



BOSTON COLLEGE

BOISI CENTER
FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

Peacebuilding and Reconciliation: Lessons from an Irish Context

MARY MCALEESE

FORMER PRESIDENT OF IRELAND

*IN CONVERSATION WITH **ERIK OWENS**, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF THE BOISI CENTER*

OCTOBER 29, 2013

Owens: One of the things that has been striking in reading about your history is the power of female leadership in Ireland—not only your remarkable fourteen-year tenure as president, but also your administration following that of another remarkable female president. Is there something specific about Irish politics or culture that makes this possible?

McAleese: I don't think that it's necessarily any different from other places. If you were to look at the political scene generally, we actually don't have a very large number of women engaged in day-to-day politics. But women are particularly suited, it seems to me. Both Mary Robinson [her predecessor] and I would have been particularly suited to the presidency at a particular time in Irish politics simply by virtue of being women. It's a bit like being a lay person in the Catholic Church. On the one hand, it's a very powerless position to be in. But on the other hand, it can also be quite a powerful position. Since you have nothing to lose, if you wish, you can stand your ground. You can state your case. You can't be censured in the way that perhaps somebody who's more embedded in the power structure can be.

I felt that the presidency was essentially a pastoral role. Leaving aside the constitutional role's office work, there was a pastoral space that I could occupy and help to give leadership there—in terms of reconciliation in particular—that was facilitated by virtue of being a woman. People expected something different from women. And I think that's always been a leitmotif of my own life and my own career—that somehow, funnily enough, being overlooked as a group or as a member of a group

sometimes (despite the fact that it is quite shocking for whole sections of a community to be overlooked) gives you space in which to do things, think things, be things, contemplate things that are not shaped by the ambient traditional discourse, but allows you space to develop alternative ideas. And I suppose also, as a woman who became a lawyer at a time when it was not normal or encouraged for women to become lawyers, women like myself are good at working small spaces and trying to develop from them something bigger than the space we were given. So in that sense, frankly, I think women around the world do that.

Owens: How did growing up in Belfast in a time of great strife and violence affect your view of life? Are there lessons about endurance or hope or peace that might apply to people in other places who experience violence or terrorism in their communities?

McAleese: We were born into it, that's the first thing. There was a normalcy about divisions, sectarianism, the threat of violence. [My husband and I] were both born at the beginning of the 1950s, and the IRA campaign continued right into the 1950s. If you look at the history of the areas we were born into—my own parish, for example, Ardoyne—there had been anti-Catholic sectarian pogroms there virtually in every generation, going back for a century or more. We were born in Belfast, a sectarian city. I grew up as a Catholic in a Protestant area; Martin grew up as a Catholic in a Protestant area. We were constantly aware of sectarianism, even as times changed and, in the 1960s, there appeared to be the growth of an accommodation between the government in the North and the government in the South. There appeared to be a settling of the conflict and particularly, in the light of Vatican II, more talk about ecumenism; but of course then that all went horribly wrong with the stirring up of the sectarian dragon by Dr. Ian Paisley and his cohorts and by Protestant paramilitaries. It all blossomed again. But I have to say, that sectarianism was always in the atmosphere. We were always aware there were places we couldn't go safely or could only go with Protestant friends to defend us.

Then, when the Troubles broke out—when effectively a civil war broke out on our doorstep in 1969—though we had lived in a sectarian conflict, we were really not prepared for the duration of that conflict. In my innocence—I was only an 18 year old at the time—I thought it might last a week. Then it lasted a month. Then it lasted a year and finally over thirty years. And during that time, there was huge provocation on all sides and huge temptation to be drawn into one of the sides, by the sheer gravitational pull of history. Both sides have a very, very strong tradition of paramilitarism and fighting. Friends of ours made the choices to join paramilitaries.

In this context, you're confronted with a conundrum. What do you do? You can do what a lot of people do, which is just pretend and ignore and hope that it all goes away. You can bury yourself in some kind of a middle class cocoon and protect yourself by all sorts of techniques of neutralization. We found that very difficult to do because we both came from very tough, rough working class areas where it wasn't so easy to do that. And so we both "made [our] stand"—to quote Seamus Heaney—and our stand was we're not going to get involved in violence. There has to be a better, more humanly decent way than this. Are we going to be conduits for the toxic spores that keep this going from generation to generation? Or could we be part of a generation—now the most educated generation on the island—that actually could think more creatively, could perhaps engage in a much more imaginative and generous discourse? And so that's where we made our stand, both individually and then together. We've been together for over forty years, and married for thirty-seven.

Owens: Congratulations!

McAleese: We started going out together when we were seventeen. So we made these decisions as we were on the run, and were helped by our families and by our faith. I was very well catechized by the Passionists in the way of the cross, in endurance and stoicism—but not in the way of Heaney's description of them in his poem, "From the Canton of Expectation," where he describes the generation prior to me, which was my parents' generation and grandparents' generation, as living "under high, banked clouds of resignation." That generation was gone.

The big disconnect between that generation and mine was education. We were the beneficiaries of free second-level and grant-aided third-level education. We now had ambitions to become university educated, to go into the professions. We were the people who started to push up against the sectarian barriers that excluded Catholics for all sorts of nefarious reasons. And we were—again to quote Heaney—we were the "intelligences, brightened and unmannerly as crowbars." We were determined to take those crowbars—in our case, intellectual crowbars. He said in his poem, "Digging," that he was going to dig with his pen. We decided that we would change things with our brainpower and our powers of persuasion, not the use of violence, and that those powers of persuasion would be rooted in gospel values to love one another. We just became determined that what we had inherited—which was a very, very longstanding conflict—had to stop. Some generation had to stand against it and to change the narrative to shift its trajectory towards peace. So that's where we started.

Long before I ever became president, I was involved in cross-community and anti-sectarian activities. I co-wrote a report for the Irish Council of

Churches, which represents the Protestant churches and the Catholic Church, on sectarianism, trying to chart a way for the churches to help us out of the mire. I did a series of broadcasts called “The Protestant Mind” for BBC radio to try and penetrate the mind that I didn’t understand, because I felt that one of the things that we really failed to do was to truly try and stand in the shoes of the Other. Worse than that, we lived beside each other—we lived cheek by jowl—in monumental and dangerous ignorance of one another, but unaware of how ignorant we were. We actually thought we knew these people well enough to be contemptuous of their views, to ransack history for ammunition to throw at them—ammunition that showed how nefarious they were, how they couldn’t be trusted, how sectarian they were. And of course they did the same for us. Here we were, these two Others, living cheek by jowl, but not really working to try and find a coherent way of living in a neighborly way. So that’s what we started down the road of doing: to see how we could become good neighbors.

Owens: That’s such a powerful account. Religion is wrapped up so tightly in this, and yet it isn’t everything in this conversation. I wonder if you could say a word about the role of education in this context: what does it take to change the value structure of a society? What should the state do, or the churches, or other institutions, to break apart a culture of conflict?

McAleese: I think you’re right to focus on education. As you know, in Northern Ireland and in Ireland generally, education is, by parental choice, denominationalized. I’m content that parents should have that choice—though increasingly people are making choices for more integrated education, where people can come together and have an education that is not based solely on the view of one denomination or another, so I feel like there is a slight widening of choice occurring. A denominationalized education system itself doesn’t bother me. It’s not where people are educated, frankly, that bothers me. It’s how they’re educated, what they’re told that bothers me. In a divided society, you get divided histories, and where you have divided histories, people tell lies about history, or they don’t tell the whole truth about history. When people use history as a way of proposing their own world view and propping up the barricades that keep them separate and different from those outside, it means that, when you do meet the Other—whether it’s at work or at play or in marriage—you might be talking English, but you’re not talking the same language. The thought processes and the perceptions that make you passionate, that whole realm of identity has been forged around a narrative that is highly specific to your group. It’s specific in a way that has been manufactured to be over and against the Other. You have all the answers for the nefariousness of the Other.

Let me take one example. That is the story about the First World War in Ireland. At the time of the First World War, the 1914–1918 War, Ireland was still a colony of Britain, and so all of Ireland was an undivided colony of Britain. Irish soldiers, as always with the poorest of the poor, were the fodder of British armies going back for many, many wars. They were the frontline troops. But given their powerless political situation in Ireland at that time, the British did not introduce compulsory military service. So it was left to people to volunteer. The narrative that we grew up with in Northern Ireland was that the only people who volunteered were the good Ulster Protestants. The Ulster Protestants of the 36th division, who died at the Somme in large numbers; they honored their commitment, their value system, to the little nations of Europe, and off they went and fought and died. That was the narrative, which allowed them, of course, to look at the Irish Republic and at Catholics as we had always been looked at: as disloyal, subversive, not-to-be trusted.

On the Catholic side, they were happy with that narrative. Why? Because in 1916 we had a rising against British rule that led to a civil war and the partition of our country. It suited people not to talk about any Irish men who might have been away fighting for Britain at a time when Irish men at home were fighting against Britain. The truth of the matter is 250,000 people—from a population of two and a half million, which means virtually a member of every family—put on a British uniform and fought in the First World War. Fifty thousand of them did not come home; a lot more came home ill, traumatized, and injured. And who were they? Were they all Ulster Protestants? Actually, a small proportion of them were Ulster Protestants. By far the greatest majority were Irish Catholic nationalists, who, when they came back, were regarded as traitors to the cause of Irish unity and nationhood, and whose memories then were shoved in “shoeboxes in the attic.”

We knew how much this military tradition mattered to Protestants because we lived in Protestant areas. Their tradition of going to the Cenotaph and putting down the wreaths of poppies enhanced their sense of Britishness, and also, over and against that, diminished any possibilities of a sense of Irishness. So we, along with others who’d been at this long before us, started down the road of telling the truth about this story. In 1998 I went with Queen Elizabeth to Messines in Belgium, where we instituted together the Irish Peace Tower in memory of all Irish men who died. Suddenly it’s different. Now people who regarded themselves as quintessentially British, not at all Irish, in Northern Ireland were saying, well, we were a little bit Irish. And people who regarded themselves as quintessentially Irish, not at all British, were saying, well, maybe we could be a little bit British. And, maybe more importantly, we could use this story to create a platform of shared memory and not one of division.

So this is where education is important. Education ought to tell the truth about things and not enter a gigantic conspiracy, as it had done for generations. I'm always very wary of every historian who claims to be objective, because ultimately they tell an edited version of history. In divided societies, history is told in a way that serves to maintain the toxin of difference. Where there is history of conflict and violence, regrettably, you'll find in the history books the spores that outcrop in one or two generations down the road in more violence.

These are important things that we are now beginning to get a grip on in the North and South. We look at curriculum now. We have looked for a long time now for ways in which our children, though they go to separate schools, can engage with one another. Historically, they didn't play the same sports, so they were never going to play on the same teams. Protestants played rugby; Catholics played Gaelic football. A huge amount of work has been done to try and find common ground in this divided community—either from the past that was deliberately obscured, or to create new common ground. Take sports as a classic example: schools now are making an effort to be more inclusive in their sporting endeavors so that Catholics will run across Protestants, Protestants will run across Catholics, and children will have an opportunity for friendship building.

Growing up, we did have some opportunities. Martin and I were involved in debating, which was the one area where there was a chance, strangely enough. But even there, it was difficult to talk real politics, because, having grown up in divided communities, we hadn't learnt the proper language of respectful engagement, and there were always dangers around those debates. So those debates always managed to carefully avoid dealing with the kinds of subjects that might be identity ridden or about which we might be cholericly passionate. They concentrated perhaps more on international politics or issues that would not divide us. But those were also good things, because we made a lot of friends through debating, as we did also at university. University was one of the very few places to meet across the divide, because workplaces, of course, were often divided along sectarian lines.

Owens: Thinking here not only about the Irish context, but extrapolating for lessons that might be learned elsewhere, do you feel like there is an inherent tradeoff between justice and peace in conflicts like this? Must one be sacrificed for another, or are they always tied together?

McAleese: I think that we would have said, in relation to the peace process in Northern Ireland, that the Good Friday Agreement is peace with justice. There is no such thing as peace without justice, in my view. We use expressions, for example, like "parity of esteem." There would never have been a Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland had it not been

underpinned by an infrastructure that guaranteed to the citizens of Northern Ireland—all of them, on an equal basis—parity of esteem, and allowed them to believe that, where their rights were violated—whether for sectarian, gender, or whatever reasons—that those incursions into their rights would be brought before a forum of justice, and they themselves, as individuals and citizens, would be vindicated. There is no such thing for me as the concept of peace without some form of justice. This may not be true of all contexts, but it's certainly true of ours, because there was such a history of injustice.

If you look at the story of Northern Ireland, British imperialism has nothing to be proud of. Britain behaved appallingly in Ireland. And then, of course, the empire changed, and it morphed into this modern democratic state that, along with us, is a member of the European Union. Our relationship with it changed—particularly the relationship between it and the Republic of Ireland. For a long time, it ignored what went on in Northern Ireland with that colonial neglect. Then it copped on to what was happening. And for a period, right through until, I think, the end of Maggie Thatcher's era, it tried to go it alone, to deal with it in colonial and imperial terms. Then they discovered, really from John Major onwards—who was absolutely a first-class interpreter of the new dynamic of partnership, of mutual respect between the governments—that you were going to get more tangible results and more stability if you worked in respectful cooperation with your neighboring government.

From John Major onwards, we've had a growing and incredibly fruitful dynamic between the governments in the Republic of Ireland and in Britain. That was key. Once they started to work together, they couldn't be defeated in a way because, in the past, they'd pulled against each other, neither working together, to a different beat and to a different drum. The government in Britain is saying, if Northern Ireland ever decides to be part of the Republic, we won't stand in their way. That's a big sea change. And then the government of Ireland is saying, well, that being so, we're prepared to accept that Northern Ireland is now part of the United Kingdom and will remain part of the United Kingdom until such times as people, by referendum, change their minds—if they ever do. These were colossal sea changes, great compromises on both sides, which were of course vindicated then in the Good Friday Agreement, because they were put to referendum. Did the people agree with this leadership? Yes they did, in huge numbers, which gave the political extremes food for thought.

The Catholic political extremes identified by the IRA and Sinn Fein were on board for the Good Friday Agreement, but the political extremes of Paisley's DUP and the Protestant paramilitaries were not. They were outside the process. But once it started to deliver, once it started to work, they began to see the value of it. Little by little, they were brought in. The

St. Andrews Agreement then, which was an update of the Good Friday Agreement, drew them into the equation, and they now are in government together.

Some people will give out about the government; they'll say they don't do this and they don't do that. I say they're there, which is a miracle. They haven't gone away, and they're working as well as any government probably anywhere in Europe is working. They have their problems. They have their things that you could criticize them for. All governments are criticize-able. But the fact that they are there and continuing to proclaim the values of the Good Friday Agreement and show it in operation seems to me that we're giving this generation breathing space to start to grow a new decent culture. Some people say that's all we're giving them.

We're not working for a generational truce. It's much more than that. It is a sea change. The Good Friday Agreement is a comprehensive agreement underpinned by justice. It's an architecture of justice that we failed to have in the past that allowed Catholics to not get jobs, that allowed Catholics to not have votes, allowed them to be excluded, to be regarded as second class. The Agreement also gives to the unionists the comfort of knowing you can remain British for as long as the people of Northern Ireland wish that to be the case. They were always fearful that their Britishness and that their adherence to the crown and their adherence to the kingdom would be under threat. So they have everything to play for in terms of being neighborly and persuading people who are Irish nationalists that staying with Britain is a better deal. Meanwhile nationalists also have the opportunity to persuade in favor of a united Ireland knowing that from time to time the level of support for a united Ireland will be tested by referendum and if it is the will of a majority it will happen. Today our priority is to work for a reconciled Ireland of good neighbors who have put the culture of sectarianism behind them and who can respectfully and peacefully argue the toss about our political future.

[END]