



“When does religion encourage violence?”¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org

Background

When people are asked about faith today, many reply 'Religion causes violence'. Yet few people either inside or outside faith communities can describe this problem with any subtlety. This conversation is designed to get beneath our one line defence systems, accept that some forms of faith are potentially violent, and think about how this happens. It is also to demonstrate that faith can also be a vital motivation toward reconciliation.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. Have you ever experienced the abuse of power within a faith community or had close friends who have suffered in this way?**
- 2. Consider the troubles of today's Middle East. Think of the way that the stories of history and of faith are told. What is it about these stories that predisposes to violence?**
- 3. Do you know anyone who has seriously fallen out with another person but who has managed to find some reconciliation. What were the ingredients in this process? And how might faith have helped or hindered it?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Begin the evening with Question 1 in groups of 4/5 (see 'Planning a Conversation' for more info on how to structure your conversation)

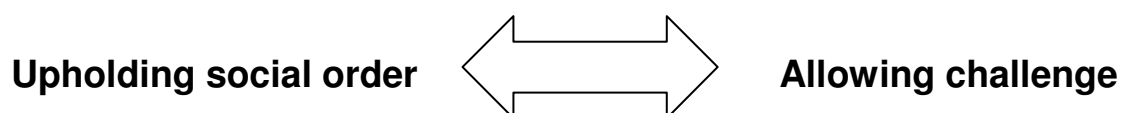
Have you ever experienced the abuse of power within a faith community or had close friends who have suffered in this way?

This is not a question directly related to violence but it will engage people with the whole area of power and its abuse. Some deep and serious things may be shared so it may be wise not to air these altogether. Instead the facilitator can ask people just to report back on what *sorts* of things they discussed (eg describe it in a phrase).

It is now necessary to expose people to some stories of faith and violence. Select a range of examples from the resources section and allow people to respond. (I often start with Thomas More, because he is a central and much respected figure in our own country)

As you range over the examples notice that some of these figures were upholding the social order eg More, Psalm 139, while others were challenging it eg suicide bombers, anti-abortion campaigners in US.

Notice the basic political tension between upholding the social order and allowing challenge.



Every good society has to manage this. The best societies can work creatively without violence but all too often violence is used either to uphold the social order or to challenge it. (see examples in resources section)

One key element that determines how well a society works in this area is the narratives that the society embraces. To unpack this go to question two

Consider the troubles of today's Middle East. Think of the way that the stories of history and of faith are told. What is it about these stories that predisposes to violence?

Collect perspectives on this struggle and fill out with examples from the resources section. Focus on how stories are used. You might notice

The danger of stories with **inevitable outcomes** which so easily **override ordinary social sympathies**. (eg 'biblical' Israel and versions of the second coming such as in the *Left Behind* series)

Histories of **victimhood** that promote a culture of **fear and threat**

Stories that **affirm the zealot**

Narratives of **revenge**

Simplistic divisions of the world into **good and evil**.

The difficulties of **fractured societies** where a single division between people exists on political, racial and faith grounds with little appreciation of the 'other'.

One very challenging approach here would be to study the Judaeo-Christian scriptures and their use through history in order to detect these sort of attitudes. (Resources are offered to allow you to do this)

At the same time you might notice – that none of these characteristics are exclusive to faith. The secular world has also developed theories with inevitable outcomes, like communism, that have abused people. Histories of victimhood and revenge are common in societies fractured along tribal lines such as in Rwanda, for example. Vicious zealots are found among animal rights campaigners as well as freedom fighters all over the world.

It is all too easy in this discussion to think the problem is all 'out there'. And to think that everyone *else* is behaving unreasonably. So I suggest

Go on to Question Three

Do you know anyone who has seriously fallen out with another person but who has managed to find some reconciliation. What were the ingredients in this process? And how might faith have helped or hindered it?

It may be best again not to air these things in the big group, but instead it may be interesting to brainstorm onto a flip chart aspects of Jesus life and ministry that would act to encourage reconciliation. (Some groups with less awareness of the stories of Christ may need help with this eg by telling one or two key stories yourself). Having collected these compare them with those characteristics of abusive stories and attitudes that were listed in the previous section. For example:

You might notice how Jesus worked to overcome the societal **divisions** of his day, to make alienated people real, working to counter the development of **victimhood** and **revenge** (talking to women, healing lepers, eating with tax collectors and sinners). He acted against simplistic judgements about **good and evil** (judge not that you be not judged - whoever is without sin cast the first stone). For Jesus, life was inextricably complex and many of his words stimulated people's **social sympathies**, making real the one who was despised (the good Samaritan). His words about the future were **mysterious**. He did not interpret Messiah as **zealot, freedom fighter** even though many people may have wanted him to. Rather he said that the kingdom of God would come gradually as yeast in a loaf of bread. As he approached Jerusalem for the last time some saw tears in his eyes and heard him say 'would that even today you knew the things that make for peace.'

Resources

There are many issues raised by this conversation. Here are some more ideas and information that are intended to resource the conversation and offer alternative entry points. Some of these resources are very challenging. Consider carefully what your group can work with. Many groups are actually more able to handle this material than their leaders generally allow.

The struggle between Thomas More and William Tyndale

At the end of these resources you will find a tale based on the life of Thomas More. More is rated as a saint in both the Roman Catholic and Anglican traditions. Yet he believed that he was serving God as he encouraged the torture and burning of the heretics who aimed to publish the Bible in English. The story is designed to show how More truly believed he was upholding vital aspects of the social and religious order of his day, how he was in many respects a deeply principled and caring Christian. It shows how complex this issue truly is.

Psalm 139

This is a psalm that everyone loves until they get to the end. It contains famous lines like 'O Lord you have searched me and known me...Where shall I go from your Spirit?...You formed my inward parts.. I praise you for you are fearful and wonderful.. you know me right well. ' and yet this psalm goes on to say 'O that you would slay the wicked O God.. do I not hate them that hate you.. I hate them with a perfect hatred.' Many times churches will leave out the hate-filled lines, but this is actually not being true to the spirituality of the writer. In his mind this great faith in God went together with the thought that it was right to hate those who were opposed to God. In many ways it seems to sum up the type of faith exhibited by someone like Thomas More. What are we to make of this?

The blood of Jezreel – different views on the same event

Elijah and Elisha were prophets who did not hesitate to kill in their zeal for God. Elijah responds to the killing of Naboth with a terrible judgement against Ahab the king (1 Kings 21v19). This judgement is postponed until the days of his Jehu's son, when Elisha anoints the army general Jehu as king. Then a vicious and most bloody coup occurs which includes the beheading of 70 children of the royal family, the slaughter of the prophets of Baal, Jezebel being thrown out of a window to her death, and much more. The narrative goes on to record that the Lord was pleased that Jehu had 'done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart' (2Kings 10v30). These things happened at a place called Jezreel.

But others were to see things differently. The prophet Hosea lived about a hundred years after Ahab. He shows us that 'the blood of Jezreel' had passed into history as a terrible act. He is inspired to name his first son Jezreel and quotes the Lord as saying 'I will punish the house of Jehu for the blood of Jezreel'. No greater theological contrast could there be on these same events. Hosea was keen to emphasise how God loved the people and mourned that they had ever appointed kings. (Hosea 13 v11)

As we reflect back on our recent war in Iraq, we are aware of a variety of views. This is clearly nothing new. Some forms of faith actually encourage such questioning of the past with a view to gaining wisdom for the future.

The longing for vengeance – in the Bible and in today's world

Brave souls may want to face the really difficult subject of biblical narratives that use violent language of God. Study the background that lies behind one of the following passages. Can you understand the feelings that may have led to this sort of perception of God? What sort of groups feel like this in today's world? Who is using this type of imagery?

1. Isaiah 63 v 1-6 speaks of God as the returning warrior covered in blood, having wreaked vengeance on the enemies of Israel. This arose from a faith community that had been treated with terrible violence and still remained dominated by foreign powers. They longed for God to intervene.

2. Revelation 14 v 17 – 20 This terrible picture of the wine press of the wrath of God again arose among a people under persecution.
3. 1 Samuel 15 v 2 – the old man Samuel believes that whole society is under threat because of the people's rebellious desire for a king. Saul rises and becomes a focus for Samuel's concern. He sends Saul out on a mission in the name of God, to seek revenge on the Amalekites in what we would now call 'ethnic cleansing'. Why did Samuel do this? How do you understand his reaction when Saul fails to complete the mission?

Did the establishment of Christendom change the Christian message?

Many have read the Christian gospels as radically opposed to violence. Jesus' sacrificial suffering is taken as a model for all truly Christian lives and has inspired movements of non-violent protest. (see JH Yoder *The Politics of Jesus*). Some argue that a fundamental change set in when Christianity became the state religion. Suddenly the Church was offered great privilege and the cross became a sign of military might. Christian unity became a political issue and Christians began to persecute other Christians who were not part of the fold. Augustine taught that Jesus words 'compel them to come in' justified coercive treatment toward heretics. Much later Charlemagne was to offer conquered peoples the choice between baptism and execution. (see Stuart Murray *Post-Christendom*).

A number of different models of the relationship between church and state have been tried in situations of Christian dominance. None of them have been wholly satisfactory. (to explore this further see Duncan Forrester *Politics and Theology*)

Some argue that authentic Christianity can only be known in the absence of power and privilege, but some sort of power structures are implicit in any human group and all sorts of churches including the 'non-conformists' have shown the potential for developing abusive power structures. (for further discussion of this, see our series 'Faith Matters')

Christian Zionism

Some estimates suggest that there are more than ten million Christians in the US who uncritically take the side of Israel in the Middle East conflict. It is also said that George Bush is very keen not to provoke their disfavour.

Israel has just launched a major offensive in Gaza. Many have been killed including civilians and children. They claim it is to root out militants who are launching rockets against their cities. Others wonder whether the attack has taken place now because the US elections are due and George Bush dare not criticise Israel for fear of alienating the Christian right. The United Nations put down a motion demanding that Israel desist from this action. It was vetoed by guess who? The US.

The tendency of Christian Zionists to promote policies that override normal social sympathies is demonstrated by the following quote from what is quite a 'moderate' website.

The Christian Zionist is not knocked off his perch when Israel is denounced for rough treatment of the Palestinians, or when a politician is found to have his hand in the till, or when the Mossad carries off a dirty trick, or when instances of brutality occur in her prisons, etc. The Christian Zionist does not have to rework the ethical arithmetic when bad news appears, in order to reckon whose side he is on. To the Christian Zionist, it is a requirement of faith to prefer the blessing of Israel above all passing things. Doing this, he believes, cannot, by definition, ever be incompatible with the will of God.

Source <http://christianactionforisrael.org/attitudes.html>

Compare this message with that of Amos, for example, whose first two chapters are devoted to the denunciation of war crimes and who makes clear that God makes no distinction between nations in this sort of matter. (see Amos 9v7 where he says 'Are you not like the Ehtipians to me, O people of Israel? Did I not bring Israel out of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor and the Syrians from Kir?' – in other words 'Why do you think you are so special?')

(for further thinking on this subject see '*Whose Promised Land?*' by Colin Chapman)

'Adopting' faith narratives to justify violence

The story of the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of the Promised Land has been adopted by several key groups in history. So, for example, Oliver Cromwell set out from Bristol in 1641 to put down the 'rebellion' by the Catholic people of Ireland, who had risen in response to the systematic appropriation of land and power by Protestant immigrants. As the fleet set sail from Bristol he told his army that they were like the army of God entering the Promised Land and setting out to rid the land of its 'idolatrous inhabitants'.

Similarly as the Voortrekkers of South Africa set out inland from the Cape to establish the white-dominated society that would rule that land for so long, they went with their great family Bibles and self-consciously styled themselves as the people of God entering the Promised Land. (Source: Tutu *No Freedom without forgiveness*)

Abusive secular narratives

To blame religion for the violence of the world is slightly strange when you consider that the most terrible violence of the 20th century came from secular philosophies. One key feature of such theories is that they predict **inevitable outcomes** to history.

So

Communism was built around Marxist theory that insisted that the process of history was an inevitable march toward the classless society.

The Nazi party was fed on thoughts of the Aryan Master Race that was destined to rule the world.

Slightly different in form and earlier in conception is

Free market philosophy Some adherents proclaim there is only one way to wealth, the free competitive market. Every other consideration is irrelevant or even a hindrance.

In each case these theories of life have demonstrated the potential for abuse. The Merchants of Bristol would argue for the continuance of slave trading on the basis of the free market. Stalin would allow millions to die in famine and in his gulag and justify it by reference to the coming new society. The Nazi party set out to found a new world and were willing to scapegoat and kill millions in pursuit of the goal. One common thread is the overriding of ordinary social sympathies produced by these theories of inevitability.

Left Behind

Some faith stories can likewise be abusive because they predict inevitable outcomes.

The *Left Behind* series consists of twelve stories, now in book, film and audio tape, has sold some 60 million copies, primarily in the United States. Written by Tim Lahaye and Jerry Jenkins, they are an attempt to popularise a particular interpretation of the biblical idea of the second coming of Christ. They imagine a world where the supernatural has broken in. Jesus has taken away the faithful and the world is set for a battle between a remnant of recent converts and an Anti-Christ figure. By setting up a worldview of good against evil the storytellers are able to divide the world according to a right wing agenda. So the Anti-Christ is the head of the UN. All liberals are on the side of evil. So are all attempts at international co-operation. And the story is implicitly pro-Israel, even if in the end those Jews who do not convert are eliminated. Gershom Gorenberg in *the American Prospect* describes these stories as 'propaganda in the guise of fiction' and declares that 'read uncritically... they give people an interpretive paradigm in which extreme views seem sensible'. **They promote an attitude to the Bible that sees it like a Sherlock Holmes puzzle where the faithful one is to search for clues and which lead to a certain and inevitable conclusion.** Tim Layhaye says, 'Our position is essentially what the Bible says. The idea that we could be wrong has not occupied much of my serious thought.' (from a review in the Washington Times). Some have argued that these stories have contributed to a violent and arrogant mindset in the US today.

Suicide bombers

Hanani Jaradat was 28 and due to qualify as a lawyer in just a few weeks. She had everything going for her, or so it seemed, until one day when she left home in the West Bank

city of Jenin at 7.30am on Saturday saying nothing to anybody and instead of going to her law firm, she went to Haifa and to a crowded restaurant. She ran up to the security guard and shot him. Then into the restaurant, where she blew herself up. 19 people were killed, and 51 wounded. Why? We cry? Why waste such a promising life? What could have driven her to it? In June this year the Israeli security forces had killed her brother Fadi, aged 23 and her cousin Salih, accusing them of being operatives of Islamic Jihad. She had always been a devout Muslim but after her brother's death she had completed her memorising of the whole Koran and began fasting two days a week. Her family insisted that her suicide attack filled them with pride.' May God bless her she made us raise our heads high.'

(For a biblical equivalent – review the death of Samson (Judges 16 v23ff) Was he the first suicide bomber?)

Animal Rights

John Curtin, a prominent Animal Rights activist was interviewed on You and Yours on Radio 4. He was asked whether he condoned persistent intimidation of relatives and children of those who worked in animal laboratories. These acts had included sending letter bombs, threatening to kill, propagating lies in the community such as accusing people of paedophilia and persistent threatening behaviour by hooded gangs at night including window smashing. He replied that these things needed putting in perspective. The perspective was animal holocaust, blood and torture. He claimed to be motivated by love and compassion for animals. He did not personally condone the violence but if it did actually shut down the laboratories then that was what really counted.

To listen to clips from this programme or download the transcript from http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/youandyours/index_face_the_facts.shtml

Anti-Abortion campaigners in US

Each year abortion clinics in America report hundreds of incidents of invasion, assault, hate mail, bomb threats and the like from anti-abortion campaigners. In some instances these have included actual bombing or murder. For example Paul Hill, a Christian believer, killed John Britton, a doctor and was sentenced to death. He writes, when charged with murder, that he knew 'I had accomplished my task... The Lord had done great things through me.' A range of pastors and priests justified this kind of violence in a statement that read 'We the undersigned declare the justice of taking all godly action necessary , including the use of force to defend innocent life (born and unborn)...'and described Paul Hill as being 'executed for obedience to our Lord.' (Source: www.religioustolerance.org)

The Dignity of Difference

Jonathan Sacks notices that all the religions of the world proclaim that there will be peace when everyone believes as they do. But, he argues, the real sign of peacefulness may be in our attitude toward those who believe differently from us. (Source: Jonathan Sacks *The Dignity of Difference*)

Truth and Reconciliation

The Truth and Reconciliation commission may have played an important role in helping South Africa overcome its violent and fractured history. Hearing the truth about what happened from the actual perpetrators helped many find 'closure' for their grief. As a form of confession this process may have helped all sorts of people in that country come to a deeper realisation of both the depths to which humanity can sink and the potential for reconciliation and working together. (see Tutu No *Freedom without Forgiveness*)

A Note on Inter-Faith issues

This conversation is resourced almost exclusively by reference to the Christian faith. This is a deliberate policy based on the idea that all the major religions of the world today embrace a spectrum of ways of believing some of which are more conducive to violence than others. Since Christianity has been the major religion in this country for many years it seems right and proper to illustrate this conversation by reference to this faith and especially to show up

the weaknesses of some Christian faith positions with regard to violence. It would be very possible to do a similar exercise for other faiths because the same principles would apply. We would be keen to pursue that possibility in partnership with others if invited to do so.

Make sense of this? **A story of Thomas More and William Tyndale**

Once there was a young man called Thomas More. As a child he was sent to school where he learnt to read and write in English, but then after a few years, in company with most of the well-educated at the time he went to Grammar school, where they not only studied Latin, but spoke it and wrote it throughout their studies. His father, being a high court judge, then found him a place at the school in Lambeth Palace, where he studied and brushed shoulders with people of rank. It was there that he would have learnt all 36 degrees of rank and how each person in 'society' should be addressed and served. At age 14 he went to Oxford, where he became well versed in the practice of scholastic disputation. Then to Lincoln's Inn Fields where he studied law and learnt another language, the rather strange French that had been adopted by the legal profession. While studying at Lincoln's Inn he lived in a monastery, joined in the prayer life and became deeply devout. Studying and disputing was his great love. Establishing himself as a lawyer he rose in stature until he became part of the royal court. More gloried in the civilisation of his day, the law and the church were one in his mind. He was renowned as a just judge. He loved his family, praying with them daily and reading from the scriptures. His daughter became one of the best educated women in the land. He was loved by the people in his part of London and often took cases for the poor. He loved the society of which he was a part. This great heritage was something to love and defend. But there was a problem. It was all in danger. From the heretics.

William Tyndale was born 15 years after More and grew up in a different generation. He breathed the fresh air of Renaissance thought, the spirit of free enquiry. He saw all too clearly the constraints of the church and its corruption and his frustrations were fed by thousands of tracts flooding into the country, courtesy of the newly developed printing press and from the hand of one Martin Luther. He went from Cambridge to be a private tutor to a family in Little Sodbury and from there one of his favourite occupations was to go to College Green in Bristol and preach in the open air. Preaching was, of course, in English. But the Bible was in Latin. Preachers generally just took a text around which to frame their talk. The rest of the Bible remained a mystery to lay people. Tyndale preached some of the new ideas and was hauled before the church authorities. He was so frustrated. Why, many of the clergy did not even know the commandments or where to find them. Some didn't know the *Our Father* or even who composed it. These were torrid times and a sense of calling formed in him. What was needed was a Bible in the vernacular, in English and to that he set himself. But there was a problem.

For More this new thinking was horrible in the extreme. This flood of tracts from Germany shook him to the depths. It threatened the whole civilisation of a thousand years, all that he had built his life on and loved so much. He responded by setting up a network of spies and informers, he would interrogate them in his own home, while they sat in stocks designed for the purpose. Old Lollard laws were revived. Public burnings of books were held often with bishops sat in grand array in a grandstand. There would be a great fire and those who had been caught with the books would be forced to publicly recant and march round the fire with a piece of burnt wood strapped to their backs – as a threat of what would come if they were

caught again. Old statutes – De Heretico Comburendis – on the burning of heretics – were to be revived. For Thomas the whole thing, even the actual burning of people, which soon followed, was all about saving their souls – from the great fire, the eternal fire.

Time to leave, thought Tyndale. England was not a good place to translate the Bible. He decided to take his chances abroad, went to Hamburg and began to write. And he didn't just write Bible. From his pen flowed furious invective against the church, free denunciations of Bishops, Pope and everything. Cardinal Wolsey became Wolfsee – the wolf among the flock. Bishops were Bishaps and much more that even we would count as too rude to say.

More began to read Tyndale's works, as they were discovered among the heretics that he interrogated. He was furious. This man would undo the very fabric of civilisation. See how he turned the word church into congregation, doing penance into repentance and charity into love. He poured out his responses working late into the night, answering point by point. One dispute ran to half a million words. And he was not courteous in his words either. For him Tyndale was 'a hell hound in the kennel of the devil...discharging a filthy foam of blasphemies out of his brutish beastly mouth'

The books flowed. Tyndale's New Testament was published. The presses in England were tightly controlled, but the English were good at smuggling. Books came disguised in barrels, in cargos of grain, amongst furs. And the people were excited to read. Little groups met to study the Bible and saw how so much about indulgences, the Pope, and much more were simply not to be found there. The pearls of the gospel had been thrown to the swine, as some clergy said. Great fires of books were had. Great fires of people also. But nothing stopped the flow.

Yet the tide was changing in England. Henry needed an heir and Anne Boleyn was ripe to be plucked. All were called to judge the King's great matter. Could he be divorced? For More it was impossible. but Thomas Cromwell was urging the king against the church. Heretic literature was being read in court and Anne was one of its chief sponsors.

Which of course meant that things were looking brighter for Tyndale. A messenger came from the King that he should return. Things had changed in his favour. But Tyndale smelt a rat. He knew that any safe passage offered might easily be reneged by More in the case of a hated 'heretic'. Instead he offered a deal. He said in effect, 'I will never again write a word. I will deliver myself to the king and submit to all that he wills be that even torture or death, if only you will do one thing. And that is to publish the Bible in English. Use anyone's translation that you approve of. There need be no notes or glosses. Let it simply be published.' Henry did not like to do deals. He declined.

Finally Henry was encouraged to declare himself head of the church. More could not affirm. As Ann was finally crowned Queen, More did not attend and Henry was furious. Who was this man who would deny him? Henry decided all must take an oath affirming him as head of the Church. And More was caught. His conscience could not allow it. He was summoned to Lambeth Palace to take the oath. He spent the whole night before in prayer. What could he do? He could not deny his faith. He could not offend his conscience. To lose his soul or to lose his body, that was the question. Finally he took the boat down the river to meet his destiny at Lambeth Palace. He refused the oath and was locked up in the tower.

But while he was in the tower, he received some good news from abroad. William Tyndale had been taken. One of his spies, named Harry Philips had found him and delivered him to the authorities. He was to be tried as a heretic.

Yet the day still came for More and the sentence was read. 'Sir Thomas More you are to be drawn on a hurdle through the City of London, there to be hanged till you be half dead, after that cut down alive, your bowels to be taken out of your body and burned before you, your privy parts cut off, your head cut off, your body to be divided in four parts and your head and body to be set at such places as the King shall assign.' This was the standard sentence, but later the king had mercy on him and allowed him to be simply beheaded.

Tyndale, still on the continent, was to be burnt in the continental manner. He was degraded, a ritual humiliation before all the people in the market square. His clergy clothes were gradually stripped off, his hands scraped to remove the oil he would have received at ordination, the sacramental cup placed in his hands, then removed, with the words ' We take away from you this cup of redemption'. Everyone watched as the solemn words were said ' We commit your soul to the devil' and he was handed over to the secular magistrate. Later he was to be led away, tied to a post where he would be mocked and then placed on the platform around which the wood was piled. He was given a moment to pray. Then a noose was placed round his neck to hang him out of mercy, but the hanging failed and Tyndale was alive as the flames began to lick round his feet.

With what should we end this tale of two devout men? This strange and sombre tale of passion for God and terrible destruction. Perhaps with a verse that Tyndale was famous for translating – which may be relevant to all who even today, are tempted to fight their cause with destructive violence.

*In Tyndale's own words- 'Yea though I speak in the tongues in the tongues of men and even of angels, yet have not love, it profiteth me nothing.
And, it goes on, 'even if I give my body to be burned...'*

(Story and quotations from Brian Moynahan's *William Tyndale –if God spare my life* and Peter Ackroyd's *The Life of Thomas More*)