants usually called Turks, or Saracens, or Mohammedans, that is, Muslims, against whom Christian kingdoms had been fighting for centuries. There was the perennially frustrating and

complicating presence of the Jews, whose impertinent insistence on continuing to exist was so vexing to Christians. And there was a whole world of non-Christians out there, in the newly discovered Americas and elsewhere, people whom Europeans effortlessly categorised as *pagans* – that is, the same as the people of pre-Christian Europe, the same as they themselves had once been. It was inevitable that people as missionary minded as the early Protestants would begin to ask themselves: surely we need to take our Gospel, not only to those who call themselves Christians while being deluded by Rome, but to those who have never yet embraced Christ?

In this series of lectures on the hidden history of how Protestantism went global, we are telling the story of how that thought first began to bear some fruit around the world in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We did a quick round-up of that effort last time, and now we turn to looking at how that story played out on four different continents. In the next three lectures we'll look at the Americas, at Africa and at the African diaspora, and at Asia, but today we are looking at the continent too easily overlooked in the global story: Europe itself. This is where the global spread of Protestantism had its roots, and where it learned the patterns that it would carry across the world. For even in this period there were non-Christians aplenty here, and it was on those populations that would-be Protestant missionaries cut their teeth. For better or for worse.

At which point we come up against a question that might sound almost too basic to ask. Why would Protestants be interested in converting others to their religion at all? In our pluralist age, where we tend to assume that it is better to live and let live and to allow everyone to enjoy their own truth, the effort can seem crass or indeed oppressive. And plainly that has often been the case. But we're never going to get anywhere with this subject unless we have some sense of the motivations here.

Protestants, like other Christians before them, set out to win converts for a whole host of reasons. Simply trying to persuade other people that you are right about something, and they are wrong has always had a certain appeal. And when you are talking about God, this can very easily become a matter of honour: there was a deep-seated instinct which said that to fail to worship God correctly, to spurn his grace or to spread lies about him, was offensive, indeed blasphemous, and that if Christians honoured their God they could not stand by and let such things be said and done. You might reply that God is quite capable of defending his own honour, but that is part of the problem: it might be your urgent duty to intervene now to stop such blasphemous offences before they bring down a terrible divine judgement both on the blasphemers themselves and on you for standing idly by and letting it happen.

Perhaps that does not persuade you. But there are more nakedly political reasons. Religious minorities are very vulnerable, and there is nothing like adding to your numbers to make yourself a little safer; converting your enemies is better than defeating them. And in a world where religious allegiances and political allegiances tracked each other, your converts were likely to be your allies, and there was no better way of cementing an alliance than to foster religious unity. In North America from the 1690s to the 1750s, English Protestant missionaries from New York and New England vied with French Jesuits from Quebec for the allegiance of various Native American groups, with hard-bitten military men urging resources be poured into these competing missions.

But all of these political or cultural concerns are in the end secondary. The fundamental reason Protestants, like other Christians before them, wanted to convert others was theological. They taught and believed that all human beings will, after death, face judgement. Some of will have their names written in the book of life; those people will have been chosen from amongst humanity for salvation, for the eternity of blissful union with God which Christians call Heaven. Others – very likely a majority – will not be found in the book of life. They are excluded from Heaven, and this state of eternal misery, which Christians call Hell, was usually also depicted as a state of active torment. If you believe in your gut that this daunting pair of alternatives lie ahead of you and of everyone else, it is hard to see how that does not become one of the most important facts in your life. And let us be clear that this *judgement* is not about whether you are a good or a bad person. We are all sinners, to a greater or lesser degree, or so Christianity insists: if we are saved, it is not by whatever dubious virtues we may have, but by faith in Jesus Christ, who redeems us from the eternal damnation we deserve. So, without faith in Christ, even if that is simply because you have never heard the name of Christ, it is pretty much impossible to be saved. Such a person simply does not have a seat on the only boat that can rescue human souls from drowning in eternal misery. So, the fundamental reason you might want to go to win converts is the same reason that, if you were on a sinking ship, you might want to go and knock-on cabin doors rather than simply making for the lifeboats yourself. Indeed, what could be more callous and inhuman than to have the secret of salvation and *not* to share it with others?

That perspective has certain consequences. First, the moral urgency of this task overwhelms just about

anything else. In other words, the ends can justify the means. Non-Christian people, by definition, do not know that they need the salvation that Christians offer them. But – on this view – they are wrong; and it may be your duty to save them from themselves, by any means necessary. A missionary is on this view offering something akin to a vaccine to a wary and hostile population: what he has can save them, if they can only be persuaded or cajoled or bribed or compelled to accept it. You may on this basis be justified in, for example, arresting or silencing individuals who are actively trying to oppose you. Or, in separating children from their parents in order to break the generational cycle, if that's what it takes to save their souls.

But this perspective also leaves you with a big question: what is *conversion* anyway? It is not in fact as simple as getting people into a lifeboat or injecting them with a vaccine. If you are a Roman Catholic, it is at least relatively straightforward: the sacrament of baptism is itself an efficacious channel of God's grace, and so if you can simply persuade people to accept baptism, even if their understanding of what they are doing is limited, that is a worthwhile beginning, a seed of grace planted in their lives. But for Protestants it is not so simple. Protestants teach that we are saved by faith in Christ, and they usually assumed that faith had two components, that is, knowledge – some basic facts about Christian doctrine, according to your capacity to understand them – and also trust, a profound trust, a reorientation of your life to place Christ your Savior at its center, a transformation which reaches the whole self. Accepting baptism or learning to recite a creed is not faith. So, pursuing quick mass conversions risks creating a continent full of fake Christians, people who may think they have been vaccinated against damnation but have merely been dosed on snake oil. That, indeed, is exactly what Protestants thought had happened in post-Roman Europe. The pagans hadn't truly been converted: a thin veneer of Christianity had been layered on top of their heathen hearts. The trouble is that this sort of deep transformation is much harder to achieve. Not just because it implies painstaking, patient work with small numbers, rather than sweeping up whole territories at a time. But also, because it is hard to know if you have ever succeeded. If someone claims to have converted, are they simply telling you what you want to hear? Or even if they are sincere, are they fooling themselves? How sure can you be of their inner hearts? The moral imperative of Heaven and Hell would have you win converts as fast as you can. But true conversion cannot be rushed and is an elusive quarry. In fact, many Protestants doubted their ability to make it happen at all. The transformation of the heart, their theology told them, is God's work. So there is a moral and political imperative to win converts: but it is also something which no human effort can achieve.

And those are only the general problems. The actual experiences Protestants had with the non-Christian peoples they encountered at home in Europe only made these difficulties more acute. Let's begin with the most fraught case of all. I said that most of ancient Europe had been sunk in pagan darkness: most, but not all. One people, as all Christians knew, had worshipped the true God and jealously guarded his revelation. And yet most of these people, the Jews, had not recognised God's Son when he was born among them. The continued existence of Jews, as a pretty sizeable minority scattered through Christian Europe and beyond, was a theological affront to most Christians. Many Christian societies had decided to tolerate the continued presence of Jews in their midst, although this is *tolerance* of the graceless, begrudging kind, usually accompanied by systematic legal discrimination and by consistent resentment and hostility. The grounds for tolerating them were often pragmatic – Jews were often well-networked, well-educated in such practical arts as medicine, and their neighbours and rulers could derive various benefits from their presence – but there was a theological side to this too, which matters for our purposes, an argument which goes back to St Paul, who back in the first century wrote about the already troubling problem of why so many of his fellow-Jews had not joined the fledgling Christian movement.

The argument goes like this. God has chosen the Jews to be his people. But he has also chosen to harden their hearts so that they will reject the Gospel, for the time being at least. This means that the Gentiles who have become Christians will look at the Jews and take warning: if they follow the Jews in becoming spiritually arrogant and obsessed with empty ritual – that was the Christian stereotype of Judaism – if Gentile Christians fall into the same pattern, they too will be subject to the same judgement. What's more, the Jews serve as an independent witness to the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible, the texts which Christians call the Old Testament. But, on this view, this situation is temporary. At the end of the age, before Christ returns in glory, St Paul foretells that *then* the Jews will at last be converted and embrace Christ and take their rightful place as God's chosen people once again. That time will come, not yet, but maybe soon.

So, all through the Middle Ages and into the Reformation era, Christians were in two minds about their Jewish neighbours. They should be allowed to continue to exist and to practice Judaism, because it is God's will and punishment for them that they should stew in their own errors. But they should also convert and embrace Christ. Perhaps Jewish conversion *en masse* won't happen until the end of the age, but some first fruits, some piecemeal conversions here and now, those are both possible and desirable. And so, throughout the

medieval period a lot of policy towards Jews was constructed so as to pressure them to convert, by imposing irksome legal restrictions on them, by propaganda, even by threats of expulsion. The result was a trickle of conversions, and sometimes, when the pressure became acute, as for example in Spain in the later fifteenth century, more than a trickle. That sight quickened Christian pulses. Not merely to see all these lost souls snatched from the fires of Hell, but to sniff the fulfilment of prophecy. If the Jews will convert at the end of the age, perhaps a wave of conversions is a sign that we are even now in the last days?

And then along come the Protestants, who bring a distinct perspective to these age-old issues. Protestants have, from the start, a complicated relationship with Judaism. On the one hand, they inherit all those old Christian assumptions and prejudices, and in some ways their core theology doubles down on them, since it includes a caricature of Judaism as a religion of works-righteousness. But Protestants also put the Bible at the centre of their religion, and most of the Bible is a Jewish book. It's not just that Protestant students learn Hebrew and immerse themselves in Jewish scholarship, though their regular adoption of the Tetragrammaton, the Hebrew name of God, as again here, is not nothing. There is also a rediscovery of some of Christianity's Jewish roots. It's a small thing, but Protestants start a new pattern of giving their children names drawn from the Old Testament – medieval Christians were almost never called names like David, Benjamin, or Daniel, Sarah, Rachel or Deborah. More substantially, Protestants rediscover Jewish opposition to the use of images, paintings or statues in worship, a practice which Catholic Europe of course embraced exuberantly, but which to many Protestants and to Jews alike – and to Muslims of course – looked like idolatry.

We can see that double-edged view of Judaism most famously in Martin Luther himself, who early in his career, in 1523, published this pamphlet, *That Jesus Christ was Born a Jew*. This book has a naivety which we're going to learn to recognise in other contexts. Luther argues that Jews certainly ought to embrace Christianity, but that the blame for their failure to do so lies with the Christians. All those strongarm tactics only serve to discredit Christianity. And worse, the specific errors of Catholicism, the veneration of saints and other practices which Protestants saw as superstitious: all of these things had, Luther feared, alienated good God-fearing Jews. So, he reckoned, if Christians renounced superstition and treated Jews with gentleness instead of force, there would be nothing left to stop them from converting in droves. It is not a coincidence that Luther, particularly at this point of his career, suspected that the end of the world was almost imminent. The time for a mass Jewish conversion was now.

The book was a hit: a dozen editions in several languages, including Spanish, and was received pretty warmly by Jewish readers. A German rabbi writing soon after the book was published called Luther 'this noble man', and wrote that

"Whereas before there were lands wherein any wayfaring Jew would be put to death ... now they invite him to their worship, joyously and with a pleasant countenance."

Still, notice that the point of all this joyful exaltation is to invite Jews to Christian worship. And it is true that a string of other early Protestants wrote conversionary treatises aimed at Jewish readers, debated with Jews and made a point of speaking of the Jews as God's chosen people. There was only one problem: Jews might have been pleased to be treated more gently, but there was no rush to convert. Jewish opposition to Christianity was more than a matter of a few statues. As Protestants actually engaged with real Jews, not the ones they had imagined, they made the same unwelcome discovery that generations of Christians before them had made: that Jews actually believed in Judaism, that they had heard all the Christian arguments ad nauseam, and that they were not about to change their minds. They had no particular interest in playing supporting roles in someone else's apocalypse.

Luther himself, notoriously, took this rejection very badly. By 1538 he seems to have come to the view that converting Jews was impossible for the time being: it would only come at the end of time. His eruption on the subject came in 1543, in this book, of which the best that can be said is that he does not explicitly and openly call for genocide. Converting Jews to Christianity was, he now believed, impossible, and he seems to have abandoned even the hope that Jews would convert at the end of the age. With that mirage gone, he could see no reason to tolerate them. The book was not nearly so popular as his first one, and some German territories banned it. But it had a long afterlife, and editions kept appearing at moments of heightened anti-Semitic panic in the following centuries. Naturally it was celebrated at Nuremberg rallies and fed into the Nazi cult of Luther as a national hero.

It is fair to say that on this as on much else Luther was something of an outlier. If initial naïve hopes of a flood of Jewish converts were disappointed, most later Protestant generations continued to believe that Jewish conversion was possible now and was inevitable in the end, and for that reason they generally kept to a

somewhat tolerant policy – in both senses of that double-edged sword. When individuals did convert, a considerable fuss was made of them. But the broad pattern Luther had set was repeated over and over again by individuals and by new Protestant movements. An initial naïve optimism that a particular preacher, or a particular sect, has finally found the secret, the key idea or reform that will unlock Jewish obstinacy and bring them over to the truth, perhaps bringing down the curtain on the age; only to lapse into muted or embittered disappointment. Oliver Cromwell, England's Puritan military dictator, who had at least a streak of apocalypticism to him, permitted Jewish settlement in England in 1656 in large part because he hoped this might trigger mass conversion and the end of days, which, as you may have noticed, it didn't. The early Quakers made a point of publishing books into Hebrew which praised the Jews as 'the seed of God, to whom the promise belongs'; the underwhelming results had them lapsing back all too quickly into familiar diatribes against the 'unbelieving Jews'.

The Christian encounter with Jews was singular, of course, but it did set two particular patterns for wider encounters with non-Christians. First, that pattern of naïve hope disappointed. At the risk of stating the obvious: Protestants believed that their own beliefs were correct. Indeed, the generally believed that their own beliefs were demonstrably, obviously, self-evidently correct. That is no surprise: we all generally tend to think that about our own core convictions. Again and again across the world, they approached people they encountered in the same way as Luther had approached the Jews in 1523. That is, that if they were clear in their explanations, gentle in their manner and appealing in their morals, the self-evident truth of their message would sweep all before it. That truth was so clear to them that they genuinely struggled to understand that it might not appear so to others. So when – inevitably – those hopes were disappointed, they swung quickly to the opposite extreme. They rapidly concluded that these people – whether we are talking about European Jews or any of the many non-Christian peoples whom Protestants were starting to meet across the world – that these people are stubborn, stiff-necked, resistant to the truth, perhaps even in league with the Devil. We tried gentle reasonableness; we gave them every opportunity to convert. So, they have had their chance. We won't cast pearls before swine again. In this way, the very idealism and gentleness with which Protestants first tried to approach conversion curdled into hostility, contempt and indifference.

That's one, bitter lesson the Jewish experience taught. But the other is more specific, and that is that missionary projects always take place within an apocalyptic frame, that is, within an understanding that God has a plan for the whole of history and that it is that plan which determines whether your efforts will succeed or fail. The Jews would, most Protestants were convinced, be converted at the end of the age, or just before it, but not now; or at least, only in ones and twos. A mass effort to convert the Jews would therefore be premature – unless you suspected that the end really was imminent, in which case it might suddenly become urgent, and that long history of missionary failure would be irrelevant because God is about to do something new. That sort of suspicion could have some real and unexpected consequences, as we'll see in the next lecture. But most of the time, Protestants tended to put Jewish conversion safely in the future, as a not-yet problem, and that had bigger consequences than you might think. Because their apocalyptic framework, their understanding of the shape of future history, wasn't only about the Jews. Along with the mass conversion of the Jews, the end of days was assumed to involve two other dramatic events; first, the overthrow of Antichrist, which was usually taken to mean the Pope but might in some cases also embrace the Turkish Sultan; and second, the conversion of, as St Paul put it, the fullness of the Gentiles, that is, all of the world's remaining non-Christian peoples. Most Protestant agreed that those three things were coming; there was not quite such general agreement about the sequence, but there was a reasonable consensus. For this we can turn to, as an example, the influential English commentator Thomas Draxe, writing in 1608.

“Q. When is likely to be the time of the lewes conuersion, before y^e sacking & burning of Rome or afterward? A. In all probability it is like to follow the burning and destruction of Rome.”

And he gives various logical and Biblical reasons why it must be so. And then:

“The conuersion of the nation of the lewes, shall be the worlds restauration, and shall wonderfully confirme the faith of the Gentiles.”

So, the overthrow of Catholicism and perhaps also of Islam comes first. Then the Jews will convert. And then and only then will the heathen peoples of the world embrace the truth. So, by this logic, if you are a Protestant who is burning with missionary zeal, who longs to spread the saving word to all the nations, your duty is clear: instead of trying to bring the new age to a premature birth, you should focus your zeal on what the English radical Roger Williams called 'God's great business between Christ and Antichrist', that is, the struggle with Rome. The route to all other victories lies down that path. The great lesson that Protestants learned from their failure to convert Europe's Jews was that they should turn their hearts away from such

projects altogether. Only the struggle against the Romish Antichrist matters. And *that* is a theme which, as we will see, echoed across the planet.

There's a similar though simpler story to be told about the second big category of non-Christians whom Protestants had on their doorstep, namely Muslims. In an era in which the Ottoman Empire ruled most of Hungary and all of Europe south and east of there, Islam was – as it always has been – a European religion. Christians recognised Islam as a distinct religion, neither Jewish, nor Christian, nor pagan, but their knowledge and understanding of it, at least until the eighteenth century, was generally very superficial. Most anti-Islamic tracts argued with caricatured versions of the faith; there was no real dialogue. In reality, plenty of conversions took place in both directions, but these were largely about social and political power; Christians who fell under Islamic rule were quite likely to convert, and vice versa. Protestants celebrated such converts when they got them: the most common source was prisoners of war, but sometimes merchants and others who had settled voluntarily in Christian Europe made the jump. These circumstances led to a persistent and sometimes well-founded suspicion that these conversions were merely of convenience. Indeed, in some cases Muslim consciences were put under unbearable pressure. At least, that seems the best way to read the case of the Turkish woman and baby, prisoners of war, who were taken to the German city of Wittstock in 1687, where she was prevailed on to allow her baby to be baptised. Soon after she drowned herself and the child in the city's river. The official accounts of such conversions go out of their way to emphasise that they were genuine, and that the converts understood Christian doctrine and embodied Christian virtues more than most of the native-born population. Plainly, such accounts had a credibility barrier to overcome: most readers found it inherently implausible that a Muslim might freely and sincerely convert.

Indeed, if there was one lesson which Protestants learned from their encounters with Muslims in Europe it was one which Catholics had accepted for centuries: that converting Muslims to Christianity is a lost cause. This did not mean that Protestants, any more than Catholics, stopped dreaming of overthrowing the Turkish Antichrist and of bringing formerly Christian lands back to the faith. But they generally parked that hope in the apocalyptic future, and when Protestants encountered Muslims around the world – which of course they did, as far afield as Indonesia – they began from the assumption that conversion was off the menu, not least because they knew that Muslim authorities generally responded aggressively to missionary efforts. Protestants tended to confine themselves to sly and pious hopes that Muslims might somehow perceive their reasonableness and their virtues.

Which leaves us with just one category of non-Christians in Europe, the people whom Christians classed as pagans. There were not many of these left, but there were a few, in the far reaches of Scandinavia, and as luck would have it, after the Reformation most of them fell under Protestant rule. The two Lutheran monarchies of the region, the Danish-Norwegian state and its Swedish-Finnish rival, were engaged in a race to the north during this period, the Swedish moving inland from the Baltic coast and the Norwegians from the Atlantic side; control over the Sami people, many of whom migrated seasonally across the emerging frontier, was a crucial part of this race. Both states began expanding their networks of churches in large part as a way of establishing this control. The Swedes took the lead in the late sixteenth century, an effort led by an enterprising Sami-speaking parish priest at Piteå named Anders Nilsson, who was also a Swedish border commissioner and a savvy merchant: his ministry, in other words, was self-funding, and as a trusted trader with the Sami he did more than anyone else to ensure smooth relations. The Danish-Norwegian state was slower off the mark, but during the seventeenth century successive bishops of Trondheim began attending to their pastoral provision. The energetic Peder Krog, bishop from 1688-1731, oversaw the building of forty-eight new churches in his vast diocese, and undertook four extensive visitations: in 1708 travelling as far as Vadsø on Norway's Arctic coast, over a thousand kilometres from Trondheim even as the crow flies.

The consistent theme of these efforts was ritual and liturgical conformity, including the suppression of indigenous Sámi religion. Krog insisted on the importance of teaching the Norwegian language. A particular focus of both governments' efforts became finding and destroying the drums used by Sámi shamans, and in sealing up the sacred holes in Sámi tents where the drums were kept. In their own terms, these campaigns were successful. A high-profile witchcraft case of 1692, in which an elderly man was arrested in Varanger for the use of a shaman's drum, arose because he was reported by other Sámi: he was apparently an incomer from the east, and his pagan ways shocked the Christianised people of coastal Norway. But the veneer of conformity did not run very deep. A scathing early-eighteenth-century account of what it called 'the delusions and superstitions of the Lapps' described a people who were by now all baptised, and who attended worship whenever itinerant clergy passed through, but whose lived religion was a mixture of Catholicism and shamanism. That author obviously found this deplorable, and during the eighteenth century there was a real change of tempo, with attempts being made to build networks of Sami-language schools and to stop

practices like the use of churches to sell state-licensed alcohol. But as viewed from Stockholm or Copenhagen, this kind of Christianisation was perfectly satisfactory. The lesson was that, as long as church structures and firm governance were put in place and held there for long enough, a pagan population could be brought into a passable semblance of Christian civility at low risk and low cost.

And if it was only in Scandinavia that you would find actual pagans, other Protestant states had barbarians within their borders. The Welsh, the Scottish highlanders, the Gaelic-speaking Irish: all of these people had been Christians for a thousand years or more, but the elites in London and Edinburgh and Dublin saw them as being as savage as any Native American. British Protestants learned most of what they thought they knew about how to convert heathens and barbarians from their experience with the Celtic peoples. Wales pointed the way. In the wake of the so-called Acts of Union of 1536 and 1543, which merged Wales into the English state, William Barlow, an enthusiastically Protestant and firmly English clergyman parachuted in to be bishop of St Davids, set himself to remedy what he called the ‘barberouse ignorance’ and ‘inueterate accustomed supersticion’ of his flock. His proposed solution was education. Once his new schools were up and running, he hoped, ‘the welsh rudeness wolde sone be framed to english cyvilitie’ and that ‘the welsh rudenes decreasyng, Christian cyvilitie maye be introduced’. *English* and *Christian* were, plainly, synonyms.

It did not quite work out that way. The Welsh language stubbornly refused to die out and was treated as evidence of the population’s barbarity for centuries. But from London, Wales still looked like a success of sorts. Its population conformed to the Protestant settlement, obediently if unenthusiastically. Its gentry were fully brought into the governing class. Apparently if civility, Englishness and Protestantism were forcibly imposed on a barbaric people, then, over time, the plaster would set, and the job would be done.

As Scotland showed, there was a tantalising alternative. When the Protestant Reformation came to Scotland in 1559-60, the Highlanders were participants in the drama, not bystanders or victims. Archibald Campbell, who as both earl of Argyll and also the head of clan Campbell was woven into both lowland and highland power structures, was at the heart of the Protestant cause from the beginning and brought large parts of the Highlands into the new religious world with him. The Reformation in the Highlands was a home-grown affair, not a missionary project, and that gave it an energy and cultural suppleness which would not appear in Welsh Protestantism for two hundred years.

Given those two models, it is no surprise that Protestant states chose the low-risk, low-reward option offered by the Welsh/Sámi example. This option was tested to destruction and beyond in Ireland. It’s often been pointed out that Ireland is an exceptional case in Reformation-era Europe, the only really substantial territory whose people did not conform to the religion of their rulers, and there has been a lively historical debate as to why this is, why the Irish did not convert to Protestantism. I don’t want to shortcut that debate, but a large part of the answer must be: they didn’t convert because the Protestants made very little effort to convert them. There were occasional and tantalising exceptions, such as William Bedell, an Englishman made an Irish bishop in the late 1620s who took it on himself to learn Irish, to sponsor preaching in Irish and to stand up against the predatory financial exploitation practiced by many of his own clergy: he apparently won respect from the Gaelic Irish population and not a few converts. But he also met a wall of opposition from the Anglo-Irish Protestant establishment, who regarded his attempts to legitimate the Irish language as bordering on treason, and who mocked his accommodation to the Gaelic Irish as degeneracy. The project died with him. One of his legacies was an unfinished translation of the Bible into Irish, which was picked up decades later by another idealist, the Irish Protestant scientist and missionary enthusiast Robert Boyle: it was Boyle’s advocacy and, not least, over £700 of his own money that got the Irish Bible published at last in the 1680s. But he and his allies also met ferocious opposition and indeed threats: one warned him that if he succeeded in making the Gaelic Irish Protestants, the Anglo-Irish would abandon the faith themselves. One of Boyle’s allies told him

“Our own apparent but very false brethren ... are not ashamed to profess a dislike of our endeavours to convert the natives of this country, upon maxims like those of the American planters, in hindering the conversion of their slaves to Christian religion.”

It’s an important comparison and a hint of what lies ahead of us in this story. But for now, it shows that the Irish story had reached a point where civilisation seemed impossible and, therefore, conversion undesirable.

In which case, what was the alternative? The wild Irish, as they were called, were seen as heathen, a spiritual wilderness, waste and desolate. How was Ireland to be turned into a flourishing garden, if its native strains turned out to be thorns and thistles, impossible to cultivate? The principal policy which English governments turned to was called, revealingly enough, ‘plantation’. If working with the native strains of Christianity was too difficult or too dangerous, better to replace them with imported cultivars which were known to be safe and

fruitful. The result, as one Irish observer put it with bitter humour in the 1690s, was that ‘our *zealous Reformers* went into *Ireland* to propagate their *Gospel*, where they took more pains to make the *Land* turn *Protestant* than the *People*. ... Their great *zeal* for Converting those *Popish Acres* made them stick at nothing that might forward so *Holy a Design*.’ Ulster, Ireland’s northern quadrant which had in the sixteenth century been the heartland of Gaeldom and of Catholic resistance, was recoloured as a Protestant province without having to convert a single recalcitrant Catholic. The process was, undeniably, not pretty. But it was possible to tell yourself it worked.

So as Protestants began to spread across the world and to encounter more and more varied non-Christian peoples from the later sixteenth century onwards, these were the lessons they took with them. Yes, it was both spiritually and politically desirable for the heathen to embrace the Gospel. But Protestants’ European experience also told them to lower their expectations. Jews and Muslims were most unlikely to convert at all, so there was little point in treating them gently in the hope of enticing them to the true faith: it had been tried before. As to pagans, that capacious category which Europeans applied by default to almost every alien religion or culture they met: hopes for them were to be distinctly muted too. If they were to be Christianised, the Welsh/Sami model of top-down enforcement of conformity was the most obvious and least risky model, and over generations it might be expected to work – but naturally that depended on firm political control being established first. And if it all seemed to be proceeding painfully slowly, if the sudden hopes of a harvest of the heathen that periodically flared up were routinely disappointed, well, what else did you expect? Perhaps a few souls could be snatched from the flames, but it was not yet time for anything more. The popish Antichrist had to be overthrown, the long-sundered Jews had to come home. Until then, it might not make sense even to treat these people as heathen, that is, as wild and uncultivated people, deserving of pity, waiting to receive the plough and ready to be watered and sown with good seed. Instead, for now at least, they might be savages, reprobates, a crooked generation, a desert of thorns fit only for burning, so that true Christians might spring up in their place.

So when, in the next three lectures, we follow the stories of Protestants across the world actually negotiating these cross-cultural encounters, remember the baggage they were carrying, the weight of the assumptions they were struggling against. Because as we’ll see, the remarkable truth is that their hopes and ideals were not crushed, that many of them continued to work at these apparently fruitless tasks, and that slowly, amid their many failures and cruelties, some of them began to learn that there were other ways.

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