

From Exclusive to Inclusive

A Journey of Faith

Ernie Rea tells some stories about growing up in Northern Ireland, his work as a Protestant minister during the Troubles and as a religious broadcaster for the BBC.

I was brought up in Belfast immediately after the war in a time of austerity. We didn't realise at the time but with hindsight it was a pretty grim place. Mine was a very happy existence but there wasn't much entertainment. The church was absolutely central. My family were Presbyterian and we went to a large church in Belfast city centre. There was a congregation of about 600 on a Sunday morning. The preaching was a bit fire and brimstone and the religion was a bit legalistic. I can remember – I think I was five years old – a Scottish Sunday School teacher whispering in my ear, 'Ernie Rea you're going to hell!'

I learnt my religion at my mother's knee. I remember on Sunday evenings we would sit down in front of the fire and she would read from the Children's Bible. Those stories became the bedrock of my existence. I loved them. They gave me my faith, even though I interpreted them then in a very literal way.

I grew up in a warm family environment. I had five sisters and I was the youngest. It was a loving family and the church, even though it was an enormous one, had a sense of belonging about it. We lived in a comfortable middle class area, a leafy suburb, in quite a large house. For me life was good but, looking back, there was a down side. There were about thirty houses in our street. Twenty-nine of them held families who were a variety of Protestant. The thirtieth, a very large house at the opposite end of the street, was the home of the Campbells. And the difference was the Campbells were Catholics. I think I knew every child of my age within a radius of about half a mile. I played with them all, except the Campbells. I wasn't ever expressly told that I was not allowed to play with the Campbells but I remember a sense that they were different, that they went to a different place of worship, that they worshipped a different God.

And our Festivals forced us apart. We enjoyed the Orange processions, specifically on the 12th July. There was a lead-up time of about three weeks

and you could hear the sound of marching bands, echoing across the city. For me they were a joyful occasion. My whole family went to watch them. As they went along they played songs that were familiarly called 'Kick the Pope' songs. During this period the Campbell children did not come out at night. They certainly didn't go to the Orange processions. Nor were they present at the enormous bonfires which we used to go to look at. Some of the biggest were on the Shankill Road. A huge crowd gathered in front of them on the evening of the 11th July, before the parades the next day. On the top was a Guy who was wearing a papal tiara. The Campbells did not go to the bonfires. For weeks, you would hear the sound of Lambeg drums echoing across the roof tops. They never struck me as a child as being particularly threatening. But with hindsight, that ominous *boom boom boom* had all the effect of marching figures, threatening if you belonged to the other side.

I have to say that there may have been a degree of prejudice in my upbringing but mine was a pretty tolerant family. However the Campbells were the Other. If I had been asked, I would probably have said that they worshipped a different God from me. I was educated at a wonderful school, a Methodist foundation, a grammar school. But significantly, I don't think there were anything but Protestant children in attendance. We had a wonderful headmaster, who was a conscientious objector during the Second World War. He had great moral authority and he would have welcomed Catholic children in his school. But there was a system of separate education and all Catholic children were expected to attend Catholic schools. In fact, there was a wonderful female dentist, who was a pillar of the Catholic church, who decided on principle that she was going to send her children to state schools, non-Catholic schools. She was determined that her children would mix with non-Catholics. The Bishop of Down and Connor refused to confirm her children unless she sent them to Catholic schools. To her enormous credit she refused.



The Troubles

But within months things began to turn nasty. We were aware that there were other forces who were infiltrating the Civil Rights movement. There were masked men who suddenly appeared. Bernadette Devlin, whom I knew at Queen's University, was one of the orators of the Civil Rights movement and it became very plain at an early stage that she was sympathetic towards the IRA. Within a few months

violence broke out, especially in the major cities of Belfast and Derry. My friends and I quickly disengaged. This was not for us.

I was brought up in a monochrome religious environment. When I went to university, the situation changed but only to a limited extent. I met Catholics; we attended the same classes. I even met a couple of Jews. They were a tiny population in Northern Ireland. I think a total of about 300 people. But even in university there was little sense of real friendship. Catholics even played different sports. We played rugby, hockey and cricket. They played hurling and Gaelic football. So again until I reached the age of 21, I had very little exposure to anything other than my Protestant Presbyterian background.

When I had finished at Queen's University, I had a vocation to the ministry. I applied to the Presbyterian church. I was accepted and went for a three-year course of study. I found that there was a religious divide within our college. There were those like me, who were of a liberal bent, who welcomed the discovery of biblical criticism, who rejoiced in the fact that we were able to treat Biblical stories as myths. Then there were the others, who were intent on interpreting the Bible in a fundamentalist way. Those who were of a liberal persuasion took part in the Civil Rights marches, those who were fundamentalists identified with the Unionist position and were deeply suspicious about what was going on.

But what I discovered in my university years was that our society was full of injustice. There was discrimination in employment. At that time a huge proportion of the workforce was Protestant. The prime minister of Northern Ireland had once spoken of a Protestant Parliament for a Protestant people and advised Protestants only to employ Protestants. The city of Derry, the second biggest city in Northern Ireland, had a large Catholic majority, but there was a degree of gerrymandering because they were all crammed into one ward, so that in that one ward they returned a single Catholic councillor with an enormous majority, while the other wards were all packed with Protestants, so this outwardly Catholic city had a Protestant council. And there was discrimination in housing and jobs. As we became aware of that and discontent began to grow, the Civil Rights movement got underway. Some Protestants joined in. We joined the marches, we felt sympathy with what was going on. We felt the situation was entirely unjust and needed to be addressed.

The great turning point in my life came at the end of my second year when my spiritual advisor was responsible for assigning us to churches where we would be assistant ministers, or curates. I thought that, coming from a comfortable middle class background, I would be sent to a comfortable middle class church. In fact he sent me to Woodvale Presbyterian. It was situated at the top of the Shankill Road, which was the most ardently Protestant, Loyalist area in the whole of Belfast. It was where the hardest of the hard men lived. And my specific job was to run a youth club. In the three years that I was there I conducted the funerals of 13 people who were murdered in the Troubles. One of them was a very beautiful sixteen-year-old girl from my youth club, who was out walking with her boyfriend. An IRA car pulled out in front of

them, a gun was produced, a shot was fired, missed him but hit her in the head.

There were regular bombs and shootings throughout the area. Terrible things would happen. If you were a young man, aged say seventeen, and you were walking up the road at night and you came to a junction, where the left hand side was Protestant and the right hand side was Catholic, you might be stopped by a gang of thugs carrying baseball bats, and they would tell you to repeat the 'Hail Mary'. You did not know which side they came from. So you had to guess. If you chose wrong you might get your knee caps smashed. That was done by both sides of the divide. There is something truly appalling about the idea that one of the best-loved prayers in the Christian tradition could be used for such a barbaric event.

One day I was visiting an elderly man on the Shankill Road who was dying of cancer. I parked my car. There was a bus stop and a queue of people, including two young men wearing denim jackets. I said hello to them. They responded. Then I crossed the road, walked to the door and sat down at the bedside of this dying man. Within five minutes I heard gunshots. I rushed out. There was a bus at the bus stop. The side window was completely broken, the front window was smashed. I waited till everybody got out of the bus and went in and the driver was slumped over his wheel with blood pouring down his shirt. I said the Lord's Prayer. I swear I heard or felt his spirit leave his body. I later discovered that the two youths that I passed when I went across the road were the people who carried out the shooting. There were a number of young men who went to my youth club who were involved in sectarian murders.

During those three years when I reflected on those kids who were caught up in that appalling violence, I knew that some of my colleagues who had trained with me for the ministry said: 'It's all down to original sin! They carry the mark of Adam.' As far as I was concerned these kids – that's what they were – in normal circumstances might be guilty of minor crimes, of burglary or muggings or what have you. They would not have been murderers. They were caught up in these times because, to be a macho man, to commit acts of violence against Catholics was a sign of authority; you got kudos for doing it. In different circumstances they would have been different people and that is not to excuse the dreadful things they did.

Working for the BBC

After I left the Shankill Road I spent five years in a rural town called Banbridge, where I was the minister and they were very happy years working alongside wonderful, committed Christian people, who managed to rise above the Troubles with their principles intact. But after the Shankill Road, it was a bit of an anti-climax. At the end of the five years I was approached by the BBC offering me a job. I'd been broadcasting more and more and had my own television show on a Friday night on Ulster television. So for the next five years I was working in Broadcasting House in Belfast and they were the most exciting and exhilarating years of my life, because religion was central to what was going on. Religion did not cause the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Troubles were caused by a mixture of circumstances, historical and contemporary, by culture and by the struggle for land and by power and identity. But when you throw religion into that mix, so that people began to say God is on our side, then you have a very dangerous situation indeed.

In our studio in Broadcasting House in Belfast we could bring together Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Loyalists, who could talk in a safe environment. Many Protestants heard their first ever Catholic Mass on Radio Ulster. Many Catholics heard their first ever Anglican Matins on Radio Ulster. We very often started work at 7.30 in the morning and didn't finish till past 10 at night. But it was exhilarating, exciting stuff.

One of the great moments of my life was Easter Sunday 1981. I was told to go up to Derry to produce Morning Service for Easter Sunday from a Catholic Church in the Republican Bogside area. The celebrant was a friend of mine whom I knew very well. It was one of those awful nights. There was gunfire, bombs going off sporadically, there were masked men in the streets. We did the rehearsal on the Saturday night. I took my friend out to supper to a very nice hotel. And he said to me, 'I've got to go and celebrate the Easter Vigil with my congregation in the Bogside. Will you come with me?' I said I'd be delighted. We went into this huge Church in the middle of the Bogside. These were among the killing grounds during the Troubles. This was not a place for any Protestant to enter, let alone a Presbyterian minister. We went into his church, it was packed full, there must have been at least a thousand people. He welcomed me, he said who I was, I got a round of applause, and then he celebrated Mass. Everybody in that church went to receive communion except for me.

Protestants were not allowed to receive communion in a Catholic church. I sat there, lonely, isolated and sad. I waited till everybody went up and everybody came back. My friend the priest waited till they all sat down. Then he walked the length of the church to offer me communion. This was a man who recognised that division and partisanship struck at the heart of what the Christian religion was all about.

I have one final experience before I left Northern Ireland which I want to share with you. It was an Easter Sunday *Songs of Praise*, recorded in St Matthew's Church of Ireland Church in the Shankill Road. In those days, and occasionally today, there were some interviews with people who had gone through an intensive experience and had some sort of testimony about their faith that informed their lives. One of the people we chose had been injured in a terrible bombing at the Abercorn Café in the centre of Belfast. He lost both his legs and he had gone public by saying he forgave the people who did it. He belonged to a very fundamentalist Baptist congregation. We started filming and as I watched I thought he's uneasy, he's uncomfortable. And sure enough, the next day I got a phone call to say he wanted to withdraw from the programme. I asked why and he said he felt very uncomfortable in the presence of priests and nuns in that service with him. I like to think that he was got at by his congregation, but it seemed to me an irony that here we were offering him an opportunity, on Easter Sunday, to give testimony to the faith that was in him, which enabled him to go through this horrendous bombing, and he decided that he wouldn't take it because of the presence of Catholics in the congregation.

I left BBC Northern Ireland two weeks after that programme went on air with a very heavy heart. I had come to the point where I could see very little difference between Catholics and Protestants, who worshipped the same God. We were brought up in different circumstances in the city, Protestants in a position of privilege, Catholics in a position of injustice. But the old certainties I had entertained as a child had been blown wide apart. I came to England, to take up a more senior job with the BBC in Bristol. My principal job was to produce *Songs of Praise*. But what a change! When I was in Northern Ireland I was living in a society in which religion was at the heart of what was going on. Most people had some connection to a church, no matter how tenuous. Bible stories were familiar territory. In England I quickly became aware that religion was a minority interest. For

most of the population it was out on the extremes.

Some extraordinary things happened. I went to a church near Chichester for *Songs of Praise*. It was quite a small church, about 400 people in it. After the recording the floor manager came up to me and said, 'There's a gentleman outside and he wants to know is he going to be on television?' I said, 'You can tell him I think it's very likely because it's a small church and the cameras go all round, so yes, I think he probably will be.' As I was packing up for the night and went out to my car, this man came running up to me and said, 'Look, let me come clean: I should not be here singing hymns in Chichester. The lady who is standing beside me is not my wife.' Get your mind round that! You're away for a dirty weekend, you've got a choice of things you could do. You don't even have to go out of your hotel. What do you do? Go where there's a television programme going on!

We were the first people to produce gospel *Songs of Praise*. I got a horrendous letter in green ink saying: 'Dear Rea, You white middle class Ulster piece of SHIT. Why don't you give us the hymns that we long for instead of this black gospel rubbish?' And every tenth word was an obscenity, mostly the 'F' word. His final paragraph said that he looked forward immensely to being in heaven revelling in the presence of the Risen Lord and looking down and seeing me roasting on a spit. He signed the letter 'Yours in the love of the Lord Jesus!' To his credit, he didn't hide behind a shield of anonymity. He signed his name and address.



Beyond Belief: Social Media. This and other episodes of the BBC Radio 4 programme *Beyond Belief*, presented by Ernie Rea, can be heard on bbc.co.uk

Head of Religious Broadcasting

Then in 1989 I was appointed Head of Religious Broadcasting for the BBC. I was working with a wide spectrum of the great and the good. I became part of a wide inter-faith network. So I became friends with Jews and Muslims and Hindus.

One of them was Rabbi Hugo Gryn. Hugo was born in the city of Berehova, which was then part of Czechoslovakia. In 1944 he was taken to Auschwitz. As they were coming up to the line his uncle said to him, 'If they ask you your age, say you are 17 and if they ask you what you do, say you are a carpenter.' Hugo was 13, he was not a carpenter. But he obeyed and watched as his uncle went to the gas chamber and he was sent over to the other side to work.

He became part of the panel on Radio 4's the *Moral Maze*. Hugo was a great man. Like many Jews, he valued the Jewish traditions, but God rarely figured in his conversations. There was an electric moment in the *Moral Maze* when the British National Party won a seat in the Isle of Dogs in a by-election and there were great fears that this was the beginning of an upsurge in anti-Semitism. This victorious councillor came onto the *Moral Maze*. In the middle of the discussion he said: 'Well, of course the Holocaust didn't really happen. There were Jews who died, lots of other people died but there were certainly not six million. And most of them died of cholera and other diseases.' And suddenly this voice rang out: 'Look me in the eye! And tell me there was no Holocaust. I lost relatives in Auschwitz. Why can't you look me in the eye?' There is a CD that the BBC issued of the Greatest Moments in the history of BBC radio and that was one of them

And of course, it was a great joy to meet many Muslims. My experience of Muslims has been almost universally good. They were people who believe that Islam is a religion of peace and want to live in peace with all. But hanging over this was the terrible 9/11. And I did make a programme which included Anjem Choudary, who has recently been released from prison after being convicted of encouraging terrorism. One of his companions was the man who killed Fusilier Lee Rigby. I made this programme and I heard the most horrendous statements made in Walthamstow, where speakers were encouraging people to go out and indulge in what they referred to as 'Martyrdom operations'. Suicide bombings to you and me.

On the Saturday night after 9/11 I was invited to go to SOAS to explain what our reaction should be to 9/11. One of the other speakers was Sheikh Zaki Badawi, another wonderful man who was the Principal of the Muslim College in London. Just before we went onto the platform I asked, 'What are you going to say so that we know that we are

not saying exactly the same thing?' And he said, 'I am going to say it wasn't Muslims who did it.' I thought he was saying that nobody who could do such an act could possibly claim to be a Muslim. But he wasn't! His initial reaction was that this was some sort of a conspiracy. Zaki loved Islam so much, he was so convinced of its high moral values, that he couldn't bring himself to believe that anyone who committed such a barbaric act could possibly claim to be acting as a Muslim. So he went into denial.

It's been a fascinating journey. Where do I stand now in my Journey of Faith? Here I part company with what I perceive to be the general stance of SOF members, although I know you are a broad church. I believe in God. And by that I mean that I believe that there is a transcendent reality, which exists beyond the realm of this world. Without that sense of 'The Other' I'm not sure that our much loved religious traditions have any meaning. However at the heart of God is mystery; and I am absolutely convinced that all the great religions are seeking and worshipping the same reality. Had I been born in Saudi Arabia or in Pakistan I would be a Muslim. Would my experience of the Ultimate Reality be invalid? I think not. I believe in a God who not only tolerates diversity but loves and embraces it.

My experience is Christian. That is who I am. Therefore I am convinced that we must hold on to those stories which we find in the Bible, and which are the bedrock of our traditions, even as we interpret many of them in a non-literalist way. We should be willing to share those stories in a non-proselytising way with those whose experience is different. And we need to listen to their stories too.

And we need to listen to those stories in Community. I am doubtful of the testimony of those who say that their faith is entirely individualistic, that they need no church or fellowship. We need the wisdom and experience of others to correct our judgements.

So I believe in God; I affirm our stories while being open to the stories of others. And I rejoice in my Faith Community. It has been an interesting journey.

Ernie Rea is the presenter of the BBC programme *Beyond Belief* and former BBC Head of Religious Broadcasting.

This is an edited transcription of a recording of the talk given by Ernie Rea to the SOF Annual Conference.