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Differing views of past do not preclude a shared future

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BRIAN LENNON

RITE AND REASON: Why look for impossible agreement about the past? Understanding is what matters

THE RECENTLY published Eames-Bradley report on the past argues that unionists and nationalists “differ not so much in the facts of what happened but more in the moral assessment of the rightness and wrongness of what was done by opposing sides”.

Members of the Consultative Group on the Past, which published the report, were optimistic that these moral assessments could be changed. People would then “see good and bad on both sides, thus allowing them to see the moral dignity and moral failures of both sides”.

This would lead “to mutual forgiveness and reconciliation and a movement away from the divided past”.

I know from experience of facilitating encounters between the most divided groups in Northern Ireland that individuals can forgive. This necessarily requires agreement about right and wrong.

Asking large groups to do this is a different matter, however. For me it sets the moral bar too high. In divided societies, one group’s “freedom fighter” is another’s “terrorist”.

Good outcomes can be achieved by other means. An encounter took place at the publication of the Eames-Bradley report that illustrates this.

Michelle Williamson, who lost her parents in the Shankill bomb, and Daniel Bradley, whose brother was shot dead by the British army, were both present.

She was deeply hurt at the group’s recommendation that the nearest relative of all those who died during the Troubles should receive £12,000. If implemented, her family and that of Thomas Begley – killed while planting the Shankill bomb – would be treated the same.

In a heated and raw exchange, they shared their pain and anger with each other. At the end of the encounter, Bradley said: "We have to put this behind us," and offered her his hand. She took it. Later she said the handshake gave her a glimmer of hope for Northern Ireland.

That exchange was not about offering or receiving forgiveness; neither changed their moral assessment of the past. Rather – to some extent – they recognised and understood each other.

Recognition is important to people harmed in conflict. Among other things, it means acknowledging that a group exists, that experiences matter, that they have suffered, that they are part of the wider story and that they cannot be written out of history.

Understanding, in part, is becoming aware of why other people did what they did and why they have the feelings and values they do. You can work at understanding – step into the shoes of others to a degree – while continuing to believe what they did was wrong.

Even without understanding and recognition, progress can be made.

Many years ago an RUC officer who continued to suffer pain 20 years after he lost his legs in an attack told me that he did not want the IRA to apologise. He wanted it to stop punishment shootings because they meant that fewer hospital resources were available for pain research.

While individuals may well change their moral assessment of the past, I am not optimistic that large numbers of unionists and republicans will do so.

It can be argued that recognition and understanding are part of the process of moral re-evaluation, but these do not require changing your moral judgment.

Paradoxically, asking people to change their moral judgment may make it more likely that they will not change it, whereas focusing on recognition and understanding makes it more likely that they will.

Fr Brian Lennon SJ is author of *So You Can't Forgive . . . ? Moving Towards Freedom* (Columba; €7.99), a publication from the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice. It will be launched by Dr Maureen Gaffney on Thursday at 12.30pm in the Church of St Francis Xavier, Gardiner Street, Dublin.

This article appears in the print edition of the Irish Times

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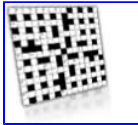
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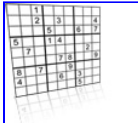
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