Ethical and Shared Remembering: Commemoration in a New Context

Visioning the Future
2012-2022

Johnston McMaster
in partnership with
Maureen Hetherington
The Junction
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Ethical and Shared Remembering Project

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The decade of remembering, is not only about making critical sense of a past which included change and violence. It is about remembering the future. During 2012-2022, there is the opportunity and challenge to envision a different future for the whole of Ireland. In Northern Ireland it is described as a shared future. There needs to be a participative and inclusive conversation about what the future will be, what kind of society we want by 2022. It will need to be a future, not only very different from the Ireland of 1912-1922, but even different from the present, and on the eve of the decade of remembering, Ireland, north and south, and the world of today are a planet away from the decade of change and violence. Globalisation, travel and communication have changed the world beyond recognition. Carson and Craig, Pearse and Connolly, Collins and De Valera would all find contemporary Ireland strange, unrecognisable and perhaps unsettling. From where they stand, the Ireland of today would be a foreign country, as their Ireland is a foreign country to us. This is not because any of these unionist or nationalist leaders have been betrayed. There is no disloyalty to the people of 1912 or 1916. It is that the processes of change, the one constant in life, have been radical and rapid. There may be elements from then on which we can build, such as the common issue of freedom, which was what the authors of the Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation really sought. However, the nature and content of freedom a century later has changed. Key words like independence have been replaced in today’s globalised world with interdependence.

A vision is needed for a different kind of Northern Ireland and Ireland. A new kind of common good is to be imagined and creative dreaming is required for the shaping of a 21st century civic society, which is both local and global.

An earlier volume in this series, ‘Ethical Theological Responses to Shared Remembering, 1912-1922’ identified the ethical theological challenges arising from the decade. From the perspective of the faith community, these are the theo-ethical issues that need to be addressed during the shared remembering. This volume looks forward, identifying the theo-ethical challenges that need to be engaged if there is to be a visioning of the future.

New images of God are needed in place of the old idolatries, as the God of the decade, shaped in political and ideological images, may well have lacked integrity.
So what is a Christian image of God for the 21st century?

Key to any vision of God and ethical living in this century, will be justice, which will involve the building of a more just, more equitable and fairer society. The perennial issue of identity will become much less oppositional in a new society or shared future. The complexity and plurality of identities will be acknowledged, and a new way of interpreting the multiple and rich identities on this island, experienced.

Ethical leadership in society is being demanded, leadership in various spheres with ethics and values, especially compassion and civility. Related to this is the need to create a common good and faith values, which are human values which have something worthwhile and positive to contribute.

The big dream of a shared future can have ethics at its heart, and whether or not covenant is language for the 21st century, the six core values integral to the Judeo-Christian covenant offer a radical socio-political and economic vision for society. This Jewish gift may well be indispensable.

The faith community, in a very different place in contemporary Ireland and with a role far removed from 1912-1922, can no longer dominate society as it did then. With a lot more appropriate modesty and with more integrity it can make its contribution to the shaping of a different societal future. Theological and ethical values still have a place in a secular and pluralistic society.
Change is the constant in life and history. Nothing ever remains the same. Most find this difficult, as the tendency is to conserve, some wanting to conserve more than others. To be socially, politically, and religiously conservative is very difficult because the waves of change just keep coming. Religion, especially in situations of prolonged conflict and violence and where identities are often defined in opposition is almost inevitably conservative. Change is resisted and even when killing and atrocity, trauma and political hurt challenge the very basis of bad theology, we may be even more determined to maintain perceived purity of the faith tradition. And doesn’t the Bible speak of faith once and for all delivered to the saints, professions and formulations beyond change? There is also the comforting fact that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever, the unchanging Christ and the unchanging God. The assumption is that what we say about Jesus and God, the doctrinal statements do not and cannot change. Less attention is paid, if any, to the biblical texts that God is always making all things new, or those that speak of God changing God’s own mind.

Events in history always keep challenging and distorting traditional and settled beliefs. The Book of Job, which was probably a storyline told to make sense out of the traumatic experience of the Hebrew faith in Babylonian conquest and exile, explores the inadequacy, even failure of traditional theology, and highlights the need for revision. This book of continuous argument with God doesn’t even have answers or a new settled tradition in the end. Faith in Job is open-ended, left with questions. There may be helpful pointers here after the historical trauma of the 20th century. Mass industrial slaughter and killing through war, violence, and genocide, the extermination of over six million Jews in the Shoah, and over a third of a century of Holocaust and violent killing in the ‘field’ that is Northern Ireland, and that of the decade 1912-1922, ought to and has challenged God-talk. The invocation of God in the iconic foundational documents of the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation, the role of religion in the Irish violence and atrocity, since the 17th century, ought to compel a serious and radical critique and evaluation of our traditional God images and language. Irish theology may have serious ethical deficiencies.

Theology or God-talk cannot remain the same after the 20th century, after the Holocaust or after the decades of violence and trauma in Ireland. A theological
response to history and the future demands the re-imagining of God or a God-shift.

The Future of God-Talk in a New Century

Finnish theologian, Veli-Matti Karkkainen writes of the obligation - and impossibility - of God-talk (The Doctrine of God, p8). People of faith have always talked of God, and God-talk has always changed. There is always the necessity and obligation to speak of God, articulate divine meaning, make sense of the ‘Other’. Yet God-talk is an impossibility because God is beyond human speech, vocabulary, symbols, and experience. Even our best attempts at God-talk cannot grasp or contain the incomprehensible mystery. When we do use language, the only language we can use is that of metaphor and symbol. The best we can do is speak of the metaphorical God, or God as metaphor, which is always like this, but not that. Theology must engage with the Metaphor, but always remains with the impossible task of speaking of God.

The tendency in religious language, whether theological or liturgical, is to speak of God in the language of certainties and absolutes. Church language knows God and controls God. Religious language speaks of divine revelation, God’s revelation of Godself, and equates it wholly with human constructs, formulations, and doctrines. There is no sign of doubt in the equation of God and guns in the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation. There is complete certainty that God is on the side of Ulster, or Ireland, or the Empire. Ireland, then, cannot afford to be anything less than that. God is on our side, not only now but in the past with ‘our fathers’ (sic). There is no room for unsettledness, ambivalence, mystery, or otherness in God. We know God has spoken, or so the clergy proclaim, we are sure. But the 20th century and the landscape of human experience in our still new 21st century have shattered the image of God.

The God on our side, political, military, or ecclesial side, was a supernaturalist, interventionist God, who in ‘his’ almightiness ordered history and human life, and always on the basis of our choseness. But the classical, theistic God was fatally wounded at the Somme and died at Hiroshima and in the Holocaust. There was no intervention in the 20th century slaughter and genocide, nor in our most recent decades of sectarian killing. But the 18th century Enlightenment that shaped our rational and scientific thinking had already left God as an Unmoved Mover, distanced...
from the world and unaffected by the events of history. This was mystery of the rational type but not the mystery of faith. Interventionist or Unmoved, both were contentious and absolutes, and experientially inadequate and ethically deficient after the brutal 20th century and a suffering planet, both human and environmental. The ‘Christian Century,’ which was the most violent in recorded human history has left us staggering problems with our God-talk and enormous challenges.

**Contemporary Challenges**

Peter Hodgen, an American theologian, has set out three major challenges which shape the context for the obligation and impossibility of God-talk (Christian Faith: A Brief Introduction, p3-10).

1. **Ecological and Cosmological Awareness**

   In the 20th century killings and genocide, we human beings took the power of life and death out of God’s hands. At least it was traditionally believed that such ultimate power over life and death belonged to God. But weapons of mass destruction have changed that. We humans also behaved as the lords and monarchs of nature, dominating and exploiting the environment in our human superiority and anthropocentrism. Our ‘ultimate’ control over the environment has been unbelievably destructive. As earth-creatures we need to realise that we are not the measure of all things, nor does the environment exist to serve the insatiable needs and demands for more and more. Most certainly not of the one third haves! We may not, in fact, survive forever. Ecological and cosmological awareness enables us to recognise that we are part of an interdependent relational web of life, and that partnership with all creation, non-domination is the way to cosmic wellbeing. Such awareness can shift us towards a more collaborative and relational view of God, the collaborative energy and love at the heart of the wonderful mystery of life.

2. **The Quest for Justice**

   The inhumanity of life together on the planet is all too apparent. The great evils of our time are poverty, violence/war, and environmental destruction, and they are interconnected. Also woven with this web of destruction are patriarchy and gender inequalities. The cry of the majority of the human population, and of the male designated ‘weaker’ sex, and the cry of the earth is for justice. Justice is
the spiritual and relational hope and ideal before it is a legal-political issue. It is the deep longing for relationships that are more humane, equal, and fair, and where there is distributive and restorative justice. It is the acknowledgement of the sacredness of the earth and every creature and life form on it. The practice of justice is about the restoration of earth-human relationships. Of course all of this requires legal-political action, such as the implementation of human and earth rights, economic, environmental, and spiritual rights, along with corresponding obligation and responsibilities.

In Judeo-Christian times the God of covenant and kingdom is the dynamic power of justice over and against all injustice. God-talk may be ultimately beyond us, impossible, but at the very least, and in our context of human and environmental suffering and destruction, we must speak of God as just and justice. What else does social, active love, divine or human, mean?

3. Cultural and Religious Pluralism
Life is relational. Others exist alongside us, as do multiple life forms. Life is social and communal, even though we try hard to create ‘us and them’ categories, ‘in and out group’, ‘friends and enemies’. In Northern Ireland we develop our divisions in housing, education, sport, and religion. Despite some of the gains of an ecumenical century, churches in most cases remain apart, comfortable in their separation, even creating a sociological and cultural sub-group keeping itself apart from the rest of an unbelieving society. In overt and public ways the message is ‘God is with us’, and not with them, or to a much lesser extent. Even a loyalist paramilitary group on its East Belfast mural claims ‘Who can separate us’, an allusion, even direct quote from St. Paul’s affirmation in Romans in relation to the ever-present love of God. But all biblical texts can be sectarianised and read as exclusivist, translating into social praxis.

Whatever globalization means, it means cultural and religious pluralism, and interdependence. Pluralism we may not like, even detest it, but the tide of pluralism will not retreat, even though some resort to violence to displace and even eliminate those who are different. Less physically violent, but feeding into it and still violent is the racist, sectarian, xenophobic, Islamaphobic, homophobic, sexist, supremacist, response to the reality of difference and pluralism. Information technology, global
travel, and communication, global markets and even the availability of international choice in the local supermarket, makes cultural and religious pluralism the great reality of our time. It exists on the street where you live.

Multiple cultures and multiple faiths challenge our exclusionist and hegemonic truth claims. The arrogance and absolutism of all religions are called into question. A God who only loves or saves one third of the human race, namely Christians, is now an absurdity. That Islam is the only really true faith is equally absurd. The God who cannot be named, as the Jewish tradition recognizes, and who is beyond all names, can never be monopolised by any religious or faith tradition. This is not to say that all religions are the same. Far from it, since each has its own uniqueness and differences. But uniqueness is never a totalising claim. The God who is incomprehensible mystery, of whom it is ultimately impossible to speak, though all religions must, will not be controlled, domesticated, or captured by any religious tradition.

Future of God-Talk – If we dare!
If we are to attempt the impossible, and we must, to speak of God, then only metaphors will do. Keeping that before us, and avoiding all literalistic language, there are three pointers for articulate but hesitant God-talk in 21st century Ireland.

1. Knowing in Silence
Perhaps the greatest philosopher and theologian to come from Ireland was John Eriugena, John the Irishman. Belonging to the 9th century, he spent his life in France, and whilst personal biographical details are scant, more is known of his very creative mind and imagination. It is important that future God-talk in Ireland should know the 9th century Irish wisdom. For John, God is beyond us, beyond our words and even our best thoughts. We cannot speak of God and the only appropriate response to God is silence. To know God is to be silent, to cease from words, even to empty our minds of rational and distracting thought. This may not be good news for Irish religion, often overwhelmed by a torrent of words, and in a sectarian culture, words that speak of God in opposition and as instruments of attack, disdain, and offence to the other. Killing the other in our 20th century decades of violence was underpinned by religious words and often seen as sacred cause.
The Christian faith community in Ireland needs to lower its voice, speak less loudly and without sectarian overtones if God is to be a reality in the 21st century. The practice of silence is essential, which will mean the recovery of contemplation, the learning of the art of contemplation. In the contemplative approach to God through silence, faith without words, there will be a more real and deeper knowing of the ultimate mystery, the divine in ourselves and in each other.

2. Only a Suffering God will do
Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Christian who lived through the dark days of Nazi Germany. He became part of the Confessional Church in Germany and stood in solidarity with the suffering Jewish community, but was unable to stop the industrial killing of Jews in the Holocaust. He wrestled with the moral dilemma of involvement in a plot to take Hitler’s life, and was eventually arrested and hanged by the Nazis. In the intense struggle, Bonhoeffer came to see that the only God who would make any sense was a suffering God. Only a suffering God will do, he said. In his experience in Nazi Germany and in the light of the Jewish experience, an almighty, all-powerful, interventionist God was already dead for Bonhoeffer. If God was reality then God was a suffering God in solidarity with all the victims, suffering with and alongside.

The immense suffering of the 20th century and the suffering and trauma inflicted by violence, state and paramilitary in Ireland, challenges us to revision God. The interventionist, providentialist, omnipotent, war God fighting on our side is dead. Only a suffering God will do, which means a vulnerable God and not a macho image. If Christians claim that Jesus is their supreme clue to God then his death, at the hands of a violent imperial power and domination system of violence, means that the image of God is always cruciform. There is no triumphant God, but only a God of suffering, vulnerability, and solidarity.

3. Knowing God in Relationships
Not only is silence the appropriate response to the mystery of God, it is the appropriate response in the face of suffering. We know God less in words than in the silence of contemplation and in solidarity with the traumatized and suffering. John Eruigena also held that in knowing ourselves and in our deepest humanity we
encounter the divine. It is also in knowing others and in encounters with others that we know the divine presence of love.

In the 21st century this has taken on a larger dimension. Cultural and religious pluralism is in our streets and in our workplaces. Globalisation is on the other side of the street. God-talk is now only possible in dialogue. To speak of God at all is to speak of God in the inter-faith encounter, and the encounter with the religious others is unavoidable, even desirable. The cultural and religious pluralism of the 21st century means that the future of God-talk or Christian theology lies in the encounter between the Christian faith and other faiths. It will be one of the characteristics of the 21st century. The future is inter-faith dialogue and ethics. The dialogue and encounters will refine our vision of God and the way in which we dare to speak of God. There is nothing new in this. It is the Bible story, as first ancient Israel and then the Jesus movement encountered pluralism and always had to articulate faith in relationships to and with many others. If the God of Jesus Christ is to make sense to other cultures and faiths, then how do Christians make their faith understandable and meaningful? Likewise how do Muslims or Hindus make their faiths understandable to Christians? How do all of us overcome our ignorance and misunderstanding of each other except in encounter and dialogue? And if God transcends all our religious traditions, if the incomprehensible mystery is beyond all our different names and vocabularies, then our knowing will only be enriched by encountering the other and knowing together in relationships. On such knowing also depends the future peace and wellbeing of the planet. A peaceful future requires us together to know the peaceful other.

Reflection questions

How do we speak of God in the 21st century, and what are the challenges we face?

How does Bonhoeffer’s suffering God resonate with our experience of violent conflict?
Not only do we need to re-imagine a new future for Ireland, north and south, faith needs to re-imagine new images of God for a new and shared future. Throughout the last four centuries of sectarian history, through a decade of violence, much of it sectarian, 1912-1922, and in the more recent phase of sectarian violence, God or god has been a player. Sectarianism has always had theological roots and God and Jesus have represented a shared dynamic. Like it or not, much of our violence has been sacred and dying for the cause has been described in religious terms as blood sacrifice or supreme sacrifice. The memorialisation of the dead is often a religious ritual, expressed in religious language and symbols, and the dead being remembered had no greater love or loyalty than to die for the national cause. If that is what they did then it needs the highest authority around to make it right and heroic and the ultimate authority is God. So God has frequently been invoked in our history of sectarian violence and atrocity either because leaders literally believed in a warrior God or they knew they had to use the God-idea if they were to get people to kill and be killed.

When the American Civil War ended, with the white South defeated, its very meaning and long-lived socio-economic structures destroyed by the constitutional ending of slavery, white southerners responded in one of two ways. ‘Some went into a century of denial and brutality. Others re-thought and re-built’ (Melvyn Bragg, The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible, 1611-2011, p256). Soon after the decade of change, 1912-1922, denial and amnesia quickly followed in relation to the decade’s brutality and violence. Perhaps there was embarrassment that so much undemocratic activity and violence had occurred. Perhaps the denial on all sides enabled the brutality and violence to remain in mind-sets and in tradition, to re-emerge in 1969 with a vengeance. Having never really acknowledged the unrest and violence, was the more recent phase of violence therefore surprising? If we fail again to deconstruct the ideology and theology of violence, will it return to haunt another future generation? To rethink and rebuild relationships and society with life enhancing values and social ethics is an imperative. For the faith community in Ireland, whose God has been so often used or invoked for the culture and practice of violence, there is the challenge to rethink and rebuild theology and its social and public ethics. There is pain in critical deconstruction of God images, dismantling old idolatries and sectarian beliefs, sectarian in their consequences for community relations. But faith in a nationalistic, orange or green god is enslaving and
destructive. The 20th century has bequeathed its death enhancing God-images, repressive God-talk and beliefs that have imprisoned us in the past. Re-thinking and re-building require new images of God that are life-enhancing, liberating, and reconciling. Is it too daring to suggest that what churches need is a big car-boot sale where we can get rid of the theological junk we have accumulated in four centuries of modern Irish history, junk which is sectarian theology and its bed partner, sectarian violence?

To re-think, or better re-imagine God for the new time of opportunity and rebuilding in Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole has three possibilities.

1. From Belief to Faith

Irish Christian religion, Protestant or Catholic, has roots in the Christendom model. It has always been so and even if St Patrick was the first to bring Christian faith to Ireland, which he wasn’t, it was the faith or rather belief of Christendom that took root here. It was not only that Christendom identified faith and political power, married throne and altar, and ensured the political and cultural establishment of Christianity. Christianity from its state-sponsored privileged role in Western society, formulated and often imposed orthodoxy or correct beliefs, and called those who deviated heretics. Heretics even paid with their lives and were certainly never honoured as those who paid the supreme sacrifice! In bed with the empire, the church often mirrored the imperial institution and proclaimed imperial, triumphalistic theology. God was in the image of the emperor and vice versa, the omnipotent God and Christ the Warrior King. Between the 4th and the 20th centuries the church was concerned with orthodoxy and correct doctrine. In this model faith was intellectual assent to a set of propositional beliefs, theological formulations, doctrines or correct beliefs. Faith was believing things about God and about Jesus and the Holy Spirit, though the latter often had a Cinderella role. Like the Emperor Constantine at the beginning of Christendom, faith as assent was a strategy to impose order and control, and to put down dissent, diversity, and often discussion. With the collapse of the Christendom model, the de-privileging and cultural disestablishment of churches, faith is moving away from the assent to specified doctrines and formulations. Western churches of all shades including the new movements no longer have the monopoly on goodness, spirituality or even God. The 21st century movement and dynamic is from belief to faith with faith
reviving and re-imagining something of its earliest experience. Harvey Cox reflects that ‘At its onset ‘faith’ meant a dynamic lifestyle sustained by fellowships that were guided by both men and women and that reflected life for the coming of the Reign of God’ (The Future of Faith, p179). When that became propositional beliefs, policed by an authoritative hierarchy, which was and is always clerical, it became warped and distorted.

In the 21st century we can move from belief to faith as openness to the mystery that is God and openness to God’s future. Beyond belief as assent there is faith as trust, not in a set of doctrines about God, or even trust in the Bible or theological statements about the Bible, but trust in the mystery of love that is transformative. Faith, and the biblical Hebrews and early Jesus followers knew this, is faithfulness. This is faithfulness to our relationship with God. It is the loyalty, allegiance, and commitment of our deepest selves, being radically centred in God, loving God and neighbour. Living faithfully is the practice of the ethics of love, justice, and peace. Put another way, faith is vision, seeing all of life as life-giving and nourishing, seeing things whole, in love with the world and giving ourselves to a vision that goes beyond ourselves, that is the present and future reign of God. Faith is living in openness to the loving mystery and dynamic energy at the heart of all life.

2. God is Power With
The problem with God, the God of modern Irish history, is that He (and he was and is male) was omnipotent, violent, and powerful. To have God on your side always needs a God like that. Who wants a vulnerable God when you have to defeat and crush the enemy? Edward Carson and Padraic Pease were never going to sign or proclaim covenants or proclamations affirming the vulnerability of God. But how many lives did the god of guns and militarized politics claim, all expendable in 20th century Ireland for respective national causes, all a sacrifice on the altar of the known god of blood and death? And that is the legacy we would rather deny than painfully rethink and re-imagine?

The problem is that we have been obsessed by god as all-powerful in whose all-powerfulness we and our cause share, or which we are called to imitate. We have bought into the image of god as power over, god as dominating power. This god-image legitimises our violence, itself a domination system, lording it over
generations of Irish women and men, dominating culture and demanding ultimate loyalty and blood sacrifice. All domination systems sacralise themselves, moralise the high ground, reduce the other to an axis of evil or a demon, a collaborator with establishment. If others are killed it was a ‘mistake’, an unintended target, collateral damage, only doing their duty, a moral victory, always moral however much an atrocity. Even secular justifications have theological roots if critically examined. Perhaps god is a flag of convenience, but the omnipotent, all-powerful, power-over image of god is a problem. Perhaps it does take people of deeply committed faith to be good atheists! Richard Dawkins et al do us some favours even in their atheistic fundamentalism.

A short time after the Jesus movement began its journey, a doctrinal and cultural enforcement officer (in private capacity?) set out with sword and maybe even some assistants to violently eliminate this unorthodox, therefore different and threatening Jewish fledgling group. In his violent rage as God’s executioner, Saul of Tarsus was blinded by a radically different image of God. The blinding light on the road to Damascus transformed his consciousness and life from violence to active non-violence and liberating peace. It transformed his God-image and later he reflected on the new image of God in his letters. When he reflected deeply on the imperial execution of Jesus and God’s vindication of Jesus in the stories of God raising him from the dead, he dared to speak of a God whose power was an upside-down power, the very opposite of omnipotent, almightiness, power-over and domination. Everywhere Paul travelled, the power of empire, imperial Rome, and its domination system, military, political, and economic, was pervasive. Yet Paul experienced a very different kind of power in the cross, the symbol of state terror and execution. Paradoxically he saw God’s power as weakness, ‘… God’s weakness is stronger than human strength’ (I Corinthians 1v25). The suffering love and vulnerability of God is stronger than the imperial might. Paul completely, radically, and subversively re-images God’s power. God’s power is essentially cruciform. God’s power is cross-shaped. The symbol and reality of Roman imperial power and violence is subverted and inverted. God’s cruciform power is not imperial power, it is not dominating or violent. Luke’s gospel has Jesus say that the imperialists, the Romans, lord it over others, ‘… but not so with you’ (Luke 22 v 25-26). The Jesus story is not one of domination or violence, but active non-violence and serving others, especially
the least. God’s cruciform power, power in weakness or suffering love opposes all power of domination, control, and violence.

Frequently the faith community has too often glorified the imperial cross and been itself a domination system. In modern Irish history there has been no consistency and sadly no serious critique of the domination system of violence. God and guns dominated our 20th century, its culture, and politics. Yet Paul sees God’s power as weakness, suffering love opposed to power as domination and power as violence; God’s cruciform power as opposed to the god of Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation. This paradoxical model of power as power in solidarity and power with, what Paul goes on to call reconciliation, new relationships between enemies and antagonists, is an ethics of power as to how we must use and structure power in our social, community, political, and ecclesial relationships.

The power over, power as domination, image of god is a very male, patriarchal image. We may well have made God in a male image, which has neither been good for God or men. Women theologians have been drawing attention to a more liberating experience for both women and men. Feminist theology has been recovering images of God other than the exclusive male father. Apart from the Mother images of God in the biblical tradition, they have recognised that Jesus taught the ‘Our Father’ as subversive to the Roman emperors claim to be father of all. Attention is also drawn to feminist qualities, which can be and should be in both men and women. These qualities of inclusion, co-operation, compassion, emotionality, creativity, and empathy have been integrated by some men. They are, however, not the predominant, patriarchal, power-seeking, aggressive, competitive, and exploitative chauvinists of much of our history and society. Liberation and reconciliation require the feminine and masculine to be integrated in each of us, and Paul’s image of God’s power as weakness can transform us into more holistic and liberated persons.

3. God’s Passion for Justice

Violence often has its roots in abuses of power and injustice. All violence is rooted in warped ideas of power and even violence used to counter injustice quickly becomes itself a great injustice, dominating, intimidating, and controlling people.
God has often been used in history to legitimize abuses of power, totalitarian regimes, and hegemonic arrangements, of political and ecclesial power. War, violence, and genocide have all been justified by invocations of God. Wealth also in the hands of the few has been divinely justified and the right to dominate nature and exploit it has had some of its roots in a misreading of the Genesis text as domination, and as God’s command. Injustices associated with poverty, greed, exploitation, violence, discrimination (gender, race, and sexual orientation), such inequalities can never be justified by appeal to God. The tragedy is that all of the above have been justified and practiced by appealing to the Bible as the word of God. Significantly the above can all be challenged and undermined by drawing on the biblical perspectives. Afro-American slaves read the Bible against their institutional slavery and later through Martin Luther King, against structural racism. The same happened with apartheid and is happening with gender inequality issues. Even though a Bible war rages within churches against those with different sexual orientations, in time homophobia and its injustice will be undermined also by key biblical values.

One could be forgiven for sometimes thinking that violence is a consuming passion for much of modern Irish history. Colonisation has never been just, anywhere in the world. It is itself a major form of violence and Ireland’s experience has been no exception. The violence used against it, as in the two Jewish revolts against Roman imperialism, increases the spread of violence and the human suffering. In violence and counter-violence situations, not only does truth go to the wall, but justice does as well. As the spiral increases, law and order usually break down, leaving a generational legacy, criminality often increases and corruption and injustice become norm.

Christians often claim that the Jesus story forms the church. There has always been ambivalence around that. Yet if Jesus is to be taken seriously and his insights into God taken as norm, then God’s greatest passion, God’s all consuming interest, is justice. The Bible is a deeply political text, a reality often ignored or a suggestion that leaves many people of faith uncomfortable. Yet the Hebrew storyline is foregrounded by successive empires, geopolitical oppression, and a prolonged cry for justice. Exodus and Exile are the headlines and both stories, told and retold by Jewish people, are stories of liberation and justice. God hears the
cries of oppressed people, acts for justice out of deep compassion for the victims and their suffering. Ancient Israel’s community is to be shaped and formed around a covenant which is social, political, and economic justice and more egalitarian relationships. And all this because it is essentially who God is, the God of justice.

Jesus himself was Jewish, steeped in this Jewish tradition of justice and sharing deeply in God’s passion, which he called the Kingdom or Reign of God. Covenant social values were at the heart of God’s Kingdom and the Kingdom was in opposition to and subversive of the Roman empire. God’s Kingdom ethics are expressed in the Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer and they include non-violence, mercy/compassion, social justice, peacemaking, and through these ethical guidelines being salt of the earth and light to the world (Matthew 5v1-16). The Lord’s Prayer has to do with release from economic debts and bread enough to live, both major community issues in Roman dominated Galilee. God’s passion for justice is no otherworldly passion or concern. The Kingdom Jesus founded too was for the earth, for a world suffering the injustices of a violent domination system. Kingdom is a political-religious term, there being no dualism(s) in the Hebrew worldview and God-view. The Kingdom was and is also about transformation of community and world.

Faith is openness to this God and God’s future. It is living faithfully in the world by the ethics and values of God’s Kingdom or covenant. It is openness to and participation in God’s passion which is justice, and it is being active for the end of all injustice and violence. The faith community in Ireland has a lot of re-thinking, re-imagining, and rebuilding to do. The commemorations of 2012-2022 provide a springboard to articulate and embody new images of God for a new time, God-images which are beyond our obsolete idolatries and more liberating and reconciling.

Reflection questions

How far, if it all, has Irish Christianity moved from belief to faith as outlined in section 1?
If God’s passion is for justice, how do we reflect and share that passion in our faith praxis?
Three days after 9/11, President George W Bush told a congregation in the National Cathedral in Washington that America’s role was to rid the world of evil. The action in Afghanistan was described as ‘Operation Infinite Justice’ and the justice was punitive, meaning that the guilty would get their just desserts. Military violence would bring justice to the world. It was and is arrogant, imperial theology, and the oldest lie in history.

In Northern Ireland there is a tilt towards the punitive. Many want punishment and vengeance. The answer lies in longer prison sentences, and throwing away the key is a sentiment often expressed in public. As well as the desire for a strong punitive justice system, there is a prevalent punitive God image. The most popular interpretation of the death of Jesus even has a punitive, violent God image at the heart of it. None of this may be surprising given the pervasive history and culture of violence. But the tilt towards the punitive remains the delusion that the punitive justice system is the basis for peace and security. This has been the ideology, even theology, of every empire in history and of any group holding or wanting to hold hegemonic power. Even when hegemonic power is lost the delusion lives on.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, justice embodies a larger and richer view of the world and community. The biblical vision of justice includes the punitive but it is only a small part of a larger vision of justice which is more distributive and restorative. Justice is the key biblical idea; its core word and primary value. Justice is the heart of God, the key descriptor of God’s presence and action in the world. It is the primary ethical vision and programme for action that ancient Israel and the early Jesus movement arrived at in the face of military and oppressive economic empires and hegemonic systems of power. Distributive and restorative justice was their radical alternative vision of how life together should be.

Justice and its associated words occur some 2000 times in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. Given the Western Christian community’s unhealthy obsession with sex and sin, the words for sexual sin are only found 90 times in the Bible. This does not mean that the seriousness of rape and sexual abuse should be downplayed. But it does mean that the moralising about sex and sexuality within the faith community has lost sight of the key biblical idea of social justice. The often homophobic rage over homosexuality has lost the Bible’s insistence on liberating community
– restoring justice, and in the end it is this primary value and vision that will bring the church to acknowledge its injustice towards those of its members and of the human race. The vision of biblical justice will transform the church as it did on the big issues of slavery and apartheid.

The history of violence and injustice in Ireland, include the injustice of violence in all its forms, and that of economic greed and systemic avarice, calls for the building of a different future. For the Christian faith community this is the theological and ethical response to history and the future that presents itself in the decade of commemoration, 2012-2022. Like those who row on the Lagan and the Liffey, there is only a looking back to move forward. History is continually remembered in order to build a different future, and the primary biblical vision of justice is at the heart of faith’s future vision. It is not a narrow religious vision, nor does it mean the churches recovering cultural establishment or ecclesial hegemony. It is the faith community’s witness in a secular, democratic and pluralistic society, and rooted as it is in the political text that is the Bible, it is a political and societal vision.

The Prophetic Vision of Justice
At the heart of the Jewish vision of justice are the prophets and the big statements on social justice are in the prophetic books. Key people are Amos, Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. Amos, Micah and Isaiah, chapters 1-39, belong to the 8th century BCE. Isaiah chapters 40-55 are 6th century BCE, chapters 56-66 are late 6th to early 5th century BCE. Jeremiah is early 6th century BCE. This is the classical period of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. The Jesus portrayed in the gospels is incomprehensible unless placed firmly in this prophetic tradition, very especially in the whole book of Isaiah. Jesus’ teaching and action make no sense unless the great justice theme of the book of Isaiah is grasped.

For the most part these prophets were making searing critiques of social injustice in the political and economic systems of great empires and in the system of monarchy as experienced in their own society. The elite at the top of 8th century BCE society in the northern kingdom of Israel are turning justice to wormwood and bringing righteousness, or right relations, to the ground (Amos 5v7). Injustice is reducing society to bitter pulp and destroying community relations. The lifestyle of the wealthy wives of top government officials, the owners of large tracts of land and
merchants dominating economic life in the capital are crushing the poor, creating economic oppression and leaving many in the poverty trap (Amos 4v1). Micah castigated the big landowners, the developers of his day, and the court system officials responsible for legal justice (Micah 3v1). Isaiah of Jerusalem too was concerned with the injustices of the criminal justice system (Isaiah 10 v1-2). Even the religious institutions practice injustice. There are elaborate rituals of worship, colourful and lively liturgy and impressive services, but totally lacking in social justice emphasis and praxis. To the worshipping people and religious leaders, Isaiah’s challenge is cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow (Isaiah 1v17). Religious activity itself needs to become just by actual solidarity with the socially and economically oppressed and the most vulnerable members of society.

The high ethical watermark of the Hebrew Bible is reached by Micah, who is deeply disturbed by the chasm between powerful religious liturgies or worship, and social injustices. What God requires is ‘to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God’ (Micah 6v8). Amos addressed the promise of a good future and was clear that a good future lay in the practice of justice, ‘Let justice roll down like water, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream’ (Amos 5 v24). Social justice is to become as essential to a new future as the power of a mighty river in full flood.

These prophets of social justice made use of two Hebrew words and often used them in parallel. In English they are translated as justice and righteousness, and they are inseparable and indivisible. The two words are derived from the same root and while each has a different emphasis, the root meaning is justice. The Christian community needs to hear the Jewish perspective, since these prophets were Jewish as was Jesus himself. The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, is a good guide. MISPHAT or justice is justice as reciprocity, the universal minimum of a just society. It includes punishments for wrong and the redress of injury and wrongs. It also means equality under the law and universal access to it. A just legal justice system is essential to a new future. The second word is TZEDK or righteousness, a more radical word. This is social and distributive justice, described by Sacks as ‘the Bible’s welfare legislation’. The word has an economic dimension, liberation from the slavery of economic oppression and poverty. Sacks describes it as ‘a republic
of free and equal citizens’ best articulated by the prophet Micah ‘... but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid;...’ (Micah 4v4). The vision of justice is socio-economic and political, liberating, distributive, and community restoring justice. TZEDK or righteousness is right relations rooted in equality and distributive justice. Micah’s poetry envisions a society where all have equal access to resources and where there is not only good social welfare but social security; which is also free of violence (Sacks, Radical Then and Now: The Legacy of the World’s Oldest Religion, p120).

Put another way, the justice expressed by these two Hebrew words has four dimensions:
• liberation of the poor and powerless from the injustice that they experience
• lifting the foot of the domineering power off the neck of the demoralised and oppressed
• stopping the violence and establishing the peace
• restoring the outcasts, the excluded, the Gentiles, the exiles, and refugees to community

(Glen H. Stassen and Darren P. Gushee, Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context, p349).

The prophetic vision of justice is legal, distributive, restorative, liberating, and relational. It is the justice that needs to be at the heart of socio-economic, political, and institutional religious life and it is liberative and restorative of community relations. It is the only way to security, freedom, and peace.

**Jesus and the Kingdom of Justice**

Jesus the Jew was rooted in this prophetic tradition of justice. Whatever other theological categories Christians want to use to express the meaning of Jesus, he is primarily the prophet of justice, who pointed to, taught, and embodied in his life praxis God’s Kingdom of justice. This is why the Book of Isaiah is of crucial importance to understanding the Jesus of the gospels. He is portrayed as quoting from this book more often than any other part of his Hebrew scriptures. It is from Isaiah that Jesus shaped his core vision of the Kingdom of God. He drew on seventeen references to Isaiah. The idea of liberation or salvation (same meaning) occurs in all seventeen and justice/righteousness are found in sixteen. Along with
peace (SHALOM = total well-being) in fourteen, the key characteristics of the Kingdom or Reign of God are liberating justice and peace. If the faith community wants to be grasped by the vision of the Kingdom of God, then it needs in-depth reflection and immersion in the Book of Isaiah.

Crucial is Chapter 42, especially v1-7. It is one of the prophetic servant songs which outlines the purpose and role of the servant. God’s servant, and it is a collective term, the Bible not being afflicted by modernist individualism, has the core task of embodying liberating justice. The magnificent poetry of Isaiah 42v1-7 not only emphasizes the centrality of liberating justice, but holds in a close, intimate relationship justice, peace, non-violence, and inclusivity. In contrast this is not only justice for Israel, but for ‘the people’, ‘the nation’, ‘the earth’. In Isaiah 51 v4-7, these themes are repeated with ‘deliverance’ or liberating justice being especially highlighted. Perhaps the best known servant song is Isaiah 53, the suffering servant, in which there is a direct connection made between distributive, restorative justice and non-violence.

In the first three gospels in particular, these are the texts more frequently associated with Jesus and the Jesus community. They are referenced and quoted to enable the faith community to grasp the meaning of Jesus and how his core vision of the Kingdom of God was to shape and form the faith community itself. The praxis of Jesus and his community is the enactment of God’s yes for justice, the concrete ethical embodiment of God’s liberating, community-restoring justice for all. Drawing exclusively from Isaiah, Jesus ‘announced God’s justice as deliverance of the outcasts, the poor and oppressed from the domination of greed and concentrated power, and the restoration of community with peace’ (Stassen and Gushee, p355). In announcing God’s Kingdom, Jesus also called for repentance, a U-turn from all injustice to community building in which justice is crucial and central.

The prophetic theology of justice is not only key to Jesus, but also to Paul. In his traditionally misread letter to the Romans, at least since the 16th century, Paul is on fire with the justice of God, the central theme of the letter. Writing, as the writers of the gospels were, in the shadow of the Roman Empire:
‘Paul’s Gospel of justification by faith was not a narrow, privileged, individualised religious experience, but a social and political vision of right relations rooted in justice in a reconciled and peaceful community, a radical alternative to Pax Romana’ (Johnston McMaster, Ch 7, On Fire with the Justice of God: Re-Reading Romans as a Political Proclamation Towards a Desired Future in Forgiving and Remembering in Northern Ireland, ed. Graham Spencer, p 140).

The violence in the past, 1912-1922, and the most recent phase, had its roots in injustice. The violence itself became an injustice. The commemoration of 2012-2022 needs to acknowledge the violence and its destructive legacy. Hopefully a new future is in process of being built, sometimes referred to as a desired future or a shared future. Future building is an ethical project and there will be no future without the kind of social justice embodied by the Jewish prophetic tradition and the early Jesus movement. It is still to be the core witness and praxis of the faith community. If it has been lost or neglected then Jesus’ call to repentance, a U-turn from all practice of injustice and unjust and punitive theologies, is to be undertaken. Not only will there be no peace without justice, there will be no future for Northern Ireland or Ireland without the liberating, community-restoring justice which is non-violent, socio-economic, political, and relational.

Reflection Questions

What would it mean for the faith community to practice the prophetic vision of justice?

How can the faith community ensure that social justice is at the heart of the vision of a new and shared future?
In Northern Ireland identities are contested. These identities in dispute have been shaped by historical memories, chosen traumas and war, and the mythologisation of history. Much discourse has been dominated by talk of ‘two traditions’, ‘two communities’, or ‘two religions’. The latter is strange since Protestantism and Catholicism are both rooted in the Christian tradition. But even that has been an issue of contentiousness with the other not being really Christian or truly a church, embedded in a logic of sectarian superiority. Religious labels persist as descriptions of divided identities, even with a more secular society. Unionist and nationalist also continue to describe our divided factions and British and Irish have become primary badges of identity. Yet all of these are too simplistic. They are identities forced upon people by violent conflict boxes into which we are squeezed by historical experience. They have never represented the whole truth and have failed to recognise the variations of identities that exist within Protestantism, Catholicism, unionism, nationalism, Britishness, or Irishness. They have failed or refused under the pressures of history to recognise the multiplicity and complexity of identities flowing through any one person or family. Each of us is pluralism embodied.

What is now being referred to as the Queen’s visit, (as if it was the first time she had been on Irish soil, or was it always British soil in Belfast?) has opened up all kinds of discussion, even liberation for many. People have spoken of her visit enabling them to bring together diverse family histories to two strands in their identity. Irish Britishness or British Irishness can now be acknowledged and one does not need to deny part of who one is. Both the Irish President and the Queen in their Dublin Castle addresses spoke of the family ties and histories that bind together many people on the two islands, our constant interaction, movement and inseparable identities. Beyond the myths of modern history, there has always been a human interaction. The largest immigrant population in the Republic of Ireland is British and the Irish in Britain are, the Irish in Britain who have always made a huge cultural and economic contribution to life. Put another way, there are varieties of Britishness running through Irish identity and varieties of Irishness in Britain. The complexity and diversity of all of us as immigrants on both islands, and all of us at one time were immigrants, shatters any simplistic identity claim. The reality also leaves no room for identity purists, the ideologues who live on both islands.
As Shane Hegarty has found out, we really don’t know much about the first Irish and we are not sure how they got here, when they landed, or where they came from. The mass of rock that was Ireland was even divided 400 million years ago when two halves collided and somehow joined. About 270 million years ago we were even joined to the edges of Russia by mountain ranges. Some reptile left its prints on Scrabo Hill, Newtownards, about 200 million years ago (The Irish and Other Foreigners: From the First People to the Poles, p5-6).

Ireland has been around for a very long time. Geological unity only occurred 400 million years ago! And to think that a 17th century Archbishop of Armagh thought the whole creation, including Ireland, only came into existence in 4004 BCE, which goes to show that we can all be wrong about geology, science, history, religion and lots more. We can only guess that about 9000 years ago, a boat arrived somewhere in Ireland and the first human beings stepped ashore. Whoever they were, they could have travelled from Denmark, Spain, Cornwall, the Isle of Man, or Scotland. At any rate, they were not Irish and there were no laws about length of residency before becoming eligible for citizenship. The rest is history and for all we know, some of us may be related to them, or to others who arrived in various waves of immigration to Ireland.

My own personal or family history or identity, at least all that we know, which only goes back a mere four or five centuries, is multiple in its strands. There are at least four identity strands, Irish, Scottish, Cornish, and Italian. How pure any of those strands are is beyond knowing, but they ensure that I am an embodied pluralist.

If we fast forward to a Dublin street with iconic status, a street that stereotypically defined Dublin, Moore Street and its stalls was the place for traders and public, and where one heard a ‘real’ Dublin accent. Like everywhere else, Moore Street has changed over the years and become international. There was in the 90s an ethnic market with Chinese and African stalls, and shops specializing in world music and ethnic goods. The shops were referred to as Little African or Chinatown (Hegarty, p207). Moore Street is changing again, with closed buildings and planning permission notices, and much of it described as decrepit. A new Moore Street may arise out of the old, but it has been the reminder of how much multicultural and multiethnic Ireland has become. Identities in Ireland have always been plural with
identity markers always changing. A more global, interdependent world means that identities will go on changing. Irishness, and for that matter, Britishness will always be dynamic and fluid.

Modern history though has polarised us in Ireland and deluded us into thinking we can define ourselves over against each other and in terms of purity of identity. Exclusive memories become part of the identity delusion. Memories are selected to reinforce what we think is pure Irishness or Britishness. In relation to the decade of remembering, 1916 is of particular divisive significance. Two events have shaped respective psyches and memories. Two narratives within a few months of each other have become separated to form exclusive identity markers, which still define many. Especially in Northern Ireland 1916 will either be divisive or have the potential for healing, or at least better understanding.

All of the Irishmen in World War I who had volunteered for service, did so for multiple reasons. Some nationalists volunteered to fight for the right of small nations such as Belgium. Others may have joined for employment. Unionists volunteered as those who belonged to the British nation, and in the ‘Ulster crisis’ had strong reason to forge a bond between Ulster and Britain. Unionists were imperialists and the Empire was under threat. The slaughter of the Somme was not seen by unionists as needless and pointless, nor in class terms as fodder for a privileged and bungling officer class. The memory of the Somme invoked every year is done so with pride. Especially in relation to the ‘betrayal’ of those involved in the Rising, those commemorated on 1st July each year are dead heroes who have made the supreme sacrifice. Blood sacrifice is how their many deaths was perceived and it put Britain under obligation to honour Ulster’s right to a future settlement which would not be home rule. The annual Somme commemorations still have a sense of asserting Britishness about them and the Garvaghy Road dispute following a Somme service remains unresolved. The contentious insistence of Orangemen to march along this route has a sense of right rooted in the Somme sacrifice.

Nationalists focus on the Easter Rising as an anti-imperialist event which was a catalyst for support leading to independence and an Irish Republic. The Rising and the Proclamation have become core to republican identity and constitutionalist nationalists as well. The physical force tradition drew inspiration from the Rising
and the dead heroes of 1916. In Belfast commemorations have been celebrations especially in 1966 and even more so in 1981 on the 65th anniversary. This was the period of the hunger strikes and Rising commemorations took the form of protest marches. Extensive commemorations are still a significant part of West Belfast remembering each year, though there is some thinking about moving away from militaristic commemoration. The Rising was ‘Ireland’s opportunity’ and those who died had thought in terms of ‘blood sacrifice’.

The two narratives which have been separate identity makers for so long are beginning to coalesce. The catholic and nationalist contribution to the War has been largely ignored, if not forgotten. Unionists and Protestants have embraced the Somme as theirs to the exclusion of the many more Catholic Irish who died at the Somme and other battle fields. Awareness is growing that the dying was shared and Irishmen were no less Irish for dying at the Somme or Gallipoli. The IRA bomb which claimed lives at Enniskillen Remembrance Day ceremony was instrumental in addressing awareness and perspective. The forgotten now being remembered and families can be public in the commemoration of the loss of their loved ones, when for too long silence and absence was the only option. The opening of the Ireland Peace Park in Messine by President McAleese and Queen Elizabeth in 1999 was significant, as have been visits to World War I sites by unionists, republicans and nationalists. Most significant of all was the Queen’s recent visit to Ireland and her bowing to the dead of 1916 at the Garden of Remembrance. In relation to the past and in terms of emotional impact, that gesture was the most significant of the entire visit. Close behind though, was the visit the following day to Islandbridge, when again President and Queen remembered the 50,000 Irishmen who died in the Great War. Both events brought together families divided by history and conflict. People were acknowledged who found themselves on either side of the divide, forced to take sides even in death by the politics of violence.

The ‘two traditions’ were the product of the 19th and 20th centuries, the product of the emerging nationalisms and violence that accompanied the nationalisms of Europe. We no longer live in that world, though a few still find it difficult to realise that the world of 1912 and 1916 has long since moved on. Identities have changed or we have realised that identities are always being invented and reinvented. The complexity of identities is being recognised and the diversity of histories is also
acknowledged. The positive impact of the Queen’s visit to the Republic cannot be overestimated. It was healing and liberating though by no means the end of the peace process. There is a new future and a common good that remains to be built. And our identities no longer are bound by the past, squeezed into molds manufactured in 1916, 1921, or 1969.

**Integrating Diversity**

*The world is not a single machine. It is a complex, interactive ecology in which diversity – biological, personal, cultural, and religious – is of the essence*. (Jonathan Sacks, The Dignity of Difference, p22). The insistence on a single identity, or pure identity, goes against the grain of the universe. The big problem with religious and political fundamentalism, of which our Irish history abounds, is that it reduces, even destroys diversity. In effect, it became a disastrous narrowing of the horizons of possibility. It restricts the potential for human and social development. *‘When difference leads to war, both sides lose’* (Sacks, p22). This has been true of our violence and conflict in Ireland. We have lost the enrichment of diversity. We have also lost a culture of life and life enhancing values and human flourishing. Our culture of death and violence has reduced our humanity and made us, at times more than others, less humane. The two contested, and at times violent, traditions have diminished all of us.

*‘Difference does not diminish; it enlarges the sphere of human possibilities’* (Sacks, p209). Whether or not a politically United Ireland would enrich our differences and enlarge the sphere of our human possibilities is not at all clear. Recent research now shows that political unity is not a priority for the majority of people in Northern Ireland. It is not even clear if the concepts of a United Ireland and a United Kingdom have any relevance in a post-nationalist, interdependent world. Trying to meet the challenges of today with the concepts of yesterday may only lead to new crises. Today’s world is moving in a different direction.

**Today’s key concepts are:**

- interdependence
- pooled sovereignty
- collaboration
- partnership
- integrated diversity.
They all imply the end of absolutism as total independence, sole sovereignty, isolationism, ourselves and hegemony, cultural, political, or religious. Integrated diversity means integration without assimilation and the valuing of the dignity of difference (Sacks, the Home We Build Together: Recreating Society, p22). And along with the other key concepts above, it means ‘one highly differentiated set of contributions to the common good’ (Sacks, The Home We Build… p22). We will remain who we are in Ireland, with all our complex identities, richly diverse, refusing assimilation and isolation, committed to building together a common good. Moving away from our oppositional identities and valuing and respecting our differences, integrating them in their rich diversity, our civic and political conversation should be centered on the common good we wish to create. It’s the kind of society we want to build, north and south, for our children, grandchildren, and the yet unborn. And it needs the contributions of all of us, north, south, immigrants all, long past, past and present.

Reflection questions

Is it now time to reject the narrow, sectarian identity markers forced upon us by violent history and politics?

How important is integrated diversity and how can it help us to build a common good beyond our historical contestedness?
In recent years we have lived through critical times. We have experienced the collapse of moral authority in at least three of the major institutions of society. The moral authority of financial institutions has been lost through unscrupulous ethical practices driven by greed. The loss of moral authority in political institutions has come about because of the abuse and corruption of power, also including greed. The moral authority of institutional religion has been lost, not so much through individual actions as abuse of power through the failure of systems to protect the victims and the weak. Some social observers would say that every 500 years or so we experience the collapse of institutions. It may be that we are living at such a time. The collapse of moral authority in major societal institutions creates both a moral vacuum and a moral crisis. So who or what shapes the moral norms? Where do our social ethical values now come from? Who or what is going to fill the vacuum? As for crisis, the Chinese word for crisis means both danger and opportunity. If this is one of those moments in history when institutions collapse, then the crisis means that we face a moment of danger, but also a moment of opportunity. There is the potential for imagination, creativity and transformation.

It is in this context that there is the growing quest for ethical leadership. This is the quest to discover or recover spiritual and ethical dimensions to leadership that have gone missing in our current experience of social institutions, the financial, political and religious.

One of the creative leaders in this field is Walter Earl Fluker, an Afro-American. Fluker is a very creative, imaginative thinker. He suggests that ethical leadership is the ‘critical appropriation and embodiment of moral traditions’ (Walter Earl Fluker, Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility and Community p 33). Ethical leaders are those whose characters have been shaped by the wisdom and practices of such moral traditions. They are people who place a primacy on values in relation to questions of ultimate concern. They embody a leadership ethos and practice a leadership style shaped by a social moral compass.

Now this does not mean a narrow moralism. Churches are often expert at that, as are conservative, right wing politics. Moralism, religious or political is not only very selective but often toxic. Ethical leadership focuses on two core dynamics and some fundamental and ultimate human values.
Ethical leadership is primarily about relatedness. It is leadership which is relationship-centric and relationship focused. It is not primarily concerned with principles, theories or doctrines, which are often abstract. The key focus is with relationships, how to relate to the other. In finance this is about relationships before profit. In politics it is about relationships before ideology. In religion it is about relationships before theological systems, traditions or doctrines. Relationality is key to ethical leadership and it is face to face and encounter with the other, and the other in relatedness is not just the human other, but also the ecological other and the Ultimate Other we call God.

Ethical leadership is also primarily about spirituality. Now spirituality is not about some narrow esoteric, abstract mysticism or other-worldly religion. Either can be as toxic as moralism. Spirituality is the inner ethos, the core values, the heart of personal and social identity. It is the way of being in relationship that gives to the other dignity, respect and reverence, the other as individual and community. This is why spirituality, ethics and leadership are inseparable. Spirituality is what we practice, what we do in relationship with the other, individually, socially and ecologically. Ethics is about how we do it, the values that enable us to relate and shape the quality of the relationships. Leadership has little or no integrity without spirituality and ethics.

Spirituality and the spiritual are intrinsic to being human. Spiritual identity is about a person’s fundamental values, moral commitments and ability to engage in moral reasoning, moral imagination and decision-making. This is why ‘spirituality is the core of the inner and social lives of ethical leaders’ (p 39).

What are the fundamental ethical values of ethical leadership? ‘Spiritual health’, Fluker says, ‘is reflected in a person’s ability to trust and care for others’ (p39). The collapse of moral authority in the three major institutions of our society was a failure in openness to and care of others. Trust, openness to the other and active compassion are the core ethics of leadership. The other core ethics are justice, equity and truth telling in public life. These are social, relational values which can also be described as justice, fairness and integrity. Integrity is present when trust, compassion, justice, equity, fairness and truth telling consistently add up. They are the interrelated core ethical values of ethical leadership.
In the presence of institutional crisis and the collapse of moral authority many of us now look for leadership at all levels of society. Ethical leadership is now on our agenda. The question after the first decade of the 21st century is not, who shall lead? It is, how shall they lead?

The Praxis of Ethical Leadership
Ethical leadership requires two core public functions, civility and compassion.

Civility and Healthy Civic Life
Healthy civic life needs civility and civility includes but is more than etiquette, manners, and social graces. The latter sometimes do go missing in political and religious discourse. Words, attitudes, and actions towards the other lack civility. But civility also includes social capital, which has to do with the quality of social relationships, the kind of civic society and community we want to be civil. A society which is civil also includes relationships built on justice, equality, and fairness. This means that an ethical leader will sometimes be concerned with exposing and critiquing unjust practices and systems within society.

Civility, in Fluker’s view, holds together three defining and interrelated values.
1. Recognition – is an in-depth consciousness and awareness of the self. It is coming to a better awareness of one’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. In other words, it is the capacity for self-awareness, self-criticism, self-dignity, and respect. It also involves the encounter with the other and ‘being-for-others’. (Fluker, p91). There is also recognition that one is defined by the other and that can be a negative experience. However, recognition can mean seeing the other with empathy and compassion, being-for-self and being-for-others in an affirming and liberating way.
2. Respect – has to do with accepted standards of relating in the public square. One expects to be treated with respect or social dignity and this is also the responsibility to show public respect or social dignity towards the other. Relationships in public are enhancing or diminishing social capital. Respect and empathy for the other and towards the other is an essential of ethical leadership. To adopt the golden rule, common to all religious traditions, ‘be to others what you would want them to be to you.’
3. Reverence – the spiritual dimension of civility, which is both religious and non-
religious. It is recognizing the sacred or transcendent in the other, the essential mystery at the heart of every human person. It is sometimes expressed as reverence for life, an ethic that lies at the heart of all religious traditions, including Buddhism, which would not see itself as a theistic or religious tradition. Reverence in the public place gives respect to all human beings by seeking the highest development of each individual (Fluker, p115). Reverence is an ethic of life that transcends political, religious, or cultural loyalties and is a mark of civility in ethical leadership.

Compassion – The Supreme Virtuosity of Ethical Leadership
For Fluker, compassion is the fulfillment of all the virtues and values needed for ethical leadership. In one of his letters to the faith community at Corinth, Paul penned the famous hymn of love, located in the public square, because the qualities and characteristics of love are all relational and public (I Corinthians 13, especially v 4-7). They can be read in a religious context, but can also be read in a social and political context. ‘Love is… not arrogant or rude; It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful…’ these are ethical values for all public relationships, and the basis for civility and social and community relations. Love is synonymous with compassion with the added dimension of being willing to suffer alongside the other. The Dalai Lama has spoken of the Tibetan meaning of the word compassion as ‘the inability to bear the sight of another’s suffering’ (in Fluker, p146).

In ethical leadership, compassion draws the leader alongside the other to share sorrow, tragedy, trauma, and grief and also to identify with the other’s hopes and aspirations. Compassion is our inter-connectedness in action and a recognition that in community we are all interdependent.

‘For leaders who must negotiate the traffic at the intersection where worlds collide, compassion must of necessity be a suffering love that seeks the redemption of the other’ (Fluker, p150). This means standing with the poor, marginalized, and suffering and being actively committed for their highest good. The ethical, political, religious, and community leader shares in the collective destiny of the community, is an active participant in the desired and shared future. With the ethic of compassion at the heart of leadership as its supreme virtue, the leader leads out of a vision of harmony, integration, and wholeness.
In a contested society like Northern Ireland, ethical, compassionate leadership in politics, religion, and community, including finance, is quite a challenge. There is much that divides, segregates, and destroys civility. Leadership is always part of civic life, but for today and tomorrow it is the ‘how’ of leadership that is important. There may not be a shared future without ethical leadership. There may not be civil community actions without ethical leadership, which has deep compassion at the heart of it. Compassionate, ethical leadership will help transform a divided, segregated and too often uncivil society into a much more compassionate and caring one.

**Reflection Questions**

In what ways do we need to recover civility at the heart of civic and political life?

What practical difference would compassionate ethical leadership make to life together in Northern Ireland/Ireland?
The common good is elusive. This is not just because it represents something beyond us, a future realization. It is elusive and difficult to realise in a contested society like Northern Ireland. Partition in 1921 ensured that not all in Northern Ireland would have a loyalty or commitment to the new political entity. Like the unionists in the border counties, the northern nationalists felt betrayed and abandoned in a hegemonic Protestant state. The Catholic minority was ‘beached’ in 1921 and never had any real commitment to the state of the Protestant majority. In a contested and divided society it was difficult even to define the common good. There was very little that was ‘common’. It is only since the Belfast Agreement that the minority ‘has finally been given that state in Northern Ireland which was partly withheld and partly rejected for much of its existence’. (Marianne Elliott, When God took Sides: Religion and Identity in Ireland – Unfinished History, p256).

The Westminster model of democracy, majoritarianism, first past the post, was never suitable for a contested place like Northern Ireland. It was rightly abandoned by the British government in 1972, and after many years of false starts, a power sharing, responsibility sharing form of governance was in place. Still far from perfect and often struggling to really function, it has completed a full term and has entered a second and perhaps more hope-filled term. With all its faults it represents a more just and appropriate form of democracy and like all good liberal democracies it is attempting to embed a commitment to the rights of all people, equal status under the law for all, and a social justice often for the poor and weak of society. Liberal democracy is also fully participative democracy. By these liberal democracy yardsticks value judgments can be made on the politics of Stormont.

This model also means a more participative and responsible role for civic society. The constitutional place of Northern Ireland cannot change without the consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland, and that principle has been agreed by all of the political parties. This agreement does not mean the end of differing political aspirations, but it is agreement to the sole use of non-violent, constitutional means of change, which is itself a recognition that violence does not work. Given that recent research has shown that constitutional change is not going to happen anytime soon, political and civic society needs a conversation to envision the common good. The differing political aspirations are no longer a barrier to striving for the common good and pursuing its implementation for the good of all the people.
of Northern Ireland. A similar conversation can also take place in the Republic, and with the levels of improving north-south relations and the growing cooperation between the north-south strand of the Belfast Agreement, there is a collaborative opportunity to strive for the common good of all the people of Ireland. It is not only that Ireland is too small to do otherwise, there is a good to be pursued in common and globalization in its many forms puts our common good in a geopolitical, intra-national context. The end of a bipolar world order, the rise of a more united Europe, and the plight of the peoples of Africa beset by war, AIDS, and extreme poverty, all indicate just how huge a task striving for the common good really is (Millar and McCann, In Search of the Common Good, p1).

What is the Common Good?

Whether in global or Irish terms, the common good is the general welfare of all citizens. Such general welfare should transcend majority-minority identities and contested political aspirations. Greek philosophers believed that the human is naturally a social and political animal and as such belongs to a community. While each is an individual, there is no individualism. As any part belongs to the whole, so the human belongs and flourishes in community. We are not ‘two’ but one community in Northern Ireland, each person needing the whole, unionists and nationalists and non-party people, all needing each other for the general welfare of all. It also means that there is the need for human government to manage and oversee the whole and to govern for the general welfare of all citizens without exception. The general welfare of all includes good politics, economics, each other’s culture, religious freedom and freedom to not be religious, the right to work, to shelter, to flourish in security and peace.

It is also important in shaping or pursuing the common good to realise that the common good in its totality and fullness is a transcendent idea, a future concept. It will always remain only partially fulfilled. There are always negative factors ‘working against a true awareness of the universal common good’ (Millar and McCann, p143). Pope John Paul II made this point strongly in his encyclical Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, when he used theological categories, drawing attention to the ‘structures of sin’ which are ‘seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world’. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the roots of the evils which afflict us’ (Millar and
McCann, p143). Christian theology, therefore, uses categories, which can of course be expressed in other language, but which are helpful in naming the realities of life in the world. It does see the common good as an eschatological concept, a future vision which recognizes that ‘the social and political context can never be determined exhaustively’ (Millar and McCann, p143). The common good we strive for will always be provisional, incomplete, partial, which also means that the striving is continuous and to be renewed again and again. Utopia is not a category faith recognizes, because there is also realism about the human and structural flaws. In theological terms, this is personal and structural sin.

The Role of the Faith Community
Faith communities are part of civic society and in liberal democracies and pluralist societies the faith community has a guaranteed right, but not privileged status, to make its contribution to the striving for the common good. Faith communities have public responsibility, but no longer expressed through control or domination of any sector in the community, educational, economic, plural or social. De-privileged in the post-Christendom, post-modern world, the institutional church has its voice, values and witness. In this context, including the context of liberal democracy and pluralism, ‘Perhaps enduring commitment to those we love and civic friendship towards our fellow citizens is preferable to restless competition and anxious self-defense’ (J Philip Wogamon, Christian Perspectives on Politics, p188).

The church through its members can take one of two other routes. Life can be lived in fragmented sectors. Church, work, politics, recreation can all be kept distinct. There are no cross-overs, but fragmented existence is not wholeness and faith can easily become separatist or privatised, never impacting on the whole of civic existence.

The other stance is to be radically sectarian, to ensure that social, economic and political contacts are kept to the bare minimum. Significantly there is not an Amish-like community in Ireland, but some have tried to keep apart from politics. This writer grew up in an Ards peninsula village where members of a particular Christian community would not in principle vote in an election, but made a point of telling the rest of us to put our X against the ‘right’ name. Isolationism or semi-isolationism is not possible since our existence is dependent on many streams and communities.
of belonging. A theology of separation is not possible and it too easily becomes an evasion of civic responsibility. From a faith perspective the world is God’s and God is engaged with history and all of life. This is not to say that people of faith live by certainty and always know what God is up to. Our human flaw, finitude and partial seeing puts limits on faith’s ability to know the details. Furthermore the church cannot claim that it is exclusively the bearer of God’s liberating action or values in human history. To make such a claim is not taking its own theology of sin seriously and it is an attempt to control and restrict God. If God is God then God is radically free to be present in and through the lives of people of other faiths and none. The church is neither in control of God nor society. At the same time there is the civic responsibility to be committed to the common good of all, actively witnessing to faith values in civic society, confident that the divine presence is in all things, humble about its ability to know the details, and engaging with the divine human partnership which is non-controlling, non-coercive.

Responsibility for the Common Good

Christians have always had to struggle with their role in and contradiction to the wider society. The Christian Testament contains a number of models of engagement. These can be traced in five of Paul’s letters, I Thessalonians, I Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians and Romans. Located in the urban imperial setting, living everyday life in a Roman empire dominated world, Paul did not call these minority faith communities to withdraw from the world, accommodate themselves to, or work towards a Christian political order. The latter was neither possible nor desirable, but from the 4th century it did become the Christendom model. In their different locations Paul called them to be citizens of this world, deeply concerned for its welfare.

A vision of the common good and faith’s responsibility for it are expressed by Paul in his letter to the faith community in the imperial capital, Rome. Paul’s letter to the Romans is not a compendium of dogmatic theology, or a doctrinal handbook. It is a political document blazing with a vision of the justice of God as a radical alternative to the justice in which the emperor prided himself and thought he embodied for imperial citizens. It was a letter written in the shadow of empire, and is a political document loaded with political vocabulary, not least the cluster of political words which highlight reconciliation praxis in Chapter 5 (see chapter on Romans by
Johnston McMaster, in Graham Spencer Editor, Forgiving and Remembering in Northern Ireland, pp129-147). From Romans 12v14 – 13v7 Paul spells out the ethics of the common good providing a model for the community’s life in society.

**Critical Engagement – Romans 12v1-2**
The complete unit, which is Chapters 12-13, begins by calling the faith community to offer themselves as a ‘living sacrifice’ to God in the world. It is a call to be committed to God’s values in the public sphere. The term ‘living’ refers to a sacrifice which is not bloody. Paul may have been aware of a certain Theophrastus who was opposed to blood sacrifice. Paul shares that opposition which puts him at odds with a core theme of Easter Rising and Battle of the Somme. Furthermore, he calls for an attitude to the values of the imperial domination system to be conformist. They are to live in the Roman public square with a constantly renewed mind, critically searching for the value system of God’s mind. The faith community is to be engaged in critical ethical reflection, because they do not have a blueprint or handbook. Striving for the common good is also a striving to recognize the challenges, responsibilities and opportunities for critical engagement in civic society.

**Living at Peace With all – Romans 12v14-21**
Significantly there is no overt religious language in this section. Paul is at home using the secular language of the Greco-Roman world, which offers the faith community a clue as to the language it uses in the secular, public square.

The faith community is to live at peace with all people, if at all possible. Paul is not naïve and recognizes that maintaining peaceful relations with everyone is difficult. But he is not being idealistic either. The possibility of living peaceably with all depends on the collective you. It is the core responsibility of people of faith in relation to other citizens. In civic society, people of faith have the responsibility and challenge to think peace, speak peace and live peace.

What follows are complementary ethical responses:

- Bless one’s persecutors
- Repay no one evil for evil
- Overcome evil with good
- Live sympathetically, harmoniously and in humility with others
There are big ethical challenges for a community whose members had just suffered imperial violence and public ostracism. But peace is core to the common good.

**Being Non-Violent Citizens – Romans 13v1-7**

This is one of the most abused texts in the Bible. Being subject to governing authorities because they have been ordained by God, has been used by dictators, totalitarian regimes, imperial powers and hegemonic forms of government. The text has justified abuses of power, discrimination, repression and violence. A closer reading will show that Paul is dealing with a problem of taxation current at the time and which was leading to protests, sometimes rioting and violent protests on the streets of Rome. Some of the faith community may well have been caught up in the violence which was leading to deaths. Paul is already opposed to blood sacrifice in 12v1. The public worship of striving for the common good will not be served by blood sacrifice, the blood shed of a member of the faith community, or the taking of another’s life. Paul is opposed to the use of violence to protest, change, defend or achieve. Taking the text in its larger textual content, shows Paul’s alternative ethic of not reacting violently, a point also made in the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul is dealing with violent protest against unjust taxation, which was always an issue between oppressive imperial power and citizens. He is not setting out a timeless theology of state or state theology, and advocating uncritical subservience to political authorities abusing their power. The common good needs the practice of active non-violence.

**Love is the Essence**

For Paul the heart of God’s value system is love. This is the essence of doing the ‘will of God – what is good, acceptable and perfect’ (Rom 12v2). The word is AGAPE which is relational and public. It is not sentimental or emotional love, but tough love that seeks only the highest good of the other. It is love committed to the pursuit of the common good, the welfare of all citizens. In Romans 13v8-14, Paul underlines this tough, relational love three times and with precedents, of which he may well have been aware. In a Jewish reflection on the Joseph story from the Hebrew Bible, love is identified with reconciliation, the healing of relationships. In the Qumran writings, contemporary with Paul, love is connected to entering into the suffering of the poor and strangers (Robert Jewett, Romans, p806). Love is
active commitment to reconciliation and social solidarity and practical care. Paul’s positive to ‘love your neighbor as yourself’, also means ‘Love does no wrong to a neighbour’ (Romans 13v10).

The theme of the common good and the public values at the heart of it in five of Paul’s letters require a more complete and in-depth study. They have important things to suggest to a contemporary faith community living post-Christendom and in a liberal, participative democracy and pluralist society. In Romans, Paul is not asking people of faith to ‘christianise society’, neither forcible nor desirable in his Roman imperial world. Neither is he asking the faith community to disengage from society. Their responsibility and faith commitment is:

- Critical engagement
- Living peace with all
- Practicing active non-violence
- Loving neighbours which is reconciliation and social solidarity in action

All of these are essential for the common good, and striving for the common good in Northern Ireland and Ireland as a whole will require their committed practice. They constitute a significant part of the faith community’s contribution to the common good, conversation and to the praxis of faith.

**Reflection Questions**

What is the role of the faith community in the public square in contemporary Ireland?

Does Romans offer a working template for the faith community’s engagement and how can it witness in practical terms to the striving for the common good?
As part of the Ethical and Shared Remembering Project, the Junction and Holywell Trust organized a seminar to explore the possibility of creating a charter for the 21st century. The organizers had a eye on 2013 when Derry/Londonderry becomes the City of Culture. A charter for the city is an imaginative idea, and the idea of a future vision was larger than the city. The idea of a new charter, a vision for the future, was sparked by two documents approaching their centenaries. The Ulster Covenant belongs to 1912 and the Easter Proclamation to 1916. Some former paramilitaries from both sides of the conflict have critically examined these documents, side by side, also with an aim to writing a new covenant or new proclamation. Such a future visioning document may not use either covenant or proclamation, but find a new title. All of these exercises though, recognise that both the historical and iconic documents were experiences of social vision. The Proclamation was more explicit and inclusive than the Covenant, though it very quickly became an unfulfilled promise of history. The Covenant, though it used the language of civic and religious liberty, was an exclusively Protestant document, and though a politico-social vision, it held out no promise of Catholic inclusion. In a sense, a socially just, inclusive future was betrayed by both the Covenant and the Proclamation.

A century on there is the possibility to create a new vision, a new covenant, proclamation, or charter of hope, which embodies ethical values and is inclusive in a way the sectarian decade of a century ago could not be. To ‘cherish all the children of the nation equally’ as the Proclamation nobly stated a century ago, has a very different meaning now in a world which, in relation to then, is post-nationalist. The orange and green, British and Irish versions of nationalism have lost meaning in an interdependent new Europe and emerging world. Nationhood is also a very different idea now and Ireland, like elsewhere, is pluralist and multi-cultural.

Given the religious fervour and profile of a century ago, it was not surprising that God should play a role in both documents. That God was more associated with guns than social vision is now disturbing. In relation to the biblical idea of covenant, of which the Ulster Covenant is an echo, the Proclamation is closer to the ancient Jewish social vision, which was Covenant. The latter was a subversive and radical socio-economic, political vision and any new vision of the future, whatever it is called, does well to pay attention to the core ethical and social values at the heart
of Covenant. They were and remain the radical basis for an alternative future in Northern Ireland or Ireland as a whole.

**Covenantal Essentials**
Before looking at the core covenantal ethics, there are three essentials to highlight.

1. The biblical idea of covenant is Jewish. It was not originally Jewish, but a common feature in the political organisation and structure of ancient Israel’s near-eastern neighbours. Covenant was essentially a relationship between the king or ruler and the people. It was a contract or pledged relationship in which ruler and people had mutual promises and commitments. The gods were also invoked since the ruler was closely related to and identified with divinity, however it was perceived. Like all their neighbours, Israel too had a covenant, but with a subversive and radical twist. God was king, not a David or a Solomon. This was always a tension in ancient Israel’s political or social life, and there were two contested narratives, both of which can be traced in the Hebrew Bible. Royal theology and prophetic theology are often in dispute. The covenant was a pledged relationship between God and the people. If there was a king, then the King was never deified, nor was his power ever considered absolute. The King had the same covenantal commitments and obligations as everyone else. All the human power and constructs of power were relativised and could be delegitimised by covenant. Power is always penultimate. Whether god is invoked or the constitution and power structures are secular, penultimacy is the essential of all democracy and democratic political society.

2. It was not surprising that the Ulster Protestants signed a covenant in 1912. Presbyterianism was and remains the largest Protestant denomination in the north-east of Ireland and being rooted in Calvinism or the Reformed tradition meant covenant was a core theological idea. For John Calvin, covenant was a defining theological principle and the basis for the democratic ordering of public power. This is why the Reformed tradition is not consistent with monarchy, but is essentially republican, the republic being a much more radically democratic model of the ordering of political power. There is an obvious worry in that, given the direction of Irish Presbyterianism took in the 19th century and where it remains. However much of Calvin’s theocratic experiment went badly wrong.
in Geneva, his covenantal logic was in line with the biblical, Jewish idea. The covenant between God and the people led ancient Israel to understand ‘that every notion of God carries with it a proposal for the organisation of society.’ Not only does this delegitimise every other political authority, but ‘Israel’s public life in political and economic relations is to embody the covenantal solidarity Yahweh practices toward Israel in the exodus, in answering its cry of helplessness and hopelessness’ (Walter Brueggemann, A Social Reading of the Old Testament, pp57-58). The covenantal challenge to ancient Israel was to create an egalitarian, non-hierarchal, non-bureaucratic society where power was distributed in such a way that all were treated with dignity and would have access to social resources and social power. Israel was to be radically different to the statism of the Egyptian empire and Canaanite city-states around it.

3. The third essential is key to the Hebrew Bible. God made a covenant with Israel which was at once particular and universal. The covenant God made with Abraham was with all the nations of the earth. The covenant God made with Noah was with all humankind, all animals, and all creation - a covenant with humans, and the environment, and the cosmos. The universal and inclusive dimensions have too often been overlooked by the faith monopolists and exclusionists.

The key dynamic in the covenant is God’s resolve to be in relationship. God is not an isolationist God, aloof and alone, but a God whose essential nature is relational. Human beings do not thrive in isolation either. The heart of life is relationality and covenant means relationships in community. The relational God means Israel is committed to the primacy of relationships. Building relationships in a just community is primary. God’s resolve in covenant to be relational is Israel’s covenantal obligation to build healthy, just, and caring relationships in which no one is excluded. Exclusivity is the distortion of covenant.

Covenant, therefore, is not a pious, narrow, religious idea. In essence it has to do with the democratic ordering of public power, the creating of a radically alternative, more egalitarian, socially just society and where human community and environmental relationships are paramount. An ethical and shared future can be nothing else.
Core Covenantal Ethical Praxis

Covenant was how ancient Israel was to form its community relations and its ordering of public power. Covenant is a relational, socio-political, and economic vision. It is subversive of all hegemonic or domination systems and calls for a radically alternative model of relationships and public power organised in different ways. Covenant was an engagement with a visionary social experiment. At the heart of covenant is a social ethical praxis expressed through six core ethical values. In the Hebrew Bible and Christian Testament, they form an inseparable and indivisible cluster of social values. They are the ethics of a shared future or covenant ethics.

In contrast to the distorted hegemonic values of King Solomon’s ordering of public power, the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah offered the covenantal God’s radical alternative.

*Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast, boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on the earth, for in these things I delight, says the Lord (Jeremiah 9 v.23-24).*

The prophet contrasts a triad of covenant ethical values with the social, political, and economic injustices and abuses that characterized Solomon’s monarchy:

- **Steadfast love** – the active love that never abandons or lets go. It stands in social solidarity with all in community, especially the poor, vulnerable, marginalized, demonized, oppressed, and victims of social and political violence. It is compassion, standing in the other’s shoes and suffering alongside.

- **Justice** - the intentional ordering of society so that none are excluded from social and economic resources and goods. Ensuring that all members of community have access to those resources and goods so that all will have a life of dignity. In the covenant, those who are to have justice are the ‘widow, orphan, foreigner (immigrant)’, those who are vulnerable and do not have the power or muscle to find their rightful place in society.

- **Righteousness** – active intervention in political and social life, including taking the initiative to act so that society can be ordered justly and positive responses
made to every social grievance. It is also action to put right every dehumanising, demonising relational and social activity. Righteousness is actively building right community relations based on justice.

- **Inclusivity** – neighbouring covenants were exclusive and the gods of the Egyptian empire only favoured the few. The God of Israel was radically different, being committed to a covenant in which each is in social solidarity for all. Covenant was for all the nations, and prophets like Amos and Isaiah spoke of a God who has many chosen peoples, including Egypt and Assyria, the dominant superpowers in Israel’s lived experience. Inclusive, social solidarity is a relational covenantal ethic and exclusion on any basis is a distortion of the covenant.

- **Non-Violence** – military violence such as that of Assyria and Babylon not only destroyed human lives and community, it abused the environment as well. The 8th century prophet Hosea not only critiqued Assyrian imperial violence; he made a devastating critique of dependence on violence and the culture and mystique of violence of the community leadership. The use of violence was the complete violation of the covenant. The covenant God was against the use of ‘horses and chariots,’ or God and guns in the language of Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation a century ago. Covenant is the transformation of social relationships to make them inclusive, neighbourly, and non-violent.

- **Peace** – the inadequate translation of the Hebrew word SHALOM. The personal, social, political, economic, and environmental well-being of all shared life. Not just the absence of war and violence, but all that makes for the well-being and flourishing of all life. Peace is inclusive of all the other five covenantal ethical values.

Covenant as a radical socio-political, economic vision of society, is lived in the:

- practice of social solidarity and compassion;
- the just and neighbourly ordering of public power, resources, and life;
- right relations rooted in distributive and restorative justice;
- radical inclusivity, a society in which none are diminished or left out;
- no appeal to use of, or dependence on, violence to control or change things; human and environmental well-being and flourishing.
A decade of commemoration or remembering of events that changed life and shaped relationships for the rest of the 20th century provides opportunity to reflect and vision a new future. The language of the past was Covenant and Proclamation. Neither word may be useful a century on. Charter 21 may be the short hand title for the kind of Northern Ireland/Ireland/Island we want for our children, grandchildren, and those yet unborn. It will be a future with ethical values, shaped by social, ethical values. In its radical idea of covenant, the Jewish tradition has given the gift of social vision and ethical values with which to dream and build.

Reflection Questions

In the light of the six covenantal ethical values, did the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation get it right in their respective visions or in their implementation?

How would the covenantal ethical values be expressed in a new vision, Charter 21 (or another title) for Northern Ireland/Ireland a century on?
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