



Ethical and Shared Remembering: Commemoration in a New Context

ETHICAL THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES
TO SHARED REMEMBERING, 1912-1922



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in partnership with
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The Junction



Holywell Trust



The Junction

Ethical and Shared Remembering Project



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Introduction

The decade of 1912-1922 was steeped in religion. A theological and ethical response is therefore required, not only to the events of the decade but also to the future. Theology is not shaped in a vacuum but in the context of history. Doing theology is a contextual and practical project. Religion had a higher profile in 1912-1922 than it has in the Ireland of 2012-2022. Theology, therefore, featured large in the events of the decade, especially in the historic documents of Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation. Church leaders as well as political leaders invoked God.

What Churches in Ireland today make of the 'God' of 1912-1922 is an issue to be critically evaluated, as is the role of clergy. Asking theological and ethical questions will have implications for faith in Ireland in the 21st century. A contextual theological response is necessary.

'Ethical Theological Responses to Shared Remembering, 1912-1922', suggests a number of ethical theological questions and issues which arise from the decade of change and violence. It is a companion publication to *'Ethical and Shared Remembering: Commemoration in a New Context'*, which provides an overview of the historical and political events, and therefore a context for theological and ethical reflection. A reading of the history and politics is essential to the theo-ethical reflection that follows. A third publication is planned offering a theological response to building peace and a shared future, *'Ethical and Shared Remembering: Visioning the Future.'*

It is hoped that these publications will provide those in the faith community with a basis for critical theo-ethical reflection on a crucial and defining decade in Irish history. People of faith have a contribution to make to a decade of commemoration and the public square.

1. Ethical Remembering and Subversive Memory

Remembering the decade of change and violence, 1912-1922, is fraught with dangers. Some will want to remember selectively and in doing so will interpret the chosen event in a partisan and ideological way. It may suit covenant politics to focus exclusively on the Ulster Covenant as the constitutional basis for Northern Ireland, justifying another century of unionism, while ignoring the guns that were an integral part of the Covenant. Likewise republicans may put all their focus on the Easter Rising and the Proclamation as an iconic and constitutional basis for Irish unity and freedom. They too may choose to play down the militarised politics that underpinned the Proclamation. Many on both sides may fail to see the connection between each of the events and as 1916 was shaped by 1912, so the commemorative tone of 2016 will be a response to 2012. We will have learned little in 100 years if the commemorations become oppositional events.

To indulge in the old rhetoric of 1912 and 1916 will also be a failure in political and spiritual maturity. To glorify either event or any of the centennial events of the decade will be a distortion of memory. To remember these events as grand heroic adventures, deleting from the memories the hell of sectarian violence and killing, will be to rob Ireland of a future. Filtering the past through the lens of harmlessness or innocence is to allow memory to turn into a 'false consciousness' of the past and become an opium of both present and future. To ensure that these commemorations do not become trade in opium, and to avoid having a young generation shaped for violence, remembering requires an ethical dimension. Ethical and shared remembering is essential if the decade is to contribute to a different and shared future.



The Need for Ethics

The broad contours of ethical remembering are found in *'Ethical and Shared Remembering: Commemoration in a New Context'*. Faith communities are communities of ethical and moral formation. All expressions of religion have an ethical basis. Faith is best understood as a way of life, a public and relational praxis. The Judeo-Christian Bible does not see truth as oppositional or formulatory. At the heart of the Jewish tradition, which is the ethos of the Bible, truth is doing, practice. John's Gospel holds together, Way, Truth and Life. In the Hebrew Bible TORAH is not a legal system, but a way of life practiced freely and joyfully. Faith is ethics and ethics is a way of life lived in the world. Faith is often the struggle to live faithfully in the public, relational world. Ethical praxis therefore is at the heart of remembering and provides a liberating, transformative way into the decade of commemoration, 2012-2022, and the events that still shape the Irish present.

There are two components at the heart of ethics, and these are justice and love. Both of these are rooted in the biblical narratives and they cannot be separated. Justice and love are not individualistic values. Both can only be lived in relationships and in community. Justice and love are social and relational ethics.

There is no ethical loving or remembering apart from the practice of justice. Justice is the core or central biblical idea, the Bible having more to say about justice than anything else. Justice is right relationships between God and humans, human and human, nature and human. Community and ecological relations are to be built on justice and when people act justly towards each other. This also means social structures, institutions and systems rooted in the practice of justice. The prophetic tradition of the Judeo-Christian Bible recognised that to do justice is to know God. Where there is no justice, God is not known; God is absent.

Love is the heartbeat of faith, not in a pitying, paternalistic way, but as an action verb, regardless of how one feels about others. Love is seeking only the others highest good. Love is active commitment to the common good. Love has been described as the soul of justice, or justice as love in action. Love is a relational love for God and neighbour with no dichotomy between faith and ethics. Jesus brought the two together and the Christian Testament recognised that it is impossible to

love God without loving the neighbour, especially the neighbour in need, without justice or who has been pushed to the margins. Paul in perhaps the best relational poetry in the Christian Testament, asserted that *'if I do not have love, I am nothing'* (I Cor 13 v 1-3). Paul went further in Galatians 'The whole Law (TORAH) is fulfilled in one word, Love your neighbour as yourself' (Gal 5 v 14).

To love the neighbour is to act justly, practice justice and build social and community relations rooted in social justice.

This is the ethical benchmark by which the faith community critically approaches the past, present and future. Were the core ethics of justice and love actively present in the events of the decade, 1912-1922? Were they being practiced by the faith community at that time? Will they be the primary ethics, shaping how we commemorate events 100 years on, and will they be core to the alternative future we want to build?

Subversive Memory

How we remember will be crucial to the forthcoming decade. The 'how' will determine the decades following and shape for better or worse the future of relationships in Ireland. Memory may well be selective, distorted, biased, even false, and since history is less about facts and more about interpretation, much of this will be inevitable. Ethical remembering will bring a more rigorous discipline to the commemorations. It will engage in a more critical investigation of history.

Christian faith is based on memory, as is the older Jewish faith in which the Christian tradition is rooted. Christian worship or liturgy is a rehearsal of memory. A story is recalled, key events are remembered and the liturgical memory shapes our lives and ethical praxis. The key events in the faith narrative are the exodus from Egypt, the exile in Babylon and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The story does not end there but is on-going, with chapters in history still being written and faithful lives and relationships still in the making.

At the heart of Christian worship is the breaking of bread, Eucharist, Holy Communion or Lord's Supper. Memory is directly invoked. *'Do this in the remembrance of me'*



as bread is broken and the cup is poured out. The memory, however, is dangerous and subversive. It is the death of Jesus that is being remembered, an historical death, a death in history with contemporary power and significance.

Over the centuries the Christian community has overlaid this dangerous memory with theological interpretations, some of which are violent and portray a violent God. The death of Jesus has even been domesticated and its subversive power diminished by piety and sentiment. But the memory is rooted in an even earlier memory, the exodus or liberation of Hebrew slaves from the domination and oppression of the Egyptian empire. Exodus language colours much of the Christian Testaments reflection on the death of Jesus, and just as there is an imperial foreground to the Exodus narrative, so there is a Roman imperial foreground to the passion narrative. Jesus was executed by the empire that ruled his world. Crucifixion was imperial execution and it was the empire's way of dealing with those who challenged its domination system and oppressive power. It was an act of state-sponsored violence, torture and brutal death being used as a deterrent. Jesus publically proclaimed the empire or Kingdom of God in contrast to the Roman empire. He was passionate about God's empire at the heart of which was justice and love. Such passion was in direct opposition to a domination system passionate about violence and conquest. The violent, unjust, domination system executed him. Any understanding and appreciation of the death of Jesus as a death in history has got to begin with this memory. To by-pass or eliminate this memory is to make Jesus ahistorical and apolitical, to remove God from history and to become an adherent of docetism, that Jesus only seemed to be human.

When we '*do this in remembrance*' we are invoking and recalling a subversive memory, because we are undermining the fiction of peace through violence, victory through war, freedom through militarisation. In every liturgy, especially of the Eucharist, we are asserting the ethic of active non-violence, the empire in which peace comes through justice and where power is vulnerable love. It is a dangerous memory because we are committing ourselves to love by an ethic of active non-violence, justice and love in opposition to every domination system, whether it be state-sponsored or the domination and dehumanising system of violence and counter violence. Living out of such a subversive and dangerous memory is to live

the way of the cross. It is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called '*the cost of discipleship*'. In this memory the faith community lives by a radically different ethic.

In the decade of commemoration the faith community will invoke a different kind of remembering, an alternative memory. That will provoke historical self-examination, perhaps ecclesial repentance, a rigorous reappraisal of our history of God and guns, and it might also inspire an ethically different social vision of a future Ireland.

Reflection Questions

In what practical ways might the faith community put justice and love at the heart of its ethical practice?

How can the faith community apply its subversive and dangerous memory to the decade of remembering?

If Eucharist or Lords Supper has practical implications for historical remembering, what is our theology or understanding of the sacrament?



2. Remembering Creatively in Exile: A Paradigm of Location

Unionists and nationalists have resorted to the use of violence to defend their socio-political and cultural ideologies. The familiar slogans: *'For God and Ulster'*, or *'For God and Ireland'*, that appeared on banners and gable walls in Northern Ireland during the period referred to as *'The Troubles'* demonstrated the interweaving of religion, nationalism and violence in Protestant and Catholic mindsets. In Northern Ireland the assumption has been that an all-powerful god must, of necessity, be on the side of the victors of history, not the victims. This god makes the cause of the victor just. This predilection to give religious legitimation to the use of violence is not a recent phenomenon. *'God on our side'* has been an oft repeated sentiment by opposing armies not just in Ireland but in the history of warfare from earliest times. The militarism and violence of 1912-1922 was endorsed by political and church leaders of the period in unionist and nationalist camps. They believed religious and political freedom were indivisible; therefore the violent defence of people, land and faith was ethically just and even a Christian duty.

On the 28th September 1912 Sir Edward Carson led the signing of a *"Solemn League and Covenant"* defying home rule. The signatories, that included the leaders of the main Protestant churches, pledged to use *"all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a home rule Parliament in Ireland"* (Liz Curtis, *The Cause of Ireland*, pp. 225-226). Religious services were then held to confirm that for the unionist community defending Ulster was equated with defending their faith.

The drive toward militancy in the northeast of Ireland was mirrored in the rest of Ireland. With the onset of the Great War, John Redmond, keen to show Irish support for the British war effort, and demonstrate Ireland's defence capability, urged the Irish Volunteers to: *"...account for themselves as men, not only in Ireland itself, but wherever the firing line extends, in defence of right and freedom and religion in this war"* (Alvin Jackson, *Ireland 1798-1998*, p.197). As the numbers of Irish dead mounted in the war, the military council of the Irish Republican Brotherhood recruited members of the Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army, which had formed in 1913, to take part in the 1916 Rising to achieve civil and religious liberty. Only in an Irish Republic could the true faith be protected and practiced without interference from colonial powers.

The challenge facing religious leaders and churches, when they come to commemorate the 1912-1922 decade, will be to look critically at the hijacking of religion to support respective nationalisms, violence and guns. Present day churches are approaching this period from a different social location that offers a particular advantage. They are no longer at the centre of power, due to the increasingly pluralistic and democratic nature of society and may consequently be better situated to recognise the ways power corrupts.

Recent empire studies have confirmed that the Bible is in large part a book about vulnerable, powerless people. Written against the backdrop of imperial ideology and violence, the Hebrew Scriptures tell the story of the Israelites' struggle to comprehend the nature of God, and their relationship to God, in the context of exile and return.

The destruction of Solomon's temple, the sacking of Jerusalem and the exile of the cream of Israelites to Babylon, in 587 B.C.E., was a defining experience for the Jewish people, shaping memory and mindset. They were stripped bare of the very things that had come to define them: the temple, which was both the dwelling place of God and centre of sacrificial rites and religious festivals; and their homeland, to which they had journeyed out of Egypt. It is no wonder that as a people no longer sure if God was on their side they lamented their loss and wept as they remembered Zion.

The experience of exile provided the context and impetus for the Hebrew community to reconsider and reformulate what being chosen by God meant. The memory of God's faithfulness ensured the survival of the Jewish story and traditions in exile. It gave the Hebrew people courage to risk non-conformity when pressured by a universalising Babylonian culture. The suffering in exile shaped Jewish self understanding, community memory and future visioning. Exilic experiences of alienation and reconciliation, dislocation and restoration, and despair and hope, birthed a creative grappling with painful questions on the existence and nature of God, the meaning of life and death, as well as communal identity and purpose.

The biblical narratives evidence this imaginative engagement. The creation myths in Genesis, for instance, are metaphorical accounts about beginnings and endings;



the poetry underlines that all of creation begins with God and exile is alienation from God. In light of this breakdown in divine and human relations the covenants, which God initiated with Noah, Abraham, Moses and David as representatives of the Hebrew community, are roadmaps for finding the way back into relationship with God. The exodus and exilic accounts show God sustaining the Hebrew community with manna during their wilderness experience. The wonderful image in Deutero-Isaiah (chaps. 40-55) of God the good shepherd gently leading the flock and caring for their needs, even carrying the young, is a further affirmation that God remains the community's source of nourishment and hope, especially in the midst of dislocation and despair (Isaiah 40 v 11). God's power, in contrast to the power displayed by empires, is rooted in truth, justice, right-relations and mercy, the covenantal values.

It is no wonder, then, that those who eventually returned to their homeland, under the protection of the Persian Cyrus, felt compelled to tell their story. In fact, the Hebrew Scriptures, in their final form, are a product and response to exile; as earlier materials, which pre-dated exile, are given fresh interpretation in that experience. When the second temple is dedicated in 515 B.C.E. by Ezra, the occasion is marked by the reading of the five books of Moses. Ezra not only read the Torah but interpreted it. So in post-exile the Jewish people became a people of the book and not just that but a people of the interpreted text.

Interestingly, it was from a place of powerlessness and marginalisation that the Hebrew community rediscovered their true vocation to practice intense hope in God's faithfulness and recover the radical, egalitarian vision of community rooted in the covenant. Third-Isaiah (chaps. 56-66) offers a poetic description of a new Eden, where no-one will want for anything and no enmity will exist (Isaiah 65 v 17-25). His imagery captures this liberating community model and power arrangement. It provides an alternative praxis to the dominant and aggressive socio-political reality of imperial Babylonian.

The Hebrew experience of exile and return has the potential to provide Irish churches with both a strategy for survival and a future orientation. Marginalisation, loss of power and diminished moral authority is the stark reality facing the majority of churches and congregations in 21st century Ireland. Those in the churches

may bemoan past times when pews were filled to overflowing, religious leaders influenced public policy and clerical authority in religious and moral issues was a given. History has shown that this opened the doors for the abuse of power and position, whether through the blessing of militarism, or covering up of sexual violence. The way forward, as the Hebrews discovered, involves a return to the founding stories to recover the community mission and value-base. As we can only engage past memories from the standpoint of present experiences, this means reinterpreting our faith story in light of recent failures, open wounds, current struggles, received insights and present hopes.

The churches now exist in a context where they have a great deal less influence over public policy. No longer being on the side of power, churches need to find new ways of engaging public issues with a credible voice based on the integrity of their core faith values. This means speaking not from a place of privilege but as a servant community, identified with the voiceless and powerless of society.

From the place of marginality, Irish churches need to recover their faith memory, and the Jewish roots of their faith, in the context of present experiences and challenges. This involves recognising that the faith memory has evolved in a context of dispute where faith is a radical alternative to all domination and hegemonic systems. Ethical dispute in contemporary Irish society is the matrix in which faith witnesses to its values.

Like the post-exilic Hebrew community Irish churches will need to become an intensely textual community. The Judeo-Christian Scriptures are the foundational documents of a living faith and ethical praxis. Becoming a textual community does not mean a literal or a dogmatic approach to the text but an open recognition that the text always requires interpretation in both the textual and contemporary contexts, and also that texts always hold a surplus of meaning. It is from these foundational narratives that the present faith community is to shape its existence and its praxis.

In a context of despair, as a result of a loss of power, status and moral and spiritual monopoly, Irish churches can become communities of hope. As the Republic struggles to survive an economic crisis and Northern Ireland struggles to build its



3. Profile of a History Maker: Jeremiah and Prophetic Witness

shared future it is imperative that hope is embodied and articulated in concrete and practical ways. Hope is a core dimension to Christian faith. It was Paul who affirmed that faith, hope and love remain. It is by holding this triad together that the faith community can witness to a different future and shape a culture of hope. The Christian faith community draws its hope from its core narrative of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Christ sought to repair creation by embedding God's kingdom in anticipation of God's new heaven and new earth. (Revelation 21) Following Christ's roadmap to future peace and reconciliation is the primary purpose and mission of the Christian church. The challenge for Christians, then, is to embrace and live out the ethics at the heart of Jesus' kingdom vision in a creative and imaginative way. This will mean allowing the core ethics of non-violence, compassion, justice and love of enemy to frame the churches' response to commemoration. It will also mean critiquing past and present power structures, political arrangements and policy decisions according to how they assist or diminish the realisation of these core human values.

Reflection Questions

How might the kingdom values be a resource for churches preparing to commemorate the decade 1912-1922?

What might the churches do together to witness publicly to Jesus' counter-cultural ethics which challenge the false ideology that peace and security depends on militarism and violence?

Why should the churches be concerned with a decade of remembering? Why should faith engage with a period of early 20th century Irish history?

- Because religion was a dominant factor shaping the events of 1912-1922.
- Because God was invoked as key to the iconic Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation.
- Because God and guns were inextricably linked and Protestant and Catholic clergy gave their blessing to militarised politics.

Churches may prefer to define themselves as the people of God, and there is theological and spiritual truth in this identity. But the people of God exist in history, are never somehow outside it and are always part of historical processes. Faith itself is always challenged, experienced, lived and articulated in those same historical processes. Some may want to keep faith separate from politics, but politics will never stay out of faith. Theology is always expressed in the historical and political context and spirituality is always political.

Irish churches and their faith were big players in the crucial decade, have been players in every decade of Irish history and will still be doing theology for better or worse in the decade of commemoration and beyond. Past, present and future, the churches are either history makers or history stoppers. If God's purpose is the well-being and flourishing of all humankind and all creation, then the churches are engaged in history as history makers ensuring well being and flourishing. Or they are history stoppers, blocking history's ultimate meaning and purpose, by their abuse of power, control of the status quo, and domination of people and nature. Faith has no option but to engage with the events of 1912-1922 and the centenaries of the forthcoming decade. Faith, if it is ethical, needs to raise critical questions about the decade of history, how it will be remembered and of the future and of the Ireland of the next decade. This may well call for theological deconstruction, especially of a dominant theology of violence and the reconstruction of a faith, more ethical and faithful to the churches best awareness and vision of God. Historical processes are where the church crafts its theological ethics and theo-ethical praxis.



As for where God is in history it is not always, or very rarely possible, for the church to know. Purposeful patterns in history are not always easy to detect. Christian faith attempts to hold something of God's sovereignty and providence in its view of the world, but the hand of God in history is difficult for finite humans to trace. When Paul wrestled intellectually and emotionally with the purpose and destiny of his own Jewish people, he found himself in a cloud of unknowing, *'O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments and inscrutable his ways!'* What God is up to in history is for the most part hidden and inscrutable. If a very violent, brutal and bloodletting 20th century has taught us anything, it is that God is not a supernaturalist, interventionist God. Faith may want to claim that God is the ultimate history maker, but not in a supernaturalist sense, rather *'through the processes and agency of human interaction'* (Brueggemann, *Hope Within History*, p55). But God's collaboration with the agency of human interaction is ethically based and directed towards the non-violent flourishing and well being of humanity and nature. The sectarian violence of 1912-1922 was anti-human and destructive of life and the physical environment, as was the most recent history of violent conflict in Northern Ireland.

Who then are the history makers and what is their ethical praxis? The Hebrew prophets provide significant case studies and Jeremiah in particular offers a challenging profile of a history maker.

Jeremiah's Faith in a Geopolitical World

Jeremiah lived at a time of deep and irreversible disruption in his community's life. The struggle for faith or faithful living in the context of this disruption and dislocation is a very public, historical, political experience. The small Kingdom of Judah was for most of its existence, a client state, colonised, occupied and threatened by successive superpowers. Political and economic independence for Judah was never an option, nor was political or military resistance. This small Kingdom had neither the capabilities nor resources to rise against a succession of empires.

Jeremiah lived through the hegemonic domination of the Babylonian empire. Before Babylon, there had been the aggressive military expansionism of the powerful Assyrians. They dominated the geopolitical horizon. But, within fifty years, the Assyrian superpower had collapsed, and gone the way of all empires in history. The

emerging superpower was Babylon and Jerusalem was forcibly invaded three times in 598, 587 and 581 BCE. Babylonian policy was to exile conquered people and create compliant colonies. Such was Judah's fate at the hands of the geopolitical power shifts in history. The crucial year was 587 BCE when the Babylonian army rolled into Jerusalem, wiped out the Davidic Dynasty, razed the holy city to the ground and devastated the Temple where Judah's God was an assured presence. The institutional collapse was total, all the symbols of memory were destroyed and trusted theology was swept away. Jeremiah lived through this social, political, cultural and theological catastrophe, an experience of the end of history. It is Jeremiah, who along with Ezekiel, helped us to see how faith struggled in anguish to the catastrophe of 587 BCE, which finally reshaped in a radical way the life, faith and memory of a traumatised community. The faith of the prophet drew on the older theological tradition of Deuteronomy and was reinterpreted in the geopolitical and crushing context into a new theology for a new time. Babylonian expansionism and destruction shaped a new theology. To what extent did the violent events of 1912-1922 deconstruct the God on our side, violent theology of the time and shape new theological thinking and imagination? The same applies to the most recent phase of violent conflict. Has there been an appropriate theological collapse, critical re-visioning of theology, or are churches retreating into old dogmas and theological traditions that no longer speak to contemporary human and ecological needs?

Jeremiah as a History Maker

Jeremiah in the face of catastrophe and loss of meaning was a history maker. This required a new imaginative approach to theology in history. The book of Jeremiah is complex and the form we have now emerged from a lengthy editorial process, which included interpretation. Our reading task is about interpretation of the already interpreted words of a very sensitive personality. Even with all of this interpretative complexity, the profile of a history maker emerges.

Jeremiah's profound experience of community pain, pathos and anguish:

- The prophet is a poet who feels deeply the anguish and failure of his community. We meet a sensitive person, moved deeply by, and in solidarity with, the acute loss of meaning in Judah. He did not find it easy to deconstruct Judah's social and symbolic worlds. The pain and distress of that is written all over chapters 1-25. In the latter part of the book he reconstructs hope out of



those shattered worlds, but only after cries of distress and woe (15 v 10-12). Also, *'My anguish, my anguish! I writhe in pain... My heart is beating wildly; I cannot keep silent;'* (4 v 19-22). History makers have the sensitivity to enter into the anguish, physical, psychological and spiritual pain of their own community. Solidarity in suffering shapes the creative history makers.

Jeremiah's fidelity to an ethically coherent world:

- The prophet could have become cynical in the world of total collapse of meaning. He could have been overwhelmed by resignation and ended up in frozen anger. He did ask the perennial question; *'Why does the way of the guilty prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?'* (12 v 1). Yet he does not give way to cynicism, despair, resignation or accept that inhumanity is just how it is. Jeremiah held onto a passionate connection that the thread of justice and right relations runs through every public square and the processes of history. Social justice and right relations will not be mocked, crushed or destroyed. As the Lord lives, truth, justice and uprightness remain (4 v 2). History can be made and remade when people act justly with one another. The praxis of justice means not oppressing the weak and vulnerable, the poor, nor inflicting any form of social violence, especially bloodshed, (7 v 5-6). Moreover religion, especially worship without compassion, is an obscene caricature of God. Here are the ethics by which history and the world hold together, the ethical coherence of the world with which the history makers align themselves.

Jeremiah's engagement with critical analysis:

- People like Jeremiah are not only poetic theologians, they are dangerous theologians. They not only had the courage to speak truth to power, but they speak informed truth to power. It is informed because they have engaged with critical analysis of the geopolitical world and of the local society. Whether Amos, Micah or Jeremiah, each has acutely analysed the issues dominating their society. They are critically aware theologians.

In Jeremiah 27-28, the prophet powerfully confronts another prophet, Hananiah. The latter is closely associated with royal power in Judah and he is asserting the status quo, exile will not last long and is not a serious event because God loves Judah and is on Judah's side. Hananiah was in denial, as those close

to power often are, and thought it sufficient to take refuge in old theological mantras and dogmas. Judah's royal house, of which Hananiah was part, could not read the socio-political realities. Theirs was wishful thinking and ideology rather than critical, living theology. Jeremiah's critical analysis had enough depth to inform him that 587 BCE was a catastrophic ending, a dislocation and a collapse of all traditional theology and meaning. History makers are engaged with social analysis and social criticism.

Jeremiah; a prophet of hope and alternative possibilities:

- Jeremiah's deconstruction of Judah's social and symbolic world was comprehensive, even ruthless. Though he saw 587 BCE as a devastating end of everything, this was not his last word. His was not ultimately a voice of despair but a voice of hope. He even dared to hope and articulate hope in the face of experience that suggested otherwise.

He sent a letter to the exiles in Babylon. They are to settle down, get used to exile, work and pray for the peace and welfare of the strange place of their captivity (29 v 4-9). There are alternative possibilities and there is hope. *'I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope'* (29 v 11). There are and will be new social possibilities, social alternatives to the violence, inequalities, broken relationships and community dysfunction. History makers are visionaries, see alternative possibilities and are bearers of hope in the face of despair and anguish.

History making *'is a process of subverting public and institutional forms of power that have become frozen and absolutized in favour of some at the expense of others'* (Brueggemann, Hope Within History, p69). The church then does take history and historical processes seriously and has a vocation to be subversively engaged with them. From 1912-1922 and in the latter decades of the 20th century it may have been more often identification with Hananiah and the *'royal'* or dominating power. But its prophetic vocation is with Jeremiah and his model of history making. In the context of history and politics the church is called to do dangerous and subversive theology.



4. Dismantling a Theology of Violence: A Radical Biblical Alternative

Reflection Questions

Reflecting on the role of the churches in the decade 1912-1922, and in the more recent violent conflict, were the churches history makers or history stoppers?

Have the churches retreated into business as usual, or are they critically engaged in re-visioning theology after a century of Irish and global violence?

In what practical ways does Jeremiah's experience and theology challenge Irish churches?

The Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation are dominated by God and guns. Perceived by many as the constitutional documents of the respective parts of Ireland, both are underpinned by a theology of violence. The active involvement of clergy in the events surrounding both documents, including involvement with guns and violence, was significant and raises ethical questions. The association of God with guns and the certainties that God took sides raises deep theological questions. The same theology was also invoked by early First World War poets and clergy. The religious ethos of the early 20th century saw no problem with a warrior god and a god of violence. God was on the side of national causes. How God could be on opposing sides did not appear to raise much difficulty, except that this god was fatally wounded in the trenches of Europe and in the killing fields of Ireland. It has taken much of the rest of the 20th century to realise that the god of the early decades of the century has died or never did exist. There are those in church and state who want to pretend that it is otherwise, especially on commemorative occasions. The warrior god on parade provides the new atheists with a field day, though self-righteousness is not the monopoly of the religious. Atheism developed its own massive killing fields and genocide in the 20th century.

Religion, though, cannot deny its role in guns and violence, not least in Irish history. Nor should it try to deny that the god of guns and violence is dead, not least because of the brutal and bloody 20th century. When it comes to remembering the events of 1912-1922 in the forthcoming decade, there may be the temptation to forget the core role of god and guns. To do so will be to allow guns and bad religion to continue, and that would be an unethical response to remembering and the future. If the churches are invited to participate in centenary events, will they remain silent about the sacred violence, or have the courage to critique and dismantle the theology of violence that underpinned the decade, and provide a radical biblical alternative, including a different vision of God?

Dismantling Texts of Violence

A theology of violence has had its roots in interpretations of biblical texts. It is not difficult to cite texts of terror in which God authorises violence and genocide, and where divine killings take place. Since Constantine Christianized the empire and his successor made Christianity the only legal state religion, God has taken



sides in war, crusades and civil violence, and the Christian community has happily supported such efforts and sanctified bloodletting. When this was Christians versus others, i.e. Jews and Muslim, it could be justified, not least on the basis of Jewish texts. But when Christian Europe engaged in the industrial slaughter of Christians against Christians, Christendom was shattered and the god of Christendom was dead. Christendom collapsed under the weight of its own inconsistencies and contradictions. For almost 1500 years and more, Western Christendom was intensely anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic, yet it used texts from the Jewish scriptures to justify its violence and war. When the violent appropriation of Jewish scripture became embarrassing, refuge was taken in supersessionism. Christianity had superseded Judaism, hence the New Testament over against the Old Testament, Christians having invented the language of the Old and New to underline the point. The God of the Old Testament was violent and the God of the New Testament was loving. Jesus the Christian had revealed an ethically superior God!

All of this is supersessionist interpretation, which is not only anti-Jewish but a distortion of the Hebrew scriptures and the Christian Testament. It is a way of reading the Bible weighted with bias. Oliver Cromwell did use God's ordering of the slaughtering of the Amalekites to justify his slaughter at Drogheda and Wexford. Loyalists did copy a text from Deuteronomy 7 v 2 on a wall mural in south Belfast, and supporters of the hunger strikers in 1981 did quote the Beatitude about justice to support violence against one's own humanity. The Hebrew Bible especially has been a quarry for violent texts. But these are critical questions of interpretation often overlooked, frequently by reading texts out of context, historical or literary. Internal dispute features in every page of the Bible, as humans struggled to live faithfully or ethically in the socio-political world in which they lived. From Genesis to Revelation, the use of violence and action for peace are in constant dispute. An uncritical or unquestioning reading overlooks this dynamic. In a sacred text, frequented by successive empires and domination systems the ancient people of Israel and the early church struggled to get it ethically right. There was constant dispute and tension between violent action and peace action. The violence may not be literal anyway, as ancient Israel or the early church were never in a position to militarily or violently counter the dominating power. The Bible needs to be read with a more critical, contextual awareness.

In the rush to blame the Jews for a violent god and violent texts, Christians conveniently overlook the violence in the Christian Testament itself. In Mark 12 v 1-12, there is the parable of the wicked tenants. The vineyard owner sends his accountants to collect the profits. They are beaten and tortured and even when he sends his son, the son is murdered. Finally the vineyard owner himself arrives and kills the tenants. The traditional and widely accepted interpretation of the parable identifies the tenants with the Jews, the son as Jesus and the vineyard owner with God. Not only is the interpretation supersessionist and anti-Jewish, the vineyard owner who kills the tenants, portrays a violent image of God who justifies violence against others. The violence in this reading of the story is now norm for many in the faith community.

An alternative and more ethically critical reading of the Markan parable renames it and re-reads it as a parable of peasant revolt and the spiral of violence. In a Roman dominated world of military and economic oppression, in which peasant revolt was frequent, Jesus is warning against the inevitable spiral of violence which is always destructive and therefore always ethically wrong. Violent revolts which mimic the violent domination system only spiral into a vortex of bloodletting which destroy life and community. If Jesus intended the parable to have a God image, it is not one of God as vindictive, punitive and violent, but a contrast image. The vindictive, punitive and violent vineyard owner is precisely what God is not.

In the Acts of the Apostles there are three divine killings. The best known is in Acts 5 where God kills Ananias and Sapphira who withhold the proceeds from a voluntary land sale. They were apparently putting the Spirit of the Lord to the test (Acts 5 v 9). Having been told that he had lied to God, Ananias *'fell down and died'*. His wife followed three hours later! Not surprisingly *'great fear seized the whole church'* (Acts 5 v 11). Church collections must have improved dramatically after that! To read the story literally is to be left with a very violent God image and one which, by basic human standards, was and is unethical. A literal reading provides a community with justification for connecting God and killing. Was Luke offering the literal word of God for all time or an example of moral dispute and how some people in the church interpreted events in a morally skewed way?



Read literally, as it frequently has been by white Western and north American Christians, the Book of Revelation is the most violent book in the Christian Testament. The text is awash with blood and violence, and those who literalize it, look forward with expectancy to the last great bloodbath in the Middle East when a returning warrior Christ will eliminate Jews and Muslims. It is a literal and violent reading of Revelation that still dominates and shapes the uncritical pro-Israel stance of political power in the U.S.A. and Europe, and the inability to broker a peace settlement between Israel and Palestine.

Divinely justified violence will remain unless the Book of Revelation is read in its 1st century historical and political context, and as a window into the political, economic and social experiences of the early church. This also includes recognising Revelation as a liturgical text in which worship is a prophetic, countercultural practice, subversive of very domination system, imperial and/or violent. The core Christological image of the book is the 'Lamb who was slain', a radical active non-violent Christology, with ethical implications for faithful living and faith in a non-violent God, as a countercultural church.

Being a Radical Alternative

Between 1912-1922, religion and violence were inseparable. God and guns went hand in hand. Even in the most recent phase of violence in Ireland, churches, while strong in the politics of condemnation, were too often ambivalent about violence, especially the violence of their own community. There was never a critical in-depth analysis of the causes of violence, and still less the articulation of a radical alternative. Have the churches been captive to cultural political and historical processes, and therefore unable to develop a theology of active non-violence in an Irish context?

It may be that the same dispute that dominated the Judeo-Christian Bible, dominates Irish churches, historically and currently. Then as now there may be those who believe violence is at times justified, or are at least ambivalent about it, while others see active non-violence and peace building as the only authentically ethical alternative.

Unless the Bible is read literally, in which case violence can be justified, the challenge to the churches in contemporary Ireland is to develop an alternative reading strategy or interpretative method. To read literally is itself an interpretative method and it should be clear from the brief explorations of the texts above that the interpretation of biblical texts is itself in dispute. Deuteronomy, Joshua, the Markan parable, Acts of the Apostles and Revelation can be read differently. More critical and contextual readings are required in which socio-political, economic and cultural contexts are taken seriously. The churches also need to engage more in-depth with ethics, especially ethics of active non-violence, peace and reconciliation. An ethical vision of God is needed and key to this will be Christology, not in traditional terms, but as a Christology of peace and active non-violence. A re-reading of Revelation and its core Christological image will disclose this. A re-reading of the teaching of Jesus, especially in the Matthean Sermon on the Mount, and in particular the Beatitudes, will encounter, be challenged and grasped by the unequivocal active non-violence of Jesus in the context of Roman imperial domination and economic oppression and poverty.

All of this will have ethical consequences for church in the public place and its public praxis. Re-reading the sacred texts, re-visioning ethical theology and ethical Christology will shape a visible shalom church as a radical alternative to a culture of violence. During the commemorative decade 2012-2022, Irish churches together could re-member their vocation to embody the praxis of a shalom church.

Reflection Questions

How might the churches respond to the commemoration of a decade in which God, guns and violence dominated?

How can the faith community deal with the texts of violence in its sacred scriptures?

If ethics are key to the life of the faith community, what alternative does faith offer to a history and consciousness steeped in violence?



5. Subverting a Theology of Blood Sacrifice: Alternative Approaches to Atonement and Eucharist

It has been claimed that some of those who signed the Ulster Covenant in 1912 did so in their own blood. It is a claim difficult to verify and may be little more than later heroic embellishment. At the same time the religious ethos of the era, with its strong Protestant evangelical theology of atonement, might well suggest that the claim is true. When it comes to the 1916 Rising and the key role of Padraic Pearse, blood sacrifice theology is pervasive. The Rising, Pearse saw, was a blood sacrifice for Ireland. With a slight addition to the Biblical letter to the Hebrews he asserted that without the shedding of blood there is no redemption for Ireland. He even saw what was happening in Ireland and in the Great War in Europe as *'a cleansing and sanctifying thing'*.

Pearse was not alone in this mystical theology of violence. It was the mystical theology of the early British and French war poets, a mystical theology of war prevalent in early 20th century Europe. Pearse was part of this stream of thought which he applied to the Rising and which was taken up by poets of the Rising. The idea found its way into the language of the Proclamation and was an essential for those who wanted a free and independent Ireland. It was the same language as *'supreme sacrifice'* being demanded of those in the trenches. Pearse's thought was shaped by his devout Catholicism, especially experienced in the Catholic theology of eucharist. This he combined with early Irish mythology, seeing Cuchulainn as a pre-Christian Christ heroically sacrificing his life for a cause. All of this made Pearse the high priest of the Rising.

At the battle of the Somme, Irishmen died in their thousands. The memory was claimed by the 36th Ulster Division, formed from Carson's UVF. The death of so many Ulster Protestants was interpreted as a blood sacrifice which placed an obligation on Britain to honour Ulster's right to self-determination. From this perspective blood sacrifice sealed partition, and the blood of the Ulster Protestant dead had delivered Protestants from Home Rule. The blood sacrifice motif for Protestants was not shaped by eucharistic language, but the similar language of atonement theology, especially a substitutionary understanding of Christ's death and the *'blood of the Lamb'* theology central to many 19th century hymns on the cross.

This theology, eucharistic or atonement, easily connected with violence and war and shaped a war theology of blood sacrifice or supreme sacrifice. It was a theology also of a violent God who demanded the sacrifice of Jesus to cleanse the sins of the world. The violent God who demanded Christ's death to satisfy divine honour was also the God who demanded the supreme sacrifice for the honour of a national cause. Was this God, or had the nation or national cause deified itself?

Towards an Alternative Theology

The prevalent theology of atonement and eucharist in 1912-1922 had been dominant in Europe for 1000 years. A millennium is long enough for such theology to become the accepted norm without asking the critical question about what theology of the cross Christians held for the previous 1000 years. Christ's death necessary to appease God's anger or to satisfy God's honour has become so dominant that many now believe it to be the theology of the Christian Testament. It has been read back into the biblical text. It is though, a violent theology of atonement portraying a violent, punitive God.

When Anselm developed this theology using medieval feudal models and ideas, it did not occur to him, nor to the Protestant reformer like Calvin who further developed it, that the violence of God was a contradiction of Jesus' teaching and disclosure of a non-violent God. The problem with the violent atonement theology of the last millennium is that it has not taken Jesus seriously. If, as Christians believe, Jesus is their supreme disclosure of God, then the disclosure of the non-violence of God needs to apply to a Christian understanding of the atoning death of Jesus. If non-violence is intrinsic to the story of Jesus, then the question of violence and atonement is one of the hottest theological issues of today. If violent atonement theology and the violence of God on which it is based was the theological rationale for the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation and Rising, as well as the theological interpretation of Ulster Protestant slaughter at the Somme, and the legacy all of this bequeathed, then the churches must face the challenge to dismantle this theology. Again, if Jesus is normative for Christian ethics and praxis, then it is imperative to deal with the violence bound up with what is now traditional atonement and eucharistic theology. Beginning with a non-violent Christology the faith community can recover a non-violent atonement.



For the first millennium Christians generally told the story of Christus Victor. This was the primary narrative of the Gospels. The Lukan manifesto of Jesus was essentially about the liberation of oppressed people (Luke 4 v 18-19). Jesus carried out a ministry of activism and resistance. He proclaimed the reign of God which set captives free from the burden of bad religion, cultural conformity and political oppression. His ministry of liberation was primarily for the poor and oppressed and the reign of the God who valued women equally with men as it did those who were ethnically 'other' Jesus healed people and cast out demons. The Gospel stories of exorcism were political, especially the exorcism of Mark 5 v 1-20, which was told in Roman military and political vocabulary. The healings are significant in an imperial dominated society such as Galilee, with its chronic Roman induced poverty and related diseases. At the heart of the reign of God was liberating justice. With Jesus' teaching on God's reign, such as the radically socio-political Sermon on the Mount, his justice orientated exorcisms and healings, it was no surprise that his ministry was seen as subversive by the Romans of their absolute authority and power. It also subverted the religious power of the day in collusion with, and dependent on, imperial power. The opposition increased to the point where the colluding political and religious powers wanted to eliminate him. In the end the Romans executed him as an insurrectionist. But as the foundational documents of the Christian faith affirmed, *'On the third day God raised him from the dead'*.

Even if today's technology had been available, the resurrection could not have been caught on a mobile phone or shown on a DVD. It was not that kind of event nor was it portrayed or understood by the Gospels as that kind of story. It is from the period between the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, known as the inter-testamental period that a theology of resurrection developed out of brutal and bitter Jewish experience. For the umpteenth time in the biblical story the Jewish people were crushed by another imperial power. Many died and justice appeared to be an impossibility. So belief in resurrection developed out of bitter human experience and was perceived primarily as God's vindication. This was the primary theological understanding of resurrection in the Jewish world of Jesus. The resurrection narratives in the Gospels were theological affirmations of vindication.

The life and teaching of Jesus, centred on Justice for the poor and powerless, and an active non-violent resistance to all that was unjust and oppressive, in essence

the reign of God, was vindicated by God. The resurrection was the big theological yes by God to all that Jesus was and did.

The early Christians who expressed this as the defeat or disarming of the principalities and powers, all of those social, political and religious systems of power that dominate, oppress and dehumanise the lives of people and communities. This is the Christus Victor theology of the cross, and some of the early Christians interpreted the struggle as cosmic and the victory of Christ as cosmic. The Book of Revelation with its *'Lamb that was slain'* Christology is a huge statement of Christus Victor theology in cosmic context as well as historical context. Though violent language is used in liturgical context to subvert the violence of imperial Rome, the Lamb imagery portrays a non-violent Christ, a non-violent Christology in line with the rest of the Christian Testament. At the heart of Christus Victor is the reconciliation of human and cosmic (ecological) community to God, but not without active non-violent resistance to all that is socially and politically oppressive. Jesus' embodiment of this active non-violent resistance to the powers was reconciling activity, all of which was the embodiment of God's reign, on the third day vindicated by Godself. Paul's Christology and atonement theology finds its highest expression in *'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Godself'* (II Cor 5 v 19). This means a *'new creation'*, not in individualistic terms as per the modern Enlightenment, but as cosmic and communal. Reconciliation as at-one-ment is therefore essential Christian praxis, the primary ministry of the whole church.

It is the recovery of this non-violent Christology and non-violent atonement that is imperative for the church in order to subvert a theology of blood sacrifice and its destructive consequences in Irish history and relationships. A non-violent Christology and atonement will put reconciliation at the heart of Christian praxis and discipleship. It will reshape the form and language of the eucharist, putting cosmic reconciliation at the heart of it with social and political consequences for the church's public life and witness.

Furthermore, Christus Victor does not allow for the concept of blood sacrifice, nor the violence that underpins it. A more careful reading of the Letter to the Hebrews would have made that clear. Hebrews see Christ's death as *'once and for all'*. This was never a Protestant text to put down the perceived Catholic notion of a



6. Theology, Women and Equality: Beyond Political Suffrage

repeated sacrifice in the Mass. For Hebrews it was the end of the sacrificial system, the end of sacrifice. Never again could it be claimed that peace demands the blood of a scapegoat. Never again could it be demanded that blood sacrifice is required for liberation, justice or peace. None of those is achieved by violent deaths, or the blood sacrifice of loyal soldiers. Neither a violent God nor a violent cause can demand the blood sacrifice of heroes or victims. There is therefore no place for blood sacrifice in Christian ethics and theology.

The theology, liturgy and praxis of Irish churches needs to recover these anti-violence and reconciliation emphases, and churches will do well to spell this out in the decade of commemoration.

Reflection Questions

Are the churches prepared to critique the patriarchal blood sacrifice theology at the heart of the decade of violence? What needs to be said?

What would it mean to develop a non-violent understanding of atonement and eucharist?

If the Letter to the Hebrews teaches the end of blood sacrifice, what are the implications for Christian worship, and a Christian ethical response to war and commemoration?

By the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century, Protestantism identified itself with Britishness and Catholicism with Irish nationalism. Liberal unionism and nationalism were replaced with conservative and militant versions of both forms of nationalism. Consequently a schism developed between Catholics and Protestants, nationalists and unionists, which would end in violent separation of peoples and land. It was in this context that Isabella Tod and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington pursued their feminist vision and equality agenda.

Isabella Tod was born in Edinburgh in 1836. Her mother was from Monaghan and while she was still young the family moved to Belfast. Isabella became a member of Elmwood Presbyterian Church in Belfast. She also joined the Liberal Party, becoming later a liberal unionist. Her activism was concentrated around the latter decades of the 19th century.

A commitment to feminism involved her in advocating for women's voting, healthcare and educational rights. She conducted a campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act that allowed police to subject prostitutes to compulsory checks for venereal diseases and confine those infected to a '*Lock Hospital*' until cured. The intention was to protect military men from contracting a disease. Tod, like other campaigners, was furious at the double standards of Victorian society that punished prostitutes while doing nothing to discourage the military men travelling from port to port who were likely infecting the women. The Act was eventually repealed in 1885.

Tod's commitment to education led her to organise a deputation of Irishwomen, from the Belfast Ladies' Institute, to lobby for the extension of the Intermediate Education (Ireland) Bill 1878 to girls as well as boys. The delegation achieved their aim, thus enabling girls to benefit from state funded educational provision.

Tod was also an activist in the temperance movement, worked for the welfare of female ex-prisoners and was the only woman of her time to infiltrate the bastion of male unionist politics.

While she never criticised Roman Catholic beliefs, Tod was deeply concerned about the Catholic church's power to influence social policy and practices. She recognised a close connection between Catholicism, ignorance and poverty



in Ireland. This perspective informed her anti-Home Rule stance, as she saw Rome Rule as detrimental to women's liberation from patriarchy in Ireland. Tod consequently organised 30,000 women's signatures against Home Rule, which she sent to Queen Victoria. She died in 1896, before the resolution of the constitutional issue that would determine the future of Ireland. Her concerns regarding the power of the Catholic church to influence state affairs proved legitimate, as another key advocate for women's rights, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, was to discover.

Sheehy Skeffington was born into a middle class, nationalist family in 1877. After graduating with a first class MA she was unable to secure more than part-time teaching, a consequence of the Catholic church's control of the education system. Sheehy Skeffington recognised connections between women's lack of economic power and their political disenfranchisement. She, therefore, committed herself to the difficult task of challenging the authoritarianism of church and state and focused her efforts on achieving political, social, economic and religious liberty for women (Ward, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, p16).

She established the Irish Women's Franchise League, a militant feminist organisation, in 1908 to campaign for a 'votes for women' clause in the Home Rule Bill, which as a nationalist she supported. Sheehy Skeffington realised, "...until the women of Ireland are free, the men will not achieve emancipation" (Ward, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, p58). In taking this stance she opposed her father who, as a member of the Irish Party, voted against Bills for women's suffrage urging "...women to wait until freedom for men was won" (Ward, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, p 53).

The granting of the vote to women did little, however, to prevent the regressive and sexist policies introduced by the Free State government. The 1937 Irish Constitution, developed by Eamon DeValera, set about redefining the role of women as mother and homemaker, restricting their roles to the domestic sphere, which was in keeping with the Catholic church's socio-political and religious gender perspective. Women were no longer free to engage in oppositional political activity that gave them a public profile and voice.

Hanna registered her contempt:

Here we are rapidly becoming a Catholic Statelet under Rome's grip – censorship and the like, with a very narrow provincial outlook, plus a self satisfied smugness...I have no belief in DeValera, well meaning... but essentially conservative and church-bound, anti-feminist, bourgeois and the rest (Ward, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, p 305).

Sheehy Skeffington, until her death in 1946, continued the struggle to dismantle the patriarchal socio-political and religious systems and mindsets that maintained women's subservience to men. She believed that when the time was ripe the seeds she had sown would germinate, flourish, and bear fruit. (Ward, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, p 305).

Isabella Tod and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington, although divided over the issue of Home Rule, were ultimately united in their concern for the emancipation of women from oppressive and unjust practices that at root were sexist and discriminatory. They recognised that women and men would never be free while patriarchy was alive and well. Both women shared a vision that was too big and too radical for the conservative powers of church and state in their lifetimes to cope with. Their equality vision finds resonance with the first century feminists, Jesus and Paul.

Jesus drew on the liberating resources within his own Jewish tradition to critique patriarchy in his Greco-Roman world. His intention was to initiate a renewal movement within Judaism. The Jesus Movement understood itself as a 'new family' that superseded the old patriarchal family (Mark 3 v 31-35). God as Abba took the place of a human father. The new family was not to duplicate patriarchal relationships. Consequently, women played an important role in the Jesus movement and were among the companies of travelling missionaries, as well as providers of places to stay and resources for table fellowship.

Jesus practiced open table fellowship, sharing meals and conversation with women and men. At the house of Martha and Mary, Jesus accepted Martha's hospitality and affirmed Mary's choice to stay after the meal and participate in the discussion (Luke 10 v 38-42). He thus challenged the patriarchal tradition that separated women from men and knowingly contravened a Jewish rule that held men were not to be served at table by women.



In refusing to limit his teaching to men only, Jesus demonstrated his belief that women had the intellectual capacity to engage in religious discourse. His actions called into question the practice that men alone were capable of studying the Torah, the Jewish way of life. Jesus was even prepared to recognise the validity of the Syrophoenician woman's inclusive vision of God's reign that embraced Jews and gentiles (Mark 7 v 24-30).

Jesus drew on female images when speaking of God, for instance in the parable of the woman who found the lost coin (Luke 15 v 8-10), further affirming the dignity of women who like men imaged God. Finally, in a world where women had no public voice and were viewed as unreliable witnesses, Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene and other women disciples and charged them with witnessing to his resurrection.

Paul was committed to Jesus' gender equality vision. He *"waged his entire ministry on the double task of deconstructing the 'divided house' and reconstructing it on a foundation of race, class and gender equality"* (Ched Myers & Elaine Enns, Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Volume 1, p 85). Paul urged Christian communities to reconcile differences, practice equality and be a visible sign of the body of Christ. His letter to the Galatians confirms his belief that baptism is a sacrament of radical equality: *"There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; all of you are one in Christ"* (Galatians 3 v 28).

In his letter to the Romans ten out of twenty-nine prominent people he addresses are female (Romans 16 v 1-16). Many of the women mentioned are called *'hard workers'* for the gospel, a favourite word for denoting apostolic dedication. Paul refers to Phoebe as a sister and deacon / minister (diakonos), the same title he applied to himself and others engaged in a ministry of preaching and teaching. The word diakonos points to a leadership role over the whole ekklesia, not just part of it. The way the title is used suggests a recognised office. Phoebe is also designated a leader of the ekklesia at Cenchreae and patron (prostatis). It is likely she was a woman of social and financial standing in her community. Junia is described as *'distinguished among the apostles'* (Romans 16 v 7). The text refers to Junia becoming a Christian before Paul and receiving the same authority as the apostles.

Patriarchy could not imagine women receiving so much authority, therefore, in some biblical translations Junia becomes Junias, the male version of the name.

As Jesus and Paul demonstrated, equality is central to the nature and mission of the Christian Church in the world. Paul, in particular, reminded the Early Christian churches that they were to become both signs and agents of equality in their local communities. Christians, consequently, are tasked with taking seriously the equality agenda at the heart of God's Kingdom. Doing so involves dismantling inequalities in both Church and State with a view to establishing egalitarian foundations, structures and practices.

Reflection Questions

What patriarchal structures, theologies and mindsets require dismantling in our churches and in society?

Can we follow in the footsteps of our foremothers, Isabella Tod and Hanna Sheehy Skeffington and work together to rebuild Northern Ireland's divided house on the Gospel principles of equality, inclusivity and just peace?

7. A New Theological Vision: Beyond Covenant and Proclamation to Hope for the Future

The Ulster Covenant and the Easter Proclamation are religio-political documents, one rooted in Presbyterian, Reformed theology and the other in the Catholic theology of its authors. God is invoked in both documents, takes sides and blesses guns. Though the language of covenant in its biblical rootage, takes God as read, there is more explicit reference to God in the Proclamation. That God in each document is identified with respective nationalism, guns and violence, ought to challenge the churches in contemporary Ireland to theologically reflect on and evaluate both documents, and to raise critical questions about the kind of God who seemed to matter intensely to the people of the decade.

Is the God of the Covenant and Proclamation the God whom Jesus disclosed? Does the God of each document bear any resemblance to the covenantal God of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures? These are serious and critical theological questions to ask of two historic documents which made theological claims. A warrior god and a god who takes national sides cannot easily be identified with the God Jesus portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount, nor the God Paul was pointing to when he wrote of Christ as the wisdom and power of God (I Cor 1 v 24). Nor does the God of the decade fit with the kenotic God of Philippians 2, who discards power as power over and is disclosed as the power of vulnerability. Paul in both texts is recognising Jesus as normative for God and humans as the image of God. This is both radical theology and anthropology. Furthermore, if Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, is the embodiment of the counter-imperial Kingdom or empire of God, then it becomes difficult to accept the imperial theology of the Ulster Covenant and its mirror image, the Easter Proclamation. As Irish churches become involved in the decade of remembering, they may need to take a critical stance, hold up their hands and acknowledge their support for and acquiescence in their decade God images. With a much quieter voice, churches may find it more appropriate to refer to the divine invoked in 1912 and 1916 as god, lower case.

Revisioning God in Humility

The imperialistic theology of the early 20th century has no place one century on. Then it was the imperialistic theology of imperialistic churches. Christendom as the expression of imperialistic faith in the West has died, except for those who want to hold on to their power as domination. Irish churches, in common with other Western churches, no longer hold a moral monopoly, nor do they possess the

monopoly on spirituality. The metaphor of exile has been used earlier to suggest an appropriate theological metaphor for contemporary experience and location. Ancient Israel in exile did somehow move from no song to new song, as on the margins it discovered creativity and new imagination. Exile became end and new beginning and this included new images and visions of God. The decade 1912-1922 is a world away from 2012-2022, and the god-talk of then is inadequate for now. Now, creative visions of God are needed.

The ethical high watermark of the Hebrew tradition was reached by the 8th century BCE prophet Micah. He saw that what God required was not blood sacrifice, but rather for the community to *'do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God'* (Micah 6 v 8). This ethical praxis was rooted in what Micah and the prophets believed was the ethical character of God. A highly ethical image of God underlay the ethical requirements of faithful living. Justice, kindness or social solidarity and humility before God were the heart of ethical Judaism, and Jesus did not go beyond this, but embodied all of it in his teaching and praxis.

Any vision of God with integrity in the 21st century will highlight a God of social justice, kindness and compassion, embracing all, especially the poor, marginalised and victims of abuses of power and violence. This needs to be normative for faith's image of God and ethical engagement with the world. If these ethical norms are missing in our contemporary God vision and human faithful action, then there are ethical deficiencies, false God-talk and distorted relationships.

'Walking humbly with your God' challenges all imperialistic and hegemonic truth claims and God-talk. God-on-our-side theology, such as was intensely believed in the decade by the British empire, Ulster unionists and Irish nationalists was, in biblical terms, idolatry. The God of the British imperial motto, and of the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation was an invention of narrow, nationalistic theology. God had not, nor does God choose sides, but rather an invented image was chosen by those in power, and who believed in violent power.

Both the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation assume a supernaturalist God and expect an interventionist God. This was religious orthodoxy in 1912-1922. But what happened in those years and again in 1939-1945, and during the 35 years of



violent conflict in Northern Ireland, shattered this god-image. There was no divine intervention in a century of slaughter, genocide and killing. For all the special days of prayer in Ireland, special services and masses, God did not intervene here, nor in Rwanda or the Balkans.

To *'walk humbly with your God'* may be to realise that in the 21st century, the supernaturalist and interventionist images of god have gone and are no longer credible. The churches know less of God that they have often claimed to know. Human attempts to describe the divine are always elusive and provisional. Trying to talk about God is like collecting water in a net. Irish churches do need to lower their voices in the 21st century, walk a lot more humbly with an elusive and unsettling God. Paradoxically the churches will then have more credibility and authenticity.

More attention will also need to be given to the image of God as wisdom, Sophia, an image of God used in the Bible many more times than Father. Patriarchy has privileged the latter and ignored the more frequently used feminine image of Sophia. The radical subversiveness of *'Our Father'* has frequently been missed anyhow. In the Christian Testament it was used to subvert the Roman imperial designation of the deified Emperor as *'Our Father'*. Sophia is shared more fully by the Judeo-Christian scriptures and it is a God-image which subverts the imperial and hegemonic practice of power over others and power as domination. Paul's Corinthian insight where he combines wisdom and power also subverts the imperial absolutist claim to dominant power. Sophia suggests power with, power shared and power as vulnerability. This is how Paul sees the God of the cross and in a suffering world it is a meaningful God-mage and a norm for Christian praxis.

Covenant and Equality

Both the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation, use the word equal. The former, in terms of equality of citizenship in the United Kingdom, and the latter, as a national claim *'to cherish all the children of the nation equally'*. The unionists desire for equal citizenship in the United Kingdom, had in practice, no place for equality of Catholics and nationalists in Northern Ireland. The equality of the Proclamation remains an unfulfilled dream of history, a betrayal of the future. Neither the Presbyterian nor Catholic authors of these historic, religio-political documents realised how much they were at least, tipping their hats towards the biblical idea of covenant. They

certainly were not aware of the radical, egalitarian nature of the Judeo-Christian covenant, that it was in fact a radical socio-political vision. Had they been aware of the nature of the biblical covenant and the non-violent nature of the covenantal God, neither of their documents would have found space for god and guns, and the equality aspiration would have been more radical and inclusive.

Ironically, current critics of the use of the word covenant as being too religious, have failed to recognise the subversive and political nature of the Bible. Being uncomfortable with religion and as critics of it, they too, like many Christians, want to read the Bible as a narrow religious text, instead of a political text. The Bible, of course, would not recognise our modern dichotomy between faith and politics. To be sure the biblical covenant is related to sacred presence and justice, the latter integral to the presence. At the same time covenant is a concrete socio-political vision, a radical alternative to the socio-political ordering of ancient Israel's neighbours and successive imperial powers that foreground the entire Bible.

A further treatment of covenant must await a more comprehensive publication. The core ethical values of covenant can only be noted. They were social and restorative justice, compassion or suffering alongside, right relations and peace or total well being for humans and creation. At the heart of these concrete values and practices are relationship and community. Covenant is a metaphor for community relations shaped by the four core values. Covenant is also a metaphor for social economics and political structures which are non-violent and egalitarian. The community's relational and structural way of life was to be lived in covenant and this meant being radically different from the relational and structural arrangements around it. These were rooted in injustice, violence, hierarchy and patriarchy. A spiritually alive faithful, ethical community was to be radically different. Covenant, relational and structural equality are inseparable and provide the metaphor and ethical basis for a present and future vision of society.

Political Hope

A century ago faith was so identified with the politics of the day and in such collusion with violent, political power, that it worshiped false gods of its own making. Jurgen Moltmann, the German theologian, has said that *'Only a Christian can be a good atheist'*. Paradoxically this is true because many atheists deny God for the sake



of humanity. Fake gods dehumanise and are destructive, and 20th century Irish history has experienced much that was dehumanising and destructive. At the beginning of the 21st century it is time for Irish Christians to be good atheists. Not only will this mean deconstructing the false gods of violence and nationalism, but reconstructing new images, more ethical images of God, and visioning a different and shared future.

Faith is, or ought to be, characterised by hope, and a retrieval of such hope is a prerequisite for building a very different future. Christian theology has always included eschatology, sometimes known as the '*last things*'. Much of this hope or eschatological vision has been otherworldly, concerned only with salvation in the hereafter and with ideas of heaven, hell and judgement. Much of this was a distortion of the political nature of the Bible, and a false avoidance of the political, this-world. Authentic faith cannot avoid political realities. It does not exist to dominate political life, control the nation's moral agenda and legislation, but to witness to liberating values and an ethical vision of the future possible in the present. The church is a community of eschatological vision, hope in the here and now, witnessing to a salvation or wholeness of life and community. It is this ethical vision and hope which is not for beyond but for now. Eschatology is realisable, it is meant to impinge on the present and help shape the present.

In a sense the Ulster Covenant and Easter Proclamation were eschatological, attempts to articulate future hopes, but they were dominated by violence and a warrior god. Ultimately they left a legacy that maimed attempts to build just and peaceful societies. One century on, people of faith need to recover eschatological confidence and articulate their ethical vision for the future. The churches will not return to or recover their privileged past or moral and spiritual monopoly in Ireland, but they can articulate and vision political hope.

Reflection Questions

In what ways do the churches need to acknowledge their support of or acquiescence in the merging of God and guns in 1912-1922.

What new, key images of God are needed for life together in Ireland and in the world in the 21st century?

How would a covenantal and equality vision of a shared future be expressed? Would you now use other language or other metaphors?

What would it mean for the faith community to be a community of hope in Ireland today?