

FINDING GOD IN CONFLICT: NORTHERN IRELAND

By BRIAN LENNON

IN THIS ARTICLE I WANT to address the question of how we find God in a situation of political and cultural conflict. It is a question that, one way or another, is inescapable if one is working in a context such as Northern Ireland.

Last summer a friend told me that he had been watching Wimbledon, and everything in him that was Irish had grated at the Englishness of the event, at the strawberries and cream (which he happens to enjoy) and at the presence of the Royalty. He was very glad that we Irish had fought for our independence and got rid of the British in 1921, and all this liberal stuff about recognizing the rights of our enemies and non-violence was stuff and nonsense.

I gently pointed out to him that in fact we had not fought for our independence since we are both too young to have been toting guns in 1921, and that many of 'us' did not in fact have much independence, since at least a fifth of the population of the Republic of Ireland live in relative poverty.

In practice my friend is the very opposite of an unregenerated nationalist, but his reaction is revealing of the prejudices and feelings that lie buried in all of us. These are not confined to people living in Northern Ireland. The Falklands war, together with a large element of the Thatcher phenomenon, and some elements of the Iraq war, all seem to me to display a degree of nationalism at least equal to the worst examples in Ireland. The point here is not to engage in the age old pleasurable pastime of Irishman beating Englishman, or vice versa, but simply to point out that underneath a fairly thin surface of liberalism, of charity, of commitment to justice and of spirituality all us have deep pools of prejudice and sin. Some of these lie in our attitude to political matters. Many people seem to believe that these should play no part in our spirituality. Spirituality, they say, is about other, more personal, more individualistic matters. One purpose of this article is to suggest that this is not true.

The context

The particular context in which I am writing is Portadown, a town of about 25,000 people thirty miles south of Belfast. It is a predominantly Unionist town and, like many areas in Northern Ireland, segregated in its housing on denominational and political lines. There are also clear class divisions and resentments within each community. Both the Unionist and Nationalist underclass suffer very high employment rates. In the estate in which I live 89% of the heads of households are unemployed. Both groups, like deprived people everywhere, often come into conflict with the security forces. However this is more marked on the Catholic side because the vast majority of the RUC and of the British army's Ulster Defence Regiment are Unionists. In October 1991, Channel Four's documentary programme 'Dispatches' alleged widespread collusion between members of the security forces and Loyalist paramilitaries, especially in Portadown, allegations that have been made for many years.¹

The feelings within each community run deep. This is understandable, given that almost 3,000 people have been killed in the conflict since 1969, 2,000 of them civilians. If the same proportion of the population were killed in Britain, over 100,000 people would have died. Between January and October of 1991, 18 members of the security forces, 12 Nationalist paramilitaries, and 36 civilians were killed.

In this context there are particular issues about how we live out our faith in relationship with other groups, especially those with whom we are in conflict. An example of a group that have attempted to do this is the Drumcree Faith and Justice Group. They came together in Portadown in 1986 to oppose Orange marches being put through Nationalist areas. As Nationalists, they resented these marches and argued that it was unreasonable to allow them to go through Nationalist areas while Nationalists were not allowed to march in the town centre. At one level the issue of marches may seem trivial, but to people living in Northern Ireland they are symbols of domination and oppression. However, the main concern of the Drumcree group was that local Nationalist youths frequently rioted after the marches and were subsequently sent to prison. This meant twice-weekly visits for their parents with all the subsequent costs for unemployed people of transport and parcels.

Up to 1986 only two ways had been used by Nationalists to express opposition to the marches: one was to shout abuse and throw stones, a

necessarily limited activity because of the presence of nearly 2,000 security force personnel, including about 800 British army soldiers; the second was to avoid them by either staying inside one's home or else going away for the day. The Drumcree group decided to do something different: they held a tea party in the middle of the road before the Orangemen went through. It was a crazy and ridiculous idea. Protestants took part in it along with Catholics. The biggest fear the group had was not of being attacked by either Orangemen or police—though they did fear both of these—but of being laughed at by people in their own community. At no stage have there been more than seven active members of the group. None of them had been politically involved previously and they were not 'demonstration types'.

As it happened local people were confused by the tea party. Those who supported violence saw it as an implicit criticism of themselves. Those who practised avoidance disliked the idea of a new group paying any attention to the march. But gradually most of these were won over by the sheer craziness of the sight of it on the road. After the event, for a time, local people who had not taken part in the tea party, took pride in it as something new that emerged from within their own community.

It is interesting to see what happened in subsequent years. The tea party became something of a ritual. The group got a fair bit of publicity. People expected it to take place every year. Orangemen laughed at it. The police accepted that it was a non-violent protest, and not only would cause no trouble to them, but actually made it easier for them to put the parades through the nationalist area without overt violence.

In 1991 the atmosphere was worse. Another group, which was not properly organized, and which had neither commitment to, nor training in, non-violence, blocked the road for short periods two or three times during the week preceding the march. The Drumcree group had more doubts than usual about holding the tea party. They argued, with some coherence, that all they were doing was making it easier for the security forces to act unjustly. In the end they went ahead with the tea party but they dropped an innovation they had introduced the previous year: that of a mime of the Battle of the Boyne (1690) in which William of Orange defeated James II, thereby establishing Protestant supremacy in Britain and Ireland. The mime was performed by two people dressed in animal costumes. The reason the group dropped it was that although people had laughed at the mime, and although it was an effective way of communicating the group's message, the group itself were tired of being laughed at

without any concrete results. This tiredness showed itself in saying that they should hold no more tea parties. They argued that they should let Sinn Fein (the political wing of the IRA) take over the demonstration and organize riots. Then the security forces would pay attention and not make a laughing-stock out of the members of the group. As things stand they will not be holding a tea party in 1992.

The group also took other initiatives. One of the most effective was making a list of all the people who had been killed in the conflict in Northern Ireland, Britain and Europe, over a twelve-month period, and of the organizations responsible for killing them, and circulating this around every house in the neighbourhood. They engaged in frequent dialogue with cross-community groups, and often met the RUC about police-community relations issues. They confronted the IRA when the latter expelled three local men from Northern Ireland for 'anti-social' behaviour. The way they did this required great courage: they did a door to door survey of houses in their local estate, received a massive endorsement of their opposition to the IRA, and then challenged the paramilitaries, both on the issue of the lack of any democratic support for them and on the lack of due process in IRA 'kangaroo' courts.

The story of the Drumcree group, one of many small Nationalist and Unionist groups who are working for new relationships within Northern Ireland and between British and Irish people, shows something of the spirituality needed to work for peace in a conflict situation. It also shows how conflict situations can draw out hidden resources in people.

In 1991 the group wrote a pamphlet reflecting on their experience.² This was a response to *Breaking down the enmity* by the Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics.³ In it they spell out their feelings about politics, especially about the security forces, the influence of their faith on them, and they say what they learnt from the Faith and Politics document. Their immediate response to the notion of the Covenant Community, which was stressed by the Faith and Politics Group, was to suggest, somewhat cynically, that maybe the Lord wanted them to go and welcome the Orangemen into their area. I reminded them of the anger of the Lord, especially at the scribes and Pharisees, and of the clearing of the Temple. They were amused at this and suggested that it meant that they should give the Orangemen a good kicking, but tell them they loved them while they did it! In one cryptic phrase they say they are glad to have read

Breaking down the enmity because it introduced them to a new way of reading the scriptures. 'Up to this we experienced the Bible as something Protestants used in order to put Catholics down' (p 11). This is revealing because it shows the burden of our history in a particular way: Catholics never heard the scriptures except in Latin before Vatican II. Since then they hear them at Mass. But they do not necessarily think of this as hearing the scriptures. It's simply part of Mass. Listening to the scriptures is still seen as something Protestants do, especially fundamentalists. Hence, in their perception, it can have no connection with Catholicism.

I want to use the story of the Drumcree group to highlight a number of points that seem to me to be necessary for a proper spirituality in Northern Ireland.

One is the need for involvement in political processes. This is a very important area for Christians to be involved in, especially in Northern Ireland. To avoid political processes altogether is to say in practice that issues of justice, or the creation of new relationships in society, or a theology of citizenship, are not important. In the Northern Ireland context that seems to me to be wrong.

A second point is the *way* people become involved. The most obvious way is by fighting for one's own rights. The Drumcree group went beyond that. They took seriously the task of learning about the fears of Unionists and Protestants. They are determined not to see British or Unionist domination replaced by Irish Nationalist domination.

Thirdly, people in the group admitted their fears, resentments and anger, and prayed about them. It was remarkable the immediate change that prayer brought to the group especially when it took place in the middle of a crisis. At the time of the first tea party in 1986 the tension in Portadown was likely to lead to deaths. In these circumstances there were reasonable grounds for arguing that any demonstration would be counter-productive. It was only prayer that led the group to see the necessity for a demonstration, and also for the particular type of demonstration that they chose. In this it was crucial that Protestants took part in the tea party and that one of the stated aims was to show how Protestants and Catholics can show respect to each other, even in the middle of conflict.

The most important aspect of the prayer was trying to see what the Lord was attempting to do in the gospels, what kind of things made him angry, what he did with his anger, and how central forgiveness was to him. The most obvious demand in all this was that whatever

the group did they should do it without bitterness. Not only was prayer necessary in order to see this, but prayer was the means through which people got the grace to act without bitterness, at least most of the time.

Prayer was crucial for opening up the scriptures as a living reality for the group and also for revealing the way, however mysterious, that the Lord is at work today. In many ways, because of the conflict, because it is impossible to avoid bitterness without prayer, because the pain of anger is too immediate, it is easy to see God 'in the bits and pieces of everyday'.

Conflict

A further point raised by the group's story is conflict, which in many ways was central to our Lord's life. He chose to oppose many evils and groups: the human suffering which he came to heal; his family, relatives and townspeople who did not accept him (Mk 6,4); the scribes and Pharisees who imposed burdens on people's backs that they were not prepared to carry themselves; Herod, 'that old fox', who butchered his precursor. Strangely the Lord did not engage in major conflict with two groups who were the cause of much of the suffering of people. One was the tax collectors who were a great burden on people, yet Jesus seemed to go out of his way to accept them, even before they had mended their ways. (All the guests at Matthew's meal were hardly converted on the spot; and Zacchaeus only offered to pay recompense after Jesus had already decided to stay with him.) The second group were the Roman authorities who occupied Palestine and butchered so many people in the way the Lord himself was to be murdered.

One would think that if the Lord were going to engage in conflict with those who cause injustice he would oppose these groups. In a sense he did oppose them. His preaching about economic justice—which some commentators see as the central theme of Luke's Gospel—surely undermined the whole *raison d'être* of the tax collectors; and his preaching about love undermined the basis of the Roman occupation.

However his most cutting words were kept for the leaders of his own people. One reason for this may be that their oppression would be internalized by the people, whereas both the Roman oppression and that of the tax collectors was external to them. The oppression by the scribes and Pharisees was therefore all the greater.

The conflicts in our Lord's life sprang from the anger he felt at injustice and enmity. But the anger was combined with both love and

forgiveness. It seems to me that this is the incredibly difficult heart of his message. It is easy to be angry and to hate as a result. It is extraordinarily difficult to be angry and to love at the same time. Parents perhaps can manage it: an example is the mother who screams in panic at her child after the child has been nearly run down by a car. But in general if one wants to avoid hate it is easier to avoid anger. The catch is, however, that if we are human we are going to be angry about some things and if we do not deal with it we will simply internalize it and become depressed. This applies as much to groups in society as it does to individuals.

Justice

A further issue raised by the story of the Drumcree group is that of justice: they were struggling for equal rights as they saw it. The term 'justice' is very much part of the thinking of different groups in Northern Ireland, more so on the Nationalist than the Unionist side. But in Northern Ireland as elsewhere the term tends to reflect the thinking of the Enlightenment: the stress is on the rights of the individual to freedom and equality. Fraternity—or sorority—does not get the same emphasis. This is in marked contrast to the approach in the scriptures. There justice is predominantly seen as something that is due to the community, the people. Further, injustice is defined as acting against the community in favour of oneself. 'You have oppressed the poor and robbed them of their grain. And so you will not live in the fine stone houses you build or drink wine from the beautiful vineyards you plant' (Amos 5, 10–12). The rich man goes to Hades because he ignored the suffering of Lazarus, even though there is no suggestion that he did anything to make Lazarus poor (Lk 16, 20). This stress on community, as well as on individual, rights is more relevant and useful in a situation of community conflict than the individualistic approach of the Enlightenment.

Justice, properly speaking, can only exist in just relationships. This suggests that it involves a two-way flow, with duties as well as rights. In their political relationships people should insist that the institutions of the State treat them with justice and respect, but they also have a duty to do what they can to ensure that these institutions are humane. In Northern Ireland this raises awkward questions about the legitimacy of the State, because the conventional understanding of the Nationalist position is that they want a United Ireland and do not recognize the legitimacy of Northern Ireland. (In practice the situation is a lot more complex than this.) However, even if one regards the State as

illegitimate one has the duty to propose realistic alternatives. It is here that many Catholics seem to me to fall down. They want the State to act justly towards them. But they do not accept that the State is legitimate. Nor do they make serious efforts to work for an alternative and in practice will tend to say they do not want any alternative that is politically possible. I am thinking especially of those—often middle-class people—who expect the State to act justly towards them, but do nothing to work for its reform. The idea that they might have a duty to do so and that this duty might arise from their relationship with God, would simply never occur to them.

Similar issues arise for the British Government and people. They often like to give the impression that they are not involved in this conflict and that Ireland, which was once a useful colony, is now no more than a burdensome duty. As they sit on the fence, looking on from a distance, they argue that there is nothing they can do until the native tribes make peace.

This is a view that completely ignores the fact that by any objective measurement the British Government and people are by far the most powerful group in the conflict. They make all the laws for Northern Ireland. They pay and arm the security forces. They control the very high percentage of available jobs which are in the public sector. They have been heavily involved in the making of this conflict. Only when they decide to get more involved in its settlement will progress be made.

Unionists too bear a heavy responsibility, especially in relation to the behaviour and accountability of the security forces. Theirs is a more difficult task than that of the British Government, because like the Nationalist community they are suffering more immediately from the killings.

The challenge of the Christian faith is that it demands that we forge relationships with others, especially with our enemies. This should involve political relationships, at least in some instances. This means that we need to come up with political proposals that are in some sense both reconciling and possible. It is perhaps easier to give clear examples of proposals that would be ruled out by these criteria, rather than ones that clearly follow from them. An example would be the suggestion that Northern Ireland should remain simply British, or the opposite suggestion that it should simply be Irish. These options are not possible in Northern Ireland. There are one million Unionists who see themselves as British and there are enough of them armed to block the possibility of Northern Ireland becoming simply Irish. the

same statement is true in reverse of the Nationalist community. So if we are being serious about work for justice in Northern Ireland, and if we accept that justice is about new relationships with our enemies then we need to come up with something other than these proposals.

Failure

Finally, the story of the Drumcree group is the story of a struggle with failure. The group came together in part to get Orange marches re-routed. They failed, at least so far. The members feel that failure. At times it can blind them to the other good things that have happened: the opening up of the possibilities of non-violent action for Catholics, the stress on the need for new cross-community relations in Portadown, the challenge the group have made to Catholic-based sectarianism and violence.

The issue of failure is central to any authentic spirituality. In terms of non-violence it raises a fundamental question: is it necessary for the project to succeed for it to be blessed by God? How do we cope with failure to get rid of injustice? Do we give up, or bottle up our anger and pretend to ourselves that the injustice does not matter? Or do we turn to violence? Such questions can in the end only be dealt with in prayer and most of us need a group both to drive us to prayer, and with whom to share and to check out the results.

It seems to me that this highlights one of the central parts of the gospels to which we have already referred: the temptations. The source of the Lord's temptation was the anger that he felt at the injustice his friends suffered and the enmity that existed between them. One way to deal with this would have been to wave a magic wand ('turn this bread into stone') and wipe away the fear, the ignorance, the sin that lay behind such divisions. A second way was that of violence. (Jesus certainly had some contact with the Zealots, one of whom—Simon—became an apostle.) But his response was to reject both these temptations, and instead to respect our freedom as humans, to accept that God has put us in control of the world, and that it is ours to build up or to destroy.

As I write the Drumcree group are dispirited. They feel they have been laughed at both by the police and by people in their own community. They feel like giving up. The collapse of any local peace and justice group, from discouragement, or tiredness, or disorganization, is always likely. No group, I suspect, really choose the way of humiliation. But many do choose a way that is likely to lead to it. If they can see that this has some parallels with our Lord's experience

they may receive the grace to continue. The Drumcree group have gone through so many crises in the past that it is my guess they will survive.

Conclusion

Spirituality in Northern Ireland must be concerned with conflict, confusion, forgiveness and the building of new relationships. In this context the way we worship is highly dangerous. To celebrate the Eucharist, or the Word in a way

that is exclusive, or that does not take account of the Christian duty to build relationships, especially with one's enemies, is to sin against the body and blood of the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 11). The greatest enemies of Christ are not atheists. They are the Christians who pray and worship in a way that contradicts the universalism of Christ's message.⁴

Northern Ireland has many groups who are struggling for long-term change. The God that the British-Irish conflict reveals to us is mysterious, involved, angry, forgiving, and in many ways powerless. Yet as we stumble through dark and bright patches, becoming more aware of the sort of blocks in us that I mentioned at the start of this article, it becomes more obvious, not that the Lord is leading us, but that he is walking alongside us. In doing so he is reminding us of his own temptations and failures. He is also reminding us that what mattered in his own life was that he remained faithful to his task of freely calling us into new relationships, especially with our enemies. Although he failed to get our full response, paradoxically he also succeeded in what was most important: forging in himself a new relationship between us and his Father/Mother. That relationship is one that can only work to the extent that we manage to get on with each other. In that lies our hope.

NOTES

¹ 2 October 1991.

² *The story of a journey: a response to 'Breaking down the Enmity'*, Portadown: Drumcree Faith and Justice Group, 211 Churchill Park (1991).

³ *Living the Kingdom*, Belfast: An Interchurch Group on Faith and Politics, 8 Upper Crescent, Belfast BT7 1NT (1989).

⁴ Tim Hamilton, Brian Lennon, Gerry O'Hanlon, Frank Sammon, *Solidarity: the missing link in Irish society*, Dublin: Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Irish Messenger Office, 37 Lr Leeson St Dublin 2 (1991).