

There is truth in the view that Ulster was a sectarian state under Stormont rule and also that Catholics in certain areas were largely defenceless against the fully fury of Protestant mobs, aided and abetted by the B Specials, in the riots of 1969. Moreover, the application of internment after 1971 was one-sided and sectarian. But these faults were largely rectified after 1972, and in any case they did not justify murder.

Turning to the Loyalist paramilitaries, their claim to be protectors of 'Ulster' from the IRA was equally misguided. Did they seriously believe that their largely sectarian and brutal murders had a restraining influence on the IRA? Each time one side escalated the violence, the other retaliated.

What, then, of the argument that political violence aims to create a more just society? In other words, the ills to which the violence is addressed are themselves so awful that the evils of the violence are less than the evils it may stop. But can the taking of life ever be justified as a means to an end, however noble? The philosopher Immanuel Kant maintained that a basic moral imperative was to treat individuals as ends in themselves, never as the means to other individuals' ends.

Kant's categorical imperative is perhaps too idealistic. The bomb plot to kill Hitler in 1944, for example, could have been defended as a means of ending the war more quickly and thus saving millions of lives. But, then, the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs were defended on similar grounds. Was the Second World War as a whole justified as the lesser of two evils, even though it led to the deaths of 50 million people?

And what of the claim that violence is inevitable in a popular revolution? The philosopher John Locke suggested that it was right to rebel against a tyrannical government, and the fathers of the American Revolution, the ANC and countless others have used this argument to justify their actions. In this context the terrorists are seen as freedom fighters seeking to liberate the people from oppression. Yet many

'liberation armies' do not have popular support at all. Thus in Northern Ireland most Protestants and Catholics opposed the paramilitaries and voted by a large majority for peace and the implementation of the Belfast Agreement. Support for Sinn Fein grew only when they largely abandoned the armalite for the ballot box.

The type of violence is also important. A basic criterion for a just war is that its means must be controlled. This would include such considerations as: there must be no wanton or unnecessary violence; the violence must be proportionately less than that which it is intended to remedy; the violence should be directed against enemy combatants and military targets; and civilians should be immune.



All these conditions were breached by most terrorist groups. Killing the innocent in order to raise tension was one of their favoured tactics. In Ulster the litany of terror records a protracted slaughter of the innocents. Indiscriminate killing diminishes civilisation and largely robs the cause of its justification. A united Ireland achieved by murder and mayhem would have been worthless.

Another criterion of a just war is that it should not be started unless there is a reasonable expectation of success. When faced with a terrorist threat here, governments often strengthen their resolve not to capitulate to political violence. Critics often maintain that in Northern Ireland they appeased the IRA. Yet although the IRA sustained its campaign of killing for 20 years, it has now accepted a Northern Ireland with a power-

sharing government and north-south bodies - a solution it rejected in 1974 as a 'partitionist fudge'.

With talk of 'Sunningdale for slow learners' and yet another 'crossroads', it is easy to conclude that nothing much has changed since the late 1960s. What, then, was the violence all about? The answer is - nothing. In my view as a humanist it was completely and utterly futile and destructive. It killed 3,600 mostly innocent people and brought misery to their friends and relatives. It further divided an already divided community. It lamentably failed to achieve its aims. Now that we are largely at peace, we have the opportunity to make it last. Yes, of course, reconciliation will help to achieve this goal. But the first and essential step is for those who were largely responsible for organising this violence to admit that it was wrong, badly, badly wrong. It was not just that any particular death or injury was a mistake; it was all a mistake from beginning to end.

Whether it was McGurk's Bar or Bloody Friday, La Mon or the Ormeau Road, the Miami Showband or Darkley, Enniskillen or the Rising Sun, they were all inexcusable. Unless and until the paramilitary groups or their political equivalents admit their error, come clean and admit full responsibility, and accept that there is no substitute for persuasion, we will continue to mistrust each other and we will continue to live, as we have done for 400 years, in the shadow of the gun. □

## Humanist Association of NI



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