



IRISH SCHOOL  
— OF —  
ECUMENICS

# **IS THERE A COMMON GOOD?**

## **Living Towards the People's Vision**



**Cathy Higgins & Johnston McMaster**

# IS THERE A COMMON GOOD? LIVING TOWARDS THE PEOPLE'S VISION

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## FOREWORD

# Irish School of Ecumenics at 50

The Irish School of Ecumenics (ISE) was founded in Dublin in 1970 by the late Reverend Michael Hurley, SJ. In 2020 ISE turned 50 and to mark the occasion, one of the initiatives of the ISE Trust Steering Committee was this education and research project. This decision by the Trust Steering Committee was in keeping with its commitment to Northern Ireland and the border counties, where the ISE has engaged in research programmes, including ‘Moving beyond Sectarianism’ (1996-2001), and ‘Partners in Transformation’ (2001-2004), which was a joint project with Mediation Northern Ireland. It has also offered community-based ‘Education for Reconciliation’ programmes (1996-2012) and helped develop and support Inter-Church Fora (1997 - ongoing).

The ISE became a part of Trinity College Dublin in 2001 and is now an academic institute within the School of Religion, Theology and Peace Studies. ISE offers postgraduate degree programmes in Dublin on *Contextual Theologies and Interfaith Relations* and *International Peace Studies* and in Belfast on *Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation*. It is committed to blending academic excellence with theory and praxis in building peace and achieving reconciliation within and between nations, and also amongst faith communities. The ISE’s academic and community programmes have informed and continue to enhance the understanding and practice of reconciliation at local, national, and international levels. The current Strategic Plan 2023-28 for the School of Religion, Theology and Peace Studies includes a commitment to civic action, climate action and global action to ‘advance the cause of a plural, just society on a sustainable planet’ (2023, p. 11). Another strategic priority is to ‘model next-level

mutually beneficial civic engagement' that will create opportunities for the ISE Trust and School to develop 'initiatives at grassroots level on the island of Ireland and beyond' (2023, pp. 20-21). ISE's commitment to education and research that is transformative, ethically rooted and praxis oriented ensures it will continue to contribute to the building of a sustainable and reconciling future locally and globally. This project and its three publications, listed in the 'Educational Strategy for the Common Good', are a contribution to that vision and its realisation.

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## INTRODUCTION

When the Trust Steering Committee of the Irish School of Ecumenics shaped this project four years ago there was much discussion around what to call it. In the end the title was in the form of a question, 'Is there a common good?' The question has never gone away but has rather intensified and become even more complex and elusive. We all thought we knew what the common good was but discovered that it was difficult to describe and would be even more difficult to realise. The horizon was always out there and kept moving. If we did not know it already, Clones was not Coleraine, and Derry and Strabane were not Newry and Mourne. A global common good and a planetary common good were beyond imagination and sight, yet the conversations over the three years of the project's life refused any reductionism of idea, simplification of vision, decomplexification of concept and localisation of horizon. Changing contexts were engaged, complexity was embraced, and commitments in practice were to a pursuit of the common good with the question mark energising the pursuit. Chapter One in this book will expand on the question of the common good in light of experiences and insights shared during the project.

As indicated already, this book is the culmination of a three-year process that began in January 2021, but the project had an earlier start date of November 2020, however, a matter of months into it and the project was shut down by the first great interruption, Covid-19. As we are all too aware, Covid brought loneliness, lock downs, suffering and, for too many, death in isolation. The project had to be reimagined, strategic changes made and when the time came, the resumption of a process in which the vision of the common good had changed.

The second great interruption was the Russian invasion of Ukraine, immoral and illegal. Ukrainians fled and over 100,000 are now in Ireland. Consequently, the project changed again as everyone realised that the conversations were taking place in a different context for, as with the war in Europe, the question of 'Is there a common good?' was more difficult given these new complexities. The project will finish on the 31<sup>st</sup> of December 2023 but before it reaches its conclusion we are living through a third great interruption. War and conflict have erupted yet again in Israel/Palestine with potential to engulf the Middle East region and with the Russia - Ukraine war ongoing, could draw in all the world powers. Morality and international law are being flouted. The United Nations believes that there may be cases of war crimes committed by both Hamas and Israel and if investigations show this to be true, then both sides need to be held accountable and justice seen to be done. There is a mutuality of evil. We are back to the drawing board, 'Is there a common good?'

### **Enabling Cultural and Social Change**

As the past three years have demonstrated, change is a given in life, even though oftentimes we are not equipped to deal with it. Much of the change we encounter, locally and globally, is a consequence of human activity. This book in its exploration of the question, 'Is there a common good?' while focused on people's experiences and insights in Northern Ireland and the border counties, expands the frame to situate the local within the global. The front cover, showing the image of the Earth from outer space, reminds us that we share this planet, which collectively we have responsibility for. The chapters in this book illustrate the need for effective cultural change which is premised on

the search for a common good that has the potential to transform relationships with each other and the earth.

No one person can change a culture on their own, for all cultures are social products created ‘interactively between people’ (Bate, 1994, p. 207). We fashion cultures and we can therefore transform them if there is collective buy-in and ownership of the new ways of thinking and acting being proposed. The primary model of cultural change we adopted in this education and research project was conciliative. Given the research question, ‘Is there a common good?’ the project needed to be participative, pursue a plurality of perspectives, be open-minded, and respond to the realities impacting participants in a critical and imaginative way. The project was process-orientated, a shared journey exploring the question of the common good. It sought to get behind the cultural mentalities and systems that needed changing if a common good culture was to become a collective concern and shared agenda. Education was a core component of the project, understood as creating space for conversation, exploration of different ideas, pushing questions, disagreeing and mutual learning. The civic conversations were the primary methodology employed throughout. There were voices we were keen to include, whose perspectives had been missing from the discussions. Focus groups were therefore organised for women from loyalist areas, those from ethnic communities, refugees and asylum seekers, and young people. We identified other perspectives needed and invited 30 people from across Northern Ireland and the border counties to share their thoughts and life-experiences on the common good in a series of in-depth interviews. The identities of those in focus groups, those who took part in zoom meetings and all the interviewees are protected in this publication, as agreed in advance

with participants. All participants quoted in this book are identified according to the role they played in the project.

A thematic approach to the common good question had as a key objective to facilitate reconciliation, which in the first year of civic conversations was identified as a primary expression of the common good. What became clearer as the project developed was that the cultural transformation needed was the embedding of reconciliation. This would require honest and respectful engagement between people on the island of Ireland on six integrated strands of reconciliation: socio-political, socio-economic, socio-legal, socio-environmental socio-psychological and socio-spiritual. An 'Educational Strategy for the Common Good', included as the Appendix, outlines the programme rolled out on the six integrated strands of reconciliation, entitled 'Is There A Common Good? Shaping the Present, Building Community'. This book includes a chapter on each of the six strands, expanding on the educational material.

### **Reflection on Emerging and Core Themes**

Over the three-year process, the project engaged in conversations and interviews with a wide spectrum of people and produced core themes that required further and deeper development and more robust conversations. Three core themes stand out:

1. Social reconciliation

It became apparent very quickly that the common good, if it was to mean anything, had to be filtered through the prism of reconciliation. The Belfast /Good Friday Agreement had reconciliation at its heart and the Preamble to the Agreement expresses a profound ethics and praxis of reconciliation. Yet, repeatedly, from people across Northern

Ireland and from the border counties, it was being stated that reconciliation has not worked. Whatever the Preamble gave us twenty-five years ago, reconciliation has failed. The consensus was that while we talked a lot about reconciliation, we fell short on the doing of reconciliation. Political and religious institutions have been part of this falling short. Reconciliation rhetoric and reconciliation piety are a thin vision of reconciliation, which fail to move us beyond a vertical and individualised version to a social reconciliation that deals with systems and structures in an integrated way.

The instability of the existing political institutions was understood to reflect a corrosive political system driven by party interest, instead of a common good interest, and zero-sum mindsets that made cooperation virtually impossible. The consensus that emerged was that changing this culture was essential to addressing the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland. Programme One in the Educational Strategy outlines a thematic approach to dealing with the past, learning from it and re-imagining a different future. We have failed to engage in the hard work of reconciliation to our detriment. If we hope to realise a common good future, then working together through the contestedness of our history and traditions and the trauma and sufferings of the past is key. What we need to keep in mind is that,

[t]he process is one of deconstruction - reconstruction, not simply an act of demolition. The intention (no matter how naïve) is that a phoenix, that symbol of cultural replenishment and renewal, will rise from the ashes of the fire that has been lit.

(Bate, 1994, p. 222)

## 2. Values and Ethics

This focus emerged almost as a demand from participants. At the end of year two there was the demand that the focus of year three had to be on values and ethics. Whatever the vision or horizon of the common good was, it needed values and ethics at the heart of it. Whatever reconciling society we were committed to building, it needed values and ethics. If anything was of primary importance, it was values and ethics, and it was not about theory but ethical practice. Values and ethics were to underpin action. A rich part of the conversations was a focus on diverse sources of ethical values and practices. For many the Judeo-Christian tradition was an important source, but the Greek humanist tradition, Eastern traditions such as Confucianism, Buddhism, Hinduism, Bahá'í and the Indigenous traditions, were all wisdom traditions with often shared values and ethics at their heart.

The conversations around the diversity of wisdom perspectives moved thought, imagination and consciousness in two important directions. We shifted from individual morality to social ethics and ecological ethics. That is an important, liberating shift from Western Enlightenment individualism. We also shifted from an ethics of conformity, passivity, status quo ethics, to an ethic of suspicion, critical awareness and dissent, an ethic of critical resistance. This too is a liberating shift from political pietism and religious quietism. These ethical shifts are core to the common good and the practice of sustainable, participative democracy.

The focus on ethical values and practices, informed by a plurality of moral worldviews and the shift in emphasis from individualism to collective responsibility, enabled an appreciation of the pluralist and democratic approach that encouraged unity through diversity. Civic

conversations opened up multiple options for pursuing common good cultural change, a rich tapestry of possibilities unified by a commitment to creating ethical, shared and reconciling community. Chapter Ten entitled, ‘Rethinking Common Good Values: Education for Reconciliation’ explores ethical values that enable and support a society living towards the people’s vision of a common good. It affirms the role of education for enabling exploration of the values that inform our understanding of what it is to be in good relations with all living things. The Educational Strategy includes the ‘Valuing A Different World: Is There A Common Good?’ programme, which informed civic conversations in the final year of the project.

### 3. Belonging to the Earth Community

The Covid interruption reminded us that pandemics are connected to environment and ecology, and the Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Palestine wars are not only destructive of humanity but equally destructive of the environment and eco-systems. Conversations raised consciousness that the common good is not only human and societal but planetary, even cosmic. That not only blew apart our Western individualism but shattered our pervasive anthropocentrism. We humans are not the centre of the world or universe, and planetary and biodiversity value is not determined by our consumption, use and abuse. We belong to the earth community, and it was here over 16 billion years before a human appeared. We became aware of Pope Francis and his call for ecological conversion. Consciousness was raised to a mind-blowing level when our cosmology and worldviews were challenged, if not shaken, by the realisation that an earth community existed billions of years before we stood up and walked upright as *Homo sapiens* even as *Homo erectus* on the planet. Now we needed a new way of looking at the planet and

cosmos, a new way of looking at ourselves, and if we were religious, a new way of looking at the Sacred or God. This would also mean a new way of imagining the common good and a new vision of social and eco reconciliation. Chapter Five in this book explores 'Caring for our Common Home: The Socio-Environmental Strand of Reconciliation', and Chapter Eleven focuses on 'Being Eco Human: An Eco-Anthropology for the Common Good', both are a resource for engaging with an alternative anthropology, vision, and wisdom. And what was the truth of this wisdom? It was truth as old as Slieve Donard or the Sperrins!

Our distant ancestors knew the importance of the collective and rarely idolised individuals. Hunter-gatherers the world over, from the coldest tundra to the hottest deserts, believed that everything is connected. They saw themselves as part of something much bigger, linked to all other animals, plants, and Mother Earth. Perhaps they understood the human condition better than we do today.

(Bregman, 2020, p. 74)

There is liberation and transformation in wisdom from the distant past! And we come back to the question in a whole new light, 'Is there a common good?'

### **Dismantling a Culture of Violence for the Common Good**

Chapter Thirteen explores abuses of power and the culture of violence enabling all manner of abuses locally and globally, with roots in colonial history. Past conflicts continue to blight the present with

consequences for the future. The chapter was written before the war and conflict in Israel/Palestine, which is exposing the depths of our inhumanity and capacity for evil. In Israel/Palestine there is an old deep-rooted problem with roots in the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916, which was a secret treaty between the United Kingdom and France for the partitioning of Arab lands. Roots of the problem also lie in the Balfour Declaration of 1917 that was to provide a homeland for Jewish people. Those who have suffered most in the conflicts in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank have been civilians, and this is borne out in the current war. The worst of all is the killing of large numbers of children by both sides. There is a humanitarian crisis. Hamas knew that would happen when they committed their evil atrocities against Israelis. When Israel tells 1.5 million people to get out of a strip of land the size of the Ards peninsula and orders a hospital to vacate all its patients including those in ICU, that is a death sentence and the knowing creation of an acute humanitarian crisis. Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, has twice quoted from the Bible to legitimise and justify his actions. But like all prime ministers, presidents and military leaders who quote from sacred texts, their interpretations, hermeneutics (principles of interpretation) are open to serious questioning. When national leaders begin to quote and invoke their holy books, we do well to exercise a rigorous hermeneutic of suspicion.

President Joe Biden quickly visited Israel to assure Israelis that America stood with them and he consoled those grieving for more than 1400 civilians killed by Hamas in the 7<sup>th</sup> October 2023 massacre, an unspeakable evil. Biden said something else, which has not received much coverage in the Western media. As well as consolation, he offered what can be described as a warning, 'I caution you, while you

feel that rage, don't be consumed by it. After 9/11 we were enraged in the United States. While we sought justice and got justice, we also made mistakes' (Freeland, 2023). Biden had learned lessons and realised that the United States consumed by rage had made big mistakes in Afghanistan and Iraq, with devastating and lasting consequences. Are the same mistakes being made again? Will there also be devastating and lasting consequences? After 9/11 the Americans birthed a darker terror, and the Israelis will not eliminate Hamas but do the same. Evil has been committed by both sides and humanity has been diminished, and morality destroyed. Western powers are not innocent and, however this present conflict ends, the international community has a moral and ethical responsibility to begin a peace process again and enable a just and lasting solution to a seemingly intractable problem. This time what is needed is a solution that is just and sustainable for both Israelis and Palestinians. Meanwhile in Israel/Palestine the question remains, 'Is there a common good?'

The offensive signs erected in Belvoir estate in South Belfast stating 'Belvoir will no longer accept the rehousing of illegal immigrants or the excrement of other communities' (Lynch, 2023), is an example of how racism and intimidation operates to instil fear and divide people in Northern Ireland. It is the most recent example of a hate incident and as indicated in Chapter Nine on 'Ethnic Communities and the Common Good', the number of racist incidents and crimes have now overtaken sectarian incidents and crimes according to the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Answering the question of 'Is there a common good?' includes and requires the perspectives of those from diverse minority ethnic communities. The chapter explores how as a society we can respond positively to the challenges of embracing the

diversity of racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious differences, which is the focus also of Chapter Twelve entitled, 'Living Without Passports: The Cosmopolitan Vision towards the Common Good'. This chapter explores how the cosmopolitan vision of the common good embraces 'an expansive consciousness, a larger identity as eco-humans and a wider and cosmic sense of responsibility with the whole community of life' (p. 338).

The perspectives of young people on a democratic and common good future with more opportunities for civic engagement as an antidote to the current political *malaise* is the focus of Chapter Eight. It ends with a compilation of comments from the young people who engaged with the project on the common good, highlighting issues they believed needed addressed, as well as their hopes for the future. The Educational Strategy in the Appendix also outlines a programme resource to facilitate discussions on developing a democratic culture with active citizenship at its core.

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### **Advisory Group Members**

#### **ISE Trust and Staff**

- Eileen Gallagher (ISE Inter-Church Fora)
- Mary Hunter (Former member of the ISE Trust)
- Jin Dong Kim (ISE at 50, Dublin Co-ordinator)
- Tom Layden SJ (ISE Trust)
- Fergus McAteer (ISE Trust)
- Dermot McCarthy (Chair of the ISE Trust)
- David Mitchell (Assistant Professor in Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation)
- Andrew Pierce (Assistant Professor of Ecumenics)
- Geraldine Smyth OP (ISE Trust and Adjunct Associate Professor)
- Salters Sterling (ISE Trust)

#### **Community Members**

- Maura Burns (Director, Drumalis Retreat Centre)
- Pauline Clarke (Good Relations Officer, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)
- Jennifer Clifford (Derry/Londonderry LGBTIQ)
- Eleanor Duff (Causeway Coast Peace Group and the Corrymeela Community)
- Martina Flynn (Good Relations Manager, Newry Mourne and Down District Council)

- Angela Graham (Clones Family Resource Centre)
- Maureen Hetherington (Former Chief Executive, The Junction, Derry/Londonderry)
- Olive Hobson (Jethro Centre, Lurgan)
- Jacqueline Irwin (Chief Executive, Community Relations Council, NI)
- Libby Keys (Community relations and inter-church involvement)
- Martin Kennedy (Formerly Clones Family Resource Centre)
- Nicola Lane (Good Relations Manager, Belfast City Council)
- Denise McCoole (Community Education Officer, Inishowen Development Partnership)
- Jennifer McLernon (Ballymena Inter-Church Forum)
- Paddy White (Former Director, Youth Link NI)

### **Regional Group Members**

#### **Armagh / Portadown / Lurgan**

- Christine Davidson (Faith and Friendship Inter-Church Women's Group, Armagh)
- Diana Farrelly (Formerly, International Affairs, Southern Regional College, Armagh, now Education Manager with the British Council in Northern Ireland)
- Charmain Jones (Formerly Rural Community Network, Portadown now Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network)
- Carole Kane (Good Relations Officer, The Jethro Centre, Lurgan)

## **Belfast**

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- Terry Howard SJ (former Catholic Chaplain UU Jordanstown)
- Helen McHugh (Agape, Lisburn Road Methodist)
- John Peacock (National Secretary, YMCA)
- Paddy White (former Director, Youth Link NI)

## **Causeway Coast and Glens**

- Eleanor Duff (Causeway Coast Peace Group and Corrymeela Community)
- Eileen Kelly (Coleraine Inter-Church Group)
- Yvonne Naylor (Corrymeela Community)
- Reverend Bert Richie (Coleraine Inter-Church Group)
- Christine Turner (Coleraine Inter-Church Group)

## **Derry-Londonderry/Strabane/Donegal**

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- Maureen Hetherington (Former CEO, The Junction, Derry/Londonderry)
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- Roy Crowe (Inter-Church Forum Carrickfergus)
- Reverend Stuart Lloyd (Ballymena Inter-Church Forum)

### **Mid Ulster**

- Margaret Hamilton (Inter-Church Forum, Cookstown)
- Libby Keys (Community development and inter-church engagement)
- Sean McElhatton (Mid Ulster Council)

### **Newry / Dundalk**

- Sonya Burns (Peace IV Newry, Mourne and Down District Council)
- Mary Capplis (Former Peace IV Manager, Louth County Council)
- Colletta Dalikeni (Dundalk Institute of Technology)
- Marie Farry (Newry Inter-church Forum)

### **Omagh / Fermanagh / Monaghan / Cavan**

- Pauline Clarke (Fermanagh and Omagh District Council)
- Jane Crudden (Peace IV Manager, Cavan County Council)
- Eileen Gallagher (ISE Inter-Church Fora )
- Angela Graham (Clones Family Resource Centre)
- Esther Millar (Omagh Churches Forum)
- Ruth Moore (The Glens Centre, Manorhamilton, now CEO of The Junction, Derry/Londonderry)

## Facilitators and Project Contributors

To ensure that those who participated in each of the programmes had a chance to be heard, we used small groups for reflection and discussion. Thanks to all those who helped with the facilitation of these groups. In addition to those named above the following also assisted: Stephen Alford, Alexandra Bellinghausen, John Caswell, Grace Davin, Seamus Farrell, Michael Hughes and Roger McCallum.

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- Catherine Cooke (Co-ordinator of Foyle Women’s Information Network) and the women from Derry/Londonderry.
- Carole Kane (Jethro Centre, Lurgan) and the women from Lurgan.
- Charmain Jones (Northern Ireland Rural Women’s Network) and the women from Portadown.
- Ivy Goddard (Mid and East Antrim Inter-Ethnic Forum) and the women from Ukraine.
- Gosia O’ Hagan and Fergal Quinn (Building Community Resource Centre, Ballymoney) and those from ethnic minority communities in the Causeway Coast and Glen area.
- Gordon Wolsey, Joe McKeown and students on the youth leader programme at Youth Link NI.

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Thirty people from across Northern Ireland and the border counties consented to be interviewed for the project. We agreed to respect their privacy, but they know who they are, and they will note their contributions quoted throughout this publication. Thank you for giving of your time and sharing your perspectives on the common good. Your contributions have enriched this publication.

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**Dr Cathy Higgins and Dr Johnston McMaster**

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## CHAPTER ONE

# Is There A Common Good?

In 1987, about six months before I was to get married, our Baptist church on the Antrim Road was petrol bombed and the church was completely gutted. And it was the parishioners from Holy Family, the Catholic church up the street, who came down with their buckets and sponges and mops to try and help us to clear up the debris and get the church into some kind of working order. So that's just a simple act of where local people in the area were showing some kind of ... I call it kindness ... for the common good, you know, trying to do something, I guess, just to show that we're neighbours and this was not carried out in our name.

(Programme Interviewee)

Whenever my wife was killed [by the IRA] I moved with my young daughter into a mixed area, as I wanted her to know Catholic friends as well as Protestant friends. So she met up with a couple of girls across the street and I got to be good friends with her father, a Roman Catholic. And on the eleventh night [of July] I was meant to be down at their house for a barbecue and I really didn't want to go because I used to go down the bonfires on the eleventh night, but this night I went over and when I got there, they'd built a bonfire in their back garden for me. No tricolour, no effigies of the Pope, and we sat

around the fire and we drank beer and we told stories and our kids laughed and played together in the garden, little Catholic girls and little Protestant girls. It's sort of like, for me there's nothing more beautiful than the sound of kids laughing and just playing together ... My friend that night in his house just realised that the eleventh night's a big thing and he just wanted to do something for me and I thought that was lovely. I don't know if you call that the common good.

(Programme Interviewee)

I live in Springmartin, right on the peace line in West Belfast. My mum and dad and I moved there at the beginning of the Troubles, we were burned out of our house by Protestants, and we moved into a loyalist ghetto which had nothing except houses. And so, we formed a committee, we fought for years to get shops in, we fought to get play facilities in, we fought to get to see it just cleaned up. It took us years, but everybody was working for the common good of Springmartin.

(Programme Interviewee)

As somebody who is in long-term recovery from drug and alcohol addiction, who's been through the process ... I almost have a duty of care to give back and that's not because I must .... I think if you've been through something then you kind of owe that learning to people who are struggling as well ... The common good is giving back

and wanting the best for people, that desire to want to help people be better. I think for me the common good means, to see the deficit that's in my community, to see the people that are struggling, to see the people that are hurt, to see the people that are impacted by trauma, just to see the broken ... to see the people that actually need help and support. They don't need judgment, and they don't need finger-pointing, and I think we need to start seeing that we are a community.

(Programme Interviewee)

Where human beings are, there will be disagreements and differences and probably conflicts, so we need to have a frame of reference within which we resolve conflicts and I think the concept of the common good gives a decent frame of reference for that. You know, let's see how we can work together to resolve these differences and at the same time do it in a way that enriches the community within which we live.

(Programme Interviewee)

This opening chapter introduces the idea of the common good, the subject matter of the education and research project and the primary theme of this book. Early on in this project we recognised the importance of asking the question, 'What is the common good?' rather than assuming that there was an agreed narrative on either 'the common' or 'the good'. The quotations at the beginning of this chapter reflect what some of those who engaged with the project understood by the 'com-

mon good'. The participants' reflections reveal that common good can come out of experiences of devastation, loss, deprivation, the struggle with addiction and conflict resolution efforts. What connects the five quotations is the conviction that the common good exists where there is commitment to community building and the restoration of relationships. And the flip side of this is also true, that any process of reconciliation should be driven by a determination to build a common good.

By way of introduction to the common good theme, this chapter provides a brief historical overview of philosophical and theological insights into the common good. This project engaged with people from Northern Ireland and the border counties, and many of the participants had lived through the period of the Troubles (1968-1998). Some of the issues raised by them are outlined in brief and will be explored in greater detail over the course of the book. The chapter will conclude with an exploration of liberating interdependence, identified as a core common good dynamic, and transformative change, which participants agreed was the hope that inspired common good actions.

### **Keeping the Question Mark?**

The concept of the common good is philosophical in origin and was popularised by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BCE) who, more than two millennia ago, made the common good a central concept of his political theory. He held that a common good action is pursued in political or civil society because of the good of the action for the community; further, that the cooperation and agreement that drives the action makes the activity a common good. There are as many common goods, in Aristotle's estimation, as there are demon-

strations of cooperation. Aristotle set out two criteria he considered necessary to meet common good conditions. Firstly, that no individual or group be systematically excluded from a share in that good and secondly, that no dimension of human well-being be excluded in determining the common good (Riordan, 2017, p. 104).

Christian theologians were in turn influenced by Aristotle, as well as the Roman philosopher, Cicero (106-43 BCE) who likewise affirmed that when people are united in agreement ‘with respect to justice and a partnership for the common good’ then the welfare and wellbeing of the people is served. Cicero believed that for a community to flourish it must practice the virtues of kindness, goodness, justice, and generosity (Jaede, 2017, p.3). Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), like Cicero, held that a common good life is founded on virtue. He underlined the importance of agreeing the need for distributive justice, thereby ensuring all had a share in the basic material goods of life. Aquinas also believed in teaching the value of right action, that is the things that make for interpersonal justice, like honour, truth and trust (Jaede, 2017, p.3).

Enlightenment thinking shifted the focus from the community to the individual and in the process conflated the idea of common good with the well-being of the individual. ‘The role of the state then became to ensure that individuals can pursue their personal ends in accordance with their common peace and safety, as opposed to promoting a moral vision of the good life’ (Jaede, 2017, p. 4).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century attention focused on the real possibilities that individual or minority rights could be sacrificed in any common good agenda. Karl Marx (1818-1883) raised critical questions about the role of the state and its self-serving system. He indicated that what was

good for those who ruled and benefitted from capitalism was detrimental to the workers oppressed by that very system. Proponents of postmodernism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century went even further and called into question any possibility of a common good, given the fact that we are all limited to subjective experiences and perceptions that prevent any universal or common understanding. A key influence in more recent times is the philosopher, John Rawls (1921-2002) who, in his 1971 book *A Theory of Justice* sought to revive a notion of the common good. He argued that while individuals pursue their own perception of the good, the purpose of government is to create and maintain conditions that will benefit all. In an age of individualism with its emphasis on individual rights, Rawls conceived of the common good as 'basic equal liberties' that are shared by everyone (1971, p. 243).

The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) affirmed that while not all people share the same vision of a common good, that should not prevent people, locally and globally, from working together to realise the social conditions that enhance life in all its forms. This Roman Catholic approach is programmatic and in the context of plurality encourages people to make a common life that seeks peace, justice, and liberation for the poor and oppressed.

Every day human interdependence grows more tightly drawn and spreads by degrees over the whole world. As a result, the common good, that is, the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfilment, today takes on an increasingly universal complexion and consequently involves rights

and duties with respect to the whole human race. Every social group must take account of the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and even of the general welfare of the entire human family.

(Second Vatican Council, 1965, Chapter 2, para. 26)

This common good ethical vision and practice has its origins in the Jewish understanding of social covenant that was the basis of Jesus' teachings. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains the Jewish understanding of covenant:

A covenant is a relationship ... A covenant creates a moral community. It binds people together in a bond of mutual responsibility and care ... There is, I believe, a covenant of human solidarity that binds all seven billion of us alive today to act responsibly towards the environment, human rights and the alleviation of poverty for the sake of generations not yet born ... It is the undertaking of responsibility for others, knowing they too undertake responsibility for us.

(Sacks, 2020, p. 327)

For Sacks, at the root of the Judeo-Christian notion of covenant is the commitment and responsibility we, as a people, embody in our efforts for the common good. The common good binds us to the fate of other people and inspires us to pursue justice, mercy, truth, and peace as universal values. Similarly, the Islamic value system prizes building community and civic engagement as core common good values (Kazi,

2015, p. 115). These neighbour religions through the shared common good concept are promoting the idea of a family of nations that are interconnected, interrelated and interdependent.

The Parliament of World Religions brings together the religions, spiritual traditions, wisdom traditions, and philosophies of life from all regions of the world. The parliament's signature document from 1993, *Declaration toward a Global Ethic*, is an invitation to engage in conversations about the kind of world we want to live in. More will be said on the parliament in Chapter Seven, where the 'four irrevocable directives' agreed in 1993 will be listed. These are concerned with promoting humane relations between people. A 'fifth irrevocable directive' was added in 2016, in response to a growing awareness of our responsibility for the climate crisis and calls for 'Commitment to a Culture of Sustainability and Care for the Earth' (2016, pp. 13-14). The declaration inspires ongoing reflection on ways to bridge the gap between the secular and religious, with a view to finding common ground for the common good.

The mounting challenges facing our world have the potential to unite people across their many differences to work for the common good and the healing of our earthly home. The threats from climate change, wars within and between nations, enforced migrations, poverty and the spread of disease, need global as well as local common good responses. Even though there is growing awareness of the common good task, framing a common good response is proving difficult as we grapple with very real questions and concerns. For instance,

- How do you find the common good in a world of difference?
- Can we foster a shared responsibility for each other and the common good?

- How do we ensure that minority voices are heard in determining the common good?
- How can we live and promote a common good economy?
- How do we protect the human rights of all people?

There are no easy or quick answers and perhaps the real challenge is living with the questions and keeping them open, allowing possible ways forward to emerge as people search together for solutions. Riordan recognises the necessity of retaining the question mark in any conversation on the common good. He stipulates, ‘I have come to understand the concept of the common good ... as open and programmatic, naming something we are still in the process of discovering’ (2017, p.11).

Keeping the question mark in our exploration of the common good was the first and most important decision we took when developing the education and research project. This was affirmed by participants who noted that it allowed for divergence of opinions and the possibility of emerging consensus:

In a democratic society people will have different views about what is the common good. So I think we need to present a plurality of voices in as honest a way as we can.

(Programme Participant)

Common good is not a choice between good and a lesser good or between good and evil. It is about finding a common better and greater good that we can agree upon, which we can't know in advance.

(Programme Participant)

Reaching agreement is no easy matter and it always involves negotiation. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is an example of a political compromise reached after three years of difficult official political conversations, unofficial conversations to end the violence went on for much longer. Commitment to that 'common better and greater good' kept the majority of our political representatives in those talks when the easier choice would have been to walk away, or not engage at all. Keeping the question open acknowledges that we will only discover what the common good is if we are prepared to engage honestly, listen to all perspectives, take account of the range of issues that need addressed and are solution focused. Moreover, as the context changes or new information becomes available, this will necessitate further discussion, analysis and possible revisions to previous agreements. To put it another way, we cannot know what the common good is in advance of achieving it and there are no short cuts, as it takes time and real commitment to the dialogical process to reach consensus. In the context of conflicts of interest, authentic reconciliation is found in a dialogical process that is honest, respectful and founded on the shared desire for justice and the good of all in society.

### **Contextualising the Common Good**

In our explorations of the question, 'Is there a common good?' efforts were made to reach out to individuals and groups from across society. We arranged focus group meetings and interviews with individuals from some of the sectors that were not represented by those who participated in the education programmes we facilitated during the three-year project. We acknowledge that not all sectors in society were engaged with, some because they excluded themselves and others

because given the time factor, the challenges presented by Covid-19 and limited personnel, we had to make difficult choices. That said, we tried to ensure diversity in terms of gender, political, ethnic and religious identity as well as age, marital status and race.

Everything has a local context, the local context for this education and research project is Northern Ireland and the border counties. And within that geographical area multiple other contexts coexist and interdepend, shaping in both positive and negative ways individual and group identities and relational dynamics. The dominant contexts include, the political, economic, religious, psychological, legal and environmental. Each of these backdrops are complex and multi-dimensional, living and changing, interrelated and indispensable foundations for the common good.

The political context is a mix of competing narratives that have both informed and been moulded by sectarian mind-sets and the structural and geographical divisions that were the foreground to the partitioning of Ireland. The impact of partition is still being felt in the border counties over a hundred years later. Since the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, when political leadership demonstrated a willingness to power-share and categorically reject a return to the violence of the previous three decades, Stormont has been suspended on five occasions. It was brought down in recent years by Sinn Féin following the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal and currently by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in response to the Protocol on Ireland and Northern Ireland. A malfunctioning Northern Ireland Assembly is a block to the common good.

Civic discontent and disconnect within and between communities also have an economic underpinning. This is both a local and a global

phenomenon. News from across Europe in recent times has reported on how the anger and alienation felt by those struggling to make a living is fuelling street protests. A recurring issue raised by those who engaged in the project was the socio-economic pressures experienced in cities, towns and rural areas throughout Northern Ireland and the border counties. Stories were recounted of families living in overcrowded accommodation, sometimes three generations in the one home due to a lack of social housing and high rents. Others told of the financial strain of working in low paid jobs with zero-hour contracts, and a lack of affordable childcare facilities that sometimes meant you were paying out more than you could earn. One interviewee expressed concern at the growing scale of the problem.

I think the economy of a country is just so, so important and we're reading day after day where people in Northern Ireland are depending on food banks and these are people who are working, the minimum wage, zero-contract hours. All of these things need to be looked at and revised. People want to work generally ... they want the dignity of work and to support their families. They can't do it on minimum wage.

(Programme Interviewee)

The lack of political leadership is exacerbating the already pressured cost of living crisis. This is illustrated by the fact there was no political intervention to prevent the removal of previous financial safety nets for the most vulnerable. To cite one example, the removal of the Holiday Hunger Scheme, which provided £27 a fortnight to 96,300

children and their families over the school holidays, increased the levels of absolute poverty (Fitzpatrick *et al*, June 2023, p. 13). This raises questions about the onus on the state to provide the basic necessities to all citizens. As more families are pushed into poverty and the Anti-Poverty Strategy gathers dust in a room in Stormont Buildings, the common good challenges us to forge a fairer and more equal society, one in which all can experience economic security, and where the welfare of all people becomes the *raison d'être* of our socio-political and economic system. History has shown us that a society is only as strong as its weakest link, in other words, unless and until the full range of needs of the most vulnerable members are met, we will not have a flourishing society. As one interviewee put it:

The common good is a recognition that society as a whole works best when everyone is benefitting and if some people benefit and others don't then I think that that damages the fabric of community.

(Programme Interviewee)

Whether our concern is economic rights, or political rights, religious or cultural rights, they all come under the remit of human rights. Human rights provide the legal assurances and protections for all citizens in a democracy. As such, they play an essential role in the provision of the conditions that allow for human flourishing. The legal framework then is another vital context which in service of the common good becomes the basis and stimulus for an inclusive, diverse, and participative civil society that benefits all. A step in that direction would find expression in a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland, still to be realised,

which has remained an unfulfilled aspiration of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

The environmental crisis has in recent years become a reality for people locally and globally. COP27 identified countries most vulnerable to the impact of climate change and least likely to have the capacity to put in place necessary protections against flooding, drought, and famine. The list included Chad, Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan, to name a few. News of wildfires resulting from rising temperatures and flooding due to excessive rainfall has become the norm in recent years. This crisis needs collective wisdom and our concerted efforts to reduce global temperatures to below the tipping point. It is in all our interests to work for the common good of our shared earth. There was a recognition among many of the participants in this project that the environmental crisis has to become a priority focus in Northern Ireland and the border counties, but we have still a way to go to convince people of that.

The trauma of the Troubles is still being experienced by too many individuals and families in Northern Ireland and the border counties. Thirty years of intercommunal violence that resulted in 3,568 deaths and left 475,41 people injured, has left a legacy of pain, fear, anger, guilt, and shame that is intergenerational. The more than 20 miles of peace walls dividing Protestants and Catholics that are still in place tells its own story. The rise in suicides and those with mental health problems is a further illustration that the peace dividend has not been experienced by all. There can be no common good until the complex narratives that surround the legacies of our violent past are acknowledged and the possibilities for healing are explored and enabled.

What of the religious context? While Northern Ireland is now a

more secular society, the Census 2021 revealed that within Western Europe it retains some of the highest levels of religious practice and belief, with nearly 80% of the population identifying as Christian (NISRA, 2022, p. 2). Those saying they had no religion or religion was not stated has risen to 17.4%, a marked increase since the 2011 Census when the figure was 10.1% (NISRA, 2022, p. 2). The power of the churches to influence public opinion, however, has been on the decline, as support for abortion services and equal marriage on both sides of the border in Ireland has shown. While the temptation to privatise religious worship and practice and not engage public ethical challenges is ever present, Christian leaders did show courage in the early years of the Troubles, as Chapter Ten illustrates, and again in September 2021 when in a reconciliation service in Armagh they admitted the churches' complicity with sectarianism. The contribution of the churches to the common good will be measured by the ability of local congregations to show similar courage.

### **Liberating Interdependence**

A recurring critique throughout the project was the way in which Western culture has sacrificed the values of community and solidarity on the altar of individuality and competitiveness, to the detriment of society as a whole. The consensus that emerged as participants grappled with the complexities and challenges of integrated reconciliation, was that we as a society are out of kilter and a focus on the common good has the potential to redress the balance. This was succinctly summed up by one of the interviewees: 'The common good stands in contrast to a sort of individuality that has come to dominate Western culture. So it is a view of participation in society whereby the well-being of the

whole of the community is one's goal' (Programme Interviewee).

The alienation felt by the overlooked and excluded impacts society as a whole. Consequently, until the concern with one's own good is widened to include the good of the community, the potential for healing and wholeness for individuals and the society at large will remain unrealised. The wisdom of community reflection, as we engaged with questions of integrated reconciliation and our interdependence, led to the conviction that what is needed in Northern Ireland and the border counties is a public culture underpinned by common good values.

Michael Sandel, who teaches political philosophy at Harvard University, has underlined the importance of what he calls 'moral engagement' as a counter-cultural antidote to the sense of isolation and alienation that undermines the common good. He calls for a reorientation in society toward the building of a common life together.

If a just society requires a strong sense of community it must find a way to cultivate in citizens a concern for the whole, a dedication to the common good ... It must find a way to lean against purely privatized notions of the common good, and cultivate civic virtue.

(Sandel, 2009, pp. 263-4)

In the third and final phase of the education and research project we turned our attention to the civic values that enable and support a common good society. There was affirmation that values are at the heart of a common good society, and they help us to make sense of ultimate questions like: 'What are we for?', 'What is the purpose of life?', 'What does it mean to be human?', 'What is community?', and 'What

does it mean to be eco-human?'. We drew on the wisdom traditions of East and West, and the Indigenous traditions, to resource our explorations of the values that enable the flourishing of human and eco life. This was intentional and a recognition that we live increasingly in intercultural contexts where different ethnicities, worldviews and value systems share the same space. This plurality and diversity allow for opportunities to connect across difference, to share and learn from each other and affirm the co-existence of 'multiple realities' (Berger, 2014, p. X1). Or to put it another way, pluralism, which basically means that there are different ways of looking at and making sense of reality, is the *milieu* within which we in Northern Ireland and the border counties now live our lives.

For some this new reality is threatening and they fear a kind of contamination with worldviews that are so different and have the potential to undermine certainties they have relied upon since childhood. The culture shock of recognising that there is more than one way to think about and relate to the world, which relativises one's received story, can be deeply unsettling. Learning about these alternative worldviews in a non-threatening environment can go some way to easing the fear of difference and in time, even encourage a willingness to make connections across these differences.

The common good is something to be discovered in the context of encounter and engagement. For those who view pluralism as a danger to the certitudes they hold dear, interethnic and interfaith dialogue is something to be guarded against. As Peter Berger, renowned sociologist of religion recognised, '...fundamentalism is an effort to restore the threatened certainty' and in this context the common good is understood as either affirming the certainty within the tradition

we inherited and/or it calls for a sense of assurance in what the future holds (2014, p. 9). Participants on the project identified common good values that assisted and enabled the embracing of difference and plurality. These included:

- Social solidarity and compassion.
- Openness to learning the truths of the other, especially the marginalised and excluded.
- Humility and a recognition of our shared humanity and vulnerability.
- Justice in public life and right relations rooted in distributive and restorative justice.
- Radical inclusivity – that is a society in which none are diminished or left out.
- Active non-violence - where there is no appeal to the use of violence or dependence on violence to control or change things.
- Commitment to human and environmental well-being and flourishing.
- Hope - in the possibility of new beginnings and fresh possibilities.

Riordan underlines the connections between actions for the common good and the values that inform and reflect said actions, 'Goods are the concrete goods of our activities and values tell us why the goods we pursue are worth pursuing' (2017, p. 32). Values, then, express the way and the why of our actions. They can shape our purpose, give meaning to our actions and make sense of the goods we pursue.

There is no common good without ethical values and living these ethical values enables us to discover the common good in real terms in our relationships with the human and eco world.

### **The Ultimate Objective Is Change**

The common good is concerned with transforming systems and structures to the benefit of all. This will involve change, which we can all struggle with, even if it is understood to be necessary and liberating. It is much more comfortable to keep talking and allow the conversation to become the end result. Instead, what is required is reflection that leads to action, followed by further reflection, to see if the action achieved the common good. This may then result in additional goals being set and actioned. One of the contributors to the project shared their insight into the importance of change and the ingredients that facilitate it.

I often say when I'm out speaking, change has six elements. C stands for the challenge of change. H stands for the hard work, and it is hard work. A stands for an agreement with other people, you can't make change on your own. N is about networking, about getting similar people who have done similar things all over the world and are willing to share that experience. G is grasping opportunities and E is about evolving with the change. Change very often comes from the bottom-up, it doesn't come from the top, they're quite happy with the way things are.

(Programme Interviewee)

As part of that momentum for change there was recognition that it cannot be imposed from above, without consultation. Change aimed at enabling or furthering the common good is something discovered in and through civic engagement. This truism is as relevant for local community initiatives, as it is for regional and national plans and procedures. We cannot always know in advance how best to actualise the common good: ‘... a searching and inclusive conversation needs to take place before action is attempted prematurely. In the absence of such a conversation, it is virtually certain that any action would serve those who have the dominant interests in the conversation’ (Sagovsky and McGrail, 2015, p. xxix).

Drawing on personal experience of community engagement in Belfast, one of those interviewed described the importance of that consultation process. Their contribution underlined that when we are talking about local context and engagement, often it comes down to several streets or a small area with very specific issues. ‘For residents in the Lower Lisburn Road to have a personal sense of common good, a communal sense of common good, they must feel they have some way of influencing what happens in their area’ (Programme Interviewee).

The common good then, is never imposed but always constructed in and through public discussion about what is needed to improve the quality of citizens’ lives and the environment. It fosters solidarity among those pursuing the common action where responsibility is shared. It also promotes subsidiarity, empowering people to address their own problems and find solutions. Change is inevitable and common good outcomes can result if we are open to new knowledge and experiences, and committed to common good values that can inform and enrich the change process. Discerning in community the future

direction that will support the opportunity and capacity for human flourishing, even within limits determined by the persons involved and/or the environment, can take time and patience. The evaluative process is an essential step in working toward the common good. It is space where we can raise critical questions and together apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to our traditions and cultures in order to discover what prevents the common good and what is needed to enable positive transformation.

We have tried as a society to flourish in the absence of reconciliation to no avail. We limp along until the strained relationships and zero-sum politics stop us in our tracks. The only truly liberating way forward is to commit to the reconciliation process: ‘For me the heart of reconciliation, which feeds into the common good, is that we will do whatever we can to help heal broken relationships’ (Programme Interviewee).

The challenge is enormous, given where we are at. It will involve difficult conversations, with an emphasis on attentive and deep listening, respect for each other and an acceptance of difference and diversity. There are no short cuts to the common good, however, if we choose a reconciled future we will also be opting for an integrated, flourishing, and stable society, a common good society.

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## CHAPTER TWO

# Overcoming the Democratic Deficit: The Socio-Political Strand of Reconciliation

Aristotle wrote in *Politics* that ‘all communities are established for the sake of some good.’ ... The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement provided a common framework in which political actors in this place that we call home could work together to build a common good for all of us. It gave politicians the consent of the people to strive for the common good.

(Programme Presenter)

Northern Irish politics, stemming from parish politics really, has a tendency to be very populist. The will of the constituency is key and politicians are scared of making big, long-term decisions and I think we need to counter-act that.

(Programme Presenter)

A personal hope for me would possibly be to lower the voting age to seventeen ... you only have to look across the water, for example, in Scotland they lowered the min-

imum age to sixteen, along with places like Austria and Germany in local elections. They're all very successful countries, so that maybe shows that younger people getting involved in politics may be the way for the future.

(Programme Presenter)

We have a representative spectator form of democracy - citizens elect those who will determine structures and policies on behalf of everyone ... It's an assumption that needs to be qualified – everywhere ... I have serious doubts about the future of democracy, given the increasing evidence around the world ... we can reasonably ask whether in our elections over the last twenty-five years the common good has even been on the agenda.

(Programme Presenter)

Sadly, democracy is not functioning at present ... No single party with some 28% of MLAs should have the power of veto to bring down the Assembly.

(Programme Presenter)

In our history we have seen how majoritarianism works in both parts of the island ... There does need to be a recognition within society and within the body politic that minorities need protected ... There can be the tyranny of the majority and there can also be the tyranny of the elite.

(Programme Interviewee)

In pursuing and living towards a vision of the common good, the common good is being viewed through the prism of reconciliation for which the vision is one of social reconciliation. The individualism which dominates our approach to politics, economics, culture and religion in the Western and Atlantic world is seriously reductionist and distorts the vision and practice of reconciliation. It eliminates the common and reduces the good to the private sphere. In relation to politics and religion it produces 'political pietism' and 'Christian quietism' (Boesak and DeYoung, 2012), leaving neither capable of addressing the social, systemic, and structural divisions and injustices of society. This is why the next six chapters will address six integrated strands of reconciliation, each prefaced with 'socio' to underline the social, systemic and structural nature of the integrated strands. There is no reconciliation without the socio-integrated strands and no common good, inclusive of all of us without exception, that is not living towards, and socially and structurally practicing, holistic, social reconciliation. The political, religious, human and secular need such consciousness, will and action to build the common good through social reconciliation. This calls for different political praxis, new theological praxis and new philosophies of life in action.

At the heart of the socio-political strand of reconciliation is the challenge to overcome the democratic deficit. This is a global challenge as strongman politics threatens democracy around the world. There is a democratic deficit as leaders come to power through democratic means and then exercise strongman politics, and they are men. Human rights are diminished, peace and security are threatened as military budgets are increased and greater weapons of mass destruction are developed. A cult of leader is created, introducing totalitarian rule

and dismantling constitutions in order to enable rule and domination for life. Such leaders, in different ways, eliminate opposition and critical thinkers, are often misogynist, homophobic and racist. Donald Trump trashed democracy in his four presidential years. He withdrew America from every agreement on nuclear weapons and armaments, hiked military expenditure and took America out of protocols, commitments and agreements on emissions, climate change and justice. Another four years of Trump as president would have dismantled the American Constitution. He instrumentalised religion and was backed by most American evangelicals and would be again if he runs in the 2024 presidential race. In India, Modi has instrumentalised the Hindu religion as he creates a Hindu nationalism and India as a Hindu state, in opposition to its democratic and secular constitution. Other strongmen with an antipathy to democracy are Xi Jinping (China), Putin (Russia), Erdoğan (Turkey), and Orbán (Hungary). Each sees himself as a lifelong leader and is moving in this direction. Freedom and rights matter little if at all for these strongmen yet majorities vote for them. The electorate put the strongmen in power, which is then exercised in a totalitarian way, only for the next election to see the majority electorate return them again.

It is in most cases the electorate who are responsible for giving totalitarian leaders and strongmen the power to dominate and rule. How much is driven by fear, or rather, how many are driven by fear? Trump's slogan was 'Make America great again'. His appeal was to those whose world, economic and political, was on the wane. Making America great was about restoring White supremacy in an America where demographics are changing. Some states took to voter repression and gerrymandering, to eliminate Black voters and keep the state

White. Trump was racist, White supremacist, which is why he banned Muslims from entering America during the pandemic and proposed building walls to keep Mexican ‘rapists’ and ‘criminals’ out. It was why, according to media sources, he also described some African nations as ‘shitholes’. Whatever about America seeing itself as the global beacon of democracy and with a mission to take democracy to the rest of the world, Trump was the destroyer of democracy. Perhaps he feared democracy. Racists, sectarians, misogynists, absolute capitalists, totalitarian and strongman leaders do, which is why they dismantle democracy.

It may be argued that a majority of the electorate in the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016. The Conservative government conveniently argued that, even though a very large minority of people in the UK didn’t vote at all. English nationalists ignored the diversity and pluralism of the UK by ignoring the majorities in Scotland and Northern Ireland who voted to remain in the EU. The Scottish and Northern Irish populations could fit into an English county, and because they were minorities the English majority did not give them a thought. They didn’t care about this small part of the UK and didn’t, and still don’t, understand it or the complexities that the English Parliament bequeathed it in 1920. Furthermore, Parliament was told that the referendum was a consultative exercise but minutes after the referendum result was announced, shocking leading Brexiteers, the vote became a mandate and the rest, especially for Northern Ireland, is messy and tragic history.

Following the settlement of 1688, a doctrine of Sovereignty of Parliament developed, which explicitly claimed that neither the Crown nor the people is sovereign. This is the constitutional position today

and we need to realise it. Parliament is sovereign, not the people. Neither the Crown, the House of Lords and certainly not the people are sovereign. And it is not even the House of Commons! 'For the de facto sovereign is not the House of Commons but the executive commanding a majority in the House of Commons' (Grayling, 2017, p. 133). In the House of Commons a single vote majority can enact or suspend any law, any civil liberty or human right; that vote has absolute power. We try to call this representative democracy, but there is no space for 'We the people' or a democracy where the people are sovereign (American Constitution, 1787). What was the Conservative executive really saying when it described Brexit as taking back control and sovereignty? They did not mean the sovereignty of the people but that of the executive commanding a majority in the House of Commons. We the electorate confer absolute power on an executive government formed from one party, which does not always or necessarily represent the popular will or 'we the people'. This is the central defect in the British system of democracy. It is a serious democratic deficit and 'we the people' never question it.

If there are serious democratic deficits in both the systems and cultures of the US and the UK, despite how they each see themselves as beacons of democracy in the world, (US and UK exceptionalism rooted in their imperialism, real or imagined), what is the state of democracy in Northern Ireland? Is Northern Ireland a democratic society? 'What do we really mean by democracy? And what do we mean by "plural democracy?" ... pluralism is about much more than orange and green' (Programme participant). If working democracy is about plurality and pluralism, then Northern Ireland does struggle with democracy. In a society that exists on binaries, that has been constructed

on sectarian binaries, is democracy possible? Is it surprising that even after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, over the last twenty-five years the common good has not been on an electoral agenda? Sectarian binary identities and politics do not allow for democracy, authentic democratic processes, the development of a common good and the building and nurturing of social reconciliation.

Hannah Arendt was born into a secular Jewish family of German Jews in 1906. In 1933 she fled Germany for Paris and after further internment fled Europe for the US, becoming a US citizen. More will be said on her life in Chapter Nine on 'Ethnic Communities and the Common Good'. Arendt published her classic book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951, described on the back cover as 'a chilling analysis of the conditions that led to the Nazi and Soviet regimes'. Arendt was concerned with learning from history and recognising the fragility of freedom, and how propaganda, scapegoating, terror, and violence can lead to a slide into absolute domination, to a fascism and totalitarian regime. In a recent publication on her life and thought, there is a reminder of how crucial critical thinking was for Arendt. We are to engage in radical, ceaseless questioning to enhance our sense of political responsibility and to have informed, discriminating judgement. How much more authentic would our practice of democracy be and how different would our politics be if as citizens we engaged in radical, ceaseless questioning, critical thinking and cultivated discriminating judgement? Politicians would be much more accountable for their manifestos, policies, promises and legislation. But as people we are too passive, too many, too often, believing in a flag rather than the common good.

Arendt believed that 'any politics worthy of the name will embrace

rather than reject human plurality, civic equality, diversity of opinion, and public debate and deliberation' (2021, p. 17). She lived through the slide into totalitarian regimes, the destruction of democracy and freedom and the oppressive control of human life and living. She knew that any politics and democracy worthy of the name would embrace plurality, civic equality, diversity of opinion, and public debate and deliberation. Against such a benchmark, do we have democracy in Northern Ireland and do we have politics worthy of the name? We have difficulty with pluralism, perhaps don't really want civic equality, we resist diversity of political, religious, and cultural opinion, and shy away from public debate and democratic deliberation.

This does not mean that Northern Ireland is a totalitarian society or that it has ever been so. But it has been and is a dysfunctional society maimed by the binary identities and politics that are the visible expressions of our sectarianism. We live out of contested narratives yet sharing a perceptual lens:

... that framed both communities' political behaviour ... that of the agreed minority. While Catholics saw themselves as the minority within a majority Northern Ireland Protestant State, Protestants saw themselves as a minority in a majority Catholic all-island Ireland.

(O'Malley, 2023, p. 37)

The Catholic/nationalist narrative was of a minority as victims of electoral gerrymandering, discrimination in everything economic and social. The Protestant/unionist narrative was that every Catholic was out to destroy the Northern Ireland state. The civil rights campaign

was believed to be nothing less than the destruction of the Unionist state.

To paraphrase words from the poet Yeats, were we ‘maimed at the start?’ If America was founded on the twin pillars of racism and patriarchy, and to these White and male foundational pillars some would add Protestantism, was Northern Ireland not founded in 1921 on sectarian and Protestant majoritarian pillars? Six counties instead of nine with an untouchable Protestant majority (66:33) in 1921, meant a gerrymandered state from the outset with a built-in democratic deficit. State building in the years that followed set about consolidating the gerrymandered state apparatus, socially, religiously, economically, and culturally. It was not a totalitarian state and cannot be compared to the Nazis and Soviet regimes that eliminated millions of lives and oppressed millions more. But Northern Ireland was a sectarian state without the democracy and politics envisioned by Arendt. We have still not overcome our sectarianism and we continue with a democratic deficit, disallowing a common good and blocking a social reconciliation process.

In all wings of government in Northern Ireland there’s a democratic deficit because nobody is held to account ... it’s a very flawed system because the people should have the power but the people in Northern Ireland don’t have the power ... The elite seem to hold the power ... But I believe that if you wanted to have equality, that the people should have the power in a democracy but they don’t.

(Programme Interviewee)

## Overcoming the Democratic Deficit

Still not enough people are questioning the democratic deficit in Northern Ireland but those who are asking critical questions are not alone. From the 1970s democracy surged in our world but five decades later, democratic people power has diminished, there is a retreat from democracy, and it even seems to be facing extinction. We might be surprised that democracy goes a long way back in history. From our Eurocentric perspective we believe democracy began with the Greeks in Athens in 594 BCE, and with Solon who wanted to abolish debt slavery and bring the poor citizens into the citizens' assembly. Democracy was about 'the birth of public assemblies, gatherings in which citizens freely debated, agreed and disagreed and decided matters for themselves, as equals, without interference from tribal chiefs, monarchs or tyrants' (Keane, 2022, p. 17). Democracy began with public, citizens' assemblies. The Greeks called it *demokratia*, which was rule or governance (*kratos*) by the people (*demos*). In Athens the *demos* (the people) were males who owned property. Solon was quite radical in wanting to bring the poor into the assembly. Again, from our Eurocentric way of seeing and reading history, we look to Athens for the foundation of democracy. But democracy as citizens' assemblies goes back well beyond Athens, to the regions we now know as Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Western imperialism and domination have been so destructive in these regions. Long before we constructed our European imperialism and dominated the world over the last five centuries, ancient Mesopotamia from 3200 BCE was a centre of culture and commerce and was a cradle of public or citizens' assemblies from 3200 to 1000 BCE. Two thousand years before Athens, the Mesopotamians had assemblies in which the power and authority of kings, along with

their land grabs and trade, or propensity for such, was being restrained by popular pressure from below. People power ruled in Mesopotamia from 3200 BCE. These older assemblies of Syria-Mesopotamia,

...invite us to see that democracy of the Greek kind had eastern roots, and that today's democracies are indebted to the first experiments in self-government by peoples who have been, for much of history, written off as incapable of democracy in any sense.

(Keane, 2022, p. 23)

Assembly or *demos*, which is people-based democracy, was born in the East not the West.

Out of the later Athenian democracy there emerged Socrates who questioned everything, including democracy. For Socrates we are to question ourselves, question all authority, all dogma, political and religious, and question all parochialism and every kind of fundamentalism or closed, exclusive system of thought, belief and action.

The Socratic commitment to questioning requires a relentless self-examination and critique of institutions of authority, motivated by an endless quest for intellectual integrity and moral consistency.

(West, 2004, p. 16)

Democracy owes much to Mesopotamia, Athens and Jerusalem. The latter may surprise us as much as Mesopotamia! But democracy also came from the ancient Jewish tradition, which is the foundation

of the Western Christian and moral and ethical tradition. Jerusalem gifted us three key insights without which we do not have democratic practice with authenticity and integrity:

- Every individual is of dignity, worth and value, everyone made in the image of God.
- The Hebrew prophets were committed to justice for all, for social, political and economic justice.
- There is no democracy without justice and justice is underpinned by compassion, tenacious solidarity with all.

The roots of democracy are in Mesopotamia, Athens and Jerusalem. These roots remind us that democracy is the power of the people through people's or citizens' assemblies. That the *demos* always counters the power of the elite, be that monarchy, the privileged or political elite. The *demos* or people exercise critical thinking and relentlessly question every authority and dogma. Democracy is the radical civic equality of every citizen without exception, treated with dignity, value and worth. The poor, vulnerable and left-out are brought in, and democracy is the practice of social justice for all, expressed through compassion or tenacious solidarity with each and all.

### **The Practice of Democracy**

Is it possible that in Northern Ireland we might practice democracy? Might Mesopotamia, Athens and Jerusalem find a place in our very green and beautiful land? Many do come to Ireland, north and south, to enjoy its un-partitioned scenery, if not its lack of sunshine! How much more investment would there be in a Northern

Ireland which has overcome its sectarian divisions and enjoyed a stable, inclusive democracy with all its people taking responsibility for the common good, living in equality, solidarity, and social justice? Institutional religion is in serious decline in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of Ireland, Europe and the North Atlantic. In this context the numbers of non-religious will continue to increase. But there may be enough residue and memory of the Jerusalem tradition and values, such as the inclusive dignity of every human being, social justice for all persons and communities rooted in compassionate social solidarity, enough of that social spiritual capital to inspire and shape a democratic and just common good and reconciling Northern Ireland.

The practice of democracy might begin with a practical realisation of the power of the people. *Demos* means 'the common people', all of us without exclusions. We are the people, not the Protestant people, nor the Catholic people, no elites or privileged, or superior, no binaries, just the people who together are responsible for the good of all, politically, economically, culturally and spiritually in relation to our social values, meaning and holistic wellbeing. It is in the context of the power of the people that politics works.

It is so easy for governments to confuse the common good with the rule of the majority ... I think we need political systems that have some sort of morality or ethics at their core so that they take responsibility for actions ... for people, for the good of people - how we treat minorities, how we treat people who feel on the margins.

(Programme Interviewee)

Together the people of Northern Ireland need to take back their power and it is the people who will shape the ethics, values and morality as the basis for political governance. This means that the politicians elected by the people are accountable to the people. If some in the community end up on the margins or are minorities, the people will remind the politicians of their democratic responsibilities and that the health, wellbeing and good of the whole community always depends on how minorities and the vulnerable are treated.

Francis Hutcheson was born between Carryduff and Saintfield. In the succession of grandfather and father he was an ordained Presbyterian minister. He is best known as the leading philosopher of the Scottish and Irish Enlightenments. Involved with a dissenting academy in Dublin, he later became Professor of Moral Philosophy at Glasgow University where he was known as the 'Father of the Scottish Enlightenment'. Hutcheson's students became influential in American politics and his Scottish and Irish Enlightenment philosophy, especially his teaching that the end of government was 'the greatest good of the greatest number', and that where government was failing and there were victims of injustices, there was the right to resist (R.F.G. Holmes, 1998, p. 265). This philosophy led to the American resistance to the first British Empire and influenced resistance toward unjust rule in Ireland. Hutcheson's thinking shaped the radical 'We the people' line in the American Constitution, even though the 'people' were White and male. This was somewhat reductionist of Hutcheson's philosophy, in which power was not in the hands of monarchs or politicians, or political elites but in the hands of the people. We need to revisit this Irish-Scottish philosopher and his Enlightenment teaching. Hutcheson has never really featured in our democratic deficit and politics and

power in Northern Ireland.

The 'power of the people' means the critical thinking of the people. The people will question every authority structure, political manifesto and policy as to whether the greatest good of the greatest number is the objective. The 'power of the people' means that politicians and political systems are accountable to the people. The Northern Ireland Policing Board holds the PSNI to account, something similar on a regional basis, which is inclusive of every sector of society, could enable dialogue with politicians based on mutual accountability.

Authentic democracy is also participative and deliberative. The people are too passive in Northern Ireland and need not only to reclaim their power but to become participants in the practice of democracy and its processes. The people need to claim their participative voice.

The Agreement foreshadowed a more participatory democracy - it included a prescient proposal for a Civic Forum. With democracy under attack in many countries the need for a more participatory democracy is more evident now. A Civic Forum was created but had a very short life, largely because before it could bed down, political opposition to it brought it to a hasty end.

... it is time for a new model of democracy ... A more participatory democracy will include fora where young people can share their views, hopes and dreams for the future.

(Programme Presenter)

Chapter Eight will explore the role of young people in democracy and the common good.

I want to know is there a role to revise the old Civic Forum and get it up and running for people from all aspects of society to come together and almost be like a citizens' parliament where they can talk and can influence and persuade and commit with our politicians and try to make life better for people.

(Programme Interviewee)

This was a repeated demand in many civic conversations and as emphasised above, it is to dialogue and commit with politicians, not an opposition to them or criticism of them. It is a new model of democracy and is participative and deliberative. Traditional politics in Northern Ireland operates from a win-lose or zero sum approach. It is part of the dysfunctionality of our politics and the glaring deficit in our democracy. Politicians shaped by zero sum politics and trapped in a tribal politics will not find it easy to change and buy into a new model. But we are all being asked to change, overcome our sectarian mind-sets and systems, move beyond our political tribalism and transition to a 'we the people' democracy with greater participation and deliberation of all the people. Alongside a political assembly there is need for regionally based citizens' assemblies, civic fora, or people's parliaments.

Democracy breaks down frequently in Northern Ireland. The Assembly has not functioned for too many of the 25 years since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the two largest parties have been re-

sponsible for these shutdowns and breakdown of democracy. As noted by a programme presenter, 'No single party with some 28% of MLAS should have the power of veto to bring down the Assembly'. He was referring to the Petition of Concern. 'From 2011 to 2016 it was used 115 times, 86 times by the DUP and 29 times each by Sinn Féin and the SDLP' (O'Malley, 2023, p. 51). Most of this was veto beyond the original intention of the petition. Democratic deficit and dysfunctionality? The 2006 St Andrews Agreement built-in a glaring democratic deficit after which the First Minister and Deputy First Minister posts would go to the largest Unionist or Nationalist party. Even if Alliance won the largest numbers of seats the party could not hold the post of First Minister. There is no way this can be described as the practice of democracy. We all know, or most do, that the crudely named First and Deputy First Ministers are equal, and they can only be nominated together. But try selling equality to the DUP and Sinn Féin! In a changing political landscape, where binary identities are diminishing and the traditional identities no longer reflect the plurality of identities that have developed since 1998, a new model of democracy requires recognition of the demographic changes and the changing political landscape. This will mean changes in the agreements to reflect the realities and enable an authentic practice of democracy. Currently there is a lack of democratic intent in the arrangements we have. But will the two largest parties at present want change for authentic democracy? Do the two parties even want Northern Ireland to work? Are they really committed to a common good? Or do sectarian and tribal politics suit?

Is there a future for democracy in Northern Ireland? We have reached a stage where the two traditions model is obsolete. In Northern Ire-

land there is no real majority, in fact, we are all minorities, maybe even a society of four minorities: nationalist, unionist, neither and ethnic communities. A new model of democracy is imperative if there is to be a future. There is no real hard evidence for the demand for a border poll or that it would succeed in delivering a united Ireland. A border poll within the next decade would drive people into binary silos and a 51% either way would polarise people for at least another decade and probably longer. Neither of the two traditions has really made the case, still less persuaded the other to favour their respective unions.

This is not to say that one day a new Ireland will not emerge. It may well. Lessons we learn from history are that nothing is guaranteed, nothing is inevitable and the future is often a surprise. A new Ireland will only come out of a stable and authentically democratic Northern Ireland, reconciling and pursuing together a common good. It will be a democratic Northern Ireland where power belongs and is exercised by all of its people, where there is participative and deliberative democracy, where the people and politicians work together for the common good, and where there is human plurality, civic equality, diversity of opinion and public debate and deliberation. It will be a democracy where every citizen is of dignity, value and worth, where social justice is for all without exclusion or exception and the whole community, all four of its minorities, are in compassionate solidarity.

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## CHAPTER THREE

# Common Good Economics: Socio-Economic Strand of Reconciliation

I worry that there is this narrative that says, ‘Well you know, we can’t really touch rich people because they are the wealth-creators for the rest of us’. The UK is something like the fifth or sixth wealthiest country in the world and we have people who can’t afford food! There’s something wrong there. But we’ve got ourselves into that narrative which says, ‘We can’t really do it any differently. We can’t afford to help those people, we can’t afford to give them more Universal Credit, we can’t afford hand-outs and anyway sure, people who are on benefits, they’re swinging the lead, they’re playing the system’.

(Programme Interviewee)

We know there are a lot of people who live on the bread-line, for want of a better word, and it’s about seeing how you can progress that and make life better for them. But you know the term ‘poverty’ has been bandied about all my life and I think of poverty entirely differently. I don’t look at it from a money point of view... There are different elements to poverty. For instance, it’s about being powerless, it’s about having somebody else make decisions

for you, and it's about having no voice. We have politicians who talk for us but they never talk to us, and it's about changing all that.

(Programme Interviewee)

When I was a kid growing up in the Westland identity was everything to me as a loyalist, as a unionist. I was always collecting for the bonfire, always out on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July. I was a member of the Orange Order Juveniles walking the Twelfth, walking on Easter Tuesday, but once I moved up, got a job, moved away, started working, went to university, those things became less important, they didn't mean the same to me anymore. That's not to say, by the way, that I don't ... I mean I do think a lot about the union and I would like to maintain the link with GB but that union for me is more an economic union. I remain an economic unionist.

(Programme Interviewee)

Which model of economic organisation produces a society that comes closest to economic equality and economic justice?

(Programme Participant)

These quotations from individuals in Northern Ireland and the border counties who engaged with this common good project offer a critique of the current neo-liberal capitalist economic system. They reflect a primary concern for the majority of the people who participated

in educational programmes, interviews and focus groups facilitated by this project, namely the negative impact of poverty and inequality on the most vulnerable individuals, their families and society in general. This chapter, on the socio-economic strand of reconciliation, will attempt to speak to the issues and questions raised in the quotations. It will incorporate further reflections from project participants, to inform the analysis of the multidimensional challenges posed by poverty and inequality.

### **Context: Making Sense of the Statistics**

In an address at an event to mark UN International Day for the Eradication of Poverty in 2016, the President of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins informed those present that ‘how a society treats its most vulnerable citizens is a reflection of its moral core.’ He reminded the assembled crowd that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2016-2030) has as its first goal ending global poverty, in all its forms. In 2015 every country in the world signed up to the 16 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which as well as eradicating poverty, are committed to reducing inequalities, combatting climate change, and protecting our natural environment by 2030. The SDGs reflect the new understanding of human development pioneered by Amartya Sen, an Indian economist. Sen’s human capabilities approach informed the UN’s 2010 global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) that monitors how people globally experience poverty. The MPI and SDGs work from the premise that improving a country’s wealth in itself does not ensure human wellbeing. There needs also to be a strategy for developing people’s abilities and giving everyone the freedom and opportunity that derives from better education, improved

health, access to resources and a sustainable environment. We are at the midpoint for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 2023 MPI shows that even with the challenges impeding poverty reduction, including widespread inequality, political instability, conflict and climate change, there has been some progress. Twenty-five countries, including India, China, and Indonesia, have halved their global MPI values in the last 4 to 15 years, demonstrating that poverty reduction is possible. That said, across 110 countries, 1.1 billion people are poor, with over 18% of the world's population estimated as living in acute multidimensional poverty. (Oxford Poverty and Human Development Institute and UN Development Programme, 2023, p. 2).

How do we understand poverty? It is generally understood as an inability to meet basic human needs, which include the need for water, food that is adequate and healthy, and for shelter that gives security and protection. Those individuals and families unable to secure all, or any of these basic human rights are, by definition, living in absolute poverty. Sen's work on the Multidimensional Poverty Index underlines the importance of taking into consideration deprivations in health, education and living standards, as important measures of absolute poverty. He urges governments to focus on people and their development and not on gross domestic product (GDP).

Poverty is also relative to context and in the UK in 2021/22 a couple with no children and an income of £314 per week or less were deemed to be living in absolute poverty. For a single person without children the income figure was £210. The threshold would be higher for those living with children. In the same year the relative poverty threshold for a couple with no children was an income of £339 per week and for a single person without children the threshold was £227 (NISRA,

2023, p. 3). Going on these figures 13% of the population were deemed to be living in absolute poverty in 2021/22 and 16% of the population were estimated to be living in relative poverty (NISRA, 2023, p. 1). It is unconscionable that in the UK, one of the wealthier countries in the world, nearly a third of the population of Northern Ireland are living in poverty. Food banks across Northern Ireland have reported an inability to cope with the rise in numbers of individuals requesting support. According to the Trussell Trust, food bank usage in Northern Ireland has increased by 141% in the last five years.

Food banks in the Trussell Trust network in Northern Ireland distributed 81,084 emergency food parcels between 1 April 2022 to 31st March 2023, including 35,334 parcels for children. This is the most parcels that the network in Northern Ireland has ever distributed in a financial year and represents a 29% increase from the same period in 2021/22.

(The Trussell Trust, 2023, p. 1)

The cost-of-living crisis, high inflation rates, low paying jobs, and budgetary cuts to public spending, in order to repay an over-spend from the previous financial year, have increased pressures on the lowest income households. According to the Consumer Council NI Household Expenditure Tracker, after bills and living expenses have been paid, those living in poverty have less than £19 per week left for discretionary spending (The Consumer Council, 2023, p. 2). A report by Loughborough University into child poverty in the UK for the year ending March 2022, in collaboration with the End Child

Poverty campaign, indicated that more than one in five children in Northern Ireland are experiencing poverty. Children in the north and west of Belfast and Newry, Armagh and South Down were deemed more at risk, as were children with disabilities (Sherlock, 2023). In the majority of households at least one adult was in work. In response, the End Child Poverty Coalition is calling for the two-child limit for those claiming Universal Credit to be scrapped, as evidence supports the fact that children with two or more siblings are more likely to experience poverty (Sherlock, 2023). The failure of the Northern Ireland devolved government to produce both an Anti-Poverty Strategy or an Early Learning and Childcare Strategy, to respond to the needs and alleviate the anxieties of those living with poverty, is compounding the difficulties for the most vulnerable.

What do we know of poverty rates in the border counties? In 2021 Social Justice Ireland carried out a Poverty Focus report in the border counties and concluded that they suffered from the highest poverty rate in the Republic of Ireland and have consistently had poverty rates far above the national average (News Northern Sound, 2021). Given that rural areas have been slower to recover economically post-Covid 19, it is likely that border regions will continue to experience real economic difficulties. This was a cause for concern for several border participants on our project. Two individuals on the project expressed their frustrations at the level of poverty:

Poverty is a geographical issue. The further you are from the seats of power, the more you are impacted by poverty; for example, places in the North furthest away from Belfast and places in the South furthest away from Dub-

lin. The border is furthest away from both! We also have Northern Ireland furthest away from Westminster with water as the divide.

(Programme Participant)

I would be concerned about the people who are in poverty and people with ill health in this border region. The pandemic has made things worse, not better and one of the areas I deal with here in my work, the one I feel is the most important one to me, is running the counselling and psychotherapy service for adults and young people, and also the play therapy for children. There's been huge demand in recent months, it's really spiked.

(Programme Interviewee)

What of the poverty situation in the Republic of Ireland as a whole; what do the recent poverty statistics reveal? According to a Social Justice Ireland 2023 report, 13.1% of people are living with poverty and more than a third of this figure (5.8%) are working families. When rental costs in the private market are deducted from income, a staggering 41% of people are at risk of poverty. There has been a 62% increase within the year of older people living in poverty, which demonstrates the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on those with fixed incomes. Finally, the report confirms that 15.1% of children in the Republic of Ireland are at risk of poverty (Healy *et al*, 2023, p. 34). The authors of the report commented on the fact that the figures pose several pertinent and critical questions to those in government, which have resonance for those with political responsibility on this island of Ireland:

How is it that we cannot imagine a society and economy based on a system other than what is already in place, which is just a human constructed system for organising economic activity? At the same time, we seem prepared to accept the possible end of our species, the devastating impact of climate change, and resign ourselves to it. Why is it so hard for political leaders to envision an alternative, one that can deliver a vibrant economy, thriving communities, affordable housing, access to healthcare when required, access to education for all, transparent and good governance and sustainability?

(Healy *et al*, 2023, p. 10)

The report calls for creative thinking on what a society should look like, and advocates for a new social contract and new social dialogue to facilitate the movement toward such a contract.

### **Poverty: A Multidimensional Problem**

There are many reasons why people find themselves and their families living with poverty, including: a lack of access to stable employment with decent pay, physical or mental health problems, caring responsibilities, a rise in inflation and personal problems. We are learning from those living with poverty what some of the consequences are for them and their families. The picture emerging is complex and multifaceted. Those individuals who contributed to this education and research project shared experiences of feeling trapped, overlooked, disempowered and devalued. Unfair and inhumane working conditions that disadvantaged the poor and kept them in poverty was a repeated theme. As one mother explained:

One of my daughters is on a zero-hour contract and is having to arrange childcare but not knowing whether she is going to get work or not, and it is actually ending up costing her money and you know, not being able to have any real family life because you don't know if you're gonna work, when you're gonna work and it's really just like slave labour. It's absolutely obscene. I feel as an employer you should be ashamed to treat someone that way. What does that do to somebody's sense of value and even mental health or whatever, apart from the financial strains?

(Programme Interviewee)

One of the contributors to the project shared how in his experience both isolation and exclusion were a common feature of the lives of those living with poverty, which prevented them from having a voice in society to challenge the system that kept them on the outside.

... Disadvantage is based on income, not based on your community background ... If you want to participate in a society it usually requires time and money, and if you have neither then participating in decision-making in civic society becomes much more difficult.

(Programme Presenter)

Women in the focus groups expressed their frustration at not being able to return to work when they had children. They wanted to return to work because it gave them an identity and life outside the home. The primary obstacle was the lack of affordable childcare. As

one young mother stated, 'It costs £55 to £70 a day for childcare for one child. How can women like me afford to go back to work?' If our governments and policy makers are to eradicate poverty, then understanding how it impacts those who live with it is essential. It is vitally important that those on the cold face, experiencing the daily grind of poverty, be consulted and listened to when solutions are being sought. They are the experts!

Another related issue connected to poverty is that of class. During the Covid-19 pandemic we were made aware of who in fact were the 'essential' workers in society and instead of feeling valued they were underpaid and often disregarded. One contributor underlined how the class system worked to reward people based on their job, income, where they lived, their family background and lifestyle.

We have massive socio-economic differences. Why should a director's job be more important than the guy who empties the bins? They're very important jobs, I know I would find the director's job very stressful but I'll tell you this, I would find the bin man's job very hard and I know, I was married to one. You know? So, why is there such a discrepancy between the value of those jobs, not just financially but socially? We drag everybody into university because what we're saying is, 'these are the only jobs that pay financially, also, give respectability'. Well, you know, why can you not achieve if you're a hairdresser or a plumber? It's because we don't value those jobs as much basically, and sometimes those people can earn really big money ... We claim that we're not the class-ridden society that

we used to be but we are an extremely hierarchical society full of judgment, whether that's about people's lifestyle, jobs, financial income, about accents, socio-economic background, we are constantly making these judgements about people.

(Programme Interviewee)

She reminded us that how people are valued financially and socially says much about the moral character of society. Inequalities become acceptable when we judge people as inferior according to society's measure of success. We rate success based on merit, but this is a false ideology according to Michael Sandel (Sandel, 2020, pp 116-119). Meritocracy claims that those who get to the top in society do so through their own capacities and those who fail have only themselves to blame, as they did not apply themselves adequately. To put it another way, the poor are responsible for their own poverty. This deceit protects the economic system by blaming the victims for their failures. It disguises the ugly truth that the freedom to secure social and financial capital is directly connected to a person's access to the necessary supports (family, health, education, opportunity) and that often those who do not achieve the same levels of success, by society's standards, lack those same support structures. Until we find ways of levelling up the support for those who are disadvantaged, we cannot hope to eliminate poverty and tackle the inequalities that destroy community. What became clear to many of us, in the course of this project, was that economic justice and equality of opportunity are a necessary component of reconciliation.

## **No Reconciliation without Just Economics**

The economic system is a social construct. We have created it and we keep it in place, which means we can also change it. There are different forms of capitalism that reflect the priorities and values important in society. For instance, in the wake of the world wars up to the 1970s the emphasis in the industrialised West was on creating a more equal society. It did not hurt that those who endorsed capitalism as an economic model wanted to show their communist rivals that the West could do egalitarian politics and economics. This had consequences for national policies (Trebeck and Williams, 2019, p. 3). In the UK, workers' unions were given greater powers, which ensured workers received a fair remuneration for their labour. The UK government improved access to second level and university education in the 1940s to raise skills and boost job quality, an ambitious social housing programme paid for by the government was initiated and, in the same period, the welfare state was established, which included a National Health System paid for by the tax system.

At the start of the 1980s a neo-liberal approach to capitalism developed in the West. The priority became both protection of property and the privatisation of assets. In Britain, from the 1980s to the present, successive prime ministers have adopted a neo-liberal approach. They have privatised transport systems including railways, airports and ship-building, British Steel, car manufacturing and financial institutions, in addition to care for the elderly and childcare. Utilities such as electricity, gas, oil, and water have also been privatised whilst large sections of education and the NHS were outsourced. The public were told that the reason for privatisation was so that these services would become more efficient and economical. On both counts this has rarely been the case.

The neo-capitalist business model tasked company directors with maximising their shareholder value to pass on a share of earnings in the form of dividends to their shareholders. Wealth became concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Kathleen Lynch, an Irish academic and Commissioner for Human Rights and Equality, describes the impact this political-economic system has had over the last 40 years:

It institutionalizes and legitimates class-based economic inequalities, frequently in deeply racialized and gendered ways. It builds on and consolidates pre-existing hierarchical, patriarchal and racial divisions of wealth and power, thereby producing and reproducing eliminable forms of human suffering. Capitalism also contributes to a corrosion of democracy and community, the encouragement of environmentally destructive patterns of consumption, and, in a world of nation states, a fuelling of militarism and imperialism.

(Lynch, 2022, p. 1)

In a competitive market, what matters is rising to the top and maximising choices. Profit-making is a priority helped by free markets and free trade. One of the contributors to the project summed up the challenge this economic and political model creates for those concerned about the common good:

Unrestrained capitalism is the problem, where the market is supreme, and people don't matter. We can't have reconciliation without economic reform and redistribution of

wealth. If we are serious about just economics the challenge is to live more simply. We also need to be prepared to pay more taxes so there is more money for those people who need it.

(Programme Participant)

A recent report by Ann Watt, the director of Pivotal Public Policy Forum NI, underlines the connection between deprivation, lack of social integration and an absence of reconciliation.

The lack of sustained economic peace dividends in many of the areas worst impacted by the conflict highlights the links between reconciliation and tackling deprivation. Wards in Derry/Londonderry, Strabane, and north and west Belfast constitute the most materially disadvantaged parts of Northern Ireland, while living most directly at the sharp end of the complex legacies of the Troubles.

(Watt, 2023, p. 3)

It is no surprise, then, that the children and young people living in these areas of deprivation are most impacted by recent budget cuts to essential services. This was confirmed by a group of researchers from Ulster University, Queen's University, Newcastle University and Stranmillis University College. They warned that the short-term budgetary savings made by the Education Authority will cause 'irreversible harm'.

The removal of, or deep cuts to schemes such as those to alleviate holiday hunger, period poverty and the high

costs of school uniforms have a cumulative impact on groups which are already disadvantaged, in terms of their experience of education provision.

(Purdy *et al*, 2023, p. 7)

Reconciliation continues to be hindered by the segregated nature of Northern Ireland society and much needed public monies would be saved by addressing the duplication of services resulting from segregation in education, housing, and culture. Watt makes this same point in her report:

86% of those living within 400 metres of any peace-wall in Belfast are in the lowest 20% of the city's population as measured by the Multiple Deprivation Index (Morrow *et al*, 2019) For many deprivation is experienced through stark local sectarian divisions, divided infrastructure, and diminishing resources often allocated along 'us-and-them' lines.

(Watt, 2023, p. 11)

There is a link also between deprivation and violence. One of the programme participants when referring to the continued presence of paramilitaries indicated that it is disaffected young people who are joining up.

I think it's east Creggan, which is just a small end of a housing estate in Derry, there seems to be a pocket of dissident republicans in there and you ask yourself 'why is

that happening?' It's unemployment and lack of education and all those kinds of things, so those people are feeling excluded from society and don't see that the peace process is doing anything for them.

(Programme Participant)

Unless and until the economic division is addressed as part of the journey to reconciliation and integration, the most vulnerable in our community will continue to live with the fear of violence and be deprived of the supports needed to flourish.

### **Political Responses to Poverty on the Island of Ireland**

When an economic system is depriving the most vulnerable of their human right to an adequate standard of living and creating huge inequalities then the system has become oppressive and dysfunctional. It is not serving the common good and needs deep structural change. To neglect such change is to prevent a more inclusive, just future and to deny people their human rights and the possibility of flourishing in a more reconciled society. Is there a commitment to make the necessary changes to the existing economic systems on this island? What do we know of government commitments and actions to eradicate poverty and enable greater equality in both jurisdictions?

Key to the eventual eradication of poverty in Northern Ireland and the shift to a more equal society is the development and implementation of an Anti-Poverty Strategy. In fact, Northern Ireland has been waiting for an Anti-Poverty Strategy for almost twenty years. The St. Andrew's Agreement (2006) contained a legal obligation for the Northern Ireland Executive to develop a strategy to tackle poverty,

social exclusion and deprivation, in keeping with a commitment contained in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. In 2015 the High Court found that the Executive, in its failure to fulfil this obligation, was acting unlawfully. In 2020 in the New Decade, New Approach deal the Executive once again committed to developing and implementing an Anti-Poverty Strategy (2020, p. 9). The Department of Communities (DfC) established both an Anti-Poverty Strategy Expert Advisory Panel and an Anti-Poverty Strategy Co-Design Group. According to a 2023 briefing paper compiled by the Committee for the Administration of Justice (CAJ), reports drawn up by the aforementioned bodies indicate that the following were some of the areas explored:

- Creating an Anti-Poverty Act and Anti-Poverty Commission.
- Implementing a new child payment, delivering a childcare strategy, making participation in school cost-free, and restoring the value of social security benefits for children.
- Dealing with low pay and precarious work, through measures like a ‘real Living Wage’, collective bargaining, and prohibiting the use of zero-hour contracts.
- Strengthening the benefits and social security system to protect against poverty, including reforming supports for persons with disabilities and removing the bedroom tax, benefit cap, two-child limit, and five-week wait for Universal Credit.
- Tackling poverty amongst pensioners and older people.
- Addressing cross-cutting issues impacting on poverty, such as housing, employment inclusion, and access to services.

The Executive collapsed in February 2022 before the draft strategy was released for public consultation. Recent budget cuts have made the creation and implementation of a Poverty Strategy even more urgent. The restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive is a moral imperative, and our elected politicians have a duty of care to the most vulnerable in our society. Recent disturbances in a nationalist estate in Derry/Londonderry are an indication of the levels of frustration and anger at being left in poverty, with no political leadership to implement changes that would give people access to the social and material conditions necessary for a flourishing life. We know the negative effects of inequality on social cohesion in Northern Ireland, there is no such thing as acceptable inequality. Recognising this and making the necessary institutional changes to improve the quality of people's lives will provide a firmer foundation for reconciling communities, dismantling the peace walls, and creating a more integrated and interdependent society.

The government in the Republic of Ireland published its first report on a Well-being Framework for Ireland in July 2021, in line with its Programme for Government and Economic Recovery Plan commitments. According to the Press Release from the Department of the Taoiseach, the intention is to: '...provide a comprehensive set of well-being measures to create a well-rounded holistic view of how our society is faring, as an important complement to existing economic measurement tools' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2021). The belief is that the framework will help the government 'deliver effective public services with equality at the core' (Department of the Taoiseach, 2021). The Well-being Framework takes account of the multidimensional nature of well-being and in its *Understanding Life in Ireland:*

*The Well-being Framework Second Report* in 2022, the government outlined its overarching vision and goals as follows:

- Empower people to lead purposeful lives that support good physical and mental health, enabling the development of skills across the life cycle and providing a good standard of living.
- Ensure a sustainable sense of place, including an appropriate and safe place to live and protection of Ireland's environment, climate and biodiversity.
- Preserve balance, inclusivity and equality of opportunities across society with open and effective government, empowering families, friends and communities to grow, connect and meaningfully engage.

(Department of the Taoiseach, 2022, p. 14)

Social Justice Ireland believes the Well-being Framework could be enhanced if it took account of seven basic rights that are essential to the development of a balanced society. They are advocating for a New Social Contract to realise these rights:

1. Sufficient income to live with dignity.
2. Meaningful work.
3. Appropriate accommodation.
4. Relevant education.
5. Essential healthcare.
6. Cultural respect.
7. Real participation in society.

(Healey *et al*, 2023, pp. 24-25)

Their report calls for investment in infrastructure and services with taxation to fund this and public engagement to ensure people can shape decisions that will impact them. Social Justice Ireland holds that a New Social Contract aimed at eliminating poverty and achieving greater equality for all is core to implementing a common good society and transforming the economic system.

### **Common Good Economics**

What might a common good economic model look like? Could such a model transform community relations, creating the confidence needed to take down the peace walls and heal divisions? Those who engaged with the 'Is there a common good?' project shared their thoughts on how we might begin to move in the direction of common good economics. One participant critiqued the consumerist culture that is vital to the success of neo-capitalism:

Capitalism relies on consumerism but consumerism detracts from the common good because it's self-centred and ignores the plight of those less well-off. Can we have capitalism without consumerism or capitalism that gives dividends to the poor?

(Programme participant)

Capitalism puts profit before people, while creating a virtue out of the autonomy that comes with having the purchasing power to avail of what the market offers. Unfortunately, those who do not have the wherewithal to only spend within their means are enticed into indebtedness to experience a sense of cultural belonging. We know from

various well-being surveys that people are happiest when they are spending time with family and friends, enjoying nature, engaging in meaningful activity or learning a new skill. Once basic needs are met, consuming more and having more things does not enhance well-being in spite of what the advertisers tell us. A question that goes to the heart of our economic inequalities concerns the form of capitalism practiced. Can we re-value capitalism so that it prizes a spirit of generosity and repurpose spending to enhance the lives of those living with poverty? In other words, would a philanthropic capitalism reinvigorate the welfare state and nurture a sense of human solidarity and mutual interdependence? Can we imagine a common good capitalism?

Another perspective that had support from quite a few who engaged with the programme was the idea of a basic income, or citizen's income, to replace the benefit system, with the aim of eliminating poverty and ensuring a more egalitarian society. The thinking was that this would transform the welfare system in a way that made capitalism work for everyone. Also, the change in language from 'benefit' to 'salary' recognises the right of each person to have a share in the common wealth:

Economically the common good means a fairer distribution of wealth, higher taxation and more accountability for spending, a basic income for everyone ... So, what you do is you scrap the benefits system and if somebody's unemployed, if the basic salary for everybody is £20,000, they get £20,000, they pay tax, they pay National Insurance, that's it ... It gives people a wee bit of self-esteem and everybody knows where they are. And, rather than

wasting millions of pounds on implementing complex benefits schemes and all this sort of thing, you get to the point of making sure that nobody is below the poverty line ... That has to be supported by investment in two key areas, I think, social housing and childcare.

(Programme Interviewee)

The right to adequate housing, and to work, to supplement the basic income as part of the package envisaged, is a reminder that the basic income on its own is not enough to transform an unequal economy. There needs to be sufficient provisioning of other rights to ensure a more participatory and enabling capitalist model.

One of the interviewees emphasised the importance of capacity building to create a fairer and more resilient society. This recognises the importance of productivity and entrepreneurship as a driving force for creating wealth, providing employment and improving living standards in overlooked areas.

The Shankill certainly is a deprived area but the Shankill is not short of resources ... Don't get me wrong, I think there are pockets of hidden poverty ... So, I think the common good for us economically has more to do with aspiration, it's more to do with believing that they are worth building a future with ... It's about capacity-building ... We have seen other parts of the city grow and develop and businesses come into them and they're looking great and there's a buzz about them and there's lots of wee cafes. Walk up the Shankill any time and it does not

reflect prosperity. You know, is it 68 vacant sites? There's nothing aspirational about it. So, economically it's about investment.

(Programme Interviewee)

The opportunity to create a social enterprise or workers' cooperative on the Shankill could transform a community and lives. As an alternative business model that enhances the common good, ownership of this enterprise / cooperative could be in the hands of community organisations, who with state aid or through fundraising, finance the venture. The involvement of business entrepreneurs willing to help train and mentor local people to run the business could develop connections with the wider Belfast community and encourage people from outside the area to support it. Also, it would be important that the values informing the business model and practice support equality of treatment, democratic decision making, equal pay and environmental sustainability. Profits could be used to grow the business and contribute to community programmes for the most disadvantaged, including educational supports, childcare provision and improved health and social care provision for the elderly.

There are numerous examples of what in the UK are called Community Interest Companies (CICs). This business model is described as having '...primarily social or environmental objectives and a legal obligation to invest surpluses for the good of the enterprise' (Trebeck and Williams, 2019, p. 156). A growing movement in Europe called Economy for the Common Good (ECG), which began in Austria, now has over 2,000 companies and over 100 local chapters. It was inspired by Christian Felber who describes the ECG model as '...a holistic,

alternative economic model which envisions a free market economy, in which the common good is the ultimate goal of economic activity' (Felber, quoted in Trebeck and Williams, 2019, p. 156). Economic success, in this model, is not measured by profits and growth but according to a company contribution to the common good, whether it be pursuing greater equity in the community or supporting environmental protection. Common good businesses sign up to a good balance sheet, which covers how products and services satisfy human needs. The following are common good questions used to evaluate the business model:

- Are working conditions humane?
- Are production processes environmentally friendly?
- Are the sales and purchase policy ethical?
- Do women receive equal pay for equal work?
- And are employees involved in core, strategic decision-making processes?

(Trebeck and Williams, 2019, p. 159)

## **Valuing Economics**

Creating a common good economy will involve implementing multiple institutional changes and will need a functioning and proactive government committed to the common good, as well as public buy in. It will rely also on the promotion and endorsement of common good values that will help constitute and regulate social and public life. One of the interviewees spoke about the values she had learned as a child, which had informed her life choices and her commitment to the common good.

I was born in a mixed area. We were poor but we didn't know we were poor because everybody was the same, so when something happened it benefitted everybody in the area. It didn't just benefit me and my family, it was shared out and that's the way I was reared. I mean, for many, many months my mother used to make soup, we all had soup on a Sunday. My mother used to make an extra pot of soup and I took that down to two neighbours down the street. I couldn't understand at the time why my mother kept making it. My father worked in the shipyard, their father was unemployed. Now it was only a meal but it was about sharing the common good. We had a lady across the street who had a mangle and we all put our names down, the washing was done, and we all queued up to use her mangle. Now that's a very small example of common good but that's the way good starts, that's the way common good starts.

(Programme Interviewee)

What is apparent from the recollections shared is the value base that informed community life and practice. The community were united in their poverty and looked out for one another. They were motivated by a sense of justice and responsibility that called forth acts of generosity and sharing. They were united in solidarity against the dehumanising effects of poverty and shared what they had, aware of those who needed support and were vulnerable to hunger and deprivation. The situation is very different in the present context. The levels of distrust and disaffection in a growing number of countries in Europe, in North

America, and other Western democracies is fuelling the rise of new-right politics, an indication that relationships between citizens within these countries are breaking down. Participants on this programme pointed to the growing gap between the wealthy and everybody else that has resulted in a detachment among the upper-class, an anxiety among a previously secure middle class, as the cost of living rises and jobs are more at risk with technological advances, and an alienated working class who see no way out of poverty. Lynch makes the point:

Solidarity with the most vulnerable is replaced by the ethic of self-responsibilization, especially among the middle classes, as they fear the loss of class standing in increasingly precarious work and welfare regimes ... It is the universalization of self-interest as virtue, and the related distancing and invisibilization of harm, that make neo-liberal capitalism particularly care-less.

(Lynch, 2022, pp. 29-20)

Lynch names the sites of resistance to neo-capitalism that are growing in number and becoming spaces of solidarity committed to an alternative value system of care, justice, equality of opportunity, access and of treatment. Whether in the form of voluntary and community associations, cooperatives, the Black Lives Matter movement, the ME TOO movement, the mobilisation of Indigenous people and environmental groups, to name a few, they represent hope that neo-capitalism will not have the last word. People are demanding a new socio-economic and political narrative founded on the values of solidarity, justice, compassion, and care.

## **Managing Economic Changes**

Brexit and the Windsor Framework have created economic opportunities for businesses in Northern Ireland to benefit from access to the UK and EU markets. The economic impact in real terms is still unclear, but time will determine if the effect is indeed a positive one, as is expected. American companies are interested in investing in Northern Ireland and creating new jobs. However, the destabilising influence resulting from the collapse of Stormont and uncertainty about its return, is not helping to sell Northern Ireland as a place to invest in. What has become abundantly clear is that painful decisions will have to be made to reduce existing public services in line with the size of the population and what is affordable.

Part of the institutional and structural change of the economic system would involve the reallocation and rationalising of resources, to improve provision and functionality. Chapter Ten will point to the need to restructure our education system to make it more affordable. Another system that is at breaking point and in need of restructuring to make it more efficient and economically sustainable is the National Health Service. Currently Northern Ireland has the longest waiting lists for operations in the UK and the highest number of staff vacancies, including in specialist roles. The failure of the government to produce a short, medium, and long-term strategy for the health workforce in order to help them meet the demands of patients has contributed to the crisis. The need for service reorganisation was raised by one of those interviewed. This had been a key recommendation in the Bengoa Report (2016) on the reorganisation of the National Health Service, which is still waiting to happen seven years later.

Is the NHS really the NHS when you have waiting lists which are 300,000 - 400,000 people in a small place like this? Is that really delivery of free health at the point of contact when you have to wait seven or eight years for an operation? We've far too many hospitals in Northern Ireland. Can we really afford to have a hospital, of some description, every 20 miles or so whenever, if you take the equivalent size of land mass or population in Great Britain, you might have three hospitals and that's it? There are all these Health and Social Care Trusts for a country our size, 1.9 million people. Do we need seven or eight? I would've thought one would do very well.

(Programme Interviewee)

Whether the answer is fewer hospitals or restructuring of services within hospitals, that is for the health professionals and advisors to take the lead on. What we do know is that our health service, in its present form, is not sustainable and its dysfunctionality is costing lives. There is an ongoing crisis in mental health care, and care of the elderly. In economic terms health has been allocated about half of the Northern Ireland budget, which still leaves a considerable shortfall, indicating that greater efficiencies are called for. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) confirmed in the 2021 Census that in terms of age the highest increase since 2011 was in the older age group (65 and over) at nearly 25% (2022, p.1). This should inform decisions on public policies in the years to come, including health policies. The long waiting lists have resulted in many, who can afford the cost, instead choosing private healthcare. This is not an option for

the poor, leaving them most at risk. As health is so fundamental to human well-being it is imperative that the long-promised restructuring take place, that savings are made where they can be, and that the remaining shortfall is funded by the government. These changes can be supported with a financial package from Westminster and through a progressive tax system.

Other public services also need to become more economically viable. One interviewee shared his perspective on the need to restructure the policing service to meet needs more efficiently.

I was asked once upon a time to have a look at how policing is divided up in different parts of the UK, when we were re-designing policing over here. At that stage we had 39 police sub-divisions in Northern Ireland. I went over to Devon and Cornwall, which is one police area in England, and they had two sub-divisions, one was called Devon, and one was called Cornwall! You know, far more efficient, far more effective. You do not need 39 leaders of policing. So, I think the cost of bureaucracy here detracts from delivering front-line services which is the most important aspect of policing.

(Programme Interviewee)

Political, religious and community leadership have a role in helping people to prepare for change by supporting the opportunities to create a more equal, cost-effective, and inclusive society. How can we encourage those in leadership to put the common good before their own interests? It will take moral courage to lead on restructuring and enable it. Politically it will mean putting the good of the community

ahead of party politics. In the process of restructuring, can ways be found to ensure that there is a levelling up so that the peace dividend provides those marginalised and kept in poverty with the means to live with dignity? Can we prioritise the basic needs of the most vulnerable to ensure they have sufficient income, suitable housing, essential healthcare and the necessary educational and vocational supports to find meaningful work? Can we put people before profit and support political and business leaders to practice just economics that are ecologically responsible? Can we ask the wealthy in our society to pay higher taxes in order to support those most in need? Scotland's progressive tax system does just that. Saying 'yes' to all these questions is to put reconciliation at the heart of our economic system.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

# Our Common Human Belonging: The Socio-Legal Strand of Reconciliation

Human rights join us together as our place of common good.

(Programme Presenter)

My dream for Northern Ireland would be a place that feels safe for all who live here; a place that is comfortable in its own ‘skin’; a place where all our people feel at ease with one another; a place where my grandchildren wish to live rather than leave – where their basic needs and human rights would be upheld. That is, a place where each is given equal opportunity, education, housing, a good health system and future employment. A place where we can listen and learn from those who are different from us.

(Programme Presenter)

A common good society is one where people feel safe, where they’re not hungry, where they feel valued, where they have a good standard of living. Whatever the system of government, it is where people have their rights and freedoms, and they don’t feel vulnerable. We must legislate for a common good society.

(Programme Interviewee)

It was the celebration of the Charter of Human Rights that sparked the Civil Rights Movement in Northern Ireland. What is the role of civil rights engagement today and how can we learn and apply some salutary lessons from the Civil Rights Movement in earlier decades to current challenges and marginalisation?

(Programme Participant)

These quotations from people who engaged with the project illustrate a shared awareness that a common good society must find a way to hold together the protection of human rights and the pursuit of reconciliation. Participants who engaged with the project recognised the importance of a socio-legal strand of reconciliation, particularly in a post-conflict society where a democratic deficit has resulted in the suspension of the Stormont Assembly on at least eight occasions since it formed in December 1998. The first quotation underlines the inclusive nature of human rights, which apply to all citizens and are, therefore, a unifying force underpinning the common good, and creating the context for trust and relationship building. The next two list specific human rights that are foundational in a common good society, for example, 'everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself [sic] and his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services' (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Article 25). A fundamental right arising from past experiences of societal conflict is the desire for liberty and security, which means the opportunity to live without fear of threat or danger from any individual or group prepared to use violence for their own ends. Reconciliation is core to the embedding of

human rights and the nurturing of participative democracy in Northern Ireland and border counties. At the same time, it is not enough to want peace, or an end to hate crimes when there are others who, for whatever reasons, desire the opposite. This is why we have legislation in place outlawing different acts of violence against anyone, such as the Offences Against the Persons Act 1861 and the Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008. There is also legislation that relates to racial and religious hate crimes, but its efficacy needs to be improved, much like the anti-discrimination legislation. Human rights and reconciliation are two sides of the one common good coin. To deny their interconnectedness is to undermine and weaken the pursuit of a common good society.

What human rights does is provide a framework in which you can build trust. Human rights frameworks of themselves don't automatically engender the trust but they can provide a framework or bulwark in which you can operate.  
(Programme Presenter)

The final quotation on page one of this chapter raises a thought-provoking question about the role of civil rights in the current context. It recalls the significance of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Movement, which challenged the discrimination and inequality practiced by the Protestant and Unionist political establishment. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) formed in 1967 to pursue a human rights agenda. Inspired by the courage of those leading the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and their strategy of active non-violent protest, NICRA took to the street to challenge:

- Systemic injustices in the allocation of social housing by the public authority housing provision.
- Systemic injustices in both public and private employment practices.
- Systemic injustices in voting and representational rights.
- Systemic injustices in the state, which employed arbitrary and oppressive powers to suppress dissent.

Who are the marginalised now and what protections do they need? Are we as a community prepared to publicly challenge current injustices; and what can we learn from our recent history of civil rights activism?

As well as local human rights protections, endorsed in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, citizens in Northern Ireland and border counties are part of a global community, and both the British and Irish Governments have signed up to international human rights declarations and conventions that protect civil and political rights, as well as economic, social, and cultural rights. This chapter will consider the importance of human rights to the reconciliation process locally and globally, and take account of changing contexts, including the challenges of living in a post-Brexit world. Some of the seemingly intractable problems that require a justice response will be unpacked, including the ongoing threat from paramilitaries and the fallout from our failure as a society to deal with the past. Before reflecting on where we are now in human rights terms, we need to go back and look at how we got here. As part of that reflection, it is important to remember that today's advocates for human rights are following in the footsteps of forerunners who prepared the way ahead, people Inez McCormack.

### **Inez McCormack: Human Rights and Peace Activist (1943-2013)**

One of those who became involved in the Civil Rights Movement was Inez McCormack. She joined in the four-day People's Democracy march from Belfast to Derry Londonderry in 1969 that was attacked by loyalists at Burntollet. The march had been inspired by Martin Luther King's non-violent march in Alabama from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 to challenge the southern state's racist policies. McCormack had grown up in a Protestant loyalist family in Co Down, and she admitted to having little socio-political awareness. She said of her sheltered childhood:

I was a puzzled young Prod – until I was 17, I hadn't knowingly met a Catholic. I was a young Protestant girl who didn't understand that there were grave issues of inequality, injustice and division in our society. It wasn't that Protestants don't suffer deprivation, but there was systematic discrimination against Catholics.

(Lynch *et al*, 2019)

McCormack's exposure to the violence, high unemployment and economic deprivation suffered by families in a Catholic estate in west Belfast in 1972 galvanised her to assert the rights of those who had no voice and were most excluded. When the rioting in Ballymurphy escalated attempts were made to close the office that McCormack worked from. She and other co-workers refused to leave, knowing they were a lifeline for the people in the estate. McCormack contacted the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) for their help when she and her fellow social workers were suspended for refusing to obey orders and

they won the case. This experience convinced her of the importance of unions, and she began working part-time for NUPE in 1974 (Melanie Lynch *et al*, 10 September 2019). Two years later she was appointed as the first female official of NUPE (now Unison) and successfully set about recruiting part-time female workers. She campaigned for improved conditions and earnings for those in low-paid jobs, especially women working as cleaners in hospitals and as home helps. Her union work exposed her to the doctrine of ‘unripe time’, the idea that you can have change but not just now. Former president, Mary Robinson, in an obituary for her friend reflected:

Experience taught Inez that change could not be delivered through well-intentioned promises for the future. Change required timetables, outcomes, and a keen awareness of power relationships. As she said: ‘Those who “have” can always argue that tomorrow is the right time for change. For the “have-nots” today is not soon enough.’

(Robinson, 2013)

Inez McCormack’s experience as a trade unionist and human rights activist taught her the value of inclusive equality and human rights provisions. She helped establish the Fair Employment Agency in 1976, which was committed to ending sectarian discrimination in employment practice. She was one of the signatories to the Sean MacBride principles for fair employment and against religious discrimination in employment, supported by US companies investing in Northern Ireland. Her leadership qualities were recognised within the trade union movement, and she became the first woman to chair the Northern Ire-

land committee of the Irish Trade Congress of Trade Unions (ITCU) from 1984-85, and the first female ICTU president from 1999-2001.

Inez McCormack understood that if the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was to transform relationships in Northern Ireland, then human rights and equality provisions had to be incorporated into it. She headed up a broad coalition of groups who successfully argued the case. She said of her experience during the peace talks:

The most difficult thing is that as a woman when you are in a peace process you want to bring to the table the issues that affect your life and the lives of the people that you work with. Violence against women, economic and social exclusion, issues which are relevant to the condition of the lives of women, but you will be told...we'll do that after the Agreement, we'll do that after the settlement. And my advice to women, after doesn't work. The cold bottom line is that if you are a woman and you are involved in peace-making...require the issues that affect the people you represent to be heard at the table. If you are told that that is grand but not just yet, you say politely but stubbornly and firmly 'No'. Because those issues if not addressed in the shaping of the conflict resolution and the shaping of the Agreement will be absent from any discourse for at least a decade or so afterwards.

(Vital Voices Global Partnership, 2015)

McCormack continued to campaign for the implementation of these rights and provisions understanding their realisation was key

to the conflict resolution and reconciliation process. Her focus was always on the communities most traumatised by the conflict, who had still to experience the peace dividend. She served as one of the first commissioners on the Human Rights Commission established on 1 March 1999.

### **Embedding Human Rights and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland**

Given the sectarian nature of relationships in Northern Ireland and the thirty years of conflict that preceded the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, the human rights and equality safeguards were spelled out for all parties to affirm in the document. They include:

- The right of free political thought.
- The right to freedom and expression of religion.
- The right to pursue democratically national and political aspirations.
- The right to seek constitutional change by peaceful and legitimate means.
- The right to freely choose one's place of residence.
- The right to equal opportunity in all social and economic activity, regardless of class, creed, disability, gender or ethnicity.
- The right to freedom from sectarian harassment.
- The right of women to full and equal political participation.

(The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998, p. 16)

A just and democratic society also needs legal protections in place to ensure civil liberties and constitutional rights. The human rights and

equality measures contained in the Agreement include the establishment of a Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to ensure that government and other public bodies seek to protect ‘the mutual respect, the civil liberties and religious liberties of everyone in the community’ (The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, 1998, p. 16). There is a framework in place to ensure ‘parity of esteem’ and fairness when it comes to adjudicating between competing rights:

There isn’t a hierarchy of rights. For instance, if one group wishes to march through or protest in a community that does not want that protest to happen, you have got the right to freedom of assembly on the one hand, and the right to private and family life on the other. The framework for managing competing rights is about recognising the level of the right. For example, in relation to freedom of assembly we look at: can you assemble freely elsewhere? Is there a particular reason why you want to march or protest in this area? How much of a disturbance is this? How long will it last? The framework allows you to make proportionate decisions.

(Programme Presenter)

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 created a further human rights body, the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI).

ECNI was set up as a quasi-independent public body sponsored by the Northern Ireland Executive Office, with a specific charge for “providing protection against

discrimination on the grounds of age, disability, race, religion and political opinion, sex and sexual orientation.”  
 ...ECNI works to ensure that equality of opportunity is mainstreamed by public authorities in their policymaking, policy implementation, and policy review.

(Waller, 2021, p. 190)

Equality and human rights protections have been core elements in securing and furthering democracy in Northern Ireland. These provisions have made significant inroads in addressing the systemic problem of sectarianism and ethno-national divisions, particularly in the workplace.

The establishment of the Equality Commission arising from the Good Friday/Belfast Agreement, to strengthen all areas of equality in the workplace, with the roll out of affirmative action to help address historical imbalances and to tackle both direct and indirect discrimination, has led to much greater equality in the workplace. Now that the Case Law, processes, and procedures to help prevent and to tackle sectarian discrimination have been established it is there to support both communities. The Equality Commission has since been able to focus on other areas of discrimination i.e., disability, gender, and sexual orientation, to name three and these apply to all peoples regardless of community background.

(Programme Presenter)

Both Commissions are progressing the equality agenda in other areas identified in Section 75 of the Northern Ireland ACT 1998 but, with no government in place, their efforts are stymied. We know from experience in Northern Ireland and border counties that when the democratic process is weakened and the structures that have been in place to support the Agreement are under considerable strain, equality and human rights protections suffer. This is already apparent. For instance, in a recent statement Alyson Kilpatrick, Chief Commissioner of the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission and Geraldine McGahey, Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, commented on the lack of progress in addressing the recommendations from 2016 made by the Committee on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The political stalemate has meant that the disability strategy is in cold storage, which means that disabled persons have no say on matters relating to independent living, adapted housing and employment (NIHRC, 2023).

In a patriarchal and morally conservative society there can be resistance to certain human rights legislation that can result in a refusal to comply with international human rights standards that are legally binding. Intervention is often the only way of breaking the deadlock and protecting the rights of all citizens. It was during a three-year suspension of the Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly (January 2017 – January 2020) that Westminster MPs voted to extend same-sex marriage and access to abortion to people in Northern Ireland bringing the region into line with the rest of the UK.

The DUP recalled the Assembly to block the Westminster legislation with the Petition of Concern, but the other parties ignored the re-

call. Consequently, on 22 October 2019 abortion was decriminalised in Northern Ireland. The Republic of Ireland had similarly legalised abortions, following a referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment in May 2018, which was carried by a 66.4 % vote in favour. On 25 March 2020 a new legal framework for lawful access to abortion services in Northern Ireland, in-line with the United Nations' Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (1979), was rolled out. The Abortion (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2020 allow access to abortions up to twelve weeks gestation without conditionality, to be certified by a medical professional that this condition has been met. Beyond twelve weeks abortions are lawful in specified circumstances, including severe foetal impairment and if fatal foetal abnormalities have been detected (House of Commons Library, 2023).

Angry that the UK government had imposed the legislation, the DUP in June 2020 proposed and then won the motion calling for the rejection of the new abortion legislation by 46 votes to 40. They knew, whatever the outcome, the new law would remain in place but were making a point that under their leadership abortion would have remained a criminal offence. Their stunt underlines the necessity for international human rights legislation and human rights bodies to pressure local governments to meet their legal obligations.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of January 2020 same-sex marriage was legalised in Northern Ireland, more than four years after it became legal in the Republic of Ireland following a referenda vote on 22<sup>nd</sup> of May 2015, which resulted in a 62% majority vote in favour. Another significant development was the passing of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, which criminalised coercive and controlling behaviour. The Republic of Ireland had similarly out-

lawed coercive and controlling behaviour in their Domestic Violence Act 2018.

Evolving social attitudes on the island of Ireland and engagement with international human rights institutions have brought gender rights and women's and girls' rights to bodily autonomy, security and well-being, centre-stage. Our ethical worldview is being challenged and shaped by new insights from science, the world religions, and philosophies of life. We are more aware of our interconnectedness, interdependence and shared responsibility for the world and the people who inhabit it. The human rights discourse underlines this connectedness and creates the space to situate the national conversations in a global framework and identify local and global responsibilities and interventions.

### **Reviewing Law and Order**

The Review of Criminal Justice in 2000 was aimed at delivering a fair, impartial system of justice, responding to, and encouraging community involvement, having the confidence of all of the community and improving efficiency. All its recommendations were accepted and to address the concern that politicians had too much control over judicial appointments it was recommended that a cross-community Judicial Appointments Commission be established. While the First and Deputy First Ministers retain responsibility for appointing representatives from the community to the commission, the process is chaired by the Lord Chief Justice. A Judicial Appointments Unit was also set up to support the commission. Other recommendations included that the Office of Attorney General, the primary Law Officer for Northern Ireland, would be non-political; that royal insignias within the courts

be removed and the judiciary on appointment would no longer take an Oath of Allegiance to the monarch; that an independent Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland be established, along with an Independent Criminal Justice Inspectorate for Northern Ireland, with responsibility to report annually on inspections of the prosecution service (Adshead and Tonge, 2009, pp. 76-77).

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement acknowledged policing was a deeply contentious issue, and that systemic reform was needed to attract more Catholics into the force and build confidence and trust in the police service within the nationalist community. The Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland was established in 1998 and was chaired by Conservative politician, Chris Patton. What became known as the Patton Report was produced the following year. Key recommendations included: changing the name from the Royal Ulster Constabulary to the Police Service for Northern Ireland; the creation of a Policing Board and District Policing Partnership Boards to ensure accountability, which would be made up of members of the Northern Ireland Assembly and independent citizens; the creation of the Office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland and complaints tribunal to provide an independent and impartial Police complaints system; removal of visible symbols of Britishness; 50:50 recruitment of Catholics and Protestants; a new oath of office with a human rights ethos; and an emphasis on community policing.

An inclusive, responsible, and trustworthy police force is vital for establishing a stable, secure, shared, and democratic society that has rejected violence as a political solution. The Police Service of Northern Ireland continues to be a key player in upholding and maintaining democracy and justice. The current crisis in the service, which result-

ed in the resignation of Chief Constable Simon Byrne and a vote of no confidence in Deputy Chief Constable Mark Hamilton, is cause for grave concern. This followed a series of controversies, including a serious data breach in which personal and employment data of every police officer and civilian member of staff was published online and subsequently accessed by dissident republicans. This was in the aftermath of the shooting of an off-duty detective, Chief Inspector John Caldwell, by the New IRA. The disciplining of two probationary officers, after an incident in Belfast that led to the suspension of one and repositioning of another, was deemed unlawful in a court of law. The court ruled that the move was likely motivated by a real or perceived threat from Sinn Fein to the effect that they would withdraw support for policing in Northern Ireland, which the party denied. This ruling in the wake of the data breach exposed deeper fault lines in the policing system and has prompted a review of the Policing Board, which oversees the service and holds its leadership to account. This crisis in the police service has been exacerbated by the lack of an operational government in Northern Ireland, demonstrating how dysfunction in the political institution can undermine law and order, and further destabilise society.

### **The International Human Rights Context**

Protecting human rights nationally and globally is a fundamental challenge for world leaders, human rights institutions, and NGOs, as well as local governments, religious bodies, civic organisations and concerned citizens. The Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 makes for grim reading as it outlines the litany of human rights abuses in 2022:

...from Russian President Vladimir Putin's deliberate attacks on civilians in Ukraine and Xi Jinping's open-air prison for the Uyghurs in China to the Taliban's putting millions of Afghans at risk of starvation.

(Hassan, 2023, p. 1)

The most recent atrocities in the Middle East, with mounting civilian casualties, many of them women and children, underlines the importance of human rights frameworks but, equally, the responsibility of the international community to hold those responsible for human rights abuses to account. There is a prescient need to strengthen the global human rights system so it can respond proactively and effectively to flagrant disregard for human life and human rights. Otherwise, those perpetrating crimes against civilians, including paramilitary and state forces, will continue to act with impunity, irrespective of the human cost.

Seamus Heaney, one of Ireland's most distinguished poets, delivered the fourth Annual Human Rights Lecture at the Irish Human Rights Commission in 2009, to mark International Human Rights Day. His speech reminds us of the moral imagination writ large in his body of work, which grappled with the human capacity to cause immense suffering, while also challenging and inspiring us to recognise our 'common human belonging' and become 'allies in the great work of 'saving nations and peoples''. Heaney titled his talk, 'Writer and Righter', and in it wove connections between the endeavours of the human rights worker and the poet with humanist sympathies. They both address common public concerns, '...the cruelty of regimes and the oppression of nations and peoples' and they can share '...an acute awareness

of the issues of human rights and human dignity, and a hard-earned knowledge of the price of the soul'. He mentions the significance of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)*, '...to each and every person and indeed nation striving for justice and equality, and each and every person and nation suffering injustice and inequality'. Heaney reflects on the profound sense of obligation poets can feel to use their voices to remember the suffering and loss of humanity, and to be both memory and conscience, while steering a path between 'sorrow and beauty' (2009). He concludes with the thought that both the human rights worker and the poet share a common quality and value, what he calls 'staying power'. Heaney explains:

In the case of the human rights worker, staying in the sense of holding out against, keeping secular power at bay and resisting in particular the abuse of it. In the case of the poet, the emphasis is more on staying power as a quality inherent in a literary work, some beauty or truthfulness to life, some awareness that recognises what Virgil called *lacrimae rerum*, all that is tender and all that is tragic in reality.

(Heaney, 2009)

Three years later, in 2012, President Michael D. Higgins delivered the Annual Lecture and outlined the complexities surrounding human rights discourse, at the national level and the global level. He underlined the importance of pursuing the UDHR vision of universality, inclusivity, and the indivisibility of human rights, with a humility that recognises the need to secure 'accommodation for each other's narratives in the contemporary world'.

Linda Hogan in *Keeping Faith with Human Rights*, discusses the ethical challenge and burden at the heart of the human rights discourse, ‘to gain a better understanding of what precisely we are doing when we use the language of human nature or personhood’ (2015, p. 95). She situates this task within a world struggling to manage global relations in a post-colonial context, while still retaining the ‘hope that in among the plurality of thick, located, and culturally embedded moral traditions, we may be able to identify shared principles that could be regarded as indispensable for our global social well-being’ (2015, p. 40). Like President Higgins, Hogan calls for humility in owning our situated knowledge that frames our interpretation of human rights norms so that universalist claims can find local expression while still having global appeal and resonance. (2015, pp. 108-109).

### **Human Rights in Northern Ireland Post Brexit**

As indicated earlier, the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is an internationally agreed and legally binding framework for peace with human rights protections guaranteed. Of necessity, it is also a situated document, reflecting the contested nature of Northern Ireland and the history of division and conflict. The emphasis, therefore, is on creating a more inclusive, just, and reconciled society committed to power-sharing and democracy.

When the 1998 Agreement was concluded both the UK and Ireland were member states of the European Union. The UK government agreed to incorporate the European Convention on Human Rights into Northern Ireland law and the Irish government committed to developing similar human rights measures in the Republic of Ireland. This meant that on the island of Ireland anyone who believed they

had been denied their human rights could appeal to the local courts for justice and even take their case to the European Court of Human Rights if needs be. A Joint Committee of representatives from the two Human Rights Commissions on the island of Ireland was established to consider Human Rights issues affecting both jurisdictions. In 2011 the Joint Committee published their advice on a Charter of Rights for the island of Ireland ‘to reaffirm the political parties’ commitments to the rights in the European Convention on Human Rights’. This was presented to political parties in both jurisdictions and the proposal remains on the table.

Post Brexit and the landscape has changed. Concern has been expressed about what this will mean for human rights legislation and protection in Northern Ireland and the possibility of widening gaps in rights across the island. The Withdrawal Agreement contains assurances that ‘...there will be no diminution of rights as a result of the UK’s exit from the EU...’ and affirms a commitment to ensure the ‘... mutual respect, the civil rights and religious liberties of everyone in the community’ (Article 2(1), Windsor Framework (formerly Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol) to the UK-EU Withdrawal Agreement). Christopher McCrudden, a Professor of Law at Queen’s University Belfast, indicates that the protection of Article 2 also applies to certain safeguards, namely:

1. The ‘need to ensure that symbols and emblems are used in a manner which promotes mutual respect rather than division’.
2. ‘The importance of respect, understanding and tolerance in relation to linguistic diversity’.
3. Continuing UK commitment to the European Convention

on Human Rights (ECHR), combined with the provision of domestic remedies for alleged breaches of the Convention.

(McCrudden, 2002, p. 146)

The Withdrawal Agreement recognises that the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) will play an important role in overseeing the implementation of Article 2. This has been confirmed also by the NIHRC who are tasked with protecting equality and human rights in a post-Brexit Northern Ireland.

Under the Windsor Framework (formerly the Ireland/NI Protocol) to the Withdrawal Agreement reached with the EU, the UK Government committed to ensuring that the protections currently in place in Northern Ireland for the rights, safeguards and equality of opportunity provisions set out in the chapter of the same name in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement will not be reduced as a result of the UK leaving the EU.

(NIHRC, 2021)

### **Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland**

Another commitment in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998 was the creation of a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The NIHRC produced a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland in 2008 but lack of political consensus meant it remained in cold storage. In an effort to progress a bill and following commitments made in the New Decade New Approach Agreement (2020), an

Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights was established and in 2022, it published a report summarising its findings. The majority of those who engaged in the research process highlighted the following as potential advantages of a Bill of Rights. It could:

- Enhance human rights protections.
- Act as a transitional justice measure and support peace and reconciliation.
- Act as a safeguard underpinning legislation and policy.
- Help support political stability by removing certain matters from political decision.
- Facilitate political accountability and good governance and strengthen democracy.
- Play an important role in the face of wider change.
- Act as an educative tool and support a rights-based culture.

(Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, 2022, p. 32)

Then in March 2022 the NIHRC advised that Article 2 of the Windsor Framework was no substitute for a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. According to the NIHRC there have been no new developments on the issue of a Bill of Rights since the Ad Hoc Committee's report. The following recommendations appear in the *Annual Report of the NIHRC and the ECNI on the Implementation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework 2022-2023*:

- ...that the NI Office implements the UK Government commitment to legislate for a Bill of Rights for NI, as set out in the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement.

- The NIHRC continues to recommend that the UK Government, particularly the Ministry of Justice, ensures that any proposed reform of the Human Rights Act does not undermine the Belfast (Good Friday) Agreement 1998 and the process to develop a Bill of Rights for NI; and
- The ECNI continues to recommend that the UK Government and NI Executive ensure that there are additional measures within a Bill of Rights to strengthen NI equality laws, address gaps in equality legislation and protect equality and human rights in a post-Brexit context.

(NIHRC and the ECNI, 2023, p, 28)

As part of this education and research project participants were invited to share their perspectives on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. The following comments provide a flavour of the responses shared:

The challenge is to take human rights back to the community and give local people, especially those living in deprived areas the power and support they need to have a say in what matters most to them –housing, health, jobs, and education. Ask them what that would like to see included in a Bill of Rights to improve their lives and social conditions.

(Programme Participant)

There is a perception in some Protestant, unionist, loyalist (PUL) communities that a Bill of Rights would undermine their rights and benefit the Catholic, republican, nationalist (CRN) community. It's a narrative, maybe,

that some of them are being fed. A conversation is needed at grass-roots level that a human right is a right for all humans, it's not a zero-sum game but a win-win for everybody.

(Programme Participant)

I would've been a great proponent of the Bill of Rights here in Northern Ireland, which hasn't really gone anywhere but when you think of a lot of the issues that people are facing now, they're essentially rights-based issues. You know, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to live in freedom and peace, the right to have your identity respected. A lot of them are rights-based issues but I think we need alongside that to talk about responsibilities.

(Programme Interviewee)

The importance of grass-roots engagement was highlighted, especially in areas where human rights protections were being eroded and equality measures were lacking. This approach would ensure the most vulnerable were heard, and necessary supports would be directed where needed. The sectarianizing of human rights and equality issues has stymied attempts to reach agreement on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland. Some within the loyalist community who were aware of the antipathy to human rights and its association with the Civil Rights Movement, set about challenging this narrative in the 1980s. David Ervine and Billy Mitchell, both members of the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), which had been formed in 1979 to offer a political voice

to militant loyalists, recognised that progressing human rights was core to reconciliation and peace-building. They were committed to educating the broader unionist community. Mitchell, convinced of the opportunity the Agreement offered unionism to raise the living standards of everyone in Northern Ireland and heal divisions, spoke of his hope in the run up to the 2001 elections.

I would love to arrive at a state where you don't need a Bill of Rights – where people automatically respected each other and gave [each other] rights. But unfortunately, we live in a world – a selfish world – so the rights are there to protect everyone, not just the Catholic minority. ... I believe that if the people of Northern Ireland have human rights and social and economic rights and citizenship rights, that – particularly [for] a broad swathe of the Catholic middle class – this idea of Catholic/Nationalist and Protestant/Loyalist will disappear.... Slowly but surely human rights have come to everyone. And I think it is a good idea to have it embedded in the constitution.

(Mitchell, 2001, quoted in Edwards, 2023, pp. 301-302)

### **The Rights of Victims and Survivors**

Some still need convincing that zero-sum politics and an inability to treat those perceived as 'other' with respect and dignity will harm the whole community. Where injustices are exposed healing can result. This was certainly the case on 15 June 2010 when Prime Minister, David Cameron, reported to the House of Commons on the findings of the Saville Inquiry into Bloody Sunday, which had resulted in the deaths of fourteen people in Derry/Londonderry in 1972. The report

confirmed that members of the British Army's Parachute Regiment were responsible and the killings were unjustified and unjustifiable. Cameron accepted that as the British Army was the responsibility of government, they were culpable in the unlawful murders. He apologised, saying he was 'deeply sorry', agreeing with Saville's analysis that Bloody Sunday '...was a tragedy for the bereaved and wounded, and a catastrophe for the people of Northern Ireland' (2010, quoted in Bell, 2022, loc 2975).

Victims, survivors and their families, under the European Convention on Human Rights, are entitled to a full, independent, and effective investigation into the murder of loved ones. The Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Bill passed its final legal hurdle in the House of Commons on 6<sup>th</sup> September 2023, which effectively means that if it is passed into law, it will prevent future court cases and inquests in Northern Ireland. The bill offers conditional immunity from investigation and prosecution to offenders who cooperate with the new Independent Commission for Recovery and Information.

Rather than criminal proceedings, the commission's focus will be on information recovery; it will carry out reviews of deaths and other "harmful conduct" caused by the Troubles and produce reports on its findings.

(McClements, 2023)

It applies to all former members of the security forces and ex-paramilitaries. Of particular concern is the provision on amnesties which '...opponents feel hands the power to perpetrators rather than victims and is designed to protect former British soldiers' (McClements, 2023).

It has been widely opposed by all the political parties in Northern Ireland, victims' groups and campaigners, the Irish government and other political parties in Ireland and Britain. Internationally it is opposed in the US and Europe, and by the United Nations. Following the vote on the bill after the debate in the House of Commons, DUP MP Gavin Robinson stated that the bill was, '... [a] fundamental assault on justice. The erosion of hope for victims and the opportunity to get the answers they seek and the outcome they desire has been snuffed out by a government that has entrenched itself' (Robinson, 2023). Earlier this year UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Türk, warned that,

...introducing conditional immunity in this manner would likely be at variance with the UK's obligations under international human rights law to investigate and, where appropriate, prosecute and punish those found responsible for serious human rights violations.

(Türk, 2023)

While this marks an end to the political challenge, victims' groups and campaigners will pursue a legal route to challenge the bill.

What became clear from the research was that people in Northern Ireland and the border counties are struggling still with the legacies of the Troubles and the violence that ensued from state forces and paramilitary organisations. This is very much a society and people living with and recovering from trauma that is trans generational. The legacy of violence is multifaceted and lives on where there is paramilitary control and intimidation, mental and physical health concerns such as addiction disorders and suicides, domestic violence, and homeless-

ness. Women's focus groups held in Derry/Londonderry, Lurgan and Portadown confirmed the justice gap which exists in local communities. The women spoke openly about the issues that were giving them sleepless nights and having a detrimental impact in their local communities.

There's an awful lot of people living in dreadful situations here in what are ghettos controlled by paramilitaries. That is a bad reflection on all of us that that is still the situation.

(Focus Group Participant)

More women are struggling with mental health. There are lots of campaigns to raise awareness of the problems. We need solutions and implementation strategies.

(Focus Group Participant)

In our area we have a problem with drugs, alcohol, and lack of youth provision especially for young people with behavioural problems.

(Focus Group Participant)

Republican and loyalist paramilitary groups are involved in criminality and drug-dealing. A BBC Spotlight programme on loyalist paramilitaries screened in March 2021 reported that:

According to a recent MI5/police intelligence assessment shared with Spotlight, the Southeast Antrim UDA "has access to arms" and is "heavily involved in drugs supply, community coercion, intimidation and other criminality".

(O'Leary, 2021)

These paramilitary groups police their own neighbourhoods and operate in mostly socio-economically deprived areas, instilling fear among residents and exposing children and young people to drugs and intimidation. The most vulnerable are still paying the price with their lives and mental health because of a failure to address the legacy issue resulting from the 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland and the border counties.

Going forward, what is needed is a spirit of connectivity that emphasises the 'we' and not the 'I', community rather than individuality, so that those individuals and communities bearing the weight of our violent past can be supported to move beyond its reach. Can we fully support the PSNI and justice system in their efforts to dismantle paramilitary controls and protect victims? Can we nurture a sense of shared responsibility and care for those needing support with mental health challenges and those struggling with addictions? Can we lobby for civic engagement and social support provisions to be included in a Bill of Rights and on its implementation? This hope for healing and wholeness was expressed succinctly by an interviewee and it is a fitting aspiration on which to finish this chapter.

I think the importance of connection and connectedness needs to inform the laws that we make and pass. The way that we plan our community, even the planning of the places where we live, needs to be influenced by the priority for people to be able to belong and to connect and to be able to see one another and to be able to support and offer care to one another, to be able to contribute to the local community that they live in.

(Programme Interviewee)

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## CHAPTER FIVE

# Caring for our Common Home: The Socio-Environmental Strand of Reconciliation

The most important thing an individual can do to stop climate change is to stop being an individual and adopt community values.

(Programme Participant)

Take the Bog Meadows, just off the Donegall Road... there was loads of money put into the Bog Meadows to keep it because apparently there's wildlife and all there that's not anywhere else. Running alongside it is the motorway and every shop on it is a motor shop, every shop, and at night it's bumper to bumper. And I was coming down that way last week and the guy in front of me, I could taste the petrol coming out of his car. It's almost like, we're doing it with one hand and the other hand doesn't know what we're doing.

(Programme Interviewee)

I was at a good conference run by Invest NI recently where we were talking about the future of food, and they were showing us consumer insights and the trend around people caring about where their food comes from. It's

clear in all of the figures and all the numbers that there's a groundswell of change and that people care about animal welfare and they care about the environment particularly, and plastics is actually a huge thing as well ... David Attenborough has changed opinions massively.

(Programme Interviewee)

Acknowledging the ways in which we have benefitted from the fossil fuel industry and from global injustice and accepting that there is a moral responsibility on the part of our minority privileged nations is a necessary step to experiencing global empathy. We need to put pressure on our government and on corporations to do the right thing in terms of climate justice.

(Programme Presenter)

There's a guy in the Walled Garden in Helen's Bay who is feeding 40 families from less than an acre of land from his veg box scheme. We should be able to do much better than we're doing because most farms in Northern Ireland are small farms, there is an opportunity here actually to begin to make them more economically viable in a sustainable way.

(Programme Interviewee)

There is a growing awareness in Northern Ireland and the border counties that climate change and biodiversity loss are critical problems we are facing locally and globally that will need buy-in from every-

one, particularly the primary culprits. That said, as the first quotation shows, not everyone has recognised the seriousness of the crisis we are in and there is an onus on political and community leadership, alongside the media and educational establishments, to lead by example and through campaigns and community initiatives to get the message across. To assist with raising awareness, this chapter will cite some of the key insights from environmental scientists and consider their implications for how we live now and into the future. Considering these challenges, what do we mean by socio-environmental reconciliation; and how are the governments in Northern Ireland, the UK and the Republic of Ireland responding to the environmental challenges and opportunities? Denialism takes many forms and can be expressed as a type of religious fundamentalism or rejection of colonial history. Ethical and common good challenges to these myopic perspectives in the form of eco-centric theologies and just economic approaches will be explored. Shifting the focus to the realities of forced migration, violence and the huge toll on human life, and consideration of life affirming alternatives to militarisation will be briefly outlined. Finally, the chapter will explore a common good way forward for socio-environmental reconciliation on this island of Ireland.

## **Learning from Environmental Scientists**

### **1) The Climate Crisis**

*Michael Oppenheimer*, an American Professor of Geosciences and International Affairs credits Svante Arrhenius, a Swedish chemist, with raising the alarm that burning fossil fuels would result eventually in global warming by several degrees. That was in 1896 but his warning was universally ignored until the 1950s when others within

the scientific community began to raise concerns about possible catastrophic consequences. It took until the late 1970s before there was a consensus on the degrees of warming in relation to carbon dioxide levels in the atmosphere (Oppenheimer, 2022, p. 23). Greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane, and nitrous oxide) absorb heat from the sun and keep the Earth's surface and lower atmosphere warm. The more greenhouse gases in the atmosphere from the burning of fossil fuels and extensive farming of cattle, the warmer the Earth becomes. Surfaces like ice and clouds reflect some of that heat directly back into space but as ice sheets melt, with less cloud cover due to warmth, this leaves more heat trapped in the Earth's atmosphere. Warming has also increased the evaporation of water vapour from ocean surfaces adding to emissions. Deforestation has contributed also to climate change as forests store carbon. All of these interconnected factors are causing the Earth to heat up at a dangerous pace (Oppenheimer, 2022, p. 24).

In 1988 the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) formed and brought together thousands of scientists from all parts of the world to assess the climate crisis and come up with solutions. This was a highly significant development as it demonstrated the concern of world leaders to engage with the scientific community in order to understand the depth of the problem and consequences for humans and the ecosystem. Oppenheimer, who was involved in these investigations admits:

The mitigating steps we took were too slow and too small. Countries did come together to sign the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at the Earth Summit in

Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The aim of the treaty was to reduce greenhouse gas emissions back to 1990 levels by the year 2000. However, the agreement was toothless because its emissions reduction obligations were unenforceable.

(Oppenheimer, 2022, p. 26)

It was close to 10 years before countries came together again, this time at Kyoto, to agree binding emission commitments for developed countries, which were at that stage the largest polluters. In choosing not to apply the same approach to developing countries, the Kyoto Protocol (1997) limited its effectiveness. Undeterred, China, India, Russia, and Japan increased their CO<sup>2</sup> emissions, burning huge amounts of fossil fuels to power their developments. Another serious blow to scientific efforts to get political buy-in for emission reductions occurred in 2001 when the world's biggest polluter, the USA, who had not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, withdrew support for it. President George W. Bush caved under pressure from fossil fuel lobbyists. The European Union led by the UK and Germany, as well as the Netherlands, took the lead on reducing emissions, achieving the target agreed at Kyoto. Other developed countries, including Canada and Australia, like America, caved to pressure from fossil fuel companies and showed no real commitment to fulfil their emissions promises.

The next landmark agreement was the Paris Agreement in 2015, adopted at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP21), which this time was supported by USA and China, the two largest polluters. The primary goal was to keep the increase in the global average temperature to well below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with a view to limiting it to 1.5°C by the end of this century. This was to avoid far more

serious weather conditions including frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves and rainfall. This placed a greater responsibility on developed countries to significantly reduce their emissions:

... Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, the international community has agreed that, for poorer nations, cuts in emissions must not unduly impede their development. Accordingly, richer nations, with much greater historical responsibility for climate change, need to mitigate their emissions earlier and faster than those in early or transitional stages of development ... This means that wealthy nations must eliminate their use of fossil fuels by around 2030 for a likely chance of 1.5°C, extending only until around 2035 to 2040 for 2°C.

(Anderson, 2022, p. 206)

## 2) Biodiversity Loss

Biodiversity loss and climate change are interconnected. The destruction of ecosystems, because of either change in land use for agricultural, commercial, or residential purposes, or as a consequence of changing weather patterns, has resulted in the loss of animals, forests, and plant life. This is occurring at such a pace that biologists refer to this as the sixth great mass extinction event. Marine biologist, Enric Sala, explains:

We are erasing species from existence at a rate a thousand times faster than the natural extinction rate. A 2019 United Nations report warned that human activities will drive

the extinction of one million species of plants and animals (one in nine) in the next few decades. And we are filling the void ... by replacing that lost diversity of life with our food sources. Today, 96 per cent of the mass of mammals on the land is us and our domesticated livestock.

(Sala, 2020, p. 15)

The loss of terrestrial wildlife, at least 60% since the 1970s, from elephants, to bison, to panda bears, through hunting and destruction of their natural habitats, has significant implications for the finely tuned ecosystems and the rest of life on the planet. Rewilding that includes reintroducing animals back into their natural habitats, and restoring those same habitats, is essential for regaining the natural balance. This applies also to large fish in the seas, 90% of which have been extracted by over-fishing this century, yet only 7% of the ocean is designated as protected area (Sala, 2020, p. 15). Ecosystems across the world are therefore under threat. Rewilding is a crucial strategy for restoring the natural food web, and ensuring the health of plant life dependent on animals for soil health and dispersion of seeds, and fish for nutrients for coral reefs. A vibrant ecosystem is crucial for the sequestering of carbon dioxide and mitigation of climate change.

Another contributor to the biodiversity loss is of course the replacing of forests and grasslands with agricultural land to feed livestock and grow food. We are much more aware of the importance of forests for carbon dioxide capture and for rainfall. Cutting down forests will deplete water supplies for those dependent on rain for drinking water and for food. It will be the poorest people that grow their own produce who will suffer most. We are also more aware that mass produced

monocultures, like grass, reduce the insect population that we rely upon for pollination. Industrial farming also destroys the ability of the living soil to absorb carbon and the loss of nutrients in the soil impacts the nutrition of whatever is grown. One interviewee spoke about the local challenges this presents:

In Northern Ireland we pretty much just grow grass and it's all we know how to do. And from a sustainability point of view, from both a climate point of view and a biodiversity point of view we must change the agricultural system massively. It's just broken, we can't keep doing what we've been doing. We're losing all our pollinators, we're losing all this diversity and that's because we have this huge, big monoculture, and Northern Ireland's the worst in the UK in terms of just growing grass and not much else. We need much more arable, we need tonnes more horticulture ... meat and dairy are our main export, and yet we're importing all our fruit and veg. It makes no sense at all in terms of land use and growing fruit and veg on your land is way more profitable ... Can we create new schemes around carving out plots of land and getting new enterprises started, almost like trial farms or demonstration farms, or model farms?

(Programme Interviewee)

The Global North since the Industrial Revolution and through colonial expansionism has wrought most damage to our shared planet and carries primary responsibility for reparation and repair. While we

can live greener lifestyles it is up to political leadership in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland to take the initiative in responding to this climate change and loss of biodiversity crises. So how are the governments in both jurisdictions responding?

### **Political Responses**

The UK Climate Change Act 2008 has a net-zero emissions target by 2050 but climate change policy is a devolved matter. In 2009 the Scottish Parliament adopted a Climate Change (Scotland) Act setting out its targets in keeping with the UK commitment. The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 set interim targets for 2020, 2030 and 2040. When the Northern Ireland Assembly collapsed in January 2017 because of Sinn Féin deputy First Minister Martin McGuinness' resigning in protest over the Renewable Heat Incentive scandal, Northern Ireland had yet to produce a devolved statute to enact similar measures as the other devolved institutions. After a three-year deadlock the Executive returned and the New Decade New Approach Agreement, which formed the basis of the return to government, made commitments to climate change legislation.

Two climate change bills competed for Assembly support in 2021, the year when COP26 was held in Glasgow. The first Private Member's Bill (PMB) was introduced in March 2021 by NI Green Party Leader, Claire Bailey, with cross-party support and it aimed for net-zero gas emissions by 2045. An online consultation on a second climate change bill by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and its minister, Edwin Poots, who had responsibility for climate action, was opened on 8 December 2021. It called for an 82% reduction in greenhouses gas emissions by 2050,

claiming a net-zero target would prove devastating to the Northern Ireland farming community and that it would be wrong to set unachievable targets. Climate Change Bill (no. 2) progressed through to its final stage, with amendments from government parties and civil society following the consultation. The Executive was dissolved again in February 2022 when DUP First Minister Paul Givan resigned in protest at the introduction of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, as part of a Brexit agreement between the British government and the European Union, designed to prevent a hard border on the island of Ireland. As the Northern Ireland Act 1998, amended in February 2022, allowed caretaker ministers to remain in post for a maximum of 24 weeks after the Executive collapsed, this meant that the Northern Ireland Assembly was able to pass the Climate Change (No. 2) Bill in March 2022. The bill received royal assent in June of that year.

The Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 has a net-zero greenhouse gas emissions target by 2050; however, methane gas is only subject to a 46% reduction by 2050, because of lobbying by the intensive farming sector. This will have a negative impact on Northern Ireland's ability to decarbonise. The Act also commits the Northern Ireland Assembly to appointing a Climate Change Commissioner, a Just Transition Commissioner, soil quality and biodiversity targets, and a Just Transition Fund to support efforts to enhance biodiversity, develop healthy ecosystems, reduce greenhouse gases, and achieve renewable energy goals.

To meet targets set, what is now required are departmental Climate Action Plans with structures in place to ensure effective monitoring and accountability. Departments will need to work together to meet the scale of reductions to greenhouse gas emissions needed within the

timescale. Given that we are still without a functioning government six weeks before Christmas 2023, opportunities for meaningful action to deliver the agreed targets are being lost. The consequences for 'our commons', the wildlife and for human consumption is apparent in the shift in weather patterns and the damage to our natural resources. One of those interviewed for the project underlined the urgency with which we need to move to a greener, more sustainable future.

Approximately 30% of our greenhouse emissions in Northern Ireland are caused by agriculture. We should be carbon positive. I think it's crazy that we're one of the biggest contributors and again, we're worse in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the UK so we've got a lot to do. Water pollution is a big problem for agriculture. Lough Neagh's one of the most polluted waterways in Europe and that is coming predominantly from agriculture, run-off from all the farms around the lough. That's because we're over-producing nutrients, we've too much slurry and not enough land to put it on because we're breeding so many animals and we have to deal with that waste ... So, there's a whole pile of environmental issues around farming and then there's biodiversity as well, in terms of the number of species that we've lost. Again, that's down to the monocultures and hedges being taken out and all of that. And we're not farming our soil properly and we're losing all the nutrient value out of it, we're losing all the fungi and stuff in it. And there's actually evidence that that means our food isn't as nutritious as it should be, so the nutrients that

you used to get from broccoli you're not now getting the equivalent nutrient values. Different farming techniques can improve the nutrient value and those systems that are more sustainable like no-dig or min-till agricultural systems are better for the climate as well as the soil.

(Programme Interviewee)

In the last few months, the dangerous levels of pollution in Lough Neagh, the largest freshwater lake in the UK and Ireland that stretches across five of the six counties in Northern Ireland, has been much in the news. The lough supplies about 40% of all drinking water in Northern Ireland. In line with the insights shared by the above interviewee, environmentalists confirm that a major contributory factor to the lough's poisoning by blue-green algae is fertiliser containing growth-stimulating nitrogen and phosphorus that is run off from fields into the lough. A decision taken by the Stormont Assembly in 2013, and backed by the five major political parties, to double the size of Northern Ireland's agri-food industry through a publicly funded Going for Growth strategy, increased slurry production exponentially. This strategy facilitated the move from traditional farming methods to industrial factory farms. Other factors that have contributed to the rise of phosphorus and nitrogen in the lough include the rise in temperature, sewage dumping, invasive zebra mussels and sand dredging. Lough Neagh is at a tipping point. Environmental campaigners and local community groups continue their protest at the serious lack of regulation and neglect by those with responsibility for the lough. The closing down of a fresh-water laboratory due to lack of funding in the year 2000, which had been set up to monitor Lough Neagh because of its importance as a body of water, accelerated the current crisis.

Had it remained open, nitrogen levels in the water would have been measured on a regular basis and remedial action taken to prevent the accumulation. Environmental scientist, Dr Les Gornall, on an ITV current affairs programme (View from Stormont, 2023), indicated it may take 20 years to flush out the historical accumulation of toxins and that laboratory expertise was needed to assist with this process. The dire state of Lough Neagh is a sober reminder of what happens when tipping points are reached. What is needed in Northern Ireland is an independent environmental agency with a remit to ensure all stakeholders, including the government, comply with environmental regulations. It should have the power also to fine those destroying ‘our commons’. Responding to the climate emergency should be a priority for all political leaders, given the serious consequences for all life. Not to make it a political priority, surpassing all other political issues and agendas, is to fail the people of Northern Ireland, the children of the future and nature.

If it is a case of leading by example, then the UK government is also lacking credibility as climate change advocates and leaders. The British Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak’s recent pledge to max out the UK’s oil and gas reserves by authorising more than 100 new North Sea licences to enable intensive drilling, raises concerns about the UK’s obligation to its net-zero commitments. The Prime Minister, who made the announcement from a Shell gas terminal north of Aberdeen, seems more inclined to side with the gas companies than heed the warnings of environmentalists who advised that drilling would be catastrophic for the climate. Even some within the Conservative Party, like Chris Skidmore, were critical of Sunak’s decision. Skidmore, who had led the government review into net-zero, said of the decision:

It is on the wrong side of a future economy that will be founded on renewable and clean industries, and not fossil fuels. It is on the wrong side of modern voters who will vote with their feet at the next general election for parties that protect, and not threaten, our environment. And it is on the wrong side of history, that will not look favourably on the decision taken today.

(Skidmore, 2023)

Rishi Sunak's climb down on other green energy pledges, announced in September 2023, which included pushing back the deadline for selling new petrol and diesel cars and the phasing out of gas boilers, has been greeted with despair by climate scientists and environmental experts. These commitments were understood to be crucial to the UK realising the legally binding target of net zero emissions by 2050. Sunak failed also to attend a UN Climate Ambition Summit in New York in September 2023. Sadiq Khan, the Mayor of London, was the only UK leader speaking at the Summit. In an interview for the Guardian newspaper, Khan criticised the UK government for backtracking on its environmental pledges:

This government's response flies in the face of common sense and shows they are climate delayers. It beggars' belief that not only are they watering down vital commitments, but they are also passing up the opportunity to create green jobs, wealth and lower energy bills – as well as failing to give investors the certainty they need to boost the green economy.

(Quoted in Harvey, F. and Carrington, D., 2023)

Ruth Davies, who was an adviser to the UK's team when it hosted the COP26 climate conference stated: 'Rishi Sunak has in one go alienated his strategic allies, exposed his citizens to higher costs from continuing gas dependence, and signalled that the UK is not a reliable place to invest in clean technologies' (Milman, 2023).

President Higgins signed the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Act 2021 into law on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2021, committing the Republic of Ireland to net-zero emissions by 2050, in keeping with its international and EU climate commitments. The Republic of Ireland's first carbon budget came into effect in April 2022. It stipulates the maximum amount of greenhouse gases the state can emit over a specific period to ensure a 51% reduction in emissions on 2018 levels by 2030. The state's Climate Action Plan (2023) outlines the emissions reductions necessary in each sector of the economy by 2030 with accompanying action plans. Sectors covered include Electricity, Transport, Buildings, Industry /Enterprise, Agriculture and Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry. Like Northern Ireland, there is a commitment to establish a Just Transition Commission to advise the government and a just transition framework to support and enable climate action, policy making and delivery. This framework is comprised of four key principles:

1. An integrated, structured, and evidence-based approach.
2. Equipping people with the right skills to participate in and benefit from a net-zero economy.
3. Cost sharing for equitable impact.
4. Social dialogue.

(Government of Ireland, 2023, p. 70)

Agriculture accounts for one third of the Republic of Ireland's emissions and dairy farms produce up to three times more greenhouse gas and ammonia emissions than other farming sectors. The Social Justice Ireland report asks why then the dairy sector has been earmarked for expansion (Healey *et al.*, 2023, p. 268). Surely this will be counter-productive in achieving the carbon budget target? With more sustainable farming practices on the increase and opportunities for Ireland to diversify its fruit and vegetable produces to meet population needs, is a rethink needed to enable transitioning from dairy to other types of farming? This would include providing necessary supports for just transitioning to a greener economy.

Regarding transport emissions, the Social Justice Ireland report underlines the need for significant investment in a public transport network powered by green energy. This will involve a substantial cost and the point is made that revenue could be raised by exploring the possibility of introducing an aviation tax, and to prepare for this the Republic of Ireland could take the lead in 'promoting the abolition of the Jet Kerosene exemption from mineral oil tax at a European and international level' (Healey *et al.*, 2023, p. 269). Working from the premise that the polluter should pay, Social Justice Ireland also recommends an environmental tax on the agricultural sector for damage done to rivers by phosphorus and nitrogen waste products, and on the industrial sector for resource extraction and the burning of fossil fuels (Healey *et al.*, 2023, p 279).

The Republic of Ireland is developing a mitigation and transition strategy aimed at enabling the transition to a carbon neutral society and economy. The Social Justice Ireland report recommends prioritising social investment and outlines core priorities for the government in implementing the necessary changes needed. These include:

- Retraining and support for those communities who will be most impacted by the loss of employment related to the move away from fossil fuels.
- Support and investment in the circular economy with regional strategies and targets.
- Investment in the deep retrofitting of homes and community facilities.
- The provision of community energy advisors and community energy programmes.
- Investment in renewable energy schemes.
- Policies to eliminate energy poverty.
- Investment in a quality, accessible and well-connected public transport network.

(Healey *et al.*, 2023, p. 282)

Given the urgency with which we need to adapt to living sustainably within the limits of the planet, what were the main challenges identified by some of those who engaged with this project?

### **Recovering an Eco-Centred Theology of Creation**

One of the challenges is to get communities in Northern Ireland over the line in accepting that climate-change is man-made (sic). We need to get our heads around this. I think many people in the broader Protestant community struggle with that whole notion and they are not getting good leadership. Sammy Wilson, for example, had a letter in the Newsletter saying he accepted climate change but not that it was man-made (sic).

(Programme Participant)

If, as the above quotation suggests, there is a belief that humankind is not responsible for the climate crisis and biodiversity loss and that any attempt to find a human solution is delusional, the logic will be to disengage and carry on as normal. After all, the environmental crisis is beyond our control. Often what lies behind this interpretation is a form of religious fundamentalism, which has understood the creation myths in the Book of Genesis as literally true, as historical and scientifically factual. The signs of climate change, therefore, are a consequence of God's actions, signs of God's judgement on the world and the end times. Nothing can and should be done to interfere with God's agenda. This apocalyptic type of thinking leads to inaction and mistrust of those who try to say otherwise. The only appropriate response is faith in God's saving plan for those God has chosen. This perspective is rooted in an anthropocentric worldview that understands the relationship between humans and nature as one of domination and control. It interprets and regards the world in terms of human values and experiences and fails to recognise our interdependence and interconnectedness with nature.

There have been significant voices critiquing the fundamentalist theological worldview. American, feminist theologian, Letty Russell, a minister within the Reformed Christian tradition, was among the first to recognise that:

... the Bible needs to be liberated from its captivity to one-sided white, middle-class, male interpretation. It needs liberation from privatized and spiritualised interpretations that avoid God's concern for justice, human wholeness, and ecological responsibility ...

(Russell, 1985, p. 12)

She was critical of a prevailing Western interpretation of Genesis chapters two and three that humankind formed in the image of God was given the moral authority to determine the value of everything and manage the resources given for human use. She recognised that this perspective has justified the commodification of nature and the extractive and consumerist behaviour, which has assumed the right to use the Earth's resources independently of all other living beings.

Eco-feminist theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, agreed with Russell that '... there can be no liberation ... and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination' (2005, p. 20). Ruether, a Catholic, is in the tradition of ecofeminist theologians who understand the connection between feminist concerns to end gender oppression and injustices and ecological efforts to save the planet from destruction. Ecofeminism underscores the interdependence of creation through the imagery of the one sacred body and emphasises our shared responsibility to end destructive and dominating behaviour that targets other humans and/or the environment. It is eco-centric as opposed to human-centred and views humans as an integral part of the web of life in which all of creation has its own sacredness and intrinsic value. This eco-centric perspective is anti-patriarchal, anti-colonial and affirms that no one species, or human race, has the right to dominate any other. It acknowledges that biodiversity is as important as human diversity, and humans are part of biodiversity. We are partners with the natural world and have a responsibility to cooperate with all living ecosystems to ensure integral and sustainable development.

Eco-centric theology is being developed within Reformed and Catholic Christian faith traditions. The emphasis in both traditions is on

creation care and healing the relationship between humans and all other living species. Reconciliation ecology is ‘... the science of restoring, creating, and maintaining new habitats, and conserving biodiversity in places where people live, work or play’ (Warners, Ryskamp and Van Dragt, 2014, p. 224). Reformed theologians are applying and reinterpreting this scientific approach within a faith context. They recognise that reconciliation ecology is about ‘the bringing together again of things that have been at odds’ (Warners, Ryskamp and Van Dragt, 2014, p. 225). The emphasis is on sustainable and relational living that is the positive outcome of healed relationships within and between the whole community of life.

Pope Francis in his encyclical letter, *Laudato Si*, calls for the recovery of a ‘green faith’ that seeks to live at the pace of biological evolution, rather than the accelerated pace of those in the Global North, which far exceeds the Earth’s sustainable limits and is not geared towards the common good (2015, p. 17). He connects the healing of the earth with justice for the poor, underlining the impact of market-driven capitalism and ‘extreme consumerism’ on the environment, on the poor, the weak and the vulnerable (2015, pp. 29-30). Pope Francis warns that our concern needs to extend beyond ‘the threat of extreme weather’ to the ‘catastrophic consequences of social unrest’, which can lead to violence (2015, p. 105). A social unrest that results from the huge inequalities between peoples and nations, the fear of loss of life and livelihood by the poor and most vulnerable, and the reality of extreme weather events that will continue to create large numbers of environmental migrants. What is needed in response is ‘... an integrated approach to combatting poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature’ (2015, p. 75).

In his most recent Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Laudate Deum: On The Climate Crisis*, Pope Francis laments the fact that the accords agreed by leaders of more than 190 countries in Conference of the Parties (COP) international negotiations have failed to have the desired impact of reducing global reliance on fossil fuels and transitioning to clean energy. The Pope attributes the failure to the ‘lack of suitable mechanisms for oversight, periodic review and penalties in cases of noncompliance’, and countries putting their ‘national interests’ before the ‘global common good’ (Pope Francis, 2023, p. 12).

The technocratic worldview encourages us to see the natural world as a resource we can utilise for unlimited growth and to increase human power. It blinds us to the gravity of the ecological crisis and our responsibility for it. By way of contrast, indigenous spiritualities and nature people celebrate and respect our partnership with the whole community of life. The rivers, mountains, the animals and plant life are a part of their cosmic family, their living relatives. They understand in a deep connected way that in harming the Earth we are damaging ourselves. Mother Earth is a living being and what is endured by her is felt by her creatures. They are to the fore in demonstrations happening across the globe aimed at defending the rights of nature. This was affirmed on the project:

The Native American religions honour the earth as Mother and hold that what you take from the earth you give back. You treat the earth the way that the earth treats you and if you treat the earth badly, the earth is going to treat you badly. There’s no other animal that causes the amount of damage on the earth, no herd of buffalo, no

lions, no gorillas that have caused the amount of damage that humans have caused. And yet, as the Native Americans recognise, we come from that earth.

(Programme Interviewee)

In Ireland the indigenous Celtic tradition offers rich resources for reflection. In pre-Celtic and Celtic societies there was an awareness of humanity's dependence on the four elements: air, fire, water, and earth. Bushes, trees, and wells on top of hills, were regarded as holy places. The Celts sought to cooperate with nature and believed in the sacramentality of the universe and that 'the physical can be a vehicle for the spiritual and that there is no sharp distinction between the two (Low, 1996, p. 18). The pre-Celtic sense of living in a sacral universe influenced early Celtic Christianity. The Celtic pantheistic perspective viewed nature as a partner with humankind, enabling and supporting all life. Can we recover the holistic, relational elements of our Celtic ancestors' cosmology? Can we recover a relationship that reverences the earth and the interconnectedness and interdependence of all things? The following quotation from one of the project's interviewees recognises the urgency of recovering a rights of nature attitude and relationship:

It is vital that we take care of the environment ... We need clean air; we need clean water ... We need to protect bees; I think people don't understand just how vital bees are to our survival. Over-fishing's another thing ... Waste disposal, huge pig farms which spoil the countryside for everyone and aren't that good for our health, battery hens, don't even start me on those but they're bad for the envi-

ronment, we should have free range things. I'm very much interested in the rights of nature people, but I can see that it would take some persuading for some people to think that trees and rivers have rights. If you think that a river has the right to flow freely then you might stop polluting it. It's just so important that our environment is protected.

(Programme Interviewee)

### **No Environmental Justice without Economic Justice**

The people in the likes of my area can't afford the nice fancy electric cars, they don't care where their food comes from. The fact that the planet is burning itself up and we are destroying it, is far down their list of priorities. It shouldn't be, but survival almost takes over ... Yet in a sense, because of economic reasons, a lot of them are using public transport and not going on foreign holidays ... So, there is that contradiction, we probably are using less of a carbon footprint in our area through poverty but there's not that awareness, maybe there is among younger folk but even then, I'm not seeing it as a massive feature.

(Programme Interviewee)

Denialism remains a constant barrier to becoming part of the change needed to deliver the required reduction in emissions. The above quotation makes the connection between poverty, inequality and environmental denialism or disinterest. It underlines the reality that greater equality will create the conditions for greater conservation. The focus needs to shift from GDP growth and the size of the economy to a sustainable economy that is well distributed. Kate Raworth's doughnut

economy, summarised in *Is There A Common Good? An Educational Resource* (Higgins and McMaster, 2023, pp. 169-179) is a common good model for economic wellbeing and ecological sustainability. The intention is to refocus the economy towards the needs of people and the planet. A regenerative and distributive economy, then, is the social foundation for safe and sustainable living that does not overshoot the limits of our shared planet.

What is needed is not only a rebalancing on the island of Ireland but between the Global North and the Global South. The richest 10% need to drastically reduce their levels of consumption so that those in developing countries can hope to meet their basic needs. Those living with poverty in most of the countries in the Global South have a small carbon footprint, yet they suffer most from climate damage, as they are least resilient to extreme weather and loss of biodiversity. It is for this reason that COP27 established a new fund to help victims suffering loss and damages because of global warming. The responsibility lies with countries in the Global North to make generous reparation for their colonisation of the Global South, their extraction of natural resources to enhance imperial coffers, and their pollution of the planet to grow the Western economy.

The impact of colonialism and the consequences for climate change mitigations in former colonies has still to be understood in the Global North, which has benefitted from centuries of colonialism. Acclaimed Indian academic and writer, Amitav Ghosh, warns:

... attempts to impose limitations on the carbon emissions of poor countries are widely seen as a covert means of preserving the economic and geopolitical disparities of

the last 200 years, since on a per capita basis the carbon emissions of the Global South are still a fraction of those of affluent countries.

(Ghosh, 2022, p. 315)

Experiences, then, of geopolitical dominance continue to undermine trust in the Western agenda, and the continued reality of global inequalities and disparities are stymying efforts to reach global agreement on decarbonisation. Financial reparation from affluent nations in the form of a climate fund to help vulnerable countries in the Global South would go some way to reconciling relationships and rebuilding trust. COP27, which took place in Egypt in 2022, agreed a system for financing 'loss and damage' for countries most impacted by climate disasters. What this means in concrete terms for countries in the Global North, whose carbon footprint created the climate crisis, has yet to be worked out. Whatever arrangements are agreed, monies given must be reparation payments and not loans.

### **The Climate Crisis, Migration and Violence**

News stories of refugees who have drowned in the Mediterranean Sea or English Channel or been found dead in transport containers as they attempted to cross to the UK, underline the intersectionality between climate crisis, social instability and conflict, and the real cost to human life. It is the poorest, most vulnerable men, women, and children, those fleeing the consequences of violence, poverty, food insecurity, global inequality, and climate devastation, who are risking their lives in dangerous crossings. Their deaths are a sober reminder that not all lives are equal, if they were, European governments would

be protecting the right to asylum and expanding the definition of a refugee to include those escaping extreme poverty and climate change.

We have known for some time that the climate crisis would amplify conflicts and societal problems. In fact, as far back as 1974, the CIA produced a study on 'climatological research as it pertains to intelligence problems' which warned of '... the emergence of a new era of weird weather, leading to political unrest and mass migration (which, in turn, would cause more unrest)' (Bell, 2021).

Scientists through-out the world reached the same conclusion as the CIA and took action to try to persuade world leaders that mitigatory efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions could prevent future military interventions.

As far back as 1992, the Union of Concerned Scientists warned that humanity faced a stark choice between spending its resources on war and violence, or on preventing catastrophic environmental damage. The report was signed by 1,700 scientists, including the majority of Nobel Prize winners in the sciences. In 2017 the warning was reissued, and this time it was signed by 15,000 scientists: it concluded that the state of the world was even worse than before.

(Ghosh, 2021, p. 124)

Going on current trends the numbers forced to migrate could be in the region of 1.2 billion by 2050 according to Global Hydrologist, Taikan Oki (2022, p. 187). Instead of accepting responsibility for the climate crisis and providing hospitality to those suffering from its devastating impact, rich nations like America and the UK are spending

money on defences to keep people out. Military spending continues to increase, as does the possibility of civil unrest and conflict over scarcer resources. If, instead, some of the monies spent on military budgets in the Global North, estimated at almost 2 trillion dollars in 2020, were redirected into a hospitality fund to support migrants or a reparation fund to enable vulnerable countries to become more resilient, the world would be a safer place. The greater the international cooperation on decarbonisation and building defences to protect vulnerable countries, the more mass migration would become less likely. The West, as the primary contributor to global warming, has an ethical responsibility to lead by example and adopt greener and more sustainable lifestyles. A reduction in military expenditure would immediately reduce carbon emissions significantly, given that militarisation does more damage ecologically than any other human endeavour (Gould, 2007, p. 331). It would show also that the geopolitical focus had shifted from a struggle for dominance and military defence to a commitment to reconciliation, to saving the lives of people in all places, and to ensuring a future for children everywhere.

### **Common Good Way Forward**

Given the size of the agricultural sector in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, there was recognition that fair and creative ways need to be found to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from farming. It was felt that small farms can more easily transition to sustainable ways of farming:

We've no animals on the farm anymore. And that's shocking for most farmers, they think we're mad! But we've put

in an orchard, we've a crop rotation on the farm with the main profit-making crop being flax to make linen ... I've also started a business and we work with restaurants. We've got maybe 10 growers on board, so I go out and collect from them and deliver to the restaurants. We've got an online platform, so it makes it easy, the restaurant just orders from us and that goes out to all the farms. It means the restaurants aren't dealing with ten different growers but by coming together, a group of small farms can supply enough to keep the restaurants sustained. A huge chunk of our fruits and vegetables and grains and pulses and things are imported, and they don't need to be, we can grow them all here, they're perfectly fine for growing and don't let anybody tell you they're not! As market demand grows, we feed that back to the farmers to help them make decisions about what to grow. So, they're not just planting stuff randomly and hoping somebody will buy it, they're planting stuff because they know that there's a restaurant that's looking for nuts for example, or watercress or chickweed.

(Programme Interviewee)

Jubilee Community Benefit Society, which is a group of over 150 local individuals, churches, schools from right across the denominational background, invested together and developed a Christian Creation Care organisation with a community owned farm called Jubilee Farm. It practices and promotes care farming, community-sup-

ported agriculture and conservation education and engagement with people of all backgrounds and beliefs. It is Northern Ireland's first community owned farm.

(Programme Participant)

The scale of transformation required to ensure greater environmental sustainability is huge, but it has already begun, and green technologies and infrastructure are being developed globally. The human capacity for creativity is such that we cannot know in advance what shape new developments will take, only that how we live will change. Urban design is greening cities, renewable energy is transforming the way we heat our homes and public buildings, eco-friendly options for travel are becoming more prevalent. There are more vegetarian food options in our shops, and there is more awareness of the need to reduce waste and recycle. Creating jobs with low environmental impact and proper training to cushion the transition is another priority, as well as some form of universal income to provide security for likely changes in work/life balance, as the nature of work changes because of technological advances. The shift from a consumer mind-set and lifestyle to one where we live more lightly on the earth will need investment in public services, to ensure good health care, elderly care and childcare, an education system that delivers for everyone, and good quality social housing. Finally, a redistribution of wealth to ensure greater equity will require a progressive tax system that needs to include a carbon tax and wealth tax, as well as shared ownership business schemes. Given the scale of the environmental threat we have no option but to change and adopt environmentally sound policies and practices for our own good, the good of our planet and for the common good.

Can we achieve the common good? Can we save the planet? The answer is yes, it's up to us, but this will only be achieved when we recognise our interdependence with nature.

(Programme Participant)

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## CHAPTER SIX

# Liberation from the Past: The Socio-Psychological Strand of Reconciliation

The burden of memory is a heavy one. We seem to be fighting for control of memories. How the past is perceived in communities, how it is used by politicians needs to be critically reviewed ... For a better future, all sides of history must be taught accurately and not as a quarry from which to get stones to throw.

(Programme Presenter)

Dealing with the past remains a difficult issue with which politicians and civic society struggle. The importance of understanding the past by engaging with history through all-age learning programmes is important.

(Programme Participant)

There's been a lot of hurt. There's been huge hurt in border society and I understand that and we're all part of the story. We can say we're not or we've nothing to do with it, we all are part of it in one way or another. Whatever side we came down on, whether we were fighting for freedom or our families were in security forces, we're all connected in some way and that has all had a major effect. On its own,

there's not a border dweller if they told you the truth that's not marked by 30+ years of conflict and even this peace that we're in, this fragile enough peace really, that we're in.  
(Programme Interviewee)

We can have an honest conversation that tries to give the context to what has happened without trying to necessarily apportion blame ... I think there needs to be a recognition and an understanding of what maybe did happen and why.  
(Programme Interviewee)

When I was in the police, we were fighting the IRA because they were involved in a campaign to overturn the government and they were nothing but terrorists. And yet when you get to talking to folk and you see the bigger picture and you listen to the Irish history from the early part of the 20th century and you humanise and speak to the individual, you then see that there are two stories or there are two parts to every story ... as you get older you become more reflective and more questioning of things learnt in the past.  
(Programme Interviewee)

Can we find a way to tell our stories of the past differently, so we break the cycle of blame and own collective responsibility for the past?  
(Programme Presenter)

Somebody has done something to me and I can live in that and I can be angry about that for the entirety of the duration of my time on this planet, or I can make the decision to say, “Look, I forgive you for what’s happened, I can’t change it but I need to move forward because it’s holding me back” ... Some people think forgiveness is giving up something. It’s about gaining something. Forgiveness is about gaining the potential of everything else and not being trapped.

(Programme Interviewee)

The socio-psychological strand of reconciliation has dealt largely with issues of identity and belonging. In Northern Ireland identity issues have for many people been tied up with flags and emblems. Flags and emblems are elevated to the status of deities and are revered as objects of worship, adoration and loyalty. The flying of the Union and Irish flags become fiercely contested territorial markers, often used in provocative ways and literally and metaphorically fly in the face of the other, ritually burned on bonfires as expressions of hate. It is difficult to see how these and other expressions of hate have anything to do with identity, culture and belonging. Even without the bonfires (and not all are expressions of hate), the flying of Union and Irish flags from streetlights and other street locations as markers of absolute loyalty, is never able to deal with the all too real socio-economic issues of deep-rooted economic and educational deprivation. In binary communities flags will never ever deal with poverty and hunger. Choosing flags and emblems over human and environmental wellbeing and flourishing is not only irrational, it is choosing a culture of death over a culture of life.

There are aspects of our identity, the socio-psychological dimension, which are imagined, or made up. Wellbeing and flourishing are not imagined illusions but fundamental to a good life on earth, a common good as the bases for human and environmental rights.

The socio-psychological strand has to do with more than issues of identity expressed through flags, emblems, or patriotism as my nation or country, right or wrong, my nation. Conflictual societies and contested societies, countries with histories of war and violence, have pasts to deal with, traumas to work through and new futures to build. There is often no agreement about the past. Different narratives exist, are contested and may always be contested. Just over a century ago partition became part of our historical and political experience. It was disputed from the beginning, remains disputed and is likely to always be disputed. Consequently, Northern Ireland is likely always to be an unsettled place, always insecure, and maybe even always dysfunctional. Violence, killing, trauma and suffering are the shared part of our narratives. These are our shared history and experiences, why violence, killing, trauma and suffering has no single or agreed narrative. The why, the reasons, the explanations and interpretations are multiple and contested. All of this means that we are trapped as prisoners of a terrible past, unable to build a shared future or experience liberation into something new. To date, politicians and civic society have not been able to deal with the past and cannot find 'a way out of no way' (Hebrew Prophets).

There may never be an agreed narrative of the past but we can begin to understand the contested narratives. We can either remain prisoners of our own narratives or begin to listen to the diverse narratives of others with empathy and understanding. It will take an effort to listen

differently and to even tell our stories differently. As we try to understand the contested narratives we may well develop a new understanding and perspective of our own. It is not that everyone will have to give up their narrative but to realize that different narratives exist because each sectional group is coming from a different place, has been situated differently and been shaped in different contexts. Hard civic conversations are needed, without blame and absolute judgement, but history, violence, killing, trauma, and suffering can be confronted together, engaged together and a way found out of the current no way.

At the time of writing, the Conservative government is forcing through the House of Commons legislation dealing with Northern Ireland's legacy issues which amounts to an amnesty for all who committed acts of atrocity. Its main purpose is to put British military personnel beyond prosecution, while denying victims and families of the atrocities in Northern Ireland any justice. As indicated in Chapter Four of this book, there is universal opposition to the bill and it is inexplicable as to why the Conservative government is hell-bent on pushing this legislation through and into law. It is legislation which is brutal, cruel, inhumane and a gross injustice. It will not go without legal challenges and result in one further reason for a complete rejection of the Conservatives at the next General Election. It is not the way to deal with the past but keeps the people of Northern Ireland and Great Britain imprisoned in the past. The government cannot go on pretending that the past in Ireland is an Irish or Northern Irish past and that our violent history is not also British history. Hard conversations are needed not only within Northern Ireland but within the east-west strand of relationships as a crucial part of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

## **Confronting the Legacies**

As 2012 loomed there was considerable anxiety about the decade of centenaries and concern that the centennial events of 1912-1922 would become violent. That didn't happen, not least because a lot of people did careful planning for centenaries and the decade was well served by historians, with access to documentation and information not available before the decade began. History was not revised in any manipulative way but new knowledge changed the narratives and provided us with better and more accurate perspectives on the crucial events of 1912-1922. A few people did perpetuate mythical versions of key events but in general the centenaries were approached in an informed and mature way. Language was carefully used, as the word 'celebration' was never really used for any of the events which were 'marked' or 'commemorated', and 'ethical remembering' became a dominant focus. The decade passed without directly related violence and with a more informed, ethical and historical perspective on the events that shaped Ireland for the last century and continue to shape the totality of our relationships and journey to a different future.

The focus on the events of 1912-1922 highlighted a past that had not really been dealt with or that was difficult to deal with. The bitterness and divisions of the Irish Civil War were still felt among families and were never talked about. The legacy of civil war politics shaped the Republic of Ireland politics for most of the century following and reconciliation has only begun to happen in the last few years. It was acknowledged that it took a century to really talk about the divisive and often violent events of 1912-1922 but it was now possible to talk about atrocities and legacies and for families to come together. Significantly, it was mainly through the arts that the beginning and the end

of the Irish Civil War was marked in Dublin at the National Concert Hall and the Garden of Remembrance in 2022 and 2023. Both events were very moving because families and relatives from both sides of the war divisions were present and integrated. It took a century to work through the traumas, process the hurt and suffering and overcome divisions. Northern Ireland has just begun to reach the fiftieth anniversaries of the terrible events of the 'Troubles'. We struggle to deal with the past, personally, politically and in civil society. As the Conservative government pushed its Legacy Bill through parliament, a Northern Ireland MP spoke from personal experience of losing friends and relatives in 1971 and through painful emotion, reminded parliament that events are still raw, not only for himself but also for his constituents. The rawness was also given voice by people who lost relatives at the hands of paramilitaries and security forces. From different sides of our enforced binaries, loss is still real, emotions raw and lives broken. The brutal and superbly produced BBC documentary, *Once Upon A Time In Northern Ireland*, presented the raw stories and experiences of real people from various backgrounds and sectors of the community. There was brutal honesty, raw suffering and trauma, and people still impacted by what they experienced or were involved in, some from a very early age. There was a grandfather who now looks at his 17-year-old grand-daughter and wonders how he at that age was in charge of guns. How could she handle that at 17? How did he? What did he know? The six programmes were a litany of tragic stories and allowed us to see and hear broken people. It disturbed us because we knew that this wasn't something outside of us, but events over 50 years in which we were collectively implicated, in diverse ways, and this is painful history for which there is collective responsibility. We all lived with

and through ambiguity, even if we did not suffer directly or never placed a bomb or fired a gun. In 50 years we have not dealt with the violence and its trauma and brokenness, and we may take another 50 years, up to a century, before there is a healing perspective on our past and some reconciliation across divisions and brokenness. This is the socio-psychological strand of reconciliation, and we may need this length of time to process it and arrive at a more shared future and a common good.

A template developed with the Junction, Derry/Londonderry in 2010-2011 was significantly called 'Ethical and Shared Remembering'. The template for this became widely influential and remains as a template or prism through which we might deal with our more recent past and perhaps find liberation from it, even if it requires another 50 years. There were five strands:

1. Remembering in context
2. Remembering the whole decade
3. Remembering the future
4. Remembering ethically
5. Remembering together

Remembering Ethically adapted work of Irish philosopher, Richard Kearney who seems to have first produced his framework in the context of interfaith dialogue. He himself had borrowed from his teacher Paul Ricoeur. Remembering Ethically had a three-strand framework as adapted:

1. Narrative hospitality
2. Narrative plurality
3. Narrative flexibility

We are our stories and a narrative is the story we tell, not merely an individual story but one shaped with others and shared by others. Not all stories are the same. They differ and are contested, and they are history in the plural. Hospitality is the openness and willingness to engage with the different stories, the stories of the others, and the openness to recognise that as new information comes to light, as it always does, our historical narratives change and will keep changing. Nothing is final or fixed in history, hence the need for narrative flexibility. Our perspectives and interpretations of the past will keep changing and we need to be open to that, otherwise we become prisoners of the past. In 2021 two additional narrative perspectives were added. These were:

1. Narrative enlargement
2. Narrative repair

(McMaster, 2021)

These two additional perspectives have significance for us in confronting the legacies and dealing with the past. Narrative enlargement is about placing our stories or narratives in a wider and larger context. At no point was Ireland isolated or cut off from events on a European and global scale. Our narratives can be and often are introverted. But the history of Ireland was always being shaped by wider events, Irish history cannot be understood apart from European imperial history. And the partition of Ireland was not an isolated event rooted in violence, violent partitions were happening elsewhere and at the same time. We need to understand these larger narratives that shaped events in Ireland and were influenced also by Ireland.

Narrative repair is about recovering lost and silenced voices from our painful past. Many of these voices are those of women, often made invisible and their voices repressed. Narrative repair is not about denying the horrors of the past and pretending that unjust and unethical attitudes, behaviours and systems were not at work. It is ensuring that the unethical systems and cultures, so much part of physical and social violence, never happen again. We repair by building a more moral and ethical society and community. Narrative repair is hard and challenging work but it is necessary if the socio-psychological strand of reconciliation is to liberate us from a violent and painful past.

### **Legacies in Historical Context**

...unless people understand our history...and massacres that happened in the past and injustices, there cannot be reconciliation...It takes very brave people to step forward and say, 'Now I know that my side committed atrocities in the past and carried out injustices'.

(Programme Interviewee)

There is no country on earth with a history that is not contested. This writer felt at home once in Sarajevo listening to three local people argue and disagree over Bosnian history. There were at least three sides to the history of a country that had just experienced terrible suffering on a scale much greater than what was suffered in Northern Ireland, and the atrocities of Monaghan and Dublin, and Warrington, Birmingham, Canary Wharf and Brighton, in terms of lives lost and injuries suffered. But all suffering is real and traumatic and leaves legacies. In such contexts history is contested, there are many versions

of Irish and Bosnian history, and all are interpretations. Whilst we have facts, there is always interpretation and we need to be critically aware of the difference. We have long since abandoned the objectivist illusion!

The trauma, suffering and pain of over 30 years of violent conflict did not happen in a vacuum. There was an historical context, there always is. It was an historico-political context stretching back at least five centuries. The roots of our tribal and sectarian conflict go back a long way. It is essential, therefore, to not only know but to understand the past in all of its complexity and contested-ness in order to comprehend the present and live towards the vision of a different future. We cannot have one eye fixed on the future without the other eye knowingly on the past. Through understanding history we can learn lessons, know what not to do again and what to do differently, or better still, we can do something new. Some become caught in a romanticised narrative, which is not an historical past but a make-believe or ideological past. Others live out of nostalgia for the good old days, a past that was great, which is the 'great' in making America or Britain great again. The good old days are also imagined, make-believe and never existed. We need to understand our history, to robustly interrogate and critically evaluate it, if we are to build a future.

The sectarian dimension to the past became embedded in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This is the beginning of modern Irish history. Not only did religious and political sectarianism take root in the 1500s but so too did Ireland's colonial experience. When the Tudors arrived in Ireland as conquerors, Ireland became England's first colony and Virginia, across the Atlantic, became the second by the next century. It was also during the 16<sup>th</sup> century that Henry VIII declared himself King

of Ireland and head of the Church in Ireland. The practice on mainland Europe was that a region took the religion of its monarch. Henry had broken off from Rome and the Papacy over divorce, which would allow him to re-marry and conceive a male heir, thus securing succession.

England was now Protestant or Anglican. Henry might be King of Ireland and head of the Anglican Church in Ireland, but some 90% of Ireland refused and resisted the religion of the monarch. The church of the 10%, Protestant population in its Anglican version, became the state church, part of the governance of Ireland and increasingly owning most of Irish land. Penal Laws were introduced to keep the majority Catholic population in their place, reaching their peak in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century under Queen Anne. By this stage, the Penal Laws were not only oppressive of Catholics but oppressive too of Presbyterians. Queen Elizabeth I had already introduced the Act of Uniformity 1560, where only Anglican worship was allowed and whether Catholic or other, to hold any office or to get on, attendance at Anglican liturgy and Eucharist was compulsory. Tithes were to be paid by all for the upkeep of good governance and the state church. Church and state were inseparable, and landlords and bishops were often absentees. Catholic resistance and later Presbyterian resistance were inevitable.

After a long war between Irish lords such as Hugh O'Neill and Elizabeth I, not only was there the flight of the Earls, O'Neill and Tyrconnell in 1607 but two years later the Articles of Plantation were introduced by King James I. The last bastion of Gaelic independence, troublesome, rebellious Ulster had to be crushed and the Catholic religion had to be repressed and replaced by the true faith, that of Protestantism; such were the aims and objectives of the carefully drawn

up Articles of Plantation. It was a programme for settler colonisation, not unlike what happened later in North America. People from England, Wales and Scotland were planted in Ulster, most of them Scots and Presbyterians, displacing many of the Gaels and introducing to the north-east the reformed religion of John Calvin and John Knox. This radically changed the landscape of Ulster, culturally, religiously, politically and in terms of land ownership. The Articles of Plantation were a structural and systemic programme to change the demographics of the north-east of Ireland, or the province of Ulster as it was now established as a Protestant region. The state church was still present in Ulster but the majority of Protestants were Presbyterian and Catholics were displaced and inferior. The patterns of religious and political sectarianism were structurally in place and they were to last. Protestant Ulster was not an accident but colonial policy, a systemic way of controlling a rebellious region by changing the demographics and establishing a settler plantation, a loyal Protestant region of people certain of their rightness, their right to dominate and to be superior and yet, forever unsettled and insecure. Perhaps most ironically, the loyal Protestant subjects keeping the rebellious Gaels in their place, would become consistently awkward, contrary, themselves rebellious. They were even prepared to fight the British to remain British and create a place apart and be, at times, disloyal loyalists. Not surprisingly, many British people have no understanding of Ulster Protestants and many of the same Ulster Protestants have no trust or confidence in successive British governments.

By 1798 considerable numbers of Presbyterians were in rebellion against the Protestant parliament in Dublin and the oppressive state apparatus. Established Church Protestants now owned over 80% of

Irish land and the Protestant Ascendancy had peaked in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century. The 1798 Rising mainly in Antrim, Down and Wexford, became sectarian, especially in Wexford, creating disillusionment among the Presbyterians. The rising was brutally put down by forces of government that also involved Presbyterians and members of the Orange Order, founded in 1795 after a victory over the Catholic Defenders at the Diamond, Loughgall. The 1795 battle grew out of sectarian animosity, which was rife in the 1790s. The Orange Order was dedicated to the 'glorious and immortal memory' of King William III and of his victory at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.

The rising of 1798 was a close call for the British and it was felt that the best way to deal with the rebellion was to introduce the Act of Union in 1800. For the Presbyterians and nominal Anglican, Wolfe Tone, this was a justice issue that was concerned with reconciliation between Catholic, Protestant and Dissenter. Orangeism and a number within the Protestant Ascendancy opposed the Act of Union but it prevailed and in 1801, the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland came into being. The Irish Parliament in College Green, Dublin was abolished and the Catholic Emancipation promised as part of the Act was not given. It was not a legal reality until 1829 when emancipation for Catholics in Ireland and Britain was granted and though called 'Catholic Emancipation', it was also emancipation for Jewish people.

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century William Gladstone was Prime Minister and was on something of a moral crusade in relation to Ireland. A person of significant moral conscience, Gladstone could see the injustices perpetrated by the British presence, even colonial presence and dominance of Ireland. In 1869 he introduced a bill to disestablish the Church of Ireland and on 1<sup>st</sup> January 1871 disestablishment became

reality under the *Irish Church Act 1869*. There was no longer an established state church in Ireland, as there had been since the colonisation of Ireland by the Tudors in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Gladstone had begun to dismantle the Protestant Ascendancy and for him that was a moral response to an Irish injustice.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century also saw the land system begin to be dismantled and with the *Wyndham Land Purchase Act 1903* landlords and tenants reached agreement on rents, eventually leading to a transfer of ownership of land to Irish tenants, thus reversing centuries of injustice. It was 1925 before the *Northern Ireland Land Act* provided for compulsory completion of tenant purchases in the new Northern Ireland.

Gladstone's moral crusade in relation to Ireland was unfinished. Home Rule for Ireland was unfinished business. Gladstone introduced his first Home Rule Bill in 1886, proposing a Home Rule Parliament for Ireland within the empire. The bill failed but Gladstone, back in office in the 1890s, tried again in 1893, and this time the bill was defeated in the Lords. The Liberal government, dependent on Irish nationalists in a hung parliament, introduced the Third Bill in 1912. As the demand in Ireland for Home Rule grew stronger, so too did strenuous opposition from Ulster Unionists. The 1912 Bill looked certain to go through by 1914, there no longer being a Lord's veto. Unionists as an act of resistance signed the Ulster Solemn League and Covenant in September 1912 and by 1913 had formed the Ulster Volunteer Force, signifying that the Covenant pledge was serious. They would 'use any means necessary' to defeat the Home Rule conspiracy. Months later the Irish Volunteers were formed to resist the threats of unionists, leaving two illegal armies in existence. By 1914 considerable arms and ammunition were landed in Larne, Donaghadee and Ban-

gor, and later by the nationalists in Howth and Kilcoole, Co Wicklow. The bulk of the arms from Germany were in the hands of unionists and the authorities had turned a blind eye to their gun-running in 1914. British military confronted the armed nationalists enroute to Dublin and with shots fired, nationalists were killed. Ireland was on the brink of civil war when a young Serbian activist shot dead Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, sparking the catastrophic war of 1914-1918.

Events elsewhere in the world averted civil war in Ireland and Irish people of all sides joined up to fight and die together in a destructive, industrialised war. Though the Home Rule Bill was enacted in 1914 it was put into cold storage until the war was over. By 1918 Europe had changed. Borders were redrawn, as was the map of Europe and the right to self-determination for small nations was foremost on the Paris Peace Conference agenda, thanks to President Woodrow Wilson. By 1916 and the Easter Rising, especially after the British military executed 15 Rising leaders, Irish opinion turned towards independence rather than Home Rule. A republican physical force tradition was dominant now and Sinn Féin began to win by-elections, gaining a landslide victory in the General Election of 1918, and subsequently forming the first *Dáil Éireann*. On the same day, the Irish War of Independence had begun and raged until July 1921. The *Government of Ireland Act* of 1920 partitioned Ireland and in May 1921 Northern Ireland came into being. Unionists had strenuously resisted Home Rule but now they had it and had successfully held out for a six-county partition, rather than the partition of the nine counties of Ulster from the rest of Ireland. Protestants in the three now border counties of Ulster, Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, were abandoned, left feeling betrayed, a feel-

ing that rankles in those border counties still today. Carson had told them they were on their own and a six-county entity gave what was believed to be an untouchable Protestant majority, 66:33. No one saw or thought that by the centenary of Northern Ireland that untouchable majority would disappear and become a narrow Catholic/nationalist majority. Demographics have radically changed and though one side of the equation might be tempted toward triumphalism and the other side react in hyper-defensiveness, fear and insecurity, a new model of democracy, politics and shared space and relationships are called for.

Partition became an eternally contested reality. The south of Ireland was divided bitterly into pro and anti-treaty forces and Irish brutally killed Irish in the Irish Civil War. After 1923 the Free State and Northern Ireland began the task of state building. The unionist fear of Rome rule became a reality in the new Irish Free State as the Catholic Church dominated much of the culture and moral legislation. It looked like a theocracy and there was much sexual repression, and as we now know, abuse of mothers, babies, and children at the hands of the religious. Not all religious but enough to scandalise the Catholic Church and faithful, with the state often complicit in it.

Rome rule was not acceptable to northern Protestants, but was Protestant evangelical rule any more acceptable? Was a Protestant theocracy somehow morally better than a Catholic theocracy? Evangelical Protestantism and morality dominated the north and eventually produced the religion and politics of Paisleyism which, if it was not always recognised or acknowledged at its peak, was nakedly sectarian and destructive of life and relationships. It too became a scandal of religion inseparable from politics. For much of the history of the two political entities in Ireland, church and state were inseparable. There

was a Catholic state and a Protestant state and the respective states were politico-religious entities. All has changed as church and state are now separate, this is the new secular reality of Ireland. The days of Rome rule and Protestant evangelical rule have gone and are not likely to return. Paradoxically, we might thank God for that!

Because of the more pronounced Protestant-Catholic, unionist-nationalist binary in Northern Ireland, sectarian politics and religion were more obvious. After 1921 James Craig and his government set about building a unionist-Protestant monolith. Quickly abolishing proportional representation in the electoral system ensured the Unionist-Protestant hegemony. It was a Unionist state being built where Unionists and Protestants dominated. It was a state built on social, political, economic and cultural division and discrimination. It was also a segregated society, especially in education and housing, which in many ways remains the case as sectarian systems and structures have not yet been dismantled. Unionists resisted what they saw as the denial of their rights and identity in 1912 and pledged any means necessary to do so. Discrimination at many levels and a draconian Special Powers Act (1922) for the first 50 years of Northern Ireland's existence, was never going to be passively accepted forever by the minority nationalist-Catholic community. Unionists, reflecting on their own historical experience should have understood that and not have been surprised by the civil rights campaign of the 1960s. But when history has placed you in a perpetual state of siege, the experience of nearly all settler colonists, it is difficult to step out from behind the walls and empathetically recognise the historical experience of the 'other'. To reach an empathetic understanding each has to help the other and in Northern Ireland and the border counties we need to talk to each

other about our histories and experiences.

We can tell our respective victim and siege narratives to each other and perhaps begin to understand the most recent phase of violence and killing. We have come from somewhere, from a past and been shaped by historical experiences. Our mind-sets, attitudes, behaviours and acceptance or ambiguity towards social and political systems and violence to defend or achieve goals, are part of who we are and where we have come from. We have a history of political and sectarian violence and we are part of that history, have been shaped by it and contributed toward shaping it. The political violence of the most recent three decades comes out of the last 500 years of shared history on this island and the neighbouring island. In that sense 1969-1994, or 1998, is no surprise. It was in the making for centuries and our ancestors and many of us were among the makers. Throwing blame around goes nowhere. It might even perpetuate violence and killing for another generation. We need to find a different way of telling our stories and listening to the stories of others.

There is another way of confronting the legacies. We need civic conversations on Irish history and on the litany of atrocities and violence of the time during which most of us have lived. We need all-age educational programmes on Irish history, not just the bits that we think reflect our community or tribe, but Irish history without cherry picking. This will be critical education in history, and history in all its complexity, its plurality and flexibility.

### **A Way Out of No Way**

There are legacies and atrocities in our more recent history that we need to confront and interrogate, not looking to apportion blame or

from a motive of punitive justice. We need to really talk about the past, share the complex, painful and plural narratives with a readiness to hear all sides of a past that we might rather forget. This requires an openness to listen to the voices of lasting suffering, to the voices of perpetrators, victims, survivors and passive but complicit bystanders. This also needs to include inter-generational conversations. We can engage with these multiple narratives through the arts, museums and exhibitions, storytelling, and civic conversations, which are also a form of educational- engagement.

These are hard conversations and therefore a learning process, which will be difficult and painful. Education in its deepest meaning is a leading out. It is a leading out from all that restricts and confines us into wider, more open and liberating spaces. The past is restrictive, confining and a prison, it is a social, communal and moral cul-de-sac. It is a road to nowhere, a way to no way. But there is always a way out and civic conversations and educational engagement offer a way.

There is a litany of atrocities and an inventory of legacies about which we can talk together, educate ourselves and engage with one another.

- Bloody Sunday
- Bloody Friday
- Dublin and Monaghan
- Shankill Butchers and
- Enniskillen and Omagh

There are many more that need to be named and talked about and there are atrocities within the locations where such educational conversations can take place, and historical and local contexts will matter.

Questions to critically explore include:

- Why did this happen?
- Where does responsibility lie?
- What was the purpose?
- What were the consequences?
- What impact did the atrocity have on people's lives?
- What did the atrocity do to community relations?
- What was the impact on politics and political and social dynamics?
- What are the legacies and the impact on the future?

The above is only one level of conversation and education and it will be important to enter into the plurality of narratives. These are the historical, social, cultural and religious narratives that conditioned and shaped the past, which was all of us, though some had lead roles and others supporting or bit-parts. In seeking to understand, we should not only listen to but critically explore the experiences and narratives that conditioned and shaped these individual and group actors, for example, politicians, republicans, loyalists, army, police, and we the people.

- How were each of the above conditioned and shaped by the complex historical, social, cultural, religious, and ideological narratives?
- Where was each coming from and what influenced them?
- What motivated involvement and what drove their activities and action, and the underlying attitudes?
- What were the values that underpinned their role and activity?

- Why did we act and behave as we did?
- Have the years and life-reflection changed our perspectives?
- Are there regrets?
- Are there attitudes, behaviours, actions, and values that we wish could have been different?

The roots of violence are often in fear. How much were we driven by fear during, and even before the years of violent conflict and atrocity? Fear can even be sub-conscious. We need to uncover our fears, the fears that drove the past and over 30 years of violent, sectarian conflict. These are hard but honest conversations. It may be difficult to unpack together, but what were the impact and consequences of our political violence? What was,

- The psychological impact?
- The spiritual and moral impact?
- The economic impact?
- The environmental impact?
- The impact on women?
- The impact on children?
- The social impact?
- What is the future for each of the above?
- Do we have a future, a way out of no way?

All the above requires a series of civic conversations and educational-engagement. More will be said in the Appendix.

Many of those who suffered directly from the recent phase of violent conflict want justice. Some want legal justice and some want punitive justice. For many others, the justice they want is truth. What hap-

pened to my loved one and why? Truth telling is an important component of justice and there are those who would be satisfied if they knew the truth. From security forces, republicans and loyalists there is a need for the truth. Abject apologies are not enough and ideological rationalisations of past atrocities add to the pain of those who suffered, whilst cover-ups inflict more pain and suffering. We need the truth as a key expression of justice and we the people need also to be truthful about our by-standing complicity and the ambiguity, often moral ambiguity, that shaped our history, which includes our silences and lack of critical thinking.

Some advocate ‘truth and reconciliation type enquires’ (Programme Interviewee). There is a place for these but in Northern Ireland we seem reluctant to engage with such an enquiry. Perhaps we paid too much attention to the South African model and didn’t look carefully enough at some of the other and many models, for example, Rwanda set up a truth and justice process.

Is there a relationship between justice and forgiveness? In the religious culture of Northern Ireland forgiveness has been a key word. But a retired church leader makes a critical judgement:

.... forgiveness really is an f-word in virtually every pulpit in the land. There is no teaching on it and that is not to say that there is a cut and dry thing that everybody must do, absolutely not. But there’s not even an explanation of it, of what it means biblically or theologically, it’s a no-go area. So even from a Christian perspective, key ingredients of reconciliation such as forgiveness aren’t even on the radar. Therefore it means there is no contribution

from the faith communities to the common good because they have no idea of what they mean by 'reconciliation'.

(Programme Interviewee)

The religious communities deal a lot with liturgical forgiveness and a very individualistic or private expression of reconciliation. Social reconciliation is often missing and there is no f-word without social or a politically contextual understanding. Ethical and Shared Remembering adapted Richard Kearney's template of narrative hospitality, narrative plurality, and narrative flexibility to the historico-political context. It did not develop or adapt one other dimension from Kearney, what he called 'pardon', or what we are now calling forgiveness. The ethics of remembering includes the three narrative perspectives above, but also 'something more':

... something which entails moving beyond narrative imagination to forgiveness ... In short, the exchange of memories of suffering demand more than sympathy and duty (though these are essential for any kind of justice). And this something extra involves pardon in so far as pardon means 'shattering the debt' ... Such spiritual forgiveness demands huge patience, an enduring practice of 'working through', mourning and letting go. But it is not forgetful forgiveness. Amnesty can never be based on amnesia. It remembers our debt to the dead while at the same time introducing something other, something difficult almost to the point of impossibility, but something all the more important for that reason.

(Kearney, 2007, p. 54)

Kearney hints above that forgiveness is about letting go and it is significant that the key word in the Jewish and Christian tradition, the tradition of the Bible, is a word meaning 'release'. Significantly and frequently overlooked in religious piety is that the word has to do with release from debts, economic debts. Most people in our cultural context, religious or not, could recite the Lord's Prayer or recognise lines from it. Its line on forgiveness is primarily about release from economic debt. This was what Jubilee 2000 was about. Forgiveness or release, or liberation is from economic and social debt. This is the 'something more' that Kearney brings to ethical remembering.

Forgiveness cannot be demanded as some legal requirement from people, families or society. For some it is rooted in the ethical expectations of their religious tradition. For others it is a psychological-therapeutic necessity. For some it is the experience of a forgiving God that inspires their forgiveness of others. For others it the realisation that the past is eating them up, destroying their very life through the cancer of bitterness and hate, and they need to let go, release themselves and the other. Forgiveness or release cannot be demanded but when it happens it is a free gift, or what the Judeo-Christian tradition means by 'grace'.

Civic conversations and educational-conversational engagement need to give attention to the 'something more' forgiveness and wrestle with the difficult relationship between justice and forgiveness. 'Without truth-telling ... no new way into a future can emerge' (Brueggemann, 2002, p. 87). Or to borrow the title of Archbishop Desmond Tutu's book from his South African experience, *No Future Without Forgiveness* (Tutu, 2000).

Forgiveness is more than an f-word. It is key to human and community wellbeing and a reconciling and common good. It is part of ethical remembering and may be more important for liberation from the past than we have realised. “Remember and change”. An experiential challenge originally from John Paul Lederach.

(Programme Participant)

There is a lot of talking, remembering and learning together to be done towards a liberated future.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

# **Socially Critical Spirituality: The Socio-Spiritual Strand of Reconciliation**

There are a few foundational values that the common good is built on. I think the first is human dignity, the fact that every life is of value and that everyone is worthy of respect. The second value that underpins it would be justice, a sense of justice. I think a third value would be empathy or compassion and I think a fourth is probably generosity.

(Programme Interviewee)

... the whole of society is becoming less interested in religion ... I have two couples in my congregation who are same sex, but they feel hurt and rejected by the church.

(Programme Interviewee)

... where there are different shades of opinion and different views on the same thing, I think that's one of the things that isn't helpful at all for us in the Christian faith, this idea that we are one faith, we are one truth, we are absolutely right. I think we need to accept where we have gone wrong, and let's face it ... we don't get it all right.

(Programme Interviewee)

... ethical considerations in business are equally as important as ethical considerations in healthcare and community work.

(Programme Interviewee)

... from the perspective of Bahá'u'lláh, religion is vital because the material and spiritual wellbeing of humanity are both connected, they are not separate ... what Bahá'u'lláh says is our life has a two-fold moral purpose - to attend to our own spiritual development and to work for the transformation of society, and they are interconnected.

(Programme Interviewee)

Francis Fukuyama ... in his most recent book ... is talking about the fact that hyper individualism will be the death of us ... that if we are to survive, what we need is a pursuit of the common good.

(Programme Participant)

The six integrated strands of reconciliation have no hierarchical order. They stand as integrated or as interwoven. The socio-spiritual strand is no more or less important than the others, all six belong together in the vision and practice of reconciliation and no one strand can be left out of the pursuit of social reconciliation. And yet, in an increasingly non-religious, secularised and post-Christendom West, there may be a tendency to ignore the spiritual dimension. Where there is antipathy, it is to religion in its organised and institutional form. Secularism means that no religion in any of its forms should

be part of public life. Religion is a private matter and should remain private with no place in public affairs. Such a view is based on individualism, even a hyper individualism which is the fatal flaw in our Western mindset and anthropology. No person is an island as John Donne the poet pointed out centuries ago. Humans are social beings, beings-with, only human in community, which means there is no such thing as privatised, individualised religion. Religion is by its very nature public. The two key words in all religions are love and justice and both words are corporate and communal, only possible in relationships. Love and justice are public.

Secular means the separation of church and state or religion and state and is a necessary separation of powers in a pluralistic democracy. Religion should have no fear of the secular, nor experience marginalisation in a secular society or in living with a secular constitution. If anything, the secular ought to be liberating for religions, enabling them to be more authentic.

Religion in the West has institutionalised, which often has meant the attempted controlling of people's lives and beliefs. It can be experienced as dominating and even inhumane towards people who are nonconformist, questioning, vulnerable, poor and do not fit the religions 'norm' of sexual morality and identity. From the fourth century the Western Church has been closely identified with empire and power. In bed with Constantine's Roman Empire, it stayed in bed with all of the modern European empires and was heavily implicated in the Western African American slave trade. There is another story, prophetic and heroic, but the darker story has predominated. When Western imperialism collapsed, imperial Christianity collapsed with it. This is the crisis of contemporary Western Christianity and why

the numbers of people declaring themselves non-religious are growing and in some countries are in the majority. It is the reason for the antipathy, even aggressive opposition, towards organised religion. There is no hope of this situation going into reverse, it may well play itself out in the death of Western organised religion before there is the birth of something new.

Organised religion is not to be identified with spirituality. This is not to say that at the heart of organised religion there is not spirituality. There is a heartbeat, which may be buried under centuries of accumulated doctrinal and systemic rubble, and it may take much excavation and digging to unearth it. Spirituality is not and never has been the monopoly of organised religion. Christianity has no monopoly on the spiritual or the Sacred. There is a spirituality, or heartbeat in different world religions, in indigenous religions, varieties of humanism, atheism and philosophies of life. However it is described or expressed, this is the spirituality or spiritual strand which is essential to social reconciliation. At the heart of systems of thought and being there is the experience, the search, longing and lure towards meaning, purpose and values. The spiritual within all of us is the search for the meaning of life, the longing for purpose in life and the desire for moral and ethical values that can make life together wholesome and flourishing.

### **What is Spirituality?**

In a world of inequality, violence, war, hunger, poverty, abuses of power, greed, exploitation and the destruction of the planet, we search for meaning, purpose and values. What sense can we make of the life situation and world we live in? Is there any purpose to life together on the planet? Are there values that can hold life together, provide coher-

ence and integrity and help us build a common good? Or is life empty and void, a futile, brutish existence which is valueless and without love and justice or any other moral norms? An ethically free life can turn violent and be destructive of human community and the earth. The other five strands of social reconciliation need the socio-spiritual. The socio-spiritual is interwoven with political, economic, legal, the environmental and psychological, which includes our identity politics and our struggle to deal with a violent and painful past. If the socio-spiritual is ignored or abandoned, the other strands are skewed, and social reconciliation is hollow.

There is a broad sense of the spiritual or spirituality used by some from the human perspective, others from a religious sense, for example:

- Spirituality is about the holistic, a fully integrated approach to life. It is life as a whole.
- Spirituality is the quest for the 'sacred', the 'something more', entering the depth of existence, exploring the endless mysteries of the cosmos.
- Spirituality is the quest for meaning, the purpose of life, a sense of life direction. It is a quest for the non-material or more than material dimension to life.
- Spirituality is the quest for ultimate values beyond a purely materialistic approach to life. It is the self-reflective life concerned with ethics and moral vision.

For some this sense of the spiritual or spirituality will be drawn from human philosophies of life, others will draw from the world of arts,

aesthetics, and music. Yet others will draw these from indigenous traditions, Amerindian, Māori, or Aboriginal. Many Chinese will draw this spirituality from their Confucian tradition, a tradition of ethics and moral vision. Yet others will root their spirituality in their religious traditions, whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Bahá'í, Hindu, Jain or Buddhist. The spiritual is in all of these, it is bigger than all of these sources or traditions and the practice of the spiritual is a key strand of reconciliation.

### **Diversities of Spirituality**

Spirituality has been described above in broad terms. These four aspects can be recognised in diverse ways and from different sources and traditions. Space only allows for brief reflection on three sources.

### **Hinduism**

Shashi Tharoor served for 29 years with the United Nations and is a Congress MP in India. In his fine book, *Why I Am A Hindu*, he re-examines Hinduism and warns against its politicisation. What he is opposed to is Hinduism and the politics of Hindutva. Hindutva is the policy espoused by Indian leader Modi of turning India into a Hindu state with a distinctively Hindu identity. It is the politicisation of Hinduism or the instrumentalisation of religion for political purposes. India would abolish its secular constitution and become a Hindu state, an India for Hindus. Muslims, Christians and Sikhs would be excluded or become second class citizens experiencing social and political discrimination and exclusion from power. We recognise something of this from Irish history. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we had a Protestant state and a Catholic state. Neither exists any longer. Tharoor is

strongly opposed to Hindutva and the creation of a Hindu state. He sees it as an extremist, nationalist Hinduism and is concerned that if this narrow fundamentalism wins out, Indian democracy itself is in peril. He believes that the Hindutva ideology is a distortion of his Hindu religious and spiritual tradition, which is a strong dynamic in his public life.

Tharoor draws attention to the Shanti Mantra, the most famous Hindu prayer for peace in heaven, on earth and in the human heart. The prayer is used at key state events in the Republic of Ireland, which are inclusive of the diverse religions in Ireland with prayers and reflections offered by many religious leaders and from the Humanist tradition. The Hindu prayer always ends with the Shanti Mantra, 'Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!' It is recited three times because the Hindu seeks peace in all three realms. 'Humans cannot enjoy personal peace in the absence of peace on earth, but equally there cannot be peace in the world if there is no peace in the inner hearts of human beings in the world' (Tharoor, 2018, p. 269). Here is a spirituality of peace within human beings and in the world and it is socially critical of Hindutva and all forms of civil and state religion.

Tharoor's final chapter is entitled 'Taking Back Hinduism' and he ends by setting out five major principles in Hinduism with relevance and validity to the faith and its spirituality in today's world:

1. The recognition of the unity of all mankind (sic) ... the world is one family.
2. The harmony of all religions.
3. The divinity inherent in each individual, transcending the social stratification and hierarchies that have all too often distorted this principle in Hindu society.

4. The creative synthesis of practical action and contemplative knowledge, science and religion, meditation and social service, in the faith.
5. The cosmic vision of Hindu philosophy, incorporating the infinite galaxies of which the Earth is just a speck.

(Tharoor, 2018, p. 273)

Tharoor expresses his Hindu spirituality of grandeur and mystery, social action and contemplative knowledge.

## **Atheism**

John Gray is a philosopher who is an atheist. He entitles his book *Seven Types of Atheism* (2018). Gray is concerned that for a generation, public debate has been corroded by a narrow derision of religion in the name of an often vaguely understood 'science'. He sets out to describe the rich, complex world of the atheist tradition, which he believes is as rich as religion itself and he also believes that atheism has been deeply intertwined with what is so often crudely viewed as its 'opposite.' The great struggle of philosophers is to understand what it is to be human. Theology also struggles for that understanding and Gray honestly recognises this shared quest of the human spirit into the mystery of existence.

In his final chapter Gray points out that: 'A clear line between atheism and negative theology is not easily drawn. An atheist who denies that any God created the world may affirm a God that permeates the world but about which little or nothing positive can be said' (Gray, 2018, p. 147). He illustrates this with reference to the German philosopher Schopenhauer, 'Rejecting any idea of a creator-god, he was

an uncompromising atheist. But when he insisted on the reality of something incommunicable he was not far from the apophatic theology of the German mystics and the Eastern Orthodox Church' (2018, pp.146-147). It was also an Irish philosopher-theologian-scientist, John Eriugena, in the 9<sup>th</sup> century who positively affirmed that the most we know of God is that we do not know. Atheism and theology are at home with the incommunicable. This is also incomprehensible mystery and it is ultimately what atheism and theology deal with. It is spirituality and a spirituality which disallows the co-option of any higher power for political and imperial purposes, such as, 'no God on our side', 'in God we trust', 'for God and Ulster' or 'for God and Ireland'. If we cannot say anything about the incommunicable, all our civil religion and politicised theology falls flat.

Gray recognises that when we speak of the human we are in a similar place,

... like the God of monotheism, humanity is a work of the imagination ... Old fashioned monotheism had the merit of admitting that very little can be known of God. As far back as the prophet Isaiah, the faithful have allowed that the Deity may have withdrawn from the world. Awaiting some sign of a divine presence, they have encountered only *deus absconditus* - an absent God.

(Gray, 2018, p. 157)

Gray recognises a futility in trying to abolish monotheism and though atheists have lived with an expectation of the arrival of a truly human species, 'A truly human species remains as elusive as any Deity.

Humanity is the *deus absconditus* of modern atheism' (2018, p. 17).

There is an intellectual honesty, integrity and incisiveness about Gray's thought and imagination. Spirituality is found in religions but can never be equated with religions. Spirituality is bigger than religious traditions. For Gray, living without belief or unbelief is a spiritual pathway. There is the quest to find meaning in life. Gray's atheism is not triumphalist as forms of institutional religion have sometimes been, and he will not accept the demonisation of religion.

Atheists who demonized religion face a problem of evil as insoluble as that which faces Christianity ... If you want to understand atheism and religion, you must forget the popular notion that they are opposites ... If you can see how theologies that affirm the ineffability of God and some types of atheism are not so far apart, you will learn something about the limits of human understanding.

(Gray, 2018, p. 158)

Not only is there truthfulness in Gray's thought, critical truthfulness, but there is also an awareness of the incommunicable, the deep-down mystery of things. There is what Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923), a German philosopher, called a 'godless mysticism' (Gray, 2018, p. 146). Gray's final paragraph may be dramatically exciting for some or bleak panic and despair for others,

Contemporary atheism is a continuation of monotheism by other means. Hence the unending succession of God-surrogates, such as humanity and science, technolo-

gy and the all-too-human visions of transhumanism. But there is no need for panic or despair. Belief and unbelief are poses the mind adopts in the face of unimaginable reality. A godless world is as mysterious as one suffused with divinity, and the difference between the two may be less than you think.

(Gray, 2018, p. 158)

### **Christianity**

It is true that hyper individualism will be the death of us and it already is. The planet is dying or burning and we humans are responsible. Our Western Enlightenment individualism or perhaps more truly, our hyper individualism, is at the heart of the death of the planet and the community of life on it. Spirituality too often appears as an individualistic quest for self-realization. More crudely, religion has often been presented as an insurance policy for life after death. Or religion here and now is about the individual's preparation for life in the next world. This is not a caricature. It was the religious tradition in which some of us were born into and grew up, and it was alive in both the Protestant and Catholic traditions. Few believe it now and for some of us it was painful growing out of it! There has been movement over the last generation and perhaps more towards a this-worldly faith. Salvation, wholeness, abundant life is for now and in this world. Eternal life, the vision of John's Gospel, was always about this life. It was wrongly translated into English as 'eternal', this sent us off in hope for the next world and an everlasting world. John's Greek referred to the quality of life in this age.

Now spirituality is a word being used in relation to public values and

we are thinking and speaking more now of the transformation of social structures. We speak of the spirituality of healthcare, of education, business, economics, ecology, the arts, and even politics. Spirituality has moved out of the sphere of religion and has become common currency in the secular world.

Within Christianity there is a consciousness that the quest for and practice of spirituality needs to bring together the mystical and the prophetic political approaches to spirituality. There is now a model of Christian spirituality described as the 'critical-prophetic type' (Sheldrake, 2013, pp. 175-176). The spiritual is at the heart of this world and its life and is related to the public issues of healthcare, economics, politics, education and ecology. This is not spirituality confined to the individual but a spirituality of systems and structures. It is therefore a socially critical spirituality. The Hebrew prophets, and Jesus was in the prophetic tradition, were social critics with prophetic imaginations for alternative just and compassionate societies, and voices of hope.

'Dorothy Day was one of the most influential figures in the English-speaking world in promoting a spirituality of social justice' (Sheldrake, 2013, p. 183). Her parents were non-religious. After university, Day was involved in communist circles, lived with her partner, became pregnant and converted to Catholicism. For Day, Christianity filled in the blanks from her revolutionary involvement. She was grasped by the teachings of Christianity about disinterested love and inclusive community. She embraced a vision of pacifism and solidarity with the poor. Matthew 25 was an important biblical text for Day,

Christ was to be experienced as present in all those in need. Every human being, without exception, had a unique and equal dignity. The heart of Christian living

was radical community, but this was not a community 'set apart' or purified by detachment from surrounding reality. It was a community called upon to undertake prophetic action on behalf of the oppressed. Indeed for Day, there could be no authentic Christian spirituality that did not have social justice at its core.

(Sheldrake, 2013, p. 183)

Socially critical spirituality was activist in its outlook and practice. Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement which left a lot of church people very uncomfortable, and they engaged in active opposition. The movement served the poor and acted against injustice where the need arose. 'Day herself continued through the Second World War, the Cold War, and Vietnam to advocate pacifism and to undertake acts of civil disobedience for which she was often arrested' (Sheldrake, 2013, p. 184). Day's was a socially critical spirituality deeply rooted in the prophetic teachings and practice of Jesus. For her, Christian spirituality was the critical-prophetic type, controversial, costly but authentic and transformative.

### **Values in Public Life**

Spirituality, whether religious, atheistic, or humanistic, is a pathway to meaning and purpose in life. As humans we need to give ourselves to a cause to serve, or another person or persons to love. Socially critical spirituality enables us to forget ourselves and to find a more authentic humanity in relationships and solidarity with others and the common good. Viktor Frankl, a Viennese Jew survived several concentration camps, lost everything except a sister, and described

this human search for meaning as 'the self-transcendence of human existence' (Frankl, 2004, p. 115). Finding self-transcendence is crucial to being human together in the life of the world. For Frankl, even through the experience of unimaginable suffering, the meaning of life can be discovered in three ways:

1. By creating a work or by doing a deed.
2. By experiencing something or encountering someone.
3. By the attitude we take towards unavoidable suffering.

The first is fairly obvious. The second, experiencing something, it may be beauty, truth or goodness. Encountering someone is experiencing another human being or beings by loving them. When it comes to unavoidable suffering, it is a situation we cannot change. It is not that suffering is necessary to find meaning but rather, in a situation we cannot change we are challenged to change ourselves. Meaning can still be found even in terrible suffering and dying. Frankl found in the concentration camps that some behaved like swine while others behaved like saints. We have both potentialities within ourselves, and '... which one is actualised depends on decisions but not on conditions' (Frankl, 2004, p. 135).

Frankl's logotherapy, as it was called, echoed the wisdom writings in the Jewish Bible. The author of the book called *Ecclesiastes* struggled with the meaning of life and its purpose and concluded that there are questions and situations in life for which there are no answers. You will never get to the bottom of some things. Don't waste your time asking such questions or trying to change what cannot be changed, it's a waste and futile. Go and do something good, even some small

good. Enjoy what there is of life. Do good and live a good life. Love, even wastefully.

Meaning and purpose are bound up with doing good, loving others, experiencing the self-transcendence of human existence, all of which is part of the practice of spirituality, and especially socially critical spirituality. At the heart of this are values. We all live our lives in community. We are public beings, and our flourishing and wellbeing are inseparable from the values that underpin all of public life. What are the values required for human, public and planetary wellbeing? Where do these values come from?

As noted by a programme participant, ‘We have many attitudes but only a few values’, but what values shape the many attitudes? Again the attitudes are not private, our attitudes are public and have public implications. Sectarian or racial attitudes reflect prejudice and become social, political, and structural, finding expression in policies and legislation. Nothing is private or individualistic. Those who foster attitudes of sectarianism, racism, homophobia and sexism do not believe in the dignity, equality and worth of every person. Such values and attitudes deny the first principle of spirituality and become embedded in the way community and society is organised and structured. Where do we get our values from, our very public values? ‘People felt we got our values from our parents, that we got our values from our community, we got our values from our faith, from our religion...’ (Programme participant). Others will find a source of values in the human tradition and secular philosophies of life. ‘There was quite a bit of debate about the influence of churches and the negative influence of churches, and the fear inspired by churches and the oppression that churches brought about in some communities’ (Programme participant). Historically in

Ireland churches have been institutions of control. As in Northern Ireland politics, there is no critical thinking in institutional religion in Ireland. Churches have controlled beliefs and morals, especially sexual and gender morality, but such control and domination has been rejected and the institutions may have realised, if not yet admitted, that they have lost control. As elsewhere, institutional religion has lost moral credibility and authority.

Values have historical roots. Public values go back into history and it may be that we lack historical awareness. Even if we got our values from parents and from our formal education, (schools teach values for better or worse), parents, teachers and public influencers are heirs to rich moral and value capital. We are heirs to Athens and Jerusalem.

The ancient Greeks outlined habits of mind and heart that steer us towards cooperation with one another, towards the common good. They thought in terms of the commonwealth, our public life together, and for the wellbeing of the commonwealth they gave expression to four significant virtues. These were:

- Temperance
- Courage
- Prudence
- Justice.

By justice, they intended it to be both personal and communal. 'In the Platonic tradition justice is in the proper relationship between all aspects of the personality [the appetitive, spirited, and rational 'faculties'] and the different classes of society' (Wogaman, 2000, p. 230). All four virtues are socio-political and apply to the whole person and the whole society.

Socrates was born in 469 BCE into an Athens recovering from a successful war. Giving attention to his life situation and socio-political and geopolitical context he asked critical ethical questions. Critically analysing his society and world, he put ethics at the heart of his philosophy. Critical questioning was the big thing for Socrates, humans are to question, question, and question. Political, economic and religious leaders, usually the establishment and representing the status quo, do not want a questioning public and will do everything to suppress critical thinking. Socrates pushed ethical questions such as, 'What is good? How do we know that we know anything? Who is qualified to rule? What is love?' (Armstrong, 2000, p. 31).

We are not only heirs of the rich Greek public virtues tradition and the persistent ethical and critical tradition of Socrates, but we are also heirs in Western society of Jerusalem and the Hebrew or Jewish prophetic tradition. The tradition includes people like Amos, Isaiah, Micah and Jeremiah. There are others in the Hebrew Bible and the prophetic tradition that shaped the socio-political consciousness of ancient Israel. A significant history of this early Hebrew community, not history as we do history today, but what could perhaps be described as an ethical narrative, the books of Joshua, Judges, I and II Samuel and I and II Kings are known as the Former Prophets. The books were written from the radical prophetic perspective and at the heart of this literature is an ethical critique. It may be that the prophetic tradition shaped the Torah (first five books of the Hebrew Bible), as well as the ethical narrative of the succession of kings and rulers (the Former Prophets). Most of the Hebrew Bible is in the prophetic tradition, something not always recognised in the Western Christian reading of what it has called the Old Testament.

The prophets were critics of social, political, and economic systems and structures, critiquing structures of injustice, inequality, and violence. They voiced just and compassionate, socio-political and economic alternatives and they articulated hope for a different future, a more just and compassionate future. The prophets were voices from the edge in solidarity with the vulnerable, poor and marginalised of their societies, urban and rural. They insisted on ethics, social ethics at the heart of public life and they shaped critical social values for public, economic, cultural, religious, and political life. Amos called for justice to flow like a mighty torrent and right relations based on radical social justice to be in full flow. In the prophetic tradition, the public institutions and systems of society are not morally neutral or value-free zones. Their major issue was that in their societies and the public life of their respective contexts and times, there was very little justice and compassion to be found. They held up an alternative social vision rooted in social ethics and values.

We are heirs in the West to Athens and Jerusalem and the ethical challenges and value-base of these two worlds are still in our memory and consciousness. A more secular Western society may resist, even aggressively resist, any thought of biblical ethics. Who now reads the Bible? Why read it? 'And you don't have to believe in God, just read the Bible' (Programme Interviewee). That may strike us as odd but there is wisdom there. The Bible is a classical piece of literature and can be read from a literary perspective and with appreciation. The problem for the Christian community is that the Bible has become a religious book, endowed with the highest authority and claims of inspiration that do not allow for critical reading or critical questioning. The Bible is a book not so much about religion, certainly not institutional

religion, but a book about messy politics, unjust economic systems, domination systems and religion colluding with imperial power. It is a book struggling with public ethics and values that might make for a more flourishing eco-human community and realise something of a common good. You don't have to believe in God, just read the Bible in its social, public and geopolitical contexts and engage with the perennial challenge to find a public ethic and value system. Its insistence on justice and compassion, or tenacious solidarity with the poor and vulnerable and a suffering planet, is as contemporary as the present.

In 1893 a Parliament of World Religions met in Chicago. World religions met before Christian traditions met in an ecumenical encounter. In 1893 the parliament was largely White, American and Protestant and the Indigenous Amerindians were invisible. They didn't have a spirituality or spiritual, ethical values! Still, something had begun, though it didn't meet again for a century. In 1993 the Parliament of World Religions met again in Chicago, this time more representative of the classical, Indigenous religions and spiritual traditions and philosophies of life. It has met at planned intervals since, in different world locations and in August 2023, the parliament met in Chicago with representatives of over 200 spiritual and religious communities. The 2023 theme was 'A Call to Conscience: Defending Freedom and Human Rights'.

In 1993 the parliament made a significant declaration entitled *Towards a Global Ethic*. Influential in this declaration was Hans Kung, a German Catholic theologian. The declaration is still affirmed by the parliament and at the heart of the declaration it declared that there is no new global order without a new global ethic. There followed 'four irrevocable directives', ethical commitments by the world's religions and spiritual traditions. They were and remain:

1. Commitment to a culture of non-violence and respect for life.
2. Commitment to a culture of solidarity and a just economic order.
3. Commitment to a culture of tolerance and a life of truthfulness.
4. Commitment to a culture of equal rights and partnership between men and women.

(Kung, 1995, pp. 17-25)

These global ethical values were agreed by world and indigenous religious and spiritual traditions. It was not an attempt to create a world religion. Every tradition retained its own particularity and uniqueness and was and is free to embrace these irrevocable directives, each through their own tradition. The 4<sup>th</sup> directive needs now to be more expansive or inclusive in its expression. We now live in a world where we have moved far beyond the gender binary. There is the reality of a gender spectrum, of LGBTQI+ with a larger commitment to a culture of equal rights and the public affirmation of the dignity, equality and worth of every human person without exclusion or distinction. For Christian and the other Abrahamic traditions and for Tharoor's Hindu tradition, it is the affirmation of every human being made in the image of God or the divinity inherent in each individual. This is a radically new and inclusive vision of human and ecological community with social values and social ethics, especially justice and compassion or tenacious solidarity at the heart of it.

We need to renew our deep rooted ethical consciousness and place our shared ethical values at the heart of our living towards reconciliation and the vision of the common good. It is the socio-spiritual strand of reconciliation.

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Young People and the Common Good

...I think that there is no shared future on this island that does not include educating our kids together in school, I think it is fundamental. Understanding traditions and where people come from, from my own experience I can tell you, it is invaluable.

(Programme Presenter)

Young people on the island face a question: do we wish to be defined by the past, or do we want to build our own future together? It is my firm belief that we do wish to move forward, and not be shrouded in the issues of the past.

(Programme Presenter)

... in our parliaments we do not have good role models and we don't have debates, we have shouting matches, whether it is in Belfast or in London and I think we can start this [teaching children and young people how to have proper debates] in our schooling ... critical thinkers from a very early age and the confidence to speak.

(Programme Participant)

With changes over the last two or three decades, young gay or trans-gender men and women no longer all need to flee from here.

(Programme Participant)

The churches are more concerned with defending Scriptures rather than living the liberating message of Scripture in community. Churches are lacking real experience of encounter with the 'other'.

(Youth Focus Group)

We need to work at civic reconciliation and structural and systemic reconciliation.

(Youth Focus Group)

The above voices are those of young people with two adult responses to a youth-led seminar. Young people have authentic voices which need to be heard in the process of dealing with the past, shaping a shared future, pursuing social reconciliation and living towards a vision of the common good. For many young people this process will be in the larger context of planetary healing and climate and environmental justice. The two million or more young people born in Ireland since the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, not only live in a relatively more peaceful Ireland, a much more peaceful Ireland, they live in a different world. It is by no means peaceful, given the Russian war on Ukraine with its global implications and a nuclear threat greater than it was during the Cold War. Yet, young people have a different worldview, a different cosmology, a more scientific mind-set and are immersed in a world of technology, all with their mix of light and darkness. There may well be a youth culture or youth cultures, but these do not exist in a vacuum. Youth cultures are shaped by social context and today by global context. Young people grow up in a world that is both local and global.

## Young People and the Social Context

Young people in Northern Ireland are living and developing in a context that keeps changing and will continue to do so. They themselves will change the context. Life is lived in a fragile peace process which is also a time of transition and change. The following outlines some of the transitional context:

- Democracy in Northern Ireland has been hollowed out, and perhaps was never strong or authentic. The two-party political domination has not worked as evidenced by the collapse of Stormont for 40% of its time since it began in 1998.
- The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement has never really been tried, the constitutional question continues to dominate Northern Ireland politics and will be the primary and dominant issue for the next decade at least.
- Following the Agreement there has been no political strategy to deal with sectarianism, no Bill of Rights, no victims' strategy, and no strategy for dealing with the past.
- A consequence of the repeated collapse of the Assembly has been a failure to transform systems and structures, including health, education, and infrastructure. Northern Ireland remains a segregated society, still sectarian, and costing millions of pounds, including large sums for segregated education alone. The cost of segregation and sectarianism is a moral obscenity.
- The rolling back of the welfare state over the last 30 years, the lack of political accountability, the failure to implement an anti-poverty strategy, means that the most vulnerable and

economically and educationally disadvantaged suffer most, with long term consequences. In this situation paramilitary influence thrives.

- The 2021 Census has now shown that there are more Catholics than Protestants in Northern Ireland and an increasing number of 'Neithers' (NISRA, 2022, p. 2). There is no longer a majority community in Northern Ireland but three or four minorities. This includes the growing numbers of ethnic communities.
- Although there are growing numbers of ethnic communities, many experience racism and are reluctant to engage with society and with the politics of Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland struggles with racism, has failed to deal with sectarianism and is a deeply segregated society.
- The 2021 Census has shown that a growing number of people are declaring themselves non-religious, the highest level being in the North Down Council Area (NISRA, 2022, p. 2). It is likely that the numbers of non-religious will have increased again in Northern Ireland by the next Census in 2031.
- There are signs of change and the beginning of transition. People are beginning to take responsibility for creating a stronger civil society and want to have an input into political and social decision making. There is a growing realisation that politics is the power of the people and a growing readiness and demand for participative and deliberative democracy.
- Civic fora and citizens' assemblies are being considered and being formed. There are educational and training programmes empowering people for political engagement and active citi-

zenship. And there is a significant programme in schools, ‘Politics in Action’.

- The 2021 Census confirmed that there are equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics in the workplace as well as an increasing number of what have been described as non-determined (ECNI 2021, p. 2). This shows that employment and equality legislation has worked.
- All of this indicates a changing and transitional society, which ultimately will produce a different political culture, new political thinking and ideas, a more active and participative democracy, and new ways of organising and governing society. The current transition will require at least a decade to develop and become a new norm.
- The business community voice has emerged out of the post-Brexit negative ideology and is showing itself as capable of taking advantage of economic possibilities opening in Great Britain, Europe, America and globally. The economic benefits can be shared with every section of the community. A peace dividend (economic) for all in Northern Ireland is now possible.
- In Northern Ireland a ‘We the People’, truly inclusive approach to democracy, economics and power is developing. This is a post-Belfast/Good Friday Agreement transition with consequences and possibilities for the next 25 years.

This is something of the local social context into which young people are being born and in which they are growing into adulthood. It is the social context shaping their lives and in which their lives are being shaped for now and for the future. Youth programmes, formal and

informal education, whole-person development, policies and resources are produced and implemented in social context. Youth service provision is shaped by social context to enable young people to develop holistically, to be and become active, engaged citizens and builders of a common good. The social context, local and global, is challenging for young people and youth provision and is pregnant with possibilities.

### **The Demons Confronting Young People**

Context is everything and the context outlined above is broadly that in which young people live today. It is the historical, political, social and cultural context in which we all live. Within that young people are confronted by particular challenges or pathways that are negative and destructive of life, relationships and a future. For example, a youth leader's focus group identified an area in Belfast where young people are being exposed to a gang culture. Moreover,

There is drug related child criminal exploitation and child sexual exploitation. Young people between the ages of 10 to 12 have access to different social media networks that are exploitative and where there is no accountability to platforms. Children are being sold into sex trafficking in the Belfast area. Youth workers are not equipped to deal with that.

(Focus Group Participants)

There are a number of related issues here. There is poverty, including educational poverty, drugs, child sexual abuse in the form of exploitation and trafficking. It was acknowledged that all of this, especially the sexual exploitation and abuse of children, is difficult to police without

a specialist covert operation. Young people are being exposed to sexual content through pop-ups on their profiles and the pages they want to follow on social media. Such is the demon confronting young people, including children, in areas of poverty and socio-economic deprivation. In terms of societal systems it requires a joined-up approach. Those who are parents or guardians need help to deal with the related demons to which their children and young people are exposed. That youth workers are not equipped to deal with this, calls for in-service training and for the issues to be an integral part of youth worker training.

Poverty is the demon experienced by many young people and children, as Chapter Three on ‘Common Good Economics: The Socio-Economic Strand of Reconciliation’ elucidates. The income poverty statistics for Northern Ireland for 2021-2022 reveal the extent of relative and absolute poverty. Approximately 300,000 people are living in relative poverty. This includes 18% of children living in relative poverty. Around 249,000 people are living in absolute poverty of which 15% are children. The extent of relative and absolute poverty is made worse by the cost-of-living crisis. Many are having to make choices between meat and heat. Parents, especially mothers, are going without. The poverty demon means that there is insufficient income to afford the necessities of life. The stark reality is that nearly one in four are living in absolute poverty. Children and young people are at the sharp edge of the poverty experience. Children have a higher risk of living in poverty than other population groups. (NISRA, 2023).

Poverty spawns violence as anger. Hopelessness, frustration, and disaffection spill over and the resulting aggression involves young people and even children, often being exploited by adults for sectarian motives. This is not to say that sectarianism and racism are not present in

more affluent areas. The communities of poverty have no monopoly on sectarianism and racism. Violence and destruction, often of one's own community, arises out of poverty, including educational poverty, which results in high levels of chronic long-term illnesses, and shorter life spans. Poverty kills!

Drugs are another potent demon confronting young people and drug related deaths are at a disturbing level. The number of drug-related deaths registered in 2021 was 212. Almost three-quarters (73.6%) of drug-related deaths were of men. The highest level of drug-related deaths was among the 25-34 age group (NISRA, 2022, p. 1). To provide some context, if the 212 drug-related deaths were averaged out over the three decades of conflict experienced during the Troubles it would result in 6,000 deaths. That is 2,500 more deaths than those suffered during 30 years of violence. In Belfast in 2022-2023 there was a 28.8% increase in drug offences. In Northern Ireland there were 8,934 drug seizure incidents and 3,340 drug-related arrests (Police Service of Northern Ireland, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2023, p.1). There is a serious problem and there are drug gangs making a lot of capital, many of them with paramilitary credentials.

Surrounding all of this, though not exclusively related, are mental health issues and related to mental health are high rates of suicide.

Mental health, especially in North Belfast, which has a higher suicide rate than other parts of the city, has been on the increase in recent years. Young men are the most vulnerable. Some of the reasons include poverty, drugs and alcohol, paramilitaries, unemployment, educational underachievement.

(Focus Group Participant)

There is unspeakable tragedy here and it is not confined to urban areas, as indicated by one of our focus group participants,

There is a lack of services in rural areas. If a child needs to access CAMHS (child and adolescent mental health service), s/he couldn't, and would be redirected to Belfast. If a child in crisis has to move out of the area for treatment it can escalate the issue. Fermanagh is a forgotten county, lack of services, isolation, a high poverty rate. A Belfast centric view is detrimental to rural areas.

(Focus Group Participant)

Professor Siobhán O'Neill has drawn attention to studies showing that the proportion of young people suffering from stress-related conditions and poor mental health is rising:

These problems impede learning, and the education, healthcare and justice systems are charged with managing behavioural difficulties that result. Mental illness and the behaviours that result from a maladaptive response to overwhelming stress are a huge challenge to the common good. Externalising behaviours, manifestations of fear, anxiety and trauma, result in social violence and are a threat to peace. They lead to illness, human pain, and more suffering. They result in us harming others, impair our ability to see other perspectives and find creative solutions to the major problems of our time: a global pandemic, climate change and poverty.

(O'Neill, 2022, pp. 203-204)

Children and young people are confronted by very real demons. A strategy on poverty still needs to be implemented as does an environmental strategy. The struggle continues to effectively deal with the drug and related homeless crisis. In 2021 a 10-year Mental Health Strategy was published containing 35 actions to address the gaps in provision and deliver a regional mental health service.

The Department of Education have also provided a Framework for Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education, endorsing a whole school approach to resilience-building and prevention, early intervention, and specific services for children and young people who have developed mental health difficulties.

(O'Neill, 2022, pp205-206)

Responding to and addressing the demons confronting children and young people in our society is important for their mental health and wellbeing, and it is fundamental to the pursuit of social reconciliation and the common good.

### **Partners with Young People**

Northern Ireland has been well served by its youth services, statutory and voluntary. As with every other area of provision, there have been and sometimes are gaps, but generally there is an effective, meaningful, creative and developmental response to the changing contexts and needs of young people. There has been a partnership with young people through the years of conflict and violence and now into a process, albeit fragile, of peacebuilding and reconciliation. Many organisations and initiatives could be named and deserve to be named. All are sig-

nificant or have been significant, but space only allows for two to be highlighted.

### **Youth Link NI**

For a long time the churches were responsible for 75% of the youth work in Northern Ireland. They still deliver a considerable element of youth work and partnership with young people even though churches are diminishing institutions in Northern Ireland and on the island of Ireland. In the late 1980s an idea and an initiative developed. The 1921 Government of Ireland Act precluded the funding of any church or religion-based activity. The Government of Ireland Act which implemented partition and brought Northern Ireland into being, precluded the funding of any church or religion-based activity. This was a recognition of the sectarian nature of Northern Ireland society. It was born out of sectarianism and was established and built on sectarian foundations. From the outset Northern Ireland was a politically and religiously divided society, with its people locked into binary identities. Historically it is not possible to say that our violent conflict has nothing to do with religion, it was a crucial part of the partition mix from the beginning, and the beginning goes back well beyond 1921. Even though the churches were responsible for 75% of the youth work, there was no government funding. By the second half of the 1980s could this be challenged? The Troubles had been tearing the community apart for some 16 years and all public institutions were struggling with devastating and destructive violence, agonising for peace. Contact was made by the youth officers of the four larger churches with the Department of Education. Northern Ireland was under direct rule at the time and the Minister of Education was a Brit-

ish Tory Government minister and the youth officers needed to get beyond department officials, however senior, to the Minister himself.

It has to be said that the youth officers of the four churches and their youth boards were not original thinkers. They were not the first to envision inter-church youth work that brought together Protestants and Catholics. Rather, the youth officers were standing on the shoulders of four earlier youth officers who had courageously cooperated and collaborated in inter-church youth work when it was neither easy nor popular. From the late 1960s four youth officers had got together, informally at first, and then took initiatives to bring young people together across the deep sectarian divide. There was opposition but they stuck at it and as Northern Ireland moved into the 1970s and the Troubles erupted and the death toll and injuries increased, reaching a peak by 1974, the four church youth officers were doing youth work together. This predated the 1971 formation of the Ballymascanlon Catholic-Protestant Inter-church meeting. The Ballymascanlon Inter-church meeting, as it was known, brought together the Protestant and Catholic Churches in Ireland to develop relationships and understanding and explore social and theological issues of concern. Perhaps the four youth officers were unsung heroes. They should be named: Rev Dr. Gordon Gray (Presbyterian), Rev John Knox (Methodist) Fr. Colm Campbell (Roman Catholic), and Rev. Fred Graham (Church of Ireland). They were the pioneers of inter-church youth work, at least 23 years before Youth Link NI was conceived. Youth officers in 1988 or 1989 stood on their shoulders, were the heirs to their pioneering and spirit of partnership. The seeds of Youth Link NI were sown in the late 1960s and there was still no government funding for church-based youth work.

In 1943 the Churches' Youth Welfare Council was formed, which was a Protestant initiative. In the 1980s there was a pan-Protestant church training board, the Churches' Youth Service Council, which did good work training youth workers for the Protestant churches. There were Catholic structures for young people but not a partnership approach. Could there be something more truly inclusive with all of the churches partnering and collaborating on youth work in a more expansive way?

The youth officers of the late 1980s got a meeting with the Minister for Education and his top officials. Perhaps there was something fortuitous in the fact that the British Minister was Belfast-born. He knew this place. Too many British ministers and even Secretaries of State knew little or nothing of this place and didn't know much more when they left. Dr Brian Mawhinney was born here, grew up, was educated here and knew and understood the sectarian dynamics. Perhaps it helped that he was a deeply committed Christian, a member of the Brethren tradition. That was never mentioned in discussions. What he did mention though, was the Lund Principle. He was saying that monies could be available but on the basis of a visible working together, collaboration and cooperation and programmes of training and community relations activity, visible and meaningful. And then he introduced the Lund Principle. Lund was a city in Sweden where a key ecumenical principle was created and agreed. It was a landmark principle of the early ecumenical movement in the twentieth century. Mawhinney presented the Lund Principle as his ace card, slightly misquoted it and then looked surprised when the youth officers gave him the correct version! In Lund in 1952, the gathering of Protestants, Anglicans and Orthodox at the World Conference on Faith and Order,

agreed that 'The churches should do together all those things which their consciences do not require them to do separately' (Gros, McManus and Riggs, 1998, p. 142). 'Work on that', said the Minister, 'and if you can achieve something, come back and see me'.

We worked on it for a long time, or rather nothing happened for a considerable time. Not everyone seemed to want to talk about it. There was reluctance, nervousness, opposition camps, threatened identities. The youth officers in the late 1960s were working informally. This was formal and there could be funding. The Minister was open to that. The Lund Principle! The process mirrored political talks at the time, stop-start, who is getting what here, a zero-sum game. Religion is also about power, control and dominance.

Eventually there was another visit to Stormont, a cup of tea, a presentation to the Minister of a model of cooperation, collaboration and the Lund Principle at work, and the Minister accepted. This was a new partnership between the churches and above all, a partnership with young people, even though, I think, we forgot that this thing called Youth Link NI was primarily for young people.

From the outset Youth Link NI's partnership with young people has been characterised by at least three significant practises, indispensable for quality assured youth work. Context has always been important and remains important. Young people's lives are impacted and shaped by the social, political, historical, and cultural context. They live, as we all do, in a real world and they are the products of it. Youth work without a context is ineffective and unreal. Following on from context a second characteristic of Youth Link NI's practise is captured in two words, developmental process. Partnering young people and youth work provision takes place in an ever-changing context. Reading the

signs of the times and analysing the cultural and social shifts requires ongoing development of new activity and programmes. Sometimes this developmental process is in response, at other times it is anticipatory or pre-emptive. Contextual youth work is developmental and requires critical thinking and creative imagination. A third characteristic of Youth Link NI's practice is the intentional core values at the heart of all policies, strategies, action plans and programmes. Values have been important from the outset, they have been and remain values from the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which have been consistently expressed and embedded. Theologically, some would call them 'kingdom values', the values at the heart of what Jesus taught and lived as the kingdom or reign of God. Youth Link NI has had the capacity to be bilingual, sometimes being able to express these values in secular language rather than theological or religious language. Such articulation becomes a bridge in a more secular society and where religious language has become a foreign language requiring much translation.

Contextualisation, developmental process, value-based or ethically focused youth work are core to the Youth Link NI ethos. When it was in the birthing process, a key component of Northern Ireland's youth work policy was about encouraging and enabling young people to be critical thinkers and to test their values and beliefs. Within the churches sector there were those who were unhappy with this policy and opposed to it. Youth Link NI embraced the policy from the outset and put it into practice. Later when core community relations values were introduced as Equity, Diversity, and Interdependence (EDI), again some saw these as secular values and not the spiritual business of the churches. The YMCA led the way by looking for a theological

basis to EDI. Youth Link NI had a key role in that and made a significant contribution to a 10-year JEDI (Joined in Equity, Diversity, and Interdependence) process involving the statutory and voluntary youth sectors in embedding EDI at the heart of youth policy and practice. It is now core to good community relations youth work.

In partnership with young people, Youth Link NI has designed and delivered many programmes which in the professional youth sector have received high quality assurance and high scoring evaluations. Remarkable work has been undertaken with hard-to-reach young people, including those living in serious poverty and educational underachievement who are at risk of exposure to violence, drugs, may face serious mental health problems and a higher risk of suicide. Literally hundreds of young people have participated in these programmes and many have been empowered to be active citizens and agents of community and peace building in their neighbourhoods.

In 2019 Youth Link NI produced a significant training resource called *Remembering the Past: Shaping the Future*. Designed and written by Dr Cathy Bollaert. It is a game-changing resource which can and is empowering young people to be agents of change and history makers. It has a significant focus on the common good, introducing young people to core common good principles or values of human dignity, interdependence/interconnectedness, solidarity, and civic participation (Bollaert, 2019, p. 24). The resource contains a video with animations and creative exercises. It is the latest high quality and professional resource from Youth Link NI in partnership with young people and with a decade-long shelf life. Contextualisation, developmental process, and a strong value-base remain the key characteristics of Youth Link NI.

## Politics in Action

Northern Ireland is now the only devolved nation in the UK where 16- and 17-year-olds do not get to vote in Northern Ireland Assembly or council elections. Hopefully that will change and young people can be participants in democracy and have a say in politics, social policy and change for the common good.

According to their website, Politics in Action (PiA) partner ‘with schools and with youth organisations with specialist skills, politicians, and key decision-makers and others so that young people we work with have the best opportunities to make a difference’ to the society of which they are a significant part. (Politics in Action Website). PiA supports young people to act on issues that matter to them to achieve social change. Young people do have voices but are often not heard and so PiA partners with them to help amplify their voices. Every voice and viewpoint is valued and helps to develop new solutions.

Learning is an important component of the PiA programme, enabling young people to develop the skills and knowledge that are necessary to make an impact in the world of politics. It stipulates on their website, ‘At PiA, we are active citizens and working together, we drive change. We believe young people are citizens now [regardless of age or nationality] and your ideas are needed for us to build better neighbourhoods, a better society, a better world’.

PiA is involved with schools and partners young people in learning skills and knowledge that enables critical thinking, critical awareness, social analyses, decision making and action as citizens for change. Conferences are also held in which young people participate and learn the skills of civil discourse and how to be change makers. During the ‘Is there a common good?’ project, we engaged with young people

from across the community who were involved with PiA and their voices can be heard below. They had more than a capacity for critical thinking, were articulate, politically aware and were in the process of visioning a politics of the future. The work of PiA in partnering with young people is crucial for the future of society and for the realisation of a common good. Apart from being good, active citizens, some of these young people will shape a different kind of politics, a more authentic participatory and deliberative democracy. They may even create political parties beyond the sectarian and binary moulds. It is possible that within a decade the fruit of PiA learning and action programmes will begin to change the political landscape of Northern Ireland. Who knows where that will lead or what the future a decade from now will be, but a more critically thinking, educated and skilled generation will shape a different kind of politics and reconciliation process to a new level. There is hope! Partnering with young people, organisations such as Youth Link NI and Politics in Action are signs of hope.

### **Voices That Count**

The following represent the voices of young people who made presentations at an ISE 'Is there a common good?' programme to mark the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement.

I want to see a more diverse Northern Ireland, a more inclusive Northern Ireland that doesn't shy away from anybody because of what they believe or how they conduct their life.

... in Scotland they lowered the minimum age to 16, along with places like Austria and Germany in local elections. They are successful countries so that maybe shows then that young people getting involved in politics may be the way for the future.

I think there is hope for Northern Ireland ... we are one of the best places to live in my opinion. I love living here but I want, most importantly, change to happen and willingness to change to become a more widespread thought for everybody.

In my opinion the Good Friday Agreement was essential for the restoration of peace in Northern Ireland and improved the safety of everyone in our communities. Without the Good Friday Agreement I don't believe Northern Ireland would be where it is at as a whole ... Although Northern Ireland has come a long way since 1998, it still faces challenges like every country, some more major than others.

Low productivity is the biggest economic challenge facing Northern Ireland, being about 40% lower than the Republic of Ireland ... Levels of research and investment in research and development in Northern Ireland are below the UK average. Northern Ireland possesses a skills gap compared with the rest of the UK.

As a whole Northern Ireland is responsible for ensuring legacy issues are addressed and resolved ... An important factor of this is initiation of a programme of memorialisation of the Troubles ... The Troubles have resulted in intergenerational trauma, and extreme mental health problems...

Whether we are pro-life or pro-choice, I think most people can appreciate that the vital abortion services presented to women in our society are not adequate. For years women were humiliated for having a child out of wedlock, from incest or rape. They were cruelly humiliated, put in homes and victimised.

... no woman should have her rights infringed. 71% of people in Northern Ireland agree that it is a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion ... It is only fair on the women of society, for their safety, that women are provided with appropriate services and support for safe abortions.

... in future an MLA's job should not be taken up with arguments as to why the sovereignty of this country should or shouldn't change hands, but rather to prove to people that through the problems they solve and things they get done, here is a way of running the country that is going to be of the most benefit to everyone.

The total value of goods and services produced in Northern Ireland is the third lowest out of the 12 UK regions ... the rate of economic inactivity is 25.8%, which remains the highest anywhere in the UK ... The gap between public spending and tax revenue is £4,939 per person which is again the highest of all UK regions.

... education is a particularly contentious issue in Northern Ireland. Whilst schooling is excellent in parts, real inequality exists. This leads to low educational attainment in the poorest areas, impacting people for all of their lives. The fact is that separation on the basis of gender, religion and political identity is not sustainable.

It is an extremely odd situation, over half the population is Catholic by background and quite a large chunk of these people haven't really had the opportunity to meet people from different backgrounds. How do communities get to know each other when, for the most part, they are kept apart?

... a wish of mine is to see the government take a firmer stand against paramilitary organisations, though I am not surprised it isn't on the agenda now. We need to move past violence as a nation, be that as part of the UK or otherwise.

At the end of the day, whether you want to stay in the UK or leave and join with the Republic has absolutely nothing

to do with healthcare, agriculture etc. It's incredibly dysfunctional that every few years another party gets annoyed and abstains from politics, and the rest of us are forced to wait for Westminster to swoop in and make us functional again ... We as a people should never-the-less strive for a political system that works.

As stated in the Climate Change (Northern Ireland) Act 2022, 'The Northern Ireland departments must ensure that the net Northern Ireland emissions account for carbon dioxide for the year 2050 is at least 100% lower than the baseline for carbon dioxide.' But it is hard to make good on that if our pattern of absenteeism continues.

... Northern Ireland is the only region in the UK where ammonia levels have not been decreasing ... it would be beneficial to the future of the country if we could work on trying to make our country a little more liveable for the future, not just for us, but for the generations to follow us as well.

Young people have voices that count. No commentary or analyses on the above voices of young people will be made or is required, other than to observe that these young people want a very different Northern Ireland, whatever its constitutional future. They want a different kind of politics, economics, educational system, social values and environment. Interesting to note, they said nothing about religion! They were and are voices of hope living towards a vision of a common good.

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## CHAPTER NINE

# Ethnic Communities and the Common Good

I was living in the Kherson region in southern Ukraine for two months during its occupation by Russians. It was a very strange experience, both fearful and threatening, as even though I was living in my own home I was no longer in charge and felt vulnerable. Out on the streets, Russian soldiers were armed and if you left your house, you risked being arrested. We heard stories of girls being raped and men taken into basements and tortured. I remember standing making dinner one day and I looked out the window. I saw a plane heading straight for my house and understood my family were about to be destroyed. I stared unable to move and terrified. As it got closer, I realised it wasn't a plane but a bird. I became hysterical. My husband tried to comfort me and realised how fearful I was that our six-year-old son would be hurt or killed. We knew I could no longer stay in Kherson and together with my son I moved to an unoccupied part of Ukraine. I started to think about where to go next. I chose Ireland because I wanted my son to have a good education.

(Ukrainian Women's Focus Group)

There is a lot of discrimination against those who come here from outside. The law prevents us from doing certain

things and in the workplace, barriers are put in our way to stop us progressing. I was seen as someone from Africa who had experienced pain and would be happy just belonging. We should be able to have tough conversations. If people don't take the time to ask who we are, or what we want, how can we have a common good?

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

Poland was a communist country – we didn't have a common good, we were told by the government what the common good was. We were told we were living the dream. This dream wasn't coming from within people, no one was asked about their dreams. You can't tell people what the common good is. People need to find it for themselves, we all have a responsibility to look for it.

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

It hurts to say refugee – in Ukraine I was so respected. Here I am 'a nobody'.

(Ukrainian Women's Focus Group)

I have been privileged to attend many diversity, equity and inclusion and anti-racism training events and more and more I hear the question being posed, 'Are We Really BAME?' The consensus is that this lumps all ethnic communities together for one main reason administration. This othering by using the term BAME is viewed as part of a power play process - the development of 'them and

us'. While some have chosen to make Northern Ireland their home, we know all too well that others are here to escape trauma and that given the right set of circumstances many will go back home again. However, for both, how they experience Northern Ireland is important to them and their families and should also be important to us, if we are to build a Northern Ireland that is diverse, equitable and inclusive. Unfortunately, we don't have a great track record in doing this, just ask our own Indigenous ethnic community, Irish Travellers, about their experiences.

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

As part of the research, we facilitated two focus groups for ethnic communities living in Northern Ireland to explore what was understood by the term common good, what they believed prevented the common good, and what contributions they would like to make to the realisation of a common good society. The first group was comprised of women recently arrived in Northern Ireland from Ukraine and the second included people from the USA, Chad, China, France, Guyana, India, Nigeria, Poland, Sri Lanka, Ukraine, and Venezuela. Some had been resident in Northern Ireland for 60 years and others just a year. The quotes at the beginning of this chapter shed light on the complexity of experiences and societal dynamics that emerged in the conversations. We glimpse the trauma and experience of loss felt by those escaping war and struggling to adapt to the strangeness of a new country, and a different language and culture. Reference is made to the barriers, both legal and cultural, encountered by those seeking to

integrate into the community, as well as the blocks to workplace progression that flow from assumptions rooted in ignorance, with no opportunities for real engagement. The importance of enabling people to actively define and pursue together their societal vision of a common good was reinforced by those who had experience of the imposition of a common good state agenda that ignored or suppressed alternative perspectives. The 'othering' of ethnic communities by lumping them all together under acronyms like BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) was perceived as sustaining an 'us and them' culture that reinforced difference, making integration into local areas more difficult. Where the 'othering' has strengthened racist attitudes and behaviours, it has exposed vulnerable individuals and families to disturbing and even dangerous experiences. If the emphasis is on difference then society fragments, so the challenge is to pursue a togetherness-in-difference approach that recognises and affirms our shared humanity, while also allowing for the variety of embodied expressions of humanness.

The late Jonathan Sacks, a former Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of Britain and the Commonwealth, captures the importance of upholding the dignity of difference as core to the realisation of a common good society.

If we were all the same, we would have nothing unique to contribute, nor anything to learn from others. The more diverse we are, the richer our culture becomes, and the more expansive our horizons of possibility. But that depends on our willingness to bring our differences as gifts to the common good. It requires integration rather than segregation.

(Sacks, 2007, p. 10)

How as a society do we respond to the challenges of embracing the different racial, ethnic, cultural and religious identities that share this geographical space? What has become clear in this education and research project is that any attempt to realise a meaningful common good society will only succeed if all living in Northern Ireland and the border counties feel included and know that they count as part of the community. Getting to know each other and learning from each other, opens us up to the richness of diversity and the wider world of which we are a small part. As people share their stories and what has shaped them, we gain privileged insights into what it is to be human and of our interdependence and interconnectedness. We come to understand what has brought those from other countries to the island of Ireland and what their lives were like before they made the journey. We are made more aware of the inextricable ways in which our choices impact the lives of those both near and far. We begin to recognise the opportunities and challenges that globalisation brings and appreciate that these can best be encountered in solidarity with others.

In this chapter we will consider the experiences of refugees and asylum seekers, some of whom participated in both focus groups, and the protections they need to ensure their safety and guarantee their human rights. There is a culture of racism in Northern Ireland and in the Republic of Ireland that has resisted an intercultural and interracial approach to community relations. Some of the reasons for this will be explored, as well as current strategies to enhance cultural and racial equality. The chapter will end with a reflection on the journey to integrated diversity.

## Our 'Glocal' World

We live in an unjust world, in a world whereby some parts of the world, or some people, get on by oppressing other people ... We are not made better because of other people's suffering. I think it diminishes us.

(Programme Interviewee)

As the quote suggests, our shared humanity connects us to people everywhere, consequently where there is suffering, whether from conflict or poverty and disease, natural disasters, climate change, or for whatever reason, what it means to be human is devalued. Many millions of men, women, and children are currently facing severe humanitarian crises and are displaced from their homes, villages, and countries, and are now refugees in search of basic subsistence and protection. Many more have been internally displaced and are in search of a place of safety within their own borders. Syrian and Ukrainian refugees have been the most recent people to seek the protection of governments in the UK, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. Their presence among us is a reminder of our transnational responsibilities toward those facing the intersectional challenges of civil conflict and oppression. Richard Haass, recently retired from the post of President of the Council on Foreign Relations (2003-2023) based in New York, while affirming the importance of respecting national borders, was at pains also to stress that political responsibilities reach beyond these boundaries. He appealed to countries to recognise these obligations as 'sovereign duties' and assist those threatened by genocide, ethnic cleansing, forced migration, internal displacement, or other human rights violations (2017, quoted in Hollenbach, 2019, p. 8). Haass un-

derlined the fact that we are all part of the human family and as with all families we have a moral duty of care.

Can we find ways of strengthening connections of support, and of sharing wealth and knowledge and resources, both within and across borders? Can we let go of our fears of difference and of the 'other' to find the resilience together to protect the future for those yet to be born? Can we become truly 'glocal' citizens, affirming and embracing the integration of the local and the global? Someone who understood the importance of states recognising their 'glocal' responsibilities was Hannah Arendt. She was a forceful advocate for refugees and asylum seekers, having experienced firsthand the danger to life and freedom when she was deprived of her rights as a German citizen.

### **Hannah Arendt and the 'Right to have Rights' (1906-1975)**

Hannah Arendt was born in Linden in Northern Germany in 1906 to a middle-class Jewish couple. Arendt studied for a degree in philosophy and completed her doctorate in 1929 at the University of Heidelberg. She then moved to Berlin in 1930, but her academic career ended when the Nazi Party seized power in 1933 and they passed racial laws that prevented her from working. Then in July 1933 the Law on the Revocation of Naturalizations and the Deprivation of German Citizenship was passed, rendering all Jews fleeing Germany stateless.

Things came to a head for Arendt when she was arrested and held in custody by the Gestapo because of her associations with a Jewish Zionist group working to expose antisemitism. When she was released after hours of interrogation, she fled to Paris with her mother. Being stateless she could not acquire the necessary papers to work in academia but found work with several Jewish refugee organisations. After

the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939, Arendt was incarcerated as an 'alien enemy' at an internment camp in Gurs, in southern France. She and her mother managed to escape the camp in 1940 and they received assistance to secure transit visas to travel to the United States in 1941. Once there, they were granted asylum as refugees. In 1942 Arendt learned of the Nazi death camps and that her Jewish inmates at Gurs had been transferred to one of these camps and none had survived. Two years later she began writing her seminal book, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which was published in 1950, the same year she was granted US citizenship. In 1961, Arendt travelled to Jerusalem to cover the Eichmann trial for the New Yorker. She continued writing and teaching until her death in 1975, aged 69.

Arendt's life was indelibly marked by her persecution in Germany, her experiences living as a stateless person for 18 years in France and America, and by the awful truth of the Nazi extermination of European Jewry. Her philosophical writings reflect this. A primary theme in much of her writing concerns the ways in which individuals can both lose and gain rights.

At the very moment when protection under the auspices of universal human rights was most desperately needed, no such protection was granted. Outside the law and not belonging to any political community, she and her fellow refugees were reduced to "mere naked human beings" in a "condition of complete rightlessness".

(Birmingham, 2006, p. 35)

Arendt would have been aware of the tens of millions of refugees expelled from their homelands with no possibility of returning in Cen-

tral and Western Europe in the period between the two world wars, following the collapse of the Russian, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. Deprived of whatever rights they had enjoyed in their home countries and unprotected by their human status, the stateless became outsiders expelled from humanity. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt argued that:

...the calamity of the right-less is not that they are deprived of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, or of equality before the law and freedom of opinion-formulas designed to solve problems within given communities – but that they no longer belong to any community whatsoever.

(Arendt, 2017, p. 386)

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR)* had been approved by the UN General Assembly and adopted in 1950 in response to the events of the Second World War, affirming that human beings by virtue of being human had intrinsic rights. While recognising the significance of the declaration and the importance of affirming the dignity of the person by virtue of their humanness, Arendt knew from experience that a stateless person had no protection from human rights abuses. She argued for the right of every person to have their rights legally recognised and protected in their state of residence, irrespective of their citizenship status. While the UDHR required states to protect the universal and inalienable rights of all humans living within their borders, Arendt knew from experience that those considered stateless would be left vulnerable. Only when a person has membership of a political community and can exert her rights will she be empowered to seek and expect protection. Arendt suggested that the right to belong

to a political community should, therefore, be a precondition for the protection of all other rights.

Only as a citizen of a nation-state can a person enjoy legally protected rights to education, to work, to vote, to health-care, to culture, and so on. Hence, Arendt declared that before there can be any specific civil, political, or social rights, there must be such a thing as a “right to have rights”.

(DeGooyer *et al.*, 2018, p. 2)

Arendt understood that there would always be people who refused to accept the unconditional humanity of all people and that protections, both universal and national, can act as deterrents, uniting people beyond and within the community under the banner of ‘we’ against those who would act inhumanely. She recognised that we need national and international systems to apply human rights legislation and hold offenders to account. When the offender is the state, or a part of it, as in Nazi Germany, then the role of international arbiters is crucial.

For Arendt the common good is measured by how well the most vulnerable are included and enabled to flourish. Recovering authentic humanity, which is what reconciliation is about, means standing with the marginalised, resisting whatever oppresses them and pro-actively working to recover the human rights they have been denied. Arendt suggested four strategies to facilitate this rehumanising process:

1. To insist on the inseparability of our human rights to socio-economic egalitarianism and to political freedom and participation.

2. To distinguish the nation from the state and find alternative ways to create unity and a common identity that does not depend on nationality, ethnicity, or religious origin.
3. To recognise rights as proactive tools to make demands of the state and its representatives.
4. To foster collective power by designing alternative institutions to replace systems of injustice, as well as voluntary associations to challenge unjust practices.

(DeGooyer, 2018, p. 120)

Arendt held that everyone has a right to belong to some kind of organised community. She drew on her experience again and again to underline that those whose rights as citizens were guaranteed had a responsibility to provide refugees, minorities, and those with no political identity with these same rights. Only then could they become full members of a political community and enjoy the right to active participation in social, economic, and political spheres. This speaks directly into our current world context where violent conflict, climate change and absolute poverty are forcing large numbers of people to flee their homelands and seek asylum and the recognition of their human rights in other countries.

Political action on behalf of the right to have rights would demand institutional and legal changes - for example, immigration reform, an end to detention practices - that would create a world where undocumented individuals could publicly and fearlessly demand their rights.

(DeGooyer, 2018, p. 54)

Immigration policy must have the dignity of the human person at its heart. Arendt reminds us of the fact that political membership of a state is a basic necessity for the protection it affords, and where people have been displaced, for whatever reason, they have an absolute right to seek sanctuary elsewhere. Unfortunately, the United Kingdom is failing in its duty of care and seeking to backtrack on its human rights obligations. This was underlined in a recent report by Amnesty International.

In April 2022, the British parliament passed legislation attempting to avoid the UK's international obligations stemming from the UN Refugee Convention, including refusing to recognize fully the Convention's definition of refugee and the prohibitions on the penalization of asylum seekers for irregular entry, discrimination and refoulement, and its demand that states share responsibility for hosting refugees.

(Amnesty International, 2023, p. 385)

In June 2023 the Court of Appeal ruled that the UK government's policy to expel people seeking asylum from the UK to Rwanda under a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rwandan government was unlawful and would be a breach of Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (AAA and others v The Secretary of State for the Home Department). This was because of deficiencies in the Rwandan asylum system that meant there was a real risk people would be returned to their home countries where they could face persecution or worse. The Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak, indicated that the govern-

ment would appeal the decision at the Supreme Court. Then in July 2023 the Illegal Migration Act received Royal Assent, which changes UK law, meaning those who arrive in the UK illegally will not be able to stay but will instead be detained and then removed to their home country or, if their plea for asylum is deemed legitimate, removed to a safe third country. In response, Volker Türk, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, and Filippo Grandi, the High Commissioner for Refugees, issued a joint statement saying that the Act, ‘... is at variance with the [UK’s] obligations under international human rights and refugee law and will have profound consequences for people in need of international protection’. They say that the bill ‘extinguishes access to asylum in the UK for anyone who arrives irregularly’, barring them from presenting claims for protection ‘no matter how compelling their circumstances’ (2023, Türk and Grandi. Quoted in Grogan and McDonald, 2023). Grandi added that the Act, ‘... sets a worrying precedent for dismantling asylum-related obligations that other countries, including in Europe, may be tempted to follow, with a potentially adverse effect on the international refugee and human rights protection system as a whole’ (2023, Grandi, quoted in Grogan and McDonald, 2023).

### **Rooted Cosmopolitanism**

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt comments that ‘whether we like it or not, we have really started to live in One World’ (1950, p. 388). Arendt understood the attack on her own people as an attack against humanity, and human plurality. She emphasised the uniqueness of each person born with the capacity to bring something different to our shared world. It is this individuality and spontaneity

that totalitarianism seeks to destroy. Arendt stressed the importance of holding together the particularity and unity of humankind, to affirm our common humanity without submerging our differences. Her vision of cosmopolitanism affirmed the importance of embeddedness within a sovereign state and the rights of citizenship for all within state borders, while also affirming the common humanity of all and our shared responsibility for people everywhere. Several participants who had a memory or experience of totalitarianism affirmed Arendt's viewpoint. A Ukrainian woman shared how she made sense of her own story as part of a bigger historical story passed down the generations that emphasised resilience in the face of national oppression and suffering. She believed the Ukrainian people gifted this quality to the wider global family.

For me the common good is about feeling connected and feeling a part of a global family. Because of our hard history, Second World War/ totalitarianism / Chernobyl / concentration camps, stories we learnt from our grandparents of the past, it is in our genes to be strong. Stories of our nation's past have formed us and help us now. We don't want to let our grandparent's down.

(Ukrainian Women's Focus Group)

Another participant drew on an experience of totalitarianism in Poland, when it was subject to communism, to underline the necessity to protect our shared humanity and individual expressions of it. We were reminded that the common good can become captive to a dictatorial regime that sacrifices the freedom of the individual to protect state power.

In Poland where we experienced communism, the common good equalled no one's good, it was stolen from everybody. The common good should be something we can all have equal access to, something we can enjoy that connects people and creates common bonds. We need to respect other's individuality and difference.

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

There can be no common good when individual differences are ignored or suppressed. A common good approach that is grounded in a cosmopolitan ethos insists on the dignity each person possesses, on account of our common humanity and it celebrates each person's distinct and individual qualities. More will be said of cosmopolitanism in Chapter Twelve entitled, 'Living Without Passports: The Cosmopolitan Vision towards the Common Good'.

Of course, while this is the ideal standpoint from which to navigate the journey toward the common good society and world, we can find ourselves caught in a very human struggle to hear and accept those whose idea of the common good differs from our own. Instead of holding our ideas about the common good with a humility, born of the realisation that none of us possesses the truth in its entirety and therefore may learn from those who are different, we become intolerant of difference. When this happens, we may even end up dismissing the person whose ideas we disagree with or slipping into a 'them and us' narrative that can quickly become racist.

### **Racism and Prejudice**

Pivotal, a public policy forum based in Belfast, was commissioned by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) to carry

out a piece of research into how Brexit impacted minority ethnic and migrant people. The report published in May 2023 drew on the recent Census 2021 figures to ascertain the numbers of people from other ethnicities living in Northern Ireland and where they had come from. The Census found that 3.4 % of the population was comprised of people from a minority ethnic group and that the number had doubled from 2011 (ECNI, 2023, p. 5). Further, that the people residing in Northern Ireland who were born outside the UK and Ireland represented 6.5 % of the population, which shows a 45 % increase since the 2011 Census ten years ago (ECNI, 2023, p. 3). In terms of places of origin, the largest ethnic minority group are people from an Asian heritage, then those of mixed race and Black heritage. The report confirms that those from an Indian, Chinese, and mixed-race heritage are the largest individual groups. Since the last Census there has been a significant rise of almost 50 % in the numbers of people living in Northern Ireland who come from an EU country, with the majority comprising people born in Poland, Lithuania, and Romania (ECNI, 2023, p. 5).

There has been a significant rise also in the numbers of refugees and asylum seekers in Northern Ireland. The UN 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a person who has a:

...well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the

country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.

(Art. 1, para. 2, p. 14)

The Northern Ireland Resettlement Scheme has rehoused 438 families comprising of 1,814 individuals from Syria since the scheme opened in 2015 (Department of Communities, 2020). It has also rehoused 2,131 people from Ukraine under government assistance refugee schemes, after the war broke out in 2022 (Flanagan, 2022). Immigration, however, is not a devolved matter and those applying come through the Home Office in Westminster. Those classified as refugees are afforded the same rights and entitlements as people born in Northern Ireland. According to data, which predates the arrival of Ukrainian refugees:

... as of Quarter 2 in 2022, 1,864 refugees have been resettled in Northern Ireland since 2015, the majority in Belfast ... The most recent data from 2015 showed that the largest refugee groups were from China, Nigeria, Somalia, Sudan and Zimbabwe, though since then the majority of refugees have been from Syria.

(Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2023, p. 6)

In relation to racism, the same ECNI report indicates that figures from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) show race related hate incidents and crimes now exceed sectarian hate incidents and crimes in Northern Ireland. The official figures for 2020-2021 indicate there were 162 hate crimes against EU nationals, and in the same

year 167 against people from Africa and Asia (ECNI, 2023, pp. 56-57). The PSNI warn that the actual numbers of racially motivated hate crimes could be as much as five times higher than these official figures, given notorious under reporting. This was confirmed by those who participated in our education and research project:

Racist hate incidents and hate crimes have overtaken sectarian hate crimes in Northern Ireland, which is alarming given the ethnic minority community makes up less than five per cent of the population. And how does it manifest? In all kinds of behaviour, from harassment to name-calling, to windows being broken, tyres being slashed, all the kind of things that somebody who hates somebody would do.

(Programme Participant)

Commenting on the findings in the ECNI 2023 report, Geraldine McGahey, the Chief Commissioner of the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, stated,

It is disturbing that the most striking findings of this recent research are that people from minority ethnic and migrant groups said that racism was a normal part of their daily life in Northern Ireland and that women are particularly exposed to racism. It also found that there was a widespread perception that Brexit had led to an increase in the expression of racism. We know racism is not new to Northern Ireland, and its impact is devastating.

(Equality Commission for Northern Ireland, 2023)

There are at least four building blocks that operate in all societies and are a measure of the degree of oppression in that society: how power is distributed; the access to resources; the ability to set cultural standards and the power to name. All four criteria can help us better assess if integration and equality schemes are effective. Given the level of fear and anxiety that racist hate crimes and incidents can arouse among ethnic communities in Northern Ireland, how willing might they be to speak up and speak out? Or is it the case that racist undercurrents repress or silence those from ethnic minority groups? One of the participants from the ethnic communities focus group indicated:

People from ethnic communities can be reluctant to speak and contribute because of experiences of racism and prejudice and the fear of difference. I think when provided with safe space and opportunity people will engage in a profound way to share insights, and experiences.

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

So how do we find ways out of racism and create a more inclusive and just society for everyone living in Northern Ireland and the border counties? Are there lessons to be learned from past failures at integration? What are the current strategies included in policy documents produced by governments in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? And what suggestions do those we engaged from the ethnic communities in Northern Ireland have for enhancing integration toward the realisation of a common good society?

## **Multiculturalism: A Failed Social Experiment**

Multiculturalism developed initially as a response to racism and was an affirmation of the co-existence and value of multiple cultures in society. In practice, the challenge for local government bodies implementing a multicultural policy was to find ways for minority ethnic communities to preserve their separate identities and traditions and not be assimilated into the dominant culture. The dilemma was how to create a sense of unity within a community that preserved cultural diversity. Multiculturalism took on different forms depending on context.

In a society like Northern Ireland where fear of difference predominated and people chose to live 'among their own kind', whether Protestant or Catholic, nationalist or unionist, those who were 'other' were perceived as a threat and often became the target of racist abuse. Given this climate, those civic bodies with responsibility to encourage multiculturalism emphasised tolerance of difference as the safest path. While pragmatic and a means of securing non-violent co-existence, the lack of integration meant that opportunities to build relationships and dismantle prejudices and fears were missed. The mutual tolerance approach also diminished opportunities for cultural sharing and enrichment.

When we operate in our silos, we can only see our own good and not the good of the other, common good has no purchase or appeal. This is illustrated in the following experience shared by an interviewee:

The big issue around common good for me is social housing. In this town alone there are 1,265 people waiting on social housing. There was a story in the local paper, 50

Syrian refugees were coming to this area. I walked down the town, and I was accosted six times and it was the same theme, ‘How is a Syrian refugee gonna get a house in front of my daughter who’s living with me and two kids this last 18 months?’ It’s hard for me to say to somebody that a Syrian refugee family who’s never had any input in this country, is gonna get a house in front of your daughter and you’ve paid tax and insurance all your life. The private sector will have to take up a bit of the slack. I can’t agree with stepping over the local needies, very, very needy people.

(Programme Interviewee)

For the common good to have any meaning a shared understanding of society is crucial. This means going beyond tolerance in our social relationships, so that ‘my’ good is not in competition with ‘your’ good, and the possibilities of working together to improve the lot of all will not be sacrificed in the zero-sum game. Justice requires the minimum level of solidarity to challenge and transform a system that is failing the most vulnerable and not delivering the basic needs that ensure everyone’s human dignity. Whether it is a decent house, or a basic income, or good education, these are minimal level requirements to secure human dignity that every citizen has a right to. Working together to secure these rights, rather than competing for them, is the common good way forward, and a more viable approach to securing the basic demands of social justice. As one participant put it:

I think the common good should address the problems of the rights and equality of education and employment and welfare to ensure justice and equality for all and, of

course, ensure the freedom to express your own culture and faith and identity.

(Programme Interviewee)

The common good, then, is a more appropriate public policy aspiration for the realisation of a just and equitable society, where solidarity and cultural diversity strengthen each other, than is multiculturalism. The common good can bring people together in a way that respects difference, is inclusive and has the potential to unite everyone around a vision for society that all can contribute to.

### **Racial Equality Strategies**

The Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 for Northern Ireland recognises that multiculturalism as a policy approach reinforces the segregated nature of Northern Ireland society and keeps different cultures apart. It suggests an 'intercultural' approach, which is integrationist, promoting intercultural education and the creation of shared spaces in schools, communities, and workplaces. The strategy acknowledges that combating racism and racial inequalities requires the support and engagement of all sectors of society requiring political, civic and community leadership to ensure a positive outcome. It underlines the link between sectarianism and racism as oppressive systems and supports the need for a holistic approach to the dismantling of both (OFMD-FM, 2015, pp. 7-11). That some in the community are more vulnerable to multiple and intersecting forms of abuse is acknowledged and mention is made of minority ethnic women, who are more likely to experience discrimination on account of their race and sex. Mention is made also of Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and the

Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, the relevant anti-discrimination legislation protecting the rights and equal opportunities of all racial groups in Northern Ireland, and the importance of reviewing the latter, to bring it in line with protections offered in other jurisdictions (OFMDFM, 2015, pp. 21-26). A consultation process on the Executive Office's review of the Race Relations (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 was completed in June 2023 as prescribed in the Race Relations Strategy 2015-2025. At the launch of the review, Denis McMahon, the Permanent Secretary of the Executive Office (2023), indicated that the purpose of the review was to provide the best possible protection against discrimination in all areas of life.

In relation to asylum seekers and refugees, while acknowledging that immigration policy is made in Westminster, the strategy confirms the need to set up positive initiatives to support both groups of people. These include setting up a crisis fund for vulnerable migrants, free English classes and access to free healthcare for asylum seekers, and ensuring asylum seeking children and trafficked children are assigned an independent legal guardian. Finally, four outcomes are suggested as measures to gauge the impact of the Racial Equality Strategy in society. These are:

1. Equality of service provision.
2. Elimination of prejudice, racism and hate crime.
3. Increased participation, representation and belonging.
4. Celebration of cultural diversity.

(OFMDFM, 2015, pp. 40-46)

The 2015 Racial Equality Strategy has been criticised by the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland and others on the basis that

the actions proposed in the strategy are 'all process orientated rather than outcome orientated', further, it also lacks a delivery timetable or targets (ECNI, 2023, p. 8). The fact that racism continues to be prevalent in society supports this critique. The ongoing experience of institutional racism in public services that include education, housing and health, and the limited nature of societal integration, underlines the need for an urgent review of all provisions to address the short-falls. This issue was raised by one of the interviewees who reiterated the need for target setting if we are to become a more equal and just society where power is truly shared.

Do we need a new Racial Equity Strategy that embraces change across all our sectors and within and between communities? Key to this new strategy are open and transparent targets, which are accompanied with the required resources and, which have only one fundamental principle, the desire, willingness, and commitment to shift power.

(Programme Interviewee)

The Republic of Ireland's 2016 Census recorded a total of 535,475 non-Irish nationals from 200 different nations living in Ireland on Census Night. The largest percentage were from Poland (23 %) and the UK (19 %), while other nationalities with over 10,000 residents were from USA, Brazil, France, Germany, India, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania and Spain (Central Statistics Office, 21st September 2017). There was an increase in the reporting of racist incidents in the Republic of Ireland in 2021. According to iReport, which is a human rights monitoring tool, there were, '223 cases involving criminal offences in 2022. Of these, there were 49 assaults, 112 cases of harassment,

26 cases of serious threat, 95 public order offences, and 8 cases of criminal damage’ (Reynolds and Omid, 2023, p. 8). The most likely targets were people who identified as Black African, Black Irish, or Black-Other (30%), followed by South Asian people (17%), and Other White Europeans (16%) (Reynolds and Omid, 2023, p. 16). The primary perpetrators were White, Irish people (67%) and more likely to be adult men. As these statistics illustrate, there is much work still to be done in eliminating hate crimes and hate speech in the Republic of Ireland.

The Republic of Ireland’s National Action Plan Against Racism 2023-2027 (NAPAR) was launched in March 2023. The Irish government has developed also an NAPAR implementation plan for the first year. It was developed by an independent Anti-Racism Committee established by government ministers in 2020. An Ireland Against Racism Fund of up to one million euros for regional, national and local projects to combat racism and foster racial equality and community cohesion has been created. An independent Special Rapporteur on Racial Equality and Racism will be appointed to monitor the implementation of the NAPAR plan.

The Republic of Ireland’s population is more ethnically diverse than Northern Ireland’s, with minority ethnic groups making up approximately 15% of the population, and Irish Travellers numbering 30, 987, according to the Census 2016 (NAPAR, 2023, p. 10). Priority actions in the plan have been developed around five objectives:

1. Being Safe and Being Heard – Supporting people who experience racism and protecting people from racist incidents and crimes.

2. Being Equal – Addressing ethnic inequalities.
3. Being Seen and Taking Part – Enabling minority participation.
4. Being Counted – Measuring the impacts of racism.
5. Being Together – A shared journey to racial equality.

(NAPAR, 2023, p. 16)

The plan outlines action points under each of the five objectives and indicates who will take each action forward and the completion date. Set into the plan, then, are measures for advancing it, delivery agents and deadlines. The emphasis on outcomes, with the availability of a funding pot for projects and the appointment of a Special Rapporteur to oversee implementation, creates the conditions for successful delivery. There is learning here for Northern Ireland on how to set targets, deliver them and measure what is working and what is not.

## **The Journey to Integrated Diversity**

To bring this chapter to a close, four strategies have been suggested by participants from the ethnic communities to enhance community integration in Northern Ireland toward a common good society and these will be briefly unpacked. They by no means exhaust all possibilities, however, they represent priorities and areas of shared concern expressed by individuals from ethnic minority communities.

### **1. Encountering Neighbour Religions**

The value of an integrative approach to community building that allows for dialogue and deepens understanding was underlined in conversations with representatives from neighbour religions.

We would get a lot of requests to come to our services from people just out of curiosity and I welcome that, but there's some feel threatened, and question whether these people are coming with a genuine motive, or are they there to try and convert us?

(Programme Interviewee)

It is very important for us to know what the other religion is and how to be with the people of the other religion, and how to have dialogue with others ... I can sort of pick up something on the internet and read about Christianity, written by somebody, you know, which is not true. Or you can pick up something about Islam, which is not true. Dialogue is very important; it is only through dialogue that we learn from each other.

(Programme Interviewee)

The religious traditions, as with other philosophies of life, are a rich resource for shared reflection on the different ways people in society make sense of life and express their hopes and identities. An essential part of these religious and philosophical traditions are the ethics that are often shared, if expressed in diverse ways. As both respondents confirmed, when those opportunities for encounter and dialogue do not exist, or are not regular occurrences, misunderstandings and misinformation can fill the vacuum, resulting in inappropriate fears that can fuel suspicion and prejudice.

Making space for the other and learning how to live together, and feel enlarged by the encounters, is the best defence against parochi-

alism and prejudice that diminishes us all. Together we can build a truly inclusive and just society that is inspired by the intersecting of our collective imaginations. Jonathan Sacks expressed the possibilities beautifully:

What then is society? It is where we set aside all considerations of wealth and power and value people for what they are and what they give. It is where Jew and Christian, Muslim and Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh, can come together, bound by their commonalities, enlarged by their differences. It is where we join in civil conversation about the kind of society we wish to create for the sake of our grandchildren not yet born ... It is where strangers can become friends ... Society is the home we build together when we bring our several gifts to the common good.

(Sacks, 2007, p. 240)

## **2. Educating for the Common Good**

Participants in both focus groups affirmed the value of education as a resource for understanding other cultures, religious traditions, and rituals, and for challenging biases or misinformation. There was agreement on the need to explore the history of colonialism and imperialism, to better understand global relations and the power plays that impacted negatively on those from the Global South. One of the participants emphasised the lack of awareness that currently exists:

I asked an Irish friend, what comes to mind when you see a Black person from Africa. He said 'hunger', because growing up there were always pictures of Black children

starving. He said he was never taught that his forefathers had colonised Africa and did terrible things. He was never taught about the dehumanisation and pain his forefathers brought to Africa. That history has been erased. We need to look at the consequences of imperialism and colonialism.

(Ethnic Communities Focus Group)

The Republic of Ireland's NAPAR 2023-2027 plan acknowledges the roots of racism in colonialism, oppression, and domination and makes a commitment to facilitate a better understanding of the impact of racism in Irish history and up to the present, by removing bias in educational material as part of a collective effort to eliminate it (2023, p. 14-15). A similar approach is needed in Northern Ireland.

### **3. Engaging Politically**

There was a wariness among those who participated in these focus groups to become proactive in Northern Ireland politics. This is completely understandable given the lack of minority ethnic representatives in political parties and within government, and the binary nature of our political system. Currently there is no ethnic minority or migrant representative in the Stormont Assembly. In the 2023 Local Council Elections only one ethnic minority representative was returned, Lillian Seanoi-Barr, retaining her seat in the Foyleside District Electoral Area, Derry/Londonderry. Other minority ethnic representatives hoped to be elected for the SDLP, People Before Profit and the Green Party but they were unsuccessful. There were no ethnic minority candidates representing Sinn Féin, the DUP, Alliance or the UUP. One interviewee indicated that work was underway in some

quarters to make the political system more accessible but that more needed to be done.

It's down to the political parties themselves to find ways to support people from ethnic communities to be able to be active in public life. There's a lot of work being done through the Commissioner of Public Appointments and through the Equality Commission to encourage people to participate in public life. At local government level there was a lot of work done in the past to try to make being a councillor more conducive to the lives of women and I think it is incumbent to make sure that is done for ethnic minority people as well.

(Programme Interviewee)

A report by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee stated that because of the nature of 'Green' and 'Orange' politics in Northern Ireland ethnic minority communities have been overlooked in politics and policymaking. It affirmed that more needed to be done to increase multi-ethnic representation (2022, p. 3). Other ways also need to be found to ensure ethnic minorities' concerns are being addressed. The following is one way forward:

It would benefit ethnic communities to identify spokespeople to represent their sector on key themes in their work with the Equality Commission and to gain easier access to Assembly committees on key themes and where there is an issue affecting their rights and their equality of opportunity.

(Programme Interviewee)

#### 4. Creating a Culture of Sharing and Caring

The fourth strategy for enhancing integration centres on the different ways in which ethnic minorities can enrich society by their personal qualities, skills and life wisdom. There were many examples shared by those who engaged with the project, the following two give a flavour of stories recounted. Both underline the importance of building relationships that enable human flourishing and the second interviewee raises ethical questions about what it means to be a responsible and compassionate community.

I am working as a classroom assistant with an autistic child. He teaches me English. Last year he had a bad attendance record, but it has improved since I began working with him.

(Ukrainian Women's Focus Group)

The African way of thinking is that a child does not belong to one person, a child belongs to the village. I only started to know when I came here that my children are *my* children, that's it. They are my problem, they're my issue and they're mine to look after. Because, that individualistic way of thinking doesn't exist where I come from, the child belongs to the village, so the child belongs to everyone ... So how do I care about my neighbour? How do I care about the old lady or the person out there, or do I care?

(Programme Interviewee)

The demographics in Northern Ireland and the border counties are changing and because of climate change and the threats posed to life and livelihoods, increasing numbers of people will be seeking asylum in the UK and Ireland. We have an opportunity now, when numbers are relatively small, to futureproof our society so that we can embrace the coming changes with confidence and hospitality. Those from ethnic communities living in our midst are our greatest resource moving forward. We can together build our common good home and become that place where unity and diversity, equality and justice, and compassion and hope are the measure and manifestation of our shared humanity.

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## CHAPTER TEN

# Remembering Common Good Values: Education for Reconciliation

### **Time for Courageous Leadership**

As a post-conflict society which is living and attempting to deal with the legacies of the past, Northern Ireland is also now faced with the challenges of living in a post-Brexit era, an outcome which the majority of the people living in Northern Ireland voted against.

Such issues have resulted in a democratic deficit, made infinitely more difficult with the absence of a devolved legislature and numerous Programmes for Government which have remained largely unimplemented since 2015. Northern Ireland needs courageous and sustained leadership. Multiple crises in key services that include health, education, the environment and the PSNI, are symptomatic of the breakdown in political relationships that has impacted the vulnerable in society. It is in dark times that the need for light and hope is felt most keenly as ‘even in the darkest of times we have the right to expect some illumination’ (Arendt, 1983, preface).

The largest numbers of fatalities during the Troubles occurred in the years 1971-1972. In the preceding years and during those darkest of days, it was church leaders who pleaded with perpetrators of violence to desist and called on Protestants and Catholics to reach across the sectarian divisions in a spirit of peace and justice. In 1991, Eric Gallagher, a former president of the Methodist Church in Ireland, shared his conviction that when the history of the opening years of the Trou-

bles came to be written, 'the courageous and penetrating statements of many Churchmen will stand up to scrutiny' (Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 156). The following are a selection of statements made by what are traditionally the four larger churches, which provide a snapshot of leadership in practice and demonstrate the capacity for alternative, ethical visioning.

The statements at the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland in 1964 and the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland in 1965, deplore the discrimination experienced by Catholics in a Unionist dominated state and call on their membership to act with justice and charity. The emphasis on taking responsibility for the breakdown in Catholic and Protestant relations proceeds from an awareness that key to societal transformation is owning discriminatory behaviour and asking forgiveness from those who suffered its effects. The churches are reminding their membership that following Christ means living out the core Christian values of justice, mercy, truth, and peace.

### **Annual Conference of the Methodist Church in Ireland (1964)**

Voted overwhelmingly to open discussions with the Catholic Church on social and religious questions. It was time for Northern Protestants to be in the forefront of the campaign for social justice for Northern Catholics. Methodism "deplores any uncharitable discriminatory attitude to another person and ... welcomes the call of the government of Northern Ireland upon all citizens ... to use their influence to create a better atmosphere and discourage discrimination in all its forms".

(1964, quoted in Tanner, 2003, pp. 355-356)

### **General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland (1965)**

The Assembly in proposing a study of religious discrimination urged “our own people humbly and frankly to acknowledge and to ask forgiveness for any attitudes and actions towards our Roman Catholic fellow-countrymen (sic) which have been unworthy of our calling as followers of Jesus Christ” and “to resolve to deal with all conflicts of interests, loyalties or beliefs always in a spirit of charity rather than of suspicion and intolerance and in accordance with truth as set forth in the Scriptures”.

(1965, quoted in Megahey, 2000, p. 159)

This perspective is reiterated in the statement by the Irish Council of Churches (ICC), an ecumenical body that included the main Protestant churches in Ireland. The ICC recognised that a lack of understanding, historical grievances, and fear were at the root of the societal breakdown and that intercommunity dialogue that reminded people of shared Christian values was needed.

### **Statement by the Irish Council of Churches (1970)**

For far too long manifest grievances have been ignored, and sincerely held fears remained unexamined. True religion in Ireland will suffer irreparable damage if we do not quickly come to terms with the need to spell out what it means to be a Christian in a divided community such as ours.

(1970, quoted in Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 145)

The introduction of internment on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1971 saw an escalation of paramilitary and state violence, which resulted in higher death

rates that included innocent children among the victims. Cardinal Conway and Bishop Daly unreservedly condemned all violence and called on the IRA to end their violence and pursue their political ends democratically.

Cardinal William Conway, worried at the escalation of violence, begged “those people, few in number, who are seeking a solution by violent means ... to consider what this vicious circle of which they are part is doing to innocent people, Catholic and Protestant, in terms of physical and mental suffering ... to reflect on what is likely to be left at the end of a trial of destruction and death”.

(Cardinal Conway, 1971,  
quoted in Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 158)

When he was Bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise, Cathal Daly, who strongly believed that there is no alternative to dialogue, challenged IRA violence as a means to a political solution.

[When] the real national problem is one of establishing mutual peace and trust between different communities within Ireland, talk of violent solutions is self-contradictory. Force as a solution to the present Irish problem must be unconditionally condemned and renounced.

(Bishop Daly, 1971, quoted in Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 162)

But worse was to come, and in 1972 more than 500 people, the majority of whom were civilians, were murdered in the conflict. Fearing an escalation of violence, Catholic and Protestant church leaders

issued a joint statement, the first of its kind. In it they stated that they felt ‘the great grief and pain of our people at each injury or death in our land, no matter who is involved. We share also the desire for peace and justice, for security and liberty alike for Protestant and Catholic’ (Heads of the churches, 3 February 1972, quoted in Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 162).

On 20 March 1973 the British Government produced a Westminster White Paper entitled *Northern Ireland Constitutional Proposals*, which it hoped offered a political solution to end the violence in Northern Ireland. The proposal was for power-sharing in Northern Ireland that would take the form of a seventy-eight-member Assembly in Belfast, elected by proportional representation. The government affirmed that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland would remain unchanged, and it included a provision for North-South links (Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 167). The Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh, George Simms, supported the proposals as ‘a fair and workable basis from which to move forward towards overcoming the problems of Northern Ireland’. He appealed to all people to ‘adopt a constructive approach and to avoid words and actions that would wreck the present attempt to take us out of our violence and instability ... Let us build not destroy’ (22 March 1973, quoted in Ó Corráin, 2006, p. 167). The archbishop’s plea to create a shared Northern Ireland for everyone anticipated the direction of travel, which was eventually agreed in 1998, 25 years later.

These statements stand out precisely because they go against the sectarian grain that was hard wired into the systems and structures that maintained Northern Ireland. This divisive and sectarian context is succinctly described by Duncan Morrow:

Despite the sizeable, alienated Catholic 'minority', Unionist governments vigorously asserted the Protestant British identity of Northern Ireland. In the absence of a single dominant Protestant church, the motor of organised political Protestantism was the pan-Protestant Orange Order emphasising political unity along religious lines in militant opposition to Catholicism. While not every Protestant was in the Order, every significant member of Cabinet before 1972 was an Orangeman. Over fifty years, no Catholic served in government. Catholics were measurably disadvantaged on every available social and economic measure and underrepresented in policing and public services.

(Morrow, 2022)

Given that religious and political identities acted as boundary-makers defining insiders and outsiders, the majority and the minority, those supporting the union and those perceived as being against it, these church declarations are unprecedented for their time.

Twenty-five years on from the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement we continue to struggle to share power and build an inclusive Northern Ireland. The commitment to resolve our differences democratically, and reject violence as a solution, is transformative and the only basis for a shared future. The ethical foundation for moving forward, affirmed by these church statements from 1964 to 1973, speaks to our own time. These Judeo-Christian values of justice, mercy, truth, and peace are human values shared by neighbour religions and humanist philosophies of life. Can these core values that inspired church leadership from the mid 60s and early 70s help us to new understandings

of what it means to be eco-humans in this time? Can our church and political leadership be a light on the journey to a common good future for all?

This chapter will explore ethical values that enable and support a society living towards the people's vision of a common good. By way of example, it will unpack foundational stories that informed the Jewish covenantal society and outline the UNESCO humanist vision for value-based education. Turning to the Northern Ireland context, we will use education as a lens to better understand how a failure to embrace common good values has negatively impacted people. And given the affirmation from participants in this project that reconciliation of people, ideas and aspirations must lie at the heart of a common good and shared society, we will end with a reflection on education for reconciliation.

### **Educational Resources for the Common Good**

An exploration of the stories informing the Jewish vision of a covenant community can deepen our understanding of the common good values that enable reconciliation and make peace possible. Essentially, Genesis, the first book of the Bible, is a book about human relations, human choices, and human potential. These stories shed light also on the question of common good leadership.

The opening chapter of Genesis affirms that human freedom and the capacity to create is a consequence of being made in God's image and that humankind are God's partners in the work of creation (Genesis 1:27-28). The phrase, 'God saw everything that He (sic) made, and indeed it was very good' (Genesis 1: v 31) connects the act of creativity and the capacity to see good in all living things. Rabbi Jonathan

Sacks, a Jewish philosopher and theologian, interprets this as affirmation that the human vocation is to look for the good in others and the natural world and nurture it, thus facilitating the creative process. He is clear that:

The rules of justice, mercy, charity, compassion, regard for the poor, love for the neighbour and the stranger, delicacy of speech and sensitivity to the easily injured feelings of others, are all variants on the theme of respect for the human other as an image and likeness of the Divine Other.

(Sacks, 2009, pp. 37-38)

The stories about Noah and Abraham are about ethical leadership in a time of crisis. Both obey God's call and are rewarded for their faithfulness. God promises through Noah to be in covenantal relationship with all living things; and through Abraham to be in covenantal relationship with those who claim Yahweh as their ancestor: Jews, Christians, Muslims, Baha'i, Yezidi, Druze, Samaritans, and Rastafari. Sacks reminds us that these covenants are value-based agreements that affirm the goodness in creation and can inspire in their adherents a commitment to work for the common good (2007, p. 110). What interests the Genesis storytellers is not how Noah and Abraham are similar, but how they are different and what this tells us about their capacity to lead.

The Noah story, like the creation accounts, is Jewish myth, not meant to be interpreted literally yet containing profound truths about life and human nature. What we learn about Noah is that he was faithful to God and honest in his dealings with other people. He is

described as ‘a righteous man’ (Genesis 6 v 9). Yet, he has a human flaw, which in the end limits his capacity to lead. According to the story, when the flood waters recede, Noah is incapable of leading the survivors off the ark to dry land. Unable to take the initiative he waits, and then waits some more (Genesis 8: 6-16). We learn he is waiting to be told by God what to do. Sacks tells us that the message in the story is that ‘when it comes to rebuilding a shattered world, you do not wait for permission’ (2009, p. 45). True leaders must use their initiative, read the signs of the times and act accordingly. To do nothing, or to wait to be told what to do, is another way of avoiding responsibility. Obedience is not enough, leaders must lead!

Unlike Noah, Abraham is a man of action. He is at his weakest when he refuses to take responsibility. We are told he fought those who captured his nephew, Lot, accepting moral responsibility for the boy’s safety (Genesis 14: 14-16). When he learns that God intends to destroy the inhabitants of Sodom because of their wickedness, Abraham pleads with God to act with justice and spare them on account of any righteous persons living in their midst (Genesis 18: 25). Abraham believed in the possibility of human goodness, in the human potential to begin again and in taking collective responsibility for the Sodomites. In arguing with God on their behalf, he showed a capacity to live by his convictions and assert his freedom. These are the marks of ethical leadership. Again, this is another example of a wonderfully written story, not meant to be taken literally but instead telling us something about the Jewish understanding of just and ethical action.

God needs humanity to become His (sic) partner in the administration of justice. He (sic) needs to hear a dissent-

ing voice. No judge, however omniscient and infallible, can execute justice in the absence of counter argument. This is why Judaism - the religion for which justice is central - is a religion of argument and debate, for the sake of heaven, even if it involves argument with heaven itself.

(Sacks, 2009, p. 107)

Just leaders never rush to judgement. They insist on hearing all sides and are committed to dialogue, and even argument, to get at the truth. There can be no justice without truth, no matter how long it takes to discover it. To bypass truth and the consultation process, which is a necessary stage on the way to justice, is to fail those in need of justice and rob them of ethical leadership. The church leaders and church bodies mentioned earlier spoke truth amid sectarian violence, calling on perpetrators of violence to choose a democratic way forward and for the people of Northern Ireland to heal their divisions. They argued with all sides to choose the good and act with justice. They didn't give up on anyone.

The second half of the book of Genesis focuses on the rivalry between brothers Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, which result in enmity. In both stories goodness trumps evil and the brothers are reconciled, but not before the guilty parties acknowledge their wrong-doing and learn from their mistakes. A brief analysis of the Jacob and Esau story illustrates the very human journey from rivalry to reconciliation. Yet again, it is wonderful storytelling.

Jacob and Esau are the sons of Isaac and are Abraham's grandsons. Although they are twins, Esau was born first and Isaac, who has a special relationship with him, intends that he have his blessing which

promises wealth and power. Isaac's wife Rebekah, however, favours Jacob and persuades him to disguise himself as Esau and take the blessing from his father, which gives him primacy over his brother. When Esau learns that he has been tricked out of his inheritance he is understandably angered and vows revenge. Jacob escapes his brother's anger by leaving to stay with his uncle, Laban. When he eventually returns home, Jacob learns his brother has married a Hittite woman. Rebekah wants Jacob to marry a descendent of Abraham, so sends him back to Laban, who has two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Before leaving, Isaac blesses Jacob a second time and promises him children and land (Genesis 28: 4). In so doing, Isaac marks Jacob as the one who will continue the covenant given to Abraham into the future. He will be the future leader of the Israelites, not Esau.

According to the story, 22 years pass before the brothers meet again and by then they are very different people. Having been tricked by his father-in-law, Laban, into marrying Leah instead of Rachel, Jacob understands what it feels like to be robbed of his heart's desire. And even though he is given Rachel as his second wife, the enmity between the sisters, because of Laban's trickery, is a constant reminder of the pain he caused Esau. Jacob still harbouring the belief that Esau will seek revenge, and not wanting to war with his brother, sends gifts from his herds and flocks in advance of their meeting. The night before they meet in person the story relates an encounter between Jacob and a mysterious stranger, whom Jacob has no doubt is God (Genesis 32:30). Jacob emerges from this battle a different man, limping and with a new name, 'Israel', which means 'he who wrestles with God and never lets go' (Sacks, 2009, p. 228). Sacks sheds light on the purpose of the encounter: 'It was Jacob's inner battle with existential

truth. Who was he? The man who longed to be Esau? Or the man called to a different destiny, “the road less travelled,” the Abrahamic covenant?’ (2009, p. 227). To become himself and follow his own destiny, Jacob must let go of the mimetic rivalry that has defined his relationship with his brother and give Esau back the original blessing of wealth and power, his birthright.

This Jacob does the very next day. But before he can seek his brother’s forgiveness, ‘Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept’ (Genesis 33 v 4). The story underlines that Esau has already forgiven Jacob and is in a hurry to be reconciled. Jacob, however, wants to acknowledge his wrongdoing and make amends. He bows seven times before his brother and his family and servants, following his example, also bow down. We are told that five times Jacob addresses Esau as ‘my lord’ and twice he refers to himself as Esau’s ‘servant’. Sacks explains that what Jacob is doing is giving Esau back the blessing he stole from him in their youth. The herds and flocks represent wealth, and his body language and words signal that he is recognising Esau’s power. He acknowledges that he should never have taken the blessing in the first place and that it was never meant for him (2009, p. 226). Sacks unpacks what these stories of mimetic rivalry and eventual reconciliation mean in the Jewish tradition:

We believe that sufferings, evil and imperfections are not the inevitable lot of man (sic); they are not woven into the fabric of the universe that God created and pronounced seven times “good”. Justice, freedom, human dignity, equality of respect, integrity and compassion are to be fought for here, not in heaven.

(Sacks, 2009, p. 237)

These biblical stories endorse the Jewish insights that these are the values that make us truly human and are the basis of a covenantal society where all living things can flourish, a common good society. This covenantal vision, Sacks believes, could become the basis for a global covenant that nations could collectively commit to. One that affirms human rights and human responsibilities, acknowledges our shared humanity and interdependence, while also respecting the diversity of peoples, beliefs, and cultures (2003, p. 206).

Jacob can only become the leader he was destined to be when he chooses to let go of the zero-sum rivalry that has characterised their relationship and which has locked them in the past. Both brothers have a legitimate contribution and different paths to follow. While we are not privy to Esau's inner conversion, the fact that he took the initiative to forgive Jacob is an indication of his transformation. Jacob's fear of any retaliatory action is shown to be unfounded. Both have let go the rivalry and can move forward together. They meet as equals and Jacob by symbolically returning Esau's birth-rite is ensuring that the future is founded on justice and right relations.

This story has significance for the healing of relationships in Northern Ireland. Until we as a community can let go our sectarian past and zero-sum rivalries we cannot journey together into a reconciled and just future. The same goes for those in leadership. If those who have a political mandate to lead remain in opposition and tethered to the past, they will not be able to assume their responsibilities to create a reconciled and peaceful future for everyone in Northern Ireland. Engaging with our stories, biblical, political, and historical, in a spirit of critical reflection has the potential to transform our understanding, relationships and community for the common good.

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), recognising the importance of preparing people of all ages to meet 21<sup>st</sup> century ethical challenges, produced an educational resource in 2015 entitled, *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO in the publication's Foreword indicates the importance of re-visioning education to meet local, national, and global challenges:

There is no more powerful transformative force than education – to promote human rights and dignity, to eradicate poverty and deepen sustainability, to build a better future for all, founded on equal rights and social justice, respect for cultural diversity, and international solidarity and shared responsibility, all of which are fundamental aspects of our common humanity.

(UNESCO, 2015, p. 4)

This ethical vision that resonates with the Jewish covenantal model, underpins the humanist approach to education adopted by UNESCO, which is founded on the moral principles of environmental stewardship, peace, inclusion, and social justice. The emphasis in the document on the need to protect all life forms and affirm human dignity, puts human rights education at the heart of UNESCO's approach. Raising awareness of the issues that give rise to violence, which include conflicts over land, power and wealth, in addition to teaching conflict resolution skills to negotiate a non-violent solution, are key components in the strategy. The document reaffirms a 'common core of universal values' that UNESCO believes are foundational if we are to achieve sustainability and peace in our world (2015, p. 29). These

include: ‘respect for life and human dignity, equal rights and social justice, cultural and social diversity, and a sense of human solidarity and shared responsibility for our common future’. The educational methodology UNESCO employs is dialogical, with an emphasis on critical thinking and analysis, problem solving and the acquisition of skills (2015, p. 38). The four pillars of education that the organisation adheres to are given fresh articulation to take account of 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges, particularly in relation to living sustainably on the earth. They are:

1. Learning to know – acquiring knowledge.
2. Learning to do – skills-based action to manage complex situations.
3. Learning to be - developing confidence, judgement, personal responsibility.
4. Learning to live together - building relations with other people from diverse backgrounds and with the natural environment.

(UNESCO, 2015, p. 39)

Both the biblical and UNESCO resources agree on the fundamentals of our common humanity. Whether teaching through story, or the application of integrated pillars of education, they have a shared purpose - to assist people to build the common good together.

### **Educational Deficit: Challenges to the Common Good**

A society with competing visions of the good life and where compromise can be interpreted as ‘selling out’ your group identity, whether political or cultural or religious, can often become mired in conflict

that deepens division. Education, akin to the model practiced by UNESCO has the potential to liberate people into a space where it is possible to embrace difference and diversity, enabling the move from competition to cooperation. If, however, the educational system institutionalises the divisions along sectarian lines, this limits opportunities for engagement toward creating a common good society together.

Societal divisions in Northern Ireland are still entrenched, impacting our capacity to communicate and build relationships of trust and understanding across the religio-political boundaries. The border in the Irish sea brought about by Brexit and signed off in the Windsor Agreement has stoked the fears of many within the unionist community that this economic deviation from the rest of the UK signals a weakening of the union. There is consequently little capacity to hear or engage with a different narrative or interpretation. As a presenter on one of the 'Is There A Common Good?' programmes explained: 'The deep issue of sectarianism is that we look at each other through our experience of the 'other' and our experience of power. And the really big challenge is, can we find a different way to hear our stories? How do we do story-hearing?'. Interrogating our respective narratives and recognising how they interconnect, challenge and contribute towards complex shared histories and stories has the potential to enable mutual understanding.

Historian, David Olusoga believes that a greater threat to the union than Brexit is the failure of schools in the UK to teach the history of all four nations. His four-part series for the BBC entitled 'Union' (2023) provides a well-researched overview of the development of the union that began in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Olusoga confirms that economics have been crucial to the strengthening of the union when all have

benefitted from shared wealth but can also become the great divider when the disparity between rich and poor and between nations increases. He suggests that what matters most economically is how wealth is shared.

Relationships depend on knowing our own and each other's stories and being able to ask critical questions of our collective stories to gain a more truthful perspective that can inform current understandings and relationships. Several contributors to the project spoke of the lack of training given in critical thinking, and in the skills needed to engage in dialogue and negotiate during their time in the education system. They wondered if these skills were high on the current school curriculum, or if the emphasis was more on banking knowledge to pass exams. One participant summarised key concerns that require attention:

What might a holistic approach to education look like that would produce creative and critical thinking and inclusive relationships? How do we promote critical thinking in civic society as well as among young people? Are we comfortable with critical questions in schools, churches, and civil society at large?

(Programme Participant)

Teaching children and adults to become independent thinkers, to ask questions and engage with those who have different experiences and perspectives, was affirmed as essential preparation for life. Unfortunately, generations of young people have left the education system without learning these life skills.

My generation were like cannon fodder for Unionist politicians. We believed what we were fed. We weren't taught how to be critical thinkers. I would also suggest that my community does not know how to dialogue well, to reason together without splitting or walking away. I think this is an art that needs to be taught ... Where have we become closed to new ideas? As a Protestant and unionist, it seems like my community has been on the defending side - defender of the Crown, we find ourselves always on the defence, it seems to me, we have lost the art of imagination. Might it be possible to risk not being on the defence?

(Programme Participant)

This inability to critique a given narrative, and defensiveness if this articulation is challenged, is characteristic also of those who identify as Catholic and nationalist. Máiría Cahill, a former Sinn Féin activist and former SDLP Councillor, underlines the propensity for silo thinking: 'We don't have a mature, reflective approach to dealing with what happened over the course of the conflict here. We still have fault lines, which are run through green and orange sectarian lines' (19<sup>th</sup> November 2020, Cahill, quoted in O'Malley, 2023, p. 113). The community pressure to defend the narrative can be such that in Protestant circles, not to do so can be equated with betrayal, the dreaded 'Lundy' syndrome, and in Catholic circles with dishonouring the memory of the past and those who died defending it.

What is it that those on both sides are defending? Not only is the union between England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland on shaky ground, according to Olusoga (2023), the once powerful British

and Protestant empire no longer exists. The resurgence of nationalism that resulted in Brexit, was a consequence of an English crisis of identity. When unionists defend the union, the link to monarchy and the British Government, how secure is the foundation they are standing on? Sinn Féin talks the language of reconciliation and the importance of engaging Unionists in dialogue regarding the nature of a future united Ireland. However, their refusal to apologise for IRA violence during the Troubles, or even to admit that the armed struggle was the wrong road to peace, prevents the necessary healing of relationships needed to create a shared and reconciled future. Naomi Long, when she was Minister of Justice in the Northern Ireland Executive, before its most recent collapse, cites the example of commemoration to expose the fault line in Sinn Féin thinking:

Until they [Sinn Féin] manage to find a way of commemorating and marking the dead that doesn't extend to glorifying the IRA's actions they will continue to be a barrier to unity on this island.

(Long, 2020, quoted in O'Malley, 2023, p. 200)

There is no going back to the past, and those trapped in ideologies of the past or closed narratives are incapable of imagining a different future. Only when we can let go of our fears and allow the space for hope to grow will we find the courage to build a shared future together. This means learning to trust the process and each other. An educational approach that does not teach critical thinking, dialogue, communication skills and conflict resolution, lacks the potential to lead us out of our insecurities and divisions, into a future pregnant

with hope in a shared vision of our common good.

Another block to the common good in Northern Ireland is an education system that for the most part continues to educate Catholic and Protestant children separately, is inordinately expensive to run due to duplication and, in the experience of some, could do more to bridge the class divide.

I passed the 11-plus, but I was only one of two people in my class who passed it and the same thing happened in my children's school. I remember sitting in a room when I was training as a teacher and people talking about everybody in the class passing the 11-plus. I thought everybody had the same experience as me, I didn't know that you could pay for somebody to come in and help you or help your children. ... There's such a barrier, it's an invisible barrier and even when I went to university, even the way people spoke, the language they had, I don't have that language ... I'd say, 'fear of a foreigner', they'd say 'xenophobe' ... I wasn't part of that world. I became part of that world later but it's so inaccessible to you when you're outside it.

(Programme Interviewee)

As mentioned in Chapter Three, Michael J. Sandel in his book, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* exposes the injustice at the heart of our meritocratic system that ignores the inequalities in society which result in different life experiences and opportunities within families. Meritocracy operates from the premise that those who do well in school and university, and end up in good careers, earn their success by themselves. And those who leave

education with few qualifications and find themselves in low-paying jobs with zero-hour contracts, have only themselves to blame. This not only ignores how economics and class impact learning experiences but also the way children and young adults are psychologically impacted by their experiences of success or failure (2020, pp. 116-119). Agreeing with Sandel, Riordan indicates that ‘...the public display of success and failure results in a loss of solidarity and any sense of interdependence within society’ (2023, p. 316). One of the participants on the project, while not using the language of meritocracy, also raised the dangers of an individualistic approach to education that militated against social solidarity and social responsibility:

As long as we are educating our young ones to strive to be the most competitive and look for those salaries that reflect a particular type of lifestyle, then we can’t change anything. It starts with education. Should we be teaching them competition is more important than cooperation? It’s a matter of changing the way we look at things.

(Programme Participant)

Teaching children of different abilities and from different socio-political, economic, religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds collectively, is the best preparation for developing a cohesive and fairer society.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement recognised the importance of integrated education to heal divisions and create a more inclusive society. The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) produced, *A Shared Future: Policy and Strategic Framework for Good Relations in Northern Ireland* (2005), which used the

language of shared and inter-cultural education. Shared education allows for the sharing of resources and pupil contact and collaboration while retaining separate schools. A 2010 OFMDFM publication entitled, *Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration Consultation Document* confirms a shift away from an emphasis on integrated education toward the promotion of good relations between schools and wider use of school premises and resources. The *Programme for Government (2011-2015)* makes no mention of integrated education and reiterates the importance of shared education for all children in Northern Ireland. The most recent *Programme for Government Draft Outcomes Framework Consultation Document (2021)* indicates that support will be given for shared and integrated education without spelling out what in practice this means. What is unclear also is the direction of travel. Is shared education a strategy that will lead to structural reform in the direction of integrated schools for all, or a way of maintaining the existing system of separate schools? The support for shared education is to be welcomed and it may be a stepping stone to further integration. Time will tell. On a practical note, questions were raised by numerous project participants about the cost of maintaining a divided society. Given the stringencies of the current economic climate can we continue to educate children separately?

In a small town near me we've got four primary schools. Think of the economic cost of that, four principals and four vice-principals. Think what could be done if you'd one big primary school delivering a good education, the money saved could go towards the National Health Service.

(Programme Interviewee)

## Education for Reconciliation

When the political parties in Northern Ireland agreed a final document that would become the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, they understood the importance of establishing an ethical framework for engagement across all three strands. In the Preamble they commit to furthering reconciliation, adhering to the democratic process, upholding 'the human rights of all,' and developing a 'partnership' approach founded on the principles of 'equality and mutual respect' (1998, p. 1). The end goal, reiterated in the first *Programme for Government*, is the establishment of a 'peaceful, stable, cohesive, prosperous and fair society' (2008-2011, p. 5). These values are core to the functioning of government and represent a break with the past and a fresh start. They remain the value base for good governance that would be for the common good of all citizens in Northern Ireland. The fact that Stormont has been in a state of collapse for over 40% of its existence underlines the contentious nature of political relations, particularly between the two largest Unionist and Nationalist parties whose 'ongoing rivalry over the ultimate national destination of Northern Ireland has institutionalised deterrence, made segregation the norm and violence the expectation' (Morrow, 2006, p. 65).

The reality is that the commitment to reconciliation, partnership, equality and mutual respect, as a methodology and goal, floundered in the years following the signing of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and establishment of a devolved government. Accepting responsibility for the past, with its sectarian system, and the atrocities that occurred during the Troubles, asking forgiveness and committing to a non-violent and shared future, is the only path to reconciliation. To avoid this is to avoid responsibility for the past. Equally, a partnership approach

aimed at creating a peaceful and stable future is unworkable when Unionists and Nationalist parties adhere to opposing constitutional aspirations for the future. Power-sharing, consequently, has been stymied from the outset. Without a commitment to an agreed narrative about the past and the future the present is unworkable. There is no real adherence to the principles of equality and mutual respect, instead the reality is mutual suspicion and zero-sum politicking. Duncan Morrow points out that by 2006 and the St Andrews Agreement the commitment to peace and reconciliation, and the provision of 'equality law, integrated education, shared housing, civic forums, bills of rights or a shared future' was downplayed (Morrow, 2017, p. 2). Instead, all that was required to re-establish devolution was evidence of disarmament by the IRA, Sinn Féin's commitment to new policing arrangements, and commitment to operate North-South institutions by the Democratic Unionists. A return to the vision for reconciliation and peace and the value base contained in the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) offers the best way forward for healing relationships in Northern Ireland, as well as strengthening relations North-South and East-West. Morrow reminds us:

Without the Agreement, there is nothing in Irish history which acknowledges the requirement for partnership, equality, and mutual respect. And there is nothing which commits everyone to "exclusively democratic and peaceful means of resolving differences on political issues." The Agreement re-orientated the constitutional relationship of two states to each other and to Northern Ireland. Ireland made this explicit by changes to two Articles of the writ-

ten constitution. The UK modified the doctrine of parliamentary sovereignty by accepting in an international treaty that the constitutional settlement of Ireland was a matter for the people of Ireland alone “without external impediment”. By acknowledging that British sovereignty in Northern Ireland reflected consent, anti-imperial reasons to refuse legitimacy vanished. Uniquely, every person could choose to be “Irish or British or both” in every and all futures - and would be treated with absolute equality. Any one of these changes would have been historic, but to contain them in one document was truly breathtaking. More urgently, the Agreement underpinned the rule of law and assured citizen equality.

(Morrow, 2018, p. 3)

While 25 years on there is need for change to some of the agreed mechanisms to account for a different context, in essence the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement offers us the best blueprint for a truly reconciled and peaceful future.

Two of the principal architects of the Agreement, who put their political futures on the line for the sake of the common good of the people of Northern Ireland, former leader of the UUP, David Trimble, and former leader of the SDLP, John Hume, shared its vision. Their words continue to inspire and challenge us to do better. Like the church leaders quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Trimble and Hume demonstrated true leadership. Their courage and commitment to reconciliation, peace and justice was based on an honesty about the failings of the past and a vision of a shared and fair future for all. The

lectures each delivered when receiving the Nobel Prize for Peace are a testimony to their earthed wisdom and ethical praxis.

... The mountain, if we could but see it clearly, is not in front of us but behind us, in history - a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is a dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish.

But both communities must leave it behind because both created it. Each thought it had good reason to fear the other ... Ulster Unionists, fearful of being isolated on the island, built a solid house, but it was a cold house for Catholics. And northern nationalists, although they had a roof over their heads, seemed to us as if they meant to burn the house down.

(Trimble, 1998)

I want to see Ireland as an example to men and women everywhere of what can be achieved by living for ideals, rather than fighting for them, and by viewing each and every person as worthy of respect and honour.

I want to see an Ireland of partnership where we wage war on want and poverty, where we reach out to the marginalised and dispossessed, where we build together a future that can be as great as our dreams allow.

(Hume, 1998)

Their words ring as true today as they did 25 years ago. Their vision and hopes for Northern Ireland and its people continue to inspire. And their honesty about the challenges that beset us then - sectarianism, violence and individualism, still remain obstacles to a liberating and empowering future. Their words not only speak into the present context but give hope, as they did then, that the future can be different if we give reconciliation in all its strands - socio-political, socio-economic, socio-ecological, socio-legal, socio-psychological and socio-spiritual a real try. It is up to everyone to realise our potential to become a truly reconciled people and for that vision to become reality we need truthful, compassionate and inclusive civic engagement and conversations within Northern Ireland and across these islands.

One of the programme participants succinctly described the direction of travel needed to become a truly ethical and responsible society:

Can we, as an inclusive Northern Irish society, create a context for meaningful conversations during which we could hear and understand one another? How might we reimagine peace in Northern Ireland? It took George Mitchell three years of persistent dialogue, of listening and hearing, before he led the politicians to the Agreement. It is my thinking that it could take us another 10 years of robust conversations to get to a place that we might call 'reconciliation'. Could we create the context for more inclusive conversations like 'Is There a Common Good?' I suggest there may be an appetite for this kind of conversation across the political, civic and generational sections of our society.

(Programme Participant)

Civic conversations on the six integrated strands of reconciliation are core to any education for reconciliation process. This project produced a resource to facilitate this process (Higgins and McMaster, 2022) and the pdf format can be accessed through the Irish School of Ecumenics website. Engagement on these themes will provide opportunities to share experiences, hear different perspectives, hone critical thinking and enhance dialogue skills. The educational methodology facilitates the creation of community and supports the shift from 'I' consciousness to 'We' consciousness. Civic conversations of this type also provide space to build trust, let go of zero-sum thinking, understand process and become empowered in shaping and having ownership of this place we call home.

American philosopher, Martha Nussbaum underlines the importance of education for producing citizens skilled in the art of dialogue, creative imagination and committed to reconciliation with other peoples and the earth. She lists three capacities she believes are essential in cultivating what she calls 'a world citizen':

1. The capacity to critique inherited meanings and values from within one's own tradition so that one can own and represent that identity with conviction.
2. The capacity to recognise and understand that all people share a common humanity that finds expression in and through diverse racial, cultural, religious and sexual embodiments.
3. The capacity to employ narrative imagination, that is the ability to empathise with other people who are very different from ourselves.

(Nussbaum, 1997, quoted in Riordan, 2017, p. 138)

Personal formation in these core capacities will produce local citizens who will be equipped to become leaders in reconciliation and peace building in Northern Ireland, the border counties and further afield. If we could learn to trust the education for reconciliation process and be open to where it will lead, rather than deciding the destination in advance, the future can surprise us. We can shape our own future and create the society we want if there is the will to do so.

One of the presenters on the project spoke of the creative possibilities that might be generated in a Citizens' Assembly.

I think we need an open space where we do what we can, which is learning to do what we don't quite know how to do, and that means you need an open space where things are left a little bit open for invention and for discovery and for experiment. I think that's how we will experiment our way into the future, not instruct our way into the future. Because talking about 'we should' or 'we must' or 'we ought to' all the time, rather than saying, 'let's try this', or 'let's do this', or 'if we did a bit more of this' it becomes an easier conversation. And so, a Citizens' Assembly, if it helps us to the practical question of 'what might we do to think about a way to move forward together?', might generate a notion of common good, or of good in which we recognise each other.

(Programme Presenter)

A Northern Ireland Youth Assembly comprised of 90 young people from the ages of 12 to 16 has been in existence since 2021. It provides an opportunity for young people to engage together on issues that

concern them, and influence policy decisions taken by politicians and other decision makers. An adult Citizens' Assembly is in operation in the Republic of Ireland, in Scotland, and in Wales. The time is ripe for a Citizens' Assembly in Northern Ireland and the question of how to move forward together to get to the common good would certainly be a pertinent starting point for reflection and discussion. For democracy to work and function well we need a political system and engaged civic society that prioritises the common good.

There is the need also for local civic conversations that bring people together from across the community to engage in a similar process of reflection and dialogue. These could be established in each council area and help shape what happens in their respective areas. Establishing these processes and structures provides channels for all voices to be heard, especially the marginalised, and for people's experiences and insights to inform and transform our civic and political systems. Civic conversations across the island of Ireland, along with civic conversations between people on this island of Ireland with those living in England, Scotland, and Wales, have the potential to deepen understanding and shape future relations within and between these islands. The more opportunities there are for co-creative processes and the establishing of networks of connection that build trust, the better we will become at risking relationship, experiencing solidarity and building a common life together. For the space of the common good is the co-created space where honest encounters, mutual responsibility and radical activism can shape an ethically engaged response to the local and global challenges of our time.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# Being Eco-Human: An Eco-Anthropology for the Common Good

The weakness of some stripes, probably all stripes of Christianity is the primacy of the human. It is the primacy in fact, of the human male, made in the image of God, the man.

(Programme Interviewee)

Being human together (unity not polarisation). Acting as 'we' rather than 'me' ... Recognising that we are earth creatures and connected to nature ... Affirming the importance of harmony between humanity and nature as in Confucianism.

(Programme Participants)

I'm wondering is there a wisdom at the heart of those Indigenous religions in their powerlessness, as it were, that is very pertinent to this whole environmental/earth question ... you look at Native Americans, their religion was based on the earth and the sea and about what they saw and the earth was their mother, and what you took from the earth you gave back. And a lot of those kinds of religions, some of them are a thousand years older than Christianity ... The seasons were so important to them,

the manifestations of the moon and the sun and how that tied into their lives and the way they looked at the earth, the way they looked at the creation, because most of those religions still have creation theologies behind them ... And I think we lost a great deal by destroying those kinds of religions.

(Programme Interviewee)

John O'Donohue, Irish-Celtic philosopher, theologian, and mystic, related in his book of conversations with friend and former RTÉ broadcaster, John Quinn, the response of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez when asked by a friend, what did he think of his wife, Mercedes. 'Márquez who had been with Mercedes for forty years now, said to Mendoza, 'I know her so well now that I haven't the slightest idea who she is' (O'Donohue, 2015, p. 30). After a lifetime of a loving and intimate relationship, Márquez had still not plumbed the depths of the mystery of Mercedes as a human being. All religions recognise God or the Sacred as mystery, beyond us as humans. We do not always recognise the human as mystery, beyond even the closest significant other. There is a deep-down mystery in all of us, no matter how much we put others in racial, religious, cultural, ethnic, political, gender and class boxes. There is a mystery, a beyond-ness, a great deal more to all of us. Our boxes, designations and categories are hopelessly inadequate, superfluous and out of touch with the reality of being human.

English philosopher and atheist, John Gray, recognised that even back in the book of Isaiah, there was a realisation that the Deity may have withdrawn from the world, 'Awaiting some sign of a divine presence, they have encountered only *deus absconditus* - an absent God.'

Atheists may have lived in expectation of a truly human species, but Gray honestly recognises that ‘A truly human species remains as elusive as any Deity. Humanity is the *deus absconditus* of modern atheism’ (Gray, 2018, p.157).

Whether monotheist, theist or atheist, we are all awaiting the truly human species, but such is eluding all of us. We all live with the absence of God and the absence of the human.

In 1872 a letter was printed in the Times newspaper and signed ‘An Earnest Englishwoman.’ Her letter was entitled, ‘Are Women Animals?’. She attacked the fact that certain people were treated as lesser humans. She was angry that some might even be treated as inferior to animals. She began: ‘Sir, whether women are the equals of men has been endlessly debated; whether they have souls has been a moot point; but can it be too much to ask (for) a definitive acknowledgment that at least they are animals?’ She fumed at 650 parliamentary representatives, asking, ‘Is there not one among you then who will introduce such a motion? There would then be at least an equal interdict on wanton barbarity to cat, dog, or woman...’ (*The Times*, 1872, quoted in Bourke, 2011, p. 1). Women at this point in history were beginning to agitate for the vote, and the recognition of their humanity. The electoral reform of 1832 had excluded them and still most men.

The Earnest Englishwoman’s heartfelt cry was for women to be allowed to ‘become animal’ (at least in law) in order to reap protections that they were being denied on the grounds that they were not part of ‘mankind’. In her view, debased groups of humans could benefit by ‘becoming animal’, or at least appealing to broader sentient life.’

(Bourke, 2011, p.70)

Women were not in the category of, or perceived as humans and were obviously less than human, not even equal with cats and dogs. The 650 parliamentary representatives in 1872 were all men, titled and wealthy men, who no doubt saw themselves as the truly human. The titled, wealthy and powerful usually do, and view a lot of others as lesser beings who are not deserving of the same rights, dignity, respect and parity as those male elites. They were also White and that too was a mark of true humanity or humanness, on which Black slavery was based and the colonial conquest of most of the world by White Europeans was carried out. For the last 500 years of European imperial history, what did it mean to be truly human? In a world still largely dominated by the Atlantic-West, what does it mean to be truly human? It may be that the truly human species remains as elusive as any Deity.

### **Anthropological Delusions**

Anthropology is an attempt to say what it means to be human. The Colombian writer Márquez recognised that he did not know his most significant other. There is a deep-down mystery about being human. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the spirited and Earnest Englishwoman was pleading for women to be recognised, at least, as animals. The truly human was to be found in White, wealthy, and powerful males. The parliamentarians addressed in the letter to *The Times* had no sense of the mystery of being human. They knew beyond doubt what being human was and they were the norm, they knew that women were not human like them. It seems we have always lived with anthropological delusions.

Ivan Jablonka ends his book on a history of masculinity,

Becoming the father of my girls has been the greatest thing that has happened to me ... Before I leave this world, I will perhaps have the good fortune to see our sons become just men, and our daughters, free women.

(Jablonka, 2023, p. 340)

There is still some way to go before men are just and women are free. Meanwhile, there are anthropological delusions still with us, distorting what it means to be human.

### **Individualism**

A long way back in history, there is evidence that humans lived together with a sense of 'we', but something happened between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries in the West. Between the end of feudalism and the birth of the modern there was a movement from 'we' to 'I', from community to the self. It has been claimed that 'All roads in the seventeenth century led to individualism' (Christopher Hill, 1961, quoted in Sacks, 2020, p. 77). A key player in the shift from 'we' to 'I' was the Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther. Luther's famous assertion of individual conscience became a pre-Enlightenment mantra: 'Here I stand, I can do no other.' Luther went on to emphasise the primacy of the individual's direct encounter with and experience of God. What Luther introduced was the absolute individual apart from any social roles or belonging. Individualism was on its way to becoming the absolute of Western thought. By the next century 'I' had become core and central to the Western view of the human. The philosopher Immanuel Kant put the supreme emphasis on the human power of reason and his work has been described as translating Lutheranism

into the language of secularity (Sacks, 2020, p79).

The European Enlightenment, which is the ethos and worldview in which we Westerners live, gave us the principles of the free market, capitalism, democracy, and the rule of law. Also known as the Great Age of Reason, it gave us a better world at one level. The Enlightenment period was also an Age of Individualism, the autonomy of the self, with morals becoming a matter of personal taste. When French political theorist and aristocrat, Alexis de Tocqueville, travelled America in the 1860s he found something widespread and new and he called it 'individualism'. By that he did not mean egoism but a life environment where the individual isolates from the corporate body of society and leaves society to itself. That, de Tocqueville saw as the 'single greatest danger to democratic freedom in the long run. People would simply cease to interest themselves in the welfare of others, and they would leave that responsibility to the state' (de Tocqueville, 1830s, quoted in Sacks, 2020, p. 84).

Individualism is writ large in the Western mind-set. Human rights are individual rights, morality is an individualistic choice, the relationship with or experience of God is individualistic and reconciliation is often for religious and non-religious a solely vertical reconciliation with God, or a reconciliation between two individuals. Individualism drives the capitalist system, the creation of wealth and the ethos of life in Western society. But individualism is an anthropological delusion. It is anti-human and destructive of authentic humanity. It has destructive consequences for life in society and on the planet.

In place of the 'we', we have been left with the 'me', the solitary individual, whose needs, wants, and desires take precedence over the collective. Human society has evolved

to a stage where the rights of the individual, particularly those with wealth, power, and status, supersede all other rights and responsibilities.

(Way, Ali and Gilligan, 2018, quoted in Sacks, 2020, p. 86)

Individualism as the heart of what it means to be human, is not only a delusion but it cannot meet the social, communal and ecological challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Anthropocentrism**

Anthropocentrism is the human at the centre of the planet, even the universe. It places the human at the pinnacle of all that is, or in religious language, the crown of creation. Furthermore, anthropocentrism is the belief and praxis of life that everything else exists to serve the wants and needs of the human. All else only has value if it serves human needs and all else has no other reason for existing other than for the human.

In 1994 Václav Havel, the leader of the nonviolent Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia and its first President, addressed the Fourth of July gathering in Philadelphia. He highlighted the ideas of human rights and freedom that we have received from the Enlightenment, describing them as moral treasures. But he saw the problem of modernity as a 'lost integrity.' Homo sapiens do not seem capable of knowing nature and the world, regarding themselves as 'the pinnacle of creation and lord of the world'. Modern anthropocentrism for Havel, was 'deeply, fatally flawed, and we must reject the institutions and life ways that issue from its ethos and spirituality' (Havel, 1994, quoted in Rasmus-

sen, 2013, p. 112). Havel believed we are not mere individuals nor lords of the world. The lost integrity is the integrity of creation. 'We are mysteriously connected to the entire universe, we are mirrored in it, just as the entire evolution of the universe is mirrored in us.' Science and myth anchor us once more in the cosmos (Havel, 1974, quoted in Rasmussen, 2013, pp112-113).

Anthropocentrism is a delusion which is destructive of our humanness anchored in the cosmos. It has destroyed the human relatedness to nature with damaging consequences for nature. Religions have had a tendency to place the human in a primary place and role in relation to nature. Christianity historically in the West, has seen the human as lord of creation. There has not only been the primacy of the human but for most of Western history, the human as male, man. Luther in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in protest against the domination system of the Catholic Church, introduced absolute individualism, which reinforced and developed by later thinkers, came to dominate Western thought, religion, morality and the ethos and spirituality of Western life. Whether religious or secular, Westerners need a revolution in consciousness and relatedness.

## **The Anthropocene**

Being human in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and the 19<sup>th</sup> century shaped three illusions. Firstly, the Industrial Revolutions were made possible by the fossil fuels of coal, oil and gas. The great quantities of stored energy powered the Industrial Revolutions and allowed humans to bypass the rhythms and requirements of nature. We didn't need to live with the seasons anymore.

The second illusion was that 'humans could bring the ecosphere

under their control and liberate humankind from futility and toil.’ The third illusion was that scale doesn’t matter. We ‘... imagine that infinite growth on a finite planet can be arranged on that scale, whatever it can be, can be managed’ (Rasmussen, 2013, pp. 53-54). Limits offend our human view and way of life.

Scientists have replaced the biblical prophets, critiquing our consumerism and military consumerism, our limitless extraction of fossil fuels, our burning of the planet which is the human home. Major research and analyses of earlier planetary conditions have led scientists to conclude:

Evidence from several millennia shows that the magnitude and rates of human driven changes to the global environment are in many cases unprecedented. There is no previous analogue for the current operation of the Earth system.

(Rasmussen, 2013, p. 55)

Where we are now is being described as ‘a new era in the geological history of the Earth, “the Anthropocene”’ (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 55). Reading the signs of the aeons of time, the scientists know that there have been Earth crises before, but this is the first time that the crisis is due to human activities. *Anthropos* is the Greek word for ‘human’ and by describing the present geological era as ‘Anthropocene’ it puts the human activity at the heart of the ecological catastrophe. It electrifies the discussion now on the role of humans in nature and what it means to be human. This is not without raging controversy,

The proposal to rename our time 'the age of humans' has probably been even more disruptive outside the Earth Sciences, kindling intense debates, sustained discussions, and transformative new research in disciplines as wide ranging as philosophy and archaeology, anthropology, geography, history, engineering, ecology, design, law, the arts, and political science.

(Ellis, 2018, p. 3)

Religion and theology also need intense debates, sustained discussions and critical evaluation of thought and spirituality. The Anthropocene requires and demands radical adjustment of our perspectives and thought forms. Who was responsible for the Anthropocene? Some say the first farmers, others say it was the wealthy consumers of the Industrial Age. If the Anthropocene is the age of the human, and humans are destroying or have destroyed the planet, then what of the future? Will humans and the planet survive? Moreover, if humans are responsible for the catastrophe, can we mend the Earth? What is the human responsibility for the future? It seems that we as humans are a force of nature. Fortunately, as noted by Ellis, 'The story of the Anthropocene has only just begun. There is still time to shape a future in which both humans and non-human nature thrive together for millennia' (Ellis, 2018, p. 160). But while there may be time, is there the human capacity to do so? Individualism and anthropocentrism have nothing to say or contribute to the shaping of a flourishing planetary future. We need a larger sense of what it means to be human and of the relationship between humans and nature. We need an eco-anthropology.

## **Being More Authentically Human**

On dealing with the anthropological question, ‘what does it mean to be human?’ we need to be aware of a Western Eurocentric tendency to impose such categories on a diversity of ways of being human. Our Western Eurocentric thought forms and categories are not universal. Humans from Africa and Asia think and imagine differently and construct humanness differently. With this awareness and respect for the diversity, we can only answer the anthropological question from the Western and European context. There is nothing wrong with the European perspective in itself. It is who we are and where we come from. The problem arises when the Euro perspective becomes Eurocentric and is imposed on the rest of the world as the universal norm for being human. That is the history of European imperialism and domination of the world for the last 500 years. The legacy of this history is very much a live issue and poses huge challenges to Western and European hegemony, including European hegemonic thought and categories. Latin America and Asia remind us that the inequitable distribution of power and resources, creating extremes of wealth and poverty, is a violation of human dignity. Africa and African Americans will not allow us to forget that racism is one of the most destructive and illusory forms of human construction or in religious terms, idolatry. Women from different parts of the planet confront us with the destructiveness of patriarchy, the distortion of gender dualisms and male phobias and violence.

Anthropology is not an abstract or esoteric issue. It is dealing with the whole of life in its social and ecological dimensions. Anthropology is about real life, real people and real relationships, social systems and structures. Critically conscious of the challenges from other parts of

the planet to Western Eurocentrism, which are rooted in colonial experience and its legacies, a European response to anthropology needs to be critically nuanced and shaped by imagination beyond the European Enlightenment.

### **Being Human with Dignity, Worth and Respect**

Article 1 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* affirms that, 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.' It is a noble affirmation that we are all born free and equal in dignity and rights and we are to live in solidarity, in a belonging together. Because it is a universal declaration it does not reference any religious dimension or source. It is a very human declaration and rightly so.

The radical idea of humanism is that every human should be seen as having dignity and equal worth - simply by virtue of their humanity ... All human beings should have a right to dignity and to our concern.

(Copson and Roberts, 2020, p. 56)

For humanism, before we are categorised by nationality, race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender designation or cultural identity, we are human. It is simply by virtue of our humanity that we are to be seen and treated as having dignity and equal worth.

Humanism has always been foundational to being European and our thought and imagination. Foundational also are the Judeo-Christian and Islamic traditions. Along with Greek humanism, Jewish thought

and imagination shape our anthropology. This too has a radical idea. Out of a situation of trauma, dislocation and loss, Jews in Babylonian exile shaped their sacred writings. At the very beginning they placed a poem, a profound piece of mytho-poetry. In the trauma of exile they encountered the Babylonian creation myth, affirming creation out of violence and the human norm of violence, and the supremacy of the god Marduk. In keeping with neighbouring Near Eastern thought, only the king, the ruler at the top of the pyramid, was in the image of god. Taking the Babylonian creation myth, the Hebrews reworked it, subverted it and nuanced it in a radically different way. It is the mytho-poetry of Genesis 1, and one of its radical insights is that in a situation and a world where only the king was in the image of the divine, the Hebrew mytho-poetry affirmed that every human person was in the image of God and was stamped with the sacred and was of equal dignity, worth and respect. All humans carried sacredness, dignity and equality of worth. It was what made them authentically human.

Christianity's roots are in this Jewish tradition and it was Christianity that became the dominant Western and European tradition. From the fourth century it was Christendom, a structured, organised marriage of empire and Church. Jewish roots were quickly forgotten, even rejected as Christendom dominated the Western world. Yet Genesis 1 with the rest of the Hebrew texts became part of the Christian sacred canon. Even though Western Christianity read Genesis and the rest of the Hebrew Bible through 'Christian' supersessionist lens, excluding, even literally eliminating, Jews from history, the Genesis affirmation of every human in the image of God and of equal dignity and worth lingered on in the better side of Christian consciousness. It was a ma-

major influence in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

Islam as a partner in the Abrahamic tradition also affirms human dignity. “The outstanding and innate characteristic of human beings is dignity, or nobility, which the Revelation affirms in the most forceful terms: “And, indeed, we have conferred dignity on the children of Adam” (17:70), thus defining the natural human state’ (Ramadan, 2017, p. 73). This is not a dignity conferred on Muslims alone. It is a universal dignity, Adam being the inclusive symbol of all humans. The pathway of life is a rising up from the dignity that is the human natural state to a higher level, to be more dignified still.

Confucius (551-479 BCE) shaped much of Chinese thought and imagination. Confucianism is perhaps less a religion and more a system of social ethics. It continues as core to Chinese thought and imagination and is rooted in humanistic elements. In Confucianism spiritual beliefs become humanistic practices. The most important ethical value in Confucianism is *ren* which means ‘humanness, humanity’. It has a double meaning, as it means ‘a human being’ and refers also to human relations, co-humanity or humanity together. *Ren* is all the good things that happen when humans relate and meet. In Confucianism we are more authentically human, of dignity and worth, in relationships. The higher good of humanity is in togetherness.

### **Being Human in Relationships and as Social Beings**

Confucian anthropology holds this social and relational perspective as core. Confucianism and Buddhism have coexisted in China and much of South-East Asia. Buddhists have always claimed that humans are networks of relationships. We are more authentically human in relationships.

Humanism also with its belief that every human being has dignity and human worth, simply by virtue of their humanity, goes on to affirm that ‘Once we understand that we are all part of the same species and the same long story, it is possible to feel a connection with all people, everywhere’ (Copson and Roberts, 2020, p. 56). The relational and social dimension to being more authentically human was affirmed by the 2011 World Humanist Congress in its Oslo Declaration of Peace,

Peace is more than the absence of war. Peace requires respect for the worth and dignity of our fellow human beings, tolerance among individuals and harmony within each person. It also requires global justice in place of global inequalities, not least in the elimination of hunger and thirst in a world that produces plenty.

(Copson and Roberts, 2020, p. 59)

Hunger, thirst and global inequalities destroy humanness and to build peace is to be in solidarity as humans for the wellbeing of all. Peace requires economic responses to restore authentic humanity, requires justice to be more authentically human. To be human is to be in peace, being human in social relationships.

The radical Jewish mytho-poetry of Genesis 1 affirms the social, relational nature of being human. The equal dignity, worth and respect of every human without exclusion or exception is not an expression of European Enlightenment individualism. Hebraic thought and imagination knows nothing of individualism, still less absolute individualism. Every individual in the image of God and therefore of equal dignity and worth is radical, and the mytho-poem affirms that the image is only fully realised and authentically expressed in community. The

dignity and worth of the 'I' is only fully realised in the 'We'. We are authentically human in relationships and together in human solidarity. This is why the insights of the Genesis mytho-poetry are developed more fully as neighbourliness or relationships rooted in justice and compassion. The Jewish tradition is one of social justice, neighbourly caring, compassion and justice. Humans are social beings who live authentically in social relationships.

Christianity was and is rooted in this Jewish tradition, however much it has lost its memory. Jesus was quintessentially Jewish, as was Paul. Neither can be understood apart from the Jewish tradition in which they were steeped. This is why the anthropology of both is rooted in relationships and social, restorative justice. It is why both oppose the dominating and oppressive, dehumanising system of empire. It is why both Jesus and Paul create alternative communities of justice, compassion and wellbeing, and peace. It is why they enable communities of radical, inclusion, relationships without social, ethnic or gender boundaries. Paul took to poetry to affirm love as the more excellent way, a poem of relational qualities, of mutual care, compassion and just community and interpersonal relations.

There is in human being the possibility for an authentic communion of free and equal persons, in which is found a full mutuality of recognition and an intending of the other for the sake of the other. But there is also the possibility for intense conflict, suffering, and alienation.

(Hodgson, 1994, p. 203)

We can destroy our humanity and reduce ourselves to less than human. We need to look critically at that.

Islam in the Abrahamic tradition has social justice as core to being in community and living and sharing life together. The supreme Islamic value is justice.

A multitude of Qur'anic verses and prophetic traditions speak of justice (*al-'adl*) and equity (*al-qist*), while the same term 'justice' is also one of the names of God. Justice must apply to all and can admit of no distinction or discrimination by religion, skin colour, gender or social status.

(Ramadan, 2017, p. 171)

Muslims make much of *ummah*. It means community and is core to Muslim practice and living. It can and does refer to the Muslim community underlining the importance of community for being human together and the practice of faith. But it is more. *Ummah* is community founded on principle and is radically inclusive. The Qur'an affirmed that, 'God loves those who act equitably' (49:9).

A community founded on principle must stand against the temptation of splendid isolation, against sectarian remoteness, and against special treatment or privilege for its members. On the contrary, its members must display a critical and open attitude, one that embodies full justice for members of other faiths [or with no faith] and chastises injustice when it is the work of one's coreligionists. The community of faith opens out onto the community of principles and as such forbids self- isolation.

(Ramadan, 2017, pp. 246-247)

For Muslims, we are authentically human in community, in social relationships shaped by social justice and equitable praxis.

### **Being Eco-Human**

The modern world has been shaped by:

... forces of conquest and colonisation, commerce, Christianity, and [white] civilization. The modern world built upon the Age of Discovery and affected by global upending of humanity and the rest of nature via the powers of modern science and technology in league with industry .... But the hubris of dominant human powers is the same, and it becomes so routinized in economic and governing practices that its adherents regard their ways as natural rather than arrogant. It is not only considered the way we do live but the way to which we are entitled.

(Rasmussen, 2015, p. 65)

Anthropocentrism is a way of life that shapes and forms the very systems and structures in which we live. Dominating human powers are characterised by arrogance and hubris. A radical change in consciousness, our way of living and a transformation of systems is the planetary imperative. The planetary catastrophe we are living through is challenging all philosophies of life and religious systems to rethink anthropology and reimagine the Earth-human relationship. For some it is being repentant and reconstructive, as in the monotheistic faiths, while for others it is explorative, working out the ecological implications of their philosophy of life. This is the way of Confucianism and Humanism. For Indigenous religions and philosophies, Amerindian,

Māori, Aboriginal, Polynesian, Inuit and many more Indigenous traditions, it is reaffirmation of a deep eco-human connection, which our Western colonisation and conquest tried to destroy, and at times succeeded in doing so. The surviving traditions are now offering us their deep eco-wisdom, which is why we are struggling to be in repentant, reconstructive, and explorative modes.

Humanism can claim the minds and imaginations of David Attenborough and Richard Dawkins. No one has done more to challenge and critique our anthropocentrism and domination of nature than Attenborough. He has not only shown us how destructive we have been of the Earth but has set out clear calls to a new Earth-human relationship and a way to the wholeness of planetary life. Dawkins has written much on the ‘God Delusion’ and in swash-buckling style demolishes many of the ‘sacred cows’ of organised Western religion. He also writes:

There are objects and occasions which invoke in me a profound sense of the Sacred, and I can cite other humanist scientists of whom this is also true ... Why, when you go to the Grand Canyon and you see the strata of geological time laid out before you, is there a feeling that brings you close to tears? Or looking at images from the Hubble telescope ... The human mind is big enough, and imaginative enough, to be poetically moved by the whole sweep of geological ages represented by the rocks that you are standing among. That’s why you feel in awe.

(Dawkins, 2001,  
quoted in Copson and Roberts, 2020, p. 229)

Dawkins' Humanist awe standing among the strata of geological time, or listening to a Schubert symphony or poetry, is a good basis for explorative thought and imagination teasing out the ecological implications of Humanist awe and wonder.

Confucianism also has explorative work to do to clarify the ecological implications of Confucian thought and ethics for a unitary vision in cosmology. There is the realisation that an anthropo-cosmic cosmology can become a cosmo-anthropic cosmology. This is a vision of the unity between the cosmos and human beings. Of humans it is said that,

If they can fully develop the nature of things, they can then assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth. If they can assist in the transforming and nourishing process of Heaven and Earth, they can thus form a Trinity with Heaven and Earth.

(Chan, 1963,  
quoted in Tucker and Berthrong, 1998, p.172)

Confucianism has a unitary vision of the interactive relationship between the cosmos and human beings.

Judaism in its mytho-prologue to its sacred writings has two creation myths, Genesis 1 is mytho-poetic and Genesis 2-3 a mythical narrative. In the second there is a profound word-play. Adam appears and is not the name for a male but Adam is the Hebrew word for 'human'. Immediately there is the word-play. Adam-*adamah* which is 'earth, dust, dirt'. The human is of the Earth, an integral part of Earth, of the stuff of the earth. The human is earthling. There is a tension

between the two Genesis texts. The mytho-poetic has (at least in the English translation) the dominion text, which has been understood as giving humans the right to dominate nature or creation, which is a disastrous and destructive interpretation running through Christendom belief and practice. However Jews and Western Christians interpret the Genesis texts, there is in the human as earthlings a much more eco-human vision, a cosmo-anthropic partnership and way of life.

Christians make much of the metaphor of incarnation. The idea has become a formulated dogma of Christology that provides little energy for life together on the planet. Incarnation is bodily, affirming the goodness of the body and of all matter. Human and Earth are already woven together in Genesis 2, and the prologue to the fourth Gospel is an intentional mirror of the prologue to the Hebrew Bible. John makes clear what Genesis has already made clear, that any sense of the Divine is immanent in matter and matter, the bodily, materiality is infused with the sacred. Incarnation has profound ecological implications. The human is earthling, we are the Earth, and the Earth matters because Earth is the incarnation of the Sacred, of the mystery of life, of awesome otherness and wonder.

Islam, like the rest of the Abrahamic traditions and other philosophies of life is perhaps in catch-up mode. The eco-human dimension is there but it is undergoing a reconstructive process, and an explorative process. As with Western Christianity, Islam has tended to give humankind a privileged status. The Qur'an also has its dominion text. 'Are you not aware that God has made subservient to you all that is in the heavens and all that is on earth?' (31:20). The subservient principle can and does lead to human domination and destruction of the environment. But the Qur'an does not allow humans to forget that

‘each and every element of Creation sings the praises of the divine, that he is surrounded by the sacred and that he must respect God’s gift’ (Ramadan, 2017, p. 186). The heavens and the whole Earth extol God’s limitless glory, ‘and there is not a single thing that extols His limitless glory and praise: but you (O Men) fail to grasp the manner of their glorifying Him’ (17:44). Humans fail to realize the wonder, beauty and joy of all of nature, the part of Earth that fails to realize that humans are Earth. Ramadan recognises that ‘undue focus on the legal aspect of Islam’s teachings has relegated to a subsidiary position or even obscured the humanism of the Message and the scope and power of its injunctions with regard to Creation, to Nature, to the environment and to living creatures’ (Ramadan, 2017, p. 190).

The challenge to Islam is to transcend its legal aspects as it is for Western Christianity to transcend its doctrinal dogmas and live in a greater eco-human relationship and from a more cosmo-anthropic partnership.

Centuries ago a Hebrew poet imagined something full of wonder and awe, ‘... and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands ...’ (Isaiah 55:12). Imagine that! The trees expressing the joy, wonder, exuberance and future newness of the Earth. And those same trees are the lungs of the planet. It is not just true that ‘I am because you are’ (African Ubuntu). I am because those trees are. Rather, *we* are because *they* are. Anthropology is eco-human becoming.

### **A Larger Vision of the Common Good**

Programme interviewees and participants quoted at the beginning of this chapter recognised the limits, even destructive limits of anthropocentrism and the prevalent anthropology. Much anthropology saw

male, even the White male as norm, sometimes on the basis of God as male. The latter was only a step away from the male as God, disastrous for our vision of being human and the realization of a common good. Confucianism long ago in China saw the importance of harmony between humanity and nature, a harmony upon which a common good could be built. The world's Indigenous traditions always saw and lived the integral connection between nature and humanity. The tragedy of modern history is that hegemonic Western powers, not only political but Christian, destroyed the cultures, worldviews and practices of these religious traditions, even eliminating them because they were pagan and didn't square with the hegemonic Western civilization, including its version of Christian religion. Colonisation and conquest eliminated the common good. The less than human Indigenous peoples were less than good and had no right to any common good. That was only for White Europeans who in their colonisation and conquest destroyed lesser humans and lesser nature.

This is why our Western anthropocentric anthropology needs to be abandoned and an eco-human anthropology developed. The eco and the human cannot be separated but are integrated and in harmony. The common good can never be confined to the human as there is no human good apart from the good of the Earth. We are not only together as human community but together as Earth community. Any vision of the common good with integrity and authenticity is of human, societal and planetary wellbeing and flourishing. Today community is not human community but Earth community, the whole community of life. There is but one living organism, planet Earth, intrinsically sacred in which goodness is common or not at all. If the common good is inseparable from reconciliation, the restoration of just relationships,

compassionate solidarity and harmony, then we need a whole Earth perspective, a new way of seeing all of life and the whole community of life. If the living planet is seamless, inclusive, ongoing, cosmic, and inspirited, then we have a new way of seeing ourselves as together with the community of life, and we have a much larger vision of the common good, and a great work along with Earth to do.

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

# Living Without Passports: The Cosmopolitan Vision towards the Common Good

My mother read to me from the Bible. It says that God created the world, but it doesn't say anything about borders. You can't cross a border without a passport or a visa. I always wanted to see a border properly for myself, but I've come to the conclusion that you can't. My mother can't explain that to me either. She says, 'A border is what separates one country from another.' At first, I thought borders were like fences, as high as the sky. But that was silly of me, because how could trains go through them?

(Keun, 1938, quoted in Bell, 2022, epigraph)

We live in the Space Age! Our consciousness and perspective changed when the astronauts not only beamed us pictures of the moon's surface but beamed us that picture from space of the blue planet, our home, and not a border visible on it. Planet Earth from space has no borders. The island of Ireland was visible from space as just a small land mass but there was no border visible, as there were no borders visible anywhere on the awesome and beautiful planet. *Homo sapiens* emerged on Earth some 300,000 years ago. It was many millennia later before humans arrived in Ireland around what we now know as Coleraine. Humans were in Co. Mayo possibly around this time also. Who knows if the people of Coleraine and Mayo met. If they did,

they didn't cross a political border. If *Homo sapiens* had been able to view the planet from space 300,000 years ago, they would not have seen a border and like Keun in 1938, they could not have described or explained it. For most of the 300,000 years of human history borders didn't exist. Ireland only got a border in 1921 and the political and nationalistic borders on planet Earth are very recent developments. Modern and narrow, militant nationalism created borders and borders lock us in, restrict us and become borders in the mind, closing down or limiting imagination and mental and emotional horizons. We fight and go to war over borders and kill each other. We may even do the same with space.

We have explored six integrated strands of social reconciliation as an essential part of a vision of the common good and the common good has been reflected through the prism of social reconciliation. Imagination and thought have been stimulated by diverse sources and traditions, the Humanist, religious, Indigenous, and philosophical traditions. Sources of thought and imagination have been local and global. The cosmopolitan has already been integral to explorations and attempts to create a vision of the common good. This chapter will sharpen the focus on the cosmopolitan and its implications for an expansive consciousness, a larger identity as eco-humans and a wider and cosmic sense of responsibility with the whole community of life.

Some of the focus is on theology, a cosmopolitan theology or doing theology without passports. This is not an attempt at privileging theology, still less Christian theology. Those in the Western Christian tradition, carrying a large burden of history, need to hear the eighth century BCE Hebrew prophet Micah and his call to authentic faith and ethics: do justice, live in compassion or tenacious solidarity with

humans and nature, and walk humbly with your God. Theology is explored in this spirit and in the recognition that the theological voice is not exceptional or superior but one of the rich plurality of voices in public and cosmopolitan discourse and living. It is one wisdom voice among many and freely engages with the many in living towards a vision of the common good.

### **What Time Is It?**

The focus here is not actual time, instead with understanding the time we are in, the moment in history we are living through. Or if the mind drifts back to Ecclesiastes, and the reflection of a wisdom writer,

A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up what is planted; a time to kill and a time to heal; a time to break down and a time to build up ... a time to love and a time to hate; a time for war and a time for peace.

(Ecclesiastes 3:1-8)

What time is it? It is a poetic reflection on real life in a real world, which this wisdom writer goes on to say doesn't make any sense. You can't find out what God has done from beginning to end. It's all vanity and a chasing after wind. This person is not even sure what time it is, nothing makes sense or has meaning. That's life! He or she wasn't the first or the last to feel this way. We look at our world and there is a great deal that bothers and disturbs us.

We may not like watching *BBC* or *RTE News*. As *RTE News* comes on the screen it is filled with a map of the world and we know that we

will hear reported horror stories of war, violence, hate, scenes of poverty, wildfires, environmental destruction, locally and globally. World news can be depressing. There are good news stories, and we rejoice in those but a lot of the news reflects the world we live in and we wonder what time it is. And if God is somehow involved in this world and its real life, we too cannot find out what God has done from beginning to end. God in history is very hidden. But history is the only context we have to live out our faith.

The time we are in, can be outlined in brief. We are living through a time of strongmen in politics, dictators and authoritarians, and they are men, putting themselves into power for life, racist and supremacist, closing borders and thought. In many parts of the world democracy is being hollowed out and on the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, rights are being diminished and denied. There is a huge and increasing inequality gap in terms of the levels of poverty both locally and globally. Women and children suffer most.

Migration and people fleeing poverty, war, persecution and environmental catastrophe is at the highest level and will be with us for a generation and more. Climate change and environmental degradation is critical. Rhodes and other parts of the Mediterranean hit us with that reality in July and August 2023. And yet Europe is not the worst place on the planet for the environmental crisis. It is global but Africa suffers most and will continue to suffer most, again with women and children bearing the climate and environmental catastrophe.

Geopolitics is undergoing tectonic shifts with power, wealth and military dominance moving from West to East. China is the emerging superpower and where you have an emerging superpower and one that

is fading, there are tensions and threats to peace. Thucydides, an ancient Greek, recognised this dynamic during the Peloponnesian War; that as Athens and Sparta reflected rising and falling power, war was an outcome. The new Cold War is between the US and China, and both are aware of the Thucydides Principle.

The nuclear threat has been increased by the actions of Donald Trump during his four years as US President. For instance, in 2017 when the majority of the world's states signed or pledged to sign the UN Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons, the Trump Administration announced that it would never sign the Treaty. The US then roared into a renewed nuclear arms race by committing \$1.7 trillion to refurbish the entire US nuclear weapons complex. William Perry, a former US Secretary of Defence analysed Trump's nuclear policy and one conclusion was that 'The risk for nuclear conflict today is higher than it was during the Cold War' (2016, quoted in McCan, 2023, p.184).

The war in Ukraine threatens not just peace in Europe but world peace and security. Ireland's neutrality has been challenged by this war and though still intact but not without tensions, Ireland has not been morally neutral. Over 100,000 Ukrainians are in Ireland, largely welcomed but not everyone is happy and those on the extreme right have found public ways of expressing their opposition and their racial prejudices.

For 500 years Europe dominated the world through its empires with economies of extraction and military dominance. The empires have collapsed and are part of the wreckage of history but European hegemony has not yet gone that way, though it is diminishing in the shifting power arrangements and changing geopolitics. European im-

perialism, the imperialistic involvement in slavery and the slave trade, historical European actions and policies of racism and White supremacy, are still coming back to bite. It will continue for some time, as will the related flow of migrants to European former empires.

If European hegemony is fading, European or Western Christianity is in crisis. Church and state are being separated, numbers are drastically falling, buildings are being sold off and the churches' role in public life is seriously diminished. Faith has increasingly become private and pious, and heavily individualised. For most of our populations faith no longer makes sense. The shape of the faith, the thought-forms and the vocabulary and language symbols have no meaning for most people. We are struggling to analyse the crisis of Western Christianity and to come to terms with it. Institutionalised Christian religion in the West is in crisis, and some think it is in its death throes.

All of this is the time we are in, and it is the context in which Christians live out their faith and practice a way of life in sync with what they imagine Jesus meant by the reign of God in the midst of the life of the world.

### **Citizens of the Cosmos**

In ancient Greece a cynic and philosopher, Diogenes, was asked where he came from. He replied, 'I am *kosmopolites*, I am a citizen of the cosmos.' (Kang, 2013, p. 20). He refused to be confined by his local origins or by any local group. He belonged to all humanity.

Socrates may have said all this before Diogenes. He too was asked where he was from and said that he wasn't from Athens but the world. The universe was his city. Marcus Aurelius also affirmed the cosmopolitan when he said, 'It makes no difference whether a person lives

here or there, provided that, wherever he (sic) lives, he lives as a citizen of the world' (quoted in Kang, 2013, p. 20).

Here were people who were refusing to define themselves by city, ancestors, social class, gender, Greek, non-Greek, slave or free. The humanity we share is more important than our place of local origin, status, class, sexual orientation or gender, which are otherings or categories that divide us. We construct our binaries, we 'other' people so that we are better, superior, dominant and pure. I am *kosmopolites*, a citizen of the cosmos. Those markers and identity labels based on nationality, gender, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, are all secondary. They limit us, make us less than human, rob us of authentic humanity. To be a citizen of the world, a citizen of the cosmos, is to belong to a moral community made up of a community of all human beings.

If *kosmopolites* is a moral idea, it is moral because it is a recognition of the equal, unconditional worth of all and every human being. This is a dignity and worth that is non-hierarchical. There is no ranking or monarchical model. There is a radical egalitarian heart in this Greek cosmopolitanism; that all human beings are to be treated as equal and having a worth beyond price is 'one of the deepest and most influential insights of Western thought' (Nussbaum, 2019, p. 2).

It is the foundation of our modern human rights, the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The language of equal human dignity is the ethical basis of the UN Declaration. We might say that the Declaration gives secular expression to shared ethics and it had to be because the great minds behind it were coming from a plurality of global cultural and religious traditions.

Yet those of the Christian tradition, the Judeo-Christian tradition,

should have no difficulty recognising the ethics, values and spirit of that same tradition. When Diogenes asserted *kosmopolites* and refused to be confined by class, gender, orientation, ethnicity, race, there are echoes of Paul in Galatians where there are no binaries or excluding identities of ethnicity, class or gender. And it is echoed by Ireland's first great European, Columbanus who said, 'Do not believe that we think of ourselves any different than of you: for we are joint members of one body, whether Gauls, Britons, Irish or of any other people.' (quoted in Richter. 1988, p. 58). We can read Columbanus from a narrow Christian identity base and restrict him to one body of Christ and the unity of Christian people. That is how we 'other' people, and Christianity like other religions, finds it essential to 'other' people, creating an 'us and them', a binary, a dualism, a superior/inferior, more human/less human, or saved/unsaved dualism, or pure/impure. But that was not the thought world of Columbanus, not the symbolic world he lived in. He was thinking in terms of a trans-national, trans-cultural, trans-ethnic and trans-identity world. Behind it was the Jewish affirmation that all humans are made in the image of the God of Life, all equally, as Genesis affirms, and which is most fully realised in community, a moral community.

It is the moral community in which there is the equal, unconditional worth of all human beings that calls for a moral approach to politics, economics, arrangements of power, human rights, international politics, religious power and community formation. This is why when we affirm in *kosmopolites*, the equal and unconditional worth of every human being, we not only are asserting a spiritual or value-based equality, but we have also got to be serious about material equality. Material inequality is a fact of life. A child born in the US has a life

expectancy of 79.1 years while a child born in Eswatini, formerly Swaziland, can only expect to live 49 years.

‘Clean water, health services, sanitation, maternal health and safety, adequate nutrition - all these basic human goods are distributed very unevenly around the world’ (Nussbaum, 2019, pp. 5-6). Material inequality is a spiritual and theological issue. It is an issue and a challenge as to how serious we are about Genesis, Paul in Galatians, and Columbanus journeying around Europe. We are talking about neighbourly-love, hospitality, solidarity, and justice. That would be *kosmopolites*-citizens of the world/cosmos in action. It would be cosmopolitan theology in action, concrete praxis.

## **Entrenched Borders**

Borders are not just lines on a map. They are designations and categorisations, racial and ethnic, cultural identity markers, and they even become established systems and structures that divide and dehumanise people. They also desacralise nature, commodify it and exploit it. There are three types of borders constructed by humans with destructive effect.

### **1. White Supremacism**

It turned out to be not only White supremacism but Christian White supremacism. It is a destructive European construct which emerged from European imperialism, of which the slave trade was an integral part. What was constructed was White, Christian superiority, privilege, exceptionalism and this was too often expressed through extremism.

After the Edict of Milan in 313 CE the Christian Church was in bed with the empire and Christianity became an established, state re-

ligion. Constantine the Emperor encouraged the practice of tolerance towards the Christian movement. Emperor Theodosius then legalised Christianity as the state religion and all other religions were outlawed. Christianity now was established, had political power and constructed a theology of chosenness and exceptionalism. Christendom was a Western phenomenon and White Christians in the West were dominant, supreme and superior.

The Western Church became established and its authority and power were unquestioned. In the 11<sup>th</sup> century the Pope proclaimed a crusade which brought together Christian military power in the West against Muslim power in the East. Western military power could now extend the presence, influence, and power of Christendom towards the East, Christian theological truth was superior and supreme. By 1493 when European imperialism and domination of the rest of the world began, the Pope issued the decree, 'The Doctrine of Discovery.' This gave the Spanish king the freedom to conquer new lands, take possession of rich resources and convert the Indigenous population to Christianity, so these Indigenous people could be disposed of their lands and resources. So began the displacement and often the elimination of Indigenous peoples, the extraction economies on which the European empires were built. It was also the construction of racism and White supremacy. White Christians ruled the world and those who did not share the beliefs and the imperialist philosophy of the White man, were lesser humans, with lesser rights to freedom, land, property and to life itself.

European imperialism, hegemony, power and wealth were built on Christian White supremacism, as was American hegemony and power. Trump's mantra 'Make America Great Again' was racist nostalgia

for White domination, superiority, and supremacy. White, Christian supremacy, deeply rooted in Western Christendom, was and remains dominant, apparent still in European imperial nostalgia, and in the way the African continent is treated. It lingers still in secular Europe and North America, and it is an entrenched ideological border.

## **2. Migration**

Closely aligned with the White Western, and Christian-aided construction of racism and White supremacism, is migration and asylum seekers. The news is often dominated by the arrival of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers to Europe. Some are economic migrants, people fleeing persecution and war, and increasingly, environmental migrants. A tragic part of this issue is human trafficking and the loss of life in small boat crossings or unseaworthy vessels. It is not untrue to say that in many cases they (migrants) are here because we were there. By 1914 and the outbreak of the catastrophic First World War, seven European empires dominated 84% of the world. 'Asylum and emergency migration are the crisis of our time, affecting Europe and to a lesser extent the United States' (Nussbaum, 2019, p. 233). The crisis will persist for at least another generation, exacerbated by climate change as that crisis devastates the poorer countries of the world.

The primary reason for Brexit was a border, reclaiming sovereignty, and primarily in this context taking back control of migration and asylum seekers. Britain wanted to close its borders. Bound up with this was a lot of imperial nostalgia, rising English nationalism, racism and White supremacism. How much that is bound up with any Christian memory is a moot point, there is no evading, however, a subconscious Christian culture.

Europe with all its imperial and hegemonic history, has failed to create a common policy on asylum and migration. The European continent has responsibilities, especially for peoples it conquered, colonised and from whom it made its wealth, further enhancing its power. The crisis and the challenge are complex with no easy answers but the burden of imperial history and the role of European and American powers in the world creates a moral imperative to respond with greater intent to a major human crisis. Nussbaum reminds us why an immediate response is called for: 'No problems are more acute, or more politically inflammatory, all over the world, than problems of asylum and migration. They involve dignity at the most basic level' (Nussbaum, 2019, p 229).

### **3. Pluralism**

Is pluralism a problem? The growing numbers of entrenched borders in the West that do not allow for diversity of humanity, ethnicity, culture, religion, political philosophy, and democratic practice, would suggest so. Why the resistance to pluralism? How much pluralism are we prepared to live with? Do we really want a homogenous society and world, a society and world of narrow conformity?

In the Greek philosophical tradition there was a sceptical, critical questioning of dominant forms of received religious belief and practice.

The pre-Socratic philosophers challenged traditional religious accounts of natural phenomena, which invoked the activity of gods in our world, by producing naturalistic causal accounts of how things happen. Socrates was charged with subverting the gods of the city and inventing new gods.

... about finding a place for Jesus' message of neighbour/enemy love in the world by fundamentally reshaping one's views of others, of the immigration laws, of international politics, of the disparity between the rich and the poor from a radically egalitarian way.

(Kang, 2011, p. 17)

In a world of inequality, a world of binaries, a self-centred, individualised world, and a world of collectivist identity and nationalist/patriotic narcissism, justice and solidarity go beyond all of our boundaries and confined spaces. The doing of cosmopolitan theology is the practice of 'impartial, planetary, and egalitarian justice and solidarities especially across all the different forms of boundaries that divide people' (Kang, 2011, p 267).

Cosmopolitan theology is about the practice of justice, social, political, economic and eco justice and justice is love in action. Theology is radical neighbourly love, which is solidarity with all citizens of the world, not only treating all as spiritually equal but commitment to a material equality. In this theological practice the spiritual is not in its own compartment. The spiritual and the secular are not different. The spiritual and the material are not different spheres. The spiritual is in the secular and in the material just as faith can only be lived in history. Our dualisms and binaries have left our religion impotent.

This is why cosmopolitan theology is doing theology without passports. A passport is an identity document. With an Irish passport you have the fourth most powerful passport in the world today. With considerable ease it takes you over many boundaries and borders. There are identity markers on all passports. A passport categorises you, puts

you into various boxes. It symbolises categorization, genderization, sexualisation, racialisation, and ethnicization. We can do, and for a long time we have done, theology with passports. I am a Methodist, a Wesleyan, a Lutheran, a Catholic and some will want to insist, a Roman Catholic. We are marked confessionally, categorized and our theology reflects this. The trouble is, in our transitioning world we are left holding weak passports. And our theology is now weak, even impotent. Doing theology without passports takes us beyond our national and confessional boundaries to doing theology and engagement with a universal community. One symbol we have of the universal community 'where every individual human being is equal to everyone else, treated justly, accepted fully as one is', that symbol is of the kingdom or reign of God (Kang, in Moore and Rivera, 2011, 280). Not everyone uses that language or symbol but may have alternative symbols. Theology without passports is theology in practice beyond borders, boundaries, and categorizations. Theology without passports is a beyond theology,

...beyond nationality, skin colour, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship, religious affiliation - because the God, the Divine, who is the primary frame of reference...is for, with, in, among those individual human beings. It is to reaffirm the sheer truth: No one is better or worse, superior or inferior than any other; '*Ich bin du, wenn Ich bin* (I am you, when I am I)'.

(Kang, 2011, p. 280)

This is why cosmopolitan theology is the practice of trans-religious solidarity. We live not only in a globalised world but a world of glo-

balised religions. The world's religions tended to be regionalised, geographically located and even confined. It is different now. We speak now of neighbour religions because we are neighbours in a shrinking world and in the same town or even street. State occasions, such as the inauguration of the Irish President, and the National Day of Commemoration each year, sees prayers, reflections, and recitals from not only Christian leaders but leaders of world religions, including the Humanist community, all now very much present in Ireland. It is representative of the secular Irish religious landscape. We are still, sadly, a long way off from this kind of trans-religious solidarity in Northern Ireland.

In a world of many religions, Christianity in the West has made a large contribution to 'othering'. It has, for a lot of its history, been imperialistic and the shape and expression of our doctrinal faith reflects that. The 'othering' enables Western Christianity to be superior, to make superior and even absolute truth claims in relation to world religions. Christianity alone has truth, is the only way to God and salvation, and for some Christians all other God-claims are false. Ironically, imperialistic Christianity has been nervous of interreligious dialogue. We are terrified about what might happen to traditional Christology and missiology. The operative words in interreligious dialogue are 'tolerance' and 'tolerate'. This is not to say that Christians have not played a positive and good role in such dialogue but we need to get beyond tolerance to affirmation and transformation. In a world of war, violence, inequality, poverty, suffering, catastrophic climate change, homophobia, racism, violence and abuse of women, we need a trans-religious solidarity through the affirmation and transformation of shared ethics of life.

Before we had ecumenical initiatives between Christian churches and denominations, we had a Parliament of World Religions in 1893 in Chicago, as indicated in Chapter Seven. It was top-heavy White and Protestant, but it was ecumenical before ecclesial ecumenism.

### **Cosmopolitan Commitments**

The *Earth Charter* is an important document for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It has 16 principles which are the basis for a global movement. It sets out values and principles by which sustainable development can be achieved. It was 10 years in the making and came out of a worldwide, cross-cultural dialogue on common goals and shared values. The *Earth Charter* is described as ‘an ethical foundation for actions to build a more just, sustainable and peaceful global society in the twenty-first century.’ It articulates a mind-set of global interdependence and shared responsibility. It offers a vision of hope and a call to action (*Earth Charter*, 2000).

The *Earth Charter* is a cosmopolitan programme for action setting out cosmopolitan commitments. The Charter has four main pillars:

- Respect and Care for the Community of Life
- Ecological Integrity
- Social and Economic Justice
- Democracy, Nonviolence and Peace

The Charter has been aptly described as a wisdom document, and by Rasmussen as an ‘important example of wisdom-in-the-making as the practical wisdom for ecological rather than industrial civilization.’ He elaborates further,

Wisdom's dream of a common earth ethic and the unity of humankind is at least as old as the Hebrew prophets, Confucius, the Buddha, and Plato. That should surprise no one since religions, together with ancient philosophies and the primordial visions of First Peoples, have consistently staked out the audacious claim that "community" not only includes Earth as a whole but the cosmos ... The *Earth Charter* belongs to the dream of the Earth as a comprehensive community guided by a shared ethic.

(Rasmussen, 2013, p. 344)

The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* calls for respect for every human life. The *Earth Charter* goes beyond that, highlighting the whole community of life and calling for respect for the Earth and life in all its diversity. The Enlightenment world of anthropocentrism which underpins our modern psychology, philosophy, economics, politics, science, technology, Western ethics and theology, is rejected. '... the *Earth Charter* is an assault on the institutionalised anthropocentrism of reigning practices, especially patterns of production and consumption' (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 344). The Charter does affirm the dignity of humans and their freedom, equality and right to respect, but it also dethrones the human. The human is not the centre of the universe and not the crown of creation. The monotheistic religions do need to reappraise their theological anthropology. Cosmology also needs critical and radical reappraisal. The scientific narrative is enabling us to see a web of life stretching back some 13 to 15 billion years and humans are placed within this vast evolving universe. The *Earth Charter* through the scientific cosmology and the primacy of Earth

rather than the human provides a new basis for ethics. Importantly, 'This means the Charter is an Earth ethic and not an environmental ethic' (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 345). This has important implications for cosmopolitan commitments. We live in a moral universe and respect is for the whole community of life, and for its diversity. 'Interconnectedness and responsibility are the two main themes of the *Earth Charter*' (Rockefeller, 2001, quoted in Rasmussen, 2013, p. 346).

The *Earth Charter* uses the language of sustainable development, or better, sustainable community. There is resistance to 'sovereign consumerism' and to the full-scale commodification of things. The Charter is strong in the protection of ecosystems and cultivation of the Earth and as the Charter puts it: the Earth as 'a sacred trust' held in common (*Earth Charter*, 2000).

Cosmopolitan commitments are expressed through global responsibility, active commitment to and with the whole community of life, and eco-humans knowing and recognising their decentred place in that community of life and the still evolving cosmos. '...the Charter recognises that the goals of ecological protection, the eradication of poverty, equitable economic development, respect for human rights, democracy and peace, are interdependent and indivisible' (Rasmussen, 2013, p. 345). Cosmopolitan commitments are to the whole of earthly life.

### **Transformation of Consciousness towards a Holistic Vision**

There are many sources of wisdom from around the world and we need to be open to wisdom from whichever source. The *Earth Charter* is one such wisdom source and a significant one in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Ecology has raised our consciousness to realise that there is a web of

life all interconnected and interdependent, and that humans are part of that web. The *Earth Charter* is creative in pointing to four living streams of ecological imagination, thought and discourse:

- The environmental vision is within the greater context of the whole community of life. As Hathaway and Boff indicate, the Earth is ‘alive with a unique community of life’.
- Social ecology is expressed in the themes of democracy, social and economic justice, nonviolence and peace.
- Deep ecology is there in the ‘sense of universal responsibility,’ ‘the spirit of human solidarity,’ and ‘reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature’.
- Integral ecology finds expression in that human beings are ‘part of a vast evolving universe’ and that the ‘Earth has provided the conditions essential to life’s evolution’.

(Hathaway and Boff, 2009, pp. 300-301).

What this means is that this holistic vision enables us to become aware and see that our ‘environmental, economic, political, social and spiritual challenges are interconnected, and together we can forge inclusive solutions’ (Hathaway and Boff, 2009, p. 301).

We need a transformation of consciousness, a new and different worldview, a new cosmology, a way of seeing the cosmos differently. As people of symbolic consciousness what matters most is the mind, imagination, ideas, and values. In the middle of the first century CE, Paul, a key player in the Jesus Movement, wrote to a community in Rome, which was at the heart of the imperial power with its military

systems, extractive economics, and oppressive politics. He wrote: 'Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds...' (Romans 12:2). Or to put it in more colloquial terms, don't let that dominating, imperial world, with its imperial ethics and values, squeeze you into its mould. Allow your minds to be constantly renewed, your consciousness raised to a very different holistic vision of the world and its cosmic being. A new consciousness is also openness to a new and different future. Become cosmopolitan in theology, spirituality, wisdom, action and living. Become cosmopolitan and live more authentically toward the vision of a planetary common good.

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# On Reflection: Power as Domination or Power Shared

As research and writing were completing it was realised that while the issue of power has been addressed indirectly in this book it required further reflection. Power is everywhere and is the issue at the heart of relationships, at the heart of governance and in the way we organise society and life. All of us have power and political and economic systems are exercises in power. Power is the issue of our lives together, the systems we create and how we engage with nature and the environment. It is in the air we breathe and there is nothing in history or eco-human life that happens without power. In relation to societies, nations, empires and geopolitics, power is crucial and in modern society, the use and/or abuse of power invites many important questions, for example:

- Who holds power and how is power being used?
- Is power being used for eco-human flourishing or is it being abused?
- How is power being used in the relationship between colonisers and colonised?
- How is power being used in the relationship between government and people?
- How is power being exercised in the relationship between men and women?

- What kind of model of power is there between a hegemonic culture and those excluded from it?
- Is hegemonic politics an ethical form of governance?
- What kind of power is there between heterosexuality as a societal norm and the LBGTQI+ community?

Religions are not power-free zones, as religious institutions exercise power, not always in a benign way but in an abusive way. Power controls thought and behaviour and determines what is religious or political orthodoxy. It is used to declare and even enforce normalcy.

To explore how we can live towards the common good and journey towards reconciliation without focusing more directly on the core issue of power, or social power, would have been a serious omission. On reflection, we need to look critically at power, how it is used and abused.

## **Power Abused**

Power as abusive power can take many forms of which sexism and sectarianism are just two manifestations. Both operate through systems and structures that are oppressive, controlling and dehumanising.

### **1. Patriarchal Power**

The Taliban now rule in Afghanistan. When the Americans hastily withdrew along with allies, the Taliban once again took power. Immediately women were denied the right to education from primary to third level and more recently, they have been banned from cultural centres. This is a denial of rights, the oppression and dehumanization of women, it is Taliban power as domination and absolute control of

women. Here power is expressing itself as sexist and misogynistic, a hatred of women which has nothing to do with the Islamic religion which the Taliban claim to uphold. It is the corruption and distortion of a religious tradition and of power. The Taliban cannot have critical thinkers and educated, intellectually empowered women on any kind of equal level with men. At the heart of it, the Taliban are driven by a fear of women, their power, abilities, and capacities. They fear women and therefore hate them.

Patriarchy is pervasive in all of our societies. It goes back millennia in history. The proto-Babylonian myth, the *Enuma Elish*, is saturated with violence. Creation takes shape through violence and humans are created out of it. That's life! It is the way we are and how life is, and power being used as violence kills off and dismembers the goddess. Patriarchy kills the feminine, and abuses and brutalises women. Patriarchy makes it acceptable for men to commit violence against women in the pursuit of power, because that is the way men are, they have the right to do. Patriarchy is the rule of the male, or at least the rule of a male elite. Religions even provide divine sanction and men use the Qur'an and the Bible to justify it. A woman has never been President of the United States. Not since Catherine the Great (1729-1796) has a woman ruled Russia. It has been a very long time since a woman led China. In so many ways it is a 'man's world' and patriarchy still prevails and is a mode of power as domination, rooted in fear and the oppression of women, and ironically, of men also.

## 2. Political Power

The Government of Ireland Act 1920 partitioned Ireland and the semi-state of Northern Ireland came into existence. It consisted of six counties of the historic province of Ulster, abandoning the other three

to a Free State because, as was indicated, there wasn't enough room on the lifeboat for everyone. The shape of power in Northern Ireland was determined by a sectarian headcount ensuring a 66:33 Protestant majority. Northern Ireland was a gerrymandered state created to enable Protestants to hold power indefinitely. A Protestant-unionist hegemony was created, which quickly proceeded to organise and consolidate its power and create systems and structures that discriminated against and excluded the Catholic-nationalist minority. The Government of Ireland Act precluded any state funding for religious activity, including church-based youth work. This was itself an acknowledgement from the beginning of Northern Ireland that this was a sectarian semi-state and sectarianism was embedded in its foundation, ensuring its dysfunctionality. One does not have to be a nationalist and/or republican to recognise this. Any rational and critical approach to history will see that partition and the formation of Northern Ireland was a sectarian act and process, which was an abuse of power and which led to further abuses of power.

The semi-state of Northern Ireland was born of rebellion. It was a rebellion staged by unionists, whose actions weakened the union; and by 'loyalists', whose actions were disloyal to the British government and parliament. It was supported by a Conservative Party that openly backed the rebellion; it involved private armies, gun-running and its leader admitting treason. The consequences were a six-county Northern Ireland that gave practical effect to the supremacist ideology that had motivated its creation.

(Bell, 2022, p. 53)

It was conceived and birthed as a sectarian state, with sectarianism and hatred not being the monopoly of one party or group. In the words of Yeats, partition 'maimed us at the start' (1931, p. 59). Dysfunctionality was built into its constitution and it may be an eternal condition. Two parties, the DUP and Sinn Féin, have become a duopoly, having sown up power between them, each capable of bringing governance and democracy down. The weakening of unionism is not a recent occurrence arising from the changing demographics; the weakening of unionism began in 1921 with partition, when Northern unionists abandoned the unionists of Cavan, Monaghan and Donegal, and the other southern unionists. The Unionist power as domination over 50 years was an abuse of power, an unethical use of power that was doomed from the outset.

In more recent times, the deaths and injuries of over 30 years of violence during the Troubles, in addition to the trauma and continued suffering of victims and survivors today, is a fundamental denial of the rights of every individual affected. The ambivalence of the many by-standers was a collusion in the denial of rights and abdication of people power. Perhaps we were, and are, trapped in our ideologies, especially our sectarian ideologies.

After war, courageous women and men showed the power of leadership and shaped the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. The peace process it launched remains fragile but the last 25 years have been the best of the 102 years of Northern Ireland. It should not be overlooked that the Agreement was an implicit recognition that partition and Northern Ireland had not worked. Some will resist that acknowledgement, but why else did we need an Agreement based on a vision of reconciliation and peace? Power as domination didn't work and will never

work. The Agreement visioned power shared as a more just and ethical use of power, but we are still waiting for power sharing to happen. Perhaps we don't want power shared! Perhaps we don't really want reconciliation and a common good!

### **What Is Power?**

We have looked at two examples of power abused: patriarchal power and political power. Power is relational and it flows through a cluster of web-like relationships. We also live within a web of relationships, ecology reminds us of this. It reminds us that this web is interdependent. Climate change is a breakdown of interdependence and power relations. Violence is a corruption of power, as is poverty and inequality. The abuse of women and the dehumanising abuse of those from the LBGQTQI+ community is abusive power and destructive of human community and the humanity of all. 'The challenge is to recast power from being a relationship of active over passive, oppressor over oppressed, and exploiters over exploited, to a new relationship based on mutuality and creativity' (Hathaway and Boff, 2009, p. 81).

When we analyse power, we can recognise three modes of power:

- Power-over is power that restricts or controls. It is patriarchal power or power that organises itself hierarchically and works through systems of authority and domination. In its extreme form power-over is power backed by the gun and force. More ordinarily, power-over works through subtle mechanisms of coercion, manipulation and control motivated by fear. This can be recognised in politics, gender injustice, climate injustice and institutional religion.

- Power-from-within is power that sustains all life and is the power of creativity, healing, and love. It is expressed when people stand in solidarity to oppose the control of power-over. Power-from-within is empowerment and finds expression through liberating models of education and political action.
- Power-with is the power of influence or power-as-process. This is power that enables us to act together in participatory organisations or groups. Authentic democracy is participatory power-with or power-shared. Power-over is an authority which imposes. Power-with is based on personal respect earned in practice. It depends on personal responsibility, our creativity, and our daring to be open. ‘The exercise of power as process demands that we unmask and reject all exercises of force that obstruct our and others’ participation in life’.

(Starhawk in Hathaway and Boff, 2009, pp. 81-82).

We can recognise Starhawk’s three modes of power at work in patriarchal, political and religious systems and institutions. We may recognise through critical awareness how we ourselves exercise any of these modes of power in our personal and community relationships. There is the challenge within the web of relationships to refuse to give in to dominating power, which stands in the way of human liberation and flourishing. That will mean unmasking and rejecting the social, political, and religious systems, and their exercises of power that are obstructing and blocking our eco-human thriving, participation in life, and living towards a common good. Which mode of power are we living with in Northern Ireland and Ireland and what needs to be unmasked and rejected?

## Imperial Power

All history is imperial and from the Akkadian Empire of 2334-2154 BCE through successive empires to the European empires that came to an end in the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE, humankind has lived with imperial power. Dominating and imperial powers go back a long way in the history of the world. Even though the European empires that dominated the world in the last 500 years have all collapsed, empire lingers on and its power is felt in the Age of the Anthropocene, the human responsibility for the environmental catastrophe and climate change. Our human induced environmental degradation is rooted in imperial power and domination of people and nature over the last five centuries, and especially the last three. Imperial nostalgia more than lingers on. Britain still lives out of imperial greatness and exceptionalism. Brexit was driven by imperial dynamics and the imperial delusion of making Britain great again or putting the 'great' back into Britain. It has not happened. The coronation of King Charles III in 2023 was an occasion for imperial and religious nostalgia. Both were delusory and there will be the realisation that imperial power and imperial Christianity have faded in Britain. It takes a lot of time to get over imperial power and dominance, and the imperial theology of chosenness.

Empires are pretty much the same throughout the ages, whether the Akkadian, Babylonian, Roman, Spanish, French, British, American and maybe now the Chinese. They are about absolute power, holding and expanding power. There is a power to do good and it is possible to line out the achievements and contributions of successive empires to civilisation. But there is a massive debit account where imperial power has exploited, dominated, extracted wealth, destroyed cultures and eliminated peoples, especially when there was resistance to empire.

Independence and the realisation of the right to self-determination rarely happened without brutal violence. No empire developed without military power and violence against colonised people.

Sociologist Michael Mann has outlined four types of social power. They are:

1. Military power - the monopoly or control of force and violence.
2. Economic power - the monopoly or control of labour and production.
3. Political power - the monopoly or control of organisation and institution.
4. Ideological power - the monopoly or control of interpretation and meaning.

(Mann in Crossan, 2007, p. 12)

This is a model of imperial power and how it works as totalism. Rome has been the model that every modern empire has wanted to emulate. It was a highly tuned military power. All goods and wealth travelled to Rome, to the metropole and there was its economic power. There was a powerful establishment, often a landowning and wealthy elite, and there was its political power. Rome's ideological power was the glue that held the empire together, the imperial propaganda or imperial narrative that controlled thought and meaning. The empire determined truth and reality. The imperial ideological power was also total, dominating and controlling thought and emotions, determining truth and meaning, and the only authorised hermeneutical or interpretative principle by which meaning was allowed. The empire had its

rituals and monuments, coinage and public liturgies or public acts of homage, loyalty, obedience and conformity, even seducing humans to make the supreme sacrifice and give one's life for the empire. As empires gave way to nation states and nationalism, much of the imperial ideology and cult was transferred.

The four modes of power were all-pervasive and dominating. There was no escape from living outside of Roman or any imperial power. Morning, noon and night, military, economic, political and ideological power was in the very air people breathed. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century this was the experience of 85% of the world and the experience of 95% of Africa. It was also the experience of Ireland, with the majority of nationalists wanting to come out of empire and the Protestant-unionists wanting to stay in. All lived under imperial power and with it. The Home Rule crisis was rooted in, and the product of, imperial power. The reason why the British government and the Conservative Party in particular, backed Protestant-unionists and legislated for partition was a deep fear that if Ireland got independence, the empire would be at risk and the jewel in the imperial crown, India, would be next. What might happen in Ireland might well be the end of the empire. Even with partition and the creation of Northern Ireland and a Free State with dominion status, 1921 was the beginning of the end of empire. By the 1960s the British Empire was no more.

The Republic of Ireland has become a mature, open and liberal state taking a not insignificant place on the world stage with a moral and spiritual influence in world affairs. Its people also had to unmask and reject an imperial church, and they have, and religious imperialism has gone, as it has in the rest of Europe. The problem for unionists is that in the Home Rule crisis, they were imperialists and with the

backing and support of the Conservative Party, they developed their own imperial mindset. It was already there in history from the Tudor invasion, the Plantation of Ulster and in 1921, partition. Even though there is no empire left and though there is much imperial nostalgia in Britain, unionists are still imperialists in heart and mind. They are Ascendency people, with entitlement, exceptionalism and a supremacism. This is why power shared is an existential difficulty. For many unionists power sharing is not acceptable because power-over is entitlement and is the only mode of power for people in the Ascendency. Not all unionists think like this but many do, and it is why in the century and more of Northern Ireland's existence there has been no coherent and rational case made for the union as best for all the people of Northern Ireland. There has been no coherent contribution to a re-visioned and reconstituted United Kingdom, which is currently a dis-United Kingdom and based on a dysfunctional arrangement of power.

Meanwhile, the main Unionist party cannot countenance a Deputy First Minister role, as they see it, wrongly, as being under a Sinn Féin First Minister. Who foolishly agreed to the designations of First and Deputy First Minister? In a society where power is contested and where it is perceived as power-over, creating and using a language of hierarchy, perhaps even an imperialistic language, was foolish in the extreme. When the core of the Agreement was parity of esteem, the totality of relationships and power sharing, to create linguistically and symbolically a hierarchy of power was to create illusionary politics, and regress into our destructive binary and dualistic thinking and practices. Whatever about a more secular age, Protestant-unionist Ascendency and supremacy was reinforced by a theology of chosen

people in their promised land. They were God's people predestined to dominate and rule. Imperialistic churches with imperialistic theology justified the people's superiority and political domination. The problem now is that this world of imperialistic power and theology has collapsed.

This is not to say that the nationalist-republican-Catholic worldview is without problems. The Easter Proclamation, iconic as it is and an inspiration and model for those who want a united Ireland, is a 1916 vision. Nationalists no more than unionists seem capable of spelling out a coherent, rational vision of a united Ireland than unionists are a United Kingdom. The united Ireland is rhetoric and what is drawn from the 1916 Proclamation is ideology, no less outmoded than the unionist imperialism of 1912 and 1921. The God and theology of the Proclamation has collapsed, perhaps because it ironically, was imperialistic.

The future is open. The future always is open, unpredictable and unknown. History may have three lessons to offer: nothing is guaranteed, nothing is inevitable and the future is often surprising. There may well be a forum or Citizen's Assembly in the future of Ireland or a united Ireland. Unionists won't turn up for that. Why would they? Unionists may well get around to holding a forum or a Citizen's Assembly on the future of the union. Sinn Féin are not likely to turn up at that. Why would they?

And yet, the future of Ireland and the future of the United Kingdom is open, and the future is the future of power, how power will be organised, what mode of power will be at the heart of future structures and systems. All of us in Ireland and in the United Kingdom have lived with ideological power, the propaganda that has shaped our

mindsets. We have lived and still do live with the imperial narrative and an anti-imperial narrative, or a respective national narrative(s). The future, whatever it is, will not be built on such narratives or expressions of ideological power. On reflection, they haven't worked and newness, a transformed and liberated future, will require a lot of critical thinking and imagination. We still have it to do and on the way we still need liberation from a past and that too is about power relations. And in the shaping of a new future, which may well be surprising, power relations will be core.

### **Are Humans Fatally Flawed?**

We look to ancient Greece for the origins of democracy, which was another way of arranging power relations. The Greeks may not have been the first to come up with the idea of democracy. Much earlier in Mesopotamia, where the cradle of civilisation is located, there is evidence of power arrangements and relations involving diverse peoples. Democracy may well have been born in Mesopotamia. As Europeans we look to Greece and have drawn our models of democracy from Athens. Solon (630-560 BCE) gave democracy its first expression. He was an aristocrat, a wise person, a poet and a legislator. Solon shaped democracy to resolve problems. He was trying to put an end to bitter struggles between the rich and poor and there were a lot of conflicting interests threatening to tear Athens apart. The aristocracy, Solon's own class, had a monopoly on power and that grip on power had to be loosened and 'some power given to lesser orders if social peace was to be shored up' (Cahill, 2004, p. 107). Democracy was created to counter injustices that were economic, to reduce the gap between the rich and poor, and to distribute power more justly and fairly between those who

were monopolising power and those excluded from it. Solon wasn't popular! 'He was seen as a traitor to his class because he abolished such pig-headed injustices as slavery for debt; but he favoured relative justice, attempting to be fair while always aware that perfect justice was beyond human possibility' (Cahill, 2004, p. 107). Solon's creation of democracy was at the intersection between economic and political power. He saved Athens from disaster and set the city on a new future and pathway. Solon used his abilities as a legislator to effect change.

Solon wrote new laws that amounted to what we might call a new constitution ... By giving the poor a defined role in politics, Solon put an end to exclusive aristocratic domination and so marks a crucial point in the transition from archaic towards classical Greek politics.

(Lane, 2014, pp. 33-34)

Democracy was born because of injustices and was intended to bring about relative justice between rich and poor. It achieved civic peace by focusing on economic relations and its proponents aimed to make the poor and rich alike, full citizens of Athens. Solon legislated because 'Law is the most important way in which a city can achieve justice. Solon claimed to have combated hubris - the violence and insolence that threaten justice - by the establishment of Eunomia, or a condition of good laws and law-abidingness' (Lane, 2014, pp 34-35). Democracy was the rearrangement of power relations requiring legislation, a constitution to share power more justly, and in Solon's words, he established 'a strong shield for each side against the other, not allowing victory to either unjustly' (quoted in Lane, 2014, p. 35).

Solon rearranged power relations in Athens because there were human problems when it came to the power relations in society. Having shaped democracy in Athens as a way to justice and peace, Solon travelled to broaden his knowledge of other cultures. When he returned he found a city tearing itself apart. There was no governance and Athens was in a state of anarchy. Solon could only watch on as his cousin, Pisistratus, rose to power and was a populist who spoke for the poorest Athenians. Pisistratus was forced out of a chaotic city, but the chaos and anarchy got worse in Athens. Pisistratus made a sensational return to power, arriving in the city on a golden chariot accompanied by a tall and beautiful woman in full battle dress. He told the crowds that she was the goddess Athena and that she had come to restore order in the city. They raised their arms in acclamation and proclaimed thanks in the streets.

Though only the most credulous members of the Assembly could be counted on to swallow such nonsense, there were, as there often are, quite enough of them to ensure initial political victory to an unscrupulous liar who piously invoked the powers of heaven. Only later, when the damage is done, do such dodos of democracy regret allowing themselves to be so easily taken in.

(Cahill, 2004, pp 112-113)

Does any of that sound familiar? So far the only verdict might be that human beings are easily duped. Evolutionary psychology does say that we humans for 80% of the time are kidding ourselves or deceiving ourselves. We have a real capacity for self-deception and can

be easily duped! There is something deeper going on in the anarchy of Athens and the monopolising of power that Solon tried to change. The Greeks were great dramatists and playwrights. We know these plays as Greek tragedies and Aristotle wrote *Oedipus*, described as the perfect tragedy. The central character is a model human being whose hamartia brings him down. Oedipus is not a bad person but someone who is strong, has courage, will take charge of things and go where others fear to go. But for the Greeks there is hamartia, the tragic flaw. There is the rise and fall of Oedipus and his story is a reminder that the same could happen to us. Humans are tragically flawed (Cahill, 2004, p 127).

Hamartia was the same Greek word that the first generation of Christians or members of the Jesus Movement used. It was the key word or symbol for sin and it was a word drawn from the world of archery. Hamartia was the failure to hit the target. The archer takes aim but misses. In one of the earliest written documents in the Christian Testament, Paul suggests that it is a shared universal condition. After borrowing and quoting quite a lot from Greek moral teachers, Paul makes a universal claim, 'all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God...' (Romans 3:23). Humans are tragically flawed, failing to hit the target of our best humanity, of sharing life and the Earth together with justice and compassion. Later he describes his own human struggle and dilemma.

I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.'

(Romans 7:15,18-19)

Paul can't understand the mystery of his very human self! What the Greeks recognised as a tragic flaw, Paul and the early Jesus Movement called sin. It was the same word, *hamartia*.

Neither Paul nor the Greeks tried to explain the flaw or why we fail to hit the target. Western Christianity later developed a systematised theology of sin, in one development an oppressive and dehumanising theology. Humankind had not only failed to hit the target but they were totally depraved and incapable of any goodness. Humans had no capacity for goodness as they were in a state of original sin from birth and only God could rescue them from such depravity and sin. It was a totally pessimistic view of the human, all humans, induced guilt and destroyed any sense of self-worth. Some thought that the human depravity was so bad that God in God's mystery would only rescue some and the rest were consigned by God to eternal damnation. A consequence of such theology was that the predestined or saved went on to see themselves as superior to others, with rights to rule others and ironically and cheerfully commit the sin of self-righteousness, lived out of a toxic moralism. Such a theology was easily politicised and became an imperialist domination system. The theology of sin making much of the Garden of Eden story and a human fall still lingers but is largely unmasked and rejected today.

A more nuanced theology will realize that the Jewish story of Eden in Genesis has never been read as a theology of original sin and total depravity by the Jewish people themselves. It will also affirm,

... that we are created good, equipped and sustained for responsible relations with God and others. Caught in the grips of sin, however, we become unresponsive and irresponsible. Sin is therefore a fundamental corruption of

what we are equipped and sustained to be. Where this goes unrecognised, so do the persistently destructive tendencies of every person, community and institution.

(Ottati, 1996, p. 46)

Solon, Aristotle and Paul recognised hamartia, the tragic flaw, the failure to hit the target of the good common life. Hamartia is not a doctrine but a symbol for the fatal flaw in every person, human community and humanly constructed institution, including the political, economic, cultural and religious. Religions and secular philosophies may try to explain why the flaw, where it came from and why it is universal, but that avoids the issue and responsible action. Perhaps we are left with the mystery of sin, even evil, and the mystery of goodness. We somehow still corrupt power, monopolise it, shape a tyranny, produce systems of domination, exploitation and oppression. We do violence to those who are a threat to our power or whom we fear and need to eliminate, especially if we fear scarcity and need to monopolise power, goods, and resources. We go to war rarely, if ever, for a just cause but as we know from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to defend and even expand empires. The two world wars were imperial wars over who would rule the world and grab and hold on to power over others. The Cold War was about imperial power and the new Cold War between America and China is a supremacy power issue in geopolitics.

What impels us to seek power over others? A character questioned by Socrates in Plato's book *Gorgias*, is Polus.

Polus takes it for granted that these are selfish motives, and he appeals to what he, like most of us, takes to be a

universal truth: we much prefer to boss others about than to be bossed about ourselves. Like most of us, he assumes that if we had absolute power, we would be unrestrained in gratifying our urges, whether sexual, financial, or a taste for celebrity.

(Ryan, 2012, pp 42-43)

Lord Acton may have been right, 'Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely' (Acton, 1887). The human flaw impels us to grab power, monopolise power, dominate others and nature, and the corruption of power sets in early. By whatever means, force, coercion, violence, oppression, discrimination, exclusion, all forms of violence, we will hold and consolidate power through the social, economic and political structures and systems we create, including religious systems and institutions. The corruption of power becomes totalitarian, fascist, a dictatorship, an oppressive theocracy and, at a more personal level, a rapist, an abusive partner, a child abuser, a sexual predator, a racist, a homophobe, a sectarian, and all of these last three can and do infect systems, organisations and institutions. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

### **Ethical Power**

Flawed humanity needs to find a way out of the corruption of power. Power is dangerous, and it is used in politics, economics and religion, all in systemic and institutional forms. Democracy was shaped in Athens but it did not take long to descend into tyranny. Democratic Athens sentenced one of its greatest thinkers, Socrates, to death. They believed that he was corrupting young people by teaching them to

think for themselves. Education that does not teach young people to think for themselves and to be critical thinkers is not education. For Socrates, a healthy free society is one in which we question, question, question. Critical thinking and questioning is a form of moral alertness, a moral questioning of every system, structure and exercise of power. Dictatorships and hegemonic powers thrive on the lack of questioning, they deprive groups of people of a liberating and critical education, such as women in Afghanistan, or the poor. It keeps the better off in power and the worse off in the prison of poverty. The arts have a way of raising critical questions and unmasking abuses and corruption of power. Governments often withhold funding from the arts, especially politically, socially and culturally conservative governments. They curb freedoms and disempower people and groups. Freedom is about the moral limits of power. Freedom to think critically and speak truth can be curbed and silenced, because it unmasks abuses of power and corruptions of power. Critical thinking and questioning puts moral limits on power, it ensures 'respect for minorities, justice and the impartial rule of law, a collective commitment to the common good and a delicate balance of rights and responsibilities' (Sacks, 2021, pp. 25-26).

Power as domination is an unethical use of power. Power shared more evenly and justly, even relatively justly, is a more ethical use of it. Ultimately power is the peoples' power, not that of the wealthy, of males, of the majority community, or any political, cultural, or religious elite. Power belongs to the people and government is 'of the people, by the people, for the people' (Lincoln, 1863, quoted in Sacks, 2021, p 25). When people claim their power of critical thought and questioning, they can hold politicians to account for their exercise of

representative power, ensure just policies and governance, just health care, education, employment and housing, and a just environment and just climate change. Ethical power is shared power and the people of Northern Ireland should expect nothing less than shared, ethical and just power.

The truly human ethical values, which are the core values of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and world and neighbour religions are:

- Social justice
- Human dignity
- Compassionate solidarity
- The good society or common good

The future of Northern Ireland is still unknown, but whatever it is, what will define its common good value is whether that future is shaped by ethical power.

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## APPENDIX

# Educational Strategy for the Common Good

This ‘Education Strategy for the Common Good’ is compiled of four interconnected programmes, which are also stand alone. Programme One is foundational.

### PROGRAMME ONE

#### **Let’s Talk About It: Civic Conversations on the Past**

This programme is composed of five interrelated courses of six sessions each. It aims to enable a better understanding of the historical roots of our conflicts. It engages with the pain and suffering that occurred during the Troubles and explores the different narratives that have shaped us as a society. Violence always has consequences for people, society and the environment. It is only when we have honesty and together engage with our painful past that we can imagine a more just and peaceful future. This is an opportunity to engage with our past through civic conversations.

#### **1. Understanding Irish-British Political History: Engaging The Context**

- The Tudor Invasion to the Williamite Wars: 1536 – 1691

- Protestant Ascendency to Church Disestablishment: 1700 – 1870
- Home Rule to the Partition of Ireland: 1886 – 1921
- Violent Beginnings to Violence Again: 1912 – 1998
- Religious Conflict in Ireland, the Key Moments: 1600 – 2000
- Women in Northern Ireland: 1922-1939 and 1969 – 1998

## **2. Confronting Atrocities 1969 - 1998**

- Bloody Sunday: 30 January 1972
- Bloody Friday: 21 July 1972
- Dublin and Monaghan: 17 May 1974
- Shankill and Greysteel 1993
- Enniskillen and Omagh: 8 November 1987 & 15 August 1998
- And Not Forgetting the Litany of Atrocities!

## **3. Understanding The Narratives: The Conditioning That Shaped Us: 1969-1998**

- Politicians
- Republicans
- Loyalists
- Army
- Police
- A Divided People

#### 4. **Violence and its Consequences**

- Why Violence? Choices or Fear?
- Violence and Power Relations
- The Spiritual and Moral Impact
- Violence and Economics
- Violence and Politics
- The Abuse of Women and the Environment

#### 5. **Re-imagining The Future**

- Early Attempts: Sunningdale Agreement: 9 December 1973  
Duisburg Formula, Downing Street Declaration: 15 December 1993
- Yet More Imagination: The Framework Documents: 22 February 1995, The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement: 10 April 1998
- Roadmap to Peace and Reconciliation: The Ethics and Values of the Preamble
- Intergenerational and Interethnic Engagement
- Reimagining Just Politics
- Living Towards Cosmopolitan Citizenship and a Common Good

## Resources:

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## PROGRAMME TWO

### Let's Talk About It: Civic Conversations on Integrated Social Reconciliation

The prism of reconciliation is the lens through which this course pursues and lives towards a realisation of the common good. The vision is one of social reconciliation. The individualism which dominates our approach to politics, economics, culture, and religion in the Western and Atlantic world is seriously reductionist and distorts the vision and practice of reconciliation. The six sessions will address six integrated strands of reconciliation, each prefaced with 'socio' to underline the social, systemic and structural nature of these strands. There is no reconciliation without the socio-integrated strands and no common good unless it is inclusive of all of us, without exception.

#### 1. Is There A Common Good? Shaping The Present: Building Community

- Key Moments in Irish-British Political History
- The Politics of Reconciliation
- Just Economics
- Making Peace with the earth
- Reconciliation and a Culture of Human Rights
- Identity Politics: Stumbling Block to Reconciliation

## Resources

Higgins, C. and Wright, K. (eds.) (2022) *Is There a Common Good? Is the Past Preventing the Future and the Common Good?* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

Higgins, C. and McMaster, J. (2023) *Is There A Common Good? An Educational Resource.* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

Higgins, C. and McMaster, J. (2023) *Is There a Common Good? Living Towards the People's Vision.* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

## PROGRAMME THREE

### Let's Talk About It: Civic Conversations on Sustainable Democracy

We are living through a democratic recession when democracy recedes and an integral part of it, human rights, are being diminished. Perhaps democracy is always under threat. In 1841 John Adams, an American President, wrote that ‘...there never was a democracy yet that did not commit suicide!’ What if this is happening in our present world? What is the state of democracy in the UK? Have we democracy in Northern Ireland? Indeed, have we ever really had democracy in little over a century of Northern Ireland’s existence? Unless we create a better form of governance, democracy is the best we have. Democracy at its best is “We the People”, participatory, deliberative, and radically inclusive. This course will explore the history and practice of democracy, the nature of democratic politics and a politics of justice. It will also explore active citizenship, our role as citizens of the earth, and being active citizens through collective responsibility.

#### 1. Democracy Matters:

##### **Beyond Religious Nationalism to Just Politics**

- Democracy Matters: Inspired by Athens and Jerusalem
- The Practice of Democracy
- Educating for Politics: What is Politics?
- A Politics of Justice
- Educating for Citizenship: Citizens of the earth
- Active Citizenship and Collective Responsibility

## Resources

Higgins, C. and McMaster, J. (2023) *Is There A Common Good? Living Towards the People's Vision*. Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

McMaster, J. (2024) *Democracy Matters: Beyond Religious Nationalism to Just Politics*. Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

## PROGRAMME FOUR

### **Let's Talk About It: Civic Conversations on Values and Ethics**

There is no reconciling society and no common good without moral values and social ethics. In any process of arriving at the values and ethics that make life together meaningful in all its dimensions, we need to be sensitive to discern what is good and right for any given situation. We need also to discover what forms us as individuals and society towards the good, and what blocks and distorts moral formation. In all of this it is essential to get in touch with our ethical, moral, and spiritual values that go beyond any narrow religious outlooks, and which enable us to do good both as individuals and as a society. Important to all of this are conversations and moral/ethical deliberations. In the West our ethics and values have been shaped by the Greek, humanist, Judeo-Christian, and Islamic traditions. Ethics and values can be obscured by ideologies, doctrines and dogmas but at the heart of these traditions there are core ethics and values for life together in the world. In a global society there are profound ethical resources in Eastern traditions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. Profound ethical values are also at the heart of Indigenous traditions and many other philosophies of life. This education programme will engage participants in civic conversations, drawing from diverse wisdom traditions and help shape foundational social values and ethics for a common good.

## 1. Valuing A Different World: Is There A Common Good?

- Valuing the Common Good: Historical Frameworks
- Global Wisdom Ethics: Eastern Perspectives
- Global Wisdom Ethics: Indigenous Perspectives
- Crisis of Values: A World Order Falling Apart
- Ethical Foundations for a Common Good World
- Ethics in Practice: Living As If

### Resources

Higgins, C. and Wright, K. (eds.) (2022) *Is There A Common Good? Is the Past Preventing the Future and the Common Good?* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

Higgins, C. and McMaster, J. (2023) *Is There A Common Good? An Educational Resource.* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

Higgins, C. and McMaster, J. (2023) *Is There A Common Good? Living Towards the People's Vision.* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

Higgins, C. (2020) *Her Story: A Journey of Liberation from Patriarchal Ethics.* Derry/Londonderry: The Junction.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this educational strategy is conversation based and therefore interactive and participative. Active listening is an important part of the process. The facilitator's role is to ensure that everyone who wishes to speak has an opportunity to do so and no pressure is brought to bear on those who wish to remain silent. A facilitator will ensure also that there are no dominant voices and no monopolising of conversations.

There is potential in this educational strategy for use across the three strands of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, within Northern Ireland, North-South or a Shared Island approach, and East-West, Ireland and Great Britain. It is imperative that the past, present and future is engaged as widely as possible in living towards the fulfilment of a vision of the common good.



IRISH SCHOOL  
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ECUMENICS

This book represents three years of field research and education through civic conversations with people from across Northern Ireland and the border counties. The core question, 'Is there a common good?' was viewed through the prism of reconciliation and six integrated social strands identified during the programme are herein explored as essential to reconciliation in Ireland. There is no reconciliation without these strands and therefore no common good.

In pursuing the common good through reconciliation, the past is ever-present. If we are trapped in ideologies of the past, or closed narratives, we are incapable of imagining a different future. We need to critically engage with the past and an educational approach that does not teach critical thinking, dialogue, communication and skills of conflict resolution, lacks the potential to lead us out of our insecurities and divisions. Civic conversations can and do open up a future pregnant with hope and a shared practice of reconciliation, a vision of the common good.

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