

# An Eighteenth-Century Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland?\*

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Concepts need contrast classes in order to be explanatorily useful. If a concept applies to everything then it explains nothing. One might justly begin to fear that the recent trend towards permissive inclusiveness with the concept of ‘enlightenment’ in the eighteenth century might run afoul of this philosophical truism. There is not simply the Enlightenment, but a series of national enlightenments, each with their own specifications and peccadillos that provide unique contributions to the larger intellectual movement.<sup>1</sup> Now it seems as if everyone wants a piece of the tasty Enlightenment pie, and any vaguely positive trait one might ascribe to a favourite historical person can be used to justify his or her inclusion as an Enlightenment figure. As David Dwan opens his review of Michael Brown’s *Irish Enlightenment*, ‘Enlightenments are two a penny these days’.<sup>2</sup> In recent years there has been an accelerating move to characterize and defend a distinct Catholic Enlightenment as well. Ulrich Lehner might be thought of as leading the charge most recently. As he puts it,

The Catholic Enlightenment was in dialog with contemporary culture, not only by developing new hermeneutical approaches to the Council of Trent or to Jansenist ideas, but also by implementing some of the core values of the overall European Enlightenment process that tried to ‘renew’ and ‘reform’ the whole of society, and thus truly deserves the label Enlightenment.<sup>3</sup>

Lehner and others like him wish to make room for a Catholic Enlightenment by altering the concept, focusing on ideas like *renewal* and *reform*, especially (but

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\* I would like to express my gratitude to Evan Davis, Michael Van Citters, Wyatt West, Patrick Wilson, and several anonymous referees for their assistance during work on this article.

1 See *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), who make room for national Enlightenments. Interestingly, there is no chapter on the Enlightenment in Ireland, and the chapter ‘Reform Catholicism’ focuses on the continent.

2 David Dwan, ‘Within Reason’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 Oct. 2016, p. 31.

3 Ulrich Lehner, ‘What is “Catholic Enlightenment”?’’, *History Compass*, 8.2 (2010), 166–78 (p. 166).

not exclusively) in the church. When added to the contemporary currents seeking to expand the concept of the Enlightenment to allow for national varieties, the risk of eviscerating the concept seems quite real. For instance, while admitting that Ireland was on the ‘periphery’ of the Catholic Enlightenment, Thomas O’Connor urges that positing a Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland is critical not only to understanding the intellectual movement, but to the movement itself.

[T]hrough the intellectual activity of Irish, Scots, and English scholastics, who wrote in the Catholic heartlands, the local Catholic Enlightenments added to the movement’s intellectual force and range, facilitating intellectual exchange between core and periphery.<sup>4</sup>

One wonders to what intellectual activity he is referring. O’Connor seems to equate support for religious toleration with Enlightenment, despite his admission that many Catholics were only interested in toleration to the extent that it would allow them to replace the intolerant Protestant state with an intolerant state of their own.<sup>5</sup> The problem is how properly to separate a principled subscription to religious tolerance (that might genuinely count as enlightened) from a more opportunistic one grounded in local political and social realities. Merely noting that certain Irish-born Catholics discussed the value of toleration is not enough; more specificity is required. That said, there is certainly a middle ground. Michael Brown writes in the introduction to his book *Irish Enlightenment*, ‘But rather than try to maintain that certain political, philosophical, or religious tenets constitute a definition, the Enlightenment is perhaps better conceived of as an idea with various applications’.<sup>6</sup> The point is well made. Being *overly* stringent about characterizing ideas can be counter-productive and cause one to miss important connections, historical and conceptual. We nonetheless need to know what the ‘idea’ to which Brown appeals actually means. Even if the Enlightenment is best understood as a collection of movements and ideas, *something* must bind the collection together (even if only a characterization) for the concept to be meaningful. We need a concept inclusive enough genuinely to capture what was happening but sufficiently clear and robust to provide a

4 Thomas O’Connor, ‘Luke Joseph Hooke (1714–1796)’, in *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe: A Transnational History*, ed. by Jeffrey Burson and Ulrich Lehner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014), 371–87 (p. 371). One supposes that by ‘periphery’ he has in mind both a geographical and intellectual sense of the word.

5 The primacy of toleration in understanding the Enlightenment is a common theme. John Marshall, for instance, remarks that ‘Religious toleration was the central value of this “early Enlightenment”’, in *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1.

6 Michael Brown, *The Irish Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), p. 7.

contrast class that makes the concept useful when trying to understand historical movements.

The inclination to be more expansive in our thinking about important historical and intellectual currents is laudable. There are reasons to think that the ‘periphery’ of Europe has been somewhat neglected in the secondary literature. That said, intellectual developments in the ‘benighted’ peripheral communities of Europe, from the Orthodox of the Balkans to Ireland’s Catholics, are now attracting attention, not simply as pale reflections of the high Enlightenments of the European core – although the basic ideas were often derivative – but in terms of their own particular ideological configurations.<sup>7</sup> Yet as with anything, good scholarly practice demands that we use our concepts carefully and not *too* expansively. With respect to the Enlightenment, the proliferation of claims that various individuals should be considered underneath its umbrella threatens to remove its coherence as an explanatory concept.

Consider an example of the scholarly work done to laud the enlightenment [AQ1] principles of Irish tradesmen, focusing on Mathew Carey, a Dublin Catholic printer. As Nicholas Wolf puts it in his article, ‘Much will be proposed here that will bolster the arguments for Carey’s notable merging of Enlightenment, if not republican, ideals with Catholic religious identity’.<sup>8</sup> Is a ‘merging’ of appeals to toleration in a dominated Ireland the same thing as being an Enlightenment figure? I suggest the answer is no. Might Carey’s calls for toleration not be equally well explained as attempts to provide relief for beleaguered Catholics? I think there is good reason to think so, but admittedly it can be difficult to determine definitively. Yet if one is not careful, it is easy to think that Ireland – Catholic and Protestant alike – was overrun with Enlightenment figures. Michael Brown includes an entire chapter on an alleged Catholic Enlightenment in his monograph *Irish Enlightenment*, but his treatment of Catholicism is notably more restrained than his chapters on the distinct Presbyterian and Anglican enlightenments.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps we should be sceptical about the usefulness of adjectives associated with the Enlightenment based on the fear of their overly profligate use.

Here I argue that we must plot a course between the Scylla of making our enlightenment claims meaningless because of profligate use and the Charybdis of making them so narrow to particular ends that they are not actually useful in understanding intellectual history. My contention is that we *can* meaningfully

7 Consider, as an example, Colin Kidd, ‘Gaelic Antiquity and National Identity in Enlightenment Ireland and Scotland’, *English Historical Review*, 109.434 (1994), 1197–214, (p. 1197).

8 Nicholas Wolf, ‘Advocacy, the Enlightenment, and the Catholic Print Trade in Mathew Carey’s Dublin’, *Eire-Ireland*, 40 (Fall/Winter 2014), 244–69 (p. 247).

9 Brown, pp. 106–60.

employ the concept of a Catholic Enlightenment in a fashion that avoids non-falsifiability, but the cost of so doing is the unlikelihood that there was a meaningful Catholic Enlightenment in eighteenth-century Ireland. My thesis does *not* imply that there were no enlightened Irish Catholics, that the Enlightenment did not impact Catholics in Ireland, or that some Irish Catholics did not contribute to the larger intellectual movement we can justly call the Enlightenment. Indeed, many vibrant and capable minds in the period were Catholic. Further, I am *not* saying that there was no Irish national Enlightenment. It was, however, predominantly a Protestant phenomenon, which is not surprising given the political and economic privileges Protestants enjoyed. Where there were enlightened Irish Catholics (in a narrower sense), I argue that such Catholics mainly contributed to the Enlightenment in other places, notably France. Where we find Catholic intellectuals in Ireland, their concerns are more political (in a pragmatic sense) and pedestrian. My argument, I hope, will surprise no one. The peculiar situation of Ireland – where a foreign power repressed the Catholic majority – produced a distinct environment that cannot properly be said to fit under the umbrella of the Enlightenment.

I first briefly explore two concepts relevant to frame this discussion: what I call a traditional concept of the Enlightenment and the newer concept of the Catholic Enlightenment with its focus on intellectual currents inside the Catholic Church. I advance a traditional conception not to defend any particular view, but as a tool for sharpening my analysis. Thus, I am *not* arguing that the narrow view I characterize here is necessarily the correct conception of the Enlightenment or anything like it. In short, this article is not a work of history; it is rather a more philosophical exercise reflecting on how scholars engage historical concepts. Providing clear conceptual borders enables us to engage various claims profitably, reducing the likelihood of exchanges that ‘miss’ one another and promoting our understanding of historical movements. Analysing each characterization as an exemplar (one as a clear but narrow conception and the other as overly inclusive) in the historical and intellectual context of Ireland in the eighteenth century reveals that we have little reason to believe that there was anything that could reasonably be thought of as a Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland. Although it is difficult to prove a negative, I contend it is unlikely that *any* clear and consistent conception of the Enlightenment applies there. Thus, in order to *protect* the meaningfulness of the concepts of Enlightenment and especially Catholic Enlightenment, we need to accept the possibility that parts of Europe – including Catholic Ireland in the eighteenth century – were not a part of the Enlightenment.

### Concepts of the Enlightenment

A traditional way of understanding the Enlightenment is through the lens of Kant. If we take Kant's motto of the Enlightenment, '*sapere aude!*' ('dare to know/understand!')<sup>10</sup> as our starting point in understanding that intellectual movement, it follows that what characterizes a period of enlightenment is a propensity to employ and seek out reasoned answers to issues, as opposed to relying predominantly on tradition and authority (secular or ecclesiastical).<sup>11</sup> As Kant characterizes it in his essay, the Enlightenment represents humankind's release from its self-incurred immaturity; 'immaturity is the inability to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another'.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the concept of the Enlightenment includes a lack of constraint from external authority in the application of reason. Such liberation one clearly finds to be the case in the first half of the eighteenth century in France and arguably elsewhere. As Jim Smyth writes in the context of late eighteenth-century Ireland, 'The concept of Enlightenment, then and now, is linked routinely with greater religious toleration, deism, and the privileging of reason over revelation and authority'.<sup>13</sup> The emphasis on religious toleration is even taken by some to be *the* critical feature of the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> One common refrain is that the Enlightenment is about reason, individualism, and scepticism.<sup>15</sup> Enlightenment thinkers reject tradition and authority and replace it with a dependence on reason (located in the individual). The critical part, however, is that this intellectual position is *principled* and hence universal. The desire to loft reason over tradition comes out of a new set of values. Enlightenment thinkers emphasize individual rights, the importance of dignity, and equality among persons (although typically still restricted to men). There is a general scepticism about religious dogma, making deism more attractive and undermining traditional views like rule by divine right.<sup>16</sup>

10 So far as I know, the phrase originates with Horace (*Epodes*, 1, 2, 40). This motto was adopted by the Society of the Friends of Truth, a circle of the German Enlightenment. Edmund Burke also adopted the motto.

11 From Kant's essay 'What is Enlightenment?' ('Was ist Aufklärung?'). It first appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in November/December 1784. See James Schmidt (ed.), *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 58–64.

12 Schmidt, p. 58.

13 Jim Smyth, 'Wolfe Tone's Library: The United Irishmen and "Enlightenment"', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45 (2012), 423–35 (p. 423).

14 John Marshall, as previously noted above, remarks that 'Religious toleration was the central value of this "early Enlightenment...."' in *John Locke*, p. 1.

15 See for instance, William Bristow, 'Enlightenment', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/enlightenment/> [accessed 1 July 2019].

16 One might also approach the topic by investigating what critics of the Enlightenment and its ideals take its core tenets to be. There is a great deal of consonance here. Some have criticized

This traditional characterization, however, at least initially seems to exclude the possibility of truly Catholic Enlightenment figures, since part of being an orthodox Catholic requires a certain level of obedience to the Church hierarchy and the traditional authority of that hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> Much the same could be said of Anglicans who pushed for various kinds of conformity, but the difference in degree is notable. It is difficult to imagine a proper Catholic daring to understand the world through a *systematic* questioning of the authority of Rome. Even the Gallican movement in France was a tempered one; no French Catholic denied the claim that the Pope was the supreme ecclesiastical authority on earth.

To cast the issue only this way, however, is to be uncharitable to the defenders of Catholic Enlightenment. Their claims, carefully read, are not that traditional Catholics were high Enlightenment thinkers along the lines of Voltaire, Diderot, and so forth, but rather that they internalized their own version of the new ideals. Within Catholicism there is room for challenging traditions and sources of authority without sacrificing the core tenets of the faith. In other words, defenders of the Catholic Enlightenment are carving out a new – if related – concept with narrower bounds. I endorse this sort of work and conceptual narrowing. We thus find not a principled form of enlightened thinking per se (i.e. they are not asserting that tradition has no value or role in the face of reason) but an intellectual movement inspired by such thinking all the same. Thus Lehner and Printy emphasize renewal and reform.<sup>18</sup> The Catholic Enlightenment makes (greater) room for the exercise of reason, produces allowances for the conscience of individual believers, and welcomes sceptical but well-intentioned challenges to the Catholic worldview – provided, of course, that nothing core to Catholicism is challenged. After all, it would be odd to say that an individual who, for instance, rejected the authority of the Pope was a Catholic thinker in any serious sense of the term. Such a person might be a former or lapsed believer, but suggesting anything stronger destroys the meaning of the term ‘Catholic’. So we find that many of the alleged Catholic Enlightenment figures are engaged in projects like parish reform, aligning the Church hierarchy with

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mainstream scholarship on the Enlightenment precisely because it has relied either on too narrow a conception of ‘the’ Enlightenment or has watered down the concept to the point of meaninglessness. See James Schmidt, ‘What Enlightenment Project?’, *Political Theory*, 28 (2000), 734–57.

17 The point here is distinct from the fact that certain facets of the Enlightenment were anti-Catholic. Dorinda Outram, for instance, characterizes the traditional Enlightenment in France as virulently anti-Catholic, but my point is about the *concept* and its applicability, and not simply the historical facts. *The Enlightenment*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 3.

18 *A Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe*, ed. by Ulrich Lehner and Michael Printy (Boston: Brill, 2010), p. 2.

more popular strands of Catholicism, and emphasizing extracurricular Church activities (such as pilgrimages, devotions, and so forth). Michael Printy sums up the position nicely:

In recent years, a scholarly consensus has emerged that the eighteenth century witnessed the flowering of a ‘Catholic Enlightenment’, which was itself part of a broader moderate religious Enlightenment. The Catholic Enlightenment occurred on different levels, and while there was necessarily an international component, given the structure of the Church, most work has been done in relation to ‘reform Catholicism’ in a variety of national contexts.<sup>19</sup>

We simply need a clearer sense of what a religious enlightenment more generally might be in order to understand an application of the concept to Ireland in particular.

David Sorkin provides a good example of a scholar trying to understand more broadly the relevant concept. In his monograph *Religious Enlightenment*, he notes that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were witness to a great many reform movements within the Catholic Church, and he argues for a concept of general religious enlightenment that encompasses both Catholicism and Protestantism alike.<sup>20</sup> Provided we tread carefully, we might expand away from the traditional and limited notion of enlightenment associated with Kant to include another, more broadly inclusive, form of enlightened thinking. Sorkin sketches the content of the concept of religious enlightenment (in our context of the eighteenth century) early in his work.

This approach allows us to define the religious Enlightenment according to four characteristics. The first two are clusters of ideas, the last two social and political attributes. First, religious enlighteners searched for the middle way of reasonable belief grounded in the idea of ‘natural religion’ and the exegetical principle of accommodation. Second, they embraced toleration based on the idea of natural law. Third, the public sphere was central: the religious Enlightenment was an important component of it, while religious enlighteners engaged in multiple pursuits in it. Fourth, the religious Enlightenment gained the sponsorship of states and, using natural law theory, advocated a state church.<sup>21</sup>

There are a number of things to note about his selection of characteristics. The latter two components (the centrality of the public sphere and state sponsorship of the church) constitute plainly *historical* (as opposed to conceptual) claims. During the period Sorkin discusses, there was an increase in the publication of

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19 Michael Printy, ‘The Intellectual Origins of Popular Catholicism: Catholic Moral Theology in the Age of Enlightenment’, *Catholic Historical Review*, 91 (2005), 438–61 (p. 440).

20 David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 9.

21 Sorkin, p. 11.

religious works and a sort of religious republic of letters arguably emerged.<sup>22</sup> Various elites sought and received state sponsorship as political leaders saw religious matters as opportunities to promote state building.<sup>23</sup> The religious Enlightenment for Sorkin is as much a historical period – a descriptive category – as it is a concept to apply to the intellectual predilections of various individuals. On such an account, calling some people religiously enlightened is similar to calling them *sans-culottes* (common people of the lower classes in eighteenth-century France), that is, members of an identifiable group. I find nothing objectionable in this practice, provided one is clear about it and the concept is suitably narrowed (as Sorkin does with his subsequent conditions). If the Enlightenment (or enlightened movements) is simply an era, then *anyone* who lived in that time period could not properly be excluded as an Enlightenment figure. If, as both Sorkin and Outram assume, the Enlightenment is a historical period, and that is all one means by the concept, then it serves no useful end.<sup>24</sup> As Outram herself concludes,

The chapter has maybe implied that, in the end, the term ‘the Enlightenment’ has ceased to have much meaning. A more positive reaction might be to think of the Enlightenment not as an expression which has failed to encompass a complex historical reality, but rather as a capsule containing sets of debates which appear to be characteristic of the way in which ideas and opinions interacted with society and politics.<sup>25</sup>

Outram understands the danger of eviscerating the concept of Enlightenment but might fail to fully apply the lesson. If the Enlightenment is a capsule containing sets of debates, then one must provide a clear conception of the factors that *make* those debates enlightened (or not). Otherwise, the analysis is not productive.

Consider some alternative conceptions of the Enlightenment. On the more traditional side, Nicholas Capaldi distinguishes the Enlightenment from other ages in virtue of an emphasis on social reform and the promotion of the ‘science of man’, where the unifying theme is the knowability of the world.<sup>26</sup> Hayden White, in his introduction to Robert Anchor’s work on the Enlightenment,

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22 Sorkin, p. 16. Cf. Constance Furey, *Erasmus, Contarini, and the Religious Republic of Letters* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009) and Joan-Pau Rubiés (ed.), *The Jesuits and the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019). For one recent broader discussion of the republic of letters, see Marc Fumaroli, *The Republic of Letters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

23 Sorkin, p. 18.

24 Outram, p. 6.

25 Outram, p. 8.

26 Nicholas Capaldi (ed.), *The Spirit of Western Civilization: The Enlightenment* (New York: Putnam, 1967), pp. 7–24.



characterizes the Enlightenment attitude as ‘a dedication to human reason, science, and education as the best means of building a stable society of free men on earth’.<sup>27</sup> One might complain that these accounts are too narrow, but they have the virtue of being reasonably clear and falsifiable. More recently, Jonathan Israel split the Enlightenment into ‘moderate’ and ‘radical’ versions, but both are surprisingly consistent with one another. The moderate Enlightenment ‘aspired to conquer ignorance and superstition, establish toleration, and revolutionize ideas’, where the radical Enlightenment ‘sought to sweep away existing structures entirely, rejecting the Creation as traditionally understood in Judeo-Christian civilization [...] scorning all forms of ecclesiastical authority’.<sup>28</sup> Both of Israel’s Enlightenments target principled toleration and loft science and reason.

Given these alternatives, the point is that simply labelling individuals or discussions as enlightened or not is insufficient. Asking whether Nicolas Gilbert (1750–80) should be described as a *sans-culotte* differs from asking whether another individual should be termed a member of the Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland. For the latter, inclusion is determined exclusively by the ideas and beliefs held, including claims advanced by the person. That in turn entails that one to have a sense of what ideas qualified as enlightened. There is a conceptual limit to the usefulness of the desire to be increasingly inclusive in one’s historical accounts.

To return to Sorkin’s characteristics of religious enlightenment, the initial two he discusses are unsurprisingly similar to the traditional account associated with Kant. Those two can be summarized as reasonableness in religion and a defence of principled religious toleration. As Sorkin puts it, ‘The religious Enlightenment constituted a conscious search for a middle way between extremes’.<sup>29</sup> Religious enlighteners constructed and defended accounts of ‘reasonable’ belief. He quotes Joseph Eybel, an Austrian Catholic, as an exemplar of such a person, who defines his ideal reader as a ‘reasonable and well-instructed Christian’.<sup>30</sup> The prevalence of ‘reasonable’ language is noteworthy. Theists and sceptics alike in the eighteenth century were creating a mainstream concept of religious toleration, although this concept varied and had limits. John Locke, for one famous instance, advocated religious toleration but did not extend it to atheists (whose oaths could not be trusted) or Catholics (whose loyalty to the Pope could undermine oaths made to the state).<sup>31</sup>

27 Hadyn White, editor’s introduction in Robert Anchor, *The Enlightenment Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), p. ix.

28 Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 11.

29 Sorkin, p. 11.

30 Sorkin, p. 11, quoted from Joseph Eybal, *Was ist der Pabst?* (Vienna, 1782), p. 6.

31 ‘Lastly, Those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the Being of a God. Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist.’ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, ed. by James Tully (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), p. 51.

The point to note is that Catholics could be enlightened thinkers. That seems entirely right and is a claim this essay seeks to defend. We need, however, a contrast class that clearly signals what is *excluded* by the concept ‘enlightened’ such that its invocation is meaningful. If it turns out that everyone is enlightened, then effectively no one is. I am *not* arguing for ‘one true’ conception of *the* Enlightenment. There might well be, as Sorkin and others claim, a spectrum of views and ideas that jointly help characterize an intellectual movement.<sup>32</sup> Yet this possibility does not remove the demand for conceptual clarity or for careful rigour in how we choose to label ideas, periods, and persons.

And so, what of the national context of Ireland in the eighteenth century? If we return to Lehner and Printy’s narrower conception of the Enlightenment as ‘reform and renewal’ in the Church, do we find evidence of a widespread movement amongst *Irish* Catholics to reform and renew the Church? The short answer is no, even though there is evidence that such movements existed elsewhere.<sup>33</sup> The complete answer requires some analysis of particular cases. It is worth emphasizing, however, before we turn to some examples, just how nebulous the concept of a Catholic Enlightenment can be. For instance, Lehner writes ‘The Catholic Enlightenment had an ambivalent dynamic. On the one hand, it was a cosmopolitan force while on the other, it was national. It was also both radical and conservative’.<sup>34</sup> What I am suggesting is that this ‘ambivalent dynamic’ demands a more careful application of the concept in the first place. If we want to preserve a meaningful sense of term ‘Catholic Enlightenment’ we need to be better about its conceptual outlines.

### The Irish Context

Several authors have argued that Ireland should be included in the list of nations that participated in a *Catholic* Enlightenment movement.<sup>35</sup> We now, however,

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For further discussion of limits to toleration in Locke see John Marshall, *John Locke, Toleration and Early Enlightenment Culture*, esp. pp. 596 and 690–91, Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 135–63 and David Lorenz, ‘Tradition and Prudence in Locke’s Exceptions to Toleration’, *American Journal of Political Science*, 47 (2003), 248–58.

32 See Sorkin, pp. 19–20 and Outram, pp. 1–10. Compare Roy Porter, who writes that ‘[r]ecent scholarship has been in a disaggregating mood’, favouring pluralism over essentialism when it comes to the Enlightenment. Roy Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World: The Untold Story of the British Enlightenment* (New York: Norton, 2000), p. 11.

33 See Burson and Lehner, *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe*, which is a rich treasure trove of works great and small from Catholic thinkers of the period from across Europe.

34 Lehner, ‘What is “Catholic Enlightenment”?’ p. 172.

35 To my knowledge, no scholar denies that there was an Irish Enlightenment. Figures such as Berkeley, King, Madden, Swift, and many others seem to be clear examples. These figures, however, were dominantly Protestant (mainly Anglican).

have a better sense of what to look for when evaluating these claims. On the one hand, the claims cannot be so broad as to turn the term ‘Enlightenment’ into something trivial. On the other, given our narrower conception of the Catholic Enlightenment as being concerned for renewal and reform in the Church, the accounts of our authors must actually fit into this new conception of the Catholic Enlightenment. At the risk of some odious repetition, it is worth reminding ourselves that the specific examples are just exemplars meant to demonstrate a larger point about how we use concepts. Similarly, the particular examples I invoke in the case of Ireland specifically are simply meant to be a representative sample and not an exhaustive compendium. Thus, one might legitimately argue that there is another intellectual movement afoot in Ireland, perhaps inspired by the times, that is consonant with the Enlightenment. I think that might well be true (although such claims lie outside the scope of the present endeavour). But if so, then we need to stake out the conceptual territory carefully and not conflate such concepts with others that are already relatively well defined. One might wonder, for instance, why Lehner and others insist on calling the reform movement in the Church a Catholic *Enlightenment* in the first place. The moniker of a Catholic reform movement seems more apt. And clearly Lehner and others struggle with fitting the subjects of their analysis into the larger intellectual movement. Here are Lehner and Printy in the introduction to their *Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe*:

The term Catholic Enlightenment is a heuristic concept that describes the diverse phenomenon that mainly took hold of Catholic intellectuals in the 18th century and early 19th century. It combines a multitude of different strands of thought and a variety of projects that attempted to renew and reform Catholicism in the 18th century.<sup>36</sup>

They even go on to quote Mario Rosa, who describes the Catholic Enlightenment as ‘a composite and also a contradictory movement characterized by a dual tension: cultural dynamism and a commitment to apologetics, or defense of the faith’.<sup>37</sup> If the movement is so contradictory and composite that no clear concept can be picked out, why would one attempt to do so anyway? Perhaps the heterogeneity in the concept signals a problem with the application of the concept in the first place. I suggest that when applied to Ireland, this is precisely the case.

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36 Ulrich Lehner and Michael Printy, *Companion to the Catholic Enlightenment in Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), p. 2.

37 Mario Rosa, ‘Roman Catholicism’, in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, 3, ed. by Alan Charles Kors (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 468–72. Cited in Lehner and Printy, pp. 2–3.

Part of the difficulty applying the concept of enlightenment to Ireland is that after the decisive Williamite victory at the Battle of Aughrim in 1691, the destruction of Catholic political authority on the island deeply influenced virtually every aspect of life there. Ireland was a religious and intellectual battleground of sorts for the Catholic Church, which actively sought to promote it as a bastion of religious orthodoxy in the face of heretical invaders.<sup>38</sup> The ascension of the Catholic monarch James II in 1685 seemed to resolve the conflict between loyalty to church and crown for the Irish, but it quickly became apparent that, even for James, he was the king of England first. It was his administration, for instance, that passed the law (I James II, c.17) prohibiting free, direct trade between Ireland and the other English colonies. Even having a Catholic monarch was not sufficient to resolve the deeper political and social difficulties Ireland faced. In the light of these circumstances, I suggest that it is at least prudent when analysing the intellectual movement to consider the possibility that there are other political influences at work when considering the case of Ireland.

So let us proceed by examining just a few of the individuals identified as allegedly clear examples of Catholic Enlightenment figures in Ireland. Thomas O'Connor argues that Luke Joseph Hooke (1714–96), an Irish-born priest, theologian, and historian, is a clear example of an Irish Catholic Enlightenment figure. Hooke's claim to the Enlightenment rests primarily on the assertion that he 'adroitly wove Newton and Locke into his theological courses'.<sup>39</sup> Hooke attempted to demonstrate the compatibility between Catholic religious doctrine and the increasingly compelling upshots of rationalist enlightenment philosophy. He appealed to intellectual elites, urging them to embrace advances in mathematics, science, and economics, and to apply them within the Catholic framework. There is little doubt that Hooke can be cast rightfully as an intellectual reformer of sorts within the Catholic Church. Although I doubt that this alone makes him a high Enlightenment figure, the point turns out to be moot. For, as with many Irish Catholic intellectuals in the eighteenth and previous centuries, he left Ireland in 1734 at a young age (twenty) and never returned. He spent virtually his entire career in Paris at the Sorbonne engaging continental scholars. Furthermore, as O'Connor himself notes, the possibility of his returning to Ireland was 'never [...] seriously considered'.<sup>40</sup> Part of the reason Hooke left Ireland, of course, is that acquiring a proper advanced education was difficult for Catholics in Ireland. It is worth noting that his academic position at the Sorbonne was traditionally

38 See Vincent Morley, *The Popular Mind in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), pp. 31ff.

39 Thomas O'Connor, 'Luke Joseph Hooke', in Burson and Lehner, *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe*, pp. 371–87, esp. p. 374.

40 O'Connor, p. 373.

held by Irish ex-patriots. He replaced the Irish-born James Wogan (d. 1742) as professor of theology. I thus must agree with O'Connor when he concludes, 'the rise of nationalism, particularly in its more romantic incarnations, effectively stifled the influence of his intellectual current on the Catholic fringes, especially in Ireland'.<sup>41</sup> But he understates the point. The rise of Irish nationalism stifled – or rather shaped – *most* Catholic intellectual currents in Ireland as the century progressed. As the Irish became separatist, issues of dogma took a back seat to issues of political and social expediency.

There was, of course, reform thinking in Catholic circles in Ireland; but those intellectual movements do not easily fit underneath the moniker of *enlightened* views. James Livesey, for instance, adroitly discusses many such currents in Catholic Ireland, but even his analysis largely confirms my own here. In his chapter focusing on Catholic authorities from *Civil Society and Empire* Livesey concludes:

Irish Catholics and Protestants constructed ideals for a civic space using very different genealogies [...]. Catholic thinkers [in Ireland] were ultimately in the debt of French interpreters of the interior experience of the presence of God, and they trusted that real justice would be made apparent through the will of God acting in history.<sup>42</sup>

Whatever the reforms and adaptations advanced, ones based largely on the 'interior experience of the presence of God' does not fit well with traditional conceptions of enlightenment thinking.

Ought we, generally speaking, consider the activities of Irish expatriates as evidence of an Irish intellectual movement? One might, but associating such activities with Ireland stretches the clarity of the concept of a Catholic Irish Enlightenment worryingly thin. Presumably, one would look to reinforce the concept by the Irish who emigrated to the American colonies in the eighteenth century as well, yet we do not tend to find that.<sup>43</sup> Doing so also undermines the general historical trend to understand enlightenment movements as national movements circumscribed by political and national boundaries. In other words,

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41 O'Connor, p. 386.

42 James Livesey, *Civil Society and Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), p. 127.

43 I am not aware of any Irish émigré to America who is claimed as a member of the Irish Enlightenment. Vincent Morley interestingly notes that although the Irish in Ireland celebrated the American defeats of the British during the 1770s, they virtually never mention the ideals of the American revolution. Washington and Arnold appear in Irish songs, but Adams, Hancock, and Jefferson do not. Irish aims were more politically pedestrian: simple legislative independence from England. After the defeat of the English in America in 1781, that goal was quickly realized. Morley, p. 186, and see also pp. 187–98.

if one relaxes the requirements to include anyone Irish – or perhaps claiming any Irish ancestry – then the concept becomes increasingly vague and so inclusive as to lose credibility as a useful heuristic for understanding the political and intellectual development of the century.<sup>44</sup>

Consider another candidate for the Catholic Enlightenment: Charles O’Conor. Livesey writes:

The O’Conors formed one node in a cosmopolitan Catholic current of Enlightenment that included other family networks such as the Nugents..., the Taafes..., and the Hookes... [AQ2] What I think has not been noticed is how cosmopolitan this variant of Irish Catholic Enlightenment claimed to be.<sup>45</sup>

In his discussion of Charles O’Conor (the younger), Livesey advances roughly three lines of analysis to suggest that O’Conor was an Enlightenment figure. First, he corresponded with allegedly recognized Enlightenment figures like Samuel Johnson.<sup>46</sup> Second, he was interested in naturalism and Irish national history. Third, he had access to what Livesey calls ‘the networks of Enlightenment sociability’.<sup>47</sup>

I have no concerns about the scholarship, which is excellent. My worries are about the conceptual assumptions that underlie the analysis. Was O’Conor a Catholic Enlightenment figure? Well, if by that concept we mean that he was vigorously engaged in the *enlightened* reform and renewal of the Catholic Church – the conception provided to us by Lehner and others – then Livesey gives us no evidence that O’Conor was *that kind* of Catholic enlightened reformer (which is not to say that there were other kinds of reform-mindedness). The opposite extreme is equally implausible. O’Conor does not endorse the primacy of reason over faith or over the traditions of the Church. He does not

44 Francis Hutcheson, for instance, was born in Ireland and, despite having left Ireland to get an education in Glasgow, taught in Dublin for a decade before returning to Glasgow. While in Dublin he published several works. Yet he is generally placed in the Scottish Enlightenment, perhaps because most of his influence on others (Hume, Smith) occurred in Scotland. He was not, of course, Catholic, but he constitutes an example of how location can alter how we understand and classify historical figures.

45 James Livesey, ‘The Fall of the Catholic Cosmopolitan: Charles O’Conor and the Catholic Debate on the Act of Union’, *Britain and the World*, 6 (2013), 152–70, esp. pp. 155–56.

46 Samuel Johnson is a curious choice, since some scholars argue that Johnson is an archetypal anti-Enlightenment figure. However, since the issue is tangential to my main argument, I set the potential concern aside. For an example of someone arguing that Johnson *should* be considered an Enlightenment figure, see John Canon, *Samuel Johnson and the Politics of Hanoverian England* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1995), esp. Chapter 6, ‘Johnson and Enlightenment’.

47 Livesey, ‘The Fall of the Catholic Cosmopolitan’, p. 158.

suggest the plausibility of deism or seek to undermine the authority of religious dogma. He does not argue for the primacy of individual rights against an established monarchy. In short, there is no clear sense as to what it means to attribute the moniker 'enlightened' to O'Connor.

It is clear, nonetheless, that O'Connor brings to Ireland wide-ranging interests and an able mind. What these interests are, however, do not strike one as obviously Enlightenment themes. Instead, I argue that they are best understood in the narrower context of Irish political subordination. Livesey clearly points out that O'Connor is eager to demonstrate both that Catholicism is compatible with loyalty to the British crown and that Irish Catholics were not systematically hostile to that same authority.<sup>48</sup> O'Connor was keenly interested in promoting religious toleration. Yet is that enough to say that he was therefore an Enlightenment figure? I am sceptical. One can be interested in tolerance for many reasons. Discussion of religious toleration in eighteenth-century Ireland was closely tied to other debates concerned with improving the civil and political rights of Catholics in Ireland generally. Catholics in Ireland were second-class subjects of an occupying empire. Leading up to the end of the century, events like the formation of the United Irishmen, the debate about union with England, and the rebellion of 1798 suggest that we might be too hasty in labelling certain Irish Catholics as enlightened simply because they called for toleration.

Consider one of the arguments Livesey himself discusses that was employed by the O'Conors and other Catholic thinkers in Ireland. The idea was that Irish Catholics should work towards promoting British civilization because the nature of British society was such that it would eventually erode the foundations of competing religions. In short, Protestant British imperialism was culturally self-defeating. As Livesey writes:

Irish Catholic thinkers took this one step further by arguing that British civilization would eventually promote rather than oppose Catholicism. Read from this perspective the British Reformation was providential since it allowed political liberty to be identified and promoted a purified Catholicism, cleared of political ambition.<sup>49</sup>

To support this reading, he quotes from a letter penned by O'Connor himself in 1786.

Arianism is at present making a progress in England; Deism is making a great noise, and the established religion is only preserved by exterior forms, and the acts of parliament on which it was established. This Anarchy of

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48 Livesey, 'The Fall of the Catholic Cosmopolitan', pp. 160–61.

49 Livesey, 'The Fall of the Catholic Cosmopolitan', p. 160.

Religion is so great, that the late protestant Bishop Berkeley, declared it must end in Popery, and I trust that his prediction will be verified, if zeal and learning unite on the part of our English and Irish ecclesiastics.<sup>50</sup>

These are manifestly *not* the words of a high Enlightenment thinker pursuing the principled cause of religious toleration, nor are they the words of a pious Catholic seeking principled reform in his own church. These are the words of an oppressed Irishman seeking political and religious breathing room in an occupied nation. Promoting conciliation between Catholic Ireland and the British government is a means to the end of emancipating Catholics, not a means to the goal of an enlightened and tolerant society (even if the production of such a society might be a side effect). That is, although some of the *words* appear similar – words like ‘toleration’ and ‘reason’ and so on – the meanings are different because of the particular historical situation.

In general, one finds that Catholics in Ireland, as well as Catholics representing Irish interests overseas, were frequently straightforward opponents of the Enlightenment largely as a result of the political and religious oppression characteristic of the time.<sup>51</sup> The early nineteenth-century Catholic Bishop John Milner (Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District 1803–26) represents the perspective of many period Catholics on the Enlightenment, describing it as ‘that Anti-Christian conspiracy on the continent’.<sup>52</sup> To be fair, many traditional Enlightenment thinkers were virulently anti-Catholic, which is evident in the works of Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot, and D’Alembert. In their writings, the teachings, organization, and claims of the Catholic Church were mercilessly parodied and pilloried and the Church itself was cast as the largest single obstacle to the spread of enlightened ideas.<sup>53</sup>

Such concerns are not new to scholars of the Enlightenment, as evidenced by Derek Beales in his review of *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe: A Transnational History*. He writes: ‘The concept of a “Catholic Enlightenment” or “Enlightened Catholicism” can easily seem an absurdity, especially given the

50 Quoted from Livesey, ‘The Fall of the Catholic Cosmopolitan’, p. 161. See Huntington Library, STO 889, Charles O’Conor to Charles O’Kelly, Belangare, 18 Aug. 1786.

51 For a brief description of Ireland’s unusual situation during the period, see Ulrich Im Hof, *The Enlightenment*, trans. by William Yuill (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1994), esp. pp. 35–44.

52 J[ohn] M[ilner], *The End of Religious Controversy: In a Friendly Correspondence between a Religious Society of Protestants and a Roman Catholic Divine...* 5th ed. (London: Keating and Brown, 1824), p. ii, quoted in C. D. A. Leighton, ‘John Milner and the Orthodox Cause’, *Journal of Religious History*, 32 (Sep. 2008), 345–60 (p. 349).

53 Thomas Bartlett, ‘The Catholic Question in the Eighteenth Century’, *History Ireland*, 1 (Spring 1993), <https://www.historyireland.com/18th-19th-century-history/the-catholic-question-in-the-eighteenth-century-11/> [accessed 1 July 2019].



ridicule to which the literal Bible story and the pronouncements of the popes were subjected by leaders of the Enlightenment in Catholic countries such as Voltaire'.<sup>54</sup> Yet I submit that there need be no absurdity in the concept of a Catholic Enlightenment, provided that the concept is kept clear and not abused through over-application. Carving out a subset of Catholic thinkers who emphasized renewal and reform as Lehner and Printy do is appropriate and useful. That concept, however, needs to be kept clean and narrow. Not just any reform movement within the church counts. The particular figures lofted as exemplars of the Irish Catholic Enlightenment seem to fall outside of the appropriately narrowed conception (renewal and reform with an eye to toleration, reason, etc.) without some contortion in the analysis. Furthermore, a plausible rival explanation exists for figures engaged in discussions of toleration and conscience that had little to do with any commitment to the principles and ideals of the Enlightenment.

## **Brown's Irish Enlightenment**

For further evidence of my thesis, a careful study of Michael Brown's recent impressive and comprehensive work on the Irish Enlightenment is warranted. The first thing one notes about Brown's discussion of the Enlightenment is that he takes care to note that the Enlightenment 'had a shaping influence on all the Christian confessions in Ireland'.<sup>55</sup> To argue that the Enlightenment influenced Catholic thought is a rather weak (even if true) claim. But Brown does better than this claim. In his introductory chapter, he characterizes what he calls a 'spectrum of Enlightenment thought'.<sup>56</sup> The spectrum concerns themes that are familiar. He starts with the spread of the notion of 'improvement', whether that be in public-spirited associations or in a renewed political commitment to the well-being of the citizenry. To provide a needed contrast class to give clarity to the idea of the Enlightenment, Brown juxtaposes Enlightenment thinkers with those of the seventeenth century who were bound to traditional authorities. He rightly emphasizes the differing forms of reason employed (intuitive, universal, and empirical) while noting that they all take the individual to be the unit of analysis – the conceptual starting point, as it were.<sup>57</sup> In short, Brown's basic conception of the Enlightenment is, more or less, the traditional one discussed above.

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54 Derek Beales. Review of *Enlightenment and Catholicism in Europe: A Transnational History*. *The Catholic Historical Review*, 100 (Autumn 2014), 823–24.

55 Brown, p. 23.

56 Brown, p. 9. Compare to Sorkin, p. 19.

57 Brown, p. 8.

Brown's traditional understanding of the Enlightenment is evident in Brown's elegant summary of his position on the Presbyterian Enlightenment. He explains that the sphere of faith, defined, guarded, and imposed by the church authorities through the General Synod of Ulster, was challenged by an emergent rationalism and an emphasis on moral autonomy, which subscribers associated with the heterodoxy and anarchy of free thought. At the heart of that confrontation was the question of human capacity. In their optimism about human endeavour, the non-subscribers aligned themselves with the central philosophical assumption underpinning the rationalist movement inside the European Enlightenment: that man was a moral agent, and that the good life could be discerned by his intelligence.<sup>58</sup>

Note the features that characterize the essentially Protestant strands of thought in Ireland: the challenge to traditional (religious) authority, the individual as the locus of reason, and an implicit scepticism married with optimism about human endeavour. To Brown's credit, the chapter that concludes with this pronouncement brims with examples that show precisely that kind of thought in Ireland. Much the same can be said about his chapter concerned with Anglican thought in Ireland. Overall, the evidence that a good number of Protestant Irishmen were Enlightenment figures is compelling.

When we turn to the Catholic Enlightenment, however, we find a rather different kind of analysis. Brown writes at the start of the chapter, 'In contrast to the Anglican community, the consequence of the conflict [of the War of the Two Kings, 1688–91] was an immense psychological pressure caused by military defeat and cultural repression [...]. The response, paradoxically, was to fall back on traditional verities'.<sup>59</sup> That pronouncement seems exactly right. The Irish Catholic community remained deeply committed to the scholastic method, historical authority, and traditional forms of cultural leadership. So then one wonders why anyone would go forward anyway and call the Catholic communities in Ireland 'enlightened' in the present sense of the word. To say that Catholics often used smart tactics to achieve accommodation with their Anglican rulers or found ways to undermine British authority does them no discredit. But it does not make them Enlightenment thinkers.

Imagine an eighteenth-century Irishman: he is Catholic, devoted to the traditions of the Church, and pragmatically bound to a life that mirrors the lives of his ancestors. He now finds himself oppressed under the rule of a foreign power that threatens his well-being by the very fact that he was reared Catholic. He now yearns to find ways to live and live well. He might, of course, abandon

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58 Brown, p. 59.

59 Brown, p. 106.

Catholicism and convert – that would be one way to advance his cause. In that eventuality, however, it would be difficult to defend the claim that he remained a Catholic thinker. Instead, he seeks to reconcile his Catholicism and traditional values with the new political state of affairs. He advocates for tolerance in civil society, by which he means tolerance to allow Catholics to worship as they please. That form of tolerance does not imply that rival faiths might be right (or even that non-Catholics might avoid terrible fates in the afterlife). And, given the opportunity to impose Catholicism on others, he would likely be glad to do so. To make life better, he also calls for reforms within the Church to promote its appeal to the new generation in Ireland. Some masses might be said in the Irish language, or perhaps curbing some of the excesses in the Church hierarchy might make the Church seem more welcoming. He writes poetry and publishes literary pieces extolling the virtues of reflective Catholics. There are many ways that the Church might be renewed or reformed from the perspective of a devout Catholic. To now call this Irishman an Enlightenment thinker, however, is to remove the basic sense of the term.

Brown spends most of the chapter on the Catholic Enlightenment providing an admirable history of the Irish Catholics, including their literature and poetry. One important figure is Michael Moore, an Irish seminarian who spent most of his time in France defending scholasticism against Cartesian thought and similar challenges.<sup>60</sup> To be clear, Brown does not paint Moore as an Enlightenment figure. If anything, Moore represents the dominant strains of Catholic thought in Ireland at the time. Moore submits himself to the absolute authority of the Catholic Church and, Brown sagely notes, ‘He was typical of the majority of Catholic clerics in and from Ireland and was similar in kind to the Irish-language poets who looked to the old nobility to defend their position’.<sup>61</sup> So if Moore constitutes the clear contrast class to the Catholic Enlightenment, where are the Enlightenment Irish Catholics?

The first example that Brown has to offer of an Enlightenment Catholic is the Dublin priest Cornelius Nary. Even here, however, Brown’s tone is rather modest. He does not say that Nary is an example of the Catholic Enlightenment; he says that Nary is the ‘most striking figure to emerge in Catholic Ireland’ who ‘advocated a rapprochement with Anglican authority’.<sup>62</sup> Nary did so by merging an empiricist methodology with his scholasticism. ‘In doing so, Nary appropriated aspects of the Enlightenment project’.<sup>63</sup> Yet the claim is curiously weak as evidence that Nary is an Enlightenment figure. Is Nary’s ‘appropriation’

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60 Brown, pp. 125–58.

61 Brown, p. 128.

62 Brown, pp. 128–29.

63 Brown, p. 130.

of an empiricist methodology evidence that there was a Catholic Enlightenment in any meaningful sense? We are not told and I struggle to see how given Nary's fundamental positions. To say that one is influenced by an idea included within an intellectual movement is not the same thing as being a proponent of that movement in any meaningful sense.

Brown plausibly attributes the 1724 pamphlet *Case of the Roman Catholics of Ireland* to Nary. For the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that the attribution is correct. In the pamphlet, which was prompted by the parliamentary proposal to make the saying of Mass subject to prosecution for treason, Nary attacks the entire penal system and the oath of loyalty in particular. Basically, Nary argues that the extant system is inconsistent with the Articles of Limerick. This tension in turn undermines public trust and damages the traditional social structure. These upshots are, to be certain, 'empirical' in the sense of empirical observations. But they are nonetheless adduced in the service of traditional authority. The pamphlet defends the decency of the Catholic community and urges religious tolerance. But, as was the case with Charles O'Connor, these are not the words of a priest defending religious tolerance on principle. Nary defends traditional authority and urges Catholics to recognize and obey the new government as a legitimate authority so that the government would accept them as loyal subjects. Nary later drafted a sample oath of allegiance to George II that he believed would satisfy both Catholics and the crown. In short, although Nary might be an important historical figure in Ireland, there is as little case to be made that he represents the Catholic Enlightenment as Moore does.

The best example we are given of a Catholic Enlightenment figure based in Ireland is that of Bernard O'Connor (1666–98), a French-educated medic who spent time at the royal court in Poland. Before we start, one might immediately worry about the example on the grounds that O'Connor converted to Anglicanism in London in 1695 and changed his name to Connor to make it less Irish sounding.<sup>64</sup> In his publications, Connor explicitly defends the authority of individual reason, but when doing so he is not speaking as a Catholic. In fact, Connor spent considerable energy venting his anti-Catholic views. As a part of the analysis, Brown notes that Connor's anti-clericalism is tied to his commitment to empirical method and individual reason. He reproduces a passage penned by Connor describing an exorcism in Rome. A person was having convulsions and the priests devoutly tried to 'fright the pretended devil

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64 Brown, p. 148. O'Connor's name change to Connor admittedly might have been due in part to his desire to publish his medical works and gain greater access to England's intellectual circles. He was made a fellow of the Royal Society in late 1695 and admitted to a licentiate of the College of Physicians in 1696.

out of him' but Connor thought the matter an entirely natural affair.<sup>65</sup> All of this suggests that Connor might have had Enlightenment sympathies in terms of being sceptical about authority and employing a more empirical method, but it also suggests that Connor was no *Catholic* Enlightenment figure.<sup>66</sup> His adherence to the Enlightenment project and his 'declaration of intellectual independence' seem more tied to his rejection of Catholic traditions than his actually being a Catholic.<sup>67</sup>

In general, Brown's analysis is restrained and fairly cautious when it comes to making pronouncements about a Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland. In fact, many of his claims positively work in the opposite direction. When considering the work of Irish Jansenists, Brown cautions against thinking of them as Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>68</sup> Brown concludes the chapter with a characteristic hesitancy that runs throughout the chapter, noting, 'The Enlightenment in Catholic Ireland had its limits'.<sup>69</sup> Instead of lofting a list of Catholic thinkers, Brown concludes by making a case for a Catholic Enlightenment by association, merely mentioning the names of Nary, Moore, and Connor alongside those of Berkeley, Abernethy, Swift, and other Protestants.

I fear that the pressure to include a distinctive Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland might well have been too great. Brown's monograph is an excellent treatment generally of the Irish Enlightenment, but it simply does not provide the evidence – historically or conceptually – for the supposition that there was a distinctive Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland. If one imagines the book without the entire chapter on the Catholic Enlightenment, it is not seriously diminished as a work on the Enlightenment. That suggests that the idea of such a distinctive intellectual movement in Ireland does relatively little work. Perhaps a better option would have been a chapter discussing the *influence* of the Enlightenment on Catholic Ireland.

At this point all that I have done is engage a few select examples of scholars asserting claims about a Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland without a reflectively clear concept of the same. If we employ a narrow, traditional concept, then it seems not to apply to Irish Catholic thinkers. If we broaden the concept and make it widely inclusive, then we have no sense of what it means to be an

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65 Bernard Connor, *The History of Poland in Several Letters to Persons of Quality*, 2 vols (London 1698), I, pp. 317–18, in Brown, p. 154.

66 Brown makes prominent note of Connor's anti-Catholicism: see Brown, pp. 54–56. Brown also recounts the story of Connor's alleged deathbed conversion to Catholicism. Even if the story is true, it does little to strengthen the case that Connor is an example of the Catholic Enlightenment.

67 Brown, p. 155.

68 Brown, p. 147.

69 Brown, p. 156.

Enlightenment thinker; the concept fails to exclude anything and hence becomes essentially without meaning.

### Objections Considered

One might ignore my opening remarks that I am not defending a particular conception but instead advancing a general conceptual point, and protest that my pressing for a narrower definition of enlightenment is overly strict. In essence, employing something like the Kantian conception of enlightenment or restricting a sense of Catholic enlightenment [AQ3] to principled toleration and reform simply excludes many Irish thinkers from being members of the Enlightenment. One might charge me with being unduly inflexible. But the principled and strict use of concepts is exactly the point. One of the ‘costs’ of having and employing well-defined concepts is that some things (figures, movements) will per force be excluded. Such a position is not inflexibility; it is a requirement for intelligibility. I am not arguing that one necessarily ought to employ Kant’s particular understanding of the Enlightenment. Others might be available. Yet whatever that concept is, it needs to be clear and well constrained in order to have explanatory power. If everyone in Ireland who mentioned the word ‘toleration’ qualified as an enlightened thinker, then the island in the eighteenth century was so filled with enlightened individuals that there is little gained by pointing that out in the first place.

One might well be able to articulate a concept that picks out other forms of intellectual innovation in Ireland. Perhaps one might lay out a sense of ‘enlightened political economy in Ireland’ characterizing a group of thinkers that emphasize free trade, resist mercantilist thought, seek to develop the whole population, and more.<sup>70</sup> I am confident that such is a useful and meaningful concept and one might wish to include that as a part of the larger Enlightenment. That possibility, however, does not undermine my thesis; it strengthens it. My argument is that there is a tendency to attach particular analyses to the moniker of the Enlightenment without carefully considering the concept actually employed. Nothing prevents quality work from being done by wielding a suitably refined or narrowed concept. But if there is a dominant sense of what enlightenment [AQ5] ideals include, then at some point we need to delineate the boundaries of that concept to retain its usefulness.

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<sup>70</sup> For an introduction to the innovative Irish reformers of political economy see James Livesey, ‘A Kingdom of Cosmopolitan Improvers: The Dublin Society, 1731–1798’, in *The Rise of Economic Societies in the Eighteenth Century: Patriotic Reform in Europe and North America*, ed. by Koen Stapelbroek and Jani Marjanen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012). [AQ4] Note that virtually all of the main figures in this story of political economy in eighteenth-century Ireland (Dobbs, Madden, Berkeley, etc.) were not Catholic.

Another concern some might voice is that an application of these principles inappropriately excludes some Irish figures who are otherwise widely considered to be enlightened thinkers. For instance, noting (in the Kantian spirit) that enlightened thinkers tend to replace tradition with the principled use of reason might be used as an argument that George Berkeley and William King were not Enlightenment figures because of their defence of passive obedience and social trust. In the particular cases of Berkeley and King I find this charge unpersuasive; Berkeley's argument in *Passive Obedience* is a philosophical argument that employs religious premises.<sup>71</sup> I think it is best understood as a clear case of supplementing religious positions with appeals to reason. But set that point aside. Part of the virtue of having clear concepts is that it allows scholars to meaningfully engage in precisely such discussions and have the hope of resolving those disputes. Might one argue that Berkeley was perhaps less of an enlightened figure than has otherwise been supposed? Perhaps so. But to properly engage that charge we need a conception of what it means to be enlightened. If we blithely extend the concept to embrace individuals we simply wish to include, there is not much point in discussing the matter in the first place and little to be learned by applying the moniker 'enlightened'.

One might additionally accept my call for a more disciplined approach to our use of concepts and then seek to turn it against me. For instance, I argue that there is no meaningful sense of a Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland based on commonly used conceptions of the Enlightenment, whether that be the broad concept invoked by Kant, or narrower ones applied to religion as advanced by Lehner and Sorokin. It might be alleged, however, that this is inappropriate on several grounds. First, a great many Irish Catholic thinkers lived and operated abroad. There were even Irish colleges in Paris, Rome, and Louvain. Second, some Irish thinkers were engaged in Enlightenment circles around Europe. One might seek to use the prominent example of Olga Tsapina's work on Charles O'Connor.<sup>72</sup>

I do not deny that there were learned Irish men of the period, both in and outside of Ireland. If it were not possible to find evidence that might falsify my thesis then I would be guilty of the exact error I am trying to diagnose. It might well be that there are individuals who fit the enlightened mould that I have overlooked or of which I am unaware. I welcome work on those individuals and intellectual movements. But I am not persuaded that, in these two cases, my thesis is actually undermined.

71 George Berkeley, *Passive Obedience*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. by A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, vol. 6 (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1953 [1712]), pp. 15–46.

72 Olga Tsapina, "'With Every Wish to Reconcile': *The Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Charles O'Connor of Belangre* (1796) and Religious Enlightenment in Ireland", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 45 (2012), 409–22.

The first case depends, naturally, on what one *means* by a Catholic Enlightenment *in Ireland*. Of course, there were a great many bright Irish thinkers scattered across Europe; that is a part of my argument. The political and economic conditions in Ireland forced many of Ireland's best and brightest to pursue their interests elsewhere. I am not denying that there were enlightened Irish; I am denying that any meaningful sense of a Catholic Enlightenment was present *in* eighteenth-century Ireland. It would be odd indeed to discuss the Scottish Enlightenment and only (or dominantly) refer to Scots living on the European continent far away from Scotland. The second case makes a similar error. Arguing that the concept of a Catholic national Enlightenment does not apply to Ireland does not imply that the work of Irish thinkers was ignored by Enlightenment figures elsewhere. In the case of Tsapina's discussion of Charles O'Connor, her own analysis of the *Memoirs* emphasizes that the book 'celebrates the legacy of Charles O'Connor of Ballingare as one of political moderation and national unity'.<sup>73</sup> I accept the claim. But as I note above, this is more suggestive of an individual operating within certain political and economic realities than it is of someone who is clearly an 'enlightened' thinker. She even concludes at one point that 'O'Connor's book, like many other contemporary writings created in this explosive atmosphere, is impossible to categorize as either progressive, reactionary, revolutionary, conservative, Enlightenment, or Counter-Enlightenment'.<sup>74</sup> I agree entirely; if O'Connor's work *cannot* be properly categorized as Enlightenment, then don't categorize it as such. And Tsapina appropriately refrains from hanging her analysis on this 'elusive' concept, noting a concern similar to the one voiced here about the inflation of the concept of Enlightenment.<sup>75</sup>

### A Warning to Conceptual Care

As it turns out, most of the alleged exemplars of the Irish Catholic Enlightenment are individuals who argued for political and religious toleration. As such, they are not defenders of the principles of the Enlightenment, at least not in any clear sense typically associated with the term. We lump these figures in that category only at the risk of eviscerating the explanatory power of the concept of Enlightenment. I suggest that it is an error to rush to apply vague or ill-considered concepts in intellectual history without a careful consideration of those concepts and the context in which we seek to apply them. There is a danger in trying to impose desirable or popular labels on the subjects of our study.

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<sup>73</sup> Tsapina, p. 416.

<sup>74</sup> Tsapina, p. 418.

<sup>75</sup> Tsapina, p. 409.



What might it *mean* to say of some person that he or she is a part of the Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland? On the one hand, to say it means that she lofts reason, challenges traditional authority, and trumpets individual rights would be a stretch even in the kindest of lights if applied to the examples we have. On the other hand, if we carve out a well-defined concept of a Catholic Enlightenment as distinct from the traditional concept of the Enlightenment, we find little to encourage us in the case of Ireland. If the Catholic Enlightenment concerns borrowing ideas from the Enlightenment and applying them to seek out *principled* renewal and reform within the Church, the evidence in Ireland is scant if not entirely missing. Were there prominent Irish Catholics pushing for this kind of principled reform in the Church inside of Ireland? There were not many. The best case – the common calls for religious toleration – in fact are often better accommodated by more pedestrian explanations. Thus, there is a danger here. If one insists on making the Hookes, the O’Conors, the Connors, the Nugents, and others Enlightenment figures, then one should rightly wonder what persons would *fail* to qualify. In that eventuality, historians actually gain little by talking about the Enlightenment in order to explain intellectual currents and changes. To preserve the meaningfulness of concepts like Enlightenment and Catholic Enlightenment, we need to be more circumspect in their use.

Of course, there were Enlightenment figures in Ireland. There were many, and most of them were in the Protestant tradition. Samuel Madden, George Berkeley, William King, and others are well-known examples. But even there the political subordination of Ireland caused many Protestants to leave. Furthermore, I intend the analysis of the present endeavour to be one that is *supportive* of the meaningfulness of the concepts of a Catholic Enlightenment in Europe and a national Enlightenment in Ireland. Yet concepts that are too inclusive lose meaning. Thus I suggest that the conclusion that there was no substantive Catholic Enlightenment in Ireland in the eighteenth century actually helps makes the concept of a Catholic Enlightenment more robust and informative. It is not to denigrate Ireland to note that many of her best minds were forced to flee to find the freedom to be brilliant.