

Religion and the Environmental Crisis

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In the brief life of the *Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace*, just over a year now, the essays submitted for publication have illustrated how far-ranging are the concerns that can be covered under this triad of themes. One topic on which we have not yet received any submissions, however, is religion and the environment, especially how religion may figure if environmental crisis engenders destructive conflict.

I had something of a personal wake-up call regarding these themes in early November. California pastor Steve Ratzlaff was touring in support of his recent book, *7 Steps to End War and Save the Planet*, which adopts a bold and prophetic tone to address the threat of imminent environmental crisis. At Goshen College, we took the opportunity of Steve's visit to organize a public discussion featuring an interdisciplinary panel of respondents. Invited to speak from a peace studies perspective, I turned to my standard ways of addressing crisis and destructive conflict. And found them wanting. The threat of catastrophic and irreversible decline posed by environmental degradation may require some radical new thinking if we are to have any chance to meet the challenge.

Most of my stances on conflict and peace are fundamentally shaped by living in Ireland and working for peace with Irish colleagues from 1980 to 2003. As a pacifist and historian, I was always on the lookout for people from the Irish past who might qualify as national heroes and yet demonstrate a nonviolent approach to pursuing national aims. In people such as Daniel O'Connell and Charles Stewart Parnell, nineteenth-century giants of constitutional nationalism whose monuments stand at the ends of O'Connell Street in Dublin city center, the standard pantheon of national heroes already included people committed to achieving independence without violence. They were few enough, however, so I was pleased to discover a little-known late-eighteenth-century academic and practical patriot named Whitley Stokes.

The 1790s were one of the most turbulent decades in Irish history, and the intense pressures of the period tended to push people into camps of violent rebellion, violent oppression, or

passive, perhaps sullen, acquiescence. Stokes refused these options. His sympathies were with the revolutionary party of the day, the United Irishmen, and some of its key leaders were his good friends, connections that eventually caused him much trouble. He could not justify violence in the circumstances, however. “In the full force of the phrase,” wrote Stokes’ friend Wolfe Tone, the main leader of the United Irishmen, “I look upon Whitley Stokes as the very best man I have ever known,” but they parted ways when it came to violence. Stokes, said Tone, “recoils from any measures to be attempted for ... [Ireland’s] emancipation which may terminate in blood.”^[1] Neither could Stokes accept oppression or acquiescence, so he put forward another way to advance Ireland’s cause.

The crucible in which Stokes was tested was the 1798 Rising, the Irish aftershock of the French Revolution and, at 30,000 dead in three summer months, the most violent episode (in terms of deaths per day) in Irish history. In the immediate aftermath, many Irish people wrote proposals for how Ireland might move forward, most of which might reasonably be described as variations on a theme of dread and panic. Stokes’ contribution was a 50-page pamphlet called *Projects for Re-establishing the Internal Peace and Tranquillity of Ireland*. It was very different, remarkable for both content and tone. At a time when most of those thinking about peace for Ireland were concentrating on combinations of security measures, education, legislation, and religion—all tending toward suppression of the feared and resentful Irish poor—Stokes used most of his pamphlet to advocate plans for relieving the economic distress of those same Irish poor, with a particular focus on getting adequate land for them. He expected to be criticised by conservatives and by his old revolutionary friends for advocating reforms that were far too slow and unwieldy to deal adequately with a crisis that demanded—or so people thought—“rapid and decisive measures, which may instantly put us in a state of safety.” But the desire for instant security was an impossible fantasy. “Be calm, and attend,” said Stokes, “human wisdom cannot devise any such measures.” It was his conviction that while “mischief might be done in a moment; good can scarcely arise but by a gradual process.”^[2] All his schemes were designed to assist this slow advance of Ireland’s welfare.

I believe in and teach something very like Stokes’ revolutionary patience and perseverance in relation to peace work. People aren’t going to stop fighting because they are awed by the brilliance of your peace plan and therefore see the error their ways, I tell my students; at some point, an exhaustion factor is going to come into play, and the same ideas for peace

that were dismissed shortly before will now start to make sense. Northern Ireland over the last forty years makes a great example. Violence started in the late 1960s, and by December 1973, multiparty negotiations had generated the Sunningdale Agreement, a plan for peace. There were too many compromises in it to succeed, however; people gave up too much to gain too little, they thought, and the plan soon fell apart. A quarter of a century later came the Belfast Agreement of 1998, which since then has served as the blueprint for peace.

So did the Belfast Agreement succeed because of its dazzling new ideas? No, its main ideas were so uncannily like the Sunningdale Agreement of 1973 that one prominent nationalist politician, Seamus Mallon, memorably referred to the Belfast Agreement as “Sunningdale for slow learners.” What had changed was the analysis that arises from a widespread sense of failure and exhaustion, the result of about 2600 deaths and many other forms of destruction between Sunningdale and the Belfast Agreement.

I stand over this approach to peace. At the same time I note that if those environmentalists who preach the near apocalyptic urgency of radical change are right, as they may be, this approach of working steadily and patiently, always alert to the moment when something new is possible, may be insufficient to meet the challenge of environmental degradation. In relation to war and all kinds of human failures, our globe has mostly been a tolerant host. We fail, profoundly and in endlessly creative ways, and the natural world is simply there as the situation for our recovery. In this case, however, our failure could conceivably bring with it the kind of environmental crisis that makes nature no longer tolerant; our heedless, even parasitic, behavior will have depleted our host to the extent that it can no longer sustain us. In this crisis, it may be that we cannot learn by mistakes, failure, and exhaustion, because we exhausting the world with us.

In the case of such a crisis, Stokes’ wisdom—be calm, and attend—may no longer be adequate. The alarmists may be right: we need to take quick, decisive, and radical action. But can we? Immediately alarm bells go off. Humanity is mostly slow, fractious, and given to dispute and division—radical change takes time. If we are to change quickly, totalitarian politics and mass coercion with little tolerance for dissent are likely to be better suited to the task than messy democracy. And then what? What will be the body count of that project in social engineering? Will we, to paraphrase Jesus, have gained the world but lost our collective soul? Will we count that as a hard but necessary deal? Will we even know what we have done? The necessary new wisdom always arises from the old wisdom, but I for one

do not know how, if the crisis is as close as some analysts believe it may be, we are going to learn the paradoxical skills of hurrying slowly and panicking with patience. Should any scholars wish to address the role of religion in this fundamental peace challenge, the Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace would be pleased to give them a platform.

On another note, the editorial board of the Journal of Religion, Conflict, and Peace is grieving the death of our colleague and book review editor, Lucinda Joy Peach (whose name can hardly be typed without writing "Peace" instead of "Peach." Either one suits.). Lucinda died of breast cancer on July 25, 2008. She had been battling this cancer for some years, and yet the end came very quickly, even unexpectedly. We were able to work with her less than two years, but in that time we came to respect her as a scholar and to love her as a person.

As we were constituting an editorial board for the journal in 2006, we invited Gabriel Palmer Fernandez to join us for his expertise as editor of *The Encyclopedia of Religion and War* and for his enthusiastic support of the new venture. Asked for advice about another board member, Gabriel strongly recommended Lucinda Peach. The rest of us had not heard of Lucinda, but her mix of research and writing interests seemed to be an excellent match with our intentions. Besides, all of Gabriel's advice so far had been good, so we invited her, she accepted, and we had the members of our first editorial board.

It turned out, however, that Gabriel's advice was not just good but inspired. Lucinda was full of interesting ideas and more than ready to take responsibilities. Her outstanding feature, however, was the simple human warmth that flowed from her, quietly, without show, but unmistakably. Perhaps that is simply who Lucinda was. Perhaps that quality reflected the depth of her Buddhist convictions and commitments. Whatever the source, it contributed so much to what seemed the almost instant cohesion of our editorial board. We loved her, and at the end of two days we felt we had a friend and colleague for life. What we could not know was just how short that life would be. We count it a privilege that we got to be her friends and colleagues for even that short period, and we extend our sympathy to the family, friends, and colleagues who loved her.

Wolfe Tone (2 vols., Washington, D. C., 1826), vol. 1, 41-2.

2. 2 Whitley Stokes, Projects for Re-establishing the Internal Peace and Tranquillity of Ireland (Dublin, 1799), 48.