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HONEST HISTORY

Facing inward will be the way out

I grew up in the cockpit of sectarianism in Northern Ireland, as a young boy I watched my community descend into a bitter sectarian civil war, fuelled by hundreds of years of toxic theology, obsession with land and in many cases a nationalistic identity that superseded any biblical Christian identity. We have a troubled history of bad theology, a theology of superiority that emphasised difference and isolated the other. We dehumanised the other and spoke badly of the other and as Abraham Joshua Heschel rightly commented, "Dehumanisation precedes genocide" and "It was words not machines that created Auschwitz."

Hubert Butler the Irish historian talks about the sores of Irish history, sores that continue to haunt both our societies. Both sides of the Irish conflict committed extreme sectarian violence, and often that violence had bad religion at its heart. Sadly, this is something that happens around the world.

Yes, bad extreme theology has set a context from which we are still scarred generations later. The power of all our memories continue to plague us well into the 21st century.

The former Chief Rabbi to the British Commonwealth Jonathan Sacks rightly comments: "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."

Racism and sectarianism have been twin evils running through the history of humanity and the church.

I read an article a few years ago by Tom Driver the Paul J. Tillich Professor of Theology and Culture, Emeritus at Union Theological Seminary entitled "Who Wants to Talk About That?" The "that" he was referring to was slavery.

In reading the article I could have been reading an article about Irish society and our struggle with sectarianism, the phrase we have used in Ireland is, "Whatever you say, say nothing." In other words do not have the prophetic courage to deal with the problem.

Let me share a quotation from the South African struggle that will hopefully contextualise the way we need to address this evil: "Reconciliation is no cheap matter. It does not come about by simply papering over deep-seated differences. Reconciliation presupposes confrontation. Without that we do not get reconciliation but merely a temporary glossing over of differences. The running sores of society cannot be healed with the use of a sticking plaster. Reconciliation presupposes an operation, cutting to the very bone, without anaesthetic. The infection is not just on the surface. The abscess of hate and mistrust and fear, between black and white, nation and nation, rich and poor, has to be slashed open."

It is strongly argued that high levels of sectarianism and racism are more than just a coincidence. In fact, there are complex linkages and relationships between them. Both develop from a "politics of difference," from name-calling to violence, and feed on common factors such as a sense of entitlement, insecurity, media distortion,

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a culture of violence and territorialism.

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 upward 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 you 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.

We need 21st century prophets such as Amos whose messages insist that God's active participation in the human story includes the totality of life. Salvation is not to be thought of only as an assurance of forgiveness and of a future life; it is to be seen as redemption that reconciles us to God, establishes a new community, free from injustice for all people.

Amos refused to be a bystander and a quiet participant in evil. Amos announces that because of injustice, God's anger has been aroused and judgment will arrive. The judgment that Amos announced was evident because of God's relationship with the people, he cannot look the other way. This prophet underlines that God's anger and judgment still exist for people of faith today, because God loves people, God still is angry and outraged when people cause others to suffer.

In my context we still are dealing with the legacy of the past and the suffering of the ghosts of the past, both our nations need spiritually to address the legacy that haunts us slavery and sectarianism we will never be free until we do and I believe God insists that should be our mandate for this time.

