

GATEWAY DOCUMENT 4.3 b

Religion and conflict: Northern Ireland

WHY IS THIS RELEVANT TO *REsilience*?

Until quite recently, the conflict in Northern Ireland was Britain's most immediate example of violent extremism. The impact of violence was felt most keenly in the Province itself, but terrorist attacks also occurred in Great Britain. Why did some people turn to violence rather than seeking change through peaceful political involvement?

Over the past 15 years both sides in the conflict have embarked on a journey of reconciliation and negotiation. Despite setbacks, this has transformed Northern Ireland. How has this been possible? Are there lessons for other conflicts?

KEY QUESTIONS

How can this help teachers and students to increase their understanding of contentious issues?

Northern Ireland raises some important RE questions for consideration. For teachers they include:

- Can only one side be right? In Northern Ireland there were, and are, very distinct and divergent views on identity, religion and politics. Religions often make claims to absolute truth. Is it possible to adhere to one belief while accepting and accommodating others?
- Why do some people turn to violence? How can we avoid this kind of 'radicalisation'? Even more significantly, some have moved from violence to political engagement, such as ex-IRA leaders like Martin McGuinness. How can this process happen?
- Is there hope for changes in long held attitudes? The conflict in Northern Ireland has a history going back nearly one thousand years. Yet in recent times a very positive and hopeful journey has transformed the outlook. Parallels can be drawn with South Africa. Are there lessons for relations between Christians and Muslims, or east and west, where memories of the Crusades are still alive after a thousand years?
- Who belongs? Land and sense of national identity, and religious identification rather than religious belief, are at the heart of this conflict. When can we say someone does or doesn't belong to a community or nation? Who has that right? Do 'Ulster Scots' whose

families have lived in the North for 'only' four hundred years belong less than anyone else? If so, how long do you have to live in a country before you do belong? And, come to that, in England, what about the Anglo-Saxons, Danes and Vikings whose descendants live in Britain today. Do they belong? This question goes to the heart of questions about ethnicity and identity.

- Is segregation a personal right or a social evil? Many people would say that sectarian and tribal differences in Northern Ireland have been exacerbated by separate schooling. What are the benefits and concerns about religions running schools?

There are also many questions that could be used in the classroom:

- Is it right to talk to 'enemies'? The peace process only began because people with opposite views and many grievances started talking to each other. Does talking with people of different beliefs compromise integrity? What makes this difficult? What can help it to happen?
- Is it possible to forgive someone? Many faiths talk about forgiveness. Are there limits to this? Does it make sense to talk of forgiveness for events long in the past, in previous generations? Is there any value in initiatives like the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa?
- Can violence ever be justified by religion? Many people have argued that the only route to justice is through violence. Many others disagree. Although bombs could never bring a solution in Northern Ireland, it can be said that they brought the issues and people to the table. Others have argued that the campaign of bombing delayed any possibility of a solution for forty years.
- How are hurts healed? How does reconciliation happen?
- What role have the churches played in this? How have they helped and how have they hindered the process?
- Does religion really cause war? Many people say this but is it true? What are the origins of the grievances on both sides of this conflict?

Why is this a contentious topic?

Clearly, the impact of violence and the fear of it have been most keenly felt in Northern Ireland. There were also serious attacks in Great Britain. At its root the conflict is about both identity and history – is Northern Ireland British or Irish? Or, in some way, is it both? There are deep feelings and long narratives on both sides.

The issue at stake in Northern Ireland was whether the province should remain part of the UK, the wish of the local majority, or whether it should become part of the Republic of Ireland. Religious belief has not been the primary cause of the argument. But religious identity has been at the heart of it, with religious affiliation being closely linked to the sense

of self-identity on both sides. How far has religion exacerbated the conflict? Conversely, in what ways has it helped to bring peace and reconciliation?

How can teachers address such challenges?

Many of the questions outlined above are sensitive in nature and it is important to follow careful guidelines on handling discussion. Conversely, it is only through airing genuine opinions that progress can be made.

The questions listed above may be a good focus for investigation and discussion.

NEXT STEPS

Signposts for further reading

Kee, Robert (new edition 2003) *Ireland, a history* Abacus

McKittrick, David and McVea, David (revised edition 2001) *Making Sense of the Troubles* Penguin

Signposts for further resources

The BBC website is a good source of news and background.

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/recent/troubles/>

The Corrymeela Community is based in County Antrim and has worked for reconciliation over the past 30 years. See www.corrymeela.org

Signposts for further action

Northern Ireland can be used as a case study on conflict and conflict resolution, perhaps also comparing this to South Africa and the ongoing complexities of the Middle East.

See Gateway 2.2 'Displaying sensitivity to the home backgrounds and the beliefs of pupils' to consider whether the school's RE department can contribute further to whole school understanding of diversity in context of pastoral care.

APPENDIX

Northern Ireland: Background to the conflict

The nature of the controversy

The conflict in Northern Ireland has a history going back nearly 1000 years. At its core are two different and distinct communities co-existing in the province. They have a different sense of identity and history, and divergent hopes for the future. Religion is entwined in the conflict, but the causes are far more complex. Both communities have grievances and fears deep in their consciousness.

Traditions in conflict

Unionists (or loyalists) see themselves as British and refer to themselves as Northern Irish rather than Irish. They want to remain as part of the UK and are loyal to the Crown. Historically, this loyalty has been primarily to the British monarchy and identity, rather than to the Westminster government, which many loyalists have traditionally regarded as slippery and untrustworthy.

Unionists are a majority in Northern Ireland (which they often refer to as Ulster), but have always been a minority on the island of Ireland. Today the two main unionist parties are the DUP (Democratic Unionist Party) and its now smaller but older rival the Ulster Unionist Party. Most unionists are Protestants of Scots Presbyterian descent, though there is also a significant Anglican tradition.

Nationalists see their prime identity as Irish. They want a united Ireland, free of British rule. They will speak of the 'north of Ireland' (a geographical description), rather than 'Northern Ireland' (a political title) or to the 'Six Counties'. The term 'republican' is generally used to describe the more militant brand of nationalism, although all nationalists must, by definition, also be republicans. In republican eyes, Britain has been an occupying colonial power and the Northern Ireland state is unjust and illegitimate. The main nationalist political parties are Sinn Féin and the SDLP (Social Democratic and Labour Party). Most nationalists are Roman Catholics.

History of the Conflict

English intervention in Ireland goes back at least as far as Edward I in the thirteenth century. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, James I and Oliver Cromwell sent thousands of Protestant Scots and English to settle in Ulster. They were given land that was previously owned by Catholic Irish. This was called the Plantation of Ulster. Power in Ireland as a whole rested with a relatively small English, royalist and Anglican group. This was challenged in 1688 when the army of the recently deposed Roman Catholic English king, James II, threatened the largely Protestant city of Londonderry. James's army was thwarted by the apprentice boys of the city who slammed the gates shut against James' troops, shouting 'No surrender!' - a cry that has resounded through the consciousness of unionists ever since. After a long and cruel siege, England's new king, the Protestant Dutchman, William of Orange ('King Billy') sent ships to relieve the city. Just two years later William finally defeated the Catholic armies of the deposed James at a muddy river crossing over the River Boyne near Drogheda. This event on 12 July 1690 became known as the Battle of the Boyne. The victory is celebrated each year by the 'Orange Order marches', along with the commemoration of the apprentice boys of Derry. It was a settlement of sorts, but the seeds of alienation and mistrust festered in a shallow grave. Effective British administration was limited to areas in the north and the region around Dublin known as the 'Pale'. The Unionist sense of being an isolated minority surrounded by a sea of hostile foes has remained to the present day.

Irish independence and the partition of the North

A long campaign for home rule in Ireland seemed to be coming to fruition in the early part of the twentieth century. Unionists saw this as a 'sell-out', the cry 'No surrender!' once again resounding. They refused to be incorporated into an Irish Free State. In 1921 the Anglo Irish Treaty established a 'temporary' partition. The six counties of the north east were formed into a separate political entity, Northern Ireland. The remaining 26 counties gained home rule in the Irish Free State. In the south, partition was seen by many as a sell-out too. A bloody civil war was fought over whether to accept or reject partition. The Irish Free State remained neutral in the Second World War, another cause of resentment, and in 1949 broke all ties with Britain, declaring itself a republic.

English politicians, who were often uninterested in Ireland and whose understanding of it was generally vague, allowed the establishment of a 'state within a state'. A parliament was set up, and a new building at Stormont, on the eastern edge of Belfast, opened in 1932. But because voting was always along sectarian lines, there was a permanent Unionist majority in the Stormont parliament. Catholics were denied equal access to jobs, housing and political rights. Property owners elected local councils and most Catholics didn't own property. It wasn't until the 1970s that 'one person, one vote' finally arrived in local council elections in this last corner of the UK.

Paramilitaries and Violence

The paramilitary dimension has been at the heart of the conflict. The IRA (Irish Republican Army) fought against British rule in the early part of the twentieth century but re-emerged during the Troubles from the 1970s. Sinn Fein ('ourselves alone'), now the main nationalist political party, originated as the IRA's political wing. The IRA targeted British troops and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) as 'occupying forces'. In recent years the IRA decommissioned its weapons as part of the peace process. Loyalist paramilitary groups included the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), which finally announced it had decommissioned its weapons in 2010. Paramilitary groups from both sides indulged in sectarian murders and civilian atrocities during the Troubles.

Despite this paramilitary activity, most people in both communities have always rejected violence and terror as a legitimate tool. Nevertheless, communities tend to live in distinct areas. For example, the Falls Road in West Belfast is overwhelmingly republican while the adjacent Shankill Road is staunchly loyalist. This segregation is especially marked in urban working class areas. Most schools are also segregated with Catholics attending their own schools and Protestants using the state schools.

The Troubles

The emergence of the civil rights movement in the late 1960s manifested the sense of injustice felt by the Catholic population. A peaceful campaign was quickly marred by sectarian violence. The army was sent to the province to keep peace. The soldiers were welcomed by nationalists who saw them as protection from loyalist sectarianism. All this changed on 30th January 1972 when paratroopers shot dead 13 civilians who were participating in a civil rights march in Derry/Londonderry. This became known as 'Bloody

Sunday' (thirty-eight years later, the Saville Report finally established the innocence of those who were killed on that day, finding that none of them had done anything to provoke the attacks). Violent opposition to British rule and sectarian hatred erupted once more in decades of violence known as 'The Troubles'. The IRA, long dormant, gained many recruits. Loyalist paramilitaries such as the UDA matched their ferocity and violence. The parliament at Stormont was suspended and Westminster imposed direct rule on the province. A long period of violence followed, with the introduction of internment without trial, failed attempts at power sharing and a sequence of hunger strikes by republican prisoners. Bombing campaigns spread to mainland Britain.

The Peace Process

During the 1990s the UK government began secret talks with representatives of the IRA, both sides beginning to recognise there could be no imposed solution in the long term. This culminated in the 'peace process'. Paramilitary cease-fires followed and the signing of the Downing Street Declaration in 1993 marked a new level of cooperation between the UK and the Irish republic. The Good Friday agreement in 1998 marked the beginning of a rapprochement between unionists and nationalists. Subsequently, long and tortuous negotiations led to the renewal of an elected Northern Ireland Assembly, meeting at Stormont, together with a power-sharing executive with ministries shared among the main parties. Other factors have helped to make it more possible for peace to be maintained. For example, the declining influence of religion in the Irish Republic has meant that religious identification is less of an issue than formerly. Increasing prosperity in the south together with common membership of the European Union have led to a greater sense of a shared future.