

The Steps to Genocide; and how to block them

“For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6)

“Where they have burned books, they will end in burning human beings” (Heinrich Heine, *Almansor: A Tragedy* 1823).

The recent opening of a new exhibition about the life of Anne Frank – Anne Frank and You – at the Newcastle City Library reminds me of the need for all of us to be vigilant about recognising the signs that society is going down its darkest path; the road to genocide. As any scholar of the Old Testament will know, the dark urges to murder an entire people have roots way back in the early history of mankind, yet as Hosea reminds us above, holocausts are not what human life should be about. Sadly however, the threat of genocide seems to be always with us and the Rwandan and Bosnian tragedies of less than 20 years ago meant that the talented young writer, who hid for all those months in an attic in Amsterdam, was by no means one of the last victims of genocide.

Yet genocide does not come out of nowhere and nothing. There are warning signs which can be heeded. What are these particular ‘canaries in the coalmine’? What should we be worried about today? And what can we learn from the history of North-east England?

One of the earliest warning signs is to beware times of severe economic crisis. This is of course happening right now. In the UK we have a double-dip recession, the Eurozone, our most important export market is in the depths of a huge debt crisis and this has already seen the rise of far-right parties in various parts of Europe, perhaps most notably Golden Dawn in Greece

The cold winds of austerity are screaming through our land far and wide, sweeping people along in their wake, blowing away their hopes. It is in times such as these that people look for scapegoats; one of the first pre-requisites for genocide. Remember how Hitler came to power in Germany on the wake of the Wall Street Crash in 1929.

Yet there is no inevitability about economic crisis leading to genocide. People stuck together in the 1930's in the North-east and rejected the BUF. This kind of crisis has happened to us before and people learnt to stand together, some even marching to London with dignity and pride – not looking for innocent scapegoats.

Another of the steps to genocide is that there has been a history of inter-communal conflict. Today there are tensions in a number of parts of our region, which numerous far-right groups seek to manipulate. In pockets across the North-east, tensions rise like unwanted weeds amongst the flowers of hope and love. There are times of course when ugly weeds can take over from beautiful flowers and smother them. In Gateshead in September 2010, a copy of the Qur'an was burned, film of this desecration of a holy book, being shown on YouTube on the internet. Sometimes it can seem so easy to forget the words of the Heinrich Heine, the Jewish born German who in one of his plays, *Almansor: A Tragedy*, prophetically noted as far back as 1823 that, where books have been burned, so human beings will later be burnt.

Again, however, we can learn from the past. The Quayside in Newcastle saw a major anti-Irish riot in 1851 whilst about years later there was the Mill Dam Riot in South Shields in 1930. Yet both these setbacks were overcome. We have had our violence before, our fiery riots and sly attacks. But gradually misunderstandings were overcome as we learnt to live together in peace.

Once the pattern of scapegoating and tensions is established, this can then be set in stone by those who make our laws. Unjust discriminatory legislation, whether measures against asylum seekers or ill-judged anti-terrorism legislation can see the end of hard-won rights which we have had for centuries, just so that politicians can sound macho and keep in with the tabloid newspapers. We would perhaps do well to remember how the Nazis consolidated their hold on power with the emergency legislation of the Enabling Act in 1933, in the wake of the Reichstag Fire, after fears of Communist terrorism had been stirred up. We would also do well to remember how many in our own region campaigned against the unjust laws which sanctioned the slave trade and slavery in the British Empire.

These unjust laws are helped by the labeling of minorities as different or more specifically inferior in some way. In recent times we have seen the labeling of asylum seekers and gypsies by some sections of the media. We have also seen the worrying rise in Islamophobic attitudes in society over the last few years. It seems convenient for some people that differences are highlighted, for commercial reasons in terms of some sections of the media, perhaps because for some people, life can seem so much easier to understand when a whole people can be summed up in a few spiteful words. Yet things don't have to be this way; the successful integration of Irish and Yemenis into North-east society and the march in May 1968 against the 'Rivers of Blood' speech by Enoch Powell from the previous month show this.

Another step on the road to genocide in Nazi Germany was the book-burning and general belittling of minority culture, coupled with venomous hate propaganda. Sadly hatred has dropped through many. The burning of a copy of the Qur'an in Gateshead in 2010 has already been mentioned above, whilst hatred has dropped through many a letterbox in the last few years from a number of different sources. Again attitudes displayed in some of the tabloid newspapers has helped to give the impression that some cultures are less important or valuable than others. Yet in the past people in our own region have rejected those who peddle hate here, whilst it was one of our infantry regiments, the Durham Light Infantry, which liberated those who were suffering so badly in the Belsen Labour and Death Camp in April 1945.

The final step we should be aware of is when there is justification of discriminatory attitudes on grounds of 'a means to an end' – that it is for the best and in the long run it is the right thing to do. We need to be very vigilant about the effect of ideology, especially in the view of the anti-immigration feeling across Britain and Europe, being stirred up by numerous groups today. Often the path to genocide has been littered by speeches claiming that those committing the genocide are actually the victims, or that in committing so heinous a crime the perpetrators are actually helping to build a better society in some way. This is nonsense of course, as history also shows us that this path only leads to death, misery and destruction. We must beware all those who will say that we have to turn our backs on neighbours and friends, that there is a bigger picture and that means are justified by ends. We must always beware the false prophets, who promise Utopia of the perfect future ahead, if we are just prepared to shed our

humanity and be harder. We have seen through these kind of lies in the past and it is argued that there is a traditional 'rejection of bullying' in region, the kind of bullying which is exposed in the actions and words of the false prophets.

This much I believe is true; if we fall into the abyss of hating people because they are somehow, 'the other', if we reject our shared humanity, if we allow the brave and innocent to die, then the ghosts of the past and the voices of the future will accuse us, echoing down the years: asking why? why? why?

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