

Breathing the air of racism and sectarianism

I remember reading an article a few years ago by a colleague who was a theologian based at a seminary in the Upper West Side of Manhattan. In it he made the statement that no one in the United States wants to talk about the legacy of slavery. In responding to this article I commented, that I grew up in a context where no one wanted to deal with the legacy of sectarianism.

Having lived through 30 years of conflict most of us living on this small island of Ireland are well aware of the toxic nature of sectarianism and its legacy, as our fellow human beings in the United States must also be wrestling with the destructive nature of the legacy of slavery and racism.

On Sunday evening past I received an article from a colleague based in the United Methodist Church in Florida. It was written by four black pastors one of whom I know very well and have worked with over a number of years, the article was entitled, "The threat of BLACKNESS."

One of the sentences particularly struck me, where the writer says "The experience of black males murdered and terrorised by violence for generations between emancipation and the struggle for civil rights, as well as the inaction of the church, lay the foundation for the discrimination and injustice we face today. When such hideous crimes against humanity occur, we write beautiful prayers to read one time on Sunday. Post a hashtag on social media in the name of solidarity. It's easy for us to refuse to face these dark spots of life because it's difficult to address such issues. We are comfortable and satisfied with less than the best and follow the line of least resistance. Most of us seek and find protection in the institution; we are reluctant to stand against the oppressive powers within it."

It has been encouraging to see a number of faith leaders leading the way in the reaction to racism in the United States today, in the same way it's been encouraging here in our Irish context to see faith leaders leading the way in the struggle against sectarianism. Yet we must acknowledge the role the church has played in these destructive isms.

If the church is to be listened to in the public square, we also need to have the courage to put our hands up and say our toxic theologies have shaped the Irish context and the United States, in many ways the church has still not acknowledged that. Let's remember the church developed a theology to prop up slavery in the United States, the church in the Irish context developed a theology of superiority to demonise the other and was part of a society that laid the grounds for a bloody sectarian war here of thirty years.

As the late Rev. Cecil Kerr, very prophetically said, "Most people in our churches did not have guns in their hands, however, many had them in their hearts."

In the early 1990's I was on a working party on sectarianism established by the Irish Council of Churches, we very quickly found ourselves back in the 16th and 17th century wrestling with the toxic nature of religion that has shaped this island for years. From the Irish context, to South Africa to the United States, to the Balkans, theologies of superiority have plagued society.

As has been highlighted by a number of scholars, there are parallels between sectarianism and racism. Each relies on an ideology of the superiority, and greater 'entitlement,' of one group over another. The processes by which racism and sectarianism operate can also be similar – escalating upwards through a 'pyramid of hate' from prejudiced attitudes, to acts of prejudice, to discrimination and harassment, to violence, and finally to genocide. In terms of lived experiences, racism and sectarianism may feel alike.

The solution to racism in the USA will be painful and protracted as they wrestle with the legacy of the past. Irish society is haunted by its past, we wrestle with our ghosts daily. But most of all what the USA needs is prophetic, people of faith dealing with this legacy of slavery in the public square, faith cannot be effective behind the fortress door mentality of the western church.

The words, "I can't breathe," will be associated forever with the death of George Floyd. The problem is, in both United States and the Irish context we've been breathing the air of racism and sectarianism for centuries, and for some it feels good.

The former Chief Rabbi Jonathan Sacks puts it very well when he says,

"On one point, and it is a substantial one, the critics of religion are right. Religion has done harm. It has led to crusades, jihads, inquisitions, autos-da-fe and pogroms. It has shed the blood of human sacrifice in the name of high ideals. People have hated in the name of the God of love, practised cruelty in the name of the God of compassion, waged war in the name of the God of peace, and killed in the name of the God of life. Those are undeniable facts and they are terrifying.

The great believers have always known this. Blaise Pascal said, "Men never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from a religious conviction." Jonathan Swift said, "We have just enough religion to make us hate, but not enough to make us love, one another". "I think we must fully face the fact", wrote C.S. Lewis, "that when Christianity does not make a man very much better, it makes him very much worse"

This happens not because religion is religion, but because human beings are human beings, not angels and certainly not God. Religion has power. It bonds people as a group. It moves people to act. It changes lives. And whatever has power can be used, misused or abused. Religion is like fire: it warms, but it also burns. And we are the guardians of the flame."

The church needs to acknowledge its wrong doing publicly, not in whispered confessions in the rarified atmosphere of the church. When the church finally

acknowledged centuries of anti-Semitism, which paved the way to the Holocaust, that was important for healing and relationships.

As Raul Hilberg has pertinently written,

“The missionaries of Christianity had said in effect: You have no right to live among us as Jews. The secular rulers who followed had complained: you have no rights to live among us. The German Nazis at last decreed: You have no right to live... The process began with the attempt to drive the Jews into Christianity. The development was continued in order to force the victims into exile. It was finished when the Jews were driven to their deaths. The German Nazis, then, did not discard the past; they built upon it. They did not begin a development; they completed it.”

The story of religion is not clean and as we struggle with these legacies globally, repentance, honesty and transparency should be the agenda for the church, not justifying what we did to stop these transgressions, as we are prone to do on so many occasions, because we all know, we simply did not do enough.

In the Irish context we still are dealing with the legacy of the past, both our societies here on this small island of Ireland and in the US need spiritually to address the legacies that haunt us - Racism and Sectarianism, we shall never be truly free until we do.

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