From Desecration to Reconciliation: Considering attacks on the Sacred during the Troubles and proposing a framework response

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Introduction[1]

It is evident that in situations of conflict, religio-cultural places and symbols are frequently targeted for attack, which in ordinary circumstances would be considered as safe from damage and destruction.

By way of brief reflection, it appears that such attacks have occurred in every conflict whether in India, the Balkans, the Middle East or the Sudan. Most recently, stories have been carried concerning the destruction of places of worship and the desecration of graves in southern Somalia[2] and the killing of people in a mosque in Thailand.[3]

Northern Ireland has not been, and is not, immune to attacks on religio-cultural places and symbols. Here places of worship, Orange Halls[4], cemeteries[5] and graves[6] have been, and continue to be, targeted. People have also been killed while attending their place of worship, on their way to or from it and in the grounds of a religious setting.

In short, it is the contention of this paper that in times of socio-political stability and peace, manifestations of the religiously symbolic are respected and to threaten or be seen to attack them crosses boundaries of regard and respect which otherwise holds such action as social taboos. On the other hand, in times of socio-political instability and conflict, these symbols can find themselves more vulnerable to attack. As a consequence, when attacked in this way, boundaries are crossed which appears to impact heavily on those most affected and can lead to a deepening of the conflict.

The activity involved with crossing religiously symbolic boundaries in a disrespectful and violating way is considered, by this paper, to be desecration, defined as any activity that 'divests of sacred or hallowed character or office; diverts from a sacred to a profane use or purpose; treats with sacrilege and profanes'.[7]

While defining and identifying desecration in this way, it is notable that given what appears to be the ubiquitous nature of attacks on the religious in contexts of socio-political instability, little research has been carried out, nationally or internationally, on its prevalence in, and impact on, situations of conflict and/ or violence. Indeed, as far as it can be ascertained at present, no research at all has been carried out in Northern Ireland on desecration and its influence on the conflict and attempts at finding reconciliation and peace.

Given the lack of research attention on this neglected, yet important, issue, the Institute for Conflict Research (ICR)[8] was granted funding under the Community Relations Research Award Programme of the Community Relations Council (CRC)[9] to undertake a short piece of research into desecration and its relationship to conflict in Northern Ireland. By way of outcome, it was intended that the research would lead to a better understanding of desecration as a dynamic of conflict and violence in order that the conflict potential of its impact might be limited and any opportunity for furthering reconciliation might be maximised.

Thus, this paper is an output from that research and specifically focuses on desecration within the context of the Northern Ireland conflict. As such, the research sought: (1) to conceptualise desecration; (2) to record a small number of indicative stories of desecration during the conflict and violence in Northern Ireland; (3) to consider the impact of desecration on individuals and communities as a dynamic of conflict and violence; and (4) to propose a framework model for responding to incidents of desecration.

Research Methodology

a. Research Design

As noted above, the research sought to achieve the outcome of better understanding desecration, as a dynamic of conflict and violence, in order that the conflict potential of its impact might be limited and any opportunity for furthering reconciliation might be maximised. So as to gather useful data to facilitate this outcome, the research objectives were in turn used to develop a number of core questions including

1. What is desecration?

2. What are the stories of desecration during the violence in Northern Ireland?

3. What is the impact of desecration?

4. What should a good practice response to desecration include?

Each of these questions had, in addition, a range of sub-questions which were used to further explore the issues in semi-structured interviews.[10]

b. Methodology

The research was carried out as a qualitative social research exercise. In this it was planned to interview three groups of people: namely, those who had specific experience of someone being attacked at place of worship, attack on their place of worship or attack on a cemetery or grave; secondly, representatives from organisations which would have some particular insight to offer on such attacks; and, thirdly, other civic representatives of church leaders, academics and political representatives.

i. Primary Research

Meetings were set up with a number of people from each of the three target groupings. By the end of the interview phase, thirty three people had been interviewed in twenty three interviews: twenty personal interviews and three small group interviews (one with the three staff from the Churches' Community Work Alliance (CCWA)[11], one interview with a group of six members of Whitehouse Presbyterian Church and one with a staff group from Crossfire Trust, Darkley[12]).

In terms of sample grouping, one interview was held with a political party representative, two with academics, four with church representatives (two with church leaders and two with individuals who were involved in responding to incidents), eight with organisations and eight with people who had particular experience to share. Within this latter group of eight, four were interviewed on basis of experience of damage and/ or destruction being done to place of worship (The Church of our Lady, Harryville, Ballymena, Whitehouse Presbyterian church, Springfield Road Methodist Church, Fortwilliam Macrory Presbyterian church), one due to damage at a cemetery

(Milltown), two arising from attacks on people at a place of worship (Mountain Hall Lodge, Darkley and St Brigid's, Belfast) and one from a combined situation of attack on a place of worship and attacks on people at the same place of worship though from different times (St Brigid's, Belfast).

ii. Secondary Research

At the outset of the research, it had been hoped to make use of a broad range of literature relevant to the issue under consideration. This transpired to be more difficult than initially assumed due to the paucity of available literature focussed on desecration and conflict.

That said, however, the research did become aware of some academic work having been done on church burnings in the southern states of the United States of America and particularly as it related to the experience of churches and congregations belonging to faith groups from the Black community.

As it turned out, after a significant amount of web based research, only two papers directly exploring the theme of desecration and its relationship to conflict were found.

In terms of quantitative data, the only available information appears to be PSNI statistics describing attacks on church property, Orange Order/ Apprentice Boys' Halls[13] and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)/ Ancient Order of Hibernian (AOH) clubs.[14]

Research on Desecration and Conflict

Two papers were found concerned with the themes of desecration and its relationship to conflict, though not necessarily reconciliation. Ravindran[15] does not appear to be aware of Hassner's work[16] though, as outlined below, there is consideration given to some similar themes and contexts.

While acknowledging a lack of research in this area, it is nevertheless worth noting some broader academic work which has been carried out on the themes of attacking the sacred as represented by religio-cultural places and symbols. Thus, incidents of desecration have been collated by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).[17]

In addition, it would appear there is a small but growing body of literature and information in the field as represented by the work of Jack Santino, and a range of contributors, on shrines and memorialisation[18]; Eriksen and Jenkins, and similar contributors, on flags, symbolism and desecration[19]; and, the National Coalition for Burned Churches and Community Empowerment (NCFBC) in the USA[20].

In light of a research gap, the contribution of Hassner and, independently, Ravindran is important in trying to understand the relationship between desecration and violence in situations of conflict.

Hassner begins his paper with a story from Iraq illustrating the conflict that arises over sacred spaces. On reflection he considers, 'conflicts at sacred sites mobilize tribal, nationalist, and ethnic sentiments, inciting violence that spreads rapidly beyond the structure's physical boundaries.'[21] While recognising the universal dimension of conflict and desecration at sacred sites, he is particularly concerned with the 'unique dilemma for US operations' in Iraq where service personnel have to choose in a conflict situation between 'desecrating a sacred space or restrict their fighting to respect the opponent's religious sensibilities'.[22]

Ravindran begins his thesis with an itemisation of incidents of desecration in a number of conflict settings. He states that for him desecration 'is the profanation or violation of anything sacred'.[23] This he develops later to involve 'the destruction, defacement, devaluation or defilement of sacred space, object or belief'.[24] The focus here is on exploring what desecration is and how it impacts the context wherein it happens.

Ravindran considers the sacred to have three important roles: to be a place where people meet their God; to be a place of divine dwelling; and, to provide meaning. Given these roles, it is thought that sacred space can be created or interpreted as being sacred. However understood, it is further suggested the importance of a sacred is defined by indivisibility (not open to reduction, substitution or sharing), centrality (the importance of the sacred within the whole understanding of belief and practice) and exclusivity (the controls placed on access to the sacred). The potential for conflict is thought to increase with the degree to which any of these boundaries are crossed, as to do this involves a desecration of the sacred.

While acknowledging the importance of Ravindran's work, it needs to be noted that while interested in trying to conceptualise desecration and gain an understanding of its impact it does this from the perspective of secondary

qualitative sources. In addition, even though some dynamics involved with desecration are proposed, these are done to indicate the propensity of retaliatory reaction. Apart from two passing comments, speaking of grief and trauma, his study on the impact of desecration engages with the psycho-spiritual impact on individuals and communities in a very limited way. Further, Ravindran appears to give no attention to ways in which an incident of desecration can be managed.

With respect to Northern Ireland, it is noted that no research has been found that considers the themes of desecration and violence during the time of the Troubles. If desecration is thought to be something about attacking the sacred of the other, then perhaps it is necessary to begin with querying whether any such attacks took place and if they did what is known about their nature and scale.

That said, if deaths alone at places of worship and/ or graveyards are counted as indicators of desecration then it is important to recognise the fact that possibly twenty one of those who died during the violence were killed either at a place of worship or on their way to/ from place of worship.[25] The two places of worship most recognised here are St Brigid's, Belfast, where four people died in three separate attacks and Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley, where three people were killed in one attack. Five of the twenty one were killed in two incidents where one individual was using church premises as a spot from which to fire during trouble on the lower Newtownards Road, Belfast, and the other four were killed by security services in a church car park after they had been involved in an attack on the security services. One person was shot at her church on the Albertbridge Road, Belfast. As well as those who died following attack at a place of worship, Sutton also identifies nine people were also killed at funerals or in cemeteries.

Further to this, there are stark statistics available from the PSNI concerning the number of attacks on places of worship (and separately, Orange Halls and GAA clubs). These show that from 1994 – 2006, five hundred and sixty seven places of worship, two hundred and eighty seven Orange Halls and forty six GAA clubs (in years 1994 – 2002) have been attacked. It is particularly striking that 78% of the attacks on places of worship, during 1994 – 2000, involved a fire or petrol bomb incident; and, over 13% of attacks on Orange Halls, which have recorded the nature of the attack, show them to have been destroyed in the incident.

In the light of this quantitative data, it is thus suggested that there is a significant body of evidence to indicate the sacred of the other has been attacked in incidents of desecration during the conflict in Northern Ireland. At the same

time, given the high percentage of attacks involving petrol bombing and/ or arson it is hard to believe how these incidents could reflect spontaneous unplanned attacks.

Year	Places of Worship (Fire/ petrol bomb)	Orange / Apprentice Boys Halls	GAA/ Ancient Order of Hibernians Halls
1994	20 (19)	8	4
1995	52 (46)	42	6
1996	52 (41)	38	4
1997	41 (36)	41	6
1998	42 (27)	29	2
1999	15 (10)	26	1
2000	31 (19)	26	8
2001	30	16	12
2002	35	4	3
2003	59	6	N/A
2004	32	4	N/A
2005	83	14	N/A
2006	75	33	N/A
Total	567 (1994 – 2000, 78% attacks by fire / petrol bomb)	287 (39b / 13%Destroyed)	46

Table 1:
Attacks on Places of Worship, Orange Halls and GAA clubs, 1994 - 2006[26]

While this research began with some general awareness of particular incidents of desecration, there was no recognition of the scale of attacks on religio-cultural places and symbols. Along with such a lack of awareness of the scale of the problem, there also appears to be a corresponding lack of strategic response. It is to be hoped that with the introduction of Hate Crime legislation[27], there may at least be a quantitative underpinning of the problem that will require the development of a strategic response. At the same time, however, there is an issue here concerning how an attack is reported to the PSNI (if it is at all), whether it is perceived as having been 'motivated by prejudice or hate' and how in the light of this it is recorded, reported and followed up.

Though not focused specifically on places of worship, it is also worth noting the early work following the Ceasefires by Jane Leonard on Memorials.[28]This report was produced as a survey of 'the landscape of conflict commemoration in contemporary Northern Ireland'.[29] In this paper, she observes 'Public memorials to the Troubles are regularly desecrated'.[30]

Reflections on Desecration

The following findings for each of the four themes under consideration in the study were elicited from those interviewed.

a. Conceptualising desecration

'But what is desecration?' was a question frequently asked by people in the course of outlining the focus of the research to them in the hope of gaining their participation in it. Consequently, at the outset, it was important to acknowledge that trying to understand what desecration was actually constituted a dimension of the study. It was important to realise that a number of aspects were of particular relevance here and so questions were posed that sought to facilitate some understanding of this core issue.

Thus according to the interviewees, desecration is considered to be a complex phenomenon which is frequently found in conflict situations where boundaries and taboos are crossed that would not be in more stable times. Every person interviewed could recognise desecration and talk about its place within conflict. As such, desecration was described as an attack on the treasured sacreds of an individual and/ or community.

It was interesting to note how broad the participant's understanding of the sacred in a community was. Thus, these sacreds are considered to include places of worship, buildings, war memorials, memorials, cemeteries, religious artefacts, clergy, religious leaders, Orange Halls, GAA clubs, murals, civic and national symbols, eg flags as well as places of healing and safety. The sacred in community was recognised as hallowed ground which could develop as a result of atrocities and/ or historical events happening on the site. In this regard, it was thought desecration 'takes away a part of me and who I am meant to be'.

It was further suggested the underlying dynamics of desecration include anger, exclusion, injustice, personal hurt, hatred, a lack of respect, reprisal, dissatisfaction with society and a wish to take away the 'special' from another, brain washing on behalf of the cause, a challenge to the powers, frustration, contempt and a drive for purity.

Desecration in short is acknowledged to be symptomatic of a society where the 'way of dealing with difference and hurt is through violence'.

b. Identifying Incidents of Desecration

Every person interviewed was able to identify incidents of desecration which had taken place during the Troubles. A number, of course, had personal and direct experience. Thus, places of worship identified as having experienced desecration included: The Church of our Lady, Harryville, Ballymena, St MacNissi's Roman Catholic Church, Randalstown, Fortwilliam Presbyterian Church, Springfield Road Methodist Church, John Knox Memorial Free Presbyterian Church and St Brigid's Church, Belfast. Incidents were further identified as having happened in Milltown Cemetery, City Cemetery and Carnmoney Cemetery. Attacks happened to people at Mountain Lodge Mission Hall, Darkley and St Brigid's, Belfast. In addition, attacks on War Memorials, Orange Halls and GAA clubs were also identified, as was an attack on the Memorial Garden in Omagh.

While being able to identify certain places where incidents had taken place, the scale of the attacks in some places needs to be appreciated. So, for example, during the interview with the group from Whitehouse Presbyterian church it transpired they had experienced some twenty seven attacks over the years with the last attack being an arson attack which resulted in the destruction of the church building.

c. Acknowledging the Impact of Desecration

As the previous stories were recorded, it was continually the case that comment was given on the effect and impact of the incident. Thus, it is important to pay due attention here not only to the incident itself but also to the way in which the experience impacted the lives of the individuals and communities.

With respect to the impact, desecration is recognised by those interviewed as being like a trauma with deep emotional and psychological effects on personal and community identity as well. These effects include a sense of outrage, upset, bewilderment, anger, fear, sadness, devastation and a questioning of faith; but a strong resilience to keep going was also identified.

A significant impact of desecration is the way in which it is thought it undermines a person's sense of security, while leaving them with a sense of hopelessness, despair, a lack of direction, increased suspicion, reduced trust, isolation and victimhood. It needs to be realised that the impact of an incident may not be immediately evident and could manifest itself years later. At the same time, if handled well, the situation may open transformational possibilities for reconciliation as evidenced by the development of some significant cross-community relations following the attacks at Harryville.

In addition, it is recognised that desecration is both influenced by conflict and is an influencer of conflict. Whatever the complexity of this relationship, and the possibility of retaliation emanating from an incident, it is not thought that it automatically leads to a predetermined response. That said, it is suggested desecration generally influences conflict by keeping it going.

The challenges brought by desecration are identified as including: bringing the conflict to an end, dealing with the financial implications of an attack, developing tolerance and respect, addressing the incident to limit conflict potential, protecting the site where it has happened, educating about sacred space, handling the hurt caused, preventing a victim mindset from taking hold, and seeking legal due process. Finally, there is a challenge in trying to find ways in which past incidents can be acknowledged while at the same time having hope that these things will never happen again.

d. Responding to Desecration

The research interviews progressed from trying to develop a conceptual understanding of desecration, to gaining an insight into the experience of some people who were direct victims of desecration and on to acknowledging the effect and impact of such experience on individuals and communities. In light of this, it was also important to consider what an effective response to an incident of desecration might look like.

Here then, the interviewees identified a number of needs as requiring attention. These included the need for affirmation from religious and community leaders, especially those from the other community; the need for accountability and understanding; the need for a co-ordinated, properly resourced, cross-community and cross-sectoral strategy; the development of tolerance and respect; public and unequivocal condemnation of any incident from all sides of the community; empathy with victims; safe space for reflection; enforcement of Hate Crime legislation; working to 'make the place sacred again'; addressing the psycho-spiritual impact; and, keeping the community together.

From these needs, priorities were also identified which included: meeting and continuing to meet those from the other community; developing and maintaining good community relations; managing incidents and their impact well; developing community education processes; dealing with the pain; bringing people to court for the attacks; and, consulting with all effected to find a way forward.

In light of all the information shared by the participants, it is proposed a framework response to desecration needs to involve:

1. Preparing a strategic, coherent, resourced and co-ordinated plan of action developed by a range of concerned parties, including representatives from government, district councils, faith groups, denominations, criminal justice agencies, PSNI, media, youth and community work, victims/ survivors groups, other interested organisations eg Healing through Remembering and Journey towards Healing and those who have been victims of attacks.

2. Maintaining a database of information on all such attacks.

3. Identifying a 'lead partner' who will own and remain accountable for the strategy's implementation.

4. Ensuring the strategy is made available to all faith groups and those with responsibility for the care of graves and cemeteries at district council and local congregational levels.

5. Developing joint 'incident scenario' plans between local churches/ faith groups/ clergy forums which will include how a faith group will respond in the event of an attack, how faith groups not attacked will respond in support of those who have been and how the media is to be briefed.

6. Making available affirming, appropriate and ongoing trauma support to any victims of an incident of desecration.

7. Developing 'accompaniment arrangements' to support those who have suffered an attack returning to the place of the incident.

8. Providing clergy and other faith workers, responsible for pastoral care, with specialist training and supervision in trauma, bereavement and mediation work.

9. Preparing and disseminating biblical, liturgical and pastoral resources dealing with the range of issues raised in this research for faith leaders, faith community members and victims. These resources would benefit the work of reconciliation if they were prepared and promoted in an inter-church/ ecumenical manner.

10. Encouraging appropriate pastoral responses to incidents of desecration by members of the community which the perpetrators of an act of desecration come from, eg visiting and letter writing to the victims.

11. Developing and sharing acts of 'reconsecration' which, as gestures of healing, would benefit from being designed and shared in an inter-church and/ or cross-community way.

12. Handling incidents of desecration according to the 'anti-hate crime' Criminal Justice Order legislative framework and PSNI process for dealing with 'hate-crime', while also considering how to implement an effective restorative process.

13. Publicising widely prosecutions of people for acts of 'desecration'.

14. Giving active consideration to the development of shared sacred spaces known, respected and protected within and between communities as safe places of welcome and inclusion for all; as well as being places of creativity, imagination, transformation and healing.

15. Accessing Good Relations programmes which focus on developing tolerance and respect for all that is considered to be sacred in community.

16. Encouraging reflective practice processes in order that practice can be continually improved and the strategy made more effective such that in time non-violent responses to conflict are seen as the only option.

Concluding Comment

Identifying desecration as 'an attack on the treasured sacreds of an individual and/ or community' allows for a broader typology of desecration to be proposed. Thus, when reflecting on such a desecratory attack, it can be asked whether the desecration was:

- spontaneous or planned;
- intentional or accidental;
- perpetrated by an individual or group.

While acknowledging the actual impact of the attack on a victim may be the same no matter what, it is possible that different strategies of response may be developed according to the way in which the act is understood to have been carried out. In other words, an attack which is believed to be a spontaneous act carried out accidentally by a single person may occasion one form of response. On the other hand, an attack believed to be a planned act carried out intentionally by a group from 'the other' community may call for a different response. Here, it is important to realise incidents of desecration are still happening.

In addition, the research has found itself being opened up to, and opening up, a broader understanding of the sacred in the community which is found to encompass substantially more than formally identifiable religio-cultural places and symbols. This has implications also for the ways in which desecration is understood within a community.

Thus, it is concluded there is a great deal of work to be done on trying to better understand the development of the sacred in a community; how it influences and shapes the identity of a community; and how that sacred is symbolised, perceived and used by all sides in furthering the spiral of conflict and violence, and possibly reconciliation.

Given this situation, a society in transition from violence to peace (as well as being one which is developing towards being increasingly multi-cultural) is faced with the challenge of facilitating the development of the sacred in the community in ways which enable a shared future to become more of a possibility.

The reality for the time being, however, is one where community sacreds remain as potentially 'viable' targets of attack and desecration. Thus, there also remains a need for a responsive framework which will mitigate the impact of any such attack while promoting any potential for reconciliation. That said, this may possibly indicate the need for at least two types of framework: one focused on the identifiably religious and the other specifically concerned with responding to attacks on other community sacreds such as memorials, murals, etc.

While there is need for further work to be undertaken on trying to ascertain a responsive framework for attacks on community sacreds, this research was focused on developing a responsive framework for attacks on Christian places of worship, on people at a place of Christian worship as well as graves/cemeteries. It is hoped this further work will be taken on as a priority.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge and thank a number of individuals and agencies for their openness, support and encouragement during this research project. I would particularly like to express my appreciation to:
    All who shared their stories and insights. I trust they feel their experiences have been fairly represented;
    Dr Geraldine Smyth OP, Senior Lecturer and Co-ordinator of Research Degree Programmes at the Irish School of Ecumenics, and Dr David Stevens, Leader of the Corrymeela Community, for kindly agreeing to be members of a project reference group and who offered valuable comments on the draft report;
    Dr Neil Jarman and the staff of the Institute for Conflict Research; and, The Community Relations Council for generously providing the funding for the research to be carried out under the Community Relations Research Awards Programme.

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Appendix 1

Desecration – Questionnaire

1. What is desecration?

1. What images (and associated words) come to mind when thinking about desecration?
2. What are the 'sacreds' in the community?
3. How do things become 'sacred'?
4. What would you say desecration is?
5. Why does desecration happen?
6. Are you aware of any other work done on the theme of desecration in situations of conflict?

2. What are the stories of desecration during the violence in Northern Ireland?

1. Are there any incidents during the Troubles that you would describe as examples of desecration?
2. What can you remember about it?
3. What was the response to the incident?

3. What is the impact of desecration?

1. What is the effect of desecration
2. How does this impact on the individual and/ or the community?
3. How does desecration influence conflict?
4. What challenges does desecration pose in conflict situations?

4. What should a response to desecration include?

1. What needs are evident from desecration?
2. What should be the key priorities in responding to desecration?
3. What would a 'best practice' response look like?
4. How can the potential for further conflict be minimised?
5. How can the potential for reconciliation be maximised?

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