

A Message from Ireland on Violence and Peace

Ireland is not one of the more supportive countries of the State of Israel, but discussion of an important moment in its 20th-century history may be useful for casting a light on the Arab-Israeli dispute and providing a valuable, if not complete, parallel with it.

The Easter Rising in April 1916 was a dramatic moment in Irish history. A major leader and the inspiration for it was Patrick Pearse, a brilliant intellectual and lawyer, a charismatic and complex personality, prominent in the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood. Fusing Catholicism and Irish nationalism, he articulated aspirations of independence from Britain and glorified violence as the means to that end. Pearse, who was executed on May 3, 1916, became a mythic figure who many believe was the icon and even the main creator of the Irish nation.

That status and the role of Pearse in Irish history was challenged by Father Francis Shaw, S.J., professor of history at University College, Dublin, in an essay written in 1966 but published in 1972, after his death. The essay, "The Canon of Irish History, a Challenge," was written for a special issue in Spring 1966 of *Studies*, an Irish Jesuit journal, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising.

The premise of the essay, highly controversial, is relevant for the Middle East today. Father Shaw criticized Pearse as expounding the myth of an innocent and oppressed Eire defying the bloody Saxon (English), the unique source of every Irish ill. Shaw held that the Irish population in 1915 was not being subjected to British tyranny, nor did it need redemption through shedding blood in an insurrection. He believed that the British government was planning to grant Home Rule to

Ireland after the end of World War I.

Shaw believed that Pearse's objectives were wrong on two counts: his emphasis on nationalism and his insistence on the total separation, cultural as well as political, from England.

Shaw was even more critical about two other issues. One was Pearse's gospel of hate and what Shaw saw as his glorification of bloodshed and violence. In the midst of the enormous casualties of the first year of World War I, Pearse wrote that "the old earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefields."

Most abhorrent to this Jesuit intellectual were Pearse's misuse of religious language and his invocation of the Passion of Christ as parallel to the bloodshed that would be spilled in the insurrection. Shaw argued that Pearse had falsely identified nationalism with holiness and misused Christ's remark, "I bring not peace but the sword." Shaw, who had personal knowledge of Nazi Germany, was fully aware that religion could be used for manipulative and brutal purposes.

Father Shaw has not been the only one to criticize Pearse's commitment to the use of force and his view of violence and death as desirable. Conor Cruise O'Brien, himself another brilliant and controversial figure, argued in his book *States of Ireland* that as a result of Pearse's influence, the mystique of the gunman became the main political theme in Irish nationalism. In a cutting remark, O'Brien argued that Pearse identified the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus Christ with the crucifixion and resurrection of a personified Ireland.

Whether O'Brien's analysis is accurate or not concerning Irish nationalism, it is certainly valid concerning the emphasis on the resort to violence, and the equation of religious language with political ideology, that has animated the Arab and Palestinian hostility against the State of Israel. Arab, and specifically Palestinian, rhetoric as well as action, through

various means, media, education, and culture, has promoted religious hatred and demonization of Jews, whether inside or outside Israel. The consequences have been wars, murders and assassinations, and terrorist attacks.

The past and present Palestinian leaders, Yasser Arafat and Mahmoud Abbas, cannot of course be compared, intellectually or morally, with Pearse, but they share the same emphasis, with one qualification, on armed resistance and violence as valid methods to be used against the enemy until victory is achieved. The qualification, recently articulated by the Palestinian Fatah group, is the condition that though it has a right to use all forms of resistance, diplomacy is suitable in the international arena in appropriate circumstances and for a temporary period. After all, Yasser Arafat spoke symbolically at the U.N. General Assembly with an olive branch in one hand and a rifle in the other.

The Palestinian parallel with Pearse is the assertion that violence is a valid and heroic way of achieving political goals. It is distressing that terrorists are lauded as heroes and role models, that public opinion polls of Palestinians show that the majority support violent tactics, and that public places, streets, and squares in Palestinian towns are named after terrorists who are seen as martyrs.

The parallel is not completely accurate, because Arab animosity towards Jews, certainly as shown in its rhetoric, is even deeper than that of Pearse towards the British. Jews are seen as inherently evil, treacherous and corrupt, responsible for all the evils of the world. Pearse never had the fantasy, as Arabs have and some still do, that the enemy intends to conquer the world, militarily as well as economically and culturally.

Pearse may have misquoted religion on occasion, as Father Shaw alleged, but much of the Palestinian hostility is permeated by constant reference to religious writings. The Koran is quoted

as is Allah, who “does not like corrupters.” The religious context is particularly noticeable in the falsehoods, a combination of national and religious assertions, about Israeli threats to the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the “noble sanctuary” on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Palestinians promote the fiction that Israel is planning to destroy it and therefore Muslims have the right to resort to violence, rioting, and use of stones and Molotov cocktails to prevent that destruction.

Other action is to oppose Israeli archeological excavations that may uncover finds related to the 3,000 years of Jewish history in the area. This is part of the Palestinian strategy to rewrite the history of the area, to deny Israel’s right to exist, and to replace that history with a fallacious invented Arab history such as that the Palestinian people have been present in the area for thousands of years. Father Shaw would be horrified not only by the Palestinian distortion of the history of Jerusalem and refusal to admit the existence of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, but also by the Palestinian denial that Jesus was a Jew who lived in what is now the State of Israel.

The lesson to be learned from Father Shaw is that diplomacy and peaceful negotiation, not violence, are necessary to end a conflict. Even Pearse on April 29, 1916 accepted the view of the majority of his colleagues to negotiate with British forces in order to save the lives of his followers. Diplomacy means bargaining, a process in which the parties compromise and do not achieve all their aspirations. The Palestinian leadership would do well to learn from the events in Irish history, and strive, as Father Shaw said, for peace and save the lives of Palestinians as well as Israelis.

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