



Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster

reflection questions & episode transcript

In a typical year, Corrymeela's meeting rooms — and dining and welcome areas — are filled with people discussing matters of politics, history and religion that have separated them. During this time of Covid, we are providing you with a transcript of each podcast episode, along with some discussion questions, to aid your consideration of the themes which emerge. You may wish to discuss these questions with friends, family, a group you establish on zoom, or use them for your own writing and consideration.

In group discussions at Corrymeela, we seek to locate political and religious points of view within the story of the person speaking. If you're gathering as a group, consider how to create a sense of connectedness within the group. It might help to choose one of the Very Short Story Questions. As with any group process, if you are talking about this episode with others, make sure to check that people feel safe enough, that the time is right for them, and make it easy for anyone who wishes to keep their considerations to themselves, or for anyone who doesn't wish to join such a conversation.

1. So much of Johnston McMaster's theology has been formed by looking at what is familiar from a slightly distance. He looks at Northern Ireland from West Cork; he sits with Germans at a conference in Norway while Germany is being reunited. He finds a sense of curiosity in considering things from new points of view. Has this ever happened to you? Could you tell the story of it? Do you seek these points of view out? Or do you avoid them?
2. Johnston McMaster shares some insights into partition — politically and theologically. If *you* were to tell the story of the partition of Ireland as you know it, where would you start? And once you know where you'd start, consider why you'd start *there*. Would starting the story somewhere else be something you'd embrace, or resist? Why is that?
3. Johnston McMaster has his own particular take on religious and political leadership. Who are the leaders in your community (well known or not) who hold out hope for you? What is it about their style of leadership you admire? What about other styles of leadership causes you caution?
4. Johnston McMaster speaks about how an ecumenism has helped him consider his own political, national and religious belongings. Some of this has happened through friendships, some through learning. What are your feelings about seeking out points of view that are different to your own? Do you embrace such possibilities? Or are you cautious about them? Have your political/religious leanings ever changed? What is some of the story of that change or resistance?

Copies of Johnson McMaster's new book on the Churches and Partition can be found by contacting the publisher, The Junction, through the following link: <https://thejunction-ni.org/publications/>

The Corrymeela Podcast. Interview with Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster. Transcript.

Welcome to The Corrymeela Podcast: conversations about politics, history, art and theology. In this podcast I'm in conversation with a rich lineup of guests, considering Irishness and Britishness in this year that marks a centenary of partition and is the first year of Brexit.

For this week's episode I'm in conversation with historian and theologian Dr. Johnston McMaster. He talks about the major issues facing Ireland, the UK, Europe and the world, including an issue that recent events close to home have brought very much to the surface: *'the partition of any country is traumatic and the reunification (if you like, to use that word) of any country becomes equally traumatic'*. And he tells me how the double impact of Covid and Brexit have the potential to wreak massive change: *'what is the future for Europe? What is the future for the United Kingdom? What is the future for Ireland? Nothing is guaranteed. And I think nothing is inevitable'*.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Hello, my name is Pádraig Ó Tuama, and you're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. With me today is Dr. Johnston McMaster. A historian and theologian, Johnston is the author of the Ethical & Shared Remembering programme at The Junction in Derry, and Adjunct Assistant Professor at the Irish School of Ecumenics. His book *Partition: what did it do for us?* was published in 2020. Johnston, thanks very much for joining us.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Thank you, Pádraig. Pleasure to be here. Thank you for asking me and inviting me to be part of this podcast.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Just as we start, where are you talking to us from Johnston?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I'm in Youth Link at the moment - Youth Link in West Belfast, on Springfield Road - the interchurch Youth Service Agency. I still- I used to work here. Not in this building. But elsewhere, early days of Youth Link- the first five years of Youth Link, but I'm still involved in informal ways with the organisation so I've borrowed a room this morning.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

We're delighted you're with us. We'll jump right in. Johnston, you've been involved for many years with the Irish School of Ecumenics, having grown up and trained for ministry within the Methodist tradition. What influenced your interest in ecumenism?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think, maybe one of the things that was helpful, that encouraged it: my first appointment after theological training in Edgehill College in Belfast was to West Cork. And I'd never been any further south than Dublin before then. But suddenly, I found myself in the month of July in 1971 in Dunmanway in West Cork, and that was a small Methodist community, very much a minority community- the Protestant community in total: very much a minority. When I arrived there, I was inundated by people calling at the house, saying 'welcome, you'll be involved in this, you'll be involved in that, you'll be involved in the other', and I realised that I was going to have to be - or was expected to be - much more than merely a Methodist minister- somebody who was pastoring just Methodist people. And they were

early days in this kind of thing. But that's where I cut my teeth in a very early experience of ecumenism and collaboration and working together and trying to understand together people of different traditions.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

As a Corkman myself, I'm thrilled to hear that it was Cork that converted you to ecumenism!

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

There's a bigger story, I think, in that one as well. Because it was the West Cork experience which in many ways was formative. Not just in my introduction to and involvement with practical ecumenism, but it was in West Cork and around that area that I discovered Irish history... it not having been part of my education in Northern Ireland.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

That's so interesting.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Yeah, it was not part of any curriculum that I was following. I was doing English history, I was doing some American history. But I did not do any... I was not taught any Irish history. And suddenly in West Cork, I'm driving along, getting to know the country in a new area, and I'm coming across memorials, sites of ambush; discovering that there are headstones in certain graveyards, and there's a history and there's a story here of 1920s... 1919, 1920, 1921.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And you had never come across that before?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I'd never come across that. And suddenly, also, you're realising that, that here, I'm in the Bandon Valley. And the Bandon Valley is where in 1920 (or thereabouts) there are 13/14 people shot dead in a couple of nights. From the Protestant community. But I was not aware of this. And then I started to realise: well, I haven't been- I'm not aware of what was going on at the same time in Belfast. I've since discovered that the killing and violence in Belfast was even much worse. I became angry, actually. This had not been touched in my formal education- in school. It had not been touched either in any of my theological education. And I became angry because I thought: I'm supposed to be here as a pastor- as someone who's got to make sense of God. And I've no context in which to do that. From that point, from West Cork, I was putting together history, politics and theology.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

In your most recent book on partition Johnston, you wrote: 'all history is interpretation and there are few historians who believe in the objectivist illusion. With all our presuppositions and biases, there is no absolute objectivity'. And it occurs to me that as a point of view into history, it must be quite complex to hold that point of view into your own discipline of theology as well. I can't imagine it makes you friends to be- to have to hold so many truths together.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Yeah. But here again I think has been the value of approaching theology from - if you like - an ecumenical perspective, because that has opened up one to traditions other than one's own. And it has opened one up, I think - in the course of a lifetime reflection, and trying to think through things - it opens you up to theologies that are well beyond any kind of Irish experience as well. I do engage with South American theology, with African theology, with Asian theology. And

also, the journey brought me to a point as well, where it was engaging with theologies that were beyond Christian theology. I would say that all of that has been, for me, an enriching experience that has meant - you're quite right - holding together all sorts of- of tensions at times.

But tensions can be held together I think - in creative ways I hope - and in creative tension. You are living with not a static- you can't then live with a static kind of theology. The whole vision of God or God-talk or God language (or however we want to describe it) is always developing, always changing, always deepening, always a work in progress. And, I like to think of that in terms of a journey and a journey that I don't see having any end. I don't mean to be literal about that in terms of any afterlife. But as long as there's breath in one's body, I think one needs to be questioning, pushing the boundaries, expanding the horizons. And, and for me, that is done again in terms of history, politics, and theology and trying to hold those together.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

One of the things that's so clear in looking at your whole life of work Johnston, is that - you know – you are very well accoladed in the academy and you have lectured in many places, both as an employee of various academic institutions, as well as visiting lecturer in many places around the world. And at the same time, you're as easily to be found giving a series of talks in a retreat centre, or a parish hall. And so it isn't only in terms of ecumenism where you're holding different things together, it's also in terms of lecturing and the dissemination of information. For you, you seem to curate that as a public historian and a public theologian, and not only in the academy. And neither seems to suffer: it's not like you kind of find the *Ladybird* version of something; you're presenting material with great sophistication in places where you think folks here mightn't have - you know - they might have too many other priorities in order to go to lectures or do another degree, but you bring it out. Why is that so important to you?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Well, I think that has been important to me, as I like to think that at least one of the roles I try to have is that of being an educator. And, an educator, I think, is someone who enables others to open up the space and new space, and explore whatever it may be. And it's been important for me to... not to hold that solely in the academy. But that has got to go to the community; that has got to go into the community, be part of the community. And I think sometimes there are huge tensions in that. And the tensions... there are tensions in two directions, I think. There is a tension between the academy and the community. They don't always relate well. And there is a tension also between that kind of community education - community theological education, if you like - and the ecclesiastical institutional approach and systems. And those - it seems to me at times - those two theologies don't always meet. But there needs, again, to be an engagement.

And so I felt it important as someone who tries to do education, to bring the insights that perhaps are to be found in the academy, and to enable people to find an accessible way into those and understand them and wrestle with the critical questions that are being raised there. In turn, I feel then that the community has this huge contribution to make to the academy. Because it's- where the rubber hits the road is in the community and that is where if theology and ethics is going...are going to make any sense, they've got to make sense at that level. And at that level, also, there are the insights that need to challenge the academy.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And the unheard stories as well.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

The unheard stories- exactly. One of the great things about being at local level - the parish hall, as you say, or some such centre - are the narratives that you become exposed to yourself. The narratives that you hear being told; the experiences of people, the struggles of people with big ultimate questions. Sometimes the academy can be in a bubble that doesn't quite connect with that level. So they need each other I think. And also, I think the other thing I would say on that is: it's about holding together the local and the global, as well...

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah, as you were mentioning...

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

The local's in the global, the global's in the local, if you like.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I'd like to talk to you about partition. In your book there's a story about being in Oslo with some friends from East Germany, who knew that by the time that they - you know when the Berlin Wall was coming down - that they were going to be returning home to a different country, because of everything that the falling of the Berlin Wall meant. Tell us about that experience and the impact it had on you.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

It was a Methodist Youth Council: I was in youth work in those days. And once a year, a Methodist Youth Council would meet in different parts of Europe to sort out a European-wide kind of youth work strategy, etcetera. And we were in Oslo, and some of us - I think, three East German youth workers and myself - were staying in Lillestrom, which is not terribly far out of Oslo- half hour train journey, I think. But on the night in which at midnight, the two Germanies were to be reunited, they said to me: "look, do you mind staying for a while getting a later train back to Lillestrom?" (there were three other East Germans staying in Oslo itself) "...we'd like to spend the midnight hour with our three friends. And mark this occasion". And there was a little television in the room. And we approached midnight, watching the events in Berlin and the midnight hour was going to mark the reunification - if you like- of the two Germanies. And the bishop who was there- the East German Methodist Bishop who was there... that was a hugely moving moment. Two or three minutes to midnight he sat down and he played - as it were, for the last time - the old East German anthem. And then came midnight: the speech, brief speech by the Chancellor of Germany- Kohl, I think, Helmut Kohl. Then the bishop played the new German anthem as it were. There wasn't a dry eye in the room.

But what struck me very much about that was: I couldn't help (and I think I said this in the introduction to the book), I couldn't help but reflect on my own experience. They were going back to a country that no longer existed. They were going back to a new country, and however difficult and hard it had been living in the old East German system, they were still sad about something. And it was a traumatic moment I think in many ways, a hugely moving emotional moment. And I wondered at that point: well, what would it be like if I'd left Belfast last Thursday, and I go back this Tuesday, and something's changed in Ireland? How would I feel? And I think one realised in that experience that the partition of any country is traumatic and the reunification (if you like, to use that word) of any country becomes equally traumatic. They're big experiences that challenge - and shatter probably - people's sense of identity: who they are.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Yeah. Partition starts something that reunification doesn't end. So in 2021, we're reaching the centenary of partition of Ireland, which resulted in two separate jurisdictions existing on the island. You've published a book: *Partition: What did it do for us?* And in the book, you explore the journey to partition and you consider its impact. And I know this is a torturous question for a historian. But could you - for anybody who's listening who mightn't be familiar with that period in Irish and British history - could you talk us through some of the events that you think are important for folks to know that led to partition?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think in that chapter in the book, I think I start a fair bit back. And I think you've got to try and understand the longer view of history. The road to partition, I think was pretty torturous, and it was long. This all- it didn't happen in 1920/1921. We're back to plantation, for example. We're back to the story of different communities of people arriving in Ireland, and becoming part of the narrative of Ireland. And there is a sectarian dynamic that's there from the 16th century and the Reformations, which never took hold in Ireland. Protestants were and remain a minority community in the whole of Ireland. In some senses, you've got to nearly say: the Protestant Reformations were no great success in Ireland, if you look at it from the perspective of Protestant Reformations. So we have this sectarian tension, and it's a combination of: religion is in there, politics are in there. You have the experience that goes through the dismantling of penal laws. First of all, the establishing of penal laws, the dismantling of penal laws... You come into the 19th century, where there is the whole campaign to sort out the land issue, where land had belonged to- 85% of land in Ireland had belonged to a 10% community if you like, and more even. And all of that leads eventually to the Home Rule crisis of 1886, 1893, and then again in 1912.

So there is this torturous, painful, increasingly violent build-up, particularly through that decade, the decade that we're marking with centenaries at the moment from 1912 to 1922. Ireland was heading for a pretty bloody confrontation and civil war, I think, around 1914 when World War One broke out, and Irish men in particular (of nationalist or unionist persuasion) were going off together at that stage and even dying together on various fronts in World War One. When you come to the end of it, and you have Churchill's famous words about redrawing the map of Europe, and when the deluge had settled, we've still got the grey dreary steeples of Fermanagh and Tyrone. The Irish problem is still there. And then the torturous two or three years where there were interesting possibilities. Was it inevitable that it was going to end up in partition? Or could there have been other possibilities?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What are some of those other possibilities that you're familiar with?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Well there was a possibility, for example, that had been certainly live from about 1914 and was being seriously looked at by the Prime Minister, Asquith, which had started further back with Lloyd George, who had talked about Home Rule all round. And that would have been what then the person who was very much involved in drawing together the Government of Ireland Act that was passed on the 23rd of December 1920, that actually partitioned Ireland- these people were Federalists. And they were looking at the possibility of federal solutions: a parliament in Scotland, a parliament in Wales, a parliament in Ireland, a parliament in England. But for some reason or other, it was Lloyd George himself who put the brakes on that in about 1918/1919. And that possibility began to fade from the realms of possibility. And then, we cannot simplify the process that led to partition.

But then, in the end- and I think there was mistakes in here. I think one of the mistakes - and that may not be popular to say - but I think the abstentionism of Sinn Fein at that time was a mistake that left the Irish question solely in the hands of the Ulster Unionists in the British Parliament. And there was no other voice in there. And so the unionists were, I think, able to have quite a say and influence on what was a Conservative-dominated government at the time. That eventually panned out as this partition of Ireland, this Government of Ireland Act. And that's where the book is actually focused. I think it doesn't focus on the centenary of the birth of Northern Ireland, and it doesn't focus on the centenary of the founding and birth of what became the Republic of Ireland in 1922. It focuses on that Government of Ireland Act of 1920. Because that was the Act that actually partitioned Ireland. And it seems to me it also partitioned the province of Ulster. And as I tried to say in the book, it also partitioned Irish unionists, and partitioned Irish nationalists. Now, I think there's a lot of tragedy in all of that.

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Pádraig Ó Tuama:

You're listening to The Corrymeela Podcast and I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama. With me today is historian and theologian, Dr. Johnston McMaster.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Johnston, I would like to talk to you about the kind of role and power of churches within the context of Irish partition. You know, we've heard of Northern Ireland being described as 'a Protestant state for a Protestant people'; which has less to do really, of course, with what people think theologically and more to do with [the fact] that Protestant communities might have looked across to Britain in terms of a sense of identity, whereas Catholic communities would consider themselves Irish. And I'm sure you'll want to bring subtlety into what I'm putting forward there fairly baldly. What role and what power did the churches play within the context of identity and even partition as it happened?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

One of the good things about this decade of centenaries - if we can refer to that - is that you look at the role of churches 100 years ago, and then you look at the role and place of churches now. And you begin to see how much has changed enormously. And the churches are in a very very different place 100 years on. You go back then and I think in Ireland, they are pretty powerful institutions - whether they're Protestant or Catholic - they are very much identified with their respective political positions, for example. The Catholic Church is fully supportive of Home Rule: 'Home Rule, nothing less', they were saying, 'will meet the needs of the Irish people'. Now, we can maybe wonder what did they mean, who did they mean by 'the Irish people'? But then you have the Protestant churches who are all totally aligned with the opposition to Home Rule. And the story of 1912, and Ulster Covenant and all the rest of it, coming to partition in 1920/21. And you have the churches still pretty much lined up and still pretty powerful in terms of their political influence, and their role. And they take on even greater roles it seems to me after that, in some ways.

The Catholic Church in the Republic becomes very much the powerful institution- it had been becoming that through the latter half of the 19th century. But it's very much involved in legislation, when you look at events like the International Eucharistic Congress of 1932, and you see the role of, of the politicians in that. And then you move into this new creation of Northern Ireland also. And you find that the Protestant churches have in fact settled in some way- very much so for a kind of Protestant state and what Craig described as 'a Protestant state for Protestant people'. When he said that he was merely echoing de Valera, who talked about 'a Catholic state for Catholic people'. So I think part of the problem of partition was that not only had we two states born in violence, but we had the birth of two confessional states. And that confessionalism was both bad for politics, and bad for faith and bad for theology, and bad for church.

The interesting thing was that when partition came about, you have... For example, the role of the Church of Ireland bishops is interesting, and some research has been done around that. And you have the Church of Ireland bishops, in a sense, all being unionists. But Irish unionists. And when it comes to partition, you have the southern bishops opposed to partition (as southern Irish unionists were), and you have the northern Irish bishops supporting the partition of Ireland. And yet at that same point, you have not just Church of Ireland bishops saying, but you've also got the church leaders of all of the churches really saying and being quite adamant about it. Bishop Orr of Tuam, for example, in his diocesan synod talks about the partition of Ireland, and whatever the partition of Ireland does there is no way that we are going to settle for any kind of partition within the church. And so the churches all retained all-Ireland identities. They may have had political positions, where they were either supportive of or against the partition of Ireland, but nothing was going to partition the churches.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

When it comes to partition, you know, obviously, there's always going to be great subtleties about what led to it, why it was there; why six counties rather than three counties- who decided that, the border commission; all of those things are going to be debated back and forth. And different people will bring forth both data as well as analysis. But where do you see the border now? Like, do you see an inevitability of two independent... two separate jurisdictions in Ireland continuing? Do you see that the only option is either for reunification or not? Do you see other interesting things happening? Where do you see what's happening now? And what possibilities for the future might be that might be perhaps less divisive than just a yes or no?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

It's very difficult, I think, to separate out the whole COVID issue, and the Brexit issue: both have come together. And each has in their own way exposed a lot of things that are dysfunctional...not working... wrong. The inequalities that we've had exposed, the dysfunctionality of government systems that has been exposed; the flaw and weakness, I think, within the concept of a United Kingdom, which has been exposed as being anything *but* united. And I think also, I think we've reached a point. And there are the new challenges with Brexit: it might have been a great deal worse, had we ended up with a hard border; we haven't. But we seem to have ended up with what some people are calling this border down the middle of the Irish Sea. But it has thrown- not just in terms of Northern Ireland. It has thrown everything up in the air, I think. What's going on in the United States... what's going on, as power and wealth moves from west to east, and a future that might well be Asia and not Europe... and therefore, what is the role of Europe within this geopolitical, new and emerging narrative for Northern Ireland?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And the last ten years have been such a change. I'm looking at a quote from you from a booklet you'd published in 2011, where you were describing Europe as post-nationalist and writing that the kind of nationalisms we saw at the beginning of the 20th century, you know, had been overtaken. And this is a quote from you: 'overtaken by European

integration... The 21st century on the island is about a different and more ethical kind of politics, characterised by a liberal participative democracy, and a local European and global interdependence'. How do those words seem now ten years later?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Yeah, quite! Thank you for quoting those back at me... stuff comes back to bite us all the time!

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I mean, I think it's so interesting, like what you were saying then made a lot of sense, and I'm curious how you sit with those words.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think some of that still holds. I think there has been a big swing - call it populism or whatever we call it - but I think there has been a big swing towards, towards extreme. And we have had voices raised in Europe, in America and elsewhere... We have entered also, I think, since those words were written, I think we have entered... we've moved more also towards a democratic deficit, on our planet. Now, this is where I think everything is up for grabs at the moment. And we may well be in some big moment of transition, some big hinge moment in history.

I still think democracy is the best form of governance that we have until we invent something else (and I don't think it's beyond the ingenuity of human beings to come up with another form of governance that may be better). But that's the best I think we have. And I think it's worth trying to strengthen that and deepen it, particularly in terms of deliberative and participative democracy. And there's something there that has radical roots. I think back, for example, in Irish Presbyterianism, which we've all kind of lost, I think, in a process as well.

Now, this is where I would be prepared to say, at this point, I think, it has been a growing conviction for some years that the concept of a United Kingdom and the concept of a United Ireland are both obsolete. We're not in 1916. We're not in 1921 anymore. We're not in 1701 or wherever, when a union first came about between Scotland and England. We're in a situation where maybe we're looking at the diminution of the United States. The diminution of the United Kingdom, even the diminution of the European Union. The big unions, I think, have been crashing- The Soviet Union disappeared. And there's something that may be shifting and changing.

So when that is put into global context- and I think there was nothing more stark and amazing than watching Ursula Van der Leyen and other European officials sign off on the agreement between the United Kingdom and Europe. And then the next day, we had Merkel and Macron and Van der Leyen and the Chinese President signing a huge big trade agreement between Europe and China. Now, good or bad, that's the shifting world we're in. And I think there is a question here: What is the future for Europe? What is the future for the United Kingdom? What is the future for Ireland? Nothing is guaranteed. And I think nothing is inevitable. But I think we're at a point where we need to engage ourselves in global context, in trying to wrestle and struggle and imagine what a future will be. Because I don't think it's going to be the same. What it is, I'm not quite sure. But I think we might well find if the United Kingdom, for example, wants to survive, then it may well... we may well be back to a hundred years ago, to look again at federalism, a written constitution and a bill of rights. Ireland, if it is to come together- let's put it that way. And I think we should drop language like a united Ireland or a reunited Ireland. We need to talk- if we're going to talk about a shared Ireland or a new Ireland. And that's very different from what anybody I think will have envisaged or could have dreamt of. But

that too, might be a federal arrangement. There might be a parliament in Dublin and a parliament in Belfast, but a shared island: one country.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And what would you say is the role of faith communities in all of this Johnston as you look at the role north and south?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Okay, if I go back 100 years again, the faith communities had conflated their faith loyalties with national loyalties. They had identified and over-identified their faith commitments with political commitments. I think the breakdown of church-state- and this is the value and I think it's the positive value of the secular: that it is the separation of church and state. And I think we have seen that happen in Ireland. And that puts the churches in a different place and I'm not quite sure they've realised it yet- what has actually been happening and what it means. It means that I think for the faith community now, there is no religious commitment that can be identified with a political commitment. I think what the faith communities bring to all of this is to... is to give an ethical perspective; an ethical perspective on what would ethical politics look like? What do ethical economics look like? What do ethical environmental concerns look like?

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And do you think the churches have the authority to do that? You know, I don't mean from governments but in terms of their own public witness, do you think the churches-?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I have questions about that. I have questions about that. Because I think what has happened is, I think in the last lot of years, as we've seen the breakdown between church and state, religion and politics... I think we've witnessed the churches, generally - I'm talking generally now - going into flight. And I think they... we have come through the three decades and more of violence. But I think we too easily got to the end of that and thought: 'the violence is over, back to business as usual'.

There was no radical shift in theologies. There was no major working out a theology (for example) of social reconciliation. There was no kind of working through a whole radical public theology; a new public theology that would apply ethics to the big social, public questions of our time and generation. And I think, therefore, the problem for the churches is that they are theologically not fit for social reconciliation, or social peace, or common good. They don't have the theology worked through, because there's not been sufficient reflection. There's not been a process of deconstruction, and then a process of reconstruction; there's not been a shift of hermeneutic that allows theology, sacred text, foundational documents to be interpreted and read from a sociopolitical ethical perspective. And until we start to move much more along those lines, I don't see- I think there will continue to be a diminution of the institutional forms of religion here. And I think it's interesting. And I had this discussion yesterday with a number of people who were saying, from different areas in different parts of Ireland, from Dundalk to Ballymena: young people aren't interested in this stuff at all. They don't have any religious identity and do not wish to have a religious identity. Now I think we need to ask why. And there may be some obvious answers to that.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

I can hear what you're saying there is a kind of a classic example of lots of the ways that you speak about the future by inviting people to have an ethical examination of the past. It isn't just laying out facts of history, and deciding who's to blame and who's not. But that there is a kind of a self-reflective and community and church and political and identity-

based reflective approach toward the past in order to be able to find a new way to live together with those tensions into a future where the tensions might look very different. Why is an ethical reflection on the past so necessary in order to open up the present and perhaps a future after that?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think what we tried to spell out in the Ethical & Shared Remembering programme was... we borrowed from Richard Kearney, the Irish philosopher teaching in Boston. Who had a template that he had developed around- I first came across it in a book and piece he had written on inter-religious dialogue. And it struck me then that this template of narrative hospitality, narrative plurality, narrative complexity was something that we- that could be applied to the exploration and the reflection on our history and on our decade of events: that crucial decade of 1912-1922 in Ireland. And that that was an ethical approach, because here was a way of opening up space, to hear a multiplicity of narratives; to recognise that (go back to something you quoted from me earlier) that all history is interpretation and there will always be multiple interpretations. But we need to hear, and have enough generosity (in hospitality terms, if you like), to hear the diversity of perspectives and stories and histories. And also to realise that that is hugely complex. Complex in the sense that it doesn't stand still; that somebody discovers a bunch of letters up in an attic that had been sitting up there for the last century maybe and it opens up a whole new perspective, and a whole new angle, and the history changes. And it's not about the kind of thing that you sometimes hear: ah! revisionism, revisionism... rewriting history. History is always being rewritten because it's inevitable that it is rewritten, because the narrative and the information and the insights keep changing. No one has the whole story of Ireland.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

In everything that you're proposing, Johnston, one of the things that I think is fundamental, that would hold all that together, is the capacity for leaders across religious and political identities on the island of Ireland - as well as between Ireland and Britain - to have exchanges of thought and expansions of the mind, and communicating with each other in a way where people are open to curiosity and surprise, and shared learning. Do you think that we have adequate leadership for that, both in religion and in politics?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think you're absolutely right that that is what we need. And we, for example, we... Brexit, I think has shown us in the last four years, that with a lot of politicians in Britain, certainly of government, there was the most appalling level of knowledge of Irish history, as if Irish history was not also British history. And I don't know what exposure for example young people in an educational system in these two islands would have to those complex narratives of Irish-British history, but I think we do need to engage.

The problem, I think, at the moment is that on one side of the pond, there has been a lot of nostalgia around the whole Brexit thing. There has been a kind of longing for empire again, and an inability to acknowledge that empire has gone, faded, the sun has set. But also the possibility that that offers to begin to critically look at a history and histories of the past. And to look at it together. How do the Scots and the English need to talk to each other about histories? How do we in Ireland and Britain, east-west need to talk to each other about histories? How do we need to help young people be engaged in that kind of thing? The churches themselves... when you have situations where in one denomination, there has been a cutting off of the relationship with a sister church - the Mother Church in fact - on the other side of the pond: you have a closing down of history. You have a closing down of engagement, you have a closing down of discourse, and we're not going to be open and that kind of thing to having our narrow perspectives - and they are therefore narrow perspectives - challenged and widened and broadened. And also- and I think key to all of that engagement is the recognition of complexity.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

And one of the things I think that dialogue requires is the capacity to recognise that some people will see that dialogue will be morally suspect, because I think to be blunt about it, some folks are really moved toward dialogue, and other people will say: 'well, if you dialogue with them, well, therefore, you are no kind of co-identifier with us'. You see that that's informing some of the anxiety that there's a taint imagined really, if somebody's seen to be engaging - like a Presbyterian from Ireland, and a Presbyterian from Scotland, for instance, formally in their public roles - would probably wonder who's watching them, were they to be seen to be engaged well?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

There is a great deal of angst about. There is a great deal of fear around... I think something for example, like fundamentalism - whether it be political fundamentalism, or religious fundamentalism, not just Christian, but others as well - is largely driven by fear and angst. And it's the fear and angst that comes from the sense that a world is collapsing, that old certitudes are really disappearing- they're not there anymore. And therefore you will get this kind of opposition I think, which we've got to try and understand. And that begins to sound almost like a condescending reflection on it. But what are the root causes of the angst? What creates the fear, that may lurk in all of us, that will stop us from engaging? And the feeling of our identities are tied up in small little boxes that you feel then that if you do begin to broaden out and open up in the slightest way to another set of narratives, you begin to lose that identity, you begin to lose your faith.

I've had it put to me frequently: 'how can you be ecumenical? You're compromising the purity of your tradition'. When it comes to inter-religious dialogue, and talking together and engaging in dialogue with Muslims and Jews and Hindus and so forth, there is a tremendous angst over that one, and 'how can you do that? You're letting the side down. You'll compromise the whole, the whole faith'. There's a purity issue, I think lies behind a lot of this as well. And what is the purity that we're trying to maintain? And that may be deeply personal in terms of what we think our identity is. And it raises questions again: well what is our... ultimately how do we talk about identity? Are we unionists? Are we nationalists? Are we Methodists? Are we Catholics? Are we Presbyterians? Or are we primarily human? And that common shared humanity is a much larger identity I think, that that has also, can also be perceived in terms of beyond our very localised, maybe parochial kind of perspective and identity. And we need I think, in today's world, and where we're heading and where we're going, we are global citizens.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

What- as we finish up I'm curious about what sustains you in hope about the practising of our politic and ecumenism, that is based on this common shared humanity?

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

I think the wider larger perspectives are there and in terms of faith community, I think there is this growing awareness of a public theology that goes way beyond our confessionalisms, that is rooted in the human as well as in the sacred if you like, and the two are not different. And it's an ecumenism that recovers the sense of the meaning of that word in its original language for example: 'the whole inhabited earth'. But it's even broader than that now because I think this is where we need to talk about the whole community of life. And within that perspective of a whole community of life, our humanness is tied up also with I think, the world of nature, and the animal and the inanimate world that we live in.

We're not apart from this, we're not above this, we're all part of a huge partnership; on which I think we need to find ways of expressing it and embodying it; so that our identities can be larger, so that we can be engaged in a process of the healing of a world. That is not just the healing of a human community, but the healing of a whole community of life. And I see in the context and the contacts and the opportunities I've had and still have, I draw a great deal of hope from a lot of the dialogue and action that is taking place. There are moves into that larger way of looking at things. I see the hopefulness in young people who - okay, not all but many, I think - who do not want to identify with the old narrow identity markers, be they political or be they religious, but are open to a more human story.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster, public theologian and public historian, thank you so much for coming on The Corrymeela Podcast.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Thank you, Pádraig. Thank you.

Our guest this week, Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster, is a historian and theologian. His latest book is *Partition: What did it do for us?* And it's a publication from The Junction. That's available from the Junction's website. We've got links in our shownotes. Don't forget to listen right to the end for when Johnston answers some of our Very Short Story Questions.

Thanks for listening to The Corrymeela Podcast. I'm Pádraig Ó Tuama and I'll be back next week with another episode.

The Corrymeela Podcast comes to you with generous support from our funders: the Henry Luce Foundation, the Fund for Reconciliation from the Irish Government, the Community Relations Council Northern Ireland and our regular monthly and annual donors, who are part of the Corrymeela network of friends.

The Corrymeela Podcast is a FanFán production. Thanks to researcher and producer Emily Rawling. This podcast was mixed by Fra Sands at Safe Place Studios.

Rev. Dr. Johnston McMaster:

Three people that I would be in a lockdown bubble or would enjoy being in a lockdown bubble with, I would say Columbanus, Daniel O'Connell, and John Hume. Those three people were big people in their imaginations and their outlook on things. They were great, global figures, Europeans, speaking truth to power, looking for emancipation, be it religious be it slavery, be it political. I'd love a conversation that would be in a bubble with those guys.

Pádraig Ó Tuama:

Johnston, thank you so much.

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