

**Trauma and Spirituality: An International Dialogue
The Europa Hotel, Belfast 9-13 March, 2011**

Spiritual capital and the role of religion in the public domain

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Friday 11 March

Thank you for the invitation to speak this afternoon; it is a very great pleasure to be part of this public discourse on the social benefits of religion. I have three objectives in my short talk. First, I want to introduce you to a new concept, spiritual capital, as a way of measuring the public value of religion; secondly, to apply it to Northern Ireland to help us understand the potential of religion here to help deal with the aftermath of what we colloquially know as ‘the Troubles’, a phrase in my mind that has always undervalued the level of trauma our conflict caused; and finally to use it as an index of how well the churches are doing in managing trauma.

What is spiritual capital?

We have to say that it is the term ‘social capital’ that dominates discussion in Northern Ireland. It does so for three reasons. It is popular amongst academics as a familiar lens through which to characterise civil society; the language of social capital has penetrated lay discourse and is part of the rhetoric of civil society itself; and the bonding versus bridging debate offers practitioners in civil society some self understanding of the limitations of their role. Churches in Northern Ireland are not immune to the popularity of social capital in lay discourse and the churches are full with the notion that religion excels at garnering and disseminating bonding social capital, poor at developing bridging social capital.

Let me be controversial then. We need to abandon the term. Social capital is not the most relevant notion to measure the public role of religion in societies emerging from conflict.

Spiritual capital describes the social *impact* of religion on believers and society generally; it is not about people's feelings towards religion but the social *consequences* of these feelings. Religion is not just good for individual believers, it is good for society and spiritual capital helps us see religion as a resource; one that people can draw on to meet various challenges – sickness, political oppression, ethical choices, or social problems.

It is clear that secularisation impacts negatively on the capacity for spiritual capital, since it weakens with the decline in observance. While observers in the USA express anxieties about the social benefits of religion as a consequence of the decline in religiosity, the relatively high levels of observance in Northern Ireland potentially makes spiritual capital a useful resource that the churches could promote and exploit.

However, to be provocative again, the potential for spiritual capital in societies where religion was part of the conflict is mediated by the churches' activities in the pre-agreement phase. Putting this bluntly, the institutional church's failure in the peace process in Northern Ireland, constrains its capacity to deal with the legacy of violence.

Spiritual capital and the legacy of violence

Spiritual capital in the post-conflict stage is reflected in the churches' activities in the public sphere in dealing with the legacy of violence, both for individual victims and society more generally. It is measured by the translation of people's private troubles into public issues, not by rendering this activity into pastoral care dealt with only in individual congregations.

High levels of spiritual capital would signal a strong commitment by faith groups to work in the public square on issues that violence has left as ongoing problems. Such as, mobilising public discussion about post-conflict emotions and emotion management, like the appropriate balance between righteous anger and forgiveness, or the cultivation of public sentiments around hope, reconciliation, compromise, compassion, and empathy. It would reflect in churches assisting in the management of the risks of renewed outbreaks of violence, and supporting ex-combatants with the deconstruction of violent masculinities and with their wider social reintegration. Spiritual capital would show itself in churches working amongst victims and in bringing victim issues into the public sphere; or assisting in the correction of distorted notions of the conflict and of history generally, as well as empowering local communities to engage in informal ‘truth’ recovery procedures; or encouraging new notions of identity and new processes of identity formation; or encouraging the deconstruction of sectarian shibboleths from the past, particularly confronting ethno-religious group structures that perpetuate segregation rather than facilitate integration. This is not an exhaustive listing but it gives an indication of the scale of the task if spiritual capital is to be meaningful in post-‘Troubles’ Northern Ireland.

How does religion in Northern Ireland match up?

Let me make another provocative sound bite: the institutional church failed Northern Ireland during ‘the Troubles’. Religious peacebuilding was individualised to lone peacemakers, independents and mavericks. And in the post-conflict stage, the peace process, as far as the institutional church is concerned, has come to an end. Taking no responsibility for the past, or their contribution to sectarianism, the institutional church does not accept it has any responsibility to the future, save ministering to the pastoral needs of their congregations on a piecemeal basis. Hesitant and uncomfortable in displaying prophetic leadership in the public

sphere during the violence, the institutional church is at a loss to know what to do publicly after it. It is thus left again to individual religious peacebuilders to address the legacy of violence, equally piecemeal.

Victim groups feel neglected by the church as victimhood is reduced to a pastoral issue to be handled on a case by case basis inside private church space not in the public square. There is no public religious discourse on forgiveness, hope and compassion; still less on resentment and anger. Forgiveness as a process is often feared by liberal human rights activists and victims alike because it is assumed to mean amnesty, although it need not. But debates about what forgiveness means politically, and whether or not it first requires repentance, on which churches *ought* to take the lead after conflict, are not entering the public arena. And hope is not a word in the lexicon of the churches - at least not this-worldly hope. As part of the same neglect, the churches are silent on transitional justice issues. There is no religious discourse in Northern Ireland on human rights issues, on truth-recovery, or on other transitional justice themes like reparation, memory, restorative reintegration of ex-combatant prisoners and the like. Religious peacebuilders placed a very high priority on working with prisoners and their families, but not when released, nor once they gave their imprimatur to the deal.

Of course, one can cite a few examples where this is not so - of brave churchmen and women active in social witness, managing the risk of renewed outbreaks of violence, or dealing with the management of memory. But these are independent of the institutional church, done freelance by individual religious peacemakers (in some cases done after they retired from active ministry) and undertaken in conjunction with other civil society representatives in a way that they carry no strong religious stamp. There is no authoritative religious voice in public debate on post-violence issues.

This is partly a skills issue but primarily a motivational one. Polarisation has been left intact by the peace agreement and in this quiescent phase without overt violence to stir them, there is no motivation for the churches to get involved. The churches are uninterested in post-violence reconstruction.

By way of conclusion I want to ask the key question that lurks within this conference. Are the churches capable of doing anything anymore, even if they wanted to? Their condition post-agreement is worse than before. Secularisation and anti-clericalism diminishes their influence and respect. They lack moral legitimacy for having missed opportunities for prophetic leadership during ‘the Troubles’. Individual peacemakers are aging, retiring from active ministry, or burning out, ill and moving out of Northern Ireland. Religious peacebuilding is in crisis as the individuals who bore its brunt depart and as the institutional church evades its responsibilities in the public square. I fear that the capacity of the institutional church to inherit the future is diminished by its failure to take responsibility for the past. Thank you.