



# lion & lamb

Evangelical Contribution On Northern Ireland

## MAKING THE CROSS COUNT

When the Prime Minister officially launched the election campaign, ECONI's election focus was already in full swing. In their first joint venture, Care and ECONI took to the road in March with twenty Christian Election Forums in the eighteen parliamentary constituencies. In total some 700 people attended the landmark events.

The questions put to the prospective parliamentary candidates covered a wide range of issues. From pensions to overseas aid, education and health cuts to abortion and pornography. The debate showed a healthy interest among churches for the future of their community.

Not all the prospective candidates were selected by their parties in time for the events. However, every effort was made to contact those who had been nominated and to secure a representative from all parties, with the exception of Sinn Fein. Five sitting MP's took time out of their busy schedules to face the questions, while the pressures of parliamentary business prevented two others from being present at the last minute.

Inevitably the state of the peace process was a major focus for many people. The recently published party manifestos reflect this, with most parties making the search for peace and political accommodation their main agenda. Yet the main electoral contest is within the unionist and nationalist communities as the battle for the soul of unionism and the authentic voice of nationalism is engaged. The ability to articulate a vision of a society at peace with itself that takes account of the realities in this divided community continues to elude us.

At a time when it is all too popular to blame the politicians it is good to remember that, in a democratic society, politicians act on the basis of their support at the ballot box. It is hard to face the reality that Northern Ireland's political leaders do reflect the views of the community that elects them.

In the face of this, choices must be made. No one can afford the luxury of opting out. Evangelical Christians must make their cross count. And this is only the start. With growing polarisation and rising sectarian tensions the next few months will be the acid test of whether the cross of Christ counts for anything in determining the behaviour of a society in which many confess that it is all that counts for them.

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# Comment

## "We don't have to do anything"

In the last issue of *Lion & Lamb* the author of the comment page invited us to an authentic Christ like love expressed in a practical and courageous care for our 'neighbour' and even our 'enemies'. In my life as a Christian minister in N. Ireland I have been consistently challenged by the nature of this kind of love and have sought in small ways to fulfil its demands. However, I have also discovered in myself and in the church that there is a built-in 'resistance' to the radical call of the gospel to love our neighbour as ourselves.

This resistance is commonly acknowledged but its form is less understood. We tend to resist not by blatant disobedience or blind hate of others but through the more subtle but equally deadly attitudes of neglect, apathy and complacency. When it comes to the biblical imperative to love our neighbour, disobedience is deceptively easy - we simply don't have to do anything.

This kind of apathy is conceivable because of another attitude - a desire for a religious respectability that stays above strife and like the Pharisee of Luke 18 is able to thank God that we are 'not like other men'. This text offers a sober warning - it is possible to ignore the reality of our own brokenness and lack of compassion and still consider our lives to be true and just.

We have a similar insight in the story of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. It is those who 'neglect' to feed the hungry, visit prisoners or take in strangers who are the focus of judgement. The apathy shown in the presence of needy neighbours is defined as not only complacency to human need but a neglect of Jesus himself. Disobedience is deceptively easy - we simply don't have to do anything.

When Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10) he is inviting his religious listeners to move beyond complacency and neglect and to embrace the radical nature of God's love. This is why the early focus of the story is on the priest and the Levite and not on the robbers who left the traveller for dead. It is in the heart of these devotees to orthodoxy that stubborn

resistance to the will of God is found. These men represent the 'good' people of all communities who make personal respectability and spiritual purity a priority above mercy. The scripture says that the two pilgrims to Jerusalem 'passed by on the other side'. Their failure to fulfil the law of love was deceptively easy - they simply didn't do anything.

Neglect by the 'righteous' is contrasted by the 'compassion' of the Samaritan. Here is the parable's challenge and threat. The one that crosses the sectarian divide of Jew and Samaritan and fulfils neighbourly love is the one we least expect. Neither do we expect the demands of this love. The love of the Samaritan is called 'compassion' because his involvement with the wounded neighbour is more than a kind act - it is relational. Read through the list of practical involvement that defines the relationship between these two men. It is demanding, responsible and committed. We can fool ourselves by talk, which is perhaps why Jesus portrays the Samaritan as saying very little. It is in his costly engagement with the hurt and experience of an historical enemy that the Samaritan shows he loves God, his neighbour and himself. 'Go and do likewise' says Jesus to those waiting for direction.

In N Ireland the sectarian climate is sustained, not by the violence of the 'bad' people but by the apathy and neglect of the 'good'. It is not enough to be non-sectarian. We must be actively anti-sectarian in our words and actions. It is not enough to lament the brokenness and alienation in our community we must be agents of healing and hope. Our commitment to the gospel and the radical call of Christ to love our neighbour must inform our worship and witness. The healing of a nation will demand great acts of courage and biblical imagination. The alternative is deceptively easy - we simply don't have to do anything!

*The Rev Denis Bambrick is the former minister of Bloomfield Methodist Church. He is now retired and living in Holywood, Co Down. He is also a member of ECONI's Steering Group.*

By  
**Denis  
Bambrick**

# Affliction

In the first part of my article (Victims of Violence) I sought to identify three key tasks which I believe to be central elements in our response to those who have suffered through violence. These are: acknowledging, remembering and learning. In this submission I would like to propose how these tasks can be given effect in a way which enables those who have suffered to be part-owners of a peace process. As before I am not speaking on behalf of any group or for those who have been affected by violence. I come to these sensitive issues as a social worker who has worked with people who have been bereaved and injured through acts of violence.

Affliction (in French, *malheur*) is a word used by the French mystic and philosopher Simone Weil to encapsulate the experiences of one who has suffered. She describes affliction as suffering caused by another person, and it involves physical pain and humiliation held in place by fear. Pain and the fear of pain caused by others leads to something akin to death in the mind and soul of one who suffers. Affliction seems like the absence of God. It involves an inability to love. People experience scorn, disgust, guilt, defilement and self-hatred. 'Affliction ... deprives its victims of their personality, and makes them into things'. Such people 'have no words to express what is happening to them'.

This description of suffering through violence describes, powerfully and poetically, the experience of the one who suffers, and describes well the experience of many who have suffered as a consequence of the violence within and between our communities.

Affliction through violence is generally an experience of a breach of trust. Most of us grow up and live our lives with an underlying belief that the world is a positive and safe place to live in. Such beliefs, which are fundamentally important for our psychological well being, are seriously threatened by experiences of violence. We lose faith with the world.

Within the context of a process that we hope will lead us to peace, it is therefore of greatest importance that as a community we address the experience of affliction and the breach of trust that many people have known.

If we fail to do this we will not enable those who have suffered through violence to unpack the experience of affliction and to belong in the peace which we all hope will be achieved. Victims of violence run the very real risk of being left out in the cold when settlements are being reached and when peace can truly be declared. If we fail to acknowledge and address the needs of victims of violence, we will not have enabled them to bring to a completion the tasks of mourning and adjustment. We will have further marginalised, and therefore afflicted, those who have suffered most directly and profoundly, through the tragedy that has befallen us all.

Why the  
afflicted  
should  
have a  
say in  
peace  
making

by David Bolton

*David Bolton trained as a social worker and has worked extensively with people bereaved and psychologically traumatised by tragic and violent experiences. He is currently manager of Community Services in the Omagh area and Chairperson of the Omagh and Fermanagh District Partnership for Peace and Reconciliation. This article is taken from a paper submitted to the Forum for Peace and Reconciliation.*

# **B**ridging the Gap

There is a gap to be bridged between those who have suffered through violence and those who have been responsible for that violence. The gap is at an interpersonal level, and relates to the accountability by those responsible for the violence and the accommodation of those responsible for violence by those who have suffered. Both the afflictor and afflicted will be challenged to respond in a way which goes beyond what might be expected, and in the case of the victims of violence, beyond what we might reasonably expect. The challenge facing the victims of violence is that of forgiveness. This is a response which many have struggled with, some finding that forgiveness is not possible without an explanation or an apology, and even if that is forthcoming, forgiveness would still be difficult or impossible. The response of forgiveness would be less difficult and make more sense if it is matched by an acknowledgement of the suffering and acceptance of responsibility for the terror, injury, death and destruction.

How can such responses be enabled? How can they be enabled in a way which clarifies the hurt and sorrow of those who suffer through violence? How can the wider community be helped to accept and understand the depth of pain people have suffered?

## ***The Resolution of Grief and Suffering***

In the transition from violent conflict to peace involving accommodation, and constructive processes and alternatives to violence, our attention is removed

increasingly from the suffering and losses and from the causes. We need to know that for many people who have been afflicted through violence, the present political interactions and

positioning makes them feel that, already, they and their suffering and losses have been forgotten. There is the possibility that while we can never fully set aside the pain of the past 25 years, it will increasingly cease to move those of us who have not been afflicted. The prospect and experience of peace will distance us from the conflict and fill our lives with different and more positive things. There is a real danger we will cease to recognise the suffering that goes on behind the closed doors of the homes of those who have suffered through violence.

Set against that, there is the need to allow us all to move on. To move towards peace, to embrace and enjoy the experience, not just for ourselves and our families, but for our neighbours too. Those who have suffered and lost must also be allowed to move on. This article seeks to draw attention to the fact that for many, there will be no moving on, until a number of matters are first of all addressed.

## ***A Peoples Forum***

In this submission it is proposed that the voice of people affected by violence could be heard through a Forum. The purpose of the Forum for People Afflicted through Violence would be to allow victims to tell the story of their suffering, to have that story accepted, understood and taken account of by the Forum, on behalf of the total community. Through this process, the total community and its institutions would be enabled to recognise the consequences of violence.

The Forum would be established with the support of the Governments, the political parties in Northern Ireland and the Churches, and legitimised and empowered to receive submissions from the victims of violence. It would be funded jointly by the two Governments and possibly with additional international funds. The Forum would be presided over by a

person of high standing, held in esteem by the sponsoring Governments, parties and churches. Other members with relevant experience of the conflict would assist the chairperson. The Forum would have a secretariat to support its business, and would be located at a designated place in Northern Ireland, with the freedom to convene at other locations if desirable. It would be strictly non-political and would only receive evidence which articulates the human and personal pain and suffering. Submissions could be received in person or in writing (or in other forms determined by and acceptable to the Forum). They would be recorded and placed on record in published form (with due account being taken of confidentiality where necessary). At the completion of its task, the Forum would issue a final report, with any observations and recommendations for the attention of the sponsoring Governments, parties and churches. This would address matters such as the overall impact and scale of violence, the nature and type of further help and support for victims, and on how we ought to remember in a sensitive and meaningful way. The Forum should initially convene for up to 2 years (and make recommendations after 18 months as to whether that should be extended).

The Forum should draw up guidelines as to what circumstances and experiences should be taken account of in determining who are the victims of violence, and may seek advice from others on this matter. These considerations should be completed within 2 months of being established, to allow the Forum to commence its primary task as early as practicable. Within that framework, all who regard themselves as victims of violence would have the right to make a submission.

The timing for the institution of the Forum would depend in part on the decisions being reached about a political settlement, but the voice of those afflicted through violence needs to be part of the considerations in talks. Therefore, the Forum should be instituted as soon as is practicable.

There is the potential for this Forum to be used by political interests for political gain. Such misuse of the Forum would be unacceptable. Politicians and Governments would be required to mandate the Forum, and commit themselves to learning from it, but would have to avoid interfering with its task of providing a setting for the telling of the story of the suffering of individuals.

### ***Declaration and Acknowledgement***

In preparing this submission, I tried to shape a proposal for a second Forum which would hear the perspective of those responsible for violence. Its function, within the terms of this submission, would primarily be aimed at enabling those responsible for violence and the consequent suffering to declare their involvement, so that those who suffered could hear a reason, an explanation, an acknowledgement, and possibly even an apology. Such a process would provide that other part of the equation of acknowledgement, forgiveness and reconciliation. It would also provide an opportunity for those who have been responsible for violence to, in some way, begin their own journey of reconciliation with themselves.

This proposal could have considerable potential, along with the Forum for People Afflicted through Violence, in facilitating the proper conclusion of matters between victims and those responsible for violence, which is an essential ingredient of a wholesome peace.

There are problems, however, with this second proposal, which are beyond the restrictions of this article, and which relate to legal, constitutional and political matters. Nevertheless, I would appeal to Governments and politicians to seriously consider how the process described could be facilitated, through a proper, acceptable and honourable framework. In the promotion of reconciliation the balance between pragmatic political agreements and the upholding of principles and values which underpin common law and our common human experience, needs to be carefully judged.

### ***In the promotion of reconciliation the balance between pragmatic political agreements and the upholding of principles and values ...needs to be carefully judged.***

This article has explored how the voice of the members of our total community, and others in places further afield, who have been afflicted through the violence can be heard and accommodated within a peace making process. The suffering and loss of those who have been bereaved, injured and traumatised, and the all too

### ***The response of forgiveness would be less difficult and make more sense if it is matched by an acknowledgement of the suffering and acceptance of responsibility for the terror, injury, death and destruction.***

great a number of those who have been killed, are at the heart of the tragedy of the conflict between our communities. This remains a matter which needs to be addressed in a serious way, as a

corner stone of peace and peace making. The violence and the death, injury and suffering it resulted in, are all key elements. Within the process of peace making, one of the motives which

has driven us to make peace has been the need to address the violence and its causes. Within our peace making we must also address its consequences. In the process of reaching a settlement, our community and its representatives will need to do business with those responsible for violence. It must not neglect to also do business with the victims of violence.

It needs to be recognised that the spectacle of those who have been seen as the orchestrators and means of violence being in the front line of the process which we hope will lead us to peace, is difficult to accept and unpalatable for many who have been afflicted. It also needs to be recognised that peace was ever only going to be possible when people who use violence sought different ways, ways of non-violence. In the present stage of the process of making peace it seems that the parties to the process, which excludes the victims of violence, are primarily focusing on their own interests. In and through the process, we all must move to a position where we aspire to promote our own interests, and with just as much vigour, the interests of those who hold different and opposing views,

and, like those afflicted through violence, have different needs. If we do not, then the peace will be a faulty peace; it will be an anxious settlement with inherent tensions established through a war of

*A Copy of David Bolton's first article in this series (Victims of Violence) is available from the ECONI office.*

# When Worlds Collide

## The Politics of Holiness

**T**he world of Roman might and rule was on a collision course with the world of Israel. It was a political collision, but more than that it was a collision between Israel's call to holiness and the godlessness of the Gentile rulers. Jesus' life and ministry was shaped by these two worlds in collision.

The world of Israel was shaped by the covenant. They were called to be a holy people, reflecting their holy God. This call to holiness was also a call to separation from all that would defile or corrupt. While politics and holiness may seem strange bedfellows, for the people of Israel they were intimately connected. The whole of life, their life in community as a people, was to be shaped by and to reflect the holiness of the LORD.

Yet the reality in Palestine in the first century was that the Jewish people were no longer sovereign in their own land, living instead under a Gentile nation which neither knew nor feared God. Local vassals set aside the demands of God to accommodate the demands of their overlords.

In this world, how were the people of God to maintain their identity and their purity? The answer was the politics of holiness. However, within Judaism different groups worked out the politics of holiness in different ways.

**O**n the one hand were 'the men of holiness', the children of light' known to us through the Dead Sea Scrolls. Since holiness was impossible within society they withdrew to the desert and established a community marked by strict discipline - especially in relation to ritual purity. They awaited the day of divine intervention when Rome would be destroyed, a corrupt Judaism would be judged and they - the faithful - would be vindicated.

On the other hand were those who would not wait. These were the groups who believed that "holiness could be achieved only by expelling Rome, the impure and idolatrous occupier" (Marcus Borg). These resistance movements looked back to earlier victories and looked forward to a new victory in their own day.

### **A Kingdom of Priests**

The Pharisees advocated neither withdrawal nor rebellion. Instead, as a lay movement, they advocated

and practised standards of ritual purity previously required only of the priests who served in the Temple. While Roman rule was tolerated most of the time, it would be resisted where it was seen to come into conflict with the demands of the law.

**B**org concludes: "With their different strategies, all the renewal movements sought to preserve the Jewish social world by shaping it increasingly in accord with the politics of holiness." And the wider community was also influenced by these different understandings of the politics of holiness for that was "the cultural dynamic shaping the society as a whole."

However, attempts at preservation led to fragmentation. There were competing groups within Palestinian Judaism in this period each offering different ways. Beyond that was the problem that the increasingly radical demands of these groups led to increasing numbers of people who could not live up to those demands. These latter were the outcasts (the 'wicked' and members of certain occupational groups) and sinners (the non-observant, often so because of economic pressures rather than through choice.)

Thus Jews were set against Gentiles, committed Jews against other committed Jews and committed Jews against those Jews who could not attain the level of holiness demanded.

The politics of holiness, however understood, was leading to conflict with Rome - there was a perception of real injustice and there was a loyalty to a deeply ingrained way of life. Borg concludes, "To a large extent, the politics of holiness, coupled with the insensitivity of the Roman imperial power, was responsible for the conflict [that erupted in AD 70.]".

### **Northern Ireland and the**

**W**hat has this to do with Christians striving to live Holy lives in Northern Ireland? Simply this - holiness still has political consequences. The different approaches to holiness that existed in Jesus day still exist in our day. Our stress on personal piety may have obscured this but that in itself has political consequences. So what kinds of holiness can be seen among Christians in our community?

## **H** Personal Holiness

oliness is understood almost exclusively in a personal or private sense. At best it includes the family or the wider family of the local Christian fellowship. Holiness is severed from the rest of life - not only politics in the limited sense, but many other areas of daily living.

This consequence is that the demands of holiness are not seen to be relevant to the same degree in business and daily life. Thus the ethos of social life, community life, business life, relationships is shaped by the culture of our society more than by the demands of holiness.

In some circles society is seen to be the sphere of evil. Encounter with it is minimised and the demands of holiness are met through belonging to a group of believers who view the world in similar ways.

## **R**enewal Holiness

Within this tradition some of the themes noted above are common, but there is also a quite distinctive stream. Involvement with society is sometimes seen as a distraction. Instead, the focus of Christian life is on receiving and practising the gifts of the Spirit, on worship and on prayer. Through the faithfulness of God's people, God will act to bring about the required transformation.

In some strands there is an echo of the apocalyptic visions of Christian and Jewish literature. The decisive battle is spiritual, fought out between the forces of God and the forces of evil. Christians must fight the spiritual battle on God's side with spiritual weapons. However, quite often the understanding of what is spiritual is quite narrow.

## **S**ocial Holiness

When the demands of holiness become formal, institutional and traditional then, despite being presented as spiritual requirements, they can often become social requirements. Holiness becomes a matter of setting boundaries - markers that separate those who are holy from those who are not. These boundary markers define the limits of a holy life; crossing the boundaries is considered a transgression of standards of holiness. In the New Testament many of Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees in particular were driven by their outrage at his willingness to cross their boundaries - Sabbath observance, ritual purity, table fellowship.

Among contemporary Christians attitudes to Sunday observance, alcohol or forms of entertainment can be boundary markers. In particular, in Northern Ireland attitudes to political matters can be seen as boundary markers.

## **R**emnant Holiness

Remnant holiness often considers other Christians to be hopelessly compromised. The faithful remnant alone

has maintained or striven for the purity - often doctrinal rather than ethical - demanded.

Remnant holiness can be linked to withdrawal from the world but it can also be crusading, against both other Christians who do not belong and the wider society with its corrupting and godless attitudes. No compromise is acceptable on any issue.

## **J**esus and the Politics of Holiness

Why does Jesus eat with tax collectors and sinners? Mark 2.16

Why are the disciples doing what is unlawful on the Sabbath? Mark 2.23

Why don't your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with 'unclean' hands? Mark 7.5

Boundary markers defined exclusion zones. Those within were righteous; those without were sinners and tax collectors. The law that God had instituted so that Israel would be a holy witness to the holy God had become an instrument of exclusion and self-righteousness.

Jesus, the Holy One of God, shattered the boundaries and the pretensions of holiness. He took his holiness to the despised, the compromised, the marginalised, the failures and the faithless. His holiness was not about boundaries but about the centre. It was about being Holy, not about practising holiness. It was a holiness that was not afraid of being tainted by the impurity of others, but was itself infectious. When Jesus touched the leper his holiness was not compromised. Instead, his holiness drove out and destroyed what was unclean.

In his encounters he proclaimed the Kingdom of God and called men and women to repentance, transformation of life and discipleship. In breaking the boundaries he did not compromise his holiness. Instead, he displayed true holiness and fulfilled the will of God.

As with the teacher so with the disciple. Faithful followers of Jesus will not establish exclusion zones or draw boundaries. True followers are not afraid that their holiness will be contaminated by encounter with others. True followers, like Jesus, have a holiness that is about the centre, not about the boundaries. We are called to be holy - holiness follows as a consequence.

In Northern Ireland true followers, like Jesus, may have to challenge the boundaries that have been drawn by others. It may not be sufficient to practise the politics of holiness in our own lives. It may be that we cannot practice true holiness until we are prepared to challenge false holiness and false ideas of the politics of holiness that have affected our community.

## **Alwyn Thomson**

*Alwyn Thomson is Research Officer with ECONI. He is the author of a number of ECONI publications including (Ed) 'Faith in Ulster' currently available from a number of book shops or directly from the office.*

# The Way of the Cross

by  
David Porter

A recent British TV documentary provided the opportunity to eavesdrop on that most quintessential of middle class rituals, the dinner party. A group of typical Tory voters were persuaded to sound off in a forthright manner on the issues they felt passionately about. Of course, a lot of what emerged was deemed rather indiscreet.

A friend once remarked that in Northern Ireland the problem is not the views people express in public but the attitudes revealed in those indiscreet moments around the meal table. After all, surveys tell us that if it were up to the ordinary people no one would be protesting at Harryville or blocking the Ormeau Road. Nor would anyone vote for whatever version of intransigence that reflects his or her political identity.

During the events of leading up to the cross, conversations between Jesus and his followers over meals are a significant part of the drama. John provides us with a record of the incidents and table talk in the closing chapters of his gospel. The first meal takes place in Bethany at the home of Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, the day before Jesus enters Jerusalem. The story ends with Jesus having a meal with the two disciples after their journey to Emmaus. It was the very act of breaking bread to eat that brought them to realise that their travelling companion was Jesus. Later, at his beach barbecue of fish with the disciples, he reinstates Peter who had denied all knowledge of him at the time of his arrest.

Central to the whole account for all the gospel writers is the Passover meal that Jesus and his disciples shared together. Here, in both word and action, Jesus shows them what lies ahead, including their part in it. But his conversation goes beyond the immediate events and the disciples' need for comfort and a guide, to include all of us who would come to believe. Chapters 13 to 17 of John's gospel provide us

with an intimate understanding of Jesus and his expectation of all who would follow him.

Unfortunately the one conversation on which I would most like to eavesdrop is not recorded for us. It is the conversation among the disciples during that long day and night between sundown on Good Friday and the Sunday morning. The events of the previous twenty-four hours had been a disaster for the followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

The most dedicated had been travelling throughout Judea with him for over three years. They had heard his speeches and watched as he healed the sick and demonstrated his miraculous power over nature. Together they had walked for miles sharing the intimacy of a travelling band of religious disciples.

It was not that they did not know it was dangerous for him to go to Jerusalem. Over the years his ability to engage the ordinary folk was in stark contrast to the hostility he met from the religious leaders. Yet within a few days of his ecstatic welcome by the people as he entered Jerusalem, an angry crowd rejected him in favour of a violent revolutionary.

It is only speculation, but I am sure during that long day of shock and trauma they repeatedly asked themselves, why didn't he do something? And this is where I come back to the meal tables of Northern Ireland. How often have I been asked, and not just at meals, why doesn't somebody do something?

In the long days of trauma and shock as we adjust to each expression of the deep bitterness in our community there is a deep sense of helplessness that is shared across our divides. Many ordinary people are angry and frustrated. There is a view that anyone could have predicted the events of last summer and yet nothing was done to prevent it. That many did and much was done which was unable to prevent it, is an unpalatable truth that leaves little hope for the coming months. This simply reflects the lack of consensus across our community as to who should act and what it is they should do.

For Jesus' disciples the implications of his meal conversations were crystal clear. In the horrific events that followed his arrest far from doing nothing, Jesus was fulfilling his destiny. In a profound way he was doing all that needs to be done. It is surprising to us who can read the record that they did not understand this. His conversations had been about the essence of his life. The call to serve expressed when he washed their feet. The cost of love, as he broke the bread and drunk wine and talked of his self-giving sacrifice.

Jesus did not run away from the challenge. Neither did he take up the sword or call down the angels to his rescue. His was a third way that Peter recalls in his letter to a persecuted church - 'Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example.' It is the way that John places at the centre of Christian living - 'We should love one another. This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.'

In this both apostles grasped the essential thrust of Jesus' meal conversations. To be his disciple we must follow the way of the cross. It becomes our responsibility to act, to do something but not just any thing. If our Christian witness is to have integrity our actions must be marked by love, service and sacrifice. The practice of hate, domination and self-seeking are simply incompatible with the way of Christ in the world.

It is now the beginning of the marching season. Catholic residents and Protestant Orangemen both claim to follow this Jesus. So too do many others who are choosing to get out on holiday in July. Our proclaimed faith in Jesus leaves us with a choice at this difficult time. Do we violently fight for our cause or run away? Or do we commitment ourselves to discover together what it may mean for us to follow in the steps of Christ?

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words and hostility. We will have lost the opportunity to create a more positive set of relationships and a firmer basis for being reconciled

*David Porter is the Director of ECONI. This article was first published in the Irish Times.*

# Parades Commission

ON THE 26 MARCH this year, the Secretary of State announced the appointment of the Parades Commission in response to the recommendations of the North Report. Among the five members assigned to the Commission are two prominent Evangelicals, the Rev Roy Magee and David Hewitt. The latter has had a long association with the work of ECONI and has served as a trustee, chair of the Steering Group and a member of our Central Co-ordinating Group.

During the last ten years the work of ECONI has aimed to encourage Evangelical Christians in Northern Ireland to engage more fully with the challenge of living in our divided community. During this period ECONI has presented an Evangelical and Biblical perspective to various commissions, forums and political parties. In doing so we have recognised that words need to be matched with a willingness to be responsibly involved in those areas where we express our views and concerns.

Within ECONI we accept that this practical engagement will be done in a variety of ways, formal and informal, individually and corporately. We therefore welcomed the invitation to David Hewitt to become a member of the Parades Commission and support his appointment.

In the light of this however it has been agreed that it is best for the work of ECONI and for David's role as an individual within the Parades Commission, that he stand down as chair of ECONI's Steering Group and member of our Central Co-ordinating Group. As a co-founder of ECONI David has played a major part in developing and guiding our organisation. It was hard for us to reach this decision but consider it right to release him for a wider public role in our community at this crucial time.

The diversity of political and social concerns within the Evangelical family will inevitably lead to different ways of engaging with the issues of a divided society. This diversity has the potential for significant creativity and practical involvement for Christians. However, it also holds the possibility of profound misunderstanding and division.

It is therefore important to the integrity of our witness that we recognise the diverse and legitimate ways that Christians can work for the healing of our community. This will involve a sensitivity to different forms of engagement, an honest representation of others, a willingness to dialogue, an openness to alternative perspectives and a respect for the sincerity of those involved in difficult and controversial situations.

Above all, we are called to pray for each other. In this, David and Roy, and all the members of the Parades Commission can be assured of our prayers as they take up their onerous task.

**David Porter**

# reviews

## **The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology For The Twenty First Century**

Robert Benne

*Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1995*

FIRST, SOME DEFINITIONS - public theology is the process of "engaging the Christian vision with its surrounding public environment - political, economic, cultural, and intellectual." (x) The paradoxical vision is that Christian vision as it is understood in the Lutheran tradition. The purpose of Benne's work is to elucidate a distinctively Lutheran perspective on the question of public theology.

His first chapter, *The Challenge of Public Theology*, discusses the nature of the society that religious traditions are trying to engage. It is a society where the enlightenment project first marginalised the role of religion and where ever increasing fragmentation and individualism are threatening the coherence of the society.

However, Benne notes that while political, economic, cultural and intellectual spheres may appear autonomous they are "radically dependent on thinking, valuing and acting human beings" (6) And these human beings are or can be shaped and influenced by religious or other moral traditions. It is here that religious traditions have a role to play.

The second chapter traces the rise and fall of mainstream Protestant public theology in the United States. In essence Benne argues that from its beginnings the United States was shaped by a Calvinist vision of transformation. As God could transform the sinful soul, so society could be transformed. "God's kingdom in the individual soul will be translated into God's kingdom in society." (28) This 'constructive Protestantism' looked for the transformation of American society and the creation of a Christian America.

However, the contemporary position is completely reversed - the kingdom will come from almost anywhere but America. "The

redeemer nation had become the destroyer nation" (32) The mainstream denominations and ecumenical bodies increasingly looked elsewhere for signs of the kingdom - liberation theology, left wing politics, environmentalism, feminism...

In the process these groups lost touch with the American life and experience and were alienated from many in their own denominational bodies. As a consequence they were left with nothing to say and no-one to hold a conversation with.

While these appear to be diametrically opposed visions, both are premised on the assumption that society is transformable. This, argues Benne, is the fundamental - Calvinistic - theological flaw at the heart of much past and present public theology. Against this Benne advocates the Lutheran position: "The soul is never fully transformed. We remain sinful even as we are justified before God...Society is definitely not the instrument of God's saving acts. Politics, economics and culture cannot be the vehicle's of God's justifying grace...We cannot be god's in history" (43)

Benne does find signs of hope in the increasing public role of the Catholic Bishops, in the rise of the neo-conservatives, and in the increasing involvement of evangelicals. Having surveyed past and present Benne subscribes to the view that the future will see a realignment into orthodox and progressives camps. As a result, "The Christian vision may again become a persuasive voice in the public sphere. Theology may again become public." (55)

Standing within the camp of orthodoxy Benne then outlines the paradoxical vision - a Lutheran theological perspective which he sees as providing a surer base for developing a public theology. This perspective is set out in four principles:

- 1) The qualitative distinction between God's salvation and all human effort;
- 2) The paradox of human nature - "a paradox of good and evil, manufacturing idols of the things we are given" (78);
- 3) God's paradoxical rule - through law and through gospel;
- 4) The paradox of history - the kingdom has come in Christ, and it

will come in the future.

Each of these principles is developed theologically and applied to the specific issue of how to do public theology. This whole section is filled with thought provoking and insightful comment - too much to summarise in a brief review - and would be valuable reading for anyone with an interest in these kinds of matters.

The rest of the book is about the outworking of the paradoxical vision in society. First, Benne analyses the role of the paradoxical vision in the public theology of the Lutheran denominations of the United States, then he surveys some key individuals - not necessarily Lutherans - whose work reflects the paradoxical vision. Finally, Benne develops a typology of how religion and public life should connect.

\* They can connect indirectly and unconsciously as the teaching of the church shapes the hearts and minds of the people of God who then live out their Christian lives in society. \* They can connect indirectly but consciously as the church intentionally teaches and encourages the people of God to reflect and act as Christians in society. \* They can connect directly and intentionally as churches attempt to influence society. \* They can connect directly and intentionally as churches act to exercise power in society.

Again, this section is filled with wisdom and insight too extensive and valuable to summarise. For those trying to work out the relationship between the church and society there is an abundance of help to be found here.

One final thought: Given the dominance of Calvinistic influence among Protestants in Northern Ireland, could it be that too many of us - whether evangelical, ecumenical, liberal, progressive, orthodox or whatever - are looking for too much? What difference would it make if we approached the difficulties facing our society and the resolution of those difficulties from the perspective of the paradoxical vision?

Overall, then, an intelligent, thoughtful and helpful book. While it is unlikely to be on the shelves in the bookshops, it can be ordered through Familybooks in Belfast.

*Alwyn Thomson*

# The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology

Oliver O'Donovan

Cambridge University Press, 1996

Oliver O'Donovan, Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford and author of *Resurrection and Moral Order* (IVP, 1986) has written a demanding book and a very ambitious one. And, yet, it is a book with a deceptively simple story - a story of loss, rediscovery and renewal.

According to Donovan, we (late-moderns) have lost our way. We have become morally uncertain, politically cynical and philosophically confused. Few of us - whether religiously disposed or not - seriously suppose that theology has much of worth to contribute to an understanding of public life, let alone its conduct. Our intellectual disciplines seem incapable of resolving our deepest predicaments. No doubt they equip us adequately for the negative tasks of critique, deconstruction and suspicion, but they fail us badly for the positive tasks of construction. And, unless we're satisfied to muddle along with the instabilities of liberal voluntarism or succumb to the temptations of fundamentalism or utopianism (and thereby swallow an indigestible amount of guff), it seems we've little prospect of ethical / political certainty, direction or hope.

But despite appearances, this isn't entirely our lot. The resources we require for constructive moral and political thinking and acting are closer to hand than we realise; it's just that the prejudices of modernity and postmodernity (many of which have infiltrated theological reflection) have hidden them from our view. These are the resources made available by "Christendom" and which find their original source in God's revelation of his kingly rule to Israel. To rediscover and draw from these resources - which principally means taking seriously the moral and political reality of the kingdom of God - is at once to set upon a path of renewal.

This is a path the church should be leading. By understanding itself (analogously) as a political society and by assuming the political character of its mission (which it has either largely forgotten or sadly misinterpreted), the church is uniquely commissioned to provide

tangible and prophetic witness to the kingdom of God in society at large.

A path of renewal also involves retrieving theology from (relative) intellectual obscurity and from political irrelevance and incompetence; it involves meeting honestly and confidently the various challenges of "late-modernity"; it involves being inspired by a theologically informed political vision which is neither escapist nor utopian, but which provides durable foundations for the life of the church and the life of society. In short, to embark upon a path of renewal is to find good reason for insisting that all powers and authorities are properly subject to the rule of Christ, in whom alone the "desire of the nations" attains fulfilment.

That, I think, is O'Donovan's simple story. But it is deceptively simple, since to follow its detailed twists and turns proves a most demanding task. The story begins and ends with our contemporary (Western) circumstances. En route, it goes on an intensive tour of decisive periods of our history - Old Testament, New Testament, early church, medieval, modern and late-modern - paying particular attention to their various understandings of theology and politics. This is a tour conducted with skill and verve. O'Donovan is an enterprising and often novel guide who not only casts fresh light on well-trodden paths, but frequently discovers paths that other guides have missed.

Unfortunately O'Donovan's enterprise and novelty will probably go unnoticed by all but the most experienced travellers into our history. And this is part of the difficulty with his book: it presupposes considerable acquaintance with Old and New Testament scholarship, church history, the major political - philosophical traditions of the West, and contemporary debates about "modernity" and postmodernity". O'Donovan makes few concessions for the uninitiated. *The Desire of the Nations* is primarily a book written by a scholar for other scholars. And the sheer range of scholarship on display sets stiff requirements for any reader.

Are those requirements so stiff that we shouldn't bother with this book? I don't think so. The substance of *The Desire of the Nations* is eminently worth struggling with and debating. It aims to unsettle any number of our cosiest assumptions, Christian and secular alike. And that in itself makes it worth commending.

The book should be judged on its success in delivering four of its main ambitions: (1) To show that a pre-modern tradition of political theology

(that of Christendom) - lost from sight for centuries - retains an ongoing pertinence; (2) to provide a convincing theological critique of, and alternative to, the major political theories on offer today; (3) to demonstrate the political nature of theology within canons of theological orthodoxy; (4) to combine the analytical skills of exegete and philosopher in laying out a serious political theology for our times.

Without doubt, O'Donovan can claim conspicuous success in delivering (3) and (4). He displays philosophical acumen and his exegetical skills are masterly. These skills are employed to great effect in his conclusive arguments why those who admit the centrality of the kingdom of God to the biblical message cannot plausibly avoid conceding the political character of the Kingdom. It is the "hyper-spiritualists" - those denying the political content of the gospel - who belong in the ranks of the spiritually unorthodox.

With regard to (1) and (2), O'Donovan's success is not quite so spectacular. Certainly, his analysis of political authority - which skilfully interweaves the concepts of power, judgement and possession - illustrates the intellectual strength of his political theology. It should give pause to those political theorists for whom theology is inconsequential. But his critique of their positions is too underdeveloped to be sufficiently compelling.

There are also problems with his attempted resuscitation of the political theology of Christendom. First, he underestimates the positive resources of "late-modernity" (Charles Taylor's *Sources of the Self* is very good on these). And, second, he doesn't engage enough with other - especially neo-Aristotelian - attempts to find pre-modern cures for our modern / postmodern ills - Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* for example.

These are quibbles, which don't detract from the importance of O'Donovan's book. Even if it is not written for a general audience, its ideas deserve widespread discussion.

**Norman Porter**

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*Alwyn Thomson is the Research Officer with ECONI. Norman Porter is the joint winner of the Ewart-Biggs Memorial Prize for his book 'Rethinking Unionism'.*

## Back to the Future

At this year's conference we will be exploring, through keynote speakers and a variety of seminars, the nature of separation & sharing in a divided society. Put a note in your diary and watch this space for further details.

### **A Second Look at Protestant Culture**

This four day residential conference of Bible reading, workshops and field trips is designed to help you reflect biblically on themes relating to religion, culture and identity.

**Bible teaching - Robert Dunlop**

**Facilitators - Ann Dickson & Derek Poole**

**Relevant contributions by invited guests**

**Thursday July 10th Sunday July 13th.**

Belfast Bible College (kindly granted)

Residential £80. Non-residential £50

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## Journey In Understanding

**Exploring the influence of Culture, history and Religion in shaping our identity**

The April/May six week course is now full. However we will be running two Journey in Understanding events later in the year. The first from **23 September - 28 October** and the second from **11 November to 16 December**. For details contact the office (01232 325258).

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## Bridge Builders

**2nd October - 11 December**

This is a ten week course (Thursday evenings) designed to motivate and equip leaders to address the issues relating to the conflict in Northern Ireland. The goal is to enable leaders to run a 'Journey in Understanding' programme in their situation.

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## Clergy Day

**Monday 16th June**

**Miroslav Volf**

Miroslav Volf is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, California. He is author of **Exclusion & Embrace** - a Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation.

9:30am - 2:00pm

The Wellington Suite, YMCA,

12 Wellington Place

Belfast BT1

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## ECONI Sunday

**November 2nd 1997**

Last year 65 churches registered for ECONI Sunday. Each church received a ministry and resource pack designed to help congregations consider important biblical themes for a divided society. ECONI staff and

members of the Steering Group spoke in different services around the country. To register please contact the ECONI office and ask for details.

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## ECONI Conference

**The Politics of Holiness**

**Saturday November 1st**

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## Lion & Lamb

The last few issues of Lion & Lamb have developed to a point where we feel the magazine can become a useful forum for different perspectives on issues facing our community. Therefore we hope that future additions will include a broad range of articles from a Christian perspective and on occasions from others in the community who have a relevant contribution to make. Obviously these will reflect the views of their authors and not necessarily those of ECONI. We will of course continue to bring you news of ECONI initiatives and events.