

JESUS AND NONVIOLENCE: YOU CAN'T BE SERIOUS IN IRELAND!

A parish priest from a border area told me how at Sunday Mass he offered a homily on the nonviolent teaching and life of Jesus. Four young men waited around afterwards until people had scattered and then engaged him in conversation. They objected strongly to the homily about Jesus and nonviolence. He tried to explain what he had said and why Jesus had said what he had said. The four were having none of it and eventually said of Jesus, that it was alright for him to talk about nonviolence, he was divine. Christology from above or a high Christology in the service of violence. In Irish Christianity, Catholic and Protestant, we have never had any difficulty with the divinity of Christ. It's the real humanity we trip over.

At least twenty years ago, probably more, I was facilitating Saturday workshops with a group of Christian or faith-based youth workers. In the afternoon we were exploring conflict and violence. I had introduced the old Babylonian myth of redemptive violence, the Enuma Elish. It was the New Year re-enactment of the myth that the Hebrews encountered in their traumatic Babylonian exile. After maybe thirty years of having this creation myth re-enacted in your face every New Year's Day, some creative Hebrews produced a counter story, an alternative creation story in which the creator was good and nonviolent and in which all of humankind was created in the image of a good nonviolent God. Saturday after lunch is usually the graveyard session, but on this Saturday all hell broke loose. It wasn't that Genesis 1 had been described as a counter myth, myth wasn't the issue. It was the suggestion that God was nonviolent and we were all made in the image of the nonviolent God. I was stunned by the aggression and anger not only in what men were saying but the anger in their eyes and body language. Some stood up and I got worried at one point. The women there said nothing.

At one point the argument turned to the right to punish children. It did cause you to wonder what kind of lives their spouses and partners lived. What was being projected onto their children and what were they teaching kids in the youth group? Christian youth clubs in which a nonviolent God and the teaching of the nonviolent Jesus didn't feature. But how much did it feature in Sunday preaching and sacraments?

What lies at the heart of our culture and history? Two of the most iconic and historic documents we have are the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation. Both are big on God and both invoke God and guns. The Covenant is confident that God will deliver us and that we will use all means necessary to defeat this conspiracy, the conspiracy being home rule for Ireland. Some have tried to play down the 'all means necessary', but in 1912 everybody knew that meant guns and resistance to home rule by violence if necessary. Guns were already arriving in the north-east of Ireland in 1910 and in the same year guns bound for here had been intercepted at Leith outside Edinburgh and at Hammersmith in London. The finance for weapons was already in place. Some Protestants were talking about guns in the early 1890s. The Proclamation also had God and guns and even invoked God's blessing on the guns. Photographs were taken and still exist of a Protestant bishop and clergy blessing UVF guns in Ballymena. By 1913 an illegal army, the Ulster Volunteer Force was formed and a few months later the Irish Volunteers, another illegal army, each with about 100,000 members. You don't form such forces to walk up and down a field with wooden poles. Armies, illegal or otherwise need arms and in 1914 both Volunteers went into weapons overdrive. At Larne, Donaghadee and Bangor weapons and ammunition, including 6 Maxim machine guns arrived in the dead of night, having been sourced in Germany. Later in the year weaponry for the Irish Volunteers arrived at Howth and Kilcoole, Co Wicklow, also from Germany.

On the cusp of a war involving Britain, Germany was only too happy to arm opposing groups in British Ireland. Ireland was heading for a very bloody civil war except for the outbreak of the so-called Great War. Instead of dying in Ireland, thousands of Irishmen died together in the mud and trenches of France and Belgium and at Gallipoli. Later some were remembered and many forgotten.

The architect of the UVF gunrunning was Fred Crawford. He returned from Germany with the huge arms cache including the six Maxim machine guns, one of which was and may still be on display at the Ulster Museum. Crawford was a Methodist, not a nominal Methodist but a committed and devoted Methodist. He had a special interest in missionary work and chaired a Methodist committee on missions. Crawford was a business person, owning a bleach manufacturing company in Lisburn. According to the rules of the Methodist Church in Ireland, then and now, if Crawford had gone bankrupt, he would have remained a Methodist but could no longer hold any office in the Methodist Church. He would have had to step down from chairing his beloved missions committee. But it was alright to be a gunrunner and illegally smuggle weapons into north-eastern ports. The church would have downed him on bankruptcy but not gunrunning, not dealing in weapons of violent destruction. I am not aware of any action being taken against Fred Crawford by the Methodist Church after 1914 and as far as I know there is no plaque to Fred Crawford in any Methodist Church. But how morally confused was the Methodist Church and other churches at this time? In the late 1890s a Wexford Methodist, Howard Rowe, described Methodism as being in a foam of passion over home rule. The same foam of passion was evident in the Presbyterian and Church of Ireland churches and the Catholic Church had its own struggles and ambiguity around a physical force tradition which had some priestly support and involvement. We were all caught up in religious nationalism and that meant involvement or ambiguity around violence.

The main finger prints on the Easter Proclamation are those of Padraig Pearse. Pearse has been described as the high priest of the Easter Rising. Why is it called that? It didn't start until the Monday of that April week. It was planned for Easter Sunday but didn't happen until the Monday. And yet the centenary in 2016 was marked on Easter Sunday and not the Monday. But even secular Ireland wants to keep the connection between rising and resurrection, even if it is a piece of fiction. But Pearse was a mystic with a Messianic complex, a devoted Catholic, as devoted as Crawford to his Christian tradition. Pearse was steeped in an atonement and Eucharistic theology of sacrifice which he combined with the ancient Ulster myth of Cuchulainn. Pearse christified Cuchulainn, read a violent atonement theology back into the myth of the violent Cuchulainn. Pearse provided a theological basis for the Easter Rising with the myth and sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death and a sacrament both steeped in violence. But then both Catholic and Protestant were the inheritors of a violent atonement theology from the eleventh century. It was a blood sacrifice theology to appease an angry, violent God helping to shape violence in Europe for a millennium. It was the theology of the early First World War poets with Pearse in the same tradition and it was the violent atonement theology of the nineteenth century Protestant evangelical hymnology that provided the blood sacrifice image for the Protestant interpretation of the Somme and their losses there. Pearsean theology reappeared in the 1937 preamble to the Irish Constitution, an extraordinary preamble, possibly making it a unique Constitution in the world. Not only is the Trinity invoked but there is a Christology, a Christ invoked who sounds suspiciously like someone who had been in the GPO in 1916 with Pearse. Well might Jurgen Moltmann ask of his German Constitution, who is the God of the German Constitution? Who is the God of the Irish Constitution, the God of the Ulster Covenant, of the Easter Proclamation? Are the gods made in our violent image? Have we projected our pathological violence unto the nationalistic gods?

The gods of religious nationalism are the gods of death who have brought death to thousands of young Irishmen and left us with a culture and legacy of violence and death to the present. It is where the worship of a death-giving god always leads. The delusion always proclaims the dying as sacrifice, and supreme sacrifice is the same delusion. Why do we still describe war, violent revolution and related dying in religious language?

Who introduced the gun and the culture of violence to modern Irish politics? We can trace the physical force tradition to the nineteenth century. It was there in the Fenian tradition of the mid-century, even earlier with Emmet's Rising of 1803. Protestants were talking about guns at least by the second Home Rule Bill of 1893. The Orange Order was founded in 1795 in Loughgall after tension, violence and violent outrages during the early 1790s. Peep O'Day Boys against Catholic Defenders. A wealthy Protestant landlord supplied the Boys with arms and at the Diamond crossroads, a few miles from Loughgall, a hamlet battle occurred, thirty Defenders were killed and later the Orange Order was formed in a Loughgall pub. The Orange success led to a wave of terror against the Catholic community in north Co. Armagh in the autumn of 1795, driving thousands of families out of the area and pushing Catholics into the United Irishmen. Known as the Armagh Outrages, it marks the birth of the Orange Order in violence, and the Outrages are part of a culture of sectarian violence with roots in the seventeenth century. Who of us stands outside this culture of violence? But who introduced the gun to modern Irish politics?

Modern Irish history begins in the sixteenth century. It is not that violence was absent before then. The Vikings brought violence in the eighth and ninth centuries and the Plantagenet came to conquer in the twelfth century. The Tudors came in the sixteenth century and Ireland became England's first colony with Virginia being colonised shortly after.

With the Tudor invasion of Ireland came another dynamic, the Anglican model of the Protestant Reformations and the establishment of a state Church. The established church was the arm of government and was the powerful and wealthy church of a 10% minority. It dominated until 1869 when it was traumatically disestablished. The Protestant Ascendancy imposed Penal Laws on the majority Catholic population, later applying them to the seventeenth century Presbyterians. Ireland was colonised and no empire has colonised without guns and violence. It is the way of all empires in history. From the very first empire in history, the Akkadian Empire in 4,250 BCE, violence and conquest and domination have been the way of empire. Every empire in history has been resisted and every empire has responded to the resistance with bloody and brutal violence. Empires are characterised by 3Gs, gold, guns and god. The gun was brought to Irish politics by empire, the colonisers and when resistance took place it was brutally and violently responded to whether in 1798 or 1920. By the second decade of the twentieth century the narrative became really complicated. The empire, one of seven European empires dominating 84% of the world, now feared the loss of its first colony and if that happened, would India, the jewel in the imperial crown be next? The complication was that most of Ireland wanted to leave the Empire, mostly Catholics, and the minority, mostly Protestants in the north-east wanted to stay in the empire. In 1920 the island of Ireland was partitioned and two confessional States were born in bloody violence. And the empire which had crashed in another three decades, but still doesn't think it's gone, doesn't take responsibility for bringing the gun into Irish politics. There is little awareness either that Irish history in all its violence and messiness is also British history. We have a culture and a history of violence and we are shaped by it and still not liberated from it. Are we now at the end of religious nationalism? Have we overcome our violent history? Jesus and nonviolence: are you serious in Ireland? Where now for communities of faith?

Jesus and Nonviolence: Being Serious in Ireland

I am always haunted and challenged by the words of Gandhi. Influenced deeply by his Hindu tradition of nonviolence, he was also profoundly shaped in his practice by the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence, especially by the Sermon on the Mount. He said that the only people who do not take the teaching of Jesus on nonviolence seriously, are Christians. Gandhi disturbs me and in truth, Jesus even more. We are coming to an end of a decade of Centenaries, marking the events that have shaped Ireland for a century and shaped our lives. From 1912-1922 there was the constant threat or actuality of violence, with a catastrophic war in between that left its deadly mark on the whole island. In the years of the War of Independence and the Civil War there was terrible killing and violence in Cork and West Cork, but the most violent part of Ireland 1920-1922 was Belfast and Derry. The new Free State never really dealt with the Civil War but lived with the bitterness that divided families and until 2020, lived with Civil War politics. The new Northern Ireland never dealt with the violence and killing of the very early 20s. We have never really talked about it. And then in 1969 we resumed the violence and killing again this time for over thirty years. We have never analysed or interrogated these killing fields of the 20s and the last three decades of the twentieth century. We have never probed together the root causes of our violence and both political and civic society do not seem to know how to deal with the past. We still live with it and in it and are bound by it. There is still much that prevents the future.

Meanwhile, as faith communities we are in a place where we have never been before. If we take partition and the centenary of it as book ends, the church decline, loss of power, status and privilege is traumatic. I emerged from theological college in 1971, God's gift to Ireland, and the Methodist Church in its wisdom or humour sent me to West Cork.

After being a panellist on a community forum in Dunmanway in 1972, I realized then that something was already changing in Ireland and all of the churches were going to be deeply impacted by the change. Ireland's version of Christendom has died as it has in Europe. We were just a couple of decades behind. The secular tide has come in and secular is the separation of church and state, a reality now in both parts of Ireland. I am not sure we have fully understood what has happened or have begun to acknowledge it. We need to sit down as Protestants and Catholics together, interrogate together the cultural and political tsunami that we have gone through in the last sixty years as churches. And that includes a robust critique of the culture and mystique of violence. At the end of that we might even discover that with the end of Christendom and in secular Ireland we are in a good place. The secular may be our best bet.

It means that we are at the end of religious nationalism. That the god of Christendom, the 'for God and Ireland' and the 'for God and Ulster' and 'for God and empire', this god is also dead. The god of religious nationalism and the violence of the god of religious nationalism is dead. We are all atheists now. Like those Hebrew exiles in Babylon we can create an alternative narrative and in creativity and imagination we can as they did, emerge from captivity with a new image of God, a new imagined identity and a new sense of purpose and being in the world. It is possible. And the new God-image will be nonviolent, compassionate and just. And what will this God ask of us? The ethical high water mark of the Hebrew Bible, and I am not sure that Jesus and the Christian Testament went beyond this: "to do justice, love mercy or compassionate solidarity, and to walk humbly with your God". [Micah 6 v 8]. In our post-Christendom and secular world we will recognise with those minority Hebrews that "...every notion of God carries with it a proposal for the organisation of society".¹ That is a major biblical thread and insight. Every notion of God carries with it a proposal for the organisation of society.

For God and Empire, for God and Ulster, For God and Ireland, what notion of God is that and what organisation of society does it propose? The violence of God proposes a society in which the myth of redemptive violence, violence pays, controls, achieves and defends, is societal ethos. It is a society that is exclusive, ourselves, dominating, exceptional, elitist, mono, sectarian, racist, divisive, separatist, with a caste system.

With a violent god we have a violent society, a violent culture and a deeply embedded mystique of violence. Now as people of faith, followers of the nonviolent God made known in the nonviolent Jesus we can stand up and say no to wrapping God up in the tricolour, the Union Flag or the Stars and Stripes, or any national flag. No more idolatry. We repent! What would that look like?

We will need to become serious about Christian education, catechesis. What are we preaching and teaching? What are we talking to and with each other about? What and how are we tweeting? Nonviolence and peacebuilding need to be at the heart of the faith curriculum in youth work, adult education, theological education, community education, life-long learning, civic conversations and all-Ireland churches don't need to wait for the Shared Island initiative to engage a shared island approach to reflecting and learning together the nonviolence of Jesus and immersing ourselves in the Sermon on the Mount.

We need a new hermeneutic in our reading and reflection on Scripture. The new hermeneutic is one of reading the text in its socio-political text. It is recognising that when we read the Bible from Genesis to Revelation we are engaging with text written in the shadow of empire. We are reading a text from Genesis to Revelation that is in resistance to empire and domination systems, including religious systems.

Maybe we need to learn to read the Bible for the first time! This means honestly and critically engaging with the texts of violence and terror within the text itself. We tend to avoid this. We don't know what to do with books like Joshua and Judges, except to isolate a few texts and spiritualise them. Perhaps we should preach or teach Judges 19 where a woman is gang raped all night and then dismembered and bits of her scattered over the land, all it seems in the text at the command of and with the authority of God. Can you imagine reading that text next Sunday, Judges 19 or even the parable of Jesus on the vineyard owner who sent his stewards to collect the rent and they were beaten up or killed, so the vineyard owner sent his son in the end and they killed him too, so the landowner wreaked the most terrible vengeance and violence? And the western church has read the vineyard owner as God taking it out on the Jews for their killing of Jesus. In Judges 19 and the parable we have a very violent God. Can you imagine reading those next Sunday and ending with the words, 'the word of the Lord' and the worshippers response, 'thanks be to God.' I prefer the New Zealand Anglican prayer book. Readings end with, 'hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.' That leaves it open to the possibility that the Spirit is saying to us that this text or that is not the word of the Lord but a projection of violence, our violence unto God and therefore the kind of violent society we are creating. And that would be a society where there are high levels of violence against women.

There is violence in the text and there are also devastating critiques of violence in the text. We need the socio-political and the shadow of empire hermeneutic and a critical hermeneutic. Jesus himself is the critique of violence in the text and the tradition, but take care we don't set Jesus over against the Hebrew text, the nonviolent God of Jesus against the violent God of the Old Testament. That reading has done huge violence against Jewish people culminating in the Holocaust of the twentieth century in what we thought was Christian Europe.

Jesus was Jewish and so was Paul. Neither were Christian and in Western Christendom we forgot that for nearly 2,000 years. The most devastating critique of violence in the Bible is not only Jesus, but Genesis 1, out of Babylon and intentionally placed as the opening poem in the Hebrew Bible prologue. Perhaps even more devastating is the 8C BCE prophet Hosea. Hosea critiques the mystique of violence which was widespread in his society at a time of social disintegration and the growing threat of national annihilation by the Assyrian superpower. He critiques the leaderships' devotion to the mystique of violence, liberation by trust in military arrangements, the violence of social injustice and the propaganda of lies. He repudiates the zealous violent myths of his society, a society awed by the violence of its heroes and leaders. Hosea sees violence as the perversion of justice, the destruction of the land itself and of species. The brutalisation and dehumanisation of life, the militarisation of foreign policy. For Hosea violence is the breaking of the covenant, the abolition of neighbourliness. Hosea is pretty up to date and Jesus is in this prophetic tradition and so was Paul. Let's learn to read and help each other to read the Bible for the first time, through a different lens and let's develop the educational programmes for the faithful and produce our public theology and praxis of active nonviolence.

I end by going back to Jesus' hymn book. This is what his people and the people of his first century movement sang. Psalm 82 is a mythopoetic and imaginative courtroom scene where there is a public enquiry to determine the criteria for authentic godness and who qualifies as real gods. The gods are in the dock, and we can identify our contemporary gods of militarism, religious nationalism, military consumerism, consumerism extraction economies, patriarchal and racial systems, sectarian systems, and the infallibility of the Bible or the church. So what is the proper role of a god? It has been put this way.

That proper role, so defining for Israel's faith and ethics, is to be guardian, protector, and guarantor of the vulnerable-the weak, the widow, the orphan, the lowly, and the destitute-all those who lack resources to sustain and protect themselves... Godness consists in care for the vulnerable.²

The verdict on authentic godness is power in the service of compassionate solidarity with the marginalised and vulnerable, and turning to other hymns Jesus sang, we include the suffering earth, its suffering from our violence. Nonviolence as with peace is inseparable from social justice for all especially the vulnerable and violently marginalised. Authentic godness as the vision of God is definitive for faith and ethics. It is a proposal for the organisation of society and a programme of public and ethical action for the faithful community. We have work to do.

Reference

1. Brueggemann, Walter. *A Social Reading of the Old Testament: Prophetic Approaches to Israel's Communal Life* (Augsburg Fortress Publications, 1994) p57.
2. Brueggemann Walter and William H, Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), p 355.

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February 2022