

# Mission and reconciliation: transcending and transforming identities in Northern Ireland

MAUREEN SLATTERY-MARSH

**Maureen Slattery-Marsh's reflection on the need for, and possibilities of, reconciliation in Ireland draws powerfully on her own life-story.**

*The love of one's country is a splendid thing. But why should love stop at the border?*

(Pablo Casals)

## Inherited Identities

Like most people in the Republic of Ireland, I was raised on a non-violent kind of religious nationalism that profoundly shaped my inherited identity in terms of my relationship to the *past, culture* and *place*. In school, a selective history of Ireland was presented where dates of our victories and defeats, over the English were recorded in my identity narrative. I tapped in time to the tunes of rousing rebel songs and sad laments, and acted in plays and pageants which evoked the ancestral voices of nationalistic fervour within me. My contact with the 'other', the small Protestant community in our town, was minimal. We breathed the same air,

lived parallel lives in worship and schooling. Yet we related with a self-conscious awkwardness whenever our paths crossed in the daily routines of life.

I was 10 years old when the Troubles<sup>1</sup> began over the border 120 miles away. Our family reacted in listless depression and burning indignation to accounts of escalating violence on the TV, especially when Catholics were the victims. I sided with the majority response of our community: supporting a united Ireland, expounding one line solutions like 'Get the Brits out' and praying hard that the conflict would not spill over the border and disrupt our reasonably peaceful lives.

My inherited identity, imbued with uncritical patriotism, became severely conflicted at university, when I joined an interdenominational prayer group. My vision of God and church expanded as I studied the scriptures and built

friendships with Christians from other denominations and cultures. For the first time I experienced the reality that in God's heart there are no walls, no divisions, distinctions or prejudices. At the foot of the cross, the ground is level and we all stand in need of God's forgiveness (*Ephesians 2.14-22*). I responded to this truth by making a personal commitment of my life to Christ as an adult. My primary identity as a Christian was now 'in Christ' and all other aspects of my identity needed to change in the light of this reality. I had to review how my Christian faith rooted in my Catholic upbringing and Irish culture had been tainted with sacral nationalism. Hidden prejudices, sectarian attitudes and simplistic stereotypes had been crippling my capacity to love deeply from the heart. I discovered that recognition of these did not necessarily guarantee release and that they would prove stubborn to shift. Love still stopped at the border.

My border crossing into Northern Ireland began in a circuitous way. In the summer of 1983 I took part in a missionary project to South Africa. The team was comprised of different nationalities and denominations, including some Protestants from Belfast. As we reflected on the issues of apartheid in South Africa together, I saw clearly for the first time that there was religious, social and political

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apartheid at home in Ireland and our Churches were contributing to it. A scripture that captured my sense of call at this time was Acts 1.8:

*You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you: and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'*

I sensed I was not to go to the ends of the earth just yet but to cross into my Samaria – the land of deep hostility – much closer to home. In 1986, I left my teaching job and crossed the border to join an ecumenical community, committed to a vision of prayer, renewal and reconciliation, at the Christian Renewal Centre in Rostrevor, Co. Down.<sup>2</sup> The five years I spent there were among the most formative of my Christian life. While remaining members of our own denominations, as brothers and sisters in Christ we sought to give prophetic witness to what the body of Christ and the people of God in unity could look like. We struggled with many issues of identity, especially our denominational identity, and how to

transcend and transform them in the light of our primary identity in Christ.

### **Identities in Conflict**

Issues of identity are linked to the many categories contrived and invented by the world to control and segregate in the social construction of identity. The interplay of ethnicity, religion, culture, race, nationality, disability, for example, are held in creative tension or locked in critical conflict, as context and hierarchy of importance shapes or dictates them. The conflict in Northern Ireland is described, in the convenient if inaccurate shorthand of competing identities: Catholics v Protestants, Loyalists v Republicans, Nationalists v Unionists. Communal violence has touched almost all sections of Northern Irish society since the outbreak of the Troubles in 1968. It is hard to communicate the intensity and severity of the conflict inflicted on the population of one and a half million people. Over 3,500 people have died. There have been 37,000 shooting incidents and 16,360 bomb explosions. In the early 1970's over 15,000 people alone were driven from their homes through bomb damage and intimidation – at the time the biggest forced population movement in Europe since World War 2. Over half the population know someone who has been killed or injured. Many continue to suffer from post-traumatic stress and other

mental health issues. Although the intensity of the conflict has decreased markedly in terms of killings since the ceasefire in 1994, other types of violent activities such as racketeering and punishment shootings are still regular occurrences. The deafening silence in the community to appeals by the McCartney family, for witnesses to come forward to help bring the murderers of their brother Robert to justice, bears witness to the levels of intimidation that still prevail.<sup>3</sup>

In any culture the convergence of religion and nationalism is dangerous and in Ireland (North and South) Christianity is increasingly secularised and politics sacralised.<sup>4</sup> Religious Nationalism and Religious Unionism have shaped identities in Northern Ireland in profoundly destructive ways. They derive their authority from the 'Ancestral Voices' called forth by versions of history, as actually experienced and as subsequently expounded. They consist, not primarily of 'doctrinal formulae, but of feelings clustering around symbols and epiphanies'.<sup>5</sup> Picture the banners and rituals of the Protestant Orange Parades on the 12th July every year. Or the religious-political murals found on the gable ends of certain Belfast housing estates. The fusion of religion and nationalism is seen at its worst in sacralised acts of violence. This is brutally illustrated in the IRA punishment shooting called the 'Padre Pio' in which



*Wall-hanging of the 'Tree of Life' in the Croi at Corrymeela, Northern Ireland*

the victim is forced to join his hands in a posture of prayer in imitation of Padre Pio (a twentieth century Italian Catholic saint who had the stigmata) and is then shot through the hands, afflicting him with the 'wounds' of Christ.

In Northern Ireland, one might be forgiven for assuming that identities would be shaped significantly by Christian values, beliefs and attitudes, based on high church attendance and levels of religious practice. The anticipated outcome of this shaping would be the widespread witness of communities to the love of neighbour, hospitality, forgiveness, and peace making. I, like many others, was forced to ask hard questions when

these assumptions and outcomes failed to be realised. If the Churches are meant to incarnate the presence and power of God in the communities they inhabit, then what hierarchy of identities has been operating in them to so seriously distort their role? The Churches have long been accused of being part of the problem, and described as the 'People of Division' rather than the 'People of God'. Why have the Churches struggled so much in their prophetic role and responded for so long in fudged and compromised ways to the sectarian attitudes and violence in the community. The Churches have been implicated in the Troubles by colluding with sacral nationalism /unionism at

varying levels. Churches have ‘mirrored the divisions in society, and often unwittingly, they have given them an institutional shape and an ideological validity’.<sup>6</sup> The promotion of allegiance to denominational identity over a primary identity in Christ as Christians, and collusion with the lethal mix of religious nationalism/unionism has weakened their witness. In the early years of the troubles a few initiatives in reconciliation gave witness to our unity in Christ and challenged this lethal mix. In the last 15 years, the Churches and other institutions have begun to address their complicity in buttressing the sectarian divide.

### **Transcending and transforming identities**

If we are to incarnate the presence and power of God in the communities we inhabit, then our identities need to be reconfigured around our primary identity in Christ. In my own personal experience and from research done to identify processes of identity transformation among those involved in reconciliation work in Northern Ireland<sup>7</sup> several reshaping catalysts can be identified.

The impact of personal encounter with the *other*, previously viewed with deep suspicion or as a feared enemy was of fundamental importance. Over the years communities of reconciliation have played a vital role in providing ‘safe spaces’ facilitating such personal

encounters across the religious, cultural and demographic divide. The Revd Ken Newell, moderator of the Presbyterian Church, described his first significant encounters with Catholics, ‘When I began to make friends with the other side, and to see the love of God and their faith, I realised that I had been looking at the Catholic Church with one eye shut’.<sup>8</sup> Personal encounter with the *other*, by crossing borders or spending time abroad also challenged stereotypes.

The scriptures, and the writings and witness of peacemakers on the world stage e.g. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Jean Vanier, Mairead Corrigan were influential as catalysts. The influence of role models in local communities bearing witness to a non-sectarian lifestyle and the victims of violence who embraced the path of forgiveness challenged single identity commitment and partisan living. Painful awareness or experiences of discrimination and injustice forced a deep questioning of inherited identities, Personal experiences of trauma and tragedy led some to seek ways to express a solidarity in suffering with the other side.

The influence of global events on the local reality also proved a reshaping catalyst of identity. Events such as Vatican 2, the dismantling of the Berlin Wall and the apartheid system inspired fresh vision and hope. For many a marked moment of encounter in their

relationship with God produced a process of profound inner change and shift in understanding. Revd Cecil Kerr called this the experience of ‘Spirit and Fire’ described in Luke 3.16-18. This brought about a process of root-deep repentance, a purging of old fears, old sectarian based convictions, old forms and formulas and a new empowerment in ministry.

DeYoung uses the image of entering the womb of God in preparation for the birth of a new beginning, to experience freedom from a history we have either created or inherited by being renewed by the Spirit.<sup>9</sup> The womb-of-God experience as Jesus discussed with Nicodemus in John 3.1-21, enables us to leave behind the dysfunction and distortion of our inherited identity.

These reshaping catalysts caused a radical reassessment of the existing hierarchy of identities. They led to a new understanding of God, a new relationship with self and the other, a clearer focus on primary identity in Christ, and a new theology based on relationship. D’Souza advocates that the underlying goal of the process of reconciliation is the transformation of relationships and structures.<sup>10</sup> Reconciliation is evidenced when existing broken relationships are mended; the state of enmity is transformed into friendly relationship and the structures of injustice are transformed. A theology of relationship looks at various types of relationships and

tries to find God and meaning to one’s own faith in relation to them. A theology of relationship which affirms our primary identity in Christ and facilitates the transcendence and transformation of identities has several characteristics:

- ▶ It is contextual to people, place and culture involving a shift from a ‘thinking theology’ to a ‘doing theology’.
- ▶ It is not static, but dynamic, because it keeps evolving and changing according to the context that presents itself.
- ▶ It requires direct involvement in and commitment to build relationships where they do not exist, as involvement and commitment are essential for any healthy relationship.
- ▶ It seeks to provide a space for meeting others, offering hospitality without conditions.
- ▶ It seeks the healing of relationships where they are broken and the deepening of relationships where they are weak.
- ▶ It requires compassionate listening and the offering of unconditional acceptance of the *other as other* with all the beauty and limitations the other possesses.
- ▶ It demands the ability for deep empathy with the *other* i.e. the readiness to feel at my gut levels the

feelings of the *other*.

- ▶ It demands the active concern for the welfare of the *other*, the whole creation.
- ▶ It requires collaborative endeavours with our neighbours of all faiths, cultures, races, creeds, castes, and genders.
- ▶ It requires the capacity to grow in trust, respect, love and understanding – the building blocks needed to promote reconciled relationships.<sup>11</sup>

A theology of relationship is essentially also a theology of reconciliation because it is while relating to the *other* as *other* I discover that I am united to my brother, or sister in my human condition by far more things than that which divides us. Within our Christian calling as ambassadors of reconciliation in Christ, we are entrusted with the ministry and message of calling people into right relationship with God and with one another (*2 Corinthians 5.18-19*). A theology of relationship is developed, by witnessing to the life of Christ in us, and by recognising God's hand in our neighbours' life leading them to act to change and transform relations, and to transcend human made barriers.

Initiatives in reconciliation have developed considerably in the new climate of relative peace in Northern Ireland. The Centre for Contemporary

Christianity, Restoration Ministries, Irish School of Ecumenics, Corrymeela and many other groups seek to practise a theology of relationship and promote reconciliation by addressing the destructive distortions of inherited identities and finding ways to transcend and transform them. They encourage people to take 'small actions' to meet those whom they are brought up to see as being different to them, and to create fresh opportunities for understanding and transcending differences.<sup>12</sup> As Hilary McDowell, a differently-abled Northern Irish Presbyterian deaconess who embodies in her ministry a theology of relationship says 'I have always related to "people". Never have I distinguished between the many categories contrived and invented by the world to control and segregate.'<sup>13</sup>

One of the major challenges to the Body of Christ in the local and global arenas is to consider the implications of 'reconciliation and healing as a mission paradigm'<sup>14</sup> and how a theology of relationship can bring about a reshaping of other identities to reflect our calling to live out our primary identity in Christ. My hope is that the Churches in Ireland can continue the painful process of identity transformation to let more of the 'light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ' shine through in the communities they inhabit (*2 Corinthians 4.6*).

**Notes:**

<sup>1</sup>The conflict in Northern Ireland is often referred to as 'The Troubles'.

<sup>2</sup>[www.crc-rostrevor.org](http://www.crc-rostrevor.org)

<sup>3</sup>Robert McCartney was murdered by members of the IRA on 30 January 2005, outside a pub in Belfast. The pub was full and many witnessed the murder. His five sisters, partner, and two children have begun a campaign to bring Robert's murderers to trial.

<sup>4</sup>Cecil Kerr, *The Way of Peace, Peace amidst the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1990 p.145.

<sup>5</sup>Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland*, Poolbeg, 1994.

<sup>6</sup>Duncan Morrow, 'Church and Religion' in Seamus Dunn (ed) *Facets of the Conflict in Northern Ireland*, St Martin's Press, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>Maureen Slattery, *Issues of Identity: the Churches in Northern Ireland and Rwanda: Sowers of Conflict or Solidarity*, MTh thesis, University of Edinburgh 1995, (unpublished).

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Curtiss Paul deYoung, *Reconciliation, our Greatest Challenge – Our Only Hope*, Judson Press, 1997.

<sup>10</sup>Andreas D'Souza, Theology of Relationship in *Forum-in-Focus, the Canadian Churches' Forum for Global Ministries*, No14: 2002/2003. Dr. D'Souza was the director of the Henry Martyn Institute for Interfaith Relations in Hyderabad, India.

<sup>11</sup>Tom Marshall, *Right Relationships*, Sovereign World, 1989.

<sup>12</sup>Duncan Morrow and Derrick Wilson, *Ways out of Conflict*, Understanding Conflict Trust, 1996.

<sup>13</sup>Hilary McDowell, *Some Day I'm Going to Fly*, SPCK 1995.

<sup>14</sup>Kirsteen Kim (ed) *Reconciling Mission: the Ministry of Healing and Reconciliation in the Church Worldwide*, ISPCK/UCA 2005.

**Resources:**

Wesley Ariarajah, *Axis of Peace: Christian Faith in Times of Violence and War*, WCC, 2004.

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**Websites:**

[www.contemporarychristianity.org](http://www.contemporarychristianity.org); [www.Restorationministries.co.org](http://www.Restorationministries.co.org);

[www.crc-rostrevor.org](http://www.crc-rostrevor.org); [www.irish-association.org](http://www.irish-association.org)