

Hope, Faith and Redemption 1

Tony Carroll considers the victims of history.

When Richard and I met to discuss our joint contribution to the Sea of Faith Conference 2018 on *The Necessity of Hope*, the topic of redemption emerged for us as a possible way in to the theme. We met with our friend Brian Pearce at my house in Folkestone, which like Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* (Arnold 2018, pages 7-9), has afforded my wife and me the opportunity of gazing onto glimmering lights of the French coast, of marvelling at the dancing of the moonlight on the sea during clear nights, and of hearing the ebb and flow of the tide breaking upon the channel shore.

Whilst our local beach, unlike Dover beach, is sandy and not one of pebbles, we can nevertheless hear the crashing of the waves during turbulent seas. This combination of visual and auditory sensations, typically present at coastal places, is powerfully combined by Arnold to metaphorically represent the retreat of the Christian faith from his own life and indeed from the shores of England. With melancholy wistfulness, Arnold laments the loss of certainty which this situation has led to for a Victorian world shaken to its foundations. These seismic shifts during the Victorian Age had been promoted by discoveries such as those of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, but also by religious changes which had directly involved the Arnold family. These religious challenges for the Arnold family included the Tractarian storms of the 1830s, the historical criticism of the Bible, as in the controversy surrounding Bishop John William Colenso's *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined* published in 1862, and the publication in 1888 of the novel by Arnold's niece, Mrs Humphrey Ward, *Robert Elsmere*, about an Oxford clergyman who through doubt about the doctrines of the Anglican Church takes up a position of 'constructive liberalism' (Collini 1994, p. 93).

In the love Arnold finds during his honeymoon crossing of the Straits of Dover in 1851 there is the fragile flickering flame of hope that some kind of solace may still be found on the 'darkling plain' of history (Arnold 2018, p. 9). The later Welsh poet Dylan Thomas would express a

similar melancholic hope in his poem *In my Craft or Sullen Art* published in 1946 (Thomas, 2000, p. 106). But in contrast to Arnold, Thomas explains that it is poetry itself written, 'for the lovers, their arms Round the griefs of the ages, Who pay no praise or wages Nor heed my craft or art' (p. 106), which provides solace for the down-at-heart poet. Writing when the 'moon rages' and the 'night is still', Thomas labours by 'singing light' for those mourning Arnold's 'darkling plain' of history. The tempering of all hope by the cold brutality of the tragic concludes Arnold's poem as he alludes to Thucydides' account of the Athenian invasion of Sicily in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 'Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, Where ignorant armies clash by night' (p. 9). This is the so-called 'friendly fire' of its day as Athenians kill fellow Athenians in the confusion of a botched night-time invasion.

But such is the confusion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for the great literary figures such as Arnold, Thomas Hardy, and H.G. Wells and others that war was an appropriate setting for these seismic shifts. Whilst the Victorian age had been one of extraordinary achievement and in many senses an age of optimism, it had also harboured an underbelly of pessimism to which high literary culture had given a voice. The Martian invasion of the Earth depicted in H.G. Wells' 1897 *War of the Worlds* and the Napoleonic Wars inspiring Hardy's writings such as *The Trumpet Major* (1880) revealed the theatre of war to be an apposite metaphor for the time. And sadly, not only for the Victorian Age. The First World War would also have its sullen poets. Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon would move generations with their blisteringly powerful depictions of the crushing absurdity of War. Who could not be moved by *Dulce et decorum est (pro patria mori)* (It is sweet and right to die for your country)? Owen describes this rallying cry leading the absurd charge into oblivion as the '*old lie*', which has been used to jingoistically trick the young into heroism for king and country (Owen 1994, p. 29).

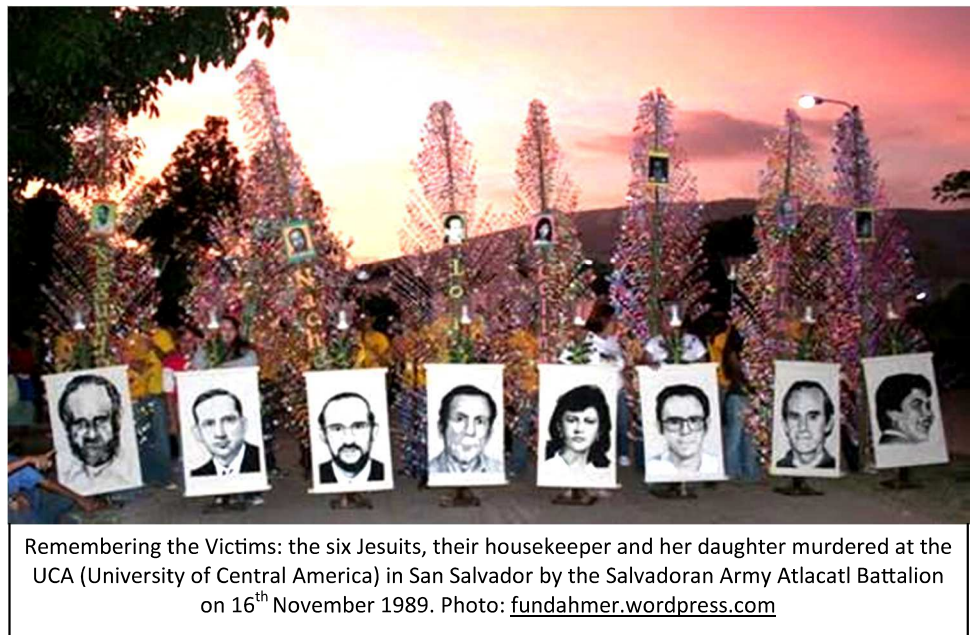
It would be another reference to the Roman lyric poet Horace which would be used by the

German philosopher Immanuel Kant to define the modern age: ‘*Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own reason, this is the motto of the Enlightenment’ (Kant 1999, p. 20). Kant too was motivated by the struggle for peace, indeed for a ‘perpetual peace’ which banished war from the international agenda of nation states. And whilst his philosophy may seem excessively abstract to some, it is chastening to remember that his so-called ‘Critical Philosophy’ was intended as a contribution to the struggle for peace and international security and solidarity.

Kant’s ‘Critical Philosophy’ set the agenda for modern philosophy and theology by giving structuring answers to three fundamental questions: What can I know?, What should I do?, What can I hope for? Significantly, in giving an answer to the third question of hope, Kant tied religion and moral action tightly together. Hope in God would no longer be conceived according to the speculative proofs of theoretical knowledge, as had been the case for the Scholastic medieval thinkers, but as a necessary postulate of practical reason. For Kant if we hope, we already assume the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. Kant provides two reasons for this.

The first is that without belief in God there is no *practical* ground for hope in the face of the tragic nature of life. Moral, political and legal actions, areas of our rationality Kant calls ‘practical rationality’, inevitably slide into the quagmire of despair in the face of the tragic fate of all our actions. Though it should be noted that acknowledgment of the ultimately futile nature of our actions and objectively meaningless nature of life without God has led some, such as Albert Camus, not to sink in the quagmire of despair, but to embrace revolt, freedom, and passion in the face of the absurdity of life (Camus 1942).

The second reason is that assuming the existence of the eternal God provides the divine



Remembering the Victims: the six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter murdered at the UCA (University of Central America) in San Salvador by the Salvadoran Army Atlacatl Battalion on 16th November 1989. Photo: fundahmer.wordpress.com

agency and *extra time* to bring to a good end all that is tragically incomplete in time. Eternity, for Kant as you would expect from a Prussian, is the penalty shoot-out after history in which the right team wins in the end! This Kantian reformulation of the proofs for God from the theoretical to the practical level of argumentation would have far-reaching consequences for the discourse about hope for later philosophy and theology. It would be German ‘Critical Theory’ and its closely related cousin ‘Political Theology’, which would raise this moral discourse about God to the level of the political significance of hope.

Walter Benjamin and Max Horkheimer, the first generation of Frankfurt School ‘Critical Theorists’, would return to this Kantian theme and confront it with an issue which concerned the thinkers of their time: the place of the victims of history. If we are to act for justice, to work to improve our world, what place have the victims of history upon whose shoulders we stand in this struggle? Do we need to reconcile ourselves to the tragic fact that they have suffered for us so that we may be free and that is their lot? Can we march onwards in hope remembering them and still bear the weight of their tragedy upon our shoulders? Perhaps it is enough to honour their sacrifices and to enjoy the fruits of their labours for our happiness. But this memory of their tragic fate for our benefit wounds us. Benjamin would raise this issue with Horkheimer in terms of asking whether a theological moment of history is necessary for its redemption, but Horkheimer flatly refuses this. He acknowledges that for the

victims, history is tragically closed and we must stoically soldier on, grateful but ultimately wounded by the memory of the tragic nature of history (McCarthy 1991, pp. 200-215).

The second generation Frankfurt School 'Critical Theorist' Jürgen Habermas developed the project of 'Critical Theory' on these Kantian grounds of universal reason, but now through a decentred form of the 'de-transcendentalised' reason located in the historically constituted intersubjective relations of true, just and truthful communication between people (Habermas, 1981). The theological question posed to this Habermasian project would be reminiscent of the Horkheimer-Benjamin exchange: who should be included in this universal conversation? Do the victims of history, upon whose shoulders our hope for a transformed world rests, still have any voice? Is there any redemption of history? The German theologian Helmut Peukert provided the most philosophically sophisticated version of this question and in so doing, he would reformulate the initial Kantian discussion of hope in theologico-political terms by posing the question of the redemption of the victims of history to our present desires for political emancipation (Peukert 1978).

Peukert uses the Judeo-Christian term of 'anamnesis', of redemptive remembering to include the victims of history in the conversation of humanity. Real justice, true liberation and autonomy, which is the goal of Enlightenment, can only be actual when there is a redemptive moment of solidarity between the living and the dead, lest we fall into an amnesia of self-satisfied individualism. For Peukert this is only possible when we may hope in its full redemption. No one should be excluded if our hope is to be solidary and not simply the 'I'm alright Jack' solidarity of the lucky ones. Drawing on Kant's justification of the necessary practical postulate of the existence of God for hope, Peukert argues that only faith in God, who is the Lord of history, can provide hope for this universal solidarity with all the victims of history.

This position rests on the rational grounds of faith. It is not an argument which *necessitates* faith as such, but rather grounds the necessity of hope in the practical postulate of faith in God. Consequently, no approach to the question of the redemption of the victims of history should face another, honestly and critically held, position as if

it were the *only* option or the *exclusively* logical one to take. As critics of Kant, such as Thomas Wizenmann in his own day argued, there is no *logical* necessity for there being an objective reality to meet our need for this universal hope. And for some, such as Horkheimer and Camus, redemption of the victims of history may be no more than wishful thinking in the face of the ultimately tragic nature of history and our place in it. For Matthew Arnold too this is our tragic fate: 'The world, 'So various, so beautiful, so new, Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain' (Arnold, p. 9).

Whichever position one adopts, we can still work together. Realists, anti-realists, critical realists and those on the spectra of the religious-non-religious categorisations can all transform our world for the better. *This* many-sided collaboration for the redemption of history honours the memory of the victims of history through further pursuing the cause for which they struggled. Even if, for some, they are ultimately lost, those without recourse to the belief in their redemption can struggle on in their memory. As Camus found, passion for freedom and change in the face of absurdity is a generous giver and it offers its riches to all who enter the struggle for justice and peace.

The gift of passion is the possession of no one tribe, precisely because it structures the universalism which inhabits the hearts of all who strive for justice and peace in ever expanding circles of inclusion. The religious and the non-religious may draw this circle of inclusion with different ontologically and historically covering circumstances and adopt various epistemological positions, but they all share in the common desire to make things right, to restore the peace and to contribute to our redemption. Understood in this way, perhaps we should speak more of hope as an *option* rather than as a *necessity*; a realistic possibility that is bequeathed to us through our passion to struggle for justice and peace and is sometimes given to us through the very ones with and for whom we are struggling.

But we should also acknowledge that, chastened by tragedy, our perhaps youthful enthusiasm becomes less naïve about the costs of the struggle. And so those who dare to speak of the redemption of the victims of history should do so in a minor key; tempered by the

acknowledgements of our own failures of solidarity. It was to foster a broad solidarity in the Church of England that Arnold challenged central doctrines of Christianity and even treated the Bible as simply another literary text (Collini 1994, p.94). Triumphalism in any of these controversial matters bespeaks a faith which is not prepared to struggle in the force field of uncertainty so powerfully expressed by Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*:

Dover Beach

The sea is calm tonight.
 The tide is full, the moon lies fair
 Upon the straits; on the French coast the light
 Gleams and is gone; the cliffs of England stand,
 Glimmering and vast, out in the tranquil bay.
 Come to the window, sweet is the night-air!
 Only, from the long line of spray
 Where the sea meets the moon-blanch'd land,
 Listen! You hear the grating roar
 Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
 At their return, up the high strand,
 Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
 With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
 The eternal note of sadness in.

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought,
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

The Sea of Faith
 Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
 Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
 But now I only hear
 Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
 Retreating, to the breath
 Of the night-wind, down the vast edges drear
 And naked shingles of the world.

Ah, love, let us be true
 To one another! For the world, which seems
 To lie before us like a land of dreams,
 So various, so beautiful, so new,
 Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
 Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
 And we are here as on a darkling plain
 Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
 Where ignorant armies clash by night.

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