The Role of Religion in Making Peace and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland

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Northern Ireland is a conflict society. History, politics, culture, identity and religion are contested. We are in the early stages of a peace process, only eight years into the Belfast Agreement. The latter was not a peace agreement but a framework, the provision of structures by which a peace process might be pursued. The structural approach to relationships is still in place. Some may still want the Agreement abolished or re-negotiated but anything better or even remotely approaching better has not been suggested. There is still no credible alternative that will address the totality of relationships, key to understanding the conflict and building the long term peace. Currently there is political difficulty with yet another deadline looming. Politicians went to Scotland for three days and in the town of St Andrews they surprised many by reaching agreement. The St Andrew's Agreement was made public on Friday and was already in difficulty on Monday. The first meeting to plan government failed to take place. November 24 is the deadline for the Northern Ireland Assembly to meet and nominate a First and Deputy First Minister. That may not happen as the two largest parties each have major decisions to make and each may not be able to convince their people. The British government has indicated that failure to agree on shared government will mean the dissolution of the Northern Ireland Assembly rather than devolution.[2]

Paragraph 12 of the St Andrew's Agreement is clear.

> *The Governments have made clear that in the event of failure to reach agreement by the 24 November we will proceed on the basis of the new British Irish partnership arrangements to implement the Belfast Agreement.*

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[2] St Andrew's Agreement – the full text is:
http://www.taoiseach.gov.ie/index.asp?docID=2931

What that means is that Northern Ireland will not have its own devolved government but governance through shared responsibility by both London and Dublin, governance shared by the two sovereign governments. This will not be satisfactory but it is probably the best approach given the failure of local politicians to agree to work together. We have about four weeks to rescue the St Andrew's Agreement.

The role of religion in making peace and reconciliation in this context is a huge and long term challenge. Religion has less public role than it had in 1969 when the most recent phase of our violent conflict began. A diminished role and less credibility because of a sectarian history make a positive role difficult. And yet there is still enough public profile for religious institutions to make a contribution and to play a positive role in civic society. Partnership and collaboration will be key to it and it will mean deep internal transformation for the religious institutions if they are to be partners for peace and reconciliation. I will explore a key issue; the role of religion in making peace – a generational task.[3]

THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN MAKING PEACE – A GENERATIONAL TASK

Peace cannot be realised in a vacuum. To be effective it can only be contextual peacebuilding. If the Christian traditions in Northern Ireland remain in their pietistic or sacramental captivity they will contribute little. Congregational or parish maintenance will be the priority consuming energy and destroying morale. There might even be some numerically strong congregations, but as a community of people talking to themselves in a language of zion, incomprehensible to a growing, larger secular public. So what is the context, or the multiple contexts for peacebuilding and a reconciling process?

A Pervasive Culture of Violence

There is a long legacy of violence in Ireland which has been generated over centuries. It is colonial violence which is not to say that the violence and brutality are all one-sided. There is no monopoly on atrocity in Irish history. Terror and counter-terror have been working in all directions for a long time. Violence is integral to our history, it is a cultural given and norm. We have a pervasive culture of violence. Even though ceasefires were declared in the most recent phase of violence in 1994, the culture of violence has not gone away. Whether child abuse, domestic violence, mothers fighting in school playgrounds,

[3] The concept of generational peace is drawn from the work of John Paul Lederach, especially in *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*, United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997. See also his *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace*, Oxford University Press, 2005.

punishment beatings and the meting out of very rough street justice, to young people who do not know of any other way to resolve conflict except by violence, a pervasive culture and legacy of violence prevails. The primary ideology remains, that violence pays, achieves, defends, it works. The myth of redemptive violence is deeply and historically embedded in the psyche, the culture.

Religious communities cannot pretend that it does not exist or that their religious separatism places them outside of this culture. Religion has and continues to contribute to it. The identification of god with national causes, whether the state cause or paramilitary cause is the perpetuation of a nationalistic god, a militarised god, a god who is inherently violent. Religious communities still work with violent and oppressive god images. Even liturgical language reinforces a patriarchal, all-powerful, dominating god, a god of battles, an imperial god. Military metaphors are still used. The death of Jesus is proclaimed as appeasing an angry, demanding god for whom justice is punishment of his only Son and for whom justice is always and only punitive. Theology and liturgy have bought into the myth of redemptive violence.[4] The deeper truth is that we have projected our own violence onto god, created god on our own violent images and institutionalised the violent theology and liturgy. It is not only an Irish problem, it is international. God images and language justify and legitimise the doctrine of *anticipatory 'self-defence'* or *'pre-emptive strike'* of the world's only superpower, conveniently emulated by the Israeli state. British language has not been as theologically overt as American but British alignment with the USA in the so-called war against terror and weapons of mass destruction has attempted to use high moral language. When these two governments try to persuade the violent culture of Ireland to change its ways, there is always a credibility gap. When the language of absolute, dominating power is conflated with god, the culture of violence will be maintained and critical ethical perspectives will become difficult if not impossible.

This is part of the context of peacebuilding in Northern Ireland that religious communities need to take seriously. It is the pervasive culture of church and society and it requires critical and rigorous self-examination of theological and liturgical language. It also means learning to re-read the gospels, in their socio-political, economic and cultural contexts of violence and Roman superpower imperialism, taking seriously the active non-violent praxis and teaching of Jesus. It means learning to re-understand the death of Jesus and locating the violence where it really belongs in the passion narrative, not the violence of God but the violence of the State and its domination system as the primary cause of the crucifixion.

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[4] The Myth of Redemptive Violence is dealt with in depth by New Testament scholar Walter Wink in his *Powers Trilogy* especially *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Fortress Press, 1992, pp 13-33. See also his *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium*, Doubleday, 1998.

It means re-experiencing the resurrection stories as God's vindication of Jesus' active non-violence and the call to a resurrection life of active non-violence. This is what faith communities might mean by discipleship, living faithfully in the world. Reading the faith story in this way provides resources for a positive contribution to making peace and reconciliation in Northern Ireland.

Sectarianism as a Way of Life

Sectarianism is both religious and political.[5] It is not about holding different opinions or different identities. Sectarianism is the consequences of beliefs and identities wanting to exclude or dominate others. When my beliefs and identity is excluded from a fair and responsible place in society, when I am treated as second class or discriminated against on the basis of my religious beliefs or political convictions, then sectarianism is active and experienced as oppressive. It expresses itself in personal attitudes and behaviour and is also structural and systematic. People and institutions are sectarian.

There may be a myth at the heart of Northern Ireland society that as religion declines so sectarianism declines. That may be a delusion. When people stone and petrol bomb each other across a community divide, when people are forced to leave their homes or sustain constant attacks, or when a young person is beaten to death because he is one of the other side in the wrong place, those responsible are not likely to have been in church last Sunday or for a very long time, even if ever. And yet there is some kind of underlying fear and hatred that wants no place for the other. It may not be active religious practice but it can be a cultural Protestantism or cultural Catholicism. A cultural religious legacy lives on even though a political identity may be overtly stronger. The other will be a Unionist or Nationalist. Political sectarianism is still a reality and has shown little sign of going away.

Yet this way of life, endemic in Northern Ireland, has deep religious roots. Directly and indirectly churches have nurtured and perpetuated it. Much of it has been unintentional but sectarianism has nothing to do with intentions but with consequences. A theology of sectarianism has expressed three things.[6]

The One True Church Outside Of Which There Is No Salvation

[5] The definitive Irish study of sectarianism is *Moving Beyond Sectarianism: Religion, Conflict and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland* by Joseph Liechty and Cecelia Clegg, Columba Press, 2001. This book is the result of a six year major research project of the Irish School of Ecumenics.

[6] For historical and theological roots of sectarianism see Liechty and Clegg, pp 67-70.

In theology and practice every Irish church has been there. When large numbers of Protestant clergy say that Catholics cannot be Christian or they hold erroneous beliefs, therefore we cannot pray or worship together, the consequences of that are religious, social and political exclusion. The majority or the faithful will not therefore accept the integrity of a Catholic's faith and the Catholic therefore is not only excluded from the reign of God but from the political governance of Northern Ireland. God sharing and power sharing are not really possible.

When the Catholic church forbids sharing of Holy Communion and insists that inter-communion is a step too far, when it makes official statements that Protestant churches are not somehow fully churches, it perpetuates a superiority complex that convinces Protestants that the Catholic system is oppressive and therefore exclusive. Religious fear becomes political fear of domination and repression of freedom.

Whether it is evangelical conversion as the only authentic way to God or Catholic sacrament as the true and authentic way of salvation, it is zero-sum theology with serious socio-political consequences. Of course, each thinks the other is sectarian but not themselves.

Error Has No Rights

Faith, of course by this point has become identified with orthodoxy, correct formulations of belief and intellectual assent or uncritical obedience to the authority of the institution. Purity of doctrine and dogma become primary. If the other is in error then the other has no rights, not only to salvation, but to land, jobs or property. Historically that is how it worked and one would be naïve to think that it still doesn't operate in this way.

Doctrine of Providence

Usually this means God's gracious and generous care of humanity and creation. But in a sectarian context it easily flips over into *'God is on our side'*. If God is on our side then God is definitely not on the other side. God is with us but not with them. This either becomes a slogan or an assumption in conflict or war. Our cause is God's cause and that perceived reality, justifies killing and all forms of violence.

All of this theology does not need to be preached and taught overtly. Sometimes it is but more often it is more subtle. If you hear often enough in a sectarian context that the interpretation of salvation is absolute and pure, then you believe it over against the other.

The other side may not be openly attacked but if your Sunday diet is absolute, non-negotiable, dogmatic truth claims, then you eventually believe it over against the other. If you have been taught that faith claims are to be simply accepted and never questioned, that doubt is sinful, then you are uncritically part of a sectarian belief and praxis. If all you ever hear are differences, elevated to dogmatic status with the implication that our differences are superior, then you are part of uncritical zero-sum theology which again translates into forms of zero-sum politics and culture.

Sectarianism is about power over, power over the faithful and power over the other and it is religious and political and its consequences are control, domination and exclusion. The antidote and the way to effective peacebuilding is to learn how to *'walk humbly with God'*. Unlearning the arrogance of absolute truth claims, realising the provisonality of every formulation of truth we make, discovering that authority and power are not the same and that the God with whom we walk in Christ is at heart cruciform,[7] these are prerequisites for religion and peacebuilding. Faith communities need to learn the liberating power of vulnerability and weakness; that there is no place for infallibility and totalism in the God of the cross. Religious peacebuilders need to hear again the Pauline insight on KENOSIS, letting go of power over and domination, being vulnerable and open and learning to actively seek the highest good of the other, especially the other who is theologically, politically and culturally different. Sectarianism needs to be dealt with on the way to a reconciled and reconciling society, and the religious communities need to move beyond the sectarianism within their own theologies, structures and practice.

Generational Hurts[8]

A geographically and demographically small society which has experienced over three decades of civil conflict and violence is a hurting, if not traumatised society. With over 3,600 people dead and 40,000 injured many permantly scarred and maimed, from a total population of 1.5 million, the total number of people affected is large. Each of the individuals killed or injured are part of extended families and the hurt and trauma extends outwards. It is believed, therefore, that at least 50% of Northern Ireland's population has been directly and indirectly affected by the community violence. It is even possible that

[7] For a full treatment of cruciformity see *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*, by Michael J Gorman, Eerdmans, 2001, especially ch 1, *The Cruciform God*, pp 9-19.

[8] There are a number of initiatives in Northern Ireland dealing with hurts, memories and healing. Notable is *Healing Through Remembering* which has put forward a Day of Private Reflection Proposal, September 2006. An important earlier study was *Reconciling Memories*, the result of an Irish School of Ecumenics' research project. An enlarged edition was published in 1998 by Columba Press and edited by Alan D Falconer and Joseph Liechty.

hurt and pain for some pre-dates 1969 and the beginning of the most recent phase of violent conflict. Hurt is generational and the earlier violence in Ireland, especially around 1919-21 has passed on in the psyches and memories of families. Two novels portray the dynamic of generational hurts. *'Reading in the Dark'* by Seamus Deane[9] begins with civic trauma involving people from the same family against each other in the 1920s. The dysfunctionality and antagonism continues into the recent violence across three generations and in the story remains unresolved. Though Deane's book won a fiction prize, it is a larger than life story reflecting lived experience.

The other masterpiece is *'Amongst Women'* by John McGahern[10] and tells the story of Moran who fights with his family, neighbours and with himself. He finds relationships impossible, which forces his two sons to leave home, one of them never to return. Moran was involved in the violent conflict of the early 1920s, had witnessed atrocities and committed atrocities. Moran has never been able to process his trauma and his repressed anger and hurt destroys all his subsequent relationships. In real life with the children and grandchildren of a Moran, and McGahern may well be describing a real life character in the guise of fiction, hurt and trauma can be transmitted across generations. If Northern Ireland is a traumatised society as a result of the 1969-94 violent conflict, dysfunctional relationships may well extend into present and future generations.

This was simply put in a recent phone-in radio programme when a caller said that *'hurt people hurt'*. It's the familiar syndrome that the abused can become abusers, victims become victimisers and hurt peoples carry on hurting those around the. Memories carry hurt, pain, trauma and anger, all of which can be transferred to children and grandchildren as well as being projected onto the other community. Unless there is some healing of memories violence will be projected and perpetuated. Hatred, bitterness and vengeance will be passed on and has already been passed on. Children with no personal memory of the violence have acquired sectarian attitudes and violent behaviour against the other. Without any direct experience of the violence and without any understanding or awareness of the logic of violence children are becoming involved in local confrontations, taking violent initiatives and even engaging in *'recreational violence'*.

Religious communities are pastoral communities and have much potential to be communities of healing. During the years of violence faith communities were directly involved with tragic deaths and grieving relatives. Indeed clergy were too often on the front line of pastoral care and support, not only through funeral liturgies but follow up

[9] Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark*, Vintage Books, 1998.
[10] John McGahern, *Amongst Women*, Faber and Faber, 1991.

pastoral support to those left. Now that the fighting has stopped the pastoral role is different. The legacy of unresolved hurt and trauma and the healing of memories cannot be dealt with outside the politics of violence that caused the pain. The process is also complex. Victims and victimisers may sometimes merge into one personality. There are difficult issues of truth-telling involved. Many victims want answers as to what happened to their loved ones and why. Those who carried out violent atrocities, either on the side of the State security forces or paramilitaries, find it extremely difficult to acknowledge wrongs done. Moral responsibility is avoided on the grounds that *'we were fighting a war and in a war situation terrible things happen'*. At the same time moral responsibility avoidance blocks the restoration of moral dignity and wellbeing. Sectarian motives still want to keep a score of wrong-doing or a sense of superior victimhood. Some find it difficult to move beyond a blame game. A shared day of reflection or remembrance is still contentious. The politics of a contested society and violence predominate. For others the memory and hurt is still too raw and the wounds too deep to open up and process. Yet peacebuilding and a reconciliation process cannot move without a process of healing of memories and a healing through remembering.

Religious communities have spiritualities which can contribute towards healing. Liturgies are needed using language, symbols and rituals which are sensitive and touch deep wounds. The recovery of Israel's tradition of lament is central to this with its ability to be honest, truthful, including the ability to express rage before God. A non-pietistic, non-moralistic approach to forgiveness has the power to liberate and heal hurtful pasts and the inability to relate to oneself and the other. Repentance also expressed through liturgies can enable those responsible for violence to restore their moral dignity, acknowledge to the other, make reparation to the community and also find liberation from a past. The community too shares the pain and itself is not judgemental, moralistic or above responsibility taking for a sectarian, violent past and a better shared future. Religious communities also need to repent, commit to moral responsibility and ministries of peacebuilding and reconciliation.

Churches can become centres of community restorative justice providing conferencing facilities and healing circles in which direct victims and offenders with community support can encounter each other in truth telling, empathy and healing process which can restore the humanity of all involved. Conferencing can also bring together victims and offenders who are not in a direct symbiotic relationship to each other to hear each other's stories and, be heard and accept responsibility for a liberated and shared future. Through liturgies and conferencing or healing circles as well as victim and support groups, religious communities

can make a creative and dynamic contribution to a generational healing process. These will require skilled facilitators and sensitive communities. It will also need the rediscovery of spiritual resources in place of churchy theological dogmas to resource a crucial spiritual dimension to generational healing.

Peace as Generational

When the Belfast Agreement was produced in 1998 there may have been some, perhaps too many who naively thought that peace had arrived. The middle classes especially settled down into a false peace where social and economic security and comfort were safe. Such thinking where it did and does exist is delusional. Peace is not instant or a quick fix. In any conflict situation peace does not suddenly appear a few seconds after the midnight hour. Peace is generational, it needs to be developed and built. The old structures of sectarianism and violence need to be deconstructed and the long work of transforming conflict and building alternative structures of democracy, human rights, inclusion and responsibility sharing is pursued. Both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures are right to insist the *'peace is to be pursued'*. It has been suggested that as much time is needed to build a new and peaceful society as it took to build the old society of sectarian violence. A peace process is lengthy and complex. Europe was ravaged and torn apart by two 20C wars, the most bloody in recorded history. Indeed most of Europe's history has been a centuries old story of conflict, war and violence, most of which was also exported to other continents through colonial conquests. Yet the second half of the 20C has seen a remarkable transformation of conflictual and violent Europe. The European Community is a high profile story of conflict transformation across a continent but especially between Germany and France. For two generations now young people of Germany and France have encountered each other in youth exchange programmes enabling tolerance, respect and healing of memories. Since the early 1970s German young people have shared a new history curriculum which has moved beyond the Weimar Republic to include, however painfully, the violence of the Nazi regime and the Holocaust. Encounter and education have contributed to a more peaceful Europe, more peaceful than at any time in its history. Democracy and human rights are especially embedded in Europe today, not least to ensure that European nations *'shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more'* (Micah 4 v 3).

Northern Ireland needs to learn the European lesson, not least because it is part of Europe. Encounter and education across two generations could transform our conflict and enable one of the last violent regions of Europe to take its place in a peaceful Europe with its peace safeguarded by inclusive and participative democracy and human rights and responsibilities for all. Maybe it will be mid 21C before such peaceful transformation is realised because peacebuilding is generational and is a task for the long haul.

A peacebuilding and reconciling process is precisely that, a process which requires sustainability. Peace has not only to be pursued but to be sustained. In an imperfect world peacebuilding also needs to be renewed. In theological terms there is an eschatological dimension to peacebuilding and reconciliation. Eschatological realism points us to God's ultimate purpose. We are not carried away by utopian dreams but God's end-time dream has already broken into the present and to live faithfully in the here and now world is to allow the eschatological shalom to shape as far as possible the present. In Christian perspective we live in two worlds, the now and the not yet and the not yet is to shape the now.

Religious communities in Northern Ireland need to be communities of encounter and education. It is not enough for like to meet like. Like needs to meet different or to be more precise, different needs to meet different. Difference needs to encounter difference, religious, political and cultural difference. Only in such encounter can protagonists humanise each other, learn to respect and understand each other. If many people are not yet ready or confident enough for encounter then preparatory workshops on a single tradition basis will be needed. But not as an end in itself simply reinforcing sectarian differences, but as preparatory. Education workshops or seminars will do what good or critical education always does, lead out to larger horizons and understandings of self or group identity and of the other. Education that truly leads out is empowering and confidence building.

Education which is community based is not only empowering but is rooted in moral and spiritual values which are essentially relational.[11] Education is for relationships. Education for peace and reconciliation is for relationships which are rooted in compassion, respect, justice and peace. Good peace education will enable a common vision of the good society; it will educate for a shared future. It will also deal with the past, explore history together, journey through hurts and memories, move beyond sectarianism, transform hate, establish justice which is restorative, enlarge visions of equity, diversity, interdependence,

[11] For methods in education for reconciliation and examples of course content, an important publication is *Communities of Reconciliation: Living Faith in the Public Place*, by Johnston McMaster and Cathy Higgins, Colourpoint Books, 2002.

cultivate a culture of human rights and responsibilities. Education for peace will also educate for inclusive democracy and active citizenship and will always enable critical thinking and awareness in relation to all systems of power, including the religious systems themselves. All of this does not add up to a secular agenda as somehow distinct from a spiritual agenda. That perspective is based on a false view of spiritual and secular. We need to overcome our false dichotomies and dualisms. The spiritual and secular are two sides of the one coin. The sacred can only be found in the secular. The irony may often be that God is where the religious community thinks it ought not to be. If Ireland is becoming a more secular country with less institutional religious presence than before, then religious people need to learn to recognise the sacred in the secular public square.

To be part of a generational peace building and reconciling process will mean religious communities developing educational programmes and encounter programmes around the components and relational issues that make peace. The churches in Northern Ireland will have a role in making peace and reconciliation only if they are prepared to place education for peace and education for reconciliation programmes at the top of their agenda. Without such an educational priority and commitment they will simply help perpetuate ignorance, misunderstanding and therefore prejudice and sectarian bigotry. And those educational and encounter programmes, and they do need to be encounter because Methodists and Catholics need to stop talking each to themselves, these programmes need to deal with the new Irish reality, multi-culture and multi-faith. Understanding neighbour religions is now also crucial to education for peace and reconciliation. And that will mean all the religious traditions learning to behave less aggressively and to lower their voices.

There are huge challenges in Northern Ireland. We are all on a journey without maps. The old maps are obsolete and of little use. It is a time to make new maps, to journey with peace and be map makers as well as history makers. Transforming the pervasive culture of violence, moving beyond the sectarian way of life, healing those generational hurts and engaging with a long term, generational peace and reconciliation process, these are some of the important signposts on the landscape. This is where the role of religion needs to be active. It is, perhaps, surprisingly, a good time to be alive!