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The Rise & Fall of Christian Ireland (with Crawford Gribben and Matthew Brennan)

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Crawford Gribben (Queen's University Belfast) and Matthew Brennan (Clonmel Baptist Church) join me for a discussion of Crawford's recently released history, 'The Rise & Fall of Christian Ireland' (<https://amzn.to/3AJR5bt>).

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Transcript

Hello and welcome. I'm joined today by a very old friend and my pastor throughout most of my childhood, Matthew Brennan of Plummell Baptist Church, and also Crawford Gribben, who is back to discuss a new book. You've written two books within the period of two years, within one year, you've had two books released.

So this is The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland. I was raised in the Republic of Ireland in a beautiful town called Plummell. And Matthew was my pastor.

So he's known me probably longer than anyone else in my life outside of family, could probably tell all sorts of stories. But we have so many other things to talk about today. So I'm sure we don't have time for that, Matthew.

But it's wonderful to have you both on for this discussion. And within this discussion,

we're dealing with some issues that are clearly very fraught historical questions that touch deep nerves of identity for many people. And certainly, my own country and my own denomination does not come out of this picture very well.

And I think for that reason, it's an important story to look into. The book is absolutely superb. And if you look on the back, it has a very flattering blurb by Enda Kenny, who was the Taoiseach from 2011 to 2017 in Ireland.

And I cannot recommend the book highly enough for anyone who wants to orient themselves to Irish history more generally, but also to the specific story of Irish Christianity, which is so completely entangled with it. Crawford, if you could begin, I would be interested to see your thoughts on some of the key events or the landmarks of Irish Christian history. Just giving us the big bird's eye perspective on Irish history, what are some of the standout events that will help to orient people? Thanks, Alistair.

And thanks for the invitation to come and talk about the book with yourself and with Matthew. The book covers many thousands of years and about 200 pages or just over. The history of Christianity takes up the last one and a half thousand of those years.

And as the book's title suggests, I am sort of framing it as a life cycle story, so that Christianity is born in Ireland, it develops, it matures, it declines and it dies. So that's the sort of sweep of the story as a whole. Within that, there are, I think, a number of really important moments, obviously, at the beginnings of Christian mission in the early 5th century.

We don't know a whole lot about it. We have in the centuries that follow the gradual expansion of Christian influence through the island. The Irish church takes on some very idiosyncratic positions in relation, for example, to liturgical issues such as the dating of Easter and so on.

Before a couple of centuries have gone past, the Irish church is a bit of an outlier, not just geographically, but also liturgically and perhaps even theologically within the European church. At the same time, the monastic federations, these loose confederations of monastic institutions are really beginning to expand across and beyond the known world. So just as the missionary enterprise to Ireland in the early 5th century was the first time that missionaries had worked outside of the boundaries of the Roman Empire, so they move on from there, they take that opportunity to push even further north, even further west, and Irish monks are establishing institutions up and down the Hebrides in Scotland, but also in Shetland, Faroe, and even in Iceland, so that by the time the first Vikings arrive in Iceland, they discover that Irish monks have beaten them to it by several hundred years.

Then you've got the Irish participation in the conversion of the Picts in Scotland, in the conversion of the Northumbrians in the northeast of England, in the conversion of the

Anglo-Saxons, and then pushing into Europe as well. So that's a quite extraordinary passage in this story. And then by the time you come to the 11th, 12th century, obviously the Norman invasion takes place, and that's justified, in fact warranted, by a papal bull, or a papal decree which may or may not have been forged, which asks Henry II, who was king of a vast empire, which included England, to intervene in Ireland with a view to reforming the Irish church to make it Catholic.

But that doesn't succeed, and in a way the church divides between the parts of it that are dominated by English influence, and the parts of it that are still deeply, deeply Gaelic in culture and language, and so forth. And in the Gaelic parts of the church, clerical marriage continues, and priests continue to have wives and families, right the way up to the 16th century, when there's a second attempt at reformation, but this time a Protestant attempt at reformation by another Henry, Henry VIII, but that reformation also fails. And you could argue, if you wanted to, that it's really only during the Protestant reformation that the Irish church becomes Catholic, because that's when it's really brought into the European structures of the foundational way.

So then, you know, by the early 17th century, you've got two parallel communities, a tiny minority of Protestants, most of whom, in fact almost the overwhelming majority of whom, are either settlers, migrants, or the children of migrants into the island, and the vast majority of the population, 85, perhaps even higher percent in the 17th century, who remain committed to the position through the 18th century, which is a century of tremendous difficulty. Obviously, there's violence at the start of the 18th century, and a field rising. The history of English intervention in Ireland is, of course, you know, notoriously violent, and through much of the 18th century, it's given a distinctive religious overlay as well.

Penal laws are brought in, which support the economic benefits that are given to members of the established church, but which preclude participation in professions or university education or other kinds of occupations from the vast majority of the population. All the Catholics, of course, but also all the Protestant dissenters, Presbyterians, Baptists, and so on. And those penal laws affect the different religious communities in different ways.

So, while Catholic marriage is always legally recognised in Ireland, Presbyterian marriages are not. And in fact, it's only an Act of Parliament in 1844 that regularises the legal status of Presbyterian marriages. So, 18th century into the 19th century, we've got really two different revival movements going on, more or less simultaneously, from the 19th century onwards.

An evangelical revival, which brings these competing groups of Protestants together and gives them a common sense of religious identity, which at the end of the century, during the Home Rule crisis, becomes a common political identity under the rubric of unionism.

And at the same time, among Catholics, you've got a devotional revolution, which is really encouraging for the first time weekly mass attendance. It's regularising what parish community, what parish life is meant to look like.

And that's really consolidating a Catholic population, which is also forming its own political character under the rubric of nationalism. So, at the end of the 19th century, you've got now a united, for the first time really, a united Protestant community, united by politics, and a united Catholic community, which also has a shared political goal. And if Protestants are identifying with the British state, Catholics are identifying with the Irish nation.

And that's what sets up the very real, visceral political problems of the early 20th century. Early 20th century, the third Home Rule Bill leads to the raising of private militia on both the part of loyalists, those who want to remain attached to the United Kingdom, and nationalists, those who want to pursue a different future, an independent future for Ireland. The prospect of civil wars initially staved off by the breakout of World War One, in which both members of both the loyalist and nationalist militias, the volunteer forces, serve with distinction and honour.

And at the same time, back in Dublin 1916, there's a rising of a small group of very committed Republicans, nationalists, a rising that's condemned by the Catholic Church, but a rising that promotes a kind of ideology of the necessity of blood sacrifice for Ireland's redemption and new birth. It's very striking, Matthew might want to comment on this, it's very striking that so much of the language used around 1916, and in the foundation of the state once partition happens in 1922, is deeply religious language, language of atonement, of sacrifice, blood sacrifice in particular, and new birth. And then from 1922 onwards, after partition, the island is divided, the six counties in the north constitute Northern Ireland, it's governed consistently by Protestant politicians, even though about a third of the population is Catholic, they really struggle to make effective political representation.

In the south, there's a tiny proportion of Protestants to begin with, in an overwhelmingly Catholic culture, and the architects of that new state in the 1937 constitution set out to turn the free state, which becomes later on the Republic, now officially known, of course, simply as Ireland, as Michael D Higgins has reminded us recently, they really set out to turn it into a model Christian state using very up-to-date Catholic social theory, and thinking about what's the nature of democracy in a truly Catholic state? Well, it's not going to be one for one voting, it's going to be some kind of Chestertonian style guild representation in this model society, and you know, some of this takes effect, other parts of it don't take effect. In 1937, the constitution recognizes the special status of the Catholic Church, that status is continued until a referendum. I forget when, in the 1970s, Matthew, 1970s or 80s, the status of the Catholic Church is normalized, and so you've got these twin parallel projects of religious nationalism, the south gradually,

economically it moves up and down quite a lot, but as time goes on, the influence of the church begins slightly to wane, but in the 1990s, it's almost as if a dam burst and there's just revelation after another of incidents of clerical abuse, and you know, which seem only ever to grow in the horror that they represent, and so you know, we come to the present day, and Ireland, south of the border, 26 counties, is one of the most secular progressive nations in Europe, and is very proud of that fact.

In Northern Ireland, the same direction of travel is evident, but it's happening in a in a different kind of culture, where religion is much more balanced in terms of, or mixed in the sense of being mixed, and also where religion is seen to be something that has provoked a 30-year civil war known as the Troubles, in which around three and a half thousand people were killed variously by terrorist organizations, or by representatives of the British crown, so you know, while north and south are different kinds of stories, they're ending up now more or less in the same place, the south I think a little bit further ahead, but both jurisdictions heading broadly the same direction, there are prominent voices in both sides of the border that speak on behalf of what we might call a Christian culture, but there's no doubt I think that that culture has been eroded, and is eroding at a very significant rate, and and so at the end of the book I think we come to the end of Christian Ireland. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts Matthew, on just the experience of being a Baptist minister for from the early 1980s onwards, and seeing the fall in many ways of Christian Ireland, what you would describe as some of the key changes, the events, the more gradual shifts and changes that you've seen over the course of your ministry, and how the position of the church and Christianity more generally has changed over the course of that time. Thank you Alastair, thank you very much for including me in the discussion on Dr. Gribben's book.

Dr. Gribben has just outlined the book in 10 minutes, but it's a suede of extraordinary history in a condensed format. It's one of the most dense books, densest books I have read in a long time, and that's no insult to the writer, it's just that the detail is so full, and he covers ground at a colossally fast pace, but it's you almost want to pause at every few paragraphs because he says something so complex and prescient. To come to your question Alastair, I'd like to think that there was a time when you could see the turn in the decline of the Catholic faith.

I'd like to say that there was a specific event, I mean from the 60s, 70s and 80s and onwards, and nothing was sort of on the horizon we'll say by the late 60s or early 70s, mid 70s even, there was no gray clouds in the distance. I think our nearest neighbor, the advent of television, media, travel, people going away, people picking up ideas, contraception been available in other states, devotional marriage been available in other states, people living different kind of lives in other states, we're getting the BBC on our televisions, all of those things I think had an impact. And then I think there was the decline of civil war politics.

The old guard of the civil war era would have been Catholic in the main, so they would have, I suppose, I wouldn't say, I wouldn't have, it wouldn't have non-interfered with their politics because the church was still very, very powerful up until we say the mid 70s and around that period. So you can't put your finger on a particular thing and say this was the turn, but as people are traveling, as people are getting more influence from outside the country and it's no longer sort of sealed off, because I mean the fascinating thing was Devalera said when he became president, it was an Irish country for a Catholic people. And I think in saying that, you could almost say in saying that the death knell for the community to mix and grow and expand together was gone.

Within a very short period, I think 33% of the of the Protestant population left the South. That was a significant figure Alistair, because then the diluting of a very condensed and intense Catholic faith was going to, it wasn't going to happen now. So the state itself, I suppose the state itself, sowed the seeds of its own destruction by knocking out those who could have had a say in the republic and in the long-term good of the country.

I think that was a factor. And then I think when the media and the BBC and the influence of other countries began to impact Ireland and television programs of an entertaining nature with singers and personalities were on the increase. And into that came priests like Michael Cleary and other men like him.

They came on the scene and at first people thought this was the odd that we have a priest doing singing at a concert. And then after a while, it was around for a while and then they began to see it well. Even those who approved of the singing at one level, I think they were saying that this was a denial of what they ought to be at another level.

So there was a sort of a duplicitous mentality at that time. That popularity of the clergy becoming more and more dominant on our media and having a voice was there for a while, Alastair. But then there was this, one of the leading members of that was there was a scandal of family that he was maintaining as a clergyman.

That came as a shock to some people. And then the bishop, a bishop was discovered to be in a similar position. That had a huge impact.

Now, whether those things were the straw in the wind to tell you where the country was going to go, because in the past that would never have come to light. The media was on the side of the Catholic and politics wouldn't have brought it to light either. But with the opening of the doors from other influences, the power at this level was beginning to wane.

And it almost opened the door for people to see another aspect of the church that they hadn't looked at before or the popular community could see. And then there was the unfolding of scandal after scandal after scandal that had a huge impact in among the very conservative Catholics who had supported the church through thick and thin. And

who were totally disillusioned that what they'd prayed for and paid for and paid to and loved and revered had let them down.

And it's almost after that that the whirlwind sucked up everything else in its vortex. And we're still in the vortex. And I don't know where the vortex is going to take us, Alastair.

Those were sort of, I think those were sort of the sort of indications that we were going to have difficult times with a very Catholic state and then the influence from without and then society at large changing from within. All of those things, I think it was socially driven rather than theologically driven, Alastair. I remember just growing up, we went to a Irish Christian boys school and many of the students just in the years above me were called John Paul after the 1979 visit of the Pope.

It was very clearly something that meant an awful lot to people. There was a huge attendance when he visited and it seemed to bring an energy to Catholicism in the country and the proud, the pride of Irish Catholicism. It was actually such a big influence, not just in Ireland, that's a very Catholic nation, but worldwide, the influence of the Catholic diaspora from Ireland.

That was still very much something that people felt, but very swiftly you could see things changing over the final years I was there and the ways in which a certain, I mean, there's always been a deep nominalism within that sort of Catholicism, but that nominalism became a lot more cynical and dismissive of the church and the sort of suspicion with which the church was viewed was very different from when I, my first memories of the approaches towards the church. You mentioned the Irish constitution and even in the preamble to that, there's a very strong statement of the Christian identity of the nation. In the name of the most holy trinity, from whom is all authority and to whom as our final end, all actions, both of men and states must be referred.

We, the people of error, humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our divine Lord Jesus Christ, who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial, gratefully remembering their heroic and unremitting struggle to regain the rightful independence of our nation, et cetera. There is a deep marriage between Irish identity and the Christian faith. And I think you can go back to the very dawn of Irish Christian story.

We can think about the influence of St. Patrick, the probably the best known saint worldwide, and have celebrations of St. Patrick all over the world, wherever there is an Irish diaspora community. And yet that marriage between Christianity and Irish identity has always had fraught dimensions to it. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts on the particular events that gave rise to that sort of marriage of Irish identity and Christianity, and then later Catholicism.

It seems to me that you mentioned the rise of Christianity in Ireland, but the way you describe it, it's not just a rise of Christianity within Ireland. There's something of a

resurrection of the church within the context of Ireland. And it seems like the end of the world.

It's a period of time when everything seems to be collapsing. And yet it's within the context of Ireland that many of the seeds of what will come next emerge. And so Ireland at its very outset is an image, in a sense, of the death and resurrection of the church.

And maybe there's a seed of hope within that for this period of what seems to be renewed ferment. I think that's an interesting point, Alistair. If you look at the situation in the years after the sack of Rome 410, which is the couple of decades just immediately before the Christian mission in Ireland begins, it's in respects remarkably like the present day, where you have major civilizations seeming to move into some kind of existential moment of self-doubt.

In the case of the early 5th century, that's compounded by the beginnings of civil war in Rome, in the empire, the contraction of military power and so forth. So when those first Christians arrive in Ireland, whenever it is, and when Gladius arrives in the year 431 as their first bishop, and then when Patrick follows him some years later, we're not exactly sure when, they really truly believe living at the end of the world. The church has never experienced a crisis like this.

For 100 years, the church has come to depend upon the structures of the Roman empire. Since 380, Christianity has been the empire's official religion, or one of them. And now, less than one generation after 380, all the benefits that Roman civilization seems to be giving to the church are being stripped away from it, because the empire is in crisis.

It's crumbling. And when Patrick jumps in the boat and heads back to Ireland, a country that he had just escaped from a number of years previously, he is, he believes, heading to the very edge of the world at the very end of the world. And he understands that as a fulfillment of the Olivet discourse, the gospel being preached to all nations, and then the end will come.

And that's very much how he sees it. But the remarkable thing is that far from that heralding the end of the world actually signals the beginning of something new. And the Christian church, as it begins to institutionalize, and as it begins to forge relationships with various political actors on the island, actually serves to consolidate an identity on the island.

In the early 5th century, there's approximately 150 separate kingdoms in Ireland. And over the next couple of centuries, political power begins to coalesce, but it coalesces as church power coalesces as well, and often in the same places, so that there's a coming together of temporal and ecclesiastical power structures. One of the things I think about in the book is the way in which the shape of the church is often determined by the culture in which the church is being expressed or founded or lived out.

And I think you can see that in that period as well. So, you know, Matthew was just chatting just before we started there, telling me about someone who had mentioned that the book is more of a history of Ireland than a history of Christian Ireland. But in a way, that's the point, because the Christian religion becomes so intertwined with virtually every significant moment of historical momentum or movement or change, that in a sense it becomes invisible, and yet it's always there.

And it comes really to create an atmosphere. And the thing about atmosphere is it's kind of invisible. It's something you breathe, you rely upon it, but you can't see it.

If you can't see it as poison gas, you can't see an atmosphere. But it's everywhere, and it really determines what anyone can do. And so, you know, we come then to the preamble to the 1937 constitution that you read out there, Alistair, and it's, you know, from a theological point of view, I will go on record and say I think it's one of the most carefully calibrated expressions of biblical truth regarding political power.

And it's certainly a million times better than anything beginning with the people, which locates power in a very different source. But, you know, there's the men and women who wrote that constitution understood what they were doing. They thought very deeply about what scripture and Christian traditions say about politics, and therefore about how Christian states ought to respond to that.

However, it's also a deeply exclusionary document, because it presupposes that the very small Jewish population that lived on the island at the time had no place or part in the Irish Catholic nation. And, you know, you can move from that moment of exclusion to think of other moments of exclusion. So it looks like it's commodious, and it looks like it's capacious, but it's also very artfully designed to be distinctively Catholic.

And so, you know, it's clearly drawing on Catholic social theory by Protestant denominations in the same period, even though they've been invited to comment upon it. It's clearly a document shaped by Catholic social theory. And, you know, that in some senses, one Catholic commentator recently suggested it was a moment of overreach, where the church was trying to do more than simply guard and nourish the spiritual lives of the faithful.

It was attempting to shape a nation at large. Can a nation be born in a day, the prophet asks? Well, you know, I think that's a haunting question when you look at the 1937 constitution. One of the questions that maybe need to get into is that marriage between Irish identity and the Christian faith.

To what extent did the Christian faith get compromised in the process? To what extent was Ireland really Christianized in terms of folk religion and various practices that were taken over from the past tradition? And I think of the shaping of a nation, something I've often thought about in the context of the UK, the way in which the sense of place is

defined by churches and minster communities and sites of pilgrimage. And it's even more so in the case of Ireland, in many respects. The whole sense of place, the sense of national story, the merging of the old pagan myths and the early Christian missionary work is an interesting example of that.

The way in which old places of pagan worship become sites of new Christian pilgrimage. And it seems to me that marriage of a deep cultural identity and story and the myths and the paganism that can come with that was something that never really disappeared in Ireland. You can still very much see that within the sort of Catholicism which I grew up with very much.

You'd know the people who were very devout Catholics would also tell you about the fairies in the area and things like that. There was a sense of the law of the land and the mythology that goes with that. And then that was married in an easy way with the Christian faith.

Lots of superstitions that are very different from the sort of Catholicism that you'd find in the UK or in the US, where it's leavened by a very different set of concerns that are very much brought from outside by engagement with Protestant faith. And I'll be curious, particularly from Matthew's perspective of how that marriage of Christian faith and Irish identity and story and place has been an easy one in which Christianity has not always been as dominant as it might appear to have been. I think, just going back to something Crawford said earlier about Patrick, I almost wonder was Patrick the first real evangelist because he seems to have kept the gospel central.

And Crawford indicates in the book that he was influenced by Augustine's confession. Now if Augustine's confession was over here, I'm sure the city of God was over here as well. And of course in the city of God, Augustine outlines civil and Christian distinction.

And you almost think that had Patrick been left alone to get on with the job of evangelizing and keep reading Augustine's confession and the city of God, we might not have got into the mess we got in. And then the first bishop is sent and it becomes a political thing. But then Alistair, as that faith began to expand throughout the country, much of the old pagan scene centers were Christianized.

And there's logic to it. Because I mean, if we take the preamble to the constitution that God is the ultimate one we're in authority to, even we'll say in places like holy wells or holy mountains, there's a sense where you can almost not Christianize them, but you can put a different perspective on it, a biblical perspective on it and marry it. Now I don't think that was thought through.

It was just done because it was a means of Christianizing the community without necessarily changing the heart. And so that was always the undercurrent. That was, and it just so happens that today and yesterday, we're debating a new bank holiday.

And we're debating what we're going to call it because of the pandemic. And St. Bridget, we're going to give it a St. Bridget's Day. Because she was a no, before Bridget, there was a woman.

And that's how St. Bridget came into it. And some folks says, no, we don't want any religious connections with this day. We want it to be a non-religious day.

And the debate was, well, Bridget wasn't religious or who she represented wasn't religious. And there are some who say it's going back to her pre-Bridget state. So we're now seeing the picking, the unpicking of all the apparent aspects of what was perceived as Christian with the wells and the mountains and everything else.

And it's now been picked over. And the raw non-Christian version is coming very much to the surface along with everything else in the country, which I think is just in keeping with where we are. We're reverting back.

And it almost begs the question at the very outset. And as you said it, we can be a state and not Christians. We can be a religious Catholic state, but not evangelical or not believers.

And you almost wonder, you know what, if Patrick and evangelists were allowed to keep their distinctives at the very start, the situation may have been completely different. But we're now seeing even what was apparently Christian being unpicked socially in the present atmosphere we're in. And I think any vestige of a so-called quasi-Christian appearance will go under the microscope socially.

And I don't know if it's going to stand the test, but everything is up for criticism presently. And I don't even know where we're going to end. Will Crow Patrick be Crow Patrick this time next year? I don't know.

But everything is up for grab at the minute, Alistair. One of the challenges of talking about Christian Ireland is that there have been many forms of Christianity that have been expressed within Ireland and competing for the driving seat of Irish identity. And it's been connected with fairly brutal history of English invasion and plantation and other things like that, with apartheid almost situations with the treatment of Catholics and with a lot of sectarian and other violence.

And the challenge of understanding the role and the place of different denominations and Christian traditions within the telling of the story of Christian Ireland is perhaps it's one of the most delicate questions to deal with. But I'll be curious to hear just an outline of some of the key events and developments that shape some of the tensions that people can see in, for instance, Northern Ireland or some of the history before, for instance, the history that provides a background for people like Cromwell or some of the early rebellions, things like the United Irishman. Yes, it's an interesting question, Alistair.

We tend to think about cultural or ethnic difference in sectarian terms. We've kind of got used to doing that. And of course, for much of the last couple of hundred years, that's a very appropriate way to frame the whole issue.

But the history of the Irish church is a history of invasions as well. So, you know, the eighth, ninth century, 10th century, you've got waves of Vikings coming in. And 11th, 12th century, you've got waves of Normans coming in.

And 15th, 16th century, you've got waves of Scots coming in. In the 16th century, also in the plantations, waves of English coming in, you know, and so on. So, you know, a lot of these tensions predate the arrival of denominational difference.

I think there's a lot of difficulty and a lot of violence within the Irish church before there's any religious difference within it. And I think that, you know, when the Vikings arrived, one of the reasons why the Vikings made such little impact in Ireland compared to elsewhere is because they're landing on an island that's already incredibly violent. And the horrors of Viking violence just, you know, don't really get much of a look in for a while.

But the violence that the Vikings come to witness is a violence between king and king, but also between one king's monastery and another king's monastery. So there's a lot of bad stuff going on. I mean, certainly by the time you come to the Reformation, the already tense relationship between the Norman invaders and the Gaelic majority in the 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th century has begun to wane.

But then the introduction of a new set of settlers in the 16th century and early 17th century to do with the plantation projects in Weeshawfully, in Munster, and eventually up in Ulster as well. You know, they are very clearly overlaid with sectarian and confessional difference. And, you know, some of the propaganda that's produced to justify English or Scottish intervention in Ireland is very crude by any stretch of the imagination and makes its points in extremely crude ways.

You know, when Cromwell comes through, we think of Cromwell and his invasion as representing exceptional brutality in the course of Irish history. In fact, Cromwell was just achieving a goal of English foreign policy that was already 70 odd years old, which was an attempt to control the land in order to get involved in massive land transfers, transfers of land ownership. So, you know, for all we think of him as exceptional, in a way he's actually typical of what wanted to be achieved.

You know, by the time we come to the 18th century, as mentioned before, the penal laws, I think, prise open differences between Protestants. And just as in England in the later 17th century, you've got a persecution of Protestants by Protestants unparalleled anywhere else in Europe, so in Ireland you've got the same Anglican ascendancy representing about 10% of the population, controlling the opportunities that are provided

to the 80% of the population who are Catholics or the 10% who are dissenters, almost all of them Presbyterian. You know, I think in the middle of all that, there are some really interesting moments of cultural exchange or generosity that stretches across religious difference, friendships, opportunities of kindness or service, famously during the famine, when church people from lots of different backgrounds get involved in some sacrificial service that costs several of them their lives.

Quakers, I think, do a very notable job during that period, organizing transatlantic relief efforts. In the same period, Baptists are actively planting churches. They plant about 40 churches in 40 years and all of that comes to a very sudden end at the famine, when Baptists who had been recruiting some of the poorest of the population find that the Baptist community decimated by famine and by the emigration that follows.

It's just a long and really sad story. I'd be interested to hear your thoughts, Matthew, on telling a story of Baptist identity within Ireland, which is a story that really is complicated by the fact it's not connected with any of the major players in the same way and is a story that maybe challenges people to look at things from a different angle than they used to. What are some of the points of reference in thinking about Baptist identity in Christian Ireland that help you in articulating your Irish and your Christian identity and how they interact? Before I came to Clonmel as a minister, I worked in another job and it was in the time of the troubles that were very pronounced at that time.

There was the hunger strike and there was tension in the air all across the country. It was a very intimidating place. It was a very fearful place because black flags flew on masts all around the country.

The company I worked with, there was a particular man, he was a very big man physically and I was not a very big man physically. He would talk to me about going on active service. By that, that was a euphemism to be involved in some sort of paramilitary or sectarian activity.

He would use very expressive language. We got another black Protestant bee. We shot another one.

Then he'd say, you're one of them. I'd say, I'm not. He says, you're.

He says, you're. He says, you're. He drew this very colorful language and I would say, I'm nothing of the kind.

I said, I am a Christian. No, he says, you're a. He would try to pigeonhole me in this category. I would say, no, no, no, I'm not that.

I'm a Baptist. I'm a Christian. Ye Baptists are the same.

I tried to let him think, no, there was a distinction. We're not, it's not all caught with the

same cloth and he couldn't quite pigeonhole me. But I think if he had his way, he might have done something to me anyway.

So there was that very strong tension in the year. And I think, Alistair, I think historically, and it goes way, way back. We can go, we can, we can go back as far as Cromwell or go even before him.

You can't, I don't know if you can separate your culture from your Christianity. I think someone said Christianity has been found. As has been tried and has been tried and found wanting a wanting hasn't been tried.

I think we're still in that. I still, I think we're still in that dilemma. Christianity hasn't been tried.

But a version of it has been and it's been found wanting the radical nature of, you know, separation politics. Now, each of us will take different views on this, but the Baptists would have taken a very sort of non-participatory activity, we'll say in state affairs. It was spiritual, it was church planting, it was reaching the lost.

Politics wasn't there, wasn't a big concern. So they got on with the main thing. And if we, if we had kept the main thing, then I think the situation would have been different.

But we're all, we're all children of our culture. And I don't think we can change that. And I think Christianity is a loser because of it.

On one occasion, I was at a conference with a lot of Ulster men and the discussion of a well-known Ulster man came up and I asked the question naively, maybe not naively. I said, how come this particular man is the dominant voice for Christianity in Northern Ireland? The man has now since died. And everyone in the room said to me, you don't understand.

That's the usual response they give you in the North when they don't like your question. They say, you don't understand, you don't understand. So there was another man in the room who was a very eminent man who was not an Ulster man and he wasn't an Irish man.

He says, well, actually, I agree with this man here. This man, this particular voice should not have been the voice for evangelicalism. Why did you men allow this man to be the dominant voice? And then the room went, went definitely quiet.

And I, I think, I think we coalesce behind the culture we embrace Christianity in and don't think outside of our cultural heritage. And I think that's more, I think that's more pronounced Alastair than we're willing to even realise. Yeah, but just to follow on from Matthew's point there, I mean, I think one of the things that allowed that particular voice to become so loud was that it wasn't a voice that was restricted to church-based

proclamation.

In other words, that the volume of that voice came through political leadership. So while, you know, while the Baptist to talk about the Baptist a little bit more, while the Baptist were busy preaching within their little tabernacles or, or, or, you know, churches, other voices were taken to the streets to engage in other kinds of protests. And they, and they, you know, while the Baptist were pursuing perhaps more spiritual in effect, to come to a more spirituality based much more on, on certain kinds of piety.

Others were framing their religious commitment as requiring them to be very noisy and very vocal and taking part in external events, events external to the church, which Baptist brethren and some other people just would have looked askance at. So, I mean, I think it's very telling that, you know, when we're thinking Alastair about how different communities relate to, like between really religion and nationalism. I think it's very telling that while Protestants from almost all the nominations were arrested for some kind of troubles related violence, as far as I know, no Baptist and no brethren person was ever involved, or at least was ever convicted of being involved in terrorist related violence.

I think different kinds of Christians understand their relationship to society in fundamentally different ways. And that's one very visible outcome of that. Why do you think that the reformation didn't succeed in Ireland in the way that it did in the UK and other places? Well, a little bit, I suppose, like what Matthew was just saying, it was, it was half-hearted.

It was never tried. It was half-hearted. It was initially in the 1530s up to maybe, I don't know, the 1570s, 1580s.

It was really a political movement about getting the crown at the head of the Irish church. It wasn't really interested in theology. While the Church of Scotland had its Scots confession in 1560, and the 13 articles came out when, 1563, something like that.

It wasn't until 1615 that the Irish church had its own statement of faith. So the church moves from theological ambiguity for most of its first century to ultimately and very, very suddenly embrace a very, very rigid Calvinistic theology in the Irish articles produced in 1615. But there's still no Bible translated into the national language.

So while the German Reformation advanced on, to use that cliché, the open Bible, the Irish Reformation had no Bible. And, you know, the people who were promoting it were very obviously doing so for political or even colonial reasons. We were talking there about William Bedell.

Matthew, do you want to tell us that story about Bedell and his translation and how the rebels of 1641 so valorized him even in his death? Well, yes, and he was quite a brilliant

man. He was an Anglican from the established church, but he didn't conform to the established church. And he had a desire that the Bible should be in the language of the native.

It was an extraordinary late, I mean, it was this is, that's the 17th century. This is even been talked about. So it's very, very late, but at least it's now been talked about.

But not only was it talked about, he did it. And it was printed 40 years after his death. And in Galway, where he worked and labored, he was, when he died, he was revered by the entire community.

Now, there was something about Bedell that broke the mold by comparison with the majority of the established church. He went outside the pale in more ways than one. And he saw himself, my priority must be, I got to bring Christ to the people.

And the scriptures, that extraordinary thing, we should get that in the language of the common man. So that was his, I think that's his lasting achievement. And that was the first time, as far as I know, that the Bible was translated into Irish by Bedell.

So that was a significant thing. I think, even if we look at the Puritans, and I know some people are going to shake in their chairs now and start talking about the Puritans, but I think they failed in Ireland. I think they failed badly.

I think when Cromwell came over with his psalm singing soldiers, he brought over some of his ministers. And they were within the pale, which was the sort of the Westminster of Ireland. They landed, the private, the beautiful, the wealthy, and everyone outside the pale was in a different category.

And they worked and lived within that little hermetically sealed unit. And their concern for the wider country wasn't there. Even when John Owen goes back to Westminster and says, do your utmost for the gospel in Ireland, he was primarily thinking about those within the pale.

He wasn't thinking of those outside the pale, which was a shock when I realised a man that I'd read a lot about and admired enormously, but he had a blind spot regarding the wider community. But Bedell did not. And then there were others of that sort of ilk who had a heart beyond the establishment tradition and tried to reach the native Irish.

Who would be some of the other names that if people are wanting to read some great works, for instance, of Irish theology, to get a sense of the flavour of different voices of Christianity in Ireland, what would be some of the works or the names that you would point towards for both of you? Well, I suppose we could start with Patrick, Matthew, couldn't we? We could recommend Patrick. You can. And his Confession is a really extraordinary document, I think a really wonderful document, which describes his life.

Patrick, of course, is an ex-slave. He's a former slave. He writes about being a slave and he writes about being a slave, being captured and taken beyond the bounds of the Roman Empire and being a slave among barbarians.

And yet realising that God has called him to go and serve them in the service of Jesus Christ. You could talk about Columba, some lovely poetry by Columba. It's widely anthologised in the Oxford Book of Irish Verse, for example.

Where would you go from there, Matthew? Well, I thought your previous book on Usher and the Irish Puritan Crawford had some very salient and helpful suggestions in that. And it's a much more, it's a much slimmer, it's a much more slimmer volume than we're presently discussing. I think that's an interesting volume.

I think some of the old Presbyterian history have got some very extraordinary men who worked hard in the Republic. I think the Wesleys and the Methodists, they did some extraordinary work. Gideon Ewsley, Thomas Walsh.

There were a number of those sort of men who had a huge impact in their day. I think Thomas Coke, for me, who was an Englishman, but he was the coordinator of the Methodist movement. I think Coke was an extraordinary man.

He was an extraordinary man. He had Herculean energy and he had extraordinary organisational skill and passion and capability. And he loved the Irish Conference when the Methodists would come.

He wanted the church to grow. He wanted the country to be reached. Not only that, this man goes across the Atlantic more times than Whitfield crosses the Atlantic to see Methodism and preaching go there.

And then in his mid-60s, he wants to go to one of the southern isles and no one was willing to go. And he says, well, I'll go. And he puts his own money forward and then he dies en route.

But he had a huge... For me, I thought he was an extraordinary man in the Irish context, that he wanted these men supported and sustained to do what they were doing. So that's one that stands out for me, I think, as an extraordinary man. Patrick particularly.

But there's a big gap between Patrick and the Methodists. There's a thousand-year gap there. We've got to fill in the gap, boys.

You're going to have to give us some more details there, Crawford. If Matthew gets to mention the Methodists, I get to mention John Nelson Darby, who is undoubtedly the greatest product of the Church of Ireland and certainly the most influential. A Wicklow curate becomes a priest who leads the Church of Ireland over exactly some of the issues we've been talking about today, the relationship with the state, which he feels is

completely deleterious.

And he sets up these informal Bible studies, which eventually become the movement known as the Plymouth Brethren. The Baptist... Sorry to cut across, to run on that theme. I was struck by the fact that Crawford said that the Baptists were seeing a church come into existence for a year, for nearly 40 years.

And then post-famine, the presence of the Baptists in the Republic has completely gone. I mean, pre-famine, there was a Bible college in Ballinagh and there was a Bible college in Dublin run by the Baptists. Post-famine, there's very little left of a Baptist presence.

And it's staggering how that movement was wiped out nearly after the famine. And I just can't understand that, Crawford. I think it's just because so many of the converts were agricultural workers, the rural poor, who were being educated in the Irish language schools that the Baptist missionary organization set up.

And they were the people who were most vulnerable to the pressures that the famine revealed, either in terms of starvation, disease, or emigration. I think that's the only way to understand it. But I think it's very striking that Baptists grew in the southern counties of Ireland in the early 19th century, when they couldn't get into the north, because it was so dominated by Presbyterianism, and a Presbyterianism that was really, really hostile towards any other forms of evangelical churchmanship.

Of course, after 1859, that great evangelical revival, all of that changes and the Baptists do begin to get a foothold. But, you know, the 1859 revival both sees a huge number of conversions, maybe as many as 100,000, it's estimated, and at the same time begins to erode what churchmanship really means. You know, one of the great effects of that revival is to cut away at what ecclesiology, whether ecclesiology really matters or not.

You know, 150 years later now, we in this part of the world, you know, still very much remember the 1859 revival, we find ourselves very much swimming in an atmosphere that is dominated by that kind of spirituality, revivalistic spirituality, but an atmosphere or a culture in which churchmanship is basically absent. All of these denominations, and yet hardly any of them, have any kind of functioning ecclesiology, and that's absolutely a consequence of the revival movements in the 1860s. You know, we find ourselves in a culture which is dominated by that kind of evangelicalism, even though there's a declining number of evangelicals in it.

And I think that's something that's really interesting when we talk about the history of Christianity in Ireland, that you can have a Christian culture in which Christians are a minority, so that the culture can be shaped by these norms, either because Christians are successfully projecting them and normalising them, or because they were once held by a much larger proportion of people than they are now. But still, the kind of hangover of that continues, gradually erodes, gradually changes. You know, I think that's pretty

much where we see ourselves at the minute.

Irish history has been profoundly shaped by suffering, danger, violence, persecution, oppression, and all these sorts of negative forces. How has Christian faith been shaped by the context within which it has developed in Ireland? And how has Christian faith been a source of something that sustained the people through all of those forms of suffering and difficulty? I think if you take Christian in its broadest sense first, Alastair, the Catholic faith sustained Catholic people through very difficult times. Simple people were loyal to the Church, looked to them for hope and succour, and got it in some shape or form.

But I would say that within that constituency, there were genuine believers. There were genuine people who had a simple faith in Christ himself. And I mean, when the unpicking of the Catholic Church happened 20 years ago, I remember when I would knock on doors and talk to elderly Catholics and talk about the Gospel.

They were completely disillusioned with their own faith. But they wouldn't say it to me. They respected it too much, but they were lost.

You could see they were lost. You could see that something had happened in their lives that had a profound impact on them. And they were disillusioned, but they didn't want to deny the faith, but something very tragic had happened to them.

So when we would come and when the people now would begin to share the true Jesus, Christ with them, I think that they had been anaesthetised against anything else. I think they thought they had the one genuine thing because that's what they were always taught. We were the one true holy Catholic faith.

And so us boys who just knew on the block, as it were historically, we didn't cut mustard with them. But in the 70s, there was charismatic renewal. And right across the country, right across the country in small towns, there was a work of the spirit and little groups of people came to faith.

And that impact was really, really profound. And it got so... The Catholic Church got so concerned about it that they tried to bring it under the umbrella of the Catholic Church so that they could regularise it or snuff it out, as may have been the case. But before they could do that, it already reached out and people across the country had come to faith.

And you can go into churches now or down through the country and ask some of the older people there, when did they come to faith? And you'd be surprised to hear that someone say it was through the charismatic renewal back in the 70s. So there was an outbreak of a small work of the spirit in the 70s. And these people are still there today.

And I think as they look back, as they look where we are today, they'd be staggered, Alastair, because when they came to faith, they may have been the only few in their

town. Now, every major city and every major town has at least one evangelical church. I mean, there's so many churches in the capital and the larger cities now that you have to pick of them.

And even in the more rural areas or counties, there are churches there, which when these people came to faith in the 70s weren't there. So Christianity has been growing at a very small, but constant rate since the 70s. And it is really, really exciting that people are now in churches and churches are growing and more and more people are learning about the Lord Jesus and more churches are coming into existence.

It's an exciting time to be in Ireland. It's a very exciting time. Now, ask me in a few minutes about where we are as a country.

That's another question. But it's still an exciting time to be alive and to be a member of the church presently in the Republic, I think. The history of Ireland, I think, particularly when you compare it to the history of England, you can see, for instance, I'm trying to remember the figures, I think it was before the famine, the population of the whole Ireland was 8 million.

And then in England, at the same time, about 12 million. And now it's about 50 million in England. And it's only just getting up to the pre famine levels in Ireland again.

And so many of those people went overseas. The history of Irish Christianity is a history not just of what happens within the shores of Ireland, but also the history of a diaspora community. What are some of the ways in which the Christians that left Ireland have left their mark in the countries that they went to? Well, certainly in terms of the Catholic Church, Alistair, for much of the 19th century, a vast proportion of Catholic clergy and religious worldwide were Irish or of Irish extraction.

And, you know, the it's very significant, for example, in New York, that the first Catholic well, the Catholic Cathedral in New York is called St. Patrick's, you know, it's very much part and parcel of, of, of an extended and global Irish Catholic Church and experience. But I think in addition to personnel and staffing, it's also, I think, important to think about the way in which ideas developed within the Irish Church have traveled around the world. I mentioned earlier on, John Nelson Darby, you both smiled as the founder of the Plymouth Brethren movement, but he was also a biblical theologian who developed a way of reading scripture that became known as dispensationalism.

Now, dispensationalism is, and the Plymouth Brethren movement to from which emerged were deeply, deeply shaped by the experience of the Anglo-Irish elite in the 1820s and 30s, who, you know, whose very privileged lives, Darby came from that background, but their very privileged lives absolutely were coming to an end, a whole world was coming to an end in the 1820s and 1830s. And, you know, Darby is quite open about that in his letters, you know, he writes very personally, very movingly, about what it was like, as he

puts it, to be a Protestant in Ireland, when everything was being shaken. And he sees that as the context in which this new way of reading scripture, that we call dispensationalism, begins to emerge.

But dispensationalism is in some ways a theology that really expresses what it meant to be Protestant in Ireland at that point. It's very dark, it's very, very foreboding, well, I'm using pejorative words, I don't mean to do that, but it has a sense of imminent crisis and the hope for imminent rescue. And that's really, I think, marked by that experience.

What would you add, Matthew? I think not only was it in the case of Darby, but when the founding of the state in the 1920s, 1916 is happening, it's a similar religious model that they're thinking. You know, Patrick Pearse's poetry, I see his blood upon the rose, the schools he influences, the ministries he's in discussions with. There's a new dispensation, if I can use that word, there's a new dispensation being perceived for Ireland as a Catholic entity.

We're now a new thing. So yeah, I think there are parallels between Darby, what he was thinking and the remaining Anglo-Irish who were there because Yeats and Morgon and some of these other people were instrumental in that sort of renaissance, parallel with nationalism on the rise. And Pearse is fascinating, isn't he? Because in addition to writing all of that verse, which is really devotional in its lyricism of his love for Ireland and also for the sacrifices that he and others are prepared to make, he also has this idea in some of the speeches and letters that Ireland will become a kind of millennial state, that it will become the great fountainhead of global Christianity.

And you know, he really, I know he's a very eccentric individual in lots of ways, but he really does seem to have this idea that the blood sacrifice they're prepared to make is not just political, it is actually for the renewal of the church, for the renewal of Christianity itself. And perhaps not fully taking into account that only one instance of blood sacrifice is ever going to do that. But that influence of Irish Christianity beyond its shores is very much from the outset of Irish Christianity, the importance of Irish missionaries going to various parts of the world, the protection of the Christian heritage, even as society is collapsing elsewhere, this redoubt of Christianity being established on the island of Ireland.

One thing I'd be curious to hear Matthew's thoughts on, particularly as we conclude, you've mentioned some of the positive sense of the possibilities for the church as a voice within society, within the current context, where even as society is leaving behind a sense of its Christian identity, there is a place that's increasing for the voice of a committed group of faithful Christians who are very self-conscious in their faith. It's not a nominal thing, it's something that is very considered and resolved. It seems to me that the shape and the face of Irish Christianity has changed a lot in the last few decades.

One of the things that we've mentioned is the influence of the Irish diaspora. One of the

things we're seeing now is the importance of immigrants coming to Ireland and their influence within particularly evangelical churches. Could you say more about some of the ways that you see the church changing in these times and some of the possibilities and exciting potential that you see for the future? I think as a country, Alistair, there's something that's happened at the core of government.

The church now doesn't get a voice and if there's a voice it's because a lot of people are making a lot of noise to get the attention of the government. During the lockdown, the church wanted to know if they could gather and it was almost as if it's almost the last group in the room to be invited to the government to discuss it were the church. The drive by the by our and this is my perception and it may not be accurate but appearances do convey something.

The state at the instruments of the state now I think are marginalizing the church to the periphery of society. Even with Ireland being a Catholic state, they are dismantling all of that and so you have a large number of Catholics who were Catholic at heart who have no voice now, who have no representation in this state. The government doesn't speak to them or speak for them.

It's almost as if they're not there. I almost think it's government policy to be intolerant towards the religious presently. They will play the political card when they come to occasions of national remembrance but as an entity Alistair, even with the flag been blessed by the Catholic church when the state was founded, there's been none of that now.

They're almost running as far and as fast as they can from any religious connection in the state. Now that's fine, that's fine if you want a secular state but you have a huge number of citizens who are deeply religious. You have a huge number of citizens who are Christian and you're saying to these citizens you have no voice in the state.

In other words, you're a non-entity and I think that vibe has been picked up all the time Alistair and the diaspora played a role in the last two major referendum or referendae. That's on the same-sex marriage and on the abortion referendum. A large number of the diaspora were contacted by pressure groups, lobbying groups to campaign and to come home and vote in a particular way and I think by sheer resources of funding and voice and media that's happened.

I can understand why if you've been raised in the Catholic country you'll be hostile to the Catholic faith but as the governing class you have to govern the whole of the state and I don't think the government are doing that for the religious. Now what that's going to look for us in the future? The way the wind is blowing internationally it doesn't look very encouraging. I think church will be marginalized.

I think its message will be not silenced but reduced. Its impact will be reduced and I

think the church is going to have to become creative and not fear it but go back to what Augustine was saying. We're running parallel with the state.

We're the citizens of another kingdom in a state. We're the best citizens of that state but our priority and a primary concern is a greater kingdom and I think we're going to have to learn that in a fresh way and have been learning it in the last few years Alastair but as a state, as a government, I think anyone who's got a religious conscience in Ireland at the moment I think they're not being represented by the state. While Christianity as related to the state seems to be really marginalized, what are some of the positive signs that you see within the church's life itself? Some of the trends that you see within evangelicalism and other forms of Christian denomination and tradition within Ireland? In the Republic, I think Alastair, it is, I have to say even though the winds of adversity are blowing all around us, I think we are still excited.

I think of towns like Sligo now would have 10 evangelical churches in it. When I was growing up there was one. I think of Cork, the county.

I think of the large number of Christians in the county of Cork. You could almost call it the Bible Belt of Ireland now. I think of the largest church in Ireland is Romanian in Dublin and the Chinese churches growing.

The Nigerian churches were becoming a very international country and that I think is another facet of the decline of the Catholic faith because it was one country for a particular people. A Catholic faith, a Catholic country for a Catholic people. Now that model is completely blown out of the water by the sheer scale of those who are coming into our shores and bringing new ideas.

Now I love that because it opens up the door to other Christians and other influences in the state. Right across the country I think the Baptists and the Republic are growing. The Presbyterians are holding their own and growing.

I think the church that was there in the 18th century as the established church, it's in decline, numerical and otherwise, although there are significant personalities but it's still in decline. It's not seeing growth by way of conversions. So I'm more excited about it because I've been a believer in Ireland for nearly 45 years now and the landscape has completely changed from what it was when I was starting out.

We could take a train journey from my home to Dublin and we would know any Christian between the three counties. Now not anymore, not anymore. So there's huge growth and the country is still small but it's very, very exciting because it wasn't there 30 years ago.

Crawford, is that a fair assessment? Yeah, I think probably the situation in Northern Ireland is quite different. I think here it's maybe more about managing decline than seeing decline reversed and I think here that evangelicals generally struggle to

differentiate who they are as a Christian from what they do in the polling booth. I still think that there's a lot of untangling still to be done there.

Thank you both so much for joining me. I thoroughly enjoyed your book Crawford and I highly recommend anyone listening to this get the book. There's just so much covered within it.

It's a rich and dense book and whether or not you have any connections with Ireland you'll find a lot within it to make you think, a lot within it that will enrich your understanding not just of Ireland but also of the Christian faith, its relationship with society and to, I think you'll find it a very worthwhile read. It's published by Oxford University Press, *The Rise and Fall of Christian Ireland*. I'll give a link within the show notes.

Matthew, it's been wonderful to have you on the podcast. I owe you a very peculiar debt because you have been one of the most important Christian influencers in my life and I would not be doing this were it not for you. So thank you very much and hopefully have you back at some point.

Thank you Alastair. Thank you Alastair. Just on the book again, I think there are indications that other countries who are going through the secular phase will find Crawford's book salient for them to be reading as well.

Thank you very much for listening. God bless.