

HOPE IN A TIME OF WAR; A RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVE ON PEACEMAKING.

Introduction

In September 2004, the 1300th anniversary of the death of St Adomnan of Iona was marked in Edinburgh by a procession from the east end of Princes Street up to the High Street, to Parliament Square, site of both the national cathedral, St Giles, and of the Scottish Law Courts. There, they took part in an act of worship commemorating the life of Adomnan, and especially the promulgation of the *Cain Adomnan*, the Law of the Innocents, an early attempt to distinguish and protect non-combatants in war. The liturgy was repeated at the Scottish Parliament. The people processing came from the Adomnan of Iona Affinity Group, which is made up of members of the Iona Community who are affiliated to the Trident Ploughshares movement. That movement campaigns against Trident nuclear-armed submarines across the world; the Adomnan of Iona group is particularly concerned with the presence of Trident in Scotland.

I am first and foremost an **activist**, with a lifetime of engagement in peacemaking and social justice issues. But I have also tried to be someone who **reflects** on my activism as a theologian and writer. And all of my activism and reflection has been done in the context of **partnership**, of finding common cause with individuals and organisations of good will. My activism is sustained by a strong spiritual base, and draws inspiration from spiritually-based non-violent movements of people and from the Justice and Peace Commitment of the Iona Community.

But let me return to Adomnan, an obscure Celtic saint, best known as the biographer -and hagiographer- of Saint Columba. His story begins in 7th century Ireland, a patriarchal society of constantly warring tribes. Violence and brutality were endemic. Women were subject to horrific oppression and exploitation. The Celtic church and its clerics were also vulnerable. In this situation, what authority could challenge the bloody killing fields, what could offer an alternative to the dominant warrior ethos, what hope was there for protection and justice?

Adomnan, successor to Columba as Abbot of Iona, was a key player in the ecclesiastical and secular politics of late 7th century Ireland. His *Cain Adomnain*, Law of the Innocents, was proclaimed and formally promulgated at the Synod of Birr in Munster in 697. It was a significant piece of legislation in many respects. It was formal not just customary; its authority extended throughout the whole of Ireland, and into those parts of Britain under the influence of Columban monasticism; and it declared clearly that clerics, women and 'innocent youths' were to be exempt from any duty of military engagement. But the main concern of the law was *'the freeing of women from encounter and encampment, from expedition and hosting, from wounding, from slaughter, and from the slavery of the cauldron.'*

The test of the Law is preceded by an introduction which tells a gruesome story of cruelty, hardship and bargaining. We learn that the real instigator of this Law was Ronnat, the mother of Adomnan, who used some extreme

methods to persuade her son to take up the cause of 'the women of the western world.' A vivid picture is drawn of the hideous double burden – domestic servility and suffering in battle – which was imposed on women as 'slaveys'-*cumalach* or bondmaids. The Cain tells us that '*Cumalach* was a name for women till Adamnan come to free them'

Ronnat first draws her son's attention to the horrors suffered by women in war, by jumping on his back, and refusing to get off until he had been forced to see the horrors endured by women on the battlefield. Then, armed only with his 'wee true-judging bell', Adomnan threatens dire consequences for the kings and their progeny. They recant, and the Law itself lists 91 powerful guarantors from throughout Ireland, who swore to ensure that the Law would be enforced. It imposed sanctions for killing, injury, rape and sexual harassment – not just in battle, but in the context of women's daily life and work.

Described as 'the first law in heaven and earth for the protection of women', Adamnan's Law extended to children and clergy, and is an early attempt to protect non-combatants. And even-handedly, it also forbade killing by women of other women or of men. As such, it is a precursor of the Geneva Conventions and the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. Thirteen hundred years on, it is a document which challenges us to discern whether, and in what ways, we can engage constructively with a Celtic legacy which represents spiritual rather than physical force to confront, even to curse, the power of the dominant elite.

It is hard to gauge just how widely the Law of Adomnan was actually adhered to and practised. As with the Jubilee laws of the Hebrew Bible, which advocated the regular cancellation of unpayable debt, the redistribution of wealth and the resting of land, which were designed to prevent the accumulation of capital into ever fewer hands and the oppression of the poor, those with power never cede it without a struggle. And much more recently, we have seen that those with power, and tame lawyers, will find ways to ignore the Geneva Conventions and the European Convention on Human Rights if they consider it is in their own interests. Nevertheless, such laws remain crucially important, not just because the protection of law is the best guarantor of freedom from oppression, but because they become an important part of changing a culture of violence to one which says, 'this is not acceptable.' And the Cain Adomnan is a salutary reminder that violence against women remains a major form of oppression worldwide, that extreme sexual violence against women is still used as a weapon of war, and that too often, it remains the case that ultimately women cannot rely on men to protect them from male violence.

In Celtic Ireland, as in many other ages and places, 'protection of women' was bought at the cost of indebtedness and obedience to male hierarchy, economic and spiritual power, and definitions of proper female behaviour. In our own time and context, perhaps we can ring our wee true-judging bells to break that dependence, so that women, and others who suffer violence, may find their own power of resistance.

Protection of non-combatants and the just war theory

The Cain Adomnan is also known as the Law of the Innocents, and was for the protection of non-combatants. The Treatise is not itself a non-violent document; it fights fire with fire, uses extremely violent threats and includes execution and amputation in its punishment. It is of its time and context; therefore it is wonderful that one of its most significant tenets is about complicity:

But he who from this day forward shall put a woman to death and does not do penance according to the Law, shall not only perish in eternity, and be cursed for God and Adamnan, but all shall be cursed that have heard it and do not curse him, and do not chastise him according to the judgement of this Law'.

It is not enough for good men to do nothing. Silence, as Nahzeda Mandelstam said from the gulag, is also a crime.

The case for Christian non-violence has been made frequently and fervently by many writers. The Gospel writers record that Jesus called his followers to a way of life in which violence and division are overcome by sacrificial love. We must not return evil for evil, Jesus taught, but must return good for evil; we must not hate those who wrong us but must love our enemies and give freely to those who hate us. These themes in Jesus' ministry were deeply rooted in the Hebrew prophetic tradition, and Jesus' ministry and his sacrificial death were a continuation and a fulfilment of that tradition. Followers of Jesus must follow both his example and his teachings: they must show love for all in their actions and seek healing and reconciliation in every situation.

Early Christian apologists, including Paul, were overwhelmingly absolute pacifists, and conversion to Christianity for another saint important on Iona, St Martin of Tours, often described as the father of Celtic monasticism, meant abandoning his military profession for the practice of non-violence, for, he said, 'I am a soldier of Christ; I cannot fight.' The early Christian community understood Jesus' commands to prohibit the bearing of arms. Christians refused to join the military, even though the Roman army of the period was as much a police force as a conquering army. Those who converted to Christianity while in military service were instructed to refrain from killing, to pray for forgiveness for past acts of violence, and to seek release from their military obligations.

After the Roman Emperor Constantine converted in A.D. 312 and began to conquer "in Christ's name," Christianity became entangled with the state and with imperial power, and warfare and violence were increasingly justified by influential Christians. Three centuries later, the Cain Adomnan drew a clear line of differentiation between combatants and those whom we would now describe as civilians. That differentiation was important for other teachers and theologians of the church, from St Augustine of Hippo to St Thomas Aquinas, who attempted to legislate for, and limit, the horror and cruelty of war. In formulating and developing the classical theory of the just war, these interpreters shaped what was accepted by later centuries as conditions under which a war could be fought.

As the dominant identity in the West became that of Christendom, the collusion of church and state became entrenched and corrupt. State power offered protection and influence to whichever form of the church was in the ascendant; in return, the church offered moral authorisation and justification for state interests and often for the most appallingly violent policies and practices. Though self-interest, aggrandizement and the lust for wealth and power drove the colonization and imperialism of Europe since the Middle Ages, the effortless assumption of superior Christian morality was considered an adequate justification for invasion, land appropriation and dispossession, plunder and slavery. But there were always exceptions to the rule; the egalitarian communities and historic peace churches like the Society of Friends, the Mennonites and the Church of the Brethren, the missionaries who saw the people to whom they had been 'sent' as equals and not inferiors, the individuals who followed the dissenting path of non-violence. Many of them met the same fate as those with whom they had identified themselves— insecurity, persecution, powerlessness and death when they threatened the interests of the dominant power.

Today, it is hardly surprising that dispossessed, disempowered and outraged people everywhere try to draw new maps to challenge the dominant one. Some of them are not really new, of course, they are a reversion to older, familiar maps; the map of fascism, the sectarian map, the ultra-nationalist ethnic map. They have in common that they are drawn to exclude anyone who is different, 'outsiders', foreigners, and to reinstate a real or imagined dominance of the past. They also have in common that they depend on violence and the threat of violence, whether military, physical, cultural or spiritual. The religious fundamentalist map is also an old one, but of course we know that it is taking new and dangerous forms, whether these be the extraordinary alliance between Christian Zionism and the State of Israel, Moslem anti-Semitism, Hindu nationalism, Christian fundamentalism in the service of American imperialism, or the Islamic fundamentalism of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which is a culture which glorifies death, instrumentalises its young and practices extreme violence against women.

My activism is spiritually-based, and motivated above all by the desire to follow Jesus Christ and walk in his way. Christianity is a religion whose founder was unequivocal in teaching that his followers should love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them and pray for those who ill-treat them, and who died doing exactly that. Yet Christians have been remarkably willing to embrace war and engage in conflict. They have been, and are, found on both sides of every conflict, and have often been prepared to kill, not only to defend their own side but to aggressively obliterate the other side.

It is not, of course, surprising to find Christians showing up on different sides of conflicts. The unavoidable fact of difference, of being enculturated into time, place, culture, tribal identity and all the other components of being human make it inevitable. The self-interest of the group or individual, and the drive to conformity within that, is a powerful force and we are full of human frailty. The French philosopher René Girard believes that violence, the dark shadow we project onto our gods, can be seen as a form of ritual sacrifice that Christ

tried to end. And besides, for millions of poor or subject groups, the fighting of wars has never been a matter of choice but of coercion.

Nor is it surprising to find Christians passionate in the cause of justice, and against oppression, slavery, profound and preventable human suffering. One cannot stand in the line of Isaiah, Amos, Micah, Jesus, however small and shaky one is in that line, without a burning sense of anger and urge to right glaring wrongs. For as many people who fought in the Second World War out of motives of fear, greed, hatred and racism, there must have been as many who fought reluctantly but committedly out of the desire to halt a very fearful evil.

Nevertheless, in all the border conflicts, civil wars and open warfare on a global scale, the responses of the Christian church have mirrored those outside it, and indeed, have so often been the originator of violence, that when the image of Christ shines out, in a Franz Jaegerstatter or a Martin Luther King, it makes the contrast all the more stark. The prevalent human responses to conflict show up as much in the religious stance as in the secular.

In order to attempt to bring a Christian perspective of checks and balances to bear in such a situation, and to try to draw guidelines for military engagement, the 'just war' theory was developed from the Middle Ages onwards. For many since then, the principle of the 'just war' has been a standard to be followed with much conscientious and agonized decision-making. For others, it has simply been a convenient justification for doing what they wanted in order to get what they wanted.

And of course, there is always a lot of compromise, of trying to find the best solution in the circumstances, of appeasing, looking for the middle ground. We all do it, and the church does it quite well. But still, there is a longing among so many for an approach to conflict that goes deeper. We are so aware of the cost of war. We are so aware of the failure of war to solve things, only to shift the balance of power a little, of revolutions that replaced one set of injustices with another. But we are also aware of the repression, the torture, the inequalities, the slavery, the cruelty, the grinding poverty, the exclusion and sense of being utterly expendable that makes people rise up and say, 'enough is enough'. We do not want to sit back and do nothing, We are not comfortable about retreating into pietism, even if it is dressed up in the modern garb of exploring our own spirituality. Even our compromises look shabby and complicit. They leave basic issues unresolved, covered up, waiting to surface again when the stakes are raised.

The Myth of Redemptive Violence

The American theologian, Walter Wink has used the notion of the myth of redemptive violence to critique the role of religion in establishing and maintaining violent and oppressive power structures in contemporary society. The myth of redemptive violence, the notion that hurting and killing people is

good for them, has exerted, and continues to exert huge power. It has authorized the beating of children, often by religious people, 'for their own good', the subordination of women, because they are 'weaker', the oppression of whole peoples because they are 'inferior' or 'uncivilised', occupation, imperialism, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Much military and imperialist policy of the last century has depended on the myth of religiously-sanctioned redemptive violence. It has its secular versions also, of course.

This myth saves people from having to engage with **the central humanitarian value that people are not expendable as a means to an end**, and leaves fundamental abuses of power unchallenged. That is why it is necessary. It raises violence to the status of a virtue. It justifies hateful and unjust means. It instrumentalises young people as weapons. It serves the killers, not the killed. It is particularly useful when other interests are at stake as well – markets, resource flows, arms sales, political campaigns at home.

The myth of redemptive violence in its modern Christian form derives from some theological interpretations of the meaning and significance of the passion and death of Jesus Christ-what are known as theories of the atonement- and in particular the theory of substitutionary atonement, a doctrine in Christian theology which states that Jesus of Nazareth died – intentionally and willingly – on the cross as a propitiation, or substitute, for sinners. I don't wish to go into these in detail, which would take me centuries, but it is worth noting that the penal substitution theory, which is held by most fundamentalist and many conservative Protestant Christians, sees the crucifixion of Christ as being a vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice that satisfied the demands of God's justice upon sin. In His death Christ paid the penalty of human sin, bringing forgiveness, imputing righteousness and reconciling man to God. Those that hold this view believe that every aspect of human beings, mind, will and emotions has been corrupted by sin and that the individual is totally depraved and spiritually dead. This view holds that Christ's death paid the penalty of sin for those whom God elects to save and that through repentance a person can accept Christ's substitution as payment for sin. The essence of the *Penal Theory* is that violence, suffering, and punishment of one or more innocent people is justified, if it produces beneficial results for other people. This is the clearest possible example of the myth of redemptive violence. It is enormously powerful and influential in fundamentalist Christianity.

These obscure, violent and forensic theories turn the gospel message on its head. While most Christians would believe of Jesus that the love which suffers is the love which saves, it is fatally easy for the suffering to become the object of belief, and to end up glorifying pain and violence. Every thinking human being recognises that to genuinely love other people will at times and inevitably involve suffering and self-sacrifice at many levels, and we willingly undergo this for the sake of our children, our partners, our friends. It may be the consequence of personal or political choices we make. But we do not therefore make a god of suffering and violence, we do not think of it as a good in itself, or a moral virtue, we do not willingly seek it out for its own sake unless we are mentally unbalanced, and we do not take it upon ourselves to impose it on others. It is the love that saves, not the suffering.

If I seem to be labouring this point, it is because it is crucial for an understanding of religious fundamentalism, for all religions, and secular ideologies too, have their own myths of redemptive violence, which have been used to justify the most appalling atrocities, have legitimised gender violence, racism and homophobia, have terrorised countless millions and have been the consistent justification for endless wars.

The myth of redemptive violence relies on being able to blur the distinction between a just cause and a just war. It matters to countries going to war that it be seen to be a moral war, a just war; otherwise, what authority is there for it and in what way are we different from and superior to those we fight. But the classical theory of the just war underlines much of the ambiguity about that distinction. The conditions justifying a war have been established as follows:

- the war must be defensive and a response to unjust aggression
- all other methods of resolving the conflict must have been exhausted
- there must be a realistic chance of success to justify all the wartime sacrifices
- there must be some proportion between the moral and physical costs of the hostilities and the peace and better social order sought afterwards
- only military targets, not unarmed civilians, can be the targets of military strikes
- force may never be used as a means in itself or to brutalize the social order and the military personnel

I do not think it now possible for modern warfare to meet these conditions.

The Map of Nonviolence

I have tried to show that throughout Christian history, which began with Jesus Christ's reminder that those who live by the sword will perish by the sword, there have been continuous efforts, with varying degrees of success, to refuse war altogether, to limit its effects on non-combatants, civilians and women and children, and to set principled and pragmatic constraints on the conditions under which it might be pursued. But we are now in a technological era in which all of these are no longer applicable. Pacifism, when it is understood as simply an avoidance of all conflict, does not take account of the fact that real peace is always rooted on justice. Passivity will not suffice for a global order of intolerable injustices, or for the human desire to alleviate and redress these. The First World War nearly a century ago was the last war in which military casualties outnumbered civilian ones. It is no longer possible to protect non-combatants. And just war theories in such a context are meaningless, as we see every day in Iraq and Afghanistan. Modern warfare does not bring peace and it does not bring justice.

The notion of the just war may have some utility when getting into a war (few countries will voluntarily surrender the moral high ground), but it has much less in getting out of it. War itself is brutalizing; even its language dehumanizes. This is especially the case when there are numerous factions involved in the post-war dispensation, each with their own claim to legitimacy, and their different

maps for the same territory. Such intractable conflicts have proved acutely resistant to imposed solutions elsewhere. The aftermath of wars is inherently racist in its casual disinterest in the people left, literally, to pick up the pieces – of homes, of families, of bodies –and in its studied disregard of the fact that many more civilians have, and will continue to die after the official cessation of hostilities than died before; from their injuries, from disease, from unexploded ordnance, from want and destitution. For them, wars are never over.

It is time for all people of goodwill to embrace a different way-the way of active, and proactive, non-violence. Instead of pre-emptive strikes, we need pre-emptive peacemaking. Not peace liking or peace wishing but peacemaking. Primarily, this means diplomacy, negotiation, listening, massive investment in conflict resolution, mediation and a wider vision. Above all, it means much more serious engagement with what it means to live with difference, with the recognition that people are different and will remain different. And it also therefore requires that non-violent action for justice and human rights and dignity is accelerated.

So what does it mean to attempt to live by the map of active non-violence? I believe that it is an invitation to live hopefully and to bear witness. *Jesus had a profound understanding of conflict and violence and his teaching should not be understood as impractical idealism. Instead it should be seen as a way of getting out of the reciprocity of conflict. Going the second mile, turning the other cheek, giving your cloak to the one who takes your coat (Matt 5, 38-42) are all ways of doing the unexpected – the non-imitative thing which offers the possibility of breaking the reciprocity of conflict. Some translations of verse 39 speak of offering 'the wicked no resistance' or some such. A better translation is 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil' (the Scholars Version). What we are being challenged to do is not to resist evil but to find a creative way out of the reciprocity of action and reaction (an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth).(1)*

The Japanese-American theologian Kosuke Koyama writes:

What is love if it remains invisible, inaudible, intangible. 'Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have seen.' The devastating poverty in which millions of children live is visible. Racism is visible. Machine guns are visible. Slums are visible. Starved bodies are visible. The gap between the rich and the poor is glaringly visible. Our response to these realities must be visible. Grace cannot function in a world of invisibility. Yet in our world, the rulers try to make invisible the alien, the orphan, the hungry and thirsty, the sick and imprisoned. This is violence. Their bodies must remain visible. There is a connection between invisibility and violence. People, because of the image of God they embody, must remain seen. Faith, hope and love are not vital except in what is seen. Religion seems to raise up the invisible and despise what is visible. But it is the 'see, hear, touch' gospel that can nurture the hope which is free from deception.(2)

To bear witness

This connection between invisibility and violence is particularly strongly evidenced in war: I think particularly of the refusal of the 'coalition of the willing' to count the Iraqi dead, of the secrecy around Guantanamo Bay, around extraordinary rendition. But, 'people must remain seen.' **To live hopefully, to bear witness, means to make the violence done to people visible;** to say what we have seen, to ask what is still unseen, to break the culture of silence and to name names. There are, of course, many ways to do this; through campaigns and lobbying and advocacy. Sometimes it is simply to draw attention by presence; like the Mothers of the Disappeared in Argentina, or the Women in Black in many places. When members of the Iona Community sit down outside Faslane, we do not think that blockading is going to close the base then and there. We do it to make visible once again the huge capacity for death and destruction contained in every Trident submarine. It is what Ecumenical Accompaniers and Christian Peacemaker Teams do in the West Bank and Gaza.

But bearing witness is about more than just making violence visible. David Stevens, the Leader of the Corrymeela Community in Northern Ireland, writes, *(Christians) are called to make this reconciliation visible – visible in terms of a quality of relationships, visible in terms of openness and hospitality. It is a visibility which serves the same purpose as Christ's visibility, namely, to reveal God and God's reconciling love. This is true holiness and is the ministry of reconciliation.* (3) **Bearing witness is also about making reconciliation visible, about making alternatives visible.**

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, April 1996, East London, South Africa

*On the first day
after a few hours of testimony
the Archbishop wept.
He put his grey head
on the long table
of papers and protocols
and he wept.*

*The national
and international cameramen
filmed his weeping,
his misted glasses,
his sobbing shoulders,
the call for a recess.*

*It doesn't matter what you thought
of the Archbishop before or after,
of the settlement, the commission,*

*or what the anthropologists flying in
from less studied crimes and sorrows
said about his discourse,
or how many doctorates,
books and installations followed,
or even if you think this poem
simplifies, lionizes,
romanticizes, mystifies.*

*There was a long table, starched purple vestment
and after a few hours of testimony,
the Archbishop, chair of the commission,
laid down his head, and wept.*

That's how it began. (4)

I spoke earlier about my interpretive key being spiritually-based and depending on a community. I have been part of the Iona Community all my life, first as a child of members, then as a member myself. Peacemaking and opposition to militarization has been a central part of the Iona Community since its beginning in 1938. Our Founder, George MacLeod, who had enlisted at the age of 19, and who had been awarded the Military Cross and the Croix de Guerre in the trenches of the First World War, and subsequently became a pacifist and socialist, had a holistic theology that did not just express itself in rebuilding on Iona, but in radical non-violence and sustained opposition to nuclear weapons and the arms trade. This commitment to non-violence is expressed in the Community's Justice and Peace Commitment which is one part of the fivefold Rule of faith and life to which all members adhere. Its first article states:
We believe that the Gospel commands us to seek peace founded on justice and that costly reconciliation is at the heart of the Gospel.

This is what I believe, and what I try to practice. But I know that if I was trying to do it alone, I would have given up a long time ago. Jesus' way of non-violence invites us to discover not just what we are against, but what we are for. It invites us to fullness of life. But fullness of life is not to be identified with having it all, or thinking we can. It

requires a recognition that this fullness encompasses emptiness, that gain incorporates loss, that joy involves sorrow, that living means learning to let go, and to face death. All of this is so counter-cultural that I think it's almost impossible to follow the way of non-violence without a community. The spiritual base and nurture that the community I am part of offers crucial things:

- In the human search for meaning, the freedom to **ask questions**; it is in the struggle to name and articulate our truth that we learn to know ourselves, including our own capacity for violence
- In the human search for intimacy, the **creation of safe space** – accepting, non-judgemental, encouraging, disciplined – in which to know and be known
- In the human search for belonging, the **encouragement of the art of sharing** through a revaluing of the communal joys and a rebuilding of confidence in relationship

There is another set of principles which are important to members of the Iona Community, who share them with millions across the world. These are the principles of non-violence, developed out of many violent situations as comprising:

- respect for the opponent as a fellow human being
- care for everyone involved in a conflict
- refusal to harm, damage or degrade people/living things/the earth
- if suffering is inevitable, the readiness to take it upon oneself rather than inflict it on others
- not retaliating to violence with violence
- belief that everyone is capable of change
- appeal to the humanity of the opponent
- recognition that no one has a monopoly of truth, so trying to bring together different truths
- belief that the means are the ends in the making, so the means have to be consistent with the ends
- openness rather than secrecy

Inadequately, and failing constantly, these are nevertheless what we seek to live by. They are, after all, an invitation to personal responsibility for the sake of a larger peace.

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:
so much has been destroyed.
I have to cast my lot with those
who, age after age, perversely,
with no extraordinary power
reconstitute the world. (5)*

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Notes

1. From *'the place called reconciliation; texts to explore'* by David Stevens (Leader of the Corrymeela Community) The Corrymeela Press 2008
2. Kosuke Koyama, from an address given at WCC General Assembly, Harare, 1998
3. David Stephens, from *'The Land of Unlikeness: Explorations into Reconciliation'* The Columba Press, Blackrock, Co. Dublin, 2004)
4. Ingrid de Kok, from *Terrestrial things: poems by*, Snailpress, Plumstead, South Africa, 2002
5. Adrienne Rich, from *'The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974 – 1977.'*