

Lore of the rings and Good Friday coins

Rings have a remarkably prominent place in human customs and beliefs. Their material and the finger on which they are worn varies greatly from place to place and from time to time. They may be worn to signify a social contract, as in engagement and marriage, or as a means of keeping in contact with a person who can no longer be physically near the wearer. They may denote a religious significance or a rank in the social order. And behind them lies a fabric of superstition which renders them operative or defensive in the life of the wearer.

One interesting aspect of rings is their use to ward off disease or cure suffering. In 1323 a royal ordinance of Edward II laid down that on Good Friday the king should provide five silver pennies from offer-tories made that day in five different churches, from which rings would be made that were capable of curing epilepsy, convulsions and cramps in the wearer. It was insisted that the gift of a cramp ring, as it was called, be made without any petition or financial recompense to the recipient.



There were variations on the theme. It was the custom at one time for the monarch to take a stand before the altar of the Chapel Royal and rub the coins concerned between the fingers before consigning them to the furnace and the mould. One variation called for the five coins to be placed before a crucifix while five Pater Nosters were recited, on five consecutive days. After the coins had been converted into a ring, it was inscribed

with the words "Jesus of Nazareth" and the names of the Three Wise Men. The custom was abolished by Queen Elizabeth I but thereafter some people made such rings for themselves to cure their fits or their rheumatism.

(The cramp ring custom should not, of course, be confused with the continuing tradition under which the monarch distributes silver coins money to the poor on Maundy Thursday — the day before Good Friday. The Maundy ceremony also dates back to about the time of Edward II.)

Good Friday was also traditionally the day when potatoes and peas should be planted in the garden, and parsley sown. Nevertheless there were beliefs, in Yorkshire for example, that potatoes planted on Good Friday were doomed to fail. On that festival the washing of clothes was taboo, but baking was highly commended.

From the 18th century hot cross buns were widely made. Some of those kept and allowed to dry were grated and consumed to cure diarrhoea.

Dealing with terrorism, great and small

We hear a great deal today about fanaticism and terrorism, matters that have much in common with one another, but calm consideration of what these mean, as opposed to politically inspired denunciations, is sorely lacking.

Fanaticism has been defined as "excessive, mistaken enthusiasm, especially in religion". Enthusiasm itself was a term used in the 17th and 18th centuries to describe irrational behavioural excesses committed by individuals who claimed to have received mysterious instruction and guidance from a divine source or alternatively, as their opponents maintained, from a diabolical one. In pursuing their fanaticism, its exponents indulged in acts of terrorism.

Terrorism is said by philosophers to defy easy definition, and in our own times the term has been distorted to meet political convenience. It has been described as political killing rendered illegitimate because it excludes any consideration of peaceful political or social alternatives to violence and targets innocent citizens rather than responsible politicians.

Likewise, terrorism has been a form of warfare contravening all the limitations of acceptable strife by injuring harmless civilians. Terrorists are supposed to adopt their unacceptable tactics because they lack the resources to defeat a military force by traditional means.

Ethical theorists maintain that terrorism can never be justified because it inevitably brings disaster to innocent bystanders and breaches political obligations accepted by any civilised culture. They have distinguished state terrorism, which is activity directed against minority groups by a majority, from the reverse process.

A similar distinction is awarded to the force used by global business organisations to advance their sales tactics against individuals and small groups, which amount to terrorism of a milder nature. It may not involve the application of brute force, but is nevertheless a form of coercion.

We should also remember that forms of subterrorism are met in our daily experience. Violence within families is not uncommon, though it may be well concealed. And in our schools there is recognised to be a cult of bullying that sometimes approaches submitting an unfortunate child to sheer terrorism.

How to deal with any form of terrorism is a tricky question to which there can be no simple answer. The one thing that cannot work is any form of counter-terrorism, which will inevitably unite the terrorists by telling them that the rest of the world is against them, and so stimulate their efforts to assert their ideas. Much thought is needed here, and there is no room for political correctness or the gung-ho approach so beloved of powerful governments.

Child soldiers hit by post-traumatic stress

A research letter in the 13 March issue of *The Lancet* draws attention to the ugly problem of child soldiers in many parts of the world. Researchers from Belgium have reported serious post-traumatic stress affecting Ugandans who were formerly employed while children in armed conflicts. They state that worldwide 300,000 children are employed as soldiers.

Interviews with 301 former child soldiers who had been abducted and made to fight in the recent Ugandan rebellion movement revealed that they had been taken from their homes at the mean age of 12.9 years and used for conflicts for an average of 744 days. Almost all, on an average of six occasions, had witnessed someone being killed or being forced to kill others. Some had chosen to fight voluntarily after seeing family members undergoing atrocities. Others were trying to protect their families. Yet others were seeking a means of survival after their social structures collapsed. Almost all showed clinically significant and disabling post-traumatic stress.

As an editorial in the same issue of the journal maintains: "The rebuilding of societies after wars must be an urgent priority so that these children can be rehabilitated, educated, and have a secure future." For the rest of the world to disregard such a compelling challenge indicates an appalling indictment of 21st century priorities.