The International Journal of Ethical Leadership

Volume 2 Article 16

2013

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Recommended Citation

Morrow, Duncan (2013) "Self and Other in Northern Ireland: The Challenge of Ethical Leadership in an Ethnic Conflict," *The International Journal of Ethical Leadership*: Vol. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/ijel/vol2/iss1/16

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Self and Other in Northern Ireland: The Challenge of Ethical Leadership in an Ethnic Conflict

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Roots

Northern Ireland is possibly one of the longest running territorial disputes in the Western world. Modern politics has been defined for generations by the struggle between those seeking a united all-Ireland republic, independent from and distinct to Great Britain, and those seeking to defend and deepen the British 'Union.' This drew on deep historic roots in imperialism in Ireland, in which a militantly Protestant British Empire expanded its reach over an island where the majority population was and remained stubbornly loyal to Roman Catholicism. The association of religion, politics, and economics with imperialism and resistance combined to embed a deep sense of suspicion, antagonism, and hostility, which was especially difficult to resolve where people living on both sides of the hostility lived in close proximity and made simultaneous claims to legitimate power. Critically, it bred a political rationale for violence, which came to mark Ireland out from the rest of the British Isles. Whereas by 1920, the rise of democracy as the source of legitimacy created decisive majorities for Irish nationalism in much of Ireland, but it merely deepened the sense of division and resentment in the North.

Ireland's position on the western periphery of Europe and the absence of significant mineral resources acted to limit the extent to which Irish territory could be entangled with wider international relations. While Catholic advocates and Irish nationalists persistently sought support from France and Spain, the sheer logistics of establishing a successful military bridgehead against British interests in Ireland largely prevented serious effort. Irish history is instead characterised by episodes of local uprising, deep intercommunal antagonism, and sporadic attempts to engage French or Spanish military interest.

At the same time, Ireland was, in historical terms, an early participant in the expansion of parliamentary democracy, especially after discriminatory restrictions on Catholic participation in political life were abolished in 1829. Thereafter, until 1920, Ireland participated in the expansion of the franchise at the same pace as those in the rest of the United Kingdom. As elsewhere, the ethical thrust of liberal democracy was on the political equality of individual citizenship. Daniel O'Connell, the first great Irish democratic leader, took a leading role in the Chartist movement, which rallied huge crowds in favour of the universal franchise throughout Victorian Britain. During the nineteenth century, the emphasis was on establishing the principle of equal citizenship against the traditional privileges of inheritance. By the turn of the century, attention had turned to the inclusion of women in the electorate, a principle finally conceded in 1918.

The Ethics of Ethnicity

The political and ethical framework within which modern Ireland emerged therefore rested on two fundamental pillars: the principle of democratic participation in general, and the assertion of the right of Irish people to self-determine their destiny as a distinct and defined nation and territory, free from external domination. Self-determination was directly connected to specifically ethical claims for freedom and justice, and it was both personal and national. By implication, Irish nationalists understood their project as an ethical, as well as a power-political, enterprise. By the end of the nineteenth century, discomfort with the implication that imperialism was incompatible with the principle of human equality convinced the Liberal Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to champion the cause of Irish Home Rule, an issue that was to bitterly divide British politics for thirty years.

But whereas in much of Ireland democracy resulted in large majorities for Irish parliamentary nationalism, imperialism in the richest and most industrial part of Ireland—the North—left a very different settlement pattern and a very different democratic legacy. Local protestant majorities, extending across all classes, organised to resist what they saw as the extension of Roman Catholic authoritarianism and the potential for revenge against Protestant domination, which an Irish national framework would create. In 1912, hundreds of thousands signed a petition with profoundly religious overtones, known as the Ulster Covenant, which rejected Home Rule as "disastrous to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland, subversive of our civil and religious freedom, destructive of our citizenship, and perilous

to the unity of the Empire," and asserted their willingness to use "all means which may be found necessary" to resist its application.[1]

Both sides to the dispute over Home Rule now defined their cause in moral terms. Central ethical principles—like freedom, justice, and democracy—were deployed by all parties to appeal to external allies. Unionists spoke directly to principles of loyalty to comrades and to the British conservative conceit that British imperialism was, in practice, the primary vehicle for international liberty, through the spread of free trade and democracy. This sentiment is most clearly reflected by Rudyard Kipling in his bitter anti-Home Rule poem, "Ulster 1912":

> Rebellion, rapine hate
> Oppression, wrong and greed
> Are loosed to rule our fate,
> By England's act and deed.
>
> The Faith in which we stand,
> The laws we made and guard,
> Our honour, lives, and land
> Are given for reward
> To Murder done by night,
> To Treason taught by day,
> To folly, sloth, and spite,
> And we are thrust away. (Kipling 1919, 9–11)

Irish nationalism found its most enthusiastic support among the radical diaspora in North America, who nurtured bitter memories of starvation, forced emigration, and landlessness in rural Ireland. Already in 1867, Fenian supporters in the US framed the rebellion in moral terms:

> We appeal to force as a last resort ... unable to endure any longer the curse of a monarchical government, we aim at founding a Republic based on universal suffrage, which shall secure to all the intrinsic value of their labour. The soil of Ireland, at present in possession of an oligarchy, belongs to us, the Irish people and to us it must be restored. (Lee 2008, 56)

Both Unionists and Nationalists therefore pursued projects which they understood not merely as 'ethical' in a general sense, but as moral imperatives whose realisation necessitated the use of violence. Both understood them-

1. Available at http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/ulster_covenant.htm.

selves as victims in an ontological and not merely circumstantial sense: the morality of specific actions was to be measured against the scale of historic injustice—either in the past, in the form of political oppression or in the future in the threat of imminent catastrophe—which was the alternative. In a powerful echo of Dostoevsky's dictum that: "The more I love humanity in general, the less I love man in particular" (Dostoevsky 2004, 60), the sacrifice of lives was a regrettable element in the liberation of life. The most incorruptible, and by implication the most noble, like Robespierre, were the most ruthless. Under pressure from violence and threats, violence became imperative rather than detestable, and the notion of the universal human subject was submerged under the clear distinction between friend and foe.

Antagonism and Its Consequences

As Frank Wright commented, the definition of antagonism is a relationship in which the other is perceived as part of a conspiracy, and against which eternal vigilance is required (Wright 1987, 122). People caught up in an antagonistic relationship cannot dismiss the possibility that the other is part of a hostile conspiracy. Anxiety is lessened, but not eliminated, by the calming rhetoric of moderates and personal relationships if the other is perceived to belong to a hostile group. But by treating the conspiracy as real, we are driven to conspire ourselves.

Once antagonism to another becomes embedded as a political imperative, its most profound consequence is to invert the ethical logic which sees all human beings as worthy of fundamental respect and replace it with a struggle in which the freedom of one depends on the destruction of the other. The language of ethnic cleansing which emerged in the Balkans in the 1990s reflects a view that the destruction and expulsion of the other is an act of purification.

The result is a pervasive but fundamental distinction between friend and foe, a distinction which is treated as 'fact' and 'common sense.' Antagonism creates a self-replicating engine of vigilance in which each act of violence promises to end violence, but actually generates more violence, in a pattern of reciprocity and escalation. What persists is the structure of 'them and us,' where responsibility lies with 'the other,' and can only be solved by 'them' or by victory over them. Antagonism hides the mechanism through which we are also contributory within the reciprocal cycle, raising resisting the enemy to heroism and declaring compromise as appeasement. The heart of antagonistic conflict is this self-perpetuating dynamic of conspiracy, discrimination, and

terror in which everyone participates and nobody feels responsible, and in which violence and ethics align in a kind of logical death spiral.

This in itself has further ethical consequences. In a conspiratorial world, it is simply irrational to promote equality. Antagonism turns everything into a conflict to get and hold the maximum amount of resources before rivals can claim them. If inequality creates conflict, it is equally true that conflict rationalises inequality.

The coming into existence of Northern Ireland in 1920 had the effect of embedding intergroup hostility at the core of political life. Furthermore, it implicated democratic procedure in this by promoting leaders who reflected the antagonistic relationship and offered to act to protect the group against its enemies, rather than to transcend the relationship. Unsurprisingly, the higher ethical claims of democracy—including the core principle that every person counts, in relation both to fundamental individual rights and to the principle of equal political value—were qualified in this prism. For as long as the existence of Northern Ireland itself remained contested, voting in elections was essentially reduced to a head-counting exercise on that apparently existential question.

Paradoxically, the fact that neither Britain nor Ireland had any immediate interest in resolving this dilemma allowed it to remain in a state of unstable equilibrium for fifty years. Unionist Prime Ministers in Northern Ireland were first and foremost leaders of their Protestant tribe against Nationalist ambition, rather than uniting symbols of shared citizenship. Within the formal apparatus of a democracy, informal political culture reflected the fundamental antagonism between groups of citizens. Without a formal trace, the friend and foe dynamic was embedded in the routine of the state.

This in its turn provides and provided a new breeding group for polarisation and resentment. Once systematic inequality is rationalised as necessary for self-defence, the antagonistic pattern of citizenship becomes embedded in discrimination and resentment, institutionalising a de facto experience of first- and second-class citizenship based on group divisions. Inevitably, Unionists explained the root of this crisis by the malevolent intentions of Nationalism, whereas Nationalists condemned the system of larger and smaller exclusions institutionalised in the fabric of the state.

The erosion of universal ethics under ethnic antagonism is profound. Freedom can no longer be treated as a universal human ethical principle, but is a finite good dependent on political or military triumph over specific others. By equating victory with justice, violence is raised to the highest

ethic. In the face of existential threat, war is necessarily just. The only justice is victory. By equating peace with treachery, cooperation is anathema.

Internal participants present a narrative of provocation (by others) and reaction (by us) in which differences in moral responsibility are absolute. Outside observers without stake in the antagonistic relationship see a pattern of reciprocity and similarity, where heroes and villains perform essentially the same acts observed from different sides of an antagonistic relationship. The gap between justice and revenge reduces to an almost indistinguishable level. Unsurprisingly, it is this insight of the equivalence of heroism and crime and the ambivalence of our categories of victim and perpetrator which provoke the greatest resistance of all (Girard 1987).

Identity is defined against the other and it becomes almost impossible to distinguish the extent to which identity is in the solidarity of being 'anti-them' or in being 'pro-us.' Peace will thus not only demand a change in relationship with the other, it will radically alter our understanding of self. Politicians discover that any compromise or refusal to represent the fear underlying antagonism will lead to their replacement by more radical elements. Unless some mechanism is found to break this, politics is reduced to a Clausewitzian extension of war, with the inherent potential to 'escalate to the extremes' (von Clausewitz 1984, 77).

The Exhaustion of War

Northern Ireland is unusual in international relations, in that it did not draw in the surrounding states to the logic of its internal antagonism. Instead, the violence of divisions in Ireland acted to repel outsiders. After 1920, both Britain and Ireland sought to protect themselves against the potentially destabilising impact of its hostilities rather than be drawn into them. On the other hand, not only were they unable or unprepared to act to resolve the antagonism, they increasingly lost any sense of direct responsibility for it; Northern Ireland was to be managed. Even once violence broke out in earnest between 1969 and 1972, the primary political goal of the British government was to restore the 'acceptable level of violence.'

The consequences of this were unusual. On the one hand, as part of a Western European welfare state, Northern Ireland continued to draw on considerable financial and economic subsidy, in spite of the collapse of any substantial private economy. This combination of active security policy, conflict management, and economic support simultaneously created a curious and unusual hybrid of ethnic and nationalist polarisation, alongside a function-

ing administration and civic society. Most of the violence took place either between paramilitary organisations or between paramilitary organisations and the state. There was no interstate war, but the antagonism between the Nationalist population and the British state was exacerbated at times through the often-violent interface between the British army and the local population. Intergroup violence on a wider scale was prevented through public engineering, such as the erection of permanent security barriers between exclusively Catholic and Protestant neighbourhoods (interfaces) and the subsidy of parallel systems of community development. Meanwhile, the civil service was expanded to create new jobs and the hardest edges of discrimination were removed.

Eventually, a new unstable equilibrium emerged, in which violence was endemic but increasingly strategically counterproductive. When, almost by accident and against her instincts, Margaret Thatcher was persuaded to sign a new strategic alliance with the Irish republic in 1985 (the Anglo-Irish Agreement), the unexpected result was the reemergence of a new universal ethic for peace-building in Northern Ireland which refused the 'ethnic' implications of Northern Irish antagonism and promoted instead a new doctrine of universal and inclusive 'reconciliation.'

While some of this was already visible to the leaders of moderate nationalism, such as John Hume and (particularly) Garret Fitzgerald, and the more conciliatory parts of the British Conservative party (Sir Geoffrey Howe) who were its architects, the emergence of a settlement rooted in universal ethical framework can more plausibly be traced to a combination of near-despair at the failure to contain the endless spiral of violence and a vaguely articulated sense that the ethics which had shaped Western European politics since Auschwitz were at stake. In a general sense, this was welfare state leadership: a combination of pragmatism and principles, interests and instincts and of committees and diplomacy, rather than grand gesture. Reconciliation was understood in principle rather than in practice. Nonetheless, and in a real sense it changed the game in Northern Ireland, from one of ethnic one-upmanship to a search for a universal framework.

The Ethical and the Ethnic in Transition

The power of the Northern Ireland peace process rested on an ethical framework rooted in universalist values which were both consciously taken for granted and often only intermittently observed in Western capitals. While ethical inconsistency and hypocrisy were hardly new in international affairs,

it became clear, however, that if the argument for an inclusive peace was stronger, the more it could be championed as an ethical alternative to violence and ethnic separatism. Reconciliation proved to be a powerfully attractive proposition for all those who were repelled by the violence of Northern Ireland, rather than drawn to it.

Thus although the Anglo-Irish reconciliation project initially set the governments of the UK and Ireland and their international allies in the US and Europe at extreme odds with their ethnic clients in Northern Ireland—and Unionists mobilised in hundreds of thousands to reject any involvement of the Republic of Ireland in internal Northern Irish affairs, while Republicans vocally rejected the new initiative—it had the effect of limiting this rejection largely to Northern Ireland and to militant partisans outside. Elsewhere, the ethical appeal of an inclusive peace was utterly persuasive, especially as direct material interests in Northern Ireland were so limited. As a result, the ethnic antagonists of Northern Ireland now faced the utter indifference of the international community to their causes and an ethical rejection of both their methods and their arguments. In strategic terms, the opportunity costs of violence increased exponentially. Gradually, and against their initial will, all parties were drawn into the negotiating framework which it created.

What is remarkable is the extent to which the process was articulated by the system rather than by individuals. The custodians of the process were the governments of Britain and Ireland, supported by US diplomacy and finance, and even more finance from the European Union. They were of course also interested parties, at least to the extent that they had profound historic allegiances and political, security, and civic responsibilities. But they shared a common view that the crisis in Northern Ireland had to be brought to an end for both in the national and ethical interest. For a combination of domestic and international reasons, the US leadership, especially under the Clinton Presidency, gave Northern Ireland a prominence which its size and importance did not deserve, while Jacques Delors saw in Northern Ireland an opportunity to realise both the historic peace-mission of the European Union and an opportunity for direct intervention.

This combination of political, security, and financial muscle was then deployed through diplomacy, legislation, and an unusual and noteworthy strategy of social and economic intervention. Reconciliation was promoted through targeted interventions in the labor market (equality), through support for integrated education, through economic and community regeneration, and through support for dialogue and mediation at the local level (community

relations). Intercommunity peace initiatives, whether by heroic individuals ,such as Gordon Wilson, or longstanding champions of reconciliation, such as the Corrymeela Community, were given both publicity and encouragement. Although the initial steps in all of these areas were tentative, relying often on experimentation and coalitions of willing volunteers and pioneers, over twenty-five years they became embedded aspects in the landscape of social and economic development in Northern Ireland. Leadership was distributed across civic society and through legislative interventions to promote independent institutions guided by principles of equality and, after 1998, of human rights.

The holy grail, and most difficult challenge lay with change in politics. Without local political leadership and partnership, the project continued to rely on external supporters. Furthermore, while the governments were convinced of the centrality of an ethical peace process, their primary interest was to divest themselves of direct entanglement in Northern Ireland. In the absence of the emergence of a new leadership, the implicit narrative of the peace process was therefore one of creating the conditions under which the old leadership would find room to change. In this, all parties shared a dilemma: local political leadership continued to reflect the underlying antagonism and suspicion of Northern Irish voters, yet at the same time were now expected to explore opportunities for ending violence and establishing a better future. Furthermore, it was abundantly clear that further violence was tactically useless and increasingly nihilistic. The story of the Northern Ireland peace process is a story of the engagement of these hostile parties within a common framework while attempting to find linguistic and political formulations which allowed politicians to make significant changes without appearing to betray established causes and positions.

The result was a contorted, complex, and difficult process of accommodations, compromises, and trade-offs which came together as the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement in 1998.[2] Problematically, even this gigantic achievement was insufficient to completely eliminate the suspicions underpinning antagonism. Within four years, the political institutions and the intercommunity coalition underpinning the agreement collapsed and the governments were faced with further endless decades of external administration or further compromises with Northern Ireland antagonists to devolve responsibility and power. In the event, after five years of living with the former, they succeeded in renegotiating elements of the 1998 agreement to the satisfaction of the outer wings of

2. Belfast Agreement, April 10, 1998. Available at http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/events/peace/docs/agreement.htm.

Unionism and Republicanism. In 2007, an exhausted intergovernmental and international coalition closed the book on Northern Ireland and declared peace achieved, guaranteed by previously unthinkable images of enemies sitting together as joint patrons of the new intercommunity system of government.

Afterword

The Missing Link: Ethical Leadership for an Ethical Society

The Northern Ireland peace process is an almost paradigm case of systemic action for peace in the Western world. Reconciliation emerged as clear ethical alternative to ethnic and national conflagration after 1985 and it engaged the political systems of two western states and their allies for two decades in an almost unique effort to transform a deeply polarised society. In doing so, it deployed all of the weapons of western democracy: the cajoling leadership of political figures such as Garret Fitzgerald and John Hume, John Major and Albert Reynolds, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern; the military logic of containment; the economics of incentives for peace, diplomatic, and international attention; platform and flattery in Washington, Brussels, and the Nobel Committee in Oslo; and the heroic efforts of small scale community-led initiatives to promote a shared future against the odds of ethnic hatred at community, religious, and educational levels. This coalition introduced frameworks for equality and human rights, established a consensus against the use of violence, and was flexible and open in its treatment of prisoners and former combatants. Within their own movements, prisoners, combatants, and victims often themselves became important persuaders for the new process.

All of this activity created a space for political leadership to shape and to own, a process which was completed in 2007. Problematically, however, no visible political leader emerged in Northern Ireland for whom the new reconciliation was in itself a vision to champion. Instead, all parties continued to see the agreement process not as a miraculous escape from antagonism, but as a necessary, if difficult, compromise with the unpalatable. Instead of an agreement which replaced the unethical with the possibility of ethics, political leadership was unable to eliminate the suspicion that the agreement and the peace process were an unethical compromise with an evil enemy. As a consequence, neither part was willing to institute any process of reviewing their past relationship which might highlight the unethical nature of the violence deployed to prosecute their cause. As time went on, it became increasingly clear that this unwillingness to risk ethical equality in relation to violence in the past was preventing any progress towards real trust in the future.

Northern Ireland therefore still stands at its crossroads, evidence that peace is a decision in human affairs, requiring people who make decisions, at least as much as a process or a mechanism or an event. Northern Ireland does not lack for a sophisticated political, administrative, and legislative model for peace. But it lacks a champion, a vision, and a model of a shared vision of the future, still paralysed and lacking someone or some mechanism to plausibly move towards a different future. Pending leadership, peace will remain fragile and tantalising.

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