Francis Hutcheson, the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and Terrorism

By James Dingley

Few non-philosophers will have heard of Hutcheson (1694-1746), a Presbyterian minister from Drumalig, Co Down, Ulster, and one of the foremost philosophers of his day. He was a major influence on Hume, Kant, and Adam Smith (an economic student of his at Glasgow University, where Hutcheson held the chair of Moral Philosophy).[1] He was an important 18th century Scottish Enlightenment thinker, preceding Jeremy Bentham in formulating an utilitarian system of thought and part of a pan-British Isles network of learning that helped usher in modern democracy and industrialisation.[2] Hutcheson was widely read on the Continent and the American colonies, where his theory of the right to rebel against unjust government encouraged political violence.[3]

Consequently his ideas helped inform the 18th and 19th century revolutions and the rapid industrialisation of Europe and America. His ideas are in themselves important in understanding political violence, as *ancien regimes* resisted - and both sides utilised - philosophical ideas to legitimate their violence: to overthrow tyranny in France and America or maintain legitimate order.[4] The age of Hutcheson was an age when religion, philosophy and politics were not seen as separate, but intimately connected issues. This concept of interconnectivity still exists in the non-western world from whence most modern terrorism derives.

In 18th century Ulster, Hutcheson helped evolve a specifically Presbyterian mentality that opposed the Irish Anglican (Episcopalian) Ascendancy, where Catholics and Presbyterians were excluded from political, legal and property rights – the Penal Laws.[5] After the abolition of the Penal Laws later in the 18th century, the ideas associated with these rights continued and became the basis for a distinct Ulster Protestant (Unionist) culture that united Anglicans and Presbyterians (the largest Protestant denomination in Ulster) into an Unionist opposition to a wholly Catholic (the largest denomination in Ireland as a whole) Irish nationalism.[6] The roots of the partition of Ireland and the present 'troubles' and acts of terrorism can, at least in part, be laid at Hutcheson's door.

The Enlightenment was the application of science in politics, economics and industrialisation, social order and the creation of a rational verses mystical world.[7] This period emphasised the rights of the individual to freely assert themselves and their own interests (developed by Adam Smith), thus freeing individuals from *ancien* religious restrictions and orders (e.g. Anglican Ascendancy). It also posited the individual as the major moral imperative (utilitarianism, individual rights and the greatest happiness to the greatest number of individuals). The Enlightenment utilised the scientific method of reducing society down to its individual members and recreating it (revolutions) according to individual interests, thus freeing the individual from the communal and so undermining it. Hence, we have Hutcheson's and Smith's economics of self-interest and the idea that the final socio-political order is not pre-ordained, but man-made to enable individual freedom, pursuit of happiness, and economic maximisation. In this regard,

their idea was merely an extension of Protestant theology on individual salvation and both science and industry were strongly associated with Protestantism.[8] For Presbyterians like Hutcheson, this was vital since they struggled against the politico-legal disabilities of an 'established' Anglican Church and aristocracy based on mystical *ancien* rights.

Ulster was not simply a Presbyterian dominated region, but also the only centre of industry and science in Ireland.[9] This area embodied all the ideas and principles of Hutcheson and Smith, similar to the rest of Britain, where science and industry were also strongly associated with dissenting Protestants. Ulster was Ireland's radical core, the centre of the United Irish revolt against Ascendancy rule in 1798 and the only region of Ireland to regularly return Liberal Members of Parliament in the 19th century.[10]

Hutcheson's ideas and thought can be seen in action wherever Ulster Protestants dominated. His ideas helped develop a distinct philosophy that informed the minds of important sectors of Ulster Protestantism, emphasizing a rugged individualism, a rejection of higher authority, and independence of mind and actions. Ulster Protestants rationally and scientifically critiqued established socio-economic and political orders to champion the rights of individuals, even the right to rebel against injustice (defined in their individual utilitarian way).

Meanwhile, the existing order justified itself via scholastic philosophy, while mounting fierce counter-attacks in defence of traditional religio-political order. The most significant establishment to feel threatened was the Catholic Church, which responded in two primary ways. Firstly, it responded through ultramontanism(i.e. the strict enforcement of Papal discipline from Rome).[11] Second, the Church responded through a renewed vigour in applying scholastic philosophy (Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of Aristotle) as the core of Catholic teaching. This change of core teaching was in fact an inversion of everything the Enlightenment and Hutcheson argued for.

Scholasticism emphasised an ordained, natural order, which was revealed by God (via the Pope) as the sole truth and being. It also legitimated ideas of monarchical and aristocratic divine right, and therefore an unquestioning deference to established authority and order (even Anglicanism accepted scholasticism up to the 18th century). This order was essentially rural and medieval in character ('natural order') and opposed the ideas of individualism, industry, free enquiry and science.[12] Moral authority and legitimacy for scholasticism lay in the defined order, an existing social system, which became the basis for a peasant-proprietor Catholic economy and society in Ireland and the almost polar opposite of Protestant Ulster.[13] Thus Catholic Ireland was also opposed to science and industry, which were considered British incursions on a 'true' Ireland. Indeed, much of the Catholic population's violence was directed against such seemingly disruptive inroads.[14] This opposition also dovetailed neatly in to Romanticism, with its emphasis on emotion and violence, which opposed the Enlightenment and also heavily influenced Irish nationalism.[15]

Thus, we have created opposing moral rights, truths and imperatives (individual versus communal). These are barriers in the mind that deny the legitimacy of the other and fear of the other as untrue. We Created the assertion of opposing orders and forms of livelihood (industry against peasant economy), which in turn legitimate revolt or violent defence because one is oppressive of the other. In the case of a scholastic world view and Romanticism, the individual was secondary to a pre-conceived social whole, thus individual life and interest is sacrificial to it, whilst the opposite holds true for an Enlightened Presbyterian. Hence, Catholic republicans can legitimate their violence and defiance of democratic government and see their terrorism as sanctioned (by God).

Hutcheson's influence is essential to arriving at an understanding of Irish republicanism and terrorism. Legitimated and impelled from a religio-philosophical perspective, violence (terrorism) can even become an imperative on behalf of the 'truth' (God). Meanwhile, one also can gain a religio-philosophical understanding of Protestant opposition to violence (individual conscience and the rejection of any higher authority to the individual). Both philosophical perspectives in their own way provide a basis for denying democratic majorities as a source of legitimacy.

Outside of Ireland a similar mental conflict is represented in militant Islamic fundamentalism. It can be argued that Islamic philosophy shares some of the same Aristotelian roots as scholasticism.[16] Meanwhile, the Islamic concept of the Ummah (community of the faithful) implies the same kind of divinely ordained socio-political order (rural, peasant societies) and communal conformity that Catholicism and Romanticism represented in Ireland.[17] The Muslim world has been viewed by some as being invaded and disrupted by precisely these 'exogenous' influences which challenge existing 'natural' orders. Ironically, using Hutcheson's philosophical concept of invasive ideas, the Muslim world can now been seen being invaded from the two countries most associated with Hutcheson's thought, the United States and United Kingdom, which is stoking the fires of terrorism.

In both Catholic Ireland and the Muslim world, there is a fundamentalist element that has been violently abused by modern Enlightenment thought. This resulting consequence of the acceptance of this set of thoughts has been a rise in the utilization of terrorism. Both parties identify in their communal systems a divinely ordered way of life. When this way of life is disrupted and threatened by Enlightened ideas and behaviour, the response can be violent.

Additonally, by emphasising the communal order over the individual, life is devalued, making it easier to take and give up. Indeed, laying down individual life for the communal whole (suicide bomber) may even become a moral imperative (martyrs). It is precisely the challenge to this way of thinking that Hutcheson helped initiate. To an extent, one may argue that terrorism (especially in Northern Ireland) is partly a revolt against the ideas that Hutcheson helped usher in.

Terrorism, as in Northern Ireland, utilises certain socio-religious and philosophical ideas in defence of a way of life that is deeply settled and has an air of timeless naturalness

about it in terms of community and culture. New ideas, or the material realisation of new ideas, then pose serious threats to the settled system whose resistance to the novel is manifested in terrorism (the violence of God) to ward off ungodly invasions. Meanwhile, Hutcheson helped create a philosophy that religiously legitimated revolt against such an order.

NOTES:

[1] Francis Hutcheson, (ed. Downie) *Philosophical Writings,* London: Everymen, 1994, Introduction.
[2] Note 1.
[3] Note 1.
[4] Robert Nisbet, *The Sociological Tradition,* New York: Transaction, 1996.
[5] D George Boyce, *Nationalism in Ireland,* London: Routledge, 1995.
[6] Note 5.
[7] Arthur Herman, *The Scottish Enlightenment,* London: Fourth Estate, 2003.
[8] Roy Porter, *Enlightenment,* London: Penguin, 2000.
[9] Liam Kennedy & Philip Ollerenshaw (eds) *An Economic History of Ulster,* Manchester: MUP, 1985.
[10] Note 5. Frank Thompson, *The End of Liberal Ulster,* Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2001.
[11] http://mb-soft.co./believe/txc/ultramon.htm
[12] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy,* London: Routledge, 1996.
[13] Joseph Lee, *The Modernisation of Irish Society,* Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1989.
[14] Peter Bowler & Nicholas Whyte, *Science and Society in Ireland,* Belfast: IIB, 1997.
[15] Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism,* London: Pimlico, 2000.
[16] Anthony Kenny, *Medieval Philosophy,* Oxford: OUP, 2007.
[17] Karen Armstrong, *Islam, A Short History,* London: Phoenix, 2001.
[18] *The Economist,* 6/7/07, p.25-7.