Colonists play heresy card

Page Turner / By Peter McDermott

Maeve Brigid Callan

Husband: Seth Andersen
Children: Finnian and Hunter
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Position: Assistant professor of religion at Simpson College in Iowa.

Religion can be used to support a whole range of ideas from the sublime to the ridiculous. At the National Prayer Breakfast last week, President Obama spoke about the “terrible deeds” that were justified in the name of Christ.

Of course, it’s never been easy to separate genuine religious motivation from other factors involved.

For instance, in 1155, Pope Adrian IV, who was from Hertfordshire, urged King Henry II to invade Ireland “in order to expand the boundaries of the church, declare the truth of the Christian faith to an ignorant and barbarian people, and weed out the new growth of vices from the field of the Lord.” But in her book, “The Templars, The Witch and The Wild Irish,” scholar Maeve Brigid Callan writes: “Henry did not act on his support until 15 years later, and then he did so out of greater concern for the threat his subject Strongbow’s power might pose than for the state of the faith in Ireland.”

Her work, which is subtitled “Vengeance and Heresy in Medieval Ireland,” Callan told the Echo, “explores the ways in which religion was used to justify the English invasion and subsequent colonization of Ireland.”

She added: “It focuses on Ireland’s medieval heresy trials, which all occurred within the tumultuous 14th century, when the Anglo-Irish colony was under considerable strain. The first trial, of the Templars, was part of international proceedings in which the colonists were compelled to participate,” Callan said. “The second occurred when the lone local inquisitor, the dean of St. Patrick’s Cathedral, tried the tactic in his ongoing feud with the canons of Holy Trinity Cathedral. Dublin is exceptional with its two cathedrals so close together, leading to bitter rivalry between them.”

The book has won praise from fellow scholars. Mary Condren has described it as a “brilliant and accessible case study of witchcraft and heresy,” while Helen Nicholson of Carduff University said that the author presents in detail material that is important for understanding the “development of witchcraft trials in Western Europe.”

For her part, Callan said: “Writing and storytelling are in my blood—both my parents and two aunts are writers, and my uncle produces movies, including ‘Once.’”

What advice do you have for aspiring writers? I’ll paraphrase my aunt, the author Lia Mills. Just write. If it’s truly what you want to do, make it a priority, make the time, and do it. She says that much more eloquently, of course.

What book are you currently reading? As an academic, I am usually reading several at a time. But for pleasure, currently it’s “The Book of Life” by Deborah Harkness.

Is there a book you wish you had written? The novel about the Kyteler case that I have been working on for ages. It’s such a rich story which deserves the full treatment. Hopefully one day I will have finished it!

Let’s fall in love

Artwork by John Spinks. For more on Spinks’s work, go to www.kfineart.com.