CHURCHES, IDENTITY AND RECONCILIATION: A NORTHERN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

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We conclude these articles with one from the frontline. As leader of the Corrymeela Community, David Stevens speaks from a much respected position. He is all too aware that "Church" is often part of the problem of violence as well as part of the solution. He identifies some of the core issues in terms of the relationship between faith, nation and identity. How can a Christian community enmeshed in sectarian violence find the way out? David Stevens points us toward the transcendent realities that can and should inspire churches to be a witness to reconciliation. ***CS***

INTRODUCTION

Christian faith challenges all exclusive claims of tribe, tradition and political commitment. The gospel invites us into the space created by Christ and to find there those who were previously our enemies. It therefore seeks to break down the enmity between us: enmity caused by different traditions, and national, political and religious loyalties. The gospel opens a view of wholeness, justice and living in right relations which sees the whole world as potential brothers and sisters; a nourishing fulfilment of the human. This is a vision of a new humanity reconciled in Christ living together in a new community.

Through Christ a new relationship is established between those who accept the gift of reconciliation: strangers become citizens and aliens are recognised as members of the household of God (Eph 2.19). This redeemed people are called to be a community of reconciliation, of openness and inclusion, united by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Churches are also part of communities and nations; they cannot be other. They are chaplains, reflectors, consciences, restrainers, discerners, givers of wisdom, custodians of collective memory and places of community belonging. Churches bring "their" community before God. They are places where the "specialness" and stories of communities and nations can be celebrated. Much of this is necessary and good, but there is another side. "Specialness" can lead to exclusivity and a sense of superiority. Churches can be places where we are told, implicitly and explicitly, who does not belong to our community (by who is prayed for and who is not, by the contents of sermons, and by the symbols displayed or not displayed).

The Church is a home for the community or the nation. At the same time, it lives by a story of a Jesus who died "outside the camp" (Heb 13.13) and who, while completely a Jew, did not belong to his world

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(Jn 17.14) and was driven out of it by those who did not want to be disturbed by another way. All our "'homes" (personal, communal, national) are radically decentred by Jesus: "For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." (Heb 13.14). The Church is a community where "Jews or Greeks, slave or free" belong (1 Cor 12.13). In its very essence the Church transcends all social, cultural and national boundaries.

The Church lives in a tension: in the world, but not of it (cf. Jn 15.19; 17.14; 18.36). The danger is that in situations of communal conflict the tension collapses. As Miroslav Volf says: "Churches often find themselves accomplices in war rather than agents of peace. We find it difficult to distance ourselves from our own culture so we echo its reigning opinions and mimic its practices."[1]

THE JANUS FACE OF RELIGION

Religion plays a profoundly ambiguous role in conflict situations. It can encourage hatred (e.g. anti-Catholicism is particularly potent in Northern Ireland and has political consequences). Churches can reinforce community division and harden boundaries (e.g. Catholic views and rules on mixed marriage and the importance of church schools have had significant consequences in Northern Irish society). Religion can give divine sanction to nationalisms, political positions and violence. Shimon Peres says of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite terrorist group, "These are religious people. With the religious you can hardly negotiate. They think they have supreme permission to kill people and go to war. This is their nature."[2] In conflict situations theologies of enmity, superiority and distorted recognition of others can easily gain prominence.[3] When churches and religions find themselves on different sides of a fear-threat relationship between two communities there can be a political/religious symbiosis.[4]

Churches find it difficult to establish any critical distance from the pressures coming from "their" community. The temptation is to identify without reserve and to become chaplains to "their" community. Ian Linden has written about the "stranglehold that ethnicity had gained" in the church in Rwanda. The churches "had never seriously challenged Hutu or Tutsi identity as potentially open to being re-imagined in a Christian form, because ethnicity had always been taken as a given".[5] When the genocide occurred in 1994 the churches found it very difficult to resist the dynamics of hatred and killing. There were a significant number of prominent Christians involved in the killings (although there were church people who resisted and were martyred). In the former Yugoslavia some churches became guardians of national identity. There was a religious-national symbiosis and some people who committed war crimes regarded themselves as defending not only their nation but their faith as well.

On the other hand, religion can be a force for restraint and this has been generally true in Northern Ireland. Without the churches the situation would have been far worse. For example, the preaching and living out of non-retaliation, forbearance and forgiveness has had real social consequences. The churches opposed those who espoused violence and the gods of nationalism. Churches working together have been a force for good. They have helped lessen the religious/political symbiosis. The developing pattern of church leaders and others meeting together over the last thirty years in Northern Ireland, of clergy visiting victims of violence together, has been a significant public witness. Churches have been encouragers to politicians seeking political compromise. There have been many individuals and groups working for peace and reconciliation. Contacts were established by church groups with paramilitary organisations; clergy and others acted as go-betweens. The Irish Council of Churches, together with the Roman Catholic Church, has had a peace education programme working in schools, and so on. Nevertheless, the picture is mixed and ambiguous. Churches are part of the problem, and struggle to be part of the solution.

The church in Fiji illustrates this well. Many of the instigators of the 1987 military coup were deeply steeped in Christian religious practice and openly invoked their faith as a guide for their action: "The temptation was strong to align the church to the interests of chauvinist politicians who seized control of the state and sought legitimatisation of their rule that pitched one ethnic community against another. It fell upon another set of church leaders to defy the military and secular authorities in advocating an alternative course of reconciliation."[6]

In the former Yugoslavia, after peace was declared, religious institutions and communities, by and large, found themselves appealing for forgiveness in their general statements but not being able to stop blaming and judging each other.

The problem is that nationalistic politics appears to dominate the churches more than vice versa. This is a significant factor that inhibits churches and prevents them from being agents of cooperation and raises profound questions about what is more important,

NOTES

1. Miroslav Volf, "A Vision of Embrace: Theological Perspectives on Cultural Identity and Conflict", *Ecumenical Review* 48.2 (1995), pp. 195–205.
2. *The New Yorker*, 14 and 21 October 2002, p. 195.
3. For example, the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa theologically legitimated apartheid.
4. For example, in Northern Ireland – Protestantism/Unionism, Catholic/Nationalism.
5. Ian Linden, "The Church and Genocide: Lessons from the Rwandan Tragedy" in Gregory Baum and Harold Wells (eds.), *The Reconciliation of Peoples: Challenges to the Churches* (World Council of Churches Publications, 1997), p. 52.
6. Ralph R Premdas, "The Church and Reconciliation in Ethnic Conflicts: The Case of Fiji" in Baum and Wells (eds.), *Reconciliation*, p. 93.
7. Witness the role of Revd Dr Ian Paisley in Northern Ireland.
8. Duncan Morrow, Derek Birrell, John Greer and Terry O'Keefe, *The Church and Inter-Community Relationships* (Centre for the Study of Conflict, University of Ulster, 1994), p. 261.
9. Lewis Mudge, source unknown.
10. Emmanuel Levinas, a Jewish philosopher, speaks of God in terms of that which is "different and strange".

"The challenge is to believe and act"

religious commitment or political commitment? In theological terms, we are talking about the issue of idolatry.

Instead of acting as agents of change or transformers of conflict, churches tend to mirror people's fears, community divisions and a communal experience of violence and threat. For example, the Protestant churches in Northern Ireland frequently talk about law and order, reflecting a community under siege, and the Catholic Church often talks about justice, reflecting a community feeling of victimisation. Churches can also amplify these fears.[7]

Local churches, in particular, often mirror people's sense of fear and threat. They are places of ordered calm, a safe space where we are among our own; our enemies are outside. In the words of the political scientist Duncan Morrow, speaking of some Protestant churches in Northern Ireland, they are "protective fortresses for threatened people".[8] Or they may be places that assume a symbiosis between religion and national identity (e.g. Catholicism and Irishness). The prayers, liturgy, sermon, plaques and flags can tell us, often in oblique and coded ways, who is outside and inside of our concern, the identity of our enemies and the state to which we belong. In some settings a local church may also, of course, contain a lot of political difference within it. Then the rule is these differences are never discussed. However, we all know they are there and because the issues are never mentioned, the disputes can never be resolved. Clergy in such contexts find themselves in a restricted and vulnerable position.

In divided societies fear, anxiety and a sense of threat are encoded. They almost become part of people's genetic make-up. As the dynamics of conflict gather force individuals and groups disappear into a vortex of antagonism. They are magnetised by violence. It takes strong people to stand out when all around succumb to the bitterness.

In Northern Ireland some church people are the most committed in terms of peace and reconciliation, common witness and cooperation, and have been so since the start of the troubles. In Rwanda some Christians were martyred for standing against the ethnic hatred and killing. In Fiji some Christian leaders resisted the coup and stood for reconciliation between ethnic groups.

TRANSCENDENT FAITH

The Church is a witness to the Kingdom of God and the presence of transcendence, and is called to be a community of reconciliation and as such offer a "space" in the world for those who believe that human society can, if only in anticipation, "overcome its violent origins, its continuing resentments and mistrust and come to realise its true calling to become the beloved community envisaged in the biblical story".[9]

The Church exists that we may know what humanity might be, i.e. a people who are "different" and "strange". Christians can stand against community hatred and cross community boundaries; they can be peacemakers, and bring healing and forgiveness; they can stand with the victims and engage in costly action. When we see this "difference" and "strangeness" we are in the presence of transcendence[10] and in the presence of witness to the Kingdom of God. The message of reconciliation is made visible.

I am a member of a community of reconciliation in Northern Ireland. The Corrymeela Community has worked, often residentially, with a huge mixture of people from all sorts of backgrounds. We have been journeying together for almost forty years and there are "graduates" of Corrymeela all over the place.

At Corrymeela we recognise that the transformation of the world is linked to the transformation of ourselves. We are a community of faith, of diverse people who are sustained and nourished by hope and a vision of a different future. We acknowledge that reconciliation is not just a theory, strategy or technique; it is a practice and a long journey of many small steps. We have learnt that it is only in encounter and relationships that words like trust, reconciliation and forgiveness become real. We recognise that identities and lives are based strongly on the stories we tell about ourselves, our families, our communities, our countries. Thus we need safe places where people can come and meet each other, where there is an atmosphere of trust and acceptance, and where differences can be acknowledged, explored and accepted in order to bring healing as memories are explored and untangled. We have learnt the importance of acknowledging and sharing vulnerability, of not writing people off as incorrigible "baddies" no matter what they have done (this is not to trivialise evil or say wrong does not matter), and of avoiding self-righteousness by being aware of our own hypocrisy.

At their centre, churches have a narrative of forgiveness, reconciliation, new possibilities and new identities which, if it was really believed and acted on, could be transforming. The challenge is to believe and act.