

Ireland's Holy Wars, by Marcus Tanner

reviewed by [Ronald A. Wells](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Like Ireland's religious history itself, books about religion in Ireland provoke controversy. One reviewer found Marcus Tanner's book "plodding and dense, full of turgid prose and cluttered with detail." But that's not the book I read. I found it one of the best-written things about Irish history and culture I've come across. Tanner is a journalist working for *The Independent* who took off more than a year to research and write this book. He combines the sense of history that comes from the study of complex sources with the insight of a journalist who can rivet readers with a telling anecdote or aside.

Is Tanner biased? All of us who write about religion in Ireland must run a gauntlet of suspicion about partisanship. Indeed, Tanner's book on Croatia (1998) has been criticized for being anti-Serb because of his alleged reliance on Croat sources. How, then, did this non-Irishman do in this context? He was protective of, and offensive to, both Catholics and Protestants. For those who write about Ireland, that's not bad.

Tanner is particularly good at shedding light on the sad tale of the old English settlers who were loyal to both Catholicism and the crown. He is a bit less convincing in discussing the worldview of the English and Scots "planted" in Ireland in the post-Reformation period. His treatment of secularization in the Republic of Ireland is excellent, but it will not please those Irish-Americans who fantasize about a staunchly Catholic Ireland standing against the secular tide sweeping in from England and Europe.

Tanner's thesis that religion is the key to understanding Ireland's past and present is persuasively argued. This still-minority viewpoint is a rebuke to scholars and journalists who insist that the real issues are politics, economics and social class. Surprisingly, Tanner does not mention the work of contemporary scholars who argue versions of the same thesis: Scott Appleby, Steve Bruce, Brian Lambkin, Duncan Morrow and me. This is in spite of a very considerable bibliography.

A significant test for a book on religion in Ireland turns on the treatment of the Northern Irish "troubles"--much as a book on the history of Turkey invites a close analysis of the treatment of Armenians. Tanner does fairly well in describing the complexity of the troubles. But in view of his decision to stress the societal impact of religion he does very little with the compelling stories of those Christians who worked for peace in context of great risk. He apparently visited Clonard monastery in West Belfast but does not seem to know about the signal importance of that place in the movement toward the 1998 peace agreement. The best book on that subject is by Tanner's *Independent* colleague David McKittrick and his co-author, Eammon Mallie, but their book is not mentioned in the bibliography.

This otherwise interesting book peters out near the end, implying that a multicultural Ireland, fully ensconced in Europe, will become secular enough to render the troubles irrelevant. But those who want a well-written and engaging religious history of modern Ireland could not do much better than this.