



CNI

COMMENT - The Christian persecution myth industry in Northern Ireland

A leading Belfast journalist, Alex Kane, who makes no secret of his agnosticism, had a right good go in the Belfast News Letter this week at those Christians in Northern Ireland who claim they are being persecuted - writes Houston McKelvey.

Apart from a paragraph where Alex diverted into a science versus the Bible comment (1), I travel with him and agree with his views rather than with those of self-proclaimed Christians who are playing the persecution ticket. This soap box has been well trodden by Lord Carey and others such as the Christian Institute which has a fairly obvious vested self-interest in its focus on this area.

Alex's view was that sensible and fair challenging and questioning of statements and proclamations made by religious people fell far

short of persecution. I would put it more bluntly, Isil is not besieging the gates of Derry or demolishing the varieties of temples we divided Christians have erected on this wee island to the one God. There are sadly no shortage of examples of real persecution in our world.

One of the most obvious aspects which many of the self-appointed defenders of God ignore is that faith itself, in its very essence, is both a gift and a jump.

The jumping analogy I acquired from one of the few sermons I heard during my six terms of compulsory attendance at Chapel in TCD. As irony would have it in terms of my Anglican exercises, the preacher was a Presbyterian of impeccable provenance. His name was Murdo Ewen MacDonald. He was a Hebridean polymath who could have scaled the heights of academic success. Rather, after progressing from his island crofter's home, through schools and universities, he was ordained into the Kirk. He most likely would have remained a parish minister but the war intervened.

He offered for service in the chaplains' department and was attached to the Queen's Own Cameron Highlanders. In 1942 Murdo Ewen joined the First Parachute Brigade and during a

mission to capture an airfield in North Africa in November 1942, he was wounded and taken prisoner. He ended up in Stalag Luft III and became involved with the escape attempt that would inspire the film 'The Great Escape'. His job was to dispose of sand dug from the tunnel. During his time in the Stalag Luft III, Murdo Ewen became chaplain to the American forces held there and this became one of the most rewarding experiences of his life. He was awarded the American Bronze Star medal for his leadership and counselling of the American soldiers.

I knew nothing of this when he engaged my attention. His reference to parachuting did. It was based on his experience. It was a parable of faith. Since then I have been a passenger on numerous occasions on RAF Hercules, the very aircraft from which today's paratroopers jump. I have stood at their side doors and at the back ramp, whilst in flight, without having the least motivation or desire to step outside.

Murdo Ewan's message which I received was - When you jumped, you had faith in the person who packed the chute, and you had faith in those who had made it. Faith in God was a similar jump. And you made sense of things in the light of that experience. Post event. (2).

Those who wish to indulge in Christian apologetics - and it is necessary for all Christians to do so to witness to their faith - should never forget that our faith in Christ is a gift. Furthermore we need to be sensitively conscious that the claims we make concerning God, together with the teachings, the activities, and the moral structure we wish to have implemented or maintained, arise from within parameters determined by the lenses of faith which we have chosen to use. They are post-event both personal and the church corporately.

This fundamental perspective of faith needs to be applied within the church's discussions as well as in our comments to the wider civic society.

A related area I have long had to acknowledge and with sadness, is that often the people most ready to "defend" God and what they perceive to be the standards of the Kingdom, are not the most winsome in attracting others to God.

Indeed I would describe their contribution as a counter-evangelism - a behaviour which makes the ministry of those attempting to commend the Kingdom of love and forgiveness so much more difficult. In fact they are the biggest millstones I

have encountered in my ordained ministry which is now in its fifth decade.

Eternal truth in the person of Jesus Christ and the divine love he personifies cannot be communicated when it is based upon the falsehood of imagined and deluded perceptions of persecution.

Houston McKelvey

1. Challenging Christians is not the same as persecuting them - Alex Kane

<http://www.newsletter.co.uk/challenging-christians-is-not-the-same-as-persecuting-them-1-6809621>

2. “The need to believe”, by Murdo Ewen MacDonald.

<https://archive.org/details/needtobelieve012425mbp>