Culture or Faith?
Origins of Conflict in our Society

A Catholic Perspective

Raymond Canning

Abstract: This is a revised text presented at the *Fifth International Inter-Religious Abraham Conference*, Sydney, August 2006, which took as its theme "Interfaith Relations in Confronting Cultural Conflict". [Editor]

A very clearly stated Christian perspective on the role of interfaith relations in confronting conflict in society was presented by Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, then President of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue, in delivering the inaugural *Pacem in Terris* lecture in February 2005.[1] The Archbishop's development of his particular perspective on how interfaith relations can confront cultural conflict revolves around four precise requirements of the human spirit. These had already been identified by Pope John XXIII in his encyclical as truth, justice, love and freedom; for John, these four elements are indispensable if order is to reign in society. "[The] foundation [of order in society]," John XXIII had said, "is truth, and it must be brought into effect by justice. It needs to be animated and perfected by people's love for one another, and, while preserving freedom intact, it must make for an equilibrium in society which is increasingly more human in character."[2]

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[1] An initiative taken by Georgetown University, Washington DC, to keep alive the spirit of Pope John XXIII's encyclical of that name: *Pacem in Terris* / *Peace on Earth*. See the full text of Archbishop Fitzgerald's address, "Peace in the World: The Contribution of Interreligious Relations" at [Accessed 28-05-09]:
http://www.bc.edu/research/cjl/meta-elements/texts/cjrelations/resources/articles/fitzgerald_28Feb05.htm

[2] *Pacem in Terris* 37.

On the fortieth anniversary of *Pacem in Terris*, Pope John Paul II in his turn would refer to these same requirements of truth, justice, love and freedom as "pillars of peace," and to these four pillars, Archbishop Fitzgerald in his 2005 lecture at Georgetown added a fifth, viz., prayer. "Prayer for peace," he stated, "can be a distinct interreligious activity, but prayer should permeate all interreligious endeavours … It is the spirit of prayer that reminds us that in meeting and cooperating with people of other religions we are not seeking the advantage of our own group, but the good of all. In this way interreligious dialogue can truly be a contribution to peace in the world."

As these abundant references to Popes and papal encyclicals, and to Pontifical Councils and Catholic universities, make clear, the particular Christian perspective that I wish to bring to the question "Culture or Faith? Origins of conflict in our society,"[3] is profoundly shaped by my own Roman Catholic upbringing and affiliation. Many alternative approaches would be possible. It might, for example, be illuminating in the context of a discussion of culture, faith and conflict in society to consider the fervent opposition mounted by some elements of German Protestantism to the racially and religiously inspired violence that was being perpetrated by the National Socialists in the 1930s.

This opposition was embodied in the famous Barmen "Theological Declaration" of 1934, according to which only the Word of God is to be trusted and obeyed. All other "events and powers, forms and truths" cannot be recognised as revelation. Thus the critical distance from this world and its idols which is mandated and enabled by the so-called "Protestant principle" – based as this principle is on the one Word of God spoken from outside this world – gave strong theological grounds to a number of German Protestant Christians to

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[3] I read as conflict in terms of "violent" conflict. For a recent, quite comprehensive treatment by a Catholic author, see L. D. Lefebure, *Revelation, the Religions, and Violence* (Maryknoll, New York 2000). See now also W. W. Emilsen and J. T. Squires (eds), *Validating Violence – Violating Faith?* (Adelaide 2008).

call into question and even repudiate the purported truths, powers and heroes of National Socialism.[4]

Whatever one's perspective, however, it is essential to note a possible ambiguity in the question as stated, "Culture or Faith?" Does this imply a straightforward option? Are we to expect that either one or the other, i.e., either culture or faith, will be identified as the principal cause of violent conflict in our society? Such an approach, it is clear, could lead the unwary into an over-simplistic exoneration either of culture or of faith (or belief or religion), without paying sufficient attention to the considerable cross-fertilization between them.

As far as a definition of "culture" is concerned, a classic treatment is to be found in the extensive 2003 work of Michael Paul Gallagher SJ, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture*.[5] The central concern of this work is the interaction of culture and Christian faith in today's context. Gallagher's treatment of "culture", it is true, is framed around a somewhat different question from the one that is being examined here. Still, in clarifying the concept of "culture" and developing a twelve-point synthesis of its multidimensional nature, Gallagher's analysis can help shed light on our own discussion of culture and faith with its focus on analysing their propensity to give rise to strife and violence.

Three of the twelve dimensions of culture that Gallagher lists have particular bearing on our question. Firstly: "Underlying [its] social manifestation culture is found to involve a convergence of both visible factors and acquired ways of interpreting the world [elsewhere Gallagher refers to these acquired ways of interpreting the world as "a more concealed set of subjective attitudes often assimilated unconsciously over a long time"[6]]. For instance, culture carries and

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[4] On this question see D. Sölle, *Thinking about God: An Introduction to Theology* (London / New York 1993) 11-12.

[5] M. P. Gallagher SJ, *Clashing Symbols: An Introduction to Faith and Culture.* New and Revised Edition (London 2003).

[6] *Clashing Symbols*: 24.

expresses: (a) meanings and *beliefs*…; (b) values…; (c) customs, practices and traditions." Secondly, the connection that has been established here between culture and beliefs is now extended to embrace religion as such: "At its 'higher' reaches, culture includes not only such spiritual activities as art or literature, but some ultimately *religious* vision." And, thirdly, in the last of his twelve points on culture's multidimensionality, Gallagher concludes in this "religious" vein: "Throughout most of human history," he writes, "cultures have been rooted in *religious consciousness.*"[7]

However we might wish to respond to these points in detail, it is clear from Gallagher's presentation that:

(1) belief, tradition or some "ultimately religious vision" or "religious consciousness" is virtually inseparable from the notion of culture – as Pope John Paul II wrote, "[a]t the heart of every culture lies the attitude a person takes to the greatest mystery, the mystery of God"[8]; and

(2) the power of culture to sway people lies in its "being largely concealed in its impact";[9] lived culture, far from being neutral in its effects, "can encourage creativity or it can prove imprisoning";[10] indeed, for Gallagher, "[a]wakening to [culture's] non-neutrality [its concealed sets of assumptions, which may be very deep-rooted and unconsciously clung to] is a first step towards a Christian response to culture in practice."[11]

Gallagher's very nuanced treatment of the multidimensionality of culture, therefore, is again fair warning against any cheap and easy kind of either-or option (culture or faith) when it comes to identifying the origins of violent conflict in our society. Culture is not neutral, even though it may be fashionable in rationalist circles to read it only as "secular, rationalist" culture and to pit it

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[7] *Clashing Symbols*: 26. Emphasis within each point is my own.
[8] *Centesimus annus:* 24.
[9] *Clashing Symbols*: 10.
[10] *Clashing Symbols*: 11.
[11] *Clashing Symbols*: 12.

against purportedly "irrational" religion.[12] Culture, however, on Gallagher's reading, cannot but embody faith – whether people are aware of it or not – and this embodiment takes the form of beliefs, traditions and practices. From a mainstream Catholic perspective also, by the very fact that these beliefs, traditions and practices represent attempts to express the mystery of God in human language, they will inevitably bear the marks of the particular cultures according to which they have been shaped.

Thus, once the term "culture" is weighed and assessed, it is found to include belief and beliefs in its own very pores; and this remains true even if the "beliefs", the concealed sets of assumptions, are purely rationalist and denigrating of religion. What then is to be made of the term "faith" when we find ourselves faced with the proposition that either culture or faith is the cause of violent conflict? Could we, without any shift of meaning, simply replace the term "faith" with "belief" or with "religion," such that the question becomes "culture or *belief*?" or "culture or *religion*?"

From a Catholic perspective it is prudent to recall at this point St Thomas Aquinas's reminder that "the act of the believer [i.e., the personal act of faith] does not terminate with the proposition [i.e., with the words communicating the content of faith] but in the reality [i.e., the living reality of God's self]."[13] Aquinas thus makes a clear distinction between "faith" as an act of personal response to God and "belief" as denoting content in the form of propositional statements. According to this understanding, the act of faith, as an act of surrender of the whole person to the mystery of God revealed in Christ,

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[12] For a critique of arguments that posit a secular/religious dichotomy, and that attribute religion's proneness to violence to its absolutism, divisiveness and irrationality, see the address entitled "Does Religion Cause Violence?" delivered by Dr William Cavanaugh at St Mary's Church, Upper Coomera, on 8 June 2006. [Accessed 28-05-09]: http://www.bne.catholic.net.au/mission/downloader.php?dir=&file=cav_does_religion_cause_violence.pdf

[13] Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 1, a. 2, 2. See D. Lane, *The Experience of God: An Invitation to Theology* (New York / Ramsey 1981) 68-78. Also on the relations between faith and belief, see R. Haight, *Dynamics of Theology* (New York 1990) 26-29.

transcends the objective belief and beliefs that the believer has about God or Christ. And these beliefs, as necessarily partial expressions of the fullness of that divine truth to which faith is committed, will always be limited and inadequate. To this extent, faith itself would seem to be above the fray.

It would be unwise, however, to run too rapidly to such a conclusion. If personal faith in the living reality of God's self were to resist all expression in particular beliefs, it would soon become prone to distortion and manipulation. Faith needs beliefs in order to maintain its own vitality, integrity and credibility. It is bereft without them. Until it reaches its ultimate destination in the very fullness of God, could faith itself then remain totally untouched when Christian belief adopts certain cultural expressions that may foment violence? For example, what is to be made of Bernard of Clairvaux's view that killing in Christ's name could be undertaken with a clean conscience?[14] Is this just an utterance of belief, all too prone to the impact of culture, or is faith itself implicated?

We have seen that people's belief and beliefs are central to a number of essential dimensions of what we understand by culture, and while it is important, along with Aquinas, to distinguish faith from belief, still faith and belief cannot do without each other so long as human beings are pilgrims on this earth. In the words of Pope John Paul II, it is not only beliefs but also the personal faith that they express which are "at the heart of every culture." If this is so, one will need to proceed carefully in deciding whether to lay blame at the door of *either* culture *or* faith when it comes to the origins of violent conflict in our society, for faith is itself inscribed at the very heart of culture. On the other hand, as Aquinas shows, faith can also be distinguished from belief in that it is specifically oriented to the full reality of God. To the extent that faith transcends any and

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[14] I have this quotation from J. A. van der Ven, "The Multicultural Drama: Religion's Failure and Challenge", *Australian EJournal of Theology*, Issue 7 [Accessed 28-05-09]: http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/research/theology/ejournal/aejt_7/van_der_ven.htm
For this reference van der Ven cites R. Forst, *Toleranz im Konflikt* (Frankfurt 2003) 89.

every specific set of beliefs, it puts Christians in a position to respond critically and creatively to the actual structures and practices of the particular cultures in which they find themselves. At this level, to consider the question of the origins of conflict and violence in terms of "culture or faith" can in fact prove fruitful, but now with an understanding of faith as potentially transformative of culture.

From a Catholic perspective, therefore, the question to be probed might be formulated as follows: how, and under what circumstances, might a culture influenced by Catholic *belief*, and even the Catholic community itself, be responsible for causing strife and violence? Conversely, how might Christian *faith* help to resolve conflict and build peace in society, both in awakening people to any particular culture's hidden assumptions and in representing an agency by which cultures might be transformed.

These are not questions that can be dealt with at any length here. It should not be overlooked, however, that the Catholic Church has in fact acknowledged the historical complicity of its members in doing harm to others, and recognised that the expression of its belief has not always been faithful to the transformative power of its faith in the mystery of God revealed in Christ Jesus. An important expression of this recognition resides in the service of *Confession of Sins and Asking for Forgiveness*[15] which was observed as part of the Jubilee Year in Rome on 12 March 2000. The then Cardinal Ratzinger, for example, led the following call to prayer:

> Let us pray that each one of us … will recognize that even men of the Church, in the name of faith and morals, have used methods not in keeping with the Gospel in the solemn duty of defending the truth.

In the same service there was also a call to repentance for "the words and attitudes caused … by enmity towards members of other religions …", and for the contempt shown for the cultures and religious traditions of others. Reflected

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[15] See full text at http://priestsforlife.org/magisterium/papal/00-03-12prayerofforgiveness.htm Accessed 28-05-09.

in these prayers is that spirit of repentance called for by Pope John Paul II in his letter on the eve of the new millennium in which he lamented "the acquiescence given, especially in certain centuries, to intolerance and even the use of force in the service of truth."[16]

What are the sources of this intolerance and recourse to the use of force? At the beginning of the fifth century in Christian North Africa St Augustine eventually invoked the power of the Roman Empire in order to suppress the Donatist church which had, in his view, broken and separated itself from the communion of love. This policy of compelling the so-called heretics to come in (cf. Lk 14:23) is often taken as the starting point of the Church's turn to force in the service of the truth. How could Augustine, the Church's great Doctor of Love, have done this? How could he resort to state-sanctioned violence as a means of resolving the social and political conflict with the Donatists, with its tangled historical web of doctrinal and cultural roots? According to a recent commentator, the reason was that Augustine's humility failed him at precisely this point. Where he ought to have continued to cling to God with continent love, waiting for love's true realisation in God's time, he instead strove to anticipate the presence of "higher [ultimate] goods through coercive and manipulative [incontinent] grasping."[17] As Gerald Schlabach puts it:

> Augustine longed for…the eschatological fullness of all love for God and for neighbour…when all creatures in loving God as their *summum bonum* would also be bonded together in mutual love for one another "in God."
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> For a passionate, forceful personality such as he, the great temptation was then to rush the creation of an order of mutual love. His pre-conversion desire to be loved and esteemed had not gone away, for such desire alone was not sinful. Yet such desire could and did become an incontinent desire as it goaded his impatient effort to create that order of mutual love through human power.[18]

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[16] *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 35.

[17] G. W. Schlabach, *For the Joy Set Before Us: Augustine and Self-Denying Love* (Notre Dame, Indiana 2001) 127. See also Schlabach's "Augustine's hermeneutic of humility: An alternative to moral imperialism and moral relativism", *Journal of Religious Ethics* 22/2 Fall (1994) 299-330, especially 315-330.

[18] *For the Joy Set Before Us*: 138.

Leaving aside what might have driven Augustine, and bracketing for a moment the putative origins and causes of the abuse of force in the history of the Christian Church, we may take heart from the principle enunciated in Vatican Council II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*,[19] and reiterated by Pope John Paul II in his 1999 letter referred to earlier, that "[t]he truth cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth, as it wins over the mind with gentleness and power."[20] This same spirit of openness and non-violence also pervades the Pope's letter at the close of the millennium year, where he states that "interreligious dialogue is especially important in establishing a sure basis of peace and warding off the spectre of the wars of religion which have so often bloodied human history."[21]

To this dialogue, which is essential for peace, the Christian Church brings its own symbol of peace, "Christ [who] is our peace" (Eph 2:14), the humble God who "triumphed [upon the cross] with a love capable of reaching even to death," the judge of the last judgment who identifies himself with the stranger ["I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35c)], the one who proclaims "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9).[22]

The five "pillars of peace" derived from reflection on *Pacem in Terris* – truth, justice, love, freedom, prayer – clearly stand at the basis of many of Pope Benedict XVI's statements during his recent visit (8-15 May) to the Holy Land.[23] There is, however, a significant gloss. A sixth shared "pillar" is now specifically identified, for Christians and Muslims are called to work together

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[19] *Dignitatis Humanae* (promulgated 7 December 1965) 1.

[20] *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* 35.

[21] *Novo Millennio Ineunte 55.*

[22] As Pope Benedict XVI reflected in a seven-minute meditation which he delivered in the little mountain parish of Rhemes Saint-Georges (Val d'Aosta) on 23 July 2006. See [Accessed 28-05-09]: http://www.chiesa.espressonline.it/dettaglio.jsp?id=73684&eng=y

[23] See, for example, "Visit to the "Regina Pacis Center": Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI". [Accessed 28-05-09]:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090508_regina-pacis_en.html

"to cultivate for the good, in the context of faith and truth, the vast potential of *human reason*."[24] This summons has been seen by some prominent Christians and Muslims to mark a shift in the Pope's thinking beyond his 2006 Regensburg address, which appeared to depict Islam as weak in reason and therefore prone to violence.[25] Now, however, adherence to truth, which is embraced by both parties, is presented as keeping "debate rational, honest and accountable and [opening] the gateway to peace." It is seen as broadening "our concept of *reason* … and [making] possible the genuine *dialogue of cultures and religions* so urgently needed today."[26]

Thus the largely concealed set of often unconsciously assimilated subjective attitudes identified by Gallagher, which give both cultures and religions the power to sway people for good or for ill,[27] can be critically brought to light and creatively reconstructed. Across cultures and faiths, cultures and religions, tapping "the vast potential of human reason" thus becomes a common challenge for people of faith everywhere as they struggle to move beyond situations of conflict and perceptions of a clash of civilisations towards building together a civilisation of love.

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[24] "Meeting with Muslim Religious Leaders, Members of the Diplomatic Corps and Rectors of Universities in Jordan: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI", Mosque Al-Hussein bin Talal – Amman, Saturday, 9 May 2009. See [Accessed 28-05-09]:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090509_capi-musulmani_en.html (emphasis added).

[25] See Tom Heneghan, "Pope Benedict slowly learns dialogue with Muslim", 14 May 2009 at [Accessed 29-05-09]:
http://uk.reuters.com/article/idUKTRE54D2LE20090514

[26] "Meeting with Organizations for Interreligious Dialogue: Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI." See:
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/may/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090511_dialogo-interreligioso_en.html Accessed 29-05-09. Emphasis added.

[27] *Clashing Symbols*: 24, 10-12.

Author: Professor Raymond Canning is Assistant Head, School of Theology (ACU, Canberra Campus) and Director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Inter-religious Dialogue, Australian Catholic University.

Email: Raymond.Canning@acu.edu.au