

POLITICS AND FREEDOM IN NORTHERN IRELAND

1.1 Politics and a Higher Authority

There were times when politicians and people alike knew they were under higher authority. Even when they respected it half-heartedly or tried to escape from it, they could not go far astray. A politician could not be a politician without recognising this higher authority or transcendence, whether the authority was a king, a god, a humanitarian ideal, the well-being of all the citizens of the country. Even their political conduct was guided by respect for such transcendent authority. Politics has always been full of fighting, power games and struggles but everything happened under the shade of a shared transcendence, which was the last reality for everyone. This had important consequences for politics and power games. Political opponents were never alone with each other; they were never left in rivalry with each other without rules or structures. This created a freedom towards one another, even where there were power struggles. There was always a final goal which was the point of the entire power-game. Because of this shared transcendence, they had freedom in relation to one another. Thus they retained responsibility for and towards each other.

1.2 Politics without Transcendence

We need not trace here the process by which all kinds of transcendence are being corroded. This cultural process has invaded public and private areas of life and has, in any case, gone a long way in the political field. The disappearance of transcendence in politics leaves politicians without that important 'something'¹ that is above and between all of them. Their political goals are now only their own and no transcendence or structure unites and separates them. They oppose each other nakedly without rules. They become interested only in triumph over each other. Without transcendence, politics becomes more and more a power game only. Once the power game was governed in the last analysis by transcendence; the goals themselves were derived from transcendence; but now the goals lose their objectivity. The only reality which remains is the fight for power itself. Everything, programmes included, becomes a function of the power fight.

Culture, in which transcendence and structures are anchored, came into existence to prevent and contain human violence which could destroy any possibility of living together, as humans have actually done. When politics is only about power, it is handled as if culture and its achievements did not exist.

1.3 Politicians in the Power-Game

Politicians are just human beings like anyone else. They are no better and no worse than anyone else. They are caught up in a cultural change, or perhaps disintegration, for which we are all responsible. We got into it together and we must get out of it together. But at the same time, the politician's situation is a very special one. The loss of transcendence (and the disintegration of structures which always depended on it) makes all conflicts involving power degenerate into power fights pure and simple. Politicians in the middle of this power fight then have only themselves without anything between them. The closer we get involved in a fight, the more we resemble those we are fighting. We and those we

are fighting together destroy any transcendence above us and structure between us. We are fascinated by each other, imitating each other more and more. This is the old wisdom of the classical tragedy. Especially when we think we are totally unlike those we are fighting, we copy each other's actions even more faithfully. In the end we are tempted to do everything necessary to win and at the same time to get rid of each other. Every means is used, however nonsensical and violent, so the entanglement becomes tighter, the ties stronger and the slavery worse. There are no possibilities for resolution. As violence escalates, everything that is done is about and for nothing.

1.4 Politics and Politicians in Northern Ireland

Transcendence and structure are disappearing all over the world and Northern Ireland is no exception. But in Northern Ireland age-old issues, hurts and memories of violence make the consequences more dangerous than in many other places. The existence of Northern Ireland is, or seems to be, at stake. Freedom in politics is very badly needed in order to find a possible solution, but at the same time all the mechanisms of rivalry are working to destroy such freedom. Politicians, and people, for the most part know about transcendence. Yet even the transcendent God, who protestant and catholic worship together, is often a sectarian God; a helper, or worse a weapon, against the other. That which might have been the anchor of transcendence, our biblical and cultural heritage, is destroyed.

Politicians in Northern Ireland, as everywhere, are responsible for what they do. At the same time, they are participants in a power struggle, one which is taking place at all levels of Northern Irish society. It is also a power struggle which faces the same inevitable conclusion that it becomes in the end a mere struggle for power, and the old and official political goals become increasingly worn out and irrelevant. While this is true, politicians have nevertheless a responsibility of their own to come back to real politics and real political goals, working with and against each other for a future.

2. Politics and Freedom

2.1 What is Freedom?

It would not take much to have an enormous debate about the meaning of freedom, in the course of which everybody would become 'unfree', merely fighting about freedom. In this paper, I define freedom as the possibility each person has to do their duty in the particular situation in which they find themselves.

To merely do one's duty means to be out of rivalry. As soon as we are in rivalry with someone else, we are at the very least doing things other than our duty. When we are in rivalry, we are fascinated by the other and our actions are no longer determined by our duty but at least as much (and increasingly) by what the other, the rival, is doing. Ultimately, we lose sight of our duty, our responsibilities become hidden and ignored, and we are fighting only a power game, in which our actions are dictated simply by the actions of the other(s), our opponent(s). In fact we don't even know what our task is anymore because everything is dictated by the rivalrous relationship. Every tool or goal, all other people, even God himself, become weapons in the struggle for power. To be free means to be outside this rivalry. It entails the possibility of discovering a real task and of carrying on with this without being led astray by others. It means creating the possibility of finding

that task, speaking about it with others, listening to them quietly and in a matter of fact way, and pursuing the work without being infected by rivalries and the power game.

Being free means to have distance, not because you fought the others away, but because you don't rival with them. To accept differences between me and them, recognising their different possibilities and we helping each other, just by being different.

Freedom also means knowing yourself, and recognising your own hypocrisy. We are all hypocrites in our culture. When relations become difficult, we use our hypocrisy to attack our opponents. We are very hypocritical about violence; we are all aware that our opponent's violence is a bad violence and always believe that it has to be withstood with our own violence, which is always good in our eyes. Yet violence always destroys relationships. There is no 'good violence*'. Our own violence is as bad as that of our 'opponents'.

We are also extremely hypocritical in our scapegoating; we always assume that the other is the baddy while I/we are the goodies. We protect unity among ourselves by using violence against these others, by scapegoating them. Being free means to understand what you are doing and to stop it. Being free also entails living within structures recognising each other's duty and place. We have to rediscover a new transcendence for everyone. I will return to this.

2.2 Losing Freedom

It is clear how we lose our freedom. We may become less and less busy with our task, which may be a task which must be fulfilled together with others who do not belong to the group we call 'us'. Instead we may become more and more preoccupied with these 'others'. Then we are no longer carrying out our task, we are competing with them. This rivalry destroys the chance of fulfilling the task in an adequate manner. The people who we are responsible for, who we have to serve, become tools used for our goals. We forfeit our real potentials and our features as personalities, becoming just fighters - increasingly indistinguishable. We lose our trustworthiness and in the end our integrity. More than ever we become hypocritical and violent, blaming ever more people for our problems, even our own constituency or our family as the reasons for our failure to win.

Thus, we are helping to destroy culture itself. Culture has always existed and can only exist because there is difference; these differences, while we recognise and accept them, prevent our disappearance into total rivalry. Rivalry destroys differences and hence undermines culture itself; and we need cultural order in order to live together. The end result is total chaos.

2.3 How can we become Free?

We may think that we can fight against others in order to become free. We believe that we have become free when we win; in fact we have only won the power game and we are 'one-up'. Time and again we make the mistake of believing that one-up is identical with free. The so-called 'free nations' are in fact the 'one-up' nations. They are only free because there are 'one-down' nations. This freedom may create a temporary equilibrium in international politics, but it is not the freedom we need if we are to work together for the benefit of the community large or small.

The freedom we need for this, is the freedom from rivalry, freedom from the necessity to win. It is this supposed necessity which always makes us unfree and justifies our violence and the ensuing chaos,

2.3.1 Freedom must be Given

Freedom is intimately connected to human relationships, as is love. This implies that you cannot give freedom to yourself or acquire it alone. It is our experience that if we fight to be free we simply become more enchained. The notion of fighting for one's own freedom has the result of changing a form of human relationship into an ideal to be striven for. As a result this ideal becomes a rival which becomes higher and higher, more and more unreachable and destructive. The more we strive for freedom the more we become the slaves of yet another rivalry. Freedom can only be given and accepted in human relationships. All that we can do alone is to lessen the 'unfreedom' by increasing the distance between ourselves and our rivals. Rivalries become worse when distance diminishes. Hence we can turn to other fields of interest, or go on holiday, or if we have a contented family we spend time with them, etc. By so doing, we create distance and reduce the rivalry, making them less destructive. Eventually, if we see no other option, we give up and shrug the whole burden off our shoulders.

2.3.2 How do we become Free?

We must now ask the question a second time. To come to an answer, we have to recognise that we receive and learn everything from another, from somebody outside ourselves. This can, of course, have dire consequences. To prevent crisis, we have structures keeping us apart from one another. We must also have a common transcendence to which we all owe loyalty and which we all have a duty to follow. However, because structures are weakening and transcendence is disappearing we are losing this institutional prop for freedom and we must find another way.

We receive everything from somebody/something else. This is as true of the good part of life as of the bad. It is also true of freedom. We become free, we receive freedom, when we meet someone who is free and recognise this. By choosing to 'follow' someone, by being together with people who are free, we find freedom. These can be people who simply have more distance, who may or may not understand why, but who do not have interests which provoke rivalry. They could also be people who are free,, because they still know or have learnt to know about the real transcendence of God or Christ. It could be Christ himself.

What I am trying to say is of fundamental importance and I will try to rephrase it: Everything we are, everything we know has come to us from other people and this process continues from birth until death. Everything which gives us new life comes from one person to another, from one group to an individual or to another group and the reverse, because we are always doing and wishing as our models do.

In 'meeting freedom' we ourselves become free. Nobody wishing to be free can work for it directly on their own. We can only seek a man or woman, any person or group of people who are free, who have freedom. In meeting free people, the rivalry with others for objects disappears. The temptation to rival recedes and freedom arrives.

The reverse is also true. The person who is free, for whatever reasons, can give freedom. We have to do nothing else, except to remain in the relationship which makes us free. Thus, we stay free and are able to meet the other in various ways. There is no way in which this can be 'achieved', although there is preparation which can be done.

2.3.3 The Freedom to Choose

It is not quite true to say that we have no freedom except that which is given to us. There is indeed one exception. We have the freedom to choose who we follow. It may, of course, appear very difficult to make that choice, or even nearly impossible. Indeed, very often we do not even wish the choice to exist or at least we don't want it in the short term. Nevertheless the choice is there.

We have the freedom to choose whether or not to remain in rivalry. We can choose the exciting life of the power struggle. For this option there are many rationalisations; e.g. that the best we can do is to fight for our people, or for interests which cannot be lost, etc. etc. But whatever the reason, the end result is that we destroy ourselves and the cause for which we are fighting.

The other choice is to choose freedom and to find the way back to a real transcendence. The choice which the gospels offer us is to follow Christ. In following him, we escape rivalry and hence escape violence and destruction. In fact, given the situation in which our modern culture now languishes, i.e. that it is rapidly becoming a non-culture; he is the only source of real freedom. We can still meet freedom in meeting a free person and hence by finding a new transcendence in our life, a new sense of duty, new content for our political work which is not derived from rivalry and bears no relation to it.

3. Politics and Freedom

3.1 The Risks of Losing Freedom

In our modern culture, there is a real risk that we will all lose our freedom as we become caught up in the game of rivalry and desire, in the struggle for power and the struggle to be one-up. In this game, politicians are no exception to the rule.

The problem for politicians is that they are much more exposed to the risks of losing freedom than most others. I will briefly run through some of the risks:

a. In general, politics is seen as a power game by definition. The stuff of politics, so it is : repeatedly claimed is power itself. Thus being a politician means being involved in the power game. This highlights the possibility that it may be those who most seek power themselves who are most attracted to politics. They may indeed be very able politicians, but at the very least, the reason for their occupation is a very dangerous one.

b. Politics is further about power on the large scale; 'big power'. As a result this power is much more fascinating than power at a lower level, e.g. when we are in rivalry with our neighbour about whose car is the most beautiful. The greater the power, the more fascinating it is. This fascination will always lead to the subordination of everything else to it and lead to rivalry, violence and the extinction of every human goal.

c. Politicians always live under pressure from their constituencies. They feel that they have to fulfil the wishes of these people, often their wish for power. If they fail to meet these expectations they are blamed, scapegoated, unless the politician can blame another. For the average human being, being the scapegoat, 'carrying the can', is the worst thing that can happen. We try to prevent

it happening at all costs, because being scapegoated means to be excluded, ultimately from humanity itself. As a result we try to prevent it by scapegoating others.

d. In politics, we always have our goals, ends which we want to achieve. In our conceptions, we assume that if we have no goals we cannot function as politicians. Most importantly, we need goals to get votes! Unfortunately, unless these goals are transcendent (i.e. embracing everybody), doing politics in this manner means that one is automatically a victim of rivalry. No longer are we merely rivalling our opponents, but the goal becomes a rival to be conquered. As with freedom, in fighting to ensure goals we lose them - we become slaves. There is a further reason why the pursuit of such goals is dangerous. By setting them, we are acting as though the future already belongs to us. In fact, life and the world are so complicated that this can rarely be possible. As a result, we have not merely made an opponent, a rival out of our goals -we have made a rival of reality and the future itself.

e. Political goals are *a*. threat in yet another manner. As soon as the goal has been formulated publicly, the politician's constituency expects him to do everything to achieve it. Thus the constituency becomes a threat, an obstacle. In fact we must replace 'goals' with the fulfilment of daily tasks. I will come back to this.

f. Once freedom has been lost by a politician, creativity and the possibility of finding really new ways are lost. Again this gives further grounds to get caught up in routine and by implication, reinforces rivalry. Politics itself becomes increasingly a goal and habit - a way of life. It becomes more and more useless. At best it does no positive good, but often it becomes the root of violence and misery instead of the origin of peace and happiness. This is a further reason why politicians become seen increasingly as people working for themselves, for their own gain and as people without real principles. Even here they are really no different from anybody else. This does not change the result however, it merely further increases the responsibility of politicians.

3.2 The Need for a New Transcendence

How do we go about changing this situation? How can we achieve a creative politics? How do we create real possibilities of sticking true to tasks? How can we get free and fruitful politics in which politicians are prepared to take risks, personally, on behalf of the people, instead of letting the people run the risks? Clearly this is a complex question, but we can say a few things about it.

The old structures and transcendences in which it was possible for people to live in tranquillity have disappeared or are disappearing. We still need to remain individual, apart, each with our own place, because only so can we be free. We must also share in common, otherwise we can never work together for the common wellbeing. We need a new transcendence. We need a relation to a reality which is larger than ourselves, than our human existence and which is more important than all our desires, all our powergames. I accept that this is still much too general and formal; which transcendence are we talking about?

It could be a humanistic one - human rights. The deep certainty that every human being has the same worth and the same rights. Then at the very least the scapegoat mechanism which is the base of all non-biblical religious strategies and one of the most used strategies in 'politics-as-a-powergame' would become impossible. This is one of the most important ways by which politics can be made more human.

Alternatively, it could be a political one - the interest of the entire country and all its inhabitants, scapegoating no one of them. This is only valid in the context of a particular country where it avoids scapegoating of those beyond.

These forms of transcendence can allow space for movement, allowing political work to take place and so they are very important. Nevertheless there is a further possibility given to us by the gospel. Jesus Christ is free. He is free because he is outside the world of desiring. Following him carries with it the implication of trust, and of his trust in us because we are with him. Following him, means to become as he is - free. Free, because we can stop the desiring and the rivalry, and thus stop making fools out of ourselves, At last we have the inner freedom we need to do our task without identifying enemies, or without having to 'be' something expected of us by others.

3.3 Aspects of Freedom

Living with a real transcendence, one that is valid for our lives and for our actions, means to live in a space where we are free. The consequences of such a new reality are enormous.

a. Being free, and seeking nothing else, enables us to take responsibility. For a politician to carry responsibility is an enormous task. The issues are very often very important. As long as we are unfree, carrying responsibility for these decisions will always be too much. We are then attacked on all sides and we will always try to get rid of the responsibility, to find some kind of scapegoat.

The freedom to carry responsibility is endangered not only by the importance of the issues but also by the people for whom we carry the responsibility or who pretend that we are responsible for them while at the same time evading the responsibility for what we do on their behalf.

Time and again in modern politics, responsibility is evaded and very understandably so. But the politician who cannot carry responsibility loses his authenticity and becomes a mere puppet either in the interests of his own or others' desires. It is only truly possible to carry responsibility in as far as we work and live in freedom.

b. Exactly the same applies to the notion of 'duty'. When we are unfree, we cannot see our duty. We are more worried about what others think; we are influenced by everybody, are afraid of what everybody might think of us or do to us. In this turmoil we expect to find precisely what our duty is. Even when we do find something, the next conversation may set off further fears and change everything. Only if we know of a freedom in our lives can we know about our duty and stick to it. Then we are prepared to pay for doing our duty even with our lives if necessary - not out of fanaticism but from an inner peace which is given to us by the freedom in which we live.

c. Another important word in this context is 'task'. The task is something different from a goal. A good political programme is also not the same thing as a goal; a good programme provides the politician with the framework within which to move. It provides him with a sort of transcendence and allows him to have the possibility of fulfilling a daily task. As soon as the programme becomes a goal it takes on the shape of an ideology or of an absolute law and hence begins destroying life. Carrying out the daily task means to take the decisions which have to be taken today with the best knowledge and experience available but no more. These decisions, which are necessary today, can and will nearly always change the future. As far as obligations in the future are concerned, it is necessary to consider them very carefully. However, as soon as we start taking decisions under

assumptions, even partially connected with some fantasised and unknown future, then both the present and the future are endangered.

To live in the present, to be free of all cares about the future and its opportunities, to do the things which are obviously necessary in the present needs freedom. Even more profoundly; not being in freedom makes it impossible to find out what the 'obviously necessary thing' actually is and to find good political answers.

3.4 The Way to Freedom

In modern culture it is very difficult to become and to stay free. The extremity of the rivalry destroys all our freedom. In politics, the subject at hand is always the 'big' interests. Very often the last remaining traces of freedom are destroyed or endangered by the media. Furthermore, freedom has to be given and has to be accepted, though this does not mean that there is nothing that we can do ourselves. In fact we can do a lot, by controlling ourselves, our feelings, our doings. And that is not all:

- a. The only chance that freedom has is the transcendence. We must ensure that we do not try to manipulate this, trying to rationalise situations as 'exceptional' and irrelevant to the overall transcendence. We must never make of our transcendence a weapon with which to attack others.
- b. We can also control ourselves if in fact we are carrying out our responsibility, doing our duty and performing our task. As soon as we are thinking about our opponents and they begin to dictate what we are doing, we are already in rivalry and are losing our freedom.
- c. We must always be clear that our 'opponents' are human beings exactly the same as ourselves. They are no better or no worse than we are. This implies that whenever we are blaming the other, scapegoating, we are losing our view of reality and building up myths, we are provoking violence and losing our freedom.
- d. Another area we can take care of is in ensuring that we take distance, both physical and spiritual, on politics. We need to get along with others outside of the direct sphere of politics and to have and maintain wider interests.
- e. It is essential to have somebody or some people who are free of the rivalries we are in and who we trust. Here at least is a direct way to find freedom, by being in fellowship. The most obvious, though probably not the easiest way, is to follow the only man who was authentically free by his own nature, Jesus. Another possibility is to seek a friend who is not a politician, who is at the very least more free than we as politicians are, if only because they are more distant from the rivalry. We choose them because of their knowledge of authentic freedom, thus we follow free people. We need a friend that we can trust whose criticism we can hear and sustain. Another option is to form a small group of people around us of those who have more freedom than we have because of their distance and because of their freedom. Politics is always a group process. The force of the group, acting upon us to try and force us to do what they do, is considerable. It is impossible for a person to stay free from this pressure, from the rivalry of the group if there is not an alternative model acting as a counter. Thus a group around us, which we really trust, takes on a special importance.

4. A New Political Ethos

In actual fact, this whole paper is about a new political ethos. It is NOT about solutions. Underlying it all is the conviction that we will only find such answers if and when we move as free people in the political landscape.

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