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Religious Women and Peacebuilding during the Northern Ireland ‘Troubles’

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The focus of this essay is on the critical and various roles, still largely unrecognised, played by religious women during the conflict in Northern Ireland. Working at the margins of society rather than in the corridors of power, they made important contributions to peace-building that ranged from grass-roots activism to secret talks. As well as contributing to the crucial work of community groups, educating the young and tending to the old, religious women established innovative and independent organisations offering succour and support to victims of the ‘Troubles’. Motivated by faith, they adhered to a value system that eschewed the violence, fear and intimidation that all the military forces party to the conflict inflicted on the working-class communities to which religious women were committed. At crucial points in the peace process, their interventions helped accelerate and promote peace-building. Theirs was a quiet presence that mattered and made a difference.

In her award-winning book, *Milkman*, Anna Burns captures the enigmatic and at times surreal nature of the complex, destructive ethno-nationalist Northern Ireland (NI) conflict that pitted neighbours and communities against one another as society descended into a multi-factional and seemingly endless war in which the majority of victims were civilians. One hundred and eighty-six were children.[i] Burns depicts the ways in which women in working-class communities culturally belonged not simply to themselves, but to family, friends, churches - the wider community. It oftentimes ruthlessly judged and policed them amidst the terror of punishment, disappearance, murder. Burns depicts the insidious oppressiveness of tribalism, conformity, religion, patriarchy, compounded by fear and mistrust and exacerbated by historical convictions that engendered further layers of grief, anger, suffering. Her searing observations of one young woman’s attempts to find agency amidst toxic masculinity and violence against women, universal features of war, is a salutary reminder of the difficulties and dangers confronting women peacebuilders. Critical to what gradually becomes a narrative of hope are the insider/outsiders quietly resisting the brutality that accompanies the apparently hegemonic and invincible community will. Religious women do not feature in Burns’s fictional account, yet they epitomise the quiet insider/outsider rooted in the community (Kirby, 2021).

In the murky depths of what today is termed asymmetrical warfare, oral history has proven invaluable to the excavation of buried stories, most particularly the marginalised and neglected, the otherwise voiceless, women above all (Aretxaga, 1997; Felo, 2013). Significantly, in most studies the identities of the contributors are concealed. The cessation of violence shifted the conflict to the cultural arena and combat commenced over historical memory in which the battle of narratives rendered unwelcome recollections that deviated from self-serving partisan portrayals of the past (O’Toole, 2020). Even on the cultural front, war has consequences. Hence names are not used, nor words attributed, when areas of known sensitivity are addressed in this paper, with potentially identifying details also omitted.

The paper draws on a small-scale oral history project that recorded the voices of religious women discussing their memories and recollections of the conflict (Kirby, n.d.) The project embraced not simply the ordained and consecrated but those whose peacebuilding was declaredly motivated by faith convictions. The project consists of recorded conversations and individual interviews and all of the quotes in this essay are from these conversations and interviews unless otherwise noted. It began with Catholic sisters (Rafferty & Kirby, 2017) and

uncovered a network of religious women of various denominations working together in a wide range of peacebuilding roles, from grassroots community activism to political campaigning to secret talks with paramilitaries. Protagonists with uniquely varied worldviews trying to navigate existence in a war zone's many shades of grey, they were a taken-for-granted part of the community whose peacebuilding contributions have been largely overlooked. Religious women possessed local community knowledge, credibility and grounding, plus institutional resources and a degree of authority. The paper shows that their peacebuilding activism mattered and made a difference, including quietly subverting the legitimization strategies of both sides.

Religious Legitimation

Impression management was exceedingly important in NI and religion permeated the way each side perceived and presented themselves. To maintain legitimacy, a sacrificial social contract needs to convey a sense of moral integrity buttressed by firm principles. The belligerents embellished their respective causes with religio-mythical narratives. Unionist iconography, strengthened by the Ulster Volunteer Force motto 'For God and Ulster', draws on warfare scenes from the Western Front that resonated with a community that felt itself under siege, a beleaguered, embattled people, vilified, misrepresented and betrayed. Families with security force members identified with First World War stories of combat, loss and endurance. Critically, according to Orr (2014): "In the local cultural narrative of Ulster unionism, the Somme began to play a crucial role, featuring that tragic battle as a counterweight to the events of Easter 1 1916, a blood sacrifice that was meant to copper-fasten Northern Ireland's bond to the Union.

Sacrificial discourse was generated before, during and following the Irish Easter Rising, especially after the execution of the leaders. Hunger strikers regularly rekindled the sacrificial dynamics unleashed in 1916. In the Republican morality-tale the blood sacrifice of Easter 1916 intertwined with the hunger strike of IRA prisoners in 1980–1981 to powerfully reinforce the religio-nationalist iconography on which the IRA campaign drew. It also highlighted the complex dynamics of the struggle between the IRA and the Catholic Church hierarchy for the allegiance of the Catholic community, including that of local clergy (Power, 2016; Scull, 2019). Notably, Bobby Sands was influenced by the example of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence James MacSwiney, who saw Ireland's independence struggle as a religious crusade. His 1920 death after 74 days on hunger strike in Brixton prison triggered mass demonstrations worldwide.

The Troubles' hunger strike became the catalyst for far-reaching changes in the policy of both the British and Irish governments, creating an environment conducive to peacebuilding (Smyth, 1987). Notably, MacSwiney famously stated: 'It is not those who can inflict the most but those who can endure the most who will conquer.' Albeit a powerful sentiment, the legitimacy of each side derived from 'defending' their respective communities not increasing their misery. In the context of ethno-nationalist religio-mythology, religious women were witness to, embodiment and reminder of the terrible toll wreaked on ordinary people. Their spiritual presence amidst the suffering, solidarity with real victims in the community, plus resistance to combatant community control and coercion, surreptitiously, almost silently, challenged each side's projection of a sacrificial social order.

Struggling and Silencing

The Troubles began at the end of the tumultuous 1960s as moral revolutions, ideas and movements swept the globe. New research has revealed meaningful engagement by Catholic female religious with the 'Enlightenment,' the seismic eighteenth-century intellectual

movement depicted as a challenge to religion. Hence it should be no surprise that religious women were receptive to mid-twentieth century movements, particularly progressive leanings within mainstream churches that embraced human and civil rights, second wave feminism and new theologies. Religious women in both communities were notably responsive to liberation theology's teaching that pastoral action should address the specific realities that impacted the lives of God's people, understanding who they were and how they lived. This required personal encounters, listening, respecting and above all knowing that peacebuilding starts from below. Sr Marie MacNeice recalled: 'As time went on we were able to gather people together to support one another, and it seemed to work, to help people...In the words of St. Paul, 'In our weakness comes strength.' Those words mean an awful lot to me.'

Women were crucial. Baroness May Blood insists, 'The true story of Northern Ireland will never be told till it's told about women... women were way, way ahead of the men... Quietly just working, building up those bricks that built the building up of the peace movement; building up the idea that we could come together as a community.' Sr Rosaleen Murray agreed: 'It was the women who held it all together....' At great cost: '...most of them were on tranquilisers. That was the answer when all else failed.'

Known world-wide, the African-American struggle for civil rights resonated with a Catholic community conscious of their own subjection to discrimination and injustice in an affluent First World society. Weary of second-class status accompanied by poverty and deprivation, their political disenfranchisement contributed to working-class Catholics' perception that their material circumstances were much worse than those of their Protestant counterparts. The prejudices of a 'Protestant state for a Protestant people' meant Catholics were denied jobs and housing, subjected to inequality and inequity, an accumulation of grievances that pushed young working-class Catholics into the ranks of the IRA, more-so than the constitutional question. IRA aspirations and willingness to deploy violence were perceived by the Unionists as threatening their culture and communities. The outcome was a drawn out, bloody blame-game in which each side considered themselves the victim of the other. The conversations acknowledged that religious women were far from immune to such sentiments. One Catholic sister explained: '... we definitely opposed the whole sense of having been dominated for centuries, at the same time, people, we didn't favour innocent people being killed either.... There was an ambivalence all the time really in terms of sympathy and at the same time a certain revulsion against violence....'

Living and working in paramilitary controlled areas and belonging to Churches regarded as hostile institutions owing to their hierarchies' indictments of the murder and mayhem, religious women occupied ambiguous terrain, beset by gender constraints and institutional loyalties, yet subject to the same constellation of emotions as their respective communities:

'I just felt shame and a sense of horror about the whole mess that we were in. And yet, as a woman in that I couldn't find a voice at the time. So it was a strange thing because the two things in our communities that we didn't talk about were sex and we didn't talk about the Troubles. (Laughter) They were the two taboo subjects. It was like you lived in an almost schizoid kind of environment: the teacher out there, the helper, the Sister, the social worker, whatever it was you did you didn't talk about it, and inside it was whatever do I do about all this stuff that was going on.'

The absence of men resulting from conflict conditions can thrust women into public positions they would otherwise not have attained, empowering them in a range of areas from which they

were previously excluded. Opportunities opened also to religious women with centuries of experience negotiating roles in hierarchical churches controlled by men. Nonetheless, far from being gender neutral, war tends to re-fortify and revitalize male political hegemony. Combatant groups - paramilitaries, police and soldiers – often derive legitimation through the socially constructed patriarchal sacred. For religious women, the Troubles added to the sacred patriarchy an 'armed patriarchy'.^[ii] As individuals they experienced the same levels of harassment, policing and silencing. A frequently repeated sentiment was '...you soon learned: you saw nothing, you heard nothing, and you said nothing.' In Catholic communities, various forms of control and intimidation derived not just from the IRA but also its political wing, Sinn Féin. One sister recalled 'getting into a bit of trouble' in a town where 'two of the parents were Sinn Féin Councillors'. She was accused of 'spreading anti-IRA propaganda by inviting an army chaplain to the class.' Amongst the repercussions: 'the kids getting off their buses were being stopped by the Sinn Féin people to enquire what exactly I was teaching in music. Was there any Irish content in it? ...There was no serious outcome, but I was told to keep my mouth shut!'

Silencing occurred both sides of the religious divide: 'on the Protestant side we'd seen the advent of the paramilitaries and that increased fear even more, you didn't speak out because they lived in the same community.' Any association with the police, however inadvertent, was dangerous. Blood recalled an event with a Catholic woman where a photograph was taken that made her appear to be standing beside a leading RUC^[iii] officer: 'Well, that woman's home was picketed for a fortnight and she and her husband had to move out. It was the same on the Protestant side.' In another case: 'My neighbour next door to me had all the windows blackened out just because she chose to put on what the RUC used to call a Blue Light Disco for kids.^[iv] ...that was wrong to do as far as the leaders in our community were concerned. She shouldn't have been working with the police because police were the enemy.'

Class and Calling

Ideological underpinnings drove the leaders of the respective combatant groups. Their recruits derived largely from the dispossessed, disadvantaged, often vulnerable, driven by grassroots grievances. Classified as a low-level intensity conflict, it was the working-class areas that most suffered its persistence and excess. At least one generation was born and grew up amidst the chaos and trauma as their streets became the arena in which working-class soldiers from some of Britain's most deprived areas confronted paramilitaries recruited from NI's poorest nationalist and loyalist communities. Experiences differed between poor and affluent areas, urban and rural, but the class dimension most mattered.

Religious women living and working in working-class communities were well-aware of the distressing aspects graphically described in Burns's *Milkman*. Their recollections, however, highlighted community resilience, kindness, the struggle to survive keeping hope alive and raising families, disregarding hardships. They praised grandparents who assumed child-care responsibilities and mothers who became breadwinners when husbands were arrested or interned.^[v] There was clear affection and admiration for ordinary people confronted by extraordinary circumstances who retained a value system rooted in a common humanity that transcended violence, hatred and sectarianism. Religious women constantly reiterated the privilege of being and staying 'with the people.' Sr Geraldine Smyth suggested that because religious women were known not to have 'power in institutional circles within the Church... people could feel more at ease with us.' This allowed them to exercise what 'collective influence and power' they did have, 'creatively, or in solidarity with others, or opening gateways.'

Smyth felt Catholic sisters were resourced and renewed within their religious congregations and by their faith: 'our calling to be in that journey, our calling to be at one with Him in the struggle for justice, in the work for peacebuilding, in the work for trying to overcome this idea of the other as enemy.' It also meant 'free space for thinking, for critiquing, for self-critiquing (well, maybe not enough self-critiquing) but we're certainly not short on critiquing those in high leadership in the Church and high leadership in politics.' Sr Nellie McLaughlin observed: '...we had no voice in Church matters, or in politics really. We were very much the voiceless and we were with the voiceless....' McLaughlin compared the role of religious women to NI Secretary of State Mo Mowlam, the 'unsung heroine' of the peace process: 'she's never mentioned, not then or now'. Known for her genuine love of and interaction with people, Mowlam was central to securing the Good Friday Agreement. Her role was subsequently shamefully neglected in the rush of men claiming credit (see Norton, 2018). McLaughlin recalled the pioneering work undertaken by religious women all over the country for which 'others took the kudos'.

Friendship, Humour, and Humanity

Violence and religion have a complex, ambiguous relationship, complicated by gender. Women may be no less violent than men in conflict settings, but the tendency to identify women as harmless, 'natural' peacebuilders facilitated cross-community activism that was to prove profoundly subversive. Beyond being involved in numerous, diverse community enterprises along with others, religious women also undertook their own peacebuilding initiatives. Known as 'great listeners' and acutely aware of the need, they provided counselling services. MacNeice's personal trauma, anger, helplessness in the face of tragedy, brought her to realise that counselling was essential: 'I thought, these people are going to need help - because I knew what I was needing - so I reckoned they were going to need something to do with counselling, so eventually I trained in psychotherapy: well, at least I'd be able to do something'.

She established WAVE, Widows Against Violence Empowered, a cross-community venture that subsequently included men. It remains vibrant still: 'going from strength to strength, and now it has an organization for Trauma. ...it was one little space for women who had been deeply affected by the Troubles just to tell their stories...and get strength from each other'.

Sr Noreen Christian set-up the Currach Community in West Belfast in 1992, an ecumenical reconciliation group. Separate from the institutional church, it was committed to active social justice and provided a model of cross-community living. Religious women in schools created and found funding for all sorts of imaginative cross-community initiatives. Sr Deirdre Mullan, mindful of what hate could do to young minds, organised the extracurricular 'Dance Beyond Hate'. Youngsters were taught dance as a means to learn each other's stories, make friends, eventually performing for Irish president Mary Robinson. Another innovative organisation was Women of Faith, established by Lady Jean Mayhew, then the wife of Secretary of State (1992-1997) Patrick Mayhew, now an ordained minister in the Church of England. Following various invitations from church-women's organisations, she thought rather than talk to each separately, better have an event for all, which prompted her to establish an organisation for Christian women. However, advised of: 'a group of Hindu women in Derry who wanted to join in and said we are women of faith, we don't want to be left out. So we called it Women of Faith instead and said it would be lovely to have them, so it wasn't just a Christian organisation'.

At the initiation, wanting to avoid symbolism that would offend religious sensibilities, each

delegate was given a sweet pea from the Hillsborough garden. Subsequently 'they were collected up together to put in the vase to symbolise that a flower is quite pretty by itself but put them all together how much more powerful and beautiful it is.'

An important facet of the religious women project is exploring the work of religious women in the high-security prisons housing combatants, many of whom were influential within their respective organisations. Religious women forged relationships between combatants from opposing sides. Quakers, men and women, were an active presence. Sr Sarah Clarke supported families visiting prisoners in England and campaigned for the release of those unjustly imprisoned. Pax Christi also campaigned for the rights of prisoners. Valerie Flessati commended Pax Christi NI representative Mark James who worked with the 'Peace People' and on various community peacebuilding schemes. Pax Christi committed to disseminating a better understanding of the conflict beyond the province. In James' estimation: 'I think the critical, crucial role played by women was bringing an end to the hunger strikes in '80, '81.' Reflecting on women's peacebuilding activism, Presbyterian minister Lesley Carroll challenged the 'grandiose' aura ascribed to peacebuilding and reconciliation, suggesting: 'The beginning and the end of it, it is about building friendships. There is no friendship under the sun where you agree about everything... the women were making friendships on the Shankill and the Falls, in the Clonard talks we were making friendships in the end of the day.... just be human with each other, building the friendships and if we don't get that we get nothing.'

Blood concurred: 'Absolutely.' Flessati also. Flessati recognised the daunting difficulties of peacebuilding but stressed the importance of the 'small stuff', the kind 'women are very good at and without which the more kind of high-falutin peace-making can't work'. Mayhew recalled a practice of supreme friendship by Cornerstone men and women, with the women 'playing an equal role'. A Catholic and Protestant pairing visited families grieving a conflict murder, steered to 'just sit there and absorb whatever anger they wanted to focus on us in the hopes that we would break that cycle of revenge and the young people in the family being recruited.'

Friendship, humour and humanity were identified as liberating components that helped 'people find ways of transgressing the boundary, of sabotaging the barricades, and forming friendships'. They were 'the groundwork of what's done in the name of faith or in the name of justice, or in the name of reconciliation...' Women's groups were crucial: 'they were able to unite on issues of common human need, common human aspirations, the desire for the best for their children, and they could actually set the political Green and Orange cards aside... a great risk... women's initiative groups always broke through.' The influence of women's groups on religious women, the mutual respect and identification, was clearly articulated:

'I think we were all empowered to look more deeply than we had been wont to do before that... there was a lot of sharing... there were also groups like the Women's Education Association, who were also influenced by feminist theory and analysis and they became very good partners and knew how to work a partnership model in terms of community and empowerment and leadership-building and capacity-building... the civic society sector up here was phenomenal... at the civic level, women here were active, were educated and empowered through their networking and their education processes.'

Cooperation, Collaboration and Education

Disappointment with the churches was palpable amongst the religious women. Blood considered that 'some churches did their bit but they are only a small minority.' With 'a very strong Christian faith', Blood 'always believed the church could have been more involved':

And I have to say that I found the Church very unhelpful. I'll give an example: some years ago a group of us – a group of women on the Shankill – decided to set up an Early Years Project. ...at that time, in the Greater Shankill area where I lived, I knew there were 47 Churches' Group mission halls, and I wrote to every one of them saying, "We've got this money, and we'd love you to come on board and tell us because we consider the family and parenting a big issue." And, out of 47, three responded.

Smyth recounted how a Catholic mother, following the death of her son, with:

'nowhere to go with her helplessness and her anger, went to the Church to see if she could get other mothers together, the Church really didn't want to know. They ended up having their first meeting of mothers who were concerned in a watchman's hut – he let them use his night-watchman's hut - and it was small seeds like that of women coming together out of desperation, or insecurity, or trying to prevent their children being co-opted, or prey to any social forces of one kind or another, or drug predators, that they actually began to discover ways of organising'.

Support came from religious women who 'found ways of cooperating and collaborating, either with people within the community or across the community, so that people would find their own voice and find ways of discovering their own capabilities'.

The Troubles inflicted on working-class communities a swirling vortex of emotions, anger above all. Struggles with anger and forgiveness were frequently raised by the project's contributors. However, as one explained: 'between anger and that place of forgiveness something needs to happen, and that space is, somehow, the important creative space.' In myriad small ways, religious women's everyday lives were quietly subversive. At the beginning of her Presbyterian ministry in a loyalist North Belfast community, Carroll found support 'amongst the Catholic sisters in the local area who were so very excited that there were women being ordained in other traditions. The Mercy Sisters on the Ballysillan Road, the Dominican Sisters on Fort William Park... opened up a whole new ecumenical world to me that wasn't so terrifying as I had been taught back in Tyrone or contaminating at all'.

Norma Dodds, wife of a Church of Ireland Rector on the Shankill Road, became part of the Cornerstone Community, an example of Protestants and Catholics living together in a divided community. Possessed with a profound sense of ecumenicity, Shelagh Livingstone, married to a Minister of the Methodist Church in Ireland on the Shankill Road, became part of Cornerstone and Corrymeela.[vi] She was determined 'to live and share and continue to worship with people from different backgrounds.' Crossing the barricades roused controlling combatants' suspicions, but also those of the security forces. Dodds, living on the Shankill Road but working on the Falls Road, recalled her phone being tapped, as did other Cornerstone cohorts. Carroll remembered being warned that 'the British Army could bounce signals off walls and mirrors and all sort of things and listening to what you were saying.' More traditional methods were also deployed. Well after the conflict ended, Carroll was to discover that the Sinn Féin group with which she was involved as part of Clonard's 'secret' peacebuilding initiatives was infiltrated by a British informer [Kirby, 2021]

Close checkpoint observation, and the misassumption that all Catholic sisters wore rings, resulted in Mullan being removed from a school bus suspected of being a 'fake nun'. Her identity had to be confirmed by the Bishop before she could resume her journey.

Religious women's work was a daily reminder that life was sacred, children were precious, education and every-day living mattered. 'Sister Veronique... from Cork' was fondly remembered:

'She always referred to 'Our People' and 'Our People' were the people of West Belfast... a bomb went off in the street and killed 11 people.... regularly there were bombs going off in pubs and people were killed... And that Sister, she was an old one at the time, she would go down to the street and kneel down and she'd say the Rosary – that's a very old-fashioned thing – and the women would come... So she would go and she would pray with them'.

Pulpit denunciations of brutal killings were not uncommon. One such resulted in the appearance of a mural opposite the offending priest's church. He responded by handing his parish sister a tub of whitewash. Together they erased the offending artwork. Shortly afterwards there was a knock at the sister's door. She invited the youths before her in for a cup of tea. What subsequently transpired was, she explained, a confidential conversation. Notably, however, the mural did not re-appear.

A sister from Armagh articulated anger over killings to her pupils. Subsequently one conveyed parental displeasure with the sentiments she expressed. At the end of the class, despite uncontrollably shaking knees beneath the desk, she advised her pupils to tell their parents that as an RE teacher she would continue to teach the ten commandments, the fifth of which was 'Thou Shalt not Kill', adding that she would be pleased for any parents perceiving a problem to come into the school and have a chat with her. None did. Mullan recounted a telling tale about her school Principal, who leapt aboard a school-bus being hijacked by a gunman. Combatants hijacked and burnt buses in specific locations with the intent of luring army patrols into an ambush. The Principal's instinctive reaction was not, however, guided by thoughts of saving soldiers but rather saving the bus. A burnt-out bus would lead to the withdrawal of the school bus-service for what would likely be a minimum of ten weeks. That meant ten weeks of additional stress for staff required to walk students through barricades and checkpoints to alternative bus-services. For many youngsters it would mean missing school. For one and a half hours she and the bus were missing, during the course of which the gunman contacted 'head-quarters'. He advised that he had the bus, but it came with a problem, 'a f***ing nun on board.' The gunman eventually withdrew. The bus-driver requested instruction from the sister. She asked he take her and the bus back to the school.

Schools in working class areas were subject to the same control and coercion as the rest of the community: '.... now and again you'd get the instruction that there's to be no school...' In certain places sisters 'were battling an awful lot with the supremacy of the IRA', trying 'to keep the schools open, even though we were threatened by the IRA.' Confronted by a group of angry women demanding to know why a school remained open, the Principal explained: 'Well, this is a school day and we're taking our instructions from other places than the IRA, so classes are as normal'. Undeterred, the women marched around the school with a placard demanding the sisters join them and recite the Rosary in Irish. The principal insisted the staff carry on teaching. She then put on her coat, fetched her Rosary beads and joined the marching women. The sister remembering this event observed that in addition to her courage, the Principal was known for her compassion for the pupils, telling staff they must be aware of local disturbances and sensitive to the impact on children traumatised by army house raids, smashed doors, no sleep. She expected sisters to 'talk to the pupils and try to help them to carry on as usual... keep life as normal and help them ...'

Blood emphasised that: 'Education was a big problem on both sides within the working-class areas, a very class issue in Northern Ireland,' the difficulties of which were compounded by trauma impacting young minds. Before being overcome with emotion, one sister recalled reading a child's essay that recounted how she and her mother went to meet her father coming from work. They spotted him walking toward them with his lunch-box under his arm and his friend at his side. A gunman suddenly leapt from the bushes and shot the father's friend dead. The child ended her essay with a heart-rending reflection: 'I have never spoken about this before and expect I shan't do so again.' The same sister recalled the death of a young girl, killed in an explosion alongside her grandfather. It caused mass hysteria throughout the school. The sister thought the hysteria symptomatic of a reservoir of unleashed anguish, realizing that what she and her colleagues saw most days in school was but the iceberg tip of emotions. None could imagine what each child experienced in their home settings amidst the ubiquitous seething violence in and outside of the home,[xvii] around and on the way to school. In Derry where sisters taught: 'right in the Creggan, in the heart of the conflict...it was unsafe even to travel to school and often during school children had to get under their desks because of shooting outside, you know. And then there were the bomb scares: bomb scares in the schools; and sure that went on for a long time'.

Keeping the schools open was paramount. A sister recalled how in September 1973 she began a new teaching job 'bubbling with energy and bang!' in a school in a mixed-area 'built to get the children in the areas where there was no space, out into the areas where there was space for proper sports grounds and facilities.' Three weeks later, loyalist paramilitaries unhappy with the location of the school bombed it in such a way that it was flooded and the heating system destroyed. Nonetheless: 'We did NOT close the school.' Religious women in schools strove to make them oases of normality, pathways out of poverty, an escape from hate and violence.

Personal, Societal, and Political Reconciliation

Religious women were party to personal, societal and political reconciliation, effective peacebuilders at all levels. Critical agents of change, religious women combined practical applications with emotional appeal in pursuit of a 'positive peace' that moved the human imagination beyond simply the cessation of violence. Peace talks can happen privately, publicly, or secretly. Aware of the 'secret' talks conducted from Clonard Monastery, religious women involved with Cornerstone persuaded Redemptorist priests Alec Reid and Gerry Reynolds to allow them a voice and input. It made a difference to the talks and to Carroll who came to work closely with Reid, acknowledged as pivotal to the peace process:[xviii]

'Alec Reid became a very significant part of my life. So we met in the group on a monthly basis at Clonard but I would have done many other things with Alec and met many other people in all sorts of strange and wonderful places – sometimes Republican, sometimes senior Loyalists, sometimes the Irish government, or sometimes folks from the American government, sometimes our own folks here around our own government'.

Conducting conflict involves countless considerations, exponentially increased and complicated by the pursuit of a possible end to the fighting. A negotiated peace involves a rational framework of cost-benefit analysis, with obstacles often involving issues to do with honour, pride, or ideology. Combatant rationale was that the more pain and damage they could inflict, the stronger their negotiating position, the more shattered lives and bodies, the more advantage to be derived for forging peace. Such calculations were an abomination to religious women. They brought to the talks a combination of 'raw emotion' and strategic empathy, the

need to understand all the relevant actors. They helped combatants to imagine oneself in another's emotional situation and viewpoint. In the early 1990s Carroll became involved in the 'hardnosed dialogues' with senior Republicans 'Gerry Adams, Gerry Kelly, Denis Donaldson, Tom Hartley, Alex Maskey'. According to Carroll:

‘ the purpose of the meetings was to assist Sinn Fein to understand their neighbours on this island. Our view was that the Republicans were engaged in a war with Britain – or with the British – and actually Unionists and Loyalists on this part of the island didn't matter, didn't count. And, if peace was going to be made, it was going to have to be made with those neighbours. Our intention in those conversations was to be their neighbour, whether they wanted that neighbour or not, and to keep saying to them, 'You know, when you did this, it had that impact on our community'. And, of course, they had hard things to say to us too. It wasn't all nicey-nicey at all. It was a difficult conversation many times. Those, of course, were days when members of the Republican movement turned up to meetings with their flak jackets on, so it could be quite scary. Now, while all that was happening, I didn't tell anybody. It wasn't stuff you talked about. Again, the silence was there and the fear'.

Stronger than the fear was the determination 'to be there to reflect what people on the ground were feeling. At that time I was working in a Loyalist community so it was a privilege to reflect that into those conversations.' Recently released PRONI papers have confirmed Carroll's assertion that Adams didn't understand Unionism (McBride, 2020). She indicated that 'one of the things the Republicans wanted out of those meetings was to hear the Unionist story from your gut, not from your rational head, but to hear it from your gut.' Religious women played a significant role in the process whereby Sinn Fein recognised that whilst their adversaries could not secure victory with overwhelming force, nor could they be coerced through increased pain and pressure.

Fighting and negotiation are linked by an overall political strategy and co-evolve to shape the trajectory of conflict. Notably, 'third party mediation' involving religious individuals was a feature of the NI peace process from the beginning. As early as December 1974, Feakle, Co. Clare, became the venue for secret talks between a group of NI clergymen and senior members of the IRA (The Clare Champion, 2010). Yet by the 1990s, the trajectory was still stalemate. Negotiations carry risks and costs as well as potential benefits. Belligerents are inevitably concerned to manage any adverse inference that might arise about one's capacity or willingness to fight. A deep fear is that agreeing to talk will be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Indeed, negotiation can be repudiated to keep or enhance a reputation for military capability or high resolve. Blood insisted that women made a difference: '...all those men could do was sit and talk.' The religious women involved acknowledged that they cut through a lot of the 'posturing'.

The implications of the practice of back-channels and unofficial communications through individuals with unclear negotiating authority suggests such are viewed as a means of reducing the reputational costs of agreeing to talk. Moreover, it seems that from the inclusion of religious women there emerged a discernibly more overt commitment to the peace process. The rhetorical emphasis perceptibly shifted from victimhood to agency, to a strategic future in which realism replaced 'idealism'. Both sides became pro-active rather than reactive, looking to manage the process rather than resist it, cogently reflected in the Republican transition from physical force to constitutionalism.

Conclusion

During the Troubles religious women exemplified how religion functions more effectively at the margins of society than in the corridors of power. Their neglect is a potent reminder that the contested history of the Troubles still derives from a narrow, select range of voices. The challenges of a post-conflict society require an honest engagement with the past that eschews the blame-game and explores grassroots creativity, adaptation amidst chaos and crisis to pursue participatory democracy, working-class attainment, community empowerment, women's emancipation, justice, equality and freedom from fear and violence. A part of that process, religious women constantly emphasised that peacebuilding starts from below, is community driven and that the significance of working-class women cannot be overestimated.

Endnotes

[i] In Northern Ireland alone 3,720 people were killed, approximately 47,541 injured, 36,923 shootings, 16,209 bombings. 1,533 victims were under age 25, 257 were under 18. Of those killed (54%) were civilians, as were injured (68%): https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/victims/docs/group/htr/day_of_reflection/htr_0607c.pdf<https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_cain.ulster.ac.uk_victims_docs_group_htr_day-5Fof-5Freflection_htr-5F0607c.pdf&d=DwMFog&c=Cvk6809QJWx44KVfpEaK-g&r=-43ckM1fyvCtDsgaGhk1VMKiVK-i95wy4F-Y5fstD8M&m=v81DQfAqoiSFcrHSYtKHCbiVATye3orOIGAtO-6GntY&s=FXrJCka5m-V_1AYRwVlYn_BAaWU_J26jRGfDiDtFb6Y&e=>

[ii] Description offered by NI Women's Coalition.

[iii] Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police force in Northern Ireland from 1922 to 2001 after which it was reformed and renamed as PSNI, Police Service Northern Ireland.

[iv] An alcohol-free dance for young people organised as a community project by police.

[v] Imprisonment without trial.

[vi] Corrymeela was established in 1965, a place of gathering, work, faith and discussion, bringing together people of different backgrounds, political and religious beliefs and identities.

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