
COMMENT -

Paris should make us reflect on our violent past

While we have a right, and indeed a duty, to condemn the barbarity of last week's Paris killings, how clean are our own hands in Ireland and Britain when it comes to infusing religion into politics - and politics into violence? Writes Patrick Murphy in the Irish News.

In view of the raw emotions which still pervade French society, you may think it an untimely question.

However, in a week which witnessed Stormont's renewed failure to address our thirty years of meaningless and futile bloodshed, can we really adopt the high moral ground in condemning others for doing exactly what our society did?

You could offer two arguments in response. One is that religion no longer pervades politics and society in Britain and Ireland.

The second is that our days of violence and paramilitarism are gone. Sadly, both arguments are flawed.

Religion still shapes politics in these islands. Only two states in the world reserve places in their parliaments for unelected religious clerics - Iran and Britain.

In fairness, the 26 Anglican Bishops in the House of Lords are often a liberal influence, but that hardly justifies their automatic right to civic governance.

Britain would also appear to be the world's only state where there is specific legislation to prevent a Catholic from becoming monarch.

Indeed, there has never been a Catholic prime minister of Britain. Tony Blair (the man who now accepts that he helped to build Isis) thought it appropriate to become a Catholic only after he left office.

In foreign policy, Britain still condones selected religious violence, as evidenced by last week's

lavish state reception for Indian premier,
Narendra Modi.

He is a member of the RSS paramilitary organisation. Its members have been routinely found guilty of violence against Indian minorities, including a 2002 pogrom which left 1,000 Muslims dead.

So RSS are "good" sectarian paramilitaries, because they offer trade with India. Isis are "bad" sectarian paramilitaries because they provide no economic opportunities. (You may be able to think of other examples nearer home.)

Well, you say, Ireland is different. Is it?
Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said of the Paris killings that they were an example of religion being used for ideology.

He was right, but at the same time a four-year-old Hindu girl was unable to get a place in several Dublin primary schools because she was not a Catholic.

Her parents claim that the Archbishop's office told them to have their child baptised. (She eventually got into a school a half hour drive

away, while her friends attend the school across the nearby park.)

Yes, they were Catholic schools, but they are entirely state-funded. Is that using religion for ideology?

Should public money be used to fund religious teaching (for one religion only) as, for example, in Iran?

But, you argue, religion is a force for good. In many cases it is. In others, it is not.

The Catholic Church, for example, has inflicted a huge amount of human suffering in this country.

It caused immense trauma through its emotional and physical brutality against unmarried mothers and their vulnerable children and through child sex abuse and its shameful cover-up. In terms of historical evolution, are we really that far ahead of those we now condemn?

Well, you say, nobody died here because of religion. In that case you will have forgotten our litany of massacres, some more openly religious than others: 10 Protestant workmen at Kingsmills; three elders at a service in Darkley Pentecostal Church; eight civilians killed in

Greysteel by an AK47 (the same weapon used in the Bataclan attack in Paris); the Miami showband murders; the Abercorn restaurant deaths; the six dead in Loughinisland and thousands of other killings, including those carried out by Stakeknife.

But in Tuesday's "fresh start" the DUP and Sinn Féin (which supported much of the violence here) agreed with the British and Irish governments to ignore the victims of past policies and actions.

You will argue that those days are behind us. Not according to the British government, which says that an armed (and presumably Catholic) IRA still exists and effectively controls Sinn Féin. The DUP was founded on Paisley's religious extremism.

In an Assembly based on members identifying their sectarian allegiance, the politico-religious cream rose to the top this week, leaving the less vocally sectarian in the political wilderness.

Our condemnation of the Paris massacres is right. But our words would carry more conviction if we also reflected on the not so subtle inter-relationships between religion, politics and violence in our own society.

As the more genuinely religious might suggest,
only those without sin should cast the first stone.

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